

Exhibition Reviews

Items: Is Fashion Modern?

Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Items: Is Fashion Modern?

Paola Antonelli and Michelle Millar Fisher, eds.

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Large-scale encyclopedic exhibitions of art and design may seem somewhat outdated to contemporary audiences. Yet this was the approach curator Paola Antonelli, with Michelle Millar Fisher, chose for MoMA's highly anticipated exhibition on dress, held seventy-three years after the museum's first (and last until now) foray into fashion curation. With no geographic limitations, Antonelli framed her mediation on the fashion "items" central to our collective design landscape of the past century around the presentation of 111 fashion typologies, or "stereotypes," "the incarnation that made a particular garment or accessory significant," as outlined in the introductory wall text. Built into this framework was a contextual apparatus that explained each object's historical "archetype" through imagery or writing and, in certain cases, moved the conversation into the future through a commissioned "prototype," made with "pioneering materials, more sustainable approaches, and novel design techniques." In one respect, the exhibition's extensive scope exposed a dialogue with its predecessor, Bernard Rudofsky's *Are Clothes Modern?*, conceived during a high point

of modernism, as the Second World War drew to a close, when grand (utopian) narratives seemed useful. It is interesting to think about the ways in which, in our moment of industrial flux into digimodernism, Rudofsky's mode of inquiry resonates anew. What does this display model reveal about the place fashion holds within broader design contexts, and in scholarship and institutional discourse?

In the context of today's globalized world, the exhibition's wide framework offered a lesson in how narratives of inclusivity might be mediated within the museum, in both the number of people involved in the installation and satellite programming (including an abecedarium and audio headsets involving the participation of a range of specialists from academic, industrial, editorial, and other sectors), and the engagement with universal wearers of dress, who saw themselves reflected in the display of "everyday" objects drawn from global contexts. Further, the show's particular focus on design itself challenged the primacy of the designer-led fashion exhibition, and encouraged experiential viewing. As they entered the exhibition visitors were asked to consider their own active relationships to fashion, with the introductory text defining clothing as "the most universal and the most intimate [design object]. Every day, everywhere, everyone wears something." In *Items*, the "significance" and modernity of the clothing, or "stereotypes," were measured first by visitors' own culturally influenced subjectiveness. Along with the text a slide show of snapshot-like images drawn mainly from Creative Commons highlighted the diverse everyday, and gave context to the clothing showcased in the following rooms.

Display objects ranged from the ordinary and ritualistic to the branded and iconic, effectively contesting hierarchies of cultural production. The exhibition's 111 typologies, conspicuously listed on a large wall in the entranceway, were mainly generic item names (e.g., chinos) and specific brands or product ranges (Y-3, Converse All Star), as well as the occasional concept (Space Age). Beyond these broad parameters, the exhibition was organized according



Installation view for *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* Entrance wall to the exhibition galleries for depicting the 111 typologies on display. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Martin Seck.

to subthemes including the body, future, luxury, and garment types (e.g., undergarments, sportswear, shift dresses, and suits), demarcated by informational wall texts. Within these categories, topics as varied as freedom, agency, modesty, and power were introduced in relation to the various ways our personal engagement with dress connects to its social, political, economic, and environmental significance. The exhibition often felt as though it had no limit to its scope. The surplus of information, however, often expressed in potted histories, minimized the display's revisionary and "equalizing" potential.

This was not least because, despite the above-mentioned organizational attempts, it was often difficult to follow the individual threads in what was a massive space of adjoining rooms, with object groupings (showing one or several typologies) physically overlapping with one another as they related to text panels. This physical layout certainly reflected the complexity of our self-fashioning, which negotiates a mixture of psychological, social, and cultural forces. In fact, the subject of the exhibition's last display

was the curatorial consideration of the many subtle and unintentional ways different items of fashion interconnect to express the link between personal and broader cultural narratives. "Data ITEMS: A Fashion Landscape," a data visualization by information designer Giorgia Lupi and Accurat, drawn from the curators' own notes and printed over three massive walls, revealed the complex cross-referencing relationship between the 111 typologies in the exhibition. This vision, however, was often lost in the individual displays of simplified object juxtapositions, which, in the most problematic cases, reduced items with very different cultural provenances to shared stylistic qualities (for example, an undated sari by an unknown maker and a 1970s wrap dress by Diane von Furstenberg).

