



Fig. 1. Marnie Guglielmi-Vitullo, Chalayan, 2015. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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Conceptual Fashion, An In-Depth Look at Hussein Chalayan and His Monumental Designs

That fashion is a completely frivolous and materialistic entity could not be further from the truth, as there is always so much more that lies beneath the surface. This essay hopes to challenge the former notion by clearly defining the bond between the materiality of fashion and the possible concepts hidden underneath. By focusing on three distinct dresses designed by British and Turkish fashion designer, Hussein Chalayan, this essay will explore their individual connection to the Western conceptual art movement. Beginning with a brief history of the relationship between fashion and art will help contextualize how fashion and art have functioned together over time. This will be followed by an examination of how fashion can and is viewed as art, and not just as a capitalist endeavour. Finally, this essay will delve into an in-depth exploration of Chalayan's three conceptual designs; the Chair Dress (S/S 1999), the Aeroplane Dress (F/W 1999-2000), and finally the Remote Control Dress (S/S 2000).

Throughout the twentieth century, art and fashion have always had a tumultuous relationship.¹ Beginning around the nineteenth century, English fashion designer Charles Frederick Worth called for the autonomy of the fashion designer. Worth did not perceive his profession as one that was subject to the wishes of the clientele, as craftsmen were. Instead, he believed that designers were free to design and create on the basis of their own subjectivity.² Worth emphasized a connection between fashion and art, and expressed that the fashion designer was also an artist.³ But since the divide between art and craft, fashion has been accorded with its own realm, subsequently distancing it from the world of craft, but not exactly deemed as art.⁴

Over time, art garnered a fair amount of scholarly attention, resulting in a field of study that has been greatly expanded upon, unlike fashion, which had not received much attention from academia until recently. This subsequently reinforced the divide between the world of art and the world of fashion. Art was perceived as a legitimate form of expression, while fashion, on the other hand, was referred to as 'capitalist merchandise.'⁵

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Fashion was understood as being superficial and commercial, a medium that could not be placed on par with art. However, with recent scholarship, fashion has been slowly earning a reputation as its own art. Along with the plastic arts, the study of fashion has been developing its own self-reflexive and self-referential lexicon.⁶ All the while, it still borrows terms and names from the language of the fine arts—such as avant-garde, deconstructionist, and even conceptual—solidifying a possible connection with the arts.⁷

Moreover, while the idea of what constitutes an art piece has expanded greatly over time, fashion has also aligned itself with art objects as a means of elevating the cultural capital of a certain piece. It has become a difficult endeavour to distinguish what is art, what is not, and even what is anti-art.⁸ But then it begs the question, how is fashion still not identified as art? The intention of this essay is not to provide an explicit answer to the question. Instead, Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen provides one point of view addressing that very question, claiming that “[...] fashion has [not] ‘gained’ the level of art, but rather that practically everything (including art) is subject to the principles of fashion.”⁹ Svendsen does not try to suggest that art and fashion are equals, but instead reasons that both are dependent on one another in order to function.

Fashion critics began drawing from the terminology of art and architecture in order to describe garments that resisted the basic fashion vocabulary. These pieces were defined as conceptual, with the emphasis drawn away from the functionality of the clothes and instead directed to the idea behind the designs.¹⁰ This is much like the principles of conceptual art, as defined by American artist Sol Lewitt in his writing *Paragraph’s on Conceptual Art* (1967), insisting that “in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.”¹¹ In other words, it is not the final product, but the original idea that initiated the project which is most important. Over the past fifty or so years, fashion has grown into a medium capable of expressing ideas and concepts through clothing,¹² once again distancing itself from its initial conception as a commercial product, and aligning itself with the realm of fine arts.¹³

British-Turkish fashion designer Hussein Chalayan graduated from Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design in London in 1993. From that point on, Chalayan had earned himself the reputation as “[...] one of the most original designers working anywhere in the world today.”¹⁴ His fashion shows are unique and unpredictable, as the designer incorporates props as unorthodox as confessional boxes and trampolines onto the runway, while at the same time creating garments that are capable of transforming

themselves into furniture and vice versa.¹⁵ Chalayan often worked on his collections alone—except for the time he spent designing in New York for the label Tse—thus ensuring that his initial designs would translate into elaborate final products.¹⁶

During the late 1990s and early millennium, the British-Turkish designer would go on to create collections and fashion shows that truly expressed his ideas on a more symbolic level.¹⁷ However, according to Chalayan, particular pieces stood as “monuments to ideas,”¹⁸ or in other words, as complete manifestations of a specific thought or motif.¹⁹ Closely analyzing three of Chalayan’s monumental designs such as the Chair Dress (S/S 1999), the Aeroplane Dress (F/W 1999-2000), and finally the Remote Control Dress (S/S 2000) will help illustrate how the designer manages to embody an idea through a physical garment.²⁰

