

# Is 'Items' Exhibition Subversive? A New Exhibition at MOMA Dares to Explain and Show Fashion as A Design Object



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## Introduction

A white T-shirt (item 106) on a dark gray background is not an art Object, but can be found in an exhibition on the sixth floor of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York. The new exhibition that opened on October 2017, "Items - Is Modern Fashion?", curated by Paula Antonelli, is a bold new reflection on the fashion paradigm of modern society today. Antonelli, disrupts the expectations of the fashion world to appear in all its splendor and glamor at one of the most important museums in the world. There is a great deal of doubt, if fashion lovers can accept it in the affirmative, because it breaks down common images and hard-built paradigms. The term "fashion" evokes images of supernatural glamorous marching models, with scant structures on their lean bodies whose sole purpose is to amaze the sharp-eyed journalists and critics. 'Fashion' is a verbal expression of something changing, which does not survive the dimension of time, and which has no essence or eternal quality. The exhibition creates the exact opposite of this view. While walking on the museum's display floor, the visitor looks around and finds that a high percentage of exhibition items are used by the visitors themselves. This is the white T-shirt that was first created by Hansa for the US Navy recruits in 1903. The white T-shirt as a symbol that repeats itself over the last century is one of 111 fashion items that show vividly that the things we use, for dress purposes in our Everyday life objects, are design objects that have inner truth that cannot be erased, and they have a real source, created at some point by a solid need. And this is a kind of truth embedded in them from the day they were born. We are mistakenly thinking that fashion is a rapidly changing cultural component, capricious and alternately replaced. The exhibition does not ignore this aspect of the fashion world, but it presents the historical fact that the entire form of change and intensive exchange occurs around fixed archetypes, and celebrates most of those items that have not changed substantially and survived many decades of life. The main argument that comes to me as an observer is that 'items' in fashion are like 'standards' in the

world of jazz. There are thousands of versions of the standard such as 'Autumn Leaves', and there are thousands of versions for the fashion standard 'Trench Coat' (item 103). This is a simple argument, perhaps a trivial one, but no one has dared to present it in this way, toward the glamorous world of Fashion, and on such a major stage as the MoMA, which seems as a theoretical earthquake.

## Is modern fashion?

My mother use to say that "the word 'Modern' is no longer so modern." Antonelli asks this question with bold and courageous action, not because she thinks it's not modern, but because she wants to make a new and powerful argument. Modernity is one of the elusive concepts in Western cultural theories, and it was born in the world of design and architecture. After 30 years or more of uncompromising attack on modernism by many theorists who define the attack as Post-modernism, Antonelli puts a huge banner above everything, with a big question mark. It uses Fashion as the best platform for this theoretical argument, to recreate ground truths for most of the intimate items we use - our clothes. In this way, Antonelli does not blame Post-modernism in the decadent state in which we are, but creates a simple and clear way on the history map of clothing, showing how to build anchors in this ocean. In the course of the exhibition's curiosities, in parallel with obsessive documentation of objects and items, a daring theoretical process takes place in the hall where the words "Modern Art" appear in its own name.

The name of the exhibition corresponds to the former design exhibition at the museum, which dealt with fashion, curated by Bernard Rodovsky immediately after the end of World War II (1944), "Are Clothes Modern?" In the exhibition, Rodovsky complains about the fact that the garment as an object is rejected by the art world as an object of artistic creation. Antonelli, expands the question, in a reflective fashion towards the world of fashion itself. A review of 111 selected fashion items includes

the cultural contexts and ground from which they grew, but also the sequence of their production processes, the material transformation they have undergone, their ecological impact on the environment, their ability to be produced in millions of copies as an industrial mass product. Those items expanded during the time into various unnumbered versions. In this sense, the reference to the eternal fashion items is like any other industrial product, which is perhaps the main force of the exhibition.

And what is missing from it? The exhibition does not emphasize the narcissistic side of fashion, nor does it adorn fashion designers or luxury fashion houses in their context. It lifts the 'items' into sky as modest heroes. The big names of superstars of fashion are hidden in the display, which means that Antonelli is consciously "entangled" in one of the "ego-reinforced" clichés that exist in culture. Fashion is based quite a bit on brands, and a major part of the brands are the designers themselves. Establishing an exhibition on 111 fashion items rather than 111 super-starts from the fashion world demands more than just a rare analytical ability but also public courage.

### Items

The items listed in the illiterate list are fashion objects that have evolved to live forever. The T-shirt, the bucket cap (item 019, that the 'Tembel' iconic Israeli hat is its derivative), the sports jersey (item 091), the jumpsuit (item 051), or the tie (item 100). These objects were created for a specific purpose, and when they were transformed from a single product into a mass product, they were cast as items for which different variations were born. In contrast to technological design items, iconic fashion items do not disappear quickly. When Sony's Walkman came to market in 1979, it became an icon, symbolizing mobile music. But when the technology transferred the music from a magnetic tape to a CD-ROM and then to MP3 files, Sony's Walkman disappeared and evaporated as a product. Conversely, Converse's All-Star basketball shoe (Item 028) was created by Marquis Mills Converse in 1908 in Melden, Massachusetts. Since then it has undergone many design transformations and even imitations. In 2003, the brand was acquired by NIKE, and still over a hundred years after it was born, millions of All-Star shoes are manufactured and sold all over the world, in many different versions of the original. What makes this item so sustainable?

