

TOTAL WORK OF FASHION:
BERNHARD WILLHELM AND THE CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE

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Abstract

In fashion discourse, the term “avant-garde” is often applied to garments that fall outside of the mainstream fashion, whether experimental, conceptual or intellectual. However, such usage overlooks the social and political aims of the historical, artistic avant-gardes. Through an examination of the contemporary avant-garde fashion label Bernhard Willhelm – led by designers Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus – this dissertation reconnects the historical or original vanguard and its revolutionary potential and proposes that Bernhard Willhelm belongs to an emerging, contemporary narrative of the avant-garde that intersects with fashion. In this study, I analyze Willhelm and Kraus’s collections, ephemera, runway presentations, exhibitions, online media, fashion films and critical reception from the brand’s inception in 1999 to 2016. Firstly, I develop the notion of “fashion-time” and contend that Willhelm and Kraus’s designs reject accelerated change, oscillating between the temporalities of fashion and anti-fashion and fashion and art. Secondly, I argue that the designers devise a political fashion, one that simultaneously critiques global politics and challenges norms in the fashion system. Thirdly, I assert that enduring collaboration with other cultural producers underpins Willhelm and Kraus’s work. The interdisciplinarity born of their collective work informs their spectacular visual language, the of sum of which I term a “total work of fashion.” By exploring these tenets of Willhelm and Kraus’s practice, I demonstrate that the avant-garde project is dynamic and in constant flux, at times incorporating dialectical facets that continually expand the disciplines of fashion and art.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	vii
 Introduction: Entering into the Bernhard Willhelm Universe	1
 Chapter One	
Literature Review: Junctures Between the Avant-Garde, Art and Fashion, and the <i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i>	10
 Chapter Two	
Against Fashion-Time: Bernhard Willhelm and the Avant-Garde Object of Fashion	63
Fashion and avant-garde objecthood	65
The anti-fashion of Bernhard Willhelm.....	71
Quotations of folk dress as anti-fashion.....	77
Workwear as anti-fashion	82
A question of dialectics: the contemporary	87
<i>Jetztzeit</i> (now-time).....	94
Time travel: when fashion moves from the runway to the museum.....	96
<i>Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel</i> at ModeMuseum, Antwerp.....	100
<i>Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus</i> at Groninger Museum, Groningen.....	114
<i>Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger</i> at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles	116
Conclusion	121
 Chapter Three	
Fashioning the Political.....	123
Fashion as political protest.....	125
The politics of diversity	136
Body politics: challenging gender and sexuality in fashion	142
Against notions of taste: challenging a bourgeois construct of fashion.....	149
Transgressing codes of decency in dress	153
Queering the boundaries of propriety	158
Against luxury: a critique of conspicuous consumption.....	167
Conclusion	176
 Chapter Four	
<i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i> : Bernhard Willhelm and the Total Work of Fashion.....	178
Collaboration as a foundation for practice.....	181
Merging art and life: the world of Bernhard Willhelm.....	191
Spectacle and theatre in the total artwork of Bernhard Willhelm.....	196
Bernhard Willhelm, the show: the exhibition as a total work of art.....	203

The runway <i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i> : the theatrical fashion shows of Bernhard Willhelm	214
Bernhard Willhelm on stage and screen: dance and fashion film.....	224
Spectacular costumes: Bernhard Willhelm on stage with Björk and Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet.....	236
Conclusion	242
Conclusion: Looking Ahead to the Future of Fashion and Art.....	244
Bibliography	252
Appendices	
Appendix A: Figures.....	271
Appendix B: Interview with Bernhard Wilhelm and Jutta Kraus.....	309

List of Figures

Figure 1: Fibreglass “suit” work by Björk on the cover of her album *Volta* installed in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp

Figure 2a: Photocrom of an unmarried woman wearing a traditional Black Forest *bollenhut*, 1900

Figure 2b: Bernhard Willhelm *bollenhut*, Autumn/Winter 1999-2000 womenswear collection

Figure 3: Reproduction of Aleksandr Rodchenko leather and wool artists’ working suit, 1922/2005

Figure 4: Japanese workwear influenced designs in a lookbook image, Spring-Summer 2005 menswear collection

Figure 5: Japanese high altitude construction workers (*tobi shokunin*) wear baggy trousers known as *bukabuka zubon*

Figure 6: Varvara Stepanova’s *sportodezdha* designs, 1924

Figure 7: Models wearing workwear from the Kaseyama Co.

Figure 8: Drawings for Thayah’s one-piece *tuta* and women’s *tuta*, 1918-1919

Figure 9: Liubov Popova, *Textile Design* 1923-1924

Figure 10: Look featuring *loferln* (Bavarian “legwarmer” socks), Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection

Figure 11: Look featuring a floral print of *edelweiss*, gentian and Alpine roses, Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection

Figure 12: Look featuring Tyrolean folk dress hybridized with acid house, Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection

Figure 13: “Ghosts” (Spring/Summer 2004) installation in *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*

Figure 14: “Flowers in Construction Work” (Spring/Summer 2003 womenswear) installation in *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*

Figure 15: “Tirolean Room” (Spring/Summer 2007) installation in *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*

Figure 16: “Trashed Room” (Autumn/Winter 2004-2005 womenswear) installation in *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*

Figure 17: “Framed Ghetto Boys” (Autumn/Winter 2006-2007 menswear) installation in *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*

Figure 18: Installation view of *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010) at the Groninger Museum in Groningen, Netherlands

Figure 19: Installation for Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus*

Figure 20: Installation for the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger, Fashion is the Danger* (2015) at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles

Figure 21: Installation view of *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger, Fashion is the Danger*

Figure 22: Installation view of the exhibition *The House of Viktor & Rolf* (2008) Barbican Art Gallery, London

Figure 23: “Farm Boy” tote bag, Spring/Summer 2015

Figure 24: Cat-camouflage sweatshirt, Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection

Figure 25a: Camouflage jacket with *trompe l’oeil* prints of military medals and decorations, bullion fringes, Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection

Figure 25b: Detail, camouflage jacket detail with *trompe l’oeil* epaulette print, Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection

Figure 26: Singlet tank top, Spring/Summer 2006 menswear collection

Figure 27: “Protest Room” (Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 womenswear) installation in *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*

Figure 28: Karl Lagerfeld’s “Protest Collection” runway show for the Chanel Spring/Summer 2015, Grand Palais, Paris

Figure 29: “I ♥ GAZA” skirt, Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection

Figure 30: “Suicidedoux” top and “I ♥ GAZA” skirt, Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection

Figure 31: Detail of “Sequoia” trousers, Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 menswear collection

Figure 32: Detail of “Angel Eyes” sweatshirt dress, Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 womenswear collection

Figure 33: Lookbook image, Autumn/Winter 2005-2006 menswear collection

Figure 34: Bodybuilder Rahel Ruch at the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show

Figure 35: “Be Into It” mankini, Spring/Summer 2012 menswear collection

Figure 36: “Twirly” skirt/peplum, Spring/Summer 2011 menswear collection

Figure 37: Matthew Marble in the lookbook for the Autumn/Winter 2014-2015 collection

Figure 38: Robe jacket, Spring/Summer 2011 menswear collection

Figure 39: “Watch Me” dress, Spring/Summer 2002 womenswear collection

Figure 40: “Himalayan” shoe from the Bernhard Willhelm x Camper Together collaboration, Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 women’s collection

Figure 41: François Sagat wears a mankini in a lookbook image from the Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection

Figure 42: A runway look from the Autumn/Winter 2012-2013 menswear collection

Figure 43: *BUTT* magazine interview with Bernhard Willhelm, wearing a leotard from the Spring/Summer 2015 collection

Figure 44: “Sac” dress, Autumn/Winter 2009-2010 womenswear collection

Figure 45: Trousers from the Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection featuring equestrian motifs appropriated from French luxury brand, Hermès

Figure 46: A Bernhard Willhelm monkey paw tag

Figure 47: View of the Bernhard Willhelm boutique at PARCO

Figure 48: Model with leaf blower during the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear runway show in the Marais area of Paris

Figure 49: A page from the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 collection lookbook

Figure 50: Screenshot of the Bernhard Willhelm Instagram account

Figure 51: George Kostopoulos arrests Bernhard Willhelm at his Hollywood Hills live/work space.

Figure 52: Installation view of the Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 womenswear collection in *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*

Figure 53: A sausage sculpture sits amongst the audience at the Bernhard Willhelm Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 menswear collection presentation

Figure 54: Installation view of *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History* (2012-2013) Middelheim Museum, Antwerp

Figure 55: Installation view of *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History*

Figure 56: Installation view of *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History*

Figure 57: Hand-sculpted clay hotdog pendant necklace for the Spring/Summer 2009 womenswear collection runway presentation

Figure 58: *Tableau vivant* from the Autumn/Winter 2010-2011 womenswear runway presentation, Palais Brongniart, Place de la Bourse

Figure 59: Model at the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection runway presentation, Palais Brongniart, Place de la Bourse

Figure 60: Model at the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection runway presentation, Palais Brongniart, Place de la Bourse

Figure 61: A dancer from The William Forsythe Company Frankfurt during the runway performance for the Autumn/Winter 2013-2014 collection, Place du Carrousel, Louvre

Figure 62: Björk and her all-female brass band in Bernhard Willhelm costumes for the Volta Tour (2007)

Figure 63: Dancers in Bernhard Willhelm costumes from the final Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet performance, Brooklyn Academy of Music

Introduction: Entering into the Bernhard Willhelm Universe

I first experienced Bernhard Willhelm's avant-garde designs in the flesh on a visit to the exhibition *Het Totaal Rappel* in 2007 at the ModeMuseum (MoMu) in Antwerp, Belgium. Given the context, I was prepared to see a fashion exhibition in what I now realize was the most basic possible sense: clothes displayed on mannequins and not much else. What I saw upon entering the gallery confounded me on many levels. Despite the fact that I was in a fashion museum, I could not classify exactly what it was that I was seeing. After I followed a queue of goofy looking ghost "costumes" up the stairs from the MoMu's main entrance hall, a whole world of subversion opened up before my eyes. The fashions, while grouped by collection, were each installed in separate stage-like scenes or entire environments, replete with architectural constructions, props, found objects and in some cases, audiovisual components. To put it simply, I was engulfed in the uncanny splendour of the Bernhard Willhelm visual language: bright colours, intense patterns and outré silhouettes that the fashion label has come to embody. The exhibition conflicted with any previous notions that I had concerning modes of display for fashion. I could not reconcile the work fully as fashion, yet its setting in a fashion museum told me that it was also not art. I came away from the visit simultaneously enlightened yet perplexed.

An encounter with the wild visual universe of Bernhard Willhelm¹ can be confounding. The work of Willhelm and his longtime business partner Jutta Kraus – whether museum exhibitions, curation, collaborations with artists, musicians and designers, or the production of clothing – takes on multiple meanings and statuses as

¹ To clarify, use of the name Bernhard Willhelm will refer to the fashion label hereafter. Willhelm himself collaborates with partner Jutta Kraus. While Kraus largely handles business operations and Willhelm the creative side, together, they form Bernhard Willhelm, the label.

cultural form. In museological display, their garments are seldom hung on rigid, blank-faced mannequins in staid rooms, but rather bring Bernhard Willhelm stories to life in their phantasmagorical environments and installations. Similarly, the runway shows and fashion films of Willhelm and Kraus's womenswear and menswear collections resist any rigid definition of medium and often oscillate between various performance arts. In such performance-presentations, the clothes are removed of their fashion thingness and they inhabit roles similar to costume. Under the surface of spectacle, however, is multi-layered, strident political activism and critique of fashion industry norms. My objective is to delve beneath the outer layer of Willhelm and Kraus's work in order to excavate the radical resistance that forms the core of their practice.

Since the formation of the Bernhard Willhelm brand in 1999, German-born Willhelm and Kraus (both 1972) have maintained a dedicated but small following that is global in its reach. In particular, the Japanese market had an early allegiance to the label and are continual early supporters. A visible example of this is demonstrated in the Japanese company BUS STOP's licensing of Bernhard Willhelm's womenswear collection in 2005, which eventually led to its first retail boutique in Tokyo in 2006. As well, the majority of Bernhard Willhelm garments are produced in Japan and Belgium. Willhelm and Kraus established their first atelier in Antwerp, in the heart of the Belgian fashion avant-garde before moving to Paris in 2002, which also signaled Willhelm's two-year long creative directorship of Italian fashion house Capucci. After eleven years in the French fashion capital, Willhelm and Kraus shifted their studio to Los Angeles in 2013, where they remain at the time of writing. To date, they have mounted several gallery and museum exhibitions for fashion and art, on which they partnered with longstanding

collaborators; designed and styled costumes for dance, music and theatre performance, most notably for Icelandic experimental-pop singer Björk; and sustained ongoing commercial collaborations with brands including German eyewear manufacturer Mykita and Spanish footwear brand Camper. From 2009-2014, Willhelm served as head of the fashion department of the Universität für Angewandte Kunst (University of Applied Arts) in Vienna, a school famed for its faculty Vienna Secessionist Gustav Klimt, Vivienne Westwood and Zaha Hadid, and alumni including Klimt protégé Oskar Kokoschka and contemporary artist Pipilotti Rist.

Willhelm and Kraus's cross-disciplinary approaches to making, in an expanded field of fashion, transgress the ontological categories of fashion and art. The Bernhard Willhelm *oeuvre* is difficult to classify and boundless in terms of aesthetics or propriety. Willhelm and Kraus's designs can be crude in two understandings of the term: they are deliberately unrefined in their construction, whereby fabric is often torn, ripped or hems are left unfinished; or in the vulgar sense, in which garments accentuate, expose or refer to body parts normally covered for modesty purposes. Their gender-bending menswear and womenswear collections include clothing and accessories that recall elevated streetwear gone awry (e.g. leggings, hooded sweatshirts, over-sized T-shirts, jogging pants, wide-legged trousers) and borrow from across the cultural and social spectrum. Collection themes are taken from diverse sources and range from Tyrolean folk dress, Japanese street cleaners and hip hop culture, to the Iraq War. Labelled the "Black Forest wunderkind of fashion" (Harms 2009: 21), Willhelm is an *enfant terrible*, a fashion anarchist whose rebellious tendencies directly translate to the Bernhard Willhelm brand as an entity.

This study examines Willhelm and Kraus's contemporary avant-garde fashion practice from its inception up to 2016. I evaluate a variety of sources in their *oeuvre*, from the object analysis of collection garments, accessories and ephemera including invitations and lookbooks;² and visual culture and online media such as exhibitions, runway presentations and websites; to the textual study of Bernhard Willhelm's exhibition catalogues, critical reception and interviews. My project responds to a need for continued dialogue on the avant-garde and specifically, a theoretically rigorous analysis of contemporary fashion within avant-garde discourse. To date, no significant scholarly overview of Bernhard Willhelm has been written, nor has one been conducted on the fashion vanguard. In bridging the historical artistic avant-garde with contemporary fashion, my research unites the disciplines and methodologies of art history and fashion studies, mirroring Willhelm and Kraus's own interdisciplinary and blended approach.

In this dissertation, I argue that Bernhard Willhelm serves as an exemplar for a contemporary strand of the artistic avant-garde. Willhelm and Kraus challenge the ontological and temporal status of the fashion object, politically engage with the fashion system and public sphere, and blur disciplinary boundaries with their inherently collective working methods. Viewed as a whole, Willhelm and Kraus's practice enacts a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art, unifying collaborative partnerships and revolutionizing creative fields. By integrating fashion into the avant-garde narrative and concept of the unified artwork, I challenge disciplinary gatekeeping in art history that overlooks the applied or "minor" arts in favour of sweeping grand narratives of "major"

² A lookbook is a portfolio of photographs styled with or without models from each season's collection for marketing and promotion purposes. The lookbook also contains within it a narrative about the brand.

arts. In carving out a space for the study of fashion using art historical methods, my aim is to extend the conversation on fashion and art beyond the cursory and oft-rehearsed comparisons of fashion as art or vice versa. As fashion and art move closer together in the contemporary moment, it is crucial to not only elucidate a position on the relationship between the two highly contested disciplines, but also to add to a growing body scholarship on fashion. In so doing, my original contribution to the field will advance dialogues in the field of visual culture and more specifically, in the history and theory of the avant-garde, and contemporary visual art and fashion.

My multi-methodological approach reflects Willhelm and Kraus's wide-ranging practice. Bernhard Willhelm artifacts in the MoMu collection and library served as the entry point for my archival research. I conducted close analyses of fashion objects, ephemera and runway show documentation in order to ascertain themes in materiality, iconography and textual messaging. This object analysis was viewed alongside the abundance of visual material on the Internet from websites, promotional videos, fashion films, lookbooks and social media such as Instagram. All of these sources informed my examination of literature on Willhelm and Kraus's work, which included exhibition catalogues, print and online articles, interviews, blog posts and runway reviews. As little in the way of academic texts or theory exists for contemporary avant-garde fashion or Bernhard Willhelm specifically, it was necessary for me to construct a theoretical context for their practice by drawing from literatures of art history and studies from fashion, the avant-garde, culture, theatre and performance. As with any contemporary, living subject, it was a challenge to keep up to date on primary source material as Willhelm and Kraus's practice continues to develop and evolve. This, however, provided me a dynamic and

fluid territory in which to work and I took great pleasure in undertaking the important task of recording contemporary culture as it happens. By no means exhaustive, my objective is to present a study of Bernhard Willhelm in all its diversity from a truly contemporaneous perspective.

Chapter One presents a review of literature and provides the methodological and theoretical framework for the dissertation. I assess both historical and contemporary avant-garde discourse to place Willhelm and Kraus's *oeuvre* in this context. This includes tracing a genealogy of the avant-garde from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century to the present, as well as a historiography of avant-garde theory. In this chapter, I also analyze current and recent discourse on the relationship between fashion and art and how these fields intersect in the avant-garde. Lastly, I provide an overview of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its historical and contemporary interpretations. Following the literature review, the chapters are thematic and intended to represent tenets of the contemporary avant-garde present in Willhelm and Kraus's practice. While each can be read individually, they are also intended to comprise – like the works of Willhelm and Kraus – a unified whole.

In Chapter Two, I examine how the object of Bernhard Willhelm's vanguard fashion occupies a temporality between fashion and anti-fashion, and fashion and art. Willhelm and Kraus's designs are against what I term "fashion-time," the internal temporal logic of fashion. In order to demonstrate this, I seek to define the avant-garde fashion object, looking at the notion of Michael Fried's "objecthood" and Marcel Duchamp's anti-art. From there, I explore Willhelm and Kraus's folk dress and workwear-inflected designs as examples of anti-fashion that resist fashion-time,

referencing the historical vanguard practices of the Russian Constructivists and Italian Futurists. These examples are evaluated within the theoretical framework of contemporaneity and concepts of history including Walter Benjamin's *Tigersprung* (a tiger's leap into the past) and *Jetztzeit* (now-time), and both Giorgio Agamben's and Terry Smith's theories on the contemporary. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to a case study of three Willhelm and Kraus exhibitions: *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* at the MoMu (2007-2008), *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* at the Groninger Museum in Groningen, Netherlands (2009-2010) and *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger* at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles (2015). My analysis of these exhibitions engages with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's idea of "time-travel" in which Willhelm and Kraus's designs are removed from their provisional life as clothing and consecrated as art objects in the space of the museum. I further discuss display strategies that present Bernhard Willhelm fashions as installation art, which impose a static temporality on the garments and transform them into objects that can be interpreted and contemplated as art.

Chapter Three focusses on how Bernhard Willhelm takes an antagonistic and political stance in the fashion system. In analyzing specific collections and methods of their display in exhibitions and promotional materials, my objective is to demonstrate how Willhelm and Kraus interrogate industry norms of beauty, gender and sexuality, and challenge race- and class-based mechanisms of the fashion system. They actively refuse to perpetuate homogeneity by supporting diversity in its various forms, from employing mature models of varying body types in their Spring/Summer 2014 campaign to promoting non-heteronormativity in casting prominent gay pornographic actors as

models. Additionally, Willhelm and Kraus address contemporary issues within the public sphere and make an argument for fashion as a form of political resistance. In particular, they instigate critique on bourgeois notions of good taste and propriety in dress while rejecting any display of conspicuous consumption. I discuss the short-lived Bernhard Willhelm boutique at PARCO in Tokyo in which Willhelm and Kraus along with collaborators item idem seemed to go out of their way in order to present an aesthetic experience that explicitly condemns luxury and excess, asking shoppers to evaluate their role as consumers. In these examples, I propose that Willhelm and Kraus produce an effective fashion that connects with the political origins of the historical, artistic vanguard and reactivates the radicalism of the vanguard project.

Chapter Four builds on fashion's political potential in the previous chapter and examines how the revolutionary form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is articulated in the production of Wilhelm and Kraus's fashion and its display. Collective work serves as the basis for their practice, merging multiple disciplines that comprise what I term, a total work of fashion. Through longstanding collaborations with like-minded cultural producers, Willhelm and Kraus promote the sharing of ideas and resources. This notion of communalism extends to their working method in Los Angeles, where they integrate fashion into everyday life and blur the boundaries between Bernhard Willhelm the designer, character and brand. Taking on this idea of performance, I explore theatre and spectacle in Willhelm and Kraus's exhibitions and runway shows through staging, performance and in mediums such as dance and fashion film. I argue that their immersive displays – whether real or virtual – engage the spectator as an active participant. Finally, the remainder of the chapter considers the integration of fashion into costume in

Willhelm and Kraus's costume designs for Björk, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet and the dance music collective Hercules & Love Affair.

Chapter One: Literature Review: Junctures Between the Avant-Garde, Art and Fashion, and *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Fashion discourse employs the term “avant-garde” to describe fashions and personalities that are “edgy” but seldom does usage align such fashion with the historical and “original” artistic avant-garde. Yet, the word “avant-garde” does not receive an entry in the *Berg Companion to Fashion* (Steele 2010), a recently updated encyclopedic resource for fashion studies. This is a curious gap given the discipline’s partial origins in dress history, the study of which is connected to art historical discourse. The ubiquity of the term “avant-garde” in the fashion press further complicates matters more,³ creating a disconnect between the lack of acknowledgement in fashion studies and the logic of the fashion press. As a result of this discontinuity, the term has become a catachresis in its contemporary deployment, a catch-all term for experimental, conceptual or intellectual fashion that avoids any real commitment to the possibility of critical and radical fashion.

Despite frequent usage of the word “avant-garde” in the lexicon of contemporary fashion, academic discourse on specifically named avant-garde fashion is few and far between. To date, no in-depth study on the current state of the contemporary avant-garde in relation to ready-to-wear fashion exists. Anthologies such as Dietrich Scheunemann’s edited volume *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde* (2005) and David Hopkins’s compilation *Neo-Avant-Garde* (2006) address the avant-garde in relation to areas such as art,

³ See the September 2011 issue of *Vogue Italia* which labels cover inspiration Ethel Granger (1905-1982), the woman with world’s smallest waist to date, “avant-garde”; *Vogue Italia* editor Franca Sozzani proclaimed “Elegance is the new avant-garde” in a 2012 blog post. In 2008, *Elle.com* featured an interview with make-up artist Dick Page who provided “avant-garde tips,” while later in 2011, they posted an eye makeup tutorial video entitled “Avant-Garde Look.” *Harper’s Bazaar* stated in 2014 that jewellery designer Delfina Delettrez takes on the “avant-garde spirit” of Fendi, her family’s Italian luxury design house.

architecture, film, literature and performance, but make no reference to fashion. In the discipline of fashion studies, discourse on contemporary fashion has examined its relation to modernity and its discontents at the end of the twentieth century (Arnold 2001, C. Evans 2003, Wilson 1985/2003), but none has explicitly tied ready-to-wear fashion to the tradition of the historical and artistic avant-garde. Thus, the gap between the uses and abuses of the term “avant-garde” and its historical provenance can be closely examined in its relation to contemporary, ready-to-wear fashion. My dissertation aims to fill the lacunae in scholarly literature within both avant-garde and fashion studies, while simultaneously extending discourse into the disciplines of art history and visual culture.

I position Willhelm and Kraus’s practice within the avant-garde tradition as a “contemporary” practice to reflect newness and nowness in reference to the words of art historian Hal Foster, who stated that there is a “need for new narratives” of the avant-garde’s history and an “independent construct of the avant-garde” (*Return of the Real* 5). Although Foster’s call to action speaks specifically to art of the 1950s and 1960s, the same sentiment can be applied to contemporary manifestations. Just as the neo-avant-gardes promulgated “new spaces of critical play and prompted new modes of institutional analysis” (Foster, *Return of the Real* 21), Willhelm and Kraus’s fashion functions as institutional critique to question and resist the structures of the contemporary fashion system. Aesthetically, their collaborative and cross-disciplinary practice shatters visual codes and modes of display in both fashion and art. In this way, Bernhard Willhelm is a part of a new narrative that serves as a continuation of avant-garde project both in the field of fashion and in visual culture more generally.

This chapter presents a genealogy of the avant-garde from its origin to its place in art and fashion at present. I focus on key works in avant-garde studies and theory, contemporary fashion and modalities of display in fashion and art, but do not intend to provide an exhaustive overview of the avant-garde. Specifically, I examine the definition of the avant-garde and its relation to art and fashion, the interstices of art and fashion, and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it applies to collaboration, display culture and performance. This literature review serves as the theoretical foundation upon which my investigation is based, and thematically demonstrates that the interactions between the avant-garde, art, fashion and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be located in the contemporary avant-garde fashion practice of Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus.

Definitions of the avant-garde: etymology and origin

Perhaps ambiguity in the meaning of “avant-garde” in the fashion sense is in part due to the fact that the very act of defining the term is itself oxymoronic. Clarification on the definition of “avant-garde” is necessary in order to understand its evolution throughout history in relation to cultural production and the contemporary articulation that I posit. In the thematic issue on the avant-garde in *New Literary History* (2010), critic and poet Bob Perelman contends that the avant-garde must be orthopractic over orthodox, as it “attacks inherited forms and established aesthetic protocols—decorum in general” (891). As such, the avant-garde requires openness and regeneration, an adherence to some fluid ontology not bound to a series of dogmatic principles. I am aware of the theoretical contradiction that lies ahead by this very exercise and therefore within my dissertation more generally; despite the avant-garde’s lack of adherence to any set of rules, I attempt to carve out a

more defined niche for contemporary avant-garde fashion by instilling critical rigour that would be admonished by avant-gardes themselves.

Contemporary usage of “avant-garde” in reference to the forefront of sartorial fashion has roots in revolutionary France. *Avant-garde* is a French medieval military term that literally translates to “vanguard,” or “advanced guard” and refers to the front line of the army. As a leader in the field of battle, this foremost section of troops surveys and secures terrain, clearing obstacles in reconnaissance to allow for the unimpeded advance of the main military force. It was not until 1825 that the avant-garde was altered by political literature, when the French Socialist Count Henri de Saint-Simon articulated a theory of what art historian David Cottington describes as “state-technocratic socialism” (*The Avant-Garde* 5). For Saint-Simon, three professions: the artist, the scientist and the industrialist, would be the leaders of society, and the artist would hold the position of the avant-garde. According to Cottington, this is allegedly the first instance in which the avant-garde concept was employed for a non-military use. It was not, however, until the mid-nineteenth century that the term became synonymous with art alone. While Cottington notes that its early non-military use was a label applied to writers as early as the 1850s and 1860s, it carried negative connotations. He specifically singles out an example from poet Charles Baudelaire’s journal in which Baudelaire reveals distaste for military metaphors because they invoke the ideas of discipline and conformity, and states that not all literature is avant-garde. Cottington argues that the key to understanding and use of the avant-garde as it is known today is the shift from the idea of “art (in its widest sense) *as such* as avant-garde” to there being “an avant-garde *within art*” (*The Avant-Garde* 6, author’s emphasis). Yet, the origin of the avant-garde and its connection to art is

an issue upon which historians and theorists have not entirely agreed. Literary critic Renato Poggioli locates the first application of *avant-garde* to art in the work, *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes*, by Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant, a disciple of French utopian socialist philosopher, Charles Fourier. Laverdant wrote of the importance of art in society as a whole:

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the *avant-garde*, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is. (Laverdant qtd. in Poggioli 9)

Poggioli concurs that aside from Laverdant's conception of the vanguard as artistic instigator, the *avant-garde* was seen as a leftist political term first and foremost – in reference to the 1848 revolution and Paris Commune – and that it was seldom employed outside of a political context (9). While both artistic and socio-political understandings of the term were conjoined for some years, Poggioli contends that the definition of art as the original vanguard diverged from the primary political definition of the word during the 1880s and became the primary definition of the term, while its political definition fell into disuse (12). Despite the varied points of origin in military, artistic and leftist political discourse, there is a general consensus in *avant-garde* studies that the artistic vanguard emerged from the mid-to-late nineteenth-century in Europe.

Uses and abuses of “avant-garde”

The varied uses of the vanguard concept in contemporary fashion reflect its undefined and vague meaning. Securing a definition of any term in part requires an examination on how it has been and is applied in language. In parsing out the nuances between the

grammatical distinctions of “avant-garde,” it becomes evident that the use of the term and its meaning varies widely. Perelman outlines three distinct syntactical uses of “avant-garde” in the English language: as a proper noun without capitals, “the avant-garde,” a common noun, “an avant-garde,” and adjective, “avant-garde” (878-879). He contends that the first use is tied to the understanding of a historical moment, while the last is the least effective yet most popular application (Perelman 879). Cottington goes one step further to declare that as an adjective, “avant-garde” refers to qualities, whereas in its proper noun form, it denotes a “notional community of self-consciously aesthetically radical artists” (*The Avant-Garde* 4). Furthermore, he delineates the abstract noun “avant-gardism” as a grouping of qualities which “bundles commitment to them into an attitude and even an ideology” (Cottington, *The Avant-Garde* 4). Thus, when used as a noun, the word “avant-garde” carries more weight and pledges allegiance to the ideological (and historical) avant-garde than in its use as a descriptor. As a case in point, the term is often applied in its adjectival form in fashion, thus connoting a decidedly less rigorous association to the historical vanguard. Thus, experimental, conceptual, or intellectual sartorial fashion is referred to as “avant-garde fashion” rather than as a proper noun, “the fashion avant-garde.”

Despite the above attempts to isolate a definition of the avant-garde, a survey of the term garners a wide array of uses and abuses. The use of “avant-garde” in the English language becomes lost in translation, deviating from earlier iterations of the French military term as the foremost part of the advancing guard. Perelman, for example, locates a number of disparate examples of “avant-garde’s” catachresis in the English language. Although they are used solely as a series of epigraphs for his article, I will expand upon

them here for clarity. The first instance of misapplication of “avant-garde” is in luxury watchmaker TAG Heuer’s slogan: Swiss Avant-Garde Since 1860. Perhaps unbeknownst to Perelman, the moniker is in fact an acronym for “Techniques d'Avant Garde” attached to the surname, Heuer. When the private holding company TAG acquired the Heuer brand in 1985, it amalgamated the two names. To explain its use of the term avant-garde, the TAG Heuer website reads:

Redesigning a collection of legendary models to fit current tastes, creating new watches, working on innovative concepts that integrate advanced technology; all these activities are part of new product development at TAG Heuer. Our principle inspiration comes from the world of sport and it’s our involvement in sport that gives us strength and differentiates us. The company has written some of the most important chapters in the history of Swiss watchmaking; from the oscillating pinion to the Microtimer (the first bracelet chronograph accurate to 1/100th sec) to the Monaco V4 concept watch and the Carrera Calibre 360 (the first mechanical movement to display 1/100th sec). Today, our [sic] teams continue the same search for innovation and creativity.

This example aligns the adjectival form of “avant-garde” with technological innovation and creativity, concepts that are often used synonymously with fashion to imbue it with symbolic capital and the status of an art object. In a second epigraph, Perelman highlights a comment on a Philadelphia basketball blog describing professional basketball player Andre Iguodala as an “avant garde rainbow jumper” due to his untraditional ball-playing. The commentator advises against trading Iguodala to another team despite the fact that his coaches and teammates do not favour his eclectic style. Here, the term is meant to reflect the fact that “untraditional” is to be equated with “unpopular.” Lastly Perelman’s third epigraph is a quote by American journalist Jeff Sharlet in which he uses “avant-garde” to discuss the Christian fundamentalist elite or “innovators” who affect change and push the Christian agenda in government, business and military in the United States. In other words, “avant-garde” becomes a stand in for term for those who enact change

and lobby for their cause. In the examples given here, “avant-garde” is a problematic adjective that refers to innovation, anti-tradition and change, rather than the notion of the avant-garde as cultural production embedded with revolutionary potential. Although it can certainly be argued that a definition of “avant-garde” does include the qualities outlined in these epigraphs, its meaning is more extensive than a series of attributes.

Perelman further deliberates on the fate of the degraded “avant-garde” descriptor:

One could try to discipline the adjective by demanding that it be used rigorously, that is, only when pertaining to a fully theorized avant-garde. Would such rigor, however, simply enforce a tautological imperative, as if “Miltonian” could only refer to Milton? Unless the avant-garde is a category with a static content (which it surely is for Bürger, as a one-time historical event), it will continue to be confronted with new candidates for admission. However, once this wider applicability is granted, it’s hard to see how to avoid the slippery slope whereby the adjective “avant-garde” becomes an intensifying cognate for a host of words such as “confrontational,” “difficult,” “advanced,” and “new.” Such latitude, of course, raises new problems, for these terms are, in particular contexts, far from synonymous. (880)

As per Perelman’s statement above, an endeavor to instill rigour on the use of “avant-garde” is not without its caveats. The implementation of a more precise definition of the vanguard is made difficult because – contrary to Peter Bürger’s contention that the avant-garde is purely historical – I will argue here that the avant-garde is an ever-present and evolving project and its history is still being written. The avant-garde’s definition is elusive, and an exhaustive theory or definition of “avant-garde” is neither the aim nor end product of my investigation. Instead, my examination of Willhelm and Kraus’s contemporary avant-garde fashion practice serves as a discursive space – for art, fashion, collaboration, critique, performance and display – where such potential theories of the ontological status of the vanguard can be tested against practices deemed to be avant-garde. My intention is to separate instances of the everyday usage of the term “avant-

garde,” such as those Perelman cites from the inheritors of the vanguard, and to more firmly ground the latter in a historical framework of the avant-garde project.

Avant-garde theory

The widespread usage of the term “avant-garde” in fashion necessitates a theoretical framework in order to more clearly define its aims. In aligning the contemporary fashion vanguard with its art historical forebears, I will develop and secure a specific theory of avant-garde fashion within avant-garde discourse. Inroads made in developing a theory of the avant-garde have roots in literary criticism. Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962/1968) was the first attempt to delineate such a theory and focussed on the vanguard as a sociological phenomenon. According to Poggioli, the avant-garde is “a historical concept, a center of tendencies and ideas” (3), a defined period of radicalism and revolution that is specifically situated in the early twentieth century. In its limitation within an historical and temporal framework, the vanguard is relegated to the past, and indicates that there is no possibility for renewal or future interpretations. Despite Poggioli’s assertion that the avant-garde is a historical event, he later retracts his statement slightly, calling avant-gardism a “chronic condition of contemporary art,” a malady whose “acute symptoms indeed appear all the more intensely as they are now less frequent and numerous” (230). Nevertheless, this proclamation bears an undercurrent of the avant-garde’s end or imminent demise, a topic on which there is no dearth in avant-garde studies.

Furthermore, Poggioli contends that the avant-garde was a strictly European social phenomenon, and as a movement, was more successful in France and Italy than in

countries such as Germany due to the “Latinity of the phrase” (6). His bias means that other traditions outside of the Franco-Italian vanguard were less effective; in general, he did not look towards the Anglo-American avant-garde favourably. To him, English and American writers are “less theoretical and self-conscious,” and had a tendency to “not so much logically to separate, as obscurely to confound, the problem of the avant-garde and the problem of all modern art” (Poggioli 8). I imagine an avant-garde that is temporally and geographically fluid, unlike Poggioli’s (and later, Peter Bürger’s) rigid definition, but that like fashion itself, is rooted in a European historical tradition of scholarly inquiry. Having said that, the when and where of the avant-garde – its placeness in geographical space and historical time – has become decentred in contemporary cultural production, and extends far beyond the purview of my study.

Poggioli delineates four “moments” of the avant-garde movement in his theory: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism, the latter two of which are derived from antagonism. He argues that “activism” is the least impactful, and that it speaks directly to the avant-garde’s military metaphor. Poggioli highlights the function of the exploration and securing of terrain:

Within the military connotations of the image, the implication is not so much of an advance against an enemy as a marching toward, a reconnoitering or exploring of, that difficult and unknown territory called no-man’s land. Spearhead action, the deployment of forces, maneuvering and formation rather than mass action and open fire... (27-28)

Secondly, he makes the case that antagonism was the most “showy posture” of the avant-garde in its actions, and was split between opposition to the public and antitraditionalism (Poggioli 30). Poggioli sees nihilism as a “transcendental antagonism” which serves to propel the avant-garde movement beyond limits, “beating down barriers, razing

obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way” (30). In turn, nihilism spurs the agonism that leads to the eventual self-destruction of the movement, which sacrifices itself in order to propel new currents forward (Poggioli 26). Together, activism and antagonism function as attitudes based on the logic of the vanguard, whereas the nihilism and agonism served as irrational “dialectics of movement” (Poggioli 26-27). To date, Poggioli’s moments: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism, remain commonly held characteristics or tendencies of the avant-garde.

German literary critic Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974/1984) is perhaps the most referred-to and disputed example in scholarship today. Bürger identifies two concepts of the avant-garde that are closely associated: “self-criticism” or opposition to the institution of art, and the integration of art into the praxis of life. If art cannot be freed from institutional reins, the merging of art and life cannot be fully realized (Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde” 696). He also argues that the historical avant-garde failed in its mission because it was unsuccessful in its attempts for artistic autonomy and unifying art and life. Although inherently flawed in some respects, his inquiry does serve as a useful model that fleshes out criteria to answer the question, “What is the avant-garde?” As well, Bürger’s examination of self-criticism in vanguardist practices is valuable with regards to my discussion of how Wilhelm and Kraus critique the fashion system, as I discuss further in Chapter Three.

Like Poggioli, Bürger concludes that the avant-garde is a historical paradigm. He argues that any neo-avant-gardist attempts are doomed to fail because the original avant-garde experiment did not meet its lofty aims. To further those historical efforts is farcical, inauthentic and “negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions” (Bürger, *Theory of the*

Avant-Garde 58). Here, Bürger takes a page from Marx's dictum that history repeats itself, occurring first as tragedy, then as farce. He goes so far as to posit that "[t]he Neo-avant-garde, which stages for a second time the avant-gardist break with tradition, becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever" (Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* 61), which only seeks to highlight his prejudice against the contemporary avant-garde. I diverge from Bürger here in that I am unconcerned with whether or not the avant-garde fails or dismantles the "false autonomy of bourgeois art" (Foster, "What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?" 8), or that the avant-garde – neo-, contemporary, or otherwise – repeats itself. Rather, I want to stress that a vanguard is both necessary and elemental for cultural production, and more specifically, that it is imperative for fashion practice to participate in a dialogue critical of the institutions in which it operates.

Literary critic Paul Mann's *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (1991) follows up on Poggioli and Bürger's efforts, and extends avant-garde theory beyond calls for the vanguard project's failure or inefficiency. Mann questions the need to continually define the vanguard, and suggests that the mere exercise of definition is not a productive means of inquiry (8). He contends that any theory is not a constructive means of probing the avant-garde, for it is itself "a theoretical discourse (and implicitly a theory of discourse)" (Mann 17). Mann argues that the discourse surrounding the avant-garde's death does not present an end for the revolutionary project, but rather serves as a useful tool for further inquiry. He goes one step further to state that it is in its death that the avant-garde lives on: "the discourse of the avant-garde is its death and in death it continues to reproduce itself as a death-discourse" (Mann 40). Furthermore, Mann welcomes the continual

questioning of the ontological function and status of the vanguard as unstable ground is a necessary force that drives avant-garde studies:

Is the avant-garde advanced or traditional? Revolutionary or reactionary? Does it promote cultural progress or bring it to a close? Or both: are its negations real but bound into the service of some other affirmation? To engage in a study of the avant-garde is to be suspended between just such irreconcilables as these, to be caught up in a discourse in which every proposition immediately announces its negation. Within the discourse of the avant-garde these contradictions cannot fully be resolved, for a certain ambiguity is essential to the discourse's proper functioning. The avant-garde is separate from and opposed to the main cultural body; the avant-garde is advancing the salience of the main cultural body: these positions do not simply cancel each other; rather they articulate a productive conflict which it has been crucial not to settle. (45)

As Mann sees it, internal and theoretical strife is the lifeblood of avant-garde discourse; debates centred around its life, death, role and purpose are key to both critical inquiry and survival of the vanguard. Yet, he poses a challenge for future critical inquiry: how can one contribute to avant-garde discourse without formulating yet another theory to the already crowded field (Mann 93)? Despite Mann's disinclination towards theories, he concocts an anti-theory that plays into the avant-garde spirit of resistance. Perhaps this is not so contradictory, as the avant-garde itself is a dialectical concept, and any theory further enshrines and institutionalizes the vanguard.

My impetus is to counter Poggioli and Bürger's statements of the vanguard as a historical current. Rather, I argue that the avant-garde is not merely relegated to the annals of the past, but is part of the continuum of history. Similarly, I do not see the avant-garde as a historical singularity, but as a condition of contemporary multiplicity, that is, of relevancy in a multitude of time periods (present included) as well as geographical location. Although I will be discussing specifically a European tradition of avant-gardism, I am also cognisant of the emergent and/or global avant-garde on the

margins of the avant-garde canon (which is in itself an oxymoron), and therefore see avant-garde as a plural concept.

The artistic avant-garde

Given the aforementioned difficulty in delineating a definition of the avant-garde, a solely historiographical survey of associated movements or currents may not be a productive strategy in understanding the antecedents for the artistic vanguard. Rather than grant certain currents avant-garde status and exclude others, it is more constructive to examine the theoretical framework of the vanguard's junctures. Poggioli's genealogy of the avant-garde consists of four phases; the first phase begins in the mid-nineteenth century with romanticism and ends with impressionism, followed by futurism and cubism in the second "phase of crisis and development" (Poggioli 228) in the early twentieth century. For the third phase, Poggioli identifies dada and surrealism as a "violent tidal wave of avant-gardism" (229), which leads to the final phase of "rest and readjustment, [...] realization and conquest" (231) in what can be presumed to be the mid-twentieth century. Further consideration by critics such as Bürger have reinforced a golden age of the vanguard, centred mostly around early twentieth-century movements such as constructivism, Dada, and surrealism. Art historian and critic John Roberts criticizes this position and claims that Bürger's historicist view of "endism" is unconvincing:

The weakness of Bürger's historicism lies in his overidentification of the critical fate of art of the 1920s and 1930s with its conditions of production, as if the critical horizons and ideals of the art of the period could only be articulated in relation to their immediate social and political horizons. Bürger, then, tends to see the art produced in the name of the avant-garde after the 1950s as a falling away from these horizons into pastiche or social irrelevance, given the socially antipathetic conditions for avant-garde practice in the West. ("Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde" 717-718)

It is therefore convenient for Bürger to draw the lines of division between the historical avant-gardes and their post-war followers; not only are the neo-avant-gardes positioned to fail based on their unsuccessful forebears, but their efforts are also seen to be inauthentic or impossible because they do not face the same conditions of early twentieth century European revolutions. In the 2010 special issue of *New Literary History*, Bürger returns to his seminal text to respond to its critical reception and reinforces the historical nature of the vanguard, insisting, “we must admit that the avant-garde is now far removed from us” (713). He severs ties between the historical vanguard and its contemporary incarnation, claiming that the current use of “avant-garde” as synonymous with “progressive modernization” is in opposition to the avant-garde’s original vision (Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde” 713).

Rather than identify and name specific “isms” as avant-garde, cultural theorist and critic Raymond Williams describes three phases of the developing vanguard in the late nineteenth century: first, the resistance of artists against the expansion of the art market and the authority of the academies; then, the creation of an autonomous system of artistic production and dissemination; and last, the attack on the institution(s) of art (50-51). His analysis of these phases is helpful in elucidating the undefined relationship between the vanguard and modernism. For Williams, modernism begins with what he describes as the second phase of independent cultural production of “alternative, radically innovating experimental artists and writers,” whereas the avant-garde commences with the third “fully oppositional type” (51). In what follows, I will further examine the artistic avant-garde’s manifestation in relation to modernism and its more recent forms. This exercise functions as a way to elucidate a continuity that I argue passes from the historical

vanguard to neo-avant-garde in art, and onwards to the avant-garde in contemporary fashion.

The avant-garde and modernism(s)/modernity

While there is consensus that modernism and the avant-garde are closely related, each of these terms is unclear, and this has bearing on the difficulty in defining an avant-garde for contemporary fashion. Intellectual and cultural historian Walter L. Adamson views the two concepts as entirely synonymous, and that any division between them is an “impediment” (2007). This concern is evident in a reading of his semantics. Rather than linking the two terms by way of a preposition (the avant-garde of modernism), he instead considers them together (“the avant-garde modernism”). Although this combination of terms is cumbersome at best, it does make clear that in its proper noun form, the avant-garde is not merely relegated to the role of descriptor, but is of as equal importance as modernism. Another perspective considers the vanguard as one facet of modernism. Its inverse, however, does not necessarily hold true. Cottington’s summation best describes his interpretation of the interconnectivity between the avant-garde and modernism:

If the two terms are closely related, they are not coextensive. That is, not all modernisms need originate in the avant-garde, or have self-consciously avant-garde properties. There may exist isolated individual artists expressing their experience of modernity in an innovative interrogation of the conventions of their chosen medium without membership of, or even contact with, the collective of the avant-garde. (*The Avant-Garde* 13)

In other words, while the vanguard and modernism were in part co-synchronous, both entities do not inhabit the exact space at all points. The vanguard can be thought of as a modernism, however, not all modernists are avant-garde. This view is shared by Williams, who distinguishes modernism as a general concept, and in his words proffers it

as “a new kind of art for a new kind of social and perceptual world” (51). On the other hand, he observes that the avant-garde is more pointed in its aims as its military origins suggest and argues that “its members were not the bearers of a progress already repetitiously defined, but the militants of a creativity which would revive and liberate humanity” (Williams 51).

In a further case of linguistic gymnastics, literary critic Matei Călinescu delineates modernism and the avant-garde as separate entities as he categorizes them along with decadence, kitsch and postmodernism in his book *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987). Despite placing the vanguard under the banner of modernity, he argues that it is a “radicalized and strongly utopianized version of modernity” (Călinescu 95). Furthermore, Călinescu suggests that the vanguard is a “self-conscious *parody of modernity* itself” (141, author’s emphasis), which leads one into the territory of postmodernism. Yet, how can the avant-garde be contained within a historical paradigm and simultaneously function separately from it? Does Călinescu mean that the vanguard is more radical than modernism? This confusion presents a question of semantics, the centre of which is the root word itself, “modern.” Williams attempts to clarify the shifting meaning of “modern,” one meaning of which refers to “historical time” and the second definition which applies to literary scholars Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “eternal contemporaneity.”

