Art, Fashion, and Anti-consumption
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What is This?
Abstract
Contemporary artists deal with many forms of social interaction, including consumption. In this commentary, I walk the fine line between art and fashion, distant sisters in history. Referring to fashion projects presented at dOCUMENTA(13), I show that art’s aesthetic language may speak against fashion’s ultimate commercial meaning. The aesthetic perspective is important because reasons against consumption are not merely intellectual. They include many emotional and symbolic forms of knowing, in this case about self-degrading styling concepts that are possible only through unsustainable production by global fast fashion retailers such as H&M, Zara, and Forever 21 and other cheap fashion brands. Referring to art critics’ assessments and aesthetic theory, I interpret my observations through theories of anti-consumption. Included is a review of Elizabeth Cline’s critical book *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* that reveals some of the motifs of the fast fashion industry resonating in contemporary artworks and investigates opportunities to reject, resist, and reclaim fashion.

Keywords
art, anti-consumption, consumer culture, experiential consumption, aesthetics, culture, fashion, cheap fashion, macromarketing

Introduction
The world of consumption has become a theme and a target for an increasing number of artists. Concerned with the unsustainable and exploitative conditions of mass production in industries such as fashion, these artists create artworks that inspire people to reflect upon and imagine alternatives to consumption. Many of these critical works oscillate between resistance to market influence and the exercise of power on one hand, and anti-consumption on the other hand, in that they reject, restrict, and reclaim the use of certain goods (Lee et al. 2011).

I shall discuss István Csákány’s work *Ghost Keeping*, presented at dOCUMENTA(13), a world famous exhibition of modern art. The work consists of an elaborate wooden reconstruction of a sewing workshop accompanied by body-less mannequins wearing suits tailored like workers uniforms. Crafted with great detail and carefulness, it is regarded in the art world as a statement against the low quality piecework demanded by fast fashion retailers and acts as a reminder of the disappearance of sustainable work (see e.g., Boecker 2012; Pora 2012). The artwork can be understood as critical of many issues that are related to fashion production and consumption. Its way of communicating has implications for research in marketing and anti-consumption in today’s aesthetic economy (Böhme 2003). The artwork’s aesthetic form of communication goes beyond rational reasoning, not delivering concrete reasons for and against consumption, but aesthetically communicating with the mass of consumers who parade along the scenery, many of them dressed in popular retailers’ lower-priced casual garments (Figure 1).

Academic literature has been concerned with fashion and its production, emphasizing a range of marketing issues (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006). Large retailers such as H&M, Primark, and supermarkets with value clothing have outperformed the rest of the clothing market (Mintel Oxygen 2007). Of importance in this literature are socio-ideological dimensions, such as identity construction (Thompson and Haytko 1997), which have long been associated with consumption (e.g., Belk 1988). Popular works too have discussed the seductive and destructive forces of ubiquitous and permanent consumption in the field of fashion (e.g., Klein 2000). Elizabeth L. Cline (2012) recently published the book *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. With the passion of a converted cheap-clothes shopper, Cline traces the entire chain of mass-market fashion production. She bemoans her own low-quality clothes, accompanies young fashion haulers accumulating blazer collections for presentation on Youtube, volunteers in thrift stores, learns how to sew, and travels to Chinese and Bangladeshi factories, pretending to be a fashion producer. Cline sketches some ideas about how to break what she identifies as the buy-and-toss cycle of cheap fashion by turning to sustainable brands and even by mending and making her own clothes. Her findings reveal some of the underlying motives of the industry, which can also be seen in Csákány’s artful form of investigation, *Ghost Keeping*. Thus, I integrate a book

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review of *Overdressed* with this reflection of art, fashion, and anti-consumption (Figure 2).

The structure of this commentary is as follows. The next section will provide some context on the interplay of contemporary art and social critique, referring to critical works in institutional arts settings, including the most recent Documenta exhibition in Kassel. The concept of aesthetic knowing is used to explain the critical form of artistic communication, which is similar to, yet different from, today’s aesthetic marketing communications. This is followed by some reflections on *Folklore U.S.*, also presented dOCUMENTA (13), by the artist Seth Price in collaboration with New York fashion designer Tim Hamilton, and by some thoughts on the traditional relation between art and fashion. Then, *Ghost Keeping* is interpreted in conjunction with *Overdressed*, prior to some concluding thoughts for the developing field of anti-consumption research.

