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4 Contemporary Runway, Contemporary Costume

Felix Choong

Conceptual showpieces have long provided designers with an opportunity to experiment with their medium. Although destined to never truly be worn, once seen on the runway they go on to exist as museum pieces, as images in fashion spreads or in paparazzi shots. In each case, they are brought out for a fleeting moment before being returned to the garment bags, acid-free tissue paper and temperature-controlled cabinets of the archives. These creations embrace fashion's symbiotic relationship to capitalism, acting as a unique form of brand publicity while presenting audiences with garments that have significant conceptual and artistic value.

The interactions between the spheres of art and fashion are dynamic; however, it is still rare for clothes to be considered on the same critical level as works of art. They resemble each other as aesthetic categories but are ultimately defined by different systems – in particular, systems of labour and production – that keep these notions clearly distinct (Ugelvig 2020: 7). Art and performance, both of which predate capitalist modernity, have managed to sustain a connection to values we hold in high regard, despite the commercial underpinnings of their contemporary iterations. In contrast, fashion is inextricably linked to capitalism and frequently regarded as superficial in comparison to other artforms (Evans 2013: 1). While the history of Western fashion dates back at least 700 years, the emergence of the French haute couture system in the mid-nineteenth century was instrumental in establishing how the current fashion system operates. The technological parameters of the runway have developed since the first fashion shows in France, Britain and the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; its underlying performativity remains intact. Artistic strategies that were used by trailblazing designers, such as Charles Frederick Worth, Lucile and Lucien Lelong, continue to be employed today. They understood that couture houses could function like theatres, marketing to diverse audiences through staging, musical arrangement, lighting and other dramatic devices that, in Lucile's case, included erotically named dresses such as *Come to Me*, *The Sighing Sound of Lips* and *Unsatisfied* (Evans 2013: 35). The runway flips the relationship between culture and commerce, where culture is treated as a commodity, economic value grafted onto a model's body (Evans 2013: 115). These early strategies of spectacle blurred the lines between the performance of fashion and bodies in movement

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and the performance of designers and their brand identities (Kollnitz and Pecorari 2022: 14).

While fashion may look to art for new stylistic trends, it cannot assume the same levity and criticality that art can. There is less opportunity to challenge the fundamental hierarchies, prejudices and exploitations that exist within its industry because it is a business in much more overt ways than art, and it is therefore expected to produce quantifiable results (McKenzie and Lipscombe 2020: n.p.). Fashion constantly contends with complex modalities of looking. Blunting the fashion buyer's calculations of a garment's saleability, titillating the individual's materialistic desires, and satiating the press's need for endless novelty are all demands that fashion needs to satisfy in its cyclical debuts. French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes notes that fashion transforms the body from an organism into an abstraction, making it a site of intense imagining (Barthes 2010: xi). As such, garment construction, runway presentation and styling can all be viewed as artistic strategies that exemplify fashion's conceptual and artistic value. In treating these garments as discursive sites that challenge and reconfigure the border between art, performance and fashion, I look to the 'insubordinate' creations of Jonathan Anderson at Loewe, and Matty Bovan and Craig Green at their namesake labels, to open up a wider discourse on contemporary, ready-to-wear fashion. Each ensemble was chosen for its ability to exist in between the fictional and spectacular act of performance that happens in the here-and-now, and the real worldliness of performativity that constructs identity (Kollnitz and Pecorari 2022: 3). If performance can be seen as operating in the realm of fiction, performativity is a concept used to address the effects of shaping the real. Fashion continuously moulds our identities and bodies, in both material and immaterial ways, which can be seen to employ the *modus operandi* of both performance and performativity (Kollnitz and Pecorari 2022: 4). Jonathan Anderson's duo of car dresses for Loewe in Fall/Winter 2022 illustrates society's obsession with and relationship to modernisation, even as concerns mount around our ability to integrate with these advancements. Matty Bovan's dramatic ball gown for Spring/Summer 2019 dissolves time by creating an intricate layering of transgressive garments and historical styles that embody a spirit of defiance in the face of current British politics. Craig Green's rubber cocoon for Fall/Winter 2022 is a monument in motion, ruminating on ideas of control and preservation. In each example, the body and garment are activated by one another. Through alteration and adornment, the ensembles offer a theatricalisation of life that performs and interrogates wider themes related to the body, society and culture.

