

The emperor is naked: deconstructed materiality in fashion NFTs

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Abstract

Guy Debord defined his modern world as the society of the spectacle. Today, the increasingly influential Metaverse that includes the NFT images indicates a new postmodern spectacle. Like so many other spectacle spaces and activities, fashion could not remain innocent and started to develop its NFT world. Fashion is thus entering a Metaverse as yet unforeseen but probably inevitable. Matthew Ball claims that: "As more of human culture shifts into virtual worlds, individuals will seek out new ways to express their identities and show off." Examples of this new kind of human expression are *the Antwerp Cyber-Six(C6-Designers)* projects or the collaboration between the luxury brand Balmain Paris and the toy brand Mattel. However, the Balmain NFT Barbie is raising fundamental questions of aesthetics and the psychology of image. Fashion and the Barbie universe have been mutually inspired by each other since the 1970s. NFT Barbie is a new step in imagining the child's existence through the Barbie dolls and the doll phenomenon in general. In the background of this story, we may find Freud's and E.T.A Hoffmann's *unheimlich* Olympia doll, and the surrealist phantasy of Hans Bellmer's 1934 photo book *The Doll*. This paper explores how our relationship with fashion is changing with the emergence of fashion NFTs. The paper investigates this new phenomenon through three case studies.

Author keywords

digital fashion, NFT, fashion studies, deconstruction, Antwerp Cyber-Six

Metaverse and NFT

The pandemic has brought about a powerful change, primarily economic but social and cultural, transforming the arts into a newly emerging digital space, the Metaverse. If we had to name the most exciting phenomenon in the art scene in 2021, it would definitely be the NFT. There is hardly an artist who has not heard of the 'non-fungible token' system and the heated debates surrounding it, "which are expected to bring about a revolution in the digital art market through blockchain-technology" (Sárai, 2022, p. 4) "The success of NFT has exploded relatively recently thanks mainly to the record \$69.3 million sale of the digital artwork by artist Beeple" ("Crypto Art," 2022) According to the book *Crypto Art: How to Become A Crypto Artist Step by Step*. Of course, the world of fashion is also affected by the emerging and popular NFT. This paper focuses on this phenomenon, giving three examples and a possible theoretical framework.

Metaverse refers to a three-dimensional world that is simul-

taneously considered real yet not real, created at the boundary between virtual and augmented reality. "It is a persistent virtual world that reached, interacted with, and affected nearly every part of human existence." (Ball, 2022, p. 4) Their users interact with each other through virtual avatars built with different fetish characters. The terminology "Metaverse" comes from the 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash* by American author Neal Stephenson. One of the settings of the book's plot is a virtual space called Metaverse. Video games (World of Warcraft, Fortnite, Second Life) account for the most significant percentage of platforms currently operating as Metaverse. However, they still need to be properly interconnected. "One of the main promises of the future is that a Metaverse network can be created in which these atomized virtual worlds are interconnected so that their users can roam between them with a single sub-agent." (Sárai, 2022, p. 4) As home office became more widespread thanks to the quarantine of the Coronavirus, developers of digital spaces continued to work on NFTs, originally linked to video games, as their popularity grew. Matthew Ball claims that: "As more of human culture shifts into virtual worlds, individuals will seek out new ways to express their identities and show off" (Ball, 2022, p. 270) Ball also warns us that with the rise of Metaverse we are entering a kind of 'dystopia': after all, the concept of Metaverse is that it will envelop all our lives, labor, leisure. (Ball, 2022, p. 22)

In addition to demand, a solid base for the construction of the digital space is to be found in the spread of the digital economy and the burgeoning cryptocurrency trade[2]. NFTs can be created on a blockchain network (e.g., Ethereum, Polygon, Solana, etc.) and then purchased using cryptocurrency on online marketplaces such as Nifty Gateway, SuperRare, or Decentraland. These are intermediate spaces through which real people in the real world can buy and own digital products, take ownership. The items that can be bought, range from digital artwork to collectible cards to clothes for your virtual avatar. Their unique authenticity is what gives them their verifiable digital authenticity. Items created on the blockchain are unforgeable because their sale is traceable precisely through the blockchain's mechanism, so their origin can be controlled and recorded. The cryptocurrency operating principle automatically associates a certificate of authenticity with the purchased artwork, and the transaction trail remains on the blockchain, indelible, indicating who bought the original digital work, when and for how much. Because a blockchain-based archive of the ownership of artworks is maintained, original copies can not only be owned but also passed on. Owners of original copies can buy and sell artworks on NFT marketplaces. However, they