**Art, Resistance, and Anti-consumption**

Over the last several decades, with the increase of performance and concept art, boundaries between the art world’s institutions and everyday social and political life have blurred. The distinction between artist and activist has become less clear. These issues are analyzed in cultural studies (Perucci 2008) and popular art magazines (Buchhart and Nestler 2010). A longer tradition of research in the area of macromarketing and consumer culture theory has addressed culture jamming (Handelman 1999; Lasn 1999; Sandlin and Callahan 2009). Elsewhere, I have described how artists protest against consumption and organizational practices by providing an aesthetic experience able to generate fuller, richer, and potentially stimulating ways of thinking about issues of resistance (Biehl-Missal 2012b, 2013). Organizations also have seen new antagonists including the artist–activist Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping who perform sermons against consumption in shopping malls and stores. Earlier protests and activism by artists have used consumption and all related forms of presentation as a source of inspiration and criticism (Grunenberg and Hollein 2002; Mitra and Pingali 1999).

These forms of resistance and culture jamming use symbolic and aesthetic means to distort original messages and frame their critique, and could also be considered as consumer activist artworks. The case discussed here is in some ways similar, yet also different in its positioning and intentions. We witness the development of artists who clearly label their presentations of anticonsumerist ideas as “art works,” not only leaving it to the audience to decide on the meaning but also using art institutions as an additional channel to reach people and to frame their critique. Several recent art exhibitions have been characterized by such developments.

Artists and artistic activists have come to oppose market forces and their powers in new ways. Individuals who joined the diverse Occupy movements have made contributions to the world’s largest modern art fair, dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany, and also to other contemporary art shows such as the 2012 Berlin Biennale, an important platform for modern art. In Berlin, Occupy received an official invitation from the Biennale curator, the Polish video artist Artur Zmijewski. The activists moved into the major exhibition hall, erected their tents, and invited visitors to political debates. The radical Russian artist collective “Voina” (war) acted as associated curators. All artworks presented by international artists were claimed to exert political influence on reality.
The emergence of artworks that are mindful of social responsibility and critical of consumption, including the fashion industry, can be seen in recent popular outrage against consumption excesses in other areas, including in the art world itself. In a critique of decadent dealings at Art Basel and the Miami Art Fair, Occupy Art Basel (2011) finds that the financial power of the 1 percent drains tax money out of America through dubious banking practices, disregards human rights through political involvements, and infringes free speech for the public. Gallerists prepared for protests although no official plans were released. Protests did not manifest in masses of people or tents, but remained as rumors, threatening those who may be thinking about dropping their complimentary glass of Moët. Because of the connection of wealth and art, the art world has become a target at other occasions as well. At a Sotheby’s auction in London, protestors against the UK government’s massive funding cuts for the arts presented a banner with the words “orgy of the rich,” tossing fake £50 notes in the air (Huffingtonpost 2011).

In the macromarketing field, researchers have critically analyzed excesses of the art business and the economic powers that take over artists (e.g., Bradshaw, McDonagh, and Marshall 2006) and art institutions (Chong 2013). In this commentary, I consider the critical impact of some artworks that are still accessible for—in the words of Occupy Basel—the “99% who can’t afford to buy this art.” Despite their more modest financial means, these 99 percent are still often referred to in the public discourse of today’s privatized sectors and spaces, as consumers instead of democratic citizens. Despite being reduced from political agents to actors in the commercial world, individual people and art lovers may still feel that critical artworks have something relevant to say and are capable of stimulating the imagination of political, social, and economic alternatives. Artists take a stance against today’s dominant and often unexamined perception that ubiquitous consumption is the natural behavior of people (Kozinets, Handelman, and Lee 2010). Istvan Csákány’s work can be interpreted in this sense: it inspires the imaginations both of critical consumers and of people not yet reflecting about consumption.

These artistic forms can be understood as a critical mirror on the world of consumption, which itself is full of aesthetic and artistic elements that endow products and services with an aura, give them an atmosphere, and help “to stage, costume and intensify life” (Böhme 2003, 72). “Costuming,” as a metaphor from the realm of fashion, is not only about the embellishment of appearances but simultaneously conceals parts of naked reality. Aesthetic consumption spaces provide experiences that are experienced bodily and subconsciously rather than provoking cognitive reflection, while simultaneously masking real-life social issues such as exploitation (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012). As elaborated by Cline (2012), discriminating and unsustainable conditions of production and their social and ecological consequences are often hidden in the discourse of the fashion industry behind seductive advertising and “must-have” styles.

