ANTI_FASHION

a manifesto for the next decade
by Lidewij Edelkoort

TEN REASONS WHY THE FASHION SYSTEM IS OBSOLETE:

EDUCATION

Fashion institutes, academies and universities all over the world keep training their students to become catwalk designers, highly individual stars and divas, to be discovered by luxury brands. These institutions seem to be oblivious to the new world we live in, a world created for and from interaction, dealing with an economy of exchange and a strong sense of extended family, where working and playing together has become more important than individual gain. As a result the fashion world is still working in 20th century mode, celebrating the individual, elevating it-people, developing the exception... in a society hungry for consensus and altruism. A world where individualism is long over. This places fashion outside of society and by de facto makes it old-fashioned. While all other disciplines such as dance, art and design have acknowledged the need in their students to cooperate and form groups, teams and couples, it seems that only fashion is left behind. Furthermore fashion schools are responding to the current need and greed of the luxury market by forcing their students to design not just clothes but also accessories, jewellery, underwear and a logo. They are trained to become little Karl’s and must realize a film or make photos, layout a catalogue and create the music for their runway show. Since time is short the design process is compressed and therefore the young creative elite make clothes and no longer fashion, they no longer have time to consider a conceptual approach which might transform the silhouette, nor the time to transcend dominant trends. Students are groomed to be up and running within the luxury industry without further due. The brands need star designers like football needs star players. Star designers that no longer know how to create what was once called fashion.

TREND UNION
MATERIALISATION

Fashion schools are under pressure with most of our governments taking away the bulk of their finances and therefore they have to adopt a commercial model. In the process, the first to be sacrificed are knitting and weaving ateliers. As a result the students are no longer instructed in textile creation and basic knowledge about cloth. Therefore they speak of chambray-like cottons and moiré-like silks since they have no clue what the constructions are all about. Some students even order their colours and fabrics on-line, further promoting a two dimensional world without the sensuality of texture, weight and drape. This ignorance of textiles is also rampant amongst journalists and recently we have seen prestigious magazines such as Vogue, Elle and Marie-Claire write about the important comeback of printed garments, while these coats, dresses and pants were actually realized in jacquard, which happens to be an intricate woven. Ladies! Do your homework!

The European fibre, yarn and textile industries are on the verge of collapse, bravely struggling, combatting to survive. Without them the knowledge of spinning, weaving, finishing and printing will be lost. Brands have decided to hunt for price over quality and purchase evermore textiles from low cost destinations. The emerging economies are doing a great job in catching up, yet their mills do not yet possess the talent and skills needed to preview new trends and design inspiration guided by cultural change.

Therefore they are often unable to surprise and stimulate the creative minds of clothes designers. Thus we are facing the possibility of a world with just denim, nylon and jerseys for the rest of our lives. A world without Italian finishes, French silks, Belgian linens, English classics, Irish tweeds, Japanese synthetics and Spanish surfaces. Therefore the House of Chanel is buying up their suppliers to maintain quality and creativity, concerned about the disappearance of their fabric makers and artisans. Possibly other brands should follow. If some higher organization of the fashion trade does not halt this hemorrhaging process, we will see the demise of the creative textile industries, and with it the death of fashion as we know it.

MANUFACTURING

The manufacturing of clothes has gone through a rapid and sordid restructuring process, which has seen production leave the western world to profit from and exploit low income countries. Leaving the capitalist western world behind with significant unemployment figures. On the hunt for cheaper deals volume companies but also some luxury brands have trusted the making of their wares to underpaid workers living in dire conditions. The collapse of a manufacturer’s building in Bangladesh, killing hundreds of people, made these conditions front-page news. With the arrival of ever-cheaper high street chains this problem will only get bigger while merchandise is becoming indecent in price. These brands copy Hedi Slimane and Christopher Bailey, doing a pretty good job, and getting away with murder...

