

“Being natural is simply a pose”

- a critical intervention into the conventionality of clothes through the process of experimental fashion design



"BEING NATURAL IS SIMPLY A POSE"

– A CRITICAL INTERVENTION INTO
THE CONVENTIONALITY OF CLOTHES
THROUGH THE PROCESS OF
EXPERIMENTAL FASHION DESIGN

*IDA-SOFIA TUOMISTO
MASTER'S THESIS 2019*

*FASHION, TEXTILE AND CLOTHING DESIGN
DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN
SCHOOL OF ARTS, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE
AALTO UNIVERSITY*

*ADVISORS
TUOMAS LAITINEN
ANNAMARI VÄNSKÄ*

*SUPERVISOR
PIRJO HIRVONEN*

Quote from Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray", 1890.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of critical thinking in the process of clothing design. It shows that the design process is a form of critical thinking through which it is possible to acknowledge, challenge, deconstruct and change culturally predominant binary oppositions. The thesis investigates, through theory and the process of creating a clothing collection, how the actual design process from pattern making to final garments and their photography can be seen as a method of changing the conventional meanings of clothes as gendered.

The motivation for this thesis thus lies in the ability of fashion design to propose critical approaches and in its possibility to participate in the process of deconstructing certain dichotomies. This thesis draws from research that has shown that the dualistic idea of gender is deeply rooted in culture and therefore also in the very core of fashion as an embodied practice. By acknowledging the gender dichotomy inherent in fashion this thesis utilises it as a filter to investigate also other oppositions such as functional/unfunctional and that of natural/artificial in order to reveal ambiguities between these assumed oppositions in fashion. The thesis proposes a nonbinary approach and how it can be reached by critically investigating the aspects of the design process. This thesis exposes that fashion is involved in constructing embodied representations of reality, and that it is also a critical practice that has power to change that reality.

The thesis draws from examples from the 1980s and 1990s – the period defined by a rise in the philosophy of clothing and increasing conceptuality. During these decades fashion began to question itself and the heteronormative and binary assumptions about gender and its “natural” presentations. The thesis draws from certain subversive cases in the history of “deconstruction fashion” and utilises them in the production part consisting of seven looks. The collection is the result of experimental pattern drawing and methods with an aim to deconstruct the ideas of “natural” and “functional” in clothing through reconsidering traditional shapes and characteristics. Through the experimental approach, this thesis aims to reinforce the acknowledgement of clothes as interpretations of social and cultural constructions.

Keywords: critical design, experimental pattern, deconstruction, gender, dichotomy

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä maisterin opinnäytetyö on tutkielma kriittisestä ajattelusta vaatesuunnittelun prosessissa. Työ osoittaa, että suunnitteluprosessi on kriittisen ajattelun muoto, jonka kautta on mahdollista tunnistaa, haastaa, dekonstruktoida ja muuttaa kulttuurillisesti hallitsevia, kaksijakoisia käsityksiä. Tämä opinnäyte tutkii teorian ja vaatesuunnitteluprosessin kautta, kuinka suunnitteluprosessi kaavojen valmistamisesta lopullisiin vaatteisiin ja niiden valokuvaukseen voidaan nähdä sukupuolitettujen vaatteiden konventionaalisten merkityksien muuttamisen metodina.

Tämän opinnäytteen motivaationa on muotisuunnittelun mahdollisuus esittää kriittisiä näkökulmia ja sen kyky osallistua tiettyjen dikotomioiden purkamiseen. Tämä opinnäyte pohjaa tutkimuksiin, jotka ovat paljastaneet, että dualistinen idean sukupuolesta on juurtunut syvälle kulttuuriin ja täten se on myös muodin ytimessä, käsitteen ruumiillistumana. Opinnäyte käyttää muodin sukupuolidikotomiaa suodattimena huomataksaan myös muita kontrasteja, kuten funktionaalinen/epäfunktionaalinen ja luonnollinen/epäluonnollinen, paljastaakseen moniselitteisyydet oletettujen vastakohtien välillä. Tämä opinnäyte ehdottaa uutta näkökulmaa binäärisen tilalle ja näyttää kuinka sen voi saavuttaa suunnitteluprosessia kriittisesti tutkimalla. Opinnäyte valottaa muodin asemaa todellisuuden representaatioiden rakentamisessa ja sitä, kuinka sillä on myös mahdollisuus kriittisenä metodina muuttaa luomansa todellisuus.

Tämä opinnäyte esittelee esimerkkejä 1980- ja 1990-luvuilta – aikakaudelta, jolloin vaateen filosofia ja lisääntynyt konseptuaalisuus nousivat muodin kentälle. Näinä vuosikymmeninä muoti alkoi kyseenalaistamaan itsensä ja heteronormatiiviset ja binääriset oletukset sukupuolesta ja sen ”luonnollisesta” presentaatiosta. Opinnäyte nostaa esiin esimerkkejä tietyistä dekonstruktio metodeista muodin historiassa ja hyödyntää niitä produktio-osuudessa, seitsemän asukokonaisuuden vaatemallistossa. Mallisto käyttää kokeellista kaavaa ja metodeja purkaakseen ”luonnollisen” ja ”funktionaalisen” käsitteitä vaatteiden kontekstissa. Kokeellisen lähestymistavan kautta opinnäyte pyrkii vahvistamaan käsitystä vaatteista sosiaalisten ja kulttuurillisten konstruktioiden ilmentäjänä.

Avainsanoja: kriittinen suunnittelu, kokeellinen kaava, dekonstruktio, sukupuoli, dikotomia



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the year 2016 I took part in a course of the Master's Programme in Fashion, Clothing and Textile Design, *Innovative Fashion Design* at Aalto University. During this course of collection design, I was inspired by surrealist and conceptualistic art, where mundane objects are taken out of their context and their shapes stretched and altered. My main visual research for this course was images of hurricanes and other literally twisted shapes that were created by nature. This course was not an official start for my thesis yet, but it was the beginning of my desire to work with experimental patterns. I started to shape abstract forms as I wanted to create garments that would tell a story about forces of nature bursting out from the human body, and with this to represent the connection to nature that we are losing more and more as humans.

The try-outs ended up looking very artificial: Complicated constructions that were looking pretentious, not like I imagined. The shapes were so far from the shapes of traditional clothes that they looked like costumes, like representations – “unnatural” clothes, not actual clothes even though somehow wearable ones. This brought me the thought chain that led to the questions: “what is actually considered “natural” in the context of clothing and fashion?”, “how we, as designers are moulding meanings through clothes and those of clothes?”, “do we have the ability to define the “natural”?”



As I started to question the concept of natural, I noted that fashion embodies strong heteronormative social and cultural settings. Having the power to unite, but I argue that throughout its history fashion has been concentrating more on marking differences. The most significant divisions that the discourse in fashion points out, according to Barbara Vinken, are: the division between “being” and mere appearance (authentic – artificial), differences of the sexes, or of classes. All of them correlate with each other and also with a sociological understanding of class and gender divisions.¹ Even though the foundations of fashion are standing on the three concepts mentioned above and the emphasis of their setting changes during different time periods, the most visible in fashion – and therefore the most graspable one – is the division between gender representations: the idea of the female and the male and their attributes such as femininity and masculinity. For this reason it is also discussed in this thesis: as an example of the dualistic foundations of fashion. This thesis – both the written part and the collection – does not aim to categorising the differences between the sexes but rather focusing on the fluctuations of the concept of gender and revealing its artificiality; examining conventionally gendered clothes, as well as those that do not seem to have distinguishable gendered characteristics, to discuss, through them, the idea of “natural” in the context of fashion.

Instead of accepting and embracing the in-betweenness and the *aporia*, puzzlement, we as humans naturally tend to categorise things and put them to place; this is an effort to desperately control what goes around us. This can have a positive impact, helping us to navigate through signs². Although, sometimes our fear for the unknown is too high and it makes us rely on prejudice and expectations of identities, like that of interpretations of binary gender. The roles that fast fashion and consumerism are playing in presenting unachievable “ideals” are a concern to me since I see them reinforcing capitalistic structures and affecting our daily lives in a negative manner. Therefore, I see my part as a designer, more importantly, than to offer certain ideals, to understand and reflect the values behind the design, to reveal that we are surrounded by elements that have meanings that are continuously in flux, in creation, evolving and endlessly forming. Even

¹ Vinken, 2005: 3-4

² Kaiser, 1990: 252-253

humans and the concept of humanity are in a state of continuous change without stable or original meaning³.

With this thesis I try to break free of expectations and conventional thinking. To honestly question the setting, I felt that I needed to get to a more abstract level (in theory and practice) to see the “bigger picture” so I could find a way back to the characteristics of clothes and fashion with more understanding of their fundamental settings. Therefore, ideologies behind clothes and appearances became even a more important focus for this thesis than visual aesthetics.