Csákány’s work is one example of how artists use their own and proper aesthetic means to critique contemporary economic practices and disseminate divergent ideas. I argue that the artistic work Ghost Keeping does not communicate in an intellectual way, but rather transports ideas aesthetically, in a form of bodily perception. Artworks do not express rational arguments against consumption, but provide a different “feeling” for these issues. This is different too from the typical intended role of marketing instruments, which make increasing use of aesthetic and experiential means to comfort people and increase their consumption. In contrast, artworks provide an aesthetic experience which can be different and disturbing.
challenging ideas about social norms, behaviors, and practices of consumption (Böhme 1993). In this sense, artworks represent a will to separate from the embracing totality of the marketplace.

This form of aesthetic experience roughly conforms with tacit knowing (Taylor and Hansen 2005, 1213). Aesthetic knowing and tacit knowing are concepts that are commonly used to make sense of the world (Vico 1744). Aesthetic forms of knowing generated in aesthetically mediated encounters have received some attention in marketing research (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012; Joy and Sherry 2003) and also in the growing field of organizational aesthetics research (Taylor and Hansen 2005), where this epistemology has been adopted to explain what drives people’s behavior in social contexts both within and outside organizations. Aesthetic knowing is often tacit and hence different from intellectual realization. This form of knowing can act as a force of acceptance, for example of continuous consumption, and as a force of resistance as well, via rejection and disgust (Pelzer 2002) and other corporeal and emotional reasons against consumption that are difficult to verbalize.

This conceptual framework relates to anti-consumption, which is driven not merely by clear, cognitive arguments against consumption. Its reasons for opposing consumption are more than, or at least different from, the logical opposites of reasons for performing consumption behavior and go beyond social, economic, and symbolic issues (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). Part of the reaction against consumption can be seen as an expression of a certain form of aesthetic knowing involving both rational and emotional components. For this reason, the discussion of the artwork has implications for research on the complexity of anti-consumption. In the following section, these ideas are outlined with reference to dOCUMENTA (13).

dOCUMENTA (13). Documenta takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany for one hundred days and features art from all over the world. dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012 was curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and, with an outlet in Kabul, Afghanistan and workshops in Banff, Canada and Alexandria, Egypt, welcomed a total of 887,000 visitors. Rather than imposing a narrow definition on artists, dOCUMENTA (13) expressed a critical, political, and ecological spirit in the face of globalization. The mission statement stated it was driven by a “holistic and non-logocentric vision that is skeptical of the persisting belief in economic growth, a vision that is shared with, and recognizes, the shapes and practices of knowing of all the animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people” (d13 2012). Christov-Bakargiev emphasizes that it is not the word, but the aesthetic form that is used to negotiate our understanding of economic developments. I interpret the mention of “shapes and practices of knowing” as referring to the aesthetic knowing that influences people’s behavior and decision making.
Documenta is “dedicated to artistic research and forms of imagination that explore commitment, matter, things, embodiment, and active living in connection with, yet not subordinated to, theory” (d13 2012). The curator suggested that these are “terrains where politics are inseparable from a sensual, energetic, and worldly alliance between current research in various scientific and artistic fields and other knowledges, both ancient and contemporary.” With regard to the critical artwork discussed below, I read this statement as an indication of strong emphasis on issues such as “aesthetic knowing” and “embodied agency” that describe how people live in the world of consumption. Artistic agency can be considered a form of research with aesthetic means that may inspire and complement our academic intellectual efforts.

In reference to the importance of aesthetics and aesthetic knowing in today’s economy, the social sciences have witnessed a growing emergence of arts-based research methods. They are used to capture and express tacit, embodied, and aesthetic forms of knowing and also are deployed for the presentation of research findings. These arts-based methods include imagery, photography, sculpture, and performance (Brydon-Miller et al. 2011; Knowles and Cole 2008) and already have entered the canon of organizational research methods (Buchanan and Bryman 2009). With regard to Ghost Keeping, I discuss the kinds of aesthetic knowing about consumption and anti-consumption that people express and generate when they encounter these artworks. First, however, I shall make another comment on the context of art and fashion.

