

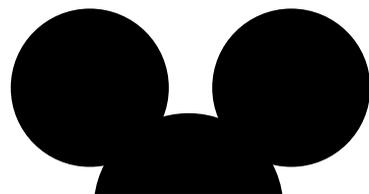
DISSENT

“The majority is always wrong”

Henrik Ibsen, “An Enemy of the People.”
Printed on fabrics for Comme des Garçons men’s Fall 2003 collection.



ESSENCE



“Rei’s clothes have that weird mixture of Japanese minimalism and nihilism and Walt Disney”

Nick Knight, “Rei,” *Another Magazine* #18, Spring/Summer 2010.

EVERGREEN

CDG Homme Plus subline introduced in 2005, since discontinued, consisting of favorite items from past collections that have been re-issued with slight design alterations

“I have one of these, trust me, they’re worth it! Their polyester fabric is very nice and comfortable and they do so many things with it, do it in a crisp twill, do a warped/wrinkled treatment, etc. I NEVER thought I would ever want to own anything polyester but I was suprised how much I like their synthetic pieces.”

posted by brian_w

In response to

“\$1,000 for a polyester jacket? I’m trying really hard to swallow this...”

Posted by birdofparadise on *The Fashion Spot* online community, “evergreen” thread.



FOUNTAINHEAD

“One cannot fight the battle without freedom. I think the best way to find that battle, which equals the unyielding spirit, is in the realm of creation. That’s exactly why freedom and the spirit of defiance is the source of my energy.”

Rei Kawakubo in Frankel, 2010.

FRAGRANCE

Since launching its first eponymous perfume in 1994, Comme des Garçons has steadily developed a small but significant line of innovative fragrances, many of them unisex. Over the years they have included such critically acclaimed and commercially successful scents as Comme des Garçons 2 and, most recently, Wonderwood. Odeur 53, the brand’s first “anti-perfume”, with cellulose and burnt rubber among other unconventional notes, was released in 1998 to mixed reviews.

“ODEUR 53 (Comme des Garçons) *** woody soapy

Historically important but artistically unsatisfying, this fragrance started as a minimalist one-line concept-art school of perfumery that has so far proved only a moderately good idea. This one was intended to smell clean and does that a million times better than the fragrances from the “Clean” brand which just smell vile. But it begs the eternal question: *pour-quoi pas rien?*”

Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez, *Perfumes: The Guide*, Viking, 2008.

FREEDOM

“Feeling free inside oneself is being free.”

Rei Kawakubo, *Interview Magazine*, November 2008.

FUN

“I duly asked her what she laughs at, and she answered deadpan, ‘People falling down.’”

Thurman, 2005.



FURNITURE

Kawakubo has designed five collections of furniture. “Chair No. 1”, from 1983, was not characterized by comfort.

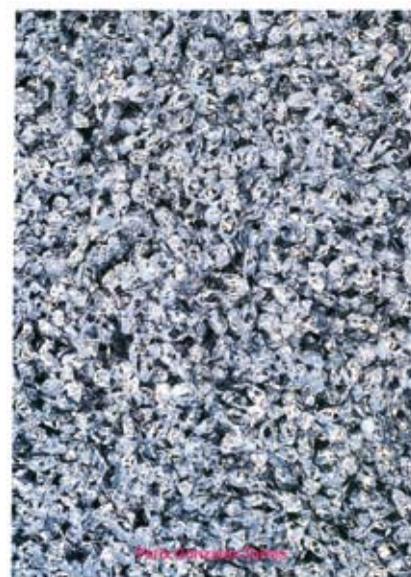


GATEWAY

Of all Comme des Garçons products, the classic zippered wallet is perhaps the single most sought-after item, even by people who know little else about the brand.

GONZALEZ-TORRES, FELIX

Candy Pieces by the Cuban-born artist was shown at the Aoyama store in May of 1998.



HISTORY

“Ms. Kawakubo, 66, is one of the great fashion forces from the last decades of the 20th century to now.”

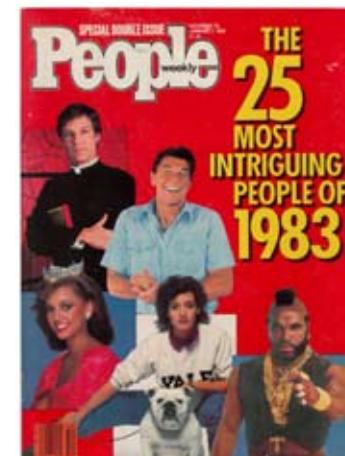
Menkes, 2009.

