

Time, Cruelty and Destruction in Deconstructivist Fashion: Kawakubo, Margiela and Vetements

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that deconstruction in fashion was ushered in by the first major collections of Rei Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons) in the early 1980s. Kawakubo, together with Vivienne Westwood and Martin Margiela revolutionised fashion by turning their back on finery and preciousness in favour of a fundamentally aberrant sartorial language that suggested impoverishment, discontinuity and discord. However, these three designers came to this aesthetic in differing ways and intentions. As we argue in detail in *Critical Fashion Practice* (2017) Kawakubo's (and Martin Margiela's) approach can be strongly aligned to the philosophies of deconstruction as advanced by Jacques Derrida, and more specifically to *deconstructivism* which is the more structural and practical application of deconstructionist principles when applied to architecture. Kawakubo's deconstructivist approach destabilises binaries of inside-outside, body-clothing, old-new, worn and discarded, and so on. Kawakubo's ground-breaking designs went on to influence Margiela who would revolt against the holy scriptures of couture by experimenting with silhouettes, reversing linings and hems inside out and experimenting with oversized proportions. Just as Derridean approaches to philosophy, literature and cultural theory influenced feminist and postcolonial scholars, so too has Kawakubo and Margiela influenced several generations of designers and such as Demna Gvasalia of Vetements, who have not only followed Margiela's example but continues to expand the notion of what clothing, fashion and dress means, functions and signifies in the Anthropocene age.

Keywords: Deconstructionist fashion; Silhouette; Destruction; Time; Critical fashion practice.

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Introduction

Haute Couture as it was shaped by Charles Frederick Worth in the latter half of the nineteenth century was built on the premise of preciousness, craftsmanship and an unquestioned order of beauty. There was something unshakable about it, as unshakable as the lineages and status of the feudal order it clothed, and whose very status were soon to be toppled in a succession of wars and upheavals culminating in the First World War. Haute Couture was based on finery and finesse, the abilities of the couturier — who in the hands of Worth was now elevated to that of an artist — were commensurate with the power and importance of the wearer. Even the “inspiration” for Worth’s gowns, as is well known, came from a canon of undisputed Western masters of painting from the Renaissance to the Rococo. In its beginnings, the language of fashion placed wealth and precocity on a par with design. Well after the elaborate sartorial apparatus and Worth and his contemporaries had been dispensed with, fashion from the base to its highest levels persisted according to a series of givens. Pre-eminent among them included that soiling and wearing was a degradation of the garment, and that superficial details and superfluities, if not serving the decorative harmony of the garment, ought to be kept to a minimum. The first criterion was one of class, the second of taste, which also had to do with class. As in the language of white linen for hundreds of years, only those with the means could afford to keep them consistently white.

Fashion became radically simplified in the 1920s, making women more mobile, softening (but not breaking) lines of class and privilege, while replacing fabrics such as silks, damasks and satins, which had long been at the high register of sartorial taste with cheaper more available cotton. Chanel’s *marinière* top, a simple blue-striped cotton shirt derived from sailors’ uniforms, was welcomed at the time it appeared after the First World War as it was viewed as not overstepping in appearance or material in a time of economic fragility that could scarcely afford excess.¹ After the Second World War with the accelerating proliferation popular culture, the rise of counter-cultural youth casualised fashion to an even greater extent, as a protest against the straight-laced formality of their elders. But still there was a conformity to tenets of clean and kempt clothing. The now ubiquitous combination of white T-shirt and waist-length jacket hailed from aviator military dress: they were simple and utilitarian. It was only in the wake of the protest movements of the 1960s that some fashions began to redefine themselves and to seek a break with the past, against the status quo that had precipitated two devastating wars, and to express the pressures exerted by the Cold War.

