In this chapter, I retrace the methodological and theoretical strands that underpin my research on the grotesque and carnivalesque in experimental fashion at the turn of the millennium. I then move the focus to my exploration of selected 1990s collections and presentations by Belgian designer Martin Margiela, investigating the relation between fashion and time, followed by a discussion of my research process and the way I teased out meanings from Margiela’s designs via a method I refer to as “applied theory.” This approach places the objects and images in dialogue with a theoretical framework derived primarily from fashion studies, critical theory, cultural history, feminist theory, as well as film studies and material culture. It is also based on the belief that fashion is itself theoretical and not an inert matter to which theories are merely applied. As Alison Gill warned, fashion should not be thought of “as a passive reflection and measure of agencies found elsewhere in (deeper) social concerns” (Gill 1998, 35), but rather as having a theoretical dimension that intervenes with and influences the theoretical discourse.

I started my research project by observing a proliferation of grotesque bodies within “experimental fashion” at the turn of the millennium. I use this term to describe the kind of fashion that, as the word suggests, experiments with established
forms, patterns, textiles, and modes of presentation. Drawing on the work of Russian cultural historian and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), I set out to investigate the reasons behind this proliferation. In Rabelais and His World, a study from the 1930s and 1940s of the sixteenth-century French author François Rabelais, Bakhtin describes the open-ended, collective body of carnival as the grotesque body par excellence, in contrast to the classical body of official culture: “an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual” (Bakhtin 1984 [1965], 320). He theorizes the grotesque as chiefly a phenomenon of reversal and of unsettling ruptures of borders, particularly bodily borders. A constant transgression, merging, and exceeding of borders constitutes the central attribute of the Bakhtinian grotesque. In an endnote, he writes that it would be “interesting to trace the struggle of the grotesque and classical concept in the history of dress and fashion” (Bakhtin 1984 [1965], 322–23). My research took on this task within the limited framework of experimental fashion that had been established by the turn of the millennium within European fashion capitals, specifically Paris and London, though produced and circulated globally.¹

Finding sources and tailoring methods

When setting out to study experimental fashion at the turn of the millennium, I thought that it would be quite simple to reconstruct and access such a recent past. However, I found the opposite to be the case. In fact, it was specifically because it belonged to a relatively recent past that it was, at times, difficult to find actual visual and material evidence of the garments, as well as of fashion show recordings and lookbooks produced within those years as they had not yet been fully collected and archived. Materials produced in the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, prior to the widespread usage of the internet, were particularly difficult to find, thus making photos, let alone videos, hard to locate in the image databases dedicated to designer fashion, such as style.com, or more specialized ones, such as firstVIEW.com and Catwalking.com—two image databases specifically created for the industry. The only database that had some (albeit incomplete) information on 1980s and 1990s experimental fashion was the Contemporary Fashion Archive (contemporaryfashion.net): an information network created by five European fashion institutions to document contemporary fashion design. (The archive was a shared initiative of the Austrian-based organization UNIT F, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London, the Dutch Fashion Foundation in Amsterdam, the Flanders Fashion Institute in Antwerp, and the University of Applied Sciences in Pforzheim.) The project, which is still accessible online, was started in response to the multimedia nature of contemporary fashion and as a testament to its increasing centrality as a cultural force. The Contemporary Fashion
Archive ran from 2002 to 2007 and received funding from the Culture 2000 program of the European Union. Unlike industry databases, the archive served an educational purpose and thus, it contextualized the images of the presentations through designers’ descriptions of their work and other relevant materials. It is also free to access, which makes this archive an important and practical tool for teaching such material.