can also create online galleries and museums in the digital space so that anyone can browse the digital art they own. "The buyer can do two things with his NFT: he can show it off, or he can trade it." (Sárai, 2022) In other words, he can include it in his desires, enjoy the exclusivity of possession in the manner of Lacanian jouissance (Leader, 2021), or, through the operation of a commodity relationship, sell this perverse pleasure.

The blockchain network significantly impacts the art trade scene and the luxury fashion industry precisely because of its "customization". At the same time, fashion shows are becoming increasingly digital: the first ever *Crypto Fashion Week* appeared between 10-17 September 2021 ("Crypto Art," 2022). Commercial galleries, auction houses, and major fashion houses are also affected by NFT and cryptocurrency trading. A good example is *Sotheby's*, which has eighty locations in the real physical world but has its own digital auction space. The company opened a virtual counterpart of its London gallery in the Voltaire Art District of the Decentraland virtual platform in 2021. There are also examples of digital exhibitions. Among art institutions, the German *König Galerie* was the first to organize an exhibition on the Decentraland platform, *The Artist is Online* [3]. It has also set up a linked NFT auction on its Open-Sea platform. The exhibition was shown live in the gallery's real space in Berlin. From this perspective, it seems that even investors and the profession at large have doubts about the success of an exclusively online exhibition.

Digital fashion examples

My first digital fashion example is the collaborative 3D fashion film work of the AES+F (artist) group with the design brand *Gentle Monster*, which, alongside its stunning visual world, blurs the boundary between art, advertising culture, and fashion while "blurring the real body in favor of the spectacular body." (Sibrik, 2022, p. 11). Their *The Circle of Life* project is also linked to the world of fashion films (see more: Reese-Roberts, 2019). Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of the Earthly Delights* is brought to life with this spectacular project as NFT. "First formed as AES Group in 1987 by Arzamasova, Evzovich, and Svyatsky, the collective became AES+F when Vladimir Fridkes joined in 1995. AES+F work at the intersection of traditional media, photography, video, and digital technologies. They define their practice as a kind of 'social psychoanalysis' through which they reveal and explore contemporary global culture's values, vices, and conflicts." (Malevolent, 2021)

The second example is *The Antwerp Cyber-Six (C6 Designers)*. The group is named as an homage to the six graduates (1980) of the Antwerp Royal Academy, who became an influential avant-garde collective in fashion history. In order to re-ignite this legacy, MUTANI invited six Antwerp-based creative zealots to blaze new virtual trails: Brandon Wen, Flora Miranda, Max Rittler, Nadav Perlman, Shayli Harrison, and Stefan Kartchev. *The C6-Designer* is a project by Antwerp-based digital fashion network MUTANI, supported by the City of Antwerp. MUTANI is a Web3 digital fashion company stepping up "against the oppressive and exploitative nature of the fashion industry, alongside the capitalocene that has broken our imaginations and blocked the formation of a creative spirit." ("Introducing: The Antwerp Cyber-Six," 2022). To subvert this system they are staging a creative coup; inviting and onboarding a digital fashion, unitive to drive actions between the most radical fashion designers and digital creators. MUTANI collaborated with ior50 Studio to translate six digital silhouettes on six av-

atars. ("Introducing: The Antwerp Cyber-Six," 2022). The first stop of this futuristic digital fashion project was in Miami. The digital collection was exhibited at the Scope Art Show from 29 November to 3 December. There was also a live exhibition and online auction in partnership with MetaMundo ("Miami Art Week + Art Basel Miami Beach 2022," 2022). *The C6-Designers* put avant-garde aesthetics into the digital realm.

