

PASSAGEWAYS



Matthew Linde
Martin Kamer Collection

Text
Photos

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The *other* of art, fashion is an elusive discipline, an anxious aesthetic branch haunted by its relationship to mortality and time. From Hussein Chalayan's embrace to Rei Kawakubo's refusal, there is a tendency to turn to art as a recourse for unearthing or denying deeper truths of form. Yet art, as a contested and specialized discipline, can only offer shaky reflections that enforce dislocated histories upon fashion's own tempo. The origins of the fashion show themselves reveal the paradox of modern experience between standardization and abstract mutability. The fashion show, as a form of gestural modernism, illuminates culture in flux. While technological treatments of the fashion show have changed, its underlying performance remains intact; where commerce, leisure and the body converge.

NEW VELOCITIES

In *Adorned in Dreams* (1985), Elizabeth Wilson writes:

"In the modern city the new and different sounds the dissonance of reaction to what went before; that moment of dissonance is key to twentieth century style. The colliding dynamism, the thirst for change and the heightened sensation that characterize the city societies particularly of modern industrial capitalism go to make up this "modernity," and the hysteria and exaggeration of fashion well express it."¹

The fashion show first emerged in late nineteenth-century Europe, evolving out of antecedents such as dolls, miniature figurines donning new prototypes; and tableaux vivants, live acts involving a series of freeze frame poses mimicking postures in painting. One of the first innovations of the "show" entailed couturiers sending mannequins into the public square, shocking the public with new design lines and cuts and inciting photographed dispersal. After the Haussmannization of Paris, Charles Frederick Worth, commonly mythologized as the king of couture, sent his wife down the Champs-Élysées donning his designs in the 1860s. The race-course too became a common cultural destination to watch the living mannequins sport new sartorial imaginations. This was practiced by other designers such as Jeanne Paquin, Jeanne Margaine-Lacroix, and Paul Poiret and during the 1900s it synthesized a powerful social marketing strategy for French couturiers. But more than trade, these mannequins and fashions embodied the new dynamics of city life. Walter Benjamin cites Charles Blanc:

"Everything that could keep women from remaining seated was encouraged; anything that could have impeded their walking was avoided. They wore their hair and their clothes as though they were to be viewed in profile. For the profile

is the silhouette of someone [...] who passes, who is about to vanish from our sight. Dress became the image of the rapid movement that carries away the world."²

If a society is deemed modern by its ability to produce and consume surplus images, the new phantasmagoric jolts of fashion were constitutive for a nineteenth-century unfolding. From 1852 to 1870 firms such as Worth, Virot, and Laferrière programmed private viewings for clients to view their new fashions, modelled on living mannequins, and by 1880 this was habitualized into twice a year. Thanks to the prosperity of a globalized press, shows were soon being covered by American newspapers and seared into the modern public consciousness. Presentations became elaborate affairs with specially crafted invites for exclusive clientele and French couturiers begun to offer champagne and canapés for the event, adapting this socializing innovation from the English designer Lucile. The fashion show, from its inception, was tied to the production of spatial experience. Music and interiors were manipulated to illuminate the fantasy of bodily mutability and the fashion show encroached further into the sensorium. A report on Poiret's salon dating from 1912 describes in detail the walls (Nile Green, threaded with dark green and antiquated gold), carpet (raspberry), and curtains (also raspberry, made of taffeta): The very clear opposition of these two colors, the one neutral and the other hot, produced a bizarre atmosphere, at once soft and vibrant, and which must harmonize happily with the fresh and buoyant colors from which Poiret likes to take his effects.³

