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ART, FASHION, AND ROCK-AND-ROLL: A CURATORIAL REFLECTION

Abstract:

This article explores the interconnectedness of art, fashion, and rock-and-roll through an analysis of curated and designed exhibitions. By examining the curatorial and design strategies employed, the author demonstrates how these exhibitions challenge traditional museum practices and foster new forms of engagement with popular culture. The examined exhibitions illuminate the dynamic interplay between the cultural forms, revealing their capacity to explore identity, rebellion, and cultural transformation. By integrating multimedia elements and reimagining the museum space, these exhibitions offer a more nuanced understanding of the intersections.

Keywords:

art, fashion, curatorial studies, exhibition design, museum practice

Introduction: The Intersections of Art, Fashion, and Rock-and-Roll in Exhibitions

Curating and designing exhibitions that focus on art, fashion, and rock-and-roll offer an opportunity to explore the nuanced ways these cultural forms intersect and inform one another. Art provides a visual narrative that speaks to history and identity; fashion communicates individuality, power, and societal shifts; and rock-and-roll has always represented rebellion, innovation, and cultural commentary. In the museum context, these mediums allow for a comprehensive examination of how creative expression reflects and shapes societal norms and cultural movements.

Through my work, I have focused on bringing these intersections to life within the museum space. Exhibitions such as *American Identities: A New Look* (2001), *Who Shot Rock and Roll* (2009), *Killer Heels: The Art of the High Heeled Shoe* (2014), and *David Bowie Is* (2018), demonstrate how art, fashion, and rock-and-roll are more than mere categories—they are dynamic expressions of the human experience.

In this essay, I will reflect on several key exhibitions that I have had the curated and /or designed, organized by the thematic focus of art, fashion, and rock-and-roll. Through these exhibitions, I aim to show how these three domains continually intersect, offering a lens through which to better understand our cultural landscape.

Art Exhibitions: Engaging with Identity, Politics, and History

Art exhibitions allow us to engage with broader conversations around identity, politics, and cultural history. As a curator and designer, my goal has been to offer visitors not only a chance to appreciate aesthetics but also to consider the social and political forces that shape the art they see.

In the years working at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (1985–87) and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1987–1999), I worked primarily in the film and video departments, and then regularly designed exhibition in other media. Beyond the presentation of single-channel films and videotapes, at the time there was a growing interest in presenting expanded forms of film, video and sound installation. Works by video artists Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas, Bill Viola and Gary Hill utilized the gallery as a space to present sculptural works and environments/installations that enveloped visitors. Paik often commented on the interaction between people and the every-increasing presence of electronic media, while Jonas resurrected myths and retold them through performances, evolving into multimedia installations. These video pioneers set the stage for the immersive art exhibitions that would flourish in later years.

The 1993 *Biennial Exhibition* opening, which was immediately dubbed the “Politically Correct Biennial,” marked a significant shift toward using art as a platform for social justice. Addressing issues of race, gender, and sexuality, the exhibition critiqued societal norms, offering a space for reflection and challenging both art and society. The Biennial was significant not just for the art it displayed but for its engagement with the pressing cultural conversations. Footage of the Rodney King incident, Spike Lee’s music video for *Money Don’t Matter 2 Night* (Prince, 1993), and installations like Pepon Osorio’s *Scene of the Crime (Who’s Crime?)* (1993) contributed to the tone. Osorio’s installation resembled a “crime scene” in an apartment, bracketed by walls simulating a videotape rental store, with layers of political commentary. A vivid moment occurred during the installation of the piece, when Osorio employed a police detective for finger-print dusting on the glasses and other elements, and just as he was finishing the detective was called to the World Trade Center because a bomb had detonated in the underground parking garage—a precursor to 9/11.

The 1993 *Biennial Exhibition* redefined how art exhibitions could engage with social and political issues. What was previously seen as primarily visual presentations expanded to include critiques of cultural norms, and this transformation paved the way for future politically charged exhibitions.