To return to modernism/modernity, modernism refers to William’s first definition of “modern” – a historical moment in time, and a facet of modernity as proposed by Călinescu – whereas modernity relates to the second meaning, a type of forever presentness aligned with contemporaneity. Although this query is tangential to my

investigation, it highlights the contentious, yet close relationship between the concepts of the term “modern” and by extension, the avant-garde’s own undefined critical position within modernity and modernism. The avant-garde’s proximity to modernism also places it in a discourse of authority (Cottingham, *The Avant-Garde* 3). In his 1939 article “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” American art critic Clement Greenberg spoke of the avant-garde as a largely aesthetic practice that was the driving force behind modernism. In other words, the vanguard is synonymous with modernism and vice versa. He saw the avant-garde as a necessary vehicle in opposition to middlebrow kitsch, that is, the detritus of mass culture: degraded art forms such as Hollywood films, musicals, comics and Norman Rockwell paintings. The hierarchical positioning of avant-garde over kitsch is just one instance of the vanguard’s authority in art, where avant-garde art is seen as high culture compared to mass culture. A glance at the art historical canon secures this; both modernism and the avant-garde are held in high regard and feature prominently in university art history syllabi. In *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (1999), art historian Paul Wood furthers this concept and asserts that the vanguard plays a role in “official culture: the culture of Tate Galleries and Turner Prizes, Venice Biennales and corporate sponsorship” (10). Thus, the avant-garde can have a dual role: firstly as a leading, oppositional force, and secondly as a part of the very status quo it challenges (Wood 10).

In her essay, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” (1981), art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss acknowledges the authority of the vanguard through its steadfast trait of originality. The originality to which she refers, however, is more than a concept of newness or anti-tradition, but “a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth” (Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* 157). As a case in point, Krauss makes

reference to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's parable of emergence from a water-filled ditch following a car accident, (re)born as a Futurist in the first *Futurist Manifesto* (1909). She contends that for the early twentieth-century avant-garde, "originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life" (Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* 157), or in other words, the creation of self. With this origin, Krauss states that avant-gardes distinguish between the present and traditions of the past. She extends her theory by establishing the theme of repetition, which is embodied in the modernist and avant-garde figure of the grid. For Krauss, the "originary purity" of the grid functions as an "absolute beginning" (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde* 158), and is the site of continual rediscovery by artists. Although this discussion of the figure of the grid is in part divergent to this dissertation, its signification as a source for recurrence is a useful concept in the discussion of the neo- and contemporary incarnations of the avant-garde.

The neo-avant-garde

In conceptualizing a fashion vanguard, I am taking a stand against the idea of a singular or authentic avant-garde that can only be located at its historical point of origin wherein all else that follows is mere disingenuous redundancy. According to Bürger, the neo-avant-garde's repetition is not only farcical, but also enshrines the vanguard as an institution, therefore negating the very practice it attempts to recreate. It should be noted that his use of the "neo-" prefix here is derogatory in tone. Art historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh has levelled criticism at Bürger's theory, and contends that Bürger's claim of a singular origin and theory of the avant-garde is "limited, if not naive"

(Buchloh, “Theorizing the Avant-Garde” 19). In his strident review of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Buchloh deems Bürger’s endeavour as a failure as it focusses solely on the attack on the institution of art. He argues that had Bürger not held such prejudices against contemporary art, he would have discovered that the aims of neo-avant-garde art – and specifically the practices of those artists working in the late 1960s – were in fact aligned with the historical vanguard. In place of a singular theory of the “original” avant-garde, Buchloh considers a more productive definition:

It seems more viable to define avant-garde practice as a continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning, the discovery and representation of new audiences, and the development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry to occupy and to control all practices and all spaces of representation. (“Theorizing the Avant-Garde” 21)

This interpretation of the vanguardist project allows for a more open-ended approach restricted neither by the finality of a historical periodization nor a rigid definition of inclusion and exclusion. In his book *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (2000), Buchloh further rebukes Bürger, this time taking issue with his claim of the neo-avant-garde as an inauthentic repetition of its prewar forebears. He argues that artists of the late 1960s such as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, and Hans Haacke “detach themselves more than any other postwar activity from the legacy of the historical avant-garde” (Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde* xxiv), and that their concerns – identified as institutional critique – were vastly different from Bürger’s previous conceptions. Thus, although the neo-avant-gardes are alike with their antecedents in name, their objectives are shaped by concerns specific to their contemporary moment.

Like Buchloh, Foster also finds fault with Bürger’s assertion that only one theory of the avant-garde exists. He argues for the continued relevance of the vanguard and the

need for new narratives that “*complicate its past and pluralize its present*” (Foster, *Return of the Real* 5, author’s emphasis). In his essay “Who’s Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?” (1994), Foster identifies Dadaist readymades and Russian constructivism as precursors to pop art and minimalism of the late 1950s and early 1960s respectively. According to his account, the two repetitions functioned as alternatives to high modernism – that is, formalism – advocated by critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell, and later, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Foster contends that the historicism practiced by figures like Greenberg “condemns contemporary art as belated, redundant, repetitious” (*Return of the Real* 10), and that Bürger’s historicist view of the “heroic” vanguard versus its unsuccessful descendent is unstable (*Return of the Real* 13). Rather than overhaul Bürger’s problematic, yet seminal theory, he instead builds upon it, and poses the question: “*rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, might the neo-avant-garde comprehend it for the first time?*” (Foster, *Return of the Real*, 15, author’s emphasis). Foster intimates the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or “deferred action,” and suggests that neo-avant-garde “recodes” the historical vanguard (*Return of the Real* 29). He argues that the avant-garde artwork is traumatic and therefore cannot be entirely successful in its initial action. Therefore, the first action is “disruptive” followed by the second “restorative” action (Foster, *Return of the Real* 29).

Film scholar Dietrich Scheunemann is not convinced by Foster’s application of deferred action in relation to avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s. Spurred on by Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), he refers to the neo-avant-garde artist as a historian: “To him the historical avant-garde was neither a tragedy nor a trauma, but represented the most advanced position artists had achieved in the practice

and understanding of artistic production in the modern age. To re-ignite this position after a long period of recess is the task to which he set himself” (Scheunemann 37). As such, Scheunemann sees the neo-avant-garde as “neither a meaningless repetition of the gestures of yesterday, nor an independent and unrelated revolution in the American arts world” (44). Rather, he argues that it is a sporadic project that must continually advance new genealogies of the vanguard. Other theorizations such as David Hopkins’s edited volume *Neo-Avant-Garde* (2006) aim to take the derogatory “neo-avant-garde” and reformulate it into a favourable term. He warns, however, of too quickly aligning the neo-avant-garde with its historical forebears as Bürger does without observing the nuances of difference. Specifically, Hopkins is referring to the American and European incarnations of the vanguard. He views the American genealogy as following in the line of thought after Greenberg, whereas the European avant-garde continues in the tradition from Surrealist poet André Breton and Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky. Hopkins aligns the peak of the European neo-avant-garde with the Situationists of the 1960s, and its close with the May 1968 uprisings in Paris. Hopkins’s interpretation allows for differentiation between geographical and ideological genealogies, and therefore promotes multiple histories of the vanguard.

History and contemporaneity: the contemporary avant-garde

The inexactitude of the avant-garde can be attributed to its historicization in theory, and its unclear temporal status that simultaneously places it at the junctures of past, present and future. Scheunemann contends that new genealogies of the avant-garde are necessary to “complicate its past and support its future” (18), therefore allowing discourse to move

beyond Bürgerian condemnation of failure. For the purposes of my investigation, I would like to suggest that the vanguard unites modernism, postmodernism (which is arguably a continuation of modernism rather than a break) and the contemporary. A contentious category, modernism is a fissured concept: one view, as proffered by American critic Harold Rosenberg, argues that modernism constitutes a radical break with tradition, whereas the opposing view, favoured by his rival Greenberg, sees it as a continuation. I contend the same opposition can be assembled for the avant-garde, and that the avant-garde is a dialectical concept whereby tradition comes in the form of critical innovation with radical social and political aims. Just as postmodernism is seen as modernism's inheritor, so the contemporary is the new, heterogenized iteration of those modernist forms and practices. For contemporaneity is a fragment of modernism and is, in other words, modernism under a different guise (T. Smith 2009). Thus, in my approach, the contemporary and the avant-garde are not incongruous concepts, for both are differing iterations of modernism.

According to Williams, the avant-garde continues to generate new possibilities for growth and renewal:

Beyond the particular directions and affiliations, this is still the historical importance of this cluster of movements and of remarkable individual artists. And since, if in new forms, the general pressures and contradictions are still intense, indeed have in many ways intensified, there is still much to learn from the complexities of its vigorous and dazzling development. (62)

While he does not specifically identify the contemporary avant-garde as progenitor, he suggests that the vanguard project is not finite. Artist-writer Marc James Léger is more pointed in his approach on the contemporary avant-garde in *Brave New Avant Garde* (2012) and defines the new vanguard beyond Foster's analysis. He rallies the troops and

reinstates the revolutionary concept of struggle, declaring that the new avant-garde “represents not so much the transnational class of civilized petty bourgeois culturati, but a counter-power that rejects the inevitability of capitalist integration” (Léger 3). Léger asserts that “extradisciplinary” artists such as the Guerilla Girls, The Atlas Group, and Raqs Media Collective administer critique on art production that willfully invites subsumption by capitalism, that is, the art market (4).

In the 2010 thematic issue of *New Literary History*, French art critic Phillipe Sers also views the contemporary art market as occupying a similar position contra the avant-garde. His outlook, however is more bleak:

We must therefore accept the idea that the very evolution of the avant-garde, which compels it to follow the trends of the marketplace, also brings about its death—a death—to which the contemporary art market and institutional consensus alike seem fully determined to have us bear witness by crowning its most ridiculous propositions with museum exhibitions. (Sers 850)

Yet, Sers sees this instability as productive, and insists that with the avant-garde’s death comes an ability to assess its obstacles. He brings attention to three “social phenomena” which disrupt the contemporary vanguard. Sers argues that the first disruption of the contemporary avant-garde is the “devaluation of the image, and artistic creation” in which formal innovation takes precedence over content in a work (851). He maintains that the second phenomenon is a “belief in the end of utopias” which manifests in the stagnation of progress in contemporaneity (Sers 852). The third phenomenon is more convoluted, and is a “tendency for contemporary prefabricated thought [*le prêt-à-penser*] to question inspiration” which Sers aligns with a negation of the transcendental (853). While this last point is obfuscating, by highlighting these social phenomena, Sers aims to discredit the contemporary avant-garde and its preoccupation with nihilism,

formal innovation and a fixation on transgression. In contrast, he views the historical avant-garde as radical and unified with a “constant internal principle” which effectively rallies against totalitarianism (854).

Literatures of art and fashion/fashion and art

The overarching concept of this dissertation – drawing the lines of comparison between the historical, artistic avant-garde and the contemporary fashion vanguard – is that fashion can be investigated using the terms of art, and that its discourse overlaps with that of art history. This is not to say that fashion is art, but that occasionally, there is a fashion practice such as Willhelm and Kraus’s that can be discussed using a methodology informed by art history. Similarly, I am not suggesting that contemporary fashion is turning into art. I see fashion and art as two disciplines in tension with each other which at points overlap. This pairing has generated a great deal of agreement and disagreement in each of their respective discourses. Anne Hollander’s *Seeing Through Clothes* (1978/1993) is a well-cited example in fashion studies of an early attempt at viewing dress, and by extension fashion, as art. Hollander probes the relationship between dress as a material object and the representation of dress in Western art history, and argues that clothing depicted in art is more cogent than in real life. For her, this thesis is bound up in the aesthetics of dress and its inherent visual nature:

Dress is a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as its medium. The most important aspect of clothing is the way it looks; all other considerations are occasional and conditional. The way clothes look depends not on how they are designed or made but on how they are perceived; and I have tried to show that the perception of clothing at any epoch is accomplished not so much directly as through a filter of artistic convention. (311)

Thus, Hollander supports the concept of fashion as art in the expanding field of visual culture and underlines that fashion is not the frivolous cultural form that it has been perceived to be. In doing so, she builds the case for fashion as a serious discipline for academic study. Like Hollander, Aileen Ribeiro examines dress in art – specifically through eighteenth and nineteenth-century portraiture in England and France – in *The Art of Dress* (1995). While she recognizes Hollander’s thesis that dress represented in art is more compelling than dress in real life, she argues “it is important to record the fact that the clothes themselves are the starting point for both artist and sitter” (6). Ribeiro therefore views fashion and art on equal planes, and asserts that fashion is key in placing portraits in historical moments.

Hollander’s assertion of fashion as art serves as the basis for *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985), in which Elizabeth Wilson examines fashion in modernity “as a cultural phenomenon, as an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society” (3). As Wilson argues, art history has all too often attempted to maintain the disciplinary boundaries between “high” art and more popular forms of cultural production, although she does not see these two concepts as mutually exclusive in fashion. Rather, she posits that fashion inhabits both realms of high and low, and that “‘modernity’ is useful in elucidating the rather peculiar role played by fashion in acting as a kind of hinge between the élitist and the popular” (Wilson 60).

Following in tradition of Hollander and Wilson, Sung Bok Kim’s article “Is Fashion Art?” (1998) traces fashion discourse in American art magazines. Kim investigates the aesthetic component of fashion, and identifies the contentious fashion-as-art question as having emerged in the early 1980s. Using James D. Carney’s “Style-

relative Model of Art Criticism” (1991) as a model for analysis, she scientifically evaluates criteria for writing on fashion as a serious aesthetic concern. Although unresolved, Kim’s exercise itself answers her questions of fashion’s ontology as art. The very appearance and consideration of fashion in contemporary art discourse is an indication itself that it can and does sit alongside other arts such as film, literature and architecture. As demonstrated by Kim’s study, however, there is some complexity and reluctance in its inclusion. Sanda Miller’s article, “Fashion as Art; is Fashion Art?” (2007) follows Kim’s investigation, and extends it in her consideration of two questions: “(a) can it be legitimately argued that fashion is a form of art, and if so (b) can we enlist the help of aesthetics to elucidate the peculiar nature of so controversial a form of art?” (26). To address the issue of fashion as art, Miller attempts to locate a definition of art and examines theories of art including those of philosophers Noël Carroll, Jerrold Levinson and Arthur Danto. Although she finds them inconclusive in their definitions, she contends that clothes can be studied within such theoretical frameworks. In her investigation of fashion’s aesthetic characteristics, Miller compares it with other time-based arts such as photography, film, video art and scenography:

A garment is a “type;” the only parallel we find within the “time-based” arts is scenography, another “Cinderella” of the visual arts. Like clothes, stage designs are ephemeral, co-extensive with the physical time of the production, made of expendable materials. Both clothes and stage designs become obsolete at the end of a season, or a production. Like clothes, this history of stage design stretches back to antiquity and the beginnings of theater, and our knowledge of it comes mostly from visual sources. (34-35)

She concludes that clothes, and therefore fashion, can be viewed as functional devices, but also separately as “beautiful objects for aesthetic contemplation” (39).

In the introduction to their 2013 anthology *Art and Fashion*, editors Adam Geczy and Vicky Karaminas occupy a similar supportive standpoint, maintaining that “to call fashion art’s inferior and frivolous *Other* is far too glib, let alone inaccurate and unfair” (1). Rather than provide a reworked history, however, they aim to contribute to the dialogue on fashion and art in a way that is “*additive and supplementary*” (Geczy and Karaminas, *Fashion and Art* 11, authors’ emphasis). Geczy and Karaminas identify three main areas of study in fashion and art to date: fashion as the subject matter of painting, artistic avant-gardes in the early twentieth century designing clothing as art, and the intersection of commerce and pop art. Although such a list inevitably oversimplifies contributions to the field, it serves as a useful example of the many gaps that remain to be filled in the discourse on fashion and art. Yet, amongst the many advocates of the conflation of art and fashion, some are more cynical. Peter Wollen acknowledges the increasing hybridity of fashion and art in his essay “Art and Fashion: Friends or Enemies?” but feels uneasy about the pairing. He is of two minds; while he commends the new possibilities for a partnership between fashion and art, which he identifies as the “convergence of experimental fashion and Clothes Art” (Wollen, *Paris Manhattan* 180), he simultaneously cautions against accepting it too readily for fear of corruption by commercial interests. Wollen views the current situation of art/fashion as far removed from historical integrations, and in the end, sides with the belief that the massive institutional and ethical perils outweigh the modest artistic possibilities (*Paris Manhattan* 181).

Fashion and performance art

The bond between performance art and fashion is exemplary of the cross- and interdisciplinary approach to both contemporary avant-garde fashion practice and fashion studies as an academic discipline. In a 2001 *Fashion Theory* special issue on performance, curator Ginger Gregg Duggan argues that this hybridity is due to “the inability to comfortably segregate art and fashion” (244), and subsequently groups fashion shows into five categories based on the following characteristics: spectacle, substance, science, structure and statement. She asserts that fashion shows identified as “spectacle” share traits with theatre, opera, film and music videos, and are demonstrated in presentations that have been staged by Alexander McQueen and John Galliano at Christian Dior. On the other hand, Viktor & Rolf and Hussein Chalayan have more conceptual concerns, placing them in the group of “substance designers” with their “creative and unique productions” (Duggan 250). According to Duggan, while “spectacle designers” employ theatre and stage design, props, music and lighting effects, “substance designers” lean on an “*abstract* concept” (Duggan 251, author’s emphasis). She compares the shows of Chalayan and Viktor & Rolf quite generally to 1960s and 1970s performance art, but it is not clear as to which aspects she is referring. In the category “science,” Duggan argues that the material innovations by Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake and Junya Watanabe can be viewed as similar to the experimentation of early video-performance artists such as Bruce Nauman and Nam June Paik. She puts Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and Martin Margiela under the banner of “structure,” stating that their attention to construction and form aligns them with artists such as Jana Sterbak and Rebecca Horn and the physicality of their performances (Duggan 261).

Lastly, Duggan compares 1970s happenings and performance art to “statement” designers Susan Cianciolo, Miguel Adrover and Elena Bajo, and asserts that they use fashion as a medium for their political messages. Although the categories that Duggan constructs are helpful in parsing out the various components of performance as demonstrated in fashion shows, they generalize the relationship between fashion and performance (art). Furthermore, it is curious that the majority of the designers she discusses could be considered avant-garde. In this way, Duggan’s discussion is beneficial to a wider discussion of the connection between fashion, art and the avant-garde.

In the same issue, Caroline Evans’s essay “The Enchanted Spectacle” traces the history of the fashion show from the late nineteenth century to present day. She identifies early-twentieth century fashion shows such as those of Paul Poiret and Elsa Schiaparelli with “theatrical *mise-en-scènes*,” noting that Schiaparelli employed musicians, dancers and film se-designers to complete her presentations (“The Enchanted Spectacle” 291). Such concepts served as models for the evolution of the runway show for designers such as Mary Quant and Ossie Clark in England and later Kenzo in 1970s Paris in which “the fashion show became theater on a huge scale, a spectacle of lighting and sound as much as of clothes and models” (Evans, “The Enchanted Spectacle” 300). Evans affirms ideas put forward by Duggan, including the spectacle nature of presentations by McQueen and Galliano that she describes as in “the realm of pure entertainment” (“The Enchanted Spectacle” 301). She argues that concurrent to this narrative of spectacular entertainment are designers such as Miyake and Chalayan, who make references to “fine” art to distinguish themselves from their peers. While Evans’s allusions to art and the avant-garde are general, they are helpful in introducing concepts in the following section.

Intersections of fashion, art, and the avant-garde

Reticence by fashion scholars to more clearly define a fashion avant-garde is due in part to the fact that the confluence of fashion, art and the avant-garde creates friction and opposition between art, commerce and mass culture. In *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2006), theorist Lars Svendsen sees fashion's pursuit of the avant-garde to consist only of a repetition of "empty gestures" long discarded by the artistic vanguard (110). In comparing art with fashion, and the fashionability of art, he presents a grim proposition for the future of fashion as an artistic enterprise:

An important reason for art having remained in fashion could be that it actually manages to say something important from time to time, whereas fashion is caught in a loop where it mainly repeats itself and means increasingly less. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that today's fashion finds itself way down in a creative trough – and it is doubtful if it will come up again. (Svendsen 110)

Svendsen sees a problem with avant-garde fashion and its relation to the market, in that cultural capital is acquired for financial gain. He reveals that although designers maintain an "avant-garde aesthetic" and are seen as being somehow above the fray of the crass commercialism of fashion's market forces, they in fact reap in millions of dollars per year (Svendsen 93).

This disdain for fashion and its place between art and capital is also well cited by historians of art. In the chapter "Fashioning the New York School" in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (1996), art historian Thomas Crow examines the use of Jackson Pollock paintings as backdrops in a March 1951 *Vogue* magazine fashion spread shot by Cecil Beaton. He admonishes this connection between commerce and the avant-garde, labelling the photos as "appropriation, even exploitation, if one wants to choose that kind of moralizing language" (Crow 47). Crow, like Greenberg before him, holds mass culture in

contempt, and this is explicitly demonstrated by the placement of this chapter in the table of contents under the category of “Kitsch.” His colleague T. J. Clark takes the same example of the 1951 *Vogue* photographs and has similar derisive views on fashion. Clark puts forward his aversion to the role of Pollock’s paintings in the culture industry, and conjures up nightmarish imagery:

A further reason the *Vogue* photographs matter, from my point of view, is because they bring to mind – or stir up in us against our will – the most depressing of all suspicions of modernism as a whole. The bad dream of modernism, I shall call it. I think it is a nightmare modernism has often had about itself, and which may even be the root of its extremism... (306)

On this negativity, Clark comments, “I persist in thinking that high fashion’s cocktail of artiness and classiness (unattainable elegance spiced with avant-garde risk) is deadly, and deeply woman-hating – at least, in its effects” (437). In so doing, he risks generalizing and ghettoizing the cultural production of fashion, seemingly inattentive to its nuances. According to Clark, this dalliance of avant-garde Pollock with high fashion (yet, low-culture) *Vogue* is a dangerous one. At the same time, his analysis demonstrates his outmoded viewpoints on fashion, and his ignorance of differing practices in the field. It should be noted that such damning perspectives on design and the applied arts are common with Clark and Crow’s generation of art critic-historians. With gate-keeping functions clearly in mind, such critique attempts to maintain art’s purity from encroaching disciplines.

This disdainful view of fashion, however, is not limited to theorists and art historians like Svendsen, Crow and Clark. Radu Stern’s *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930* (2003/2005) surveys historical artistic avant-gardes as they were “confronted with fashion” (2), and their resulting rejection of fashion. With their

oppositional views on fashion, the historical avant-gardes instigated reform with the aim of abolishing fashion's "mercantile logic" by "striving to replace it by a utopian 'antifashion'" (Stern 3). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists such as William Morris, Henry van de Velde, Giacomo Balla and the Russian avant-gardes envisioned destroying fashion in its contemporary incarnation, and enforcing a limited form of dress more aptly described as uniform. Yet, despite the restrictions they imposed on what the clothes should or should not look like and how they would function, there was still a remarkable amount of aesthetic play in terms of style in the dress in their designs. Although I would not go so far as to label these artists' designs as art – I see them occupying a hybrid space that is more complicated than that – I do echo the sentiment that such "dress proposals" are against fashion, but only with the understanding that anti-fashion is still fashion, but that it is just external to the "official" fashion (Stern 3). Thus, the historical avant-gardes attempted to "overstep the limits of 'pure' art and act directly on daily life" (Stern 3) in order to abolish commercial fashion with their clothing designs. Stern's overview of historical (or "radical") avant-garde fashion such as constructivist, futurist and surrealist dress serves as a foundation for drawing parallels between avant-garde fashion and clothing designed by vanguard artists.

There has been productive discourse on fashion and the artistic vanguard, despite the oppositional stances taken by critical art historians and artists. Nancy Troy's *Couture Culture: A Study of Modern Art and Fashion* (2003) explores new links between the artistic avant-garde and fashion, beyond the concept of clothing as art and fashion reform as outlined by Stern. According to Troy, the "crisis of originality" in avant-garde art put forward by Rosalind Krauss is a crisis in haute couture (Troy 8). She focusses on the

early twentieth-century practices of French haute couturier Paul Poiret and artist Marcel Duchamp, and identifies parallels between haute couture dresses and the readymade, which “depend in each case for their efficacy as singular, auratic objects on the addition of their creator’s signature – the couturier’s authentic label or the name of the artist – to an object of serial if not mass production” (Troy 9). For Troy, it is at the juncture of originality and mass-production where vanguard art and fashion meet:

Where couturiers in general and Poiret in particular consistently marshaled the discourse of originality in order to resist or (equally unsuccessfully) to redirect for their own benefit the commercial power represented by reproduction, Marcel Duchamp actively embraced the idea of reproducibility, making it a central and enduring focus of his work. Duchamp’s readymades played upon the imbedded interrelationship of originality and reproduction that lies at the heart of the logic of fashion. (337)

She also identifies parallels between the marketing strategies of Poiret and art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, comparing haute couture with cubism. Troy argues that Kahnweiler and Poiret, at once appealing to the wealthy elites whilst maintaining popular interests, were “caught in the web of contradictions” (60) in the sense that both understood the delicate balance between widespread recognition for their work and maintaining some element of exclusivity. As an advocate for cubism, it was necessary for Kahnweiler to engage with a broad international audience in the same way that Poiret licensed select designs in the United States in order to capture a foreign market for his creations. Through examples such as these, Troy demonstrates that beyond aesthetics, the worlds of avant-garde art and fashion can share similar structures in terms of production methods and promotion.

The avant-garde and fashion

Fashion's alliance with mass culture and therefore, the market, complicates any discussion of its relation to vanguard cultural production. Before I embark of an outline of sartorial fashion and its partnership with the avant-garde, I would like to begin with a lengthy quote from Poggioli on the concept of fashion as fleeting, and the avant-garde's predestined failure at the hands of fashion's trend-based logic:

The connection between avant-garde and fashion is therefore evident: fashion too is a Penelope's web; fashion too passes through the phase of novelty and strangeness, surprise and scandal, before abandoning the new forms when they become cliché, kitsch, stereotype. Hence the profound truth of Baudelaire's paradox, which gives to genius the task of creating stereotypes. And from that follows, by principle of contradiction inherent in the obsessive cult of genius in modern culture, that the avant-garde is condemned to conquer, through the influence of fashion, that very popularity it once disdained—and this is the beginning of its end. In fact, this *is* the inevitable, inexorable destiny of each movement: to rise up against the newly outstripped fashion of an old avant-garde and to die when a new fashion, movement, or avant-garde appears. (82)

According to Poggioli, the avant-garde is no stranger to fashions, as its own history reads as an “uninterrupted series of fads” (83). In this way, the vanguard and fashion are inextricably linked concepts as each subsists on, and requires the other in order to continually regenerate. Ulrich Lehmann examines this close relationship between fashion and modernity – and by extension, the avant-garde – in his discussion of the etymology of the French versions of the terms in *Tigerpsprung: Fashion and Modernity* (2000). Lehmann acknowledges that *mode* (fashion) was developed as a term before that of *la modernité*, thus not only situating fashion as a modern concept, but also locating the Baudelairean notion that *la modernité* is fashioned through *la mode* and “determined by the effects of ever-changing styles” (153). One cannot be had without the other. Lehmann contends “*la modernité* equals *la mode*, because it was sartorial fashion that made

modernity aware of its constant urge and necessity to quote from itself” (xx). Radu Stern echoes this sentiment of fashion’s innate connection to the modern, stating that “[f]ashion, is not merely any kind of change in dress style: it is a particular type of change indissolubly linked to modernity and the pursuit of the New” (2). In this vein, I propose that the avant-garde, as a modern phenomenon, is inherently tied to fashion, and that fashion is a vehicle for progressive, revolutionary, and at times, utopian change in the course of modern and contemporary history.

It can be argued that the exclusion of sartorial fashion in avant-garde studies is due to the paradox of the avant-garde and the market as they collide in fashion, for fashion, unlike art, makes explicit its relation to commerce (Kim 57). Yet, the historical avant-garde has made use of mass culture: cubist and Dadaist collage, surrealist illustrations for fashion magazine covers, costumes for the *Ballet Russes*. Crow, however, states that the vanguard has historically made a practice of incorporating forms outside of the arts: “From its beginnings, the artistic avant-garde has discovered, renewed, or re-invented itself by identifying with marginal, “non-artistic” forms of expressivity and display – forms improvised by other social groups out of the degraded materials of capitalist manufacture” (3). Without the disparaging tone that Crow takes on here (itself a cue from Greenberg), I posit that fashion, as an applied “marginal” art makes use of itself to promote the avant-garde project. Despite repeated pronouncements of the avant-garde’s death in the face of capitalist subsumption, I concur with the position put forward by Isabelle Graw in her discussion of art criticism: “Criticism is both associated with market conditions and capable of defying them ” (2012). Similarly, the avant-garde – as an instance of institutional critique and therefore, criticism – and the fashion vanguard

simultaneously operate from within the framework of a market while dissenting from within those confines. Thus, the market and avant-garde are no longer in an entirely paradoxical relationship; rather, the avant-garde utilizes the structure of the market to advance its project of critique and opposition.

Perhaps one of the most in-depth investigations between fashion and the avant-garde exists primarily in exhibition form. Richard Martin's 1987 *Fashion and Surrealism* exhibition at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York explored the art movement's effect on fashion and the converse, both historical and contemporaneous to the late 1980s. Focussed largely on the practice of designer Elsa Schiaparelli, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue details the interactions and collaborations between her and the second generation of surrealists. The distinction between generations is important, as the founders of Surrealism led by Andre Bréton disavowed later surrealists in the 1930s and onwards for their connections to the "worldliness of a Surrealism dress in the mode of fashion" (Martin 217). The second generation's deviant commercial interests in fashion – magazines, advertisements and window display for shops – separated them from their decidedly more dogmatic forebears. In the same way, it is fashion's complicated relationship between art and commerce that conceivably underlies the dearth of academic texts on avant-garde fashion.

Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* explores oppositional and utopian dress and dress reform, but unlike Stern, does not categorize such movements under the banner of the avant-garde. This in part has to do with the fact that Stern approaches the link between fashion and art from the standpoint of artists who make clothes, whereas Wilson deals with such subject matter from the side of dress. While their material does overlap,

Wilson's interpretation of oppositional dress stems from a cultural studies discussion of counter- and subculture. Her analysis of utopian dress and dress reform focusses on the revolutionary feminist movement and opposition to women's dress of the day. Although Stern does acknowledge dress reform's origins in the American "Bloomer" movement, he does not align this with a feminist motivation. Returning to Wilson, in an essay entitled "These New Components of the Spectacle: Fashion and Postmodernism" (1990), she states she is open to the possibility of punk as an avant-garde, but then backs away from this idea, claiming: "Because of its intimate relation to the body, fashionable dress can never be wholly 'modernist' in the sense of modernism as the creation of a hermetic work of art concerned with the conditions of its own creation, or as an artifact to be judged solely in terms of its own dynamic: abstract art" ("These New Components" 214). In making this argument, Wilson invalidates a great number of historical avant-garde movements that encompass both applied and decorative arts and the traditional "fine" arts. She further ghettoizes fashion in her quick and outmoded dismissal of modernism as dealing solely with Kantian ideas of disinterestedness.

Caroline Evan's seminal *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (2003) examines fashion of a conceptual and experimental nature, including designers such as Commes des Garçons, Hussein Chalayan and Walter Van Beirendonck. She does not, however, explicitly classify these designers or their practices as avant-garde. Evans states that a majority of the fashion she studies in the text is "economically negligible" (*Fashion at the Edge* 294) – usually a characteristic of vanguardist work – but then argues that although Martin Margiela's "aesthetic of dereliction is avant-garde, his experimentation does not take him outside a capitalist paradigm" (*Fashion at the Edge*

295). One can then pose the questions: must the vanguard exist solely outside the confines of capitalism, and if so, is it possible? Evans's concept of the avant-garde is ill defined in this case and too easily dismisses any possibility for a contemporary avant-garde in fashion. Later in a side note, she acknowledges Lisa Tickner's argument in *Modern Life & Modern Subjects* (2000): "Partly *faute de mieux*, and partly as a consequence of its own desire to remake its audience, the avant-garde was never free of fashion or commerce or economically independent of the bourgeois society whose tastes and values it disdained..." (188). Evans's position here, then, is unclear and demonstrates the trifling dilemma that exists for both avant-garde fashion and the dialectic of the artistic avant-garde more generally. Along the lines of Isabelle Graw's argument that market conditions exist for everything, I see vanguard fashion as privy to the concerns of the market, but that it also refuses to be fully complicit.

Like *Fashion at the Edge*, Claire Wilcox's exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Radical Fashion* (2001) looks at the innovative and exploratory practices of contemporary designers including Chalayan, Rei Kawakubo of Commes des Garçons, and Martin Margiela, but only skims the surface of how and why these designers are radical, if the term "radical" is taken to be synonymous with the revolutionary avant-garde. While Wilcox alludes to the vanguard practices of these designers in her language – she refers to Rei Kawakubo as "revolutionary" and Issey Miyake as "avant-garde" (2) due to their challenging of conventions in fashion – her focus is more on their aesthetic transgressions than their attempts of social and political reform through dress. While Judith Clark's essay in the catalogue "Looking Forward to Historical Futurism" does touch on the omission of futurism from fashion history, her examination of the movement

– like Wilcox’s curatorial premise – involves the aesthetic understanding of radical dress. Aside from briefly addressing futurism’s obsession with speed and dynamism, she mentions nothing of its extreme right-wing politics and connection to fascism. This is an unfortunate oversight, as Clark’s lack of rigour demonstrates vagueness in naming the radical or revolutionary in fashion and mirrors the catachresis of “avant-garde” as discussed at the beginning of the chapter.

In her article “Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde” (1997), sociologist Diana Crane labels certain historical and contemporary designers such as Elsa Schiaparelli, Paco Rabanne, Martin Margiela, and Rei Kawakubo as avant-garde, but eschews the art theoretical definition of the term as a basis for her argument in favour of its association with experimentation. The fact that she does not reference any literature on the avant-garde results in a superficial reading and understanding of the vanguard that she defines generally as the subversion of aesthetic convention. Instead, Crane’s analysis deals largely with the avant-garde trait of opposition, and discusses four binaries in postmodern avant-gardism: “futuraity-tradition, masculinity-femininity, luxury-pauperism, and bodily concealment or nudity” (135). While I do agree that the characteristics she describes are relevant, her analysis is by no means a comprehensive understanding of the fashion avant-garde. Regardless, Crane’s historical overview and analysis will be helpful in understanding the larger picture of the role of the avant-garde in fashion.

In a more recent example, Alison Bancroft aligns avant-garde with haute couture and designers such as John Galliano and the late Alexander McQueen in *Fashion and Psychoanalysis* (2012). Although Bancroft uses what she calls the “artistic model” of the avant-garde in order to discuss the role of Lacanian desire in haute couture and the

interjection of the real in the symbolic order of things (18), she does not apply historical avant-garde tendencies to Galliano and McQueen's practices. Furthermore, while there are many couture tendencies to be found in avant-garde fashion and the two approaches are closely related in many respects, they are not synonymous. The haute couture industry engages a select, moneyed clientele for its custom-fitted, highly unique, hand-sewn and embellished creations and is tightly controlled by the governing body, the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* in Paris.⁴ Furthermore, haute couturiers must be granted accreditation by the French Ministry of Industry, a list that is reviewed yearly in order to ensure compliance. Thus, a gap exists where the avant-garde can be closely examined in its relation to contemporary, ready-to-wear fashion, and where such fashion can be discussed using art historical methods. Although Willhelm and Kraus design objects that are sold as clothing in the fashion system and worn as such, their garments and accessories can take on the symbolic value of art objects once they are displayed in museum exhibitions or presented in runway presentations. The shifting status of a Bernhard Willhelm piece is representative of their inherent method of working in which various disciplines are mixed and reshaped; borders are redefined or in some cases, pummeled until they no longer hold up. Because of this constant engagement across cultural fields, Willhelm and Kraus's work is most effectively discussed using art theoretical discourse on the avant-garde.

Given the examples I have explored in this section, it is evident that vanguard fashion is seen foremost as aesthetically experimental rather than for its greater

⁴ Regulations for approved haute couture houses include having an atelier in Paris with at least fifteen full-time employees and presenting two collections annually to the public with a minimum of thirty-five garments for day and eveningwear.

revolutionary social and political potential. I argue that to define Willhelm and Kraus's practice as avant-garde is to commit to, and attribute a cultural and historical specificity to such a reading. To use the term "experimental" in relation to revolutionary or radical fashion is overly general and lacks proper definition. While the avant-garde may be a subcategory of the experimental, the same cannot be said of the inverse. Furthermore, the concepts of modernity put forth in scholarship such as those of Wilson and Evans do not include a discussion of the avant-garde in unambiguous terms. If, as Tickner contends, it is "unhelpful to insist on dogmatic distinctions between 'modernism' and 'avant-garde'" (188), then it is evident that scholars have hesitated in defining the avant-garde with respect to fashion. As I will argue, in order for fashion to be included in the discourse of avant-garde studies, its terms of engagement must be clearly defined.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art

The inter- and multidisciplinary aspects of contemporary avant-garde fashion practice lend themselves more specifically to the Romantic idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art. I employ this concept in a discussion of Willhelm's practice cognisant of its revolutionary potential. Although the use of the term is often attributed to the German composer Richard Wagner, the first-cited example of its use have been located to German philosopher Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahdorff's *Aesthetik oder Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst* [Aesthetics; or, Theory of Belief and Art] from 1827. In it, Trahdorff writes of "a striving within the entire territory of art toward a total artwork [*Gesamt-Kunstwerke*] on the part of all the arts" that would "flow together into one presentation" (Trahdorff qtd. in Finger and Follett 10), and specifies that such a total

work would consist of four art forms: “word-sound [*Wortklang*], music, facial expression [*Mimik*], and dance” (Koss 13). It was Wagner who later fleshed out the *Gesamtkunstwerk* more fully in his early treatises, “Art and Revolution” and “The Art-Work of the Future” (both 1849) in response to the failures of the 1848 revolutions. In “Art and Revolution,” he set the groundwork for what was to be a detailed theorization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in “Art and Revolution,” and argues for the revolutionary possibilities of art:

The question must be therefore put to Art itself and its true essence; nor must we in this matter ourselves with mere abstract definitions; for our object will naturally be, to discover the meaning of Art as a factor in the life of the State, and to make ourselves acquainted with it as a social product. (Wagner 31)

Identifying art as a tool for the attainment of Utopia, Wagner modelled the total work of art after ancient Greek drama. In *Modernism After Wagner* (2010), Juliet Koss stated that Wagner saw political potential in the total artwork as he “called for a German artistic culture that, like the one he imagined to have existed in Ancient Greece, both expressed and fostered the nation’s political culture; one that would also be worthy of the nation it would, in turn, help create” (14). Unlike Trahndorff’s total art work which combined four art forms, his united work of art consisted of three domains including poetry, music, and dance, the conflation of which was found in opera or as he called them, “music dramas.” Wagner uses anthropomorphic imagery to describe the individual art forms as “sisters”:

By working in common, each one of them attains the power to be and do the very thing which, of her own and inmost essence, she longs to do and be. Hereby: that each, where her own power ends, can be absorbed within the other, whose power commences where her’s ends,—she maintains her own purity and freedom, her independence as *that* which she is. (189)

Thus, in the total work, the individuality of each of the art forms is strengthened rather than diluted.

Almost ninety years after Wagner's treatises, Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno famously attacked the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his polemical work *In Search of Wagner* (1937-1938). He condemns Wagner's total artworks for their dilettantism while employing "phantasmagorical" as a derogatory descriptor. For Adorno, this "magic delusion" (85) was responsible for commodifying Wagner's music dramas:

In Wagner's day the consumer goods on display turned their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of customers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character, from the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, in the phantasmagoria, Wagner's operas tend to become commodities. Their tableaux assume the character of wares on display. (*In Search of Wagner* 90)

Furthermore, he sees that Wagner's association with the Third Reich (as Hitler's favourite composer) corrupts his work, despite the fact that his study is anachronistic. Although Wagner died before Hitler was born, Koss argues that Adorno held Wagner as "personally responsible for Hitler's 'final solution'" (272) because of this posthumous attribution. It is this theorization of Wagner's works as tainted goods which has dominated studies on Wagner and the total work of art, and which contemporary scholarship attempts to correct. Koss aims to recover Wagner's original revolutionary intentions and provide a critical understanding of the total work prior to its identification with Wagnerian protofascism. Koss discusses Adorno's attacks on Wagner as a dilettante and his "lazy" behaviour:

Such comments were directed not only at Wagner's personality but also at his music dramas, at the very idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and at the model of spectatorship it encouraged. Accusations of amateurism, reveal a range of claims and presumptions about the interrelation of the arts, with regard both to artistic production and reception—often conflating the two in the person of Wagner himself. (266)

Blinded by his disgust for Wagner's posthumous association with the Third Reich, Adorno thereby commits character assassination. Beyond such Wagnerian overtones that have dominated scholarship on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* for decades, Koss makes a case for the artwork and interdisciplinarity, situating both as central concepts in an alternative narrative of modernism. It is with this sense of moving forward and the need for productive uses of the total work that comprise the anthology *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments* (2011). Editors Anke Finger and Danielle Follett understand the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to represent three kinds of borderlessness: "aesthetic (the use of mixed media), political (the blending of art and life), and metaphysical (the aspiration to the spiritual or redemptive)" (5). They describe new possibilities for contemporary understanding and evolution of the total work of art:

The adventures of the concept of the total artwork are not over. It has yet to adopt new and unpredictable incarnations; the notion of the gathered work, with every possible degree of cohesion, from the abstract absolute to utter material scatteredness, continues to resonate in the human psyche and its creations and will certainly inspire new manifestations. The unifying quality, if one may call it that, is the aesthetic practice of *bringing together* along with some kind of aspiration to a better collective future. (Finger and Follett 25).

Here, two arguments can be highlighted: firstly, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is limited neither to a historical paradigm, nor to its "retrospectively overinterpreted" Adornian version (Finger and Follett 19). Secondly, the total work of art is imbued with revolutionary potential to transform the public sphere. Viewed as an entity in the continual process of regeneration, the total artwork therefore remains relevant to contemporary artistic practices.

In *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (2011), David Roberts identifies two lineages of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, "one the expression of Gallic dash and

daring, the other the expression of Teutonic profundities” (143). For Roberts, the French revolutionary *avant-garde* and German *Gesamtkunstwerk* aesthetic are woven into modernism, the sum of which culminates in the artistic avant-gardes’ response to European political instability from the late nineteenth century and onwards (D. Roberts 2). This is contrary to conceptions of the total work of art as antimodern, a stance often taken by Wagner’s detractors. Rather, Roberts argues the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is essential to an understanding of the avant-garde in modernism (D. Roberts 3). As a point of clarification, in conflating the total artwork with vanguard art practice, I assume a position against notions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as anti-modern. This view of the total work of art as anti-modern is one that coincides with the idea of modernism as rigidly adhering to principles including medium specificity and the purification of disciplines. Instead, I echo scholars such as Koss and Roberts who view that the total artwork serves as the basis of understanding the relationship between the avant-garde and modernism. It is at this intersection of the total artwork in relation to the avant-garde and modernism where I situate my thesis. Through the lens of contemporaneity, I aim to redraw the lines of connection between these three interrelated concepts, and unite them in my examination of Willhelm and Kraus’s vanguard fashion practice.

On performance and display culture: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in fashion

Current scholarship in fashion has seen a further resurrection in the use of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* by fashion scholar John Potvin (2010; 2013) and his collaborative work with theatre scholar Dirk Gindt (2013). Potvin argues that the concept of the total artwork has evolved in its contemporary iteration to “a complete lifestyle, that is, a life

and a style wherein performances are activated” (“The velvet masquerade” 13). In *Giorgio Armani: Empire of the Senses* (2013), he contends that the Italian designer’s empire – which encompasses sartorial fashion design along with diffusion lines and licensed goods, beauty products, furnishings (Armani/Casa), service-oriented entities including sweet shops (Armani/Dolci), flower shops (Armani/Fiori), cafés and restaurants (Armani/Ristorante), and hotels (Armani/Hotels) – constitutes an attempt at formulating a total lifestyle. In an evolution of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the contemporary moment, Potvin defines the concept as “a complete look, lifestyle or atmosphere” (*Empire of the Senses* 218). According to the company overview on the Armani/Casa Facebook page, the home interiors division is “seamlessly linked to the other ‘worlds’ within the Armani Group.”

Potvin discusses Armani’s boutiques as sensoriums, where customers are sold experiences alongside garments:

Rooted, once again, in the notion of phantasmagoria is the idea of light and dark, mechanisms to create illusions, the very nature of glamour itself. Various forms of sensorial stimulation coupled with the control of light, ensure certain effects on the spectatorial cum corporeal and cerebral experiences. [...] As Wagner himself believed, the basis of art (or the experience of the aesthetic) is sensation, which is undoubtedly made possible and manifest in the increasingly larger sensory emporia Armani constructs. (*Empire of the Senses* 314)

The experiential side of Armani’s retail operation is but one part of the designer’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as the concept of a total artwork surfaces again in Gindt and Potvin’s article “Creativity, corporeality and collaboration: Staging fashion with Giorgio Armani and Robert Wilson” (2013). The authors examine Armani and theatre director Robert Wilson’s collaborations including runway presentations and exhibition design for Armani’s retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2000. For their initial partnering on

Armani's Spring-Summer 1997 menswear "hybrid fashion show/retrospective" titled *G.A. Story*, the comparison to a total work of art is explicit, as Wilson himself compares the production – which took place in Stazione Leopolda, a nineteenth-century Florentine train station, and involved 80 performers (30 dancers, 50 models), multiple projection screens, and *tableaux vivants* – to an opera (Gindt and Potvin 6). Potvin and Gindt make a case for the borderless entities that Armani creates in partnership with Wilson's avant-garde *oeuvre*. In their analysis of Wilson's production of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) for which Armani designed costumes, Gindt and Potvin argue that the director and fashion designer "achieve a modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which rips material objects, phenomenal sensations and spatial experiences from the burden of context, narrative and textual language" (13).

Furthermore, they find that in the critical reception for the productions of *G.A. Story* and *The Lady from the Sea* "no reviewer questioned the commingling of theatre and fashion. For both events, the boundaries between the two disciplines and industries appeared (at least on the surface) to be maintained" (Gindt and Potvin 16). In defence of the contemporary total artwork, Gindt and Potvin assert that Armani and Wilson's collaborations resulted in "carefully balanced cultural products where the creative input of each contributor related to the whole without risk of being drowned or overshadowed" (23), a characteristic held in common with the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is this simultaneous boundary-keeping and interdisciplinary seamlessness that I investigate in Willhelm and Kraus's practice. From runway presentations, to exhibitions and the website, seemingly disparate themes, genres, and disciplines are unified whilst maintaining the label of fashion.