Exhibition catalogs provided an important corrective to such gaps in the documentation of experimental fashion of the 1980s and 1990s, though for the most part they did not provide an exhaustive account of designers’ work, and especially in the case of less known designers, they simply did not exist. Additionally, some very important documents of fashion of this period were style magazines published in the 1980s and 1990s. Particularly relevant to a study of experimental fashion were British independent magazines such as i-D and, later The Face—which, unlike the various editions of Vogue, covered independent designers from the very beginning of their careers. These were joined in the 1990s by avant-garde publications, such as Purple and Visionaire, which gave ample coverage to more experimental designs, as well as the magazines produced by designers themselves as with Six, published by Rei Kawakubo and her Japanese fashion design company, Comme des Garçons. The press record of the period not only serves as documentation of the collections, but also traces their early reception. Margiela’s work, for instance, was discussed in a number of newspaper articles. Particularly influential was an article titled “Coming Apart” by the New York Times fashion critic, the late Amy Spindler, which discussed the deconstructive aspects of his work (Spindler 1993, A1). Literary theorist Barbara Vinken was also an early commentator on Margiela. Published in German in 1993, and later translated into English, her book Fashion Zeitgeist includes one of the first academic accounts of the Belgian designer’s work (Vinken 2005, 142).

The New York-based, independent magazine Details also featured extensive coverage of Margiela’s first few collections, which were otherwise not as thoroughly commented upon and photographed as the Belgian designer’s later work. (During the 1980s and early 1990s, Details was strikingly different from its current Condé Nast incarnation as a men’s style magazine. It was a fashion magazine featuring extensive editorial and photographic coverage of the Paris shows—often exceeding thirty pages—all written and photographed by Bill Cunningham.) Besides newspapers, gaining access to style magazines of the period was rather unstraightforward as they had not, for the most part, been digitized and had been scantily collected. As a result, in order to find documentation of fashion from this period, further review of individual titles in specialized universities or museum libraries was still needed.

However, since 2012, the European Union also sponsored the Europeana Fashion project. Part of this initiative is to generate “an online collection of
millions of digitized items from European museums, libraries, archives and audiovisual collections,” which makes Europeana Fashion the widest repository of private and public dress and costume collections and archives across Europe (see http://www.europenaafashion.eu). Among its content providers, too numerous to mention here, is the ModeMuseum in Antwerp, which holds a very important collection of experimental fashion of the 1980s and 1990s (including garments from Martin Margiela), as well as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, whose contemporary fashion holdings are also substantial. Europeana Fashion was started precisely as an acknowledgment of fashion’s “research value.” It allows access, free of charge, to over 700,000 digital fashion objects ranging from historical and contemporary dress to accessories, photographs, sketches, and lookbooks, providing an invaluable research and teaching tool. A similar trend toward digitization has also opened up some museum collections to the general public in the United States, chiefly that of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which holds important examples of experimental fashion from the 1980s and 1990s. Also, underway is the digitalization of British photographer Niall McInerney’s archives to be available through Bloomsbury’s Fashion Central (www.bloomsburyfashioncentral.com) starting in 2016. His photographic archive of runway shows from the 1980s and 1990s, including independent and experimental ones, is substantial and during my research I contacted him to find documentations of some of the least accessible of Margiela’s collections.

Although I began my research by looking at images in the form of photographs and fashion show recordings, as well as videos and films produced by designers in lieu of or in addition to fashion shows, I soon integrated it with a close study of objects understood both as garments and as accessories. Object-based research was central to my project and was employed as a way to build and test theories against examples of actual garments and accessories. I closely examined, photographed, measured, and whenever possible, handled, surviving dress in museums and private collections. To augment my study of Martin Margiela, I repeatedly visited the collection of the ModeMuseum in Antwerp, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute in New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as the home of a private Margiela collector. Access to museums and private collections was certainly time consuming and required much advance planning, and it was in some cases, as with the New York-based collections such as the Costume Institute, restricted to doctoral students and scholars. I had access to the Costume Institute through a one-year fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was crucial for my project. In the case of my work, a close examination of the garments and accessories I discussed was, in fact, necessary to “unveil” their construction techniques, which were often impossible to ascertain from photographs. It was also indispensable to establish, with a level of certainty, the textiles and alternative materials used in a number
of experimental garments produced within the period, and the effects that these materials might have ultimately produced. For instance, with Margiela’s enlarged collections 2000 and 2001, it was only through a close examination that I was able to observe the lack of respect for grading techniques. Unlike graded clothes, the garments were enlarged equally in width and length when adapted from a size 42 to a 72, resulting in gargantuan dimensions and a general lack of proportionality (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). Only after a close and detailed analysis, which involved

**FIGURE 7.1** Examining Margiela’s garments at the MoMu Archives, Antwerp. *Photo:* Francesca Granata, with permission of the Mode Museum, Antwerp.

measuring and handling the garments, was I able to deduct how some of the knits and coats were in fact molded and rendered stiff thus retaining their shape when worn, and further ensuring their gigantic size. Following this material discovery as well as contextualization of the garments through runway photography, I was able to see and speculate the ways in which such garments were read at times as “fat suits,” thus allowing a theorization of the collections’ relation to normative sizes and body types.

