

Violent forces, Vulnerable bodies:

Artistic Provocation in Representations of Psychiatric Hospitals and the Female body

Iain de Ruiter
Fashion Department, Gerrit Rietveld Academie
Elisa van Joolen
Marina Sasseron de Oliveira Cabral
2025
6093 words (actual text = 5466)

Abstract:

In a world full of choice, some audiences favor the unconventional, sometimes extreme works of art. But what do these works contribute when they explore the unfamiliar, taboo, or controversial side of human nature? In this research, I review such artists' intentions, the contexts in which their works were produced, and the effects they have on audiences. By highlighting the potential of extreme portrayals, I intend to open up the discussion about these kinds of works rather than avoiding them.

Through a comparison of two works (VOSS by Alexander Lee McQueen and PENTIMENTO by Frans Zwartjes)—analyzed through the lens of the body, each with its own approach and aesthetic choices—I uncover their distinct meanings and examine why audiences might respond in certain ways.

The study argues that extreme artistic portrayals challenge conventional norms and provoke active engagement, resulting in viewers confronting and questioning their own perceptions. In doing so, these works not only offer a critique of societal taboos but also create a space for transformative reflection on the complex interplay between art, emotion, and social issues.

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Question

2. Case Studies

2.1. Frans Zwartjes

2.1.1. Pentimento

2.1.2. History & Artistic Intention

2.2. Alexander Lee McQueen

2.2.1. Voss

2.2.2. History & Artistic Intention

3. The Body / Framework

3.1. The Body... in Hierarchy & Space

3.2. The Body... in Dress

3.3. The Body... Carrier of Experiences

4.0 Conclusion

1. Introduction:

Art, much like a glove, is not one-size-fits-all—some works naturally appeal to certain audiences, while others may experience discomfort or simply dislike it. Besides, a near-unlimited choice of works is provided to engage with. Therefore, we naturally become selective. Within that process different factors come into play. John Dewey (1921) states that art is not universally experienced in the same way. Each person's background and emotional engagement shape how they respond. This individual variability can affect how audiences experience discomfort when encountering art that challenges norms.

According to Julia Kristeva (1980), when art challenges cultural norms, often deeply ingrained—whether moral, social, or aesthetic—it triggers discomfort. Engaging with discomfort enables audiences to connect with unfamiliar or unsettling perspectives but also open the floor for bi-directional influence. The art reshapes their views, and they, in turn, shape how art is perceived.

On the other hand, if the work exceeds the ordinary or expected boundaries, it can be considered extreme—pushing psychological limits to evoke fear, shock and sometimes amazement, as *“Images of the repulsive can also allure”*. (Sontag, 2003, p. 60) I suggest this response typically leads to two actions; avoidance or activation. While one may shy away from engagement, others are drawn in because of excitement, either through amazement or a desire to decrease incongruences.

Susan Sontag also suggests that simply sympathizing with the subject is insufficient. Not only does this have little effect on the issue at hand, if avoided, it creates room for desensitization. (Sontag, 2003, p. 51) Where multiple instances over time can increase familiarity. This avoidance could also lead to suppression or inner incongruity, thereby potentially affecting personal wellbeing.

Engagement may be more confrontational and requires active commitment. Whether it is a protest against public display, a rigorous discussion of the subject matter or a personal reflection.

When engaging with extremes and discomfort in art we can look beyond the scope of the work itself. It activates—through reflection on the media, history, symbolism, aesthetics, artistic intent, or personal experience—expanding knowledge, shaping opinions, and potentially redefining what is or was considered extreme.

1.1 Research Question

Building on the reflection above, this research explores the dynamic between artist, viewer, and work when confronting unsettling imagery. By examining how audiences engage with what makes them uncomfortable, I aim to understand how intentional analysis and curiosity can reveal the underlying causes of both positive and negative responses to extreme and discomforting art.

I will explore and compare how different approaches to the same controversial or boundary-pushing topics are visualized. The focus will be on the symbols used—whether conscious or unconscious—that are revealed by analyzing hierarchy, dress and characters' experiences. Hereafter i will provide an articulation of the case studies that bring these together. A glue of sorts.

This research supports the exploratory and comparative aspects of my personal practice, where I integrate concepts from diverse artistic currents to develop frameworks that support my topics of interest and enrich my design thinking. By purposefully steering away from the limitations of conventional fashion design, my work embraces an innovative strategy that allows me to look beyond them. In turn, this approach deepens my understanding of the symbols and techniques found across a range of media, which—through trial and error—form the foundation of a unique visual language of my own. Moreover, engaging with multiple disciplines has proven to be a valuable entry point, allowing me to examine subjects from fresh, alternative perspectives.