Fashion in the museum

Disciplinary boundaries between art and fashion become blurred in the display culture of fashion in museum collections and exhibitions. The role of fashion in the museum generates inquiry into the ontological statuses and display of fashion objects, and by extension, the function of the museum. Valerie Steele's article "A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes-Bag" (1998) is an early attempt to articulate the issues faced by fashion museums. She argues for the importance of preserving fashion as a cultural object, acknowledging the prejudices against museums; one view deems them "musty" while the contrary view accuses them of functioning as vehicles for entertainment (Steele, "A Museum of Fashion" 333). Steele asserts that methodologies such as object analysis can serve a useful instrument to "address the problems that frequently beset fashion museum exhibitions—whether musty antiquarianism or superficial glitz" ("A Museum of Fashion" 334). In a special issue of *Fashion Theory* devoted to exhibitions (2008), she revisits museology and extends the discussion in her essay "Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition." Steele provides a historical overview of museum fashion exhibitions and explores issues such as corporate funding for exhibitions and its hand in curatorial decisions. She contends that the traditionally-held view in academia that fashion inhabits the hierarchically inferior space of mass and popular culture, mirrors fashion's typically low-status in art institutions. While Steele acknowledges that the relationship between contemporary fashion and its commercial aspects is a thorny issue in museums, she argues that it overshadows the fact that fashion exhibitions are a culturally valid and intellectual medium, "good for thinking" ("Museum Quality" 22). Furthermore, she maintains that the "new" art history's alliance with cultural studies bore

a new fashion history, and that new art historical discourse has had an impact on the scholarship surrounding fashion exhibitions. As Steele sees it, the twinning of fashion and art in scholarly discourse has a profound effect on display culture in museums.

In the same *Fashion Theory* Exhibitionism issue, curator Alexandra Palmer likewise probes the museological and commercial contexts for the display of fashion, examining the blurred lines between “academic” museum exhibitions and marketing stunts. While Palmer regards the function of the museum as one that educates visitors and provides intellectual inquiry, she posits that uncritical exhibitions can shift the visitor’s role from viewer to window-shopper, and the curator’s function to that of a “glorified stylist” (“Untouchable” 35). On the other hand, commercial attempts to display fashion such as the exhibition, *Waist Down: Skirts by Miuccia Prada* – which showed 100 skirts designed over a span of eighteen years in an exhibit designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas’s Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) – provide the customer-viewer with an “imitation” museum experience (Palmer, “Untouchable” 34). In this way, Palmer highlights the problem of context in exhibiting fashion in which ambiguity between the museum and non-museum settings results in a public unable to differentiate between the artifact, or, fashion as a historical object, and the commodity. She echoes Steele in stating that the museum fashion exhibition serves as intellectual medium, and challenges curators “to move the visitor beyond a visual shopping excursion and to encourage them to look and think critically about what is on view” (Palmer, “Untouchable” 57).

Potvin too draws on the problem of context, albeit the lack thereof, in his 2012 article “Fashion and the Art Museum: When Giorgio Armani Went to the Guggenheim.” He contends that the Giorgio Armani retrospective exhibition held at the Guggenheim in

2000 failed to acknowledge its own situation – Armani is a non-avant-garde designer who is a self-proclaimed modernist – within the greater setting of a museum of high modernist art. Potvin also brings to attention the role of corporate sponsorship in the exhibition, which, as Steele and Palmer have previously considered, sees the commercial world of fashion clash with scholarly interests. In his analysis of critical discourse surrounding the exhibition, he points to the acceptance and prevalence of avant-garde fashion museum exhibitions, but the absence of non-avant-garde fashion in such circumstances. Thus, any attempt by fashion – especially non-avant-garde and commercially-driven fashion – to penetrate the high modernist canon threatens the purity of the museum:

The true threat engendered by consumerist incursions into the sanctity and purported neutrality (a coded misnomer for universalism, and hence masculinity) of the art museum is a deeply-held fear that fashion (read: the feminine) might infiltrate the rational, objective and humanist ethos of collecting institutions. In the objective realm of Kantian aesthetic disinterest, in which the subject is removed from the beautiful objects that surround him, hinting at consumption in the space of the museum, appearing as if in a shop window, leaves the museum vulnerable to the vagaries of fashion and undermines its mandate to edify the visitor by charting out clearly and legibly the lineage of modern art. (Potvin, “Fashion and the Art Museum” 61)

By highlighting Kantian disinterestedness and consumption, Potvin addresses the art and fashion debate through problematizing both the status of the cultural object of fashion in the museum, and the institution of the museum itself. In the discourse I have presented here, it is clear that the place of fashion in a museum sits at the intersection of scholarly and commercial interests, high and mass culture, and by extension, the avant-garde and non-avant-garde. These inquiries complicate the role of fashion – specifically contemporary fashion – in the museum and display culture more generally.

Conclusion

In the overview of key works and scholars in this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the instability of the term “avant-garde” with its varying histories and theories, as well as the contentious relationship between art and fashion. The attempts made by Poggioli and Bürger to understand the theoretical implications of the vanguard project, while contentious, are valuable for their prescient insight and continue to provide much needed direction in current scholarship. Despite repeated calls of the avant-garde’s demise, I concur with Mann’s assertion that the avant-garde’s death-discourse is its “most productive, voluble, self-conscious, and lucrative stage” (3). Here, I take my cue from Foster, Buchloh and Léger, who argue for the evolution of the vanguard project and its continued relevance in the contemporary moment. It is amongst this theoretical strife that I situate the work of Willhelm and Kraus, and contend that at the centre of their fashion practice lie critical junctures between history and contemporaneity, fashion and art, and interdisciplinarity.

Philosopher Bruno Latour argues that modernity is the cause of disciplinary divides between nature and culture, and to this effect, I contend that contemporary avant-garde production seeks to bring hybridity to the forefront of its practice by obliterating that which Latour labels “distinct ontological zones” (10) that have been kept separate in recent modernity. Avant-garde artists began to question the ontological status of art in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, addressing the gap between fashion and art. During this time, boundaries dissolved between artistic mediums, processes and concepts for a wider, more expanded field for art. The varied terrain this chapter covers is an indication that the study of fashion is interdisciplinary by nature, thus requiring what

Francesca Granata calls a "multi-methodological" approach ("Fashion Studies" 75). To an increasing degree, art history is also becoming an interdisciplinary field. As Evans points out, fashion takes from art history its form of representation, but it is also an embodied practice (qtd. in Grau, "Interview with Caroline Evans"). With this interdisciplinarity in mind, the theoretical basis for my project draws from fields such as art history, visual culture, performance studies, and cultural criticism. It is from the line of Evans's and Troy's groundbreaking work that I locate my project in examining fashion through the lens of art. In so doing, I raise the stakes for fashion to be acknowledged not only as a field of scholarly inquiry, but one that tests the preconceptions and boundaries of art history as a discipline. My argument thus aims to dismantle the arguments set forth by Crow, Clark and Svendsen, of avant-garde art's degradation at the hands of fashion, and refute the claims made by these disciplinary gatekeepers.

Chapter Two: Against Fashion-Time: Bernhard Willhelm and the Avant-Garde Object of Fashion

In the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008), a psychedelic, rainbow-coloured, fibreglass “suit” stood in its own bubble-wrap lined, geodesic dome-like structure. Designed by Willhelm and Kraus for Icelandic singer Björk’s album cover for *Volta* (2007, fig. 1), and inspired by contemporary Italian artist Luigi Ontani's small clay sculptures, the outfit is wearable only in the sense that it can physically be worn. However, it is not possible to become mobile in it; while each of the legs are separate entities, they are not articulated. The wearer must stand in the leg components and have the head/torso piece lowered over her; this top section is then held up with a chain suspended from the ceiling. Described as an “unreal, surreal sculptural disguise” by the fashion film website *SHOWstudio*, the fibreglass suit is neither fully sculpture – it was meant to be worn rather than for display in a museum – nor intended for the consumer marketplace. In 2015, the wearable sculpture found its way into Björk’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York along with other Bernhard Willhelm costumes designed for the world tour in support of *Volta*. It is such works of Willhelm and Kraus that challenge notions of fashion and test disciplinary boundaries between fashion, art, music and performance.

The object of Bernhard Willhelm’s avant-garde fashion occupies a liminal temporal space between fashion and anti-fashion, as well as between fashion and art. By quoting anti-fashions such as folk dress and workwear, Willhelm and Kraus’s designs are oppositional to the conventional object of fashion, and contest the temporal logic of fashion, a concept which I term “fashion-time.” In museum exhibitions the same objects are ontologically hybrid and temporally fragmented, suspended between the utility of

clothing and fleetingness of fashion, and the nonutility and lastingness of artwork. The designs sit out of time, or are out of fashion rather than “in fashion,” temporally situated between history and contemporaneity. Similarly, the contemporary avant-garde is suspended between the tradition of the historical artistic vanguards and its contemporariness. Using these temporal concepts of history, my goal is to extract a more specific understanding of vanguard fashion at an object level in order to determine its connection to the larger structure of avant-garde cultural production. I evaluate Willhelm and Kraus’s practice within the temporal framework of history and contemporaneity, engaging with theories of the “now” from Walter Benjamin, Ulrich Lehmann, Giorgio Agamben and Terry Smith. Furthermore, I examine Willhelm and Kraus’s exhibitions – *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008), *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010), and *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger* (2015) – to determine how their avant-garde fashion objects have been interpreted by curators and scenographers in the physical and temporal space of a museum, and how their meanings change when displayed in this context. By specifically referring to the likeness of exhibited garments in museums as sculpture or installation, I am positioning Willhelm and Kraus’s fashion practice within the avant-garde project and the expanded field of art more generally. In unpacking the temporal condition of “when” in Bernhard Willhelm’s avant-garde *oeuvre*, I propose that my examination extends discourse in fashion studies beyond cursory comparisons between fashion and art.

The present chapter expands upon the definition(s) of vanguard cultural practices foregrounded in the preceding chapter through Willhelm and Kraus’s interrogation of what constitutes an avant-garde object of fashion and its nature of being. I will examine

how Willhelm and Kraus's fashion functions in relation to the institutions of fashion and art. Specifically, I will explore how their practice defines and produces the vanguard object of fashion in resisting official and established categories of fashion through their use of anti-fashion, and how institutional validation and museum display connect the fashion avant-garde with artistic vanguards.

Fashion and avant-garde objecthood

To elucidate the Bernhard Willhelm avant-garde object of fashion, I will begin by determining its condition or "objecthood," a term I take from Michael Fried's infamous essay against Minimalism, "Art and Objecthood" (1967). According to Fried, the concept of objecthood promulgated by the Minimalists (or "literalists" as he calls them) can be understood as a direct reference to the "condition of nonart," a phrase taken from Clement Greenberg's contemporary essay "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967). Fried asserts that minimalist objects were "antithetical to art" (153). While Fried employed "objecthood" as a derogatory phrase to demonstrate why minimalism was not "authentic art" (167) and therefore did not belong in the canon of modernism, I deliberately utilize it as a complimentary term of disruption in relation to contemporary avant-garde fashion, whereby Willhelm and Kraus's practice assumes a position of opposition. "Objecthood" in this context conveys a conviction to resist fashion's conventional modes of display, function and ontological status; the vanguard fashion object is antithetical to fashion in the sense that it refuses to function solely as wearable clothing. To take Björk's fibreglass suit as an example, it is neither fully wearable in the sense of quotidian clothing, nor solely a nonfunctional object of art; the wearer is able to be placed in the suit, but is

unable to move in it. Characteristics such as these position it between art and fashion design. Similarly, the minimalist works of Donald Judd sit at the intersection of art and design with their industrial materials and processes of fabrication. As the work of Willhelm and Kraus, and Judd can neither be considered purely art nor design, it threatens disciplinary boundaries of what Fried calls the “individual arts” (1967/1998).

The idea of avant-garde art – that is, socially and politically-engaged cultural forms – as against art is a recurrent theme in art historical discourse. Art critic Jed Perl’s article “The Liberals Are Killing Art: How the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty” (2014) in the American “liberal” magazine, *The New Republic* revisits the championing of aesthetic beauty in discussions of art. Setting aside the title that confuses liberal politics with politics of the left, Perl perpetuates the conservative idea that the object of art should remain tied to beauty and aesthetics:

The challenge that confronts us now, it seems to me, is to preserve the difficulty of beauty in a world dominated by the liberal love of reason, which is all too often reduced to a set of measurements and statistics. The difficulty of beauty matters so much because art—and again I mean all the arts, from poetry to painting to dance—is the essential way in which human beings give shape to their imaginings. It is a shape freely evolved, the imagination interacting with the world.

Such sentiments as expressed in the above quote indicate an alliance to traditional values held by conservative art critics such as Robert Hughes and Hilton Kramer, who have famously denounced the (political) progressiveness of art in favour of beauty and aesthetics. It is no coincidence that Perl had his start writing art criticism at former *New York Times* art critic, Hilton Kramer’s conservative cultural magazine, *The New Criterion*. Perl argues for autonomous art that plays no part in the socio-political sphere, which in other words, does not “[condemn] the arts to the hyphenated existence that

violates their freestanding significance.” Moreover, he speaks out against the integration of art into the praxis of life and therefore issues art a death knell at the hands of the avant-garde. Perl surrenders all too easily to the Cartesian separation between mind and body when he states that “[a]rt is by its very nature overheated, hot-headed, unreasonable—and, dare we say it, sometimes illiberal.” He interprets art as possessing a Hegelian inner spirit, one rife with illogical emotion and unhinged expression. This is juxtaposed with vanguard cultural production, which serves as its enlightened, logical opposite. Yet, Perl’s thesis also echoes Bürger, who understands the avant-garde objective as one that attempted (yet ultimately failed) to “destroy art as an institution” (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* 87). What Perl and Bürger refuse to see is the plasticity of art and the avant-garde, and how both definitions are in constant flux; both Perl and Bürger seek singular definitions and institute a death drive for artistic vanguards. The dialectical nature of the avant-garde is such that it constantly rejects and negates its ontological status. The ultimate avant-garde fashion object renounces its function in the same way that Marcel Duchamp’s readymades renounce aesthetics in art to focus on ideas or concepts. Duchamp’s work did not put an end to vanguard artistic production, but rather spurred further movements including conceptual and pop art. In providing Fried and Perl as counterexamples, I suggest that firstly, art theory can be cross-germinated with that of fashion and secondly, that Willhelm and Kraus’s practice is deliberately antagonistic towards the aims of the institution of fashion, while simultaneously maintaining a position in it.

To define the avant-garde object of fashion, it is useful to define in tandem its opposite, mainstream fashion, and shed light on its temporal structure of sustained and

rapid change. Fundamentally speaking, what is fashion and how does it function? I will first briefly trace efforts of fashion historians and theorists to define it as an abstract concept in order to create the theoretical framework for my discussion of Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde object of fashion as expressed through anti-fashion. Like the artistic vanguard – which pits the extreme conformity and regimented nature of the military against the unwillingness of avant-gardes to delineate their practice in rigid terms (or rather, their willingness to resist any type of classification) – the concept of fashion is difficult to fix, for fashion is ever-evolving due to whatever is simply “in fashion.” Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that, as an indication of contemporariness, fashion possesses a disjunctive temporal structure: “Fashion can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity that divides it according to its relevance or irrelevance, its being-in-fashion, or no longer-being-in-fashion” (47). He states that an understanding of fashion must be ontologically fluid and open to modification and transformation in relation to and shaped by that which is fashionable; in other words, shifting concepts of taste alters fashionability over time. Furthermore, Agamben raises questions concerning the “when” of fashion and its preoccupation of nowness:

Is this “now” perhaps the moment in which the fashion designer conceives of the general concept, the nuance that will define the new style of the clothes? Or is it the moment when the fashion designer conveys the concept to his assistants, and then to the tailor who will sew the prototype? Or rather, is it the moment of the fashion show, when the clothes are worn by the only people who are always and only in fashion, the *mannequins*, or models; those who nonetheless, precisely for this reason, are never truly in fashion? (48)

In this passage, Agamben demonstrates the slippery temporal nature of fashion, whereby fashion is associated with change and constant (re)generation of the new and now. Thus, the time and “now” of fashion eternally shifts between points of disjointedness.

Over time, theorists have also examined fashion's relation to areas including commodification, communication and cultural phenomena. Early examples of forays into questioning fashion's ontology are attributed to American sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), who made a case for fashion as an indication of economic wellbeing in his book chapter "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture" in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), and German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918), who argued that fashion is a means of both differentiation and inclusion in his seminal 1904 essay "Fashion." In more contemporary analysis, fashion theorist Gilles Lipovetsky has countered that fashion is tied less to an expression of class "than a way out of the world of tradition" (4). In this interpretation, fashion is an agent of social change and carries with it the potential for shaping modern democracy. In his own attempt to delineate a philosophy of fashion, Lars Svendsen highlights the schism between the abstract, social concept of fashion theorized by Veblen, Simmel and Lipovetsky, and fashion's physical nature and function as clothing. After identifying the similarity between Anne Hollander and Elizabeth Wilson's definitions of fashion – both of which contend that fashion consists of all (Western) clothing or dress, whether fashion, anti-fashion or non-fashion – Svendsen asks: "[b]ut is it clothes themselves or a quality they have that constitutes 'fashion'?" (13). In posing this question, he pinpoints a gap between the understanding of fashion as material object and its socio-cultural interpretation.

Despite these aforementioned attempts to define fashion as a concept, these theorists have not discussed the root ontological status of the fashion object. As fashion historian Giorgio Riello states, fashion concerns both the "(immaterial) idea and an

(material) object” and that its immateriality “is part of social, cultural, economic and personal practices that are material and involve material objects.” Therefore, the fashion object operates in a system: firstly, as a social phenomenon, secondly, as a physical and visual object and thirdly, within the institution and business of fashion. In the same way that namely “official” contemporary art relies on the globalized art world system of biennials, art fairs, museum shows and press, “official” contemporary fashion inhabits a global network of fashion weeks, multinational corporations and media discourse. Anti-fashion repudiates the establishment of the system, throwing fashion into flux. Stern has described the historical avant-garde’s oppositional stance as a “common will to reject ‘official’ fashion, refusing its mercantile logic and striving to replace it by a utopian ‘anti-fashion’” (Stern 3). As avant-gardes, Willhelm and Kraus resist the increasingly rapid turnover of trends motivated by the market of fashion, a strategy that aligns them with the vanguard artists – from William Morris and Henry van de Velde to the Russian constructivists and Italian futurists – whom Stern asserts aimed to reform dress in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The contemporary avant-garde fashion object has a specific function to occupy a position against conventional fashion and its principles. As it would be unproductive to attempt a definition of all criteria that comprise the object of fashion, I will more clearly delineate its temporal disjunction, non-linearity and duration through an examination of how Willhelm and Kraus utilize anti-fashion and museum exhibitions to elucidate the avant-garde object of fashion.

The anti-fashion of Bernhard Willhelm

Through quotation of the anti-fashions of folk dress and workwear, Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde fashion sits out-of-time and is out of fashion rather than "in fashion." Their designs are against fashion-time and contest fashion's temporal logic of accelerated and constant change. In the past, Willhelm has questioned the fashion industry's adherence to biannual seasons and voiced his disagreement with its institutional machinations:

I mean, it's ridiculous, fashion. And everybody should know that. I mean, this whole system; why should you change your wardrobe every half a year? Why should you read Vogue? There's nothing in Vogue. Why should you read about rich and famous people in all those magazines, always the same 10 rich and famous people? Over and over? And how they are dressed. I mean, who cares? (Willhelm qtd. in Rushton)

Similarly, the title of the 2015 exhibition in the MOCA Pacific Design Center, *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger* is an explicit demonstration of Willhelm and Kraus's discomfort with the function of fashion within the larger context of contemporary culture, and their critical position in relation to the industry. They reject and critique "official" fashion by confronting its taste for obsolescence with obsolescence itself, all the while simultaneously operating from within its confines. Since its inception, Bernhard Willhelm collections have occasionally occupied spots on the Paris Fashion Week calendar and have been reviewed sporadically by fashion journalists and mainstream media outlets such as Tim Blanks and Sarah Mower of Condé Nast's now defunct *STYLE.COM* website, Cathy Horyn of *The New York Times*, and Suzy Menkes, former style editor of *The International Herald Tribune* (now *The International New York Times*). Although the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection was shown at the MOCA Pacific Design Center in place of a traditional runway presentation, the Paris showroom still operated for fashion buyers, a practice that

continues despite Willhelm and Kraus's relocation to Los Angeles in 2013. While the Bernhard Willhelm label is not a household name in the way that more mainstream designers are, it fundamentally operates as a business and possesses cultural cachet and a certain degree of visibility in the global system of high-end fashion. Willhelm and Kraus do not deny that they function in the fashion system, but rather make conscious efforts to challenge the institution(s) of fashion and attack its dominant narrative. By highlighting these issues, I stress as I have in the previous chapter, that contemporary avant-garde practice does not exclusively rest outside of the institution, contrary to claims that vanguard cultural production no longer thrives due to its institutionalization in museums and university course syllabi. Rather, I maintain the logic that radical change can be enacted through, as Rudi Dutschke – leader of the late 1960s student protests in Germany – phrased using revolutionary rhetoric from the Communist Party of China, a “long march through the institutions” (qtd. in Horvat). The politics and rhetoric of the left serve as a useful model for the revolutionary act of reconfiguring everyday life through fashion. Just as Wilson and Hollander have stated that anti-fashion belongs within a definition of fashion, resistance and critique can occur within that very structure that it resists and critiques. Thus, the object of avant-garde fashion is dialectical; it is simultaneously a subversion of fashion and a product of it.

By restating anti-fashion strategies of folkloric dress, and workwear in contemporary fashion, Willhelm and Kraus alter and disrupt the predilection for rapid change and constant newness in the fashion system. With their timelessness, these traditional dress forms slow down progress in fashion and cause disjunction, fissuring the continuity of linear historical time. Yet, this resistance is not exclusive to the notion of

aesthetics, but can also be understood more broadly as a subversion of the modalities of fashion production altogether. Against fashion, the Bernhard Willhelm object performs a function similar to that of an artwork, where fashion is associated with utility and changes of great speed, and conversely, art is associated nonutility and a slower pace. Willhelm and Kraus's anti-fashion is parallel to the anti-art of Duchamp, whose work opposes notions of the function and status of the art object and the system in which it operates. Duchamp's 1917 work *Fountain* – a urinal – occupies a contentious place in art history. Although the original urinal was never exhibited and was not his first readymade, *Fountain* (and its subsequent replicas) has been one of modernism's most controversial works since its attempted public display at the first exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists. The Society rejected *Fountain* despite its policy "No jury, no prizes," unaware that Duchamp, who sat on its Board of Directors, had submitted the urinal himself under the false name "R. Mutt" of Philadelphia. Discursive reactions to *Fountain* initially dealt with the status of the work as art. In a review of the Society's first exhibition, *The New York Herald* took issue with the controversy and voiced that the urinal "may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not an art exhibition, and it is, by no definition, a work of art" (*The New York Herald* 6). Although art historical discourse more or less accepts *Fountain* as a work of art, its status remains often discussed. Its ability to interrogate the institution of art and ask the fundamental question "What is art?" continues to maintain its relevance in the artistic avant-garde. Art historian and critic Arthur C. Danto's 2013 book *What Art Is* is a testament to the pertinence of this philosophical question. To this day, *Fountain* carries with it implications for artistic avant-garde in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries whereby "institutional critique" –

a term later developed in conjunction with 1960s conceptual art – is a practiced method of vanguard cultural production.

Duchamp claimed aesthetic indifference with the anti-art *Fountain* and defied conceptions of the art as an object of beauty that pleases the eye, calling such art “retinal.” Rather, he championed “non-retinal” art through the use of the readymade, which was “based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste...in fact a complete anesthesia” (qtd. in de Duve 294). Willhelm and Kraus are interested in fashion as a conceptual entity that resists definition and defies conventional notions of pleasing aesthetics in a way similar to how Duchamp was “interested in ideas—not merely in visual products” (Duchamp qtd. in Sweeney 20). While Duchamp’s conceptual focus referred specifically to the institution of art and the ontological status of the art object, Willhelm and Kraus’s approach is analogous in the sense that they resist fashion as an institution and push beyond conventional ideas of fashion as ornament for the body or as utilitarian body covering. Aesthetically, their designs do not conform to preconceived notions of acceptable dress, and fashion editors and writers have described their clothes as “unwearable” (Pfeiffer), therefore suggesting that they are not everyday objects, but also that they are not visually attractive. This is not to say that the fashions cannot physically be worn, but rather, that the garments are viewed as being inappropriate and unappealing for attire in everyday life. In the words of journalist Hywel Davies, Bernhard Willhelm menswear is “impenetrable to the average gent” (10), a sentiment that communicates the grotesque physical attributes of the garments and the absence of a widespread appreciation or understanding of the brand’s conceptual aims. It also signals a resistance to gendered categories and an attempt to

unsettle their role in the social order. An indication of the so-called lack of wearability can be illustrated in the following example. Since Spring/Summer 2013, the majority of Willhelm and Kraus's collections have been shown online. With the exception of coverage for the *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* exhibition and its featured Spring/Summer 2015 collection, press coverage has proliferated in the blogosphere and independent fashion and general culture magazines. Willhelm and Kraus's designs have consistently received exposure in the directional youth-focussed magazine *Dazed and Confused* that promises "radical fashion," and its older sibling, the luxury bi-annual *AnOther*, both of which belong to the group Dazed Media. Willhelm has explicitly referred to the appreciation of his designs as objects (rather than as "wearable" or functional clothing:

A lot of people have preconceived ideas. They lack the openness to look at something and allow themselves to be persuaded that something is beautiful. I see myself as someone who wants to shine a different light on things. A lot of people judge clothes on the sole criterion of whether or not they would wear it themselves. For me, it suffices to look at them and respect them." (Willhelm qtd. in Harms)

If fashion is unwearable, its object status transgresses the borders between the applied and "fine" arts and becomes a radical thing, whereby unwearability is synonymous with its radicality. According to critical theorist Bill Brown, objects become things "when they stop working for us" (4), that is, when objects lose their original functionality in the human world. As well, he speaks to the unknowability of a thing and its tenuous status as an unnamed, indeterminate object without a prescribed function, as it can be seen as "an amorphous characteristic or frankly irresolvable enigma (Brown 4). In this way, Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde creations are things because they renounce a socially acceptable notion of wearability and no longer function as fashionable clothes, instead existing in a state of ambiguity. I follow interdisciplinary scholar Margaret Werry who

contends that thingness possesses a temporal element that simultaneously is “a mystification of the relations of production” and “of the production of time itself” (85). Released from their everyday function, Willhelm and Kraus’s things play with time as they adapt to different contexts of display and use (or, rather, uselessness).

In his writing on fashion and art, Svendsen asserts that fashion designers use visual strategies that make their clothes more appropriate for museum exhibitions than as functional garments for quotidian use (92), employing the specific example that Hussein Chalayan’s fashion shows take on the appearance of art installations. This quality of transference between fashion and art makes for avant-garde fashion’s easy transition from the catwalk to the museum. In some instances, designs proceed directly into the museum without having participated in the ceremony of presenting collections on the runway during industry-approved fashion weeks. Willhelm and Kraus’s exhibition record is indicative of such circumstance and it is likely that more people have encountered their fashions in a museum than in a retail setting, or on the street. Their clothes are everyday objects that when taken out of the fashion system, take on an ontological status similar to works of art. While this may be the case for many fashionable garments in general and is not limited to vanguard objects, Willhelm and Kraus’s designs occasionally omit the step of industry engagement, only to immediately progress to presentation in the institutional space of the museum. In refashioning everyday items as art objects, Bernhard Willhelm garments follow a path of transformation similar to Duchamp’s readymades. Due to this decontextualization, their pieces perform as artworks rather than as garments worn on the body. If one is to understand fashion as a social phenomenon, the unwearability of their clothes prevents them from achieving status as fashion in the traditional sense of the

term, for their “works” participate less in a wider social sphere and more in the codified spaces of cultural institutions. Unwearability also exemplifies the doubt cast in Willhelm and Kraus’s clothes as fashion objects, therefore obfuscating any clear path to categorization, for their designs revolt against the presumed utility of clothing. What follows is an examination of the ways in which their practice positions the object of vanguard fashion against the conventional nature of fashion via anti-fashion and its political engagement.

Quotations of folk dress as anti-fashion

Willhelm and Kraus’s recurring quotation of folk dress defies the pre-established temporal modes of rapid change and the continual (re)generation of newness in the fashion industry. I wish to underline that their borrowing of folk dress traditions is anti-fashion – that is, against fashion in the sense that it conflates seemingly contradictory ideas of folk dress and fashion – rather than non-fashion, as interpreted by fashion historian James Snowden (7). While I see “non-fashion” as a closely related concept, not all “anti-fashion” is “non-fashion” because the former is a conscious and deliberate rejection of fashion. In their book *Fashion and Anti-Fashion* (1978), Ted Polhemus and Lynn Procter elaborate on the concept of “anti-fashion” as exemplified in folk dress:

With the exception of the unfashionable (those who can’t keep up with fashion change but would like to), anti-fashion refers to all styles of adornment which fall outside the organized system or systems of fashion change. The Royal Family, at least in public, wears anti-fashions; my mother wears anti-fashion; the Hell’s Angels, hippies, punks and priests wear anti-fashion [...] In no case is their dress or adornment caught up in the mechanism of fashion change, neither do they want it to be [...]. While anti-fashions most certainly do occur within the context of Western and Westernized societies, the most readily identifiable forms are the folk costumes of primitive and peasant peoples. (16)

This excerpt demonstrates how the perceived stability of folk dress opposes a particular type of rapid change in the contemporary fashion system. As the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) has articulated, while the time of customs and tradition – and by association folk costume – is vertical and specific, the temporality of fashion is expansive and broad (236). In other words, the temporality of the “folk” moves in a progressive, linear direction, while fashion’s time is multi-directional. That is not to say that folk culture does not progress in time, but that its temporal development differs from that of fashion. As well, it has been nearly forty years since Polhemus and Proctor’s book publication and in that time, much has changed in the perception of monarchical dress. As a case in point, the younger generations of the British Royal Family now occupy positions in the fashion system as trendsetters of a sort. Perhaps the Duchess of Cambridge is most notable example with her Sarah Burton-designed Alexander McQueen wedding gown and numerous appearances in high street labels such as Hobbs London, Reiss, Zara and LK Bennett.

Although folk cultures have long been generalized as static in time and impenetrable to change, their interpretation by contemporary designers challenges fashion-time. Contemporary fashion is largely viewed as an urban phenomenon in which the city is equated with a rapid pace and constant growth. On the other hand, folk dress is associated with rural life and progress that is perceived as being slower than that of the metropolis. Snowden has intoned the opposition between city and countryside whilst addressing the notion of class: “When we speak of folk dress we mean the dress of the peasant communities and to a certain extent the non-fashionable dress of urban communities of Europe as it developed through the centuries” (7). Folk customs are not

seen as wholly urban cultures; they are cultures of the peasant and rural “folk,” which have come to represent a romanticized and static notion of tradition.

Willhelm and Kraus’s employment of so-called “traditional” or timeless dress forms, however, does not fall into the category of “fashionalization,” a term Polhemus and Proctor define as a phenomenon in which “traditional costumes are converted into the latest styles” (17). While Polhemus and Proctor may have been referring to the popular “folklore look” of 1970’s fashions that were contemporary at the time, I contend that Willhelm and Kraus’s “sartorial remembrance” (a term taken from fashion theorist Ulrich Lehmann) of folk culture extends beyond imitation and pastiche for fashion’s sake. The Black Forest region of Germany – which sits in relative close proximity to Willhelm’s hometown of Ulm in Baden-Württemberg – influenced his first womenswear collection for Autumn/Winter 1999-2000. The collection features a quotation of the *bollenhut*, a hat that is part of the region’s *tracht* (national folk dress of Germany and Austria) for women in this region (figs. 2a, 2b). Characterized by fourteen large woolen pom-poms fastened to a white straw hat, the *bollenhut* comes in two colour variations: black yarn (for married women) or red (for unmarried women). With this personal relationship to the Black Forest, Willhelm and Kraus go beyond mere quotation and transform folk dress into a contemporary fashion object embedded with historical meaning and subjectivity. Although Willhelm expresses ambivalence in parading about as a German national, he acknowledges the importance of his identity as a culturally valuable entity, where identity is far removed from notions of fashionability: “But from the beginning, I didn’t want to be seen as German. [...] The fashion industry in Germany was a nowhere-land after World War II, and I had to make myself free of the past. But

folkloric costumes are worth remembering and every designer should show his roots” (Willhelm qtd. in Menkes 18). Other notable souvenirs of Austro-German folk dress in the Autumn/Winter 1999-2000 collection include Willhelm and Kraus’s use of *loden*, a traditional Tyrolean fulled woolen material that is waterproof and typically produced in shades of green, brown and grey. The time intensive production of *loden* decidedly slows the rate at which fashion can be manufactured and runs in opposition to the demands of contemporary fashion and its accelerated pace. As a hardwearing material, *loden* challenges the fashion system’s strategy of planned obsolescence. Willhelm and Kraus seem to make an implicit critique of the fashion industry, which functions only when it maintains the cycles of ever-evolving trends that in many cases are produced industrially and often on a mass scale. By introducing this traditional material into contemporary fashion, they support old world methods of production, and propose timelessness in terms of fashionability and an extension of the material life cycle of clothing as a protest against contemporary fashion’s rapid manufacturing and its throwaway culture. The designers specifically choose to incorporate authentic elements such as traditional techniques and styles associated with *tracht*, therefore avoiding the “fashionalization” of anti-fashion whilst subverting the logic and object of the contemporary fashion system.

Willhelm and Kraus’s specific engagement with folk dress also poses a question of costume versus fashion. The term “costume” can be read in two ways: one that connotes a musty idea of historical dress or garments (e.g. Costume Society of America) or the definition of the term that denotes clothing worn for special occasions (e.g. Hallowe’en costume). Neither understanding of “costume” implies dress as conducive to everyday wear, but rather indicates a enduring temporal state presumed to be relatively

unaffected by shifts in fashion, regardless of the fact that, as anthropologist Johannes Fabian states, “cultures are constantly changing” (81). As well, both interpretations of “costume” imply tradition, where the past is preserved and time stands still. In the case with folk costume, the rural “folk” occupy a position of the Other, whose culture Fabian contends is identified with “repetitiveness, predictability, and conservatism” by dominant culture (81). In turn, this repetitiveness and predictability translates to reliability, where costumes are referred back to in order to perform a specific purpose, time and time again. As early twentieth-century Russian couturier Nadezhda Lamanova states in her 1923 article “*O sovremenon kostiume*” (Concerning Contemporary Dress), “in Russian folk costumes, despite their dependence on custom and traditions, we notice a certain functionality; they were suited to the goal they were made out for. There are everyday clothes and ‘Sunday’ clothes” (Lamanova qtd. in Stern 174). Thus, much like the general understanding of folk dress as something that does not progress with time, costume too evokes an element of conservatism and an association with the past. *Tracht* further encapsulates this idea of costume; while the wearing of *tracht* has gained popularity in recent years in the form of *landhausmode* (country house fashion) and *trachtenmode* in countries with Germanic cultural traditions, it should be noted that such forms of dress are hybrid in function similar to bridal fashion. In other words, although *landhausmode* or fashionable *tracht* do not operate within the contemporary fashion system per se, there is a fashion of this customary dress that shifts over time. As such, the nuances that divide the subcategories of *tracht* further complicate an understanding of Willhelm and Kraus’s quotations of folk dress as anti-fashion. The complex pairing of their position as

contemporary fashion designers and folk dress places their work at the juncture of tradition and contemporaneity.

Workwear as anti-fashion

Willhelm and Kraus employ the anti-fashion forms of workwear to defy the conventional understanding of fashion's ontological status as rapid and sustained production of the new. Similar to *tracht*, workwear is clothing that is timeless and made expressly for a specific function and activity. Uniformity and practicality in workwear counters the idea of constant evolution in fashion and as a result, occupies a position exterior to the contemporary fashion system. The Russian constructivists promoted one such utilitarian approach to the design of clothes with their anti-fashion. In 1923, painter-designer Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958) proposed three categories of clothing use: *prozodezhda*, *spetsodezhda* and *sportodezhda*. She argued that *prozodezhda* or "production dress" should be designed specifically with the wearer's profession in mind in addition to their comfort while performing required tasks; *spetsodezhda* or "specialized dress" had a protective function for occupations of surgeons, firefighters or factory workers; lastly, *sportodezhda* or "sports dress" would, as the name suggests, encapsulate clothing for athletics. Putting these concepts into production, Stepanova's husband, constructivist painter Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956) designed a two-piece leather and wool artists' working suit which featured several pockets for holding writing instruments and other tools (fig. 3). High-stress areas such as the collar, cuffs, placket, waistband and pocket openings were reinforced with hardwearing leather. Patch pockets were large and accommodating; the trouser pockets accounted for almost the entire surface area of the

front thighs. Furthermore, the suit allowed for a range of motion for the wearer, as it was loose fitting without being cumbersome. With these practicalities in mind, Rodchenko's design bears an explicit connection to the plight of the worker in uniform, unencumbered by the concerns of fashion.

Willhelm and Kraus's direct application of workwear traditions to their designs connects anti-fashion with production in the contemporary fashion system. Their Spring/Summer 2005 menswear collection was influenced by the workwear of Japanese manual labourers (fig. 4). A number of the collection's loose-fitting trousers are taken directly from the *bukabuka zubon* (baggy trousers) worn by *tobi shokunin*, high-altitude construction workers (fig. 5), which in turn are references to late nineteenth-century loose trousers known as knickerbockers. Cotton work shirts and jackets have also been quoted, and as with the rest of the collection, take on pulsating patterns including enlarged kimono motifs and bright colours such as orange, yellow, red, green and blue. The highly graphic, geometric patterns have a flattening effect on the clothes that recall Stepanova's *sportodezdha* designs from 1924 (fig. 6). While Willhelm and Kraus's interpretations of these uniforms are vibrant and made contemporary, it should be noted that Japanese construction worker uniforms themselves – as with *landhausmode* and *trachtenmode* – are not impervious to fashion change. Current examples of such shifts are evident in catalogues for major Japanese workwear companies such as Toraichi Co Ltd. and Kaseyama Co. As the catalogue for Kaseyama Co.'s "Working Style Magazine" suggests, the *tobi shokunin* uniform can be highly customizable in terms of aesthetic, from minimalist and understated designs to more flamboyant denim versions onto which traditional Japanese motifs and characters are printed (fig. 7). While workwear is not

designed to be contemporary fashion per se, there is fashionable style within the parameters of uniformity.

The Bernhard Willhelm Spring/Summer 2005 menswear collection and many subsequent collections include variations on overalls, an iconic example of American workwear that has transcended the cultural borders of many workwear traditions. As Stern argues, historical avant-garde anti-fashions such as Italian futurist Thayaht's (1893–1959) one-piece coverall *tuta* (1918) (fig. 8), Rodchenko's artists' working suit and László Moholy-Nagy's (1895-1946) designs are themselves re-workings of American overalls (42). Their borrowing of American workwear is explicitly aligned with the Marxist revolutionary idea of the proletariat. While Willhelm and Kraus are not card-carrying Marxists, their quotation of utilitarian dress similarly highlights the issue of socio-economic class. By recontextualizing workwear in a high fashion context, they subvert an understanding of contemporary “designer” fashion as luxurious objects that serve to communicate one's material wealth and social standing. I will return to this idea of fashion as a political commentary in the following chapter.

Returning to Thayaht, it should be noted that his position is unique from that of the historical avant-gardes such as Rodchenko, as he had a direct connection to the fashion industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Although he is perhaps most recognized for his design of the *tuta*, Thayaht also worked closely with Parisian couturière, Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975) in the 1920s. He illustrated Vionnet's 1922 collection for the magazine *Gazette de Bon Ton* that depicted outfits using “line, bias-cuts, and movement depicted with the cubo-futurist ‘fields of force’” (Ryan 27). As Daniela Fonti points out, however, Thayaht was also responsible for designing Vionnet's

logo, proposing his own clothing and accessory designs, and for preparing graphical elements in the production of designs (47). Thus, Thayaht's wide-ranging involvement with Vionnet initiated a distinctly revolutionary aesthetic dialogue within a more widely disseminated fashion discourse.

While noble in their efforts, these artistic attempts to eradicate fashion were never mass-produced, and therefore were unable to infiltrate the fashion system. In a comparison between Thayaht and constructivists such as Stepanova, and her comrade Liubov Popova (who also trained as a painter), the latter were less able to successfully enact revolutionary change because they were external to the fashion system. As Djurdja Bartlett writes in her book on Socialist fashion *FashionEast* (2010), Stepanova "made a lot noise with her programmatic texts" while Popova's "artistic excellence was never transferred to real dresses" (37). Trained as cubists, both applied geometric principles directly to their designs lending a futurist sensibility. Stepanova's drawing of sports clothing renders garments as two-dimensional, as if no body was expected to ever fill them. The patterns were drawn largely with straight edges in a colour palette of black, white and red, echoing contemporary agitprop posters. The patterns and colours seem to vibrate, causing an optical effect. Stepanova and Popova's textile designs were equally uncompromising in their politics and aesthetic abrasiveness. Popova's design from 1923-1924 features a blue hammer bisected by a red sickle set against a flat white background (fig. 9). Other textiles included lurid combinations of circles, chevrons, stripes, triangles and zigzags in contrasting colours, often all densely packed in the same design. In the mid-1920s, the Westernized National Economic Policy brought in the successful prerevolutionary designer Lamanova in an attempt to proffer a more accessible style of

dress “when it became clear that the socialist industry was incapable of producing any decent clothes” (Bartlett 37-38). Rather than strive to abolish fashion altogether as Stepanova did, Lamanova opted to reform fashion in favour of the contemporary socio-political climate of the capitalist NEP (Bartlett 38). In contrast to artist-designers Stepanova and Popova, Thayaht attempted to affect change within the pre-existing structure of fashion employing the same machinations that brings fashion to a larger audience.

Unlike the constructivists, who used clothing to counter or eradicate the system of fashion altogether, Willhelm and Kraus instead aim to reshape the cultural understanding of contemporary fashion through their role as agitators within the industry. It should be stressed that Willhelm and Kraus’s quotations of workwear are not interpreted for the characteristic of conformity in uniform dress in the way that Stepanova envisioned with her categories of *prozodezhda*, *spetsodezhda* and *sportodezhda*. Rather, Willhelm is strongly against uniformity and has expressed this as such: “Uniformity is so sad. Please mix it up. Make things happen your own way. I’m happy we don’t have to wear uniforms. It’s nice to be different and individual” (qtd. in Kowalewski). His resistance to conformity through uniformity demonstrates the push and pull between contemporary anti-fashion and the categories of workwear and folk dress. Much like the subcultural anti-fashions of punk, a dialectical relationship between uniformity and individuality can be said to exist not only in Willhelm and Kraus’s *tracht* and workwear inspired designs, but also in the method of quotation in their practice more generally. Their fashions therefore inhabit the interstitial space of what can be called a “quasi-uniform,” a term fashion scholar Jennifer Craik uses to describe popular music acts’ attempts to

standardize a style while at the same time allows for variation (2005); they purport difference, yet adhere to a certain degree of recognizability. While both workwear and folk dress appear to be temporally static and outside of fashion change, their condition of being out-of-time is thrown into flux when quoted in contemporary fashion. The temporal precariousness of Willhelm and Kraus's anti-fashion disrupts the "nowness" of fashion-time – a function of the contemporary – and presents a fractured notion of present time.

A question of dialectics: the contemporary

Willhelm and Kraus's anti-fashion quotation of Black Forest and Tyrolean folk dress and Japanese workwear renders their avant-garde designs temporally disjointed, because they hover between history and contemporaneity. They sit outside of historical linear time, and are simultaneously "out of fashion" whilst functioning within the discourse of contemporary fashion. This notion of disjunctive temporality in relation to Willhelm and Kraus's fashion can be further elucidated with reference to the theoretical framework of Terry Smith's interpretation of contemporaneity (the condition of being contemporary), and Walter Benjamin's concepts of history, *Tigersprung* (a tiger's leap into the past) and *Jetztzeit* (now-time). In *What is Contemporary Art?* (2009), Smith proffers that contemporaneity "requires responses that are significant in ways quite different from those that inspired the many and various modernisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (1). In other words, the contemporary is distinct from modernism and occupies its own site in historical time. Thus, contemporaneity in Willhelm and Kraus's fashion can be seen as being outside of modernism, a way of being-in-the-world that is specific to the present. Smith further distinguishes "contemporaneity" from modernism as "the

immediate, the contemporaneous, the cotemporal [...] [and] the relation between the modern and the contemporary” (T. Smith 4). In regards to Willhelm and Kraus’s sartorial remembrance of folk dress and workwear, this interpretation demonstrates the multiplicitous meanings of the contemporary: it speaks of the present time, denotes co-existence and simultaneity, and is periodized as a distinct current that follows modernism, postmodernism or its variations. Given Smith’s definition of the “contemporary” as immediate, “contemporaneous” and “cotemporal,” all of Willhelm and Kraus’s current production falls broadly within the contemporary. Smith’s interpretation, however, leads to the question: what periodization encompasses the contemporary and by extension, contemporary fashion? If in the ever-shifting present, the contemporary is a moving window of time, then Smith also suggests that “contemporary” can be read as “being perpetually out of time, or at least not subject to historical unfolding” and “to be suspended in a state after or beyond history, a condition of being always and only in a present that is without either past or future” (T. Smith 245). In other words, the contemporary is not with time (cotemporal), but rather outside of present time.

In this sense, Willhelm and Kraus’s garments are situated in a paradoxical relationship; they are simultaneously anachronisms of the past and future in the present, and reflect the multiplicitous nature of temporality in the contemporary moment. Although they are contemporary because they are in current production, they also inhabit a disjunctive temporality external to a linear concept of history. It is this exteriority to present time with which Agamben examines in “What is the Contemporary?” The essay takes Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1873-1876) as a point of departure,

wherein the philosopher grapples with his own present. Agamben writes to Nietzsche's sense of "disconnection and out-of-jointness":

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong in their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (40)

To be contemporary is to be anachronistic and outside of the present time, where present time is a site of disjunction (Agamben 41). In addition, Agamben asserts that as an exemplar of the contemporary, fashion "always takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a 'not yet' and a 'no more'" (48). The question of the fashion object is such that to be "in fashion" signifies either anticipation or a sense of belatedness. In the conventional understanding of the term, fashion is therefore never truly fashionable.

