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THE DISPLAYS, SILENCES, AND AESTHETIC POSSIBILITIES OF MUSEUM
FASHION'S GENDERED GEOPOLITICS

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Displays, Silences, and Aesthetic Possibilities of Museum Fashion's

Gendered Geopolitics

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This thesis studies how the “museumification” of fashion —the collection and display of decommodified objects— may affectively (re)produce normative gender, class, ethnic, and geopolitical hierarchies narrated and embodied in the garments and exhibitions. Relocating “personal” fashion items within institutional walls molds the (art) museum as a site for social control —surveillance, inclusion, exclusion— of subaltern groups, specifically of women, subcultures and ethnic minorities: respectively, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* and *Punk: Chaos to Couture*; and the Museum of Chinese in America's *Shanghai Glamour: New Women 1910s-40s* and *Front Row: Chinese American Designers* serve as case studies.

This argument is developed through a contrastive study of the exhibits, which deploys a multi-method approach. In order to contextualize museum practices and the fashion exhibitions, and address geopolitical relationships among those exhibited, I consider historical investigations and previous museum studies scholarship. Moreover, feminist fashion, affect, and post-colonial theories help navigate some of the different but complementary standpoints that shape the museum fashion experience. Informed by repeated visits to the exhibitions, I perform discourse analysis of the spatial (visual and physical) organization of the artworks in the displays; and of the visual and written texts provided at the museum —the descriptions of the galleries and the captions that

accompany the garments, accessories, photographs, videos, music or paintings. Finally, throughout I analyze a contemporary prosthetic to the museum's social body that aids the proliferation of the hegemonic discourses circulating within the museum: mass media related to the exhibits —television, press articles, and the museums' websites.

However, by focusing on the artificiality and construction of these discourses, the thesis ultimately considers the possibilities for destabilizing and subverting the aforementioned hierarchies. Rethinking collective aesthetic experiences and practices —such that audiences might consciously engage with and perform the meaning-making processes that art and fashion both allow— could alter museum publics' degrees of participation with the fashion spectacles and within society at large.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my
mother,
the most caring and the strongest person I know.
Eres mi inspiración.

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of the 19th century, fashion —especially feminine bodily dictates of fashion, beauty, and aesthetics— made its way into the realm of art, impressionist painters incorporating it into their representations of quotidian scenes, their gaze focused on exotic/luxurious fabric, dress, taste, and lifestyle. At the same time, consumer culture peaked. Fashionable garments gave up their aura to be massively reproduced as ready-to-wear, the aristocrat emblem of the best culture becoming accessible to common citizenry.

Nowadays, in a neoliberal, supposedly democratic, post-feminist, and post-colonial era, it seems like history might be repeating itself. As they recreate or compete against shows in Paris, London, or New York City itself; as they narrate, appropriate, or reclaim the cultures embodied in clothing, museums in cosmopolitan NYC have been constantly featuring fashion articles that promote and are promoted by fashion houses, designers, and popular celebrities in their special exhibitions. Given that over a century ago the phenomenon of fashion as art helped both reify and alter regional and international dominant discourses on gender, class, racial and ethnic hierarchies, an interrogation of how and why these and other discourses may be resurfacing today proves necessary.

In his field-founding book *Orientalism*, Palestinian literary critic and postcolonial theorist Edward Said explained, “culture was the vital, informing, and invigorating counterpart to the economic and political machinery that [...] stands at the centre of imperialism” (Said in Lewis 13). As will be studied in the thesis, fashion is the materialization and means of communication of certain messages, of the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discourses that make up the cultures in which it is designed, worn, and/or displayed —i.e. social gender, ethnic and nationalistic norms. In this sense, if fashion is said to embody culture and thus functions in the ways Said describes, one can see that the exhibitions at the Metropolitan, or fashion exhibitions at other museums

(imperial institutions) could also embody these gendered geopolitical dynamics.¹ Thus, the experience and struggle to admire an Indian shawl, for example, or at a larger scale the interest for the display of decadent Punk subculture (another Other), proves thought-provoking, given the social dynamics they may come to represent and how these can then *affectively* interpolate, define and position not only museum collected objects, but also museum publics.

With this in mind, this project aims at investigating the intriguing ways in which fashion (not costume) —the fashion industry at large, and the cultures, subcultures, lifestyles, or genders they portray— has now found a place in some of the most respected institutions: museums in the United States (and Europe). I ask what kinds of inter-objective ² /subjective relationships are affectively produced, prescribed, or possibly destabilized through both the aesthetics in the museum exhibitions and the media that frames them. Are countries, economic, or geopolitical centers attempting to “collect” and (re)colonize³ their own deviants or Others by displaying their fashions, gendered models, as works of art in museums, while at the same time advertising their own products? Can self-representation configure processes of decolonization? Ultimately, this project permits a better understanding of the kinds of human relationships already tacit in the museumification of fashion collections, but, ultimately, also the potential for subverting normative gender and geopolitical relationships through the redefinition of aesthetics as practice, consequently shifting the ways the audience may or may not interact and participate in them.

¹ Anthropologist Alfred Kroeber states that “The rise and fall of national arts and national fortunes” (Kroeber 235) are some of the waves of civilization that can be traced through the study of fashion.

² “Bruno Latour has written against the privileged ascription of agency to human beings, arguing that, as “actants” of sorts, “non-human entities [like fashion garments or museum spaces],” too, may be interpreted as effecting a kind of agency” (Navaro-Yashin 162).

³ I want to point out that throughout the thesis, while I do oftentimes refer to former empires and their colonies, I also deploy the term “colonialism” and related concepts figuratively. I refer to a cultural imperialism, rather than an explicitly political one —i.e. Chinese decolonization from the hegemonic West, in the last chapter.

In order to answer the above questions, I intend to scrutinize the different discourses that circulate with fashion in the museum space. For this purpose, the structure and set-up of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's (Met) *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* and *Punk: Chaos to Couture*; Museum of Chinese in America's (MOCA)⁴ *Shanghai Glamour: New Women 1910s-40s*; and *Front Row: Chinese American Designers* will serve as case studies. I chose these particular exhibitions, as their "cluttering" in time and space (within one city), plus their proliferation in the media evidence that the fashion displays can function as sites of control: physically immersing audiences in them is one of the mechanisms used for such regulation.

A contrastive study among the museum spectacles, I used a multi-method approach to develop my arguments. To some extent, this methodology embodies my argument: it privileges interaction among different lenses, different but complementary perspectives and standpoints, and the ways these create meaning. First of all, in order to contextualize museum practices, the fashion exhibitions, and address geopolitical relationships among the cultures, subcultures, and ethnic minorities exhibited, I was compelled to consider historical investigations. Moreover, I deployed feminist, fashion, affect, post-colonial, cultural and museum studies theories in order to perform discursive analyses. After repeatedly attending, observing, and experiencing the exhibitions, I used these theoretical tools to interrogate both the spatial organization and the texts —written and visual— provided at the museum. I did not include textual and image analysis of the shows' catalogues for two reasons: one, not all of the exhibitions had them; two, these materials do not appeal to the wide-ranged public the exhibits at large do (mainly given their elevated cost). However, popular culture and mass markets dominate the media, celebrities nowadays infiltrating the quotidian, private and/or personal as role models for fashionable lifestyles. Thus, additional to the investigation of the lived experience of the museum, reading —textual and image

⁴ Not to be confused with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, also a MOCA.

analysis— the media associated with these shows (television, press articles, and the museums' websites) proved imperative to comprehend how different aesthetic forms might affect their extended public through narrative emotional stimuli.

I do not attempt to unravel the codes and meanings in punk subcultural style, in Parisien/ne fashion of the 18th and 19th centuries, or in current Chinese designs, but rather the implications of the geographies in which they are located, and the sensory and affective techniques utilized to engage the public. I argue that oftentimes the subalterns (collected/colonized) represented in fashion and displayed at the art museum, specifically women, subcultures, and/or ethnic minorities, gain visibility and respect from the audience. However, this is only so if they contribute to the enhancement of the dominant culture (the collector).

In the first chapter, I start by analyzing the particularities of collection and display within a museum setting. For this purpose, I review a brief history of fashion in art museum collections. I then analyze the power dynamics harbored in the act of collecting and displaying decommodified objects within these institutions. That is, I study the politics of the museum gaze in terms of who/what —objects, bodies, genders, and ethnicities— is or is not worth granting visibility to, because of its visual, fashionable value; accordingly, also who has the power to define this value. Lastly, I consider the specificity of the *art* museum gaze.

The second chapter moves on to question *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*. As a meta-text, this Metropolitan show helps illustrate why fashion in particular is a powerful tool for the (de)construction of the aforementioned gendered and geopolitical hierarchic social structures that organize subject relationships. The first section analyzes the qualities that allow fashion to be collected within art museums. I then deliberate on the ways in which fashion helps both define and further categorize “personal identities” which then come to *represent* and reify communal identities that

“may make or unmake a nation” (Kroeber 237). This occurs especially through the construction of oppositional gendered subjects. In the next section, I investigate theories of fashion as a language that permits processes of meaning making, which contribute to identity production and reproduction. In conjunction, I end with an exploration of the possibilities for fashion and style to provide a language for aesthetic political enterprises.

The theme of the third chapter attempts to answer why displaying fashion specifically at art museums may consequently have distinct political implications for social organization beyond the institution. I argue that this setting allows a sensory, collective, and artificial experience —there is not necessarily a claim of objectivity— which affects the audience such that the meanings already embodied in and transmitted through fashion garments are either further fixed, remaining in circulation for longer periods of time, or are contested by recognition of the artifice. Initially, I use *Punk: Chaos to Couture*, presented as an immersive multimedia experience by the Met, to contemplate the techniques the display used to involve and organize both the subculture presented and the public (regardless or not of their “real” effects). Moving forward, I study the media that, as a prosthetic extension of the museum body, also frames and affects the exhibitions and its public. Consequently, deliberating over both the bodily and virtual experiences of the fashion exhibitions, in a final section this chapter questions standard notions of aesthetics. They are no longer intrinsic qualities in the objects, but *processes* of meaning making among objects and people.

Finally, the last chapter is dedicated to the consideration of geopolitical relationships among the social identities represented in aesthetic fashion museum displays. I enquire into fashion exhibitions *Front Row* and *Shanghai Glamour* at the MOCA in order to address the following questions: is self representation and the display of Chinese-American fashion designs at the Museum of Chinese in America an attempt at Chinese or Chinese-American cultural decolonization from the imperial powers of the

constructed hegemonic West —represented in museum fashion displays like the Met’s? Are the discourses that circulate within this cultural heritage museum simply “proof” that the West has conquered? In other words, does the MOCA function as the “official” narrative of integration (Lowe 98), or is it *instituting* further cultural and political colonization of the constructed Orient and foreignized Chinese-Americans in a battle to diminish Chinese economic “global” colonization? Or, finally, is the display of fashion at museums an example of how aesthetics can help negotiate the languages of the “top” and “bottom,” such that establishing new collecting agents may destabilize social — gendered, classed, racialized— hierarchies?

Alluding to the 1980s Diana Vreeland curated shows that linked fashion museum exhibitions with department store trends, I argue that the MOCA exhibitions could aid the aesthetic decolonization of the East or ethnic minorities in the West. The possibly decolonizing texts —the exhibitions— displace (104) the gaze in power. The Museum of Chinese in America’s displays took place as a detour in the excavation of “history” (108), shifting the gaze from people of Chinese descent being “laundry [or other] *workers*” (“Documenting,” my emphasis) to them being designers and producers. Additionally, showcasing the designs of the Nautica brand for *men* illustrated an alteration in discourses, the feminized Oriental or Asian American dressing and addressing the constructed male west. However, my reading of postcolonial museum practices suggests that the process of decolonization is trumped in the exhibitions studied, for they aim at inclusionary politics and collaboration, which nevertheless render the museum simply as a contact zone among communities.⁵ This could contribute to normalizing dichotomous relationships, inverting social hierarchies, rather than subverting them.

It is precise to state that this is only one of many possibilities of tacit relationships deployed in the museum as colonial institution. Furthermore, what most

⁵ Contact zones are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt in Boast 57).

compels this research is the fact that modern, public museum collections extend beyond the act of collecting or even mounting the exhibitions. The experience of an art museum nowadays, contrary to the original private collections of the 19th century (cabinets of curiosities), is a collective experience. The ways the museum audiences perceive the fashion exhibits are what could ultimately fix or subvert these relationships.

Therefore, the museum experience can have multiple outcomes. On the one hand, for example, thinking about international settings and the stories told about them in the museum, we are also able to recognize that museum history in particular and histories in general are not necessarily linear nor do they coincide universally, although they may undoubtedly intersect. The particularities of certain contexts shape local histories as well as histories of relationships among communities. Histories need not remain parallel between continents or nations, or whatever imagined community we may fathom, as a disembodied, progressive, homogeneous history (singular) might suggest. If the audience is able to acknowledge the artifice behind the spectacular fashions and displays that make these histories (plural), then aesthetic spaces for communication are also created.⁶

On the other hand, the illusion of having learned the “truth” about cultures that are only represented at the museum can prove rather violent. Just like the orthodoxy of domestic womanhood reemerges in the new global access to novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, as Lisa Lowe explains in *Immigrant Acts* (99), social norms tacitly reemerge in the narration of fashion at art museums. The need to couture/refine the break with the norms of women, subcultures, or ethnic minorities, and the importance and mechanisms of the language of fashion similarly become “globally” accessible.

⁶ However, “The concept of historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself” (Benjamin in Lowe 101).

I am aware that thorough investigation on public reception can only result from meticulous, participatory fieldwork inside and out of museum walls. One cannot speak about the *effects* of these exhibitions without engaging with the museums' publics regarding their reception of the fashion exhibits. Even though a significant amount of the readings for this thesis were executed based on my repeated visits to and observation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's and the Museum of Chinese in America's exhibitions, interaction with the other museum-goers and ultimately insights into not only mine but their experience and perception of the shows, could further complete the questions I am discussing in future projects.

CHAPTER 1: MUSEUM FASHIONS AND POLITICS OF THE GAZE

A permanent collection of bronze and marble eyes and perfectly sculpted Greek and Roman bodies arranged along two walls of a long room lead the way into the galleries of contemporary special exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Solemn silence shames the voices and footsteps of the passersby and heightens their concentration. These foundational and epitomic models of Western art and aesthetics, canonic symmetries that praise the body of the model and the rationale, technique and accuracy of the sculptor, condition and help trampoline the public into a state of provocation and confrontation (*Punk*, “Title Wall Gallery”) as they approach the loud John Gosling music and the festival of lights that summon them into the galleries of *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (May 09 – August 11, 2013).

A video directed by Nick Knight, British fashion and documentary photographer, is projected onto the back white wall of the entrance space. Standing guard in front of the screen, heads held high —made even higher by their black pointy wigs—, two mannequins face each other: Dior, by Galliano, and Vivienne Westwood designs. Their fashionable haute couture, “impacted” and “influenced” (*Punk*, MET website) by punk subcultural style —black and red ensembles made of plastic, metal, sequins, beads, leather, tulle and wool—, offer a prelude into the seven sections of the exhibition. On the left hand side, the title wall introduces the exhibition as the “origin story of punk’s most enduring contribution to our cultural landscape” (“Title Wall”): its style.

According to art and media theorist Dick Hebdige, in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, which offers one of several possible readings of punk among other subcultures, punks presented themselves as “*signs* of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain” (88). They *dramatized* their social conditions by *displaying* “their own codes [in their own context] or at least demonstrate[d] that codes are there to be used and abused [...]” (101). In the words of the Metropolitan, as it explains the linkage between punk and fashion by alluding to the

visual history of the 1970s movement, “Armed with a youthful amateurism, punks took cultural production into their own hands, fashioning looks that were distinctive, innovative, and revolutionary. This ethos of do-it-yourself [and...] the couture ethos of made-to-measure, both are defined by the same impulses of originality and individuality” (“Title Wall”).

However, I argue that the museumification of punk style, or of fashion in general, does not necessarily function as an ode to these cultural products. Instead, the shows function to control non-normative societies, positioning them below the collector culture in the hierarchic social ladder. This regulation is made easier by the use of articles targeting female or feminine bodies, and, at large, by the further feminization of the cultures embodied in the objects —masculine superiority over the feminine has been “naturalized” over time, through performative practices.⁷ In the case that the “minority” group mounted the exhibitions, the spectacles might have meant to break from that exertion of control. The latter could happen either through the alteration of the normative discourses that facilitate that regulation, or through the incorporation of the subalterns into hegemonic discourse.

For example, notice the use of the word “amateurism” to describe punk innovativeness. While in the context of the sentence it could simply mean an unpaid enterprise, “amateur” also means inept (Oxford Dictionary). The juxtaposition of the words “youthful” and “amateurism” emphatically invites the consideration of this second definition. This locates not only the practice of punk do-it-yourself, but also their ethos —the (“intrinsic”) spirit and way of being of punk— in a precarious state of being. In contraposition lies the sophistication and *techne* (in *greek*, Platonian terms) that characterizes couture’s made-to-measure. Additionally, it provides a contrast between craft, oftentimes a feminized activity, and the masculine artistry of the couture industry. In this case, hegemonic society can increasingly control punk or other subalterns by

⁷ I analyze this gendered aspect in depth in the second chapter of the thesis.

collecting them at the museum. How, and for what purpose is the theme of the upcoming chapters.

I reiterate the importance of considering the exertion of control over subaltern societies, whose ethos is embodied in their fashions, particularly by means of their collection in the (art) museum. The ethos and experiences encoded in subcultures varies depending on the geographies where they develop, “each of these locales [imposing] its own unique structure, its own rules and meanings, its own hierarchy of values” (Hebdige 84). These geographies range from the bodily and embodied (geographies closest to the subject) to the local space that includes and/or excludes a multiplicity of bodies, and to inter or transnational symbolic and physical grounds. When the re-possessed everyday clothes and objects that endowed punks with meanings that broke down hegemonic consensus (16-17) on taste (107) and style are re-located in the art museum, the commodities start to function under the codes of that museum.

Following these notions, throughout the thesis I want to ascertain that the location of fashionable items in art museums can organize the societies they are mounted in or the societies displayed, by creating different representations of the collected and the collectors: “According to Foucault, the museum or colony are both examples of heterotopias: they are sites of deviation and crisis that call into question the hierarchical organization of all other social space” (Lowe 122). Furthermore, these relationships are built through the gendering of the societies at play.⁸ The West (and I use terms East/West aware that they are all-encompassing terms that make homogeneous what is not), that is, Britain and the United States, is masculinized through

⁸ This had already happened in the realm of science before. To this day, the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris possesses formaldehyde jars containing female genitalia (i.e. a Peruvian and an African woman) and male organs none other than brains (i.e. Hume's and Descartes's)— women are defined by their sexuality, the men by their rationality. This museum display, which functioned as part of the imperial project of the 19th century, seems to be evidence of a performative consensus that assumes “feminine” (individual or communal) property —bodies or now fashion— is easier or more important to attain, control, and showcase for the knowledge and power of others. It is important to consider the kinds of social relationships, especially gender relationships, being recreated and reaffirmed in European and European influenced museums in the hegemonic West.

the spectacular displaying techniques at the museum; more so, as it collects the fashions of likewise spectacularly feminized cultures (sexual French) or non-normative subcultures (punk). Simultaneously, the East, which has been constructed as dichotomy of that West, could also possibly deconstruct that narrative and decolonize itself through museum self-representations.

The reincorporation of the subversive into mass culture —i.e. which renders punk products comprehensible and profitable as merchandise (Hebdige 96)— has been repeatedly explored in depth before, as one can see in Dick Hebdige's, Margot Weiss's, or Kobena Mercer's investigations on subculture, BDSM, and black style politics, respectively. In the following pages, I wish to analyze the particularity of framing fashion within the walls of art or aesthetic museums, a distinction that will be explained as we move along. What could happen, how and why, when it is fashion aesthetics that are presented within the walls of the museum?

As an opening statement, the Metropolitan reminds the public that the politics of punk (i.e. their anarchic principles) are not the contribution deserving to be mainstreamed through this art institution.⁹ Instead, style becomes a “naturally” accepted form of the beautiful and, in the museum, or at least in this exhibition, politics are rendered a means to that end. Politics are accidents, mere props and accessories, a detail in a larger performance. Articles previously made to shock and distinguish oneself from the mainstream now work as the chic distinction of the self through the element of shock (96). The appeal to a historical past in *Punk: Chaos to Couture* is simply used to give a sense of stability and continuity to the transition from shock to chic (Silverman x). Chic is thus normalized.¹⁰

⁹ “The defining characteristic [of mainstream culture is], according to Barthes, [...] a tendency to masquerade as nature, to substitute ‘normalized’ for historical forms, to translate the reality of the world into an image of the world which in turn presents itself as if composed according to ‘the evident laws of the natural order’” (Hebdige 102).

¹⁰ In other words, punks embraced style, or, in fact, the lack of it, in a complete lack of affiliation to any Western aesthetic, through “newness.” Choosing the visual in order to express their political ideals and inconformity gave great shocking power to the movement. Yet, as in the case

But, what does this mean? Is punk's and Other cultures' appropriation within aesthetic hegemonic discourses the ultimate step for its mainstreaming?¹¹ And/or is it possible that fashion aesthetics, through affect, might shift hegemonic discourses on gender, ethnicity, geopolitics and post-colonialism?