The third example is the Mattel x Balmain collaboration. The Barbie collection that could be bought as NFT: the auction was held on Mint NFT.com. This has also affected the physical sales of the luxury brand Balmain, as in addition to the NFTs, the brand has launched a ready-to-wear collection with the Balmain x Barbie logo.

Deconstructed ideologies: The Antwerp Cyber-Six

C6-Designers are carrying on the cultural heritage of the "Antwerp Six" (Walter Van Beirendonck, Dries Van Noten, etc.) in the digital space. A good example is the "Halo" character designed by Flora Miranda: the designer deals with the disintegration of physical borders, with the immaterial body and being. *C6-Designers* not only deconstruct the materiality of the garment, but the function of the garment is also no longer connected to the physical world. In doing so, they also perform a critique of the fashion industry through their deconstructive design (as did their great predecessors such as Martin Margiela). Their distinctive technique is irony [4] and gender performativity (Butler, 2006). These designs deconstruct not only the human body but also gender. The MVFW23 collection by the designer "Brandylaa" clearly questions gender. Still, a very similar aim is also pursued by the designer Stefan Kartchev, whose clothing design/character "Cooee!" is linked to the concept of "eco-sexuality" (seeing nature as your significant other, a relationship that comes with all the nuances of human relationships). These *C6-Designers* are not only deconstructing the materiality of clothing, but also ideologies.

On their own Instagram page, the aforementioned *C6-Designers* have posted images of these NFTs drawn with their own hands on a page and also photographed the garments realized/created in the physical world on real flesh and blood models. Although the same glamour cannot shine through in the clothes created in the physical world, it is still exciting to see these designs on the page and as part of a real photographic material. This also implies that the physical world and the Metaverse still mutually support each other, so it cannot be said that these artists only created these works of art as NFTs in the digital space. It seems that the Metaverse will always draw its strength from the real world. In the case of *C6-Designers*, NFT is a deconstructive gesture, a critique of the fashion industry (which, as we know, is unsustainable...)

Deconstructed materiality: Balmain x Barbie in the digital world

From 11 January 2022, the digital outfits Balmain x Barbie NFT1, Balmain x Barbie NFT2, and Balmain x Barbie NFT3 - three different NFT Barbie styles - were up for bidding on the MintNFT.com auction site.

The heads of both companies (Mattel and Balmain Paris) said the launch of NFTs was a historic moment for both the new web3 technology and the fashion and toy industries. According to a representative of the Balmain brand, the future of NFTs will be a vital tool for fashion brands to drive strong customer engagement: "I believe it is going to change the fashion industry

completely, and it will have the same impact as when social media first started or when the internet first launched." (Klich, 2022)- notes Txampi Diz. Metaverse researcher Matthew Ball says Metaverse is "more about driving new narratives, product launches, and marketing than anything life-changing" (Ball, 2022, p. 10).

We should also remember that digitally owned NFTs have received much criticism since their launch. Some argue that it is unnecessary to pay for an artwork or fashion product that is already freely available by anyone at any time. Others argue that it is an excellent new opportunity, as creators have never before been able to receive financial remuneration for their works of art circulating in the online world. The NFT is, therefore, a kind of modern digital "patronage" system for the arts. In this sense, NFTs are also commonly thought of as giving control back to creators. Unlike other artworks, however, fashion is at greater risk of losing its materiality. In the case of clothing, we are already talking about objects whose materiality is by its very nature indispensable since clothing serves to cover the body and protect it from the forces of nature. The wearer of a digital garment cannot wear it at real social events, nor can he enjoy the simple protection of the material (he cannot put it on). Despite owning something, its owner remains naked in the real world. Thus, eliminating the materiality of cloth has severe consequences in real social life. However, when one chooses to buy the Balmain x Barbie NFT dress, one is also supporting the fashion house and voting for a technological evolution of the fashion industry that is taking on a whole new design practice and a new form of appearance. As I mentioned above, visuality and 3D reality in the digital space have different potentials. This is exactly what the designers are taking advantage of when they create their own MVFW event in Decentraland, the Metaverse Fashion Week (held this year from 28-31 March with over 60 artists).

