

Changing Aesthetics – Shaping Taste: A World of (Dance & Fashion) Communication

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“The dance is an art in space and time.
The object of the dancer is to obliterate that.”¹
(Merce Cunningham)

“Without change, nothing new can emerge.
Even a slight change of perspective can
bring about a dramatic change of the whole.”²
(Rei Kawakubo)

Encounters and Changes in the Arts

The following observations deal with encounters and exchanges in the arts that have occurred numerous times since the beginning of the 20th century and continue to have a significant effect on the arts today.³ The focus is on the extraordinary cooperation between the American dancer and choreographer

1 Cunningham, in Meade, 2017, p. 341.

2 Kawakubo, in Loschek, 2007, p 125.

3 In the field of visual arts, the most notable groups include Der Blaue Reiter [The Blue Rider] and Die Brücke [The Bridge] as well as pioneering design schools such as Bauhaus and De Stijl. No less memorable are the groundbreaking musical innovations of Alban

Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) and the Japanese dressmaker, fashion and couture designer Rei Kawakubo (*1942) in conceiving and realizing the 1997 dance piece “Scenario.” Cunningham and Kawakubo entered a groundbreaking collaboration for this purpose by joining their powerful individual means of expression – each of which had by then been an iconic creative language of its own – into a unanimous, multi-sensual message. This message was delivered through a characteristic choreography, signature garments, and an avant-garde tapestry of sound, staged in the heart of a white cube.⁴

Rei Kawakubo, originally a stylist with no professional training in the fields of dressmaking or fashion, was already pushing the boundaries of established design in her early days in the late 1960s, creating garments never seen before and redefining fashion in the process.⁵ She founded her own label in 1969 and named it “Comme des Garçons” (Like the Boys), harnessing her sense of aesthetics for future fashion by questioning the architecture of body proportions and leveling her subtle criticism against predominant fashion styles and beauty ideals.

Kawakubo made her first appearance on a fashion stage in 1981 Paris⁶ with oversized, asymmetrical pieces. Anyone interested in fashion is familiar with the creative impact of her 1982/83 fall/winter collection. The pieces shown in the early 1980s featured holes and seemed unfinished due to deliberately exposed manufacturing techniques.⁷ Her “Lace Collection” of black sweaters dotted with random holes made it clear that some kind of ‘destructive power’ was at work here that was symptomatic of the intellectual flux of the 1980s and that subjected the garment per se to critical scrutiny. In her early Paris days, Kawakubo displayed the exposed hems of her designs, presented unfinished pieces and turned her peculiar fabrics inside out. This rad-

Berg and Arnold Schönberg, and in modern dance those of Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Mary Wigman.

4 The dance piece “Scenario” premiered on 14 October 1997 at the Brooklyn Dance Academy. The 40-minute performance was accompanied by the musical piece “Wave Code A–Z” by musician and composer Takehisa Kosugi. The original cast of the piece included the following dancers: Lisa Boudreau, Thomas Caley, Michael Cole, Holley Farmer, Maydelle Fason, Jean Freebury, Frédéric Gafner, (Foofwa d’Imobilité), Matthew Mohr, Banu Ogan, Jared Phillips, Glen Rumsey, Jeannie Steele, Derry Swan, Robert Swinston and Cheryl Therrien.

5 Whitfield, n. d.

6 Rei Kawakubo presented her first collection in 1981 with fellow designer Yohji Yamamoto at a Paris hotel (ibid.).

7 Cf. Wenrich, 2003, p. 110.

icalism of action, of a creative process that can also be found in her current collections, sheds light on the dressmaker's skills. The exposure of structures and processes seems pioneering in both fashion and art. Multi-layered wool fabrics obstinately resist the impression of a perfect cut, merely hinting at the contours of the body (Fig. 1). Rei Kawakubo remarks in a conversation with Japanese architect Tadao Ando: "When it comes to finding possibilities, I derive my skills from architecture and tailoring in equal measure."⁸

But Kawakubo also frequently draws inspiration from puristic designs of modernist architecture. To approach a piece of clothing is, to her, to start from scratch, and to examine not only the appearance of the body shell, but also its construction. The female body is not blatantly exposed but enters an organic, reciprocal relationship with the respective cover, which can move in space and alter its appearance through the wearer. Kawakubo's designs reveal themselves to the viewer through architectural concepts rather than the logic of fashion theory. Designed between 1971 and 1979 by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris was formative for Kawakubo's first *défilé*. As an exhibition forum for contemporary art, it embodies Le Corbusier's dictum that a "house is a machine for living in." The architects exposed the internal structure of the building's organism to reveal its mechanical and constructive elements to the viewer.⁹

It almost seems as if the apocalyptic rider Kawakubo wanted to reset the history of clothing and fashion to zero with a single blow while at the same time becoming a pioneer by exposing the sophisticated inner structure of her clothing to the audience. Kawakubo's designs still disrupt the idea of fashion and (Western) perceptions of the ideal body today.