The methodology just briefly described was developed from Valerie Steele’s article in the methodology issue of Fashion Theory (1998) entitled “A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes-Bag,” which is based on research methods developed by the art historian Jules Prown, and is thus deeply indebted to a material culture approach. Material culture is a “mode of investigation” common to the field of cultural history and cultural anthropology, which uses objects as its primary data, seen as the articulation of culture through material productions (Prown 1974, 1980, and 2000). Steele, following Prown, breaks down the process of garment analysis into three main stages: “Description, Deduction and Speculation,” and suggests that these stages should be kept relatively discrete (Steele 1998). Lou Taylor has also discussed the importance of museum collections and object-based research to the study of fashion in her books Establishing Dress History and The Study of Dress History (Taylor 2002 and 2004). A more recent and very thorough example of object-based analysis in action is given by Alexandra Palmer’s article “Looking at Fashion: The Material Object as Subject” (Palmer 2013). Although object-based research played a significant role in my methodology, I did not privilege this approach over others. Nor did I establish a hierarchy in favor of object over theory—one which, as Prown’s methods prove, is unnecessary—rather, I attempted to place this empirical study within a theoretical framework.2

My methodology also involves, albeit to a lesser extent, oral history. Whenever possible, I conducted interviews with practitioners and their surviving collaborators that proved helpful, and often necessary, in providing additional information about the production of the work, which was often insufficiently cataloged and documented. Moreover, this method allowed for a “dialogical encounter” between practitioner and interviewer, in which new meanings and interpretations developed. However, as discussed by a number of oral historians, there are obvious limitations and common pitfalls to this approach (Sandino 2006; Thompson 1988; Taylor 2002). Of particular relevance to my research was the “intentional fallacy”: the misreading of the practitioners’ intentions as the work’s primary meaning. Instead, it has been suggested that interviews with practitioners provide not a direct or more authentic reading of the work, but rather an instance of “the author’s” self-reception (Proctor 2006). In the case of Margiela, due to the reclusiveness of both him and his team, it was not possible to conduct an in-person interview, however, I was able to use the Maison’s detailed press releases, lookbooks,
and the exhibition catalog that the Maison produced on the occasion of its 1997 retrospective to take into account the designer’s perspective.

**Applied theory: Margiela’s work and alternative temporalities**

In addition to formal analysis of images/videos and object analysis of garments and accessories, my approach combines fashion and design history and theory, along with critical theory, cultural history, feminist theory, as well as film studies. I position my project as a work of “applied theory” (Evans 2003, 3): the theories enable a greater understanding of the garments and performances discussed, while in turn the work discussed opens up new possibilities for theories of fashion. This becomes evident in the analysis of a number of Margiela’s collections from the 1990s and his exhibition from 1997, which suggests new ways of theorizing time in relation to fashion and its histories.

Bakhtin argued that cyclical time played an extremely important role within the carnival and the culture of folk humor, and was opposed to official time, which was characterized by an apparent stability and pretensions to eternity:

> carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order: it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (Bakhtin 1984, 10). The culture of folk humour conceives all these false pretences of immovable stability and eternity in the perspective of ever-changing and renewed time. (Bakhtin 1984, 213)

