

## Meaning Creators: The Communicative Power of Language and Conceptual Art via Fashion Phenomena

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### Abstract

Conceptual Art was an avant-garde movement that gave special attention to the idea, meaning, and concept rather than the beauty, form and art piece. From the early days of the movement in the 1960s, Conceptual Art and language have tied together. In fact, some conceptual artists attempted to make a bridge between language and art. Language offers many artists, such as John Baldessari, Joseph Kosuth, and Jenny Holzer, a lot of possibilities to convey their provocative messages to people. In this way, they succeeded to engaged people directly. This communicative power of Conceptual Art and language has inspired the design world, in particular, the fashion world. The purpose of this research is to investigate the connections between Conceptual Art and language in fashion. At first sight, it seems that there is no relationship between Conceptual Art, language and fashion phenomena. Because fashion is a big business and selling products play a vital role for fashion designers. On the contrary, in Conceptual Art, the concept or the idea is more important compared to the final product and market needs. This paper will also discuss how some fashion designers succeeded to show the relationship between Conceptual Art, language and the final product. It can be concluded, for these fashion designers, fashion is beyond the clothing itself. Through language, they become a kind of meaning creator which is the ultimate goal in Conceptual Art.

**Keywords:** Language-Based Artwork; Conceptualism; Fashion Phenomena; Meaning Creators

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## 1. Introduction

The Bauhaus historical significance can be a good point for our discussion about the communicative power of language and Conceptual Art via design world, in particular, fashion phenomena. With no doubt, the Bauhaus was one of the most significant and the world's top art schools in the last century. It was established by German modernist architect Walter Gropius in 1919 and was closed by the Nazi totalitarian regime in 1933. But their influences on people's social life have remained until now. The Bauhaus main purpose was to integrate manufacture, art and people's necessity in an advanced society. Due to this cause, the Bauhaus introduced and popularized design for the general public. This cultural movement has influenced the design world from graphic design to fashion and furniture design.

Interestingly, some of the most influential artists of the twentieth century such as Wassily Kandinsky, Johannes Itten, and Paul Klee worked there as a lecturer. These artists played a very important role to make a bridge between aesthetics and modern machined design. The Bauhaus aesthetics had more emphasis on abstraction and geometric forms. Despite classical aesthetics, in particular, Plato's aesthetics on art, craft and its unimportance, the Bauhaus placed a high value on craft and craftsman. According to Walter Gropius "The ultimate aim of all artistic activity is building. Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all get back to craft ... The artist is a heightened manifestation of the craftsman" (Denervaud, 2008: 118). In this way, the Bauhaus succeeded to make a connection between aesthetics and modern design or unification between art and craft.

The modern design phenomena have interwoven with aesthetics and art, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For instance, the fashion phenomena and art movements have a very close association together. As proof, here are some examples; Yves Saint Laurent who was one of the most significant figures in fashion history inspired by geometric abstraction especially Piet Mondrian's paintings. In addition, abstract art and Abstract Expressionism have a strong ability to convey the feeling to the spectators. This could be a good reason for many fashion and interior designers to use abstract elements in their designs. For instance, some fashion designers such as Stella McCartney, Elie Saab, Gucci, and Hermes are inspired by abstract art, in particular, Abstract Expressionism. They have tried to capture the soul of abstract art and express it through their design.

In a post-modern design especially in furniture design, Memphis Design Group was one of the most innovative and influential groups in the body of the design world. They were inspired by Art Deco and Pop Art to create their own language in the design realm. As a result, the Memphis Design Group simplified the forms and created extremely colorful furniture with a smooth line. According to Demir Barlas "they introduced postmodern themes and motifs such as kitsch, bright color, and humor into furniture design, to embrace the industrial and popular in the mode of pop art" (Barlas, 2009: 664). The design world is greatly influenced by art history and aesthetics. This inspiration is not limited to Art Deco, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art.