**Fashion and Art.** The role of artworks that are critical of fashion production is somewhat different from the role traditionally played by fashion itself in the institutional arts context. As a sister of the fine arts, fashion—with its creative, socially challenging, and culturally changing dimensions—has long been celebrated and employed by artists. For example, a 2012 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City showed photography by the renowned American artist Cindy Sherman. Using clothing to masquerade as a myriad of characters, from fashion victim to career girl, she presents personas and tableaus which question the norms of the construction of identity and gender (MoMA 2012). In doing this, Sherman cooperated personally with different fashion labels such as Comme des Garçons, Issey Miyake, and Balenciaga.

Similarly, the 2012 exhibition Reflecting Fashion at the Museum Moderner Kunst (MUMOK), Vienna, Austria considered modern fashion as a system of remembrance. It presented works by Salvador Dalí and Elsa Schiaparelli (the *lobster dress*) and Erwin Wurm (for Hermés) to show how fabrics helped to implement individual and social dreams. Such issues are strongly emphasized by marketers today and relate to our consumption of fashion for purposes of identity construction and self-fulfillment, particularly in our “aesthetic era” (Böhme 1993). The same issues also are identified by Cline (2012) as pivotal for cheap fashion and the high social costs it causes. The artwork *Ghost Keeping*, rather than celebrating high fashion, provides some form of aesthetic knowing about cheap
Another artwork at dOCUMENTA (13) also deals with these issues in its particular, aesthetic way: Seth’s Price’s “Folklore U.S.” that will be reflected on in the following section.

Seth Price’s “Folklore U.S.”

Another artwork at dOCUMENTA (13) was moved directly from the exhibition halls to Kassel’s Sinn-Leffers department store, despite, or possibly because, it is both ironic and critical. For part of his larger contribution, Folklore U.S. artist Seth Price collaborated with New York fashion designer Tim Hamilton to produce a seven-piece collection inspired by military tailoring and by the function and shape of paper envelopes. Bomber jackets, flight suits, and trench coats made of white raw cotton canvas material have their inner linings printed with nontransparent patterns typically used on security business mail envelopes. Likening an envelope to fashion, Price suggests both that the “mantels” are cut, folded and sealed, and that they are empty shells that need to be filled with substance or life before being ready to travel (Christov-Bakargiev et al. 2012, 364-365). Human beings are presented in the work, however, as a somewhat unimportant addition. At the initial presentation of the collection at a catwalk show, Price’s models, instead of walking, acting, and letting their clothes flow, stood still, facing the audience silently for fifteen minutes. With no movement of the clothes or bodies, the individual models were reduced to being a part of the uniformed mass, emanating irritating immobility and silence. An art critic suggested that in Price’s “darkly ironic world, the money makes the clothing that wears the people, not the other way around” (Nathan 2012). The question of individuality, humanity, and clothing is one of the issues raised in other ways by the work of Csákány (Figures 5 and 6).

István Csákány’s “Ghost Keeping”

Hungarian artist István Csákány (born in 1978) has created a monumental installation entitled Ghost Keeping. His works ironically express the conflicting relationships between politics and art, be it in postsocialist Hungary or elsewhere. Using materials such as wood, bronze, and bricks, the artist gives form to social utopias, the aesthetics of work and the deficiencies of the economic context. Ghost Keeping is made of two parts. The first is a meticulous reproduction of a typical sewing workshop presented on a raised floor and entirely made out of light softwood that is elaborately carved. Lined up in two rows, divided by a corridor, are several desks with swivel chairs, sewing machines and other equipment, individual lamps, a large ironing press, and a tailor’s bust. Wooden cables with plugs hang from long fluorescent tubes attached to the ceiling. The replica is slightly

larger than life-size. The second part of the work is situated beneath and extends over the entire length of the workshop. On a catwalk-like platform, eight figures lacking heads, hands, and feet are arranged into groups of two or three. These figures wear white shirts and suits that are dark-blue pinstriped and tailored like working uniforms. They are frozen into mannequin-like poses of sitting, standing, and walking.