“Wear another shoe to comfort the soul” - Damien Rice

2. Objects of Study

With regard to arts' power to unsettle and provoke reflection; the body is an especially powerful tool. As it is relateable, it steers audiences towards empathetic and sympathetic responses. The bodies of women are especially potent visual and cultural symbols and have therefore been used historically and artistically to evoke such empathy, raise questions about objectification and challenge societal norms.

Another challenging and relevant subject represented in art is mental health. Unlike more straightforward themes, mental health is entangled with personal vulnerability and complex societal taboos. Engaging with this topic forces both artists and audiences to face uncomfortable truths about care, neglect, and the limits of empathy. The act of representing mental health in art exposes cultural fears and internal struggles of these bodies and minds.

When considering the above, my research question is especially appropriate when analyzing societal institutions which carry profound historical weight. Among these, psychiatric hospitals have a unique position—spaces that symbolize both care and containment, humanity and inhumanity. Historically they have reflected cultural fears, systemic failure, and individual suffering, often hidden behind closed doors. Their portrayal in art may force audiences and artists to face these extremes, sparking discomfort as we are confronted by not only the institutional horrors but also our own boundaries of empathy and understanding through the depiction of marginalized and neglected bodies.

As my study aims for a comparison, i used the following criteria; They obviously have to tackle the same subject matter. They will need to be in different art forms, allowing for the comparison in techniques. They should be from different time periods, offering various contexts to research—and lastly, it must stem from personal interests. I chose the first artist based on the latter criterion, and subsequently found another work that aligned with the former.

these two objects of study will illustrate how intent, approach and outcome may vary. Where one artist depicts a psychiatric hospital resembling a slaughterhouse, the other artist focuses on the surreal experiences and the desire to escape through imagination.

Provided below is an introduction to each artist:

2.1 Frans Zwartjes (Alkmaar, 1927-2017)

Frans Zwartjes is one of the First Dutch experimental filmmakers and is known for his non-linear storytelling and intuitive camera-use. He has worked for the Psychiatric Provincial Hospital SANTPOORT in his early years and notably got inspired. Thus, in one of his only full-length films the life and horrors of psychiatric institutions has been portrayed. Of course with a degree of creative freedom. This film has been a marker for his international notoriety as well as the expressed commentary. Namely at the premiere it has been received with a protest by an unknown feminist group where—at multiple locations— they threw red paint on the projection canvas.

2.1.1 PENTIMENTO (1979)

The story (which is awfully linear for Zwartjes' doing) follows the fever dream of a patient who is on the verge of dying. In his dream he experiences the asylum from the perspective of the warden. The patients are mistreated to a degree—visually and physically—that is reminiscent of a slaughterhouse. They are stripped of their humanity and undergo several abusive actions in the sake of their “health”. All of this while the warden enjoys the luxury of running a facility. It seems as if his uncanny desires come to life in this dream.

2.1.2 History & Artistic Intention

Zwartjes, as mentioned, worked in the former Psychiatric institution *SANTPOORT*. On his first visit he was immediately confronted with the realities of the institution. During a round in the women's facility he had seen someone pee against a metal cabinet. In Zwartjes' own words from the documentary *DE GROTE TOVENAAR [THE GREAT MAGICIAN]* (Ruud Monster, 2006) he described;

“I was so fascinated, I thought it was tremendously good”

After which he makes an interesting comparison: *“There's something to it. A lot of visual arts deals with a kind of being or not being lost”*. When you place this supposition next to his work it becomes clear that such experiences have been inspiring to him. In many of his works he seems to be looking for something: the right framing, a certain feeling. In an interview I conducted with Ruud Monster in 2021, he observed that Zwartjes' method of disorientation and raw editing were indeed in pursuit of this search. The use of zoom, as well as fast and natural camera movement carry this feeling. Which sometimes confronts the viewer with a remarkably strong or discomfoting image.

The idea of being lost is shown in his work in more than just the fast, wandering camera techniques or montage—such being the literal events portrayed. In that manner there is experimentation visible in his short-films. In *LIVING* (1971) (See fig. 1.) Zwartjes and his wife/muse Trix wander through their new apartment, searching for their relation to the space. In the book *THE HOLY FAMILY* (2013) there are stills that shows several bodies of women in deserted locations such as that of a meadow.

In other works there are also themes and subjects related to Zwartjes' past and interests. The idea of being lost is also found in regards to mental health. In *ANAMNESIS* (1969) (See fig. 2.), there is a set of people slowly losing grip of their mental wellbeing and, of course, in *PENTIMENTO* it is explicitly made clear that the people are lost.