Bakhtin’s conception of time, expounded in relation to the carnival and the ever-becoming nature of the grotesque, brings to mind the constantly changing nature of “fashion time,” characterized by ephemerality as opposed to the stability and immortality traditionally claimed by other cultural forms. Thus, one could argue that, to some extent, all fashion partakes of the carnival and the grotesque in its relation to time, yet Margiela’s work makes this argument most convincingly: by recycling his own collections, as well as old clothes from various past decades, he highlights the cyclical nature of fashion, which is sometimes denied by the linear and progressive teleological narrative of Western history, and fashion history in particular. The latter often follows traditional art history and art historical survey texts in their dependence on strict chronology and suggestions of progress.³ Margiela’s interest in transience and in the recycling of old garments, however, is shared by a great number of artists and designers of this period, and can be
partially read as a response to anxieties surrounding ever-accelerating times of production and consumption, as well as a rejection of the aesthetic of excess characterizing the preceding decade. These anxieties over progressively faster temporalities occurred concomitantly across design and art disciplines—including fashion—and Margiela’s work can be seen as part of this larger debate occurring simultaneously across theory and practice (Sandino 2004, 283–93; Evans 2003, 36–39 and 249–60).

As the literary and psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva points out, cyclical time stands in opposition to “time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding time; time as departure, progression and arrival—in other words the time of history” (Kristeva 2001, 30). Kristeva adds that cyclical time is “traditionally linked to female subjectivity,” a point which reveals a continuum between fashion, the feminine, and the grotesque. The concept of cyclical time, in fact, dovetails with Kristeva’s discussions of the subject-in-process, which presupposes constant and endless change. This temporal modality is also central to the “ever-becoming” grotesque body of carnival. The cyclical nature of fashion history, which contradicts popular understandings of fashion as a chronological progression in search of the new, can be observed in Barbara Burman Baines’s account of fashion’s endless revivals, which she explored within the context of the English dress in her book Fashion Revivals from the Elizabethan Age to the Present Day (Burman Baines 1981). This concept has also been theorized in three-dimensional form by Judith Clark’s exhibition “Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back,” which was dialogically developed with theorist Caroline Evans. The exhibition employed a system of interlocking cogs on which garments from different periods were placed to explore the cyclicality and nonlinearity of fashion time (Clark 2004).

Margiela, however, takes this process a step further and produces what could be described as a carnivalized time. I use the expression “carnivalized time” as a further elaboration of Bakhtin’s theories of the carnival to mean not only the cyclical time of carnival festivities but, more specifically, an inverted and topsy-turvy time when temporalities of past, present, and future are reversed and/or thoroughly confused.4 Through a close material and visual analysis of his work and, in particular, his Theatre Costumes and Trompe l’oeil collections, I observed how Margiela’s work denies the ineluctable linearity of Western industrial time, and literally inverts past and future, thus carnivalizing time. Margiela’s garments and performances invert and accelerate time, as well as confound both the aging process of the garments and the historical time of fashion history. He inverts and refutes teleological and progressive notions of time and history, by making the old anew and rendering the new as old. These tendencies, however present in the majority of his work, can be best observed in his Spring/Summer 1993 and Spring/Summer 1996 collections—two collections that have been largely ignored within the literature on the designer—captured in the designer’s ten-year retrospective at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1997.
Theater costumes collection: Spring/Summer 1993

The designer’s Spring/Summer 1993 collection presented “historically inspired underwear and skirts” alongside “reworked and over-dyed jackets of Renaissance and eighteenth century style theater costumes in velvet and brocade worn on bare torsos, closed with safety pins or belted with scotch tape” (La Maison Martin Margiela 1997). Besides the obvious irony of using Scotch tape and safety pins to “style” historical theater costumes, their inclusion adds another layer to Margiela's play with temporalities. These costumes, which were transformed and further aged through an over-dying process, in fact, already carry a reference to historical time. Not unlike historical film costumes, they approximate a historical past by often resorting to established conventions of how the past has come to be represented (i.e., puffed sleeves and velvets become a shorthand for the Renaissance, neck ruffs for the Elizabethan era). In the case of this collection, very scant examples of clothing were available and, with the exception of two pieces from the aforementioned private collection, I had to base my analysis on photographic documentations of the clothes comprising the collection. These were examined alongside the Costume Institute’s curatorial notes for the deconstruction section of the exhibition “Infra-Apparel” from 1993, which included material analysis of some of Margiela’s Theatre Collection pieces. The analysis was also further informed by the Maison’s own detailed press release, which I was able to access in the museum collections.

