

How fashion is used as a platform to address social and political issues.

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Introduction

As a designer, I used to have a very straightforward and popular conception about fashion where what you wear characterises each individual's perception where you're judged on what you're dressed in. This encourages more people to wear more fashionable clothes which are why we are dressed in what we are today. However, after reading magazines and articles on high end designers about the fashion industry, I was completely taken aback on how fashion is being used as a platform of protest and expression. As a result, I came to focus on the effects of fashion and the details of what is used in the industry creatively to achieve a response from the public. In order to find out how fashion can be used as a way to address social issues, this essay will be discussing how designers show their involvement in topics and with it how they manifest it with their clothing and collections in their fashion shows. The designers that are going to be discussed are seen to imitate trends and rebel against the norm signifying that the use of textiles could be a system of activism. Fashion designers and companies advertise their clothes not only to sellers such as fashion buyers but also to directly to consumers, gaining a wider variety of audience's attention.

Additionally, Stitch is also a key component in the fashion industry the two areas contribute to a relationship that connects the two simultaneously. Stitch in its own aspect has pursued people through its times and the world of fashion has also been equal to it. Although discussing the challenge of how stitch is seen as a domestic role and how over the years stitch is being used for campaigning schemes to generate change, by applying stitch it can be seen as an important element to create a voice for individuals such as activist groups like the craftivists collective. Ultimately, by looking at controversial collections done by designers and craftiest the aim of this discussion is to discover the ways in which fashion is used as a strategy to tackle social and political matters.

Chapter 1 – Political dressing.

Political dressing has a great role in fashion especially for well-known designers because they can use their platform to address a bigger issue, as specified “The perception of fashion as an apolitical phenomenon has always been a partial misperception, as fashion and appearance have always played a key part in the politics of difference.” (Edwards. 2016, p.100). This statement is indicating that there are misperceptions in the fashion industry by targeting emotions through advertisement and runways, these are key element to create an understanding of difference and give a wider range of knowledge of issues using clothes. By voicing style and personality through clothes it demonstrates the degree of freedom and expression a person has through fashion, there are ways in which fashion can be misunderstood when trying to address topics such as abortion, environment, culture etc which are ways to create garments that have had thinking behind it.

Alexander McQueen a contemporary designer who is very innovative in his designs has a reputation for pushing boundaries when it comes to political dressing, it could be said that he tries to empower women in his collections by using female models as a statement of artistic declaration. However, by using over the top themes to trigger a profound reaction he leaves the audience members in a trance after his shows, such as of the clothes which took many by surprise. For example, one of McQueen’s shows in the 90’s became a fashion phenomenon for his spring/summer collection because he created art on his luxurious white outfits live Infront of the public with robots to spray paint the fashion pieces.



Figure 1-(McQueen, 1995-1996).

In the Alexander McQueen savage beauty journal (Bolton, Sundsbø, and Frankel. 2011, p.17 it portrays that whether you liked or hated his work McQueen wanted you to feel emotion “provoking extreme reactions, not only among the public and press but also within the supposedly shockproof fashion industry.” This appeared to work for him because of the impact on the appearance of women’s fashion in society today. McQueen knows that every stitch and form made on the clothes leaves to the imagination as it is portrayed almost fantasy-like when then put onto the female model's body it then becomes reality. This provides us with the knowledge that he uses runways as a diplomatic strategy to interpret his views and scenes from his favourite artists such as Joel-Peter Witkin, and then present his own interpretation through his fashion shows.

McQueen’s political dressing as some may call it can be a way for him to bring attention to problems in society, such as the oppression of women that he feels passionately about which indicates his artistic side using fashion as a voice through his designs. In his 1996 autumn winter fall collection known as the ‘Highland Rape Show’ the models were displayed in what looks like ripped clothing and fragments of scrap material. The sexual exposure of the women in this show as displayed in (Figure 1. McQueen, 1995-1996) is demonstrating that McQueen’s models are merely objects to display his collection because the dress is styled with delicate lace patterns and then slashed and cut through exposing the model’s pink underwear which makes the model look girlish and fragile. This is the opposite of what he is trying to achieve in the show, he wants them to look powerful and strong.



Figure 2-(McQueen, 1995-1996).