As a contemporary designer, I do not see certain clothes as more “appropriate” on some people than on others based on assumptions of their gender or other attributes. I understand the concept of garments “being more suitable” for some occasions than for others, as a very subjective point of view. Humans make assumptions of what is considered as a “natural” way of dressing through their own experiences and world views. I must acknowledge that even though my personal desire, approach, and methods aim to be free of assuming the case of the dualistic idea of gender, they do not erase the gender expectations existing on a societal level. In any case, with the artistic freedom of this thesis, I can aspire towards a nonbinary “utopia” where certain dichotomies are already deconstructed. This is what the product of the practical part of the thesis, a clothing collection, aims to represent. Although more important than the “result”, the accent of this thesis is on the process and what lays the base for the collection.

One of the standpoints for the practical process of this thesis is distancing myself from the idea of a “natural way to dress.” It began as a subconscious rejection of conventionality, a method that is familiar to me already through my personal history of choosing what to wear. In the context of clothing design, this was intuitively examining societal and therefore also my personal assumptions of clothes, the things that are considered “natural”. Some notions came more to the surface than others due to my subjective experiences with clothes: characteristics of femininity, the ideal

³ Vänskä, 2018:27

shapes of clothes for specific body types and the physical and theoretical functionality of clothes. In the framework of this thesis, this means studying the idea of “natural” in the context of fashion, and in practice, it resulted in the creation of my experimental method.

Since clothes are designed, they inevitably reflect contemporary ideas about humans and humanity and not only that of gender. My thesis stems from the desire to make room for clothes that go beyond the existing gender dichotomy and thus also make space for those who are not comfortable with the extant dichotomy. I propose, through my own practice, some ways this can be done because I believe that recognising the diversity and complexity of being a human is the only way for the future.

1.1 Structure of the thesis

This practice-based thesis consists of a theoretical framework, the practical design process and analysis of the latter. The sections are roughly divided but they will intertwine as they have continuously been in dialogue throughout the process. The topics of this thesis are studied through literature reviews and practical production.

In the second chapter, I will present critical approaches used in this study, experimental pattern cutting and methods familiar from conceptual art. I will also contextualise my work within the history of deconstruction of fashion.

Chapters three and four will provide most of the theoretical background. In the chapters, I will discuss the heteronormative foundation of fashion. I will draw from arguments according to which clothes participate in creating gendered identities, thus exposing gender as a culturally constructed concept instead of a naturally given entity.

Chapter four focuses on one critical approach in fashion: “deconstruction

fashion”. This chapter will investigate the concepts of “natural” and “artificial” through examples from fashion history, from the times of the modern and postmodern period. In this chapter I will especially concentrate on the work by Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, designers of the era of deconstruction fashion, and important designers in terms of my own practice.

Chapter five will open the practical design process of this thesis: the base for the silhouettes of the collection of seven looks, and the experimental methods used in the process. In this chapter, the production process will be discussed analytically based on the theoretical part. In the final part of this chapter I will analyse the collection from two perspectives: the fashion show and the photographs. They are presented here as distinct examples of “a staged moment”: In the fashion show, my thesis collection was part of a larger predetermined occasion, but through my own photography, I was able to create an environment for the collection where I could control all the elements involved.

Chapter six draws the previous chapters together and discusses the essential findings in my design process. I will conclude with a more general discussion about the discoveries I made during the process and evaluate my process.



2. METHODOLOGY: A CRITICAL APPROACH

I recognise that my ambition to question what is considered conventional in the context of fashion is not a new thing. Fashion has a long history striving to change structures of power through clothes. One of the big discussions within the critical fashion discourse pertains to gender, sexuality and class status. According to professor of fashion research Annamari Vänskä, fashion is the “material record of the critique of the idea of the ‘(hu)man’ in various forms”⁴. By this she means that fashion is involved in those processes that define what being a human means at any given moment, and that clothes have the ability to materialise understandings about the body and its boundaries, physical as well as psychological. Since garments are expected to be designed *for* the human body, they can be examined as entities that condense ideas about how we approach and see the body and ultimately humankind. They can also give us an idea of how we relate to and approach garments through our bodies and through sociological aspects. This thesis aims to expose these possibilities and relations through critically examining clothes in the design process.

⁴ Vänskä, 2018: 28

As a practical, yet critical practice, fashion design has the power to expose personal, societal and cultural structures. This means that the methods of critical fashion design are similar to those used in conceptual art and critical design. It means, for example, working with common objects, garments and expectations of their use. Critical fashion practice challenges the observer to question the expectations of use of the object by creating a dilemma and interruption of scepticism⁵. This dilemma is created, for example, by taking the object out of its assumed environment or context and placing it somewhere where it does not “naturally” belong; a method used frequently by designers of deconstruction fashion. For instance, Martin Margiela has been creating sweaters out of socks, vests out of gloves, and has questioned the enabling conditions of an object’s functionality also in multiple other ways in his collections.

The process of thinking through clothes and their design, critical fashion design practice can be seen as giving value to the human, but also to the environment and to other species. This is visible in the process of designing, in the “imagining and giving shape to the human – as gendered, sexualized, class, ethnic etc.”⁶. In this thesis I aim to examine certain conceptual approaches and methods used in deconstruction fashion and evaluate if and how they would be beneficial to my own design process.

Since the artistic freedom of the practical part of this thesis, a clothing collection, the practicality of the garments was not the obligated priority. This gave way to alternative approaches and methods. For example, subconscious choices and improvisation were allowed and many times even preferred during the process. The approach that I used in pattern cutting can be called “experimental”, meaning that it differs from commonly used techniques based on conventional patterns in clothing design processes. In the collection’s study of shapes, silhouettes and through the use of materials, questioning the traditional, it can be seen as a critical method itself. In this thesis, using an experimental approach in pattern making meant acknowledging that there are possibilities beyond the accustomed patterns when common thoughts about functionality of clothing can be bent.

⁵ Malpass, 2017: 47

⁶ Vänskä, 2018: 18

As a fashion designer and in this thesis work, I have the opportunity and the responsibility, to take part in “giving shape to the human”⁷ through clothes and I tend to do this considerably. In this thesis I will introduce the process of creating a clothing collection and critically analyse it in order to understand its contexts and its possibilities to make new discoveries.

2.1 Deconstruction in fashion

For this thesis, an essential point in fashion history is the beginning of “critical fashion” and more specifically “deconstruction fashion”⁸, which brought a distinguishably new philosophical approach to the fashion field in the 1980s. From this historical period, this thesis marks more closely the works of designers Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo. This framing is done because of their significantly separate aesthetics to present the same category, and because their tactics are relevant to introduce as a reference to the methods used in my design work. I concentrate on examples from their works that can be seen clearly representing deconstruction fashion, from the end of the 1980s until the end of the 1990s. I am interested in how and why deconstruction fashion came to shake the dominating assumption of the modern era: that there is a static centre, something “authentic”. For this reason, I will also shortly explain what laid the historical ground for the significant change in the mindset of the 1980s fashion.

The shift in the history of fashion from the modern to postmodern brought many changes that still correlate today. Contextualizing deconstruction fashion in the fashion history aims to a wider understanding of the contemporary ethos. It is often referred to when describing garments that are worn out, dismantled or made from recycled materials. Rei Kawakubo’s designs full of holes, as well as Martin Margiela’s unfinished edges and collages of used objects, are often pointed out as examples. When the term is used in a more general way, it is used to refer to the critique of the dominant fashion system.⁹ Designers such as Vivienne Westwood, Jean-Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen are often mentioned under this wider term,

⁷ Vänskä, 2018: 18

⁸ A term used in this thesis, by Alison Gill (1998)

⁹ Zborowska, 2015: 2-3

and nobody can argue that they have not earned it with their subversive methods; with their designs they also contributed to deconstruct the era of modernity. Other revolutionaries that would deserve to be mentioned are the Antwerp Six: Dries Van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee Walter and Van Beiderdonck with his posthumanistic visions. The fashion scholar Barbara Vinken does not stop at name-dropping; she presents a wider term, “postfashion” to describe fashion that comes after a clear modernistic period¹⁰. In this thesis, it is used as an umbrella term, describing a more general ethos of fashion as a critical discourse, and the term “deconstruction fashion” is used to refer to a more specific period that started to be more visible in the latter half of the 1980s. I use the term specifically to describe the works of Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo since within the limits of this study, it is possible only to concentrate on the most significant examples of deconstructivism in fashion.