Although one cannot read the intentions of cultural institutions or of the press as transparent evidence to examine how precisely those cultural institutions function, it is still thought provoking to see whether lived experience could potentially correspond to the said attempts. This is particularly important in that it allows us to consider different ways publics could be affected by, relating to or shying away from, the works represented at the museum. I want to ask: what kinds of power dynamics and hierarchical or anti-hierarchical relationships are created in fashion *museum* exhibits as they de-center (or not) sight and visibility? Ultimately, might these fashion museum expositions mold some public's quotidian emotional epistemologies (Ramos-Zayas 25) —the ways we come to know (perceive, create and share) the world and its subjects in and through everyday practices? If so, why are they doing it and what techniques make it possible?

The organization and the techniques the art museum uses to engage with its public are intriguing, for they contribute to an audience's (bodily, sensory and affective) experience of the fashion garments inside and out of museum walls, that is, their possible conditioning and disciplining through the discourses circulating in the space:

The way a picture or object is hung or placed—its frame or support, its position relative to the viewer (is it high, low, or on a level? Can it be walked around or not? Can it be touched? Can one sit and view it or must one stand?), the light on it (does one want constant light? Focused or diffuse? [...] natural light [...]), and

of other subcultures, such as the Black Panthers and the Rastafaris, since it functioned as an extreme mode of "tactical inversion," punks' power to shock by definition was but an ephemeral one. Anything around long enough, and controlled, ceases to shock: "Fashion is the collective imitation of regular novelty; even when it has the alibi of individual expression, or, as we say today, of a 'personality', it is essentially a mass phenomenon [...] Fashion is only ever perceived via its opposite: Fashion is health, it is a moral code of which the unfashionable is nothing but illness or perversion" (Barthes 68). These ideas will be developed in the upcoming chapters.

¹¹ There is no intent in saying that mainstreaming is good or bad, as visibility and invisibility both have positive and negative possibilities.

the other objects it is placed with and so compared to—all of these affect how we look and what we see (Alpers 31).

In the following three chapters, I move on to the reading of the spaces and the texts connected to each of the exhibitions mentioned in the introduction. However, here I will first review a brief history of clothing in museum contexts, and the implications of the art museum geography itself. This proves imperative given that, even though museums themselves function as colonies and heterotopias, they are also located within wider geographies: cultural, political and economic contexts. Considering the historical dynamics in which museums, museum sections, and museum collections are established provides a further glance into what particular exhibitions can come to represent for their audiences; especially so, because what these displays represent can additionally trigger distinct societal movements: shifts in hierarchical relationships —again cultural, political and economic— locally and internationally.

HISTORY OF FASHION IN ART MUSEUMS

In “Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition,” fashion historian Valerie Steele surveys the history of dress in museum collections, primarily in the United States and Europe. Dating the practice of collecting clothes by Britain’s national museum of decorative arts back to the mid-1800s, and the debut of the first fashionable garment in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to 1877, she describes the resistance to and controversial inclusion of textile, dress, and, finally, fashion into art museums. These 19th century cultural institutions subscribed to Kantian ideas —in circulation then for around two hundred years— that defined high art as timeless, sublime, and devoid of materiality. Art and beauty were said to be independent from the subject (artist or admirer), the rules of industry, and the economy, as made explicit by the motto *l’art pour l’art*. Additionally, notions of pure art rejected “not only any social function but any definition in terms of a representational content” (“The Work of Art” 24). Hence, as

Steele explains, it is not surprising that the uneasy incorporation of fashion into museums was partly due to the fact that this specific branch of the decorative arts was linked to a valueless and ephemeral feminine style that “[...] only *evoked* notions of vulgar commerciality [...]” (Taylor in Steele 9, my emphasis).

Even at the turn of the century, a time when gender, class, and social norms were being put to the challenge by artists and writers,¹² an “objective,” progressive fashion history exhibition barely found its place at the International Exhibition in Paris (1900). These international exhibitions intended to position their respective countries as culturally superior. The project mostly affected ethnic and racial hierarchies as they displayed their “intrinsic” abilities to produce and promote culture. It was not until the late 20th century, in 1977 –perhaps in relation to the rise and changes brought on by feminist movements–, that a proper fashion museum was created: the *Musée de la Mode et du Costume*. The masculine teleological approach to the exhibition of dress and fashion did not give way, although fashion ceased to belong just to ethnographic museums –which collected the “facts” of civilizations around the world– and established itself within the art museum.

Exhibitions dedicated exclusively to fashion (not to one fashion garment among many objects as in the 1800s) within *art* museums did not occur simultaneously in Europe and the United States. On the one hand, full-blown fashion exhibits appeared in New York City as early as 1915 at the Brooklyn Museum. In 1944 The Costume Institute became a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as it continues to be today. “The Costume Institute houses a collection of more than 35,000 costumes and accessories spanning five continents and just as many centuries” (Met Facebook page, 01/10/2014). On the other hand, in Paris, fashion capital of the world, the same phenomenon occurred barely seventeen years ago, in 1997, when a wing opened in the Louvre Museum (Steele 9). This in no way proves a more advanced, mature and

¹² This will be addressed in the chapter that takes *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* as a case study.

increasingly more rational (Lowe 111) position of United States versus France, regarding the politics of art/fashion integration. Rather, it merely illustrates history as a dynamic process.

Acknowledging these interdependent histories helps comprehend how particular social relationships are represented in exhibitions at the museum. Specifically, these histories illustrate the geopolitical alliances within the West. The “old” world as model for hegemonic discourses, the innovation of the “new” world as it learns from, actualizes and reaffirms those discourses, and, again, the “old” world’s recognition of the value of these actualized discourses, is an essential back and forth used to position the West oftentimes against/above the East. Furthermore, the context and content of the Museum of Chinese in America is also highly dynamic, given that the MOCA is a Chinese-American museum: notice its geographic location (USA), the context of the designers presented, and yet, the oppositional or complementary locality (China) of the discourses that *Front Row* and *Shanghai Glamour* embody. These dynamics will be analyzed in depth in the last chapter of the thesis, when we discuss the Museum of Chinese in America fashion exhibitions, but continuing this fashion history should start to evidence these geopolitical relationships.

Consider, for example, that throughout the 1980s there was a major advent of fashion museum exhibitions at the Metropolitan. During these years, Diana Vreeland, a French fashion editor at *Vogue* magazine (Silverman 3), was special consultant in charge of organizing The Costume Institute’s shows (ix). She presented *Costumes of China: The Ch’ing Dynasty* (1980); *The Eighteenth-Century Woman* (1981); *La Belle Époque* (1983); and *Twenty-five Years of Yves Saint Laurent* (1984), among others. In her book *Selling Culture*, art historian Debora Silverman openly critiques the incursion of the market, specifically of the Reagan administration’s neoliberal politics, into museum politics. Neoliberalism promotes a particular kind of individual, responsible for his own self-

invention and for its failures and successes, usually dependent upon their economic and cultural capital (Freeman 362).¹³ Even though Vreeland curated exhibitions about 18th and 19th century France, for example, she did so without much regard for history (x). Actually, she attempted to both illustrate and formulate the aristocratic and imperial identity of the fashion designer, educating the US fashion consumer, and positioning the Oriental (Chinese) fashion producer (ix-x). She used art and the museum only as tools.

Of course, it is crucial to keep in mind that the pressures of corporate sponsorship for the exhibitions play a primary role in the dynamics between the museum and US politics and economy (xiv).¹⁴ This is why, since 1948, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Gala has played a key role in the promotion of the exhibitions. In the 1980's attending the Gala cost visitors US\$300 dollars (37); today, the cost has scaled up to around US\$25,000 dollars per ticket ("Would Anna Settle").¹⁵ Over thirty years of prosperous consumerism and 'normalization' of Metropolitan museumgoers has rendered belonging to this particular leading community of tastes more and more unaffordable.

Moreover, the fact that that community nowadays consists mainly of television, cinema, music celebrities, and fashion entrepreneurs who draw audiences' attention as lifestyle role-models, additionally shows why the analysis of social media related to the museum exhibits is fundamental. Excluding press articles addressing the exhibitions would ignore a major medium through which hegemonic (celebrity, new aristocratic lifestyle) discourses circulate. Again, recall that museums are part of specific contexts,

¹³ Alfred Kroeber describes individuals as those who "listen to history, or tell it, [looking] for what history can reflect that is similar [to them]; and what it offers of psychology and morality in its biographies, or those of its parts which can be distorted into dramatic crises or romantic tales, [which] they seize with avidity" (Kroeber 262). In this sense, we can see how it is the individualistic model that helps include/exclude people based on similarity. This is the basis for social hierarchization of power, and that is, like I mentioned in the introduction, what the collective experience at the museum might be able to destabilize.

¹⁴ Silverman sometimes appears too personally critical of Vreeland, instead of realizing that "choice" in individuals depends on the context and the possibilities and limitations those contexts allow.

¹⁵ Considering guests rounded up to 800 in May 2013 ("Staying Up Late"), we can perceive the dimensions of The Costume Institute's earnings last year.

and that social media are part and help shape those contexts: they have central roles in the creation and organization of the aforementioned hierarchical relationships.

After Vreeland's death, in order to avoid controversy related to the Metropolitan's promotion of one particular designer's economic interests, as occurred with her Yves Saint Laurent exhibition, the museum ceased to exhibit the work of only one living designer (Steele 12). Curated by British anthropologist Andrew Bolton, who has worked at the Metropolitan since the 2000s, *Savage Beauty* (2011) was the celebration of the *late* Alexander McQueen's designs. This particular show made history, as it established itself among the top eight exhibitions to draw more bodies into the walls of the New York City museum:

Several exhibitions contributed to [the Metropolitan's] record-breaking year, including 'The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso and the Parisian Avant-Garde,' which attracted 324,000 visitors, and 'The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini,' which drew 205,000 [...] blockbuster exhibition 'Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty,' which closed on Aug. 7 and included extended hours in its final weeks, drew 662,000 visitors (Vogel, my emphasis).

As records show, this fashion exhibition more than doubled the most successful painting exhibition that year in number of visitors.

In 2012, The Costume Institute had a disappointing number of attendances (339,838) to the exhibition called *Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations* (Cartner-Moley). Hence, in 2013, Bolton decided he would attempt to top his own 2011 success by mounting *Punk: Chaos to Couture*. British press, specifically *The Guardian* newspaper, explained this motivation as a wish to recapture The Costume Institute's previous moment of glory.

Moda Operandi sponsored the punk exhibition, with additional support by *Condé Nast*. The latter is a New York City based mass media empire established in 1909. It is a division of *Advance Publications*, whose magazines include *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *GQ*, *Bon Appetite* and *The New Yorker*. Since 2011 it has also been involved in film, television and digital video entertainment. *Moda Operandi* is an online fashion retailer that pays special homage to couture items of clothing. On their website, they describe

themselves as the only place to preorder fashion garments straight from the runway shows, before they even reach the stores.

The involvement of these capitalist and media enterprises with the museum exhibitions could help affirm that what is driving fashion exhibitions at museums is merely a monetary incentive. In this case, the art museum would be a setting for “sublimed” propaganda. However, reflecting on the particular content of these exhibitions, it becomes clear that sales are not necessarily the primary issue at stake. Rather, it is what the garments stand for, the messages they embody about the cultures and subcultures presented at the museum. As I shall explain in the following chapter, it is not punk style that is being promoted and sold at the museum, but the mainstreaming of punk subculture. Punk lifestyle, and Other cultures, are coutured and normalized, such that the “main” culture —its gender, class, ethnicity, race— is elevated and, by extension, its monetary interests.

Finally, while in previous years in the United States it had only been The Costume Institute that featured fashion as worthy of museum display, this year fashion finally shared the spotlight with traditional painting in an *art* department at the Metropolitan: the department of European Painting. *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* (February 26 – May 27, 2013) was designed in a collaborative effort between the Musée d'Orsay, the Met, and the Art Institute of Chicago. The curators organized the first show in France (25 September, 2012 – 20 January 2013), just in time for Paris Fashion Week (*The New York Times*). New York and finally Chicago (25 June – 22 September, 2013) followed.

The inclusion of fashion in a traditional art department allows me to consider what a reinterpretation of the notions of aesthetics within the museum institution could imply: that is, a redefinition of high/popular art that does not divide the two. Moreover, the discourse that blends them could start circulating “officially,” institutionally, at the museum. Most importantly, this shows the possibilities of aesthetics no longer

describing intrinsic qualities in objects, but promoting communication, both between objects —as supplementary texts—, and among people, either within one society, or transnationally.

THE MUSEUM GAZE

Now, before engaging with the fashion exhibitions at the Met and the MOCA, it is necessary to review the codes that function within the museum. In other words, this section aims at answering the question: why and how does the museum work as a site for social control and organization? The consideration of ever-present relationships among objects (in their “original” settings), collectors, the ways the objects are displayed and re-signified, and the public and their interpretations all contribute to my investigation of these social processes.

The activity of collecting objects and the ways in which these objects are organized within any collection respond to ideologies of power —political and intellectual (Alpers 26). For example, scientific inquiry is guided by ideologies that assume the accumulation of fact —accumulation of fact transformed into a collection of knowledge (Baudrillard 22) that later circulates and disciplines through institutions (Bennett 73)— to be the best or most powerful way of being in the world. By extension, the rationale behind the constitution of early museums was to create encyclopedic collections (Alpers 26). Personal cabinets of curiosities reserved for the aristocratic gaze or natural history and ethnographic museums made public during the nineteenth century (Bennett 73) all followed this logic. More knowledge and especially more *rare* —of low availability, due either to time or space, and high on demand, as proof of existence or exoticism— and thus expensive material property are both defining preconditions to belong to the top of the social ladder.

The dynamics of power in accumulation, collection and museum display, further extended into the realm of the cultural, in art museums. This is so, because collecting cultural capital is a necessary means for accessing power in society:

The class of practices whose explicit purpose is to maximize monetary profit cannot be defined as such without producing the purposeless finality of cultural or artistic practices and their products; the world of bourgeois man, with his double-entry accounting, cannot be invented without producing the pure, perfect universe of the artist and the intellectual and the gratuitous activities of art-for-art's sake and pure theory ("The Forms of Capital" 46-47).

What is more, accumulation of cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, occurs over the same time as the process of socialization (49). This process thus organizes power. As enough capital is collected, people earn the right to *be* normal: they become normative, controlled, non-threatening, individuals.

In fashion's case, most of the time, this process produces normative, controlled, non-threatening feminine bodies: I refer to both female-bodied subjects identified as women, and feminine males (as much of the male homosexual designer community might be labeled). Regarding *Punk: Chaos to Couture*, as we shall see, mainstreaming punk only occurs when it becomes inspiration for a tasteful community —couture designers— to turn its chaos into artistic order. Punk earns space, as it helps the designers earn even more respect (cultural capital), and simultaneously turn a higher profit (economic capital). However, they can only gain that visibility if they are deemed and conform as subcultures, individual punks becoming normative, controlled, non-threatening subalterns.

Just as systems of collection aspire "to discriminate between objects, privileging those which have some exchange value or which are 'objects' of conservation, of commerce, of social ritual, of display – possibly which are even source of profit" (Baudrillard 22) for the collector, it is worth noting that they can also function as a way to discriminate the subjects who visit the exhibits. In the process of categorizing and exhibiting collected objects, museum visitors are also ordered into a public to be inspected (Bennett 74).

Within these cultural institutions, the general public is given the power of the gaze and thus a certain quality of expertise (“The Work of Art” 33). People cease to be objects of knowledge and become subjects of knowledge (Bennett 76). They even gain access to the authorship, to the creation and control, of whatever it is they are viewing (“The Work of Art” 34). The reader should bear this in mind as I analyze United States museum displays: Western bodies acquire expertise over the collected features. However, they simultaneously learn to know and

regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) shown by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of surveillance and, hence, self-regulation” (Bennett 76).

This corresponds to Michel Foucault’s views of modern disciplinary forms that aim at controlling behaviors of subalterns, specifically of women, subcultures, or ethnic minorities, through the overstatement –confession (through the Church) and display– of what is supposed to be kept secret (Foucault 6). The fact that it is fashion, a feminized form in society, which is being displayed opens the possibility of it being women who are being organized within the display, and women who then know and self-regulate, as the primary visitors of these exhibitions. Most evidently, at the Gala, it was women and their gowns, the primary object of the gaze and, hence, of surveillance, even if they did have their male counterparts present. At a less explicit level, it is subaltern cultures, gender-bending subcultures, such as punk, which can be collected/colonized at the art museum.

Although Foucault explains that there has been a shift from sovereign and state regulation to a system of biopolitics whose modes of disciplining depend on bodily peer and self-surveillance (Boddy 123), what is intriguing about museum institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art (not a State institution) is that they offer a space for these forms of surveillance to occur *en masse*. This could be perceived as threatening for the freedom of the masses –if freedom is in fact the ultimate achievement. Yet, it could also occur that the individualism that characterizes modernity and current politics of

neoliberalism, as was mentioned earlier, is somewhat counteracted by the collective *aesthetic* experience at the art museum.¹⁶

Either way, considering that one of the ideas behind collecting knowledge is that not having ever *seen* something before precludes the possibility of even imagining that it is possible, that it exists (Alpers 25), it is important to inquire about which cultures or subcultures are today perceived by art institutions as worthy of collection (of visibility). For example, does the probability of sales and profit prime in these decisions? I once more argue that in the museum it is the “messages” that particular garments embody which are crucial.¹⁷ Economic prosperity comes as an added bonus.

Appropriating the Gaze. It is worth noting that the methods of appropriation of museum pieces that may turn a profit in the name of knowledge oftentimes transgress the integrity of the bodies taken in order to represent the subjects and communities to which they “originally” belonged—whether they are physical subject bodies (animal or human) made objects of exhibition once dead, or inanimate objects (natural or artificial). Take, for instance, the highly debated case of the display of Sara Bartman’s remains—her live persona and later her skeleton, genitalia, and brain.

Alive, in the early 1800s, this Khoi-Khoi woman was taken to Europe—England and France—to perform as “The Hottentot Venus.” She was held as visual and tactile “proof” of the then thought missing link between apes and human beings; hence, of the deviance and lower status of her people (Gilman 22). Though she refused to fully undress and show her genitalia, she modeled for sketches that intended to capture her other bodily “uniqueness:” her steatopygia, which, in mundane English, in contrast to this overpowered, exclusive and excluding—as pathologizing—Latin, simply means enlarged buttocks due to the accumulation of fat. The dimensions of most of her body

¹⁶ See Lainie Schultz’s “Collaborative Museology and the Visitor” in *Museum Anthropology* 34.1 (2011): 1-12.

¹⁷ See Chapter 2.

parts were also measured and recorded by biologist Georges Cuvier and his team of scientific experts.¹⁸ After her death, around the age of twenty-five, Cuvier acquired her, as a commodity, imposing his agenda over the now completely subjugated body. He dissected her. The remains were then put on display in the French ethnographic *Musée de l'Homme*, where, decommodified and thus erasing the history embodied in them, they remained in sight until the 1970s.

It was not until the past decade, in 2002, that Bartman was returned to South Africa for a proper burial. However, this only occurred after a long judicial process, requiring Parliamentary action. In this return, France would be giving up part of its cultural and scientific heritage. Additionally, renouncing the ownership of Sara Bartman's remains meant not only recognizing the violence in the means for accumulating knowledge, but also giving up the authority and international power that came from possessing that particular knowledge.

Political scientist Timothy Mitchell's article "The World as Exhibition" speaks to this last point. As he analyzes mounted Orientalist —feminized (sensory)—representations of medieval Cairo at the World Fair in Paris, 1889 (217), he explains that "What [Arab writers in the nineteenth-century] found in the West [...] were not just exhibitions of the world, but the ordering up of the world itself as an endless exhibition" (218): the hierarchization of different locales, such as Europe and the Middle East, Egypt in this case. Similarly, Bartman's collection, travel and display were meant to provide the basis for a taxonomic organization of subjects. Additionally, this organization specifically identified which geographies, which races, and which sex, were to be considered human and which were not. Both of these exhibits, Sara's and Cairo's, precluded the chance of self-representation of those displayed, mounting only the views of the exhibitor.¹⁹

¹⁸ See also Koch and Gortz, and Marshall.

¹⁹ This occurred, and still does, because the authenticity, the *certainty* of the representation (Heidegger in Mitchell 222) of the exhibitions "depended on [a] deliberate difference in time and

THE ART OF THE MUSEUM

In this last section, I show what dynamics are at play specifically at an art museum. This is necessary because engaging with art, though it is still a form of capital, requires a particular kind of interaction that does not necessarily respond to statements or attempts at Truth. This means art creates space for debating social hierarchies previously normalized. Aesthetic experiences then open up possibilities for alternative social processes that can redefine gender, class and geopolitical relationships, among others.

As American art historian Svetlana Alpers encourages in “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” it is key to look beyond systems of power and pay special attention to the fact that artifacts collected in any museum are displayed because of a *visual* interest in the objects (Alpers 25) —more so in an art museum. Alpers’s concept of the museum effect, “the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own” (27), is embodied in the Met’s exhibitions. Such as “the visual interest accorded a flower or a shell in nature is challenged by the visual interest of the artist’s representational craft” (26), *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* may have taught the audience that fashion was incorporated into impressionist painting because it visually invigorated their craft. *Punk: Chaos to Couture* also takes punk subculture away from its “natural habitat.” The interest, the visibility and visibility of punk, is shifted to the designers and their craft, even to the curator and his craft (exhibiting the designers’ clothes). The translation of the fashion show into the walls of the art museum thus provokes another mode of seeing and sensing the works of

displacement in space separating the representation from the real thing” (Mitchell 223). Certainty lies in mediation, as science in generalization, and as objectivity in the disregard of all subjective aspects of life: proof is only proof in that it ignores all other proof not yet thought of, seen, or acknowledged. I will return to this premise in the following chapter, as I explain why *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* could function as a meta-text on the politics of fashion, while *Punk*, concerned about its “authenticity” could not. Instead, the latter established style as mere response to a context rather than a tool for the molding of that context.

art.²⁰ Moreover, the audience's curiosity regarding this new mode of seeing punk may invite them into the museum to contemplate punk differently.