While the ’60s and ’70s witnessed an interest in Sci-Fi futuristic clothing, exemplified in designs by André Courrèges at the time, another approach slowly made itself known, which was associated with a new kind of disaffected youth. Vivienne Westwood and her partner, Malcolm McLaren are given the lion’s share of credit for punk fashion, which in its early years in the 1970s involved repurposed and recycled fashion, DIY techniques, and the incorporation of rips and tears, and the inclusion of a syntax of violence in the use of studs, spikes, and the like. In short, fashion was beginning to be deconstructed, inasmuch as it no longer accepted long-held, canonical standards of propriety and taste, especially in the way that shabby had become irrepressibly chic. But further, fashions of this kind no longer abided by rules and givens such as what constituted inside and outside, whether the clothing followed the contours of the body. Kawakubo is one of the chief pioneers of this approach to fashion that was taken up by Japanese designers in her wake, such as Yohji Yamamoto, Junya Watanabe and Noir Kei Ninomiya. But it is a project not limited to contemporary Japanese fashion alone, the Antwerp 6, especially Anne Demuelmeister and Martin Margiela were also interested in the ways in which deconstructive fashion challenged the fashion system by questioning tenets of beauty and luxury and reinventing traditional rules of tailoring and silhouette. In a similar vein to that of Kawakubo’s earliest collections, Margiela produced garments that looked unfinished that seem to follow a different pathology, mutating garments so that they looked like a composite of misshapen fragments with billowing silhouettes. Garments that were sewn inside out, were frayed and tattered and contained missing sleeves.

Designing during the excesses of the ’80s, when fashion had propelled designers to celebrity status,

1. See Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Fashion and Masculinities in Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 72.

Margiela preferred anonymity and referred to his work in a collective sense, often using the pronoun “we” rather than “I”. His store was located in an unmarked space in Paris and its interior was completely white, and in accordance, his entire atelier who dressed in white lab coats to lend an air of conformity and anonymity. When catwalk shows were opulent and exclusive spectacles with rarified bodies to match equally rarified garments, by contrast, Margiela chose to use people from the street rather than professional models, and his early shows were more akin to art happenings and performance installations. Margiela influenced a great number of designers in his wake, including Marc Jacobs and Muccia Prada, but none more so than Demna Gvasalia, creative director of Balenciaga and Vetements. (*Vêtements* means “clothing” in French.) The principal factor that unites these approaches is a sartorial syntax of time. Time is the centrepiece in the apparently hurried approach to making, or the signs of wear. Imminent to the garment is the garment’s very immanence. In this regard with deconstruction in fashion, fashion is endowed with an ontology of a being-toward-death. While it is said that fashion is already past the moment it is shown, the moment it comes to be, with deconstruction in fashion, there present highlights a past and a putative future, and an end, all projected in the mutability and (mortal) fallibility of the garment itself.

Destruction, Deconstruction, Deconstructivism

For the sake of analysis and argument, it matters little that Westwood predates Kawakubo or Margiela by a small number of years in making clothes with stress, tears and holes. What concerns us here is that their styles evolved from different circumstances, and with different motives in mind. To characterise the difference, it may be best to turn to the expanded applications of the term “deconstruction” and its misuse, or to put it more generously, the looser and more colloquial usages. “Deconstruction” is often used instead of “dismantle”, “disaggregate”, disassemble, “pull apart”, “take to pieces”, undo, and in plainer parlance, simply destruction. Indeed, “Destroy” has become a popular metonymic epithet for Kawakubo’s work, not only in its use of methods of breakage and degradation, but for the way it shatters basic sartorial premises and protocols. But while we will not persist too far with contesting the use of this term — as terms from journalism derive not from philosophical rigor but from their capacity to conjure and to stick — it is in fact Westwood in the 1970s and to some extent the early ’80s for whom destruction is the main strategy. Destruction in the manner of Punk and related subcultures: the destruction of firmly entrenched social strata, a wholesale rejection in a convulsive style that was as repellent to the status quo as it was potentially self-destructive, as in the fate of the Sex Pistols and countless other hapless suburban punks. The Punk aesthetic is rooted in frustration and anger, and call to violence as a result of impatience with the slow pace of social evolution. So to speak rigorously, “deconstruction” as used in fashion conflates the philosophical application of the term as destabilizing assumed hierarchies with that of a more simplified understanding of destruction per se, however much such destruction does indeed destabilize and reorient habitual power-language stereotypes.

By contrast to punk, the destruction played out in the work of Kawakubo is one that is more silent, and it is experienced not as a provocation but as an aftermath. Hers is an aesthetic of ruins and of mourning. As we have argued in detail in *Critical Fashion Practice*, Kawakubo’s practice can more properly be called “deconstructivism”, which designates the adaptation of the philosophical principles of deconstruction into architecture.² That is, architecture needed to be workable and functional expression of the deeper abstract beliefs around discontinuity, pluralism, dysfunctionality and discord. Otherwise referred to as postmodern architecture, the most famous proponents include Robert Venturi, Eero Saarinen, Daniel Libeskind, Renzo Piano, Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman, the latter at one point having engaged in a philosophical dialogue with Derrida over the relationship between deconstruction and philosophy and deconstruction and architecture. Deconstructivism faced its own impossibility head-on through the metaphors of the plan on the one hand and the ruin on the other. The big questions were how to engage with transience, permeability and fallibility in structures that were expensive to build and were answerable to practical applications.

2. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Critical Fashion Practice from Westwood to van Beirendonck* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 33–35.

All of this is easy to transpose into the tropes of fashion, and all the easier as single garments are significantly cheaper and have less to risk than whole buildings. Asymmetry, unaccountability and gratuitousness — all that represents a spoliation of modernist ideals of architecture — are active in deconstructivist design. In 1983, Rei Kawakubo launched her career-making collection, “Destroy”, which would cast a long shadow of inference over many collections to come. Commentators would draw parallels between the stressed fabrics and the gaping holes with an aesthetic mourning the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a connection that Kawakubo continues to deny. Nonetheless, the correlation has proven particularly tenacious, and “*Le mode Destroy*” is often referred to as “Hiroshima chic.”³ *La mode Destroy* are garments that were literally dismantled in an expression of nihilism and revolt. Six years later in 1989, Margiela would launch his first ready-to-wear collection of deconstructed flat-folding and upcycled garments that suspend in paradox the construction and the decay of clothing. His preference for the abject, epitomised by the old, the used and the one-off, appeared as tropes of poverty and disenfranchisement. Garments were cut up and stitched together, a ball gown became a long waistcoat, a mannequin is recreated as a waistcoat so that “foundation becomes outerwear, the body becomes the dress.”⁴ If time has made the use of such phrases acceptable rather than insensitive, time has also shown that the tendency toward symmetry, simplicity and suitability are insufficient expressions to the new millennial age of multiple crises and new ways of thinking about the body in its closer and closer encounters with biogenetic engineering, prostheses, cosmetic surgery, and other interventions. Deconstruction in fashion is as pertinent as ever as we confront an increasingly fragile notion of the concept of the natural, and hence the normal, the stable, the essential.

Time and Self-Destruction

By introducing holes and other signs of wear, Kawakubo’s and Margiela’s garments engaged in the language of time, hence of wear, mortality and death. Again, there are some subtle distinctions to be made between Kawakubo and Margiela’s garments and those of Westwood’s repurposed clothing. Westwood’s DIY aesthetic reaches to a culture for whom recycling is a necessity, elevating it to the dignity of fashion, but if it speaks of ennui and anomie, it is clothing that does not hold the same kind of melancholia as that of Kawakubo in the early collections, in other later ones for that matter, or Margiela’s. While the history behind Westwood’s repurposed garments is a de facto one, it does little to illicit a narrative of the absent presence of a body. What was remarkable about the language of wear, and the traces of a past, in Kawakubo’s and Margiela’s collections, is that it was a language analogous to the language of literary fiction that in its intensity still sought to speak a language of truth. For the holes, stretches, tarnishings, and so on were not the work of life, but rather gestured to an anonymous and universal past. Thus, the garment was imbued with the language of time, a time and a life before that was entirely hypothetical, but which perforce had to be linked to a future and an end. Hence the destruction within the garments is far from limited to the details themselves, as signs of hostility and decay, but in foregrounding time itself, by making time internal to the meaning. How can deconstruction be used as a method to unpack this approach to time in its relation to fashion?

In an early essay in *Writing and Difference*, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation”, Derrida delves into Antonin Artaud’s undertaking to undermine and ultimately destroy representation and the possibility of a pure theatre. The essence of theatre, which makes it difference from film even when it is filmed, is time. Film is representation from the outset, while a filmed theatrical performance is always a record of what will never be again. Representation, as is so often noted is a presentation again as signaled in the prefix “re”, and thereby implies a lag in time. Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is an attempt to overstep this lag, to avoid it altogether. As Derrida affirms:

The theatre of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself inasmuch as life is unrepresentable. Life is the non-representable origin of representation. “I’ve said ‘cruelty’ as I

3. Jake Hall, “Destroy,” *Stylejournno blogspot*, July 29, 2013, <https://stylejournno.blogspot.com/2013/07/destroy.html>.

