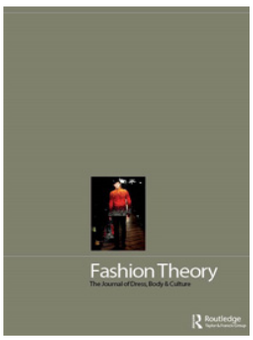

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Breaking the Idea of Clothes: Rei Kawakubo's Fashion Manifesto

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Abstract

Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons is an anomaly in fashion's celebrity-designer, brand-driven world. Intensely private, she rarely gives interviews; instead she expects those wanting to understand her work to look at the clothing itself. So, when she released a "creative manifesto" that offered insight into the Comme des Garçons spring/summer 2014 collection, it made an impression. In the manifesto, Kawakubo claimed to "break the idea of 'clothes'", and, certainly, the accompanying collection, *Not Making Clothing* (spring/summer 2014), represented a new degree of abstraction in the designer's repertoire that was then amplified in following collections. Bypassing the common response to explain

a monograph, *The Fashionable Ideal: Bodies and Images in Fashion*.
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away Kawakubo's work as art, anti-fashion or a refusal of fashion, in this article the author approaches the manifesto itself as one of Kawakubo's "works". Pulling at its threads to unravel the seams of the text, the author begins with its "making" and weaves in and out of the history of the fashion manifesto to compare Kawakubo's work with the fashion manifestos of the Futurist artists Giacomma Balla and Volt. The author then comes back to the clothes themselves. In breaking the idea of clothes, the author argues, Kawakubo puts into doubt what we take for granted, changing what clothes signify and intensifying the normal work of fashion.

Keywords: Rei Kawakubo, Comme des Garçons, fashion, manifesto, Futurism

Kawakubo

Rei Kawakubo is a famously, intensely private person. An anomaly in high-end fashion's celebrity-designer, brand-driven world, she stopped taking the customary post-collection bow on the catwalk years ago. She rarely gives interviews, expecting instead anyone who wants to understand her work to look at the clothing itself. So, in October 2013, when the high-profile website *Business of Fashion* published a "creative manifesto" written by the founder of Comme des Garçons, it made an impression. Kawakubo did not say any of the things that designers usually say about the creative process. Art, fashion history, films and travel had as little to do with the creation of the Comme des Garçons spring/summer 2014 collection, *Not Making Clothing*, as "seeing new shops, looking at silly magazines [or] taking an interest in the activities of people in the street" (Kawakubo 2013).[1] Because these things already existed they could not help her find something new. What she wants, what she has to wait for, is "the chance for something completely new to be born within myself". In order for this to happen, she wrote, "I tried to think and feel and see as if I wasn't making clothes" (Kawakubo 2013).

Making clothes is what Kawakubo does. She started her label Comme des Garçons in 1969 and heads a company that manufactures numerous clothing lines for men and women, as well as lines by her protégés, Junya Watanabe, Tao Kurihara, Kei Ninomiya, Fumito Ganryu and Gosha Rubchinskiy. There are Comme des Garçons flagship stores, boutiques and franchises across the world, and the experimental department store curated and opened by Kawakubo in London in 2004, Dover Street Market (DSM), has expanded to operations in Tokyo, New York, Singapore, Beijing and Los Angeles. In 2004, she launched the first of the ephemeral Comme des Garçons "guerrilla" stores, which involved the occupation of low-cost, unrenovated retail spaces that

would close after a year and were tactically located in edgy corners of offbeat cities. But making—and selling—clothes is not all that she does. From 1989 to 1991, Kawakubo published *Six*, a biannual A3-sized magazine that coincided with the launch of Comme des Garçons collections and set a new agenda for fashion branding. Now collectors' items, each issue of *Six* incorporated collaborations with artists and photographers in a format where text was minimized and the visual reigned. Indeed, artistic collaborations punctuate Kawakubo's career and, co-opted by the art world from early on, her clothes are regularly exhibited in museums and art institutions, with the most recent—*Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between* at the Costume Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art—the first solo exhibition devoted to a living designer to be mounted by the museum in over three decades.

