

(Ap)Praising Vetements: the Celebrity Digital Surface and the Making of a Leading Fashion Brand

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Abstract

In this paper, I situate the meteoric rise of the Parisian fashion collective Vetements within the paratextual circulation of celebrity images that have accompanied the press, media, and publicity coverage for this brand. I argue that “selling out” is a pithy turn-of-phrase that is useful for understanding Vetements’ aesthetic and business sensibilities. As the literalness of the translation of Vetements into “clothes” makes clear, Vetements strips the wide-eyed lure of luxury fashion—one that evokes both the extravagancy of the runway or red carpet and the expert craftsmanship of couture—and replaces it with a form of what I am calling spectacular mundanity, offering products that are simultaneously more and less real than your mother’s weathered, vintage Champion hoodie. The brand’s exchange value, I argue, is made extravagant not through any notion of intrinsic worth, as is the case with couture and the logics of congealed labor and expert craft held therein, but rather through the symbolic surplus value generated through the brand’s proximity to celebrity culture and its discursively constructed status as an “it brand”.

Keywords: Commodity Fetishism; Reality Television; Instagram; Demna Gvasalia; Meme

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Introduction

Vetements translates from the French as “clothes.” Google the brand, and the first thing to appear is a question: “Is Vetements a joke.” Ask Lucy Norris, fashion writer and historian, and she will tell you “the joke is that there’s no joke.”¹

If Vetements did not exist it would have been invented. Fashion critic Tim Blanks – one of first to extol the brand as revolutionary – indicates as much in his review of the brand’s Autumn 2017 menswear collection. In discussing the premise of that show, which revolved around the concept of “stereotyping” and type-casted models – there was the quintessential “Chanel” woman in her Tweed business suit, for example, done *a la* Vetements’ deconstructive flair, the Fifth-Avenue older woman clad in her fur, even the “emo” done-up in black make-up, black attire, and hair shiny as if with grease – Blanks reminisced upon the brand’s humble 2014 origins when it claimed to be nothing more than to be just clothes. “That humble claim,” Blanks writes, referring to the stance Vetements took of being just clothes, “has been overwhelmed by Vetements’ huge, rapid influence, the kind that suggests the fashion world was waiting for just such a thing.”² Three years, in the fashion industry, it turns out, is enough for nostalgia. Is enough to fall so far into fashion that one’s vision is depleted of its essential nature. Enough to “sell-out” that vision even when one’s position in the field of fashion starts with no vision at all, really. Just the clothes.

Here, we hit the hard kernel, to think with Slavoj Žižek, of a paradox concerning the ways that Vetements was promulgated by industry vanguards as the next “it” brand, as the next revolutionary way. A glut of media headlines that began in 2014 when the brand first gained recognition for its denim jeans – one *American Vogue* headline ran, “How Vetements New Vintage Jeans Became the Style of Fall” – trace an arch of how taste producing media arms vaulted Vetements into a sphere of distinction with regards to the rest of its high fashion peers whose own clout had ossified. What many dub the “Celine Moment” – when creative director Phoebe Philo at Celine was seen as setting the pace of the industry in the late aughts – had waned as high fashion’s favored silhouettes moved from the minimalistic and sleek to the maximalist, baggy and unpolished. The position of distinctions that critics created, in the columns of both fashion magazines and newspapers, discursively constructed Vetements as avant-garde, as revolutionary, as a panacea to a Western fashion industry that had grown stale with its traditionalism and conservatism. This peak of adulation and fanaticism crested in 2016, with headlines in the *Wall Street Journal* noting the brand’s arms length position from the rest of high fashion – as in “The Cult of Vetements” – or going as far as Tim Blanks, writing for *The Business of Fashion*, heralding the brand as nearly messianic – as with his articles, “The Genius of Vetements” and “The Revolution will be Branded Vetements.”³