4. Caroline Evans, “The Golden Dustman: A Critical Evaluation of the Work of Martin Margiela and a Review of Martin Margiela: Exhibition (9/4/1615),” *Fashion Theory* 2:1, (1998): 75.

would say ‘life.’” This life carries man (sic) but is not the primary life of man (sic). It is only a representation of life and in this lies the limit — the humanist limit — of the meta-physics of classical theatre.⁵

For this to be achieved, however, Derrida explains that Artaud would need to remove theatre’s tie to language, thereby severing its connection to human interpretation toward a basic and primordial immediacy that has its being only in a present action.

Then Derrida proceeds to an observation that has rich appurtenance to the language of destruction in fashion, the language that foregoes objective standards of quality and the good:

The theatre of cruelty chases God from the scene. It doesn’t stage a new atheist discourse, it does not borrow the words of atheism, it does not raise theatrical space to that of a philosophical logic proclaiming once again, for the sake of our greater lassitude, the death of God. It is the theatrical practice of cruelty which, in structure and act, inhabits or rather *produces* a non-theological space.⁶

In other words, it allows for a slippage that elides laws and rules. “Theology” is used as a multi-valent term that applies to rules, to causality and a regime of obeisance to these rules. To abjure rules is to open up a space of cruelty, of destruction, in which there is no totalizing order. While theology is retained in the sense of authorship, it is destabilised in the premium set on chance. “Cruelty” and “destruction” are deployed as mechanisms to interrupt the basic flows of creative endeavour and of interpretation.

Traditional high fashion is one that affords itself an authority that it believes to be universal. Fashion dedicated to destabilisation defies order, linear time and logic, symmetry and beauty. Destabilised fashion — fashion devoted to destruction and, if we may now add, cruelty — is fashion that follows no positive direction, or progression. Even if it points to a past and a future, these are not ideal points, as its temporality is always rhizomatic. It can be compared to what Derrida calls abstract theatre in regard to Artaud. Abstract theatre is what forgoes “the totality of art, and so life and its resources of communication: dance, music, volume, physical depth, the visible image, sonority, the phonic, etc. An abstract theatre is a theatre in which the totality of sense and senses would not be consummated.”⁷ Despite all of this, Artaud’s efforts are thwarted, because there is no pure present, as the present is accompanied by its double which is its representation of having been present, a repetition that must transpire as affirmation of what occurred.

In the deconstructive garment, the interminable overlap of time exists from the very point of its false origin, or origins. Time is injected into the garment, where the garment’s origin lies in the insertion, and hence the repetition of the past seen in trace of the hole, the tear, the stretch, or the stain. These signs are a re-presentation of something, and existing only as a representation. Yet it this kind of fashion it is impossible to replicate in its essence, as only orthodox can, for each spoil, however intricately similar is still in its organisation and its minutia, unique. “The theatre as repetition of what does not repeat” observes Derrida, “the theatre as originary repetition of the difference in the conflict of forces, where ‘evil is the permanent law, and what is good is an effort and already a form of cruelty superadded to the other’, such is the mortal limit of cruelty that begins with its own representation.”⁸ Deconstructivist fashion must always begin with its own representation by its situatedness in time, but not a time but in an abstract time. Its history is always abstract but because of that, most forcefully there. It participates in the proverbial “ends of man” (sic) through its indefinite and unspecific nature which alerts us to the ways in which time is created, just as beings and personalities are created, and recreated through strategies and social languages, fashion being prominent among them.

5. Jacques Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 343, emphasis in the original.

6. Ibid., 345, emphasis in the original.

7. Ibid., 358.

8. Ibid., 267.



Figure 1: Vetements and DHL Couriers collaboration

From Hiroshima Chic to Landfill Lux

As we wrote in the *End of Fashion* (2019), the ways in which modern fashion has been produced, manufactured, consumed and disseminated has radically shifted since its inception in the nineteenth century. Almost a century later, the setting of styles by the aristocratic elite that trickled down and were imitated by the masses began to bubble-up, moving from the street to the catwalk. The breakdown of social class differentiations and the collapse of style distinctions via mediation and digitalization meant that fashion was no longer about class distinction but represented representation itself. The demand for new fashion collections and the speed in which fashion travelled capturing trends and propelling forward cheap synthetic copies of original styles resulted in what can be called “landfill lux”. The more one had the more one wanted. Fashion labels responded by increasing the number of yearly collections, sending the fashion system into overdrive and in turn becoming unsustainable. Fashion had reached its apogee or its “end time.” It is in this space of annihilation that Demna Gvasalia, creative director of Balenciaga, and his brother Guram, created the deconstructed streetwear label Vetements, tapping into a new *Zeitgeist* that defined the spirit and mood of the times. “It’s a kind of movement, but it’s an air in fashion in general,” Gvasalia told *i-D Magazine* in 2016, reflecting on the new mood, aesthetic, and silhouette of the era. Hypebeast and haute couture are two very different worlds, but they function as mirrors of each other.”⁹