Conceptual Art applies to diverse types of artworks and it developed in the early 1960s. But the historical significance of Marcel Duchamp for a movement like Conceptual Art must not be overlooked. Marcel Duchamp's works, in particular, readymade, had one the most significant impacts on Conceptual Art. Duchamp is very famous or infamous for his readymade. Readymade is not more than an ordinary artifact or commonplace object which Duchamp took and put it under different circumstances. In such a way, he tried to create a new meaning for our daily life objects. Readymade as an output for Duchamp's creativity changed a lot about the context, meaning and, concept of art. He opened a new horizon for the aesthetics qualities. For Marcel Duchamp the main point is that readymade can be conceptualizing in a place where objects of value are kept. As a

result, the fundamental meaning of art changed substantially. In general, the beauty, narrative, artistry and skillfulness are vital in the traditional definition of art but Marcel Duchamp denies all these influential elements. As Guillaume Apollinaire, French poet and art critic recognized Marcel Duchamp as “liberated from aesthetics preoccupations” (Acton, 2004: 65). This is the main characteristic and the most significant aspect of Marcel Duchamp's artworks.

In Marcel Duchamp perspective the concept behind the readymade is the most important element. In other words, the mental concepts played a crucial role for him. The mental concepts, Conceptual Art and language have a direct connection together. As Michael Newman stated, “The attempt by Conceptualism to make a shift in emphasis from aesthetic questions to ontological problems, as Marcel Duchamp had tried to do, was the source of art’s linguistic turn” (Newman, 1999: 132).

Henry Flynt as an American thinker and musician was the first person who used the term concept art in the early 1960s. He believed that concept art is a kind artwork which its essential element is idea and meaning. According to Henry Flynt “Concept art is, first of all, an art of which the material is concepts, as the material of e.g. music is sound. Since concepts are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is the language”(Morgan, 1994: 118).

Conceptual Art was a movement that began in the 1960s concurrently with Performance Art, Psychedelic Art, and Fluxus. It was an avant-garde movement that gave special attention to the idea, meaning, and concept rather than the beauty, form and art piece. In fact, a conceptual artist uses the form of artwork as a vehicle for his or her idea. According to Alberro “Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions”(Alberro, 2000: 15). Since the beginning of the movement in the 1960s, Conceptual Art and language had a very strong connection and they have tied together. Indeed, some conceptual artists try to make a bridge between language and art. These conceptual artists, such as John Baldessari and Joseph Kosuth, believe that language itself can be a form of visual art. As John Baldessari once said, “Language seems to me to be a very viable material to use in a creative way”(Bruggen, 1990: 69). In this way, they employ language as a medium to express their thoughts and ideas to spectators. For these artists, the function of art and the role of an artist are completely different in the postmodern age. For them an artist is more like a theorist and thinker who develops theories, not like a skilled worker and artisan.

Generally speaking, in the postmodern era the world of art is influenced and inspired by globalization. As a result, art and design are not bound to any specific medium and national boundaries. For example, the contemporary fashion phenomena are influenced by conceptual art and language. But the main questions are; how fashion phenomena are inspired by conceptual art? Is there any connection between fashion design and language, For instance, in Nima Behnoud and Katharine Hamnett’s works?

## **2. Jenny Holzer: Text-Based Artworks and Public Debate**

Jenny Holzer is one of the key figures in the contemporary art scene, in particular, Conceptual and Installation Art. Since the beginning of her career in the 1970s language and text have played a very important role in her artworks. For Jenny Holzer, the main medium is language because the use of language can help her to fully and clearly engage ordinary people. She believed that communicative power is the most important characteristic of language and text. As she stated, “I used language because I wanted to offer content that people—not necessarily art people—could

*understand*” (Ross, 2014: 173) . Indeed, for Jenny Holzer as the phraseology of multimedia artist language can be seen as art.

She has placed phrase and language on electronic signs especially L.E.D. Because, for Jenny Holzer, the public space is so important and no one expects that these flashing L.E.Ds or Advertising boards are artworks. People are anticipated to see advertising on the L.E.D signs but Jenny Holzer consciously uses L.E.D technology as an unexpected context to convey her message to the people. The contents of her artworks are disconcerting and people automatically start to think about the meaning that hides behind these phrases. As Joan M. Marter mentioned about Jenny Holzer artworks “commercially printed in cool, bold italics, numerous one-line statements such as “Abuse of power comes as no surprise” and “There is a fine line between information and propaganda” were meant to be provocative and elicit public debate”(Marter, 2011: 532) . In this way, she makes a linguistic bridge between her artworks and Conceptual Art.