Another example that is important to my process, is the movie *Liquid Sky* by Slava Tsukerman (1982), the most vital part of my visual research for this thesis although not something that I have drawn upon literally. Its position is to be a reference to an ethos. The movie can be seen as the culmination of avant-gardists visions of the 1980s. With its bold colours and extravagant styles, it reveals the power of masquerade and embodies the concept of “artificial”. In this thesis, it refers as a visual reference to the shift from the narratives of modernity towards more open platforms of postmodernity. It plays in a shameless manner with gender stereo- and archetypes and in this way deconstructs the conventional ideas of anything “decent” and that of something “natural”.

¹⁰ Vinken, 2015: 35



Figure 3. Slava Tsukerman, 1982. *Liquid Sky*

3. REPRESENTATION OF THE “REAL”

“There are no ‘real’ identities prior to their performance.”¹¹

In its most evident form, fashion has always been a duet or a debate between male and female fashions. This binary opposition of gender in fashion is repeatedly reinforced with very stereotypical manifestations such as ultrafeminine fashion for women and ultramasculine for men or vice versa, and even in designating collections as ‘womenswear’ or ‘menswear’. This is because these two identities are dependent on one another; their individual existence makes only sense if the other one exists as well, since they are defined by the relation to each other.¹²

According to postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, binary oppositions do not actually exist but are discursively constructed within the language¹³. His theory of deconstruction meant examining the assumed opposites carefully; when the meanings are exposed thoroughly, can be discovered that the two elements were not holding an oppositional stance in the first place.¹⁴ Drawing from Derrida’s theory, deconstruction fashion came to challenge the assumption of “authenticity” of modernity as an “anti-authentic discourse”¹⁵. This means that fashion is a representation of “reality”, a disguise that can *produce* different effects, for example, that of authenticity. Fashion is ensuing a fixed code that imitates reality and

¹¹ Lehnert, 2010: 452–461

¹² Lehnert, 2010: 452–461

¹³ Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction aims to unravel philosophical discourses through critically analysing writings

¹⁴ Korhonen, 2016

¹⁵ Vinken, 2005: 52

through this code it naturalises what is the “appropriate” way to dress in consonance with one’s gender, profession or social position. However, at the same time it reinforces that this sought authenticity is only an effect. In the words of Vinken, postfashion “exhibits this effect for what it is; as an effect.”¹⁶ It came to display artificiality and to reinforce Derrida’s view about binaries; essentially there cannot even be such things as opposites with a clear division – “natural” / “artificial”, “man” / “woman” – if fashion is exposed only as a representation of assumed reality.

3.1. Clothes as a tool to create identities

Through clothes people have a possibility to represent their realities: their identities¹⁷. Clothes are also symbols that create *assumptions* of identities in the observer’s mind. Seeing them as a way to communicate through the meanings they process has been discussed already by many scholars. Using clothes as tools to create representations and fashioning one’s presence through them, offers the possibility of liberation from the conventional roles or the opposite, adaptation to them, depending on whether the clothes are used to reveal or conceal in the process¹⁸. With the manipulation of garments there is also the chance of increasing and even altering the “historical memory”¹⁹ of clothes, and thus, also the future connotations formed *by* them.

In the words of A. Vänskä, clothes are “active and vibrant agents that materialize and mediate understanding of the human”²⁰. This sounds appealing as it is also true: looking at the history and present of fashion and its societal and cultural circumstances, we can understand more about the human/humanity. Nevertheless, can we truly understand the individual through clothes? Many times, we assume that we understand the individual because of what they wear. We *expect* that clothes, among other things, construct the appearances and therefore identities. Of course, clothes can also deceive: assumptions do not equal reality and for this reason they can be also deconstructed.

¹⁶ Vinken, 2005: 52

¹⁷ Kaiser, 1990: 40–41, 51

¹⁸ Finkelstein, 2007: 129–130

¹⁹ Kaiser, 1990: 49

²⁰ Vänskä, 2018: 18

Like identity, gender is a socially and culturally constructed concept that clothes, with other elements of appearance, are constructing by creating an “aesthetic body indifferent of the biological aspects”. In this construction the “ideal” or fetishized image of a body is always present. This can be whatever the wearer desires it to be: male, female, androgynous etc.. As Gertrud Lehnert states, we are in a continuous process of performing identities through clothes, staging our bodies on a daily basis.²¹ To conclude that there would be such a thing as, for example, a “natural” gender that clothes, among other aspects, could construct, is to oversimplify a complex matter. This thesis marks clothes as tools in “doing gender”²² and thus important parts of defining the human body and representations of identity.

I argue that having a more diverse ground, freer from rigid structures is creating more acceptable identities. I critically examine one of the biggest binary-oppositions in the context of fashion, that of the underlying *differentiation* of genders and those of femininity and masculinity, in an effort to add variety to the domain of fashion.

This thesis wants to reveal the process of manipulation of clothes: the design process. Through the process it aims to present a new approach, a new “reality” to tackle with expectations of gender in the context of fashion. In the next chapter I will discuss the concept of assumed “natural”, “authentic” gender identities, and the efforts made in the fashion history to pursue these ideals, as well as the critical approach inspired by them.

²¹ Lehnert, 2010: 452–461

²² Lehnert, 2010: 452–461

4. CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY: SELECTED CASES OF GENDER CONSTRUCTION FROM THE HISTORY OF FASHION

Fashion has a long history as a signifier of class, gender and wealth, and sometimes this has meant quite radical statements in the form of clothes. Though fashion can be a valuable tool to criticise and to comment, not all fashion is critical.²³ In this chapter I discuss the foundation of critical approach in fashion design by opening the modern and postmodern concepts through examples from fashion history.

4.1 Modern fashion marking the differences

Modern understanding of gender is based on an idea that oppositions are found in nature and thus binary setting would be something natural. In this way, fashion is understood as a form of feminine vanity while a man and his clothes were separated from the world of fashion and defined through functionality and authenticity.²⁴ This controversy between a “functional” and thus “natural” man versus an “unfunctional” and “artificial” woman, sets the base for my theoretical framework as an example of the modern mindset. A division between genders and gendered clothes is always present in the context of modernity.

²³ Geczy and Karaminas, 2017: 4

²⁴ Lehnert, 2010: 452-461

4.1.1 Fetishization and clichés

From the eighteenth century, modern fashion intended to display and to examine “the opposition between producing, working, political men and vain extravagant, idle femininity”²⁵. From this setting fashion grew and occasionally spread over this division but it still gets its vigour from its relation to the separation of the sexes; it has the power to erase this division and to expose, even in the most pompous ways, the evidence of the partition that once existed²⁶. Through fetishizing, exaggerating and stereotyping, fashion exposes the traces of the divisions.

An example of the modern mindset is an attempt to define a “natural” and “ideal” representation of gender with a belief in a clear division between femininity and masculinity. Before World War II, designer of modern woman’s clothes, Coco Chanel, made an attempt to create a ‘natural’ woman. Inspired strongly by men’s clothing, excluding distinct feminine features of the times, Chanel created practical clothes for women to wear. With this she, without question, modernised women’s clothing. Nevertheless, her image of the “real” was not holding steadily. Chanel’s rival, Dior, used the idealized and exaggerated image of femininity and presented the effeminate “New Look”, which became greatly popular. In their own ways, both designers pursued the concept of the “ideal” image of femininity differently: undermining, and on the other hand marking, the stereotypical femininity.²⁷ Their idea of “natural” gender representation was based on the structuralist assumption that there could be established binary oppositions.

Chanel and Dior were both exploiting the distinction of the sexes and the clichés of the social gender roles, and with this they were undeliberately marking that the ‘natural’ gender appears as an everchanging concept. In a way, fashion is always representing exactly how impossible it is not to wear a fetishized mask. Therefore, as stated by Vinken, it is not possible to “dress oneself naturally”.²⁸

²⁵ Vinken, 2005: 18

²⁶ Vinken, 2005: 18-19, 22-24

²⁷ Vinken, 2005: 21-24, 28

²⁸ Vinken, 2005: 28

4.1.2 Change in the atmosphere but not yet “there”!

Youth cultures in the 1960s introduced new approaches to the concepts of masculinity and femininity. A clear change in the atmosphere occurred, when the common gender and status assumptions started to shake in the context of fashion. As a reaction, English mod culture represented more conceptual and political means with their more androgynous “dandy-looks”, bands like the Beatles and The Who being its manifestations.²⁹ These efforts of rebellious youths in their casual parka jackets, were challenging the modern, hierarchical order and became a worldwide subculture, uniting people from different classes and backgrounds³⁰.

In the 1970s, Glam rock came to represent a different approach. Not only was it marking the differences of the sexes, but more importantly, it was gambling with their limits. With a Wildean quote, “*being natural is simply a pose – and the most irritating pose that I know*”³¹ rock pioneers such as Marc Bolan and Alice Cooper were playing with narcissistic representations and David Bowie was constantly reinventing himself in the form of a new stage character, rejecting the “natural” appearance.³² In this rejection there was an acceptance of ‘artificiality’ that came to be one of the characteristics of postmodernism and therefore postfashion.