The installation presents a conceptual critique of work and fashion products. It evokes an aesthetic understanding of a range of related issues once we recognize that these encounters are not mere intellectual communication processes but visual and aesthetic encounters (Biehl-Missal 2011, 2012a). In these situations, the corporeal, atmospheric experience of these artifacts enables a construction of meaning in an active form of bodily thinking. Although it can be assumed that the construction of meaning is still individual, it is not arbitrary, being shaped by culturally accepted patterns that make all cultural exchanges possible. My interpretation is based on personal experiences of visiting dOCUMENTA(13), on art historians’ comments, and also takes into account academic and popular publications on the topic of fashion, using Cline’s (2012) work Overdressed as the main reference point.

Absence and Silence

When approaching the artifact, a “ghostly” silence becomes palpable together with an impression of the absence rather than presence of work, even in this obvious work setting. The sewing workshop, devoid of people, is an unexpectedly immobile construction without any mechanical movements of the sewing and ironing machines. There is no audible trace of a work process and no other tangible elements: no heat, warmth, or steam emanates from the construction. The fashion products, the suits, are devoid of life and even of bodies, their movement frozen. The wooden frame is erect, like a skeleton from which human life is completely absent. The wooden reconstruction of the workshop does not include any option of functional capability, but is consigned to be a still life, a silent, and unpopulated copy, a space for emptiness and absence. This absence, on a very obvious level, draws our thoughts to the whereabouts of the “missing” people, including the sewing machine operators (Figure 7).

This question is a starting point of the three-year investigative journey that the author Elizabeth Cline (2012) took into the frenzied world of “fast fashion.” The notion of fast fashion is commonly used to describe how designs are moved very quickly from catwalk to stores and in to the mass-retailing market where an unprecedented amount of clothing is sold (Ferdows, Lewis, and Machuca 2004). This is made possible by advanced technology, quick manufacturing, and supply chain control (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006), and by the use of cheap materials. While large companies generate higher profits, the payoff to workers is small, typically at a country’s minimum wage (Cline 2012, 141). So even if workers fulfill their staggering 1,300-shirt quota every day, financially they are not really “present.” Not, at least as Cline argues, until fashion prices rise with rising labor costs in China. Until then, their “absence” in the form of low labor costs, makes it possible for large retailers to offer fashion styles at a low price to millions of consumers.
Cline (2012, 96) criticizes the exploitation and economic unsustainability of mass production in today’s cheap fashion industry. Mass-market retailers ever more quickly create and waste trends. H&M and Forever 21, for example, get daily shipments of new styles and Zara has new lines twice a week. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of identical clothing items are ordered from one factory. In her undercover investigation into Chinese fashion fabrics, Cline (2012, 147) found that this results in cheap prices for single items. This approach of producing massive amounts of low-quality clothing with artificial fibers puts strain on natural resources. High doses of harmful chemicals are commonly used to process these large quantities, pollute the environment, and periodically lead to accidents in overseas factories (Cline 2012, 124). A wave of antiglobalization protests has criticized the exploitation of overseas workers in sweatshops and of the environmental damage caused by chemicals used in production, as explained in the consumer resistance classic No Logo (Klein 2000).

Sewing workshops nowadays can rarely be found in the United States or in Western Europe. Cline (2012, 6) puts this in a social context, reporting that the loss of garment production and trades has contributed to a decline in wages and an increase in unemployment. Twenty years ago, around 50 percent of the clothing bought in the United States was made there. Today, the figure is down to a mere 2 percent, with a staggering 41 percent coming from China (Cline 2012, 6). The artwork in this sense conveys different ideas of absence, which are aesthetically perceived.

**Headless and Handless Figures—the Consumers?**

The skeletal structure of the workshop and the headless, bodyless mannequins transport the idea of a certain “soulness-less.” Despite all physical components present, a mental, and spiritual emptiness become almost palpable, which is the main critique of the mass-market fashion industry. Not only is there no presence of humans and life, but also there is a clear absence of full-bodied mannequins in the suits on the catwalk. These show the contours and movements of humans but lack a head, hands, and feet and presumably represent the intended ghosts in Ghost Keeping. Ghosts, in traditional belief and fiction, typically appear invisible or in the more or less immaterial manifestations of a deceased being. Ghost-keeping ceremonies are performative rituals that aim to contact those spirits. Wearing the products of garment work, these figures in the artwork can be seen as consumers, or as what is left of them when they are invoked, namely, clothes. Being presented as ghosts, they seem not to be actual agents with a soul—that is, empathy, deep feeling, and emotion—in the real world of consumption (Figure 8).