Before moving towards specificity, either about what makes Vetements revolutionary, or about how this empty promise functions as a necessary lie conditioning the field, I want to claim that what is so radical about Vetements is its status as a brand that represents nothing beyond mere commerciality – just the clothes – occupying the most distinguished position in fashion: the “it brand,” with all the valences of agenda setting and taste making that titles confers. Further, I see that this position is the result of technological, financial, and sociocultural shifts in the global fashion industry at the logical ends of what Nicholas Mirzoeff sees as the image as commodity and not the commodity as image. Which is to say, we find ourselves in a moment in the global fashion industry where consumer buying, communicational, and representational behaviors are being renegotiated in the digital era and in the current moment of informational capitalism. A moment in the fashion industry where, as Mirzoeff describes, “money is exchanged for the image and then reconverted to capital.”⁴

I argue that part and parcel to Vetements’ discursive construction as revolutionary and avant-garde is a semantic bloc of concatenated, metonymic celebrity associations – proper Names that whirl and rumble, signifiers of their own – that constructs the problem of Vetements as one of a double ambivalence. A brand

¹ Stoppard and Norris, 2017.

² Blanks, 2017.

³ Marshall, 2016; Blanks, *The Genius of Vetements*, 2016; Blanks, *The Revolution*, 2016.

⁴ Mirzoeff, 2010, p. 220.

that stands for nothing, just the clothes, as “selling-out” its own authenticity; and a brand of extraordinary ordinariness, just the clothes, just our friends modeling on the catwalk, concatenated with celebrity and associated with celebrityhood as, or rather at, the upper limit of private, liberal personhood.⁵ At the same time, my appraisal of the brand’s meteoric rise is not completely fatalistic, not without its own ambivalent feelings of desire for the brand even as it would seem to mock that gesture: they might say, “look, another fashion victim to sell my \$1,000 hoodies to.” Even as Vetements adopts a pessimistic affective stance by projecting images of a kind of empty and mocking avant-gardism, I hope to show that the brand produces erotic possibilities in reclaiming non-reproductive pleasures. Said another way, Vetements produces an aesthetic that is deeply and productively queer, an affective gesture geared not towards the future but towards the present as a hedonistic garden of worldly delights.

Packaging Vetements

The French fashion collective launched in 2014 and is helmed by brothers Guram and Demna Gvasalia, with Guram managing the brand’s business dealings and Demna acting as head creative. Demna Gvasalia was also appointed creative director of Balenciaga in 2016 – one of fashion’s most coveted and revered appointments – further solidifying his mystique and industry clout. Although the brand started with Demna Gvasalia at a time when he was working in Paris, both Gvasalia and reporters describe the enterprise as a collective effort that was born out of a transnational network of fashion industry insiders and close friends. Although this network was distributed widely across Europe, the brand has strong links with Eastern Europe. Gvasalia and Lotta Volkova, chief stylist at Vetements and industry darling, hail from Georgia and Russia respectively and attribute their Post-Soviet cultural upbringings as influencing their design work.⁶ The collective began with just 18 members traveling to-and-from Paris scrambling to get collections ready in time for the fashion calendar presentation. They have recently moved their headquarters to Zurich and now hire well over 40 people. They have, for now, even moved off the Paris collections schedule entirely.⁷

One must factor the collective’s Post-Soviet influence and Demna Gvasalia’s early experience in his twenties working at Maison Martin Margiela to understand the quintessential ingredients of a Vetements’ collection: wardrobe staples that are culled from subcultures and given a modern interpretation – goth, rock-and-roll, hip-hop, rave and punk influences have each appeared – and often deconstructed to tongue-in-cheek effect. For example, take the by now classic Vetements’ “polizei” hoody: a green hoodie with kangaroo pouches on both front and back sides with the Russian word for police printed on the front retailing for \$885 on the e-market store sense.