Rei Kawakubo's concept of clothing sculptures bears analogy to Merce Cunningham's dances and choreographies in terms of development and impact. Cunningham's work has been formative for contemporary dance across the globe. His beginnings go back to the Martha Graham Dance Company, which he was a member of in the 1940s and where modern dance had been negotiating the forms of expression of classical ballet since the early 20th century, with dancers conquering the floor and space and freeing the body from the highly aestheticized rules of ballet positions such as *port de bras* and *arabesque*. Dance narratives often remained linear nonetheless, and the aesthet-

8 Sudjic, 1990, p. 10.

9 Cf. Wenrich, 2003, p. 110.

ics of movement was based on the sequence of overall choreographic statements. Cunningham's dance technique and choreographies soon broke fresh ground as he started in the 1950s to develop seemingly arbitrary movement sequences and eventually founded the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.¹⁰ Pieces conceived under his direction referenced the history of dance with irony and respect, while at the same time opening the doors to a new world of dance right from the start.

Positions of Concept and Design

Cunningham and Kawakubo's creative force and aesthetic iconoclasm has arguably paved the way for contemporary artists and subsequent generations of dancers, choreographers, and designers to trespass norms.¹¹ Perhaps the most striking feature of their work is their radical refusal to impose boundaries on the body regarding both fashion design and the lines of movement. Their continual design experiments epitomize a mixture of masterly technique and the unshaking will to cross boundaries. In their respective fields of design, Cunningham and Kawakubo display a high potential for innovation and for initiating processes of change. Their ultimate ambition is to reflect on traditional forms of design and the milestones of their respective cultures and combining them with their own wealth of ideas. In the process, both Cunningham and Kawakubo anticipate conceptual and creative developments in the fields of dance, choreography, clothing, fashion, and aesthetics.

The early phase of dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham's career in the 1940s is closely linked to his encounters with artists active in diverse fields of design and expression at the famous Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina. Black Mountain College opened in September 1933, the year the Nazis seized control, which would ultimately drive the entire world to the brink of total ruin in the following twelve years. In the history of American progressive education, this college exemplified the

10 In 1953, Merce Cunningham founded the Dance Company during one of his sojourns at Black Mountain College. He had been there in 1948 and danced in John Cage's Theater Piece #1 (Black Mountain Piece).

11 Cunningham was always interested in everyday life movements and implemented them in his choreographies, which were then appropriated and interpreted by the dancers of his company. Pina Bausch and Sascha Waltz were clearly influenced in their choreographies. Kawakubo's conceptual radiance is very much reflected in the design of her former protégé Jun'ya Watanabe. Watanabe and Tao Kurihara's brands subvert the prevailing boundaries of fashion in their designs.

courage to not only develop but, more importantly, rethink the curricula that had been handed down until then, emphasizing diversity in both the arts and sciences. Taking its cue from pragmatic philosopher John Dewey and his critical view of specialized knowledge taught everywhere amid specialized isolation, Black Mountain College sought to make Dewey's emphasis on experiential education and interdisciplinarity the core of various approaches to teaching. No one could have guessed at the time of its opening that, between 1933 and 1957, Black Mountain College would become a place where eminent artists and scholars would meet and spark numerous processes of change and development.¹² A look at its lists of teachers (which included Josef and Hanni Albers, who had immigrated from Europe, as well as Richard Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage) and students (among them Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and many others) illustrates the pioneering importance of this university from today's perspective. Teaching, research, and ultimately the cooperation of all those involved, characterized by democratic awareness and the will to engage in dialog, resulted in a powerful stream of innovation which still reverberates today in many lines of development.