From his works and past experiences I would like to conclude that—besides other red threads—there is a noticeable connection to his past in *SANTPOORT*. Though, we should not forget the prominence of female bodies in his work. He seems to have the intention to portray these subjects as they seem to him, not to glorify them. Besides his general interest in the human body, he admits that the body of the woman is more intriguing. Partly because of this attitude he could be described by as ‘voyeuristic’. Though he does not seem to be looking with desire, as he himself states: *“there's something with the person who observes it, not the*

vagina itself” (Zwartjes, 2006) where the word ‘vagina’ can practically be replaced with ‘subject’. This speaks to both the viewers’ perception and Zwartjes’ intention.

Considering Sontag’s statement “*All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic*” (Sontag, 2003, p. 60) the portrayal of female bodies and their respective parts immediately places Zwartjes’ work in this category. Although reviewed and intended as un-erotic works of art—by virtue of the lack of sexual acts performed—there is an undeniable erotic layer. Whether through the

Fig. 1.
Frans & Trix Zwartjes



Screenshot from *Living* (1971) [Film] Directed by Frans Zwartjes

Fig. 2.
Two characters



Screenshot from *Anamnesis* (1969) [Film] Directed by Frans Zwartjes

portrayed or actual context. These images are not just a reproduction or vision of Zwartjes, but are—through the distribution’s purposefully expositional nature—connected to the viewer’s experience

2.2 Alexander Lee McQueen

A famous name in the world of fashion, McQueen was known for his controversial collections, where concept took the precedence over commerce. His fondness for women, especially those close to him, was of great importance for his collections and approach to fashion. Thus having him, like many others, work with the history of these figures. In his collection VOSS he seems particularly occupied with women’s mental health. This can be seen in several aspects, whether through female models or the asylum-like runway. It carries an even more reputable historical load, where many mental issues affecting women—such as depression and anxiety—could be regarded as hysteria. To achieve his controversial title, he had previously been bombarded with bad press, especially around the ‘Highland Rape’ collection. This collection was inspired by the annexation and subjugation of Scotland by England. Though VOSS and other shows were received with less commentary, as people warmed up to McQueen, it did hold up a mirror for the audience and press to rethink their roles in their treatment of women.

2.2.1 VOSS (2001)

McQueen seemingly draws from the historical mistreatment of women in psychiatric institutions, staging models in erratic movements and restrictive yet fantastical garments. The show builds towards its climax—a naked woman encased in a collapsing glass box, covered in moths—blurring the line between spectacle and suffering. While controversial, VOSS forces its audience to reconsider their role in the portrayal and consumption of women’s bodies. Assisted by the use of mirrored glass which confronted the viewers for an hour before the show started actually with their own gaze

2.2.2 History & Artistic Intention:

Alexander McQueen's work was always much more than the sum of its garments; it was an interaction of beauty, power, and the systems that objectify women. McQueen's designs consistently sought to transform pain into power. As he famously stated:

"I want people to be afraid of the women I dress"

This quote, featured in several retrospectives captures his intent: to shock and subvert conventional representations of femininity. Not just to provoke, but to empower.

From his early days on Savile Row to his time at Central Saint Martins, McQueen's work was personal and charged. He drew upon his own experiences and his family's Scottish heritage, reconfiguring this legacy into a defiant language. His garments challenged the sanitized aesthetics of mainstream fashion. McQueen once stated in an interview with Miles Socha for WWD, *"Fashion should be a form of escapism, and not a form of imprisonment"* (McQueen, 2009) emphasizing that clothing should liberate rather than confine its wearer.

His runway presentations were immersive shows that made the audience reflect on themselves. By changing the traditional dynamics of a catwalk, McQueen not only showcased his creative mind but also critiqued an industry that commodifies the female body. The theatricality of his shows—where each look was charged with narrative and symbolism—served as a way to look at cultural taboos and the underlying violence they often perpetuate.

In McQueen's work, the female form was remolded from an object of desire into a symbol of resilience. The strong and beautifully made silhouettes together with the bold, sometimes brutal, use of material and form were designed to activate a sense of both admiration and defiance in the viewer. His legacy is not simply one of aesthetics but rather reimagination. It was a continuous challenge to the status quo that continues to inspire in fashion and beyond.

3. The Body / Framework

As both artists have built a relationship to the female body through their media of choice, and the body of us individuals (audience, reader, anyone) is affected by how it is portrayed and treated, they hold a certain power over what happens to them. This starts in their creative productions and continues at the reverberation that happens after their display. Especially when working with the topics of mental health and the psychiatric hospital, which are grounds for controversy and discomfort, the choices made regarding the female bodies portrayed are generally not taken lightly. Whether unconscious or conscious, each choice made reflects on them, the viewer and the work itself. This could be through symbols, direct statements and contextual relations.