For Loewe's Fall/Winter 2022 womenswear collection, the brand's creative director Jonathan Anderson devised a collection which references the transition from the industrial age into the twenty-first century. Anderson referred to the season's offerings as *primal*, reducing garments down to their essential forms, inserting Surrealist motifs and utilising new advancements in textile fabrication to reflect a fascination with mechanisation and automation (Mower 2022a: n.p.). The collection traced a subtle historical progression from a pre-industrial to a consumer society. This could be seen through the car dress and its allusion to the mass production of automobiles, through the emancipated female embodied in

prints and pursed-lip bodices, and in the advent of leisure time seen through tubular, slouched and stacked knits.

Looks 4 and 5 were a pair of mini trapeze dresses, each with a three-dimensional printed skeleton of a car suspended in stretch satin: one black, one silver (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). A child-sized car immured under an adult-sized dress, an intervention on the garment's body-conscious silhouette distorts the body's natural lines, replacing it with something rigid, angular and cumbersome. A Vivienne Westwood *mini-crini* updated for the twenty-first century. In perverting the boundaries between organic and inorganic and human and mechanical, the human figure becomes a literal and metaphorical vehicle. The dress was paired with trainers that look freshly pulled from a plastic mould, residual tendrils still intact, still waiting to be sent to quality control. It is as if the model has stepped straight off the assembly line and onto the runway. She is the essence of capital in motion, decades in the making.

The advent of Fordist ideas that linked mass production to mass consumption in the early twentieth century led to a new aesthetic that saw culture and commerce collide. As fashion shows moved further into the realms of spectacle and indirect advertising, the industrial aesthetics of the production line began to permeate shows. Models marched out at speed in quick succession, producing a more modernist, streamlined and rationalised body. Models became increasingly regulated and uniform in appearance offering a blank canvas that contrasted

4.1
Loewe Fall/Winter 2022, Look 4. © Violette Meima @ Viva Model Management Paris.

4.2
Loewe Fall/Winter 2022, Look 5. © Estrella Gomez @ IMG Models.

with each season's exploration of novelty. In 1924, the French couturier Lucien Lelong introduced his kinetic line, practical clothing for the modern woman that highlighted a newfound freedom of movement, with the imperative that they be shown in motion and not in static pose (Evans 2013: 116). The imperative to show fashion in motion found another analogue in the development of the *Concours d'Élegance et Automobiles*, high society events originally dating back to seventeenth-century France. To enhance their prowess, cars were presented alongside female models, mostly recruited from fashionable society and dressed in the latest fashions by the leading Parisian couturiers. This created a compelling symbiosis that suggested that both woman and car were a singular entity and produced an erotic exchange between mass production and elite fashion styling.

German scholar Siegfried Kracauer coined the term *mass ornament* to describe the aesthetic expression of capitalism through the geometric arrangements of human bodies for the purposes of entertainment and attraction. This was embodied, for example, in the chorus lines of the Tiller Girls, whose formation in the 1890s coincided with the first fashion shows. Identically dressed and matched in weight and height, they linked arms around one another's waist as they tapped, kicked and gestured in unison. Modelled on the humming and whirring of industrial machinery, the Tiller Girls choreography organised the performers in a way which obliterated the individual, presenting the audience with an indissoluble cluster whose staged movements mimicked a mechanised loom or the threshing drum of a combine harvester. As such, the Tiller Girls became reduced to a linear system for the purpose of entertainment. In constructions of this sort, the individual performer has no grasp on the totality of the act, but consciously takes part in its assembly. This level of engagement represents a significant component of modernity; the demand for calculability can render us invisible and sacrifice individual personality. Machines were built to be subservient to the craftsman, mimicking the natural movements of the human. The Tiller Girls choreography reverses this relationship. The chorus line represents an aesthetic reflection of the prevailing economic system, where workers no longer operate the machine but are themselves its tools and prosthetics (Kracauer 1995: 78).

Mass ornamentation and the runway both privilege the optical allure of movement disengaged from any narrative or psychological identification with the human form. Alienating the image of the body from the idea of individual personality and sentiment works to privilege motion over emotion (Evans 2013: 245). The hands in the factory, the legs of the Tiller Girls and the model on the catwalk are all aligned. As each embarks on its preordained set of movements, the figure of the woman becomes not just a commodity but also a mass-produced article (Benjamin 2008). The mechanical intervention required to construct the Loewe dress, to create an effect that would be difficult to achieve by hand, conveys a sense of flatness and coldness, which adds to its impersonality and potential for dehumanisation. Understanding its construction and establishing where the human hand stops and the computer starts is difficult to pinpoint. The three-dimensional printed fabrication of the car represents a shift from the deskilled device of the readymade to the skilled manufacture of the facsimile or duplicate (Foster 2020: 48). The Loewe dress enacts the impact of industrialisation on the body and captures our

obsession with technology, modernity and novelty by making the speed at which things change its own fertile subject matter. It exists both as a showpiece that will never be widely produced and as a replica of a commodity, an original and a simulacrum at once.