²⁹ Vänskä, 2017: 107-130

³⁰ The Mod Culture

³¹ Wilde, 1890, in edition by Random House, 1998

³² Denney, 2016



Figure 4. Marc Bolan on a skateboard.

Figure 5. Martin Parr, “The Cost of Living – Punk with her Mother” 1986.

Figure 6. Westwood & McLaren, F/W 1981–82.

Even though glam rock already questioned the existence a “natural” appearance, the influence of punk fashion as a critical ideology cannot be undermined. Punk brought the “class war” to observation with its aesthetics challenging the idea of “decency”. With this, it was also heavily questioning the ideals of beauty and the concept of “natural” femininity and masculinity.³³ It positioned itself, in the words of Vinken, “most actively under the sign of the artificiality of both sexes”³⁴ and with this the accent on artificiality it pushed from the separation of the genders towards questioning the “natural”.

The 1980s laid a ground for questioning sexuality and allowed interruptions and ‘bending’ of the rigid gender roles. “Artificiality” was greeted by popular culture as its was finally welcoming diversity and used often shocking methods to tackle topics.³⁵ Subcultures like the “New Romantics” and the “Goths” were drawing from the past as well as heavily from punk fashion and created their own parallel universe, a lifestyle that was ‘dandified’ and ‘theatrical’.³⁶ No one was embracing the concept of artificial better than them, as they were living it by reinventing exaggerated appearances every day and night. Vivienne Westwood and Malcom McLaren were defining the era with their collection “Pirates” (F/W 1981–82) (Fig.6) that brought the subcultures to the catwalk³⁷. It was radical in its masquerade but the truly subversive thinking in fashion came along when designers turned their focus towards the ontology of the garment instead of constructing the excess.

³³ Vänskä, 2017: 107-130

³⁴ Vinken, 2005: 61-76

³⁵ Vänskä, 2017: 123-124

³⁶ Princess Julia in Club to Catwalk: Blitz Kids documentary

³⁷ Skidmore, 2013



Figure 7. Guy Bourdin, 1984
Comme des Garçons



Figure 8. Peter Lindbergh, 1984
Comme des Garçons

4.2 Dismantling the traditional

When the term “deconstruction” started to come to a wider awareness in the 1980’s and 1990s, it was embraced not only by philosophers and literature specialists, but also by creatives: architects, graphic designers and multimedia designers. It was understood as a form of criticism, as a method to uncover the not-stable nature of things.³⁸ Although already widely in use within different fields, it was not before the 1989 when critic and fashion photographer Bill Cunningham used the term “deconstructivist” for the first time in the context of fashion³⁹. With the term he was referencing to the A/W 89-90 collection of Martin Margiela. Only after this, the term started to retrospectively find its way to describe also the works of other designers, such as Rei Kawakubo or Yohji Yamamoto, who before this, were characterized as avant-garde.⁴⁰

The Japanese influence cannot be bypassed in the history of deconstruction fashion. Designers Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo came to expose the conventionality and false ideals of Western fashion with their designs. The designs were seen as provocative, their silhouettes and use of material being subversive to their contemporaries. As argued by Vinken, when Kawakubo presented her collections in Paris in the early 1980s; her designs, which were not “poured on the body” – this being the most important criteria of haute couture – nor even “cut to the body”⁴¹, there was a clear change in the power setting of fashion creators. The visionary thoughts did not anymore come from haute couture but from prêt-à-porter⁴².

Designers such as Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo started to use methods that can be seen to utilise Derridean thoughts: ripping, revealing, piercing and reconstructing clothes, sometimes even to the point that they became unusable. With these approaches, they wanted to expose what is inside clothing, aspects that are usually left unseen from the observer. This way they were reflecting, in the words of Alison Gill, “on the nexus of making, wearing, thinking, and dwelling that happens in fashion and

³⁸ Gill, 1998: 26

³⁹ in English language. Garda, Francesca in Zborowska, 2015

⁴⁰ Zborowska, 2015: 2-3

⁴¹ Vinken, 2005: 70-71

⁴² Vinken, 2005: 35

people’s relations with all clothing”.⁴³ Like Derrida’s theory, based on careful readings and writings in order to examine all the possible relations between the meanings of the words, deconstruction fashion exposed relations in fashion by revealing their construction processes. Through garments, deconstruction fashion was able to engage the audience with certain issues; it started to unveil taboos and to bring to daylight discussions of sensitive topics. Matters, such as sexuality, status quo, nudity or gender: the binarity of conventional and the diversity of non-binary gender, were examined many times by the means of parody and sign deterioration. There was a clear change of direction from the excess and decoration around the body towards the inner worlds, to the philosophy of the cloth.⁴⁴

This increased conceptual approach in fashion that began in the 1980s, drew clearly from lessons from the near past. I argue that one of the clearest connections is to the heritage of the ideology of punk fashion; deliberately using non-fashionable elements to appear *against* fashion⁴⁵. Its aesthetics against the concept of “decent” or “natural” in the form of vandalised and altered clothes, is translated to a conceptual approach to go beyond fashion. For instance, references to punk are seen, sometimes quite literally, in the works of Rei Kawakubo and her label Comme des Garçons, for example in her breakthrough collection presented in Paris in 1981 with clothes that were looking dismantled and worn-out. In the case of Kawakubo, punk ideology makes sense since as a style it established itself as an interpretation against the concepts of good taste and what is considered appropriate, and these aspects are frequently present also in the works of Kawakubo.⁴⁶

4.3 Deconstruction fashion as a conceptual commentary

To understand the shift between modern and postfashion, we must underline the relation to conceptuality and the aspects that were expected *from* the clothes and fashion in both periods. In traditional, dominant fashion, clothes have generally been characterized by their usefulness, functionality, mirroring resistance or belonging. As an example, according

⁴³ Gill, 1998: 42

⁴⁴ Gill, 1998: 28-29, 32-33, 35

⁴⁵ Vinken, 2005:

⁴⁶ Vinken, 2005: 61-67

to Adam Geczy and Vicky Karaminas, conventional pieces such as the black dress or the suit are aiming to emphasize the person “in action and image” and therefore their functionality and suitability to the image of the chosen person is everything.⁴⁷

Where conventional modern fashion underlines values of functionality, personal image, and is obsessed with “style” and only the opposite sides of certain dichotomies such as “good/bad”, critical approach in fashion is more a conceptual commentary.⁴⁸ Gill claims that critical deconstruction fashion came to structure the ontology of the garment. Marking at the same time “the labour that the garment-maker and clothes perform”, as well as the act of clothing, wearing them and being defined by them.⁴⁹

Deconstruction fashion can be seen as an aim to liberate the garment from the medium and also from its determined function. In this way, in the words of Gill, “the dress becomes theoretical”. It becomes so, through demonstrating a theoretical stance born from philosophical reflection. Deconstruction fashion brings this theoretical position to the surface, as something tangible, in pursuance to alter it.⁵⁰ The action of exposing something abstract in a physical form of garment forces us to re-imagine the function of the piece⁵¹. Through this, interactions about clothing, bodies and other aspects can be revealed⁵²; a form of “thinking through clothes” happens.

The strong grasp of conceptuality can be seen in the works of Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, where the commentary stated *through* the garment becomes more relevant than the garment itself. Bringing functions to settings where function is not essential anymore and taking usability away from objects in contexts where they should be usable. This brings up a feeling that something is off, or something is not complete.⁵³ This state of flux creates dilemmas in the observer’s mind but more importantly it brings possibilities; when things are not settled, they can continue to form.

⁴⁷ Geczy and Karaminas, 2017: 3-4

⁴⁸ Geczy and Karaminas, 2017: 4-5

⁴⁹ Gill, 1998: 28

⁵⁰ Gill, 1998: 35

⁵¹ Spindler in Gill, 1998: 35

⁵² Gill, 1998: 35

⁵³ Geczy and Karaminas, 2017: 30-31



Figure 9. Maison Martin Margiela, 1998
Figure 10. Maison Martin Margiela, 1997





Figure 11. *Comme des Garçons*, 1998



Figure 12. *Comme des Garçons*, 1997

4.3.1 Constructing the artificial body

“No representation is natural, and representation of the body, whether clothed or unclothed, are no exception.”⁵⁴

Deconstruction in fashion is involved in creating theoretical dilemmas through clothes. This dilemma can be seen as “aporia”, which philosopher Jacques Derrida saw as an unavoidable occurrence and therefore something that should be accepted. Aporia is the realisation of the impossibility to find a “solution” between two oppositions, a paradox, which the theory of deconstruction aims to locate.⁵⁵ In my thesis I aim to challenge conventional thinking patterns and it is therefore obligatory to create dilemmas on the way, discovering them is part of the process. In this chapter I will introduce case examples from the works of Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo; How they brought up the “complex interaction between bodies, clothing and the various settings in which they are worn⁵⁶” by revealing aporia.