While there is a plethora of ways the body functions in this realm, the focus of my analysis will be:

- the body in **hierarchy & space**, where it shows how spatial elements as well as power structures define and enforce the hierarchy presented.
- The body in **dress**, intended to show how clothing—or the lack thereof—reinforces the above, as well as the experience within these institutions.
- The body as a **carrier of experiences**, illustrating these experiences through embodied acting, visual cues and more.

Within the oeuvre and works discussed the body is not just present, but actively shapes and is being shaped by the power structures involved.

3.1. The Body... In Hierarchy & Space

Each object of study presents a distinct power dynamic or hierarchy. This becomes evident through markers such as clothing, role division and spatial relationships

In *PENTIMENTO* (Frans Zwartjes, 1979) there are three distinct types of characters, with the protagonist being the most developed character as he is portrayed in daily attire—a navy three-piece suit (See Fig. 3.)—while partaking in leisurely activities such as tea-time. This distinguishes him from the other characters who function merely as cogs in the machine. He “*as some incoherent flashbacks suggest, was himself a victim of*

Fig. 3.
The protagonist



Screenshot from *Pentimento* (1979) [Film] Directed by Frans Zwartjes

Fig. 4.
The blood-stained protagonist



Screenshot from *Pentimento* (1979) [Film] Directed by Frans Zwartjes

torture during World War II' (Verstraten, 2021, p. 407) and seems to be struggling with PTSD. He treats his staff as partners in crime while rarely conducting inspections or check-ins with the patients.

While he emerges as the facility's dictatorial leader his introduction reinforces the characterization through a defining scene, the aforementioned flashback. Here, he appears in blood-stained clothes—or their remnants—fleeing from a car that seemingly seeks to retrieve him. Eventually, he collapses, ending up on the surgery table. The same table that he will pass away on at the end of the movie. This suggests that the entire film unfolds as a fever dream, potentially from the perspective of him as a patient.

Midway through the film, another scene vividly illustrates his relationships with his employees, wife, and patients. Here they can be seen having dinner. They indulge in an uncanny moment of luxury, sharing wine and time together—contrasting the secluded and deprived patients. The dim candlelight and floral decorations enhance the scene's intimate and abundant atmosphere.

The couple in charge occupied separate spaces and had the freedom to walk around the facility. The employees, generally a step lower in the hierarchy, were divided into male doctors/psychiatrists — performing medical procedures and restraining patients— and female nurses/caretakers that seemed present for their assumed nurturing nature. Each of these were dressed in their own uniform. This further reinforced their distinct roles and hierarchical positions. The men wore white doctors' coats and the women donned dresses reminiscent of WWII red cross uniforms. (See fig. 5 & 6.)

The female psychiatric patients, by contrast, were entirely nude apart from their heels. They were empathically occupying the lowest position in the facility's rigid hierarchy (More about this in Chapter 3.2.) This structured visual separation aligns with Jan Foudraïne's critique of psychiatric institutions, where patients are not only confined physically, but also through diagnostic labeling. (Foudraïne, 1971)

The patients' vulnerability is accentuated by their fragile presence in the vast, cold corridors of the building, where they were confined within the facility, unable to leave its premises. This is depicted in several scenes where disoriented, weakened patients attempt to escape, only to collapse slightly beyond the facility's threshold. (Fig. 7.)

Foudraïne claimed that such institutional structures create a self-fulfilling prophecy where, when one is treated like an object they, in turn, start to behave like it. (Foudraïne, 1971) Enforcing the dehumanization and slowing down progression is reflected in PENTIMENTO through the patients inability to reclaim autonomy, contrasting earlier scenes where they were visibly more in control.

However, Foudraïne's critique suggests a paradox: even when exposing institutional oppression, such portrayals risk cementing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle. This potentially supports the critique received from the feminist groups protesting the premiere of PENTIMENTO because —whether or not this work was directed at the mental institutions—it was a display of the suffering of women. Which, without

Fig. 5.
Red Cross nurses in Uniform



British Red Cross [BRC], 2001, *Why do older images of nurses' uniforms have a red cross?*

Fig. 6.
Nurses & guards



Screenshot from *Pentimento* (1979) [Film]
Directed by Frans Zwartjes

Fig. 7.
Escaped patient



Screenshot from *Pentimento* (1979)
[Film] Directed by Frans Zwartjes

further consideration, could get engulfed in the wave of sex and violence portrayed in the Dutch media landscape of the seventies and early eighties, when it was at risk of glorification and normalisation.