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THE ENTERTAINMENT OF DREAMS

As fashion shows became more theatrical, they became fashionable occasions in themselves. It was Lucile who pioneered the fashion play, a spectacle situated between a party and theatrical event. Some of her shows lasted hours including highly stylized mannequins, accessories, dogs, and acrobatics. In fact, early couture houses often paralleled strategies in modern art. Nancy Troy remarks in *Couture Culture* (2002) that “historians of modern art have typically focused on avant-garde theatre, ballet or film as principal sites of artistic intervention,” yet “remaining relatively unexplored are the more popular productions”⁴ imagined by Poiret and Lucile. Unlike the manifestos of modernist art, these fashion shows located a hinge between modernism, the body, and commerce. Lucile deepened the complex eroticism of her theatrical spectacles when she removed the numbered taxonomy of the gowns and bestowed them instead with evocative titles such as *Passion’s Thrall*, *Do You Love Me?*, and *A Frenzied Song of Amorous Things*—all performed as walk-about collectively titled as *Gowns of Emotion*.⁵

The most elaborate had texts prepared by Lucile’s sister, society novelist Elinor Glyn. The series culminated in 1909 [...] with the ambitious *Seven Ages of Women*, a stage piece in seven acts tracing from birth to death the dress-cycle of a society dame.⁶

In 1911, James Laver, writing for the *New York Times*, proclaimed that presenting the latest fashions on stage was “surely the most dramatic way of showing off splendid gowns that has ever been invented. [...] Such a spectacle is something well worth going to see, even if one does not buy the gown.”⁷ These events became so successful that, by the 1920s, Lucile’s plays were touring Chicago, London, New York, and Paris. In America, department stores, fairs, and philanthropists initiated their own fashion plays, involving multiple designers and varieties of mannequins in daylong performances. One elaborate vaudeville was “The Fashion’s Passing Show” at the Newport, Rhode Island, home of Mrs Hermann Oelrichs. The show featured society women in costume parading down grand stairs, mannequins running out in new bathing suit designs, as if appearing from nowhere, into fountains and others wearing golfing and tennis outfits in tableau enactments.

Back in France, Poiret also experimented in turning fashion shows into theatrical affairs. His most famous event, “The Thousand and Second Night” (1911), took the form of a highly staged party in the garden of his atelier, where three hundred guests arrived adorned in his new modish “orientalist” dress. As a fantastical evocation of the East, the event featured sartorial elements such as the harem trousers that dominated his following collection. Poiret’s

soirée behaved as a participatory advertisement that enjoyed abundant publicity. His exercise of orientalist sensibilities explored ideas of the *other*, specifically in modern gender masquerade where women were seen dressed in the masculine style. These PR tactics of surreal gestures have a remarkable similarity to the “experimental” designers of today, from the horrific dramaturgy of Alexander McQueen to the relational presentations by BLESS. In the early 1900s they caught the imagination of novelty and, more significantly, symbolized successional replaceability, reflecting a transition in fashion from idealized objects into dreams. As Anne Hollander explains, the figures in fashion photographs “came to resemble characters in small unfinished film dramas. These had no history and no future, they existed unsettlingly for an instant.”⁸

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With a stamp by the Société des nouveautés textiles, August 9, 1912

MATHEMATICAL ILLUSIONS

Caroline Evans writes in depth about the “rationalization of the body” in her analysis of modernity and the fashion show, *The Mechanical Smile* (2013). The mannequin, as a live enactment of design, functioned in early fashion shows much the same as today—walking in mathematical configurations enacting stylized, repetitive poses made industrial. This rationalization of the body, however, was not unique to fashion. In dance, the women of the chorus line were distinctive in their effacement of individuality—Benjamin identified the chorus girl as a mass-produced article in the libidinal life of the big-city dweller. Military parades of the time also standardized bodies in uniformity, resembling the mechanized flow of modern life. When captured in images, these disciplines all share a concern: that of bodies in movement, fragmented and synchronous.

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Complex systems of mirrors allowed the mannequin to be multiplied in salons and showrooms alike. In the fitting rooms of Paquin and Doeuillet, an arrangement of three angled panels reoriented the mannequin so that she was able to pose and look back at the client via the refracted image. Through the optical elision the client could forge a self-identification with the mannequin as a commodified figure. Other houses such as Redfern established fitting rooms as complete mirrored boxes. These dazzling optical devices became ubiquitous in presenting mannequins on stage, enabling effects of infinite recession, as if multiplying capital into the psyche. Like globalized commerce, the mannequin was optically reconstructed into a mass-produced copy. Chanel’s salon, known for its magnificent mirrored interior, particularly its ascending staircase, had phantasmagoric effects. Evans argues that while analogies could be drawn with the modernist avant-gardes and their depictions of the fragmented body, Chanel’s modernism was instead located in the rationalization of the body in the workplace.