Nevertheless, in the book *Dressed: the secret life of clothes* McQueen asserts “I want women to look stronger ... I don’t like women to be taken advantage ... I don’t like men whistling at women in the street. I think they deserve more respect”. (Bari. 2019, p.63). This clarifies that from personal experiences McQueen is encouraging female empowerment, As indicated the models are shown to be an idea of fantasy that men cannot touch, where he plays on the fact that the women look almost inhuman challenging the male gaze representing pleasure for the spectator, and the objectification of these women as they are not passive but assertive.

However, At the time people would believe the rape in the ‘highland rape show’ referenced the rape of women. McQueen's view was the rape of Scotland by England which referenced an eighteenth-century event because of the use of tartan in his collection incorporating Scottish heritage. This implies that he would use his shows to highlight actions that would have a meaning to him, for example, he wanted to get rid of the romanticism which utilized Scotland's persona. The show was incredibly intense displaying some blood splattered women with what appears to be tampon strings attached to their garments. This show was followed with a lot of opinions and outrage which is what McQueen is known for in his work for going against the norms of fashion by using exaggerated manipulated outfits. In the journal *Reforming women’s fashion*, it states that “It was socially important to be considered fashionable and beautiful; clothes could earn 1 merit in society.” (Cunningham. 2015, p.3.). This indicates to me that your clothes are considered as a big factor in society's opinion of you. Whereas I feel that McQueen tries to encourage strange and different looks, but it almost seems like he is undertaking the extreme by creating mad scenes and chaos on the runways. McQueen’s highland rape collection was extremely imaginative providing the audience with an over the top compilation and showed a dark romantic quality which is shown throughout his work. The dark aesthetic in this collection captures the public’s attention with outfits that have a dominant arrangement to undertake his vision of romanticism in the shows. Though, by incorporating more traditional patterns, for example, having ripped tartan shows how he can develop fashion demonstrating an example of McQueen’s adaptability as a designer.

In a recent article it declares “fashion designers are making use of the runway as a site of resistance, and design clothes that communicate defiance against a global political climate characterized by the rise of far right, authoritarian and populist political movements”. (Titton. 2019, pp.747-756.). This is demonstrating fashion designers are playing on the craze of high fashion catwalks and using that as an advantage to produce displays of protest.

Designers Viktor & Rolf are also known for seeking to cause extreme reactions from the media and audience especially in their spring 2019 couture collection called fashion statements it tries to generate an intense atmosphere by displaying the models as an authoritative figure similarly to McQueen, they do this displaying large sale ruffles as seen in (Figure 3- Viktor & Rolf,2019). The bold text in their collection sparks judgments from the viewers because of the use of the capital letters and extravagant tulle dresses with neon colours generating a compelling feel in the show to announce the unusual shaped dresses to have their own meaning to each individual in the audience because the dresses were appealing forms but then sinister slogans throughout such as “Go to hell”.(Vogue, 2019). Signifying that these playful dresses are undertaking a deeper meaning to a person with the bold wording defying the main concerns being climate change or culture etc.

In the image figure 3, the tulle dress is built with bright pleated shoulders with manipulated fabric covering the model as if it has been arranged to form a shield for her to appear powerful. Which is also said that McQueen tries to empower women on the runway using the stage as an influence to mark topics they're interested in. Women are mainly used as the ‘muse’ for designers because women express the designer’s concept of signifying beauty as stated, "through the perspective of women who not only advance a designer's vision but also come to symbolize the fashionable beauty of their time”. (Koda and Yohannan. 2009, p.12). This suggests that a person especially a woman is the main source of creative encouragement for an artist which is what Viktor and Rolf have done in this collection. It is the femininity that makes the fashion pieces powerful, encouraging women to wear clothes that may not be the norm but make them feel empowered and good about themselves which a lot of big designers are trying to do today. By using the woman as the role of the model in fashion shows it explores the view of a feminine figure taking the role of a powerful individual to show off designs.



Figure 3-(Viktor & Rolf, 2019).

The tulle dresses showcased in the 2019 collection had a fairy tale sense about them as displayed in figure 2 (Viktor & Rolf, 2019). The black area with the text is fairly similar to the well-known Coca-Cola brand because their font is bold with the comparable big swirl underneath. This demonstrates that they intend to get the public to relate and be immersed in their collection by recognising their familiarity. In the book 'The sustainable fashion handbook' Viktor and Rolf state that "fashion for us was like a glossy fairy tale world made real. Through our work, we still seek that emotion, over and over again". (Black. 2013, p.197). This is indicating that one of the main purposes they have such frivolous garments is to create a fictional perspective of their designs for the audience to feel an excitement afterwards which they additionally have in common with McQueen. However, Viktor & Rolf project a fairy tale world of fashion in their collection which the public enjoys as it is very light-hearted and successful.