From the very beginning, Martin Margiela was literally dismantling objects, old clothes and accessories and collaging them together in his collections. Vinken states that in the work of Margiela “the function without a function also becomes an ornament: he is actually more on the side of ‘l’art pour l’art’⁵⁷” (art for art’s sake). His work can be seen as a commentary to the clothing itself. Using recycled fabrics and clothes as a base, Margiela brings a strong presence of the past into his work; he frequently uses recognisable, common objects and pieces such as gloves or socks to create forms of existing clothes⁵⁸. Showing a view that is usually hidden from the observer, he lays the whole production process for everyone to see⁵⁹. It is like an embodiment of the fundamental of life: history defining the new. It is the realisation that the future can be controlled in some ways, but the foundations are always present - in positive and in negative. In this way, as stated by Agata Zborowska, Margiela is always challenging the “accepted principles of design” and creating polemics of the functionality of garments, using very conceptual methods. For example, with the collection from S/S 1998, Margiela presents two-dimensional clothes (Fig. 9). By neglecting

⁵⁴ Cavallaro, Warwick, 1998:4

⁵⁵ Tieteen termipankki

⁵⁶ Gill, 2018: 35

⁵⁷ Vinken, 2005: 139-152

⁵⁸ Zborowska, 2015: 5-6

⁵⁹ Vinken, 2005: 140-141

and excluding the presence of the human body,⁶⁰ he is dismantling the most distinguished relation: clothes made *for* the human body.

It is argued by Vinken, that by turning the dress inside out to show all its secrets, darts, fastenings and other details, Margiela is deconstructing the most distinguished conventional gender representation in the domain of fashion: the fetishised image of a feminine body. In the ready-to-wear collection of Maison Martin Margiela from fall 1997 (Fig. 10), he reveals the artificiality of a feminised body by dressing the models to the ‘ideal body’ of a mannequin. The form of a mannequin brings the difference between an image and a body for everyone to see. Margiela reveals it to be something readable, as a mere construction, a product of fashion.⁶¹

I argue that the same deconstruction of an ideal image of a woman, and in addition the more general image of the ideal body, and their representations, can be seen in the Ready-to-wear collection of Comme des Garçons from spring 1997, “Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body” (Fig. 12). In Kawakubo’s work there has always been a rejection of the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘decent’. As Vinken claims about the revolutionary collection of Comme des Garçons in Paris 1981, Kawakubo’s collections seek to deconstruct the relation of body and clothing and in this process, she often omits the differences of the sexes.⁶² The forms of Kawakubo’s designs defy the conventional so much that, I claim, they are in their own dimension, where they physically not even slightly need to remind us of the presence of the traditional clothes.

The designs are, however, not existing in a void, and thus, they create a dilemma, a commentary towards dominant fashion. The use of paddings in not expected places in ‘Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body’, creates a discourse about what parts of the body that traditionally seem to be emphasised. Giving accent to certain parts of the body creates a discourse about the ideal image of a woman, because throughout fashion history the body of a female has been the one to be moulded. At the same time, this clearly creates a dialogue between the natural and artificial. The overall

⁶⁰ Zborowska, 2015: 5-6

⁶¹ Vinken, 2005: 30-31, 140-141

⁶² Vinken, 2005: 70-71

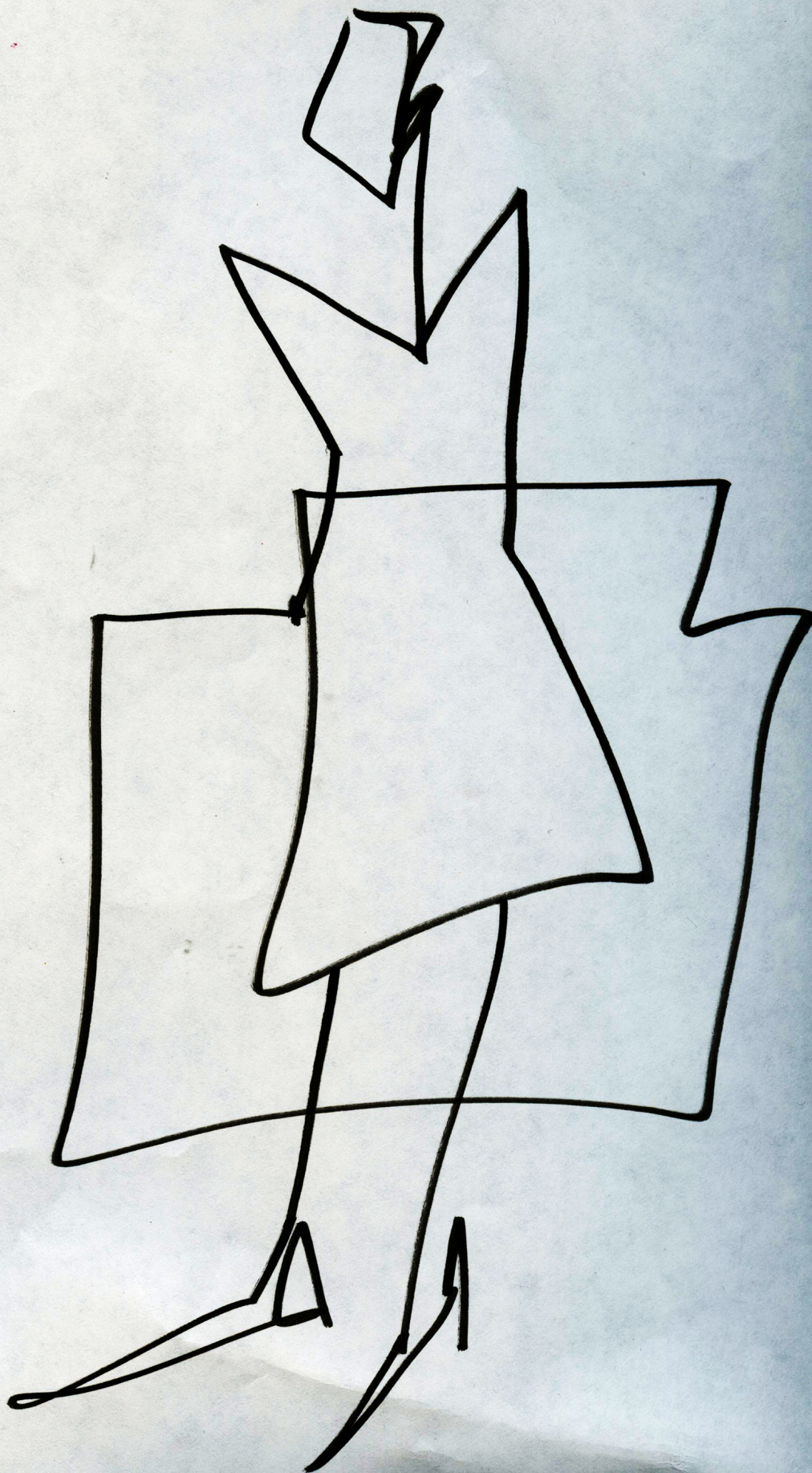
shapes of the designs are so foreign to conventionalities – the only thing that the observer can grasp as a familiar element is the plain gingham fabric – that it creates a dilemma of interpretation. To me, the only certain thing in Kawakubo’s designs, is the creation of aporia.

Where I see Kawakubo’s practices to be more abstract and more about the puzzlement per se, the methods of Margiela – revealing the process of design – as also stated by Vinken, underlines that the role of a dressmaker is to take part in the constructing of the artificial body and to disguise it as something natural⁶³. Both of them are laying the ground of exposing the dirty secrets of the fashion system, and both of them can be seen as pioneers in feminist approach in fashion, giving value to the intellect of the woman instead of the fetishised image of femininity. It must be noted here that combining fashion and philosophy was criticised by both, and neither has used the term ‘deconstruction’ about their own designs.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Kawakubo also stated that the “result (of her work) is something that other people decide⁶⁵” and this is what has happened in the context of analyses of their works.

⁶³ Vinken, 2005: 140-141

⁶⁴ Zborowska, 2015: 11-12

⁶⁵ Cooke-Newhouse, 2008



5. UNPACKING “ASSEMBLY” – THE COLLECTION

Assembly is the name of the physical part of this thesis, a clothing collection. It consists of seven looks that can be seen to be forming three pairs and one individual look: the looks with tops and trousers, with long vinyl coats, the jersey ‘dresses’ and a viscose knit dress (Fig.). The collection represents an utopia without expectations of binaries. As a collection, Assembly is not meant to be about completed, fulfilled products, rather, it aims to represent a fluctuant concept, a constant search for forms. It is the reconstructed concept after the deconstruction of certain contrasts, and it aims to reveal the impossibility of oppositions and the possibility of “in-betweenness”.