Born out of Kawakubo trying to think and feel and see as if she was not making clothes, the Comme des Garçons spring/summer 2014 collection consisted of precisely the sort of clothes that the art world likes most when it is engaging with fashion. Kawakubo (in Bolton 2017, 157) calls them "objects for the body". Featured in the clothes/not clothes theme of the exhibition at The Met, according to curator Andrew Bolton, they "represent Kawakubo's most radical, profound, and transgressive realization of forms that have never before existed in fashion" (Bolton 2017, 15). Compared with Kawakubo's earlier work, he writes, her later collections are "divorced from the delimiting requisites of clothing and exist as purely aesthetic and conceptual expressions [that] formally share qualities with sculpture as well as with conceptual and performance art" (15). A similar view was shared by journalists from *Vogue* who witnessed the unfolding of *Not Making Clothing* on the catwalk: the collection was "something nearer a parade of experimental art pieces than a fashion show" (Mower 2013); Kawakubo had pushed "the idea of wearable fashion to the absolute limit"; the objects sent down the catwalk were "over-the-top creations, not clothes" (Bumpus 2013).[2] This is not an uncommon response to Kawakubo's work. Writing about the designer in 2005, Judith Thurman (2005) suggests she gave up representational fashion in the early 1980s and has been making "clothing as wearable abstraction" ever since and, in 2008, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, was titled *Refusing Fashion: Rei Kawakubo*. Barbara Vinken (2010, 34), however, makes a finer point of distinction, describing Kawakubo's early collections in Paris as providing "a negative aesthetic, an examination of our idea of fashion itself".[3]

The *Not Making Clothing* collection was particularly challenging and represented a new degree of abstraction in the designer's repertoire with even seasoned professionals finding it "one about which it's incredibly difficult to write" (Mower 2013). In hindsight, it would be considered the first in a series of collections that were beyond translation. Kawakubo has often said she could not explain her creative process,

and even if she could, why would she want to? The release of the manifesto then was a gift, a bonus for those attempting to decipher the collection, and yet, how much it served this end is unclear. As I shall explain later, I am not even sure that the term "manifesto" can legitimately be used to refer to these few paragraphs. This notwithstanding, I consider these words, this manifesto (the word sticks), to be one of Kawakubo's "works", one of her creations, and so in this article I propose to pull at its threads and unpick its seams to unravel the text of what she has written. I begin with its "making", weave in and out of the knotted history of the fashion manifesto, focusing particularly on those written by Futurist artists and poets early in the twentieth century, and then come back to Kawakubo's clothes themselves. In doing so, I confess that I am putting myself into a role not unlike that of the customer who enters a Comme des Garçons store, unsure of whether the object in front of her is a hat or a coat, who struggles to find a sleeve and needs the help of staff when trying on a dress to determine which way is up. If I am not always certain of the material before me, that seems appropriate. I do not promise to decipher this difficult collection and those that followed. I am not sure that Kawakubo's manifesto says anything about her creative process that she has not said before, but it does invite thinking about manifestos, about clothes, about fashion and about creating something completely new.

Making

Kawakubo's manifesto came to *Business of Fashion* readers as an exclusive courtesy of *System* magazine, a recent entrant to independent, arty fashion publishing. The manifesto itself was the culmination of a long-format conversation between the designer and Hans Ulrich Obrist, with Kawakubo's husband (and chief executive officer of Comme des Garçons International), Adrian Joffe, acting as translator. Obrist, or HUO as he is known, is himself quite a celebrity in the art world. A curator and prolific publisher, he travels constantly, knows everyone and is a notoriously hyperactive, insomniac workaholic. An enthusiastic talker, with over 2400 hours of interviews on tape, the contrast with Kawakubo is stark. The designer, it seems, hands out words like pearls; pattern cutters in her studio work from her enigmatic fragments of speech; fashion journalists try and fathom her work through cryptic clues she offers backstage; and even her husband treats her with awe. As Thurman (2005) notes, "Small talk—indeed any talk—is not Kawakubo's forte".

The interview, at least initially, does not go well. Like an excited undergrad writing for a university newspaper, Obrist's first question comes out in a tumble of words and intellectual name-dropping—Heidegger and Rem Koolhaus are mentioned—only to be met with a curt translated response: "Rei thinks there is no relation" (Obrist 2013,

39). As the interview, and the prompts, progress, Kawakubo reveals that she began working as a designer because she could not find the clothes she wanted—and the work allowed her to be independent. There was no epiphany that she could think of, but "a sense of values" (40) was important. She has worked collaboratively—on the media project *Six*, with photographers, with artists, with the choreographer Merce Cunningham and with Vivienne Westwood—but as for the designers in her stable, Watanabe, Kurihara, Ninomiya and Ganryu, "they're staff, so I wouldn't call it a collaboration" (44). She likes punk, does not need dreams, and does not draw or write down rules; these, she states, "are in her head" (42). Much of what she says in the interview is not new, but an echo of previous public statements, although at one point a surprised Joffe tells Obrist "She's never said that to me before" (41). At the close of the interview, Obrist asks her to write something in handwriting. She resists: it is his thing because he thinks handwriting is disappearing; it is nothing to do with her. Persisting, Obrist suggests she could just write "Comme des Garçons". Kawakubo holds her ground. Joffe's last translated words are: "She expects that none of this was very useful to you" (45). The manifesto arrives a few days later, emailed to Obrist as something of a peace offering, a compromise, an afterword, or perhaps a combination of all three.