Anja Cronberg, editor-in-chief at Vestoj, has critiqued fashion journalism’s sensational claims around Vetements’ radical singularity. In her view, the hype represents attempts by an industry to make sense of a post-Celine turn that finds itself awash in the welter of digital images and vexing consumer behavior patterns best epitomized by recurring narratives that herald the death of physical retail stores and question the practicality of the fashion week schedule and utility.⁸ “In an industry,” she notes, “that appears run aground and is rife with discontent due to visual overload and a seemingly stuffy and befuddled producer-to-consumer relationship, it is tempting to long for alternative fashion heroes.”⁹ Here, Cronberg refers also to the visual fatigue that industry insiders have contracted from the new necessities of marketing to and through social media and visual technologies like Instagram. She also hints at the strike through crisis surrounding the viability of the traditional fashion business model in the current digital age. The usual model

⁵ A number of Vetements shows have casted close friends rather than traditional models. The collective has also been criticized on multiple occasions by a number of media outlets for their lack of casting diversity. For more, see: Klein, Alyssa Vingan, *Industry Darling Demna Gvasalia Fails to Cast a Single Model of Color in His Runway Shows This Season* in “Fashionista,” 6 Mar. 2016 (<http://fashionista.com/2016/03/demna-gvasalia-models-of-color> | last view Dec 1, 2017).

⁶ Fury, 2015.

⁷ Fernandez, 2017.

⁸ Adams, 2013; Highland, 2017.

⁹ Cronberg, 2015.

of showing a collection during fashion week that is not available for purchase in stores for a pursuant six months, during which time the clothes are being manufactured and mass-produced in garment factories, has been charged with being negligent of consumers intensifying demands for instant gratification.

Fashion critic Andrew Fury has noted how, for Gvasalia, this traditional way of doing things places the creative and commercial dimensions of business at odd ends. A model where creatives are always catering to the requirements of business analysts, and where business analysts see the role of creatives as staging an ephemeral dream vision of the brand that gets seen during fashion week but that is ultimately meant to sell accessories and perfumes. Fury quotes Gvasalia – who could not sound less the avant-garde designer of John Galliano’s day – declaring, “the garment is a product. It’s not made to be in a museum.” Gvasalia adds insult to injury, adding, “There are no illusions of, ‘Oh, we want to create a dream about fashion.’ We just want to create clothes that people want to have.”¹⁰ What is alluded to is the necessity to pull away from the Louis Vuitton or Chanel model where the clothes shown during fashion week do not sell, but instead serve the purpose of creating a mystique or atmosphere. Instead, we might have Vetements’ pragmatic, contrarian business methodology whose, as cultural critic Lauren Sharkey succinctly puts it, “ethos is simple: never overproduce, never go on sale.”¹¹ And finally, in a move that truly was revolutionary, the brand was the first to pioneer the “see-now, buy-now” trend of making collections readily available for purchase by pre-manufacturing their collections and reducing the temporal delay between the time the collection is stage and the time it available for consumption. Only one season after Vetements’ announced it would make their products available for immediate purchase, Burberry and a number of other brands quickly followed suit, further evidencing the industry sway of this brand in setting trends, both aesthetic and commercial.¹²

The celebrity halo

A December 2016 paparazzi photograph taken by James Devaney of Kim Kardashian West and daughter North West wearing matching Vetements \$13,000 silver-sequined dresses – cut in their signature Russian “peasant dress,” elongated arm style – aptly materializes the semantic linkage between the brand and celebrity. In this photo, the flash emitted from the paparazzi’s bulb produces a shine that reflects light off both the dress’s textural surface and off of West’s made-up, sculptural face. The result is that Kim Kardashian West positively glimmers. The use of light, as art historian Krista Thompson has noted in regards to the use of bling as an aesthetic practice in hip-hop – involving, as it does, the ostentatious display of flashy objects, like jewelry, in order to flaunt one’s wealth – “captures the moment, so central in contemporary hip-hop, when consumption becomes conspicuous.”¹³ Light underscores the “moment of being made into a representation and its optical effects.”¹⁴ Is not the shine of West’s face, twice illuminated by the camera’s bulb and the reflecting of her sequins, the site where two discourses of fetishism merge: that of the sexual and that of the commodity.¹⁵ Does the dress not collude – when one considers the exorbitance of its exchange value, an issue I will return to, in converting West into an immaculate object – an object to be consumed in the pages of tabloids and devoured on social media channels? And does Vetements not benefit from the circulation of these paparazzi images even as the brand, I submit, erases the discursive grounds on which its celebrity associations are (being) written?