In 2001, I designed *American Identities: A New Look* at the Brooklyn Museum (2001), which opened immediately in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. This exhibition examined the evolving nature of American identity by juxtaposing works from various cultural backgrounds and time periods, reflecting on how art contributes to the formation of national identity. The United States of America’s founding and evolution are tied to the multiple cultures that inform its narratives, challenging the idea of one idealized American voice. The exhibition allowed visitors to explore the complexities of Americanness, particularly at a time when the nation was grappling with collective trauma and introspection.

In 2005, *Luce Center Visible Storage Study Center* extended the conversation by offering visitors a behind-the-scenes look at curatorial decisions. By exposing over 2,000 objects usually hidden in storage, this installation invited the public to engage with the museum’s collection in new ways. The design process occurred during the Gulf War, and due to the increased price of steel, I opted for aluminum, which meant adjusting the proportions of the ceiling-high casework, but added a polished, glinting effect to the room. Additionally, lighting for the lower shelves was a challenge in visual storage displays, and my solution was to repurpose technology used in Timex’s “nightglow” watches which is made from a thin, laminated material named “E-lite” that only produced 3 footcandles of light (well within conservation standards). These innovations, which increased visibility, offered new transparency to the curatorial process, shedding light on how exhibitions are crafted from permanent collections, and the narrative possibilities.



Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum, New York, April 19, 2012–October 2, 2016, exhibition view. Photo: M. Yokobosky.

In *The Mummy Chamber* (2010), the focus was on the intersection of ancient art, identity, and the afterlife. Dark chocolate-colored walls with black stencils of phoenixes enveloped visitors, connecting ancient beliefs about death and immortality with contemporary reflections on identity. The gallery name and the exhibition design were based on my travels in Egypt twenty years earlier, especially the underground tombs in Luxor valley. The centerpiece of the galleries, was the recently conserved 25-foot *Book of the Dead of the Goldworker of Amun, Sabekmose* (Egypt, c. 1500–1480 BCE), displayed in a custom case with motion-activated lighting to preserve it for future generations.

Another exhibition that examined the complexities of identity across cultures was *Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn* (2012–2016). Installed in the renovated Great Hall, it introduced visitors to the museum's Permanent Collection galleries by juxtaposing work from various regions and periods, emphasizing the global interconnectedness of artistic traditions. A particularly significant element was a rare volume of *Atlas nouveau : contenant toutes les parties du monde ou sont exactement remarqués les empires, monarchies, royaumes, estats, republiques & peuples qui sy trouuent á present* (Paris: Chez Hubert Iailot ioignant les Grands Augustins aux deux Globes, 1692), a historical document from the museum's predecessor institution, the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library Association. Founded in 1823, it was the first free and circulating library in Brooklyn. The Library was the nucleus of the Brooklyn

Museum and this book is an excellent example of the original institutional vision as it documents a need to know about the world and the desire to share information. It was housed in a state-of-the-art case featuring “smart glass” (an opaque glass that became clear when electrified). This exhibition invited cross-cultural dialogue, emphasizing that while artistic traditions vary, the fundamental impulses behind them—identity, belief, and self-expression—are universal.

In these exhibitions, whether focused on the moving image, ancient artifacts, or contemporary social issues, the underlying themes are consistent: identity, expression, and the power of art to connect us across time, space and heritage. Art, as I have aimed to show, is not static; it is in constant dialogue with the culture and physical environment that surrounds it, offering insights into who we are, where we come from, and where we are headed.

FASHION

Fashion, as an artistic medium, powerfully communicates identity, status, and social constructs, creating an intricate narrative of self-expression and cultural influence. Through my curatorial and design work, I have focused on how clothing operates not only as a personal statement but also as a political tool, reflecting broader societal dynamics. Each exhibition represents fashion’s dynamic role, illustrating how it shapes and responds to shifting cultural landscapes.

Fashion & Film (Whitney Museum, 1997) was a series of over 65 features, documentaries and shorts exploring how costumes shape character development and narrative structure, as well as how fashion became a central part of film history. From *Nanook of the North* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1922), a documentary about the Inuit people of northern Quebec sponsored by Revillon [Furs], to fashion-driven stories such as *Mahogany* (Berry Gordy, 1975), the exhibition demonstrated how fashion propels narratives and works as a form of advertising. Film has often launched fashion trends, as viewers seek to emulate characters in real life.