Manifesto

Once described as "a genre in a hurry" (The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0)—possibly in deference to F.T. Marinetti's celebration of speed, transformation and novelty in his landmark *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909)—the term "manifesto" has a particular historical and political resonance. As signaled earlier, the document I have been calling Kawakubo's manifesto is not described as such in *System*. Only once it was published on the *Business of Fashion* website was it branded as "Rei Kawakubo's Creative Manifesto". Not all of it was new, with some lines having already appeared in reviews of the collection in the form of quasi-quotes from the designer. Was this then a case of overreach? Can an emailed statement legitimately be called a manifesto? I think so. Certainly, it has enough of the hallmarks. It is a short, striking gesture that blends creative posturing and artistic vision. If there is also an air of the press release about it, purity of genre has never been a concern of the manifesto, which has "long borrowed from advertising" (Hanna 2014). Kawakubo is also clearly aware of the historical and political connotations of the form, as evidenced by her guerrilla stores, which were run according to a series of strict manifesto-styled guidelines that, when launched, drew comparisons in the press with Marinetti's famous text.

The manifesto, in general, has itself been having something of a fashion moment. Those produced by individual brands mostly read like the

product of a P.R. agency, but more traditional manifestos have been produced by the slow fashion, ethical fashion and sustainable fashion movements. Following such examples, the three-point Detox Fashion Manifesto launched by Greenpeace in 2011 speaks for "a global movement of fashionistas, activists, designers and bloggers united by a belief that beautiful fashion shouldn't cause toxic pollution". Another to attract attention is British designer Vivienne Westwood's (2007) whimsical, meandering manifesto, which she claims "penetrates to the root of the human predicament and offers the underlying solution". One of Westwood's slogans is "Shop Less Think More", and when it comes to the question of her own role in the fashion system and excessive consumption she requests that if people want to buy her clothes, they "don't buy too much" (Cadwalladr 2007). A more sophisticated response to over-consumption and sustainability in the twenty-first century is provided by trend forecaster Lidewij Edelkoort's "Anti-Fashion Manifesto" (Edelkoort 2015), in which she explains why fashion is obsolete, newness no longer interesting, and addresses the repercussions of current fashion practice across institutions, manufacture, industry and media. Kawakubo's 2013 manifesto voices different concerns. Far from being anti-fashion, it heads in the direction of pure fashion, a point I return to later. More immediately, it reaches inward, searching for the point of creation.

Shifting the line of vision from the present to the past, the fashion manifesto of the early twentieth century belongs to Marinetti and artists of the Futurist avant-garde who produced a number of proclamations on clothing from 1914. In 1920, the *Futurist Manifesto of Women's Fashion* was published by Volt, the pseudonym of the artist Vincenzo Fani. Most of the other related writings were by Giacomo Balla and concerned men's dress. These include *Futurist Manifesto of Men's Clothing*, written in 1913, but never published, *Futurist Men's Clothing: A Manifesto*, published in May 1914, and *The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto*, published in September 1914 with contributions by Marinetti (Rainey 2009).[4] Writing at a time when mass production and the ideology of modern consumerism were in their infancy, the Futurists envisioned fashion in a very different light to current thinking. Far from seeing it as a problem, the potential of fashion's built-in obsolescence enthralled them because "it necessitated continued creativity on the part of the artist, provided sensual delights and novelty for the wearer-consumer, and served as a stimulus to the national economy" (Braun 1995, 34–35). There is much in Kawakubo's manifesto and work that makes me want to compare her work with the writings of Marinetti, Balla and Volt. But if I am going to gather these Futurist artists and poets around Kawakubo, I need first to untangle the ideological and aesthetic differences that might hold them apart.