Theater costumes present a simplified and emphasized version of “history,” even more so than cinematic ones, distilled in a few immediately readable signs, which need to be recognizable by an audience at a distance. As a result, they often shed more light on contemporary rather than past fashions, and on the way the conventions, according to which we represent and imagine various historical periods, are, in fact, rooted in the present. This is particularly evident in the theater costumes that Margiela included in his 1993 collection, whose historical approximation and vagueness are furthered by the reworking of the garments, which ultimately look rather contemporary and vaguely pan-historical. The reworked theater costumes, having been taken out of the context of an entire ensemble and undergoing photographic close-up, give away their lack of historical accuracy: snap buttons, which are often used in theater costume to allow for quick changes, are visible on “Renaissance” jackets worn open and on a vaguely military eighteenth-century jacket. A waistcoat, once taken out of context, conveys a nineteenth-century riding habit, such as a Redingote à la Hussarde. Stomachers and corsets paired with exposed belly buttons underscore contemporary mores rather than whatever period they were originally meant to represent.
Margiela’s Spring/Summer 1993 collection brings to mind the complex filmic time of historical movies, where the past is imagined via the present. Historical films, such as the 1967 gangster/romance film *Bonnie and Clyde*’s portrayal of 1930s America, merge fashion from different decades and convey how a decade, be it our own or, in the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the 1960s, represented a particular past. This process is in great part achieved via costumes and mise-en-scène. Similarly, Margiela’s reconstructed theater costumes highlight the ways in which history is constructed and makes visible how the past is mediated and available only through the present. His designs reinforce an understanding of history—or better, histories—as reflexive, interpretative, and thus necessarily mediated and culturally constructed, rather than a stable and unmediated reconstruction of the past, which could be fully disinterested or objective.

It is through my material and visual analysis of the collection that I build my argument that the Belgian designer’s garments constitute visual and material theorizations of “new history,” and its attendant historiographical methods, which developed with particular force from the 1970s onward to debunk the so-called “Master Narratives” and the traditional paradigm of history. Written from a Western vantage point, this paradigm was highly dependent on official documents in its quest for causality and objectivity, and was characterized by an interest in the chronological unfolding of national and international political events (needless to say, this mode of history had very little space for fashion). Margiela’s reconstructed theater pieces instead forcefully point to the ways in which reality is socially and culturally constructed, and expose how one “cannot avoid looking at the past from a particular point of view” (Burke 2001, 6). Such a reading of Margiela’s work opens up the field of inquiry and suggests new theoretical models for the study of fashion histories, which, as with Kristeva’s conceptualization of temporalities, understand histories as nonlinear, as well as inevitably mediated. Thus, ultimately, Margiela’s reworking of theater costumes provides further evidence that fashion has a theoretical dimension.

Under closer scrutiny, and as the suspension of disbelief afforded by the stage is removed, Margiela’s garments reveal themselves for what they are: obviously “fake” replicas and approximations of a historical past often achieved by quoting more recent pasts; such is the case with his eighteenth-century-like, small fur jacket, which seems to be adapted from a 1940s garment, and a Renaissance-like blouse whose laced sleeves seem to be quoting the nineteenth century, and were possibly made of textiles of that period.

Frequently, due to budgetary restrictions and the unavailability of materials such as old laces, theater costumes adapt old clothes and materials from a more recent past to make reference to an older past. For instance, nineteenth-century lace is often used for Renaissance costumes, which might have been the case with the Renaissance jacket from the 1993 collection. These layering of pasts in Margiela’s
garments is confirmed by Richard Martin and Harold Koda’s research for the exhibition “Infra-Apparel,” in which they date one of Margiela’s reconstructed eighteenth-century theater costumes to the 1940s (Martin and Koda 1993, 28). And, as fashion historian Alexandra Palmer has shown by studying eighteenth-century garments in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum, clothes often retain layers of histories (Palmer 2010).

Rendering the conflation of various historical periods explicit, Margiela’s pieces dismantle the illusion of a stable and “authentic” past that the theater costumes are meant to represent. The reconstructed theater costumes deny fixed and stable origins. They carnivalize linear history and, in their obvious fakeness and inverted complex time, question a historical past that is stable and unmediated. These clothes show the complex temporalities of dress history where, at closer scrutiny, one finds a palimpsest of historical periods within a single garment.

