

## **Rethinking Fashion: Fashion, Art and the Anthropology of Art - A Case of the Vivienne Westwood Exhibition at the V&A -**

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### **Abstract**

*"The ultimate aim of the anthropology of art [fashion] must be the dissolution of art [fashion]." Alfred Gell, Art and Agency (1998)*

*This study aims to rethink fashion by examining issues that have emerged out of recent writings in the anthropology of art. Since their inaugural coinciding, sound discussions have emerged between the anthropology of art and the art world, addressing such subjects as: '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 the possibility for an anthropology of fashion.*

*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 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in terms of an empirical account.*

Key words : art and fashion, anthropology of art, art and agency, anthropology of fashion, materiality of clothing/fashion

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## I . Introduction

Since their origin, art and fashion seem to have had close ties due to their aesthetic features or visual enchantment of beauty. From an anthropological point of view, for example, there appears to be certain common issues such as tattooing in both small-scale society and elsewhere, viewing either as an embodied visual art or as a body decoration of fashionable adornment through the same body surface (cf. Johnson 2001, Ember & Ember 1996). From the twentieth century forward, as Florence Müller describes in her book *Art & Fashion* (2000), there has been a recognition for the astonishingly stimulating relationship between the worlds of art and fashion, which has caused growth in the fields; this relationship can be appreciated in people as diverse as Salvador Dali and Elsa Schiaparelli, or Keith Haring and Vivienne Westwood, to name a few. The journal *Fashion Theory* has examined as one of its subject areas the relationship between fashion and art, and more specifically, fashion and performance (cf. *Fashion Theory* 2001 5/3; Duggan 2001). Art and fashion are indeed being dealt with more actively in certain practices, with a greater appreciation for the possibilities of interdisciplinary examination. The exhibition 'Refuge Wear' (1994) by Lucy Orta serves as a fine example of this boundary-crossing, provoking social issues through an art form by adopting fashion objects (cf. [http://studioorta.free.fr/lucy\\_orta.html](http://studioorta.free.fr/lucy_orta.html)).

Nevertheless, one may have to question whether two areas are always interrelated fairly and sharing an unproblematic wheel. The ongoing conflict between the two starts from a rather critical point. In comparison to fashion, art has a relatively long history, and one may also claim that fashion has paled in comparison, having been viewed under the shadow of art world. How can one more fairly re-evaluate fashion, considering it in a realm outside of art, and further, criticise fashion in itself as a reflexive manner? This does not necessitate a separation between the two areas or make another niche discipline between fashion and art, precisely because all boundaries have been blurred and interlocked, not only because of the postmodern era, but because of their intrinsic relations. Yet, through identifying a clear distinction of each terrain and examining the relations of the two in a dialectical way, we may be able to read critical implications from both art and fashion.

This study attempts to rethink fashion or, more specifically, the anthropology of fashion, through examining issues generated by the relationship between art and the anthropology of art. Ever since the anthropology of art has tackled the art world, intriguing discussions have emerged between them, such as subjects about 'artworks and artefacts', 'Western and non-Western discourse' and 'art and agency' (Gell 1992;

criticise art itself in a manner that can be taken outside the art world. Such a translation of a project undertaken with reference to art into the realm of fashion may suggest insightful views or a critical engagement in a timely manner.

## II. Is Fashion Art?

The fact that Valerie Steele posthumously dedicated the issue of *Fashion Theory* (Steele 2000 4/1: 1-2) to Richard Martin, would suggest that he is a pertinent example of an individual who crossed the boundaries of fashion and art. His endeavours in exhibitions of art and fashion as a curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and his scholarly writing during his life can be acknowledged to have opened up the dialogue between two areas. One of his exhibitions, showcasing 'Gianni Versace',<sup>1)</sup> triggered some astonishingly hostile responses in the press and critics debated what Versace's clothes were doing in an art museum (Steele 1998: 2). Consequently, Sung Bok Kim's article (1998), "Is Fashion Art?", was introduced in *Fashion Theory* (1998 2/1: 51-72), and this can be examined as the first context of this debate.

