Inside out fashion

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This paper will look at the recent upheaval of traditional practices of design by drawing upon examples from the fashion practices of Martin Margiela and comme des garçons and from my own practice. It will argue that these designers have attempted to transform older conceptions of the fashion system through their collaborations both within and outside fashion, for example, the project between H&M and comme des garçons, and the opening of the first Maison Martin Margiela Hotel in Paris. It will also examine the impact of guerilla marketing, the effect of comme des garçons’ pop-up stores, and of the constant reconfigurations of the way that clothes are shown on and off the catwalk. This new form of fashion expression has impacted upon the universal language of fashion and design, and the collaborations that these designers have undertaken have changed not only our fashion sensibilities but also our expectations of the kinds of places where fashion may be experienced. Ultimately these changes have removed fashion design from its traditional domain and opened it up to a new and unforeseen audience. They also challenge us to reconsider whether we have things the wrong way round when we speak of fashion first and design second.

Collaboration has become an important addition to the language of design, especially fashion design. Today it is not uncommon to see design houses presenting projects in homewares, interiors, automobiles and food--the list goes on. Likewise attention to experiential space has become as important as the selling of clothing to consumers. Experiential space covers not only the traditional physical spaces of catwalk, showroom and retail, as well as the more recent virtual spaces opened up by the internet, but also the unusual hybrid spaces that designers such as Rei Kawakubo of comme des garçons and Maison Martin Margiela have discovered and explored through their ability to rethink our traditional experience of clothing and to enter into collaborations with others working both inside and outside of fashion.

The Japanese label comme des garçons is one example of a fashion design company that has successfully collaborated with a range of design houses and in doing so has blurred the boundaries of traditional fashion practice. Some collaborations have involved other fashion designers, although designers with a very different style, market and range, and in so doing have blurred the boundaries, and therefore the experiential space, that separates high and mainstream fashion. Comme has collaborated with Fred Perry, Levis, Converse All Stars, Speedo, Nike, Moncler, Lacoste, Cutler & Gross and Louis Vuitton. Other collaborations have extended well beyond fashion. Rei Kawakubo has also produced furniture, music and a magazine and, collaborated with American photographer Cindy Sherman. In retail, Dover Street Market experiments with food and offers fashion from other independent designers, whilst the guerilla stores infiltrate non-fashion precincts, bringing high fashion to places where it would once have been scorned, and drawing its consumers to neighbourhoods they might once have avoided. This ability of comme to offer us a new or transformed experience of fashion in the unlikeliest of company has no doubt contributed to the longevity of the label.

“It has been dubbed the oddest marriage in the Fashion industry [SHOW YOU TUBE VIDEO], Rei Kawakubo the designer behind what is widely regarded as fashions most avant-garde label teaming up with a high street behemoth” (Fox, 2008).

H&M, the Swedish company Hennes and Mauritz, approached Rei Kawakubo in 2008 to produce a range of men’s and women’s wear with some accessories for 200 stores worldwide. The proposal explicitly challenged the existing boundaries between the two modes of practice. H & M Creative Advisor Margaretta Van den Bosch and Brand & New Business Director Jorgen Anderson approached Kawakubo with the very philosophical idea of contradiction. In an interview with David Marx for The Business of Fashion, Jorgon Anderson noted that, “there is a contradiction between H& M and comme des garçons. H& M is very mass market, selling to reasonable prices, whereas comme des garçons has a completely different price level and is also very artistic” (Marx, 2008). Kawakubo was clearly challenged to see how the brand integrity of comme des garçons could be maintained while meeting the demands of the mass market. She wanted to retain sense of higher purpose, describing the collaboration as an event rather than simply an opportunity to increase sales.