Barbie in the Metaverse wearing luxury fashion. The NFT1-style avatar is wearing a striped sweater dress with a shoulder cut-out and is holding a pink maxi bag with the Balmain monogram and the Balmain x Barbie logo. The NFT2 avatar shows a puffy dress with maxi bow detail in pink silk satin. While NFT3, also up for bid, is now a Ken avatar in a white cotton T-shirt with pink trim and a vest blazer, a long-collar jacket paired with loose pleated trousers (all in pink satin crepe), and a logo baseball cap to complete the digital set. There is no doubt that NFT partnerships are redefining the meaning of brand ownership for customers, as it "symbolizes buying into the ethos of the company." (Klich, 2022)

A curious encounter of the toy universe and luxury fashion

Mattel's first Barbie doll was unveiled to the public on 9 March 1959 at the *American International Toy Fair* in New York. It was created by Ruth Handler, who named the dress-up doll Barbie after her daughter. Barbie's first dress was designed by Charlotte Johanson, then a fashion designer for Mattel. (Peers, 2004, p. 172) Barbie's original, classical function was a children's toy. It is, however, a very complex object in its simplicity because it involves its owner in a heterogeneous, performative mental process: it has to be played with. For the child owner, a doll is a transitional object, "it is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" it happens "between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 2-3). On the other hand, the child

playing projects onto the doll his or her own inner experiences, conscious (thought), and unconscious (bodily-instinctual) desires. This contradictory nature of the play doll has long been explored in art and philosophy. Although the Barbie doll would suggest this, she is not just beauty and kindness. She is essentially heterogeneous: she has clothes and a parallel (but repressed) "body". Freud once cited the doll Olympia, from E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *The Sandman*, as an example of the uncanny, disturbing experience of being a real Barbie doll when she was 'in-tact', life-like, before her creators sadistically tore her apart. And it was in the wake of this duality that Nathaniel, the protagonist of the short story, fell into pathological love. The rewriting of the doll in this way can be traced back to the photographs and texts of a surrealist author, Hans Bellmer, who in 1934 published ten sadistically dismembered dolls in his photo book *Die Puppe*. According to Hal Foster's summary, these dolls are "uncanny confusions of animate and inanimate figures, ambivalent conjunctions of castrative and fetishistic forms, compulsive repetitions of erotic and traumatic scenes, difficult intricacies of sadism and masochism, of desire, defusion, and death." (Foster, 1995, p. 101) The Barbie dolls, of course, conceal this heterogeneous basis, for the dolls (unlike Bellmer's dolls) are dressed, and the dressing itself (the concealing fetish) is their essence. And this is reinforced by the Balmain- Mattel dolls, which, unlike the normal Barbie, are undressable, existing only in their original clothes.

In her comprehensive essay, Beauregard Houston-Montgomery notes that the development of the so-called "designer Barbies" was a surprisingly belated move by Mattel, despite the company's generally quick reaction to various trends and real fashion trends (Houston-Montgomery, 1999, p. 86). According to fashion history writings, Oscar de la Renta was one of the first designers to dress the legendary Barbie figure in luxury fashion. The designer Barbie phenomenon began to blossom after 1994 when the New York department store *Bloomingdale's* ordered a Barbie doll. (Peers, 2004, p. 175) In 1995 and 1996, the Dior fashion house was already producing haute couture dresses for the iconic Barbie. In 1999, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Barbie's 'birth', designer Barbies were presented at two exhibitions at the *Bon Marché* and *Galleries Lafayette* department stores. (Peers, 2004, p. 175) The Barbie collections presented there included dresses from the houses of Missoni, Moschino, and Christian Lacroix.