Using the neologism *Tigersprung* (a tiger's leap), Benjamin contends that "[f]ashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thicket of long ago" ("Theses" 261); fashion therefore jumps from the contemporary moment into the past, and in doing so, elucidates a disjointed relationship with historical and linear time. Due to an endless "method of quotation" (Lehmann, "Fashioning History" 301), the logic of fashion is to evoke the past within the present as new and up-to-date. Willhelm is distinctly aware of temporal disjunction in his practice which occurs as a result of borrowing from folk dress traditions. When referring to Black Forest hats known as *bollenhüte* quoted in his Spring/Summer 2007 womenswear collection, Willhelm states that they "look like they came from outer space" (qtd. in Loschek 2006/2008) rather than entirely acknowledge their provenance from the historical category of folk customs and dress. In its contemporary quotation, the *bollenhut* goes through a process of

decontextualization; it is no longer a historical object taken from its origins in the mid-eighteenth century. Instead, it acquires newness in the contemporary context as its original status is fissured by fashion-time. Willhelm and Kraus's version of the *bollenhut* is made new because it is not an outright copy of its original. Instead of natural-colored straw used in traditional *bollenhüte*, the Bernhard Willhelm hat is formed from black felted woolen material, as if to literally refer to the Black Forest in name. Lehmann contends that imitation – a form of emulation or simulation – differs from mimicry, that is, outright copying or exacting reproduction: “However, irreverence toward the past is best achieved by quotation as imitation rather than by mimicry, since the constant change in fashion cannot be satisfied simply by a historically accurate copy. The clothes have to “invent” the old, not mimic it” (*Tigersprung* 165). In other words, for fashion to enact change and remain contemporary, the past must not be wholly reconstructed. In Willhelm and Kraus's interpretation of folkloric dress, nothing is a complete copy; their fashion achieves contemporariness because it references the past but remains a product of the present. Another example of imitation is an ensemble in the Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection includes a white t-shirt with *trompe l'oeil* print of suspenders traditionally paired with *lederhosen*. Willhelm and Kraus's techniques, however, are not inauthentic; they are conscious of the temporal shift between the past and present and, to use Eric Hobsbawm's words, the “invention of tradition” (1992). Through the form of contemporary fashion, the re-articulation of folk dress creates synchronous temporalities split between history and contemporaneity. Although nostalgia may play a part in their quotation, Willhelm and Kraus are not attempting to recreate a lost historical time tied to

folk culture. Rather, they knowingly decontextualize folkloric dress, producing fashion that creates a temporal fissure as it reaches into the past to reorder the present.

Although Willhelm and Kraus's garments and looks can be labeled as postmodern in their mash-up of old and new, they are more succinctly tied to the idea of the contemporary. While the postmodern was more concerned with refuting grand narratives and attempting to break with modernism, the contemporary addresses the existential nature of being in the contemporary world as a historical time that has collapsed under the weight of the Internet. Contemporaneity, then, is a condition separate from modernism(s) of the past, and as Smith suggests, sits both outside of present time and outside of history. Agamben further elaborates on the connection between contemporariness and a specific state of being:

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it. (41, author's emphasis)

Therein lies a temporal disjunction: the fashion of Bernhard Willhelm is contemporary because it is in current production, yet its contemporariness contains within it a distancing effect. I argue that this exteriority can be more succinctly described as a position at the forefront of the contemporary, where Willhelm and Kraus advance fashion practice at the intersection of the avant-garde and contemporariness.

Ulrich Lehmann's concept that "*quotation is sartorial remembrance*" (64, author's emphasis) and his theorization of Benjamin's "tiger's leap into the past," and "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) align with Agamben's and Smith's postulations on the

contemporary. These interconnected ideas are manifest in Willhelm and Kraus's methodology whereby contemporaneity is articulated through their sartorial remembrance of folk dress traditions. The quotations of traditional alpine and Tyrolean folk dress serve as examples of the heterogeneous character of contemporaneity. In the Spring/Summer 2007 menswear and womenswear collections, contemporary silhouettes are hybridized with Bavarian and Tyrolean folk dress: *dirndl*n dresses, *lederhosen* (leather shorts), crossbar suspenders, blouses, *loferln/wadlstutzen* (traditional Bavarian "legwarmer" socks), stockings with garters and felt hats (fig. 10). These so-called traditional garments have been committed to collective memory, idealized throughout popular culture along with the alpine region from which they originate. Films such as the American musical *The Sound of Music* (1965) and its nostalgic folk-styled song "Edelweiss," come to mind, while stereotypes such as the yodeller and alphorn player in television advertisements for the Swiss cough drop brand Ricola proliferate. Through folk music set to visual imagery of Alpine mountains and bucolic meadows, both examples elucidate pastoral calm in idyllic rural life and refer to a wistful affection for a time that has long since passed. Yet, Willhelm and Kraus's quotations of Tyrolean folk dress disrupt any sense of an imagined, romantic past trapped in the vestiges of time. A number of collection garments – displayed on models of culturally diverse backgrounds – feature authentic-looking, yet doctored floral motifs comprising of edelweiss, gentians and Alpine roses along with classic horn and bone buttons (fig. 11). These appear on an ensemble complete with a fanny pack, while the same print is translated to trench coat-like jackets, hats and backpacks. *Lederhosen* are hybridized with a mini skirt in the womenswear collection and *dirndl*n are truncated, while green *lederhosen* are paired with a loud, bright yellow

hooded sweatshirt with an all-over print of cartoon characters. These amalgamations speak to the temporal heterogeneity of the contemporary, as they are simultaneously historical with their quotations of folk dress and workwear, and contemporary in their silhouettes. In this way, the garments are contemporary because they are produced in the contemporary moment and because they sit outside of present time.

Whether it is the heterogeneity of styles or the plurality of its global forms (T. Smith 2009), Willhelm and Kraus's designs – with their multitude of influences from across cultures and historical periods – cannot be pinned down to any one style or period; they are not fashionable in the sense of being on trend, but rather are at once historical and contemporary. The very essence of the disjunctive present and temporality is found in fashion. Agamben argues that in order to be fashionable, one is required to be ever so slightly out of step with fashion: “So, being in fashion, like contemporariness, entails a certain “ease,” a certain quality of being out-of-phase or out-of-date, in which one's relevance includes within itself a small part of what lies outside of itself, a shade of *démodé*, of being out of fashion” (49). Thus, Willhelm and Kraus's sartorial remembrances reflect on contemporaneity, a state of temporal simultaneity where heterogeneous styles, histories, and approaches constitute a present unfettered by Benjamin's concept of universal history or homogenous, empty time. The Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection melded folk dress traditions with multifarious looks including the psychedelic 1960s or its reinterpretation through the aesthetics of the 1980's music genre, acid house. In both the runway presentation and lookbook, a long-haired male model simultaneously sported *lederhosen*, round sunglasses with an iconic Smiley face motif, and Smiley face paint (fig. 12). While these various temporalities of

the past are individually familiar and can be located to their respective periods, their contemporary amalgamation with *tracht* is confounding. Willhelm and Kraus's specific incorporations of folk dress and workwear are leaps into the past in which time does not change and memory remains intact. Using these temporally static traditions, they invent their own tradition that is at once old and new, and write a sartorial history subjectively as German nationals and as fashion designers. This notion of rewriting is taken from Lehmann, who sees fashion's rewriting of its history as a way of understanding through looking back (*Tigersprung* 232). Specifically, Willhelm and Kraus write the narrative of the contemporary, which itself is constantly being revised and rewritten in the continuous present. Their nostalgic garments make sense of the contemporary moment fractured by heterogeneity; they are contemporary objects against time (con-temporary) or out-of-time. In this way, the historical is no longer relegated to the past, but rather, becomes anew in the perpetual present. Due to constant regeneration and renewal, both history and fashion are comprised of the past, present and future, the relative distinctions of which Caroline Evans contends has "almost imploded" (*Fashion at the Edge* 13). As such, this collapse of time disrupts a sequential understanding of historical narrative where Bernhard Willhelm's folk costume and vanguard fashion are spliced in the contemporary moment.

***Jetztzeit* (now-time)**

The Benjaminian concept of *Jetztzeit* or "now-time" is helpful in understanding non-linear historical time and the contemporary in Willhelm and Kraus's temporality-defying designs. For Benjamin, "historicism," as differentiated from "history," is full of

homogenous, empty time, whereas “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” (“Theses” 261). Lehmann explains that in a Benjaminian understanding of history, the past is acted upon by the present: “Benjamin thought that the evaluation of history must be concerned with activating the past by injecting the present into it. Periods can be extracted from the false and positivist historical continuum and charged with “now-time,” filled with meaning and revolutionary potential for contemporary (cultural) expression” (“Fashioning History” 298). By Benjamin’s assessment that history is discontinuous, it follows that current cultural production takes on this mindset. The contemporary moment’s cross-cultural exchange is one such indication of now-time that disrupts the continuum of history. For centuries, cross-cultural borrowing has facilitated taste for the new and up-to-date, the novel and the exotic; in the contemporary moment, this is further accelerated through globalization.

A dissection of the musical accompaniment in the promotional video for Willhelm and Kraus’s Spring/Summer 2007 womenswear collection illustrates how several fragments of history combine to comprise now-time. The call of an alphorn, accompanied by orchestral strings and flutes, introduces the video’s title sequence; as the camera slowly focuses on detail of a garment, a female yodeller joins in on the musical arrangement. Although the soundtrack suggests a bucolic Alpine location frozen in time, it in fact originates from the opening theme song to the 1970s anime series *Arupusu No Shōjo Haiji* (*Heidi: A Girl of the Alps*), which itself is derived from the Swiss novel *Heidi* (1880) by Johanna Spyri. In turn, German scholar Peter Büttner has suggested that *Heidi* may have been borrowed or plagiarized from a German book written by Hermann Adam

von Kamp in 1830 (AFP 2010). The anime version has been translated into numerous languages including Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian and Arabic due to its continued worldwide popularity for more than thirty years after its initial airing. Willhelm's video features a few of these translations that, for the listener, might meld together into one theme song. The video manages to amalgamate these widespread points of cultural reference – from Western Europe to East Asia to the Middle East – rather seamlessly, where one interpretation of the *Heidi* theme song merges into another. The viewers fill in the incongruences, for Willhelm's designs are neither exact copies of traditional folk dress, nor is the soundtrack comprised of authentic recordings of Alpine yodelling. This exercise of tracing the point of origin for Willhelm's quotation of the Alpine through folk dress and music demonstrates the steady pace at which globalization in cultural production has been growing. In this case, the original film has been dubbed over several times and exists in a discourse of continual re-telling. Thus, the story of Heidi, or Adelaide, as it is known in its German incarnation, comes full circle through the filter of the global turn: from von Kamp's German novel, to Swiss literary heroine Heidi, to Japanese anime series, its incorporation into the Spring/Summer 2007 womenswear collection promotional video, and finally to Willhelm's Tyrolean folk dress-inflected fashion.

Time travel: when fashion moves from the runway to the museum

Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde fashion object travels in time when it leaves the runway only to enter a museum for collection or display. During this process, it oscillates between the fast pace of the fashion industry and the decidedly slower tempo of the

gallery or museum. In 2006, Willhelm and Kraus donated their entire clothing archive to the MoMu. The holdings now number in excess of 2,500 artifacts, which represents a tenth of MoMu's entire collection. Furthermore, the Bernhard Willhelm collection continues to expand, as each season MoMu receives a selection of looks from both womenswear and menswear collections. Contrary to proto-avant-gardes and avant-gardes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who took a critical position against, and external to the institution of art, their inheritors in contemporary fashion embrace such institutional affiliation. For designers, such an arrangement can be rather beneficial in terms of cultural capital as their *oeuvre* is taken out of the fast-paced fashion system and secured with a final resting place in the history of material culture or elevated status as art. The longevity of fashion is extended in moving from the runway to the museum, resulting in a prolonged duration of socio-cultural relevance. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of "time travel" in her work on museums and their interaction with tourism and heritage (1998) is useful in articulating the precarious temporality of fashion objects as they enter a museum for collection or exhibition purposes. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett makes reference to a series of Museum of Modern Art exhibitions on so-called "Primitivism" dating from the mid-1930s to 1980s, whose "[t]emporal elevation moved objects from the status of artifacts to that of (modern) art" (230). In this example, the ontological status of objects – as art or nonart – is directly affected by temporal recontextualization in the site of the present day museum. Yet, museum conservation can also create multiple new temporalities for objects each time they are unearthed through archival research. Theatre scholar Marlis Schweitzer recalls her encounter with a dance costume from an early nineteenth-century dance performance inspired by Oscar Wilde's

play *Salomé*, noting that the object performs again in the present. The costume's life force is renewed with each interaction:

It is not that I, as researcher, read the costume as a text but rather that the costume invites me to imagine the intricate choreography it developed with Allan. In such moments, the "frozen" theatrical life of the costume begins to thaw and flow again. The repertoire emerges from the archived object and a new performance unfolds, this time between the archived object and me. (Schweitzer, "Maud Allan's Salomé Costume" 47)

As with the case of the recontextualization of artifacts through MoMA's presentation and representation of "Primitivism," the performance of the Salomé dance costume for Schweitzer is seen anew each time it is accessed. In this way, archived and exhibited objects become multitemporal, connecting past, present and future (Schweitzer, Maud Allan's Salomé Costume 46), their preservation allowing for the continual renewal of life.

Fashion objects become relics as they undergo a process of life-prolonging secular consecration when exhibited and preserved in cultural institutions. In her article "Oral Logics of the Museum" (2005), Jennifer Fisher writes that in the museum, artifacts are prevented from entering the final stages of life through a process of literal and figurative embalming: "The traces of such technologies of death persist in the museum, an institution that fosters a forensic orientation to material culture, an obsession with preservation, a preoccupation with embalming objects that would otherwise dissolve, rot, fade or fracture into dust without the science of conservation" (198-199). As places of conservation, museums attempt to slow down or halt the progression of time in objects, staving off a premature death of conceptual and material deterioration. During this process, artifacts become isolated from their historical context because they physically co-exist in the museum, "a temple where Time seems suspended" (Bazin qtd. in Duncan

11). The notion of embalming garments and putting fashion-time on hold is directly oppositional to fashion's cycle of transience and the understanding of contemporary fashion as throwaway culture. Through the illusion of permanence – artifacts can still become broken, damaged or de-accessioned after they enter archives and collections – museums act against fashion-time as they struggle to prevent objects from death and irrelevance. The preservation of Willhelm and Kraus's garments in museum collections ensures that both runway fashion and designs that are produced for the market (10 to 15 percent of Bernhard Willhelm runway looks do not go into production) are archived and protected as artifacts of cultural heritage. Furthermore, runway presentation props such as handcrafted accessories not intended for production are conserved alongside collection items at MoMu, for they provide researchers with important information in understanding Bernhard Willhelm as a cultural entity.

In *The Culture of Fashion*, Christopher Breward writes that the work of Antwerp school designers such as Martin Margiela or Ann Demeulemeester are “manifestation[s] of those late twentieth-century debates centering around the distinctions between fine art and craft, suitable for presentation in the spaces of a gallery, rather than ephemeral commodities designed for retail and wear” (231). Taking Breward's work into account, I argue that Willhelm and Kraus's practice falls within this intermediate space between fashion as a short-lived commercial product and the eternal time of art. Abdicating certain notions of fashion as wearable commodity, Willhelm circumvents mass appeal and consumerism in favour of high art when he states that “fashion is not a product that has to please everyone” (Willhelm qtd. in Loschek 2006/2008). As a result of the expeditious institutionalization of their designs, Willhelm and Kraus's designs are

quickly enshrined with cultural capital and accrue additional temporal meaning once displayed as museum pieces. Following the logic that fashion guarantees its own obsolescence in order to manufacture newness and that fashion is already “out-of-fashion,” garments can become renewable entities and made forever contemporary when shown or acquired by cultural institutions. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, as heritage organizations, museums and galleries transform otherwise obsolete cultural groups and practices into the contemporary through “the value of pastness” (150). In other words, obsolescence plays a key role in reversing time, and regenerating and ensuring survival of an object. The irony is that these humorous, ironic fashions are made serious and given an air of cultural importance once they acquire the status of artifacts. Once placed on pedestals, any remaining contemporary marker of “street style” is removed and their object condition shifts from a fleeting state to one of permanence. It is precisely these temporal contradictions that trouble the ontological status of Willhelm and Kraus’s avant-garde object of fashion. Thus, museums prolong fashion-time twofold: firstly, in the conservation of objects whereby artifacts can potentially be preserved for centuries or even millennia; and secondly, through exhibitions, which extend the display of fashion from mere minutes in the case of runway presentations to days, weeks, or months.

Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp

Willhelm and Kraus’s exhibition practices interrogate the ontological and temporal conditions of the avant-garde fashion object in testing the disciplinary and temporal divisions between fashion and art. Museums are spaces that create time and space for

both the objects exhibited and the viewer. Art historian Carol Duncan links concepts of time and space in museums and compares them to ritualistic edifices such as temples, arguing that “museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning” (10). Referring to the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, Duncan highlights the concept of liminality in viewing exhibitions where time is momentarily suspended (11). She further contends that a museum visit is an occasion external to everyday life in which visitors are able to “move beyond the psychic constraints of mundane existence, step out of time, and attain new, larger perspectives” (Duncan 12). As a result, individuals can become lost in a time capsule of culture, shielded from contemporary life that carries on outside of the museum. Contrary to a runway presentation of fifteen minutes, a fashion exhibition lasting a few months markedly slows down the time of viewing, therefore promoting meditation on objects. This is significant, for fashion is inherently concerned with planned obsolescence both conceptually and materially.

Willhelm and Kraus offered a place for contemplation in their retrospective exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*. Mounted on occasion of their donation to MoMu, the exhibition condensed eight years of the label and employed contemporary Swiss artists/photography duo Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs (known as TONK) as art directors. Divided into twenty sections and based on ideas of past lookbooks, the show included a reading room, a soda machine installation and a projection room of archival footage. The stage-like sets for each collection functioned like sculptural installations in the round, allowing the visitor to physically move about to view the fashions through a number of perspectives. Avoiding a decidedly museological and chronological approach

generally attributed to retrospectives, the result was a series of collections organized into temporally disjointed installations and stage sets. Didactic panels and other short texts in the exhibition space were forgone to provide a less mediated experience for the viewer, itself a characteristic of contemporary art exhibitions. Numbers painted next to each set corresponded to an accompanying exhibition leaflet containing a hand drawn map of the various installations. The map plotted a course like a meandering treasure hunt, with texts describing the collections and how each was originally presented. The result was a marketplace or bazaar-like environment in which the visitor could freely wander along his or her own pace without being forced to follow any chronology or linear narrative.

From the museum foyer, a trail of zombie-like ghost costumes – from the Spring/Summer 2004 collection and film collaboration *Ghosts* (2003) with the Swiss artist Olaf Breuning – led the visitor up the stairs into the exhibition entrance (fig. 13). Already this display of bed sheets draped on human scale forms – many with humorous cartoon faces, bloody daggers and *trompe-l'oeil* gashes silk-screened on them – signaled an alternative understanding of the avant-garde fashion object as extending beyond the boundaries of a garment, inhabiting the space of art. The garments themselves did not resemble high fashion, but instead looked like Hallowe'en costumes that had been installed to reenact a performance. Furthermore, the ghosts were not isolated from the viewer, who would ascend the staircase alongside them. In fashion exhibitions, garments have traditionally been hung on mannequins and placed on pedestals or in vitrines, out of reach and at some distance from the viewer. On the other hand, contemporary art installations often forgo boundary-making devices such as stanchions or lines drawn on the floor in order to provide a more immersive environment. If it were not for the fact that

the MoMu is a fashion museum or that *Het Totaal Rappel* was a fashion exhibition, the “Ghosts” installation could easily have been read as contemporary sculpture in a different context. At the entrance, a hand-written credits panel inscribed by longtime collaborator and artist Carsten Fock introduced the space; it hinted at a “do-it-yourself” quality that undermines the clean and glossy aesthetic normally associated with high-end fashion. Organized thematically, each collection was conveyed through environments that at times were immersive and recalled *tableaux vivants*. The rest of the “Ghosts” collection was displayed in the form of a haunted-house amusement park ride, a “house of horrors” as described by the exhibition brochure. Black fabric was tented around the collection, replete with imitation cobwebs. The display recounted a zombie-like scene where skeletons and bloody mannequins, wearing the collection’s Greek and Etruscan-inspired designs, arose from coffins. The result was an elaborate conflation of elements in which the fashions themselves were no longer primary, but were part of a stage set. By presenting fashions in these *mise-en-scènes*, the avant-garde fashion object becomes secondary to the overall narrative installation where garments function as accessories. The supporting role of Willhelm and Kraus’s fashion in this example is similar to the function of costumes in theatrical or dance performances, where all numerous visual elements combine to convey the greater work.

Despite the seemingly disjunctive narrative of the installations, the visitor's viewing of the fashion was highly controlled and site-specific, mediated only by the confines of the museum space. The artistic presentation of Bernhard Willhelm designs in this context left little room for the sole interpretation fashion as a commercial product, as garments collected or exhibited by cultural institutions are rarely worn again. As Jeffrey

Horsley writes in his article “Re-presenting the body in fashion exhibitions” (2014), guidelines set out by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) state that clothing and textiles must not be worn on the body once accessioned into museum collections. He further points out that although exhibitions such as the MoMu exhibition *Dreamshop: Yohji Yamamoto* (2006) allowed visitors to touch and try on garments in dressing rooms constructed in the museum space, such cases are rare and isolated, as the objects came directly from the designer’s archive. Horsley compares this to an exhibition at Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, in which Yamamoto’s garments were exhibited outdoors, arguing that such “transgression of museum protocol can be read as reflective of the designer’s characteristically radical outlook” (77). Yamamoto’s fashion goes through a transformative process from its initial conception as wearable clothing, to artifact in a museum, before returning to its initial function. In the space of the museum, the object of avant-garde fashion struggles with the condition of its being, flitting back and forth between the impermanence of fashion and permanence of art. In artistic presentations such as these, exhibition practices blur the line between industry and museum; the commercial fashion object clashes with the museum artifact and becomes hybrid within the walls of the cultural institution (Pecorari, “Contemporary Fashion” 50). While the ICOM guidelines on the conservation of artifacts can be altered slightly to accommodate for garments borrowed from private collections or the designers themselves, this is not a common practice. As such, fashion – avant-garde or otherwise – loses its function as wearable clothing and everyday object, yet gains status closer to artwork once it enters the liminal time and space of the museum. What a vanguard artifact loses in use value when it is deemed “unwearable,” it gains in cultural value as a

visual, material object, ripe for display in a museum. In her discussion on the rise of museums in modernity and the advent of aesthetic theory, Duncan asserts that the ultimate resting ground for art belongs to the museum, arguing that “if art objects are most properly used when contemplated as art, then the museum is the most proper setting for them, since it makes them useless for any other purpose” (14). Garments that cannot or will not be worn do not serve any further purpose except as objects for contemplation, foisted into the context of the museum and incorporated into the canon of cultural history.

The section “Flowers in Construction Work” (Spring/Summer womenswear 2003) mimicked a construction site (fig. 14); reclaimed wooden furniture fragments, scraps of wood and household fittings created a chaotic scaffolding system or a hastily built, nonfunctional Rube Goldberg contraption upon which the garments were displayed. Unlike the presentation of dress in more traditional museum exhibitions, many of these garments and accessories were not placed on mannequins. Instead, they were neatly draped over sections of the half-built structure, merely hung on hangers, or poured from plastic household buckets. Without the suggestion of a bodily form as a reference, garments lose their context as wearable clothing. Rather, they revert to lifeless, flat objects that inhabit an ontological space closer to art than fashion. This seemingly casual mode of presentation was evident by way of prop hamburgers that were placed amidst the installation, emphasizing the objecthood of the fashion on display. In other words, the garments were less fashion – wearable clothing that circulates in the fashion system – than sculptural art objects. While such contexts of presentation remove Willhelm and Kraus’s avant-garde fashion objects from circulation in the fashion system, their value translates to a market for contemporary fashion in museums. As a case in point, MoMu

dedicates fifty-percent of their budget to the purchase of contemporary avant-garde fashion. This level of commitment demonstrates and stresses the value attributed to fashion as an important form of cultural production rather than its status as commodity or quotidian object. Adding to this are recent statistics that fashion exhibitions have proven to be a great draw for visitors, bolstering attendance and enhancing the museum as a branded entity. The 2015 exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute brought in 815,992 visitors, which became the fifth most visited exhibition in the history of the Met and broke the Costume Institute attendance record for the 2011 exhibition *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* with 661,509 visitors. With sponsorship from Yahoo, Condé Nast and a number of unspecified Chinese donors, the *China* exhibition also proved to be lucrative in ways beyond increasing attendance figures.

In the hybrid future-past aesthetic of the "Tirolean Room" installation, mannequins took on a cyborg-like presence where their folk dress-inspired garments from Spring/Summer 2007 were juxtaposed with lit-up, computer monitor "heads" that replaced traditional mannequin heads (fig. 15). The mannequins stood on pedestals surrounded and topped by piles of beige obsolete monitors, computer keyboards, printers, mice and a tangled mess of cables, all backlit with fluorescent light. One pedestal even featured a stuffed dog that wore a hat from the collection. Lit prop windows replete with checked curtains and window boxes filled with artificial flowers surrounded the area, giving the space the feel of an Alpine chalet. On a wall behind the cyborg mannequin display was a three-minute video work by Dutch artists and frequent Bernhard Willhelm collaborators, Carmen Freudenthal and Elle Verhagen. Entitled *Singing Girls* (2007), the

projection consisted of a girls' choir singing the song "Far Away" by British boys' vocal group, Libera. Their animated heads floated atop a photographic print of Willhelm and Kraus's designs situated against a snowy wooded scene and carved pumpkins. Across from this work was a bricolage of life-sized human and dog sculptures made of reed and basketry, accompanied by music traditionally performed at New Year's celebrations by local farmers in the Appenzell mountain district of Switzerland. It is in installations such as these that communicate Willhelm and Kraus's openness to multiple interpretations of their fashion beyond the functionality of clothing. The various mediums, modes and techniques of presentation expressed in exhibitions such as *Het Totaal Rappel* are achieved through constant engagement with collaborators, which serves as the basis for their practice.

In the space of a museum, Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde object of fashion endures as a conceptual entity beyond its transient materiality. "Trashed Room" (fig. 16) was an installation for the Autumn/Winter 2004-2005 womenswear collection inspired by throwaway and fast food culture. An enclosed room built in the exhibition space contained a teenager's bedroom that had been completely ravaged. Furniture sat overturned on the floor, which was littered with glossy magazine cutouts and other mass-produced detritus. Inside the room was a television, showing a video of three girls in midst of the trashing session. A mannequin wearing a flannel Mickey Mouse-styled suit sat facing a window, looking out onto an ersatz brick wall beyond it. In the installation here, a whole environment was conceptualized for a very small portion of the collection. In this sense, Willhelm and Kraus's work is conceptual and can be expressed through a variety of visual forms not limited solely to the display of the garments themselves. The

representation of their designs in various mediums extends and prolongs fashion as an idea. To offer a comparison to a contemporary example, the exhibition *Rad Hourani: Seamless, or 5 Years of Unisex* (2013) at Centre Phi in Montréal did not show any actual garments of the avant-garde haute couture designer within the gallery space. Rather, the exhibition featured a monochromatic spread of photographs, videos and computer-generated drawings of designs. Physical manifestations of Hourani's creations could only be located in the museum boutique/bookstore come "pop-up" shop where they were for sale. As guest curator, Hourani determined that it was not necessary to display tangible garments in the exhibition space in order to illustrate his practice. Exhibitions of vanguard fashion are more concerned with conveying a broader message about fashion – that is, a lasting, abstract concept of fashion – than with showing how garments are to be worn. However, focussing on the conceptual, nonmaterial aspects of the fashion strengthens its cultural capital, which is then meant to translate to a higher exchange value. In cases such as this, both the cerebral notion of fashion and historicizing lens of the museum can be used as branding tools through which more sales can be generated.

The section "Framed Ghetto Boys" (fig. 17) in *Het Totaal Rappel* featured a selection of urban streetwear hybridized with more formal tweeds and button down shirting from the Autumn/Winter 2006-2007 menswear collection. The installation, originally shown in the Palais de Tokyo, juxtaposed street culture with high art in explicitly referencing portraiture painting. Each mannequin – whose head was replaced with a floating photograph of a model, some of which were taken directly from the lookbook – stood in a wall niche, ensconced within large jagged, misshapen and gilded Baroque-like picture frames. This method of display altered the three-dimensional object

into a two-dimensional plane, as the mannequins could only be seen straight on, almost as if to create a reverse *trompe l'oeil* effect. In some of the “portraits,” jagged pieces of mirrored glass were inserted into the frames so as to mimic a broken mirror, while others featured sections of chain link fence that separated the “artwork” from the viewer’s space; both presentation strategies created a diorama-like environment that could be likened to display practices for animal taxidermy in natural history museums. Adjacent to these works was the collection “Black” (Autumn/Winter menswear 2005-2006), presented in a space filled with curtains of gold tinsel hanging from the ceiling, and through which a pedestrian bridge had been constructed. Mannequins sat on plastic lawn chairs in and amongst the tinsel fringe, lit from below by fluorescent tube lights that had been mounted to carved and terraced blocks of white polystyrene foam. As the viewer physically moved over the bridge and through the space inhabited by the fashion, it became abundantly clear that this was a deliberate break from conventional modes of presenting fashion in museums. Functioning more as interactive installations, environments such as these encouraged the viewer to experience and understand the conceptual basis for Willhelm and Kraus’s practice through direct engagement with the exhibition space. As perhaps the most explicit comparison of fashion to art in a museum setting, this mode of display revalued the commodity status of fashion, injecting it with the cultural value of art.

What is important to note is that such modes and techniques of exhibiting fashion are not only strategies employed in displaying Willhelm and Kraus’s work, but rather are representative of MoMu’s general curatorial and installation methodology. This is in part due to the fact that curators of past exhibitions have come from a diverse lot. To date,

curators have included: retail pioneer Geert Bruloot, owner of Antwerpian fashion mainstays Louis, a boutique of avant-garde fashion and Coccodrillo, a high-end designer shoe store; Linda Loppa, former MoMu director and head of the fashion department at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts, and current director of Florentine fashion school Polimoda; Bob Verhelst, sceneographer and artistic director of MoMu; Kaat Debo, current director of MoMu; and numerous designers who have collaborated with MoMu curators on their retrospectives. Furthermore, Horsley argues that the innovative display practices in exhibitions such as *Het Totaal Rappel* are largely due to the fact that the gallery “has been constructed so that optimum environmental conditions can be maintained throughout the space” (“A Fashion “Muséographie” 46). This is a deliberate move on the part of MoMu that does not require artifacts to be housed inside display cases, therefore “adding to the physical presence of the pieces and diminishing their psychological distance from the viewer” (Debo qtd. in Horsley, “A Fashion “Muséographie” 46). In addition, Debo stresses the importance of scenography in presenting fashion because “garments themselves don’t always tell you the whole story (qtd. in Horsley, “A Fashion “Muséographie” 46). Thus, MoMu’s experimental approach establishes Willhelm and Kraus’s practice in a newly-founded tradition of institutional display of contemporary vanguard fashion.

Het Totaal Rappel is an exhibition that reinforces the connection between sculpture, installation and temporality in the display of avant-garde fashion objects. It is in these built environments that Willhelm and Kraus’s avant-garde object of fashion is therefore contextually defined as artifact, isolated from fashion-time. As several of their regular and longtime collaborators’ work is included in the exhibition, there is no clear

distinction between exhibited fashion and the art that exists independently. It should be noted that while *Het Totaal Rappel* is indicative of MoMu's presentation techniques for fashion, MoMu's exhibitions are by no means average when viewed against those of their peer institutions elsewhere. Their experimental approach in probing the boundaries between fashion and art is an inherent part of their curatorial methodology. Yet, this disciplinary liminality is one piece of a larger plan to enact an avant-garde discourse. As fashion scholar Marco Pecorari argues, MoMu adopts a strategic methodology in which the museum "mime[s] the avant-garde role played by the Antwerp designers within the fashion system" ("Contemporary Fashion "49). By this, Pecorari is referring to the heritage of the "Antwerp Six," a group of avant-garde designers – Walter Van Beirendonck, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee – who after graduation from the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1980s, travelled to London in 1986 to show their collections at the London Fashion Fair. Due to this legacy, the city of Antwerp branded itself not only as a capital of fashion, but a capital of the fashion avant-garde in the 1990s. Since then, Antwerp has served as an incubator for the display, preservation, production and study of vanguardist fashion practice, uniting governmental support with the fashion department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and MoMu. Housed in the same building known as ModeNatie, the Royal Academy fashion department and MoMu have a symbiotic relationship in producing and maintaining the heritage and tradition of Belgian fashion as initiated by the Antwerp Six. Both institutions preserve this past through the continual presentation of avant-garde designers – historical or contemporary, Belgian or non-Belgian – in order to establish Antwerp's role within the history of vanguard fashion. In

using the term “Belgian fashion,” I am distinctly referring to fashion designed in the tradition of the Antwerp avant-gardes in the same way that French fashion is a synonymous term for Paris fashion. Previous to the Antwerp Six, there was no strong idea of what Belgian fashion was and as Suzy Menkes once argued, Belgian fashion in the 1980s was largely irrelevant because it “seemed like a contradiction in terms” (“A Rare Reunion” E2).

From its inception in the 1960s, the Royal Academy fashion department has taken a decidedly artistic route, and this is in turn echoed in the innovative exhibition practices at the MoMu. The 2013 anniversary exhibition for the school *Happy Birthday Dear Academie* affirms this dedication to crafting a historical narrative for the contemporary avant-garde and more specifically, the cultural production of the Antwerp school. Interestingly, this is not the first MoMu exhibition to celebrate and affirm the Belgian avant-garde, but one in a line of exhibition discourse that has continued from *Mode 2001* (2001), the exhibition *6+ Antwerpse Mode* (2007) which examines the practices of the Antwerp Six and Martin Margiela, and several monographic shows on Antwerp-trained designers. In this way, the importance of the Royal Academy in Antwerp’s development as a centre for vanguard cultural and fashion production is reinforced continually in these curatorially-focussed events and exhibitions, connecting the historical with the contemporary. Through its curatorial practice, the MoMu’s (re)staging of the Belgian fashion vanguard practice and their histories through exhibitions such as *Het Totaal Rappel* mirrors the complex temporal structure of the avant-garde. Institutionally vetted by both Willhelm’s alma mater and the MoMu’s exhibition programme, Bernhard Willhelm became a part of the Antwerp school’s avant-garde discourse, referring

simultaneously back to the tradition of the Six and to future generations of the academy. MoMu presents a temporally disjunctive history of Antwerp's fashion vanguard, weaving together the past, present and future, each of which informs the other. Here, I would like to bring into discussion the Freudian concept of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) in Hal Foster's theorization of how generations of the avant-garde negotiate between temporalities of the past and future: "[H]istorical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts—in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition" (*Return of the Real* 29). In Foster's view, the avant-garde cannot be wholly effective in its initial advance because it is "traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of time that is not prepared for it" (*Return of the Real* 29). Upon its return, the (neo)avant-garde seeks to repair the disruptive first moment that simultaneously "deepens such holes and binds them" (Foster, *Return of the Real* 29). As such, vanguard works do not merely repeat the events of their historical forebears, but also adapt to revivify the contemporary avant-garde and its construction. Temporally speaking, the avant-garde project itself is non-linear, and as Foster argues, "the neo-avant-garde acts on the historical avant-garde as it is acted on by it" (*Return of the Real* 29). By restating and exhibiting the avant-garde in their innovative displays, MoMu re-engages and revises avant-garde history, a project that itself is continually developing and negotiating between past, present and future vanguard practice. As a result of *Het Totaal Rappel*, Willhelm and Kraus's practice is firmly grounded in the artistic approach Willhelm honed during his time as a student in

the fashion department of the Royal Academy, and the tradition of avant-garde fashion in Antwerp.

Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus at Groninger Museum, Groningen

Willhelm and Kraus's exhibition entitled *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010) at the Groninger Museum in Groningen, Netherlands, took a less interactive approach in its staging in contrast to *Het Totaal Rappel* at the MoMu. That the context for *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* was an art museum – as opposed to a museum of decorative arts or world culture – imbued additional cultural capital on the vanguard fashion objects. The art museum's acknowledgement of their work provided an institutional validation that in and of itself was enough to frame avant-garde fashion as art or stress its close relationship with art. According to Duncan, the very structure of the museum provides a context in which any or all of its contents are available for contemplation:

One could take the argument even farther: the liminal space of the museum, everything – and sometimes anything – may become art, including fire extinguishers, thermostats, and humidity gauges, which, when isolated on a wall and looked at through the aestheticizing lens of museum space, can appear, if only for a mistaken moment, every bit as interesting as some of the intended-as-art works on display, which, in any case, do not always look very different. (20)

Duncan speaks to the authority and power held by the museum as a cultural force, the same force that legitimizes Duchamp's *Fountain* as an artwork rather than an object of modern sanitation. However, an examination of presentation methods and modes of Willhelm and Kraus's practice in the Groninger Museum exhibition further substantiates their work as serving a role lasting far beyond the provisional function of fashion as clothing. Costume designer Žana Bošnjak's approaches to the collection vignettes were

decidedly more classical in the sculptural sense than the more immersive elements of the MoMu retrospective. While much of *Het Totaal Rappel* transformed the interior of the museum, *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* featured more formal display language. That is not to say that the interpretations of the collections were not adventurous or playful, but that their presentation was more physically contained within the museum exhibition space. Grouped by collection, mannequins stood on short platforms placed in the middle of the room; some mannequins were individually housed in open wooden, vitrine-like frames that simultaneously spoke to the language of a retail display and preciousness normally associated with museum artifacts (fig. 18). In museological practice, objects are placed in vitrines because they are important material pieces of history meant to be preserved and protected; they are both culturally and monetarily valuable. In distancing the fashion physically from the viewer, the visual and passive consumption of objects signifies not only physical inaccessibility, but also the removal of everyday objects from everyday life. Such strategies verge on classical in manner and effectively create an aura around the *tableaux* as a method of creating greater cultural and symbolic value. A closer inspection of the mannequins themselves revealed their specific allusion to classical sculpture. With the exception of the Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 womenswear collection installation – which featured large Georg Grosz “Dada Death” skulls for heads in tandem with the collection’s lookbook – the majority of the mannequins resembled Greco-Roman sculptures as they exist today, firstly in their alabaster-white surfaces, secondly for their naturalistic forms, and thirdly, for their idealized bodies and finely-articulated facial features (fig. 19). Although the Greco-Roman mannequins were seemingly incongruous with the fashions they wore, and in

some cases, their overtly pornographic poses, the classical figures imparted a sense of timelessness and classical beauty on the fashions. They referred back to the history of Western art and the notion of the enduring art object. In aligning Bernhard Willhelm with this heritage, the sculptural display also suggested a link between art historical artifacts and Willhelm and Kraus's objects, establishing their practice within the context of cultural preservation more generally. As such, the temporal condition of Willhelm and Kraus's vanguard object of fashion is prolonged when exhibited in an art museum and its status is elevated to that of art.

To the experienced viewer of contemporary art, the Groninger Museum interpretations of Willhelm and Kraus's *oeuvre* bore an uncanny resemblance to the wax mannequin installations of contemporary Georgian artist Andro Wekua, yet without the loaded psychological intonation. Would the average contemporary art visitor in an institution such as the Groninger Museum have been able to parse out *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* specifically as the work of fashion designers without prior knowledge of the exhibition contents? I would argue that given these methods of presentation and context, Willhelm and Kraus welcome any confusion that may come of viewing their exhibition installations, as they intentionally obfuscate the ontological status of their objects.

Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles

Devised as a replacement to a traditional runway presentation, *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger* (2015) at the MOCA Pacific Design Center showcased the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection using both

photographs of and actual collection garments in seven spaces. The exhibition broke down all visible barriers between fashion object and viewer, blurring the boundary between fashion, installation art and retail space. The main installation featured eleven mannequins designed by a crash test dummy manufacturer, wearing the season's designs and situated amongst a mock tradeshow set-up of tables arranged in the shape of a pentagon (fig. 20). Tables were dressed with tablecloths and circular rugs – handmade by the luxury rug brand Henzel Studio – that prophesize the apocalypse of the year 3000 in messages including: “There Goes the Sun” and “In the daylight hours of 26th April 3000 14:18, in a narrow swath across the United States, the sun will seemingly go out.” Tables were covered in arrangements of various Kevin Murphy hair products, paintings, photographs of the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection, vintage copies of *Lee Baxandall's World Guide to Nude Beaches & Recreation*, and other naturist and nudist magazines in plastic sleeves. The arrangements in this main room took on the visual language of capital in the space of a gallery setting, reconfiguring and reinterpreting cultural space as a site for commerce. The visitor could freely window shop the exhibition, as many of the objects on display were available for purchase in the museum gift shop: Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection tote bags, wooden spanking paddles and leotards, and items from collaborations including Camper shoes, Mykita sunglasses and Uslu Airline nail polishes. Additionally, the aforementioned handmade rugs were also for sale, priced at over six thousand dollars on the Henzel Studio website. While *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* stopped short of opening a defined store in the space as Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami controversially did – he installed boutiques of French luxury retailer Louis Vuitton in his 2008 retrospective ©*MURAKAMI* at The

Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles and later at the Brooklyn Museum – it effectively transformed the gallery spaces into a museum gift shop or boutique, albeit an exclusive one with pricey souvenirs. This explicit display of consumer goods impinged on the presumed saintliness of the heritage-disseminating museum and questioned its role as a revenue generating business. While cultural institutions are often conceived of as being shielded from the demands of the market, contemporary (art) museums increasingly accept and solicit corporate sponsorships and private funding from the wealthy elite to promote exhibitions, programming and fundraising activities.

Willhelm and Kraus's main installation reimagined the hallowed space of the museum as an alternative shopping destination and experience. While *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* was similar to their previous exhibitions in that fashion was transformed through the language of art and its context, it differed in the sense that it took a step back to acknowledge its wares' original commodity status and its confirmed role in the fashion industry. Willhelm and Kraus's garments were acted on by the museum as a place of contemplation, and in turn acted on the context of the cultural institution. The fashion installations reconfigured the gallery as a retail space, almost as if to reveal its inner truth as a hybrid entity of culture and capital. As with the fully functioning Louis Vuitton boutiques in ©MURAKAMI, *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* toyed with the sanctity of the museum in unabashedly showcasing its commercial aspect. At the same time, the exhibition did not solely resemble a retail environment generated for the sale of fashion; it also took on the appearance of a site-specific installation imitating (or parodying) commercial space, much like Murakami's retrospectives. In toying with the aesthetic of retail display through installation art, Willhelm and Kraus attempted to simultaneously

recode the commodity status of their designs to create lasting cultural value as art (i.e. nonfunctional) objects and the cultural status of the art institution.

Another installation featured an algae-encrusted fish tank containing vintage copies of American *Vogue* and the book *My Life in Porn* by former gay porn star, Bobby Blake. Suspended over top of the tank was a mannequin pointing a handgun and wearing coveralls and sneakers (fig. 21). In another room, secondhand-store lamps, child-sized furniture and plastic laundry baskets were strewn about the space, splattered with paint that covered the wall and floor, the latter on top of which synthetic grass was laid. Corrugated plastic and large sheets of plywood leaned up against wall, to which more photos of the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection were affixed. It was a chaotic arrangement of found objects that prompted one to pose the question “Where does the fashion end and the art begin? Or, conversely, “Where does the art end and the fashion begin?” Perhaps more importantly, how necessary are these distinctions? The act of showing the collection in a gallery – not just the mere staging of a runway presentation in a gallery – but assembling it into an exhibition, extended the time of the runway show from minutes to months in duration. With static presentation, viewers are encouraged to spend longer contemplating the collection than they would viewing a live runway show or video broadcast. This prolongation of time is in direct opposition to the current climate in which runway fashions can be visually consumed online minutes after their presentation halfway around the world and designer knockoffs are made available to consumers mere weeks later by multinational retailers, only to be tossed aside when the next wave of trends advances.

Het Totaal Rappel, Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus and Bernhard Willhelm 3000 are comparable to more experimental exhibitions that have tested the limits of fashion display in museums including the Design Museum's *Hussein Chalayan: From fashion and back* (2009) and *The House of Viktor & Rolf* (2008) at the Barbican Art Gallery, both in London, England. In the former, the exhibition included Chalayan-designed T-shirts in the gift boutique, Chalayan-selected Turkish coffee in the café, and literally went beyond the walls of the gallery space to a display an outdoor vitrine/exhibition space along the Thames riverfront; this show engaged with fashion as but one medium of many. The installation for the *Panoramic* collection (Autumn/Winter 1998) in which three mannequins stood on step stools, and painted a curved section of wall, allowed the viewer to engage with and occupy the same space as the fashion, breaking away more traditional and hierarchical modes of presenting artifacts.

Dutch design duo Viktor & Rolf's exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery in London (2008) featured a dollhouse structure that occupied the majority of the two-storey gallery space and contained miniature mannequins fashioned after Victorian dolls, wearing smaller scale Viktor & Rolf creations (fig. 22). The upper level of the gallery inverted the idea of miniatures and featured life-sized mannequins with enlarged doll heads, effectively reversing the roles of the viewer and the viewed. Like these examples, Willhelm and Kraus's exhibitions are departures from traditional modes of presenting fashion in exhibitions; they go beyond the mere placing of garments on mannequins and create narratives, sculptural installations and at times, whole environments within which to view them. In doing so, they blur the categories between art and fashion in their visual display strategies, inhabiting a grey area between culture and the market. Within the

context of a museum exhibition, Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde fashions function like cultural property because they are presented as objects of artistic heritage. As ontological hybrids of commodity and art, they simultaneously inhabit states of provisionality as clothing, and are temporally suspended as art objects for contemplation.

Conclusion

Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde objects reside between the temporalities of fashion and art. While fashion operates in a system of rapid change and planned obsolescence, the object of art possesses a long duration, as it is held in contemplation. Their anti-fashion and exhibition practices challenge fashion-time and probe the fundamental question "When is fashion fashion?" Willhelm and Kraus position themselves both within and against the fashion system, just as the historical artistic avant-gardes simultaneously struggled within and in opposition to the institution of art. Through their employment of anti-fashion forms of folk dress and workwear, they define contemporary avant-garde fashion through its very negation. Their avant-garde garments transgress the ephemerality of the fashion object as everyday clothing when presented in museum exhibitions, where time is suspended and artifacts are physically and conceptually preserved as markers of cultural heritage and history. The result is an upending and subversion of the object of fashion as wearable, provisional clothing. Just as Duchamp's readymades defy their status as everyday objects when placed into institutions of art, the collection and exhibition of Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde fashions in museums imbue them with cultural capital, prolonging their life as artifacts. In the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, art institutions have become the final resting ground for discourse

of the historical, artistic avant-gardes. It is with this heritage that Willhelm and Kraus's exhibitions perform the avant-garde just as the vanguards before them. In the next chapter, I will turn to an examination of Bernhard Willhelm vanguard fashions as political credo and protest, and how Willhelm and Kraus sustain the narrative of the avant-garde as makers of socio-political change.