Following the design of *Edward Steichen* exhibition (Whitney Museum, 2000), which illustrated how his work for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* blurred the line between commercial photography and artistic expression, the *Annie Leibowitz* retrospective (Brooklyn Museum, 2006) treaded similar territory in a contemporary context. The exhibition examined the intersection of fashion, celebrity, and photography. Leibowitz’s portraits of cultural icons such as Demi Moore, Melania Trump, and Mick Jagger, defined by their sartorial choices, underscored fashion’s power to shape public perception. Her work captured not only the aesthetics of these individuals but also their cultural significance, transforming them into enduring symbols of their time. Additionally, the exhibition featured a behind-the-scenes look at Leibowitz’s editing process, with Xeroxed images tacked to Homosote panels lining a corridor. Through this intricate exhibition staging, the idea emerged that



The Rise of Sneaker Culture, Brooklyn Museum, New York, July 10–October 4, 2015, exhibition view. Photo: M. Yokobosky.

fashion, as filtered through Leibovitz's lens, plays a fundamental role in shaping identity, fame, and cultural memory, transcending mere external aesthetic.

The back-to-back exhibitions *Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe* (Brooklyn Museum, 2014) and *The Rise of Sneaker Culture* (Brooklyn Museum, 2015) explored the evolution of footwear as symbols of power, sexuality and status. *Killer Heels* traced high heels from their aristocratic origins to avant-garde designs (Jean-Paul Gaultier and Noritaka Tatehana), showcasing their cultural and political significance across 160 examples. The exhibition revealed how designers played with the artistic possibilities of high heels, using innovative materials and pushing the limits of functionality and beauty. The high heel, as seen through the lens of designers like Christian Louboutin with his towering 120 cm heels, exemplifies how a single accessory can reflect and challenge gender norms and societal expectations.

Similarly, *The Rise of the Sneaker Cultures* examined how sneakers, originally designed for functionality, have evolved into cultural icons and a global obsession. This exhibition focused on sneakers as symbol of youth rebellion, individuality, and social identity, reflecting broader shifts toward casualization in fashion. Featuring Adidas, Converse, Nike "Air Jordan", Prada, and collaborations with artists such as Damien Hirst, this exhibition attracted a younger, male audience, while *Killer Heels* attracted a female audience. Though exhibitions are not typically curated or designed by gender, the role of shoes in these cases appeared to attract specific demographics. Both exhibitions underscore how footwear can serve as a powerful marker of cultural identity and status.

Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern (Brooklyn Museum, 2017) offered a rare look into how the artist's minimalist personal style mirrored her modernist art.



Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern, Brooklyn Museum, New York, March 3–July 23, 2017, exhibition view. Photo: M. Yokobosky.

By juxtaposing O'Keeffe's monochromatic wardrobe with her paintings, the exhibition revealed her strategic rejection of conventional femininity and the fusion of personal style with artistic identity. O'Keeffe used fashion not as mere attire but as an extension of her creative expression, challenging societal expectations. With displays of early hand-made dresses, her country wardrobe of jeans and bandannas, her classic monochrome A-line dresses, tailored men's black suits by Austrian-based Knize and Salvatore Ferragamo shoes, *Living Modern* illustrated how O'Keeffe's personal aesthetics and artistic vision were deeply intertwined, further solidifying her iconic status.

Pierre Cardin: Future Fashion (Brooklyn Museum, 2019) celebrated the designer's revolutionary approach to fashion, emphasizing his use of innovative materials and futuristic designs that pushed the boundaries of what clothing could be. Cardin's early training and experience working as Christian Dior's first head tailor before starting his own brand, gave him the knowledge and freedom to explore new ways of living and expressing oneself through avant-garde designs. The exhibition demonstrated how Cardin's forward-thinking designs were not merely about aesthetics but about imagining the future and pushing the limits of design. Cardin's work underscored fashion's role as a medium for envisioning how

society might evolve, illustrating the intersection between design, technology, and self-expression.