In fashion, contemporary designers use this platform for political activism, history, fairy tale, these similarities exist challenging the relationship between having a voice through fashion but additionally opening an opportunity for designers like Viktor and Rolf to showcase glossy dresses as a symbol of power and vanity. The text stating 'leave me alone' (Figure 3-Viktor & Rolf, 2019) is an oppressing statement but to the audience would seem empowering, to create a voice and retaliate

to not be seen as a victim. Overall, the presentation of the tulle dresses on the model generates a type of communication platform from Viktor and Rolf to the audience. By pushing the boundaries, the Dutch designers have successfully given the impression that they can incorporate art through fashion as their garments look like wearable art forms which means that this collection is trying to emphasize that art can be used in fashion. Yves Saint Laurent another well-known individual in the design industry, reveals in the fashion and art book "Fashion is not quite an art but requires an artist in order to exist". (Gekzy and Karaminas. 2012, p.99). This relates to the muse in fashion because Saint Laurent expresses that fashion isn't seen to be an art form, but it will take a creative individual to produce successful clothing and by having the muse the designers can create a story behind their outfits.

Vivienne Westwood is another contemporary designer, she is a designer and anarchist who was the creator of the punk movement in the fashion industry in the 70's, Westwood's designs are rebellious and exaggerated as a protest against mainstream society. In the 'Art and fashion' article it states that "critique the twentieth- and twenty-first century's fashion industry, tackle the stereotypes of fashion, and expose its vulnerabilities to a runway audience." (Ulrich. 2006). This statement implies that the fashion industry is always trying to confront the norm of wearable clothes and make runways more of a social issue platform to expose the issues in today's fashion trends and style. Westwood's designs have always provoked questionable views from her slogans that were confrontational with the use of dark torn t-shirts with holes through the fabric particularly in her punk collection.

However, Westwood had respect for craftsmanship and traditional historical costume, even the punk fazes incorporated tartan in her shows although still reaching the youth culture with the rebel aesthetic of her designs. The punk movement was a proposal to bring together youths to conform against accepting the current trends in society as detailed in this article "Punk reintroduced working-class and youth values of rebellion into British culture, exposing the wider public to the privations of youth in the economic climate of the era." (Simonelli, D. 2002, pp.121-144). Influenced by the British culture punk appeared as an alternate political action that communicated an uprising and brought alternative groups of people together such as bands like the sex pistols who are a punk group, this then helped establish the punk movement. This theme was a message of rebellion as seen in figure 4 (Westwood,1971-1980). The bulky red jackets and tartan skirts illustrates the movement and empowerment of the wearer, demonstrating that the edgy looks were worn by individuals brave enough.



Figure 4- (Westwood, 1971-1980).

Westwood and punk were very much related to her background because her very first shop that was opened in London seemed to be motivated by Elvis Presley, as a daughter in a working-class family which she then named 'Let it Rock'. There was a revolutionary feel in Westwood's punk collection as it reveals in the diary called *Get a Life: The Diaries of Vivienne Westwood* "punk was a culmination of previous collections. We were trying to form a band of rebels who could topple the system". (Westwood. 2016, p.1). This specifies that Westwood was a maverick of the fashion world and her punk collection made the public feel like they could rule against the values of trends in the fashion industry and express themselves even if it was through a very different style. Westwood and punk motivated risky fashion pieces with challenging graphic images to be worn seeking to shock individuals, by wearing clothes that were made purposely to be absurd.

Westwood's designs have a lot in common with the other designers because they all seem to try and tackle the clichéd look of fashion and create something that is not what a person would normally wear but makes you think of a wider picture. In the book *'The very best of Vivienne Westwood'* it discussed that her inspiration was also from powerful feminists groups as indicated "when we started to do punk, we put all of these things together to create the look of an urban guerrilla - a rebel". (Johnson. 2014). This shows that Westwood's punk collection was also inspired by feminism by addressing issues in society by protesting for what they believed in, this was used as the term guerrilla. The punk movement had a lot of boldly draped tartan fashion pieces as seen in Figure 4-

(Westwood,1971-1980). This then re-directed the significance of textiles back towards the uprise of rebellion.