**Trompe l’oeil collection: Spring/Summer 1996**

Denying and subverting notions of authenticity and origin is a recurrent theme in Margiela’s work. His Spring/Summer 1996 collection materializes this idea by featuring photographs of garments, often vintage garments, alongside ones from previous collections (Figure 7.3): “Printed on light and fluid fabrics and made up into garments of very simple construction . . . . A photograph of a 1930s heavy man’s half belted overcoat is printed on light viscose, 1940’s checked skirts to the

![Figure 7.3 Printed silk garments. Maison Margiela, Spring/Summer 1996. Photo: Francesca Granata, with permission of the ModeMuseum, Antwerp.](image)
knee are shown in silk chiffon. A secondhand army surplus jacket is printed on stretch cotton and a lighter viscose” (La Maison Martin Margiela 1997). Following Steele's and Prown's methods of close looking and examination, I was able to observe through examples of this work in the collection of the ModeMuseum, as well as through a number of photographic documentations, the ways in which these printed garments instill a temporal and material confusion. The viewer is not sure, at least, at first sight, whether they are in fact vintage pieces and/or pieces from Margiela's previous collection, which, in a further twist, were often replicas of vintage pieces to begin with. This material confusion is exemplified in a garment from this collection which was included in the Rotterdam exhibition: “[A] photograph of the original lining of the 1950s cocktail dress the reproduction of which appears in outfit 14 [part of the Autumn/Winter 1995–1996 collection]” (La Maison Martin Margiela 1997). Furthering the sense of confusion, the garments photographed are of a different material than the one on which the photographs are printed. This creates a trompe l'oeil effect that disorients and upsets expectations. Margiela's disorienting garments appear reminiscent of surrealist techniques especially as articulated by Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli; in 1938, Schiaparelli created her “Tear Dress” in collaboration with Salvador Dali by using a trompe l'oeil technique similar to Margiela's to give the suggestion of tears in an otherwise “whole” garment (Te Duits 2007). (It is important to note that this trompe l'oeil technique has become more common and technically easier to achieve in the last ten years, thanks to the widespread use and the improvement in the quality of digital printing techniques.)

Additionally, as is underlined by the Maison Martin Margiela press release, and evident in the examples I was able to study, “the colours of old photographs—black and white, sepia and tones of brown—are maintained throughout.” These tones are perhaps more obviously visible in the 1950s cocktail dress lining (included in the Rotterdam exhibition) which, in its yellowish color, seems to carry the patina of an heirloom, thus prone to induce nostalgia and offer the illusion of a direct relation to an authentic past. This strategy would seem to align Margiela with much contemporary fashion and fashion merchandising, which employs references to bygone times in order to induce nostalgia and activate an emotive consumption (Appadurai 2005, 75–79). However, what these goods create in actuality is what Arjun Appadurai describes as “imagined nostalgia,” a longing for an imagined past, one never necessarily experienced and lost. Referring primarily to fashion advertisements, he writes, “[T]hey teach consumers to miss things they have never lost. In thus creating experiences of losses that never took place” (Appadurai 2005, 77). To which he adds: “The viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she never suffered. This relationship might be called armchair nostalgia, nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory” (Appadurai 2005, 78).
Yet Margiela denies or at least ironizes these processes of “imagined” nostalgia. He does so by isolating and doubling up various elements which are supposed to induce nostalgia, such as the old clothes and the old photographs, and putting them back together in ways that render obvious their artificiality. By printing artificially aged photographs of old clothes onto new fabric and leaving the processes readable, he questions notions of authenticity and unveils how nostalgia—and particularly nostalgia for consumer goods—can be potentially constructed and fabricated.

According to the theorist Linda Hutcheon (1998), processes of ironizing nostalgia are common to contemporary cultural productions. She qualifies this claim, however, by arguing that irony and nostalgia were, in fact, associated well before the late twentieth century by citing the example of Don Quixote, which is, according to Bakhtin, a quintessential carnivalesque novel. Hutcheon makes a distinction between these practices of ironizing nostalgia versus the unironic and potentially conservative invocation of an idealized past, partially in response to Fredric Jameson’s pessimistic view of “late capitalist” society. Jameson, in fact, sees all contemporary nostalgic cultural production as a failure to engage with history. He discusses the phenomenon, according to which, style and periodization is used to invoke past as a testament to the fact that contemporary cultural production has done away with real history in lieu of historicism in the negative sense of the term, “In the bad sense of an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions: indeed for all the styles and fashions of a dead past” (Jameson 1991, 286).