For Martin, the reasons for exhibiting Versace's dress in the museum seemed to be obvious: he believed that Versace chose to employ contemporary media to depose a guarded classic perception of fashion and to replace it, as a strategic possibility, with his rash and fervid sexuality (Martin 1998: 99). He understood that "a contemporary artist, whether Cindy Sherman, Damien Hirst, or Gianni Versace, cannot subvert a bourgeois convention entirely in the realm of the middle class" (Ibid: 99). Through the object, 'Versace's little black dress worn by Liz Hurley' <Fig. 1>, Martin attempted to attack the art realm beyond the vulgar fashion, employing his curatorial intention and practice by highlighting Versace's dramatic gesture.

Reviewing Sung-Bok Kim's article, it becomes clear that she is arguing that what has been most notably overlooked in fashion research is the notion of 'the aesthetic' which has been considered exclusive to art, and proves its relevance to fashion by referencing from a series of fashion relevant scholars: Anne Hollander's essential aspect of 'visual impact', Elizabeth



<Fig.1> Liz Hurley in her Little Black Dress (*Fashion Theory* 1998, 2/1, p. 98)

Wilson's a form of 'visual art' and George B. Sproles' 'aesthetic components' (Hollander 1978: 311, Wilson 1987: 9, Sproles 1985: 63 in Kim 1998: 52). The question is whether fashion can be considered as art, and such a question emerged most significantly in the early 1980s, sparked in particular in 1983 when Yves Saint Laurent's 25-year retrospective exhibition opened at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Ibid: 52). Kim's 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 between 1980 and 1995, including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Artnews* and *Arts magazine*, during which time it emerged as a domain of aesthetic inquiry (Ibid: 52-8).

As early as 1959, Kim deploys a set of critics' views on whether or not fashion is art: Remy G. Saisselin's approach 'fashion as art' (1959); more recently came Diana Vreeland's 'fashion is not art' (Zelenko 1981)<sup>2</sup>, and Michael Boodro's denying that 'fashion is art', but conceding to 'strong links between art and fashion' (1990)<sup>3</sup>; later still came Roberta Smith's suggestion of 'substantial shift away from the dichotomous hierarchical view of the fashion-art relationship' (1996); and Richard Martin's standing in stark contrast to 'Boodro's and Vreeland's perspectives' (Turner 1996)<sup>4</sup> (all quoted in Kim 1998: 53-8). However, although the later critics admit fashion as art, these discussions seem as a whole to remain under the realm of art rather than aiming to achieve an independent aesthetic criticism of fashion. This may be partly because of their critical background in art discipline, but it is also due to a strong history of art which overwhelms the history of fashion.

Through the methodology of her article, Kim analyses thirty-two fashion writings selected according to the seven key elements of art criticism: 'Locate the Style, Descriptive Features and Structures, Primary Aesthetic Features, Value Features, Low-level Interpretation, High-level Interpretation and Critical Judgment (Carney 1994)'; these constitute 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). As a result, findings indicate that writers in the artworld were most interested in fashion exhibitions, since the exhibitions were organised by art institutions and the fashions on display were selected by curators on the basis of the criteria needed to evoke an aesthetic experience, that is, as if the fashions were art objects (Ibid: 64). This implicates the question how the relationship between the two is created by, and thus to a certain extent dependent on, the form of exhibition, and further raises as a real problem how fashion outside of the exhibition can be

evaluated. Kim's following findings also show up the authors' conceptions of fashion to be part of a project of visual art, and as part of visual arts, to be grounded in the perception of the body within society. The art-like nature of fashion is thus grounded on a hypothesis of its profound psychological, cultural, sociological, and political implications (Ibid: 68). The problem with this argument is that 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 exclusive of each other, 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, the revelation of a distinct property in each, as well as a consideration of how they can interrelate in order to produce more fruitful dialogue.