There is a connection between Jenny Holzer's language-based artworks, fashion and the public space. For Jenny Holzer, the public space is so significant because she can easily convey her provocative messages to the general public in society. At the same time, fashion and public space have a relationship together and usually, people wear their fashionable clothes to show it in public space. In other words, public space has the same value as the private space for fashion designers.

The public space can be a significant common ground between Jenny Holzer and fashion. As a result, her artworks inspired some fashion designers. For instance, we can see the impact of Jenny Holzer's artworks on American fashion designer Virgil Abloh and his Milan-based label called Off-White. Another example is Keds Company which produces canvas sneaker and that shows how even some shoe designers influenced by her artworks. Jenny Holzer created one of her most significant series called Survivor Series in the 1980s. Among these one-line statements is a phrase called “protect me from what I want” which has had a tremendous impact around the world (Fig 1). After almost three decades Japan-based fashion brand Uniqlo produced some T-shirts based on Jenny Holzer flashing L.E.D artworks, in particular, Survivor Series (Fig 2). Make people think is the ultimate goal for conceptual artists. When ordinary people see these clothes in the public places, undoubtedly begin to think about the meaning of these statements. In this manner, Conceptual Art generally and Jenny Holzer's artworks particularly have inspired the fashion world.



**Fig 1** Jenny Holzer Survival Series Times Square NY 1986, Source: (URL1)



**Fig 2** Uniqlo men sprz NY graphic 2010, Source: (URL2)

### 3. Katharine Hamnett: Political and Environmental Messages via Fashion

The British fashion designer, Katharine Hamnett, clothing design is a perfect example of the connection between language and text with fashion. She consciously uses fashion as a medium to remind us our social-environmental responsibility. As Taryn Benbow-Pfalzgraf mentioned “Hamnett’s most important contribution to fashion, and the one for which she will best be remembered, was her use of clothing as a vehicle for political and environmental change” (Benbow-Pfalzgraf, 2002: 295). There is no doubt that, among all her designs, the slogan T-shirt has the most unique and influential role (Fig 3).



**Fig 3** Slogan T-shirt by Katharine Hamnett, Source: (URL3)

She has demonstrated her concerns about political and ecological changes via language and words. Language has played a very important role for her and it has same power and value as image. Because of that such as a radical conceptual artist she minimized beauty and artistic taste of her slogan T-shirt. She employs language and text in black bold print on a white background to directly convey her messages to the outside world. These catchy phrases in her clothing design is not just a formal or design element. She is fully aware of the sociopolitical power behind language which can easily affect people. Katharine Hamnett and her clothing design can be interpreted as a speaker who tries to warning hearer.

Katharine Hamnett has same idea with some conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Jenny Holzer because the idea and meaning behind the language and text in her design are so significant. In this way, she is so close to Joseph Kosuth’s idea about language. As Franz Schulz mentioned that “Kosuth believed the use of language would substantially redirect art away from appearances and even aesthetics, and toward ideas” (Schulze, 1998: 163). For both artists (Joseph Kosuth and Katharine Hamnett) the idea is the fundamental element for creation. Indeed, the idea has the highest value and the visual elements and aesthetics have the lowest value.

Also, the idea behind her design is so close to Jenny Holzer flashing L.E.D artworks and its concepts. According to Peter Goldie “Jenny Holzer has used her language-based works as a vehicle for passing provocative question about a wide range of topics in modern life” (Goldie, 2009: 85). Katharine Hamnett’s attitude towards fashion is the same as Jenny Holzer’s attitude towards conceptual art. Both artists propound some serious questions about social, political and environmental problems in modern life. With the rise of the modern world and life, we are witnessing some unique problems, from social, environmental, and political to even ethical, which are related to our time. These artists through their language-based works are warning the public for the dark future.