In Vetements, Gvasalia brings together a team of creative streetwear designers from historic fashion houses to form a “design collective” that deconstruct garments and logos from multinational conglomerates. Levis jeans DHL Couriers, Heineken beer and Internet Explorer mixed together political themes and symbols of luxury, making no distinction between high and low culture, kitsch and chic, corporate and cool, mainstream and underground (Fig. 1). All of a sudden streetwear became very serious rising from low to high fashion and mixing hypebeast with haute couture. Where once Kawakubo’s designs heralded the destruction and degradation of a post nuclear world, Vetements turns streetwear into a statement about the corporatisation of everyday life at a time when cultural establishments are crum-

9. “How Demna Gvasalia’s Balenciaga defined the Aesthetic of a Generation,” *iD Magazine*, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/xwvwj3/how-demnas-balenciaga-took-over-the-world-and-defined-the-aesthetic-of-a-generation, accessed February 4, 2020.

bling. Whilst the deconstructive ethos of Kawakubo's and Margiela's work makes use of the signifiers of ruin in a very active and confrontational way in the ways in which garments are tattered and torn, Vetements takes ugly, big and chunky "dad" sneakers (Balenciaga's Triple S) and upcycled jeans and turns them into revolutionary statements about meta-nationals, large stateless companies that are coordinated out of swiss holding accounts, unsettling the definition of global superpowers. To borrow from the title of Slavoj Žižek's book (who paraphrases Jean Baudrillard) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: for a generation that has been raised on climate change and environmental destruction, Vetements taps into the new world order where the forces of capital and technology have superseded the nation state. As Žižek notes, "the ultimate truth of the capitalist despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of the 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show."¹⁰ According to Žižek, the ultimate American paranoid fantasy is when an individual living an idyllic life of consumption suddenly suspects that the world that they live in is a fake, a ruse staged to fool them into believing that they are living in a real world.¹¹ "Luxury used to be so exclusive that it would sell a dream to the people who could afford it, and to others who couldn't afford it to still dream about," Gvasalia said. "For me, fashion has to be inclusive and cannot be exclusive any longer to survive. It no longer sells a dream, but it sells an identity to people," be it a corporate identity turned on its head.

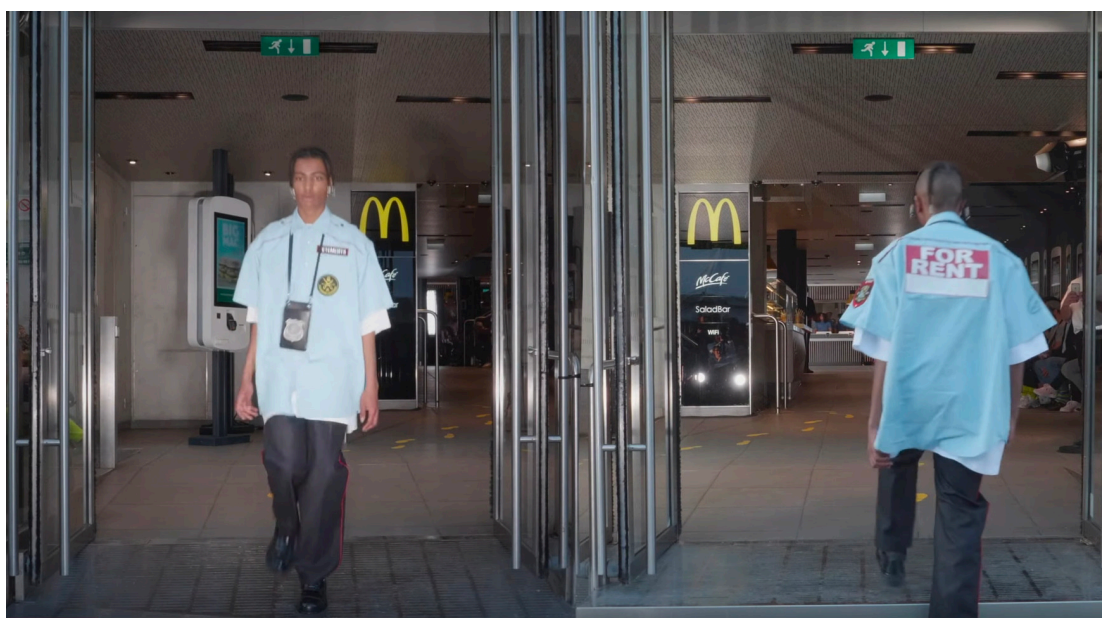


Figure 2: Vetements Menswear Spring/Summer 2020 Paris fashion week, McDonalds, Paris