Studio 54: Night Magic (Brooklyn Museum, 2020) explored the cultural phenomenon of the legendary nightclub as a crucible of fashion, music, and identity from April 26, 1977, to February 4, 1980. The exhibition immersed visitors in the glamour and creativity that defined Studio 54, where fashion became performative (the dance floor was the stage of a former opera house) and where patrons experimented with gender fluidity and self-expression. With extensive archival photographs, video footage, original club décor and fashions worn by its legendary patrons like Grace Jones and Liza Minnelli, the exhibition highlighted how Studio 54 was a microcosm of broader societal shifts, particularly in terms of cultural liberation. By tracing the evolution of the disco era from underground clubs, to Studio 54 with clothing by Halston, Norma Kamali, Stephen Burrows and Larry LeGaspi, to early 1980s, when chic dresses were supplanted by designer jeans by Gloria Vanderbilt and Calvin Klein, as modeled by Brooke Shields, the exhibition showcased how fashion and self-expression were integral to advocating a cultural shift in the pre-MTV era, reflecting the era's ethos of hedonism and rebellion.

In *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* (Brooklyn Museum, 2021) aimed to celebrate the legacy of one of the most influential fashion designers of the 20th century. Previously exhibited in Paris and London, this revised iteration skillfully utilized the Museum's Beaux Arts Court. Structured around a historical framework, the exhibition highlighted Dior's introduction of the "New Look" silhouette in post-World War II fashion, which redefined femininity and luxury. Featuring over 200 ensembles, along with numerous accessories and archival materials, the exhibition offered a comprehensive overview of Dior's career, emphasizing his exceptional craftsmanship and the contributions of the six subsequent creative directors, including Yves Saint Laurent, Gianfranco Ferré, John Galliano and Maria Grazia Chiuri. By underscoring haute couture's cultural significance, the exhibition demonstrated how Dior's work shaped women's fashion and continues to inspire contemporary designers.

Thierry Mugler: Couturissime (Brooklyn Museum, 2022) celebrated the avant-garde French designer's dramatic and theatrical approach to fashion, which often blurred the boundaries between fashion, architecture, and performance art. Mugler's creations challenged conventional notions of femininity and beauty, emphasizing strength, transformation, and otherworldliness. Frequently inspired by science fiction, such as Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), and the surrealism of nature, as seen in *Microcosmos* (1996), Mugler's background as a dancer and his knowledge of theater elevated his fashion shows to performances, blending artistry with design. The exhibition underscored the idea that fashion, much like art and film, can challenge societal norms and, like the work of Pierre Cardin, offer imaginative visions of the future.

Looking ahead, *Solid Gold* (Brooklyn Museum, opening November 16, 2024) will explore the symbolic and material significance of gold in art, fashion, jewelry and music. Featuring over 500 works from various cultures, this exhibition will trace gold's odyssey as a symbol of beauty, power, and wealth, throughout history. With designs by Christian Dior, Demna, Gianfranco Ferré, The Blonds, and Yves Saint Laurent, alongside jewelry by Cartier and Jacob & Co., *Solid Gold* will celebrate gold's seductive allure while confronting the human and environmental costs of its extraction. As both a material and a color, gold has inspired countless works of art, fashion, and design, making this exhibition a testament to humankind's long-standing fascination with this luminous, yellow element.

Through each of these exhibitions, I have endeavored to demonstrate that fashion transcends mere clothing, functioning as a dynamic medium through which identity, politics, and culture are continually negotiated and expressed. Whether through avant-garde designs, the portrayal of cultural icons, or the ubiquity of everyday footwear, fashion both reflects and shapes the socio-cultural landscape, serving as a potent vehicle for storytelling and self-expression. These exhibitions foreground fashion's critical role in shaping cultural narratives, providing nuanced insights into how individuals and societies construct and express their identities within evolving cultural frameworks.

Rock-and-Roll Exhibitions: The Visual Legacy of Music and Rebellion

Rock-and-roll transcends its origins as a musical genre, functioning as a profound cultural force that has indelibly shaped fashion, film, and visual art. My curatorial work has sought to capture the rebellious spirit of rock-and-roll and critically examine its pervasive impact on visual culture, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between music and artistic expression.