It may be true that when a work of art becomes part of a museum collection it becomes an object to be gazed at and consumed through that gaze. It loses part of its history and the chain of inter-objective/subjective experiences that led it to become art in the first place —that is, the story of its production, its materials, the instruments that helped construct it, the inspiration behind it, the exchange value, its travel, its restoration. Nevertheless, when objects are collected in the museum because of their visual interest, this does not consequently mean that visibility or invisibility implies objects appear only to be looked upon or ignored. A body (alive or inanimate) is not just waiting to be read, interpreted, and given meaning to. It is not present only to inform. Instead, the objects project themselves *toward* the world (Merleau-Ponty in "Embodiment" 140) and demand being perceived by others through somatic modes of attention. These, explains anthropologist Thomas Csordas, are "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" ("Somatic Modes of Attention" 138), such as museums.

Accordingly, Alpers asserts that art museum exhibitions that mount major historical events such as *Punk*, which registers a crucial moment in British and United States political history, are not to be taken as simple pictures illustrating history (29). Rather, "To walk through the rooms [is] to see that [...] those objects [the fashionable garments] themselves constituted a history" (28). This does not mean that the art historian necessarily believes cultural objects to be displayed or to exist as transparent phenomena. They are not reflections of the history happening "outside" the museum, but they are representations.

²⁰ This connotes that the punks' "original" garments were already works of art, as Dick Hebdige concludes in *Subculture* (129).

Still, when “Museums turn cultural materials into art objects” (31), museum representations could possibly affect the public’s way of looking outside its walls, and their ways of affecting and being affected by other people (Massumi xvi). Although “affect *does* refer, broadly, to an emotive domain, but its scope goes far beyond that of human subjectivity or the self” (Navaro-Yashin 167), it is about “redistributing subjective quality *outside*” (Latour in Navaro-Yashin 167).

Moreover, this affectation occurs to the point where museumgoers might be forced into movement (Massumi xii-xiii) —physical or of thought. Artworks happen, make things happen (Ahmed 119), and reflect what is happening in the world. But, what? In order to begin answering this question, the following chapter will study how gazing and interpreting particularly fashion objects in the museum might affect what the public sees and how they interact with others beyond the institutional setting.

CHAPTER 2: *IMPRESS*: FASHIONABLY PAINTING MODERN IDENTITIES

According to French artist Eduard Manet, “The latest fashion [...] is absolutely necessary for a painting: it’s what matters most” (*Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, Met). Assuming this were in fact true in the late 1800s—a necessity and not merely a common tendency—it is thought-provoking that, over one hundred and fifty years later, it seems like the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, mounted by the department of European Painting, incarnates this statement. However, while for Manet fashion was but a model—the quality of the painting and the mediation of the painter as artist giving fashion its ultimate importance by expressing the ideal (Silverman 16)—, the 2013 exhibition proved to be a *dialogue* between traditional art (Benjamin 254) and other aesthetic products.

I am therefore compelled to enquire what it means for fashion at the museum to potentially blur the lines between high and popular culture, such that aesthetic practices and manifestations are destabilized. What embodied relations can museumified fashions entice, and how does that affectively inform, create or reaffirm different modes of organizing, being, belonging or becoming expunged from the hegemonic world? Later, this chapter will contribute to the understanding of how fashion, from the realm of the personal, can come to affect broader communities and geopolitical relationships through the museum—a space that guarantees a collective experience.

FASHION AS ART

Fashion is defined as such given its “fleeting allure” (*Impressionism*, Met): “An item of clothing,” literary critic and cultural studies scholar Roland Barthes states, “is indeed, at every moment of history, this balance of normative forms, all of which are constantly changing” (Barthes 4). It was precisely this characteristic that drew the impressionists’ attention in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The garments they depicted in their paintings embodied the feeling of modernity that they wished to

capture. Modernity, in the words of Charles Baudelaire, is “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, half of the art whose other half is the *eternal and the immutable*” (Baudelaire 92, my translation and emphasis).

Consequently, it could seem like nowadays the pieces exhibited in *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* could not be labeled as fashion, since they are not contingent. However, they do embody the tension described by the French poet. As anthropologist Alfred Kroeber explains in “On the Principle of Order In Civilization as Exemplified by Changes of Fashion,” a quantitative and qualitative study on the “eternal flux” (Kroeber 239) of fashion:

Details, trimmings, pleats, and ruffles, perhaps colors and materials, all the conspicuous externalities of dress, do undoubtedly alter rapidly [...] But underneath this glittering maze, the major proportions of dress change with a slow majesty, in periods often exceeding the duration of human life, and at least sometimes with the even regularity of the swing of an enormous pendulum (258).

In other words, last year’s feature at the Metropolitan may have showcased *old-fashioned* clothing items and accessories, but the characteristic waves of fashion and taste made it possible for these objects to resonate with people’s contemporary life, and thus for the museum exhibit to attract contemporary publics.

Linked also to the modern economic state (260), as was mentioned in the previous chapter, fashion responds to the ebbs and flows of the dynamics between a public’s desire and the industry’s offerings of new products. However, as Barthes insists in *The Language of Fashion*, it is new combinations more than new features that are performed in fashion (Barthes 54).

Judith Butler’s definition of performativity—as the act of altering or undoing certain semantic conditions or conventions through their own means and terminologies—extends Barthes’s “performative” in a manner that is useful for clarifying the distinction between performance and performativity (Robinson 68).

By performatively experiencing the meanings that garments transmit, what are also created are mythological systems of taste. These systems of taste additionally

correspond to fashionable lifestyles with which the museum audience can identify today.²¹

To summarize, performed definitions of taste come and go, but at any particular moment they may seem unquestionable and timeless, because they are, through unconscious repetition —i.e. reappearing in the art museum—, normalized. Similarly, the communities created through definitions of taste, forms of belonging or exclusion, also become “immutable.” Therefore, what the fashions helped reify in the past —i.e. gender roles, class dynamics, as will be shown later— are elements and meanings that continue to circulate in today’s world.²²

There are two more reasons why this exhibition found its space at the art museum. On the one hand, *distance* in time and space between the exhibited and today’s marketable fashions, as well as the juxtaposition of the garments and the paintings within the Metropolitan’s galleries, helped provide the once wearable (useful) pieces the sublime quality of art that any object requires to be displayed within this institution.²³ Concretely, they continued to be stripped from any function other than leisure (museum visits and accumulation of cultural capital). In the words of feminist art historian Debora Silverman, just like art and taste —which act as aristocratic forms, differentiating themselves from the mundane— “dress [operates] as the insignia of leisure, the proclamation of freedom from utility and function” (Silverman 17).

The sum of these qualities is what Walter Benjamin would call the aura in his “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility:” “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin 255). For the first time ever, owing to

²¹ Garment turned lifestyle is “[...] a practice whereby individuals reinforce and cultivate their individuality through taste preferences and define their identity [...]” (Lukács 43).

²² Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes these dynamics as follows: “[...] every change in the system of goods induces a change in tastes. But conversely, every change in tastes resulting from a transformation of the conditions of existence and of the corresponding dispositions will tend to induce, directly or indirectly, a transformation of the field of production, by favouring the success, within the struggle constituting the field, of the producers best able to produce the needs corresponding to the new dispositions” (*Distinction* 231).

²³ Although I have said that these fashion exhibitions could potentially help shift the definition of aesthetics, the museum as institution still functions under dogmas centuries old.

the maintenance of this particular distance, fashion could explicitly be recognized as art and not merely as costume at the Metropolitan. This further allowed the art department to use the clothing articles as supplementary rather than secondary texts in the exhibit. Lastly, when fashion earns such a status in the hierarchic chain of cultural products, it becomes more capable of affecting publics and further organizing other hierarchies to which it is bound.

On the other hand, the Met's allusion to modernity, a term the public might mistake for contemporary—for "us" or "our"—grants additional charm and interest to the exhibit, no longer performatively but consciously. Better understanding this point can shed light on the importance of analyzing particularly art exhibitions that feature fashion and style. The art exhibition at the Metropolitan drew in a large public because it fed people's narcissistic need to attend to, turn towards, and gaze at representations of themselves (Alpers 32).

In "Embodying and Affecting Neoliberalism," anthropologist and Women's, Gender and Sexuality scholar Carla Freeman reflects on how new institutions (i.e. religious/spiritual; tourist/leisurely) offer "personalized care and individualized meaning" (Freeman 362) to their consumers. In the case of fashion, regard one of *Impressionism's* monetary sponsors' catch phrase: the boutique's intention in to "help you find a look for every occasion: specific, sophisticated, and uniquely you" (*Moda Operandi*). These services aim to aid consumers in their projects of self-managing by providing them with the therapeutic tools to resolve the many anxieties and panic attacks (363) that those same processes of self-making, partnership-making (354) and/or child-making (raising normative teenagers/adults) yield. Within this "late capitalist" model, defined by a catering to the individual—a "narcissistic reinvestment, orchestrated as a mystique of liberation and accomplishment" (Baudrillard 279)—, it is then reasonable that the fashion industry would be one of the most profitable industries of the 21st century: "Dress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies

and feel at home in them” (Entwistle 7). Fashion is constructed on the basis of the consumer’s craving for distinction. Therefore, this narcissistic desire is doubly addressed at the art museum when it makes art and sublimates the tools that make that distinction possible.²⁴

In an age when the museum might be in crisis, for, as Benjamin explained, there are so many different ways in which the general public can access reproductions of the artworks whose aura has been degraded (“The Work of Art” 254-255) —in fashion this would extend from ready-to-wear to seasonal sales—; a time when, additionally, “a new hedonistic consumer has come into being, whose demands are no longer regulated by an ‘economy of needs’ but by an ‘economy of desire and dreams’, or the longing for something new and unexperienced” (Gronow 74); it is also reasonable that what could currently invigorate the art industry is fashion. Within this alliance, fashion provides consumers auxiliary mechanisms to make themselves. At the museum and through fashion, the public can learn how to serve or disserve particular roles compulsory for romantic relationships, and to reproduce or contest, in their family’s education, hegemonic standards of personhood —mainly gender, class, race and age dependent— over generations (Freeman 354). Moreover, the art museum issues its public the opportunity to collect the cultural capital that ought to give them access to or exclude them from a normalized community of tastes, guaranteeing that their self/partnership/child making is in fact worth reproducing.

Fashion scholar and sociologist Jukka Gronow says that “fashions are transitory – otherwise they would be transformed into traditions” (83). This phrase functions almost oxymoronically with the existing art museum fashion exhibitions. What these shows might demonstrate is that the first part of Gronow’s statement does not exclude

²⁴ In this sense, neoliberal institutions help preserve the ideas of what Kroeber calls “individualistic randomness” (261): the result of ascribing “a mind, a particular genius [the] motivating impulse of fashion; [...] the claim would certainly be asserted by those who like to see history as only a vast complex of biographies” (260), rather than seeing fashion and aesthetic history as a force of the social (261).

the latter. Through transitory fashions, hegemonic ideals are transformed into traditions, and thus ideologies (Hebdige 16).

For example, in these exhibitions the museum could be inclined to reaffirm the aforementioned themes of individualism and violent competition that characterize current neoliberal economics and politics. Because it is fashion that it displays, the museum institution ceases to advocate for the “collective dream energy of [this] society” (Benjamin cited in Taussig 84). In turn, “[...] the idea of the aesthetic as an autonomous realm, independent of the economic, social, and political [...] a fixed form rather than experiential process” (Mascia-Lees 3-4) is recreated.

Nevertheless, at the same time, there is potential for destabilizing these ideologies by artificially²⁵ mounting fashion exhibits and hence de-naturalizing the myth of fashion.

Prejudice, fear and suspicion still surround the status of fashion within many museums [...] This sometimes takes the form of fashion being tolerated as a form of ‘entertainment’ which will ‘pull the crowds’, with no acknowledgement of the serious contribution it also makes to the educational role of the museum (Anderson in Steele 8).

Through critical analyses and/or the *affective* experience of these displays on fashion, the audience can be moved to look at “themselves” by looking at dress. While fashion is something people may live their everyday submersed in, a ritual that they carry out performatively, fashion at the art museum creates space for the consideration of conscious performance. Recovering the aforementioned dream energy, the museum opens an essential space for education —rather than disciplining—, as it creates the possibility for self-questioning, or questioning of the “self.”

Somehow, in the context of the museum, the act of *beholding* fashion as art— notice the affective shift in bodily perception impressed in the word “be-hold”: it is no longer gaze, but an almost tactile being— can open the possibility for reflecting upon it. Letting ourselves be affected at the museum with fashion as art object means we do not

²⁵ Perhaps in contrast to runway shows which aim at *modeling* for reality.

distance ourselves so much from it that it incites critique or judgment of those who wear it or model it. Additionally, we do not draw it in so close as to impose ourselves on it, and, by ascribing to it our own interpretations, make it pornographic (Joyce in Epstein, *Open to Desire*). The latter is what generally occurs on the streets, on the runway, or at ethnographic museums: a voyeuristic gaze forcibly possesses the art pieces and denies their autonomy.

Aiming to better illustrate how fashion's decommodified objects aid in both the standardization and destabilization of the dominant culture's, the collector's norms, I move on to analyze the Met's painting and fashion exhibition. This display specifically helps navigate the rules, language, and possible effects of fashion on larger societal organizations, because it functions as a meta-text about fashion. This is possible, again, because of the distance established between the artworks showcased and the current curators and museumgoers.

REPRESENTATIONS OF FASHIONABLE "IDENTITIES"

Stepping into the opening gallery of *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, my eye was caught by the presence of a single dress. Encased in glass,²⁶ the "Day Dress" stood in the lower left hand corner of the high-ceilinged room (imagine a theater stage)—the faceless, generic, female mannequin felt small. Once I approached it, I confirmed its skirt fell, "princess style" (*Impressionism*, Met website, "Gallery Five"), from a tightly bound corset, a "form-fitting bodice" ("Gallery Five").

Breaking the senselessness caused by its entrapment in the transparent box, which supposedly placed the garment out of the public's touch, the figure still managed to seduce some of the museumgoers. As was previously noted, the Metropolitan's scriptures on the gallery walls educated the audience, explaining that the fashion

²⁶ This may have actually been plastic, but, now that I have reviewed my experience, I realize I did not actually touch the box, as I automatically disciplined myself to respect museum rules.

garments' "fleeting allure" was their most enticing characteristic for the impressionists. However, it was some of the visitors' responses that proved fashion's power of seduction, affectation and organization of the society it belonged to or of the society that gazed at it today.

"Look at the size of that waist!" exclaimed one of my peers. A teenage girl, who seemed to be the interpellator's granddaughter, instantly answered: "Yeah, but these dresses would look bad if you didn't have perfect posture, and they were designed that way." Both the expertise on fashion this girl brought into the museum —informing her grandparents through museumified samples— and the content of what she expressed, tacitly illustrated how fashion proceeds.

Her age and sex exemplified the demographics the fashion industry appeals to. Although nowadays it could seem like the market is appealing to a wider range of people, and although in the previous case the "expert" is a girl, what remains unchanged is that beauty, style and ultimately fashion standards are still guided by male gazes and occasionally desires: what continue to be policed are, if no longer only female, then feminine bodies or bodies that represent women, as are the dresses in the museum. Furthermore, the dynamics through which the particular inanimate bodies —the mannequin as ideal body, and the dress— embody a person's (designer, wearer, admirer) position, both bodily and relational, are made explicit in the art museum experience. The girl in *Impressionism* positioned herself "in" a particular circle whose cultural capital is knowledge of fashion, through her judgment of how garments and women's bodies should interact. A stroll through the following galleries of *Impressionism* —"Refashioning Figure Painting;" "En Plein Air;" "The White Dress;" "The Black Dress;" "The Dictates of Style;" "Frocks, Coats and Fashion: The Urban Male;" "Consumer Culture;" and "Spaces of Modern Life"— aids the comprehension of these last points.

Entering the first gallery, “Refashioning Figure Painting,” I noticed another dress in the center of the room. This single dress stood under the gaze of the highly hung and generously dimensioned impressionist paintings. Adjacent stood a case of *cartes-de-visite* —miniature photographic portrait cards, assembled as a grid of eight shots, which were widely exchanged and collected (“Refashioning,” Met). The large-scale artworks’ and the *cartes-de-visite*’s subjects were, over and over again, more female personas. These women were often labeled “mistresses” of the mostly male painters.

According to the descriptions of the Metropolitan’s website, the paintings in this first gallery presented pictures

every bit as stylish and elegant as Haussmann’s newly renovated Paris. Artists from Monet to Tissot gravitated to contemporary dress as the key to invigorating threadbare traditions with modern sentiment’ —the double characteristic that defines both modernity and fashion. These paintings were meant to portray ‘the woman of our time, the French woman, the *Parisienne* (*Impressionism*, Met website).

From the very beginning the museum teaches the public that fashion is an essential instrument for carving personal space within the tasteful organization of the broader modern. Additionally, this space is constructed through the interpretation of female subjects by the masculine creative gaze. Moreover, female bodies were those placed under the spotlight for surveillance, as wearing particular fashions implied particular lifestyles —mistresses— that either pleased or provoked (*Impressionism*, Met website): fittingly, galleries two, three, and four narrate how different dress styles and colors became appropriate or inappropriate for distinct social gatherings.

For example, “En Plein Air” displayed garments appropriate for outdoor life. The women depicted in this gallery proved to transgress social norms as they invaded public space, freely engaging with “gentlemen.” Consider painter Gustav Coubert’s “Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine” (1856-57), hung on the walls of this second gallery. In their caption for this painting, the Metropolitan informed —this time referencing the content/objects of the paintings and not the stylish paintings themselves— that some

Parisiennes were not 'ladies' at all, but women of easy virtue: drowsily content after [trolling] in the grass with gents (as suggested by the top hat in the rowboat [again the unseen, tacit, omnipresent male]) they have cast decorum to the wind, along with some pieces of clothing [...] ("En Plein Air," Met).

On its part, "The White Dress" gallery focused on intimate scenes, where women rested in the privacy of their homes. The white linen of these fashions however did not symbolize purity. On the contrary, in its transparency, it called attention to female nudity and, again, to their power of seduction —a "power" used for the pleasure of the observer. What is more, although the increased number of women painters in this gallery could be read as an increased agency in the female population (Lewis 2), where they were not only object but also subject creators of the representations, the museum actually stressed the "lesbian subtext" (166) in the creations of the non-normative sexuality of the artists. This way, women painters were stripped from their femininity and made to contribute to the objectification of other women through their interest in their white dress. These un-corseted, immoral postures (172-173) evoked the Orientalist depiction of the harem (164).

Finally, "The Black Dress" provided a selection of clothing items meant to be worn at nighttime, at social gatherings. These parties were described as habitual sites of debauchery ("The Black Dress," Met). The women who entered these spaces were also there to be consumed. Furthermore, they enhanced their sensuality through the darkness of their dress, and penetrated a time of day generally reserved for the gentlemen as well. The sum of these behaviors resulted in the fashionable representation of a particular lifestyle: "Black silk gowns conveyed [...] worldly elegance and sensuous élan" (*Impressionism*, Met).

Recalling that the impressionist artists themselves were not respected as a group in their time, for they broke with the aesthetic standards previously established, with the lapse in time they have gained fame as flâneurs, reporters, or historians, merely captivating the *essence* of their times, while additionally rendering it beautiful. However,

the perception of the women depicted, the free and sensual woman, has not changed: *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* dulls the women's self-making in the act of dressing, the freedom of expression that could come from style, as they become mere tools to the making of the (French) male citizen who creates their representations. He (or a masculine she) is the one who can freely see, desire, interpret, collect and exchange his "muses." It was the impressionists' want of distinction what was portrayed, through women and their fashions, while the women became generic: "they chose full-length formats that privileged the latest styles over individual facial features" (*Impressionism*, Met website).

Fashion thus created, as it still does, the illusion of female liberation, as that depicted in Carolus Duran's *The Lady with the Glove*, displayed in the first gallery.²⁷ The model in this piece posed in a black silk, upper-middle class dress, which the Met described in its audio tour²⁸ as modern but comfortably controversial. Her naked hand undressed its counterpart after rejecting its own glove, now lying the on the ground. The captivated/ing instant in this painting, however, shows how the aforementioned liberation responds to the codes of masculine desire. The woman's posture, her body facing the audience in a three-quarter angle, and of course the design of the dress, invitingly accentuate her backside. The color of the dress furthermore emphasizes the sensuality of the seductress. As the audio guide explained, the sum of these characteristics embodied an unseen male presence, that which in fact ascribes the value of elegance or sensuous flair to the women (*Impressionism*, Met) —remember these are not intrinsic qualities, but meanings made and transmitted through dress.

This self-making of masculine identities, which utilizes the "self-making" of female identities, is an especially powerful and common site of control, given that some

²⁷ The illusion of liberation through the use of fashion will be echoed in the last chapter as I consider the Museum of Chinese in America's configuration or illusion possible process of decolonization through the collection and display of their own fashions.

²⁸ I paid seven dollars for this audio tour.

of us have grown up thinking that our body is our most personal belonging, the limits and extent of our materiality, and that which makes “us” us and not any-body else. As fashion is directly linked to the body, which corresponds to the “geography closest in” (Rich 30), identity construction through fashion becomes increasingly powerful as well. It is therefore compelling to analyze the relationships created when, as in the case of the art museum, physical human bodies disappear from display and yet the content of the exhibitions is still fashion.