VOSS (Alexander McQueen, 2001) On the other hand has a completely different portrayal of power relations. There is more of a relationship between the press/guests and the models or characters portrayed. The space they were placed in required the viewer to reflect on themselves by using multi-functional glass. Before the lights inside the ‘catwalk’—which is made to look like a quiet room—are turned on, McQueen disrupts the expected power hierarchy by using two-way mirrored glass: the spectators, accustomed to controlling the gaze, suddenly see themselves reflected. It asks them to look at themselves—the voyeurs—looking for sensation. They selectively and consciously make decisions on how to portray the show. Judgements are made on what the best angle is, which looks or details are highlighted and spread through media-outlets. Putting them into a rather powerful place. They have the ability to decide which designers and models are showcased in what manner. (See fig. 8)

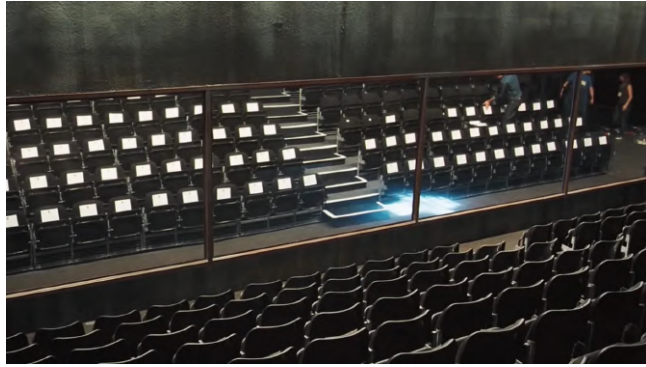
This scenario seems reminiscent of the way the mentally distressed were studied in the early 20th century, where patients were placed in front of a clinical psychology lecture hall to be looked at and studied. While it was a regular practice during those times, it is now seen as dismissive, stressing and stereotyping through extreme example. This type of studying the subject is detrimental to the patient. And in the case of *VOSS* it shines light on how we look at models.

This dynamic reflects Sturken & Cartwright’s notion that to look is to assert power (Cartwright & Sturken, 2001)—the press selects, frames and constructs meaning, much like early psychiatrists did when observing patients. Sontag, similarly, warns that repeated exposure to suffering can normalize and desensitize, as some sort of a defense mechanism. (Sontag, 2003) McQueen therefore shakes things up and forces the audience to confront their complicity in this process.

Where Zwartjes emphasizes a rigid, institutional power structure, McQueen takes a different approach by actively disrupting it, making the viewer complicit in the act of looking. This difference in approach shapes how each artist critiques systems of control. This brings out the question: is either of these approaches more effective than the other?

While *PENTIMENTO* has a runtime of a whole hour, McQueen was dedicated to a medium that generally is more rushed. Though Fashion—and this show in particular—has theatrical moments, it is constrained by time. Therefore, certain aspects will and understandably should take focus. Therefore, as we will see in the

Fig 8.
Set pre-show



[set photograph] From "Voss" by Alexander McQueen (2001)

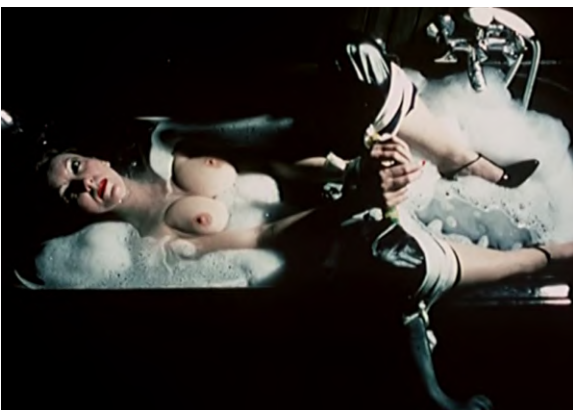
next chapter; McQueen utilizes dress to a different degree than Zwartjes. He tells a story about the same subject using different symbols and focal points.

3.2 The Body... and Dress

As previously mentioned: In PENTIMENTO, Zwartjes' actors are depicted wearing nothing but high heels. While both features highlight their femininity, the heels concurrently symbolize restriction. (See Fig. 9)

While Zwartjes deliberately chose to portray nudity to depict the dehumanizing processes of the mental asylum, McQueen dressed his models in various extravagant garments which counter homogeneity, thereby humanizing them. This difference in approach exemplifies, through signs and associations, how the choice of clothing can tell a different story. In VOSS it simultaneously demystifies the portrayed environment and decreases stigmatisation of mental health patients, while in PENTIMENTO it serves as a marker of imbalanced power relationships.

Fig. 9.
Naked patient in heels



Screenshot from *Pentimento* (1979) [Film] Directed by Frans Zwartjes

Fig. 10.
Michelle Olley, show finale



[runway photograph] From "Voss" by Alexander McQueen (2001)

The use of nudity in PENTIMENTO increases our negative feelings towards the portrayed situation through the "western" ingrained shame around naked bodies. Despite our bodies being natural and human, the involuntary removal of clothing symbolizes dehumanization. Simultaneously, when pertaining to women's

bodies, this sexualizes them, making them an object of desire. In this work, in contrast to his other films, the intent appears twofold: it both sexualizes—reflecting the protagonist’s desires—and renders the piece as unerotic as possible for the audience.