The *No Wave Cinema, 1978-87* exhibition (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996) delved into the No Wave movement, an intensely independent art and film scene that emerged from New York's punk rock subculture in the late 1970s. Characterized by its raw, unpolished aesthetic and its rejection of mainstream filmmaking techniques, No Wave cinema employed Super-8mm film, with directors such as Beth B, Kathryn Bigelow, Vivienne Dick, and Richard Kern producing films on minimal budgets. These works delved into themes of alienation, disillusionment, and societal fragmentation, eschewing conventional narrative structures in favor of experimentation and a DIY ethos. This deliberate roughness mirrored the ethos of punk rock, aligning No Wave cinema with a broader countercultural rejection of institutional norms.

By foregrounding the movement's influence on subsequent filmmakers and musicians, including Jim Jarmusch, I sought to demonstrate that No Wave cinema was not a marginal phenomenon, but rather a seminal cultural force that shaped critical dialogues around postmodernism, identity, and rebellion. The first large-scale exhibition (three years in development), illuminated how this underground movement's aesthetics and ideological innovations contributed to broader cultural discourses, cementing its place within the evolving history of visual and musical rebellion.

In *BAM BAM BAM: Catching the Next Wave for 20 Years* (Brooklyn Museum, 2002), I examined the collaborations between the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) and some of the most avant-garde musicians and performers of the late 20th century. Structured as a 30-minute video cycle of theatrical scenes presented in a purposefully designed setting, the exhibition celebrated the BAM's pivotal role in fostering creative partnerships between musicians like David Byrne, Lou Reed and Tom Waits, and visionary performance artists and directors such as David Lynch and Robert Wilson. These collaborations transcended traditional boundaries of theater and music, generating interdisciplinary works that synthesized music, visual art, and performance.

The video installation illuminated how rock-and-roll evolved beyond a musical genre, functioning as a catalyst for innovative forms of artistic expression. For example, Lou Reed's collaborations with Robert Wilson were transformative, merging Reed's poetic and gritty lyrics with Wilson's avant-garde though stark, visual language, as seen in works such as *Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*, 1990 and *Time Rocker*, 1996. Through this exhibition, I sought to emphasize BAM's role as an incubator for experimental art that fused music with performance, demonstrating how rock's rebellious energy intersected with theatrical and artistic innovation to create wholly new forms of expression.

Who Shot Rock and Roll: A Photographic History, 1955 to the Present (Brooklyn Museum, 2009) explored the significant role that photography played in constructing the mythology of rock-and-roll. The exhibition featured iconic images from renowned photographers like Richard Avedon, Annie Leibovitz and Pennie Smith, whose portraits of rock icons such as The Beatles, Patti Smith, Led Zeppelin and The Clash became enduring representations of the genre's rebellious ethos. These photographs not only documented performances but captured the musicians' personalities, charisma, and defiance, contributing to the larger cultural narrative of rock-and-roll.

In editing and designing this exhibition, I sought to evoke a "digital" aesthetic that reflected the technological shift in music consumption at the time. With the compact disc, which gained dominance over two decades, finally supplanting vinyl records, the exhibition's visual design mirrored the transition. The walls were painted in shades of white, grey, and platinum grids to evoke a digital sensibility, while an interstitial space paid homage to the once-beloved vinyl record covers and 35mm slide shows, with works by Henry Diltz offering a nostalgic counterpoint to the digital theme.



Who Shot Rock & Roll: A Photographic History, 1955 to the Present, Brooklyn Museum, New York, October 30, 2009–January 31, 2010, exhibition view. Photo: M. Yokobosky.

David Bowie Is (Brooklyn Museum, 2018) was one of the most expansive and immersive exhibitions dedicated to the life and career of David Bowie, a figure who continually pushed the boundaries of gender, fashion, and music. Featuring over 450 objects from Bowie's personal archive—including costumes, handwritten lyrics, music videos, stage designs, and personal items—the exhibition provided a comprehensive exploration of Bowie's transformative influence on popular culture.