Clearly and effectively communicated, however, was the idea of the body as a point of entry both for the actual exhibition and for visitors' perceptions of fashion. Bolstered by its first-person narrative voice, the first wall text set the subjective, embodied tone of the viewing experience, explaining how, "When we



Installation view for *Items: Is Fashion Modern? Underwear* installation in right foreground; statue display in left background was included in Bernard Rudofsky's *Are Clothes Modern?* (1944), the first and only other fashion exhibition the museum has held. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Martin Seck.

put on clothes, we change the shape, texture, and outline of our body." With this notion in mind, the display of Rudi Gernreich's Unisex Project knitted leotard (1970) and Yves Saint Laurent's "Le Smoking" tuxedo (1960s) introduced viewers to concepts of gender nonconformity. The adjacent large display of "the Little Black Dress" typology was a means of discussing the normalizing role of the silhouette, as well as its historic underpinning of fashion's trend-based seasonal rhythm. However, the irony in the presentation of French and couture-driven high fashion, only to articulate the tension between conformity and individualism and democratic and elite dress, was not lost on design history specialists.

The neighboring installation of underwear, and makeup to a lesser extent, was perhaps more successful at defining fashion as a bodily experience and forging viewers' connection to the display objects. An easily missed tube of YSL Touche Éclat foundation alongside a 1990s Wonderbra and the lacy full-body Skin Guardian tights by Tamae Hirokawa (2006) on an

outstretched mannequin evoked the myriad ways we physically manipulate ourselves. An accompanying video loop showing twentieth- and twenty-first-century advertisement stills underscored manufacturers' and image makers' roles in prescribing beauty ideals. Further displays discussed fashion's function to variously "correct" and enhance body distortion, relating maternity wear, rarely seen in exhibitions, to a garment from Rei Kawakubo's oft-displayed "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body" collection of 1997. Elsewhere the body was viewed as a site of control or power, and as a map, with clothing serving to demarcate personal space. Here, the architectural concept *existenzmaximum*, and its connotation of early twentieth-century efficient spatial practices, was applied to today's wearable technology and other accessories such as sunglasses.

The path stringing these sections together culminated in a display from Rudofsky's original 1944 exhibition. Its installations relating ethnographic artifacts to physically similar contemporary fashion products

spoke to the architect and designer's lifelong quest for innovative design that rethought Western cultural norms. That he chose to comment on fashion during a time of heightened development of the New York sportswear industry and its powerful promotional apparatus, explains his rather negative outlook on the medium, whose ever-changing silhouette he viewed as a means to objectify and disfigure women. Rudofsky expanded upon these ideas in his resulting philosophical text, *Are Clothes Modern? An Essay on Contemporary Apparel*, commenting in one section, "Our civilization keeps alive the fascination for monsters and, at the same time, expresses disdain for the normally built human body. The female figure is redesigned from time to time, like furniture or automobile bodies."¹ Reprinted in Antonelli's exhibition text, this extract accompanied the display of four plaster mannequins designed by Rudofsky and sculpted by Costantino Nivola, satirizing fashion silhouettes of the Victorian, Edwardian, and 1920s eras. Whereas Rudofsky's iterations represented bodies distorted by bustles, corsets, and other undergarments, *Tolula*, a scaled-down plus-size dress form by Brandon Wen

and Laura Zwanziger (2013), was added to the display, a comment on today's attempts to shape an inclusive, unmanipulated female body image.

This transhistorical dialogue between exhibitions, ephemeral as they are, is a rare treat. Subtle evocations of the earlier event were to be found throughout *Items*, whether in its consideration of the physical aspects of dressing, or in conceptions of democracy, adornment, modesty, and trends as they relate to fashion and the body. But without reading Rudofsky's book or viewing images of his exhibition, both available to download from MoMA's website, these connections almost certainly wouldn't be noticed.

For those in the know, however, Rudofsky's innovative spirit was channeled in *Items*' recircling around the notion of "modern," with its connotations of futurity, invention, and break from tradition with regard to fashion production. Our current "fast fashion"-driven industry, and its devastating impact on the environment and labor, ties directly back to the industrial drive of Rudofsky's era. Antonelli allotted space to this topic in her essay in the exhibition's accompanying catalogue. And it is surely what she had in mind to rectify in the exhibition's exploration of "not only the ways clothing is made but how it might be made."² This objective was exemplified in the twenty-eight items commissioned for the exhibition, as well as in its section on the future, which presented Pierre Cardin's "Cosmos" ensemble of 1967, a favorite of fashion curators, as a contrast to its 2017 "prototype" by Kerby Jean Raymond of Pyer Moss, alongside a 1970s Gor-Tex parka, an array of moon boots, the latest sunscreen technology, and a contemporary Fit Bit. Whereas Rudofsky was inherently negative in his assessment of contemporary fashion, describing it as "anachronistic, irrational and harmful,"³ Antonelli and Millar Fisher stressed the positive impacts of fashion design as carrier of cultural meaning and heritage (from the screen printing of a Hermès scarf to the expert creation of a Kashmiri pashmina shawl), while remembering the forgotten makers, silenced behind elite fashion production.