Cline refers to a similar phenomenon of headless, handless, and powerless consumers who are frozen in their poses. Starting with a critical examination of herself, Cline realizes her bad taste in fashion, her 354-piece clothing collection including several items of sailor-stripe tops and fleece hoodies, and low-quality canvas flat shoes with their soles coming off. She deduces that competition based on low price has led to lower quality, “leaving most of us wearing painfully simple designs that are crudely slapped together (p. 7).” Vested in items artlessly styled and simply produced with quick and dirty hemlines, rushed stitching, and elements simply glued together, she came to suggest that today’s younger consumers have never been acquainted with a sense of good quality clothing. Most younger consumers do not know much about fibers such as polyester, nylon, or elastane, nor do they know about any sewing techniques (Cline 2012, 5). This group of consumers has mostly no knowledge of home sewing, which was still
widespread in the 1960s, as they spent their teenage consumption experiences in Gap and Old Navy stores in the late 1980s and early 1990s, then soon encountered a rising number of H&M stores.

Consumers’ interaction with clothes, instead of being personal and long lasting, has become somewhat empty and alienated through buy-and-toss consumption. Cline finds that cheap fashion has altered the way most Americans dress and think. The turnover of enormous volumes by retailers such as TJ Maxx, Forever 21, Zara, and H&M, as well as by supermarkets with their “value” garments (Ross and Harradine 2010), drove prices down and profits up, simultaneously turning clothing into a disposable good. This has displaced the traditional attitude toward clothing as a higher-priced good that is made to last for a long time, to be mended and altered, and which, first of all, needs to be carefully chosen and integrated into an existing wardrobe.

Today, after a number of interviews with style-conscious cheap fashion consumers, Cline finds that cheap fashion clothing does not survive many spin cycles and washings and is seen as disposable. To support this argument, Cline (2012, 122) devotes a chapter to the afterlife of clothes. She watches YouTube channels on which young women after their “shopping-hauls” flash masses of clothes, announcing that they will throw them away after wearing them only a few times. Referring to the Environmental Protection Agency’s assessment of the 68 pounds of textiles that are disposed of every year by each American, on average, Cline notes that not even second-hand or thrift stores, the Salvation Army, and Goodwill organizations, could benefit much from bad quality clothing, which she has observed being disposed of by the compressed cubic meter. These bales go to textile recyclers who see lower profits while having to handle increasing masses of decreasing quality (Cline 2012, 131). Much of American’s shoddy donated clothing is sold overseas, killing local textile industries (Bloemen 2001) and turning African countries into our “dumping ground” (Cline 2012, 136). Cline (2012, 127, 135) has come to call this the “clothing deficit myth” where no “shivering person” is out there to give these rags a new life or “some poor, underdressed African who wants our worn and tattered duds.” With this illusion in mind, people buy more and more cheap clothes and are also foregoing the mending of clothes, not making much use of seamstresses’ services. With that spiral, other industries die as well. So there is another element of death, emptiness, and absence to the interplay of fashion and consumption.

A price that puts a piece of fashion on a par with a coffee-to-go has ruined the valuation of our wardrobe, together with, as Cline (2012, 6) suggests, our “sense of self along with changing trends . . . Some of us stand in line at Target, H&M, or Macy’s—overnight in some cases—to be the first to grab shoddy facsimiles of clothing by luxury fashion designers such as Versace and Missoni.” Quicker turnarounds and releases, as
in Zara’s two-week cycle, not only rattle an industry long habituated to a seasonal pace, but also pressure individual styling and consumption concepts with frequent, almost permanent, store visits, and trend chasing. Hoping for individuality at “dumped” prices, most people do not actually recognize that there is not much of a choice to cheap shopping since this situation makes higher quality clothing with lower order numbers outrageously priced. While fashion was always, as in arts institutions, celebrated for its utopian potential, its actual potential in Cline’s view is not a utopia of self-actualization, but a dystopia of pathetic consumers—“muppets,” to use another figurative analogy.