¹⁰ Fury, op. cit., 2015.

¹¹ Sharkey, 2016.

¹² Arthur, 2015.

¹³ Thompson, 2014, p.481.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Here, I am indebted to Abigail Solomon-Godeau theorization of sexual and commodity fetishism and the sites where they converge explicated in her article “The Legs of the Countess.” *Fetishism As Cultural Discourse*. (1993): 266–306. Print. I am also indebted to multiple conversations with Dr. Page duBois, professor of Classics at University of California, San Diego, who helped shaped the intellectual scaffolding of this paper.

On July 2016, *Elle Canada* published an article titled “Every Time a Celebrity Wore Vetements.”¹⁶ The pithy list, whose titles evokes the meme culture it subtly mocks, includes all the usual suspects: Kylie Jenner, models Hailey Baldwin and Sara Snyder, and musicians Selena Gomez, Rihanna, and Kanye West. (Notably absent from the list were models Gigi and Bella Hadid, who have been photographed wearing the brand on more than one occasion, and who have immured themselves to the Kardashian gang.) More articles evidence how these celebrity endorsements of the brand are essential in setting Vetements exorbitant price despite the rather mundane commercial products it offers – some of its best sellers, after all, are its platform shoes, cotton hoodies, track pants, and polyester raincoats. In an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled “The homely hoodie gets a not-so-humble makeover,” Mellissa Singer credits the couture hoodie craze to none other than Gvasalia himself, noting that when one “Add(s) the celebrity factor – the Hadid sisters, the Kardashians and any combination of Bieber/Gomez/Baldwin – it’s no wonder people now regard paying \$500-plus for a sweatshirt normal behavior.”¹⁷

For a moment, I want to gesture towards Demna Gvasalia’s relationship with Kanye West, who frequently attended Vetements’ Paris calendar collections. One could rightfully argue that it was just as much West’s first collection for his Addidas Yeezy line, where he showed a number of hoodie, track pant and bomber jacket looks very similar to Vetements’ aesthetic, that helped traffic the hoodie into style. Additionally, West was one of first celebrities shot by the paparazzi wearing a Vetements’ hoodie, and is unquestionably responsible for helping vaunt them. One cannot think Vetements without thinking Kanye West, and, by association, the Kardashian clan. The two are semantically linked in a metonymic signifying chain, a fact that appears again and again in the fashion criticism, media, and publicity that surrounds Vetements. Take an article from the *New York Post* entitled “Celebrities are dropping \$800 for this sold out Hoodie,” where a sales associate at Barney’s Madison Avenue makes the phenomenon sound quite simple, really. Just the clothes. As she succinctly puts it, “It’s the sweatshirt of the moment.”¹⁸ This article further solidifies the linkages, making it clear which celebrities are part of this fashion brigade. It concludes, “The hoodie certainly has crossover appeal. Both Kanye West and Rihanna have made headlines rocking identical Vetements sweatshirts and retailers can’t seem to keep any of them around even though the cheapest version costs \$800 including tax.”¹⁹

What interests me about these semiotic connections is what the blazing popularity of a brand like Vetements indexes about the shifting relationships between fashion, entertainment, and digital technologies. My analysis is grounded in the insights that Subculture and Fashion Studies have provided about the relationship between consumption, culture, and individual identity. These fields have demonstrated that, rather than thinking of individual identity as independent from spheres of consumption that attempt to capitalize on notions of the authentic in order to sell products, we must understand personhood as constructed in and through commercial activity.²⁰ Furthermore, my aim here is to consider what the blurring of lines between entertainment and fashion – when starlets become the arbiters of new fashions, and where fashion recruits stars as both designer, model, and muse – reveal about our cultural practices of self-representation, self-styling, and self-creation. Particularly when and as it is made through increasingly digitized modes of communicating and buying.