“In fashion, it was the year of the Japanese. And no one in that ultrasensitive land, where every stitch can set off an earthquake, rattled more sake cups than Rei Kawakubo – not even her talented compatriots Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto. From Paris to Tokyo her followers are striding about in Kawakubo’s mournful, strangely cut garments, black socks and rubber shoes. Rei’s critics hold the 41-year-old designer responsible for perpetrating a formless, asexual look. ‘Her clothes don’t touch or mold the body,’ complains traditionalist French designer Sonia Rykiel. ‘There’s a lack of softness.’ But Rei’s supporters credit her with some of the most startling and influential designs out of Japan today. ‘Rei is an original,’ says Bendel Vice-President Jean Rosenberg. ‘She is a master of intricate cuts.’ Kawakubo, the most radical of the new wave of Japanese designers, pronounces Western skintight garments ‘quite boring,’ adding, ‘I design for women who are beyond that.’ What sort of woman? ‘The bag lady of New York,’ Kawakubo replied flippily when asked by *Women’s Wear Daily*.

“Rei’s now historic advance on the West took place only two years ago. Her first show in Paris caused one of the biggest furores since Stravinsky introduced *The Rite of Spring*. Like Stravinsky, Rei coolly mocked conventions – shredding and poking holes in skirts, tops and dresses. In the US, where her clothes still baffle the uninitiated eye, Rei’s success is growing rapidly. She now has outposts

in nine US cities, with her own boutique in Manhattan’s breathlessly fashionable SoHo district.’

“Japan’s Stravinsky of Fashion Rocks the World with her Atonal, Assymetric Sad Rags,” *People Weekly*, December 26, 1983.



Elsa Klensch: When did you first become interested in fashion?

Rei Kawakubo: When I was about 24. I’d been working in the advertising department of a textile company, and I was asked to style the print ads and TV commercials. I liked the work so much that after two years I decided to leave the firm and work as a freelance stylist.

EK: Later, when you decide to become a designer, was it because you couldn’t find clothes you thought were right for your work?

RK: It wasn’t so much that I couldn’t find the kinds of clothes I wanted. I was frustrated by the way we chose the clothes.

EK: When and how did you get started?

RK: In about 1969 I rented a room that was part of a Tokyo graphics design studio and set up with two assistants.

EK: What sort of clothes did you produce?

RK: Clothes I felt were modern and new. But they were commercial as well; I was in business, and I had to support myself.

EK: How did you decide on the name Comme des Garçons?

RK: I don’t remember exactly. I know I wanted something long, something with a ring to it. One of the people working with me said, “How about ‘Comme des Garçons?’” And I thought, “Why not?”

EK: Your own name has a ring to it.
RK: I didn’t think of myself as a designer. It was a business, a group of people working together. I wanted a name that would represent the whole group.

Elsa Klensch, “Another World of Style ... Rei Kawakubo,” *Vogue* (New York), August 1987.



KARI RITTENBACH: For a designer – or rather, aesthete – whose otherworldly ascent in fashion is accounted for by no less a creation myth than the flattest plateau of “starting from zero” (the uncouth postwar epithet “Hiroshima’s Revenge” attended CDG’s earliest presentations), it is certainly apposite to examine how Kawakubo allows herself to be historicized after the fact. A deconstructivist with a paradoxically tightly-controlled image, Kawakubo toys with cultural and historical references as adroitly, or as murkily, as the most prodigious Postmodernist – and in so doing has fashioned a history all her own. But what came before the legend? What was the reception to early Comme des Garçons in Japan like during the seventies? (Kawakubo began producing clothing for CdG as early as 1969.) Does much clothing from this early period still exist? In her *New Yorker* profile of Kawakubo, writer Judith Thurman is best able to describe these pieces as possibly featuring “denim apron skirts.”



The lunar lamp by Konstantin Grcic illuminates Comme des Garçons in Aoyama.

AKIKO FUKAI: For Kawakubo, the Seventies were, I could say, her training or trial period. She was well known among professionals, such as stylists, fashion journalists and buyers, who considered her a very talented new type of designer. In fact, we have just a few items of clothing from her earlier period. They are as Thurman described, and based mainly on “basic” daily clothes, such as Japanese traditional farmer’s clothes made of “Aizome” (Japanese indigo dye textiles or denim) and men’s tailored suits. They are baggy without holes and tiers – yet a flair for a new era can be discerned in her clothing.

What was women’s sportswear or streetwear like in the 1960s before Kawakubo?

So-called American sportswear had already been translated into Japanese women’s wardrobes in the 1960s. The Japanese apparel industry had developed enormously by learning the American ready-to-wear fashions around that time.

Was it more difficult for Kawakubo to control the presentation of her apparel as a young designer? (Which might necessarily have encouraged her to show in Paris?)