On the other hand, McQueen’s use of slight nudity potentially serves to enhance empowerment through what is worn and how much skin one decides to show. Here, both nudity and dress personalize the subjects.

In the case of PENTIMENTO, the spectator is inevitably confronted with the subject’s nudity. Though many can relate to being naked around others, some can only imagine how degrading it feels to be in their place.

While McQueen does not place too much focus on the nudity and dehumanized aspects of the mental hospital, he does finish the show with a particularly interesting touch. The glass case in the middle of the ‘quiet room’ suddenly collapses and shows a naked woman connected to all kinds of tubes, covered in butterflies. Though VOSS is generally less shocking, this scene in particular does leave a mark. Finishing the show with a literal bang, as depicted through the shattered glass in fig. 10 on the previous page.

In VOSS The models are shown in various kinds of garments ranging from business attire to extravagant dresses. Each of these have the potential to enhance or complement the story told.

Several items, combined with their respective models acting in a ‘mental’ manner suggest a surreal and fantasized experience of the patients. One notable piece featured a bodice made from a half-completed jigsaw puzzle depicting Neuschwanstein Castle. (See fig. 11.) The jigsaw puzzle, an activity that serves to prevent cognitive disorders, may have been a comment on the contrast between reality and illusion. Showing the patients efforts to remain cognitively challenged, while alluding to a desired fantasy world.

Similar to this are the dresses made from shells. (See fig. 13.) While shells are inherently linked with their place of origin, they can be a symbol for the freedom associated with the sea. A place patients might fantasize going to or being at. Though, the act of tearing the clams off might have a whole different meaning. (More on this in 3.3)

A thing even more closely associated to freedom is the bird, a motif and object used throughout McQueen’s career. It returns in this show in the shape of taxidermied birds atop of a model’s head. (See fig. 12.) While it

Fig. 11.
Jigsaw puzzle top



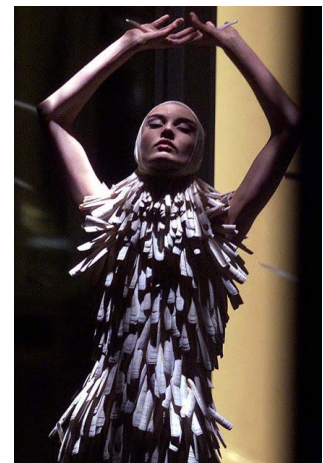
[runway photograph] From “Voss” by Alexander McQueen (2001)

Fig. 12.
Taxidermied birds



[runway photograph] From “Voss” by Alexander McQueen (2001)

Fig.13.
Clamshell dress



[runway photograph] From “Voss” by Alexander McQueen (2001)

still keeps its original meaning, the manner of usage suggests a certain imprisonment and death. These once free animals can no longer roam free and are now just shells of their former selves. Much like the patients in mental asylums.

These specific examples are among many others that symbolize key themes such as dehumanization, desire for freedom and fantasy. Showcasing how their varied choices of dress can carry a different meaning and therewith influence our perception of the story told. Zwartjes' work uses strong imagery and statements such as the fragility of female nudity contrasted by the powerful symbol of a suit. These choices steer the experience in a direction that is more directly discomfiting than that of McQueen's choices. Where the garments portray the discomfort experienced by the patients in a more indirect, symbolic manner.

3.3 The Body... Carrier of Experiences

Beyond hierarchy and dress, the body withstands experiences in the mental and physical realm such as distortion, distress and more. Similar to how nudity amplifies vulnerability, the body —through posture, action or modification— can also communicate internal disturbance.

In VOSS bodily distortion becomes a direct means of externalizing psychological distress. In an interview by Vogue with Erin O'Connor (2014), who walked the show, she recalls McQueen saying:

“So, you're in a lunatic asylum. I need you to go mental, have a nervous breakdown, die, and then come back to life.”

After which she and other models did exactly that and more. These actions led to a display of mental distortion which, when combined with the quiet room-esque decor, amplified the intended portrayal of psychological distress.

There was the moment where 3 models who all appeared lost, ghostlike and acting in different manners came up. It distorted the standard way of presenting model after model, but also seemed to hint to mental disorders such as Multiple Personality Disorder. Strengthening the surreal and confusing atmosphere and thereby making it increasingly hard to follow. Other actions were the flailing of arms, staring into the distance and acting strange towards their mirror images. Together with the fairly clear subject matter, these gestures invite the viewer to draw conclusions and connections to the meaning of each symbol—in particular, those of the designed garments

Zwartjes takes a different approach to these bodily experiences. He highlights the horrors of being in such a place, while McQueen works with the embodied experience of the patients themselves.