Returning to Coubert’s painting, notice how in this image fashion tends to impact and speak more about women’s social positions than that of men. On the one hand, there are no physical male bodies, flesh, and thus behaviors to judge in this depiction. On the other hand, the fact that the artist is male somehow guarantees that the object of the gaze and desire is also female.²⁹ This way, the male subject position is made invisible, easily ignored and thus made unquestionable.

Correspondingly, in the only gallery of *Impressionism* devoted to masculine wear, “Frocks, Coats and Fashion: The Urban Male,” what becomes clear is that in the course of more than 150 years designs for men remain practically unaltered: same suits, ties, tuxedos. This phenomenon illustrates the constantly unchallenged moral, lifestyle and social position of normative men. If the fashions don’t change, then “identities” and the social positions thus “expressed” also remain constant. On the contrary, there seems to be a recurring need to reinvent women’s fashions, to give them more “freedom,” casting away decorum, and yet, actually thrusting them into the public gaze, available for judgment and reprimand given their non-normative lifestyles. This way, the French exhibit illustrates how fashion representations, including painting, aid in the

²⁹ The non-normative sexualities of painters like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s are never addressed in *Impressionism* at the Met.

regularization of non-normative persons.³⁰ They digest them to make them beautiful art, and this beautification occurs as a gender-bound process.

Following these examples, I argue that the museum institution, acting as a social body clothed in fashion, creates relationships, hierarchic relationships with whomever it collects, as well as with whoever visits, admires, dislikes or disregards it, which of course depends on where, globally, the museum and its exhibitions are located.³¹ Furthermore, this process of social organization works as the Metropolitan embodies a masculine gaze. It is the interpreter, and it collects the represented female fashion objects, transforming even the most anarchic communities into order.

FASHION LANGUAGE

Amid the previous analysis of *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, I hinted at several of the elements that allow fashion specifically to deploy social relations. The primary element corresponds to the ways fashion is read, by the user and by the viewers, to express particular behaviors as identities. The ways these messages are expressed and transmitted are through the *language* of fashion. Following, I will develop this idea.

According to Roland Barthes, fashion constitutes one of the many languages that, as myths, structure societies.³² In *The Language of Fashion*, a recompilation of the author's works, which includes roundtable interviews with other thinkers, the reader learns why fashion ought to be studied sociologically; this, in contrast to the wider known histories of dress. Broadly, Barthes argues that concepts and ideas regarding social organization are normalized in fashion. Specifically, Judith Butler would argue

³⁰ Later I will use *Punk: Chaos to Couture*, to extend this assertion.

³¹ I will return to this in the last chapter of the thesis.

³² In *Mythologies*, this author had already explained the ways in which concepts and ideas are constructed.

that it is gender/sex/desire norms and identities that are performatively embodied in these objects (*Gender Trouble* 70).

Barthes defines histories of clothing as those that attempt to list differences among clothing from different times. What is important in these cases is determining archetypes of “bodily coverings” —something practical, unlike adornments (Barthes 6-7). He suggests that, instead, one should look at what a whole “vestimentary system” might *mean*. He believed the former corresponds to an aesthetic analysis, while the latter is rather a sociological one (4). Given that throughout this thesis I seek to destabilize aesthetics not as an intrinsic characteristic in the object, but as a process that is, in addition, relational, it is impossible to consider an aesthetic analysis separate from a sociological one. Yet, I agree with Barthes that an analysis of clothing as vestimentary system should not be limited to quantitative analysis, with fixed beginnings and ends.³³ It is essential to analyze the vestimentary system, because it reveals degrees of participation of people within the system —“the *value* of a system (that is, its *value-for-ness*) can be understood only via acceptances of, or challenges to, it” (13)— and I argue that fashion in art museums determines these levels of inclusion or exclusion. Specifically, the “official” display and attendance to these fashion spectacles, rather than wearing fashion opens up more possibilities for participation, as was stated at the beginning of this chapter.

However, fashion cannot be taken as a simple reflection of its context. It is but a way to represent moments. If fashion is to be studied retrospectively, it is better understood as memory, rather than history. The latter implies a certain degree of fixity that neither fashion, art nor the past in general have. In the words of British writer Jeanette Winterson, “Art is memory — which is quite different from history. Art asks us

³³ Fashion “can easily produce its own rhythms: changes in forms have a relative independence in relation to the general history that supports them, even to the extent where fashion has only a *finite* number of archetypal forms, all of which implies, in the end, a partially cyclical history [...]” (Barthes 6). See also Kroeber 236, where the anthropologist defends the value a quantitative study when attempting to establish a principle for that cyclical history.

to remember who *we are*, and usually that asking has to come as provocation” (Winterson, my emphasis).

Speaking less abstractly, and concretely about clothes, the production, multiplicity and proliferation of particular garments does not instantly imply they are fashionable. On the contrary, what more people wear may not necessarily be fashionable, as taste is not generally democratic (i.e. couture), but rather selective. Ready-to-wear and branding, which appeal to mass publics, are not what gives garments their value or what establishes tastes. Tastes are formed first, and then mainstreamed. Clothes are only signifiers,

in as much they are linked by a group of collective norms [...A] system is completely different from gestalt; it is essentially defined by normative links which justify, oblige, prohibit, tolerate, in a word control the arrangement of garments on a concrete wearer who is identified in their social and historical place: it is a value (Barthes 7).³⁴

The fact that museumification is part of this mainstreaming was foreshadowed at the beginning of this chapter.

Similarly, I argue that what makes clothing fashionable, popular and yet simultaneously aristocratic (5) enough is not so much the amount of sales, or the number of garments collected, but the context in which the item is set. In this sense, dress and fashion could be something that is not even worn at all: at the art museum, fashion is rendered as such because within the institution there is a larger accumulation of signifiers, meaning a wider “*redundancy* of messages, the study of which could lead to a structural definition of taste” (29). Outside the museum, these messages are transmitted by “individual” bodies that can anyway deviate from normative notions of taste. Within the museum, previously normalized messages are re-*collected*, juxtaposed, and potentially reified. In Barthes’s words, “dress must be described, not in terms of aesthetic forms, or psychological motivations, but in terms of institution” (7) —still

³⁴ Barthes defines *gestalt* as “a ‘psychological’ illusion: defining a social fact such as clothes as the sum of a certain number of instincts, which, once identified on a strictly individual level, are then simply ‘multiplied’ to the group level [...] precisely the problem that sociology is trying to leave behind” (6).

recalling I disagree with the rupture between aesthetics and social process/institution. On this occasion, the institution, and what provides the grounds for taste, is the authoritative context of the art museum.

With this in mind, one can see how nowadays, control and therefore surveillance (Weiss 119) no longer come only from a “[...] system of churches, clubs, professional associations [...]” (Horkheimer and Adorno 149). They actually come from the collaboration between these institutions and individuals’ disciplining gazes (Weiss 120).³⁵ The fashion industry and museum institution don’t rob the individual’s function (Horkheimer and Adorno 124) but replaces it so that the audiences’ agency becomes that of a supervisor. Simultaneously, when the public gains the position of expert at the museum, as they come into its walls with former acquired knowledge (i.e. informed by the press and the media), the possibility of subverting the hierarchic structures made by language, and fashion as language, become apparent.³⁶ In placing fashionable garments of past or present inside the art museum, the clothes play by the rules of its geography and take on new meanings. The reinterpretation —transformation and displacement— of the definition of “aesthetics,” not as characteristic but as process, additionally contributes to the process of redefining the language expressed by style.

Roland Barthes explained how speech, *parole*, is but the individual act of getting dressed. However, the scholar clarifies that whoever communicates through their clothing is merely drawing from a larger pool of signifiers that are already in play within the “normative reserve” (8) of the collective. This reserve functions as the ideological *langue*, of which dress is a compelling example. The social components of this particular language include “age groups, genders, classes, degrees of civilization, localization” (9).

³⁵ I do not mean this to imply intentional or conscious.

³⁶ “Language and dress are, at any moment in history, complete structures, constituted organically by a functional network of norms and forms; and the transformation or displacement of any element can modify the whole, producing a new structure: so, inevitably, we are talking about a collection of balances in movement, of institutions in flux” (Barthes 8).

The ways these social components become hierarchically ordered and normalized through the language of fashion, circulating in the art museum, are captivating to a Women's and Gender Studies scholar; especially so, because the collection of garments at an art or any other museum embodies the actual tension between *langue* and *parole*. It is not a one-way street. As cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall would explain in the case of "representation," it is not only "reality" that is represented. Representations also construct reality: "every cultural fact [as are the museum displays] is both a product of history and a resistance of history [...]. The study of dress must retain continually the plurality of these determinisms" (Barthes 14). Fashion, as both dressing and dress, "constitutes an intellectual, notifying relation between a wearer and their group" (10). The awareness of the cultural construction of these determinisms, of these modes of belonging or exclusion, and the realization that there is not one but many "realities" or, rather, standpoints, is a primary stepping-stone for the challenge of normative society in the search for more just, less violent social relationships.

SPEAKING FASHION: STYLE AS POLITICS

Editing speech, the museum exhibits what seems "worthy" of collection and visibility; that is, either what dressings are worthy of becoming language or what may need to be controlled. If art is taken for immutable history, and made political to the point where it is commodified, then it becomes dangerous: it would aid in the justification of those with oppressive agendas. If, on the other hand, objects that are made or re-signified as artworks —becoming anti-commodities or decommodified—, but which are still acknowledgeable as political, because they are created within their context, create space for the contestations of the oppressive powers that structure societies through commodification (Benjamin in Robinson 60).

As much of the feminist project has shown —take, for instance, Judith Butler’s struggle to extend Barthes’s theories— language and thus fashion as language, as a way of perceiving and thinking, as a way of knowing, is also political. Audre Lorde has motivated her readers to dismantle the master’s house by creating and using tools, language, different than those “he” provides us with (110-113). Therefore, I find the study of the language of fashion compelling, especially as it has the possibility to affect publics in art museums nowadays. By this, I do not mean to state that fashion collection and display in museums is only repressive or threatening to the wellbeing of its direct or extended public. I believe that between the redefinition of aesthetics as process and the reminder that language is a means of communication and not expression (Barthes 33) —such that “person-making,” rather than “self-making” comes from engaging with rather than speaking at others— the art museum can provide us with tools to constantly *become* persons cooperatively. In art and aesthetics, and therefore in fashion as art in the museum, it is more about *creating*, than sending a message. This creative process is in itself a political act.

Reviewing cultural studies critic and Yale art history Professor Kobena Mercer’s studies on style, which corresponds to speech —a particular individual’s or group’s way of communication— will be helpful to better understand how fashion as language —as the normalized, hegemonic form of speech— works politically. In the article “Black Hair/Style Politics,” Mercer attempts to de-psychologize style such that it is recognized as a cultural practice. In other words, he wishes to show style not only as a need for the *expression* of the self, (Mercer 34), “[...] as if the fundamental function of clothing were to bring together and solidify the self confronted by a society wishing to swallow it up” (Barthes 26). Instead, he presents style as an aesthetic *embodiment* of society’s norms, conventions, and expectations (Mercer 34).³⁷

³⁷ Following Kroeber once again, this corresponds to the consideration of the super-individual versus the individual (Kroeber 263). This contemplation shifts perspectives from moral

To do so, and clearly influenced by Dick Hebdige, and even by Roland Barthes, who had previously studied dandyism and fashion —perhaps early “punks” who often destroyed or deformed clothing, removing it “from all sense of value as soon as a value [became] a shared one” (Barthes 67)— Mercer explores a few United States black subcultures: the Black Panthers and the Rastafaris. He analyzes the *ways* (form above content) in which they stylized their hair. Their Afros or their Dreadlocks functioned as part of political agendas to contest white superiority and legitimate their own right to being in the world: “Through aesthetic stylization each black hair-style seeks to revalorize the ethnic signifier and the political significance of each re-articulation of value and meaning depends on the historical conditions under which each style emerges” (Mercer 37).

Women’s and Gender Studies scholar L. Ayu Saraswati asserts that space is the imperative signifier for people’s subjectivities (Saraswati 61), as she illustrates in her investigation of the construction of Indonesian —national— whiteness. Similarly, Mercer signals how anti-racist struggles and many other subaltern manifestations are basically a struggle for space and possibility of movement. The three-dimensional Afro, unlike the straightening trends’ techniques and ideals, occupied space (Mercer 38). Furthermore, the hairstyle’s name, as well as its ode to the “natural,” in contraposition to supposedly European artifice, attempted to root a political cause in “Negros” identification with Africa (39). Style embodied what its wearer fought for, displacing hegemonic discourse and relocating their own politics. This way, the physicality of style becomes essential. Accordingly, its consideration when referring also to museum fashion exhibits, as the institution literally concedes space to the garments and their meaning, is likewise imperative.

However, Mercer critiques Rastafaris’ and Black Panthers’ particular form of action, for it relied on a simple “tactical inversion” of values that ultimately still resided

judgments that hierarchize peoples to less condemning, “cultivating [...] understanding[s] of the workings of civilization” (262).

within the Western/European dualistic logic of binary (41); hence the rapid reincorporation of these styles into mainstream dominant culture. As Barthes would explain it:

Indeed, the abundance of forms, upon which the whole mythology of fashion [or the unfashionable —culture and subculture or counterculture—] is constructed ('caprice', 'taste', 'invention', 'intuition', inexhaustible renewal', etc.), is an illusion [a spectacle], which is possible only because, with the synchrony here being very short, the play of combinations easily goes beyond, if only by a little, any human memory of these forms [...This] is a shocking truth for a commerce [or a counter-struggle] based entirely on the exaltation of incessant newness, but useful precisely for an understanding of how ideology *turns* the real *inside out* (Barthes 55).

Still, Mercer's main point in questioning these particular political moves does not dwell exclusively in this tactical inversion. He recognizes that "[...] for 'style' to be socially intelligible as an expression of conflicting values, each cultural nucleus or articulation of signs must share access to a common stock or resource of signifying elements" (Mercer 42).³⁸ Instead, the problem is that the *myth* of natural Africa, for example, is being perpetuated as a unique version of reality. Contrary to what is/was thought, African practices of beautification are one of the best examples of the embrace of the artificial: "[...] artifice is valued in its own right as a mark of both *invention and tradition* [again Baudelaire's definition of modernity], and aesthetic *skills* are deployed within a complex economy of symbolic codes in which *communal subjects recreate themselves collectively*" (42-44, my emphasis).

By the end of his article Mercer confirms that the use of style is or can be a solid instrument for political movements. Yet, it will only be generative as such if it recognizes the value of the constructed aesthetic, the collective way of articulating and affecting the world, in contrast to an individual expression or a marker for an identity that excludes everything, old or new, that does not mirror it. The breakdown of any subculture's stylish language, and the way the museum ultimately could facilitate this collapse, lays in the fixity of the phenomenon: as we will see in the following chapter, when punk

³⁸ This corresponds to Barthes's dress or *langue*.

becomes uniform, or better, when couture's version of punk becomes history at the museum, it is in danger of being read as the only version of punk reality.

Nevertheless, following the previous reflections on space and locality, I reiterate that *Punk: Chaos to Couture* and *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* were staged at an *art* museum and not at an ethnographic, history/heritage, or any other museum. Given that the Metropolitan displays aesthetic pieces that draw attention to *artifice*, which is what Mercer ultimately encouraged, these exhibitions embody the tension necessary for style to become political. The distinction of the art museum display lies in the way the audience is affected, and thus in the possible inter-subjective dialogue, as well as the communication with decommodified objects. This way, in these spectacles, the public — and as I will show later, the communities self-represented— gains the possibility of recreating themselves as they live the exhibitions.

In the context of the art museum, fashion garments are now artworks that request the public's participatory gaze. They are no longer consumer products. At the museum the impossibility of possession, and thus the reduction of the narcissistic neoliberal ego, of one's "identity," creates pleasure in aesthetics as a process, rather than in the attainment of a final product. Pleasure surfaces in the experience of the text in a particular moment, in the process of meaning making, with others around, rather than in the message ultimately transmitted. Fashion's placement within the walls of the art museum recuperates the aura that Benjamin thought lost in modern and contemporary "popular" cultural objects. In other words, fashion may affect people, and *impress* aesthetically, rather than impress its dictates (*Impressionism*) on them.

CHAPTER 3: AFFECTING PUBLICS, PUNK STYLE

“Made with conscious attention to crafted visibility,” (Alpers 27), punk subculture meant to disrupt established assumptions and expectations of taste, beauty, and class through dress. They critiqued, through dramatization, the discriminatory conditions of the British society of the moment (1970s). On its part, *Punk: Chaos to Couture* intended to recount the history of punk (visual) style by, in its own way, dramatizing the shifts that this particular form of dress underwent through time, eventually influencing some of the most respectable designers today. The exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was then mounted as an alternate experience for the public’s perception of art and hence of the fashions displayed: it was “presented as an immersive multimedia, multisensory experience, the clothes animated with period music videos and soundscaping audio techniques” (*Punk*, Met website).

Following the last section of the thesis’s first chapter, where I described how objects both represent and act on their contexts,³⁹ it is possible to say that punk’s exhibition at the Metropolitan is in fact culturally informing: some of its aspects may have been severed in the editing process that habitually occurs when constructing a representation, but other aspects, especially those of its politics of style, were enhanced (Barthes 27). Specifically, in the present chapter I argue that the punk exhibition at the New York City art museum *affectively* helps establish the identity of the West, by proving both Britain’s and the United States’ ability to subsume their own deviants. The deviants’ identities and the identity of the collector are both communicated through the language and politics of style and fashion.

In other words, the Metropolitan may exhibit how punks’ dressing (Barthes 9) practices drew from society to express and disrupt it by actualizing the language they already had. However, the museum also shows how then couture fed off of “authentic”

³⁹ For Roland Barthes presentations of clothes in collections, as in the case of fashion display at the art museum, a social institution, pose an interesting case study as “an ideal confusion between dressing and dress” (32).

punk to create and sell its designs. More importantly, since the museum collects, displays and circulates information, the institutional experience simultaneously shows that one particular perception of punk *parole* can become fixed, mainstreamed, and made into *langue*. This way, display at the museum provides a site for social control, given that the institutional setting regulates the messages embodied in fashion, and can influence the ways those are received by the audience, hence also monitoring them.⁴⁰ However, in the redefinition of arts and aesthetics, I also propose the art museum as a site for negotiation and contestation.

In the succeeding pages, I first study the art museum exhibition in order to see how the museum itself re-presents punk style. This includes a reading of the spatial set-up of the display, which is additionally informed by the analysis of the captions that frame and introduce the themes of each gallery, as well as those that comment on the garments themselves. Furthermore, since the affective experience of museum aesthetics no longer ends in the physical experience of the exhibits, I then move on to interrogate the discourses circulating in the press, mainly articles in the *New York Times*, and in media celebrity events: the television transmission of the 2013 Annual Metropolitan Gala. Both of these forms may condition the public even before attending the shows. Demonstrating the possible reach of the museum exhibitions outside of its walls gives further insight as to why it is important to academically critique the museumification of fashion. Finally, I illustrate how it is ultimately the spectacular quality of displaying fashion at art museums which is of main concern: it is what allows the normalization or disruption of the social, hierarchic positioning of particular communities.

⁴⁰ The description of *Punk: Chaos to Couture* at the beginning of the first chapter intended to show this process of preconditioning and disciplining of visitors' bodies in the art museum. I will extend this idea below.

PUNK: CHAOS TO COUTURE

To begin, notice that the experience at the museum is unavoidably a *collective* experience. At this institution, the audience, if affected, feels in public: this particular location creates space for shared debate, boredom, fascination, re-illusion and re-enchantment. Acknowledging the collectivity of emotion, contrary to the limitation of individual experience, allows the affective questioning of interpersonal and, later, geopolitical relationships: “Affect is not simply emotion [...] nor is it reducible to the affections or perceptions of an individual subject” (Thrift in Navaro-Yashin 167). In other words, exploring the affective power of the fashion exhibitions is key to grasp what implications possibly arise from presenting fashion’s embodied punk or Other cultures through the gaze or perspective of the *art* museum. Recognizing the strength of museum displays means accepting that affective experiences with “un-useful” objects — even with objects commodified, and decommodified— are as or more powerful than becoming fascinated by “fact.” Museum exhibits can have “real” effects in the world.

As I approached the exhibition, the rational space of Greek and Roman sculpture, where people move around the artworks or sit to contemplate them, motivated an emotional build up that eases the public’s perhaps cathartic experience as they confront the punk exhibit. According to Aristotle in *Poetics*, catharsis, and the pleasure that comes with it, is made possible by reactions of fear and compassion, which cause amusement in tragic representations (Aristotle 1453a-b).

For example, when museumgoers read the “Title Wall” of *Punk*, they turn their backs to a miniature note on the opposite wall that warns them about the sexually explicit imagery of the exhibition. Having overlooked this script, as they enter the next gallery, intrigue, awe and/or disgust for the explicit contents of the show magnify. This time surrounded by black walls, more music playing in the background —i.e. The Ramones; a narrative of Punk; and a speaking TV—, the viewers come face to face with a vitrine displaying a replica of the toilets in New York City’s club CBGB’s. The cathartic

experience relies on this magnification of feeling: from the very first gallery the public is permitted to live punk, though only through a representation of it. The public can either identify with or feel sorry for the punk social movement; they do not necessarily perform punk in “reality,” but they do witness it. As Guy Debord says, referring to the spectator: the more they contemplate, the less they live (Debord 30). Either way, punk can be expunged from the public’s bodily/mental systems during the exhibition. Thus, the subculture does not actually threaten the hegemonic, normative reality that the museum shows. Ultimately, the visitors can also be disciplined.