In contrast to the focus on the high-fashion designer, mass manufacturer, or local maker, the exhibition also depicted the consumer as fashion author. This was discussed in relation to the display of Donna Karan's "Seven Easy Pieces" collection, whereby the female wearer performs a creative act in her choice of pairing individual dress items.



Installation view for *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* Champion, red hoodie, and Richard Malone, jumpsuit prototype (2017). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Martin Seck.



Installation view for *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* Thea Porter, caftan (1970) and abaya (1977). In background are beret, balaclava, leather jacket, keffiyeh, Doc Martens, leather pants, Walkman, surgical mask, New Era baseball cap, and down jacket. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Martin Seck.

This individualized, creative practice sat in opposition to the earlier display of the T-shirt and tattoos. With a loop of designs and slogans projected onto undressed mannequins, it could have been interpreted as a metaphor for the ways fashion's often standardized production is reproduced onto bodies. We largely fashion ourselves through acts of appropriation, and this idea was also addressed in exhibition texts, although not clearly materialized in displays. The active, subjective relationship we have with our garments is the area that *Items*, with its unique and important focus on ordinary objects alongside elite ones, could have further explored. The garment is a bearer of embodied memories, and therefore a potentially powerful tool for forging connections between viewer and display object. This is why displays of the anonymous, universal black turtleneck and red hoodie were especially compelling. Unfortunately, many potential narrative connections were undermined by the overall enormity of the show, which made following curatorial threads and cues at times difficult.

Nevertheless, the curators' subtle engagement with this range of ideas stands as a testament to

the experimental nature of this exhibition. That their curatorial process was a negotiation between various institutional and ideological debates was apparent based on disclosures ranging from an introductory text that discussed "wrestl[ing] with [the] knotty words *fashion*, *modern*, and *design*," to Antonelli's catalogue essay, in which she described her trials of breaking into the fashion design patriarchy (including a run-in with Philip Johnson). In the latter she argued for the initiation of fashion collecting at MoMA (the vast majority of works on display were loans) to disseminate a more complete picture of design history. Likewise, fashion was analyzed via traditional design language in wall texts, which also cited much of the valuable work undertaken by dress researchers specifically, in the years since Rudofsky left his mark. Rather than devote the space of the catalogue to this and newer work, it comprises Antonelli's essay and brief written entries for each "item," as well as five commissioned photo essays that extend the narratives of these typologies. Specialist scholarly contribution would have enriched the entries and provided a more rigorous assessment of "modern" in relation to dress, which ambitiously spanned the twentieth

century and our digital age in *Items*. Indeed, the exhibition's breadth was its strength as well as its downfall. Yet it opened a space for further questioning in relation to fashion thinking, practice, and curation. In a world where exhibitions of fashion are increasingly common, if not at MoMA, are such encyclopedic displays necessary? Would a similar exhibition on furniture, or painting, have been attempted? Or does fashion lend itself to this type of investigation?

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1 Bernard Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern? An Essay on Contemporary Apparel* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 49.

2 Paola Antonelli, "Who's Afraid of Fashion?," in *Items: Is Fashion Modern?*, ed. Paola Antonelli and Michelle Millar Fisher (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 19.

3 Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern?*, 115.

Eileen Gray: Une architecture de l'intime / Intimate Architecture

Cap Moderne, Roquebrune / Cap Martin (in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, Paris)

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For more than two decades, the Villa E1027 and Le Corbusier's work and behavior there have been central to the revisionist discourse on modernist architecture. In 1996 Beatriz Colomina published an article detailing the events in the villa during the late 1930s and 1950s and concluded that Le Corbusier, driven by a combination of envy and his characteristically competitive relationship with rivals, painted without Eileen Gray's permission a series of murals which were, in effect, his colonization of the space, the building, and indeed the whole project.¹ The villa itself was built for the Romanian-born critic and architect Jean Badovici between 1926 and 1929, and would seem to have been a collaborative project between him and Gray. Situated near the bottom of a rugged hillside on Cap Martin, just above the sea, it is a spectacularly sited summer retreat with a wonderful view across the baie des Bleues toward Monaco. It must have been even more enticing in the 1930s before the encroachment of modern housing domesticated much of this rocky stretch, but it is still a fairly wild part of the cape, richly overgrown with Provençal foliage. Gray and Badovici lived here at various times, but it has become associated with Gray above