In this chapter I will show, through the collection and its photographs, the deconstruction of certain conventionalities. The chapter is divided into sections that have been used as tactics in the process of Assembly: deconstructing the assumed gender division in clothes, re-thinking common characteristics and distancing from the thought of a gendered body by reconsidering functionality in clothes. The last part will present the process of the photography of the collection.



*Figure 14. Assembly, line-up.
Photographed by Iitu Pii.*

5.1 Unravelling the approach

Since this thesis is based on critical thinking, the ways of my earlier design processes did not feel right this time: they also felt like something to be challenged. Gathering visual references is usually the beginning of defining the direction for the collection. Since I was not following the convention of visual search but rather followed an abstract thought of ‘challenging the unconventional’, the aesthetical research in the domain of clothes felt limited and thus hard to grasp. Instead of gathering pictures of obvious conventional clothes which could vary all the way from androgynous jeans to clothes consisting gender dichotomies such as the suit or the skirt, I found it best to concentrate on the *similarities* found among clothes. The similarities are the characteristics that we expect from every piece of clothing. Here stating the obvious, in the overall shape of garments there is, for instance, holes for the head and forearms. In the patterns we see that front and the back pieces are straighter in certain areas and more bending in other. These things are very clear, especially to clothing designers, because garments are designed *for* the human body and therefore, they are expected to follow its shape to function. This brought up questions: what happens when these basic characteristics of functionality are taken away or re-thought? What is the point when a garment loses its function as a garment?

Semiotics in clothing has been researched widely, and it has been found that we communicate through clothes, as they can represent conventional expectations of for example gender, age or geographical backgrounds⁶⁶. Nevertheless, there are aspects that are expected *from* the clothes regardless of intended gender. They are expected to be appropriate, suitable for the situation that they are manifested in, and they are expected to be wearable. If they meet the conventional expectations, they go many times even unnoticed and therefore they suit *naturally* to their circumstances: they function. Stripping away the context, environment or function, that makes the garment existing in the first place, creates a dialogue about the natural and unnatural environment for the object and the other way around, about the naturality of the object itself and its functionality.

⁶⁶ Kaiser, 1990: 25

5.2 Liberating mundanity

With my design work I aim for “gender fluidness”. This, for me, doesn’t mean that I would aim for some kind of centre between masculine and feminine, something called ‘unisex’ by mixing gendered characteristics of clothes. Like discussed in this thesis, finding this kind of centre would not even be possible. To me “genderless” or “gender fluidness” means a concept that embraces continuous change as a part of identity and therefore it cannot even be defined and does not need to be. I rather call it “individualness” which already as a word means something not labelled, something unique. It is perhaps better explained by telling what this sought individualness *is not* in the case of this thesis; it was not to be afraid of certain characteristics of clothes or shapes because they could be translated to assumptions of gender. It was not either to try to deliberately exaggerate or use gendered features of clothes in order to achieve crossdressing: to dress an assumed woman with masculine clothes or the opposite.

To critically examine in practice how clothes are taking part in constructing representations, I had to find a physical standpoint. In the beginning of the design process I deliberately avoided distinguishable visual references to certain historical eras or examples of silhouettes in the context of clothes, which usually are part of the design process. I found these kinds of references limiting since my approach was highly abstract. I found the standpoints in a different way. Analysing methods of Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, two approaches seemed to be clearer than others. The first, to investigate pieces that have a wide “historical memory⁶⁷”, for example, those with clearly traditional characteristics. The second, to use pieces or shapes that already *seem* to be stripped from the connotations to certain constructions. I wanted to create a collection that would represent fluidness and not be marking differences. Therefore, I decided to use the most fundamental pieces of garment as the base for the design process: a t-shirt and a trench coat.

⁶⁷ Kaiser, 1990: 49

I chose these garments because they are mundane, something that everyone can imagine and wear in their daily lives and because they are perhaps some of the least gendered garments. I understood that a conceptual asset lies in these unassuming and yet ambiguous garments; there is an advantage that lies in the relation to habituality of wearing familiar⁶⁸. As argued by Alla Eizenberg in her thesis *Signs in flux* (2017), meanings of everyday garments are “constantly reiterated and reinterpreted” as they are worn by millions of people every day, and thus are ‘in the permanent state of becoming’. Because of this continuous fluctuation in their essence, common clothes also allow altering their meanings, unlike pieces that demand more consideration from the wearing process.⁶⁹ Garments like the t-shirt possess a wide historical and cultural background and thus they are also connected to a larger context of contemporary fashion.

With their very wide fabric of meanings these garments are eventually without a definitive meaning. For this reason, they are more malleable without immediate connections to certain eras or places and in addition to this, they are also pieces that lack specific notions of gender, body type or age. Therefore, the high level of mundanity of these garments gave me an opportunity to work in ideal circumstances where I did not need to consider the gendered characteristics of clothes. However, through the chosen ambiguous garments that can be seen to be distanced from gender, the gender expectations became an even more pressuring topic. It all depends on the viewpoint: if I observe my own design work through a subjective lens, as a “utopia”, where assumptions never existed in the first place, I don’t consider it gender specific. On the other hand, as a designer I do not work in a vacuum, my work exists in relation with prevailing structures of society, which are not yet free of suppositions of gender, as I have witnessed by realising that the outcome of my collection has been categorised rather strictly as “womenswear” by others.

⁶⁸ Gill in Eizenberg, 2017: 76

⁶⁹ Eizenberg, 2017: 76

5.3 Clothes as gendered

Dominant fashion still seeks the differences between the sexes by separating men’s and women’s clothes and collections. However, during recent years, exceptions to this division in the fashion field have been presented more frequently: for some designers, such as Vivienne Westwood, it is already considered normal to use a wide range of models for all of her collections⁷⁰ and dress them in clothes not regarding their gender.

Yet, outside the at times innovative and progressive high fashion, a clear separation still occurs. As stated by professor Gertrud Lehnert, the most obvious physical examples of differences between the sexes throughout the fashion history are skirt and trousers. Through these pieces, fashion has been constructing contrasts for centuries, so tightly that this vestimentary division is considered to be “natural” between the genders.⁷¹ Nevertheless, as Lehnert does too, I argue that this division is not anything natural even though it is something we are used to. Trousers are not more natural for men than skirts, nor are skirts more natural to women than trousers; as pieces they are mere representations of femininity or masculinity, tools involved in the construction of gender. For example, G. Lehnert sees trousers as “a powerful cultural and social sign for supremacy, autonomy, and, of course, masculinity”⁷² and therefore a skirt is a symbol of inferiority and dependence. In this way, they are signs of deeper heteronormative binary structures in the society, in which, as stated by Derrida, one will always be the dominant⁷³. To unbuild and re-think the shapes of these garments that inherent so clear gender dichotomy is to play with the power structures of the society.

Emphasising the kinds of cultural and social signs that for instance trousers or skirts signify, has been a popular method for many designers such as Vivienne Westwood or Jean-Paul Gaultier. Known for his use of stereo and archetypes, Jean-Paul Gaultier has a long history of mixing known gender symbols, often with the means of satire. Because of his and his peers’ efforts, the age of postmodernity brought clear changes to fashion,

⁷⁰ Which was already the case of catwalk shows of ‘Pirate’(‘81) and ‘Buffalo girls’(‘82-’82)

⁷¹ Lehnert, 2010: 452-461

⁷² Lehnert, 2010: 452-461

⁷³ Benjamin and Norris, 1988: 7



Figure 15. Viscose trousers.

and the gap between clothing of the two assumed genders narrowed. Although, as claimed by Lehnert, these changes happened much more in women's fashion than in men's. For example, despite attempts by many fashion designers, such as Jean-Paul Gaultier, men still do not wear skirts on a daily basis as socially acceptable items in the Western tradition.⁷⁴ This shows that gender representations in clothes are very deeply rooted still, also in post-postmodern fashion.

The light blue trousers (Fig. 14 and fig. 23) of Assembly symbolically represent a change in the traditional atmosphere: the dismantling of the assumed gender division. Trousers, signs of the masculine, according to Lehnert, have been widely adapted into women's wardrobes in the West and are therefore a mundane object also for the feminine. Yet, men are not embracing skirts on a general level. Eventually, I argue, there will not be a division between clothes anymore as gendered. The viscose trousers of my thesis collection represent this breaking point where the gendered symbols are forming into something else. The transformation seen in the trousers is not final, it represents just a moment in the flux; the other leg of trousers splits up and starts in this way, to gain more unidentified shapes in the context of conventional clothes.