Punk: Chaos to Couture provided its public with the possibility of “vicariously” living punk through the immersion in multimedia. Nevertheless, since it was this specifically, movie clips and music that molded the experience, there was no time for thoughtful contemplation of the information presented. Instead, there was a chance for an affective and sensory absorption of the Met’s particular representation of punk (“The Work of Art” 268). Additionally, functioning as cacophony, the multimedia immersion could easily produce a sense of discomfort in the audience, of course depending on the audience’s standpoint. This could render punk lifestyle itself to be perceived and felt as disturbing and overwhelming.

The rest of the information the exhibition provided —the written introductions pasted on the walls of each gallery, the interior design of the galleries themselves, and the couture garments— was there to be actively engaged with, gazed, and reflected upon by the museumgoers. Generally, they could be reflected upon at the visitor’s pace. However, the exhibition was in fact built for young and/or physically able-bodied public: there are no seating accommodations in the galleries. The audience was then continuously urged to rush through the galleries; again, no time for close reading.

Even so, there was one characteristic of *Punk: Chaos to Couture* that managed to trump the aforementioned description of superficial interaction between the costume and the gazer. As I walked the halls of the Metropolitan punk display, I found myself

being conditioned, socialized into a normative behavior, although I was not personally “violating” any museum rules. Every certain periods of time (not at constant intervals) I heard a high-pitched beeping sound. It was an alarm, warning everyone in the exhibition that somebody had touched the collected pieces. Even if the “incident” did not occur in the gallery I was in, I could still hear the irritating noise; it was louder the closer I stood to the “perpetrator”. In less than an hour, after thirty-two startling announcements that people had come into contact with the artworks, I noticed that I had begun to browse the rooms looking for the people responsible. A pattern of surveillance appeared among my peers.

Nevertheless, I simultaneously realized there were still those willing and not entirely caring about bending or breaking the rules. The public’s collective attitude started to embody the spirit of political punk, that spirit which had been shamed by an overexposure to and emphasis on punk style.⁴¹ The garments affectively drew the visitors in to closely look and even touch them —though this was not permitted. Once the objects managed to entice the museumgoers to turn toward them, as Csordas explicates, there was potential for the inter-subjective relationships among object/subject to be transformed. The museum’s promise of animating the garments through multimedia had failed, but the collectivity of the experience fulfilled that role.

Focusing the Couture Lens. Now that I have set the mood of *Punk: Chaos to Couture*, a mood in tension —both constricting and yet transforming—, I wish to analyze the organization of this exhibition. Recalling Alpers, the thematic line that the exhibit follows, a *progression* that is not only temporal, but also geographic, and material (what the garments are made of and what inspired them), determines how the viewer is meant to contemplate the designs. Therefore, following I provide a reading of the content of the seven galleries of the exhibit: “Facsimile of CBGB bathroom, New York, 1975;” “Clothes

⁴¹ Later in this chapter I will return to this theme in order to compare the collective museum experience to the individual media experience.

for Heroes;" "430 King's Road Period Room;" "D.I.Y.: Hardware;" "D.I.Y.: Bricolage;" "D.I.Y.: Graffiti & Agitprop;" and "D.I.Y.: Destroy." This proves necessary for the reading of the transitional feeling among the different sections and, ultimately, of the movements that the exhibition itself embodies: from the United States to Britain (and Europe) and back; from music and politics to style; from dirty trash to sanitary recycling; from origin to destruction; and, of course, from chaos to couture.

Stepping away from the facsimile of the CBGB bathroom, which initially tacitly illustrated 1975 New York punk —musical and more intellectual and artistic punk (Bolton, "See the museum in new ways")— as a dark, literally gut moving *subculture*, bodies walk into "Clothes for Heroes." This room mainly featured designs by Vivienne Westwood and Michael McLaren. Emphasizing the uniqueness of these "authentic" punk designers, the gallery included a replica of their London boutique: a few clothing racks displayed the non-mass produced do-it-yourself garments.

A round platform covered the central space of this gallery. Rising a mere foot above the ground, this platform served as the podium for the so-labeled heroes. Facing outward from the circle, they gave each other their own backs, and, as an impenetrable army, dressed in leather boots and jacket ensembles, discouraged the public from looking closely at them from behind. However, the audience could still peek through the spaces between the bodies. To the sides, on the four corners of the gallery, incomplete, upper-bodied mannequins displayed the sexual and political punk T-shirts. Their logos included: "Tits," "Cambridge Rapist," and a ready-to-wear version of "Two Cowboys," a shirt showing two male cowboys, naked from the waist down, their penises touching.

Contrarily, in the immediately adjacent gallery, "D.I.Y. Hardware," complete bodied mannequins were placed on platforms some three feet high. Set up mostly two by two, for a total of 15 sculptures, these blinded (by wigs) mannequins stood *over* the public. As if encountering a superior being, museum visitors' eyes needed to look up to witness the full splendor of Italian Gianni Versace's "skin" revealing safety pin dress,

among others. Easily accessible to the spectators' eyes sat the labels of the gowns — name of the designers, years of existence or of foundation of the fashion houses, and the materials used to make the objects. In "Clothes for Heroes," on the other hand, this information was further out of people's reach, as they were located at the punk mannequins' feet. Somewhat unconsciously, as the public ignored the labels, they also refused to bend over, squat, kneel, or bow at punks' feet. The commercial value of the garments was thus more accentuated in the third gallery than in the previous one, as if taking prestige away from the designs, which "better," more authentically, portrayed "original" punk.

Overall, according to the Metropolitan curators, "Hardware" was meant to show how, taken on by fashion designers —creative artists— punk style had to be rendered, if not beautiful, at least artful before being exhibited at an official institution. The original "lowly items" ("D.I.Y Hardware," Met), one-of-a-kind garments made by "real" punks who defined their politics against profit-oriented capitalism, thus "*exploit[ing material]* to imbue their fashions with an aesthetic of anarchy, violence, and even cruelty" ("Hardware," my emphasis), were not the ones displayed as part of history in the galleries of the Metropolitan. What was displayed in the art museum were the products of the visionaries that dared to adapt punk for the mainstream with "grandiose embellishments." It is these designers who, according to the Met, "not only question but also mitigate the distinctions between fine art and found art, high culture and popular culture" ("Hardware").

Nevertheless, one thing is what the Metropolitan *says*, their appeared intent, and another what it tacitly *shows* and what the public *lives*. The museum clearly distinguished between the "hallmarks of haute couture," the designers, and punks. It is the former that transform the latter into "artistic expression" for the mainstream to consume. The Met did not actually mitigate any distinctions. Instead, it showed a smooth and almost natural progression from low to high, from chaos to couture. Yet, by

explicitly stating their concern and recognizing the value of this “ideal” moderation between art and everything pop, the Met guarded itself from critique regarding their reinvention of punk, an interpretation that condemns “original” punk as less worthy.

For example, notice how, according to punk designer Malcolm McLaren, punks “messed around with imagery that basically was provocative, and more often than not, to do with sex, and if it wasn’t to do with sex it was to do with politics” (“Clothes for Heroes”). Punk politics were respectively known for their gender-bending styles. Nevertheless, *Punk: Chaos to Couture* displayed gender normalization, as it showed the transition from chaos to couture. What is more, the facile collection of punk subculture was mostly performed through the feminization of the subculture.


For one thing, the number of female fashions at the museum was overwhelming. Additionally, the mediums the stylists used to distinguish male and female mannequins, other than secondary sex organs, were the shoes. Punk women mannequins wore high heels throughout. Lastly, I would like to draw attention to two dresses featured in the black and white gallery “Hardware.” Zandra Rhodes⁴² design (spring/summer 1977), a woman’s wedding dress stood face to face with two of Gianni Versace’s dresses (spring/summer 1994). The British garment could be taken as a “sacrilege” to the concept of the wedding dress, neither standardly feminine (beautiful nor sexual), but rather scruffy, as it was covered in rips and holes. A punk violation, though a rather superficial one, of the matrimonial institution —symbol of familial life and heteronormativity—, this dress along with its political meanings could be easily dismissed as unfashionable by the audience. Britain has not been as popularly known for its chic fashions as Italy has, with events like Milan Fashion Week, and in this particular museum set-up, a physical confrontation, the beauty of the latter stood to be heightened, simultaneously elevating the anti-punk culture it embodied.

⁴² British, born 1940.

Furthermore, the aforementioned inability to talk back to the Metropolitan's punk representation is evidenced in how the public seemed to align with the museum's perspective. Buying into the characterization of punk behavior or ideals as "shocking" — sexual openness portrayed by the aforementioned t-shirts, for example— they took pictures of these garments' imagery more often than of any other subject. Consider that these topics, however, are only shocking because they are abnormal. They violate the "secret" imperative of Foucault's Victorian society, by voicing non-normative sexualities.

Still, it is necessary to acknowledge that precisely at this point of the museum visit, somehow affected by their counterparts' doings and perhaps even by the theme of the exhibit —as mentioned earlier, a cathartic exceptional state of rebellion—, the public again needed to break the rules of the museum. Punk escaped its museum representation and disciplining in the collective lived experience. In "Clothes for Heroes" the audience took unpermitted photographs. More importantly, in "Hardware," a gallery created top to bottom with white Styrofoam walls,⁴³ some of *Punk's* visitors decided to graffiti the walls.

On my first visit to the exhibition, during the week it opened, the walls remained white, a white that served as a light tunnel for the transition from chaos to couture. A few weeks later, when I returned for a follow-up visit, I noticed something had changed. In permanent pen and multi colored markers, the walls now read:

"I just <3 punk"
 "destroy capitalism"
 "PUN is NOT DEAD [Anarchy A drawing];" "AWWWW!"
 "This show sucks.
 Bad idea
 with the bathroom you posers"
 THIS IS ART"
 
 "[caricature face]"
 "PUNK IS FOR CHICKS WITH SMALL BOOBS"

⁴³ It is worth mentioning that the political, cultural, and especially environmental (waste, consumerist conscious) mentality that certain punks might claim nowadays is completely violated by the use of Styrofoam, as it is one of the most contaminating, an un-recyclable material *par excellence*. This goes against the re-appropriating effort of punk, something the exhibit often explains and yet, does not truly practice.

“SAVE OUR SEE” [see in black] “SEA?” [in pink, someone else’s correction]

Confused, I asked a security guard if the museum had intentionally used graffiti as decoration from the beginning. Had visitors in fact drawn and written on the walls? The latter was true. However, she told me that the Met had only allowed the public to write on the walls for a couple of weeks: “It was getting out of hand.” Most of these graffiti complained against the lack of authenticity of the museum’s punk, and against the tacit statement the museum asserted about “chaotic” punk being dead, an element of the past now belonging to a “coutured” recording of that past. Additionally, these comments portrayed the popular knowledge of the punk movement: aspects of the subculture that circulate and have managed to stay alive.

In the end, though, people’s impulse to graffiti “Hardware” might have worked in favor of the exhibitions normalizing discourse; that is, against punk. The graphic interventions created a brilliant parallel with the second to last gallery, a perfect bridge to embody the exhibition title “chaos to couture.” After a speedy walk through the remaining galleries, the public could witness how “high fashion’s co-option of punk inevitably *sanitizes* its anarchic rebelliousness” (“Clothes for Heroes,” my emphasis). When the museum deployed this medical vocabulary, which imbues the museum with objective, scientific authority, it additionally pathologized punk. Rendered originally unsanitary, punk spectacularly appears as a subculture cured by fashion, however “violent” (co-option) the mechanisms for that sanitation could be. Fashion, simultaneously, was conveniently framed to function as savior, coming to purge the mainstream from this dirtiness. Hence, the exhibition may reduce the fear or amusement in the public, by manipulating punk’s “original potency and [...] singular capacity to engage and excite the imagination;” the affective power of punk is transferred to enhance the affective power of museum display, and thus the power of its discourse.

To better understand this transition, it is worth analyzing the remaining organization of *Punk*. After walking through the long corridor that is “Hardware,” we enter “D.I.Y. Bricolage.” This gallery comprises the theme of punk “recycling,” which illustrates the subculture’s intent to create rather than consume (“Title Wall”). Twenty-six mannequins stand in the room, some in a center stage —Gareth Pugh⁴⁴ gowns designed with black trash bags; others, in couples, backed against the walls —Alexander McQueen and Maison Martin Margiela.⁴⁵ Such as the second gallery on view, these garments are displayed a mere foot off the ground. A large screen in the back wall plays a video. Loud music vibrates across the space. This time, the walls were made up of smooth baby pink plastic containing trash in a vacuum.

Supposedly, this gallery meant to expose one of punk’s subcultural stylistic methods: bricolage, “a ‘science of the concrete’ [...] which far from lacking logic, in fact carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the *minutiae* of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a ‘logic’ which is not our own” (Hawkes in Hebdige 103). In order to explicate this concept, the Metropolitan in fact quotes cultural theorist Dick Hebdige:

Punk style was defined principally through the violence of its ‘cut ups.’ Like Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ —manufactured objects which qualified as art because he chose to call them such— the most unremarkable and inappropriate items could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion (Hebdige in “Bricolage,” Met).

However, this phrase, found in one of the final chapters of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is taken out of context (there is no reference to the book in the museum). It appears as though Hebdige were critiquing punk and the violent *arbitrariness* of the ready-mades.

If, on the other hand, one refers to the original text, one can see that the Metropolitan omitted an essential part of the cultural scholar’s analysis. Immediately after this sentence, Hebdige wrote: “Anything within or without reason could be turned

⁴⁴ English fashion designer.

⁴⁵ Belgian fashion designer.

into part of what Vivien Westwood called ‘confrontation dressing’ so long as the rupture between ‘natural’ and constructed context was clearly visible (i.e. the rule would seem to be: if the cap doesn’t fit, wear it)” (Hebdige 107). Therefore, what the museum curators exclude from the scholar’s definition of bricolage are the ideas behind it, the *meaning* in the style conveyed:

the conventional insignia of the business world – the suit, collar and tie, short hair, etc. – were stripped of their original connotations – efficiency, ambition, compliance with authority – and transformed into ‘empty’ fetishes, objects to be desired, fondled and valued in their own right (Hebdige 104-105).

In “D.I.Y. Bricolage,” the found object material, the trash bags, are a mere accidents, just “(un)fashion” and no politics, no dislocation of meaning. It is an instrument to reaffirm the authority intrinsic in the “beautiful” gown, whatever material it may be made of.

What the museum perhaps intentionally disregards—in the editing of the quotation used— and leads the public to ignore, is that the ready-mades were not simply “art because they said so,” but because they, as punk subculture, recorded a “new ‘surreality’” (Hebdige 105). That surreality, “the celebration of the abnormal and the forbidden” (105) is what the hegemonic culture and, by extension, the Metropolitan avoid recognizing. Instead, by fashioning punk to fit the hegemonic narrative, the museum renders “original” punk as trash found in a vacuum.

Once punk’s trash is contained, the public advances into “D.I.Y Graffiti and Agitprop.” This gallery, which the now molested “Hardware” parallels, holds colorfully splashed tulle ball/princess style gowns (corset topped and wide falling skirts). I confirmed how, as I suggested quoting Kroeber and Barthes in the previous chapter, present day couture value depended on an embrace of the past and the “eternal” ideals of fashion. Moreover, “Graffiti” explains to the public what *couture* graffiti should look like. The black walls serve as contrast, accentuating the marvelous use of bright color in the designs: no matter how dark the context, creative, skillful minds can produce — standard(ize)— beauty. Once more in Aristotelian terms, the “tragic drama” that is punk is resolved in this fairy-tale climax of beauty. The audience could undergo a cathartic

experience here, in the safe space of the controlled and disciplining museum, and leave punk behind, un-touched and un-lived in “real” life.

The public exits the scene through “D.I.Y. *Destroy*” (my emphasis). However, this gallery displays not so much punk’s effort to destroy the establishment, as the contrary. In large neon illuminated letters, this likewise dark room, reads the punk motto “NO FUTURE.”⁴⁶ At the entrance of the exhibition, on the “Title Wall,” the curators had explained that this phrase was taken from the lyrics of The Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen,” framing punk as the future of no future. Initially, the phrase appeared as an optimistic remark alluding to punk’s infiltration into the mainstream as inspiration for high fashion. However, at the end of the exhibit, and functioning as a sort of infinity mirror within a carnivalesque context, what becomes evident is that it is *Punk: Chaos to Couture* that commands the contestation of the subculture: punk should *work for* fashion. While fashion had once previously contested punk by making its style profitable, it is the exhibit that could potentially guarantee punk’s no future, by fixing and subliming couture’s particular reading, interpretation and re-presentation of punk. “In a bizarre twist of fate [embodied and lived in the museum exhibition], their DIY *ethos* has become the future of ‘no future’” (“Title Wall,” my emphasis): the do-it-yourself ethos corresponds to couture’s hand-made, made-to-measure, one-of-a-kind price elevating value.

Finally, since nothing about punk was explicitly censored at the museum, but perhaps thrown into the spotlight for everyone to see, patrol and judge, as part of a *historical* origin story, its destruction *feels* not only natural and unavoidable, but, most importantly, plausible and compulsory (Aristotle 1451b).

⁴⁶ The original has the R backwards.

MEDIA AESTHETICS: PROSTHETIC EXTENSIONS FOR MUSEUM AFFECTATION

As was previously asserted, it is necessary to study how fashion museum exhibits can affect publics beyond the museum walls, such that even those who do not come into contact with the displays are still viable to be controlled and organized through the discourses circulating in the museum. In order to understand how these broader communities may become affected (labeled collector or collected), one must understand the interaction of punks' —or other fashions'— spectacle with the museum spectacle, and additionally with the wide reach of the media spectacle. This interaction is what allows broader aesthetic affectations of interpersonal and transnational relationships.

In his particular reading of subcultures and their styles, Dick Hebdige states:

The emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press. This hysteria is typically ambivalent: it fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement [...] Style in particular provokes a double response: it is alternatively celebrated (in the fashion page) and ridiculed or reviled [...] (Hebdige 93-94).

Therefore, I first take a step back to see what it means for this subculture to be spectacular.

In *Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord defines spectacle not merely as a collection of images, but as “a social relation among people mediated by images” (Debord 4). In this sense, spectacle is not an end in itself, but an instrument of unification (3), a language consisting of signs (as Hebdige also defines style) that express a world vision (5). As any other language, spectacle needs both an enunciator *and* a receptor —a relationship that need not be unidirectional, but which usually is, when it comes to mass media being the communicator. Punk subcultural style, as language, would not be spectacular if punks collected and reinvented everyday objects, made into clothes and images, did not have any references for the mainstream to contrast them with. Likewise, *Chaos to Couture* or any other museum collection, could not be considered a spectacle if there were no public to regard and reflect upon them.

Furthermore, it is fundamental to consider that spectacle materializes the illusion (20) that individual reality corresponds to a social reality. For example, in the case of the relationship between punk “original” subculture and the punk exhibit at the Metropolitan, the former expresses the world vision of a subaltern community; the latter, with a wider spectacular reach, thanks to economic and social capacity, expresses the cosmopolitan vision of the hegemony, a hegemony reigned by the same economic systems at play (14). Through spectacle, the museum’s view of punk becomes social reality, when it is in fact an individual reality: a single perspective of another appropriated “individuality.” Still, subscribing to the social reality portrayed by the museum, that is, assuming an expert position, possessing the gaze rather than being the object to be looked upon (punk) —recall the previous section—, becomes a means of acquiring social prestige (17). Through appearance, the spectacle of punk at the Met *shows* what is permitted and possible (25), who belongs and who does not. How the museum regulates finally depends on where the audience positions itself, by identifying with the displayed or the spectator.

Writing Punk. To better understand the above, it is convenient to look at how mediations could work. For instance, in order to ensure particular reactions to the punk exhibition, and in case people did not even have the chance to attend the show at the Met, media and celebrity events like The Costume Institute’s Gala serve both as prelude and aid in the defusing of the threat the punk movement, unmediated, represents. While punk gains visibility through fashion exhibitions at the museum, a visibility that attempts to explain the oddity of this phenomenon, its visibility also becomes a site of mockery and of actual invisibility, an excuse to talk about and showcase something else —i.e. “the cultural tourism that it inevitably leads to” (“Anarchy in the Met”). In the geographical context of the Met exhibition, press articles such as *The New York Times’*

“Would Anna⁴⁷ Settle for a Safety Pin?” published by Eric Wilson on May 1st, 2013, one week before the exhibition opened, deviate the conversation on punk by referring to The Costume Institute’s gala as “fashion’s party of the year.” Consequently, the public’s intrigue regarding the gala and celebrity gossip builds up, rather than the anticipation for the museum exhibit.

Additionally, the press circulates questions like: will celebrities be able to “get punk right?” This question in particular assumes that there is in fact something to “get right.” It suggests there is an original, authentic, and categorizable punk, rendering it a uniform movement and style. In an article that seemed to appeal to the political side of punk and its style, Jon Caramanica, another *New York Times* reporter, wrote:

Everyone loves a uniform. In both the mainstream and the counterculture, they connote order and authority. They shape the story. They make things easy. For the wearer, they stand in for having to speak. For the observer, they serve as shorthand [...] The uniform of no uniform became punk’s loudest and most lasting aesthetic legacy, probably to its detriment. It was an easy caricature, a readily reproducible expression of working class angst (“Anarchy in the Met”).

Although Caramanica seems to make an effort to analyze punk style and its value in a brief history of the movement and its incorporation into couture

—the clothes were always meant to be shown off. That the clothes might be someday enshrined —entombed?— in the same museum that also houses towering collections of Renaissance art, Egyptian artifacts and more, is perhaps the end logic of Mr. Hell’s nihilistic ideology, the dream of McLaren’s hucksterism. Such an exhibition wouldn’t be possible without the systemic dismantling of the walls around high and low culture that punk helped kick down even harder than its predecessors [...] (“Anarchy in the Met”)—,

he still dislocates punk from his own context by labeling spectacular punk expression as something more British than American. Moreover, he expresses that it was “keen-eyed designers with *traditional* skills” who rescued punk gems. Finally, he ends his article with the question: “Does infiltration corrupt, or do the corrupt infiltrate,” infiltration and especially corruption being words with generally negative connotations.

