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# Art seen from outside: Non-artistic legitimation within the field of fashion design



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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the relation between art and fashion—two fields of cultural production marked by contrasts and shifting boundaries—by investigating it in light of the perceptions of art among ordinary fashion designers. Drawing on an institutional perspective that conceives fashion and art as social fields, we summarise the effects produced between the two fields, and we outline the processes of identity formation and the legitimation of fields of cultural production. Empirical research on a sample of Milanese fashion designers allow us to determine whether or not fashion designers use art as a means to acquire legitimacy and to create an identity, thereby institutionalising their field of cultural production (fashion) as artistic. Our argument is that identification with art is often rejected by ordinary fashion designers, who seek to legitimate their cultural production, not through art, but through a culture of wearability. The case of Milanese fashion adds breadth and depth to the theory of artification and to the production of culture theory by showing that comparison with the fine arts by actors in a field of cultural production in constant search of legitimation may come about through channels other than assimilation into the world of art.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the challenges that any field of cultural production may have to face is the dissolution, or at least the attenuation, of its external boundaries, along with the transformation of its internal hierarchies. In the specific case of artistic production, the boundaries that distinguish this domain

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from others that claim fine arts status, but have traditionally been excluded, have grown increasingly blurred. Many cases have been studied in this regard, such as photography (Bourdieu, 1990), cinematography (Baumann, 2001), classical music (DeNora, 1991), jazz (Lopes, 2002; Peterson, 1972), and fashion (Geczy and Karaminas, 2012).

In this framework, the representation of art predominant in each contiguous domain, on the one hand, is a source of information about the dynamics of contact between the two spheres, whilst on the other, it sets a benchmark that art must consider as it undergoes current transformations and constantly seeks to reconstruct and redefine its social identity. For the identity of art, it is also the product of how it is perceived by those who stand on its borders.

This article examines the relationship between art and one of those adjoining worlds—that of fashion. It dwells, in particular, on the representation of art prevalent among fashion designers of one of the leading contemporary capitals of fashion, namely Milan. By “representation,” we mean what designers say about themselves in terms of their identities and practices, how they perceive themselves as professionals, and how they represent themselves when they account their experience.

This article utilises empirical research to focus on the processes by which the cultural field of fashion is legitimated. We show that—whereas in many documented cases, a field of cultural production is legitimated by being elevated from “commerce” to “art” (Baumann, 2007) or through its “artification” (Heinich and Shapiro, 2012; Shapiro, 2007)—Milanese fashion designers do not see themselves as artists; rather, they legitimate their individual creativity in opposition to art, even though both scholars and protagonists of the two sectors have created, at least at a rhetorical level, an intense and ambiguous linkage between fashion and art. The case of Milanese fashion adds breadth and depth to the theory of artification and to the production of culture theory (DiMaggio, 1991, 2000; Peterson, 1994), showing that comparison with the fine arts by actors in a field of cultural production in constant search of legitimation may come about through channels other than assimilation into the world of art.

## 2. Art and fashion

Scholars who concern themselves with the cultural economy (Scott, 2000), the aesthetic economy (Entwistle, 2009) or the creative economy (Howkins, 2001) have shown that there is a linkage among developments that distinguish the multiple forms of creative activity in metropolitan contexts. For example, artistic vitality is a characteristic common to the cities in which fashion is created (cities, note, which coincide with four or five metropolises in the Western world, namely Paris, New York, London, Milan and, partly, Tokyo, commonly known as “the fashion capitals:” see Breward and Gilbert, 2006) because they are cities in which there has developed a general economy of creativity comprising art, theatre and music together with fashion, art galleries and nightclubs, which generates both profit and culture. This fosters an urban fabric in which operators in the creative sector establish close relations with each other and with their publics. Over time, these relations have structured themselves within even the most intimate parts of the various spheres, such as the institutions of socialisation. In London, for example, which is a world capital of both fashion and art, the principal training courses for fashion designers are delivered by the city’s famous art schools (McRobbie, 1998). These institutions foster in their graduates a culture in which art and fashion are only two different ways to understand the same professional vocation.

Andy Warhol was the first to move agilely in the new scenario that we have briefly described. Indeed, his name has been used to denote a corresponding economic system: the Warhol economy (Currid, 2007). But as the Warhol economy has advanced, the suspicion has grown that the New York artist was only a precursor of what has become a broader trend in which artists collaborate with industry, design houses and media corporations to create mass market products for a wider audience. Consider, to cite a concrete and topical example, the contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, who both creates works expressly intended for the art market (and world) and collaborates with the Louis Vuitton fashion house in the manufacture of mass products like T-shirts and gadgets of various kinds, sometimes selling both types of product through the same commercial channels (Thornton, 2008, pp. 181–218).

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