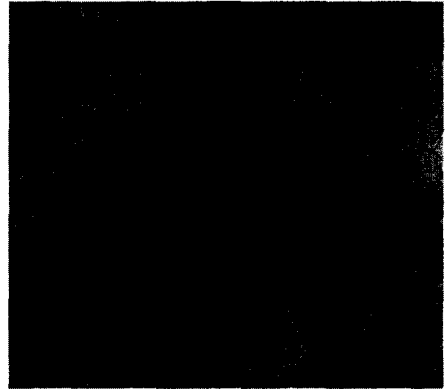
Moreover, one can question whether it is possible to conceive of a more universal aesthetic or critical theory for fashion beyond the realm of art. This is because Kim concludes that her findings prove Carney's model to be an effective tool for analysing critical fashion writings, since it allows for identification of methods, criteria, and conceptions of fashion (Ibid: 69). However, the suggestion of her conclusion seems insufficient, at least because she is still adopting the aesthetic theory from visual art criticism. For the purpose of looking at fashion beyond art, we may need to find some objective criteria outside the artworld, a possibility which is suggested in her criticism of the 'high-level interpretation' which has emerged as an important component of the critical fashion writings, since most authors interpreted fashion in the light of current *social* and aesthetic values (Ibid: 69). Kim's article exemplifies a critique of this perspective; her findings suggest that "fashion can be discussed and examined as a cultural artefact similar to art, although fashion's parameters are generally limited to the physical realities of the human body and to social identities both private and public (Ibid: 69)".

Such an emphasis on aesthetic value in the critical evaluation of fashion is arguably decidedly unsatisfactory as it invites, as Smith has claimed (Ibid: 56), a 'dichotomous hierarchical view of the fashion-art relationship'. Indeed, the author's initial aesthetic inquiry originated in, and was generated by her aesthetic criticism of fashion which was thus unable to go beyond art to fashion in its own right. Kim's problem seems to lie in basing her theory on an implicit historical framework of Western art. Rather than demanding that art-fashion worlds are categorically distinctive and thus influence each other in a reflexive manner, we may be able to advance the discussion by asking what it is that allows art and fashion to be brought into such

proximity.

### III. Art and the Anthropology of Art: Agency and Distributed Mind

An exhibition 'ART/ARTIFACT' mounted at the Centre for African Art, New York, in 1988, under the direction of the anthropologist Susan Vogel (cf. Gell 1996; Faris 1988) can be seen as a parallel case to Richard Martin's exhibition, 'Gianni Versace', mentioned above. Both exhibitions attempted to stake a claim in the realm of the art world by asking the question, 'what is an artwork?', through the Versace's little black dress and Zande hunter's net. That is, Vogel's choice of this particular item - a Zande hunting net <Fig. 2>, tightly rolled and bound for transport - was aimed to provoke us to rethink the relation between African art and modern art 'Primitivism'



<Fig.2> Zande hunting net, bound up for transport (Central Africa, *Journal of Material Culture* 1996, 1/1, p. 18)

(Gell 1996: 17-8); meanwhile, Martin's choice of Versace's dress was intended to address contemporary fashion as an 'art of living', unable to be less than 'aesthetics' and less than 'cultural postulation' (Martin 1998: 100). African art or even fashion, both deemed as marginal branches of art, are questioning the nature of art: what is an artwork rather than a mere artefact or commodity of clothing? This seems to be beyond the question of mere aesthetics of art/fashion; it goes further by questioning the philosophy of art, thereby presenting the challenges in defining the idea of a 'work of art'.

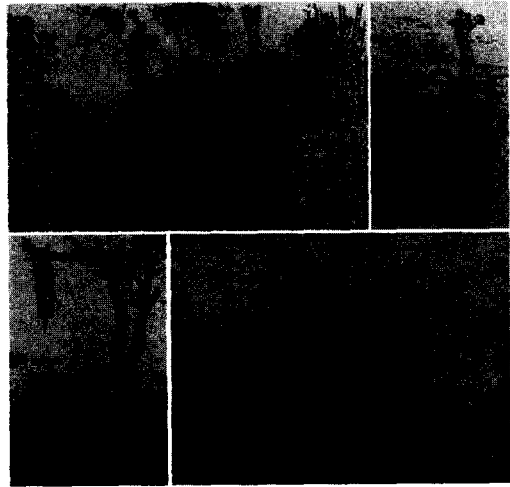
Alfred Gell has taken up the problem of art and artefact in his article *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps* (1996). Gell contends that African animal traps <Fig. 3> could very well be exhibited as art, because they tend to embody complex ideas and intentions to do with the relationship between men and animals, and because they provide a model of the hunter himself and his idea of the world of the prey animal. Criticising Danto's institutional theory of over-idealised distinction between 'functional' artefacts and 'meaningful' artworks, Gell concludes that "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). The question remains whether one can extend this argument to fashion. To understand what is involved, one needs to have a closer look at the theory of art proposed by Gell.

