Rethinking Fashion or the Anthropology of Fashion through the Anthropology of Art: A Case of the Vivienne Westwood Exhibition at the V&A[1]

이 정 택

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The ultimate aim of the anthropology of art [fashion] must be the dissolution of art [fashion].

– Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (1998).

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This study aims to rethink fashion or, namely, the *anthropology of fashion* through examining issues generated by the relationship between art and the anthropology of art. Since their crossing paths, sound discussions have emerged between the anthropology of art and the art world, such as subjects about 'artworks and artefacts', 'Western and non-Western discourse' and 'art and agency' (Gell 1992; 1993; 1996; 1998). This study is comprised of a series of discussions, the subjects of which follow: the relationship between fashion and art; art and the anthropology of art; and in parallel with this, examining fashion and otherfashion by former discussions in terms of addressing the anthropology of fashion.

연구 방법 및 절차

This study employs a qualitative approach based on the discussion of relevant literatures dealing with fashion, art and art theory for its methodology, followed by a brief examination of a case of the Vivienne Westwood exhibition, in terms of an empirical account.

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'Is Fashion Art?' : For a first pertinent context between fashion and art, Richard Martin can be listed for his endeavours in exhibitions of art and fashion as a curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as his scholarly writing during his life. One of his exhibitions 'Gianni Versace' (1997-8) triggered some astonishingly hostile responses in the press, and critics demanded to debate what Versace's clothes were doing in an art museum (Steele 1998: 2). For this reason, Sung Bok Kim's article (1998) titled "Is Fashion Art?" was introduced in *Fashion Theory* (1998 2/1: 51-72).

Kim's article argues that what has been most notably overlooked in fashion research is 'the aesthetic' which has been considered as art's own, and proves its relevance to fashion by referencing from a series of fashion relevant scholars. The article aims to serve as a foundation for an 'informed and organised discussion' (Feldman 1973 in Kim 1998: 53) of aesthetic criticism of fashion. It analyses of critical fashion writings published in American art magazines, including *Artforum, Art in America, Artnews and Arts magazine* between 1980 and 1995 (Ibid: 52-8). Kim (Ibid: 53-8) deploys a set of critics' views on whether or not fashion is art as early as 1959: Remy G. Saisselin (1959); Diana Vreeland (1981); Michael Boodro (1990); Roberta Smith (1996); Richard Martin (1996). However, althoughthe later critics admit fashion as art, these whole discussions seem to remain under the realm of art rather than aiming to achieve an independent aesthetic criticism of fashion.

Kim's methodology involves the analysis of thirty-two fashion writings selected according to the seven key elements (Carney 1994) of art criticism constituting James D. Carney's 'Style-relative Model of Art Criticism' (Carney 1991: 15-22), which was influenced by Arthur Danto's notion of 'artworld' (Kim 1998: 58-62). Kim concludes that her findings prove Carney's model an effective tool for analysing critical fashion writings, since it allows for identification of methods, criteria, and conceptions of fashion (Ibid: 69). Yet again, it does not seem to overcome the limitation of art criticism. The fact that fashion is not art and vice versa does not mean that a sphere of art is larger than that of fashion. One can

assume that the two areas exist respectively, and may have common ground, to some extent, as a subset. Thus, the question 'Is fashion art?' may no longer be interesting. What can be sought instead is, what distinct property in each must be revealed and also how do they interrelate in order to produce more fruitful dialogue? Moreover, what is more universal/cross-cultural aesthetics or critical theory for fashion beyond the realm of art may be questioned. We may need to glance at what is at stake in the art world against the aura of art itself. For this, *other* arts can provide some context, not only by the art itself, but together with the anthropology of art, which evolves wider socio-cultural aspects and the aesthetic matter.

'Art and the Anthropology of Art' : An exhibition 'ART/ARTIFACT' (1998) under the direction of the anthropologist Susan Vogel (cf. Gell 1996; Faris 1988) can be seen as a similar case in parallel with Richard Martin's exhibition. Both exhibitions attempted to stake a claim in the realm of art world by asking the question, 'what is an artwork?'.

What Gell explores in his article *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps* (1996) is the basis of the distinction commonly made between works of art or art objects, and mere artefacts. Examining the 'interpretive' and 'institutional' theories of art, paradoxically written in Danto's exhibition catalogue (1988), Gell argues that if the art object is identifiable as such in the light of the fact that it has an 'interpretation', as Danto states (1981; 1986), then many artefacts could be exhibited as art objects. Criticising Danto's institutional theory of over-idealised distinction between 'functional' artefacts and 'meaningful' artworks, Gell concludes: "a broader notion of interpretability, encompassing the objectification of 'complex intentionalities' in pragmatic and technical modes, as well as the project of communicating autonomous symbolic meaning, seems to overcome the problems contained in both the 'interpretive' and 'institutional' theories of art" (Gell 1996: 37).

Alfred Gell's posthumously published book Art and Agency: an Anthropological

Theory (1998) is a refutation of an aesthetic theory of art, which is replaced by a 'theory of the effects that art has achieved as the distributed agency of some subjects upon other subjects' (Miller 2003: 11). Initially, his argument suggests the 'cross-cultural aesthetics' which is not intended to elicit aesthetic appreciation in the conventional sense. He stands on a categorical rejection of the linguistic analogies which understand art as a matter of *meaning* and communication. The key, then, is it is instead about *doing*. This book breaks not just with the legacy of semiotic analysis, but with the lasting assumption that the anthropology of art concerns itself with the 'non-Western' system of art appreciation (Kchler 2002: 59). Gell advocates "if Western (aesthetic) theories of art apply to 'our' art, then they apply to everybody's art, and should be so applied" (Gell 1998: 1). This anti-aesthetic stance seems to continue to upholdthe sociological analysis that would identify the role of art in sustaining class cultures, or in legitimising dominant ideologies (Kchler 2002: 59).