Beginning with Chalayan’s Chair Dress, the piece was first revealed in 1999 in the Spring/Summer collection, Geotropic. The show’s central focus was the definition of a nation, coupled with concepts such as nationalism, culture, nature, expansion, and conflict over boundaries. The designer also explored the idea of a nomadic identity by constructing a garment that could also function as a chair (fig. 1), allowing the individual to sit wherever they choose.²¹ The piece was constructed of two main parts, the first being the greenish-grey chair that was fastened to the body with chrome catches collected from the motor industry. The second part was the flesh-colored undergarments that covered the body, and upon which the Chair Dress rested.

By combining the two materials together, Chalayan transformed the body into a site where tensions between the skin and technology played out. The chair piece of the dress bandaged to the model’s head and spine, along with the flesh tones of the undergarments, stood as a reminder of the fragility and vulnerability of the human body. Moreover, the hard shell of the Chair Dress acquainted the body’s posture, providing a rigid structure to rest the neck and arms—these details were symbolic of the hard-edged precision of modern engineering.²² Fashion history theorist, Caroline Evans, explains in her book, *Fashion at the Edge* (2012), “the contract between frail humanity and rigid technology emphasized the difference between organic and inorganic. [...]”²³ Through the juxtaposition of various mediums and materials, Chalayan’s Chair Dress is an exploration of the geographical displacement of the human body.

Chalayan’s second monumental design, the Aeroplane Dress (fig. 2), was exhibited in the 1999-2000 Fall/Winter collection, Echoform. In this

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show, the British-Turkish designer wished to explore the “[...] premise that everything we do is an external vision of the body,”²⁴ once again drawing inspiration from the human form, but this time in relation to speed. Through the help of enhanced technologies, the human body is now capable of experiencing varying degrees of speed and motion. With that in mind, Chalayan focused on ergonomics and the interior design of cars for the collection.²⁵ Focusing on the notion of flight, the white resin Aeroplane Dress mimicked the movement of actual aeroplane flaps. With a battery, gears, and wheels tucked away within the resin structure, the mechanism was activated by a switch located within the dress. Once switched on, various panels along the waist slid downwards, a slide flap rose, as another panel close to the chin moved horizontally across the body.²⁶

The last ‘monument’ this essay will analyze is the Remote Control Dress. Like the Aeroplane Dress, this design also had mechanically moving parts (fig. 3). However, the difference was that this dress was to be operated by a remote control removed from the garment. The dress was part of the 2000 Spring/Summer collection *Before Minus Now*, where Chalayan wished to explore notions of the intangible as a medium for creation—focusing on concepts such as gravity, the weather, technological forces, expanding forces, and wave and wind detecting objects.

The Remote Control Dress was a dress cast in pink resin with an electrically wired hem that would lift once the electrical current passed through. As the hem of the skirt lifted and spread itself around the body, the dress was left suspended in mid-air, subsequently, defying notions of gravity.²⁷ As the flaps of the dress rose, a large mass of light pink frothy tulle was revealed underneath. When the flaps closed, it encased the tulle against the model’s body, a symbolic representation of the encapsulation of nature within the machine, and the dress once again reverted back to its aerodynamic shape.²⁸

Controlling the movements of the dress was a little boy, wearing a yellow T-shirt, wandering about the catwalk with a remote control in his hand. The boy’s character played an important role in the show as he was featured on the invitations, along with the show’s program. The invitation consist of a photograph of the boy in the yellow T-shirt holding a remote control in his hands, aiming the device towards a jet plane flying overhead. In the program, the boy was photographed once again, this time, pointing his remote control at a swan found in the middle of a lake. Having the boy appear on the runway alongside many of the models conjured the idea that the boy would probably aim his remote at one of the humans in an attempt to control one of them. But in the end, nothing had happened, and the

boy left the runway disappointed.²⁹ Only to return to the runway when the model in the pink resin dress was revealed, to try his remote control a second time. This time succeeding in controlling the dress, as the panels of the garments were mechanically lifted.