During Spring/Summer 2020 Paris fashion week, Vetements staged its menswear collection in a McDonalds franchise store. Models dressed in the familiar red and yellow themed attire offered milkshakes and paper cups of coca cola as audiences were seated in tables and booths. A model appeared wearing a deconstructed McDonalds staff uniform with a name badge that read "capitalism" pinned on his chest. Another model wore a version of a security uniform with an embroidered Vetements badge as the security company logo (Fig. 2). Uniforms were exaggerated and subverted and deconstructed tailoring and sizing was blown up to XXL proportions with wide short sleeves tapering down to the elbows. Over-size is Gvasalia's territory. Writing on Victor & Rolf, Patrizia Calefato notes that the designers have incorporated two types of semiotic strategies in their garments: the first involves inserting the text that transforms the garment into a word and the second strategy uses the traditional inscription as in the

10. Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," in *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentriccia (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 131.

11. Ibid., 131

case of t-shirts.¹² The same semiotic strategies have been applied by Vetements, the words Internet Explorer became “ecstasy” and Heineken became “Vetements”. Tropes of capitalism are twisted and their original meanings perverted as brand logos are dismantled and given a new context in the collection. By deconstructing corporate logos and upcycling garments, Vetements effectively inserts a ghost or spectre into the clothing suggesting that the garment or logo is haunted with a previous life. The garment is no longer an original but a copy, a residual form of something past. Margiela’s own garments carried a ‘ghost tag’ that were marked by only four white stitches. No name. No label. Simply anonymous. This is because Margiela shunned the cult of celebrity which haunts the designer, instead preferring anonymity over stardom.

Gvasalia’s luxury leather version of the original 99 cent blue IKEA polypropylene Frakta tote bag that he designed for Balenciaga sold for \$2000 US dollars. Then there was the banana yellow DHL Express t-shirt that sold for \$300 and expanded the collection in 2018 to include a baseball cap, jacket and socks. When placed in the context of a luxury fashion item, the t-shirt’s original meaning as a courier company is disrupted, commenting instead, on the frivolity of consumer culture and the perceived value of clothing. Furthermore, the link between an original and copy, high and low, popular culture and the everyday can be traced back to the work of Marcel Duchamp, with his *Bottle Rack* (1914) or *Fountain* (1917), an up-ended urinal signed “R. Mutt”. Thus “[the Balenciaga IKEA bag] is a perfect example of Readymades, but there is a little bit more to it,” said Gvasalia. “We changed the logo and we made it beautifully out of leather and that’s why it costs so much money.”¹³

In the Ghost of Margiela

Gvasalia learnt about the tenets of deconstruction when fresh out of The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp when he was employed at Maison Margiela designing its womenswear collection. Margiela himself was an alum of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the de-facto minimalist member of the Antwerp 6 fashion collective. He was known for his conceptual designs, repurposing vintage clothing, making seams visible and expanding all the proportions of a garment, including pockets, zippers and buttons. Gvasalia has followed Margiela’s suit, adding references to streetwear and urban culture which were not part of the Margiela legacy. Margiela had a predilection to show his collections at unusual derelict locations; car parks and warehouses where models moved anonymously amongst the crowds. As Caroline Evans notes, Margiela’s shows were more like performance and installations rather than catwalk presentations. Two shows might take place simultaneously, one containing white garments, the other black. Or, a series of presentations might take place at the same time across multiple cities.¹⁴ In the Autumn of 1989, Margiela chose a derelict playground replete with graffitied walls and dilapidated buildings in the 20th arrondissement of Paris to show his collection. The seating was first come first serve, the rows were filled with local children and the runway was uneven as models stumbled across the floor. The show was a game-changer, fashion was “then about bold colours, wide shoulders; everything was extravagant, big and bold and here was Margiela with ripped sleeves and frayed hems with tailored jackets made of dry-cleaning bags.”¹⁵