Alfred Gell's posthumously published book *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (1998) is described by Nicholas Thomas, in the book's foreword, as a gift, a 'distributed element of Gell's own personhood', an 'index of his own creative virtuosity' (Ibid: xiii). Gell's book 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). The key to Gell's theory of art is that it is not about 'meaning' and 'communication', but about 'doing'.

*Art and Agency* established a watershed in the anthropology of art as "it 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" (Küchler 2002: 59). Both this work and his previous articles on technology (1992) address questions of 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). As Thomas notes, 'doing' is theorised as agency, as a process involving indexes and effects; the anthropology of art, in turn, is constructed as a theory of agency, or as the mediation of agency through indexes, understood simply as material entities which motivate inferences, responses or interpretation (Gell 1998: ix). *Art and Agency* develops this theory of efficaciousness by exploring the analogical and logical relation between artworks and persons. 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'



<Fig.3> Arrow trap, Giraffe trap, Hippopotamus trap, Spring-hook fishing trap  
(Central Africa, Guyana, *Journal of Material Culture* 1996, 1/1, pp. 26~33)

(Gell 1998: 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); that is, the Kula operator is a 'spatio-temporally extended person', and the 'efficacy is founded on a comprehensive internal model of the outside field.' One can realise that 'internal mental process and external transactions in objectified personhood are (ideally) fused, therefore, mind can exist objectively as well as subjectively, as a pattern of transactable objects (Gell 1988: xii)'. This dialectic proceeding of anthropological art theory finally allows one to see what an art object is *doing* rather than *meaning* regardless of *our* or *other* arts.

#### IV. Fashion and the Anthropology of Fashion: A Case of the Vivienne Westwood Exhibition at the V&A

Whether we can discuss the 'anthropology of fashion', or even further have 'theories of fashion objects' can now come under discussion. The question, 'is fashion art?', has allowed one to think of the relationship between fashion and art in terms of aesthetics. The emergence of the anthropology of art has liberated the categorical problem between *our* art and *other* art to some extent in discussion reaching beyond the aesthetics to the art nexus which places art objects in a logical relation to practitioners, consumers and other objects. Such a debate can open up the discussion of the anthropology of fashion, and conceptualise theories of fashion objects in their own right, as well as consider a 'work of fashion' from the level of philosophy of fashion, motivated by *Art and Agency* (1998), if applicable. As an example, one can take the Vivienne Westwood exhibition 'A Retrospective' at the Victoria and Albert Museum from 1st April to 18th July 2004; this study briefly tries to examine such a discussion through such a case.

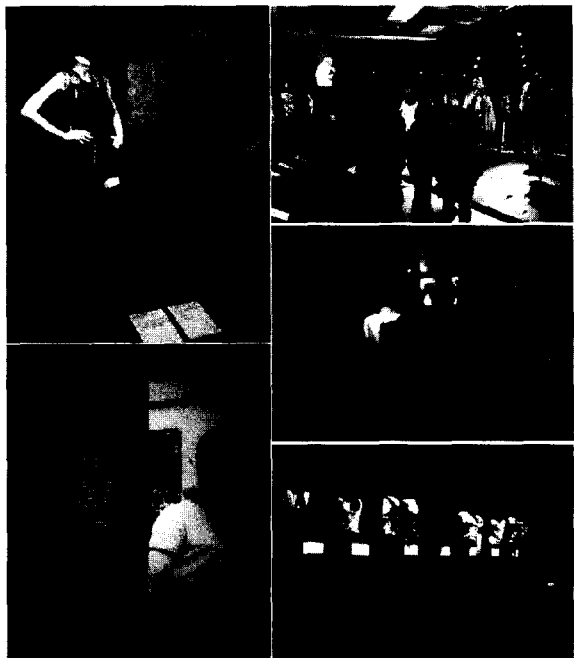
An anthropological approach to fashion can join neighbouring disciplines in understanding how mere artefacts of clothing come to have agency, meaning that they are capable of shaping ideas and allowing for the creation of new forms of social relations. However, we do not yet have a such an anthropology of fashion, merely an anthropology of cloth (cf. Schneider 1987) which is defines itself with reference to the *materiality of clothing* which from the fashion perspective is superficial fashion phenomenon. Jane Schneider in her *The Anthropology of Cloth* (1987) famously investigated the role of cloth in the consolidation of social relations and assessed its capacity to communicate social identities and values.