The founder of Black Mountain College, John Andrew Rice, had initially taught classical languages at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida. At a conference devoted to the advancement of college curricula, Rice met the chair of the conference, John Dewey.¹³ Rice's dissatisfaction with conditions at his college and the stagnation in contemporary education in general led to a break with his institution. Together with like-minded colleagues, he decided to change the educational system by founding his own college, which would aim for a holistic humanistic education. The pioneers of this new movement considered the knowledge of classical canons of literature and philosophy, history and mathematics to be insufficient. They regarded life as a continuous stream of change whose invaluable potential for innovation and creativity could be exploited with common knowledge and, above all, with artistic reasoning and action.¹⁴ These encounters at Black Mountain College proved pivotal for Merce

12 In 1933, the year Black Mountain College was founded in Asheville, North Carolina, while the Bauhaus art school in Berlin was closed by order of the Nazis. Some members of the Bauhaus including Josef and Hanni Albers and Walter Gropius were forced to emigrate. As a result, they had a formative effect on education at Black Mountain College in the college's early days.

13 Cf. Reynolds, 1997, p. 1.

14 Cf. Ellert, 1972, p. 145.

Cunningham, who was now able to develop his own dance and choreographic language at the college. In the synergy of arts, he experienced their individual power; in direct exchange, he recognized the possibilities of his own art. This interaction between arts and sciences produced groundbreaking developments in art, such as happenings and performances, which had a strong impact on society.

Changing Aesthetics – Body Meets Dress

In fashion theory, the late 1970s are considered the end point of a tradition of fashion.¹⁵ The emergence of a new clothing aesthetic associated with Japanese design ideas marks a break with traditional beauty ideals and clothing conventions. Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and, above all, Rei Kawakubo broke with the aesthetic body concepts of previous decades and challenged Western notions of the ideal of beauty, proportion and perfection of craftsmanship.

The same is obvious in Rei Kawakubo's 1997 collection "Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body."¹⁶ In its conceptualization and realization, Kawakubo referenced a moment in the 1990s history of clothing and fashion that allowed her to engage intellectually with the triangle of dress, body and space, and translate this discourse into three-dimensional form. The collection "Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body" draws on earlier design experiments and at the same time serves as basic idea and concept for later collections of space-consuming clothing sculptures created by extending the human body by means of exalted vestimentary architecture and the implementation of textile elements as paddings.¹⁷ The transition from garment to wearable sculpture became fluid. The result of this reflection was a series of garments that openly addressed clothing functionality, body aesthetics and the relation to space. All three aspects together were put in relation to their respective histories. Kawakubo placed bulges, humps and protrusions in unexpected places of the garment, distorting the body and its silhouette, while tight-fitting yet asymmetrical garments "refused to adhere to prevailing beauty norms, [re-

15 The first presentation of Rei Kawakubo's label Comme des Garçons in 1981 Paris was both a closing point and a new beginning. That was the moment the "Mode de cent ans,"* as Barbara Vinken has called it – i.e. fashion from 100 years, with highlights by Charles Frederic Worth, Madeleine Vionnet, Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Yves Saint Laurent – appears to have come to an end (cf. Vinken, 2005).

16 Cf. Vogue Runway, 2015.

17 Cf. the collections "Inside Decoration" (fall/winter 2010), Mower (2010) and "Not Making Clothing" (spring/summer 2014); Furniss, 2013.

turning] an avant-garde sensibility to fashion.”¹⁸ Individual pieces from this collection represent a turning point, or *tabula rasa*, in view of the preceding decade of aestheticization through lush shoulder pads and the oversize trend in the fashion world.¹⁹

Shaping Taste – Dress, Body, Dance and Sound Hit the Stage

“Scenario” (1997) was the first time Merce Cunningham asked for a fashion designer to create the costumes for a piece of his. He chose Rei Kawakubo, who initially declined the offer to collaborate on account of her lack of knowledge of dance, but eventually allowed herself to be persuaded.²⁰ Inspired by her collection “Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body” from the same year, she designed a completely new series of 116 unisex garments based on 14 basic cuts, divided into three groups tailored to the dance piece, each with its own fabric colors and patterns: first came blue stripes on white, followed by pale green and white-checked patterns, then all-black and finally all-red costumes.²¹

Kawakubo also designed the stage and lighting, bathing the venue in cool neon light infused with the electronic sound fabrics of Takehisa Kosugi, a long-time collaborator of Cunningham.

Cunningham and Kawakubo’s collaboration goes beyond the conventional framework of fashion design. Their focus is on the moving body in space, whose second shell, the clothing, defines it and its movement, freeing and restricting it in equal measure, evoking associations with the moving body in everyday situations while also referencing the enclosed stage area. Cunningham and Kawakubo deconstruct the dancing body in space and blur the boundary between body and clothes and their expansion in the stage space.²²

18 Meade, 2017, p. 347.

19 In 2018, an exhibition curated by Andrew Bolton offered an unprecedented glimpse into the work of Rei Kawakubo (cf. Bolton, 2018).