The very successful collaboration between comme des garçons and H&M demonstrates how the separation of two very different approaches to fashion, fashion as mass marketed apparel and fashion as artistic event, might be overcome. It shows how the cultural space of fashion can be transformed. But comme des garcons have tried other approaches as well, exploring the possibilities of physical, urban and geographical space. In 2004 comme des garçons opened their first guerilla store in Berlin, with the aim to open for a year, to spend a minimal amount on interiors, and to be located away from the city’s fashionable hubs. Their presence in the physical space took the form of an occupation, so that remnants of the previous tenants’ presence remained, strewn amongst the comme des garçons clothing. It was as if the label had been cast down from the heights of fashion, an outcast that the customer had to stumble across. In Warsaw in 1999 a comme des garçons guerilla store opened up in an old fruit and vegetable store dating from the Communist era, where past collections of comme men’s and women’s wear were hung amongst wooden crates, the walls peeling with paint.

Both the H&M collaboration and the guerilla stores are ways in which Rei Kawakubo is able to offer her loyal audience another experience of fashion. Of course, we could be cynical and see the guerilla store as a bit of theatre to entertain us while we purchase stock destined for the sale rack, as just another pop-up store in everything but name. And looking at the H&M collaboration, we could say that Rei Kawakubo has been clever to use the marketing machine of H&M to promote her main line without losing touch with her valued clientele. After having been in business for 40 years, it is only now through the collaboration with H&M that the high street consumers have got to know comme des garçons. But comme des garçons has never been a label to ruthlessly exploit every commercial opportunity. It has no official website, unlike almost every other fashion company, no online shopping profile apart from Dover Street Market, and has stayed away from the naked consumerism of sites such as net a porter.

Like Rei Kawakubo, Martin Margiela has managed to communicate his design concepts more widely by moving into other design arenas and shaking them up. Unlike comme des garçons, Maison Martin Margiela has had few collaborators. Kawakubo frequently utilizes the talents of others working in fields outside fashion. Margiela extends the aesthetics and techniques of his fashion practice beyond the limits of his own discipline. The clearest and simplest example of this is the way he transfers styles and techniques from the clothed body to the interiors of his retail spaces and catwalk venues. Of course, Kawakubo, like most designers, also strives to retain control over the total effect of their work, including the various spaces in which it is presented, and the white wash techniques and the tromp l’oeil affects which have become synonymous with Margiela, are much like the polka dot, which has come to be identified with the more recent style of comme des garcons.

Martin Margiela established his label in 1988. Predating by a year the members of the Antwerp Six, he set out from the beginning to disrupt the fashion system with his unorthodox staging of catwalk shows and his exposure of the process and craft of design. In the past two decades he has staged shows in an abandoned metro station, a circus, a parking lot, the window of a department store, a train car, a restaurant and a private museum. His first show in 1988 was held at Café de la Gare, a club for stand up comedy. Guests were invited via telegram, an unusual method when other design houses were spending vast amounts on graphic designers to produce luxurious invitations.

Martin Margiela is known primarily for deconstructing found garments and objects, for celebrating the craftsmanship of fashion by exposing the inner workings of garments that usually remain hidden or buried below the surface. He is interested in communicating to us the patient work of design, and his artisanal label often records the time taken to create a garment. The time of fashion is a recurrent theme in his work, and the wear of time is embedded into both garments and accessories. This interest in time and wear has interesting results for the spatial character of his work, one that quickly translates beyond the narrow limits of clothing design.

One technique that Martin Margiela regularly uses is that of white wash. The iconic Japanese tabi shoe is reworked, a heel added, and the shoe is then painted with house paint. Likewise the basic denim jean. This technique is readily transferred to the treatment of walls, doors, furniture, even packaging and publications. This style of painting is commonly used to maintain outdoor spaces or as a temporary cover for those undergoing renovation. For example, windows can be smeared with a light white wash to block the gaze of passers by.

The process is temporary, destined to quickly fade or crack, and never quite covering what was there before. The process of white washing creates a tabula rasa, a surface cleared of all marks, on which the designer can start afresh, but also a palimpsest, where what is painted over still manages to appear from beneath the paint. Not only does this technique easily translate to the design of interiors, since it is borrowed from it, its use as a treatment for all kinds of objects readily marks them as works of the Maison Martin Margiela.