I argue that the “hyperreal” is recruited and parodied by Vetements to sell and to “sell-out” and that the signifiers and adulation of celebrity, the incessant desire for these starlets, part and parcel to this process. Baudrillard posits the hyperreal as the essential condition of postmodernity where the individual cannot distinguish between the essential dissolution of the real and the fictive. In his discussion of the microcosmic world of Disneyland, for example, he construes this theme park as a deterrence machine “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the Amer-

¹⁶ Spronk, 2016.

¹⁷ Singer, 2017.

¹⁸ Mitchel, 2016.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ McRobbie, 2011; Hebdige, 1979.

ica surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.”²¹ By “selling out” Vetements exploits a similar crisis where the copy and the origin, the person and their specular image, become entangled, insoluble, and borderless. In a similar vein, Richard Dyer writes the reality effects of classic Hollywood cinema, and the role of celebrity as the primary vehicle of ideological dissimulation in the “embourgeoisement of the cinematic imagination.”²² The star phenomenon, structurally solidified in the 1930s, utilized the celebrity as a vehicle of ideological dissemination around attitudes concerning the family, the private individual, practices of consumption, and interior or psychological motivation.

I argue that selling to sell-out is a pithy turn-of-phrase that is actually useful for understanding Vetements’ aesthetic and business sensibilities. As the literalness of its translation as “clothes” makes clear, Vetements’ strips the wide-eyed lure of luxury fashion – one that evokes both the extravagancy of the runway or red carpet and the expert craftsmanship of couture – and replaces it with a form of what I am calling *spectacular mundanity*, an item that is simultaneously more and less real than your mother’s weathered, vintage Champion hoodie. The brand’s exchange value is made extravagant not through any notion of intrinsic worth, as is the case with couture and the logics of congealed labor and expert craft held therein, but rather through the symbolic surplus value generated through the brand’s proximity to celebrity culture and, or rather through, its discursively constructed status as an “it brand.”

At this juncture, it is useful to clarify key terms in my argument. In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai defines commodities as “objects of economic value.” Drawing from George Simmel, Appadurai defines value as that which is “embodied in commodities that are exchanged” which embodiment further “results from the commensuration of two intensities of demand...the exchange of sacrifice and gain.”²³ The source of value, construed thusly, does not appreciate post-priori parameters of supply and demand, but instead derives chiefly from them. How the parameters of utility and scarcity are constructed around objects of exchange is a matter of politics, and, in this way, submits the desire for these objects to the field of political economy. Our desire for the object, Appadurai argues, is susceptible to, indeed, is the very product of, strategies of critical distancing that carefully vaunt and guard commodities from their immediate exchangeability. The more hedged these commodities become – through their physical distance (for example, travel goods), because of education barriers regulating insights as to their use value, or simply because of price, *inter alia* – the more that value is submitted to the *alchemy* of social relations, its true spring.

We should call this alchemy by its proper name: the commodity fetish. Žižek has written that this dissimulating capacity of the commodity, to conceal the social origins of its value and instead present it as its natural property, is predicated upon two abstractions: “the abstraction from the exchangeable character of the commodity during the act of exchange and the abstraction from the concrete, empirical, sensual, particular character of the commodity.”²⁴ That is, on the one hand, the commodity is frozen within a moment in the life cycle of the commodity – after production and prior to consumption in its infinite array of forms – and, on the other, from the particularities of its use-values. The commodity is given “a special substance over which time has no power,”²⁵ and it is treated, indeed, fetishized, as if it has an immutable value that, at the same time, establishes an equivalency between various forms of value (i.e, its exchange value, e.g. its monetary value). *In this instance, Vetements’ exchange value is socially set through the paratextual circulation of images of celebrities wearing a Vetements hoodie that establish the garment as paradoxically spectacular, qua stardom, and utterly mundane, qua garment....*

As commodity fetish, the Vetements hoodie promises the glamour and subjectification of the “model off duty,” a genre of magazine online article that posts candid shots of what models and celebrities are wearing during their “leisure” hours.²⁶ Consider that the images that continuously circulate of models, musi-

²¹ Baudrillard, 1988, pp.166-184.