Now that many garments are offered cheaper than a sandwich we all know and feel that something is profoundly and devastatingly wrong. How can a product that needs to be sown, grown, harvested, combed, spun, knitted, cut and stitched, finished, printed, labeled, packaged and transported cost a couple of euros? Consumers are of course seduced by these prices and don’t boycott these companies, as they should. The people press instructs them that they can only wear a fashion style once.... the hand-me-down dress and Sunday-best outfit seem long forgotten. But worst is the symbolism of it all. Prices imply these clothes are to be thrown away, discarded like a condom before being loved and savoured, teaching young consumers that fashion has no value. The culture of fashion is thus destroyed.
DESIGNERS

Great names in fashion history have managed to change behaviour, modify posture and rewrite the way women move and live and flirt by changing the silhouette and inventing a yet unknown allure. Paul Poiret, Madeleine Vionnet, Cristobal Balenciaga, Claire McCardell, Coco Chanel, Pierre Cardin, André Courrèges, Yves Saint Laurent, Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Rei Kawakubo, Romeo Gigli and Azzedine Alaia all managed to create a revolutionary vision of another outlandish female beauty. Those days fashion would be designed by couturiers, creators and stylists, each with their own domain and handwriting, dignified for the super-rich, eccentric for the avant-garde, wearable for the masses. Nowadays we only seem to have designers and therefore the term is covering a lot of ground and creating some confusion. Let me try to dissect.

The great designers of our age are born in the eighties and brought up with the culture of vintage, a sense of loss and nostalgia for the easier, exciting decades. Therefore vintage is continuously haunting the catwalks of today. From time to time we shift periods and the references go to the 60s and 70s, only to go back again to the 20s, 40s, 50s and fast forward to the 90s. We owe this revivalism initially to Saint Laurent who launched his provocative 1940s collection in 1971 and has been upcycling existing garments ever since the creation of his Rive Gauche label that introduced the basic garments from the Parisian student protests to the business of fashion.

A historic step to take influences from the street. To place the leather jacket and the caban within the realm of fashion. The latest kid generations of Googling designers rely on found vintage detailing and are capable of haphazardly blending all periods amongst themselves, creating amusing hybrids in the process. Setting the creation of clothes free for the future without the constraints of knowledge.

The designer geniuses of today are able to create a complete picture with feature-length films, apps and ads, shop interiors, cosmetics, shoes and bags as well as jewellery, books, soups and hotels. They are market savvy and reign supreme over the fashion world, beloved and admired even by their peers. Their timeframe only allows them to design clothes.

Luxury designers are requested by the brand’s marketing to focus on product and need to give most of their creative energy to bags and shoes and are rather resigned concerning the creation of clothes; therefore their small collections of garments can be seen as an elegant and at times intelligent communication backdrop for the accessories.

The textile fashion designers of our timeframe invent and create amazing pictures based on rekindled jacquards, remodelled folklore and restored fabric fragments from the past. They give sense to colour and deliver a sensuous vision to the garments of the day. They manage to keep in touch with the fading culture of fashion as it once was.

However a new league of women designers claim a practical wardrobe for the working, dancing, travelling mother of several children, and therefore design “clothes that work as hard as we do”, as the famous Suzy Menkes quipped brilliantly. French designers have taken a separate position and following in the footsteps of Agnès b. and APC create unobstructed clothes for people with innate style. They are going through what can be seen as a silent revolution, building shops in all the major shopping cities in the world, creating a buzz without making noise. Isabel Marant can be seen as the ringleader of this growing elite, yet many other brands have followed and are gathering together in London, making South Molton Street look like a Parisian quartier.

The most stylish women of the world such as Inès de la Fressange and Jil Sander are invited to design capsule collections of wearable clothes for a Japanese megabrand, dressing the new intellectual poor elite in our urban environments. All these categories of designers are working on clothes and are no longer concerned or interested in change for change’s sake, unanimously declaring newness a thing of the past. With this lack of conceptual innovation the world is losing the idea of fashion.
MARKETING