Fashion, like clothing, is often viewed as ephemeral and whimsical, but this does not mean fashion is not valuable or that it is not feasible to investigate it in depth. The term 'fashion' seems to refer exclusively to the territory of Western fashion, yet insofar as clothing exists elsewhere, the work of fashion certainly generates not only social identities and relations, but also other values which cloth or clothing itself may not address. The anthropology of fashion therefore can be situated in looking at this as a whole, and in turn provide critical viewpoints within the pervasive ideology of Western fashion world.

Looking at the case of the Vivienne Westwood exhibition <Fig. 4>, Gell's theory of 'doing' as a process involving indexes and effects, which motivating inferences, responses or interpretations, can enlighten the dynamic of the art-fashion nexus. People's *doing* around fashion objects is mediated by agency, in which indexes and effects are involved. Although the Vivienne Westwood exhibition may raise some argument as to whether it is art-like fashion, it helps us to focus on exemplifying relevant theories around the issue: how fashion objects work with agency shaping ideas and creating new forms of social relations?

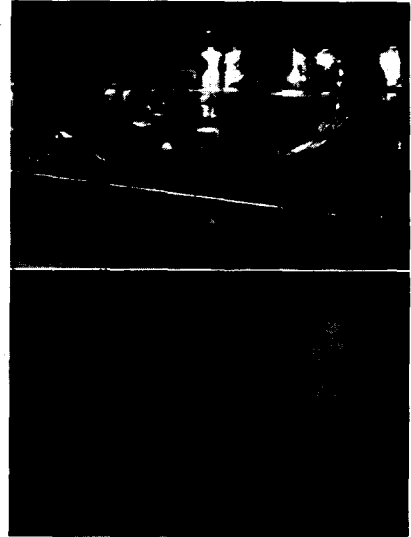
In an interview Claire Wilcox, an exhibition curator, she commented on a certain power of the object acquired in the process of fashion curation: collecting, interpretation, representation and display for the exhibition. Although she did not mention agency, she seems to work closely with the object itself 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 70s punk, not to mention display strategies of the exhibition. Even the older generation who had actually experienced the 70s punk era turned up in provocative attire at the V&A's exhibition hall. This generation in turn



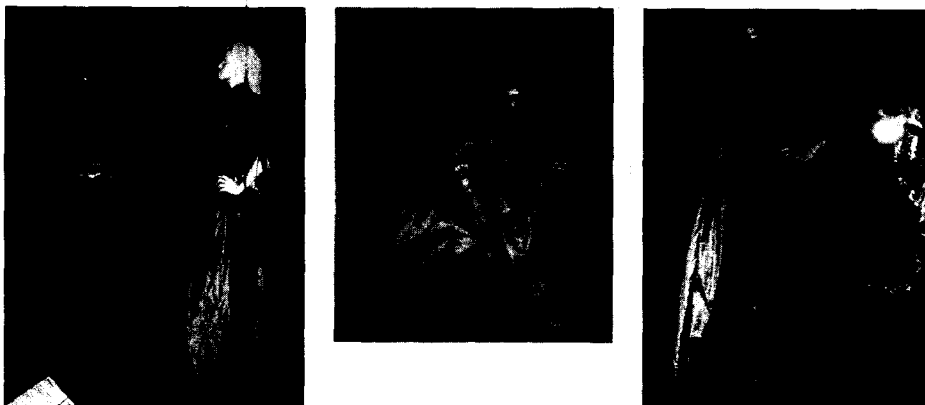
<Fig.4> Vivienne Westwood exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum

seems to form a certain social relation with today's new generation of punk, through the Westwood's clothing at the exhibition <Fig. 5>.

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. It may be worth noting that the agency of the designer (clothing maker) is rarely self-sufficient, rather being vehicles of the agency of others, and the index is not simply a 'product' or end-point of action, but rather a 'distributed extension 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 François Boucher (1758) - and the evening dress - Anglophilia A/W 2003 - inspired by this painting is a pertinent example here <Fig. 6>.