Despite being considered "the birth scene of aesthetic modernity" (Rainey 2009, 2), Futurism was the only right-wing movement of the

modernist avant-garde, with an ideology controversially tainted by misogyny, nationalist bellicosity and unrepentant fascism. In part, notes Emily Braun, the misogyny of early Futurist writings was tempered by support for the feminist movement after the war (female emancipation would undermine the status quo of social life and traditional institutions such as marriage and the family that the Futurists held in disdain). But this support was short-lived and, at any rate, shot through with inconsistencies. Chauvinistic aggression is woven through the fabric of Volt's proposed designs, with the female body that would wear them idealized as a "machine-gun woman", a daring symbol of the "sapper-soldiers at the avant-garde of an army of lightning" (Volt 1920, 254). Kawakubo has never identified with any movement, regularly claims she is "not a feminist", and is quiet about her political beliefs. She has, however, suggested letting her clothes speak for her. Following this advice does not necessarily make things much clearer, but what does come through, apart from a determined individualism, is a paradoxical feminizing of military tropes and motifs and a persistent unraveling of gender in all its forms.

In broad terms, the Futurist modern "antihumanity" (Braun 1995, 34) was to be dressed in simplicity and comfort: freedom of movement, the removal of frivolous detail, the banishment of class distinction in dress, and the integration of new technologies were all embraced. Kawakubo's clothes, especially during the period when Japanese design was sending shock waves through the fashion establishment in the early 1980s, shared these modernist principles but, grounded in Japanese culture, aesthetics and history, this was more by accident than by design and, at any rate, to draw any direct relation would be to ignore the sheer radicalism of what she proposed. Futurist design happened primarily on the surface; transformation in Kawakubo's work is profoundly structural. Then there is the question of color. Kawakubo has long been associated with the radical use of black, the widespread wearing of which in their own time the Futurists despised. Reading Balla's attack on the melancholic, funereal dress of his contemporaries is not unlike reading the derisory reviews Kawakubo received in the conservative press when she first showed in Paris. And when Volt (1920, 253) describes women's clothing as "gray spider webs" of "mediocrity and wretchedness" his tone is echoed six decades later by the critic in *Le Figaro* who dismissed Kawakubo's "patched up clothes" as "miserablism", "brand new rags … tied up hastily in tatters" (Samet in Fukai 2010, 25).

Unlike most, though, the Futurists took fashion seriously. A performance-oriented movement, they valued the inherently performative quality of fashion and, as Braun (1995, 38) notes, "were prescient in understanding clothing design as a legitimate politics of the body". The artistic ingenuity of women's fashion in particular, with its "speed, novelty, courageous creation", inspired Volt (1920, 253) to proclaim it as "the female equivalent of Futurism". Determined to rid the world of what

Balla (1914b, 202) denounced as the "mediocrity of moderation, the so-called good taste", the Futurists saw in fashion an opportunity to resist the bourgeois, the anodyne, the conventional, and the routine. What they envisioned, Kawakubo has done. Marinetti claimed that fashion was an art, as much as architecture and music, and advocated women's fashion houses be directed by great poets and painters. Left to design their own apparel, he wrote, women could adorn themselves as "an original living poem" (in Braun 1995, 38), a delightful, double-edged sword of a description that adapts with ease to the spirit of the woman (or man) clad in Comme des Garçons.

For the Futurists and Kawakubo alike, creativity, invention and the propagation of the new lie at the heart of their aesthetic philosophy. In her creative search for the unknown, writes Kawakubo (2013), she "only can wait for the chance for something completely new to be born within myself". Probably the shortest manifesto ever written is Ezra Pound's three-word dictum: "Make it new"; this implicit rejection of the past runs through the rhetoric of both the Futurists' proclamations and Kawakubo's public statements. Having long stated that she starts each time "from zero" (Frankel 2001; Bolton 2017), fashion history holds nothing of value for the designer, she claims, because it refers to objects that already exist (Kawakubo 2013). Volt (1920, 254) mocks the tendency to "revive the classics [and] silly dreams of exhuming the past" and, in his manifesto, champions the dynamism that is at the heart of fashion's perpetual compulsion towards change, novelty and transformation: How could the past hold any value when fashion was its own revolution, always at the ready to leap "over the vertiginous jaws of the Absurd"?

The Futurists had limited occasion to transform their sartorial philosophy into actual garments. None were professionals in the clothing industry and so relied on local tailors or, in the case of Balla, family members to make the garments. No designs were ever mass-produced. The archive then is scant. Balla and Fortunato Depero designed costumes for the Ballet Russes; among other items, Balla made studies for a women's bathing costume; there are a few "antineutral" suits, a waistcoat here and there, and some dresses, scarves, blouses and hats. By contrast, Kawakubo has decades of collections, all photographed and documented, often by the most skilled and avant-garde image creators of our era. If a time-travelling Marinetti, Balla or Volt were to dip into this vast archive, he would find much to applaud. One half of the Futurists' arsenal against bourgeois conformity and staid sartorial conventions was asymmetry—a principle that, from the start, Kawakubo embraced to the extreme in warped and wrapped clothes. The other half was daring use of brilliant color—exemplified in Balla's (1913) "hap-hap-hap-hap-happy clothes"—and although Kawakubo was for years closely aligned with anti-color, once "the black regime of Comme des Garçons" (Thurman 2005) had become cliché she turned to bold, dynamic color with what could be described as futuristic abandon.