Chapter Three: Fashioning the Political

The MOCA Pacific Design Center's website described the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger* (2015) as a “response to the uniformity of consumerism in the 21st century as well as a forecast of the fashion experience in the 22nd century.” While the statement referred specifically to the homogeneity of consumer tastes and Willhelm and Kraus's resistance to the conformity of fashion, the exhibition could be read as a critique of capitalism and the role of contemporary fashion within it. Having the appearance of something between a site-specific installation and a tradeshow, the exhibition performed a dual function as cultural spectacle and capitalistic enterprise. Navigating the grey area with culture and commerce, the MOCA LA gift shop sold tote bags – which also appeared in the exhibition space itself – that feature an image on one side, with a reverse featuring a series of seemingly non-related phrases on the other. One tote proudly announces, “I didn't go to fashion week” in uppercase letters, contradicting the exhibition's commercial element as it served to replace the Autumn/Winter 2015 collection runway show. On the reverse side is a close-up image of a cockatoo, chosen as a motif for the exhibition because Willhelm considers the cockatoo “the most punk” bird (qtd. in Wu) and likely, also for its ability to serve as a double entendre. Another bag features a 1980's photographic portrait of a male model, who leans his front against a large rock and coyly looks over his shoulder at the viewer. The model sports a mullet hairstyle, cropped pink T-shirt and acid-washed jeans that have been strategically ripped open to reveal the whole of his backside. On the other side of the bag, the phrase “Let's Just Say That It Involves Farm Animals” appears, an explicit nod to gay sexuality and the taboo of zoophilia and/or bestiality (fig. 23). These

suggestive tote bags are only a small sampling of the ways in which Willhelm and Kraus traverse the boundary between respectability and “bad” taste, while simultaneously making a socio-political statement in support of queer sexuality. Centred around themes of the phallus and homoerotic fetish, the exhibition engaged with politics in the circumvention of bourgeois consumption and “good” taste seen through the lens of sexual politics.

How does the contemporary fashion practice of Willhelm and Kraus reconnect the avant-garde project with the radical impulses of the initial political vanguard? While the previous chapter examines the temporal interstices of fashion and anti-fashion, and fashion and art in Willhelm and Kraus’s avant-garde object of fashion, this chapter turns to a study of their practice as politically engaged protest. My understanding of “political” is dual: I propose that the vanguard designs of Bernhard Willhelm possess revolutionary potential for their ability to both question the politics of the public sphere and critique the institution of fashion. When designed with such motivating forces in mind, vanguard fashion can transform the socio-political sphere of everyday life by shifting acceptable notions of dress and by extension, the performance and presentation of the body. Social philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky contends that fashion helps to shape democratic society as a “globally positive power” (6) and that as an agent of social change, fashion can “affect diverse spheres of collective life” (16). Although Lipovetsky speaks to the direct impact of fashion choice on modern democracy, I argue that the socio-political concepts expressed by Willhelm and Kraus through their practice can similarly function as positive change in the social order where fashion is a medium for political engagement within the modern democracy.

Fashion as political protest

Willhelm and Kraus's practice regularly takes politics of the public sphere as its subject matter. Willhelm has publicly voiced his opposition to the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, and this in part is reflected in the Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection's quotation of military uniform. He described footage of American soldiers storming Saddam Hussein's presidential palace in Baghdad as "performance" and restaged it as the concept for the collection's runway presentation. In the performance, muscular models navigated around a makeshift obstacle course of furniture and objects – which Willhelm likened to circuit training – and stood in such a way as to reference the American soldiers who posed for souvenir photos following the raid. The designs themselves hybridize the combat uniform with sportswear. Grey pseudo-camouflage prints comprised of person- and cat-like figures attempt to mask the wearer's presence in an urban environment (fig. 24); *trompe l'oeil* prints of military medals and decorations, bullion fringes and epaulettes adorn the shoulders and fronts of vests, jackets and trouser and subvert military rank (figs. 25a, 25b). Despite these references, Willhelm has claimed the presentation-performance was "just an association" to the Iraq War (qtd. in Harms, "German Fashion"). Yet, it is clear in this example that he is somewhat uneasy with the idea of political fashion, as he contradicts himself in the following statement: "You cannot really make politics with fashion, but at least you could say that fashion fulfills certain roles in certain parts of our society. And yet, when you are in fashion, you have to deny that you do political fashion" (qtd. in Grau, "Bernhard Willhelm"). With this assertion, Willhelm acknowledges the conflict within fashion and its difficult relationship to politics. While he recognizes that fashion can have a social (read: political) role, he simultaneously

concedes that the structure of contemporary fashion is at odds with the idea of political fashion. That is not to say that Willhelm and Kraus do not make fashion that addresses the state of world affairs, but that their position as designers is an uneasy one in a field that continually considers itself outside of politics. Willhelm's reluctance to claim that the Iraq War reference was politically motivated demonstrates that a designer's political commentary can have adverse effects on the market for goods; simply put, the risk in stating any political affiliation has the potential to alienate customers in an already niche market for avant-garde fashion. On the other hand, while it is possible that Willhelm deliberately obfuscates the meaning of seemingly overt political positions as in the examples that follow, it is clear that he and Kraus take a stand on political issues including race, gender and sexuality.

Political activism and protest also figure into Willhelm and Kraus's frequent visual references to the United States. For example, an inverted American flag is displayed prominently on sweatshirts in the Spring/Summer 2003 menswear collection, again in the Autumn/Winter 2003-2004 menswear collection, and is revisited in the Spring/Summer 2015 campaign. The Spring/Summer 2006 collection entitled "I Am the One and Only Dominator" takes its name from the song "Dominator" by Dutch techno musicians, Human Resource and appears to address American hegemony. Garments from the same collection feature Willhelm and Kraus's off-brand Americana with a stars and stripes pattern rendered in nontraditional colours of yellow, white and royal blue, and black white and grey (fig. 26). Furthermore, an installation for the same collection in the exhibition *Het Totaal Rappel* at MoMu featured a male mannequin dressed in the season's looks with its pants pulled down to reveal its penile bulge and holding a faded,

tattered American flag. In the Spring/Summer 2015 collection, a white cropped and hooded T-shirt worn by both a female and male model reads “America’s Next Mop Todel,” deliberately satirizing the popular reality show; a blood-like stain is splattered across the shirt, and loops on the shoulders act as holders for cigarette packs, which in turn function as epaulettes. In the collection lookbook styled and shot by set designer and photographer Josh Paul Thomas, the male model wears the shirt paired with an upside-down American flag beach towel wrapped around his waist, a cigarette dangling precariously from his mouth as if to mimic American icon James Dean. This image can be read doubly as a parodic critique on American popular culture and the homogenization of beauty through mass culture.

Yet, Willhelm and Kraus’s political stance on and relationship to America and its culture are not so clear-cut. They are rarely explicit about their political views and as Kaat Debo, director of MoMu states, “Bernhard would never in an interview say anything anti-American” (Debo qtd. in Granata, “Kaat Debo”). As of 2013, Willhelm and Kraus’s creative production has been based out of Los Angeles, a bastion of American culture with its foundation in the Hollywood star system. Their critical position on the United States serves as a starting point for further engagement rather than mutually excludes their interest in the culture. This self-contradiction is in and of itself a characteristic of historical avant-gardes. In her recent Guggenheim exhibition *Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (2014), curator Vivien Greene acknowledges that Futurism was rife with paradox. While Futurism expounded misogynist ideals, the movement did include the participation of women artists, one of whom was founder F. T. Marinetti’s wife, Benedetta Cappa. Art critic and historian Sven Lütticken has described

such wavering principles in the avant-garde project as “constant *oscillation* [...] between irony, utopian visions and the desire to affect real change: the first two could lead to the last, which could itself revert to the ironic or utopian distance when it was frustrated” (132, author’s emphasis). In other words, the vanguard cannot solely exist as criticism or lofty goals embedded with ideological fervour. Rather, avant-gardes must articulate a critical position within the social order to realize the transformation of everyday life. Seen through this lens, Willhelm and Kraus’s move westward to Los Angeles in 2013 is constructive rather than antithetical. Around this time, designers such as Hedi Slimane (then of Saint Laurent) shifted their studios from Paris to Los Angeles; in 2015, former artistic director of Louis Vuitton, Nicolas Ghesquière staged his 2016 cruise collection in Palm Springs and Burberry London hosted their first runway presentation at the Griffith Observatory. The global fashion industry’s interest in engaging with Los Angeles extended into 2016 with Stella McCartney’s namesake London-based label showing its pre-fall 2016 collection at the Amoeba Music store in Hollywood following the 73rd Golden Globe Awards and Saint Laurent taking its Autumn/Winter 2016 menswear runway presentation to the Hollywood Palladium theatre during the week of the 58th Annual Grammy Awards. Los Angeles has been an attraction for European designers, with former creative director of Dior, Raf Simons making regular trips and Slimane having resided there for the period following his 2007 departure from Dior Homme. As such, Los Angeles and Southern California have experienced a cultural renaissance of sorts as an alternative centre for the international fashion world and respite from the frenzy and intensity of Paris. Despite Willhelm and Kraus’s opposition to Hollywoodized America, they challenge the super-commodification of fashion from the site in which it is

produced in order to actuate change. Willhelm acknowledges the idea of Los Angeles as a location for superficiality, but is interested in the darker underside of Hollywood: “[Los Angeles] is a surface, but as I said I want to scratch the surface. [...] There’s a surface under the surface” (Willhelm and Kraus). By this, he is perhaps referring to the porn industry, a business with which the label has been affiliated in the past and continues to be today. Furthermore, as a result of their move stateside, Willhelm and Kraus have received more substantial coverage from American publications such as *STYLE.COM* and *W*, therefore demonstrating their ability to further disseminate their ideas to the mainstream fashion press.

On the other hand, the “Protest Room” installation of their work in the exhibition *Het Totaal Rappel* is unequivocally political in nature. Featuring the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 womenswear collection, the tableau is an absurd take on grassroots culture, playing with elements the exhibition brochure describes as “the alternative left scene.” In an area marked out by wooden-fence-type structures, mannequins reconstituted from secondhand materials foist humorous activist slogans on placards such as “Free the Fish and Mosselen” (Free the Fish and Mussels) and “Don’t Love the Animals Too Much” (fig. 27). While the majority of the messages are lighthearted, some take on a more serious tone. One such placard reads “Vlaamse Belanglos” a word play on the Belgian far right political party “Vlaams Belang” (Flemish Interest). By adding the suffix “los” to “Belang,” a reference is made to the Dutch word “belangeloos,” therefore debasing Flemish nationalism from the idea of “interest” to one “without importance.” Of particular interest is the fact that MoMu staff assisted in creating these placards, and their free speech was supported in a provincially-funded museum. By displaying such an

unambiguously political message in their installation, Willhelm and Kraus implicitly occupy a position against Vlaams Belang's anti-immigration and pro-Flemish heritage stance. The runway show for the collection paired cheerful, almost juvenile designs featuring dinosaur appliqués and prints, clown costume inspired silhouettes and colourful harlequin patchwork with audio of a news report of a mosque bombing followed by soft news and the weather from German television programme "ARD Taggeschau." In contrasting the mostly playful, seemingly innocent garments with weighty world issues, Willhelm and Kraus put on view the absurdity of the contemporary, global world. Their politics are not aestheticized as in Karl Lagerfeld's "Protest Collection" runway show for the Chanel Spring/Summer 2015 collection. Its presentation in the historic Grand Palais in Paris appropriated a faux demonstration on a street staged to resemble a Parisian boulevard. Models carried placards with feminist-inflected slogans including "History is Her Story" and "Ladies First" tempered with more flippant phrases "Should Boys Get Pregnant Too?" and "Make Fashion Not War" (fig. 28). As *Guardian* fashion editor Jess Cartner-Morley contends, Lagerfeld has in the past referred to himself as a joke and that "[i]t would be naive to take this show too seriously." In contrast, although Willhelm and Kraus obfuscate their political protest through humour, their statements are not frivolous. Rather, their intent is serious, devised to vocalize their stance on social justice and affect change.

Willhelm and Kraus's activist tendencies can be aligned with the practices of Willhelm's former mentors, the designers Vivienne Westwood and Walter Van Beirendonck. Westwood, who has long been known for her connections to the history of punk fashion in London, is one such designer who has explicitly spoken out on issues

including consumerism and climate change. In 2007, she launched her manifesto entitled *Active Resistance to Propaganda* (“AR” in short), which was intended to prompt the youth to “get a life” and make change through engaging with and producing art. The manifesto deems that a quest for art is the solution to resisting propaganda: “Our journey to find art will show that art gives culture and that culture is the antidote to propaganda” (Westwood). This concept of active resistance served as the theme for her Spring/Summer 2006 collection, which included numerous shirts, jackets and bodysuits plastered with the “AR” branding and graphic graffiti-like designs along with Westwood’s trademark asymmetric, ruffled gowns. A number of T-shirts featured the phrase “I am not a terrorist” scrawled in black and paired with a red heart, and one worn by Westwood during the runway presentation read: “Please don’t arrest me.” The T-shirts, which have been available for purchase since 2005, were created as part of a campaign to draw awareness to anti-terror laws in the United Kingdom and raise funds for Liberty, the British human rights organization. While fashion journalist Nicole Phelps commented in a review of Westwood’s Spring/Summer 2006 collection that “it remains to be seen how many of her customers want to look like a walking political statement,” Zayn Malik, former member of the pop boy band One Direction was photographed in 2015 wearing the shirt. Other T-shirt collaborations have supported Greenpeace’s “Save the Arctic” campaign, and the rights of junior doctors in the National Health Service, while Westwood dedicated her Spring/Summer 2014 menswear collection to Chelsea Manning, the imprisoned, transgendered, American whistleblower who disclosed more than 700,000 classified military and diplomatic documents in 2010 to the media organization WikiLeaks. It is in actions such as these that demonstrate Westwood’s

dedication to political resistance and how activism sits at the forefront of her practice. Westwood's method and mode of resistance through her design practice has had a lasting impact on Willhelm, who initiates a political dialogue through the ideology of punk in his fashion. But whereas Westwood's global brand has brought punk subculture to the mainstream, Bernhard Willhelm continues to practice its politics around the periphery of mainstream fashion with little to no brand recognition outside the fashion and art communities.

Antwerp Six member Walter Van Beirendonck is also outspoken with his politically engaged practice. While sexual politics has been a theme that continually resurfaces in his collections through the representation of phallic imagery, bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sado-masochism fetishwear (BDSM), he has also made statements on the social issues of censorship, racism and tolerance. For his Autumn/Winter 2014-2015 menswear collection, Van Beirendonck sent models down the runway wearing feathered headpieces inspired by traditional Papua New Guinean headdresses reading "Stop Racism" in English, Russian and Arabic. The models also wore stylized army helmets made of felt with the intent of sending viewers the message "We need to go to war on racism" (qtd. in Blanks "Van Beirendonck"). The Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 menswear collection directly referenced the freedom of speech; just two weeks after the attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Van Beirendonck showed his collection that included plastic, transparent tunics bearing the appliqué slogan "Stop Terrorising Our World." Looks from this presentation were also accessorized with 3D-printed jewellery that resembles contemporary artist Paul McCarthy's infamous *Tree* (2014) work, a giant, inflatable outdoor sculpture that

simultaneously references a Christmas tree and a butt plug. The work received public outcry for its indecency while on display in the Place Vendôme in Paris in 2014. It was subsequently vandalized and deflated, and not re-erected. By incorporating its likeness into his collection, Van Beirendonck makes a defiant gesture, immortalizing *Tree* and presenting it as an icon of gay culture and sex positive practices. It is clear that Van Beirendonck has strongly influenced Willhelm through his role as a tutor at the Antwerp Academy, conveying such methods as expressing one's political beliefs through fashion.

Willhelm and Kraus explicitly take a stand on the current state of international politics, as they unabashedly take stances on controversial issues. Appropriating Milton Glaser's ubiquitous "I ♥ NY" logo, the "I ♥ GAZA" skirt in the Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection (fig. 29) plainly indicates a gesture of support for Palestine in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite this famous reference, the proclamation functions more like an activist placard or an anti-logo with its overtly political display. In its runway look, the skirt is paired with a white silk top entitled "Suicidedoux" which features an arrow-shaped appliqué and what can be described as red, blood-like splatters (fig. 30). The co-ordination of shirt and skirt heightens the impact of the political statement and therefore makes it difficult to identify the message as politically ambiguous or neutral. Interspersed amongst an otherwise irreverent collection, the outfit sends a stark message alongside pieces such as a traditional Japanese *happi* coat proclaiming "SEXSI," appropriated to look like a Pepsi-Cola logo and deconstructed garments featuring highly graphic patterns of arrows, photos of eyes, tie-dye techniques and animal prints. Although the Willhelm and Kraus cloak serious topics in an otherwise seemingly irreverent collection, the message of support for the Palestinian territory communicated

on the “I ♥ GAZA” skirt is unambiguous. At the same time, the target market and audience for Bernhard Willhelm fashion consists largely of – as is the case for many other avant-garde designers – early adopters, cultural workers and creative professionals such as artists and performers. They are followers who would likely reside politically on the left and centre-left and support human rights and civil liberties. That being said, it is unlikely that the fashion would reach or have any real impact on Gaza residents, who might find the fashion to be an offensive or tasteless display characterizing their tenuous political situation.

The baggy “Sequoia” trousers from the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 menswear collection present a more subversive, but still clear pro-Palestinian stance. The cotton trousers hybridize pleated khakis at the top and cuffed jogging pants at the hem. The patterned material is woven in a way reminiscent of a *keffiyeh* scarf, a contemporary symbol of Palestinian solidarity. However, Willhelm and Kraus’s version is rendered in pale pink and black on a white ground instead of the more traditional black and white, or red and white colour pairings. A ribbon of stitched text runs along the interior waistband reading, “HIMMEL ARSCH UND ZWIRN,” German curse words that translate to “Bloody Hell” or “Christ Almighty!” (fig. 31). While these combined attributes can be interpreted as a political statement of support for the Palestinian people, their activist leanings are obscured by their context within the collection. In the runway presentation, the trousers were paired with a patchwork sweatshirt printed with brightly-coloured cartoon dinosaurs. Another design in the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 womenswear collection, a white sweatshirt dress entitled “Angel Eyes,” is covered in black chain-stitched embroidery depicting a complex group of images. In the centre, a masked figure

cuts down a large tree flanked by two smiling angels holding trumpets. Under this scene is the logo for the Australian hard rock band AC/DC set amidst a coil of equestrian equipment. The back of the shirt features a series of angels ascending Jacob's ladder under which a man slumbers on the ground and a skulk of fox-like creatures linger. On the right side sleeve, bombs fall on people running for cover (fig. 32), while the left sleeve features two scale-covered trees, one of which is being embraced by a smiling skeletal figure. What does one make of these incongruous images? The arrangement of figures and objects at first seems irreverent or merely to be nonsense. However, when the disturbing imagery of bombs being dropped on people is viewed against other sections of the sweatshirt embroidery, it appears the absurdity of these scenes masks something darker and almost sinister. The playful and childlike imagery produced in the collection as a whole – cheery dinosaur motifs, colourful harlequin patterns, clown costume-inspired patterns and silhouettes – serves as a foil for subversive political commentary. Willhelm knowingly plays the role of the court jester, his outspokenness on world politics veiled by humour: “The clown has always been a very special person to me—he was always the one who was allowed to say the truth to the king. Of course, to find the truth, you need to say hi to your haters and bye to conventions” (Willhelm qtd. in “MOCA”). While the scenes depicted on the “Angel Eyes” sweatshirt may refer more generally to the unjust military invasion and occupation of territories rather than a specific case in world politics, their critique is pointed when viewed in concert with other collection garments such as the previously discussed “Sequoia” trousers. In cases such as these, the politics of Willhelm and Kraus's fashion reside firstly in their engagement in a scathing interpretation of global issues and secondly, in their disruption of the fashion industry's

aversion to addressing politics. The surfaces of their garments function as a forum, where the public sphere makes an intervention into everyday life in questioning notions of moral consciousness and responsibility.

The politics of diversity

The political also manifests itself in Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde practice through a critique of the institution of fashion and its lack of diversity, whether concerning age, body type, race or sexuality. In an industry where eternal youth is favoured over the inevitable process of aging, Willhelm and Kraus's instrumental use of "mature" models in their Spring/Summer 2014 campaign pointedly dissents from fashion industry norms of ideal beauty. Featuring models that can be described as middle-aged and older, the lookbook also challenges conventional ideas of Hollywood and its common association with glamour and physical perfection. That is not to say that the photographs themselves are not appealing; their aesthetic connotes an altered version of old Hollywood allure, yet does not engage ideals of the perfected body as sculpted by the current predilection for plastic surgery. For Willhelm, Hollywood requires a dose of reality, as he notes: "In LA everyone is obsessed with having no wrinkles but I think it's good to see yourself age and to see how your face changes. Let's call it a reality check" (Willhelm qtd. in Bruce). The lookbook photographs appear largely untouched in post-production. Although skin sags, wrinkles are evident, cellulite and varicose veins are visible and hair is greying, the models are lively and healthy-looking. There is also diversity in body type, from the slender yoga instructor Claudine Penedo, to the average build of actor Bruce Wayne Eckelman. As a whole, the body shapes represented in the lookbook resist ideals of

beauty in the fashion industry and encourage figures beyond the widely-favoured waiflike, androgynous model. Willhelm and Kraus propose that fashionability and style are not limited to the cult of youth, as Willhelm states, “it’s also good to show that you can look cool when you’re old” (Willhelm and Kraus). The Spring/Summer 2014 campaign is therefore not simply a resistance to a Hollywoodized obsession with agelessness, but also a gesture against the notion that one has to dress for one’s age. American *Vogue*’s annual “Age Issue” is one such indication of the fashion system’s compartmentalization of age appropriate styles and looks for women. While celebrating the acceptance of age diversity from teenagers to women upwards of ninety years old in the issue’s main feature, *Vogue* simultaneously promotes ageism and determines who receives representation in the magazine’s pages (i.e. young, white, slender models). In the Age Issue’s other regular content – ranging from advertisements, fashion editorials and lifestyle and beauty articles – youthfulness is explicitly foregrounded as that which should be desired by all women. Recent discourse including photographer Ari Seth Cohen’s blog and its accompanying documentary film *Advanced Style* (2014) and Albert Maysles’s film on interior designer Iris Apfel (2015) both aim to counter ageism in fashion, presenting views on fashion and style not tied to hegemonic notions of idealized bodies. In the case of Willhelm and Kraus’s Spring/Summer 2014 campaign, the pairing of unconventional fashion with models of diverse age only further pushes boundaries of the conventional display and visual language of contemporary fashion. It questions for whom fashion is made and provides a model for approaches that can be taken in order to change how fashion is presented and consumed.

Wilhelm and Kraus also address diversity by embracing cultural and racial difference in their practice. As an industry that is constantly at odds with the issue of race and representation, fashion does not always reflect its audience. The systemic discrimination of models of colour on and off the runway is an issue that has been made ever more present with the recent creation of Balance Diversity, a campaign headed by Black American and British models Bethann Hardison, Iman and Naomi Campbell who identified themselves as representatives of The Diversity Coalition. In an open letter circulated to fashion councils and major fashion houses in September 2013, Hardison, Iman and Campbell identified points of contention and named designers who “were guilty of this racist act” of using one or no models of colour. A follow-up letter in February 2014 provided an assessment of how many models of colour walked down the runway during the previous season. Although the results still indicated a dearth of racial diversity in fashion week shows, they showed signs of improvement. However, one such point published in the initial document was that diversity “can no longer be accepted, nor confused by the use of the Asian model” (“Balanced Diversity”). In a post entitled “Why Fashion Should Stop Trying to be Diverse” on the blog *Threadbared*, fashion scholar Minh-Ha T. Pham asserts that this type of statement only further perpetuates the very racism that it attempts to eradicate: “The notion that Asians are not real people of color or are “honorary whites” serves racism by denying anti-Asian racism—which has a long and enduring history in fashion. It also advances a deep-seated divide-and-conquer approach to race relations that ignores the way racism impacts all racialized people” (Pham). This example illustrates that racial discrimination is deeply rooted and endemic

in the fashion system and that its variations remain invisible even to the parties who call attention to such issues.

As part of their practice, Willhelm and Kraus use fashion and its visual culture to subvert industry norms of racial homogeneity. When probed on the importance of diversity as a concept in his practice, Willhelm argues for the importance of cultural difference:

I'm from Germany and you really need all that mix because that's what's missing, that ethnic mix. You have that much more [of that] in France or in America, but not in Germany. Maybe that's also a reason why I want to show it over and over again. I find it very important. The world is getting much smaller and much closer and that mix is essential. (Willhelm and Kraus)

This need for diverse cultures to be represented is demonstrated in various collections, which in some cases do not include Caucasian models. In the Spring/Summer 2005 menswear collection based on Japanese construction worker uniforms, all models appeared to be of East Asian heritage, while only black models walked down the runway for the Autumn/Winter 2005-2006 menswear collection presentation. It can, however, be argued that Willhelm and Kraus's use of such representation is tokenistic in terms of fulfilling an aesthetic consistent with cultural stereotypes, and at times, controversial. Promotional images taken from the Autumn/Winter 2005-2006 menswear lookbook are styled to elicit activity in a drug den. Piles of what are meant to resemble cocaine or amphetamine are parted to reveal the season's looks, modeled exclusively by black men. In another image, a Caucasian male hand points a revolver over a mound of cocaine in the direction of another hand holding spoon, which is about to scoop out some powder (fig. 33). How can these be interpreted? Are Willhelm and Kraus's designs and their styling an appreciation of gangster rap as a culture, or a stereotype of young black

Americans? Are the Caucasian hands a racially charged show of hegemonic white culture and its control over black culture? In addition, how are the clothes to be read, as they appear to be incongruous confluences of “tribal” Africanism with urban streetwear? In the words of Kaat Debo, Willhelm has never gone the “easy route of politically correct thinking” (2007) and therefore challenges those very assumptions that are held to be morally right or respectable. When asked why he chose to portray drug culture in a collection modelled on and influenced by hip-hop, Willhelm cites his own recreational drug use and interest in fashion cultures that are tied to specific types of drugs and music, and that he had had enough of rock and roll because “it ended up somewhere on the high street” (Willhelm and Kraus). While rap lyrics have long professed their allegiance to consumerism in the form of luxury fashion, cars, houses, champagne and jewellery, it was seldom that high fashion reciprocated the gesture in men’s designer fashion, that is, until recently (Caramanica). While the newer wave of rappers including Pharrell Williams and Kanye West have brought much visibility to the involvement of hip-hop in high fashion, hip-hop is not as ubiquitous as white rock and roll culture in fashion and is rarely quoted as earnestly as Willhelm and Kraus do in their work. When examined more closely, the Autumn/Winter 2005-2006 menswear campaign destabilizes hegemonic white culture in its depiction of the “OG” (original gangster). According to sociologist Herman Gray, the OG confronts dominant white male culture: “[T]he OG as an emblem of black heterosexual male youth culture threatens and challenges middle-class male (liberal and conservative) conceptions of public civility, private morality, and individual responsibility” (178). Through the lens of gangsta rap, with its testosterone-fuelled lyrics and violence-as-manliness front, the black male (body) lays claim to ultimate masculinity

where material success denotes superior sexual virility. Writing on Mapplethorpe's black and white photographs of black male nudes, Peggy Phelan asserts that such images demonstrate the hegemony of white culture, as they "confirm and reproduce the dominant ideology of a normative whiteness, an ideology which employs blackness as a commodity to be purchased and/or appropriated" (47). In a similar way, Willhelm and Kraus's black male models serve a disruptive function in unsettling white masculinity and bourgeois respectability, yet simultaneously speak to and enact the commodification of blackness.

According to Pham, the systemic absence of racial diversity in fashion is not merely an issue of the percentage of white models versus non-white models. Rather, she contends that the only instances in which models of colour number in majority is "*if they are there to serve a racial function*" (Pham, author's emphasis). In other words, race is used as an accessory to further a narrative in the fashion system rather than promote awareness and need for heterogeneity. A closer inspection of Willhelm and Kraus's collection presentations and lookbooks indicates consciousness of the necessity for culturally diverse models, and not only in instances which serve what Pham labels multicultural scenery, window dressing or spectacle. To restate Willhelm's assertion of the importance of "ethnic" mixing, it is apparent that in other collections, Willhelm and Kraus employ racially diverse models for what Pham describes as "for the sake of social and cultural political equity" rather than "racial difference for its own sake."

Furthermore, their move to the United States has precipitated a wider perspective on racial politics and difference. In an interview with the African-American gay porn actor, CutlerX, Willhelm notes that he is in Hollywood "which is quite white" and that Cutler is

“a role model for interracial gay sex” (qtd. in CutlerX). By underscoring both racial and sexual diversity, he identifies that such issues need to be addressed not only in the fashion industry, but also within the social order more widely. Willhelm and Krauss further complicate the politics of race by offering an alternative perspective on fashion industry ideals. In so doing, they challenge representation and stereotypes in order to promote cultural and racial diversity in fashion and visual culture more broadly.

Body politics: challenging gender and sexuality in fashion

Willhelm and Kraus critique and subvert binaries of femininity and masculinity in their practice, at once blurring the boundaries between menswear and womenswear collections and reformulating conventions of beauty and attractiveness within the fashion system. Their Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show played with conventional codes of gender in both performance and staging. Set in a Parisian Mercedes Benz dealership on the Champs Elysées, the presentation challenged the hypermasculine space of a car showroom. Models walked down the makeshift “runway,” passing in front of a large backlit advertisement for the Mercedes C-Class Coupe, described in 2015 promotional material as “sporty” and “agile” with “strength to bare.” Willhelm and Kraus employed professional female bodybuilder Rahel Ruch to strut and flex in a bikini during the runway show amongst a display of stacked tires and cars (fig. 34). With their testosterone-fueled bodies and bulging muscles, female bodybuilders pervert codes of femininity. Their body type subverts conventional feminine ideals of curvaceousness based upon the contours of the breasts, waist, hips and backside, and instead places emphasis on muscular shoulders, arms and thighs. The fact that the term “bodybuilder”

requires the preceding “female” descriptor is an indication of its gendered status as a masculine practice. When viewed against a cast of less-muscled male models, Ruch’s presence intensified gender distinctions; the models then appear feminized despite their relatively “manly” appearance. Her embodied performance occupies areas of liminality, where hypermasculinity, in relation to both the male and female body, questions and tests the boundaries of gender. Playing the role of the car model, Ruch wore a black Brazilian-cut swimsuit that revealed her toned backside and daintily perched atop platform stilettos. Her ensemble, replete with medium-length flat-ironed hair and painted nails, enforced her femininity, contrasting her masculine physique. Like Mapplethorpe’s photographs of the Lisa Lyon, the first International Federation of BodyBuilding and Fitness (IFFB) World Women's Bodybuilding Champion, Ruch’s muscular physique oscillates between ideas of femininity and masculinity and their respective connotations of beauty and strength. In the bodybuilding industry, some competitions require women to wear high heels, and many choose to compensate for their testosterone-fuelled bodies by wearing heavily-embellished show suits, coiffed hairstyles, jewellery and make-up, including false eyelashes and long, painted fingernails. As well, some women opt for breast augmentation surgery to regain breast shape lost after muscle development. The female bodybuilder’s physique is queer, as it simultaneously runs counter to the ideal classical female beauty as a petite and delicately featured with soft curves, and attempts to superimpose femininity on the masculinized body after the fact (*Queer Style* 88). Ruch’s performance in the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show presented a complex series of masculinities and femininities that dispute a binary understanding of gender.

Other garments in the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear collection challenge gender-appropriate dressing in a convergence of the bawdy meets body. This is manifested most apparently in the “Be Into It” body tank, which resembles at best a women’s one piece swimsuit, albeit, a revealing one (fig. 35). Made of a cotton jersey, the construction of the body tank is more similar to a T-shirt than a swimsuit, yet its silhouette creates an explicit point of focus, revealing and accentuating the backside and genitalia. To be further suggestive, a *trompe l’oeil* tuxedo front is printed along with the letters “XXL” – a motif that is pervasive in the collection – as if to gesture at the wearer’s groin. At the same time, the faux tuxedo-front plays with the dressed-undressed opposition, itself evocative of male-strippers such as the ladies’ entertainment company, the Chippendales. Worn most notably by the since retired, French gay pornographic actor François Sagat, the body tank’s allusions to non-heteronormative sexuality are even starker. In a 2008 interview, Willhelm discusses the concept of sexiness in menswear:

Men’s fashion in the last 10 years has been so much about the suit and looking kind of prep and normal. [...] The body is something you actually can show and there are still some men who are not ashamed of their bodies and their sexuality. I grew up with the whole AIDS history and after that I think fashion became kind of baggy and sexless. I feel that it’s time to kind of discover that sexiness again, but it isn’t easy. (qtd. in Kowalewski)

Although the body tank transgresses normative heterosexuality and dress, the body it reveals – that of muscular Sagat – adheres to conventions of the ideal body and norms in the gay porn industry. Willhelm and Kraus’s menswear garments at once reinscribe the hypermasculine form maintained in gay porn while playing with the aesthetics of gender inversion. Pieces such as skimpy shorts deviate from traditional masculine codes of dress; one pair can be described as taking on the appearance of “hot pants,” which are normally associated with womenswear but in this case, accentuate the muscular and taut male

backside. Shorts from the Spring/Summer 2011 and 2012 menswear collections resemble cotton briefs overlaid with a gauzy chiffon-like material. More transgressive is a series of extremely short, ruffled skirts from the menswear Spring/Summer 2011 collection that seem to reference peplums (fig. 36). Although traditionally considered to be a women's garment, the "super mini skirt" as it is labelled, is categorized as a menswear object in the MoMu collection, despite also appearing in the women's lookbook. Willhelm and Kraus's crossover garments reflect a desire to diversify menswear, as Willhelm contends: "But for men, there are not many things around focusing on the more creative side. Men deserve a little bit more than another suit or a shirt" (qtd. in Heyman). In other words, garments such as the "super mini skirt" enhance an otherwise standardized uniform for menswear. Its frills are also largely decorative and therefore directly contravene interpretations of modern (read: masculine) design as stripped of ornamentation. In his 1898 essay "Men's Fashion," architect Adolf Loos writes about the need for men to be unassumingly dressed (i.e. unadorned), as "[i]n good society, to be conspicuous is bad manners" (11); he would later become known for his essay "Ornament and Crime" (1908) in which he famously denounces ornamentation as anti-modern. Early modernist thinkers took on Loos's logic in developing their own aesthetic and design ideals, perpetuating the now overused dictum that form follows function. It is such lines of thought that continue to the contemporary moment in which urban men who put thought into self-adornment have been disparagingly labelled as "metrosexuals." Given such precedents of modern masculinity, the peplum's appearance in the Bernhard Willhelm menswear collection rests at the intersection between decoration, gender, class and taste;

it crosses gender categories in suggesting similar or identical garments and silhouettes for both womenswear and menswear, but also confronts the gendered notion of adornment.

While it can be said that Willhelm and Kraus's truncated and figure-defining trouser bottoms are fitting when viewed in terms of swimwear, their decontextualization as day wear disturbs the categories of gender and plays with ideas of homosexuality and gay body culture. This is further compounded by Willhelm's reference to Sagat's look in the Spring/Summer 2012 collection as a "gay Jesus" and the models' explicit "Jesus looks" replete with crowns of thorns, styled shoulder-length hair, bronzed body makeup and electric blue contact lenses. The perversion of Christ as homosexual porn star recalls strategies of transgression in the punk subculture; the Sex Pistols's cover artwork for their 1977 single, "God Save the Queen," is one such parallel example that vandalizes the image of Queen Elizabeth II. Blasphemy, defacement, these are the characteristics of counter-culture that constitute a "self-consciously subversive *bricolage*" (Hebdige 123). While the Bernhard Willhelm aesthetic is not "punk" in the sense of referring to the punk subculture's golden age in the 1970s, its intention to subvert and trouble convention is very much so rooted in this tradition.

As a whole, Willhelm and Kraus's menswear and womenswear collections are not so easily differentiated from each other, and the collections are often displayed in concert. Some items such as the aforementioned "super mini skirt" from Spring/Summer 2011 are shown in both collections, with little or no variation, while other garments: leggings, robes, dress-like tunics, appear to be gender nonspecific. Recent collections have conflated both menswear and womenswear into one presentation or lookbook, making the designs increasingly more gender neutral. The Autumn/Winter 2014-2015

collection features two separate lookbooks, each shot by a different photographer. Both lookbooks destabilize fixed gender identities in the sense that the womenswear and menswear collections are nearly indiscernible from one another and all models, regardless of gender, wear everything in the collection from dresses, skirts and leggings to various suit combinations. To add another layer of ambiguity, gender codes are further remixed with genderqueer, transgendered or cross-dressing male models wearing long, painted nails, jewellery, high-heeled shoes and makeup; all have visible body hair (fig. 37). Without industry differentiations between menswear and womenswear, Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde objects of fashion are neither fully masculine nor feminine and inhabit a space of in-betweenness. Barring the early womenswear only collections in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Bernhard Willhelm has never been one to strictly adhere to definitions of gender. In this way, Willhelm and Kraus's rejection of gender norms can be compared to punk's subversion of socially-constructed categories of femininity and masculinity. According to the cultural critic and theorist Dick Hebdige, punks transgress gender categories through their disruption of beauty: "Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with the traditional feminine lore of cosmetics. Contrary to the advice of every woman's magazine, make-up for both boys and girls was worn to be seen" (107). Seen in this light, Willhelm and Kraus's designs function in a way similar to punk's anti-fashion; their archetypal women and men are neither feminine nor masculine and a large proportion of their garments tend towards the unisex. This punk-unisex position is plainly conveyed in the banana-themed Spring/Summer 2016 collection entitled "69," which features male and female models wearing genderless looks with a heavy dose of sexual connotation. The garments focus on an appreciation of the phallus

and are directed towards both a queer gaze and any gaze that is not that of a straight male. Textual statements printed on the garments include “2 cute 2 b str8,” “WILL WORK FOR [image of a banana]” or a shirt announcing “POSITION OF THE DAY” in combination with an image of two unpeeled bananas positioned to suggest simultaneous oral sex.

Willhelm and Kraus’s resistance against mainstream ideals of gender is also conveyed in designs that do not conform to the body or adhere to modern conceptions of Western gendered dress. In the case of women’s fashion, the concept of fashion as an enhancer of the body – whether it is to elongate, compress or stretch it into a fashionable shape – is oftentimes of foremost importance. Willhelm and Kraus regularly construct loose and baggy garments for their women’s collections that obscure the shape of the body underneath. The styling in their womenswear runway presentations and lookbook photographs often pair looks with flat shoes or sneakers, shoes that traditionally have been seen as “anti-high heels” in fashion. Current social expectations of gendered dress are reversed: menswear silhouettes are formfitting, while womenswear looks are more free-flowing and voluminous. Both interpretations provide alternative views of sexual attractiveness and communicate a progressive notion of the fashioned self as sexually ambiguous. Through gender fluid fashion and representation, Willhelm and Kraus promote the acceptance of multiple gender identities, eschewing binary gender categories and destabilizing heteronormative sexuality.

Against notions of taste: challenging a bourgeois construct of fashion

Willhelm and Kraus alter the category of fashion by confronting conventional bourgeois constructs of good taste and conspicuous consumption and questioning fashion as a function of class distinction. I take this idea of altering categories from Bürger's assertion that "the avant-gardistes profoundly modified the category of the work of art" (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* 51) as they attempted to destroy the autonomy of art in the bourgeois social order and reintegrate it into the praxis of everyday life. Similarly, Willhelm and Kraus reconfigure the concept of fashion as an aesthetic commodity, proposing their designs as agents to resist the class-based structures of fashion. In critiquing bourgeois conventions of taste and consumption, they simultaneously assess the conformist values of the bourgeois as a whole. In *Bernhard Willhelm 3000*, Willhelm and Kraus offered their fashion as an alternative to the uniformity of mass consumerism, a cure-all for what ails the current state of fashion. In situating themselves against sameness, they promote diversity on a greater scale; their aesthetic nonconformity is politically and unequivocally tied to their stance on issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Their radical designs are a form of protest, and counter the overwhelming amount of bourgeois material consumption as a means of moral betterment. Although the premise of *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* states that the exhibition examines the conformity of (unconscious or uncritical) consumerism rather than consumption outright, the latter is implicit in an understanding of the former.

Willhelm and Kraus's resistance to traditional notions of good taste and the beauty of the fashion object recalls Duchamp's claim of aesthetic indifference with his readymades. Their designs teeter between decorum and impropriety and aim to disrupt

the visual codes of both conventional and avant-garde fashion. For example, Willhelm and Kraus self-consciously use strategies such as humour and absurdity to abscond from the decidedly more “serious” avant-gardism that has come to represent Belgian fashion. Willhelm contends that he occupies a position contrary to his avant-garde forebears in Belgian fashion:

The Belgians were the exact opposite of me: unassuming and discreet. In the world of fashion there has to be the occasional indiscretion. With a lot of Belgian designers, you can look at the first or the twentieth collection and you can't tell the difference. They're still clinging to the same idea. I was always thinking to myself—come on, lighten up! (qtd. in Politi 120)

Here, seriousness and discretion are equated with “good” taste and the observation of decorum, where humour is lowbrow “bad” taste. These characteristics of solemnity can also be extended to apply to avant-garde designers outside of the Antwerp School. A 2013 exhibition at Frankfurt's Museum Angewandte Kunst entitled *Outer Dark*.

Continuing after Fashion curated by Mahret Kupka and Matthias Wagner K and designed by Žana Bošnjak, focused on anti-fashion, specifically that of designers such as Ann Demeulemeester, Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, and Alexander McQueen, all of whose fashions are considered avant-garde, dark in colour (i.e. black) and sombre in concept. In contrast, Willhelm and Kraus offer a light-hearted alternative to the “dark” and serious avant-gardism, and as a result, diversify the aesthetic of vanguard fashion. Speaking on the topic of uniformity and conformity in high-end fashion in relation, Willhelm hints at his distaste for the equations between taste, solemnity and class: “I don't want to see bourgeois Parisians who take themselves so seriously in their upper-class ghettos and think they are better. I find it very uninspiring” (qtd. in Kowalewski). Willhelm and Kraus's deviation from both norms of the avant-

garde and the aims of the broader fashion industry is tinged with an element of class warfare, and is not a mere exercise of aesthetic experimentation against the hegemony of contemporary vanguard fashion.

Willhelm and Kraus's collections also repeatedly feature bathrobe or dressing gown-like garments, bringing to mind the concept of underdressing or the undressed (fig. 38). These seemingly untailed forms evoke resistance against established modes of smart Western dress, as tailored garments force the body to perform in an upright manner, restraining and holding it in place. The wearer of tailored dress, cut and shaped to provide structure, conveys industriousness, and by extension the ideal, contained and moral bourgeois body. Good taste in fashion is aligned with orderliness and this is exemplified in menswear by the tailored, sombre and understated "sophistication" advocated by the British nineteenth-century dandy Beau Brummell. Brummell streamlined the heavily ornamented style in fashion at the time, reducing the male silhouette to include a top hat; a neatly-tied cravat; tan, fitted and full-length breeches worn inside Hessian boots, and a dark-coloured, double breasted tailcoat. As the availability of clerical work increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, taste became more of interest to the growing segment of middling classes. Thus, white-collar work signaled the prevailing uniform of the tailored, dark-coloured suit for bourgeois men. On the other hand, Willhelm and Kraus's relaxed silhouettes harken back to historical avant-garde anti-fashions of the Russian Constructivists that reacted against expressions of class and taste. Previously discussed examples such as Rodchenko's artist's working suit or Thayaht's *tuta* fall more in line with working class ideals than

white collar interpretations of workwear; they are designed to be comfortable and allow for the ease of natural body movement.

To employ a term from Hebdige, Willhelm and Kraus's designs can, at points, be seen as "noise"; they are disruptions in the landscape of good taste. Loud patterns assault the eyes and clash with preconceived ideas of the bourgeois sobriety of appropriate dress. Willhelm and Kraus deliberately attempt to re-order conventions of taste:

Each and every collection is an experiment involving the question of how I can manage to juggle good and bad taste, or rather, what people perceive as bad taste. I'm interested in what actually influences taste in our society. What I love about fashion is that it is all about overcoming that threshold of embarrassment. There are always some pieces that let you act something out – a feeling, or bad taste, or maybe just a provocative concept. (Willhelm qtd. in Harms, "Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus" 22)

Their outrageous looks elicit strong reactions to their work; indifference is not likely. In looks from the Autumn/Winter 2012-2013 menswear and Spring/Summer 2013 womenswear collections, large graphic icons from road signage and euro, yen, and dollar signs are splashed across the garments. The aggressive and outlandish pattern of currency symbols at once humours and comments on ostentatious displays of wealth. This is unrestrained kitsch of the highest order; the prints are garish, tacky, without apology and the antithesis to bourgeois sobriety. Bold graphic textile designs are a hallmark of Bernhard Willhelm's aesthetic and speak to their desired audience and use; while likely inappropriate for the corporate boardroom, the vivid garments are suited to performance and play, and have become a cult favourite with queer performers whose office is the club.

Transgressing codes of decency in dress

Willhelm and Kraus defy bourgeois notions of appropriate dress and modest display with their revealing and suggestive designs. The “Watch Me” garment from the Spring/Summer 2002 womenswear collection is a long, lingerie-like georgette dress which features an embroidered *trompe l’oeil* brassiere with eyes, a “nose” stitched around the belly button area, and an embroidered mouth that functions as over-the-clothes underwear (fig. 39). Despite the sheerness of the material, a stitched outline of a female form on the front and back of the dress provides further sexual suggestion, leaving little to the imagination. The Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection featured a number of dresses and tops with openings to display breasts. The “Metropolissy” dress from this collection exposes the breasts through large gaping holes in the fabric; an appliqué vertical arrow points toward the breasts, its head settling in between them, while its “feathers” are strategically placed over the groin. Another dress in the same collection fulfills a similar function as the cutout area reveals a large section of the upper torso, and three appliquéd arrows point to the crotch. The cutouts and slashes suggest obscenity and vulgarity to the point of comedy. Although the collection lookbook featured a male model wearing the “Metropolissy” dress, it nevertheless scandalizes through mere suggestion of the body that is underneath. It alters the common perception of male breasts, unlike female breasts, in that they are rarely seen as erogenous zones. There is something inherently surrealist at play in these dresses, as Willhelm and Kraus appear to take direct visual quotations from Belgian surrealist René Magritte and his paintings *Le Viol* (1934) and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1947). The former makes crude associations to the female body – breasts, navel and genitalia with the eyes, nose and

mouth – while the latter depicts a nightgown-like garment onto which naked breasts have been painted. Like Magritte’s perplexing and salacious sexual imagery, Willhelm and Kraus mine the unconscious, serving up Freudian associations. What is hidden deep within the recesses of the mind for many is mere surface material for them; normally cloaked body parts seem to, at points, burst out of the garments. Bernhard Willhelm fashion counters conservative models of elegance and luxury exalted in high-end fashion designs such as Christian Dior’s now classic late 1940’s and early 1950’s “New Look” suits and dresses or Hubert de Givenchy’s “little black dress” designed for Audrey Hepburn’s Holly Golightly character in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961).