Gvasalia as well chose grungy underground venues like the Parisian gay sex club Le Dépôt for Vetements Fall/Winter 2015 collection which featured hoodies and supersized trench coats. Vetements straight legged, high-rise jeans made from second hand vintage denim was first introduced in the labels debut collection in 2014, but it did not gain cult status until the Fall/Winter 2015 show. The jeans are made

12. Patrizia Calefato, *Fashion, Time, Language*, Éditions universitaires européennes, (Moldova: Verlag, 2017), 47.

13. “Demna Gvasalia on Appropriation, Ugly Sneakers and the Curse of Pre-Collections,” *WWD*, February 26, 2019, <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/demna-gvasalia-talks-appropriation-ugly-sneakers-and-the-curse-of-pre-collections-1203001305/>, accessed February 2, 2020.

14. Caroline Evans, “*The Golden Dustman*,” 79.

15. Richard O’Mahoney, “Remembered: The Game Changing Martin Margiela Show of 1989,” *BOF*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/bof-exclusive/remembered-the-game-changing-martin-margiela-show-of-1989>, accessed February 10, 2020.



Figure 3: Vetements Spring/Summer 2017 Galeries Lafayette, Paris

of two reworked pairs of jeans, cut along the seams and restitched together, much like Margiela who dissected garments and reworked them into new and unusual contexts. The Spring/Summer 2014 collection was shown at the kitch banquet style Chinese restaurant, Le President in Paris' old Chinatown Belleville and featured Vetements staple long hoodies with graphics featuring Leo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet in *The Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997) and leather jackets that were comfortable when worn sitting on motorbikes and deconstructed when standing. Then for Vetements Spring/Summer 2017 collection the label hijacked Galeries Lafayette department store in Paris whilst it was still open to the public (Fig. 3). Breaking with the fashion calendar and showing in October instead of July, the "anti-couture" collection consisting of menswear and womenswear, featured oversized and reworked garments from eighteen different brands. "The idea was to take the iconic, the most recognizable product from their brand, and put it into a Vetements frame, whether in terms of shape or construction."¹⁶ noted Gvasalia. Juicy Couture's baby-hued velour trackpants and hoodies became evening wear, Brioni tailored jackets were glued together rather than traditionally stitched so that the jacket became a single layered garment, oversized and deconstructed. There was also the Manolo Blahnik Hangisi shoe whose sparkling signature was removed transforming them into kitten heel sling backs that tied at the ankle, a court shoe and an ankle and thigh high boot with frayed edges and unfinished closings. "We're going to destroy the shoes. Are you okay with that?" Gvasalia told Blahnik and he said, "Well, I love that. Please, please, please, destroy them."¹⁷

While Margiela's deployment of deconstructive methods, his persistence with the concept of renewal and his reuse of materials, drew attention to the concept of "disposable fashion," Vetements blends couture with streetwear to comment on the banality of fashion, or to be more precise, fashion's demise. By naming the fashion brand after the French word for mere clothing, Gvasalia renders fashion obsolete. "I started Vetements because I was bored of fashion and against all odds fashion did change once and

16. Cathy Horne, "Vetements Redefines the Whole Idea of Designer Collaborations in one show," *The Cut*, July 23, 2016, <https://www.thecut.com/2016/06/vetements-collaboration-levis-juicy-hanes-18-brands.html>, accessed February 3, 2020.

17. Ibid.



Figure 4: Vetements Paris Menswear Fashion Fall/Winter 2018, Paul Bert Serpette flea markets, Paris

forever since Vetements [has] appeared.”¹⁸ Or at least, Vetements changed couture fashion rendering it more practical and utilitarian. One could have easily mistaken the most coveted invitation to Paris Menswear Fashion Fall/Winter 2018 as nothing more than a shopping receipt and casually thrown it in the bin. Except, that on closer observation one realises that the scrap of paper is the invitation to the off-schedule presentation of Vetements show at the Paul Bert Serpette flea markets in Paris’ Saint-Ouen district (Fig. 4). Aptly named “The Elephant in the Room,” Gvasalia was referring to Margiela who began repurposing old garments from flea markets unpicking the seams and reworking the garments into new arrangements. As Caroline Evans explains, “Margiela scavenged and revitalised moribund materials and turned rubbish back into commodity form.”¹⁹ The hybrid garments in this Vetements collection were worked-up fabrics exposing linings and labels. Jeans were cut out to resemble army camouflage nets, denim jacket were scattered with floral embroidery and t-shirts had been retooled as patchworks. As much as the garments in this collection looked like repurposed old clothes, they weren’t. Instead they would end up as new manufactured garments sold at a price point that would be on par with the majority of couture collections. They became a very exclusive (and expensive) apocalyptic vision of a deteriorating world. If one key aspect of deconstruction is to reverse standard binaries, then this had been done indeed, for detritus had been converted into luxury. The only thing that remained unchallenged was that the creative audacity for doing so would continue to be rewarded by prices that only the very elite (or the reckless) could justify.