In the details—of what the Futurists proposed and Kawakubo designed in her signature Comme des Garçons Ready-to-Wear collections—more similarities emerge. In Kawakubo's most discussed collection, *Body Meets Dress–Dress Meets Body* (spring/summer 1997), Balla's (1914b) concept of "transformable" apparel and the "ingenious counterdispositions of lines" he called for in *The Antineutral Suit* are transposed into a reorganization of the body, where the symmetry of desirable curves is mocked, literally pushed aside and distorted by tumorous lumps and bumps. (Indeed, the collection is widely known as "Lumps and Bumps".) Take away the aggressive intent of Volt's (1920, 253) imagined "gowns that trigger surprises and transformations" and his rather vague conception anticipates Kawakubo's (2013) statement, "I put parts of patterns where they don't usually go". The notion comes to life in *Not Making Clothing*, as well as in earlier collections. In *Cacophony* (spring/summer 2008), Brobdingnagian pockets sprung out from beneath their coats; in *Adult Delinquent* (spring/summer 2010), dresses, skirts and jackets were made entirely of shoulder segments; for *No Theme: Multiple Personalities, Psychological Fear* (spring/summer 2011), garments came with "spares"—one dress would have two more hanging from the shoulders, and jackets had extra sleeves; and in *Hybrid* (autumn/winter 2011–2012), components were collaged and reversed in a "half-and-half idea" (Blanks 2011) that offered a different proposition when seen from the front or the back. The models on the catwalk of *Cacophony* had faces painted Pierrot-white with doll-rouge cheeks and yellow-shaded eyes; in other collections, models have worn atomic clouds of candy-colored hair or sculpted curls in stainless steel. Wearing the new styles of clothing, wrote Volt, would require women of daring and courage, characteristics not inessential to the wearer of Kawakubo's experiments in design. The same holds true for the trailblazing women of fashion history. As the student of dress from the Renaissance through to the Belle Epoque will attest, Volt's (1920, 253) proclamation "Women's fashion can never be extravagant enough" is a vision that belongs as much to the past as to the future he imagined—a future that Kawakubo has realized.

Clothes

A manifesto is a set of rules and Kawakubo likes rules. In the interview with Obrist, rules are a recurring theme. The ground rule is *kachikan*, which translates as "a sense of values" (in Obrist 2013, 40). This goes hand in hand with a rule from the manifesto: "Nothing new can come from a situation that involves being free or that doesn't involve suffering" (Kawakubo 2013). There were rules for the Comme des Garçons guerilla concept stores, including the rule that each store close after a year. Once the concept was widely copied by others, she abandoned it altogether; the idea was no longer new and, well, "The rules are the

rules" (in Obrist 2013, 43). While in conversation with Obrist, she makes up a new rule about another of her retail concepts, the DSM "deconstructed" department stores: Paris cannot have one—it is too bourgeois. When it comes to designing her collections, it is by reacting against rules that Kawakubo gets to something new. The rule for the *Body Meets Dress–Dress Meets Body* collection was "she couldn't do new clothes, so she did new bodies", a rule that was later turned on its head when it came to creating *2 Dimensions* (autumn/winter 2012–2013); here the rule was to "ignore the human body" (in Obrist 2013, 42). Joining this cluster of rules is Kawakubo's spring/summer 2014 collection where breaking the idea of clothes began with the designer trying to not make clothes at all.

In *System* magazine, the 23 looks of this collection are described as "sculptural *objets*", nothing like the "mere clothes" that the rest of "the fashion industry spews out every season" (Obrist 2013, 39). So, what do these "not clothes" look like? The image—from the catwalk and *System*'s accompanying editorial, photographed by Juergen Teller—is my source. First, the catwalk. The dominant colors are black, white and violent fuchsia, interspersed with touches of cobalt, lavender and yellow. Taffeta and ruffles make a regular appearance and so does the skeletal memory of the crinoline and the farthingale. (Despite the rhetoric of her manifesto about working in a void of fashion history, the hypertrophic styles of European women's fashions of previous centuries are regularly reconfigured in Kawakubo's collections.) Nothing is where it should be or what it should be. The "crinoline" is over the dress; a single layer of fabric emits a three-dimensional sheen; skirts are padded and quilted into worm-farms of tumors; there are complicated origami folds; and flatpack pleated dresses look more like the cardboard used to create the pleats than the finished garment itself. It is hard to make sense of it all. What comes to mind is that the contents of an industrial fabric warehouse were blown into the Comme des Garçons workroom via pneumatic tube and a talented alien was tasked with putting it all together.