²² Dyer and McDonald. 2011, pp.20-25.

²³ Appadurai, 2016, p.4.

²⁴ Žižek, 2009. p.10.

²⁵ Ibidem, p.12.

²⁶ For examples of the way this term is discursively deployed in magazines, consider Okwodou, Janelle. *10 Ways to Master Model-Off-Duty Street Style* in “American Vogue,” 4 Feb. 2016 (<http://www.vogue.com/article/10-model-street-style-rules/>)

cians and celebrity rich kids sporting Vetements are usually staged on the public space of the “street” – an ephemeral stage with few visual anchors aside from the sidewalk pavement. The candidness of the celebrity snapped “off duty” endows the photograph a reality effect that grants the photographic subject a relatable attribute – *they* perambulate the streets of NYC “just as I do” – and aspirational character. Furthermore, the Vetements hoodie recreates the moment of optical arrest, the moment, as Thompson notes, of the subject turning into a visual representation, that is meant for consumption and entirely about consumption. The trendsetters continuously cited by magazines like *Elle* and *Vogue* include, without fail, the Kardashian clan and affiliate entourage – Gigi and Bella Hadid – indicating a degree to which the global fashion industry is wedded to the spectacle of reality television and the discontinuous images of “real life” it erects through a diffused series of information streams that includes, chiefly among them, the emergent arms of social media.

Minh-ha T. Pham has written about how social media has changed communication patterns in the fashion industry by stressing values like connection, relatability, and collaboration.²⁷ As an example of the applicability of that insight here, consider how Kim Kardashian West, with her over 103 million Instagram followers as of this writing, frequently invites fans to leave comments on her account reviewing the latest products for her KKWBeauty cosmetic makeup brand. This invitation towards digital interactivity turns West’s Instagram account into a space for the production of authentic images of self-representation. Her feed suggests that there is more than a glossy veneer behind her the photographs we see on her Instagram, but a Real person – which, in the construction of West’s star text, includes the discourses of entrepreneur, celebrity, mother, and model. This is to say, the Vetements hoodie fetishistically stages the paradox of celebrity: the spectacular staging of the self as image for the purposes of constructing a unique, individuating personhood.

The spectacular mundanity of Vetements’ clothings is also formally (re)produced at the level of its product design. Take as one example a curated head-to-toe Vetements look that appeared on the online shopping platform The New Guard. A model wears two articles from the Vetements’ Spring 2016 collection: a black hoodie in the brand’s signature long-sleeved style paired with a floor length maxi-skirt. The hoodie features overlain stills from the iconic 1997 film *Titanic* – an image of Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet’s characters embracing above an image of the sinking ship – printed on the body, with the block letters “Coming Soon” printed on both arms. In a similar design vein, the maxi-skirt is printed with advertisement images for the 1999 film *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and a transmutation of the titular name into “Star Girls.” The ensemble’s unabashed graphicness visually manifests multiple intellectual, historical, and aesthetic discourses at work. The black hoodie with its exaggeratedly baggy and elongated silhouette evinces the influence of hip-hop aesthetics in achieving a proper Vetements look.²⁸ At the same time, the floor-length cotton skirt winks at its 1960s sub-cultural antecedents as it perverts the hippy discourses of free love and anti-capitalism and inscribes them within consumerist pop cultural logic. The simultaneity of images – both images evoke a nostalgia for 90s pop culture as one harkens to an Edwardian past and the other imagines a dystopian future where robots and Jedi prophets roam the desolate desert landscapes of far off planets – demonstrates a quintessentially post-modernist understanding of time at play within Vetements’ design ethos.²⁹