The split in the other leg of the trousers also brings along the aspect of revealing the human shape underneath the fabric, showing the "natural", or more specifically the representation of it, under the "artificial" (clothing). Though men's clothes during the modern era were thought to be more natural, because they followed the shapes of the body, if viewed through the mindset of contemporary fashion, the emphasis has bypassed this setting of masculine as natural and feminine as artificial. Because of the ordinariness of trousers in the wardrobe of both assumed genders, there are no significant signs of masculinity or femininity in trousers per se. In the ambiguity of the mundane, trousers have lost their purpose to mark the differences between the genders; as with the wider ethos of post-postmodernity, it becomes a question between "natural" and "artificial". If anything, in the utopia of Assembly, the split in the leg of the trousers is revealing the "natural" human, not "masculine" human.

⁷⁴ Lehnert, 2010: 452-461

5.4 Re-thinking characteristics of “believable” clothes

While creating the collection, I understood that in order to underline the thought of “deconstructing conventionalities” there were certain references that should stay visible in the collection. Without these hints of its foundations, there was a risk to slip too much on the side of the avant-garde, and I wanted to make sure that the collection would work as a reminder of something between the concepts of “real”, “believable” and “unreal”, “questionable”. This meant that there needed to be physical elements that worked as connotations to the “believable” clothes. As an example, in the case of the t-shirt, this was the rib on the neck. I also reinforced the garments’ connotations to the origins as leisure wear with the material choice, sweatshirt jersey.



Figure 16. T-shirt dress from the collection with colored fabrics and a viscose rib.

Opposite: Figure 17. Prototype of the t-shirt dress.

I deconstructed, refined, and turned the pattern of a t-shirt completely around, in order to examine its possibilities. The front piece came the back and vice versa.

This is still visible in the final garment representing the “act of forming”, something not finished.





In the case of the coat (Fig. 18), I saw buttons or other fastenings as excess that would not be needed to transfer an *idea* of a coat. To emphasise the role of clothes in creating narratives and to work as symbols for identities, to me to play with the ‘believability of clothes’ was the interpretation of it. A coat will look like a coat because of the main shape and characteristics, and therefore coats in Assembly have only a few details: the collar and pockets.

Buttoning the clothes in a traditional manner has also been adding to the division between genders in the context of fashion. Customarily men’s buttons are on the right side and women’s on the left. In the design process of my collection, leaving the buttons entirely out from the construction of the coat set aside expectations of its wearer’s gender. I wanted to leave space for an individual’s decision of how to wear the piece. Of course, it then becomes a paradox towards this, when the coat is closed with an elastic top which then restricts its wearer physically. In this way, the look becomes symbolic: a desire, a choice of the individual towards the suppositions of the world outside.

Since my collection has been in the hands of stylists, I find it interesting how the ‘missing buttons’ and the confusion about which side of the front pieces should go on the top, has often created a dilemma during the wearing process. Although, more often the assumption to put immediately the right side on the top – as it is customised in womenswear – has been the case. The elastic top has also been said to look like a corset – a highly feminised object – and therefore representing oppression to these observers.

All these comments and reactions that I have received about the clothes of Assembly have been reinforcing my perception about the collection. I see the clothes of Assembly as frames for meanings, their absence and the space between the medium in use becomes irrelevant while the clothes become more about the concept, aiming to represent many aspects at the same time, trying to achieve a certain “at-onceness”⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ Benjamin, 1996: 21



Figure 19. Prototype. Making cuts and finding the shape.

Opposite: Figure 20. Constructing the viscose knit dress from rectangled pieces





Opposite: Figure 21. Study with shapes. Apron skirts without a human body.

Figure 22. Sweatshirt dress with colored fabrics and viscose details.

5.5 Distancing clothes from the gendered body

In the practical process of Assembly, I deliberately set aside the aspect of clothes as gendered. Using mundane clothes that are free from gendered connotations was one standpoint. As the other approach to patterns I decided to take the form as far that I can from all the possible connotations to social and cultural constructions and their representations. For me, this even meant taking the form away from the context of a human body. This led me to omit the lines of the body. The results of bypassing the figure became loose, abstract shapes.

After constructing the garments, I understood that the shapes that were forming in the design process of Assembly, resembled skirts or dresses. They were hiding the shapes of the lower body rather than showing them, and in this way, they could be considered to be more on the “feminine” side if viewed from a conventional perspective. I realised, that setting aside gender conventionalities reinforced their theoretical presence in my work. In this connection, I am aware that examining the outcome is based on a highly subjective experience and my own perspective is formed also by my own design process and its standpoints. Therefore, I do not see the result of my methods as gendered.

5.5.1 Abstractions

Setting the body aside also sets aside thoughts of functionality. In addition, while imagining silhouettes that a human body does not necessarily possess, even the concept of comfortability was bypassed. My method became to prioritize abstractions, condensed, symmetrical and linear shapes, acknowledging the well-known observation that the human body is asymmetrical, full of organic shapes and without straight lines. In this way, abandoning the body in the first stages of the process, concentrating on reduced shapes and examining them on their own, worked as a method of positive self-deception. I was freed from thinking about some of the

features that you usually have to consider in clothing design, such as what the moving body requires from the functionality of the garment.

A t-shirt can be seen to be constructed from four rectangles. As I started to examine and refine the t-shirt's general shape with its clear outlines, a singular rectangle felt as almost like the body's opposition. Therefore, it seemed to be an interesting contrast to use to reveal what was lying between the organic flowing element (the body) and the concentrated setting of a steady figure (the rectangle). In consequence, rectangles came to be a starting point for many of the physical forms of the garments of Assembly. As an individual shape it is far from functionality in the context of a wearable object, but as a constructed collage it can result in a wearable garment, as is the case with the t-shirt. The relation of the rectangles defines the aspect of functionality.

The most clearly visible connections to the use of rectangles in Assembly are the “aprons” (Fig. 21), a name that was connected to these pieces of clothes only after they had been put on a human body. First, the object was a two-dimensional collage of rectangles, put together intuitively. Only afterwards it became a garment, when it found its three-dimensional form on a human body. For it to be wearable was, of course, always the goal, since I aimed to display the garments on humans, but the method of starting with two-dimensional forms liberated me from thinking restrictions of functionality in the first place. However, to be wearable, the collage of rectangles needed to be somehow attached on a body. This happened with the help of an elastic belt, fastening the fabric to the waist.

When put on a body, the garment did not cover the lower-body entirely. I chose to keep the shape and let it be open from one side. It became more interesting for me to play with concealing and revealing and at the same time it broke the seemingly clear “skirt-effect”. From one side it could look like a a-lined skirt and from the other it exposed the wearers legs. I saw this as a reference to the division of the genders through skirt and trousers; to make only a half-skirt took off its function as a skirt, a sign of femininity.



Figure 23. Fittings. Silhouette with the "aprons". The black colour was eventually left out from the collection.

*Opposite: Figure 24. Viscose knit dress.
Photo by Meri Karhu.*

PHOTO: MERI KARHU

The name that stuck with it because of its shape, “apron”, of course connects it back again to the connotations of the feminine, even though aprons have been and are worn by men, for example by blacksmiths or butchers. This shape represented a non-binary approach in the context of gender.

To consider the starting point once more, the rectangle shape as a “opposite” to the organic human body, was not theoretically free of binaries; I recognise that with this I claim that the human body is the “natural” and the shape of a rectangle the “artificial”. Nevertheless, when the form is examined on a human body, it loses some of its straight edges and flows more organically as to find the similarities between two elements, the body and the garment. However, the stiff fabric of the piece does not allow it to entirely lose its shape, it holds on to it as a reminder of the assumed contrast and therefore exposes clues of the process. In this way, instead of underlining opposites, the garment proves the impossibility of them. Hence, the garment stays in aporia, where its form is continuously changing, depending on the styling, where on the body the garment is placed, and the movements of its wearer.

5.5.2 Questioning the functionality of shapes

I continued to cut the curves straight in other pieces of the collection. They stayed wearable because of the elastic materials in use. The silver viscose dress (Fig. 20 and 24) was formed two-dimensionally out of knitted rectangles, guided only by two actual measurements of the body, those that also define a rectangle, the width (of the hips) and the (overall) length. All other measurements were estimated in relation to these. The sweatshirt dress (Fig. 22) was based on the same method of straight lines, but this time with cuts to an intact shape (Fig. 19). It has the width of the entire fabric, one meter and a half, and its volume emphasises the absence of the body in the process.