This is what designers like Vivienne use to develop their fashion collections as a platform to project their beliefs to the community. In the book 'The fashion reader' Welters and Lillethun discusses the relationship between politics and fashion and what is meant by it as said: “To others, all human acts are political because of the nature of living within a society, where conflicts between competing interests are pervasive”. (Welters and Lillethun. 2007, p.199). So, individuals are always competing against each other, which is what the designers are doing with their shows to get a reaction from the public so that their clothing will be remembered or even to provide a voice to make a change.

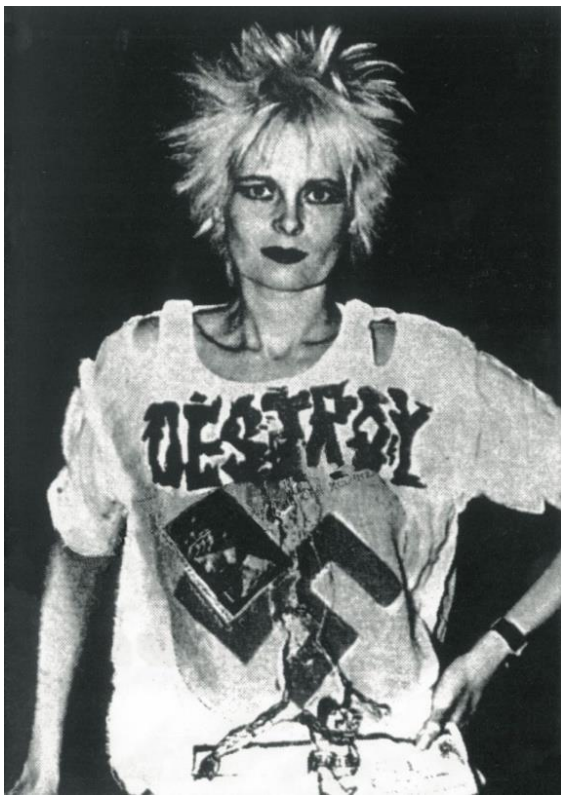


Figure 5- (Westwood, 1971-1980).

Westwood’s determination to protest and challenge the fashion industry with the involvement in the punk movement, confronted the audience as revealed in figure 5 (Westwood, 1971-1980) Westwood is pictured in a torn shirt with a Nazi symbol on the front which exhibited cult fashion, which Westwood was occasionally prosecuted for exposing to the public as it was seen as unsuitable for the larger audience. Westwood’s opposing the fashion world with the use of menacing designs as seen in figure 5 (Westwood, 1971-1980) with the aggressive rips and dark harsh slogans on the front of the shirt.

Chapter 2- Stitch

Stitch is often thought of as a domestic role achieved by women; however, this chapter will discuss the usefulness stitch is in society today. It has been explored creatively in a long history of traditions; women would be viewed cleverer if they could look at various types of stitch such as embroidery. Before women's movements like the suffragettes, most female art was rejected as an art form because of the skills they used was disregarded by the male dominant world of art at the time. In the fashion world today, stitch is widely used by renowned male and female designers as a powerful way to represent culture and tradition to signify their approach to fashion.

Rozsika Parker a writer and feminist explores the roles of women and stitch in the nineteenth century where she discusses femininity and how it is considered a domestic role affects society today as stated "The art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and providing that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity." (Parker, R. 2010, p.1). This statement proposes how women used stitch and embroidery to express their diplomatic views at that time, such as the suffragettes with the hand-stitched banners but also it suggests that embroidery was restricted to be a feminine skill, This lead to women suffragettes to refusing traditional stitching as a protest against it being a domestic ability for women.

A woman in the suffragettes recorded her experiences in an embroidered handkerchief using stitch as an act of communication as indicated in this article "The textile engages us with her act of resistance in a struggle for a political voice for herself and womankind. This singular textile communicates a powerful sense of self and, with its provocative content, a prescient anticipation of a future audience." (Wheeler. 2012). The use of stitch represents a personal demonstration of an important protest for the women, this is also showing a new power of domestic skill. By applying embroidery into a handkerchief, it makes it more personal and delicate because each handkerchief has a memory for her to communicate the events that occurred. In the book 'Really Cross Stitch' It expresses the understanding of using stitch as a way to protest a personal belief as indicated "The Luddite, Suffragette, second wave feminist, and peace movements were amongst many to share passion and understanding of the power handmade objects have to subversively communicate ideas." (Fahey. 2017, p.5). This implies that the movements taken forward by women in the past have all played a part in changing the way people see fashion today, by demonstrating strong stances through needlework.