Within this post-modernist temporality, the signifiers of periodicity, race and culture are removed from their original context and reassembled in an apathetic attitude towards and, as I hope to show, decontextual account of the present. “Selling-out” calls attention to how Vetements culls inspiration from sub-culture(s) in order to restage the signifying processes of a hoodie, maxi skirt, or biker jacket within fetishistic and deracinated market logics. While these practices of cultural appropriation are by no means unique to this brand, I argue that the veneration of clothing as simply “clothes” represents an important shift and even rupture within the fashion industry that is indicative of the larger neoliberal culture in which it is embedded. What

last view Dec 1, 2017).

²⁷ Pham, 2015.

²⁸ Morgado. 2007, pp.131–55.

²⁹ Jameson, Frederic. 1993.

is less relevant, and perhaps less believable, in this moment are the conventional market strategies of selling a fashion collection through narrative devices like plotlines. I am thinking here of the “safari through the African Savanna” inspired Spring/Summer 2016 Valentino ad campaign shot by National Geographic photographer Steven McCurry.³⁰

Rather than asking consumers to buy into characters and plotlines in order as part of the fantastical transformation of luxury fashion – here, the colonial trope of the White Settler starting into the vast and exotic Kenya savanna – Vetements’ enshrines and stages the quotidian dimensions of its wardrobe inventory. What we get here, and for the same price, are not delicate chiffons painstakingly hand embroidered and trimmed with ostrich feather, but durable cotton hoodies and polyester dresses that are course to the touch. As one example, consider Vetements’ selling spaces at Ginza Dover Street Market in Beijing that literalized the notion of Vetements as wardrobe staples by placing merchandize in an actual wooden wardrobe. The inventory was crammed and falling off the hangers, while other items were heaped in a haphazard pile at the wardrobe’s base. Here, we see a near DuChampian move of enthroning the ready-made and calling it art, though here, it is the luxury item.

Break the internet

In its final valence, I want to consider “selling-out” as a conscious maneuver of parodying neoliberal logic. Here, I am thinking of what Queer Asian studies scholar Ly Nguyen considers the potential for the “meme” internet culture of Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook and Twitter to purposefully “glitch” neoliberal discourse.³¹ For Nguyen, the affective work accomplished by memes calls attention to the absurdity and contradictions of navigating our humanness in a world over-determined by capitalism. The “meme” simultaneously responds to, pre-empts, or succumbs to capitalist discourse – a strategy both of succumbing and resisting. I argue that Vetements responds to inherent anti-intellectualism proffered by Internet culture – one where “fake” Facebook news stories clutter our newsfeed and where positions and ideologies are reduced to 140 characters. It co-opts the strategies of “meme” culture and anti-intellectualism by packing its design litanies with punchy hard-hitters. For example, their best selling items are highly textilic – one shirt is emblazoned with the line “May the Bridges I Burn Light the Way.” Another line of shirts, padded in order to imitate the effect of a linebacker, confronts the viewer with the explicative “YOU FUCK’N ASSHOLE.”

Not only do these words utilize the punchiness of “meme” culture and Instagram, where the most assured way of being notice is by packing a statement that is easily and immediately visually registered. I also want to think about the ways in which it glitches capitalist logics by doubling the commodity fetish into its sexual Other. For example, an August 4, 2016 image posted on Vetements’ Instagram page depicts the aforementioned shirt cut-off at the word “asshole” as a model limply fists a metal ring that is functionally intended to serve as a coat hanger. Here, I want to consider the ways in which commodity fetishism is slipping into sexual fetishism through the visual strategies of Instagram. I argue that this strategy of queer doubling recruits and inverts neoliberal cultural phenomena through the inherent nonreproductivity of queerness. Here, I draw from Lee Edelman’s argument in *No Future* that queerness poses a threat to normative political discourses that are organized around the heterosexual temporality of the child, or what he terms reproductive futurism...³² I also draw on Wendy Brown’s elucidation of the rise of neoliberalism in recent decades, particularly as she understands it as a governing economic philosophy that fundamentally altered the political nature and meaning of liberal democratic society. Central to her argument is the claim that neoliberalism recruits economic discourses in order to activate the social – that is to say, in order to

³⁰ Markovinic, 2016.