But as many theorists, including Hutcheon, have commented, Jameson’s writings on history are themselves nostalgic—namely, for a view of history understood as more coherent and less fragmented which, according to Jameson, allowed for a greater level of political consciousness (Hutcheon 1988). Hutcheon asks whether “Jameson’s implicit mythologizing and idealizing of a more stable pre-late-capitalist (that is modernist) world is not in itself perhaps part of an aesthetic (or even politics) of nostalgia” (Hutcheon 1998). The way in which Hutcheon’s and Jameson’s debates are ultimately dependent on two different understandings of history is discussed by Susannah Radstone, in her writing on the representations of history in film. Like Hutcheon, Radstone ultimately suggests the need for a qualification of different types of nostalgia and the way they operate within different cultural output (Radstone 1995, 37).

Performing garments: Martin Margiela’s Rotterdam exhibition

Margiela’s ironization of processes of nostalgia became, perhaps, even more evident in the designer’s retrospective at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen,
a museum of art and design in Rotterdam, which was organized by the Maison Martin Margiela itself in 1997. The exhibition was painstakingly documented in the accompanying catalog, which was also authored by the Maison, remaining as the rare documentation of this time-based work (La Maison Martin Margiela 1997; see Evans 1998 for a review of the exhibition). As a result, the catalog became an object of study in its own right and the basis for my analysis of the exhibition—a temporal event that no longer exists. (Its transformation into an artifact is made further evident by its retailing for over a $1000 in the secondhand book market.) In fact, it would be more precise to call the exhibition a performance, as it was composed of an event, which unfolded over time, and where (rather uncharacteristically) the main subjects were garments as opposed to the people wearing them. The Rotterdam retrospective entered the realm of performance art as the garments became performing “subjects”; the clothes came alive or, rather, their organic life and lifespan was made manifest. Pink yeast, red or yellow bacteria, and green mold were applied onto clothes from Margiela’s past collection, which had been treated with the growing medium agar. Their application accelerated processes of aging and decomposition, particularly as the clothes were placed “in incubating structures” in the museum’s garden. The use of bacteria is also reminiscent of disease and contagion—a reference, however, subverted by the beautiful pattern obtained through their applications. This reference to disease and medicalized spaces constitutes an undercurrent to experimental fashion produced in the late 1980s and 1990s, and can be observed in experimental fashion’s challenge to the clean façade of the body and its boundaries, which can, in part, be read as meditating anxieties and obsessions with bodily borders surrounding the AIDS crisis (see Granata 2010).

The application of molds and bacteria allowed for the fabrication of signs of aging and of patina onto the clothes across a relatively short span of time. Once the bacteria had grown on the garments’ fabric and achieved the desired effect, the clothes were exhibited on dress forms alongside the perimeter of the museum’s garden, presumably to further age. They were visible to the museum goers both from inside the exhibition hall and in rear view from the museum garden in which the visitors could walk (for images, see also Evans 1998). The mannequins were placed on a plinth outside, but facing in as if looking through the glass walls of the exhibition space at the visitors on the empty space inside. This initiated the first of a series of inversions by switching the traditional placement of mannequins vis-à-vis viewers and playing with categories of inside and outside. Thus, what appeared at first sight as a dismal and abandoned site (especially once the garments were taken out of the enclosures and exposed to the elements) was in actuality painstakingly produced and documented in the book accompanying the exhibition. The garments were aged according to a scientific process in a controlled environment so that the process of fabricating imagined histories and a sense of nostalgia was literally deconstructed and put on display.
In the exhibition, one encounters, once again, Margiela’s penchant for carnivalizing time and playing with the order of temporalities. He ages garments that had withstood the passage of time and almost overnight tatters them to pieces. Moreover, he does so in the context of the museum, a place traditionally engaged with the conservation rather than the destruction of objects. Margiela inverts the temporality of the retrospective, which is supposed to anoint a designer’s or most often an artist’s oeuvre into the “eternal” and stable time of the museum. The designer converts the relation of the museum to permanence to transience. As design historian Linda Sandino points out, in her discussion of contemporary art works, by incorporating ephemeral elements, museums are “complicit in the transition of transient to durable,” as they are “dedicated to preserve the fiction that works of arts are fixed and immortal.” As a result, “transience [which well-describes Margiela’s entire retrospective] subverts the presumed timeless significance and value of the museum collection” (Sandino 2004, 289).