The items are arranged from A to Z and therefore item 001 of the exhibition is the LEVIS 501 jeans. (The reference to the item name is only its number 501). The jeans were born from Indigo blue denim pants by a Jewish immigrant from Latvia, Jacobs Davis, who, due to the repeated tears of his clients' pants, invented the idea of inserting metal rivets in the various corners of the pockets and the upper part of the pants. He applied for financial assistance to register the invention, to his cloth merchant Levi Strauss. The jeans quickly spread among manual workers, gold miners, cowboy's and even naval soldiers, and quickly spilled into a wider audience of users, who saw in Levis pants a durable

and comfortable status symbol. Levis also began to produce women's versions, and towards the 1960s, the blue jeans pants faded in every additional laundry, became one of the symbols of flower children. Those who thought that the jeans had come to an end as a fashionable product, toward the end of the Hippies generation was wrong. The Blue jeans were able to adapt quickly to the changing fashion, and through new brands that took the lead in the production of jeans, and for those who are wearing jeans as a fashion product, you can see three generations of age today- a grandmother, a daughter and a grandchild walking together - all of them wearing jeans. To the youngest of them the amount of wear on the pants will be the greatest. In general, the wear process of the jeans is more expensive than the pants itself. Washing with stone wash, the process of rubbing and ripping of the jeans in a consistent manner and in accordance with the instructions of the designer. This is not done spontaneously - you do not tell the worker in the jeans factory: 'Come and tear and rub them where you want.' The torn jeans also have a design sketch that shows where to tear, and it repeats itself in the same way in all the pants of the same model. Then jeans can be black or gray, narrowly dreadful or wide, flexible or stiff, but will still have the distinctive characteristics of the jeans and will be sold in stores in the wing of jeans. The familiar characteristics are the same metal rivets, double suture with thick thread, upper pockets, and denim fabric. The production of one pair of jeans requires 2,000 liters of water, and the process produces a lot of pollution that can damage the environment if not handled properly. In 2016 alone, 1.2 billion pairs of jeans were sold worldwide. The fashion industry is the most polluting industry after the oil industry. There are not many industrial products in the world that are replicated in such large variations.

The exhibition emphasizes the diverse origin of the timeless items of fashion. Among these items is the straw hat with the black strip from Panama (item 068), the Oxford shirt from England (item 067), or the hijab from the Islamic countries (item 049). There are items originating in Africa, Asia and Northern Europe or the Middle East. Many items come from extreme situations or needs like sports or army. The scenario dictates a concrete shape. The Trench Coat (Item 103), has become a must-have item in the wardrobe of men and women in the West in different styles. But it originated from the veterans of World War I, when the coat kept the pants covered from mud. When an item such as Hoodie is perceived as a useful object on the one hand, it can be drawn into a political object, denoting activists who break away from the environment or miracles from the police. The exhibition stretches the limits of definition to fashion items, one of which is the tattoo covering the body (item 098). Certain items have become identified with famous figures such as the Mao shirt so identified with the historical leader of China, or the Turtleneck sweater (item 104) which has become, together with jeans (item 001) Steve Jobs signature. Perhaps the items of the white T-shirt (item 106) and the graphic T-shirt (item 044) are the most comprehensive and exceed all other items.

There are, of course, penetrating questions about choosing the different items from a larger collection. For example, the choice of Dr. Martin shoes. (item 035) and the disregard of the Blunstone boots, which are also common among teenagers. Another shoe that is missing in the list is the French Palladium, which has received many copies and returned to the fashion scene in recent years in various colorful and material versions. In the accessories field, the pants suspenders and the belt are missing, along with others useful items. You can count at least another fifty missing items without difficulty, but this does not weaken the general statement that emerges from the exhibition. Fashion does not change as we imagine, but only nuances and versions of the same iconic items. Few of those items are born every decade. One of them is the Fleece (item 040), which is a product of polished polyester, invented by Aaron Furstein, CEO of Mulden Mills in 1979, and became a product in the Patagonia clothing brand. The aspiration of the Hipster generation to dress with 'authentic' items only reinforces a variety of shops that sell workers' clothes from the 1950s and 1960s, when the identity crisis that created the work on code on a computer is compensated by the image of a woodcutter, a gas station worker, or a miner. The fashionable process of the Norm core trend only reinforces the statement of the exhibition - these items will continue to be consumed indefinitely. It is also a big question mark on romance about vague concepts of 'personal expression', free expression in the context of conscious and voluntary

conformism, which seems to represent the spirit of the times more correctly, and the true aspiration of the individual in the age of the social network (Figure 1).



Figure 1: photo: Shutterstock/SFIO CRACHO.

In a documentary, I recently watched, about indigenous tribes cut off from civilization in the Amazon forests in Brazil. One of them said, a month after a group of government aides found them naked: "That's good" and he points to his T-shirt (item 044) He removed the flip-flop (item 041) from his leg and said, "It's also very good."



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