Figure 6- (Harris & Ewing, 1917).

In the photograph above figure 6 (Harris & Ewing, 1917) the suffragette is photographed with a hand stitched banner using the words 'God' and capital letters to draw attention to the subject matter of women's rights in the 19th century. This large banner generates a powerful appearance to the woman, displaying that this woman is violating the feminine norms of society and is not a victim. This image shows a great link between women and stitch because it was seen that femininity is devalued as an art form, Stitch has become more evident in modern art, it is understood because of women being accepted.

"One of the most commonly recognized rhetorical functions of the process of women's craft, particularly textile work, has been as a performance of femininity. As previously stated, needlework has been understood to be overly feminine for some time in American culture. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the act of needlework itself has been through our history". (Goggin. and Tobin. 2017, p.17).

Goggin and Tobin express that the common judgment was that stitch would only provide the domestic role and it is the one skill in which women dominated the role of teaching their families the creation of stitch from heritage, This demonstrates that it was similarly a way of communicating creativity and provide for their family although creating work of historically relevant art this is referring back to the suffragettes because it was one of the mains acts they were known for.

Fashion designers Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen and former actresses showcased a collection in 2017 for their brand 'The Row'. This compilation made a statement and got people talking in the fashion industry because of the use of embroidered meaningful words such as freedom and hope on some of the pieces in the collection. These little details looked like they had been carefully stitched on the clothing which suggests that the Olsen's made the collection precious in a way where at first glance one may not see the text on the items of clothing. In the event there is a lack of colour displayed with white shirts providing a utilitarian impact, it could be said that the main focus would be on the words themselves and by using colour it could draw attention away from the meaning of the text.



Figure 7- (Olsen, 2017).

The 'Stitches in time' book states that "Clothes are at once the most intimate things we own and the most public". (Adlington. 2015, p.1). This makes one think that the way the Olsen's have discreetly stitched these words onto the clothing gives the impression that even with the smallest bit of stitch saying for example the word 'dignity', could have a larger effect on the individual and also the viewer creating an impact on both parties. This is what these designers like the Olsen's want to achieve by making an impression on the public after witnessing their work of timeless luxury fashion. The discrete position and placement on the shirt with small handwriting suggests individual, unique, authenticity, valued time in stitching which further empowers the actual words and their meanings. The way the stitch is written looks almost handwritten rather than digitally printed, so this hints that the content on the clothing is meant to make the collection more personal and delicate because of the relationship between the hand in the act of stitching is materialising inner thoughts and feelings

that are private, this is specified in the book 'craft research' (Niedderer and Townsend. 2011, p.4). "based on the sensorial ability and agility of the human hand, which is both a sensor and tool for understanding, reflecting upon and changing our environment through making". This is confirming the act of hand stitching generates a form of activism and a sense of comfort which is essential when transferring thoughts into crafts.

However, YouTube art teacher Sayraphim Lothian is an activist who makes protest dolls through stitch of famous female activists. This is encouraging people step by step how to use stitch and crafts as a political platform of protest. "make great guerrilla kindness drops and can be prominently installed in public spaces with special relevance to the inspiring people themselves." (Lothian. 2018). Her work is all about using kindness as a type of revolt, the use of craft is a way to encourage the public to also be inspired as she is by street art. The term 'kindness drops' used in the text are where the group place the crafts done by the group into public areas to connect with the community. This is an indicator that the art of activism can be valuable because by combining social movements and stitch this could challenge the power of art with politics, by using well known powerful women as a voice for the dolls makes them become a feminist act.

Lothian would also be leaving the handcrafted objects around her community for individuals to find and even take as a gift, it's a way for her to apply her skills with stitch produce meaningful stitched dolls to be part of the constant debate around various issues. This gives people a platform to discuss social issues expressed through craftivism, it's a way to be a part of something that they strongly believe in. As shown in figure 8 (Lothian, 2018) the knitted protest dolls are all holding bold signs stating for example 'smash the glass ceiling' which is also a bold statement about the gender pay gap in society. The signs are also handwritten, which relates back to the Olsen's work making the dolls appear more personal.



Figure 8- (Lothian, 2018).

The book *Threads of Life* discusses how stitch has an impact on people by using it for compelling issues as stated "Sewing is a visual language. It has a voice. It has been used by people to communicate something of themselves --their history, beliefs, prayers and protests." (Hunter. 2019). This shows how Hunter identifies topics of stitching using protest and the power of thread and reveals a story of how stitch is applied today to give a voice to communities about feminism and political issues. Hunter implies that by using thread to visualise our beliefs to the community it empowers people to listen to the issues through peaceful protest by the use of stitch.