⁴⁷ Anna Wintour, born in London, England, has been editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, the American fashion magazine, since 1988. In 2013 she also became artistic director for Condé Nast, mentioned earlier in this chapter.

By writing these statements, the press (Wilson, Caramanica, etc.) homogenizes and orders punk for the public; it provides a perspective that sensationalizes punk to gain audience interest in the exhibition, and yet ridicules it by referring to the subculture as taint. The press instructs its readers, and/or those who have other forms of access to the information on how to and what to read about the subculture. Spectacularly, majorly through mockery —think about the comic visuality of Venezuelan-American⁴⁸ designer, “unfailingly elegant,” Carolina Herrera’s “bead-head” Mohawk (“Would Anna Settle”)— the press molds the public’s expectations, and punk politics disappear. The fun, carnivalesque, image of punk takes its place and becomes merely the exception necessary to reaffirm the norm and reproduce sovereign power: the ability of British Andrew Bolton to control punk through the American museum aids in the reaffirmation of the hegemonic western powers. Finally, if non-normative “anarchy” —proven “working-class” resistance to the system that grants them the responsibility of their own poverty and abjection— does appear in the articles, it is solely mentioned to be immediately dismissed as that effortlessly teased ideology of decay and disorder that “intrinsically” defines punk (“Anarchy in the Met”).

I do not mean to say that “power,” as an omnipresent hand, intentionally manipulates its public. In fact, it is likely that the press (its writers) acts performatively. That is, as Judith Butler would explain, they write from a subject position that has been unconsciously constructed through repetition of personal practices or of those to which one has been exposed (“Performative Acts” 520). Their contexts, the way they have been

⁴⁸ I find it necessary to recall Carolina Herrera’s nationality, for she has become an icon in the fashion industry *despite* her heritage. If there was one thing Herrera knew needed blurring in order for her to access the top levels of these social circles, to become known for her work in dressing the First Ladies of the United States, it was her ethnic background. I am not saying that she shames her Venezuelan side, but that it is rather invisible in her designs, and in her own personal performance, which generally corresponds to the preppy American look (her brand name is in fact “Carolina Herrera *New York*”). And still, I have to recognize that, even if she did incorporate her cultural heritage into her designs, there is a possibility that it would only result in an appropriation of that culture, with little or no regard to the actual meanings: an image of Venezuela, digested and drawn through the dominant gaze of the United States; this, especially considering Venezuelan and USA economic and political rivalries in the past decades.

raised, educated, the people they encounter, the money they earn through writing for a certain public all affect the ideas they later communicate in their articles.

Nevertheless, consider that this New York City newspaper explicitly stated that the gala “is the barometer of the famous and powerful, a critical fund-raiser for the museum, *a testament to the muscle of Ms. Wintour, who is a chairwoman*” (“Would Anna Settle?” my emphasis). Likewise, it determined its punch-line inquiry to be, “What do you suggest to a client who can afford a \$25,000-or-so ticket to the gala, but has nothing to wear?” (Silver⁴⁹ in “Would Anna Settle?”), where the recurring “problem [...] is that rich women don’t want to look punk, or grunge” (Silver). In this case, it becomes evident that there are levels of consciousness in the media, and that what is being purposefully transmitted —unilaterally (Debord 24)— to the general public, are in fact representations of hierarchical society (23), expectations for a particular mode of “rich” life, and propaganda for the fashion industry that controls the art museum.

Again, I do not mean to portray the media as an intrinsically scheming agent, for the media is not “ossified” either. Melena Ryzik wrote a piece in *The New York Times* (April 25, 2013) in which she attempts to describe, at least in part, the purpose of the punk exhibition, according to its curator, Andrew Bolton. For this intent, the author included narratives of the display’s set up. Most importantly, she gave voice to one of those supposedly authentic punks, Legs McNeil, an authority in the movement and founder of “Punk” magazine in 1975, during the peak of their political struggle. He says: “‘Getting these high-fashion designers, what does that have to do with punk? [...] So rich people could go slumming? Come on, give me a break.’ It’s a ‘masturbatory fantasy for Anna Wintour and Vogue,’ he added” (“Haute Punk”).

While the header of an article written in *The Guardian* newspaper in February of 2013 explained that the organizers of *Punk: Chaos to Couture* wished the exhibition had the power to shock and draw in crowds (“Punk fashion celebrated”), it was not so much

⁴⁹ Cameron Silver in an American fashion historian, who founded *Decades*, a boutique featuring vintage couture as well as modern luxury garments.

the exhibition that provided the shock factor as these quoted punks in *The New York Times*. McNeil's skepticism, perhaps read as aggressive, and his sexual allusions, possibly taken to disrespect some of the most "unmistakably" respectable figures in the fashion industry, provided *Punk* the rebellious attitude that the recycled, designer clothes featured in the exhibition could not guarantee.

Consider, for example, the safety pins sensually holding together the black Versace dress displayed in the museum's third gallery "D.I.Y.: Hardware." The pins would not alarm the public on their own, but would barely reference the once spectacular, recognized physically appealing face and body of Elizabeth Hurley, when she wore the dress to the premier of the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994.⁵⁰ As it is not labeled in this manner at the museum, *The New York Times* made sure to bring this information back to the public's memory, or at least informed them, me, about it, in "Would Anna Settle?" Still, the Versace dress, mediated by time, and not worn on a real, seemingly naked body, but displayed on a mannequin, ceased to shock. Still, McNeil's and other punk's "deliberately transgressive" ("Haute Punk") personas and statements justified the necessity to re-invent and re-frame punk at the museum.

Live-Streaming a Punk Phase. Moving on, the public's response to the exhibition could be preconditioned not only by written press and its speculations about the Met gala, but, in a different manner, by the audience's actual presence at the margins of the social event: that is, by their peeking, from the Upper East Side streets, at the red carpet celebrity entrance. This event served as preamble, the starting point for speculation about what occurs after the guests walk through the museum's walls and into the party. It takes the spotlight away from the art exhibition and throws it onto celebrity lifestyles. Who "got punk right" after all? Who, then, subsumed to the counterculture and became,

⁵⁰Model Miranda Kerr, known also as Orlando Bloom's ex-wife, wore a dress that evoked Liz Hurley's 1994 dress, was featured once more in the 2014 edition of the Golden Globes, worn by another celebrity beauty.

therefore, object of derisory media action afterwards? Who avoided this subaltern spectacle and remained spectacular under the eyes of mainstream culture? Who deserves to be a model celebrity and stay at the top?

Since I myself did not experience NYC streets and crowd next to the red carpet, in the following pages I will refer to the live TV transmission of the event. This particular mode of presentation of *Punk: Chaos to Couture* particularly interests me because it appeals to the emotion and senses of the audience, engaging with it, more so than the press, and in a different way than the art exhibition.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the immersive multimedia experience of the museum display is inevitably a collective experience. Furthermore, the community (by community I do not mean homogeneous) is physically affected at the museum, and yet, this bodily presence does not imply the possibility for reflexive contemplation of the exhibit. On the other hand, the live streaming of the Costume Institute Benefit (sponsored by Moda Operandi, Samsung, and produced by Vogue), experienced individually from home —unless it were arranged as a family or friends afternoon plan, for example—, had a wider space for enticing language and presentation, given its form: seeing “punk” garments worn and lived by the media celebrities in fact *animated* the fashions, the way the museum promised and yet did not.

It is important to consider that I am referring to the television experience and not a later online streaming, with the ability to pause, rewind, and fast-forward. The viewers can easily absorb the live streaming, as the aforementioned videos and music, without much time for thought. Even though television did not need to make the red carpet event spectacular, for the celebrities and their gowns were spectacle enough, the narration of the gala particularly spoke to the emotional. The public may have been feeling one thing — i.e. anticipation; shock— but, as if just in case they were not feeling the appropriate emotion, the hosts additionally narrated to people their expected feelings: “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many photographers in my life [...] the flashes

from all the cameras create a sort of divine insanity” (Gala, Met website). The audience, unaware, was being told what to sense and, this way, how to be affected —how to read and interact with not only the exhibition, but also the rest of the environment and the people.

This is something that does not occur at the museum. However, the transmission of the gala could be considered a prologue to the exhibition: a prosthetic limb of the aesthetic experience. The fact that the TV coverage described the New York City atmosphere as electric, and that they explained the gala “is,” since 1948, a “reflection of our changing culture” which serves to conform and establish fashion trends, unequivocally informs the people who later witness the exhibition. Some of these audiences might have even thought they received enough of a glimpse into the art world and into the *meaning* of punk through the gala on TV, deciding to skip the exhibition altogether. Those who attended the museum display, after being interpellated by the media, might enter *Punk* expecting or looking forward to some level of similar deviating fun. If the museum’s exhibit were to be lived without mediation from the press and the gala streaming, the affectation provided by the art collection itself could fall short: the immersion in multimedia at the Met functioned more as confusing cacophony than as a sensory stimulating phenomena.⁵¹ Nonetheless, and reiterating a previous assertion, the Metropolitan used punk’s affective power, enhanced it through its linkage to celerity media, and therefore managed to heighten the museum display.

Lastly, I want to indicate how this process of intensifying museum affectation has consequences in social organization outside the art institution. Recalling that it is punk couture that is divinized at the Met, enjoying the “insanity” of the exhibition does not mean the public is affiliating with punk itself. On the contrary, as a museum viewer one would be identifying with the “finest new asset[s]” (Gala, Met website) of the Hollywood and fashion industries, that is, personalities like Katie Holmes.

⁵¹ Svetlana Alpers had critiqued the Musée d’Orsay’s depiction of Impressionism and Fashion for this same reason. See “The Museum as a Way of Seeing.”

Interviewed on the red carpet, initially addressed by the question “What are you wearing, as they say nowadays, who are you wearing?” in the midst of flirtatious laughter, the actress stressed that she did in fact go through a punk *phase*. Nevertheless, she mentioned that her mother thought it was great, meaning: “I failed to piss off the establishment” (Holmes, Gala, Met website). Therefore, if a museumgoer gives up this form of identification, by, in other words, also refusing to accept Holmes or any other celebrity (including the designers), as a commodity, as economic capital with exchange value, one would also be giving up belonging to such an elevated group. One would be *buying into* punk’s “original” spectacle, unlike, for example, Holmes, who failed to, and hence became marketable.

Ultimately, the affiliation of The Costume Institute with the media and the celebrity social circle, and the ways the museum public thus interacts the exhibition, establish alliances —present or virtual— that include selves or discriminate others. In the case that the museum experience were thoroughly omitted, that is, if it were only experienced through the Metropolitan’s website, the Gala’s streaming, and/or the articles, then the collective impulses to transgress this particular mainstreamed punk representation –i.e. touching the garments, taking photographs, or writing on the walls— also disappear. Consequently, the museum’s perspective and standards for collection of punk would go unquestioned and permit the absorption of the subculture’s normalization. This would further confirm the power of the economic system, given that it is fashion and the fashion industry, through the museum, which create space for this control.

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

While the previous analysis mainly shows normalizing processes embodied in the fashion exhibition, it is imperative to keep in mind that these shows take place in an *art* museum, and not any other. Accordingly, they also allow for generative relationships

among people and with cultural products that not only excel for their form but that simultaneously create emotion. Assuming that the Metropolitan, as an art museum, plans its exhibitions aesthetically, one can say that the immersive multisensory experiences at *Punk: Chaos to Couture* served as “grammars [that] permeate with visceral narrations of embodied values” (Saraswati 4). These languages, in turn, communicate with the public in order to create new meanings relative to the artworks displayed. Given that fashion —linked to the person in ways that it both constructs a “self” and is designed by an already defined “self”— proves to be precisely a language that embodies values in quotidian practice, it seems almost “natural” for it to be a primary choice for an art museum display.⁵²

Furthermore, consider the polysemy implied when objects displayed are treated as works of art. This polysemy multiplies depending on the various forms of encountering the punk community’s representations in and out of the walls of the museum. Whether it is because couture garments are placed at arms’ length such that they can be touched, felt, instead of just viewed; or the gossip the Gala generates, what *Punk: Chaos to Couture* also prompts are affective processes of meaning making. More than paying attention to the final product, that is, literally the advertisement of couture products in a capitalist country, “it involves an attempt to go beyond conventional theories of art (as mimesis, as representation, as a transparent reflection of reality, etc.) and to introduce instead ‘the notion of art as “work”, as “practice, as a particular *transformation* of reality, a version of reality, an account of reality” (Hebdige 118).

As anthropologist Michael Taussig explains in his ethnography *Beauty and the Beast*, encounters with the aesthetic, especially with subversive aesthetics such as punk style, provide the public with the possibility of entering a state of suspension, “[...] a state of permanent challenge and invention arising from the energy the taboo invests in

⁵² Recall Thomas Csordas’ reflections on embodiment, where he emphasizes the importance of considering both Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perception, which contests the subject/object divide, and Bourdieu’s conception of practice (as lived experience) (“Embodiment as Paradigm 7-8).

its transgression, creating an out-of-body experience in which human bodies metamorphose in other sorts of bodies and other states of being [becoming] and nonbeing” (146). The “collective dream energy of [this] society” (Benjamin cited in Taussig 84), of *Punk*’s audience, may be recuperative of punk politics other than style, as inter-objective/subjective and transgressive readings of the pieces.

More specifically, these exhibitions can create space for non-conformity with punk representations; acknowledgement of the ridicule Hollywood or other industry celebrities portray when they appropriate a non-industrious subculture; or commentary on the artificiality of couture establishing general publics’ tastes, styles, and lifestyles, given its intrinsic unattainability being what defines it. All of these, among other possibilities of meaning making, are forces that set people into motion (McDonald 489), whether it be conscious or not, immediately or not. The fact that it is in everyday phenomena that this momentum is generated additionally augments the possibility of changes in the hierarchical organization that style originally signified. In the words of cultural anthropologist and affect theorist Emily McDonald:

More than merely a decision or choice, leaps-of-faith [fashion museum exhibits] presume a particular way of being-in-the-world, the experience of sensing and feeling the forces at work beyond oneself while simultaneously generating momentum that sets other pieces into play (491).

Yet, what is yet to be questioned is the fact that punk identified people were not those who mounted the exhibition; that is, it was not a process or self-representation, as it happened when punks dressed themselves. In the next and final chapter, I therefore deliberate on the fact that not everybody has the opportunity or access to the objects needed to adorn one’s own body. Similarly, not every social body has the possibility of adorning their own culture through displays of that culture’s fashion: not every display has equal reach (media reach), power of travel, not every culture is “worthy” of collecting, and each collection probably has its own drive and reasoning behind.

As the audience of these fashionable objects, it may be easy to forget that it is very specific bodies that are being policed through fashion: “Other” bodies —females,

subcultures, and ethnic minorities. Finally, does observing these objects at the art museum and being amazed by them imply the public could be affectively moved to subsume, appropriate, collect and exchange Others and their bodies?

CHAPTER 4: RE-COLLECTING THE “SELF” AT THE MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA

Recall the description of the gallery “Refashioning Figure Painting” of *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* in the second chapter of this thesis: it contained a single dress, placed in the middle of the room, apt for every gaze represented in the impressionist paintings to fall upon it. However, the clothing item was almost unapproachable to the live public at the museum. Protected by an asphyxiating amount of bodies moving on the ground,⁵³ the garment urged the crowd, on average older in age than that of *Punk: Chaos to Couture*, and also overwhelmingly female, to fight for a spot to admire it.

Nonetheless, the dress displayed was not the main attraction. Rather, a wonderfully woven Indian cotton shawl told the story of how these “luxury imports” had been symbols of wealth and uprightness in 19th century colonial Europe. The Metropolitan further explained that these accessories, “one-of-a-kind” hand made shawls, demonstrated access to exotic, far-away lands. They were proof of great economic capital. Yet, once mass-produced by Dutch mills, probably in an attempt to compete with then world leaders Britain and France,⁵⁴ their price dropped. Consequently, so did their status (*Impressionism*, Met).

The fight to reach the shawl in the museum, curiously recreated the fight for status of the days the garment was produced. Not only in this gallery, but along the exhibition, the objects that caught most people’s attention, those they crowded over, were either accessories —details that *distinguished* one dress from the next— or the beautification of the fashion garments through the artists’ interventions; not so much the dresses themselves. This way, the excitement over the shawl, or over various

⁵³ Some of these people were clearly there to show off their own New York City style (i.e. dressed in clothes made entirely of newspaper).

⁵⁴ Notice these are precisely the protagonists of *Punk* and *Impressionism*.

parasols and hand fans made with intricately carved ivory stems and silk umbrellas, which are all markers of beauty, elegance, craft, and, most importantly access to Oriental cultures, centuries later revived the colonial system of collecting and appropriation of Other cultures, within the Metropolitan.

BROADENING HORIZONS

In order to analyze this phenomenon, it is vital to first recognize that the constitution of an Other antecedes the constitution of a self. In the second chapter we saw how the constitution of the male citizen depended on the “self-making” of the “other woman.” Similarly, culture is produced and interpreted through the construction and exclusion of the Other (Lewis 12). In this sense, the exhibition of Other fashions at the museum —whether Other means female, subaltern, and/or Oriental— could be interpreted as a step towards the articulation, definition and positioning of the host culture.

It may be unclear which culture should be considered the host culture in the exhibitions already studied: New York, in the United States, is the geographic location of the exhibitions; Britain, given the nationality of curator Andrew Bolton, is the mastermind behind *Punk*; and France, is both the theme *and* the creative muscle behind *Impressionism* (remember the original exhibition was in fact mounted in Paris’s Musée d’Orsay). However, there might be no need to choose between the three as primary collectors; as a whole, they can represent the economic, political and cultural power (Lowe 100) of the Occident. This Occident is, furthermore, the “Self” that constitutes a normative masculine/ist society. I will explain this in depth, drawing from the previous chapters, in the following pages.

Now, that the Museum of Chinese in America mounted two fashion exhibitions around the same time the Metropolitan presented theirs in 2013, is additionally intriguing. For one thing, it is undeniable that the Chinese economy is on the rise, increasingly competing against European and American economies (“developed countries”), and starting to explicitly take on imperial dimensions. Could it be said that the ultimate step to gain economic and political power is the re-colonization of cultural and aesthetic terrains?

But, how do the exhibitions at the MOCA fit into the premises of this thesis? This minority museum is not an art museum, but a cultural heritage museum. Additionally, it seems to work against the argument of the beginning pages of this chapter, since we must not forget that this museum displays the history of Chinese-Americans, rather than just the Chinese. However, the construction of a cultural heritage is in fact a representation. It is a process of story telling and meaning making, which corresponds to the way aesthetics were redefined previously in this thesis. Moreover, like any other narrative, this history has an origin, and, even though origins or the past may not necessarily be static, as Walter Benjamin explained (*Origin of the German Tragic Drama* 46), the museum uses a “Chinese ethos”⁵⁵ as their starting point.

On this occasion, the MOCA decided to add on to their cultural heritage by presenting Chinese *and* Chinese-American fashion designers. Could the fact that it is gendered fashion —material commodities— that is telling *the* (“only”) story be seen as an attempt of realist —museum— aesthetics to produce history (Lowe 104)? Can the Museum of Chinese in America create *truth effects* through these displays, in order to contest the truth effects the Metropolitan and other Western institutions (such as Bloomingdale’s) have been producing since the 1980’s, the Ronald Reagan, neoliberal era *par excellence* (Silverman 17), about China?

⁵⁵ The descriptions of the MOCA exhibitions later in this chapter address this point.

I borrow the term truth effects, which was originally meant to describe European imperialism in reference especially to 19th century English literature (including Jane Austen's), from Asian American studies scholar Lisa Lowe:

[...] congruence of historical narratives with a realist representational project suggests that this aesthetic constitutes not only the historiographical means through which empires narrated their own progress and the aesthetic that imperial subjects used to represent colonies as peripheral objects but also the aesthetic they imposed on their colonies and within which they demanded those colonies narrate themselves (Lowe 104).

With this in mind, finally, is Chinese-America talking-back to the "Occident" through *Shanghai Glamour* and *Front Row*? Or, is the MOCA merely using the western empire's language —that is, the aesthetics of western fashion— in order to make space to represent a constructed but essentialized Chinese ethos in American territory (bodily, political, economic and cultural)? In either case, what are the possible implications of mounting these representations in a museum that is, for one thing, *not* an art museum, and, for another, a minority space?

In order to begin answering all of the above questions, I will proceed as follows: first, there will be a review of how fashion displayed at the Met helps construct nationalist identities by using female bodies and/or feminine products as a site of control. This, with the hopes of discerning the kinds of discourses and dynamics that organize masculine Europe and United States, that is, "post-colonial" Western societies (the "collectors"), through fashion spectacles at museums. I include a brief presentation of how Orientalist discourses about China (the "collected") have prospered in fashion spectacles at the Metropolitan's Costume Institute connected to the American fashion industry. Finally, I examine the content and set up of the exhibitions at the Museum of Chinese in America. It is likewise necessary to study press linked to these shows to comprehend what ideas circulate about the East/West relationship in the mainstream.

Overall, this should help bring this thesis full circle, giving insight into the consequences of aesthetic displays of fashion at museums for gendered and now "global" relationships among people and between people and commodified objects.