And like Rei Kawakubo, who seeks out alternative methods of marketing without seeking to exploit them, Martin Margiela adopted an anti-marketing stance, one that maintained for him a loyal and devoted following but did not, at least until recently, attract the interest of the broader market. He rarely gave interviews and avoided photographs, a curious position to adopt in a design world more and more obsessed with the possibilities offered by you tube, facebook and reality TV.

“His logo is indecipherable, packaging is an elegant white linen laundry bag, the garments from the artisanal line carry a plain white label roughly tacked into the back” (Grumbach, 2009).

Maison Martin Margiela stores have been called “anti-stores”, filled with words, numbers, white linen, objects, images, and staff dressed in the same uniform, the blouse blanche. The plethora of objects refer only sometimes to the merchandise (Dercon, 2009).

In September 2008 Maison Martin Margiela celebrated 20 years, and after much speculation, in 2009, Martin Margiela left the label. Italian Group Diesel did not replace the designer.

One of his final projects was the design of a hotel, the Maison des Champs Elysees at 8 rue Jean Goujon, In keeping with the practice of classifying each of their products, the hotel forms part of the series of works numbered as Interior Architecture. The Haussmann style townhouse was built in 1866 for the Duchess of Rivoli, Princess Essling, Mistress to the Empress Eugenie. According to their press release, the Maison Margiela wanted:

“ . . . a challenge, as it means making different aspects cohabit – day and night, private and public – and expressing ourselves within the tight limits set by the aesthetics of a 19th-century Haussmann townhouse and the safety restrictions of a place open to the public. Maison Martin Margiela’s identity expresses itself in parallel, and in the same place, through its fashion collections and interior design work. In the Paris headquarters and the shops worldwide you see the white cotton covers, the trompe l’oeil, the subversion of objects and materials, the mixing of styles and eras, the play on aesthetic language and the humour that’s a permanent feature. Clothing, objects and interior design all communicate the same aesthetic values: an “unfinished” finish and a sense of detail, surrealism and low brow culture, oversizing and 2D projection, and imaginatively recycled materials” (Maison Martin Margiela, 2011).

The identity between the design of fashion collections and interior design referred to in the press release is summed up in three words, which we might take as an encapsulation of the design aesthetic of the label: irony, illusion, respect. In other words, design is not simply about a particular set of techniques, materials and products, but about an ethos and attitude that is easily translated from one field to another, in this case from fashion design to interior design. But the Maison also recognizes that the first customers are likely to come from the ranks of its fashion clientele, and it is quick to assure us that the fit-out is comfortable, that the attractions of the hotel are not just intellectual. Nor is the experience of its rooms like being caught in a snowstorm, even though white is the dominant colour. Yet it remains a distinctly Margiela experience, and unlike for example, the experience likely to await a guest at the Versace hotel on the Gold Coast.

The use of humble materials for the interiors of the Maison Martin Margiela stores is similar to the low cost philosophy and the down market aesthetic that comme des garcons has employed for its guerilla stores. This rejection of premium materials and richly appointed spaces has set a trend that we now see being followed by emerging designers. In a world where luxury goods and excessive branding by the big name fashion houses has been predominant, this approach has opened up paths for newer designers to show their concepts and deliver their products in an environment that is cost effective and yet also creative.

S!X, a Melbourne based fashion label, opened its first showroom 3 years ago. In selecting a space, S!X wanted to avoid the usual high or mainstream fashion shopping precincts, and to give its current or potential customers the experience of seeking out and discovering the space.