Philosopher Roland Barthes also argues that fashion is a communication platform for the reason that "Barthes considered textiles functioning as a signifying system within fashion, and how textile signifiers combine with other signifiers in fashion to create multiple readings and generate meaning." (Andrew. 2008, p.35). The system that Barthes discusses in the writing is a larger concept that supports both the designers and the consumers, involving sometimes contradictory purposes such as creating an individual identity and being part of a group at the same time. Barthes argued that the presence of texts acts as a semantic anchor providing the image with a meaning, he puts in writing that this movement of clothes into fashion displays takes place with the assistance of text and pictures explaining the garments. Barthes' theory on fashion is down to the analysis of communicating through the slogans and the use of images to cause controversy, beliefs or a form of reaction.

An Additional group that applies creativity to tackle political issues is the Craftivist collective group, who are a collective of individuals committed to using stitched crafted designs to help encourage communities to change the current problems in the world as stated “The Craftivist Collective is made up of an international group of people who have very different lives, interests, and beliefs; our common thread is that we all want to tackle human rights injustices.” (Corbett and Housley. 2011). This means that the craftivist collective group was formed to deliberately provoke injustice in society using craft to challenge major issues.



Figure 9- (Craftivist collective, 2019)

The craftivist collective group also used Famous faces such as Malala Yousafzai who is a female activist who protested for the rights of education for women in her town in Pakistan. The abilities of women in making decisions, education, and profession have been largely suppressed over time especially in more underdeveloped countries. Therefore, Yousafzai made a massive impact on society to fight for women empowerment. The craftivist collective group then made a stitched print of her face, used for one of their projects making hand-stitched cards as shown in Figure 9- (Craftivist collective).

Overall, stitch has been generally ridiculed as a boring domestic activity, led by mature ladies, with not much influence for contemporary society, though in today's day and age stitch is now becoming a modern artform for designers and makers.

Conclusion

To summarise, in the modern world fashion and textiles has always been a platform for subjects where ideas are portrayed to generate movement of change whether its through culture or a principle. However, one could argue the greater problem may simply be that the fashion industry is not creating the clothing that is giving people the wow factor whereas these designers are making models activists and their audiences speechless from the messages that are being portrayed on the runways. For example, Alexander McQueen “became known for his highly provocative and emotional collections. Juxtaposing contrasting”. (Vrencoska, G. 2009, p.871). Therefore, the models in the shows are taking the role as wearers and by making an unforgettable collection this then attracts attention to further social issues, an example of this is feminism though not all designers have this bold in your face look. These designers are challenging the notion that fashion is not always frivolous.

Rosika Parker in the subversive stitch states stitch is used a feminist act and women are now becoming activists “been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity”. (Parker. 2010, p.81). Stitch has this personal hand-written authenticity which is why these designers are using stitch in their garments and fashion shows to try and make women powerful. For example, the designers Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen take advantage of the delicateness of stitch stating the collection as “Precious in the best way” (Phelps, 2019). The small elements of hand-stitch on the white outfits are what made the massive impact through the whole show, this also proves that you don’t need bold scenes on the runways to voice something meaningful.

Nevertheless, Activist groups are reverting back to traditional skills of stitch, such as the group craftivist collective. They are tackling the idea of creating crafted works to encourage individuals to make a positive difference, creating art in public spaces that has a significance as well as been thought out to make a change as proclaimed, “needlework creating space for freedom for women in social conversation”. (Corbett. 2017, p.2). Corbett encourages people to apply crafts into the communities, which refers back to the use of creating to gain a reaction. The different feminist groups such as the suffragettes tackled social issues using stitch in their banners, which then goes against the thought of it being a domestic hobby, because they were using it as a way to protest.

Philosopher Roland Barthes provided evidence that fashion is seen as frivolous and the idealised beauty in the fashion world was of meaning as stated “Barthes’s thesis: that fashion, as a ‘written’ phenomenon, does have a vocabulary and a grammar, and this is precisely what his Fashion System

set out to analyse". (Barthes. 2013, p.114). Claiming that the use of text was acting as a means to provide a different perspective of forms on the body. Finally, after discussing both political dressing and stitch the relationship between them both establishes how fashion is used as a platform to address social and political issues.

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