The early fashion show also developed in tandem with techniques of the moving image. Emerging experiments with montage in film mimicked the displacement of the mannequin in movement. The start-stop nature of her image, reflected in paused poses and abstracted gestures suggested sensibilities shared with cinema’s fragmentary modality. The paper *L’Illustration* detailed a 1910 Poiret show’s filmic qualities as follows:

“With a word, a gesture [...] Poiret directs the cortège [...] a sign from him, a syllable, throws them forward, halts them, then makes them start again, go, come back on themselves, cross over, mix, according to his fantasy, as if it were a ballet with lazy movements, [...] and return, suddenly, all of them, to show off for a moment the curve of their hips.”⁹

If technologies alter ways of seeing, cinema and fashion articulated a world of moments, akin to how early writers of modernity characterized modern experience as ephemeral.

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MANUFACTURING THE ORIGINAL

It was Charles Frederick Worth who first offered “models”—as dress prototypes were known at the time—in order to enable the commercial distribution of couture to France and the world. As a complete product, his designs could be bought outright requiring only slight variations in fit and decoration. In standardizing dress, Worth predated the automobile industry by 30 years. This reproducible strategy was advanced by offering American buyers models designed to be copied. As cheaper counterfeits ensued, Worth’s signature was introduced in the 1860s to distinguish the genuine from the fraudulent. Couture had been created as a fantasy for exclusive novelty, yet it was equally oriented as a commercial enterprise for market expansion into America. In managing this contradiction, couturiers delivered two consecutive shows to two distinct audiences; an elaborately sensorial show to French clients, followed by a truncated presentation to overseas buyers. While this preserved the soul of Parisian fashion, upon his visit to America in 1913, Poiret discovered the true extent of counterfeit dresses. Reconciling the predicament three years later, he planned a transatlantic line of inexpensive designs suited for

the economic demands of the American woman. In a strange psychosis of inversion, fashion offered the promise of unique experience through mass-produced readymade clothing.

Nancy Troy expounds how this ambiguous relationship between art and industry was simultaneously taking place with Duchamp. Indeed, in art's readymade the same dilemma of the original and the authorial subject were being questioned vis-à-vis a booming industrial capitalism. Bourdieu reflected on the auratic collusion between the two disciplines: "The couturier does nothing different from the painter who constitutes a given object as a work of art by the act of affixing his signature to it" and described the signature by both as "one of the most economically and symbolically powerful words among those in circulation today."¹⁰ The authorized reproductions of both Poiret and Duchamp's industrialized objects cast a type of black magic on form. In erasing the existence of the original, they function as simulacra.

MODERNITY & MODERNISM

The danger of canvassing modernity and modernism so interchangeably is that their definitions can collapse altogether. "Modernity," as a process of modernization, refers to the technological, economic, scientific, and political transformation associated to the industrialization of 18th and 19th century. "Modernism" refers to the artistic avant-garde who reflected these new societal sensibilities. If the two occupy an unstable relationship, scholarship regarding Charles Baudelaire and Benjamin has thrown fashion into the ring. It was Baudelaire who appreciated the etymological wedding of *la mode* and *modernité*. In his writing on modernity, the poet-critic located art's epistemological gain within the ephemeral, where fashion was the visual manifestation par excellence. Evans develops on the value of ephemerality by arguing a possible type of gestural modernism, located within the performance of everyday life. She quotes from Michael Levenson's *Modernism* (2011):

"Men in capes, women on bicycles, workers in the square, suffragettes in the street, audiences in the theatre. The increased visibility, not only of modernist artworks but of modernist bodies, was central to the cultural milieu. [...] We need to acknowledge the special character of gestural Modernism, a major lineage within the period constituted by unrepeatable spectacles. The performances were not offered as texts, nor were they made permanent in paint. If they survive at all, and this was not their aim, it is only in half-reliable newspaper reports or memoirs. But the unrepeatable event and the evanescent gesture that 'takes the place of poetry' were crucial to adversary culture."¹¹