As a performative act, the car gestures to a children's toy or game of dressing up and gives off the sheen and sleek quality of a brand-new ride. It articulates both the promise and the threat of the future – the potential for progress, novelty, technological mastery and harmony and the danger of automation, the dissolution of human individuality and agency are distilled in one. The car dress forges an uneasy relationship between biology, technology and commerce. Historically, we have seen depictions of the female form selling products; now she is literally depicted as a vehicle selling the product. There is an erotic frisson that makes the dress both alluring and chilling, simultaneously provoking and complicating our desires. Is it the feminine body that we desire? Or the dress? Maybe the car? Perhaps the amalgamation of all three? Anderson's vision for the twenty-first century is one colonised by desires and illusions. The ubiquity of the commodity is epitomised by the model being dressed as one. By using a car as an intervention on the silhouette, the dress is 'push[ed] … towards something that can be nonsensical … that can be irrational', as Anderson remarked (Mower 2022a: n.p.). The postmodern, post-production body is presented as wholly irrational, liberated from the realm of commerce and allowed to gestate as a conceptual piece. The prevailing view of modernism is that our bodies become dissociated and fetishised, ultimately empty and machinable elements (Evans 2003: 165). Industrialisation and the advancements of technology that were created to liberate us have instead come to subjugate us. The latest advances in AI technology has meant that cars can drive themselves, written documents can be fabricated from mere prompts, and faces and bodies can be rendered in proxy of real people. We are slowly outsourcing ourselves to digital coding and are unable to stop. At its crux, the dress can be seen to embody how we have become victims to our own inventiveness, where technological advancements meant to enrich our lives have outpaced our ability to integrate with them, rendering workforces obsolete as automation offers greater efficiency, lower risk and costs (Foster 2020: 62). The performativity of the car dress re-engineers everyday consumerism and the 'white heat' of technology to reveal sinister truths about our excessive consumption (Wilson 1963: n.p.).

For the opening look of Matty Bovan Spring/Summer 2019 a ball gown woven in pink, yellow and metallic thread, spews a mass of tulle, caught in the commotion of a messy network of cable ties and ribbon (Figure 4.3). Castaways and found items reworked by the deft hands of milliner Stephen Jones create structural marvels. A rose trellis protrudes skywards from the model's head with creeping vines, fake flowers and a gardening glove pinching a single rose, gardener's net cascades over the model's face. Haphazard in appearance, artisanal in construction. The opening ensemble is a sensory overload taking whimsical detours through history – the grandeur of Marie Antoinette's eighteenth-century dresses, whispers of a Chanel tweed, the decadence of a Christian Dior evening gown, coupled with an ostentatiousness and penchant for embellishment to

4.3
Matty Bovan
Spring/Summer
2019, Look 1. ©
Shaun James Cox.

match that of Christian Lacroix. The tension between past, present and future are performed with gleeful application. Inauthentic recreations, authentically Matty Bovan. The collection explored the concept of *sempiternity*, used to describe the property of existing within time but infinitely into the future (as opposed to eternity, understood as existing outside time). By nature, fashion is both temporal and sempiternal, it constantly eschews the old for the new, but its demand for change, novelty and renewal is ceaseless. Through intricate construction and collage, Matty Bovan reconfigures time as labyrinthian and mediated, allowing the juxtaposition of the historical alongside the contemporary. Fashion history is then, less a chronological succession of events, objects and people and more a force that scrambles time and challenges linearity (Pecorari 2014: 67). The dress becomes a *heterotopia*, a concept which French philosopher Michel Foucault theorised to describe sites and objects, such as mirrors, cemeteries and prisons, that simultaneously represent, contest and invert reality. Fashion is reticent, it panders as much as it challenges, it takes into account every occurrence, every judgement, every shift before it makes its own statement. Like its predecessors, the dress and its accompaniments were made in response to its environment. The theatricality of Christian Dior's designs provided a serene mask to the anxieties of the postwar period after the Second World War, Coco Chanel's calculated austerity in response to the *Belle Époque* fashions, was agile and full of movement, modern and futurist in spirit, Christian Lacroix's decadence in the 1980s, a salve to the decade's economic strife. For Matty Bovan, designing against the backdrop of British austerity, exacerbated by social inequality and the United Kingdom's

decision to leave the European Union, the dress is a visual embodiment of the turbulence of contemporary British society. It is the descendant of a long lineage of garments that have embodied a spirit of change and defiance in their time.