³¹ This idea was formulated from one of many conversations over many conversation with Asian Studies scholar Ly Nguyen regarding neoliberal Internet culture.

³² Edelman, 2004.

degrade civic participation of the polity and, furthermore, to turn subjects into human capital wedded to their own self-investment.³³

I argue that Vetement's self-imaging practices forge a sense of collectivity through queerness and an art of queer refusal. The motifs of anonymity, duplication, and nihilism run through many of their photos on Instagram. Take an August 6, 2016 image from Vetements Instagram where two men stare away from the camera wearing matching Vetement's bomber jackets printed with the words "TOTAL FUCKING DARKNESS" inscribed within an astrological chart that contains a pentagram. One commenter, kaylaaboe, perfectly summarizes the affective power of this photograph by liking and responding to the image, saying "cuz I'm a gloomy lil witch I like it." Another photograph from their page features three white models sporting the peasant dress and wayward schoolgirl looks as they feverishly embrace, both forming a protective ring around each other and looking in directions away from the camera. As one last piece of evidence, consider Lucy Norris's observation that the fall 2016 show, held in a Parisian church months after the Paris attack "felt quite cultish" and that "as the models walked out they were covered with incense."³⁴

Vetements expertly plays with and prays on what Wendy Brown sees as perhaps the most insidious and dangerous effects of this culture of neoliberalism, the affective production of despair. I see, as with one final Instagram image posted on May 31, 2016 to their Instagram of a person wearing a yellow Vetements rain jacket staring passively at a forest fire, the ways Vetement's parodies despair at the same time that it reifies the discourse of the world going to hell. Further, I am thinking about this brand as a possible shift away from neoliberal alienation and towards collectivity reflected internationally in the rise of populism domestically in the way that Trump's election indicates, as political commenter Yoran Brook astutely notes, the willingness and readiness on the part of the American population for an authoritarian figure that readily undermines the democratic ideals of individual liberty.³⁵ The criteria for inclusion into this aesthetic universe is an embrace of postmodern temporality and what is now a kind of post-neoliberal collectivity where racial, cultural and historical antecedents are deracinated and replaced with an unwillingness to look back, literally, at the viewer.

And yet, still, I am left sitting with ambivalence, my own ambivalence towards these pessimistic, overpriced objects. My desire to be photographed in them, *to perambulate the streets just like Kylie Jenner*. The pleasures of a nonreproductive futurity, queerness and magic. I end by saying this. In considering the abstractions cohering the commodity fetish, Žižek establishes a homology between Marx and psychoanalysis in that unconscious, like the commodity, has "the form of a thought whose ontological status is not that of thought." As with the commodity fetish, the sexual fetish idolizes an object that simultaneously (dis)avows the lost phallus of the mother without knowing, in the first instance, that it does so. This manner in which the symbolic order reifies the subject is what Lacan means when he says, with regards to the unconscious, that "it speaks us."³⁶ If the phallus is the signifier of lack, if phallic jouissance is the endless deterrence of unsatisfied desire, then Vetements embraces a (w)holly feminine jouissance that mocks the inevitability of phallic failure by presenting a barred feminine subject laughing at her own lack. Or rather, she is laughing at *you* for thinking she purchased Vetements as if she believed the commodity fetish served some *serious* sort of wish fulfillment. If you permit, I might ventriloquize her: "can you believe it, I bought this \$1000 hoodie, lol."

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³³ Brown, 2015.

³⁴ Stoppard, Lou and Norris, Lucy, 2016.

³⁵ Brook, 2016.

³⁶ Lacan, 1992. p.206.

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