This idea also can be read in Csákány’s work. The mannequins are wearing dark pinstriped jackets, but boast trousers in the cut of workers’ uniforms, remindful of Chinese workers’ uniforms in the 1970s. So, in the end, it is suggested that “workers” produce masses of garments for masses of other “workers” who, in their everyday task of consuming, are not acting as discernible individuals but who too are being exploited. The critical theorist Gernot Böhme (2003) locates this development in today’s consumption. The desire to be seen, to dress up, to stage oneself “forms the basis for a new, practically limitless exploitation.” A similar idea is brought forward by Cline who refers to Thorstein Veblen’s (1899/1994) earlier arguments that fashion is the ultimate tool to present yourself to the world. Cline (2012, 73-74) argues that there is social pressure to hold up appearances. She calculates that high-end clothing may deserve high prices for its good materials, elaborate craftsmanship, and careful labor while, in the end, wholesale and retail markups still may increase the material and labor costs by a factor of five. Furthermore, not every piece of clothing is well made; “made in China” tags hidden behind designer labels are increasingly common. Yet still, in their search for exclusive clothing, name-obsessed high-end customers are unrelenting (Cline 2012, 76).

This obsession trickles down to the masses of people for whom today’s couturiers seem to offer an affordable alternative. For example, Chanel’s Karl Lagerfeld, Donatella Versace, Jimmy Choo, and others make available their own lines at H&M. Although different in quality, these pieces are cheap and available for the masses. Cline (2012, 70) critiques this issue as well, noting that the Italian designer brand Missoni’s line for Target had little to do with the high-end fibers typically used, but sold well since consumers were just after the name. “Where girls once would have paid at least some attention to the craftsmanship of the product, or even might have sat behind a sewing machine and created their own Missoni-inspired or Karl Lagerfeld look-alike, they now line up passively to buy disposable versions of it” Cline (2012, 71). These customers then, parading headless, faceless, handler, bodyless, emerge as yet another “worker” for the global capitalist system.

The reality of actually encountering Csákány’s artwork adds yet another dimension. Visitors see each other strolling along the sewing workshop and the catwalk, looking up to the mannequins. In their casual attire, which is, according to Cline’s observations, mostly bog-standard from the big clothing retailers, they can be seen as a living continuation of the ideas that I have outlined above. Using a slightly different view we can also contrast the carefully manufactured garb on the catwalk, a utopia of quality fashion, but empty, with the real people who are present, wearing actual cheap items. In this aesthetic situation, I was wondering how we as visitors relate to the artwork towering above. The thoughts that I had were not really favorable toward issues such as fashion, production, and consumption. Many weeks afterward, these ghosts—as a carrier or “medium” of ideas—were still haunting my memories.

**Handcraft**

The aesthetic experience of people, be it in a consumption context or in front of an artwork, typically is influenced by the overall atmosphere and the materiality of the setting (Biehl-Missal 2011; Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012). When people find themselves surrounded by gray, stone walls, they feel differently than when they are confronted with a large wooden ensemble. In part, this is due to the overall bodily perception of the material, conveyed via indeterminate atmospheres in the space (Böhme 1993). When people visually perceive the wood, their perception is synesthetic, linking to an indistinct sensation of warmth, as if it were felt. This principle has become increasingly common in our “aesthetic era,” where the façade has gained dominance at the expense of an honesty of material, form, and function (Böhme 2006, 150). Being typical of many artificial marketing atmospheres and consumption spaces, this principle is, in the opinion of Elizabeth Cline’s and others, a distinct feature of the fast fashion industry when it is about a façade of seemingly trendy looks at the expense of good quality garment and sewing.

Csákány’s elaborate wooden reconstruction of a sewing workshop can be interpreted as a statement for construction and material against appearance and materiality. Laborious carvings recreate all the details of such things as movable lamps, sewing machines, their small parts including levers, foot-pedals, cables, plugs, pivots, pin points, and many other small elements. Even flapping cable ends find their naturalist form, meticulously carved, serrated, and ground. The artist, together with two assistants, worked on the sculpture for more than three months. With regard to the theme of “sewing,” the work on this intricate artifact parallels careful sewing techniques and is in sharp contrast to the hasty practices demanded by sweatshop workers fulfilling their daily output of over a 1,000 pieces. Translating the sewing piecework into the traditional and sustainable medium of cabinetmaking, Csákány creates an “ode on manual work” and unveils the tension between alienated work, mass production, and difficult, highly skilled handcrafting (Pora 2012). In the art world, this is also read as an absurdly meticulous piece of manual work that is an allegory of the disappearance of careful work from the art world itself (Boecker 2012, 256). The handmade machines and the suits emphasize the traditionally close relationship between art and craft that has now become multifarious and conflicting (Figure 9).
This has also implications for the art world. Not only the mechanical reproduction of artworks (Benjamin 1973), but also their mechanical production has altered their nature and perception. A well-known example is pop art where artistic work very much resembled acts of consumption rather than actual production (Grunenberg and Hollein 2002). Andy Warhol and his “Factory,” for example, were seen as a playful critique of celebrity and consumer culture (Mamiya 1992). More recently, we witness the gaudy art of critical realism of Chinese art dealing with emerging consumer culture (Mallet et al. 2008). Artists such as Damien Hirst even license artistic construction patterns and entirely outsource the material production, but spend much effort on the façade, generating a lot of “buzz about the buzz about the buzz” and amplifying being famous for being famous as a celebrity (Holbrook 2007, 315). Yet again, this parallels some of the developments that took over fashion as a sister of fine arts as in the unloving, cheap, and fast reproduction of the couturiers’ works that is questioned by Cline (2012, 188) finds missing on virtually all mass-market fashion. Csákány’s work can be seen as a reminder of all these techniques of handcraft that have no place in today’s consumption.