A surreal historicism colonises the terrain of the 'new'. A layering of historical periods woven into a single dress approximates the past through established representations of the period. The American literary critic Fredric Jameson argues that the plundering of history by contemporary visual culture creates a postmodern carnival, the incessant return to the past a kind of deathly recycling that empties history of its meaning, rendering it bankrupt and only good for costume drama and fantasy (Evans 2003: 24). While modern society has indeed rendered everything into images and everyone into image junkies, Bovan's excavation of the past is not history repeating itself, but a study of history and identity asserted through repetition (Stagg 2019: 93). Camp is a rediscovery of history's waste. By asserting that there is good taste in bad taste and vice versa, camp retrieves not only what has been excluded from serious high-cultural 'tradition' but picks up more unsalvageable and discarded material discovered anew (Granata 2017: 96). It is the mode of enjoyment and witty hedonism found in camp that Bovan utilises with its many gestures of irony, parody, pastiche, naïveté, theatricality, extravagance, artificiality, exaggeration and aestheticism. The outfit demonstrates luxury while, at the same time, mocking it, adopting camp's philosophy of transformation and incongruity and allowing aesthetic absurdities to exist in the realm of high culture and desire. Fixed notions of time, taste, and sensibility collapse in on themselves rendering established norms obsolete and envisioning new ones in their stead.

Through a complex programme of reference and amendment, the ensemble is a physical incarnation of time unfurling. Rather than constructing the artifice of transcendent beauty, a deconstructivist approach highlights the mechanics of production, of permanent and accelerating change that governs much of contemporary global life and culture. Fashion's inherent contradictions are instead laid bare, the traces of construction visible, as a way of examining upheaval and strife. When the structure of the design appears under attack, silhouette distorted, seams displaced, hemlines skewed, inflicting the underskirt with a tangle of plastic and ribbon that dangles and clumps together, it all suggests a vision of elegant chaos, of being in the eye of the storm. While the fantasy of probing the body's interiority is common in contemporary art, it is habitually disavowed in fashion due to its emphasis on surface, perfection and polish (Evans 2003: 144–5). The use of deconstruction sensibilities, explored by Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto in the 1980s and 1990s, was a critique of established norms of beauty and convention. Matty Bovan's designs share a renewed interest in these techniques utilising displacement, inversion and unconventional materials to suggest that we are in a stage of turbulence akin to the close of the last century. Not dissimilar from how a painting is painstakingly created, the opening ensemble is an exercise in layering through a gradual, meticulous build-up of materials and colour. Bovan's exuberant bricolage reflects the frenzied and insecure age in which we live. The limits of taste and respectability are tested, the parameters of each being constantly broken down and rehashed. Beneath this veneer of theatricality and extravagance in all its frippery beats the decisive heart of a modernist, a

gleeful dystopian creativity bred from an Orwellian moment in time. As a performance, Bovan repositions fashion as politically subversive and revolutionary in spirit, where history is made histrionic, virtue is born out of duplicity, and legitimacy is conferred on what it pretends to ridicule.

Look 10 of Craig Green's Fall/Winter 2022 menswear collection was comprised of a white medical-grade latex cloak with undulating folds, that sheathed the upper torso and obscured the face, white utility trousers and beige trainers (Figure 4.4). Green noted that the collection was about 'being able to experience things in reality and touch things ... kind of for comfort, but also for suffocation' (Mower 2022b: n.p.). Throughout, mohair and satin were turned inside out, felt more than they were seen, while mould castings of Adidas Stan Smiths became footwear in themselves. These items explored an introspective experience of a garment's materiality in lieu of an outward presentation of comfort and luxury. Expansive and restrictive explorations of form, silhouette and construction probed the body's spatial relationship to its environment. The rubber sheath is a mobile monument that ruminates on ideas of control, whether that be for pleasure, preservation, or care.

Look 10 provokes the viewer's *sight-knowledge* or *tactile epistemology*, both terms Laura Marks, a philosopher and scholar of new media and film, coins to describe an intimate knowledge of the tactile experience of fabric (Evans 2013: 177). Marks suggests that particular objects can create a mimetic experience, triggering specific material and textured areas of corporeal knowledge that twist emotions back and forth between titillation and repulsion. The performativity of

4.4
Craig Green Fall/Winter 2022, Look 10. © Filippo Fior/Imaxtree.com.

the ensemble prioritises the wearer's experience, but it does not diminish the viewer's. One can understand the sensation that is provoked through sight-knowledge alone. In utilising a material produced by a factory that specialises in manufacturing medical pieces, the use of rubber references the body as an entity that is porous and leaking, in need of containment. Hands that are hidden for fear of contagion, trousers that are evocative of hospital scrubs, recall an ecclesiastical image of a saint-like chaplain visiting a sickly patient. The ensemble plays out our fears of contagion and the obsessive moral policing of bodily borders that characterised the politics of blame and responsibility of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s that re-emerged with COVID-19 (Granata 2017: 2). Illness here is not rendered through unsightly growths, protuberances or ailments but through a clinical and sanitised cloaked figure.