Willhelm and Kraus further test the limits of social acceptability with their choice of imagery on their designs. A number of garments in the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection are constructed from textiles onto which a montage of climaxing faces – men on one and women on another – that Willhelm describes as “gay Madonnas in ecstasy” (qtd. in Blanks 2015). While these images are sexually suggestive and waver between decency and obscenity, Willhelm and Kraus have also gone so far as to depict the act of coitus in their fashion. Since 2008, they have collaborated with mainstream Spanish footwear brand Camper for the line Camper Together. One recurring style known as the “Himalayan,” is a sneaker boot named for its wave-like structured outsole and labelled accordingly as a “transgressor sneaker.” Specifically, the Autumn/Winter 2014-2015 women’s collection featured a Himalayan that at first glance appears to display charming embroideries of flora and insects. A closer look reveals that the outer heel bears embroidery depicting a nude, buxom female and muscular male engaging in sexual intercourse (fig. 40). This carnal display is made more graphic due to the fact that the

embroidery portrays an unconventional sexual position; the male figure whose penis is partially visible, grasps the female's breasts, penetrating her from behind at an angle that may refer to anal sex. Rendered in a style that can be likened to black and red figure techniques on fifth- and sixth-century Greek pottery, the embroidery is taken out of context and placed in the milieu of mid-range contemporary fashion that is distributed widely and accessible online. While erotic acts have historically been depicted in various visual art forms including Athenian pots, Pompeian frescoes, and Japanese *Shunga* prints, the Camper shoe infringes on unwritten moral code because its salacious imagery is unabashedly displayed on an item of everyday clothing meant to be worn in public. As a case in point, controversy erupted in 2015 when Willow Smith, the then fourteen year-old daughter of Hollywood actors Will and Jada Pinkett-Smith, posted a photo of herself on image-sharing social media network, Instagram wearing a vintage shirt by French designer Jean Paul Gaultier. The shirt features a print of female torso, nude from the breasts to navel. While Smith was fully clothed in this long-sleeved T-shirt (and presumably trousers), the image of the uncovered breasts instigated a wave of disapproval on the Internet for its provocativeness. While the controversy was largely centred around the younger Smith's age, a similar T-shirt entitled "Tits" by Vivienne Westwood and partner Malcolm McLaren was worn by British rock musician Siouxsie Sioux in 1976 – later reissued in the 1990s and again by American directional retailers Opening Ceremony in 2015 – continues to shock today.

Although sexually explicit depictions of the human (often female) body proliferate in Western art history, to view such imagery on an everyday object beyond the walls of the art gallery or museum tests the boundaries of bourgeois respectability and

mainstream sexuality. Such visibility places sexual politics at the forefront of fashion and contemporary culture more generally, questioning and disrupting the male gaze. As I discussed in the previous chapter, fashion achieves a status similar if not equal to art when placed in context of a museum or gallery. Outside of this environment, fashion is reduced to its first order of meaning as clothing, a practical object meant to cover the body. That the corporeal nature of clothing simultaneously reveals and conceals the body, demonstrates the innate sexual quality of clothing. Sexual imagery on clothing can be seen as conveying the wearer's exhibitionism or perversion and by extension, resistance to cultural norms. The case of the Camper sneaker is exceptionally curious because revealing dress is to a certain extent, widely acceptable in the West and frequently practiced by celebrities in the entertainment industry on and off screen. Furthermore, it has become generally acceptable to show sexual acts or sexual imagery through many artistic and visual mediums including film, photography, television, literature, and the performing arts. In the past, racy fashion photography for the youth-focussed clothing chain American Apparel has featured pornographic actors, nudity and models in sexually suggestive poses that displayed nude breasts, pubic hair and/or genitalia. Willhelm and Kraus equate fashion, however, with human sexuality in their depictions of sexual nature in and on their designs. They proffer "kink," that is, alternative modes of sexuality outside of a mainstream interpretation of sexual attractiveness in subverting the idea of clothing as a body covering for modesty. In the MOCA exhibition, a series of wooden spanking paddles with phrases including "Attitude Adjuster," "Red Hot Modernismo" and "Starke Jungs" (German for "Strong Guys") were shown in the gallery and made available for purchase in the museum gift shop. Here, open and plural notions of sexual

practices – in this case, spanking or BDSM more broadly – are condoned, where the paddles fall under the guise of museum souvenirs rather than their usual context as erotic implements in a sex shop. In the exhibition space, the paddles were styled as if they were fashion accessories, resembling wristlet wallets that are currently ubiquitous in mainstream fashion. The presence of the spanking paddles violated codes of decorum in public space, where sex is often sanitized for public consumption even inside the walls of the museum. In museums, “tasteful” female nudes are framed as artful, where the eroticism of Gustav Klimt paintings or Egon Schiele drawings is tamed and made palatable for mass audiences. On the other hand, references to sexual perversity often go unrepresented in the cultural institutions; if they are displayed, they are seen as pornographic, as they cross the line between moral and indecent behaviour. The political implication of Willhelm and Kraus’s transgression is twofold: firstly, they dare to display an uninhibited view of human sexual desire in a public space contravening bourgeois decorum and secondly, the sexuality that they do stage is one of deviance and unconventional practice. In this way, their fashion plays with the politics of sexuality and presents a proliferation of sexual behaviours and identities. Examples such as these reveal how Willhelm and Kraus’s practice mirrors that of Gaultier, who has been testing the limits of moral decency in his designs with his transformation of undergarments into outer garments, and liberal references to BDSM and other sexual fetishes since the 1980s. Like Gaultier, their kinky designs produce an uninhibited, open sexuality and sex positivity that disrupts restrictive bourgeois conventions of good taste and respectability.

Queering the boundaries of propriety

Willhelm and Kraus simultaneously uphold queer identity and destabilize binary categories of heterosexuality in their resistance to conventions of bourgeois conformity and decorum. As a point of clarification, I am using “queer” as an inclusive umbrella term and intend to use it synonymously with my discussion of gay men and genderqueer persons. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick locates the term “queer” as a fluctuating, yet unifying concept in her introduction to *Tendencies*, a collection of essays from the 1980s and early 1990s:

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word “queer” itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*. Titles and subtitles that at various times I’ve attached to the essays in *Tendencies* tend toward “across” formulations: *across genders*, *across sexualities*, *across genres*, *across perversions*.” [...] Keenly, it is relational, and strange. (xii)

In this sense, the descriptor “queer” indicates fluidity, amorphousness and openness, simultaneously bridging gaps between diverse notions of gender and sexuality.

Sedgwick’s inclusion of the conventional definition of “queer” as strange or odd is an indication of how the term can serve a disruptive function in the face of normalcy. In conceiving the category of “queer theory,” Teresa de Lauretis identifies the need for unity and inclusion of difference over adherence to the labels of “gay” or “lesbian”:

In a sense, the term “Queer Theory” was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them or at the very least problematize them. (x)

Both Sedgwick and De Lauretis define “queer” as a concept that fundamentally defies and troubles social constructions and categories. At its core, queer style aims to disturb (hetero)normative codes of behaviour and being, inhabiting an ideological space in which

bourgeois values of tastefulness and restraint do not apply. As such, queer fashion is fundamentally disruptive to the political and social order, as it is an “outward expression of the imponderable disorder of sex, a necessary crack in the symbolic order of sexuality” (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 6) and an outright resistance to conservatism.

Garments such as Willhelm and Kraus’s “mankini” from the Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection queer notions of acceptable and modest dress (fig. 41). Fittingly worn by the French gay pornographic actor François Sagat, the mankini’s overt sexuality – there is an orifice for the penis and the backside is completely exposed – at once dictates and questions its function as clothing. Is it intended for everyday wear or should it be relegated to the area of fetishwear or lingerie? Styled as a wrestling singlet, albeit offering less coverage, Willhelm and Kraus propose that the “mankini” can also be utilized as sportswear in an unorthodox pairing of fetish meets the mainstream. Its item description in the Bernhard Willhelm online shop offered little in the way of context as it stated that the garment is “a brief pant with brace straps and a black trim,” a description which effectively normalizes it as an everyday garment and offers no suggestions as to its intended use peripheral to its provisional function. In comparison, American designer Rick Owens sent models down the runway for his Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 menswear collection in monk-like garments that framed and offered orifices for the models’ uncovered penises. Aside from the discrete “penis-flashing,” the overall collection is sexually staid and almost puritanical in its cloaking of the body. While Owens’s presentation features male frontal nudity, this is not connected to an inherent queer sexuality of the garments or models themselves. Unlike the Owens case, Willhelm and Kraus’s “mankini” is deliberately designed to showcase male genitalia for sexual

gratification and fetish, explicitly aimed at a gay male audience. Garments such as these challenge conventions of binary gender and sanitized (hetero)sexuality and dissent from an understanding of bourgeois respectability and appropriate dress.

Willhelm and Kraus's pervasive agitation of conventional sexuality is reflected in their casting decisions for models. Sagat was a recurring model for Willhelm, and a muse both on and off the runway; this concept of the muse is intriguing on a number of levels. Firstly, the muse in Greek mythology and context of fashion connotes a female figure, and is therefore a label that culturally applies specifically to a woman rather than a man. Secondly, although muscular, Sagat is neither tall nor slim; this simultaneously puts him at odds with the fashion industry's ideal for menswear and positions him in line with the gay porn ideal. This leads to my third point: his profession in the adult film industry situates him on uncertain moral ground. Simply put, he does not fit an established mould of propriety or moral uprightness. Featured in a calendar for the Spring/Summer 2008 campaign, Sagat is photographed in a multitude of provocative poses: in one image he bends forward on all fours and exhibits his bare backside, from which a bouquet of flowers emerges; another close-up shot consists of Sagat wearing a mankini with a small American flag hanging from his erect penis; the following image shows him fitting his penis into the tailpipe of a car. The employment of Sagat, however, is not an isolated case. Willhelm and Kraus took to the Internet to cast male strippers as models for their Spring/Summer 2004 menswear runway presentation. Strategies such as these are a move against the limited and professionalized industry norms of beauty and taste as promoted by multinational modelling agencies. Rather than uphold standards of homogeneous attractiveness, Willhelm and Kraus drive forward their strongly held view that fashion

and society should be diverse and represented as such. They push the limits of representation and present alternatives to the fashion mainstream's dominant depictions of the ideal body. In the past, Gaultier has had a blatant disregard for conventions of the fashion industry and he famously placed newspaper classified ads in the French daily newspaper *Libération* reading, "Non-conformist designer seeks unusual models—the conventionally pretty need not apply" (qtd. in Bondil 18). Willhelm and Kraus follow in this tradition of avant-garde fashion, rejecting the structure of the fashion system and breaking with heteronormativity.

Willhelm and Kraus go beyond championing gay positive messages and make pronouncements in support of interracial gay sexuality. In the Autumn/Winter 2012-2013, a number of models wore bandanas that proudly announced, "I ♥ BLACK COCK" (fig. 42). Although this unrestrained proclamation of love for the black phallus feeds into the stereotype of black males as possessing larger than average-size penises, it is more than a declaration intended to shock with its sexually explicit message. Rather, it is a statement that challenges assumptions of the black male body and its common association to heterosexual masculinity. In his analysis of Mapplethorpe's *Black Males* series, art historian Kobena Mercer writes that it is difficult to determine whether the shocking images embrace or subvert racist stereotyping, but that Mapplethorpe rather "throws the binary structure of the question back to the spectator..." (189). I argue that Willhelm's unequivocal appreciation of "black cock" too navigates a fine line between reaffirming hackneyed ideas of the relationship between sex and race, and espousal for cultural diversity. Nevertheless, it is Willhelm and Kraus's "I ♥ BLACK COCK" statement that intentionally attempts to disrupt white heteronormativity and bourgeois decorum. In the

catalogue-zine for the 1994 exhibition *Black Male* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, curator Thelma Golden remarks on Mapplethorpe's black male bodies, stating that "[t]he reception of the photographs, the controversy they provoked, speaks volumes about the fear of black masculinity and more specifically of the lust and loathing of the big, black dick" (33). This black manhood is later articulated in an essay in the same catalogue by Herman Gray, who calls attention to racist interpretations of black masculinity as "incompetent, oversexed, and uncivil—ultimately a threat to middle-class notions of white womanhood, family, and the nation" (178). If the black male is seen as counter to the white, repressed, bourgeois body, a gay black male body is yet more transgressive in its opposition to hegemony of white heterosexual masculinity. Thus, any representation of the gay black male simultaneously poses a challenge to the power relationship between the racial and sexual Other and its oppressor, and violates the dominant paradigm privileging whiteness, straightness and manliness, three characteristics that define moral rectitude and the "normal" body.

References to the gay black male abound in *Bernhard Willhelm 3000*. The exhibition included an enlarged wall text quoting an "Editor's Note" from the March 1999 issue of *Black Inches*, a now defunct American gay pornographic magazine which featured black men exclusively. Large blow-up photographs of Willhelm and two black models – Jamal Bertotte and gay pornographic actor and escort CutlerX – are featured prominently in the exhibition. In one photograph, all three wear leotards, with Bertotte and CutlerX on all fours and Willhelm mounting the latter from behind. A different photograph shows Bertotte and CutlerX standing while Willhelm crouches and attempts to catch a glimpse of CutlerX's penis from underneath his jacket. Various other

photographs capture Willhelm and Bertotte kissing; Willhelm seemingly about to spank Bertotte with two paddles in hand; Willhelm and Bertotte touching each other's leotard-covered backsides; and Bertotte and CutlerX positioned in other suggestive homoerotic stances. In another installation, two large, black, inflatable and human-shaped figures have television screens mounted in their abdomens and are seated on either side of the room. One screen shows a video of CutlerX in profile, waist up and nude with his mouth open; the complementary screen displays Willhelm facing CutlerX, and the two exchange an arc of white stars back and forth between their open mouths. The video seems to refer to the ejaculation and ingestion of semen, a visual theme that has appeared previously in Willhelm and Kraus's practice. On the website splash page for Willhelm and Kraus's Autumn/Winter 2014-2015 collection, a male model cranes his neck upwards with his mouth open to receive continuous white, viscous stream from above. In addition, their "California Creaming" name for operations in Los Angeles is the deliberately lewd. The interracial gay sex that Willhelm champions in his *Interview Magazine* interview with CutlerX is proudly intoned in these images. As a political statement, such imagery and connotation both rallies for cultural and sexual diversity and defies the demonization and the "fear of black masculinity" that Golden identifies (178).

Willhelm has been upfront with his own sexuality as a gay man from early on in his practice. He actively promotes the idea of "sex without second thoughts" and acknowledges the relationship between his role as designer and the definition of his sexuality (Willhelm qtd. in Harms, "Keep it Unreal"). In 2001, he was a cover model for the inaugural issue of *BUTT Magazine*, a gay interest magazine that features articles alongside erotic photography. For the feature entitled "Bernhard Willhelm: German

Fashion Designer Designs Clothes and Likes Designing with a Hard-On,” Turner Prize-winning photographer Wolfgang Tillmans captured Willhelm – a self-proclaimed exhibitionist – casually reclining nude on an unmade bed. Lying amidst a pile of clothes the photograph gives the impression that he has just disrobed. The next photograph features him also nude, sitting atop a pillow on a bed, arms resting on bent knees, penis out. In the last photograph, he runs an iron over an ironing board leaning vertically against the wall, wearing only knee-high socks and white briefs with a strategically-placed hole exhibiting his backside, presumably intended for rear-entry penetration. A more recent *BUTT* article published to coincide with *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* includes a photograph from the exhibition of Willhelm in a yoga bridge pose in which he wears a leotard that is specifically designed to accentuate and cradle the penis (fig. 43): “The suits and underwear have a special pattern which works with a double pouch/built-in cockring-cockadoo. The first layer has a hole with elastic for the cockring effect, the second layer has an anatomic shape which pulls the fabric over” (Willhelm qtd. in Calvi). In designs such as these, a clear connection between the role of sex and sexuality in fashion can be made. Willhelm has previously acknowledged how clothing is important in the prelude to sex, paraphrasing the late fashion patron Isabella Blow: “You put something on in order to get laid” (qtd. in CutlerX). The form-fitting garments for men speak to the notion of gay masculinity and the fit male body, ideals of which can be traced back to Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s writings on Hellenic standards of beauty and form, and their revival through Adolf Brand’s writings *Der Eigene*, the first known gay journal (1891-1931) (Geczy and Karaminas, *Queer Style* 78). The idealization of the Hellenic-influenced gay body (re)claims masculinity for itself and is one of many plural identities

and practices in modern homosexuality. In his history of homosexuality, gender and queer studies scholar David M. Halperin argues that pre-homosexual discourses of effeminacy, paederasty/sodomy, friendship/male love and passivity or inversion need to be separated from homosexuality (109). Rather, homosexuality is the confluence of three conditions: psychological orientation, desire and sexual behaviour that unite against the category of heterosexuality and cannot be reduced to a series of binary roles (Halperin 131-133). In Halperin's view, homosexuality is inclusive of all desires and practices: "Homosexuality' refers to *all* same-sex sexual desire and behavior, whether hierarchical or mutual, gender-polarized or ungendered, latent or actual, mental or physical. And, perhaps most important of all, it makes *homosexual object-choice itself* function as a marker of sexual and social difference" (131-132). This theorization of homosexuality is confirmed in the zine-catalogue that accompanies the *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* exhibition. On the cover is an image of a cast aluminum pacifier from the Spring/Summer 2015 collection alongside a dedication that reads "To Bernhard / your friend Cx / your favorite Top." The back cover showcases the corresponding script "To my favorite power Bottom Bernhard / CutlerX." This enactment of gay masculinity allows for a complication and diversification of roles within homosexual identity in which Willhelm is the active "receiver" and CutlerX is the "giver." While these roles speak to the sexual politics of gay male relations, they also acknowledge the power dynamics of race and the complicated reality of depictions of interracial sex.

Willhelm and Kraus promote multiplicitous queer identities beyond the gay male in their casting of models. The Los Angeles-based genderqueer/transgender artist-musician-performer Matthew Marble makes an appearance in recent Bernhard Willhelm

promotion material, first as a model for the Autumn/Winter 2014-2015 collection, and secondly as an exhibition guide for *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* in a video spot produced for MOCAtv, MOCA's YouTube channel. In the video, Marble, who was born male but identifies with feminine pronouns, sports long straight tresses along with full makeup, a Bernhard Willhelm current season off-the-shoulder mini dress and high-heeled sandals. Partway through the video, she also plays an archetypal but camp interpretation of a "cleaning lady" character that comically dusts, vacuums and sponge cleans various parts of the exhibition. Willhelm and Kraus have been explicit in their support for transgendered persons. When asked in an interview who they would like to dress, Willhelm responded with Caitlyn Jenner (previously Bruce), the former Olympic athlete and reality show celebrity who has been public with her transition to a woman. For Willhelm, Jenner is "a great question of gender" whose identity serves as an ultimate act of individuality and a defiant demonstration against conformity (qtd. in Finster). A blown-up poster entitled "The Beautification of Bruce" in *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* features text comprised of various quotes from unnamed sources concerning Jenner's process of transition, including cosmetic surgery treatments and surface transformations related to hair, makeup and undergarments. While the identifications of "queer" and "trans" are by no means synonymous, it is evident that Willhelm and Krauss take an activist approach to diversity in sexual and gender identity. Through various visual means, they champion gender and sexual equality, which represents their greater vision of social justice for an inclusive, progressive society. In so doing, they resist the propriety of contained bourgeois and heteronormative corporeality.

Against luxury: a critique of conspicuous consumption

Willhelm and Kraus's subversive approach to fashion extends beyond their opposition to bourgeois conventions of "good taste" to confront notions of conspicuous consumption. This position is in part influenced by Willhelm's own belief system, in which he has openly admitted that his wealth of freedom is worth more to him than financial wealth: "I might not have a lot of money but I have my freedom. [...] Freedom is the biggest luxury you can have as a designer" (qtd. in Bruce). Although fashion is a commodity and its close connection to commerce is indisputable and often widely championed, it is rare to encounter a designer who readily admits to his/her financial status as being less than prosperous. Willhelm and Kraus value creative freedom highly, above all else in an industry where success is often determined by financial profit ascribed by the market. This strongly held, anti-capitalistic belief is indicative in their aesthetic and material design choices.

Willhelm and Kraus's torn and ragged garments look unkempt, counter to bourgeois ideals of prestige acquired through displays of economic success. This aesthetic is not limited to one collection in particular, but in fact permeates their history of design. Threads are left hanging from embroideries as if ready to unravel, material is ripped, hems are unfinished and frayed. At times, skirts and sweaters appear to be missing the majority of their stitches, giving the initial impression of ragged and threadbare garments. This technique of "deconstruction" is a particularly prominent aesthetic in vanguardist fashion. Fashion theorist Francesca Granata has ascribed the first use of the term to *New York Times* style photographer Bill Cunningham in his discussion of Martin Margiela's Autumn/Winter 1989-1990 collection in a September 1989 issue of

Details magazine. Since its inception as a term, “deconstruction,” used in its literal sense of physically “taking to pieces,” has been applied to discuss the work of other Belgian avant-garde designers as well as Paris-based Japanese designers Rei Kawakubo of Commes des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto. As an aside, “deconstruction” is not used here in the Derridean understanding of the term as a mode of critical analysis, although there has been some scholarship connecting these two concepts, including Granata’s work and that of fashion scholar Alison Gill. Rather, the notion of deconstruction can be taken as a comment on conspicuous consumption and the excesses of the fashion industry, for deconstruction fashions do not appear to be covetable, luxurious or costly. Such a reading of deconstruction fashion is consistent with press reception of Kawakubo and Margiela’s work in the 1990s, as their designs were thought to be reactions to 1980s hyper-consumption. Margiela’s designs have included the re-use and re-construction of secondhand clothes and accessories. The end effect in this case is one of patchwork, a technique often associated with poverty and thrift rather than the extravagance or glamour typically attributed to high fashion’s penchant for rare materials such as exotic animal skins, fur or finely-milled textiles and expert construction/tailoring techniques. As well, the concept of material newness is spurned in favour of clothing that appears old, used and neglected. Margiela’s painted over shoes degrade the fetishistic qualities of footwear as shiny, new fashion objects, and while they may instigate a cult following of Margiela appreciators, they are not visually attractive or desirable. Such disregard for aestheticism can be seen as a parallel to surrealist and Dadaist art whereby the bourgeois institution of art was systematically attacked, and in the case of Dada, the art object was placed under question. It is this revolutionary approach to fashion that ties Bernhard

Willhelm to the historical avant-garde; aesthetic boundaries are pushed and conventional modes of production are pummeled.

Garments in Willhelm and Kraus's menswear and womenswear collections for Autumn/Winter 2012-2013 appear degraded. Originally white, deconstructed garments have been deliberately slashed, distressed and made to look soiled and stained with paint. In the menswear collection, blue or black coveralls, shirts and shorts are covered in white splatters that simultaneously bring to mind acid-washed denim and plaster or drywall dust. Far from pristine, the end result of the sullied clothes recalls used canvas drop cloths or protective workwear for construction trades labourers rather than pieces of high-end fashion. Gauzy hand-knit pieces in the menswear collection have strands of yarn hanging loose; sweaters have extremely long sleeves and look generally ill-fitting, as if to refer to children wearing under- and outsized garments. Rather than convey an aesthetic of polished couture with their handmade quality, the garments are homey, modest and vernacular with their rough-hewn hems. While the aftermath of the economic crash of 2008 meant that ostentatious wealth communicated through fashion was considered bad taste, the irony here is that garments such as these became markers of status, albeit status imbued with cultural capital. Counter to Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption, such dress instead channels "inconspicuous consumption" as the so-called poorgeoisie are "countercultural rich who have adopted a form of consumerism against consumerism, a way of spending to make themselves look as though they haven't spent" (Jeffries). The Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* is helpful in understanding Wilhelm and Kraus's aesthetic. While no direct English translation exists, *wabi-sabi* – an aesthetic derivation of Zen Buddhism – can be defined by the ability to find beauty in imperfection, impermanence

and incompleteness. In this way, Willhelm and Kraus support the cause for unconventional aesthetic beauty in contemporary fashion, where characteristics such as luxury and perfection are continually challenged.

Willhelm and Kraus's rejection of bourgeois values of conspicuous consumption is not limited to the construction or silhouettes of the garments; they take a stand against notions of mainstream luxury and excess through the subject matter of their designs. One of their most explicit attacks is manifested in the form of their "Sac" dress and cape from the Autumn/Winter 2009-2010 womenswear collection. Both garments feature a *trompe l'oeil* print of a burlap sack imposed onto a fine woolen material, bearing Dutch text that, when translated, reads: "mixing fertilizer: phosphate sodium nitrate state-mined in Limburg" (fig. 44). In keeping with the sack-like appearance, the hems of the cape are unfinished and deliberately yet neatly fringed. These sack designs make a cultural reference to the potato sack as garment and its connotations of abject poverty and unrefined dressing. They also speak to a notion of clothing outside of the fashion system, and of unrestrained consumerism in the contemporary moment. According to Willhelm, the overabundance of fashion is cause for concern: "I think fashion gets very dangerous when there is so much of it" (qtd. in Lee). His consternation on the current state of the fashion industry hints at the impact of overconsumption on the environment and global warming, an issue that he and Kraus address in *Bernhard Willhelm 3000*.

Willhelm and Kraus critique the politics of fashion, resisting power structures at play in the institution of fashion and more commodified forms of high-end fashion through their use of streetwear as inspiration. In addition to the army combat uniform and camouflage theme for Spring/Summer 2004, the collection's looks included loose-fitting

American football-style T-shirts, tank tops, long basketball-style shorts with a kangaroo print and jogging pants with bastardized equestrian motifs of the French luxury brand, Hermès (fig. 45). Kraus acknowledges the intentional debasing of high-end designer fashion with a decidedly less high-end concept, explaining, “of course we had a look at German proles on the street. It is lower middle-class, but it is sold to the elite, and they don’t notice. That’s what makes it such fun” (qtd. in Harms, “German Fashion”).

Willhelm and Kraus’s self-conscious engagement with fashion politics through the defiling of contemporary fashion, i.e. multinational corporations and the global luxury market, is further exemplified in their stance against conspicuous designer branding:

I’m not a big fan of branding, status and Hollywood glamour. It just doesn’t interest me and I don’t understand it. I would not feel better with a designer bag – which is usually very ugly or not very personal – it’s just this stupid bag. I know alternative sounds really old, but I think we need an alternative to big groups like LVMH. (Willhelm qtd. in Kowalewski)

By the term “branding,” Willhelm is referring to labels that are easily identifiable by name or logo, that in the case of luxury goods, are often synonymous with unhinged capitalism. Caroline Evans argues that contemporary fashion’s free market economy is reminiscent of *laissez-faire* economics of the nineteenth century, citing Lipovetsky’s view of the duality of the fashion industry; fashion is a democratic, progressive social tool, yet simultaneously represents the flawed character of modernity as “the reign of the market place encourages people to be greedy, demanding, selfish and uncharitable” (Evans, *Fashion at the Edge* 107). While Bernhard Willhelm is most certainly a brand – inside each garment, a black plastic button bearing the designer’s name and in earlier collections, the year of production, is affixed to a black monkey paw-shaped tag – its outward brand is indiscernible to the untrained eye (fig. 46). Furthermore, the choice of a

monkey's paw, which reflects Willhelm's love of nature and animals, can also symbolically be linked to the idea of "monkey business," that is, mischief and play.

The Spring/Summer 2005 collection of Japanese worker uniforms references and critiques class distinction in fashion, echoing historical avant-garde attempts to reform fashion through instituting uniform dressing. Seen against the backdrop of their wider practice, Willhelm and Kraus's quotation of Japanese construction worker uniforms demonstrate solidarity with the proletariat and elevate previously marginalized forms of dress. In this way, their anti-fashion rallies against bourgeois norms of conspicuous consumption and some degree of individualism. Contemporary artist Andrea Zittel has addressed the politics and ethics of (excessive) consumption with her ongoing work on uniforms and her practice more widely. An early example is her *Six Month Uniform* project begun in 1991, in which she designed one garment that she proceeded to wear for six months. In wearing this uniform day after day, Zittel reduced her personal consumption, yet countered the social stigma repeating her outfit (or item of clothing) two days in a row. To speak from an economic point of view, uniforms have a high use-value, therefore inversely conveying a low exchange value, and by extension, low symbolic value. The concept of frugality and thrift come into play with uniforms due to their presumed hardwearing and utilitarian nature. Furthermore, uniforms eschew the prestige of higher echelons of the fashion system, namely the exalted categories of *haute couture* and bespoke dress. Uniforms are associated with mass production whereas *haute couture* garments are viewed as unique creations akin to original art works worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The high exchange value of couture garments therefore serves as a marker of conspicuous consumption of the elite.

Willhelm and Kraus's resistance to mainstream luxury fashion's taste for conspicuous consumption is extended to their retail presence. In 2006, the first Bernhard Willhelm boutique and Tokyo flagship opened in the PARCO Shibuya, Tokyo, a mid-range department store that houses shops including athletic shoe company Onitsuka Tiger, American boutique and self-declared "global fashion and lifestyle curator" Opening Ceremony, and product lines from Commes des Garçons, Issey Miyake and Jun Takahashi. Designed in collaboration with the fictional brand item idem – consisting of French artist Cyril Duval and the textile designer Asa Warschafsky – the entire store concept cost just over five thousand euros to configure. Labelled a "junk puzzle" by item idem, the boutique's economic thrift was reflected in its DIY aesthetic, in which some of the store's fixtures were salvaged from junk piles in the outer suburbs of Tokyo. According to the Duval, Willhelm was adamant that the trash used to furnish the shop was authentic, and not simply fashioned to look like detritus. The boutique's sign consisted of a modest sheet of printer paper on which "bernhard willhelm" was handwritten in lowercase letters and unceremoniously adhered to the outside wall with tape. Clothes were displayed on wooden shipping pallets and mismatched hangers, and accessories were casually hung from ductwork and pipes (fig. 47). The few store mannequins that existed were smeared with different colours of paint, resembling sloppy clowns rather than idealized hangers for designer clothes. Using black electrical tape, a plastic covered clock was affixed to a structural column wrapped in brown tarpaulin. Reclaimed scraps of wood were tacked onto the wall, some of which provided for an impromptu picture board, while shelves were constructed from pieces of what appeared to be rigid foam insulation and L-brackets. Inspired in part by makeshift homeless

shelters in Tokyo parks, the overall look of the space was unfinished, with the aesthetic of a warehouse or bunker, but at the size of 50 square metres. The structure of the space was exposed, with all its seams and supports visible, lit by basic fluorescent tube lights and unadorned pendant bulbs. In revealing the underlying bones of the architecture, item idem crafted an aesthetic in opposition to customary ideas of designer boutiques as polished environments of sophisticated luxury. Instead, the boutique took on the appearance of a site-specific installation, encouraging the visitor to explore the space as a gallery and consider purchases away from the glossy sheen of retail and the extravagance of consumption. The crude aesthetic also prompted the customer to consider the fashion system itself by posing an existential question about how fashion becomes waste or how fashion is waste. This contemplation is rare in a retail space, as such self-reflexivity customarily takes place in a museum or art gallery. In this way, the Bernhard Willhelm boutique tests the boundaries between low and high culture and consumption, and contradicts and defies the logic of a high-end commercial space.

The item idem concept for Bernhard Willhelm parallels Rei Kawakubo's Commes des Garçons Guerilla Stores and the ever-expanding group of pioneering expansive retail environments, Dover Street Market (simply "DSM" in its abbreviated form). Beginning in 2004, Kawakubo's Guerilla Stores opened in several cities including Athens, Beirut, Berlin, Ljubljana, Los Angeles, Reykjavik, Singapore and Warsaw. Each of the temporary pop-up shops were developed to sell off excess inventory and kept open for one year. Guerilla Stores were situated in run-down and unadorned urban spaces, and according to one news release, each location was "chosen according to its atmosphere, historical connection, geographical situation away from established commercial areas or

some other interesting feature” (qtd. in Fortini). Store fixtures reflected a desire for rawness as the architecture was to remain undesigned and seemingly untouched. The first Guerilla Store opened in 2004 in an old bookstore in the then gentrifying Mitte district of Berlin. Rent for the 700 square foot shop was purported to be 700 American dollars, with another 2,500 dollars going towards small renovations for the building. In another Guerilla Store in Mitte that opened in 2006, stacks of cardboard boxes displayed clothing and acted as surfaces for the cash register area. The permanent DSM spaces are multi-brand enterprises that sell Commes des Garçons and its associated brands, in addition to individualized boutiques from other designers and merchants, which vary according to the location. DSM stores – London (2004), Ginza in Tokyo (2012), New York City (2013) and the I.T Beijing Market (2010), a collaboration with Hong Kong multi-brand retailer I.T – are known to feature artist collaborations and installations, scaffolding as clothing racks, and a mix of wooden openwork structures alongside more refined furnishings. Each of the incarnations feature a ramshackle hut constructed from corrugated metal and reclaimed boards that houses a cash register and stockroom. The London store features portable toilets reconfigured as fitting rooms. These experimental approaches revolutionize the selling of high-end clothes in the marketplace of fashion, upending conventional methods of display and luxury consumer experiences.

The Bernhard Willhelm boutique challenged traditional ideas in the visual merchandising of contemporary fashion, similar to how DSM stores follow a biannual cycle of change. Similar to an exhibition space, DSM stores close twice a year in order to renew the space, a practice Kawakubo calls *tachiagari* (which translates to “beginning” or “start” in Japanese). Part art installation, part retail space, the Bernhard Willhelm

boutique could be interpreted as a meditation on the value of objects in a throwaway culture and the state of fashion. This critical concept earned it the Dutch-initiated The Great Indoors Award in 2007, a biennial interior design award. To date, luminaries including the Danish art collective Superflex and star architects Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and his Office of Metropolitan Architecture have all been recipients of the award. While no longer in operation, the Bernhard Willhelm boutique at PARCO is a reminder of how alternative and critical strategies can be implemented in the display and sale of fashion.

Conclusion

At its core, the world of Bernhard Willhelm is political, whether global, racial, sexual, or class-based. Willhelm and Kraus enable their practice as a platform for socio-political and cultural critique while articulating a radical fashion that enacts change and shapes fashion and the visual world. The playful performance of their fashion serves as a mask for serious global issues from political conflict in their support for the Palestinian people, to the promotion of racial and sexual diversity. Furthermore, Bernhard Willhelm clothes radically diverge from mainstream aesthetics, rejecting conventional codes of gender, sexuality, and bourgeois values. In so doing, the brand engages marginalized communities and cultural groups external to hegemonic white, masculine, bourgeois heteronormativity. While Willhelm and Kraus's fashion does not reach a broad audience – there no longer is a Bernhard Willhelm retail or online store and garments are only available in niche boutiques and exhibition attendance numbers and YouTube views are in the thousands – it represents a group of individuals who are positioned outside of

mainstream culture and identify politically with their radical values. Here, political action is inscribed on or conveyed directly by the clothing and also in the bodies that wear it, whether models or consumers. Willhelm and Kraus push forward with their political agenda and refuse to compromise their creative freedom in order to increase the brand's commercial value, a move that does not follow capitalist logic. Although their practice occupies a visible space in the fashion industry, the designers critique and refuse to be complicit in the standards and ideals perpetuated by the fashion system. Rather, they position themselves as an independent, political conscience of the fashion industry and an alternative in reaction to the homogeneity that has come to be identified with multinational luxury fashion brands and conglomerates. As a result of its involvement in these multiple facets of politics, Bernhard Willhelm transforms everyday life through a commitment to a political fashion and puts fashion forward as a powerful form of protest. In the following chapter, I will turn to an examination of the Romantic era model *Gesamtkunstwerk* and how Bernhard Willhelm's contemporary avant-garde fashion practice can be read as a total work of fashion.

Chapter Four: *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Bernhard Willhelm and the Total Work of Fashion

On a sunny Paris day, Willhelm and Kraus unveiled a collection on a patch of green outdoor space in the historical district of Le Marais. Models paraded around in ruffled skirts, hot shorts, skimpy tank tops, leggings and other garments in bold prints with construction-themed motifs (e.g. fluorescent orange coloured leggings imprinted with the text “Warning, men working”). Some commandeered traffic and construction signs, while others were draped with laminated pinup magazine images of oiled men. Appearing like outlandish contemporary versions of the construction worker trope brought to prominence by 1970’s disco group Village People, the models strut casually about the lawn, displaying their bodies. The spectacle included a number of models that playfully moved about a mass of machine-generated foam. One model, covered in face paint and dressed in a short ruffled skirt, thong underwear and a low-cut tank top exposing his chest, shifted the foam forms with a phallic leaf blower, his ears covered by protective earmuffs (fig. 48). At points, the foam reached waist height and almost engulfed some of the models as it floated through the air. As the presentation progressed, brightly coloured smoke bombs were detonated and an air raid siren blared, causing the show to be shut down. Here, the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear runway presentation took on the form of a public disturbance, intentionally disrupting the manicured landscape and public peace of the upscale and historically aristocratic area with its visual and aural noise. The synthesis of fashion, theatrics and unconventional visual splendour in this fashion spectacle depicts the mad world of Bernhard Willhelm. In such performances, Willhelm and Kraus’s intermingling of forms and merging of mediums approaches the condition of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art.” Their all-

encompassing maximalist approach to fashion and its display embraces a plethora of artistic disciplines and references in order to construct what I term a “total work of fashion.” Willhelm and Kraus’s practice introduces a contemporary utopian narrative to the historical avant-garde, one that blurs the boundaries between collaboration and appropriation, art and life and fashion and performance.

My aim in this chapter is to provide an examination of the disciplinary mixing born of Willhelm and Kraus’s collaborative production, and how it resonates within the contemporary discourse of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and fashion vanguard. It is clear that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is an expansive concept; since its inception in the early nineteenth century, the term has been applied to a range of artistic practices including architecture, interior design, opera, dance and film. Perhaps the only consistently agreed upon axiom of the unitary artwork is that it plays host to a convergence of multiple art forms, which are then presented as one. The variation between explications of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* from Trahndorff’s early interpretation – as the conflation of four art forms “word-sound [*Wortklang*], music, facial expression [*Mimik*], and dance” (Koss 13) – to Wagner’s music dramas indicates that the total work of art is a fluid concept that can be further explored in contemporary scholarship. The extension of the Bernhard Willhelm label into other fields outside fashion is made possible through the collective work and participation of like-minded peers. At the crux of Willhelm and Kraus’s practice is their inherently collaborative methodology – whether in the production of runway performance-presentations, exhibitions, costuming or visual identity as a whole – that articulates a new manifestation of the total work of art in contemporary cultural production. By engaging with multiple facets of visual culture and its surrounding domains, Willhelm and Kraus

take on a democratic view of other disciplines. They have no regard for the hierarchical distinction between the “major” or “fine” arts and those considered to be “minor” or “applied.” Rather, their collaboration across various artistic disciplines lends itself to the continual development of creative partnerships and comprises the unified whole of their practice.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s disciplinary merging and collective work can be traced back to the historical artistic avant-gardes in the late nineteenth-century. Henry van de Velde and the Vienna Secessionists were preoccupied with the term and its application to architecture, fashion and interior design. Influenced by William Morris's writings, the Aesthetic movement and the Arts and Crafts movement, Van de Velde, a former painter, railed against ugliness and believed that art could guide humanity towards moral betterment in life (Stern 11). He modelled his residence Villa Bloemenwerf (1895) in Uccle, suburban Brussels, after Morris's Red House (1859) and designed the house, interiors and its contents “from furniture to cutlery or kitchen utensils, from toilets to wall paper [*sic*] or the shape of the handrail” (Stern 13). Extending his fixation on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* further, Van de Velde designed clothes for his wife Maria to coordinate with the Bloemenwerf in the tradition of Artistic Dress and the aestheticization of life. In so doing, he presented her clothes as objects meant to be viewed as part of a unified whole that was his vision for “a healthy and honest atmosphere of morality” (Van de Velde qtd. in Stern 13). Van de Velde's contemporaries in the Vienna Secession – a wide-ranging group of artists and architects that included Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann and Oskar Kokoschka among others – and later the Wiener Werkstätte formed by Moser and Hoffmann, further established the

role of clothing and textiles in the production of the total artwork. Klimt, Hoffmann and Moser began to experiment in clothing design beginning in 1903. Klimt's garment designs for himself and companion Emilie Flöge, a Viennese fashion designer, were sack-like caftans with names including "House dress,' 'Summer dress,' 'Concert dress' and 'Society dress'" (Houze 40-41). While working in his Vienna studio, Klimt wore painters' smocks, as captured in his protégé Egon Schiele's gouache and pencil drawing *Gustav Klimt in his blue smock* (1913). For the Secessionists and Werkstätte, there was no separation between the "applied" and "fine" arts. Rather, if the artist was responsible for the transformation of everyday life via total design of the visual world, then anything under the artist's purview, including fashion, was art (Stern 23). Thus, it is this flexibility between the numerous incarnations of the unified artwork that I uphold in order to posit Willhelm and Kraus's practice as a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Collaboration as a foundation for practice

The act of enduring collaboration with cultural producers – whether it is solely between Willhelm and Kraus, or with visual artists, choreographers, musicians, photographers, graphic designers or other fashion companies – is an integral part of the Bernhard Willhelm operation as a whole. Through collective processes of creation, Willhelm and Kraus unite the discipline of fashion with closely related fields, melding aspects of visual art, music, film, performance and theatre into a total work of fashion. Longstanding commercial partnerships with mid-range Spanish footwear company Camper, German high-end eyewear manufacturer Mykita, and Berlin-based luxury beauty company Uslu Airlines present a diverse complement to Bernhard Willhelm's in-house production and

demonstrate an alliance with both the artistic and commercial facets of fashion. At the same time, collaboration is an act and process that inherently expands the fields of cultural production and provides participants an opportunity to work outside their original disciplinary realm. In an interview on the website for German lens manufacturer Zeiss, Mykita head designer Phillip Haffmans speaks to the dynamic of moving across boundaries: “Similar to Bernard Willhelm [*sic*], our focus lies not just on the eyewear market. There is a world beyond the business, and together with people like Bernhard it is easy to cross this border” (“Anatomy of a Shade”). While collaboration has become a standard practice in the modalities of production of contemporary fashion not limited to the avant-garde – the surfeit of collaborations between high street brands including Uniqlo, Topshop and H&M with high-end fashion and style-makers; luxury companies with artists (Louis Vuitton, Longchamp, Prada); and streetwear labels partnering with celebrities, designers or other streetwear brands (Supreme, Converse or Pharrell Williams with Commes des Garçons, Kanye West x adidas Originals) shows no signs of slowing down – Willhelm and Kraus’s collective way of working is not motivated by capital gain. Rather, collaboration serves as a foundation for their practice, allowing them to foster a community in which fellow creative professionals and their various disciplines can freely mix and continually generate new artistic partnerships. Whether for exhibitions, performances, collections or broader ventures such as brand identity, Willhelm and Kraus rarely undertake projects without assistance from their wide network of cultural producers.

The longstanding collaboration between Bernhard Willhelm and contemporary artist Carsten Fock is an example of the brand’s established way of working with other

creative professionals. Fock has provided a distinctive and hand drawn “typeface” that has accompanied all visual materials and communications since 2006, and while he has occasionally employed the typeface elsewhere for his personal projects, its presence is synonymous with the Bernhard Willhelm visual brand identity. Fock has travelled to exhibition venues to hand-draw exhibition text directly onto the wall and has also collaborated with Willhelm and Kraus on collections and textile designs including the Spring/Summer 2005 womenswear collection entitled “Super” and the Spring/Summer 2016 collection. Outside of fashion, Willhelm and Fock have collaborated on art shown in contemporary art galleries including the exhibition entitled *Black is Also Available in White* (Stockholm, 2006 and Berlin, 2007) and *The New Omega Workshops* (Berlin, 2009). Fock describes his work with Willhelm as atypical of the collaborations now commonly seen in the fashion world:

I started with Bernhard in 2005. He asked me to do a whole women's collection with him. And for me it was great, because it was a break from all of my abstract, felt-pen work. I did the graphics, and then the fabric, and we worked together on the whole concept. But it wasn't gimmicky like it sometimes is today, like fashion colliding with art. It was just two people collaborating. But with Bernhard it was really special. (qtd. in M. Evans)

For Fock, the collaboration with Bernhard Willhelm is unlike that of ever-present corporate attempts to acquire cultural capital for financial benefit, and instead presented him an opportunity to diversify his art practice and widen his range of production. Furthermore, he views his involvement with the brand more as a creative partnership, and less a commercial venture meant to generate revenue through cultural capital. Likening Willhelm to an artist, Fock further speaks to the experience and process of working cooperatively:

I think he's much more of an artist than a fashion designer. I saw his show recently in Antwerp, and we created some of the sets together. For me, he has so much fantasy, and he's really free of clichés. And also with [my album cover for Berlin-based DJ] Fetsch, we had a creative synergy and really learned a lot from each other. And that's what a collaboration should be. I'm really influenced by these friends of mine, even though we may not work in the same field. I'm very interested in collaboration because it's much more than just me. (qtd. in M. Evans)

He notes Willhelm's "fantasy" as a draw for working with the label, an attribute that speaks to Willhelm and Kraus's privileging of artistic pursuits over commercial concerns. Fock's interest in moving across disciplinary borders is in part due to how collaborative processes contribute to the expansion of knowledge and development of community.

Willhelm and Kraus's frequent and sustained collaborations are also shaped by their willingness to engage with other cultural producers in the free exchange of ideas. Working collectively can legitimize the borrowing of content that would otherwise contribute to the regular but murky practice of appropriation that is rampant in the fashion industry. Swiss contemporary artist Olaf Breuning, who worked with Willhelm and Kraus on the Spring/Summer 2004 womenswear collection and accompanying film entitled *Ghosts*, revealed that their collaboration initially began as the unauthorized (re)use of Breuning's work:

There was a catalogue about my work published in 2002 or around then. And Bernhard was going through the pages looking for new ideas. It was typical of Bernhard. So he saw this photo and copied the whole thing. He made sweatshirts like these. He made bags and pants out of the same image. Stitch by stitch the same. [...] So I was surprised—and at first I was a little bit annoyed: what's with this guy? He is copying my work stitch by stitch. (qtd. in Granata, "The Bakhtinian Grotesque" 362)

Willhelm's copying of Breuning's art illustrates the fine line between appropriation and appreciation where in the case above, imitation eventually led to consensual replication. Granata cites that such issues of copying reflect a larger issue in fashion and are

“evidence of the problematic relation between fashion production and traditional notions of authorship” in fashion (“The Bakhtinian Grotesque” 340). Whether pertaining to artistic ideas or those more broadly tied to culture, appropriation is seen as the norm in the fashion industry. Yves Saint Laurent’s “Mondrian Collection” of dresses (1965) designed after De Stijl painter Piet Mondrian is one instance of how imagery from the visual arts has been supported, validated and to a certain extent expected in the fashion world. In a more contemporary example of appropriation, one only has to glimpse American designer Jeremy Scott’s use of visual imagery in his designs for Italian fashion house Moschino, from skateboard/surf artists Jim Phillips Sr. and Jimbo Phillips of the Santa Cruz Skateboards company for his Autumn/Winter 2013-2014 collection, to his regular adaptation of logos from household brand names and corporations including Barbie, McDonald’s and Coca-Cola. In the copyright infringement case of the former, Santa Cruz’s parent company NHS reached a settlement with Scott, who agreed to recall and cease production of the collection altogether. Yet in 2015, Scott was again accused of copyright infringement in the case of a dress from the Moschino Autumn/Winter 2015 collection, as the dress bore graphic similarities to a tag Brooklyn graffiti artist Rime painted on a building in Detroit.