It is without doubt the perversion of marketing that ultimately has helped kill the fashion industries. Initially invented to be a science, blending forecasting talent with market results to anchor strategies for the future, it has gradually become a network of fearful guardians of brands, slaves to financial institutions and hostages of shareholder interests, a group that long ago lost the autonomy to direct change. Marketing has worked hard to push the boundaries of production and expansion, mushrooming stores, spreading products like viruses. The way the fashion world has expanded its brands is extraordinary yet saturation is slowly turning travelling global consumers away from too much sameness and overexposure. Often branded fragrance products smell like marketing (they smell bad) and start to annoy the learned and loyal clientele, which seeks refuge in outsider labels creating artisan scents. Marketing has taken over power within the major companies and is manipulating creation, production, presentation and sales. All aspects are seen from just one perspective, which is how to produce better figures. Not to bring out a better product or to generate a better culture, let alone to stimulate a better human working environment. Designers are pressed like lemons to perform and are requested multiple collections and multiple variations on just one theme. Resulting in burnout and creators having to leave their positions. Suicide even. Consumers are invited to shop ever earlier to rake in money as soon as possible, showing cashmere in May and swimwear in November. If this continues we will soon be able to skip a season without anybody noticing.:-)

The aversion of risk has become a dominant feature, especially present in the last nine years of the global economic crisis. This repulsion has brought the fashion machine to a halt in order to be replaced by item selling, transferring the retail skills of leather goods to the retailing of clothes, electing and presenting it-items in the process. Hence a simple return to chic clothes.

PRESENTATION

The showroom is crowded and too hot, with coffee cups and champagne glasses littering the tables, it is hard to concentrate. The clothes are rapidly shown by style and colour so that the buyer is able to create his or her very own collection. All beige at Harrods, all navy at Dover Street, all bright at Barneys... difficult for the average consumer to even recognize the brand.

The invitation is amazing with a rubber-coated paper, a classic wafer print and a handwritten envelope, testimony to a heroic human effort.

The fashion show is a fourteen-minute affair after thirty or more minutes of waiting and forty-five minutes of taxi searching for the next cool location. Artists are hired to transform the podium in a work of conceptual art. The cost of a few hundred thousand euros will be calculated into the prices of the garments. Consumers sponsoring art without knowing it. Artists and musicians and actresses are arriving late to get extra coverage, for themselves and for the brand, after all they are paid to be present. The same young and rather identical models walk from catwalk to catwalk making it easy to bridge the different designers’ clothes and analyze the key pieces of the season. The top of top models is used to introduce the main silhouettes so that the editors get the message, which they need since they are working and networking on their smartphones.

Real emotion gets difficult to communicate. Everybody is watching through his or her phone. One wonders why since the shows are streamed on-line so that smart people can watch from their treadmill or lazy chaise longue at home. Now that fashion is as good as over shouldn’t clothes be shown in another and more direct way?
ADVERTISING

A beautiful text, a poem, a voice - are all missing. Isn’t texting important today? Then where is the written word?

The power of the image is such that communication is reduced to photographs. The photos are largely divided in three categories. Brands use either a famous actor, or famous models in groups or a famous photographer. The different settings have much in common, an impressive house, tattered antiques, a monumental chimney and heavy draped curtains for a melancholic moment. The models are slouched and reclining, as if too exhausted to sit. Together they might collapse into a family of burnt-out people. With them are beautiful phlegmatic dogs, stoic and anorexic cats, otherworldly reptiles or imposing birds of prey. But it is hard to perceive these autistic models since they are mostly hidden from view by enormous handbags that are dominating the anemic pictures. At one time the bag might replace the garment, at last giving shape to the word “sack dress”.

All pictures in all magazines, all the same.

Isn’t it weird that in a zapping society that fashion ads are betting on the same horse, stability and repetition? These pages are so seem so much alike that it is rather difficult to read the various brand values.

The same clothes, more or less, are used in the editorials that are heavily art directed by the economy of advertisements; a new brand has little to no chance to be featured. Halting the progress of the fashion economy that used to hunt for the new and exciting.

The ads make up three thirds of the September issues of fashion magazines, some three hundred pages sometimes, wasting a lot of paper and transport. Personally I have to tear them out to be able to carry all the magazines on the plane. People do look at me in the lounge as if I am a mad woman!