Convexities are smoothed out, the body's waste omitted, all kept veiled and secret. The grotesque realism of the sick body does not need to be physicalised and would appear gratuitous when a recent mass event like the COVID-19 pandemic reels in the minds of the masses. Instead, Green employs a visual medical lexicon conceptually. The monochromatic hues of white convey purity, cleanliness and peace, but are also symbolically linked to death, mourning and rebirth. The performativity of this gesture situates illness, in its physical and psychosomatic manifestations, as a state that offers a transgressive and alternate perception of the body in the wake of trauma. By offering readings of both mourning and rebirth, the performance here acts as a spatial metaphor for excavating loss in the present, which encourages the viewer to look frankly at these forms and resist a certain temptation to deny reality and reflect nostalgically on a time when things were allegedly simpler, better (Steyerl 2012: 5).

Dissociation and self-preservation from the troubles of the world is an understandable response. In times of strife, people often turn inwards, reclaiming the body as the only thing that can be controlled. Enveloped in rubber, the body is encased in a protective cocoon. Inspired by iron maidens and iron lungs, the first a medieval torture instrument resembling a coffin, the second an antiquated, life-prolonging medical apparatus, both functioning through encasement. A tension is created where the performative gesture of the cloak complicates the perception of the garment as remedial or harmful. Not only is the viewer's gaze denied by the wearer, the wearer's ability to see is negated in its scanning capabilities (Ross 2006: 111). Sheltered from this voyeurism, the wearer's extreme proximity to the rubber cloak intensifies the realm of interiority. The price for such protection is claustrophobic; it creates the idea of isolation rather than preservation where there is friction between the outward aesthetic appearance of the garment and the inward sensation of wearing it.

Hal Foster refers to containment as a particular kind of bondage that nourishes simultaneous desires for absolute submission and total freedom (Foster 2020: 42). While rubber was initially used to make raincoats, hats and domestic items such as gloves, it became associated with S&M fetishists before gradually being integrated into mainstream fashion, where it offers designers a shorthand for sexuality and deviancy. In the past, the single most popular rubber fetish was the mackintosh, a rubberised raincoat, invented in 1823 by Charles Macintosh.

The Mackintosh Society, one of the oldest fetishist organisations in the world, was founded in England taking its name from the coat while, as early as 1926, enthusiastic letters about the garment appeared in the fetish magazine *London Life* (Steele 1996: 148). Abstracted by Green into a sheath, the shroud defies easy categorisation; organic and artificial, space-age and medieval, perverse yet unthreatening, it resists our tendency to naturalise clothing. The magic of the fetish is that it neutralises fear turning something otherwise threatening and repulsive into something titillating and rewarding. In cultural historian Valerie Steele's book *Fetish*, rubber enthusiasts remarked that rubber 'feels' nice, which is important for people living in an insecure world (Steele 1996: 151). Asphyxiating rubber, confined limbs, loss of vision, Craig Green's bondage plays between submission and release. The fissure at the centre of the cocoon offers respite creating a visual oscillation between public and private that collapses the synthetic separation of performance and real life. Fashion sits at the crossroads of theatricality and reality, wholeheartedly revelling in both. Performing in this liminality, the boundaries of commercial and experimental fashion, sexuality, wellness, interiority and exteriority, visibility and invisibility, life and death are trespassed. What Green optimistically gestures is that strife can be revised as a lucrative opportunity for restoration where bondage, control and deficiency offer the conditions for release and renewal.

Showpieces have become a mainstay in a collection, offering designers the opportunity to test the possibilities of their medium while undertaking a successful marketing strategy that defines a brand's vision through the circulation of vivid images. While these creations reflect how design and fashion are anchored in specific moments of capitalist production and consumption, they also reflect the social and cultural upheaval of the time. What is impressive is that these concepts can be engineered to work within the restrictions of a commercial business and become machine washable at 30 degrees (McKenzie and Lipscombe 2020: n.p.). The ensembles by Jonathan Anderson for Loewe, Craig Green and Matty Bovan bypass definitions of art, design, and ready-to-wear fashion through rigorous, conceptual underpinnings that cannot be ignored. These designers are subverting the powers at play in our consumerist society where garments, such as these, are imbued with a distinct visual language whose constructed representations of life may offer an astute understanding of the conditions we find ourselves living through.

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