With these two dresses I wanted to undermine the “law of functionality”. The silver dress would have been impossible to wear without the elasticity

of the rib knit and the sweatshirt dress has so much volume that it is looking to fall off from the body. The only way the big amount of fabric can stay on, is with the upper piece attached to it, which gives an assumption, a connection to a “real” garment, specifically to a crew-neck t-shirt. This piece is on the limit of a good taste and it is exactly its desired state. It aims to transfer the decision making to the observer by creating dilemmas “is it a dress or a big shirt?” or “is it falling?”. The silver knit dress is more traditionally understandable because it generally follows the lines of the body more and emphasises only the shoulders, which I consider to be a more “socially approved” place to highlight, in the context of contemporary fashion. With these two dresses I had a chance to examine my own perception of conventional aesthetics and their relation to cuts and volumes.

With the elastic tops (Fig. 25) I aimed to continue to examine the expectations of functionality of the garment, and as a consequence, it brought up question about its relation to the human body as a communicative representation. The tops are restricting the movements of their wearer (Fig. 18), almost as if tying the hands to the body, and as a consequence the body language of the wearer looks very reserved. In this way, the piece aims to accentuate garments as tools to create certain representations; how they, as a consequence of the physical effect they produce, affect the wearer also mentally, and how they, through this, also communicate with the observer, the receiver of the signs that the body language of the wearer creates. A deeper investigation of the socio-psychological effects of physicality of clothes was not possible within the limits of this thesis but I still feel that as a notion it was important for the process, because throughout fashion history, the human body, and thus the representations of identities, has been moulded through, among other things, restricting and/or allowing movement.



Figure 25.
Elastic band top.



5.6 Exposing intuition – painting the print

In my own design, I have always produced prints carefully with a silkscreen. As this thesis process was a research challenging conventionalities – also my own – I needed to re-think the steps of my usual design process. To distance myself from my traditional methods that with their familiarity could be hiding more suitable approaches, I chose to turn to ways that would allow constant altering and a free-hand approach. I ended up with an air-oriented tool, an airbrush.

In order to use this tool, I had to choose a suitable material as a canvas, and this brought me to use pieces of vinyl, many of which I have already owned for a long time. I tried many materials, but vinyl was the only one that worked with the paint quality and resulted in a style I was pleased with.

I wanted to create a print that would bring movement and light to the quite uniformed surface of the collection. I aimed to find a way that would complement the shape of the garment and not take too much control over it. Since there was an ambition to refine shapes in the collection, my thoughts resulted in an abstract print. Inspired by the colours in the movie *Liquid Sky* (1982) by Slava Tsukerman I painted intuitively, did not try to find any certain shape or pattern. I wrinkled the fabric and sprayed paint on it from different angles and distances. By not trying to follow a certain pattern, I felt free of assumptions. I managed however to create a personal dilemma: once the print was decided, it had to be repeated into other garments as well. Therefore, I was following, though not precisely, the same style, which took some intuitivity away from the process. However, I see the intuitive standpoint as an interesting place for the future, a possibility to achieve a more free form of expression. It is worth noting here that freedom is also a very subjective concept.

Figure 26. Painting with an airbrush

5.7 Staged – Assembly in presentations

“Like a magician, fashion conceals its tricks. Its seduction lies not least in the surprise of this unbelievable success; it includes a moment of curiosity on the side of the spectator. The theatricality of fashion lies in its ability to create a perfect staged moment.”⁷⁶

Barbara Vinken argues that fashion exposes its produced effects in the same manner as it is creates them, by creating a staged moment⁷⁷, for example, in the form of a catwalk show. I got the chance to present Assembly in the annual fashion show of Aalto University in the spring 2017. During the design process I concentrated on shapes and garments that I saw as non-binary. However, aiming towards abstractions and not following the shape of a human resulted in loosely fitting garments that resembled dresses and skirts and ended up being perceived as feminine garments and thus shown as ‘womenswear’ on the runway. Although my original intention was not to categorise, I accepted this interpretation of my collection already in the process of fitting the garments. This experience made tangible how designers may have their own ideas about challenging the norms of gender, but when the collection becomes public, it is often interpreted as gendered through either of the two existing norms.

However, I also had the possibility to photograph the collection in the way that mediated, in my mind, my thought process more faithfully (Fig. 28.-34.). It was clear to me that I wanted to photograph each outfit on a different person. Even though the collection was presented on individuals at the Aalto fashion show, the accent is on the clothes and not on the person wearing them⁷⁸. Therefore, the models walk like “an army of individuals”, all repeating the same movements and usually their hair and makeup styles are following the same patterns. I agree that in its context it works. However, since I had the opportunity to photograph my collection and to affect every aspect, I constructed the settings through a lens where Assembly would be utopistically free from assumptions and “ideals”, since they had been deconstructed in the design process and therefore proven to

⁷⁶ Vinken, 2005: 149

⁷⁷ Vinken, 2005: 149

⁷⁸ Minimalistic style that was presented in the 1980s by “anti-fashion” (a term referred also to deconstruction fashion) pioneers

be mere “effects”. In cooperation with Katariina Klimenko, partly clothing the surroundings, I created a “stage” for the performance.

As a balance to this supervision that I performed, I wanted that my models would also have the opportunity to express themselves. I knew them and their unique characteristics, and to emphasise them in the photographs, I did not want to affect their postures too much. Instead, I let my models do whatever they felt comfortable with.

Considering that I decided what they were wearing, the manifestation created by my clothes and the models were my translations of an idea. However, with their presence, my friends were also taking part in creating this idea; the constructed representation was an interpretation of an interpretation. Therefore, we all embraced the artificiality of this “staged moment”⁷⁹.



Figure 27. Assembly in Aalto Fashion Show 2017, Photo by Guillaume Roujas.

⁷⁹ Vinken, 2005: 149

EETU

wears look #1



IIRIS

wears look #2



ALEX LUONTO

wears look #3



ARINA

wears look #4



MISS XYLIA

wears look #5



MIRJAMI

wears look #6



VILMA

wears look #7



6. CONCLUSION

This thesis is based on understanding that the settings, i.e. the natural gender, are constructed within socio-cultural structures and can therefore also be undone and changed. The idea of examining my own design process as well as that of deconstruction fashion, was to understand the part of the designer in this construction of defining concepts. Although this thesis is discussing fashion as a tool to create identities, representations, it aims to bring out fashion not as something superficial. Instead it aims to point out the potential in the increasing ambiguity of signs, garments. The meanings of garments have been multiplying rapidly ever since the effort of modernity to find a stable centre of “natural” identity transformed, in the times of postmodern, into accepting more fragmented identities⁸⁰. With this thesis, I claim that liberation lies in these fragments. When the ambiguity of meanings increases, it is realised that categorising does not apply and the space for assuming shrinks.

My thesis is a proposition that stands on the ground of signs in constant change. Therefore, the pieces in the collection cannot represent anything stable, they are mere prototypes and still in search of their forms. At the same time, they are whole in their aporia, they do not need to be anything more than they represent. With this, I understood the value of this thesis as a personal quest to learn and underline the importance of the process instead of the outcome. I also realised that my way of not settling with the first answer that comes to mind, and sometimes even dwelling in insecurities on a very personal level, is an effort to gain more profound understanding. In this way, examining all the possibilities, uncertainty becomes a strength.

⁸⁰ Peltonen, 2011

Deconstruction has settled itself in the history of fashion as the era of increasing criticism of the fashion system. It has been criticised since to be adapted into the mainstream, as part of the system it once resisted and thus, disappearing. I claim that seeing it as a practice that can be “against” or “with” is a view that is limited to the practical aesthetics that has been connected to the term in fashion. After all, to me, it is more about acceptance. Even if viewed as a nihilistic practice, where exposing the meanings eventually leads to “meaningless”, it eventually results in approval. However, this does not mean acceptance in a passive manner, it means acknowledging the problem *within* in order to alter the elements that are involved in creating it. I see deconstruction in fashion as an effort to change and widen our perception of what lies inside and around of things. It has an ability to bring questions to the surface and give room for reflection on a personal and societal level. I see this as a very important path for the whole industry of fashion on the threshold of major climate changes.

Theorising the dress in my own design process within the limits of this thesis has been challenging. I felt that studying new ideas and researching my own process through them, constantly brought up new contradictions in the context of clothing that would have needed more examination. I understand that I only scratched the surface of the ambiguous relations between clothes and the body as gendered.

My intent with this thesis was to try to create methods that would reflect a more equal and therefore more righteous ground, that would give space to more diverse forms of being. In the process I understood that I was not looking for stable methods, instead, an approach that would allow me to question and to widen my own perception. Most of all, through the examination of my process, I gained a deeper understanding of my role as a designer. Designing clothes - “imagining and giving shape to the human”⁸¹ - adds my perception and my values *to* the context of fashion.

Designing is a form of critical thinking.

⁸¹ Vänskä, 2018: 18

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Photo in the beginning by Sara Riikonen (2017).

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