No, it was not. After having established her own company in 1969, she presented her first show in Tokyo in 1975 and opened her boutique at the same year. (I remember very well her first boutique. It was located on the second floor of a building in Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo and was discreet without a too nice welcoming-feeling but filled with a stimulating atmosphere.) Anyway, she debuted in Paris. It was unavoidable for her to present her works in Paris, the only place where her works might be judged properly, whether positively or negatively.

Kawakubo is a virtuoso of contradiction. The title of her women’s line is French for “like boys,” yet for all of her androgynous

apparel, she has been careful to resist being labeled a feminist. Kawakubo also established herself squarely in an industry dominated by men. How were her early accomplishments viewed in Japan, and has it had any affect on gender politics in fashion there since?

In Japan before her, there were already several female fashion designers who had met with success in the business. For example, Hanae Mori was received as a member of Paris Haute Couture in 1978. The naming of her brand CdG is not related to feminism but more to the attitude that Kawakubo does not compromise on conventionality. She said, “I try to create clothes by breaking away from the clothes (or thinking) that already exist” (“Deconstruction and Elegance,” interview by Akiko Fukai, *Dress-study*, Vol. 24, [Fall 1993]). Therefore her accomplishment had little affect on gender politics in fashion. In any case, Japanese feminists didn’t pay so much attention to fashion.

Do you consider Kawakubo’s quasi-feminism, then, to be reflected in her designs for women, which drape and abstract the female body rather than reveal or sensualize it? Or is the “style” of Comme des Garçons apparel simply more culturally amenable to the domestic consumer? In other words, is her treatment of the body considered radical in Japan?

As I mentioned before, she is not a feminist. Therefore I think it would be incorrect if we read her designs in the context of feminism. Her design reflects the indigenous notion of Japanese clothing (the kimono, for example) that it is not necessary to obey the body’s form, in contrast to the Western notion that clothes should obey the body’s form; in other words, clothing has the autonomy. In the Japanese tradition, clothing tended to conceal the body line rather than reveal it. Therefore Kawakubo’s treatment of the body did not shock Japanese people. But what shocked them was her fervent

and strong expression, through the dynamic volume of form, intricateness of construction and devotion to black in her clothing.

What is most appealing about Comme des Garçons to the domestic consumer?

Kawaii (Kawaii contains a feeling akin to Japanese version of femininity). At the same time, the label’s very edgy and artistic quality.

In a 1983 interview with *Women’s Wear Daily*, Kawakubo insisted: “I’m not very happy to be classified as another Japanese designer. There is no one characteristic that all Japanese designers have.” How do you respond to this statement, today?

I agree with what she said. She can be classified by her own characteristics but not as particularly Japanese. However I am sure that any creators – whether designers or artists – can’t escape from the influence of *Zeitgeist* on their works; the circumstances, the time, and of course the culture.

What do you consider Kawakubo’s relationship to history? Would it be wrong to question the veracity of her claiming a starting point of conceptual “absolute zero”? That later Comme des Garçons collections have riffed on countless historical references (Magritte’s *The Red Model* of 1935 or designs by Elsa Schiaparelli, for example) certainly indicates that fashion and art history – and not only contemporary culture, high or low – maintain a certain significance for her.

In fact in 1993, Kawakubo curated a small fashion exhibition entitled “Essence of Quality” by mixing KCI’s historical costumes with her works in Tokyo. As she said, “I can’t create without being inspired by nothing.” She knows about art history and fashion history. But in her work, the relationship to the history is ambiguous; it is not simply revisiting the past. She catches elements of inspiration

with her sensitive antennae and absorbs them. Then she restores them to the level of “zero”, where her own creation starts.

Western journalists have used adjectives like “esoteric,” “severe,” “tricky,” “fervent” and “innovative” to describe Kawakubo’s influence on the world of fashion via *Comme des Garçons*. How have you generally described her aesthetic?

Stimulating, dynamic, strong, intricate, and new-feminine. The femininity of the new era has been created by *Comme des Garçons* following after *Coco Chanel*. New-femininity looks sometimes androgynous; it is not determined by men’s eyes.

AKIKO FUKAI, Chief Curator, The Kyoto Costume Institute, to *032c*. The KCI holds a total of 1500 CdG pieces from the early 1980s to today. Interview by Kari Rittenbach.

HOME

Kawakubo owns an apartment in a modern tower on the edge of a cemetery, not far from *Comme des Garçons*’ headquarters and three stores in Aoyama. The apartment’s precise location is a secret.

HONORIS

In 2000 Kawakubo was awarded the “Excellence in Design Award” from Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design.