The Maison initiated another central inversion during the Rotterdam exhibition, in which its clothes become animated via the application of bacteria, yeast, and mold to the fabric. To this end, Margiela employed a scientific method, which is fully documented in the catalog accompanying the exhibition. The designer’s “animated” garments are also intent on fully exploring fashion’s potential for problematizing fixed categories of inside/outside, animate/inanimate, body/clothing, and its potential for continual change and transformation. They are not only animated but also generative as is underlined by the Maison’s description of the first stage of the exhibition as “the gestation period.” Margiela’s “fecund” dresses go against the understanding of fashion (and the woman of fashion) as “profoundly inorganic and anti-maternal” (Evans 1998, 91) and reiterate experimental fashion’s exploration of the generative potential of the body and of different models of subjectivities and cyclical temporalities, as articulated by Bakhtin and Kristeva.

**Conclusion**

As my discussion of the example of Margiela’s collections highlights, a range of theories, methods, and sources are needed to analyze contemporary and near contemporary fashion design. Garments, photographs, exhibitions, catalogs, press releases, and lookbooks are all important sources, which often need to be examined together. Likewise a multimethodological approach alongside theoretical frameworks culled from a variety of disciplines is needed to make sense of this work, which exists as a still and moving image, as well as an actual object. It is only through a back and forth between material and visual analysis and theoretical approaches that these fashions can be thoroughly unpacked. My analysis of Margiela’s garments and presentations underscores the way in which contemporary fashion mediates and influences theoretical discussions as opposed
to being simply a reflection of it. As argued in this chapter, a close analysis of Margiela’s work highlights fashion’s cyclical nature, and points to the way that history is unstable and constructed. A study of his work suggests new theoretical models for the study of fashion design and its histories, models that are more fluid in their approach to temporalities and provide an understanding of history as inevitably mediated. Thus, my work underscores the need for scholars and students of fashion to allow theory and practice to enter, in a Bakhtinian “spirit,” into dialogical exchanges with each other.

Notes

1 My research project started in 2006 as a dissertation and is in the process of being transformed into a book titled Experimental Fashion: Performance Art, Carnival and the Grotesque Body.

2 I have previously unpacked my use of material culture and, more generally, its importance in fashion research in an article in Fashion Theory, titled “Fashion Studies In-Between: A Methodological Case Study” (Granata 2012, 67–82).

3 On these debates within art history, see, for instance, responses in relation to the substantial and somewhat radical updating of the canonical survey text from 1962 by H. W. Janson “History of Art,” which was recently (in 2006) revised and republished by a number of authors under the title “Janson’s History of Art: The Western Tradition.” (For a range of responses to the substantial revision, see Kennedy 2006.)

4 The expression “carnivalized time” is surprisingly seldom used within Bakhtinan literature. The few times it surfaces, it is generally synonymous with carnival time: it retains the more expansive meaning of the cyclical and renewable time of carnival festivities. Bakhtin uses the term to refer to time in Dostoyevsky’s novel, as pointed out by Richard Peace. 1993. “On Rereading Bakhtin.” Modern Language Review 88 (1): 137–46. The only other recurrence of the term in the literature can be found in an article on Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis to refer to the monstrous body of Claudius: see Susanna Morton Braund and Paula James. 1998. “Quasi Homo: Distortion and Contortion in Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis.” Arethusa 31 (3): 285–311.

5 The literature on new history and historiography is, of course, vast, but for an exhaustive summery of these debates, see Keith Jenkins, ed. 1997. The Postmodern History Reader. London: Routledge. For a nuanced discussion, see also Peter Burke, ed. 2001. New Perspectives on Historical Writing. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

References