This space, La Chambre de Bonne, is located in Crossley Street, Melbourne, in a single story Colonial Georgian-style building circa 1848-49. The location was first a butcher shop, slaughter yard and residence. Eugene Von Guerard, a colonial period landscape painter, lived there in 1857 & 1858, and supplies the current name of part of the building, Von Haus, in which S!X is located. Von Haus was opened in 2008, in a part of the building that had lay empty for over 50 years and was in a derelict condition, inhabited by pigeons and flies, a forgotten storage space for a fabric warehouse, full of old buttons, shoes, buckles and fabrics, which were strewn amongst the piles of pigeon manure and fly dirt.

S!X chose Von Haus for its lack of street frontage, and for its location tucked away at the top of Bourke Street in Melbourne, away from the strip shopping further down the hill. A further attraction was the mixture of businesses tucked away in the various rooms of the house, including a restaurant, an art gallery and a jewelry store. Sharing such an intimate space with a diversity of other creative practices suggested both the limits of fashion design and the possibility of collaboration. The obscure location of S!X at the back of the building on the first floor means that people unaware of the label often stumble upon the space only after visiting the gallery or the restaurant. It also made the space closed and slightly intimidating, a little like the fashion houses in Paris, although for different reasons. The idea was a natural evolution from wholesaling to retailers and meeting clients in a studio space. It promised to offer clients an experience more intimately connected to the practice of design, provided they are brave enough to step through the door.

La Chambre De Bonne, a single room found on the top of floor of a middle class Parisian apartment, translated means the maid’s room. To S!X the name relates to the scale of the two rooms, to their location at the top and back of the building, and to the modest but intimate environment. The name was first discovered years ago whilst staying in Paris at a friend’s studio nestled on the top floor, with a view of the spiral staircase, the rooftops of Paris, and a small slice of the Eiffel tower.

Upon entering La Chambre de Bonne, the client is invited into one of the two tiny rooms, the first a small showroom and the second a tiny dressing room, a boudoir. The walls are partially covered in a trompe l’oeil print showing a scene from a French Drawing Room circa the 18th century. The print is incomplete, and parts of the wallpaper are purposely torn at the edges to give the sense of an unfinished space. The number 6 on a faux Paris street sign is the only signage on an archway at the end of the corridor leading to the rooms.

The materials chosen for La Chambre de Bonne were purposely low tech. The idea was to create a space that could be easily transported to another place, provided that it was in an obscure location. And the print was also chosen partly because it was slightly obscure, mysterious.

“There is an intimacy in the Chambre and the client/maker relationship which I adore. I love that the process is fun and open-ended and ongoing and unquestioned” (Leeroy Kirk-Walker, client, private communication).

“I love that the room is dark and the clothing is all black and you cannot see what you are trying on and you pay for a beautiful jacket that you will carry home in a rolled up garbage bag sticky taped” (Leeroy Kirk-Walker)

Imagine this scenario:

The wallpaper is peeled carefully from the walls, piece by piece, then laid out flat to reveal the mise-en-scene. A bureau, a chair and the cornices of a French drawing room frame the shoulders and the face. The lightness of the cloth and the detail of the print swirl around the body, rendering the heavy furnishings weightless. Two half-garments become one, a petticoat joined to the square piece of cloth, attached crudely to the body of the dress with elastic.

In conscious contrast to the practice of Maison Martin Margiela, S!X for its last collection decided to reverse the movement of design from fashion to interiors, from design intended for the body to the design of the spaces in which the clothing could be presented. This time the décor of the space served as inspiration and print for the clothing. The clothing effectively “disappeared” into the space of its experience.

By putting design first, designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Martin Margiela have contributed in different ways to the destabilization of what we tend to call the fashion system. Through collaborations like that with H&M, comme des garçons has added to the terminal confusion of the old hierarchies of couture and mainstream fashion, as has Maison Martin Margiela, with its playful displays of respect for the high craft of design.

Design is design – it is never first fashion design or interior design, and designers are never first fashion designers before they collaborate with or try their hand at other fields of design. What comes before these distinctions is instead an aesthetic and an attitude, for example, of irony, illusion, respect, or of collaboration and occupation. To develop principles such as these is the key to the future of fashion design, of all design.

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