No Garments, No Show

Rather than staging a catwalk show for Vetements’s Spring/Summer 2018 Menswear collection, Gvasalia photographed people in various fashion poses wearing the garments on the streets of Zurich outside a bank, a grocery store, in a park and on a bridge. The photographs were then enlarged to life-size prints and a lookbook was placed on display in a parking lot in Paris near the Gare Saint-Lazare for a press party. The lookbook was presented to buyers the following day at the Vetements showroom along with the collection. The installation was clearly intended to mock the pretensions and conventions of fashion by not producing a show, but instead holding the garments in suspension, or in absence in an effort to expose how the hype surrounding catwalk productions generate a greater value than the garments themselves. The installation was very much in the vein of Martin Margiela’s Fall/Winter 1993-94 which produced a film instead of showing an actual collection. Using a Super-8

18. Miles Sossa, “Demna Gvasalia Exists Vetements,” *WWD*, September 16, 2019, <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/demna-gvasalia-exits-vetements-exclusive-1203283590/>, accessed February 8, 2020.

19. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 249–250.

camera, Margiela filmed seven women of differing ages wearing the garments from the collection at home or in settings from their everyday lives and then invited buyers and the press to the show room to view the film. The garments were completely absent, only their representation existed on the screen. As we wrote in *Critical Fashion Practice*, “absence can stand for many things such as the void that the fetish seeks to disavow; perception and desire; the; the intangibility and irreducibility of perception and desire (as applied to fashion or anything else); the absence of the precise starting point for the fashion object, or the absence of the pure thing.”²⁰ The concept behind Vetement’s “No Show” was simple enough: a candid comment on the overproduction of fashion and its conspicuous consumption, in other words, no garments, no waste. In another attempt to draw attention to the frenetic pace (and prodigious waste) of the fashion system, Vetements installed a large pile of old mismatched clothes donated by Saks employees in the display window of Saks Fifth Avenue. At the end of the show the clothes were donated to RewearAble, a social justice charity that recycles clothing. Similar installations followed at Maxfield’s in Los Angeles and Harrods in London. Labelled a “disrupter” by the press, Vetements agenda is to deconstruct the fashion system by showing two off season shows a year, mixing women and menswear garments in his collections and not creating a pre-season, resort or cruise collection.

Recently, Paul Tierny called on the need for a degree of introspection and the role that Kawakubo, Margiela and their epigones have played in destabilizing the entrenched complacency of the fashion world:

Gvasalia has simply filled a gap that wasn’t being filled by any other brand and the time was right for it. Fashion needed a kick up the arse. It needed a new Kawakubo, who pissed off the French fashion aristocracy in the late eighties. It needed a Margiela, who drastically changed the shapes and silhouettes we wore and still wear. It needed creativity to preside over commerce and challenge the system that is so desperately outdated. Those who don’t get it will catch up in twenty years and wish they’d bought it and kept it. And now that Demna is royally flipping it to the system and not succumbing to the circus, he’s truly carrying the Margiela torch. More designers need to, it’s the only way fashion will get its integrity back.”²¹

While all revolutions come at a considerable price, revolutions in fashion continue to come with a considerable price tag. Alas, not many can participate in it. But what is also true is the trickle-down effect of high fashion. If from a philosophical point of view “deconstruction” is often used in a loose and literal way in fashion, the salutary effects can be far deeper and more widespread. From haute couture to streetwear, fashion has survived on imitation, and to make recycling chic, and even more to make it a common day practice available to all is a commendable aspiration — we only hope that that aspiration has not come too late.

20. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Critical Fashion Practice*, 91.

21. Paul Tierny, “Martin Margiela. Deconstructing to reconstruct,” *Neue Luxury*, Issue 5, <https://www.neueluxury.com/feature/martin-margiela/>, accessed February 6, 2020.

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