EPILOGUE

What is often overlooked in the endless repeats of fashion media roundtables discussing the epistemological seesaw of "fashion/art" is that the artistic strategies deployed in fashion shows today parallel those developed in its inception. The emergence of the fashion show constituted a critical constellation that embodied, as Benjamin saw it, the new velocities of life. This relation to modernity is more profound, for its investigation of fashion's fugitive nature, than the idea that any recent designer has brought fashion closer to the epistemological truth of "art."

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- 1 Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2003), 10.
- 2 Charles Blanc, "Considérations sur le vêtements des femmes," *Institut de France* (October 25, 1872): 12–3, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 74.
- 3 "Poiret: Une silhouette Parisienne," in: *Le miroir des Modes* 64, no. 6 (June 1912): 242, cited in Nancy Troy, *Couture Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 69.
- 4 Troy, 2003, 81.
- 5 Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 119.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 "Drecol and Beer Show Conservative Styles," in: *New York Times* (October 15, 1911): pt. 8, 4.
- 8 Anne Hollander, *Sex & Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (Kodansha America, Inc.: New York 1995), 159.
- 9 Gustave Babin, "Une Leçon d'élegance dans un parc," in: *L'illustration* (July 1910): 21–2.
- 10 Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut, "Le couturier et sa griffe: contribution à une théorie de la magie," in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1975): 7–36, 21.
- 11 Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 247.



Stamp by Design & Sampling Dept., June 16, 1911



Stamp by Design & Sampling Dept., French subscription library room, 541, May 31, 1913

PASSAGEWAYS: ON FASHION'S RUNWAY

Kunsthalle Bern, Oct 13 – Dec 2, 2018
Opening: Friday Oct 12, 6pm
Curated by Matthew Linde

The origins of the fashion show reveal a constellation where the body, commerce, and modernity converge. Described as a theatre without narrative, fashion's runway illuminates the paradox of fugitive desire and mechanical standardization. The "first" runway could be understood as the practice of couturiers sending live mannequins (what we now call models) into the public boulevard sporting new designs, eliciting shock and photographic dispersal. This animation of bodies performing novelty in urban life foregrounded the format we know today: models passing along a strip flanked by their consuming onlookers. They are, like ancient palimpsests, the formaldehyde of a culture in flux. While technological treatments of the runway have modified since its emergence at the turn of the 19th century, its underlying edifice has remained largely intact. Despite this ongoing scenographic sameness, various designers have explored the runway as a discursive site to interrogate the mechanics of fashion's circulation. These runway experiments reconfigure the relations between audiences, arrangements of space, the carnivalesque body and the haunting of its commodity form. Leaping from Paul Poiret's epic 1911 "A Thousand and Second Night," the designers exhibited in "Passageways: On Fashion's Runway" at Kunsthalle Bern have approached the runway-as-medium, using it twofold to extend and challenge the ideas within their own practice as well as the fashion system at large.

Just as these designers have tested the fashion show, runways themselves test the uncanny allegory for the passage of history as labyrinthine time that folds back onto itself. As a style of dress vanishes into the exiled *démodé*, our willingness for sartorial being requires revising. But in this "revising" fashion always arrives with quotations of its prior selves. Motifs and themes from previous periods are recycled from the refuse of progress and made proximate to each other. This discontinuous upheaval of the past into the present expresses our eternal reworking of history. Fashion-time then is not simply a series of chronological temporalities, but an audacious conception of history of ideas that breaches the continuum. So, it is the task of the fashion runway to embark on a speculative future in order to recover the now.

"Passageways" curates over thirty videos of runway shows by designers that have reimaged the catwalk as an exploratory performative tool to produce fashion. Also exhibited are specific outfits from six fashion designers of these selected runways, alongside a series of commissioned replicas that rewrite new histories of the runway as a suspension of fashion-time.