On-line will therefore become the place to be yet so far the world of clothes has lagged behind the music and image industries. Product endorsements by bloggers is the latest way to speak up about a brand, coaching young writers into a dependence on designer drugs such as shoes, bags and clothes. All in all an obsolete system managed by a tired group of individuals and agencies, fatigued by the industries of beauty and clothes.

Failing fashion in quite an obvious way.
PRESS & BLOGGING

We are living in a confused timeframe where many people write about clothes yet few journalists have an education in fashion history or cultural history in general. The genial humour and knowledge of some of the best fashion journalists at international newspapers is rapidly replaced by uninteresting generalizations by a younger generation, articles that are opinion pages instead of critical assessments from a professional point of view. The Facebook culture of 'likes' has engendered a writing culture of liking, where new proposals are welcomed like lifesavers and new colours are heralded like revolutions: NEW! NUDE! ...all predictable sound bites to fill up the printed pages. The times of Diana Vreeland's quote PINK IS THE NAVY BLUE OF INDIA are long gone and we struggle here again with normality, the absence of a unique and singular point of view.

The absolute negation of what is original. Much is sacrificed to the green gods of money and the greed of the publishers, pushing editors to even more shopping pages, more people stories, more it-bags, it-shoes and it-girls, more and more, with less and less content. Most editors are living in a competitive environment such as pictured in the Devil Wears Prada and have to fight for their existence. They constantly worry about being the best, the first, the only to comment on a new idea. Now that bloggers start taking the limelight, journalism is becoming an endangered profession and amateurs start breaking the news, sending the pictures, realizing the videos and creating the buzz. This will even put more pressure on magazines in the future. Formats that are in dire need of new direction. The fashion is disconnected from the food, the clothes have no relation to culture, the beauty has no background, the travel is pushed to the outer pages, the interviews are cut up and scattered, the general news items flooded with advertisements. The total sum is dismal.

Some publications give hope and lead the way, such as the printed Net-a-Porter magazine; they are brilliant and speak to their readers as if they are girlfriends, taking them in on all things of style and culture, softly pushing them to consume the culture of clothes they so well understand.

RETAILING

Since our century started we haven't seen a new concept for shopping. Department stores date from the 19th century and all other formats were invented in the 20th. Even online shops and concept stores happened just before the turn of the century. As a consequence we are struggling with outdated formats that no longer correspond to today's fluid consumers, able to simultaneously browse high and low, city and country, airport and hotel, on-line and in real time. The hardest hit are the department stores that fight to survive in this chaotic environment. More than often one can overhear visitors to select department stores sigh that there is nothing to be found... the few thousand references patiently waiting on hangers apparently did not register anymore, just like the multitude of yoghurts in our supermarkets fail to attract. Therefore we can conclude that too much merchandise is killing the taste of the consumer and that edited store environments such as Dover Street Market are able to reinvent and rekindle a multi-brand environment. Suddenly shopping becomes fun and entertaining again.

Flagship stores that are governing the image of a given brand also seem to be suffering from a backlash. The key clients are tired of the same old themes and fail to recognize themselves in the offer at hand. After all how many trench coats and polos can one buy? The emporium's need to monopolize and design all product lines seems to be very out-of-date in a society where co-branding is the new thing. Co-branding and co-sharing is what is happening underground in Berlin, Brooklyn and Belleville.
Young brands show their very small collections with other creative ideas from their collective friends, enchanting young people to have extraordinary ordinary clothes. With garments becoming the next best thing it is clear that mono-product lines will become a major trend. Department stores and malls will be born, simply made from a collection of monolithic shops, dedicated to the ownership and craftsmanship of one item only.
A new way to sell clothes, not fashion.