The literal torture scenes are especially effective in portraying this. Whereas the patients go through electroshock therapy, surgery and being bound to a leash, to name a few. These, much like the nudity, push the idea of subordination and a loss of control but also add the element of the facility its treatment methods—further dehumanizing and debilitating the patients.

Not only is this shown in the experiences they are forced into, but also in disturbances related to their bodies. Where excreta such as blood and urine are presented in a confrontational and direct manner.

One scene shows the body of a deceased woman, who is bleeding from her vagina, getting carried away by one of the male doctors. Another shows the protagonist, right before him waking up from the fever dream, stabbing another patient on a surgery table in their sexual organs.

Such scenes are confrontational and seemingly seek to cause the strongest visceral and extreme effect. It forces the viewer to confront what is usually avoided; our innate repulsion towards bodily degradation—rather than invitation through suggestive acts.

Instead of a clean and polished quiet room, the work deliberately shocks us with its visceral images. Compelling us to face the raw, unsettling realities of dehumanization.

Besides placing the viewer in such an uncomfortable position—which does not compare to that of what is portrayed—it also tests our endurance by demanding we participate in the protagonists' dreams as witnesses. The extreme images challenge us to stay aware and to feel negatively towards the problems tackled. This, together with the facility being portrayed as a slaughterhouse, serves to consider and engage with the underlying critique of systems that reduce women's bodies to objects that can be controlled.

What I meant to illustrate here is how bodily distortion in VOSS functions as activation through symbols and suggestions. Rather than resorting to direct, extreme depictions of trauma, McQueen instructs his models to channel internal distress through exaggerated, almost surreal bodily gestures. In this way, actions like ghostlike movements, flailing arms, and vacant stares become symbolic expressions of psychological turmoil—inviting the viewer to engage with the hidden narratives behind these gestures as well as outfits. While Zwartjes opts for explicit brutality and literal dehumanization, McQueen's approach turns the body into a dynamic medium that activates our understanding of mental distress through subtle yet provocative symbols.

4. Conclusion

In exploring the risks and benefits of artistic portrayals of psychiatric hospitals, female patients and their bodies, this study showed how extreme imagery and symbolic bodily representations force both creators and viewers to confront uncomfortable truths. Following Sontag's and Kristeva's ideas, in the introduction I suggested that art—by challenging cultural norms and engaging with extremes—can either trigger avoidance or activate a deeper, more critical engagement with societal issues.

This duality of response—avoidance versus activation—is at the heart of the analysis. Extreme artistic representations can compel a distancing reaction, where the repulsive and painful elements cause the viewer to withdraw, or they can activate a more engaged, critical examination of the issues at hand. For instance, a raw and almost brutal portrayal that employs strong visual cues such as nudity paired with high heels and explicit scenes of bodily violation exposes the inherent cruelty and systemic subjugation within psychiatric care. Such uncompromising imagery forces an immediate confrontation with historical marginalization and vulnerability, often leading to an avoidance response where interpretation is secondary.

In contrast, when the narrative is reconstructed through a symbolic and performative lens—using diverse, extravagant garments, materials that blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and deliberate techniques like mirrored glass and choreographed gestures—the viewer is not pushed away but rather activated. This approach transforms bodily distortion into a language of psychological distress, inviting an active discussion of the spectacle and our role within it. Here, rather than triggering avoidance, the work becomes an incentive for empathy and critical reflection, mobilizing the viewer to reexamine established power structures and thereby slowly shifting the status quo

Both responses underscore a central insight: extreme artistic portrayals of mental health and institutional abuse can function as both a mirror and a challenge. They compel us to question the boundaries of our comfort, considering how the representation of pain and dehumanization might either desensitize or mobilize us into rethinking entrenched societal norms. By juxtaposing the tendencies toward avoidance with the potential for activation, this study demonstrates that while discomfort may initially provoke withdrawal, it can also spark a transformative engagement—one that redefines the possible languages of art and its role in public discourse.

4.1 Looking back

Whether through approach or subject matter, the connection between this thesis and graduation project has become increasingly clear over time. Although initially distant, the idea of activation versus avoidance is also found in the physical works. The suit, which in my collection serves less as a symbol of power and more as a symbol of legacy and what one leaves behind, has become a central focus. By reinterpreting it, I examine how the meaning of something iconic can shift when the form is approached from a different angle, when it is stripped down or altered. It is not just about redesigning the object itself, but about confronting the cultural memory attached to it — and allowing new relationships to form.

