

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

The rise and fall of virtual fashion

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Fashion's new mantra: Seeing is believing

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A blockchain auction recently saw the first piece of digital couture going under the non-existent hammer at New York's Ethereum Summit for \$9,500. The amount might seem small in comparison to the \$1,267,500 for the dress that actor Marilyn Monroe wore to sing Happy Birthday to U.S. President John F. Kennedy, but that dress was a real, physical thing.

The digital haute couture dress "Iridescence" was made by the Dutch startup and digital fashion house The Fabricant in collaboration with the artist Johanna Jaskowska, known for her popular Instagram filter Beauty3000 and Dapper Labs, the team behind the viral blockchain game, CryptoKitties.

The owner of the dress will have it custom tailored to her proportions by providing a photo of herself. However, she will not be wearing it out and about: The Iridescence dress as a blockchain digital asset doubles as a fashion item and cryptocurrency.

Model turn

The auction opened up many online and offline discussions about the role of virtual clothes as a cure to the gigantic sustainability problem the industry is facing.

Could infinite virtual versions of our favorite top work as a placebo to our consumerism? Will virtual fashion replace fast fashion?

The truth is, it could be too soon to tell. However, according to Dapper Labs founder Benny Giang, the popularity of face filters could signal an equal success for fashion filters.

Virtual fashion also works as an alternative to product photography and a fresh approach setting brands apart from overused film and photo-shooting techniques.

The Fabricant partnered with Hong Kong-based luxury fashion retailer I.T to digitally recreate an entire collection only in digital form, celebrating its three years of success in China.

And earlier this year, London-based fashion brand Hanger presented the world's first personalized fashion show.

Selected members of the audience modeled Hanger's latest collection in a video projected during the show without ever having physically worn the garments in real life or being involved in the filming process.

Around 2009, we witnessed a storm of augmented reality mirror startups that, although were not a successful experiment for the fashion industry, they found better use in the beauty industry, with virtual makeover applications quickly becoming popular in Europe and Asia.

In 2010, when the registered population of virtual worlds such as Second Life and Blue Mars was greater than that of the United States and Europe combined, brands did not miss the opportunity to start a discussion. Calvin Klein, adidas and Reebok had an established presence in Second Life.

Now, we have a number of exponential technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, VR/AR and automation reaching maturity at seemingly the same time, which means a mixed-reality world will soon be accessible.

Child's play

The rise of new immersive interfaces can work as the trigger for disruptive technologies that may already exist to go mainstream after many years in development.

The emerging, and at times intimidating, mixed reality world could be the perfect use case for voice and wearables as user interfaces, giving us some sense of control and comfort to explore this unknown virtual realm.

Apart from the wider technological landscape, a complex global political and social crisis has given way to fertile ground for cultural change.

The younger generations care about sustainability, highly value their mental and physical health, are entrepreneurial spirits, and their escapism culture is gaming, not alcohol.

Kids now have a digital footprint from the womb, born into a world where talking to your phone like your PA and changing your voice and appearance with filters is a given. Moving between the digital and physical worlds is seamless and their digital and physical personalities are viewed as equally important.

This explains the rising popularity of CGI influencers such as Lil Miquela, Blawko and Shudu. Investors and brands are warming up to the new phenomenon and the first model agency representing CGI models has arrived.

Digitally enhanced humans and humanized digital creations not only compete, but also collaborate, to get our attention online.

The most recent Calvin Klein campaign featuring a kiss between Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela led to the brand issuing an apology for queerbaiting.

Another brand heavily invested in the world of virtual supermodels is Balmain.

Oliver Rousteing, Balmain's creative director, collaborated with London-based photographer Cameron-James Wilson, creator of Shudu, on the creation of #BalmainArmy of virtual models, including two new models exclusively designed for the brand.

The project was also supported by CLO, a Korean company founded in 2009 with expertise in 3D garment simulation technology for the fashion and film/gaming industries.

Virtually there

CGI personas have the potential to be the embodiment of a brand's identity in a mixed reality world a pure manifestation of a company's DNA and vision.

The dominance of the flawless CGI influencers has sparked conversation around cultural appropriation and the unattainable beauty standards.

The models made of 0s and 1s have managed to break barriers in fashion with which models made of flesh and bone have struggled. This seems contradictory to the increasing demand for diversity, inclusivity, authenticity and realness in the way fashion and beauty brands work with real life models.

Will perfection be reserved for the virtual world, while the real world will thrive in embracing its PhotoShop-free image?

Is the rise of messy, low-analysis video and photography content a subconscious effort to hold on to our humanity?

Maybe leaving perfection for the virtual sphere will alleviate mental pressure for humans to maintain their well-edited online lifestyle.

IT LOOKS LIKE the era of deepfakes and AI-driven virtual personas is only beginning, so what does the future hold?

One thing is for sure, if we want to have a say in the outcome, we should better show up and participate.

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