Typically, magazine editorials dilute the catwalk vision. In the *System* sequence of photographs the catwalk models' unhealthy pallor and off-kilter, black lipstick are wiped clean and the elaborate hair sculptures by long-time Kawakubo collaborator Julien d'Ys are replaced by a simple messy schoolgirl chignon. But the complexity of the clothes remains. On its cover, *System* depicts the model wearing a leg-of-mutton gown in aubergine taffeta under a Kevlar crinoline body frame (Figure 1). On the pages inside, she wears a tunic with asymmetrical panels of box-pleats made from what looks like tailor's fusing; there is a dress that nods to Balenciaga but has the proportions of a car seat; and a slashed black silk oversized Halloween-pumpkin dress is worn with vermillion Mr Squiggle booties. Struggling to describe these objects, I find myself referencing existing fashion, former styles, other designers; unfortunately, all the self-referential tropes of fashion that Kawakubo hopes to escape by not

Figure 1
Lily McMenamy No.1, Comme des Garçons spring/summer 2014, Paris 2013. © Juergen Teller. All rights reserved.

looking at "silly" magazines or fashion history are impossible to avoid. I want to resist taking the path of fashion journalists and the tendency to explain away these garments as conceptual art, "not fashion"; but I cannot do much better than recalling the point made by Thomas Carlyle (1975, 25–26) that in all of history's "Modes and habilitory endeavours, an Architectural Idea will be found lurking". That is the problem with creating something new; everyday vocabulary pulls up short when even a simple word such as "sleeve" loses its meaning, when the thing it refers to is not where it should be and does not look like any sleeve you might have seen before. At the same time, I am beginning to understand that perhaps this is how you break the idea of clothes—in increments, one pattern piece at a time.

When Kawakubo (2013) writes "I break the idea of 'clothes'", she places the word "clothes" in quotation marks, thus putting into doubt what we take for granted. Getting dressed, being clothed is an everyday practice that, writes John Harvey (2008, 11), is "helpful to us in the daily business of life". But what he calls "the normal work of clothes" (2) is far from simple. As an outer shell, a soft husk, as "armor", clothes provide a physical and symbolic barrier between ourselves and the world. Linked to gendered, cultural and social identities, they connect

us to others, but can also separate and protect us from their gaze. They adorn, they attract, they repel, they seduce. They can be beautiful or ugly, invoking admiration, ridicule, respect, vitriol, mistrust or suspicion. They give comfort and cause pain. As an ornament of the soul, they expose and disguise. They can work metaphorically, transferring their own qualities of style, fabric and texture to our characters, our actions and our thoughts. They can lie and be treacherous, turning against us when we least expect it. They can go completely unnoticed—or matter very much.

In breaking the idea of clothes, Kawakubo does not so much ignore the normal work of clothes as add to what clothes do, to what they can be. She changes what clothes signify, confounding register and mode. This was famously the case with the series of collections that began with *Holes* (autumn/winter 1982–1983), in which the designer literally broke down cloth and clothing. Fragile silks were tortured, crumpled and baked; threads were left dangling on terminally unfinished garments; woolen jumpers were shot-gunned with holes and called "lace". Commentators, reaching to understand this new sartorial language, referred first to European fashion history and the Renaissance practice of "slashing" before settling on the theory of deconstruction by way of explanation. Taken in the context of Japanese culture, however, explains Akiko Fukai (2010, 15), what Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto (with whom she is invariably paired in discussions of this period) introduced to a Western audience were the principles of the Japanese terms *wabi*, "without decoration or visible luxury", and *sabi*, "old and atmospheric". The curator Harold Koda described this concept as the "aesthetics of poverty" (in English 2005, 29). On the one hand, it was praised by observers such as Polly Mellon for "showing the way to a whole new way of beauty" (in Fukai 2005, 20), with fans such as the filmmaker (and erstwhile Comme des Garçons model) John Waters (2010, 103) embracing it as "disaster at the drycleaners". On the other hand, for those critics discomfited by the appearance of garments that rejected every rule of Western dressmaking and aesthetics, the collection was "threadbare" and "unwearable" (in Waters 2010, 103). In time, the aesthetic became diluted, familiar and mainstream; rebranded as "grunge", it was entirely wearable and no longer shocking. The rules of conventional fashion had been broken, writes Fukai (2005), and out of this clothing itself had been redefined.