Yet, I need to emphasize that I am not using the terms global, East and West lightly. I am aware that these are all-encompassing labels that tend to homogenize rather heterogeneous contexts. Still, I use them, because it is in the dichotomous nature of these standardizations, often functioning through stereotypes, that the construction of hierarchical power is possible —i.e. feminized China coming to stand in for the whole of Asia, silencing many societies within the eastern region of the globe.

As I reported in the first pages of this thesis, the first instance in which costume entered the western world in museum exhibits was at a world fair; thus, the recognition of fashion's museum quality was made possible first in an "international" setting. Therefore, it is not surprising that Thomas P. Campbell, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's director, would take pride in the fact that "The growth of our [Met's] audience – frequent as well as first-time visitors from around the world – once again demonstrates that the Met is a truly global museum for this truly global city" (Campbell in Vogel, "Metropolitan Museum"). These "global" spaces were and still are meant to record different cultures and advance the accumulation of knowledge of these societies in the Occident. This is so, for fashion spectacles were also meant to display a self-conception that would prove the value of a particular culture (Lewis 74). "Evidence" of superiority at the museum would be the first step towards a cultural collection/colonization of the others.

While simultaneous bodily access to different geographies might seem impossible, within the museum and, nowadays, through museum media (journal articles and museum websites), a person can virtually access inter-national settings. As museum exhibitions physically travel from one city to another, from one country to another, or as particular exhibitions narrate and inform their visitors on their own or Other geographies and cultures, those with access to and understanding of the shows can engage with ideas of global —by global I do not mean standard, but from around the globe— economic, political, cultural, and aesthetic movements. A museumgoer

experiences the display, comparison, dialogue, co-existence, and/or competition between different nations' (national) art and what the artworks stand for.

In the second chapter, we saw how fashion functions as a language that transmits seemingly intrinsic meanings —i.e. gendered lifestyles— that have been constructed through the collection and recollection of already existing signs and their semiotics. Some of these meanings refer expressly to people's "identities." The latter appear as the sum of social markers such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, and race, class, among others. Finally, the reason why fashion is so successful in constructing these identities while, at the same time, displaying them as seamless, is that the language of fashion works with or through the most "personal" of our belongings, the body.

Now, it is necessary to enquire how apparently individual bodily identities might extend towards the world, through fashion, and come to organize, produce, reproduce or subvert the power hierarchies through which the social functions: images and texts —again, fashion— create spaces for imperial identities of writers and artists and readers —and spectators and objects of the gaze— to be articulated (Lewis 12). My study of the Metropolitan's fashion exhibitions and the exhibitions of the Museum of Chinese in America help analyze what kinds of communal identities are produced through fashion, and, even more so, through fashion at the museum. Never losing sight of the fact that fashion functions either by reaffirming gender roles or by contesting them, I believe the first step in order to analyze social —"global"— organization by means of these cultural products has to be through the contemplation of fashion at museums also genders certain societies.

FASHION'S GENDER-BONDING INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: THE WESTERN "SELF"

In *Gendering Orientalism*, Reina Lewis thoughtfully considers the relationships between imperialism, women and culture in the 19th century (1). She is especially interested in determining women's positioning in relation to discourses of creativity (2). Following Lisa Lowe's ideas on how Orientalism is in fact a multivocal and heterogeneous process (Lowe in Lewis 4), Lewis intends to counter Said's conception of the male colonial subject (3) in order to prove that the female gaze and female modes of representation were also essential cultural agents. In other words, females were also involved in imperial cultural production.

Therefore, I would first like to return to the shawl discussed at the beginning of this chapter. As most objects in the fashion exhibitions at the art museum, this was a garment made for women. We previously saw how female bodies were mere objects of inspiration, and mannequins for the fashions that invigorated the impressionists' paintings. The male or masculine gaze's interpretation and representation of these physical bodies (alive and inanimate) ultimately aided in the construction of a respectable male subject identity —the citizen. In the case of the shawl, an additional theme enters the conversation: the female body visually proved the wealth and power (or the demise) of the empire. The im/propriety of a person's dress reflects on the status of the society they inhabit.⁵⁶ These fashion commodities define the lifestyle and moral value of particular groups —i.e. of the French nation.

Furthermore, Reina Lewis states that high art, whether exhibitions or literary readings, was in fact created to be consumed by the middle class (7). Therefore, when the art museum hosts fashion exhibits, the institution, as was previously discussed, functions as an disciplinary tool. Through the encounter with artworks at museums, the

⁵⁶ Whether these societies are the French empire (economic and cultural) of centuries past, or the British empire of the 20th century (embodied in the gender non-normative punk).

meanings that are expressed in the objects become the base for a common knowledge: “Truth [...] becomes a function of learned judgment, not of the material itself” (17).

Yet, considering the history of the material itself and how it came to acquire all of its meanings, those that allow judgment, does prove highly beneficial to deconstruct the Truth displayed at the museum. Let us once more consider the Gustav Courbet painting alluded to in the previous chapter: “Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine.” This particular painting belongs, though painted by a Frenchman, to the National Gallery in London. This museum lent their piece to France and then to the United States, but it is in fact collected and part of British cultural heritage. This way, a chain of collection and control is established. First, the masculine painters collect and control female bodies through their representations, their artistry being the primary element of admiration. Nevertheless, considering French impressionists were in fact transgressive, as they illustrated non-normative, questionably moral and immodest women —“Coubert’s scandalous scene” (*Impressionism*, Met)—, it is a more modest, decorous and powerful Britain, that needs step in to control the deviations of the Western society.⁵⁷

Second, Britain had to prove its right to be the collector and therefore the right to exert its power over France. If we engage with the distinct Metropolitan fashion exhibitions as supplementary materials⁵⁸ and text, *Punk: Chaos to Couture* acts as the tool for Britain to scale in the hierarchic ladder. As was detailed from the third chapter, according to curator Andrew Bolton, not only did Britain transform New York punk from a musical and political movement into a stylish movement, but later this British curator collected punk into a museum. Presenting the coutured version of its style, he managed to open space to “educate” the American public on the already controlled

⁵⁷ French and English empires’ economic and political relationships generally function in form of rivalry and competition (Lowe 100, Lewis 73).

⁵⁸ This includes recognizing that France cannot be considered only a sensualized transgressive society, but that it is also on the side of power, with access to hegemonic discourses and thus dialogue with the other Western powers. Recall that the impressionism and fashion exhibit was first curated in Paris’s Musée d’Orsay —the French collected and curated themselves.

subculture. Britain has the power to control feminine identified France only after it proves it can collect/control its own deviants.

In *Selling Culture*, Debora Silverman assures curator Diana Vreeland's exhibitions of French culture —i.e. *La Belle Époque* at the Met— intended to create a new elite of Americans, tasteful Americans (Silverman 66), who could then assume power (54). As the last step in the collecting chain, then, the fact that the United States' Met mounted both of the exhibitions embodies the learning process from Europe to the American continent.⁵⁹ Having learned from the discourses and mechanisms of the "Old Continent," the fashion museum displays become an acknowledgement of the Western powers and their position and "earned" right to collect and control Others: non-normative, feminine, gender-bending Others manifested in female fashions are utilized to establish the normative, masculine, now organized and "fixed" Self, the latter collecting the former.

INTERNATIONAL FASHION'S GENDER-BOUND SUBJECTS: THE ORIENTAL "OTHER"

Assuming that the long-lasting French/British-American rivalries have been actually tamed and now work collaboratively —perhaps as a heteronormative marriage— with museum fashion displays in order to define a Western self, I now want to investigate the production of the other side of the binary: the Chinese current economic empire's identity, as a feminized collectable Other. These identities are constructed within fashion —and could possibly be "sublimated" at the museum— through oppositions and organizations of "personal" characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and class. Again, the question I ultimately intend to answer is whether the

⁵⁹ "Unsure of themselves, Americans copy European examples, which bear guarantee of long traditions. In spite of a proclaimed disdain for vulgar prejudice, what constitutes Society remains in a perpetual thrall to European fashion. And this is especially true for external glitter, when the issue is one of social status and impressing others" (Bing in Silverman 13). See also Kroeber 243.

emergence of new economic and perhaps thus political powers resulted in the consequential emergence of the anxieties of the former (maybe current) empires in a way that they feel the need to again “define and defend the bourgeois European self, whose capacities were affirmed by entwined assessments of class and race [and gender (Stoler)] achieved by contrast to nonEuropean ‘others’” (Boddy referencing Stoler 120)? Are whole geographical communities attempting to re-colonize Others or decolonize themselves by means of collecting and displaying fashion garments at the museum?

As I move forward with my argument in this section, keep in mind that I have previously stated that there is a tension in museum display. The collected communities, thrust into the spotlight, are subject to further surveillance, but they also gain visibility. In the latter case, they can start to fill in the silences the dominant culture has imposed on them. To better understand this multiple condition, it is helpful to recall Debora Silverman’s analysis of orientalism at the Met and in Bloomingdale’s in the 1980s. Initially, Silverman explains the presence of Chinese culture in the United States as dependent primarily on economic reasons. Given that this thesis revolves around the phenomenon of dress and fashion, which are inevitably economically bound, the art historian’s analysis is highly pertinent.

In 1979, China signed a commercial agreement with the United States. This trade agreement determined that “authentic” (Silverman 25) Chinese manufactured luxury goods —the description of the Indian shawl in *Impressionism* should resonate at this point— would be imported, responding to the desired specifications of the American client. Simultaneously, Chinese exports would earn profit for the country and further extend their cultural legacy (24). Advertised as handcrafted articles —their aristocratic

(23) quality—, the Chinese goods were highly priced, and yet were still assembly line produced en masse (29). Thus, the greater profit went to the American corporations.⁶⁰

Silverman moves on to analyze one of the Met exhibitions curated under Diana Vreeland's guidance: *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of China, the Ch'ing Dynasty 1644-1912* (December 1980). Before studying the exhibit itself, I want to draw attention to the title of the exhibition: an initial allusion to the fantastic and mythological Orient (dragon), an ethnographic and Othering approach to the garments (costumes rather than dress or fashion), and a reference to a time period not at all ancient, but actually coincidentally corresponding to the centuries of European colonization and imperialism. This last aspect tacitly compares stages of "progress" between East and West, as though "They" had remained *immutable* and mythological over so many centuries, while "We" collected power.

The content and set-up of the display further embodied orientalist discourses. First of all, intending to transport the viewer to an "authentic" atmosphere (30), and said to *extend* Bloomingdale's vision of China (31) —as the media did for *Punk*—, the curators not only recreated palace and temple settings in which the robes displayed were originally worn (30), but immersed the audience in a sensory experience (32). There are two points worth highlighting regarding this set-up: one, if accurately "experiencing" these particular settings (which is debatable) at the museum, the public was actually being granted access to spaces that were in the China of that time only reserved for the emperor (30). The audience's placement in power's quarters meant an intrusion that could destabilize the emperor's and his society's power and organization. The Western museumgoer's standpoint then established itself as expert in the Other.

Moreover, regarding the sensory experience, I urge the reader to keep the *Punk: Chaos to Couture* experience in mind. Silverman evidences Vreeland's lack of

⁶⁰ Notice how this echoes with punk d.i.y. products, which, serving as inspiration for the couture, in fact earns more money for the fashion industry and the Metropolitan Museum of Art than it could ever possibly earn for the punk working class.

consideration for actual historical facts and accuracy in favor of creating an immersive authentic illusion in the viewer (33), an experience that would ultimately sell —*Times* magazine reported that elite fashion designers displayed at Bloomingdale's still had a booming business, despite the general economic recession (41). This bodily affectation was planned through the inclusion of, for example, perfumes, smells that transported the audience to ancient China: remember the Orient is defined as irrational/exotic/erotic/heathen (Lewis 16). However, the art historian explains, instead of at least using Eastern scents Vreeland used *Opium* by French designer Christian Dior to fill the gallery space. This "re-created the historical license of Western mis-appropriation of China and added a startling new irony to the record of Western representations of the East" (Silverman 32-33).

Both the spatial, sensory, and emotional (Lewis 179) corporeal experiences that Diana Vreeland managed to create at the museum were meant to portray images of luxury (Silverman 43) and "innate" elegance (46), in order to appeal to and educate the ordinary American public, just as Regan's policies did (45). She firmly "acknowledged that aristocracies of the blood were gone, [but that] *female* aristocracies of the spirit could be cultivated through style and taste, manifested in the ineffable qualities of 'elegance' and 'allure'" (46, my emphasis). Therefore, her aim was to affect society at large by affecting female museum publics, through elements that would resonate for them: fashion, the senses, and an exotic Other society likewise feminized through the former two elements.⁶¹

Ultimately, according to Silverman, at the museum entrepreneurs' wives would learn what luxury items to later buy at Bloomingdale's in order to claim the (emperor's) social status their husbands had so avidly worked for (43). *The Manchu Dragon* exhibition served to illustrate what objects, but also what knowledge, what cultures and what genders to seize, in order to become respectable. In the case of *Punk*, which

⁶¹ Recall the feminization of Egypt described in the first chapter regarding the ordering of societies through the World Fairs.

likewise othered a subculture —again through sensory immersion (rather than supposed masculine rationality and objectivity)—, the audience might perceive what *not* to possess if they identified with and intended to belong to the celebrity social status.

Additionally, just like the punk exhibition could work in dialogue with *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, it is also necessary to allude to the French exhibitions Vreeland helped mount; they similarly worked as counter-text to the Chinese exhibition. While the Other culture exhibitions intended to illustrate *what* to collect, the French displays taught the audience how to *be* in order to deserve the collector position. Modern France, the topic of both 1980's and the 2013 exhibitions, was constructed in favor of a “democratic” society, now a neoliberal society like Reagan's ideal: the former sovereign power “was identified with luxury, idleness, *effeminacy*, and artificiality; the [modern or current] citizen with restraint, productivity, *masculinity*, and authenticity” (Silverman 62). The “intrinsically” aristocratic —only in vain subjects—, immutable female works for the determination of the rights of the modern male to upwardly mobilize (43) in the social ladder. Furthermore, the “correct” way to be part of this style and taste aristocracy in America is through the adoption of European standards; in Silverman's words, through the fabrication of Francophilia.

To summarize, even though Chinese products and this way the culture they embody were gaining visibility at the Metropolitan and the market, there was actually a process of violent appropriation of the commodities by two different forms of collection by the museum and the department store. The ways China was portrayed and the reasons why their products sold did not necessarily paint a picture of an up and coming China or of Chinese values. Instead, it just provided wide profit and high social status to the collector (knowing the unknown), while creating the notion that the Chinese could be bought and/or visually consumed by Americans. In the 1980s, the display of Chinese fashion at the art museum attempted a re-colonization of a growing power that threatened the decentralization of the West. What is more, this re-colonization occurred

through the feminization and racialization of the East, and the manipulation of female bodies and morals in the East and West.

Silverman's critique of the 1980s shows suggests it was fashion's (seemingly intrinsic) illusionism and market-bound nature that triumphed over Chinese history (33). While Vreeland's exaggerated use of artifice—to the point it dismissed even historical accuracy (31)—could have helped unveil processes of orientalization, the fact that she presented her shows as authentic and thus "truthful" instead contributed to those processes. Although I agree with this second statement, I argue against Silverman's conclusion. Vreeland transgressed a particular history and the inhabitants of that history, but not simply because she used fashion's illusionism to construct her own world-view. The violation lay in the fact that she used art and affect as tools for an economic, political and cultural agenda, in order to make particular hierarchical statuses seem normal and natural. Had she acknowledged her usage of artifice, as Kobena Mercer suggests (42), breaking down the mythology—the signs and symbolism—in fashion, aesthetics and affect would have become politics themselves.

Now, considering that the United States and Europe are suffering a new economic recession, and that China and other "developing" countries have gained even more strength throughout the past decades, it is thought-provoking to see how some of their fashion designs are manifesting once more in the museum setting. However, while the Metropolitan insists on drawing attention, through art, to the motherland, to the old enlightened, high-class continent, this time Chinese-America is taking a stand. Instead of letting themselves be framed or invisibilized by western hegemonic institutions, thirty years later the Museum of Chinese in America, a minority museum, decided to show their "own."

CONTEXTUALIZING THE MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA

As we know, Diana Vreeland helped mount the *Costumes of China: The Ch'ing Dynasty* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1980. That same year, a historian and a community resident/activist in New York City founded the Museum of Chinese in America. According to the museum's website, John Kuo Wei Tchen and Charles Lai meant for this space to

develop a better understanding of our Chinese American history and community and to respond to the concern that the memories and experiences of aging older generations would perish without oral history, photo documentation, research and collecting efforts ("About," MOCA website).

Ultimately, the museum suggests that their primary goal also consists in the *education* of the Chinese-American community, in order to preserve history, heritage and culture ("About").

The MOCA intends to motivate dialogue and understanding between New York City's Chinese-American community and the culturally diverse museum public ("About"). Although the museum says that one of its goals is to make their history accessible to a range of publics, the website still makes an effort to explicitly explain that even the history that is presented within their galleries is in fact a collection of multiple, multivocal, heterogeneous experiences of people from Chinese descent. In other words, alternative forms of memory, history, and *collectivity* (Lowe 101). This is especially important if one considers that the museum has collected around 160 years of history, and that the social, economic and political conditions must have shifted in the course of that time. Additionally, "texts challenge the concepts of identity and identification within a universalized narrative of development" (Lowe 101). This way, the MOCA can also challenge constructions of both "Asian" and "American" identities.

Moreover, it is key to bear in mind that the Museum of Chinese in America "strives to be a model among interactive [multimedia] museums" ("About," MOCA

website): researchers, curators, and audiences collaborate in the creation of Chinese-American histories. Although this collection space does primarily display culture in *visual* form, including “more than 60,000 letters and documents, business and organizational records, oral histories, clothing and textiles, photographs and precious artifacts” (“About”), it is not labeled as an art museum. However, the decommodified objects showcased do carry out processes of meaning and identity making; thus, of communication. Attending this museum is thus definitely an aesthetic experience.

This experience includes the museum’s offering of interactive workshops to the community. Connected to *Front Row* (April 26, 2013 – December 1, 2013), for example, the MOCA hosted “do-it-yourself” activities for children, who were meant to craft their own designs. These experiences echoed and embodied Sara Ahmed’s previously mentioned thoughts on aesthetics *doing* things in the world. Participating in the museum’s fashion exhibitions opened space for creative activity and further interpersonal dialogue, as their mission proposed.

Finally, the museum also constantly hosts a number of academic programs on widely ranged topics. Take, for instance, June 2013’s “Refashioning Race, Gender and Economy,” a panel organized by both New York University’s Asian/Pacific/American Institute and the Museum of Chinese in America. On this occasion, a group of fashion scholars, Minh-ha Pham (Threadbared; Of Another Fashion; Cornell University), Ashley Mears (Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model; Boston University), Mimi Thi Nguyen (Threadbared;⁶² The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), and Sharon Lee (New York University), met to discuss the power of media in producing, distributing and publicizing fashion. They

⁶² Threadbared is a blog —comprised of texts written by either Threadbared founders, or other collaborators— devoted to analyzing fashion and style; specifically, the political issues that arise in discussions on fashion and beauty. These include, for example, discussions on Trayvon Martin’s murder and the politics and racialization of the “hoodie,” and visceral responses to Kansas City designer Peggy Noland’s Naked Oprah Dress). You can find Threadbared on Facebook in the following link:
<<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Threadbared/97922323220>>.

deliberated on questions such as: “What possibilities do technologies pose for alternative fashions, embodiments, and representations? How can relationships between consumer and producer shift in the digital realm?” (MOCA website). Consequently, we can see how the museum attempts to extend the aesthetic experience into meta-reflections upon the topics they display.

Nevertheless, as with the Met exhibitions, one thing is the museum’s verbalizing of their projects and aims, and another is the lived experience at the MOCA, and the communities they are in fact reaching. As Lisa Lowe mentions in her book *Immigrant Acts*,

[...] owing to complex, uneven material histories of colonization and the oppression of racialized groups within the United States, the sites of minority or colonized literary production are at different distances from canonical nationalist project of reconciling constituencies to idealized forms of community and subjectivity (Lowe 100).

If we extend her claim from literary to cultural production, and reference the Museum of Chinese in America as the site for these minority projects, a site that seeks the interruption of traditional forms of narrations⁶³ (Robinson 63), then it is possible to interrogate this “minority” museum’s context and possible readings in comparison to that of the Metropolitan fashion exhibitions. The latter would come to represent the canonical nationalist (Western) project. Fashion, as has been repeatedly remarked, in either case embodies the idealized forms of community and subjectivity, whichever these may be. Lastly, a few of the material conditions that must be taken into account to determine the possible reach of one museum culture or the other are: one, the museums’ geographical location within New York City; two, the presentation of the exhibitions themselves; and, three, the press coverage of the exhibitions. I will proceed to analyze the MOCA exhibitions in this order.

⁶³ These are performative narrations, if we recall Butler in her “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” where she analyzes theatrical, spectacular, contexts.

The proliferation of Chinese immigrants in the United States —resulting in the formation of an important Chinese-American labor force in and out of the USA context, especially for commodity production in the garment sector—, and yet the segregation of local and foreign bodies, was one of the first incentives for the Chinese to begin coalescing and claiming space for their own communities and histories. Neighborhoods like Chinatown, located in the South/lower New York City area, were the result of these movements: “Chinatowns are at once the deviant space ghettoized by the dominant configurations of social space and the resistant locality that signifies the internalization of ‘others’ within the national space” (Lowe 122). They are spaces “not spoken by or in the language of the nation” (122). Generations later, the establishment of the MOCA, in Chinatown, is the embodiment of contemporary needs for the cultural preservation of those previous communities, their language and their spaces.