20 By the time Cunningham approached Kawakubo, he had already worked with renowned artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol.

21 It has been argued that Kawakubo redesigned her “Body Meets Dress” collection into ballet costumes for Cunningham’s “Scenario” choreography, but this is only partially true. In fact, she designed an entirely new set of models. However, the basic concept of humps and a specific narrative of the body that explores the body moving in space were indeed taken from the “Body Meets Dress” collection.

22 Cf. Loschek, 2007, p. 54.

The triangle of body, dress and space has a historical tradition. Research has found ample evidence of this in the history of each of these three aspects.²³ Our body moves in space, and it is only through space that its dimension, expansion and limits can be perceived; it is only through the garment, its perception and extension that the body becomes perceivable. When body and garment move in space, we perceive and experience them as a constellation in space; the body, dress and space create a total picture that can be perceived. The history of the body and its creative interpretation has seen numerous moments in which the body strove for change and transformation. This can only be achieved through the body shell of clothing. Clothes change the appearance of the body; they protect, adorn, and decorate it. The body can extend its reach through clothes. Clothes create closeness and distance, attraction and repulsion. Through clothes, the body can express desire, potency and power; it can 'embody' wealth and power, but it can also signify difference, absence, and special circumstances.

For her design concept, Kawakubo was able to take Cunningham's dance and choreographic oeuvre and its inner logic as a reference point. In his dance technique and choreographies, Cunningham had always examined the concepts of body and space since his early days. His choreographies reflected on specific aspects of dance and focused on rhythm, the relationship between torso and extremities, and the perception of the body in space. One peculiarity of his approach is that the dancing bodies constantly and simultaneously survey the space in different directions. This often led to unexpected twists in the movements of dancing bodies and ultimately established Cunningham's preeminence as an ensemble choreographer and luminary in dance history. While Kawakubo's costumes for "Scenario" clearly took their cue from her "Body Meets Dress" collection, they were also dress sculptures in their own right which were worn on stage by women and men alike. This is what made the design of the dresses so special, although it was plain to see that the dancers struggled with their restricted range of motion.

23 Cf. Lehnert, 2012.

Dance and Fashion in Dialog

It is important to note that both Merce Cunningham and Rei Kawakubo have a special connection to art and artists as well as their history, a connection to artistic innovation from the early 20th century in particular. The Bauhaus art school and Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet were definitively formative in this regard. Created in 1922, Schlemmer's costumes were an important reference for Kawakubo's pieces designed for Cunningham. They "enclose the body in such a way that movements are restricted in accordance with the minimalist choreography. The bulky, sculptural clothing thus serves only to support the artwork, which is focused on the body in space."²⁴ The architect and designer of fashion Charles James might be another link, or joint, between Rei Kawakubo and Merce Cunningham in terms of design, as can be seen from numerous pieces from his oeuvre. Take, for example, his eiderdown jacket from 1937 and its extraordinary construction and effect on the dress, body, and space. James added another, third dimension to the surface of the jacket. Note, too, that the eiderdown jacket was basically a unisex item.²⁵

These coordinates from the systems of dance and fashion are key points for a number of considerations: Cunningham and Kawakubo were contemporaries who approached each other in their creative work. The designs of the dancer and choreographer on the one hand and the dress maker and fashion designer on the other both aimed to assess the presence of the body and its physical expansion and movement in space. The point is not to aestheticize or eroticize the body, or in fact to determine its sex; Cunningham and Kawakubo tread on a different level of discourse. Their work is about crossing boundaries, exploring the possibilities of touch and distance, proximity and remoteness, open and closed forms, positive and negative forms.