Later, brands such as Givenchy, Marc Jacob, Calvin Klein, Hermès, Prada, and Claude Montana followed suit [5]. Since then, of course, not only have the styles of Barbie's miniature toy clothes been inspired by contemporary fashion, but contemporary fashion has also thematized the idealized world surrounding Barbie. The Barbie figure, as an iconic object, becomes a collectible object of value itself. In addition to being a muse and decorative object for countless fashion brands, the famous Barbie doll has also attracted sharp criticism from some designers. In 1999 Tim Walker, in his installation for Italian Vogue titled *Couture Delivery*, based his show on an explicit critique of the capitalist logic embodied by Barbie. In the installation, a real flesh-and-blood model embodies a life-size Barbie doll wearing a burgundy evening gown (in Gautier, Versace, and Valentino dresses) in a giant box. Moreover, Tim Walker's model was photographed in a warehouse so that she appears to be an object transported to the warehouse as if she were an industrial product (Evans, 2003, p. 183). Also in the nineties, a similar problem is thematized in several collections and performances by Maison Martin Margiela. In 1994, Margiela, as deconstruc-

tor, presented a 'collection of clothes reproduced from a doll's wardrobe', which retains elements of toy clothing in its appearance: by using oversized details such as zips and buckles, Margiela questions the functional purpose of real clothing through incongruities and pushes fashion towards conceptuality. This critical gesture by Margiela draws attention to the fact that the human body cannot be standardized.

The digital version of Barbie, created in collaboration with the Balmain house, becomes an NFT, a collectible artifact in the digital space, through which the primary function does not play but rather the 3D graphics made possible by the modern technology of the time and the possession of the object. It would not be possible in the real physical space. In real life, the toy Barbie has always been a collectible object (in the case of a limited number of special editions, an "artifact"). Linked to the world of NFTs, whose very essence is the experience of 'collecting' and possession, Barbie is a collectible artifact that represents and embodies other collectible (art) objects worn on its person. In Metaverse, it is no longer the real human body but Barbie's digital body that becomes collectible through the digital fashion of luxury. Her digital body exists only in a simulated space, yet it has a mighty power of identification, she is what women want to be. Like the plastic doll itself, the avatar holds the promise of a malleable body and a body image shaped by technology. It is a new digital ghost of capitalism that no longer attributes materiality or tangibility to the amount of money spent on a commodity. The nature of the commodity fetish in the Marxian sense (Marx, 1977) persists but is radically transformed; the exchange value remains. However, the use value and the materiality of the thing sold disappears and becomes ghostly: the digital clothes bought cannot yet be worn. The question is, of course, how this will change as technology develops and the

possibilities of the digital universe expand. However, the advantage of the digital Balmain Barbie is that 3D works of art can be created that would be impractical and unwearable in real life. Thus, Mattel and the Balmain brand's opening to the NFT market is likely to be a landmark in the same way that Oscar de La Renta was asked to design the first designer dress for Barbie.

In January 2022, the fashion press responded positively to the new digital collection (Spellings, 2022). Bids for the Balmain x Barbie auction were around \$2,000. This gesture transforms the famous children's toy into a collectible art treasure. Fashion is no longer a 'thing-like' object worn on the physical body. In addition, the importance of *Crypto Fashion Week* and *Metaverse Fashion Week (MVFW)* is expected to grow spectacularly in the future.

To summarize, the analyzed examples show that at the moment, the Metaverse is very much fed by the physical world, and that fashion NFTs are very much defined by it. Clothes and accessories sold as NFTs are still in some way linked to physical pieces (see Balmain's ready-to-wear or *C6-Designer's* clothes). In essence, an exciting combination of goods is created, where the NFT and a physical version somehow linked to it coexist.

- [1] This paper support by the (ÚNKP-22-4-I-PTE-1514) New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology.
- [2] By their nature, cryptocurrencies consist of interchangeable and fungible units. If two people have two bitcoins, they are worth the same amount each, so they can be exchanged without loss of value. What money and cryptocurrency have in common is that they can be broken down into smaller units (e.g. 4x50 cents). NFT, by comparison, is indivisible and irreplaceable, absolutely unique.
- [3] This exhibition, which was staged in both virtual and real space, has since been followed by several others, both on the gallery's digital platform and in its physical reality. Jonas Lund, Addie Wagenknecht, Andy Kassier. See: <https://aesf.art/>
- [4] The Metaverse itself also has this irony, as they create their own METAGALA named after the MET Gala)
- [5] In most cases, the designers were also approached by Mattel. (For more information on the Barbie collections designed by these designers see Beigbeder, *Barbie*, 1998; Peers, 2004, pp. 169- 194; McDonough, 1999).

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