To return to the collaboration between Breuning and Bernhard Willhelm, it is such instances of borrowing that ground the latter’s practice firmly on the side of fashion rather than that of art, where in the former, appropriation, copying, imitation and in some cases, piracy, are regular occurrences. Furthermore, since the advent of mechanized manufacturing processes in the nineteenth century, modern fashion garments themselves have existed in the form of copies whether in the industrial production of clothing,

creation of home sewing patterns, or replication of Hollywood costume for the mass market. As I have argued in the two previous chapters, although Willhelm and Kraus's cultural production is against fashion, they simultaneously comply with certain methods of working that have become generally accepted in the fashion industry. That is not to say that Willhelm and Kraus are disrespectful towards the object of art – their attitude is rather the opposite – but that there exists a culture of borrowing in fashion in which designers can exercise freedom in copying the work of an artist. In the fashion industry, there is little in the way of intellectual property rights for garments, as they are seen as objects of utility and not art. Media scholar Johanna Blakely argues that this open access to legal copying of designs creates less restraints under which fashion designers must work, which in turn causes the “acceleration of creative innovation” (“Lessons from Fashion’s Free Culture”). I propose that this “sharing” culture within the fashion system serves as a model for designers to borrow inspiration from sources outside of the industry. Yet, Willhelm and Kraus’s citations possess a certain amount of depth and are not mere superficial copies; for them, borrowing serves an intellectual function in service to artistic freedom, in addition to an open form of collaboration. In their practice, such open practices of borrowing or quoting originate from their collective approach to conception and production. Willhelm has acknowledged that his fashion is born of a communal effort and that designing clothes cannot happen in isolation:

I have been working with artists on how to get the message out there. You always find a better answer if you work with another creative person. Fashion is so much about collaboration with other creative people: a designer cannot do anything on his own, and collaborating with artists or photographers enables you to get something better, for both participants. (qtd. in Grau)

He simultaneously highlights the importance of diverse perspectives, areas of specialization and mutual benefit that can arise out of working collectively. Looking more specifically at the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 collection, each of the three promotional photograph collections – lookbook, looks and images specifically shot for the MOCA exhibition – feature a cast of collaborators including stylists, photographers, hair and make-up artists and set designers. For the collection, painter Rade Petrasevic was responsible for a number of textile prints; contemporary artist Philip Wiegard, who devised a sculpture for a previous Bernhard Willhelm runway presentation and provided the set design for the lookbooks; and regular collaborator Edda Gudmundsdottir served as stylist. Each of the brand's endeavours is driven by a carefully orchestrated group of creative professionals who collectively produce a unified work of fashion and are credited as such. The collective spirit of collaboration is carried forth from historical avant-gardes, whose modes of working together enabled them to disseminate their ideas more widely across disciplinary boundaries and promote a vision for a utopian future. The Wiener Werkstätte's joint project uniting architecture, design, and art; the great experiment of the Russian constructivists; Sergei Diaghilev's numerous collaborations with artists for the Ballets Russes; and second wave surrealism's active cross-fertilization of fashion, art, dance and design are all examples of how cultural vanguards have historically collaborated. For avant-garde cultural producers, collaboration is a method of working that is fundamentally based on the sharing of ideas and resources while being open to experimentation and progressive notions of expanding cultural fields. Willhelm and Kraus's efforts in working communally with other creative professionals represent a sharing of authorship, where ownership is split across many authors and each

contribution is viewed as having equal weight in the final product. This collectivity emerges out of the need to combat egoism and individuality and the alienating effects of modernism that have motivated avant-gardes to join forces to create community and comradeship (Finger and Follett 11). I employ this idea to suggest that Willhelm, Kraus and their collaborators work together not only to share their ideas and expand cultural knowledge, but as a way to counter the social isolation and atomization that has come to pervade the contemporary and neoliberal world. In this way, a collaborative method of working is a conscious effort to at once foster more creativity through sharing and create a sense of community. To speak economically, collaboration in Willhelm and Kraus's practice also results in the careful allocation of scarce resources, the combination of which brings involved parties credit and exposure. While not directly monetized, collective practice can bear the fruits of some amount of financial stability and/or sustainability in the future. Although the Bernhard Willhelm women's line was licensed in 2005 to BUS STOP, a subsidiary of Japanese company Onward Holdings Co. Ltd., it remains a small, independent operation with a studio of five employees that does not have the distribution or financial reach of larger, mainstream design houses. Therefore, collective work is undertaken in part out of financial necessity. Nevertheless, Willhelm and Kraus's division of labour and resources in the contemporary moment has a political undertone not dissimilar to anti-capitalist 1960's and 1970's subcultures of hippie and punk.

Between 2001 and 2007, Amsterdam-based photographer-duo Carmen Freudenthal and Elle Verhagen were regularly involved in collaborations with Bernhard Willhelm across platforms. From art-directing runway shows, shooting magazine

editorials and serving as editors for the catalogue accompanying the Bernhard Willhelm exhibition at the Ursula Blicke Foundation in Kraichtal, Germany (2003) to taking on creative control of all the lookbooks during this period, it is evident that Freudenthal and Verhagen became immersed in Willhelm and Kraus's practice to a great degree. Within their own practice as Freudenthal/Verhagen, the borders between disciplines fall away, traversing multiple artistic mediums and disciplines from visual art, fashion and advertising; both trained at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, where Freudenthal studied photography and Verhagen studied fashion. Together, their work for Bernhard Willhelm was a collaboration functioning within a collaboration, all the while mixing various combinations of photography, fashion, art, installation and video. Their lookbook campaign entitled "Protest" for Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 is laid out in such a way as to resemble a graphic short story (fig. 49). The frames contain photographs of the models wearing the season's looks and various props, which are then transposed onto what appears to be a DIY combination of digitally manipulated found imagery, and the occasional panel of white text or special effects lettering against a black background. The narrative of the story, printed as a running caption under each row of panels is difficult to follow, and can best be described as a surreal adventure that features two main characters Carmichael and Tricia, and later, their girlfriend, Lisa. Its text credits the moniker CLEARYPUGMIRE, who is only identifiable via the e-mail address: artlicker@yahoo.com. It appears that the dialogue had been sourced from the Internet and was also used by Freudenthal/Verhagen in the following Spring/Summer 2003 collection. Like its Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 predecessor, the Spring/Summer 2003 lookbook also follows the comic book format with a collage of found and digitally altered images of the

collection, with different text from the same “CLEARYPUGMIRE” source. Collage features regularly in Freudenthal and Verhagen’s work for Bernhard Willhelm; their selection and subsequent reworking of images – removing them from their original sources in some cases – speaks to the freedom they have in the borrowing and free exchange of ideas. Freudenthal and Verhagen’s sampling of material from a relatively unknown Internet source in the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 and Spring/Summer 2003 lookbooks also aligns with Willhelm and Kraus’s philosophy of collective authorship and practice of appropriating from any and all cultural sources in the name of sharing. Furthermore, there is a temporal dimension to such collaboration that openly rejects the fickle nature of fashion. The frequency and magnitude of Freudenthal/Verhagen’s collective efforts with Bernhard Willhelm over a sustained duration is considerable, especially when viewed in concert with the rapid change associated with fashion-time. Entrusted with articulating the brand’s visual identity over several years, Freudenthal/Verhagen would occasionally work intensively for several months of the year on Willhelm and Kraus’s projects, a feat that eventually ended their collaboration as they were unable to focus on their own practice. The longstanding collective work between Freudenthal/Verhagen and Bernhard Willhelm was born out of a mutual desire to expand the categories of visual culture, broaden experiences and create a network of like-minded individuals. It is this type of dedication and shared authorship between Willhelm and Kraus and their collaborators that sustains their creative partnerships and establishes their commitment to working collaboratively, building longstanding, productive and mutually beneficial relationships with fellow cultural producers.

Merging art and life: the world of Bernhard Willhelm

The notions of collaboration, community and sharing are further embedded in the lifestyle of Willhelm and Kraus. Since moving their studio from Paris to Los Angeles, both have been living and working in a rented mid-century house in the Beachwood Canyon neighbourhood of the Hollywood Hills. Labelled by journalist Kevin McGarry as a “creative commune” in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, the live/work space also plays host to the designers and their assistants who travelled from Paris. The conflation of art and life – while by now an overused axiom to denote vanguard cultural practice – is apparent in a description of their Los Angeles home base: “His base of operations, which he calls “California Creaming,” is ad hoc: the garage is full of clothing racks; dress forms and drafting tables open onto a communal office space that bleeds into the kitchen. If it feels cramped, the views of the hills along the back side of the house more than compensate” (McGarry). The integration of Willhelm and Kraus’s fashion work into their everyday life and vice versa indicates a willingness to combine those spheres of experience to comprise a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and can be likened to a small scale version of Andy Warhol’s studio, The Factory. Performance and theatre studies scholar Matthew Wilson Smith argues that Warhol’s multitude of projects at the Factory conflated various fields spanning from the visual arts and fashion to music and theatre into a total work of performance: “The unification of all media within a single system (which might be called *the Factory* or simply *Warhol*) represented a leveling of values that was at once utopian and vacant” (136). By integrating art into life, art becomes an embodied performance, undergoing a process of what Finger and Follett describe as “vitalization”; art approaches totality as it is filled “full with the real, the

lived, and the everyday” (3). The notion of performativity in the lived experience extends to the characters that inhabit a world created to house them. In the case with Warhol, this is evidenced by the numerous personalities manufactured by the Factory star system to act in films.

I propose that Willhelm and Kraus’s sublation of art and life is also a reflection of their politics. Finger and Follett identify the conflation of art and life as “political,” the second of three types of transgression in the total artwork, the first being aesthetic (the blending of disciplines and forms), and the third, “a more metaphysical borderlessness, a merging of present, empirical reality with a nonpresent, or not-yet-present, envisioned totality, unity, infinity, or absolute” (4). By this, they highlight the aim of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as moving beyond the bounds of cultural production, where the integration of life and work strives “toward some kind of societal transformation” or utopian future (Finger and Follett 4). Willhelm and Kraus formulate a world that, like Warhol’s Factory, articulates a dialogue with capitalism; in foregrounding various aspects of the communal: community, collaboration and collectivity in their practice, they propose utopian modes of organization and production. By living and working in a commune-like space, they expound notions of collective labour and sharing, activities that implicitly convey their socialist ideals. Willhelm, who once posted an image of a 99-cent e-book of Marx and Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto* on the social media platform Instagram along with the hashtag “#riseandfallofamerica,” articulates his political stance through collaborative practice and the conflation of life and work in the total work of fashion. While this Instagram post does not necessarily confirm Willhelm’s position as a dedicated Marxist, it establishes that the brand neither shies away from an

association with left-wing politics nor concerns itself with how a seemingly anti-market stance would affect its perception and financial performance in the fashion system.

Willhelm and Kraus's employment of a socialist rhetoric is in part reflective of their spectacular renegade stance in the fashion industry, where their products operate alongside and in tandem with their political ideology.

Although Willhelm and Kraus do not explicitly create a cast of "superstars" as Warhol did, Willhelm engages in performance and the creation of identities that can be interpreted as role-playing. The Bernhard Willhelm Instagram account showcases selfies of Willhelm along with friends and models, sometimes posing with explicit references to gay culture in a variety of provocative fetish and S&M style garments, amongst nature shots, "regrams" of other Instagram accounts' posts, images of gay porn publications, and items of curiosity and creative inspiration (fig. 50). However, if Willhelm was to craft a "star-system," it may include a motley group of pornographic actors like Sagat and CutlerX, avant-garde collaborators and Los Angeles cool kids. Playing the self-proclaimed role of the clown in his Instagram posts, Willhelm poses for the camera, daring to shock and scandalize viewers with his exhibitionism as he thrusts his groin, dildo or posterior into the frame (the latter of which is sometimes unadorned). In the *T Magazine* article profiling the brand's move to Los Angeles, Willhelm playfully performs for the camera despite the well-established newspaper's generally serious tone. Seven of the fifteen photographs accompanying the piece show Willhelm, Kraus, and their friends and collaborators play-acting domestic vignettes from life while wearing Bernhard Willhelm designs: sweeping, reading, doing laundry. One photograph in front of the house features Willhelm – dressed in long socks and a hospital gown with the back open

that exposes his underwear-covered backside – pressed up against his 1984 380SL Mercedes Benz as he is “arrested” by George Kotsiopoulos from the television show *Fashion Police* that is broadcast on the American cable channel, E! Entertainment (fig. 51). Kotsiopoulos sports a black “sexy” police officer costume that is better suited to striptease than law enforcement with its hot pants and gold Mykita x Bernhard Willhelm “Franz” aviator-style sunglasses. Staged as if to resemble film stills or scenes from a play, the camp images blur the line between reality and the imagined, and elicit the question: What is play-acting and what is real? McGarry uses dance terminology to describe the small-scale spectacle while noting the blending of the real and fantastical:

This was the culmination of a slowly unfolding ballet of scenes that mixed together the uninhibited maximalism of the studio’s everyday realities and fantasies involving marabou boas, modified wrestling singlets, big bouncy yoga balls and thongs of all shapes and sizes. Though these objects aren’t exactly design references, they collectively illustrate Willhelm’s aesthetic.

In this theatrically-staged display of art and life, it is difficult to parse out reality from performance in Willhelm and Kraus’s practice. The photos accompanying McGarry’s profile reveal their approach to working life as an all-encompassing total work of fashion. Taken together with Willhelm’s public persona on social media, the line is blurred between Bernhard Willhelm the brand, Bernhard Willhelm the character and Bernhard Willhelm, the real-life person. In her work on the connections between early twentieth-century fashion and modern art, Nancy Troy discusses French designer Paul Poiret’s work as highly influenced by his theatrical personality, noting that “Poiret himself has been described as a highly theatrical figure and the theater, in turn, was a prominent feature of all his activities” (80). Similarly, Willhelm can be described as an extraordinarily idiosyncratic figure whose idiosyncrasies, performed or otherwise, inform

the Bernhard Wilhelm fashion label. While soft-spoken in person, Willhelm's extroverted and playful, public personality effectively merges with his bold designs to create a unified brand. Unlike some designers who tend to dress in unassuming clothes with a neutral palette, he and Kraus often wear their own designs on and off the runway. As a result, Willhelm the person is sublated into the character of Bernhard Willhelm the fashion designer, who then is assimilated into Bernhard Willhelm the label, integrating art into life and vice versa.

A similar confusion arises in the blurred line between fantasy and reality with Warhol's obfuscation between fact and fiction in his life. With his carefully-crafted personae, one cannot be confident that his assertions were entirely opinions based on the personality of Andy Warhol or the actual person, Andrew Warhola, or, some hybrid of both. Warhol once directly referred to the presence of various characters he constructed and his position amongst these created personae: "I love it when you ask actors, 'What are you doing now?' and they say 'I'm between roles.' To be living 'life between roles,' that's my favorite." ("Andy Warhol"). These characters and performances and Warhol's own persona served as a supporting cast to his Factory-centric star system. Similarly, Willhelm and Kraus's revolving group of friend-collaborators assist with the creation, inhabitation and maintenance of the world that is Bernhard Willhelm, made more poignant with the American satellite of the atelier and the formation of their "creative commune" in Los Angeles. Along with "working" collaborations – those creative partnerships that contribute to the actual production of fashion – these performative collaborations with friends and models contribute to the development of the brand,

blurring the boundary between the work and life of Bernhard Willhelm as enterprise and personality.

Spectacle and theatre in the total artwork of Bernhard Willhelm

In its diverse forms, Bernhard Willhelm *Gesamtkunstwerke* can be read as theatrical spectacles that fuse together various aspects of performance and its display. By examining the semblance of Willhelm and Kraus's practices to theatre, I make reference to Troy's scholarship, which identifies various links between fashion and theatre including the function of fashion as costume, the embodied performativity of fashion, the likeness of runway presentations as theatrical productions and the engagement of fashion with celebrity (81). The Bernhard Willhelm show – that is, both exhibitions and runway presentations – is a theatrical production in all senses of the term. Each exhibition or runway show is an enterprise comprised of multiple parts, encompassing a myriad of media and requiring a long credit list of casted models or performers, collaborators and scenographers to conceptualize the totality of the works. Through scenography – the theatrical crafting of a total environment including staging, fashion and sound – Bernhard Willhelm's exhibitions and runway presentations are spectacular in linking visual display with performance. The exhibitions *Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at MoMu and *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010) at the Groninger Museum, were each the result of collaboration between the curators at the presenting institution, co-curators Willhelm and Kraus, and art directors, who conceptualized the show as a whole. Working with TONK for the former and costume designer Žana Bošnjak for the latter, Willhelm and Kraus demonstrated their intention in constructing a total experience for the viewer.

These environments were so convincing and immersive that Francesca Granata has specifically referred to *Het Totaal Rappel* as an exhibition in which the viewer felt “literally enveloped and/or entrapped in Willhelm’s manic aesthetic world” (“Het Totaal Rappel” 377-378). In addition, the theatrical reference is communicated directly by the exhibition’s use of the terms “scenography” and “art director,” which have origins in the performing arts and stage design. The concept of scenography further alludes to the creation of *mise-en-scènes*, which imagine whole scenarios for the fashions and create a series of micro-worlds. While the creation of *mise-en-scènes* has become a museological method in contemporary fashion exhibitions, Willhelm and Kraus’s version permeates multiple aspects of their practice: how their “real” life is captured, how their fashion is displayed in exhibitions and, as I will examine later in this chapter, how their runway presentations are staged. For Willhelm and Kraus, their practice is a stage for the grand *mise-en-scène* and part of a total programme that is the Bernhard Willhelm universe. At their Groninger Museum exhibition, one installation recreated the calendar image for Spring/Summer 2008 campaign in which François Sagat inserts his penis into a car tailpipe; the re-enactment consisted of a Greco-Roman-esque male statue in a different outfit, fitting its phallus into tailpipe of a real car. Another *tableau vivant* for the Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 womenswear collection featured five mannequins with large Georg Grosz-eque “Dada Death” skulls for heads smoking enormous rolled marijuana cigarettes and standing amidst a mid-calf forest of potted marijuana plants, presumably faux (fig. 52). Far from simply displays of mannequins dressed in fashions, Willhelm and Kraus’s exhibitions recreate their collections in spectacular still form.

The Bernhard Willhelm total works of fashion, however, are only activated when

they directly engage with their audiences, whether in-person or online. Their environments and displays transport the viewer into a fantastical realm, a sort of alternate reality or parallel world. Adorno dismissed the encounter with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as “magical,” a term that connotes trickery or enchantment through illusion. Based on this interpretation, art historian Juliet Koss maintains that a shadow has been cast on the total artwork: “Loosely associated with synesthesia, phantasmagoria, and psychedelia, “Gesamtkunstwerk” often stands for an artistic environment or performance in which spectators are expertly maneuvered into dumbfounded passivity by a sinister and powerful creative force” (xii). I argue that rather than be passively intoxicated by spectacle, immersed viewers are engaged participants in the experience of a total work of art. Without an audience, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* cannot fulfill its revolutionary aims of social transformation as the act of viewing is critical and active, participatory rather than passive. As scholar Josette Féral notes, theatre occurs when both performer and viewer participate in an event outside everyday life as the actor performs in this external space, while the spectator’s gaze “creates the ‘other’ space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian” (“Theatricality” 105). In other words, the spectator is a necessary and active participant who assists in the production of theatre. Both Bernhard Willhelm fashions and their accompanying productions empower the spectator to create a space for their visually complex and at times, outlandish displays outside of everyday life. In the case of their exhibitions, visitors enter the theatrical stage as they physically walk through and clamber onto installations, sometimes with little or no physical separation between the viewer and viewed. The spectacle of Bernhard Willhelm also reaches beyond the catwalk in runway shows, inviting the viewer into its zany world. At the Autumn/Winter 2007-

2008 menswear collection presentation, an outsized sculpture of a blistered sausage had its own seat amongst the audience (fig. 53). The comically enormous sausage also features in a number of promotional images for the collection: as a front-facing image of the lookbook-poster where it stands tall at the pinnacle of a hill; in a photograph that shows Willhelm clutching the sausage in a subway car while a woman seated next to him looks on in wide-eyed bafflement; and another photograph that depicts Willhelm in an interior setting with his arm around the *wurst*, giving a thumbs-up sign. While spectacular in an offbeat, humorous way, the sausage's presence and anthropomorphized performance easily engages the viewer, who cannot help but direct their gaze towards the quirky intervention. In entering into the theatrical space of Bernhard Willhelm exhibitions, runway shows or visual interventions more generally, the spectator's gaze actively transforms quotidian space.

In its maximalist and phantasmagorical presentation, Willhelm and Kraus's contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* has a dialectical relationship to historical interpretations of the Wagnerian total artwork. Thinkers such as Adorno, Fried and Guy Debord have articulated arguments against spectacle and theatricality in their respective contemporary cultures of music and art. Wagner's anti-Semitism and connection to the Third Reich perpetuated Adorno's attack on the composer, employing the derogatory term of "phantasmagoria" to label the composer's operas, adding that they "tend toward magical delusion" (*In Search of Wagner* 85). Adorno outright compared them to commodities, intended for display and consumption:

In Wagner's day the consumer goods on display turned their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of customers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character, from the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, in the phantasmagoria, Wagner's operas tend to become commodities.

Their tableaux assume the character of wares on display. (*In Search of Wagner* 90)

Furthermore, he branded Wagner's total artworks as products of a bourgeois world, therefore removing any original revolutionary intention that Wagner had envisaged. Seen this way, Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerke* were no more than overwrought spectacles, an analysis that would later serve as the foundation for Adorno and Max Horkheimer's polemical work on the culture industry. Interestingly, the contemporary film and music industries continue to maintain a close alliance to the consumption and promotion of luxury commodities, and this shows no signs of abatement. Although Willhelm and Kraus take a stand against Hollywood glamour and notions of mass commercialism, a small group of mainstream celebrities ranging from reality television star Kylie Jenner and singer-songwriters such as Rihanna and Ciara have appeared in Bernhard Willhelm garments. The unusual pairing of these avant-garde designs with popular culture personalities might seem, at least initially, to ring true with Adorno and Horkheimer's damning pronouncements on mass culture. However, the introduction of Bernhard Willhelm vanguard garments into Hollywood and popular culture introduce radical changes into mainstream celebrity fashion. Despite their status as commercial goods – albeit anti-commercial and niche – Bernhard Willhelm fashions create fissures in the homogeneity of mass culture.

Adorno's staunch criticism of Wagner finds strange bedfellows in Fried's opposition to Minimalism fifteen years later in his essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967), which coincidentally was published in the same year as Guy Debord's seminal text *Society of the Spectacle*. Fried famously charged Minimalism with theatricality and denigrated any "activity" that engaged with theatre, effectively excluding it from the

canon of modernist art: “*Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater.* Theater is the common denominator that binds together a large and seemingly disparate variety of activities, and that distinguishes those activities from the radically different enterprises of the modernist arts” (“Art and Objecthood” 164, author’s emphasis). Here, Fried’s agreement with Greenberg over the championing of medium specificity becomes apparent, simultaneously aligning with Adorno’s claim of Wagner’s aspiration to unite multiple art forms as the mark of “dilettantism” (*In Search of Wagner* 28-29). I dispute Fried’s assertion that “[a]rt degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater” (64) and Adorno’s negative judgement of phantasmagoria in the total work of art. Their judgements dismiss the revolutionary potential embedded in collaboration and the merging of artistic mediums in favour of medium specificity and adherence to strict categories. In order to grasp the totality of Willhelm and Kraus’s collective and interdisciplinary practice, Fried’s message can be understood favourably, and is an accurate pronouncement of an individual art form’s incorporation into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For any discipline to become part of a unitary artwork, it is required to “degenerate”; to rephrase this process in a more complimentary manner, fields must possess a certain degree of malleability in order to contribute fully to the collective work. Such flexibility in the contemporary total artwork is necessary in order for each art form to expand and shift, which in turn may potentially reach new audiences and enact greater change. In other words, disciplines in the total work of art must renounce their individuality for the collective good of the work. That is not to say that disciplines lose their defining characteristics – Willhelm and Kraus’s practice is still very much so fashion – but that they must open their borders and unite with others to achieve

revolutionary status as a whole entity. Borderlessness strengthens art forms once activated in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Wagner 189), contrary to the conception that the merging of disciplines is an incoherent and muddying mix of indiscernible arts. Despite the blending of art forms, individual disciplines are still discernible in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In “Art-Work of the Future,” Wagner anthropomorphized art forms in the collective work as “sisters” and argued that they remain independent:

By working in common, each one of them attains the power to be and do the very thing which, of her own and inmost essence, she longs to do and be. Hereby: that each, where her own power ends, can be absorbed within the other, whose power commences where her’s ends,—she maintains her own purity and freedom, her independence as *that* which she is. (189)

Thus, the boundarylessness of each discipline is dialectical; the individuality of each of the disciplines is strengthened rather than diluted when melded, culminating in a unified whole. In this way, Bernhard Willhelm is comprised of synthesis of components from other visual and artistic mediums that strengthen its “fashionness.”

At the same time, Willhelm and Kraus’s openness to the amalgamation of disciplines in their practice explicitly aims to be “Other,” an aspect that precisely exemplifies their avant-garde motivations. Although a fashion entity, their practice is not solely fashion; it also has qualities that align it with visual art, performance, theatre and dance. Bernhard Willhelm transgresses and rejects the conventional idea of fashion as limited to dress and adornment. I borrow the notion of being “Other” from Finger and Follett:

And, as we have said, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* constitutes an *aesthetic* aspiration toward borderlessness: although it represents an artwork that desires to be other, or more, than simply an artwork, that tends to want to drop the term “art” or “work” or both, that attempts to expand out from the constraints of the genre, to escape the limitations of the framework of art and even at times the confinements of worldly materiality, it remains, despite itself, an artistic project. (4)

The quote above also raises the issue of multiple modernisms, and proposes that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* falls within a narrative alternative to the singular modernism of formalism and medium specificity defended by Clement Greenberg, where Greenbergian high modernism disregards a swath of innovative collective art practices that are integral to a plural notion of modernism. Instead, considered this way, the total artwork intentionally obliterates disciplinary boundaries, an aspect that signals its refusal to be defined as any one art form, style or movement and squarely places it in line with the avant-garde's predilection for aesthetic experimentation. In aspiring to become Other to fashion – performance art, dance or film, as I will later examine – the Bernhard Willhelm total work of fashion is greater than any individual discipline as it breaks out of artistic and categorical constraint.

Bernhard Willhelm, the show: the exhibition as a total work of art

Bernhard Willhelm's exhibitions merge disciplines – film, installation, performance or sculpture – in site-specific installations to create a unified work. As a site for display, the exhibition synthesizes these forms and in so doing, expands fashion as a field, but also encourages borderlessness in the disciplines with which it engages. In other words, the cooperation of multimedia in the total exhibition propels cultural production forward, as it identifies new avenues to be explored in order to broaden its reach. In the essay “Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk” (2013) art theorist Boris Groys asserts that the exhibition as total work of art was a response of the historical avant-gardes to the museum as an institution, serving as “a replacement for a totalizing space of trans-temporal artistic representation of everybody and everything.” He

differentiates between the “traditional exhibition,” which places emphasis on displaying temporally static individual objects that operate independently of their environment, and the contemporary “curatorial project” (Groys, “Entering the Flow”). A glance at the MoMA’s exhibition history confirms the popularity of chronological and historical formats of traditional exhibitions, preserving artwork in their rightful places in art history and presenting them in supposedly neutral spaces. On the other hand, artworks in the curatorial project are taken out of their original temporal context in order to serve collectively in support of a curatorial vision, while at the same time taking into account the institutional space (Groys, “Entering the Flow”). Considering curator Harald Szeeman’s 1983 exhibition entitled *Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (“The Tendency to *Gesamtkunstwerk*”) as an example, Groys argues that the curator functions as a dictator who crafts a site specific “temporary Gesamtkunstwerk”:

The curatorial project, rather than the exhibition, is then the *Gesamtkunstwerk* because it instrumentalizes all the exhibited artworks and makes them serve a common purpose that is formulated by the curator. At the same time, a curatorial or artistic installation is able to include all kinds of objects: time-based artworks or processes, everyday objects, documents, texts, and so forth. All these elements, as well as the architecture of the space, sound, or light, lose their respective autonomy and begin to serve the creation of a whole in which visitors and spectators are also included. (“Entering the Flow”)

While Groys is speaking specifically about how the curatorial project disrupts the art historical narrative preserved within the temporally static space of the museum, a temporality that I have addressed in Chapter Two, I take from him the idea of the contemporary curated project as a total artwork that incorporates heterogeneous objects and forms into a unified work.

The curatorial project of which Groys speaks is represented in institutional displays of Wilhelm and Kraus’s work. In the MoMu’s *Het Totaal Rappel*, installations

blended art and theatrical stage design, where the backdrops and props used in the displays played as important a role as the garments they were accompanying. Where did the fashions end, where did the stage begin and vice versa? The exhibition was very much a show, not only in terms of the display of objects, but also in the sense of the show as a spectacle of performance and theatre. Set on literal and figurative stages and accompanied by architectural structures, props and scenographic backdrops, the fashions and the mannequins occupied roles as actors in silent scenes. The viewer would actively move about the exhibition, into and out of environments created specifically for each collection as if performing amidst the staged designs. Sharing the space with the exhibition, the viewer's presence is vital, as s/he participates directly with the objects on display. Groys contends that as a total artwork, it is only possible to encounter the curatorial project from within, and cites that the "theatralization of the museum" allows viewers to "enter the stage, and find themselves inside the spectacle" ("Entering the Flow"). Furthermore, he argues that this total immersion of the spectator into the work of art is an experience which theatre has attempted to provide, but which cannot in its separation between stage and seating (Groys, "Entering the Flow").

The activity and immersion of the visitor as observer-participant resonates with discourse on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its discussion of the reduction in distance between the viewer and the artwork. At Wagner's *Festpielhaus* in Bayreuth, the theatre was designed specifically to house performances of his operas, Koss notes that the architecture was intended to facilitate the audience's absorption into the performance:

The ideal construction of the stage and auditorium would allow architecture to remain silently present during the performance, fostering the most direct communication between the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its audience. Like a cousin chaperoning the sister arts from a distance, its success was measured by its

invisibility; as a conduit for the ideal aesthetic experience, it would be crucial but imperceptible. (25)

In the example cited here, the architecture was designed to become one with artwork, a sort of spectral collaborator in the production of the total artwork. Wagner's design further attempted to close the distance between viewer and stage by burying the orchestra pit at the base of the stage, therefore eliminating it from the audience's view and illuminating a floating rectangle of the "stage image" once theatre lights were dimmed (Koss 61-62). In Willhelm and Kraus's theatrical stage set-like exhibitions, the viewer is not only in the same space as the work – next to or in front of an installation – but physically within the work, as their exhibitions are every part fashion as their designed garments. This sense of inclusion and movement within the total work is key given the embodied aspect of fashion as an object; fashion is meant to adapt to envelope a body and be performed through a range of motion. Speaking specifically to the postmodern body, Elizabeth Wilson has argued that dress can occupy a role in the performance of identity and "lend a theatrical and play-acting aspect to the hallucinatory experience of the contemporary world" ("Fashion and the Postmodern Body" 8). As fashion is most fully engaged when worn on the body, its performative value lays dormant when displayed and preserved within the context of a museum. In Willhelm and Kraus's displays, theatrical backdrops and audio-visual components such as film and video, together with the participant-observer's presence overcome some of the limitations of static display and re-activates garments. While their fashions are not physically animated in an exhibition, they are enlivened by display and live on as agents of historical and/or contemporary time.

The notion of animating objects as actors in a historical continuum can also be

applied to Willhelm and Kraus's non-fashion curatorial projects. For the exhibition *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History* (2012-2013), the Middelheim Museum in Antwerp, Belgium invited Willhelm and Kraus to reimagine the display of the institution's 50-year-old permanent collection, not only by bringing key sculptures out of storage, but also by disrupting modes of seeing. Primarily known as an outdoor sculpture park, the Middelheim houses fragile works and temporary exhibitions like *Experts* in the Braem Pavilion (1971) designed by Belgian architect and urban planner, Renaat Braem. Like a museum sculpture itself, the modernist edifice sits nestled in the clearing of a forested area of the park. Carsten Fock's trademark and idiosyncratic block lettering of the exhibition title on the window of the pavilion greeted the viewer, who was directed to a room in which Fock's text instructed, in both Dutch and English, to "Please protect your shoes." The visitor also could have opted to remove his/her shoes, offering a more intimate experience of padding around the carpeted exhibition space in stocking feet, as one would in a domestic setting rather than a public institution. As with Willhelm and Kraus's practice as a whole, the Bernhard Willhelm visual brand identity was communicated throughout the exhibition with Fock's block lettering including the exhibition brochure and exhibition labels. An outsized yellow felt arrow on the floor indicated a meandering path through the installation of sculpture, furniture, and reading tables, terminating at a tree-like plywood structure that reached the pavilion's ceiling (fig. 54). The tree gave the illusion that it extended beyond the structure of the building as if to refer to Constantin Brancusi's endless columns and held publications on sculpture and artists whose works are collected by the Middelheim. Although the venue felt like a generously-sized living room with denoted zones of relaxation and respite, the exhibition

resembled more a playroom or tree house. The viewer's physical experience was key as the exhibition examined not only ideas of the body as subject matter for sculpture, but also how bodies behaved in the exhibition space. Here, the physical enmeshed with the metaphysical, connecting the visitor's own body and experience of the exhibition to an examination of the body as an entity. As the pavilion is hidden in the forest of the Middelheim park, the exhibition space easily transformed into a place of contemplation and thought. The result was an environment that offered reflection on the metaphysical and physical states of the body.

Experts provided a glimpse into Bernhard Willhelm's fantastical utopia and subversive playfulness. Willhelm and Kraus perched figurative sculptures by Jean Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Käthe Kollwitz and Auguste Rodin along with more contemporary works by Paul Van Hoeydonck, Peter Rogiers and Kurt Trampedach. Some were set into plywood crate-like display boxes, while others were set above the visitor's eyelevel, resting casually atop architectural wooden structures that resembled staircases and construction scaffolding (fig. 55) produced by the exhibition's scenographers, Dutch design duo Vantot. The works were simultaneously made precious in their sheltered placement and stripped of the same preciousness by means of the unfinished containers. Aside from the natural light streaming in through the pavilion's windows, bare fluorescent tube lighting directly illuminated some of the works and lent a vibrant glow, almost achieving a futurity rather than reminding one of unfortunate grade-school classrooms or characterless office cubicles. Mirrors reflected the inaccessible backs of some of the sculptures, allowing the viewer to see them relatively in the round, including one's own body in juxtaposition. The incorporation of the viewer's body and its image

into the exhibition demonstrated both her/his necessary involvement and submersion in the “curatorial project” as a total artwork. Middelheim host curator Sara Weyns likened the visitor’s experience of the works to discovering treasures in jewel boxes. As some works were shown at heights greater than those designated by regular museum standards, the viewer was encouraged to look up and around. This active experience compelled the visitor to move more freely in the space and invited one to sit on wonky-looking chairs, *chaise longues* and cube-shaped plywood seats, or climb onto the jungle gym- and ladder-like constructions to get a better and different view of the works on display and exhibition space as a whole. The change in perspective was twofold: visitors were led not only to think outside of conventional modes of display in the white cube environment, but were also asked to change their physical behaviour in moving about the space. In interacting directly with the exhibition, the passive spectator became an involved participant, crafting his/her own experience and immersion into both the works on display and the greater context of the show. Serving as a “guest” of Willhelm and Kraus’s curated “home,” the visitor’s body responded to the environment and was able to develop a personal connection to the exhibition and the architectural environment that was its context.

Experts merged architecture, design, art and fashion into a seamless entity, where borders between these fields fell away in order to formulate a cohesive whole. Through the mixing of and flow between fields, Willhelm and Kraus defied the staid and tidy categories of various artistic forms. Weyns observed that they desired “chaos and richness, [...] not structure” in the exhibition. While Weyns was speaking to the aesthetic of *Experts*, these qualities can be applied to Willhelm and Kraus’s resistance to a

restrictive definition of their practice as solely fashion. To Willhelm and Kraus, design and design-related fields each occupy a non-hierarchical position in visual culture and their practice more widely. When I posed them the question: “If you had an exhibition where you were given free rein and it did not have to be art or fashion, what would you put in it?” Willhelm answered that he would like to do a garden (Willhelm and Kraus). Prompted further on the connection between the horticultural activity and fashion, he spoke to the fluidity of form and medium in his practice: “It’s a certain kind of openness, I think [that] as a creative person [...] it’s really about giving new fields a chance. Of course there is linkage in fashion and art and what we are doing. I like craft, this is maybe the reason why I would like to work with different materials, not only with fabric” (Willhelm and Kraus). Willhelm views other fields as a means to further articulate his fashion; his interest in engaging with disciplines outside of fashion broadens the platform on which to communicate his critically engaged practice, which also speaks to aesthetic cross-disciplinary experimentation in aspects of the avant-garde. As Rosalind Krauss states, an expanded field of sculpture allows for work not to be “dictated by the conditions of a particular medium” (“Sculpture” 42-43). While Krauss is speaking specifically to the condition of postmodern sculpture, her declaration more generally imparts how material inclusivity and the heterogeneity of form are necessary in order to reshape fields and redefine borders in vanguard practice. This liminality between disciplines is at the heart of the total work of art, where forms mix and fields cannot be contained.

Willhelm and Kraus’s uncharacteristic treatment of valuable and culturally important sculpture – especially that seen from the vantage point of two fashion designers

who are not professional curators – has not been without disapproval. The Middelheim received negative feedback concerning Willhelm and Kraus’s untraditional curation, including an e-mail that objected to how Giacometti’s bronze work *Venice II* (1956) was shown (presumably because it was confined to a crate and crudely illuminated by a fluorescent tube light). Willhelm and Kraus’s transgressions in the display of the Middelheim collection turned conventional viewing practices of sculpture upside down. Where some of the museum’s collection was unceremoniously shelved into and onto the plywood boxes as if decorative objects, crafted furniture pieces were upheld as “fine” art, as they sat on short pedestals. A two-sided chair on a stepped pedestal near the entrance to the pavilion received atmospheric lighting so as to enhance the viewing of it, as if mimicking the display strategies of a high-end furniture gallery (fig. 56). At the same time, the furniture pieces were wholly functional and could have been used, albeit with care; they were not merely pieces of furniture as art, or objects meant only to be held in contemplation. In a sense, the wooden fittings recalled Donald Judd’s furniture designs, where the functional object meets the conceptual and theoretical rigour of Minimalist art. This, however, is where the similarities between Judd and Bernhard Willhelm end, as Judd saw art and design as separate entities, based on the intention of the artist or designer. In addition, while the furniture-like objects in *Experts* could be read as a paean to Minimalism and its allegiance to the grid, the exhibition’s contents were laid out in a casually rambling fashion, as if to consciously resist the sanctity and sobriety for which white cube space has become known. Several times during the exhibition installation process, Willhelm dismissed arrangements as “too *Elle Décoration*” in reference to the interior decorating magazine and its penchant for tasteful home interiors (qtd. in Weyns).

His commentary highlights two issues: firstly, he likens the pavilion's museological context to a home interior, debasing it by removing its exalted status as an institution of high art; and secondly, that there are limits to his inclusiveness of any or all visual form in that he objects to notions of orderliness associated with bourgeois good taste.

Nevertheless, the flow between visual categories and reversal between art and design codes of display in the exhibition – where design pieces were presented as art, and sculptures were treated as everyday objects in a space for designated for art – illustrates Willhelm and Kraus's deliberate co-mingling of art and design and their intent in mixing forms and combining mediums in their total works of fashion.

By ensuring the visual cogency of everything from the furniture design, the display of objects to the signage, Willhelm and Kraus transformed their brand identity into a museum-quality exhibition. The wholly inclusive approach they take in their practice and outré aesthetic more broadly is articulated in full in their exhibitions such as *Experts*. Yet, this was not the crass commercialization presented in Takashi Murakami's MOCA and Brooklyn Museum exhibitions that featured fully operating Louis Vuitton boutiques in the gallery spaces. Then Louis Vuitton creative director Marc Jacobs shied away from describing the stores as commercial enterprises, claiming that they were performance art or Duchampian readymades. While Jacobs's conception of the Murakami-Louis Vuitton boutiques-as-performance is not outside the realm of the possible, the stores cannot be disregarded as branding exercises. Whether exhibition visitors purchased the luxury items or not, Louis Vuitton is one of the world's most recognizable design houses and their participation cannot be viewed as solely belonging to the category of art. On the contrary, Willhelm and Kraus are continually able to

seamlessly incorporate their creative practice with commerce in more subtle ways because their marketing is not limited to the brand. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, it is difficult to separate the various facets of Bernhard Willhelm the fashion entity from Willhelm, the real life person, as the brand comprises both.

Although rare, the fashion designer-curator hybrid has a few precedents in various MoMu exhibitions and specifically brings to mind Saint Laurent creative director Hedi Slimane's curatorial practice. In 2007, Slimane curated the exhibition *Sweet Bird of Youth* at Berlin commercial gallery Arndt & Partner. At the time, he was creative director of Dior Homme, a position that promoted his cult of personality and preference for the colour black. This was translated directly into *Sweet Bird of Youth* in that it was a colourless (read: black and white) exhibition that adhered strictly to Slimane's austere personal aesthetic. *Experts* was no different with its total vision, which simultaneously conveyed Bernhard Willhelm as a commercial entity and Willhelm and Kraus's own philosophical motives. Visitors were asked to discover alternative perspectives in the exhibition, question ways of seeing and make critical judgments in the way Willhelm and Kraus would. By entering the warm and inviting space, visitors were absorbed in the universe of Bernhard Willhelm, and were acquainted with the designers as people. Like the *Gesamtkunstwerke* that Van de Velde and Morris called home, Willhelm and Kraus's *Experts* was an immersive entity where everything from the signage, furniture design and how the body moves through the space, to the exhibition's context within the history of art, and the art itself was closely considered.

The runway *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the theatrical fashion shows of Bernhard Willhelm

Bernhard Willhelm runway shows can be described as theatrical productions or “fashion-dramas” in which several mediums combine to comprise a unitary whole. In using the descriptor “theatrical” I mean to convey that from the spectator’s viewpoint, these fashion presentations resemble performed spectacles more broadly rather than the definition of “theatrical” as a quality related solely to stage-related performance (Féral 1982, 2002). Theatre scholars Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis build on Féral’s work, stating that theatricality is a concept that can be defined widely, whether “exclusively as a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation” (1). While expansive, such a range of meaning is helpful in exploring the elasticity of performance as a whole and ideas of staging in disciplines outside of theatre. Thus, I employ “theatrical” as an optimistic term for examining how Willhelm and Kraus broaden possibilities for fashion promotion and display as an artistic mode of expression and viewed experience, rather than as a negative idea associated with notions of artificiality, melodrama or exaggeration. Their hybrid phantasmagorical performance-presentations transform their fashions, which then acquire a role similar to costume. As fashion scholar Caroline Evans contends, early twentieth-century fashion shows of designers such as Poiret and Elsa Schiaparelli can be characterized as “theatrical *mise-en-scènes*” (“The Enchanted Spectacle” 291). They extended such fashion promotion efforts beyond the standard walkabout formula of the “mannequin parades” (as fashion shows were called at the time), including music and staging. In 1911, Poiret famously hosted a costume party in his garden entitled “The Thousand and Second Night,” a participatory extravaganza in which three hundred guests

were required to arrive in Orientalist dress in order to gain entry. Those who were not costumed were either asked to leave or dressed in Poiret's Ballets Russes and Persian-influenced 1911 collection. The result was a spectacle that combined the commercial form of the fashion show with theatre and embodied performance.

While Willhelm and Kraus do not adhere to any one style of runway presentation, it is evident that they are dedicated to developing alternative concepts of the fashion show as avant-garde spectacle. Early Bernhard Willhelm runway shows took on a traditional form in which models paraded down a catwalk in front of a seated audience. However, they have since broken from such conventional practice and their fashion shows have become increasingly free form, joining with other visual mediums. At times taking place outside physical sites of the global network of fashion weeks, Bernhard Willhelm presentations incorporate the fields of visual art, dance, theatre and performance and feature collaborations between musicians, artists, choreographers and actors. The fashion shows can be described as dramatic interdisciplinary performances, incorporating stage props and various mediums such as music, dance, installation and theatre. Willhelm and Kraus come from a long line of fashion designers who engage with alternative practices in presenting runway shows through other art forms. Vanguard Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto come to mind with their dance accompanied shows or dance performances-as-fashion shows, while mainstream and mainstream-experimental designers have increasingly relied on unconventional runway presentations to promote their designs as well. Recent memorable presentations of the latter group include the Kanye West x adidas Originals Autumn/Winter 2015 streetwear collection entitled "Yeezy Season 2," staged as one of contemporary artist Vanessa

Beecroft's trademark *tableaux vivants*; West's 2016 follow-up of epic proportions "Yeezy Season 3," which was presented as a Beecroft performance and listening party for his new album *The Life of Pablo* at Madison Square Garden; and American designer Rick Owens's enlisting of step dancers from American sororities in his Spring/Summer 2014 runway presentation. Although alternative models for runway shows are not limited to the fashion avant-garde, it is Willhelm and Kraus's frequent eschewing of the traditional catwalk that distinguishes them from conventional designers. Their shows engage multiple facets of performance, all of which are in service to the collective work.

At times, Bernhard Willhelm runway presentations take on characteristics similar to performance art, itself an interdisciplinary medium that cannot be easily defined. For the Spring/Summer 2010 menswear collection shown the Palais de Brongniart in Paris, models individually stepped onto a small podium and paused for the cameras to capture the collection looks. Some then proceeded to the area surrounding the platform and began to "paint" on canvases already bearing images that were propped up on makeshift easels around the room, while others seated themselves, facing the spectators. The viewing space was decorated with props: stuffed animals, heads of fresh cabbage, empty paint cans, artfully arranged books and ergonomic kneeling chairs on tarpaulin drop sheets, crafting an environment of an artist's atelier. The result was a work contained within a work, as the models making art(work) could be seen within the larger work of the performance-presentation. At the end of the show, the makeshift "stage" resembled a *tableau vivant* – literally a "living" picture in the sense that the models were moving, but contrary to its typical form as a motionless scene – one that was site-specific and contemporary with the nineteenth-century building. The presentation could easily have

been mistaken for a performance in an art biennial had it not been for the show's context within the commercial scope of Paris Fashion Week. In her analysis on fashion shows as performance art, curator Ginger Gregg Duggan argues that the similarity between spectacular runway presentations and performance art is so great that the only defining aspect is the former's intent to market and sell commodities (245). Without previous knowledge of this commercial purpose, performance-presentations can effectively be read as artworks. While the mercantile aspect of Bernhard Willhelm's runway presentations is muted amongst its more artistic and theatrical qualities, it is crucial to recognize the intent: as shows meant to display a product for sale and consumption. Willhelm and Kraus suppress the commodity status of their fashion in order to present their practice as cultural and not limited to the production of saleable goods.