A central theme of the exhibition was Bowie's ability to reinvent himself through fashion, music, and performance. His collaborations with designers such as Freddie Burretti, Kansai Yamamoto, and Alexander McQueen illustrated how his costumes were not merely stage outfits but integral extensions of the personas he created—whether Ziggy Stardust or the Thin White Duke. Bowie employed fashion as a medium of self-expression, actively challenging societal norms surrounding identity, gender and aesthetics

In curating and designing this last iteration of the exhibition, I aimed to underscore Bowie's role as a pioneer of gender fluidity and artistic experimentation. The exhibition highlighted how Bowie's work exemplified the fluidity between art forms, blending music, theater, and visual art into a cohesive, dynamic practice that continually defied categorization.

Technologically, the exhibition was a model for the integration of multimedia in curatorial practice. Visitors were equipped with headphones that automatically played different tracks in synchronization with the specific artifacts and displays, creating a personalized and immersive auditory experience in real time. This fusion of sounds and space allowed each visitor to experience Bowie's work on an intimate, multisensory level. Additionally, video projections and

multimedia elements created an immersive environment where Bowie's music, fashion and art converged into a unified narrative. This curatorial approach not only captured the essence of Bowie's boundary-pushing artistry but also illuminated his enduring influence on popular culture.

In reflecting on these exhibitions, my overarching objective has been to convey the rebellious and transformative spirit of rock-and-roll. Through exploring the intersection of music, fashion, photography, and visual art, I sought to highlight how rock-and-roll has not only shaped cultural history, but also served as a catalyst for innovative forms of artistic expression. Each exhibition offered a distinct perspective on rock-and-roll's influence on identity, visual culture, and societal norms, emphasizing the genre's enduring legacy as a powerful force for creative and cultural revolution.

Conclusion: The Future of Interdisciplinary Exhibitions

The exhibitions discussed demonstrate the profound interconnections between art, fashion and rock-and-roll, each acting as a critical platform for exploring identity, rebellion, and cultural transformation. These exhibitions reveal that these cultural forms are not siloed from one another but are part of an evolving conversation that transcends time and disciplinary boundaries.

The curatorial and design strategies employed in these exhibitions illuminate new methodologies of interpreting the role of popular cultures in museum spaces. By integrating multimedia elements, curators are able to engage audiences in more dynamic, participatory and educational experiences, fostering deeper connections between cultural forms. This approach reconceptualizes museums as spaces of dialogue and reflection, rather than mere repositories of objects, allowing for more nuanced engagement with the intersections of art, fashion, and music. Moreover, such focus on the convergences of these disciplines challenges traditional museum hierarchies, expanding the boundaries of what is considered legitimate subject matter for serious cultural analysis.

As museums increasingly explore these intersections, they will assume a more pivotal role in shaping our collective understanding of the broader cultural impacts of these mediums. Through thoughtful curation, innovative exhibition design, and interdisciplinary approaches, museums can offer new insights into how art, fashion and music influence societal trends and individual identities. In doing so, they ensure that the legacies of these cultural forms remain relevant and resonant for future generations, creating spaces where the past and present converge in meaningful and transformative ways.

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UMETNOST, MODA I ROKENROL: KUSTOSKA REFLEKSIJA

Apstrakt:

U radu se istražuje međusobna povezanost umetnosti, mode i rokenrola kroz analizu kustoskih praksi i dizajna izložbi. Ispitujući primenjene strategije kustosa i dizajnera, autor pokazuje kako izložbe problematizuju tradicionalne muzejske prakse i podstiču nove oblike angažovanja sa popularnom kulturom. Analizirane izložbe razotkrivaju dinamiku preplitanja različitih kulturnih formi i njihovu sposobnost da ispituju teme kao što su identitet, pobuna i kulturna transformacija. Integracijom multimedijalnih elemenata i osmišljavanja muzejskog prostora ove izložbe nude kompleksno razumevanje pomenutih intersekcija.

Ključne reči:

umetnost, moda, kustoske studije, dizajn izložbi, muzejska praksa