Fashion

The role of fashion in Kawakubo's work cannot be emphasized enough. Even those who claim that "Rei Kawakubo doesn't really do fashion" (Mower 2013) accept that these *objets* are, surprisingly, commercially successful as clothes, with her designs widely copied and destined to influence "swaths of mass fashion" (Mower 2011). Extreme asymmetry,

unfinished garments, unorthodox padding, lattice work, tough-frilliness, cutouts, sliced-and-diced tailoring and the sartorial underpinnings of centuries past are all favorite tropes and motifs of Kawakubo's that have re-emerged in the work of other designers, as well as in the mainstream. It is also true that Kawakubo herself revisits and refines her archive. Amazingly, almost without fail, what she produces is shockingly new. If, as Harvey (2008, 4) writes, "fashion may exaggerate to make its point", then Kawakubo exaggerates the normal work of fashion. Everything that defines fashion—change, transformation, artifice, excess, novelty and the new—is amplified and pushed to the limit in her clothing design. In the Comme des Garçons Ready-to-Wear collections that followed *Not Making Clothing* she continued to break new ground and present images of a dressed body as it had not been seen before. *MONSTER* (autumn/winter 2014–2015) included gargantuan suit jackets, crop tops with sleeves knotted to sleeves that left cuffs trailing along the catwalk, and bundles of woolen jackets that were tangled together, gripping at the body for dear life. Whole figures were draped and obscured. *Blood and Roses* (spring/summer 2015) was entirely in red, with the models enveloped in tumbling vines of roses, trapped in violent blood-splattered canvases or dressed in garments that glistened like bodies turned inside-out. In *The Future of the Silhouette* (autumn/winter 2017–2018), bulbous, oversized garments sculpted the models' bodies into the shape of inflated and distorted Stockman dummies. Materials (described by Kawakubo as "non fabric") were fashioned into insulating waddings of reconstituted lint or patchworked underfelt and married with foil, brown pattern-paper and other non-wovens to create bodies resembling shape-shifting magnets that had attracted the exploding innards of a factory ceiling, or the by-products of a workroom floor.

The difficulty of understanding these uncompromising collections, the attempt to decipher what Kawakubo might be saying about the world, about bodies, about gender, about clothes, about fashion, is a recurring theme in writing by fashion journalists. In reviews, recourse to explaining it away as art is common. In pushing "the boundaries of what 'fashion' is and whether that word even has to translate into wearable clothing", Kawakubo's work "is similar to any other modern art form designed to stir the mind and delight the eye", writes Suzy Menkes (2013). Other journalists also raise the "art question" (Armstrong 2014), describing Kawakubo's visions on the catwalk as "confrontational art" or "perambulating art". Such reviews are written by experts in the field whose presence at the shows, with all the atmospherics provided by music, light and audience, and with access (or proximity) to Kawakubo backstage provide valuable, immediate and often thoughtful reports of collections that can only be viewed by the rest of us via the printed image or online. But in the lead-up to the exhibition at The Met (with its assertion of Kawakubo's work as the "Art of the In-Between"), the art question became unavoidable. Categorizing

fashion as art—especially cutting-edge fashion out of Japan—is not a recent development; more than three decades have passed since *ArtForum* magazine featured on its cover a rattan bodice by Issey Miyake, permanently (it now seems) blurring the boundaries between art and fashion. Of course, fashion *can* be an art form or object, as well as an industry defined by brands and trends. But with the art–fashion–commerce nexus increasingly merging in the production and consumption of commodities and cultural knowledge, the uncritical categorization of it as such remains problematic (see Steele 2008; Melchior and Svensson 2014; Vänskä and Clark 2018).