Chalayan wished to compose a garment that was equal parts mechanical and serene. Despite the technological innovation of the dress, the movements of the panels were elegant and ended in composition similar to the figure of a swan. The Remote Control Dress embodied concepts such as nature, technology and alienation, while also underlining the futility of human mastery over the natural or technological world.³⁰ Chalayan's designs embody the various motifs and tropes of modernity, while also infusing a sense of uneasiness and trauma, thus creating spaces where strenuous relationships can play out.³¹

Chalayan's work often puts into question various facets of modern society. Using his fashion shows and collections as a means to embody his ideas, the fashion designer uses the sources available to him to express his political positions, or to draw attention to a particular social issue.³² His designs, though seemingly absurd or, by contrast, extremely simple at first glance, bear a great amount of meaning when referenced to history and time.³³ This point falls into step with one of Lewitt's affirmations of conceptual art, stating, "Some ideas are logical in conception and illogical perceptually."³⁴ With regard to Chalayan's collections, while some of the physical garments seem impractical for the human form and entirely unwearable, the emphasis is instead placed on the idea that initially inspired the design. The designer places an importance on the initial thought, and the context from which it may have come from.³⁵

Conceptual fashion provides a space for designers to experiment and play with ideas and materials, just as the art world functions for the artist. This also allows designers to work in a realm outside the confines of the fashion industry and business.³⁶ By having examined three of Hussein Chalayan's monumental works, this essay has unraveled how each piece functioned as objects of conceptual art. Beginning with a brief contextualization of the everchanging history and climate between fashion and art allowed for a short exploration of how fashion and design—and more specifically the work of fashion designer Hussein Chalayan—are not so far removed from conceptual art. This was followed by an in-depth analysis of the Chair Dress (1999), the Aeroplane Dress (1999-2000), and the Remote Control Dress (2000), which helped solidify Chalayan's works as conceptual art pieces. In conclusion, Hussein Chalayan's designs help bring an artistic and conceptual element to the fashion world. The designer does

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not shy away from serious ideas or political ideologies; but instead chooses to incorporate them into his collections, thus transforming the body into a site of expression and thought.

Endnotes

**CONCEPTUAL
FASHION, AN
IN-DEPTH
LOOK AT
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AND HIS
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DESIGNS**

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| 1 | Lars Svendsen, <i>Fashion: A Philosophy</i> (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 97. | 13 | McRobbie, <i>British Fashion Design</i> , 51. |
| 2 | Ibid., 90. | 14 | Skye Sherwin, "Hussein Chalayan," in <i>Fashion Now</i> , ed. Terry Jones (Cologne: Taschen, 2005) 54. |
| 3 | Ibid., 91. | 15 | Ibid., 54. |
| 4 | Ibid., 90. | 16 | Caroline Evans, <i>Fashion at the Edge; Spectacle, modernity and deathliness</i> . (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 74. |
| 5 | José Teunissen, "Fashion and Art," in <i>Fashion and Imagination, About Clothes and Art</i> , ed. Jan Brand, José Teunissen, and in cooperation with Catelijne de Muijnck (Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2010), 14. | 17 | Marga van Mechelen, "The tête-à-tête of performance in fashion and art," in <i>Fashion and Imagination, About Clothes and Art</i> , ed. Jan Brand, José Teunissen, and in cooperation with Catelijne de Muijnck (Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2010), 111. |
| 6 | Ibid., 14. | 18 | Evans, <i>Fashion at the Edge</i> , 270. |
| 7 | Angela McRobbie, "The fashion girls and the painting boys," in <i>British Fashion Design, Rag trade or image industry</i> , (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 51. | 19 | Ibid. |
| 8 | Svendsen, <i>Fashion: A Philosophy</i> , 107. | 20 | While fashion designer, Hussein Chalayan, acknowledges the three dresses as 'monumental' pieces in his body of work, it is fashion theorist, Caroline Evans who further expands on this point. In her book, <i>Fashion at the Edge, Spectacle, Modernity, and</i> |
| 9 | Ibid., 108. | | |
| 10 | Jennifer Craik, "Fashion, aesthetic, and art," in <i>Fashion, The Key Concepts</i> (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009) 186. | | |
| 11 | Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," <i>Artforum</i> 5.10 (1967): 79. | | |
| 12 | Teunissen, "Fashion and Art," 13. | | |

- Deathliness (2003), Evans suggests that these three particular dresses stand as ‘monuments to ideas,’ as the garments and designs seem to fully embody Chalayan’s initial ideas and inspirations.
- 21 Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 270.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 274.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 274.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 271.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 271.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 271.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 271.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 274.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 271-273.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 273.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 275.
- 32 Teunissen, ‘Fashion and Art’, 12.
- 33 Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 275.
- 34 Lewitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, 79.
- 35 Sylvia Chivaratanond, “Flesh and Bones,” in *Skin Tight: the Sensibility of the Flesh*, dir. Robert Fitzpatrick, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004). n.p.
- 36 McRobbie, *British Fashion Design*, 48.
- Craik, Jennifer. “Fashion, aesthetic, and art.” In *Fashion, The Key Concepts*, 171-204. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009.
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