In the early 1990s, 70-year-old Merce Cunningham began to use the computer for his choreographies. He used Life Forms, a program now known as DanceForms.²⁶ The choreography separated the torso from the extremities. Cunningham randomized the movement sequences and dissected the body with the computer program. The dancers then pieced together the individual choreographed sections. Rei Kawakubo's costumes intervened in the movement sequences, sometimes forcing the dancers to keep their distance and

24 Drühl, 1998, p. 178.

25 Cf. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O75134/evening-jacket-james-charles/> [6 Dec. 2021].

26 Cf. <http://www.lifeforms.com/danceforms/main.html> [12 Dec. 2021].

letting the bodies assume unexpected shapes. Cunningham associated the padded bodies with everyday phenomena, such as a man in a raincoat with a rucksack. Cunningham and Kawakubo worked separately, and it was only on stage that the dancers had the opportunity to engage with the choreography and with Kawakubo's costumes. Cunningham then manipulated the choreographed movement sequences on the computer. Because Cunningham worked on the body phrases alone, the dancers did not get to see the edited result. The goal was to synchronize the movement of a formation. Movements were rehearsed together for the "Tango" sequence at the end of the piece. Merce Cunningham then selected individual pairs of dancers and combined their movements.

You can tell from some of the costumes that Kawakubo's intention was to restrict the freedom of movement. It was virtually impossible with some items to make quick turns, or an arabesque. The dancing couples had bulges like the bellies of pregnant women. The bodies had a very hard time dancing a pas de deux. The sober, sterile stage area, for which Kawakubo initially envisaged no entrance or exit, acted like a 'white cube' in which costume innovation and avant-garde, as well as proximity and distance in dance came together and were passed on to the audience. The stage thus became a 'lab' of vestimentary, choreographic and auditory dystopias, a place where the tradition, the present and future of fashion, aesthetics, dance and performance were negotiated.²⁷

Conclusion

Rei Kawakubo's costumes for Merce Cunningham's dance piece "Scenario" (1997) referenced her signature collection "Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body" from the same year, where the costumes were padded in unexpected places and broke with body and beauty ideals. The convex and concave body shapes of the costumes were a means of expression for Cunningham's

27 Rose Lee Goldberg's reviewed the world premiere of "Scenario" in "Artforum International" in Jan. 1998: "With his breathtaking 'Scenario,' 1997, the choreographer has found a designer to give actual form to the space around the dancers. Rei Kawakubo's constructed costumes make perceptible, almost tangible, the negative spaces between people. Set against the whitest of white backdrops and lit by an overhead row of fluorescent lights, the boldly outlined costumes make it look as though each performer carries the afterimage of each movement on his or her back (or front or side, as the case may be)" (<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/199801/merce-cunningham-52065> [06 Dec. 2021]).

dance and choreographic concept for “Scenario.” The distorted proportions of Kawakubo’s dresses commanded extreme dance moves and use of space from the dancers.

Cunningham and Kawakubo’s collaboration was unique in every way. Many fashion designers have created costumes for dance performances, but “Scenario” was one of a kind. It is most remarkable that both Cunningham and Kawakubo flouted dance and fashion conventions, with dance movements that neither flow nor follow the sound but ultimately manage to overcome the resistance of the costume, which is both tight and space-consuming at the same time. Virtually all 20th-century fashion designers created costumes for classical or contemporary ballet. Couturiers ranging from Giorgio Armani to Yohji Yamamoto have produced countless innovations and creations.²⁸ The fascination of Cunningham and Kawakubo’s collaboration for “Scenario” is the fact that they both consistently and relentlessly explored the wholeness of the body in space independent of each other. In more than 50 years of fashion design, many of Kawakubo’s collections have repeatedly transcended the norms of gender and aesthetics to yield something completely new. Cunningham’s 180 ensemble choreographies gradually pushed the boundaries of the body in space and the possibilities of dance. This is what makes his dance technique so groundbreaking.

Kawakubo and Cunningham’s encounter was a unique event even from a present-day perspective. Their collaboration almost a quarter of a century ago heralded a number of essential aesthetically and socially relevant discourses by transgressing the boundaries of creative and artistic spaces, creating clothes and body shells that made gender barriers appear fluid, and liberating dance movement sequences from the corset of linearity and narration. Their clothes and dances demonstrated a fluid transition of form and structure, genre and diversity. With “Scenario,” a hybrid work of art itself, the autonomy of the arts gained center stage.

28 Cf. Jeitschko, 2015.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

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Figures

- Fig. 1: Rei Kawakubo, Comme des Garçons, Jumper, 1982, Victoria & Albert Museum, Textiles and Fashion Collection, London,
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73390/jumper-kawakubo-rei/> [09 Dec. 2021].
- Fig. 2: Comme des Garçons, Spring 1997, “Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body,”
<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons/slideshow/collection#1> [09 Dec. 2021].
- Fig. 3: Rei Kawakubo, Costumes for “Scenario,” 1997, <https://walkerart.org/collections/art-works/costumes-for-scenario> [09 Dec. 2021].