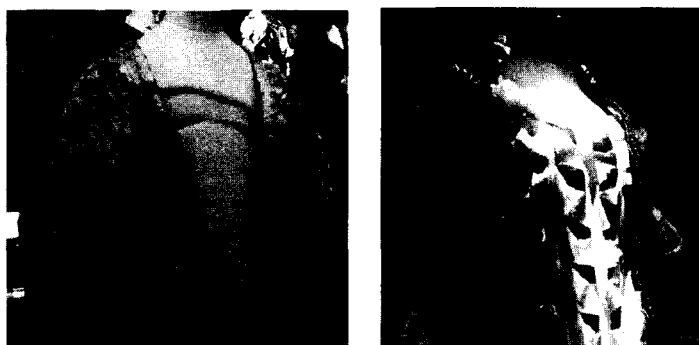


<Fig.5> Sharing memories of 70s punk among two generations at the exhibition hall



<Fig.6> Vivienne Westwood evening dress (2003 A/W) inspired by a 'Madame de Pompadour' portrait (1758)

From this point, we may be able to 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). Küchler summarises what is crucial to the theory of agency, "indexes display a 'certain cognitive indecipherability', that they tantalize and frustrate the viewer who is unable to recognize at once parts and wholes, continuity and discontinuity, synchrony and succession" (2002: 60). Indeed, when we are introduced to the idea that Vivienne Westwood's creativity in design comes from the past, we suddenly realise that we have seldom sufficiently recognised in the past that Westwood costumes reflect certain design indexes or features such as colour, pattern, corset, crinoline, slash and puffs in clothing from the past <Fig. 7>.



<Fig.7> Historical slash and Vivienne Westwood design

Further exploration of what Westwood's clothing is 'doing' through its *agency* (indexes and effects) and the *distributed mind* of former agents at the exhibition can be found through an detailed ethnographic approach to the case. Then, this theory of agency in fashion objects can serve to encourage us to rethink fashion from within an anthropology of fashion.

## V. Conclusion

This study 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). The question 'is fashion art?' has allowed one to think of the relationship between fashion and art in terms of aesthetic. As a result, one could sense a certain hierarchical relation between the realm of artwork and that of fashion. The emergence

of the anthropology of art has liberated the categorical problem between *our* art and *other* art to some extent, in a discussion reaching beyond mere aesthetics, and through investigating the art objects, namely through an anthropological theory of art and agency. Such a debate can ignite a discussion about the anthropology of fashion, and conceptualise theories of fashion objects in their own right, as well as think of a 'work of fashion' from the level of philosophy of fashion.

The anthropology of art, owing to Alfred Gell's insight has opened conventional problems up to debate. 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 insisting on a relation of fashion to art. Indeed, fashion can be deconstructed anthropologically, 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.

Looking back the relation between art and fashion in a dialectical way, we may be able to generate productive dialogue between the two. For the sake of fashion, it is necessary to engage with art sphere, because attempting to go beyond the art realm we could uncover more social and cultural issues around fashion beside art. For art, not only the anthropology of art, but also by the anthropology of fashion, could provide a critical stance or valuable issues in the deterritorialisation trend of art-fashion from outside the artworld. For the anthropology of fashion, the most significant potential highlighted through this study, acknowledging Gell's contribution, lies in the opening up of discussions on the subject matter.

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## Endnotes

- 1) The exhibition held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 11th December 1997 ~ 22nd March 1998 (Martin 1998: 95).
- 2) That is, "fashion is seen in terms of commodity and utility, whereas art is created for its own sake, often with a spiritual focus" (Kim 1998: 56).

- 3) "With fashion and art both becoming more pervasive elements of contemporary life, it is inevitable that they will continue to cross over each other's boundaries... Though the connection has grown close, there are still inevitable differences between the two. Art is typically private, the creation of an individual. Fashion is public, a collaboration between designer, manufacturer, and wearer and then between wearer and viewer. Art requires time, contemplation, and thought. Fashion is instantaneous..." (Boodro 1990: 127 in Kim 1998: 55).
- 4) Martin believes that fashion is the most appropriate form for "art and issues of body and gender" and considers fashion's commercial aspects to be a distinct advantage. His article "A Case for Fashion Criticism" (1987) serves as cornerstone for the notion of fashion as art examining conventional distinctions between art and fashion and concludes that "the lack of fashion criticism is due to an unwillingness to view fashion as art" (Kim 1998: 57-8).