Across the collection, I search for a rhythm between what is made obvious and what remains suggestive or open. Some garments seem to invite interpretation, offering threads to pull at, while others resist or hold themselves back. These shifts in presence and absence ask what it means to be legible — to be read, known, or understood. Rather than completely resolving this, the work embraces it. The tension between the counterpoints of structure and movement, memory and materiality, becomes a quiet undercurrent. Allowing the suit to act not as conclusion, but as question.

Ultimately, artists are bound to face the complexity of the triangular relationship between the artist, the work, and the public's perception. Especially in these art forms (film, fashion, performance) where the human body is prominently used for the method of presentation. The bodily connection between viewer and subject helps the audience project their own perspective, search for clues or gestures and potentially see through your abstractions — in order to gain a deeper understanding. While my decisions are personal, I can not assume they are known. As this is the one of the first exhibitions of my personal work, there is not an established context where I— compared to the discussed artists — have situated myself . I must choose what to clarify, what to hint at, and what to leave open. Although conscious choices, like walking my own collection because

of personal ties to legacy, might go unnoticed, unconscious ones can still create meaningful connections — filling in gaps I never planned for. That, perhaps, is where the real activation lies.

Sources/Bibliography:

- Bonhôte, I. (Director) (2008) McQueen. [Film] *Lionsgate*
- Dewey, J. (1980). Art as Experience. *A Wideview/Perigee Book*. (23rd Impression) [Original work published 1934]
- Foudraïne, J. (1971) *Wie is van Hout... Een Gang Door de Psychiatrie. AmbolAnthos*
- Kristeva, J. (1980) Powers of horror: an essay on abjection. *Columbia University Press*.
- *McQueen, A. L. (Creative Director) (2001) Voss. [Runway show]*
- Milligan, L. (07-08-2018) Fashion flashback: McQueen's asylum show. *British Vogue*. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/erin-oconnor-on-walking-in-alexander-mcqueen-asylum-show>
- Monster, R. (Director) (2006) De Grote Toveraar. [Film] *Jura Filmproducties*.
- Sontag, S. (2003) Regarding the Pain of Others. *Picador*.
- Sturken, M. & Cartwright, L. (2001) Practices Of Looking; An Introduction to Visual Culture. *Oxford University Press*
- Socha, M. (13-04-2009) The Great Escape: Alexander McQueen. *WWD*, <https://wwd.com/feature/the-great-escape-alexander-mcqueen-2100732-1503446/>
- Verstraten, P. (2021) Dutch Post-War Fiction Film Through a Lens of Psychoanalysis. *Amsterdam University Press*. (P. 406-408)
- Van Zoetendaal, M. & Zwartjes, F. (2013) The Holy Family . *Van Zoetendaal*
- Zwartjes, F. (Director) (1979) Pentimento. [Film]
- Zwartjes, F. (Director) (1971) Living. [Film]
- Zwartjes, F. (Director) (1969) Anamnesis [Film]

List of figures:

1. “Frans & Trix Zwartjes” Frans Zwartjes (1971) *Living* [Film] [Screenshot]
2. “Two characters” Frans Zwartjes (1969) *Anamnesis* [Film] [Screenshot]
3. “The protagonist” Frans Zwartjes (1979) *Pentimento* [Film] [Screenshot]
4. “The blood-stained Protagonist” Frans Zwartjes (1979) *Pentimento* [Film] [Screenshot]
5. “Red Cross nurses in uniform” British Red Cross [BRC] (2021) *Why do older images of nurses’ uniforms have a red cross?* Retrieved from <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/our-movement/our-history/banksy-game-changer-and-the-red-cross-emblem>
6. “Nurses & guards” Frans Zwartjes (1979) *Pentimento* [Film] [Screenshot]
7. “Escaped patient” Frans Zwartjes (1979) *Pentimento* [Film] [Screenshot]
8. “Set pre-show” Unknown (2001) *Voss* [event photography] retrieved from <https://www.articlesofclothing.com/p/alexander-mcqueen-springsummer-2001>
9. “Naked patient in heels” Frans Zwartjes (1979) *Pentimento* [Film] [Screenshot]
10. “Michelle Olley, show finale” Unknown (2001) *Voss* [runway photography] retrieved from <https://jemimaskala.substack.com/p/tortured-imaginations>
11. “Jigsaw puzzle top” Unknown (2001) *Voss* [runway photography] retrieved from <https://ilovemcqueen.home.blog/2012/02/02/hautekills-alexander-mcqueen-ss-2001/>
12. “Taxidermied birds” Unknown (2001) *Voss* [runway photography] Retrieved from <https://corene.art.blog/2019/04/29/research/>
13. “Clamshell dress” Unknown (2001) *Voss* [runway photography] retrieved from <https://medium.com/52-weeks-of-fashion/2-once-upon-a-runway-25f832650e24>