IDENTITY

“I came across *Comme des Garçons* in the early 1980s, a season or two after Rei Kawakubo first showed in Paris. At the time I was a trainee journalist with no money and still dressed by customising jumble sale bargains. But as soon as I could afford to, I started buying a piece from

Comme each season. Fashion was much more politicised then, because feminism was so important. What you wore said so much about your own identity, and how you wanted to represent your gender. *Comme* was the perfect solution. Swathing yourself in those black folds felt super chic, super uncompromising, super radical and super feminist – like waving a very elegant two-fingered salute at the establishment.”

Alice Rawsthorn, “Rei,” *Another Magazine* #18, Spring/Summer 2010.

INFORMATION

“What is important to me is information (in the journalistic sense of relating news.) Through my collections, other product projects and through my graphic work, or by collaborating with artists and photographers, I like to tell a story. Without news, nothing is alive. The final result of everything must say something. Information deepens the work. So, if anything, I am maybe more of a journalist than an artist!”

Rei Kawakubo in *Menkes*, 2009.



JOFFE, ADRIAN

Married to Rei Kawakubo since 1992, the South African is the president of *Comme des Garçons International*. He is the company’s main spokesperson and Kawakubo’s chief interpreter.



KISS

Models in the *Comme des Garçons* women’s Fall 2009 collection wore tulle masks embroidered with red sequins in the form of a lip smudge.



LOVELY

Kawakubo has said she starts out by giving form to ideas she considers “lovely” or “smart”.



MATERIALS

“Over the years the designer has also incorporated textiles thought to be cheap, ostentatious, cute, vulgar, or kitsch, and repositioned them in the aesthetic hierarchy.”

Koda, 2008.

1 “It was Hiroshi Matsushita who devised the rayon criss-crossed with elastic that allowed Kawakubo to make the garments in the women’s collection of 1984 bubble and boil as though they were melting. And it was Matsushita who formulated the bonded cotton rayon and polyurethane fabric Kawakubo used for her asymmetric dresses of 1986 ... For Matsushita, the distinctive character of a *Comme des Garçons* garment can be traced back to the thread that will be used to weave the fabric from which the collection will be made.”

2 “Once she gave us a piece of crumpled paper and said she wanted a pattern for a garment that would have something of that quality. Another time she didn’t produce anything, but talked about a pattern for a coat that would have the qualities of a pillowcase that was in the process of being pulled inside out. She didn’t want that exact shape, of course, but the essence is that moment of transition, of half inside, half out.”

Sudjic, 1990.

MEMORY, erased

“Continuity of tradition and history is present in varying degrees in all cultures, but learning to forget these rather than inheriting them is far from easy. In place of ‘forgetting’, we could substitute the words ‘destruction’ and ‘rebirth’. This is because in order to create a new memory, we must first erase the old memory. One of only a handful of examples where the mechanism of destruction and rebirth has been adopted in the context of handing down a tradition is the *shikinen sengu* ceremony at the Ise Shrine, according to which the shrine is completely dismantled and rebuilt every 20 years. The meticulousness with which this renewal ceremony is observed, which means that not only the buildings but everything down to the artefacts inside the buildings are replaced, results in the crystallization both of the skills of the craftsmen involved and of the time in which they act. A certain purity is also achieved as a result of this



process. The old and the new appear to be the same, but because the cells themselves have been replaced, strictly speaking they are different entities. The primal spirit in the form of the object of worship housed inside is embodied in the design of the shrine.

“A shrine that remains forever 20 years old or less could be thought of as an analogy for someone who rejects maturity beyond childhood and is reborn over and over again in order never to attain adulthood. This isn’t the same as equating growth with the rejection of development, but entails forgetting by denying one after another the things that accumulate inside one. The only things allowed to accumulate would be practical skills and pure technology. As soon as one declares oneself an heir to, or destroyer of, history or tradition, one begins to age towards ‘adulthood’.

“A feature of the work produced by these creators, who could almost be described as ‘Ise Shrine-like’, is that they help extinguish and regenerate the cells

and contaminated memory neurons of the people who set eyes on them. Kawakubo Rei and Sejima Kazuyo, whom I rate as two of the greatest creators alive today, both fall into this ‘cell regeneration’ category.”

Hasegawa Yuko, Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, “The Art of Forgetting,” *Art iT Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2006.

MODERNISM

Kawakubo has always functioned as a modernist. Her fashion is serious, singular, sensitive, full of energy and it always makes impertinent demands on our feelings. She works only for the satisfaction of her own ideas, season after season. She has used the skills of her pattern-makers in Tokyo to attack and explore a variety of human conditions, including randomness, unreality, our literal and metaphorical burdens, and our complex ideas about eroticism and beauty. She makes us see these things in her fashion.

CATHY HORYN, fashion critic of *The New York Times*, for *032c*