CONSUMERS
And last but not least we have the new consumer. The consumers of today and tomorrow are going to choose for themselves, creating and designing their own wardrobes. They will share clothes amongst each other since ownership doesn't mean a thing anymore. They will rent clothes, lend clothes, transform clothes and find clothes on the streets.
They will reintroduce hand-me-down garments, giving a kind of noblesse oblige back to apparel. They will build up their wardrobes and mix last year's basic with next year's must-haves and grandmother's Kelly with daddy's neckties to give it all a contemporary edge. They wear PJ's in the daytime and furs in summer. Men's hats with women's dresses. Just having fun with clothes.
Completely different from even two decades ago, we are witnessing people taking beauty and individual expression into their own hands, using skin, body and hair as a way to design their character with multiple earrings and nose embellishments, with braided, woven and matted hair, with narrative body covering tattoos that become the pattern competing with printed clothes. Humans will have an eccentric way of walking, an innate style of dancing and a general interest in active sports, music and games. All happen to be forms of tribal behaviour, the anthropology of the present brings us back in time and back in space. Silicon Valley has produced the world's first billionaires in shorts and sweatshirts that have never owned a suit, except probably a tuxedo to go to the Oscars. For most consumers a neat T-shirt and well-cut trousers are the best they can do concerning style. Fashion is not a mission amongst these nerds and their degree of coolness is obtained by loose slogan T-shirts, smart objects, paleo foods and indie music. Fashion has lost these consumers over the last twenty years and will not be able to get them back. Clothes will become the name of the game for the years to come. Clothes will become the answer to our industry's prayers.
Clothes will dominate trends for the future. Therefore let's celebrate clothes.
The accumulation of these ten points argue that the industry has reached the vanishing point of fashion. This means that the economy of clothes will take over from the turnover of fashion. Therefore the designing of garments will have to change and become more involved, more knowledgeable and more inspired. Historic, folkloric and uniformed sources of inspiration will feed the teaching of other ways to design and conceive.
Therefore trend forecasting will change as well, taking its leads from social change and finding creative ideas within lifestyle trends and consumer behaviour. Focusing on textiles and colours in favour of anecdotes.
Analyzing clothes from an anthropological point of view.
ALL ABOUT MEN

This manifesto which searches to redefine the future of the ready-to-wear industries has no impact so far on fashions for men, which are in top form, representing an ever-increasing turnover on all levels of retail. Men are increasingly interested in fashion and accessories as well as cosmetics and fragrances.

The restrained possibilities of eccentric and avant-gardist designs in the male wardrobe make small variations revolutionary, therefore the taste for fashion is increasing, taking men step by step into other worlds and other behaviour patterns. And they do seem to enjoy this new position immensely.

Turning tables, the word fashion is now related to men.

AFTERTHOUGHT

Recently fashion exhibitions have drawn massive amounts of visitors, nostalgic for the heydays of creation and couture. The sensational Alexander McQueen exhibition has drawn record numbers of visitors. Costume exhibitions at the Metropolitan attract more press than any other opening at the institution and the annual ball organized by Anna Wintour has eclipsed all other events in Manhattan.

This growing interest in curating the culture of clothes is felt like a burden by the fashion houses; in their opinion too much time is spent in the promotion of things past. Therefore they make the making of fashion exhibits gradually impossible, refusing cooperation, suggesting intervention in the curating processes, meddling in the selections of other brands. In many cases never answering requests. Sometimes the garments are from a former star designer so the current designer expresses a veto on lending. Sometimes the brand doesn’t want to be remembered by the scandalous episode of a burnt-out couturier. Often these brands create their own archives and foundations and host their own showcases that are generally just another blatant form of product placement. As we know the world of art has become involved and gladly lends its talent to create a bag. It is therefore obvious that the end of fashion curating is near, becoming almost impossible, therefore museums turn to clothes to satisfy the public interest, organizing shows around denim, activewear and streetwear, obliged to turn from fashion to clothes.

EPILOGUE

This exodus of fashion will change the landscape of what is the culture of clothes. My hunch is that we will see the comeback of couture as a major benefit. After all it is in the atelier of couture that we will find the laboratory of this labour of love. Suddenly the profession of the couturier will become coveted and the exclusive way of crafting couture will inspire all others. Ultimately leading to the selling of patterns to retailers and department stores, just as before the arrival of prêt-à-porter.

Making history turn round.

Paris, November 2014,
Lidewij Edelkoort

ENGAGE!