Over the years, Kawakubo has steadfastly resisted the label of "artist", proclaiming instead that she is a "businesswoman" or, on occasion, an "artist/businesswoman" (Thurman 2005).[5] Against this stands her insistence on a creative process where she starts from zero every time, working out of a void in a manner that (at least in the Western tradition) we associate with the artist-genius-creator. Neither proposition is without its flaws, but whatever it is that Kawakubo does, there is no need to remove it from the realm of fashion, nor of clothes. Rather, the inability, the resistance, the hesitancy to speak of Kawakubo's clothes *qua* clothes and the tendency to displace the term "fashion" with "art", "anti-fashion" or a "refusal" of fashion all together, overlooks what it is that fashion is capable of doing—and being. What Kawakubo demonstrates repeatedly is that—despite needing to dress the human body—beyond human imagination, sartorial fashion is a phenomenon with few limits. Like the constructivist clothing designers Vavara Stepanova and Liubov Popova, who "remodelled themselves not as artists but as artist-producers or artist-engineers, questioning the role of the modern artist and the very ontology of art in the process" (West 2013, 77), Kawakubo forces us to question the ontology of fashion. Her work is challenging because it deals with new realities, ones that do not already exist. Again and again she proves that fashion can be abstract, conceptual, experimental, confrontational, hyper-imaginative and artistic while still remaining within the realm of the body, and while still being wearable and commercially viable as clothes. She does this by setting herself the quest of finding something completely new. More than fashion as art, this is fashion intensified.

A year after the manifesto accompanying *Not Making Clothing* appeared, Kawakubo showed *Ceremony of Separation* (autumn/winter 2015–2016), a collection with 18 looks restricted to a strict palette of gold, black and white. Brocade, lace and tulle dominated, decorated with touches of fur, satin and PVC. There were massive bows, unexpected cutouts, a spherical sandwich-board dress, bodies all bundled and tied, and the familiar refrain of tumorous padding that distorted the frames of models whose faces were obscured behind severe "lace" veils of hair. To those present it felt like a culmination or a requiem and was written about in mournful, elegiac terms. Might the suffering that

Kawakubo wrote about in the manifesto as being essential to creating something new finally have taken its toll? Could this collection be her last? The palette of white, black and gold, wrote Jo-Ann Furniss (2015), "took on the ritualised connotations of grief: white as the Eastern expression of loss, black as the Western, and gold the most ornately ceremonial with its role in the burial rituals and death masks … found in ancient tombs … of the Egyptian pharaohs"; in these clothes, Kawakubo was addressing "the finality of death".

As has often been observed, death and fashion are never far apart (see Benjamin 1999; Evans 2003; Vinken 2005; Barthes 2006). Predicated on constant change and the repudiation of the immediate past, fashion's creations are fleeting and ephemeral, "meant to live for a few perfect moments and then be replaced by the next" (Hollander 1994, 164). But fashion's is a strange kind of death, one without finality, one that heralds endless rebirth and renewal. When on the catwalk and in the shops trends are rehashed and the past endlessly exhumed, when on the street and in our daily lives the "new" is rarely new, it is easy to think of fashion in its debased form of novelty. Yet, this erasure of the past reveals an unrestrained compulsion to create new realities. It is this that fashion insiders witness in the presence of a Comme des Garçons show. Starting out with "the intention of not even trying to make clothes" (Kawakubo 2013), the designer waits for something completely new to be born and, out of this waiting, out of this suffering, Rei Kawakubo creates pure fashion.

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Notes

1. The titles applied to Comme des Garçons collections are derived from the typically cryptic and riddle-like directives provided by Kawakubo to journalists and so can be inconsistently applied in reportage and commentary of the designer's shows. In this article, where relevant, I have employed the titles as listed in the exhibition catalogue for *Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between* (Bolton 2017).
2. A more nuanced view was offered by Jo-Ann Furniss (2013) on the *Vogue* website, who wrote: "To pass judgments on 'wearability' or 'practicality' just seems facile, especially as figures such as Leigh Bowery have existed in the past and helped move the goal posts of the perception of clothing and fashion."
3. While a detailed discussion of how Kawakubo's work has been critically analyzed is beyond the scope of this article, fashion

scholars have employed a range of methodological approaches, including deconstruction (English 2005, 2011; Martin and Koda 1993), the Bahktinian grotesque (Granata 2017), and the aesthetic principles of Zen Buddhism (Bolton 2017; Fukai 2005).

4. A second generation of Futurists formulated fashion manifestos in the early 1930s: *The Aesthetics of Dress: Sunny Fashion, Futurist Fashion* (1930); *Manifesto for the Transformation of Male Clothing* (1932); *The Futurist Manifesto of the Italian Hat* (1933); and *The Futurist Manifesto of the Italian Tie* (1933). All reprinted in Stern (2005). Concerned primarily with creating a nationalist, anti-northern style that was practical, hygienic and responded to the Italian climate, these manifestos do not fall within the interest of this study.
5. Perhaps exhausted by the need to constantly disclaim the label of artist, in the publicity and publications surrounding the exhibition at The Met, Kawakubo appeared to reluctantly accept the title so often bestowed on her (see de la Haye and Horsley 2018). However, Bolton (2017,15) confirms that she continues to refuse the title even as she concedes that fashion could be considered as art.

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