For Gell's concern, the art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents (1998). He questions the 'efficacy of the art object', without succumbing to the fascination and aura of those objects, by taking art as a special form of technology, and especially by regarding art objects as devices "for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed" (1992: 43 quoted by Thomas in Gell 1998: viii). The anthropology of art is constructed as a theory of agency, or as the mediation of agency through indexes, understood simply as material entities which motivate inferences, responsesor interpretation (Gell 1998: ix). Rather than a symbolic communication of 'meaning', Gell's emphasis on 'agency, intention, causation, result and transformation' allows a view of art as a 'system of action' that is preoccupied with the 'practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process' (Ibid: 6). In the end, the book's two key themes, 'the distributed mind' and 'the efficacious agency' are drawn together effectively in the case of Gawan Kula, put forward by Nancy Munn (1986), as a dialectic process.

'Fashion and the Anthropology of Fashion' : Regarding fashion in relation to art, although the fashion which is supported by *interpretive* and *institutional* theories can be deemed as art/art objects, one can argue other fashion surrounding our routine is not likely art, but mere artefacts/commodities of clothing. This study therefore is not interested in such an exhausted dichotomy of whether or how fashion is or is not art. Instead, what this essay pursues is how *art-like* fashion is entitled in comparison with *other* fashion within the fashion world itself. That is, it asserts when looking at the fashion/clothing world through the view of anthropological accounts, there appears to be a certain bias or hierarchy. Hence, one possible way to overcome this is to rethink the fashion world in the manner of the anthropology of fashion [art]. This approach attempts to find a more mature theory of fashion [art], which extends beyond merely conventional aesthetics.

At this point, the key begins to lie in the 'objects of fashion' or 'work of fashion'. Looking at the agency and materiality of fashion clothing, the significance of 'doing' of fashion objects from clothing maker to wearer in everyday life is highlighted through indexes, effects, internal mental/designed intention, external objectified personhood/creativity and their distributed mind as a whole process. Looking at details with reference to the case of 'Vivienne Westwood Exhibition' (2004), people's doing around fashion objects is mediated by the agency in which indexes and effects are involved. In an interview Claire Wilcox, an exhibition curator, made a comment about a certain power of the object during the process of curating fashion. Although she did not mention agency, she seems to work closely with the object itself and receive some kind of inspiration for the exhibition through the clothing itself. The next question to be addressed is how general visitors respond to the clothing in the exhibition in which curator's intention is engaged. Through the agency of Westwood's clothing, the curator and visitors seem to be connected through memories about the days of 60s/70s punk, not to mention *display* strategies of the exhibition.

Also, in the case of some historically-oriented design clothing, how the designer herself has been affected by the agency of past clothing indexes can be questioned.

Indexes stand in a variety of relations to 'prototypes', 'designers/artists', and 'recipients' around the fashion objects. The agency of the designer (clothing maker) is rarely self-sufficient. Instead designers are vehicles of the agency of others, and the index is not simply a 'product' or end-point of action, but rather a 'distributedextension of an agent' (Gell 1988). We can assume that Vivienne Westwood's clothing design is not a mere fashion product, but a process or an effect of index which is a distributed extension of agents, former clothing makers or even portrait painters who affected Westwood's contemporary design through visual paintings depicting women in clothing or actual historical dress preserved until the present. The portrait of 'Madame de Pompadour' – by Franois Boucher (1758) – and the Westwood's evening dress – Anglophilia A/W 2003 – inspired by this painting is a pertinent example here. From this point, we can assume that there are multiple implications of agency in objects clothing and painting, 'an inseparable transition' between them and actual human agents from the past to present (Gell 1998). Further exploration of what Westwood'sclothing is 'doing' through its agency and the distributed mindof other agents can be found by an ethnographic approach to the case. Thus, this theory of agency in fashion objects can serve to rethink fashion in terms of the anthropology of fashion, alike the dialectic between art and the anthropology of art.

결과 및 결론 (토론)

This essay has attempted to create links between art and fashion in terms of an anthropological wheel, particularly by adopting Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998). With critical engagement and anthropological endeavour in order to look at everybody's art, the anthropological theory of 'Art and Agency' has developed the series of concepts: work of art, art objects, agency, doing/meaning, indexes/effects, distributed mind, etc. Therefore, the legacy this approach can leave is the ability to explore the anthropology of fashion in comparison with fashion itself rather than

the relation of fashion to art. Indeed, fashion can be deconstructedanthropologically, which then suggests the significance of the materiality of clothing, which has been largely overlooked. Agency of clothing in fashion has only just been introduced and it will further tantalise people through its indexes and distributed mind of other agents, and float in shaping ideas and allowing for the creation of new forms of social relations among fashion and people. In doing so, we should reject the 'simple relativist vision' and the tendency of too easily homogenising between the two, Western/non-Western art/fashion. The virtue of anthropology can provide actual responses and productive tensions about the issues overcoming 'false generality' (Thomas 1997). Finally, rather than having come to the end of a disciplinary perspective, the anthropology of art is only just beginning to realise its purpose (Kchler 2004). For the anthropology of fashion, the most significant potential highlighted through this study lies in the opening up of lively discussions on the subject matter, akin to the enthusiasm of art and the anthropology of art.

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