#### **4. Nima Behnoud: The Memory of Iranian Contemporary History via Fashion**

Nima Behnoud is an Iranian New York-based fashion designer and also the founder of the NIMANY brand. Throughout his career, he tried different mediums, but finally, he chose fashion design as his main interest. As Sol LeWitt once said, find the best form for the idea, Nima Behnoud finds clothing design as the best form to convey his ideas.

The letter "H" played a very crucial role in the Iranian modern and contemporary art scene, in particular, in Parviz Tanavoli’s *Heech* (Nothing) Series. The letter "H" has sad but eye-catching form. Annemarie Schimmel believed that the letter "H" traditionally conveyed a sense of melancholy. According to Annemarie Schimmel “The contemporary Persian sculptor Tanavoli has very well expressed this sadness of "H" in his delightful variations on the word *Heech*” (Schimmel, 1990: 139).

In opposite, Nima Behnoud consciously gives a new meaning to the letter “H” in his clothing design. According to Nima Behnoud, the letter "H" is not just a simple letter. The shape of this letter has unique geometry and structure. In terms of formal element and aesthetics, he believed that the letter "H" simultaneously has both negative and positive space. This contrast between positive and negative space creates an object with balance and beauty. In terms of meaning, despite Parviz Tanavoli’s *Heech* (Nothing), this letter refers to the word everything in Farsi language.

In another series called The Revolution Series, Nima Behnoud used newspaper clippings to create his series. Nima Behnoud’s The Revolution Series can be a good example to explore the role of language and conceptual art in fashion phenomena. Indeed, Nima Behnoud’s The Revolution Series can be regarded as an attempt to provide an insight towards the relationship between language and conceptual art in fashion.

In this series, the design is based on a newspaper font which is so industrial compare to the traditional calligraphic font. In this way, he succeeds to create an industrial aesthetics using a newspaper font. Also, another important element is the meaning behind these newspaper articles which are related to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Iran-Iraq War 1980 to 1988. The example of NIMANY’s The Revolution Series can be seen as follows:



**Fig 4** NIMANY, the Revolution Series, Source: (URL4)

Nima Behnound believed that his design is a wearable art. He mentioned in 2010 in an interview with Daisy Carrington that he decided to put these newspaper articles on a T-shirt – everyday wear – because people could wear the message every day. The Revolution Series can be seen as an expression of social and political messages via clothes in the Iranian context. Indeed, The Revolution Series is the memory of Iranian contemporary history and also an invitation to think via fashion design. Because The Revolution Series is more about the meaning and the artist wants to ask the spectators to seek and hunting the meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, I intended to examine the relationship between the subjective world of language and Conceptual Art with the objective world of fashion. At first glance, it seems that there is no connection between Conceptual Art, language and fashion phenomena and they belong to two different worlds. Because in Conceptual Art, the artist's mind and thoughts is more significant compared to the final product or the artwork. As a result, the market does not play a crucial role for the artist. As Maria A. Slowinska mentioned, "Conceptual Art strove towards an ideal of art that was as removed as possible from the art market and from any market-driven possibilities for its exploitation" (Slowinska, 2014: 148). In opposite, fashion is a big business and industry, in each business, the market has a significant role and selling product is so vital. As Mike Easey stated that, "ability to identify product that the consumer need and will buy is essential to the industry" (Easey, 2009: 5).

Some conceptual artists convey their messages and ideas through language. Despite some differences among conceptual artists, there is a significant common ground between all of them.

This common point is that all conceptual artists are a meaning creator. In general Conceptual Art can be considered as the analysis of meaning via language. In other words, the meaning of the object forms the core of art not the object. Conceptual artists can use fashion as an instrument and different mediums to convey their messages. This includes some fashion designers such as Nima Behnoud, Katharine Hamnett and a conceptual artist like Jenny Holzer. The main goal is to create wearable art. For these fashion designers, fashion is beyond the clothes itself. Through language, they become a kind of meaning creator which is the ultimate goal in Conceptual Art. Fashion can be seen as a medium for communication and fashion designers make this communication possible through the written language. For fashion designers who want to exceed the limits, conceptual art and language can be regarded as a good source of inspiration as well as a tool to promote their products.

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