In 1980, the museum was originally founded on 70 Mulberry Street, NY. However, due especially to spatial constraints, in 2009 (Rothstein, “Reopened Museum”) the museum was relocated to 215 Centre Street, still within Chinatown. While the original site has been preserved in the present day for archival purposes, functioning now as a research center, the new building was remodeled to create innovative gallery spaces with dramatic feels. Moreover, the MOCA prides itself in its online features. Their website includes online versions of the exhibitions, comprehensive and interactive timelines of Chinese American history, and additional downloadable resources on topics such as immigration (“About,” MOCA website).

Although the Museum of Chinese in America’s own effort to become accessible to wide-ranging communities —international communities for that matter, if we consider the extent of the “World Wide Web”— as was previously stated, the actual public experience is different. For one thing, MOCA’s location draws people’s interest given stereotypically proletarian (Lowe 102) low prices, hard working beauty experts, “local”

food, or even just accidentally, if one wanders off from Little Italy and finds oneself lost in the middle of Chinatown. This heavily contrasts with the Metropolitan's location in New York City's culturally and economically elite Upper East Side. Although the Met is far less accessible by subway transportation, it blends in with the tourist and local attraction Central Park, "the lung of Manhattan." It is located in a place that embodies the supposed characteristics of high culture and the "perks" of an economically rich, labor-free, leisure lifestyle.

Moreover, given strictly economic reasons, the two different museum spaces do not draw in, by any means, the same funds. The Metropolitan at large and The Costume Institute in particular earn unfathomable amounts of money, funded by top Hollywood celebrities and the fashion industry. The MOCA, even as it "stands on the threshold of transforming from a community institution into a national museum in a world-class facility" ("Support," MOCA Website) and has adopted many of the same resources to earn money, including the MOCA Legacy Awards Gala, cannot even compare with the former.

Perhaps more importantly, another reason why the Museum of Chinese in America does not draw in more bodies and thus more income is that there is not nearly as much media coverage or propaganda for the events at this museum as there is for the Met. The MOCA's content seems to remain a "niche" culture. While looking for articles in *The New York Times*, which is supposed to cover the city of New York, I only came across one article on MOCA's fashion shows —and this still with great difficulty. The article covered both shows before they opened. On the other hand, I was almost bombarded with press articles especially on *Punk*, but also on *Impressionism*, including international coverage from Britain's *The Guardian* and French *Le Monde*.

However, in order to proceed with this enquiry, it is necessary to first analyze *Front Row* and *Shanghai Glamour*. As with the Metropolitan fashion exhibitions, it is

essential to perform a critical study of the museum spectacles at the Museum of Chinese in America. This is so, because the lived experience of the display of fashion affectively communicates what is tacitly inscribed in the collected objects, as well as the discourses that performatively circulate in these specific settings.

FASHIONABLY DECOLONIZING FEMINIZED BODIES?

As I stepped into the Museum of Chinese in America, I felt transported from the chaotic streets of New York City, into another context. While some readers may assume that this was an Oriental/ist context, as Vreeland's depiction at the Met, this could not be farther from the descriptions Debora Silverman executed regarding the Metropolitan exhibition of 1980. There were no smells, no "Opium" by Dior. What I felt, I had felt before at the Metropolitan among the solemn Greek and Roman figures referenced in the first chapter: I staggered into timid warm lights and overall intimidating silence. It was the context of a museum.

After buying my student seven dollar entrance ticket, I demurely approached the first exhibition, *Shanghai Glamour* of 1910-1940. Though knowing this was a small museum, I was still surprised at the miniature dimensions of this exhibition's space. The room felt smaller, as the further dimmer light restricted my own body's movement. Set up horizontally, such that the back wall was the longest wall in the room, a group of mannequins stood side by side behind a glass window. This showcasing echoed the arrangement of common boutique window shops. But: what was the museum selling? The remaining walls featured the title and introductory remarks, and a case full of periodicals.

These periodicals, as the media of the time, framed early 20th century Shanghai fashions as "images of new women [that] were explored by women themselves to

express their femininity" (*Shanghai*, MOCA). The caption continues, "In addition, commercial calendar posters stood as another powerful medium for shaping and circulating the ideal images of modern women" (*Shanghai*). This way, it was explicitly stated that gender markers such as femininity are *shaped* outside the body, rather than being their expression (Mercer 34). These markers are made popular through media. However, the first sentence shows how the museum, which is supposed to have digested these phenomena in order to explicitly comment on them, is in fact performatively reproducing the ideals in circulation: fashions stand in for notions of womanhood and the illusion of female agency mentioned in the third chapter. Consequently, when the audience at the museum actually encounters the female/feminine garments, we are simply being given visual evidence, "proof," that such gender standards were there.

Furthermore, what this MOCA exhibit generally displayed was not only the construction of femininity, but also its extension into the construction of Shanghai glamour, glamour standing in for taste, class, and lifestyle of a whole geographical community: the museum's labels said several garments were firstly made popular by Shanghai actresses and dance hostesses (*Shanghai*, MOCA). Just as the garments of the Parisienne came to represent Paris, France, and then the modern West, some of the traditional qipao —"body-hugging [or restraining] sleek qipao was a favorite choice for dancing dress" (*Shanghai*)— presented at the museum, reinvented by these celebrities, came to represent a broader community.

Some may wonder if, back in the 1930s and now, at the time of the mounting of these fashion exhibitions, China at large has begun to recognize the "superiority" of the West by recognizing the importance of fashion (rather than dress), and by incorporating it into their own identity construction. As Lisa Lowe explains:

The imposition of the colonial language and its cultural institutions, among them the novel [museum], demands the subject's internalization of the 'superiority' of the [cultural] colonizer [the West] and the 'inferiority' of the colonized [the

East], even as it attempts to evacuate the subject of 'native' language, traditions, and practices (Lowe 97).

Nevertheless, this is a dangerous statement. As L. Ayu Saraswati warned in her *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race*, these assumptions could in fact be simply replicating and imposing the occidental/white/gender model. Instead, one has to recognize that similar norms and similar social dynamics may exist in the non-West, independently.

Therefore, it is not necessarily the content of the exhibitions which needs to be analyzed, for I argue that in either context—or even considering the MOCA exhibitions American in ideology and Chinese-American in content—female fashions and bodies are used to performatively form gender and class dynamics that structure hegemonic United States, European, and Chinese societies. In this case, in both museums there is a similar way in which the language of fashion and the oppressive and/or disruptive implications of its meanings can be sublimated and reified, or, in the recognition of the museum gaze as artifice, contested. What then needs to be taken into consideration are the ways in which the specific museum setting contributes to the aforementioned sublimation or contestation; that is, the distinct affective and aesthetic experiences the MOCA and the Metropolitan elicit.

For this purpose, it is imperative to highlight the transition between *Shanghai Glamour* and *Front Row: Chinese American Designers*. I am aware that, for this particular reading, I am assuming that other museumgoers, like me, visited both exhibitions and, therefore, could possibly see the dialogue among them. Otherwise, this interpretation may not be as compelling.

Leaving the first exhibition, as I crossed the hallway that diagonally separated the two, my body's modes of perception shifted. The gallery space, larger than *Shanghai's* (but still only one room), and the white light, which bounced off thoroughly white walls, permitted my moving more freely around the space. It almost summoned

me to closely look/touch the garments, no longer behind glass (notice the parallel between the set-up of these two displays and that of *Punk* and *Impressionism*). A bright red princess style wedding dress, Vera Wang⁶⁴ design, stood out. Roaring dragons and floral stamps were either the inspiration or the substance of some of the other clothing items. At first, it could seem like the designers —most of the 17 born in the United States— managed to Orientalize their own heritage: see it and speak about it through the eyes and using the language of the “long dead” empires of the West.

However, the museum experience at the MOCA was designed so that the interaction with the designs did not end in the mere gaze. Truly conceived as a multimedia exhibition —unlike *Punk*, whose immersive character resulted in general cacophony— the public had access to a series of videos and audio. One large video, projected on a main wall, showed interviewed designers and fashion scholars. On smaller television sets, connected to headphones, the museumgoers could listen to the designer’s reflections individually. The cyclic repetition of the interviews allowed time to stand and reflect upon what each of them was expressing.

Overall, one of the most recurring themes of the designers’ interventions was their attempt to recuperate cultural heritage by incorporating especially ancient Chinese raw materials (Vivienne Tam,⁶⁵ MOCA Audio) —consider as economic factor—, themes and prints. Nonetheless, what was significantly emphasized was a Chinese work ethic (Zang Toi,⁶⁶ MOCA Audio). This ethos additionally represented a craft lifestyle oftentimes learned from their nurturing mothers (Carol Lim,⁶⁷ MOCA Audio).

The audience could gather that, although the Chinese American designers reproduced Western fashions in form (traditional Chinese shapes, like that of the qipao were no longer visible), they were also, through material and discursive conditions,

⁶⁴ Born in New York City in 1949.

⁶⁵ Born in Guangzhou, China in 1957.

⁶⁶ This Malaysian designer (born in 1961) has furthermore accessed *Vogue*, Anna Wintour’s and the American fashion industry’s headquarters

⁶⁷ Born in Los Angeles California in 1975.

impacting American culture:⁶⁸ “The diversity of their aesthetics, their individualized approaches to branding, and their varying personal relationship to cultural identity has shaped what we now understand as not only New York fashion, but an American sense of style” (“Front Row,” MOCA website). The exhibition thus demonstrated Lowe’s explanation of the encounter of colonizer/colonized. The subjects positioned within this liminal space—in this case Chinese Americans—could be read as contradictory subjects that, though fluent in imperial languages, have it in themselves to create degrees of antagonism to the demands of being fluent in those languages (Lowe 97)—the language of fashion. Because this is a museum of Chinese *in* America, such that the designs showcased are still read as Asian-American rather than just American, even if most of the designers are American born, it is plausible that speaking the language of the “colonizer,” or speaking a language of their “own” in the colonizers’ territory, could represent a trade off for the visibility that the so-called Chinese ethos gains through the exhibition of Chinese-American products at the museum.

Writing the MOCA for New York City. As in the case of the Metropolitan exhibitions, the museum experience does not end in the physical attendance to the mounted displays. It is important to consider how the mainstream responds to the space the minority gains through their incursion in the fashion world, initially by designing and then by presenting the designs in the museum institution. Therefore, I now draw attention to the lone *New York Times* article that covered the MOCA exhibits. This will allow enquiring whether the media worked as a prosthetic, to enhance the museum lived experience (as in the case of *Punk*), or as a mask that counteracts the power of the exhibition.

⁶⁸ Consider Taiwanese David Chu’s (born in 1955) success as founder of Nautica brand.

Eric Wilson, one of the journalists who covered both of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's fashion exhibitions, writing several articles himself, reported on the Museum of Chinese in America's exhibitions on April 24, 2013, right before *Shanghai Glamour* and *Front Row* opened. In "Documenting a Growing Force in Fashion," Wilson opened with photographs of three dresses. Underneath the visual documentation, a small-lettered footnote read:

From left: Anna Sui is always popular with young people, and copycats. This spring 2007 look, knocked off by Forever 21, was a flashpoint in the campaign for design protection; Jason Wu, who designed Michelle Obama's inaugural gowns, exemplifies the new generation of Asian-American designers with his lively evening looks, like this spring 2013 dress; Vera Wang, perhaps the most famous bridal designer in America, can get bored with white. Like her black wedding gowns in 2011, this red one for spring 2013 caused shock waves ("Documenting").

This intervention suggests how Chinese American designers have impacted American mainstream fashion to the point that it is they who are being ripped-off by department stores, or they who are dressing the most influential women in the country.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, this written fragment easily passed unseen, the arguments within the body of Wilson's review claiming more space. The opening statement of the article takes the report of the MOCA featured designers in a completely different direction. Wilson recognizes the "meteoric rise of Asian-Americans in fashion," and yet, he immediately re-colonizes the designers and what their work represents: "there have been numerous milestones, as when Alexander Wang was named the creative director of Balenciaga last year [...]" This last remark implied that being acknowledged by the European fashion house was the basis for the designer's success. Recognition by Balenciaga, rather than his vision and skill themselves, "proved" Wang worthy of collection.

⁶⁹ The first lady oftentimes represents, through fashion and style, the ideal morals and lifestyles of the nation at large: see the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History's "The First Ladies" exhibition in Washington D.C., which displays inaugural ceremonies' ball gowns and presidential china. See also Debora Silverman's critique of Nancy Regan.

Finally, when the journalist moves on to report specifically on the MOCA's exhibitions, *Shanghai Glamour* and *Front Row* respectively, he states: "One shows the influence of Western dress on Shanghai fashion from the 1910s to 1940s, a period before designer names were established in China; the other focuses on designers of the last 30 years, who are now stars in the United States, and increasingly so in China." He frames Western designs as the primary model. Thus, Wilson also depicts a "normal" transition of the United States shaping Chinese life: he camouflages the fact that it is Chinese American design and labor which actually make possible, impact, and construct Western fashions and reality.

Since *The New York Times* belongs to the mainstream New York City culture, unlike the Museum of Chinese in America, it is possible that their interpretation of the shows had broader reach than the minority museum's. In this case, all of the tacit messages described above are those that circulate among the audience, especially that "majority" that did not attend the exhibitions at the MOCA. This resonates with the "dangers" Walter Benjamin signaled regarding the reproducibility—even partial, as the media is— of art in the modern context.

Concretely, it is the re-colonization of the East as a whole —Western fashion houses providing a place for instruction for Chinese-American designers, a place for them to work *for* American (life)style— that becomes generalized, instead of the process of perhaps decolonization attempted by the host institution, the MOCA: "Fanon defines decolonization as a process of thorough social transformation that disorganizes the stratified social hierarchy beyond the nationalist party's capture of the state from the colonizer" (Lowe 107). In the case of the United States-China relationship, then, decolonization would not necessarily imply the end of colonialism but the continuing project of Chinese-American resistance —i.e. to constant foreignization— in a time of neocolonial exploitation.

Aesthetic Participation and the MOCA Experience. As I have argued throughout the thesis, the study of aesthetic fashion exhibitions at museums is compelling especially because of the collective experience and inter-personal/geographical relationships they affect. Therefore, participation in the displays is the essential element to finally return to for investigation.

In the *Punk* exhibition, as was described in chapter 2, part of that participation involved touching garments or writing on the walls of the institution. It is worth taking into account the workshops connected to both *Punk: Chaos to Couture* and *Front Row*. These do-it-yourself workshops at the museums —where especially children were invited to become the creators of their own designs— fashioned spaces in which the ethos of the subaltern cultures could be embodied and reproduced. Whoever attended the workshops actually *performed* the work ethos and lifestyles that were originally displayed and communicated in the fashion exhibitions. This way, the aesthetics of museum collections might affect the lived experience of the viewers. This new interactive geography for design and new meaning making could represent the continuing process of resistance against and subversion of the mainstream discourses both within the exhibitions and the media.

Nevertheless, the Museum of Chinese in America's presentation of a reiterative discourse regarding specifically underlined *Chinese* influence and ethos in fact trumps the decolonization project. As Lisa Lowe explains, decolonization implies no "nationalist aesthetic that posits national culture and the representative work as sites of resolution" (Lowe 107). Moreover, decolonization is "the social formation that encompasses a multileveled and multicentered assault on those specific forms of colonial rule; that project of decolonization is carried forth in the 'postcolonialist' site but may equally be deployed by immigrant and diasporic populations" (108). The Museum of Chinese in America's collections, as even its name explicitly evidences, are multicentered —China and the United States. However, what may occur at the MOCA in *Shanghai Glamour* and

Front Row is an attempt at positioning China on or above the social hierarchy, inversion instead of subversion, “proof” of Chinese-American colonization of the West through the fashion industry.

To better illustrate this point, recall the aforementioned transition between the two MOCA exhibits. The solemnity of the first exhibition, created through the dim warm lighting and the exaltation of traditional dress, gave solemnity to a Chinese past. Furthermore, the contrasting —almost contradictory— scenario of the second exhibition, so plain as to look like a department store under white cold light, somehow diminished the importance of new (Westernized) fashion. And still, what invaded the open space in the gallery, more so than the garments, were the videos and the oral histories that exalted traditional Chinese lifestyle.

Yet, processes of decolonization are not about making more accurate narratives, but about disidentifying (Lowe 104), de-centering even the Chinese “self,” recognizing artifice and affectation, and generating space for the visibility of alternative histories. They are not about becoming *the* narrative representation, the fixed museum interpretation, but about going against “dominant regimes of representability” (111). The Museum of Chinese in America in the end might have effected only the former with its fashion displays.

FINAL THOUGHTS: THE LARGER PERFORMANCE

This thesis has investigated how fashion collected and exhibited at museum institutions aids the hierarchical organization of the cultures and subcultures embodied in them. Hierarchic power relations are created through fashion when standards of Beauty or Ugliness deploy emotional/affective resonances in people to simultaneously position or displace them in the world. Yet, and stepping away from these traditional notions of aesthetics, in our modern context it is important to recognize that beauty is in fact a constructed quality that corresponds to hegemonic ideals: “beauty can be ‘*worked at* and *worked for*: looks [as cultural capital] are not merely ascribed but more and more frequently *achieved*” (Chancer in Saraswati 5). Therefore, the destabilization of the gendered, racial, ethnic, and economic hierarchies that discriminate among people, collecting some and throwing others away, reifying women, subcultures, and/or ethnic minorities, depends on the full embrace of aesthetics as artifice and process, and not as fixed characteristic. My thesis’ rethinking of the notions of aesthetics at the museum through the engagement with fashion could help publics recognize the artifice and construction of the normative messages that circulate in dress and through the institution.

On the one hand, my analysis has shown how, extending the formation of gendered “individual identities” to both represent and determine inter-personal and inter-national relationships, the museum setting has the potential to control and discipline certain people’s modes of perception of the constructed language of fashion. In order to better comprehend the reach (local and international) the hegemonic discourses embodied in fashion gain through their showcasing at museums, I demonstrated that it is imperative to consider both fashion’s *and* the institution’s unequivocal immersion in the economic system, and their linkage to mass media. Furthermore, by addressing publics through the geography that is the body and its adornment, both of them contribute to the normalization and reproduction of

hegemonic discourses on taste, style, and lifestyles that circulate in the larger social body. In other words, through the display of fashion commodities in (art) museums—a practice that decommodifies, disembodies, and renders artworks “a-political”—processes of inclusion or exclusion of certain people and their communities might be reaffirmed and naturalized, as they become fixed as a single version of history. The museum negotiates, exhibits or silences, which societies are worthy of re-collection in the historical memory it represents.

Concretely, I argued that “individually” gendered fashions embody distinct non-normative ethos—such as the punk subculture’s or the Chinese-American minority’s in the United States. As the Metropolitan’s *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* explained, clothes, style and fashion “express” the seemingly intrinsic and immutable identities particularly of women. These are additionally re-presented by a male gaze to form the identity of the male citizen and of the nation. Furthermore, audience interaction with costumes at the museum—through mechanisms of appropriation, which echo cultural colonialist and imperial enterprises of the past—might become a performance of practices of imposition, surveillance, or eventually of contestation of the circulating gendered, ethnic, and class discourses.

Moreover, the specific art/clothing pieces chosen for or excluded from display, contribute to the gendering of the communities the objects represent or help construct, through the ways they are (re)presented and make the audience turn towards them. On the one hand, the identity of the European and American west is masculinized at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to tacitly justify its position as collecting authority; the collected communities (i.e. an apparently homogeneous East) are feminized. On the other hand, some exhibitions, such as the Museum of Chinese in America’s, are mounted as an attempt for the self-representation of certain cultures. This re-appropriation of the dominant gaze can function to perhaps break from hegemonic control, countering neocolonial political and material exploitation; they can establish new sites of power. In

these cases, the collecting agents also position themselves as worthy of visibility by “proving” their ability to design and control mainly women’s subjectivities. However, as was determined in the last chapter of the thesis, fashion exhibitions that could motivate or enact processes of cultural or political decolonization are trumped. When they only represent inversions, rather than subversions, of the hegemonic hierarchical ordering of the “globe.”

Nevertheless, and returning to the idea that these shows occur within aesthetic contexts, I analyzed the ways different bodily relations to the space of the exhibition, to the pages of the articles, to the distraction (Benjamin 268) of the TV transmissions, and to the other people present in or alluded to in any of these cases, render distinct modes of inter-objective/subjective ways of knowing, interacting, and further living in the world. This is why viewing fashion at the museum not only as intrinsically aesthetic objects, but as items that motivate aesthetic processes of meaning-making—including physical visits or press coverage and reading— opens space for some museumgoers to experience these museum exhibitions not as “historical facts,” occurrences that display new forms of fashion, but rather might “[modify] the regime of participation” (Entwistle 13) with fashion forms.

Ultimately, while museum settings featuring fashion could be determined as a site for social control, in “the mausoleums of culture” (Wilson in Entwistle 10), preventing the objects’ immediate interaction with the live bodies that are supposed to carry them, the imperative hold of fashion on the human and the female body, for example, could potentially come undone.⁷⁰ Likewise, if punk, or any other style, is framed at an art museum—at least a “beautified” designer version of it— then the museum audience, as the ideal Aristotelian tragic drama public, must be able to keep a tacit understanding with the “fictional” setting and accept such styles as art. This

⁷⁰ Some may say that the lack of bodies at the museum creates a kind of “eeriness of the encounter [that] comes from the ‘dusty silence’ and stillness of the costumes and from a sense that the museum is ‘haunted’ by the spirits of the living, breathing humans whose bodies these gowns once adorned” (Entwistle 10).

generates space and an option for destabilizing and deconstructing the notions of art and beauty that are used to categorize objects, peoples, their modes of expression/performance, and their geographies, while also looking beyond notions of individual and into collective/aesthetic personhood.

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