In this light, Cline makes a suggestion for handcraft that reshapes the interplay of fashion and anti-consumption. Devoting a chapter, toward the end of her book on the topic “Make, alter and mend,” Cline (2012, 187) investigates home sewing as an opportunity for an independent choice against consumption that includes and extends beyond the choice of sustainably produced clothing. This is in line with the concept of “reclaim” in anti-consumption research that represents an “ideological shift regarding the processes of acquisition, use, and dispossession,” including people’s own production of food and other goods rather than their acquisition through conventional markets (Lee et al. 2011, 1681). Cline’s preferences seem to echo Csákány’s manual effort and similar intentions in the art world, that is, the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement between 1860 and 1910, which emphasized the desirability of manual skilled craftwork in the production of furniture, pottery, cloth, and paper designs. She describes the case of Sarah Kate Beaumont who switched from being an ardent fast-fashion shopper to a person who has been making everything she wears for four years now. Beaumont’s abrupt transition was inspired by the economic crisis and her own bank statement: “she wanted to make her own clothes because it was cheap (p. 187).” In her Brooklyn sewing studio, Beaumont has sewing machines, an ironing board, a dress form and some of the elements seen also in Csákány’s sewing workshop. Cline (2012, 188) explains that Beaumont is not to be imagined as “a plain Jane walking around in everyone’s worst vision of primitive, rough-hewn clothes.” Rather, her sewing is “as good or better than what’s found in most chain stores.” She chooses robust fabrics and uses high-end finishes such as the French seam and other labor-intensive details which are difficult to buy, but not too difficult to make. This goes along with a completely different aesthetic understanding of clothes in terms of beauty and ugliness, exquisite materiality and quality versus cheap-and-careless stuff. Beaumont (2009) explains in her blog...
that she uses the “slow clothing” concept that relates to the “slow food” principle directed against mass-produced fast food that is nondurable and wasteful, and arguably, “soulless.” “Home sewn garments, similar to home cooked foods, are made with care and sustenance. In a sense, clothing can be nourishing” (Beaumont 2009). As with food, Cline (2012, 191) finds that “not shopping was not a total solution.” However, not consuming fast fashion and producing clothes on her own might stand up as a valuable perspective. Even if, in this case, the action was financially motivated, an understanding of “nourishment” and the attentive sensual understanding of clothing are fundamentally aesthetic and not merely logical. An element of humanity, personality, and activity exists in there that is often missing in modern consumption. This is what we can also experience when we reflect on Ghost Keeping.

Concluding thoughts

Referring to an artwork and the aesthetic reactions, it can evoke provides some ideas for the emerging area of anti-consumption. Intangible dimensions, including distastes and not fully rational reflected feelings, influence acts of anti-consumption, yet remain under-researched (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013). This is where the notion of aesthetic knowing—a corporeal and emotional understanding of consumption that is increasingly relevant in today’s “aesthetic era” of consumption—comes into play. There is a widely acknowledged potential of arts to inspire people’s tacit knowing, feeling, and imagination. By leaving room for interpretation, the artworks discussed here are different from Cline’s popular literature, and from some forms of culture jamming which are more explicit. The aesthetic address of critique and resistance discussed here needs to be further researched. In the end, I hope that this excursion into the art world might inspire researchers, as well play with their imagination and thoughts about consumption and anti-consumption.

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