Aside from the runway performance, garments from the Bernhard Willhelm Spring/Summer 2010 menswear collection can be described formally as if paintings themselves in terms of colour, texture, material, and pattern. Willhelm and Kraus dressed models in camouflage makeup and patterned clothing, wrestling singlet-type garments, long hooded coats, wide long shorts, beekeeping hats and veils, long socks, hip waders and rubber boots, gladiator sandals, and a long list of various articles of clothing from which tendrils of cord and lacy bits hung like algae or grasses. In short, the defining characteristic of the collection was a hodgepodge of references, a mixing of forms and styles that has come to represent the Bernhard Willhelm ethos and serves as a metaphor for the brand's socio-political position on diversity. Furthermore, contrary to more conventional runway shows that generally populate the various fashion week calendars, the presentations did not fit the mould of those put on by mainstream contemporary

designers such as Michael Kors and Burberry, whose shows feature models walking orderly in single file down a catwalk in relatively minimal, unadorned and nondescript spaces. Rather, both venues for Bernhard Willhelm fashion shows and models are often festooned with additional found objects and/or props that are starkly handmade (e.g. hand sculpted clay “pretzel,” hotdog and *wurst* necklaces for the Spring/Summer 2009 womenswear presentation, fig. 57), and neither a part of the collections proper, nor intended for sale. In viewing the fashions and the staging together, there is an innate sense of Willhelm and Kraus’s maximalist approach to visual display. In presenting collections of objects alongside their designs, they articulate their approach of inclusiveness and openness to a fluid expression of their work in visual mediums not limited to fashion. Anything and everything can occupy a role in their presentations. Through their combinations of performed movement and visual impact, Bernhard Willhelm runway shows can be understood as living paintings.

The presentation for the Autumn/Winter 2010-2011 womenswear collection also staged at the Palais Brongniart traversed again into the territory of a performed spectacle, as the surreal show consisted entirely of the models standing in a staged environment. Unlike the Spring/Summer 2010 menswear show, the traditional walking of the catwalk and pausing to pose for photographers was forgone. Instead, female models posed along with a handful of male models in the centre of the room, amidst a collection of readymade sculptures, theatrical props and a chaotic set-up of white, blue and orange photographic studio backdrops and lighting which presented the models as “photo-ready” for the press. Areas were staged as if exhibition installations, where real models replaced mannequins, again conjuring associations between fashion display and *tableaux vivants*.

During the presentation, each model performed a specific action: pouring “tea” from a kettle (fig. 58); holding onto a staff comprised of actual baguettes that were placed end to end; skewering fresh cucumber halves, apples, bananas and pineapple on a long, pointed stick; and for one male model, weightlifting two large containers of anabolic whey protein powder which held small green plants. Furthermore, unlike a conventional recording of a runway presentation that is neutral and informative, the video of the performance disseminated on the Internet took on a filmic quality, resembling material shot on a Super8 camera. The dream-like footage recalled a nostalgic throwback to home recordings of summer vacations rather than purely documentary video. The accompanying dissonant, electronic soundscape designed by the musician laminal and Paris-based production company La Compagnie du Bon Goût (CDBG), the latter of whom also directed the video, added to the surreal aesthetic. With its heavy reliance on post-production of the footage, the video functioned as a piece of avant-garde cinema itself and was less a record of a live event.

The performance art aspect was again present in the show for the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection, also held at the Palais Brongniart. Labelled an “installation” in collaboration with choreographer Elie Hay and sound by composer and artist Martin Maugeais, the presentation positioned models around the top floor of the neoclassical-inspired building, some standing, others sitting or splayed out on the floor. The models appeared to be in a bizarre semi-vegetative state or frozen stupor; they were slumped against walls, looking dejected with their heads hanging low, lacking energy or in a drug-induced haze. All of the models had their faces dusted with frosty silver-white makeup; many wore Mykita x Bernhard Willhelm “Daisuké” sun visors (hybrid visor/sunglasses);

others were wore wigs, backpacks or military helmets. Were they marooned soldiers in their weakened state, or mere ghosts of their former selves? The models held jars that contained a photograph of their unmade-up face, perhaps an indication of who they once were. In a reversal of the viewer and the viewed, show invitees moved through the space in order to see the collection, whereas the models, dazed, barely moved, like living statues in a *tableau vivant* or street buskers (fig. 59). The removal of boundaries between model and spectator recalls Allan Kaprow's 1950's and 1960's "happenings," in which collaborative work blended art, music, performance, dance, film into a participatory experience for the viewer and later Richard Schechner's concept of "environmental theatre." Schechner asserts that the term can be applied to unconventional theatrical events in which space is not divided between the viewer-viewed space but rather is blended and used by both performance and spectator ("6 Axioms" 48-49). In such presentations, Bernhard Willhelm fashions respond to the site-specificity of the space in which they are displayed, aligning with Schechner's axiom that environmental theatre is staged in found space. Furthermore, the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear installation diverged from traditional catwalk shows in that it did not have a singular focus, but rather was comprised of multiple points of focus around the space. Schechner states the multifocal aspect of environmental theatre creates a flexible viewing situation for the observer, who in turn must actively move about the shared performance-spectator space in order to acquire a sense of the event; this in turn constructs a varied experience individual to each viewer as it is dependent on their personal movements and participation ("6 Axioms" 57-58).

As the Spring/Summer 2013 collection fell on Willhelm's ten-year anniversary of

designing menswear, the designs re-mixed and revisited past collections. Inspiration for the collection came from late Italian designer Gianni Versace's 1980's and 1990's designs, which are known for their brash colour combinations, graphic neo-Baroque prints, and iconic Medusa head that adorn everything from clothing and tableware to bedding. While the garments represented a culmination of Willhelm and Kraus's collective past, they articulated a futuristic aesthetic, in part due to the models' white makeup and the reflective sun visors. If anything, the collection itself achieved unity through heterogeneity with its at once sleek, heavily patterned, brightly coloured and seemingly ragtag clothes. While not immediately apparent, a closer inspection of the garments reveals Willhelm's interest in innovative Japanese methods of finishing materials and time-intensive processes of manipulating fabric. Perhaps the collection can best be summed up by a silky track suit which features an ornate multi-coloured and elaborate gold filigree print influenced by Versace's customary prints, mashed up with florals and emoji-like faces, with sleeves covered in a shimmering gold ruffle mimicking paper party decorations (fig. 60). While this attention to detail and luxury on a material level was mirrored in the sumptuous nineteenth-century palace and its situation at the Place de la Bourse, the site of the Parisian historical stock exchange, the show's vivid visuals simultaneously clashed with the restrained and tasteful neoclassical architecture. Willhelm and Kraus's collection is a futuristic interpretation of the Baroque seen through the lens of Versace's ostentatious but artful aesthetic. As a production, the presentation attained cohesiveness through the site-specificity of the installation-performance to the architecture, where the visual splendour of the Bourse's architectural details instituted a dialogue with the decorative elements of the fashions. In this way, the building-as-stage

united with the runway presentation – clothing, installation, performance – the sum total of which could be fully experienced by the viewer, who took part in an embodied performance shared by model and spectator. As a result of the active movement of the viewer, the performance-presentation was immersive, unlike conventional runway presentations that elevate and/or separate the catwalk from the space of attendees and press. In this sense, Bernhard Willhelm’s runway shows can be compared to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* “curatorial projects” of which Groys speaks, where the participant-observer has a direct physical involvement with the presentation and is literally on the stage during the performance. The runway show-performance art hybrids, however, are not exclusive to the instances that I have discussed here. Willhlem and Kraus have employed this format for a number of other presentations including those for Autumn/Winter 2011-2012 menswear collection, which featured an installation by artist Christophe Hamaide-Pierson, a member of the art collective assume vivid astro focus and sound by the visual/sound artist Tal Isaac Hadad, and the Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection.

Aural components such as sound and music also speak to the attention paid to non-visual elements in Bernhard Willhelm’s runway presentations. The Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection, shown at the now defunct Parisian commercial art gallery Cosmic Galerie, began with a two-minute sound and video projection by contemporary artist Dirk Bonn. Set to a recording of Hungarian avant-garde composer György Ligeti’s Fluxus “event-score” *Poème symphonique for 100 metronomes* (1962), the black and white projection captured one hundred metronomes lined up in a bleacher-like configuration, ticking in accordance to Ligeti’s score. As the projection faded from view,

the sound continued on. Models emerged from the side stage, pausing under a dramatically-lit pyramid of criss-crossed fluorescent green climbing ropes before proceeding down a catwalk. While the overall form of the presentation – save for Bonn’s projection at the start of the show – was largely in line with more conventional fashion shows. It is worth devoting some attention to the soundtrack and how it diverged from those played at more mainstream designers’ runway presentations. In the past, memorable fashion shows for Viktor & Rolf have featured live musical performances by singer-songwriters such as Rufus Wainwright and Tori Amos, while lingerie retailer Victoria’s Secret shows have featured pop stars such as Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Kanye West and Rihanna. Perhaps the pairing of popular music with the fashion show is most fitting, for pop is the most easily consumable music, and runway presentations have become widely accessible spectacles of mass entertainment largely due to the Internet. This is not far removed from the promotion of fashion on newsreels and film in early twentieth-century television and cinema. To return to fashion show soundtracks, Bernhard Willhelm and Bonn’s use of an avant-garde composition in the Spring/Summer 2007 menswear collection presentation attempts to subvert the traditional marketing function and consumerist logic of runway shows. In contrast to the mainstream pop that urges one to consume, Ligeti’s unforgiving, ticking metronomes can be interpreted as sonically grating in their rhythmic intensity. The score calls for one hundred metronomes set to various tempos, each wound the same amount of times. The faster-paced metronomes wear themselves out more quickly than those set to slower tempos, until one metronome is left ticking and then it too ceases to move. This is all to say that the modernist *Poème symphonique* is not aesthetic music to which one listens for pure

sonorous pleasure; it is conceptual and fulfills an intellectual and philosophical notion of music. The pairing of this score with Bernhard Willhelm's fashions obfuscates the garments' commodity status and cocon that the clothes are not easily consumable as objects. When the show is viewed online, the accompanying music may be more tolerable for the viewer, in the sense that it is possible to scroll past the audio-visual introduction or mute the sound for the ten-minute long presentation as the models walk down the catwalk. In this way, the presentation's Ligeti soundtrack assists in advancing conceptual notions of dress in the contemporary, weaving together image, object and sound. Furthermore, Ligeti's association with Fluxus – avant-gardes/neo-Dadaists whose work crossed disciplinary boundaries and often engaged with spectators – lends historical significance to Bernhard Willhelm. Fluxus artists resisted against conventional modes of artistic practice and eschewed commercial culture, two stances Willhelm and Kraus take in their work.

Bernhard Willhelm on stage and screen: dance and fashion film

At times, Bernhard Willhelm runway shows have extended the traditional catwalk into other performing art forms such as dance. In a dance-performance entitled *Longer, Thicker Hair* For the Autumn/Winter 2013-2014 collection, Wilhelm and Kraus brought together the mediums of dance and fashion, both of which Valerie Steele states “are embodied art forms” that rely on movement (*Dance 7*). Staged at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris, an underground shopping mall at the base of the Louvre's I.M. Pei pyramid, the show was framed as a “creative collaboration” combining music by English producer Adamski, dance choreography by Josh Johnson and the now defunct Forsythe

Company and installation by contemporary artist Geoffrey Lillemon. Attendees stood or were seated directly on the floor around the spotlight theatre-in-the-round, which focussed on a large pile of boulders; nestled among them was an outsized lipstick sculpture by the German artist Philip Wiegard, cast in real lipstick. Dancer-models emerged from the darkness all outfitted in the season's designs – many in a graphic cow print inspired by the German “Love Parade” electronic dance music festival – cavorting, crawling and jerking, their movements ape-like in accordance to the show's theme “The Animal in Us,” yet exploratory and free. A number of performers picked up megaphones and made indiscernible announcements, emitting primate sounds and other noises. Paired with music and real-time audio feedback loops, developed by Lillemon and digital artist Mike Pelletier and made in reference to Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the cacophonous sounds came to an apex with a shrill scream.

The surrealist mood of the piece was alien, at once ritualistic and disorienting. A photograph on the Bernhard Willhelm website shows inspirational notes for the dancers posted backstage. One of these notes reads: “*L'oeil de veau á [sic] la coque*/hard boiled veal eye),” while another reads: “*Les tomates farcies yoyo*/stuffed yoyo tomatoes.” It appears that these messages are explicit nods to Georges Bataille's transgressive 1928 novella, *Story of the Eye*, in which spherical and ovular objects such as eggs, eyes and testes serve as metaphors of sexual perversion. The Bernhard Willhelm runway-performance replaced these fetishistic objects with that of the giant lipstick-as-monolith, to which the dancers succumbed. After more than half of the twenty-minute performance, the dancer-models gathered together and approached the lipstick centrepiece one by one to kiss it, smearing its pigment indelicately all over their faces in the climactic process

(fig. 61). At this time, the dancers' movements became more erratic, as if to emulate zombies in some post-apocalyptic world, seduced by the tower of lipstick. As this exercise progressed, the ambient music was punctuated by alarm sounds and performers shouting "pretty, pretty" through megaphones, further painting a dystopic picture and creating what Lillemon describes on his YouTube channel as "a chamber of insanity." As the performance neared the end, the dancer-models – with red lipstick all over their faces and clothes – gathered on the rocks and then abruptly began to mimic sea lion movements and sounds. In this production, there was a distinct and overpowering sense of the absurd and subconscious, falling in line with Artaud's idea of the Theatre of Cruelty. It captured in part the dissonance and insanity expressed in Peter Brooks's 1967 film *Marat/Sade*, an adaptation of the Peter Weiss's 1963 stage play, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. The sonic discord and unconventional dance moves in tandem with Willhelm and Kraus's bizarre designs created a distressing aural and visual assault on audience members' senses.

In a runway review of the Autumn/Winter 2013-2014 collection in *Interview Magazine*, Rebecca Voight writes that by the end of the performance, "most of the audience had completely forgotten about fashion." While I would argue that her claim is an overstatement – the fashion remains an essential component of the overall performance and does not override the dance – I also contend that the garments take on a status similar to costumes for performances rather than fashion as an everyday object. Rather than occupy a role at the forefront of the runway show, the fashion was in equal balance with the dance and sound, all of which worked together to form a theatrical

showpiece. From Coco Chanel's costumes for the Ballets Russes production of *Le Train Bleu* (1924), to Merce Cunningham and Rei Kawakubo's collaboration on the dance *Scenario* (1997) and Issey Miyake's longstanding relationships with several dance companies, fashion has had a long history with dance. As a medium, dance possesses an inherent collaborative quality; it is seldom without costume in the same way that it is rarely unaccompanied by music or sound. Fashion and dance make for an apt pairing with their shared reliance on bodily movement and ability to expand notions of performance. Willhelm and Kraus's collaborators too embrace a broader concept of the relationship between dance, movement and performance. In particular, choreographer William Forsythe is renowned for his contemporary avant-garde dances and willingness to include a wide spectrum of forms including the visual arts and the wider notion of performativity; past projects have taken place in museums and have consisted of acoustic performance, installation, kinetic sculpture and film. In collaborating with individuals such as Forsythe, Willhelm and Kraus purposefully align themselves and unite with other cultural producers with similar ideological motivations of disciplinary blending and borderlessness.

Willhelm and Kraus additionally expand on the concept of the runway show, traversing into other mediums in their dissemination of fashion through film. Dance and fashion come together once again in the fashion film entitled *Men in Tights* produced for the Autumn/Winter 2008-2009 menswear collection and screened for both the Paris and New York Fashion Weeks in 2008. Directed by Nick Knight, fashion photographer and founder of the website and self-proclaimed "Home of Fashion Film," *SHOWstudio*, the production also featured a long list of illustrious collaborators including French-Belgian

choreographer and dancer Damien Jalet and performers such as Eric Underwood, a Soloist at the Royal Ballet and Lee Bridgman, an androgynous jazz dancer who has been on the British version of the televised dance competition *So You Think You Can Dance?* The nineteen minute film is an aural and visual montage, featuring eleven short vignettes of male dancers dressed in Willhelm's largely nude and neutral-coloured unitards, leggings and various types of (under)garments in nylon and Lycra. Overall, the commodity status of the costume-garments does not stand out; the clothing does not resemble high-end fashion and recalls generic dancewear that would not seem out of place in a dance studio or modern stage.

The first section of *Men in Tights* features a classical piano soundtrack that accompanies footage of fingers (as avatars for human legs) going through dance moves while erotically descending a set of prop stairs. Eventually, the camera pans out to show a dancer's torso and legs, wearing tightly fitted white cotton briefs; he descends the staircase alongside the "dancing fingers." Once this movement is completed, four white cotton gloved hands appear in sequence on each of the steps, their fingers dancing almost in unison. In one of the various sexually charged but balletic and fluid dances that follow, dancers put their backsides on display and the viewer can easily see outlines of the performers' genitals. These short clips are explicitly erotic; in another vignette, four dancers, with their backs to the viewer, sit on their own shoulders on a colourfully lit, disco dance floor. Wearing only briefs and long multi-coloured striped socks, they place their hands on hips, moving their legs as if they are snakes drawn out of a basket by a snake charmer. The soundtrack to this section consists of a woman speaking about washing machines, energy efficiency and drying one's clothes, while the video

component features the dancers overlaid with imagery of more legs, writhing, as the bodies begin to move around the floor. It looks almost like a failed game of Twister at first, but then the dancers push their backsides against one another and like a sea anemone, wave their legs in the air. After quite some time, the camera moves to show an overhead shot of the dancers making star- or flower-like formations with their legs with the dance floor illuminating them from the back, before fading out.

The film ends with a blurry, silent shot of a gyrating figure on a chair, which appears to be a man in a black wrestling singlet, tall moccasin-like boots and stockings with red orbs for breasts, mimicking the moves of a stripper. For a split second, a focussed image flashes on the screen confirming this image – the man has red balloon breasts and is wearing black fishnet-like stockings – before becoming blurred again. The dancer continues to gyrate and touch his improvised “breasts”; this series of actions repeats a few times before he pops the balloons with an explosive bang; the illusion is shattered and image comes into full focus. Viewed together, these erotic vignettes form a titillating montage of male sexuality. In her work on the Ballets Russes, art historian Juliet Bellow contends that productions such as *Schéhérazade*, *Le Spectre de la rose* and *Cléopâtre* subverted the traditional male gaze by objectifying the male dancer’s body, displaying it as “erotic spectacle” for female dancers and male and female spectators alike (137). She asserts a revealing costume for Vaslav Nijinsky’s role as the Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade* and his part as The Rose in *Le Spectre de la rose* – a role traditionally played by a female dancer – challenged heteronormative roles in ballet (Bellow 136-137). As focus is often placed on the prima ballerina rather than on supporting male dancers in conventional ballet, the foreground of the male dancer

inherently undermines the straight male gaze. *Men in Tights* presents only male bodies in its choreography, which is subject to a variety of gazes, primarily, the queer gaze and only secondly, the (straight) female gaze.

Unlike fashion films of high-end designer brands today such as Dior, Prada and its sister brand Miu Miu, *Men in Tights* is not formulaic and offers no overwhelming awareness of the Bernhard Willhelm brand identity. Jack Robinson, the head of video for *i-D* magazine, highlights the importance of fashion film in communicating a brand's essence when he states, "it's important you don't confuse your message or people won't know how to engage properly" (qtd. in Mau). While the film is clear in terms of its message regarding gender and sexuality, it does not explicitly allude to Bernhard Willhelm as an entity, fashion brand or otherwise. Its lack of narrative and disjointed imagery is obfuscating and prevents the viewer from grasping a cohesive concept of the brand. The fragmented aspect of the film speaks to Brechtian montage in the sense that an epic whole is comprised of a series of seemingly disparate parts produced through a collective process. Brecht's method, however, conflicts with Wagner's total artwork and his work is characterized as anti-Wagnerian. Matthew Wilson Smith asserts the vast contrasts between Wagner and Brecht's approach:

Brecht has long been understood as Wagner's foil, his *Verfremdungseffekt* ("estrangement effect") the very antithesis of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And for good reason: the differences between Wagnerian and Brechtian dramaturgy are legion. Whereas Wagner strove to make his work a total, pseudo-organic whole, Brecht strove for separation of elements and an exposure to the mechanics of production. Whereas Wagner hoped to absorb his audience through appeals to emotion and "spirit," Brecht hoped to estrange his audience through distancing devices and political contradictions. Whereas Wagner aimed to forge a unified *Volk*, Brecht aimed to exacerbate class conflict. (72)

By this account, Brecht and Wagner are diametrically opposed with their fundamentally divergent intents. Rather than view Brecht's response to Wagner as an appeal to dismantle the *Gesamtkunstwerk* altogether, Smith suggests that Brecht's position can be reevaluated as a call to enact real change (M. W. Smith 75). In this way, Willhelm and Kraus's total work of fashion in *Men in Tights* departs from a traditionally Wagnerian interpretation of the total artwork and integrates Brechtian montage and the division of labour through collaboration with other cultural producers. This mixing expresses the fluidity and heterogeneity of the contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where montage and conjoined disciplines can coexist in the same work. In other words, while Brecht and Wagner's approaches to the unitary artwork were disparate and rooted in different fields, they are not profoundly incongruous, and converge on the integrated whole that is Willhelm and Kraus's practice.

As a result of the lack of cohesive narrative in *Men in Tights*, it reads more like avant-garde cinema than a fashion film, the latter of which has an explicit commercial aspect. Because the film consists mostly of sonic and visual montage, the film component of work is on equal footing with the fashion and dance that comprise it; again, it is not that fashion takes a backseat to the film, but that both film and dance share in the creation of a collective work of art. In speaking about art, it is also important to note that like many fashion films, *Men in Tights* resides online, archived on Knight's *SHOWstudio* website. On the "About" page, Knight argues for fashion film's status as art or an art: "SHOWstudio is based on the belief that showing the entire creative process—from conception to completion—is beneficial for the artist, the audience and the art itself." In this wording, fashion film is not so much about fashion as a commercial enterprise as it is

a form of cultural production, its commercial aspect only implied. As well, while not foregrounded on the website, *SHOWstudio* has an online shop featuring art (largely fashion illustrations) and fashion it describes as artefacts “curated” by Knight; its goods do not have broad appeal and appear exclusive: garments are concept-driven and a bottle of limited edition perfume is marked “price on request.” For Knight and his numerous collaborators – which have included British contemporary artist Anthony Gormley and fashion designer Riccardo Tisci, creative director of the house of Givenchy – fashion film is in part an artistic endeavour that does not have a sole end goal as a branding exercise. Rather, it is also the process itself of developing an art that is in part the intention and objective of Knight’s website. However, as Dirk Gindt underlines, *SHOWstudio*’s ambition as art form and accessible fashion media cannot be overshadowed by its commercial origins:

Fashion film is a playful way to explore and participate in the world of fashion and the digital realm, but, at its core, it is also a novel form of promotion, distribution, and marketing. While *SHOWstudio*’s avant-garde aspirations push artistic boundaries, they also take the commercial enterprise to the next level. It therefore needs to be pointed out that a growing sense of democratization on behalf of the consumer might also lead to a growing participation in global capitalism. (443-444)

Despite the cultural cloaking mechanism of fashion film and Willhelm and Kraus’s articulation of the total work of fashion, Bernhard Willhelm remains a business whose main purpose is to sell clothes. Perhaps, however, the accessible medium of film is itself an indication of its commercial intentions. In looking back to fashion film’s early history in the early to mid-twentieth century, fashion shows were sometimes inserted directly into the narratives of “women’s films,” as was the case in *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949), which showcased a number of British designers in order to promote post-war

consumption. As such, the pairing of fashion and film can be seen as likely counterparts in linking the material consumption of fashion with the easily consumable mass medium of film.

Endeavours such as *Men in Tights* are also significant because they expand Willhelm and Kraus's possibilities for fashion display within the framework of the Internet, a medium of and distribution site for mass culture. The adaptation of their visual language and online presence speaks to the screen and its possibilities for entering the viewer's personal space. Willhelm and Kraus have embraced the Internet as an important platform for the dissemination of their fashion, and their website demonstrates their commitment to engaging with digital media as a whole in their visual identity. For the past number of collections, the splash page on the website has greeted the visitor with a video or GIF-like teaser (Graphic Interface Format), often accompanied by audio and always coinciding with the current season's promotional campaign. If a video is shown, it is also accessible via and archived on the brand's YouTube page. Recent greetings have included a talking head animation created by Lillemon that recites a narcissistic monologue in a monotone, computer-generated voice for Spring/Summer 2013; a short video of actress Patricia Rust smiling at the viewer for Spring/Summer 2014; a conversation between two cockatoos, one computer generated and another one live, for Autumn/Winter 2015-2016; and a banana-themed gore video with carnal leanings for the Spring/Summer 2016 collection entitled "Caramelised Banana with Toffee Sauce." In collaboration with Lillemon, the Spring/Summer 2013 womenswear collection was presented exclusively as a series GIFs for the website. The platform of the Internet allows for the effortless mixing of digital media, at the same time providing Willhelm and

Kraus's fashion and runway presentations greater exposure. In his work on cyberspace and the total work of art, Matthew Wilson Smith asserts that through technological innovation, the Internet makes total audience immersion possible; there is neither a real location nor an end to the virtual world (169). Lillemon's GIFs may not occupy real, physical space, but they are real in their virtuality and expressly intended for display on the Internet, a site that knows no limits. In this sense of limitlessness, cyberspace extends into real space. While an argument can be made that Willhelm and Kraus's participation in the virtual realm is in part due to the cost-effectiveness of holding fashion shows online, a strong online presence effectively introduces Bernhard Willhelm to larger and more diverse audiences with lower barriers of accessibility. As a viewer accessing Bernhard Willhelm online content, one is able to engage with the fashion on one's own computer or mobile device, environments and home, therefore offering a customized experience for a smaller screen. Although the screen removes some of the viewer's sensory perception from fashion performed live, the intimacy of experiencing Willhelm and Kraus's online activities in one's own personal space – perhaps even literally in the palm of one's hand in the case of viewing on mobile devices – overrides this by closing the distance between the viewer and viewed. More importantly, Bernhard Willhelm is not concerned solely with actual fashion – that is, the physical sartorial garment – but examines contemporary visual culture more widely, a sphere in which cyberspace plays an crucial role. To borrow from Koss's discussion of Wagner's Bayreuth, the availability of Willhelm and Kraus's practice online therefore offers a line of direct transmission from the work to the audience (25), allowing for maximum absorption. Furthermore, just as film merged with theatre to create the "technological Gesamtkunstwerk" (Koss 203) of

cinema in the early twentieth century, fashion film, as a medium produced expressly for the Internet, represents a sort of technological total fashion of the contemporary moment. Viewed more broadly, the architecture of the Internet has presented itself as a total work of art with Alphabet's growth from the Google search engine to numerous products and services, and their contributions to technology-based research and innovation. Google's 2015 integration into the conglomerate Alphabet is a demonstration of its evolving status into a vertically integrated company, replete with highly secretive projects grouped under the banner of "Google X" including a self-driving car and Google Glass. All this is to say that the screen of the Internet, as opposed to the screen of film or television, is a most public platform that can be read as a unitary enterprise. While Bernhard Willhelm's YouTube videos receive views numbering in the low thousands at the most, its Instagram account reaches over 20,300 followers;⁵ Willhelm and Kraus's concepts and performances have the potential to connect to larger audiences online, some who may never encounter their objects in real life. Through various avenues on the Internet, the avant-garde is made accessible through its wide and all-encompassing reach.

The screen of cyberspace literally and figuratively flattens the viewing plane for Willhelm and Kraus's practice, and promises the viewer total immersion via personal computing and mobile devices in everyday life. I argue that Bernhard Willhelm's presence online creates an ultimately active and direct interaction between a work and its viewer, an absorption that is participatory rather than passive as understood by Siegfried Kracauer in his concept of the "*Kult de Zerstreung*" (cult of distraction). As Koss points

⁵ As a point of reference, Willhelm's Antwerp Six mentor, Walter Van Beirendonck has over 8,000 Instagram followers, while more recognizable Antwerp Six members Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester have over 273,000 and 63,300 followers respectively at the time of this writing.

out, Kracauer believed that the flattening effect of the screen contributed to the lack of depth in cinema because it was fundamentally illusionistic. While the surface culture of the Internet – memes or viral content, social media, celebrity gossip or pop culture in general – can appear to represent a superficial and two-dimensional world that relies on a lack of physical depth, it can simultaneously be a potential space of widespread impact and enduring profundity. Willhelm and Kraus create depth in their practice by addressing contemporary issues such as gender, sexuality and race through their seasonal campaigns, which are widely accessible on the platform of Internet. Speaking specifically to quantity alone, it is interesting to note that one such Bernhard Willhelm lookbook campaign for the Spring-Summer 2015 collections comprised three interpretations, one of which consisted of just over one hundred photographs. If produced in a hard copy form, the production costs of a campaign this size would likely have been prohibitive, thus limiting its complexity. While quantity does not necessarily indicate content of great depth, the boundaries – and storage space – are limitless on the Internet for articulation of ideas. In extending the Bernhard Willhelm world into virtual space, Willhelm and Kraus are able to distribute their content extensively and across geographical borders, thus pushing the frontier for their total work of fashion.

Spectacular costumes: Bernhard Willhelm on stage with Björk and Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet

Willhelm and Kraus broaden their disciplinary reach as they regularly work with performing artists to put Bernhard Willhelm designs on stage, following in a tradition of fashion designers – both avant-garde and mainstream – who have designed costumes for

musical, dance and theatrical performances.⁶ While this is a common practice in the fashion industry, it is Willhelm and Kraus's choice of performers – those with similar approaches to innovation and the cross-fertilization of disciplines – with whom they collaborate that sets them apart from mainstream designers. One of their most prominent collaborators is Björk, for whom they designed tour costumes during the 2007-2008 Volta Tour. Björk, whose credits have included composer, musician, singer and actor, crafts a personal visual culture that is idiosyncratic and distinct. Gindt describes her practice as “located at the intersection of the popular and the avant-garde,” as it is rooted in experimentation that pushes the limits of mainstream culture (428). Her 2015 MoMA retrospective plainly displayed the worlds of popular music and avant-garde aesthetics conflating while traversing the numerous artistic disciplines that comprise her career. The exhibition featured the Bernhard Willhelm sculptural suit that appears on the cover of the Nick Knight-shot album, *Volta*, but also included some key costumes from other performances by designers including Marjan Pejoski, Iris Van Herpen and Alexander McQueen. As with her music, Björk maintains an unorthodox approach to fashion, once memorably wearing a Pejoski-designed dress in the shape of a stuffed swan to the Academy Awards in 2001 when she accepted a “Best Actress” Oscar for her role in Lars von Trier's haunting musical drama, *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). As with the Bernhard Willhelm album cover and tour costume designs, Pejoski also designed the album cover for her 2001 album, *Vespertine* and its accompanying tour costumes. In maintaining a consistent concept for each album and tour, Björk ensures continuity in a visual aesthetic,

⁶ Chanel designed outfits for Diaghilev's *Le Train Bleu* in 1924; Halston worked with Martha Graham in the 1970s and 80s; Isaac Mizrahi collaborates often with Mark Morris and the New York City Ballet has engaged with numerous designers including Valentino and Iris van Herpen.

while retaining creative cohesiveness and total control over the visual components of her practice. Despite her instantly recognizable style, Björk's eclectic and diverse practice cannot be pinned down to a singular defining aesthetic – aurally or visually. It is precisely this heterogeneity that formulates a kinship between Björk and Bernhard Willhelm.

Willhelm and Kraus's costumes for the *Volta* tour – which also featured designs for Björk's all-female brass band – served as multicolour theatrical spectacles. From one dress that featured an enormous gold rosette, to a cape with pompoms crafted by Willhelm's mother, the costumes were showpieces that were fully integrated into the performance as equal actors rather than supporting roles to the music (fig. 62). Björk has acknowledged the performativity of Willhelm and Kraus's designs on stage during the *Volta* tour: “Now we have done 20 shows, I have probably worn each dress two or three times. It makes each show a lot more unique. It changes when you are wearing a big gold dress, or a pink kimono” (qtd. in Shillingford 128). This quote reveals her understanding of the role of fashion-costume as an embodied practice and how it contributes to and ultimately determines the shape of a performance. While situated in the field of music, Björk's practice reaches out through disciplinary collaboration and operates parallel to like-minded creatives. As Gindt asserts, this openness to experimentation and cross-fertilization situates her as “part of a system that imaginatively combines music, fashion, and visual culture” (427-428). This system functions as an avant-garde network across creative fields in which cultural producers such as Willhelm and Kraus, Björk and Knight work in mutually-beneficial collectivity, which in turn advances their common interests and the vanguard narrative. Through their interconnected projects, they are able to cross-promote their work, foster the expansion of artistic disciplines and, as I discussed earlier

in this chapter, simultaneously share authorial ownership in the free flow of ideas. To use a historical example of collaboration and the total artwork, Bellow writes that members of the Ballets Russes, while stylistically varied, were united by an interest in working together and “a belief in the aesthetic possibilities of fusing the separate media of visual art, dance and music into a single whole” (13). Similarly, Björk, Wilhelm and Kraus, Knight and their various collaborators share a methodology and working philosophy to create a community of avant-gardes with the shared objective of disciplinary merging through collectivity.

The Bernhard Wilhelm costumes for the final performance of avant-garde ballet company Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet in 2015 function in a way that is similar to the role of the costumes in Björk’s practice.⁷ Styled by Wilhelm and Kraus’s longtime collaborator Edda Gudmundsdottir, the garments neither adhered aesthetically to conventions of classical ballet costumes – which tend to focus on leo- and unitards, and tutus in muted colours along with ornate period costuming – nor the minimalist and spare costuming of modern dance. Rather, Wilhelm and Kraus used the opportunity to experiment with movement in the costumes, with looser fitting garments crafted from a 1990’s U.S. Army desert camouflage print and colourful silk fringes in varying lengths inspired by the camouflage colours for plant and animal species. As the performance progressed, dancers added or removed layers of garments, with some outfits having the appearance of fantastical birds of paradise (fig. 63). Entitled *My Generation*, the dance was choreographed by Richard Siegal, founder and artistic director of The Bakery Paris-

⁷ Cedar Lake was entirely funded by Walmart heiress Nancy Laurie. In 2015, Laurie, who was the sole benefactor of the company, decided to shutter it due to reasons of unexplained unviability.

Berlin, an interdisciplinary space for visual media, dance and performance. As well, the dance was named after the British rock band The Who's 1965 song of the same name, and featured a soundtrack that consisted of techno music by German electronic composer and musician Atom™ (Uwe Schmidt). In tandem with its decidedly contemporary focus, the dance featured a combination of acrobatic moves and those associated more with the club than classical ballet. In one section, Cedar Lake troupe member Matthew Rich lip-synced to Atom™'s remix of song *My Generation*, a move that recalls pop music and dance performance more than art of the vanguard. Given the context of the Cedar Lake ensemble's mandate and the setting of the last performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, itself known for experimental and avant-garde leanings, the pastiche of pop was especially transgressive. As a side note, it is interesting that Siegal has also performed with William Forsythe's various companies, which speaks to the notion of an avant-garde network.

Willhelm and Kraus also styled garments from previous collections for the music video "Do You Feel the Same?" (2014) by ever evolving dance music collective Hercules & Love Affair. While the genre of the song aligns itself more to house than avant-garde or experimental art music, it does speak to the role Bernhard Willhelm plays in the performance of the club scene. Willhelm has made numerous references in interviews and through the designs as to how important various club scenes have been personally to him in his formative years, and it is clear this has had a lasting impact on his fashions given by their theatrical and performative characteristics. With their myriad of loud patterns, bold colours and complex silhouettes, Willhelm and Kraus's garments are seemingly made for performance and can only be fully activated through movement.

But while they have a place in rave and dance culture, their visual sensory overload would be out of place when worn on the street. The collision between avant-garde dance and dance music also speaks to the crossing of boundaries between vanguard cultural practice and the experimental mainstream. In the video, house music combines with fashion, the choreography of Josh Johnson and dancers from The Forsythe Company (under the moniker “Sad”) who partnered with Willhelm and Kraus on the Autumn/Winter 2013-2014 collection. Fused together as a whole, the performance, as with many other incarnations of Willhelm and Kraus’s collaborations, cannot easily be isolated as reflecting one artistic medium over another. While the fashion-costume element is not foregrounded in the video, I argue that neither music nor dance take residence as the video’s main content. If the video was not contextualized as a companion piece to music – the video premiered on YouTube by THUMP, the electronic music and culture channel from VICE media – it could be mistaken for dance accompanied by music, or as standalone film. Again, this collaboration between fields and cultural producers, whether initially grounded in the fields of fashion, music, theatre, dance or performance more generally, appears to equalize disciplinary hierarchy in order to contribute to a collective work. When the conflation of these art forms is displayed online, the separate domains are easily blended, having been flattened by the screen of the Internet. Willhelm and Kraus’s audio-visual spectacles in the virtual realm offer immersive experiences, where the Internet deftly reaches into the personal space of the viewer.

Conclusion

Through the act of collaboration and merging of mediums, Willhelm and Kraus present a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* that aspires to transform fashion and the disciplines with which it engages. They reinvigorate the avant-garde project with their fantastical visual practice, bringing together an avant-garde community of like-minded cultural producers with a common aim of transforming the social order through a total work of fashion. Willhelm and Kraus's total works of fashion are glimpses into the rambunctious world that is Bernhard Willhelm; by building a network of vanguard cultural producers and dissolving the borders that define artistic categories, they propose a heterogeneous utopia in response to global capital and the contemporary moment. In subverting the traditional runway show in their performative and filmic displays, Willhelm and Kraus integrate the fashion industry with cultural production, extending the object of fashion beyond its commercial status while advocating for its engagement with other disciplines. Their contemporary iteration of the total work of art departs from its historical predecessor, articulating their practice in the commodified sphere rather than in the rarefied domain of art and melding radical aesthetics with mass culture online. Yet, Willhelm and Kraus occupy an anti-market position within the fashion industry and for this reason, their project is radically recalcitrant. It is also important to note that no singular concept of the unitary artwork has persisted since its inception in the early nineteenth century. In this way, it is neither rooted in a period nor a specific type of practice, but rather remains multidimensional. As Finger and Follett contend, the total work of art is dialectical; despite claiming totality, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project is an unreachable utopia and never complete (8). Willhelm and Kraus's maximalism, that is, the inclusion of anything and

everything, presents a continual cycle of expansion through incorporation. As such, the Bernhard Willhelm *Gesamtkunstwerk* is dynamic and in constant flux.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead to the Future of Fashion and Art

When I stepped into the ModeMuseum on that summer day in 2007 to see *Het Totaal Rappel*, I never imagined the impact it would have on my scholarly research, let alone how easily it could sustain several years of study. As much as this dissertation endeavours to create a platform for the academic study of contemporary fashion in art historical research, it is also symbolizes for me the reconciliation of two of my scholarly interests in modern and contemporary art and a theoretical study of fashion. Here, I want to refer to Susan Buck-Morss's idea of "intellectual discomfort" ("Walter Benjamin" 75), which is helpful in articulating my position between disciplines. Intellectual discomfort is what compelled me to locate and construct a home for my research in the interstices of art, fashion and visual culture; it is a feeling that has been necessary in order to propel my critical inquiry. My dissertation aims, in a small way, to dismantle hegemonic misinterpretations of fashion within art historical discourse and contribute to a plural and continually expanding field of art. At the same time, it contributes to an already existing foundation in fashion studies that employs art historical methods, a precedence set by scholars such as Nancy Troy and Caroline Evans. By introducing contemporary fashion into the discourse of the historical artistic avant-garde, it may initially appear that I am perpetuating the grand narrative of Western art history arguing for a validation of Willhelm and Kraus's practice in the "official" canon. While it can be disputed that any written history inherently legitimizes its subject, my intention with this study has been to disrupt and fragment canonical art history by providing one overlooked narrative of many in the avant-garde.

As an agent of radical change, the total work of fashion that is Bernhard Willhelm reconnects the contemporary avant-garde with its historical forebears. To put forth their vanguard practice, Willhelm and Kraus challenge fashion-time and the function of the fashion object, articulate an effective, political fashion and encourage disciplinary mixing through mutually beneficial collaborations. Where historical artistic avant-gardes such as the Russian Constructivists or Futurists failed in transforming everyday life with their hyphenated art-fashion experiments, Willhelm and Kraus succeed in overcoming the obstacles of dissemination. They are able to implement their project from within the confines of the fashion industry and produce a direct impact on the role of fashion in everyday life. While their customer base may never reach the numbers of mainstream fashion houses or fast fashion retailers, their dedicated following ensures that there is a market for their designs. After seventeen years in operation, Bernhard Willhelm remains a sustainable business that affects real change, constantly pushing the boundaries of fashion; the same could not have been said for any of the historical vanguard's attempts at fashion reform. Willhelm and Kraus's total work of fashion is effective praxis at its core, not mere theoretical postulation.

In Chapter One, I conducted an analysis on the range of literatures that encompass avant-garde discourse, the intersection between art and fashion, and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. I delved into the historical origins of the artistic avant-garde and recorded scholarly discourse that has comprised avant-garde studies to date in order to contextualize my contemporary study of Willhelm and Kraus's practice. I surveyed the work of theorists including Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh, who have debated the ontology and efficacy of the avant-garde.

Their divergent interpretations of the vanguard, however, confirmed that the revolutionary project does not maintain a united front. Rather, the avant-garde is heterogeneous and open to regeneration and renewal. My investigation of scholarship detailing the relationship between fashion and art identified the many facets in which fashion studies has broached the similarities between the two disciplines but simultaneously revealed how it has not yet produced a satisfactorily rigorous examination of the role of fashion in the avant-garde project. I also presented a brief history of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and looked at recent attempts by Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, Juliet Koss to revive inquiry of the total work of art. Finally, I addressed John Potvin's employment of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in reference to contemporary fashion and lifestyle. Potvin's initial foray within the context of fashion studies uncovers a gap that my research aimed to fill and was imperative in framing my study as a whole.

Chapter Two explored how Willhelm and Kraus's anti-fashions and museum exhibitions resist the temporal logic of fashion and sit between fashion and anti-fashion and fashion and art. I drew parallels between the object of avant-garde fashion with the vanguard art object, taking the term "objecthood" from Fried's discussion of 1960's Minimalism as a method of describing how Willhelm and Kraus's fashions eschew their function as wearable clothing. As well, I utilized Duchampian anti-art to discuss how anti-fashion challenges the ontological status and institution of fashion. Willhelm and Kraus take a dialectical approach in the production of their fashion, using folk dress and workwear in their designs to reject the rapid pace of what I term "fashion-time," choosing instead to work with "timeless" traditions that produce "out-of-fashion" instead of "in-fashion" garments. In my discussion of time, I analyzed concepts *Tigersprung* and

Jetztzeit developed by Benjamin to explain the nonlinear movement of history, together with an analysis on the temporal condition of the contemporary as elucidated by Giorgio Agamben and Terry Smith. I suggest that the Benjaminian concept of history intersects with contemporaneity in Willhelm and Kraus's sartorial remembrance of folk dress traditions.

This notion of "fashion-time" is contrasted with the slower, lasting tempo of art both in the object of Bernhard Willhelm fashion and its collection and display in the museum. Once placed in the context of the museum, the temporal status of Willhelm and Kraus's fashions is prolonged and inhabits a temporality between fashion and art; collection preserves their objects beyond their lifecycle of planned obsolescence as clothing, while exhibition extends the time of display from minutes – in the case of a runway show – to months in duration. My analysis of Bernhard Willhelm exhibitions demonstrated that Willhelm and Kraus's presentation of fashions within installations or *mise-en-scènes* attributes a value to the garments beyond their commodity status as they gain cultural capital. As well, museum display ensures that the conceptual component of their fashion endures, even long after material integrity gives way. I contended that this methodology of curating and presenting fashion is inherent to the MoMu, an institution which, joined with the fashion department of Antwerp's Royal Academy, has informed Willhelm and Kraus's practice. As such, Bernhard Willhelm fashions function as both commodities and cultural objects, between the fleeting temporality of fashion and the enduring temporality of art.

In Chapter Three, I examined how Willhelm and Kraus's practice is politically-motivated in their critique of global politics and opposition to the racial, sexual or class-

based norms of the fashion system. I posited that iconographic and textual messages on their garments make plain their political position on world issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict and the hegemony of the United States. At times subversive and irreverent in their treatment, Willhelm and Kraus's political commentary troubles the already uneasy relationship between politics and the fashion industry. Their political interest extends to the issue of diversity in which they question norms of representation in fashion. Promotional campaigns have regularly featured mature models, models of colour and porn stars in response to the fashion industry's lack of age, racial and body diversity. In particular, I asserted that Willhelm and Kraus reject dominant white male culture and heteronormativity. They employ models that do not fall into binary gender categories or who have body types that stray from the norm in the fashion industry; they often feature gay male porn stars as models and promote interracial gay sex. As well, Willhelm and Kraus's garments tend to ignore social constructions of gender-appropriate dress, often eschewing any notion of propriety in dress altogether. I argued that this desire to unsettle the status quo is connected to their outright rejection of bourgeois good taste, a tactic that establishes their commitment to difference and heterogeneity.

Willhelm and Kraus's repudiation of bourgeois decorum is an indication of their parallel stance against conspicuous consumption and luxury fashion's association with excess. These core beliefs are reflected in the aesthetics of their clothing designs, which, to the untrained eye, do not appear to be worth hundreds or thousands of dollars. Their now-shuttered boutique in Tokyo similarly renounced luxury and contravened the consumerist logic of high fashion with its homeless shelter inspired staging. I contended that Willhelm and Kraus produce an effective fashion because of their very position

within the contemporary fashion system, demonstrating their non-complicity by critiquing the industry's political structure. While Bernhard Willhelm by no means holds mass appeal, the brand creates space for those marginalized and un/underrepresented in mainstream fashion. The label's political potential lies in the individuals who are dedicated not only to the world of Bernhard Willhelm in all of its wonderful weirdness, but also to the left-leaning social, cultural and political values that it represents.

In Chapter Four, I continued with the revolutionary potential that I explored in Chapter Three with a discussion of Bernhard Willhelm's total work of fashion. Willhelm and Kraus's anti-market sentiment from the previous chapter is translated to my investigation of their enduring collaborations with other cultural producers. I posited that their collective work results in sharing and an open approach to borrowing and appropriation. Furthermore, the interdisciplinarity of both the total work of fashion and Willhelm and Kraus's practice more generally is a direct consequence of their collaborative method. I asserted that the convergence of the numerous mediums that comprise Bernhard Willhelm exhibitions and runway shows reflects their taste for maximalism, not only in the aesthetic sense of their bold and colourful designs but also in the understanding that anything and everything is ripe for incorporation into their work. The role of performance features heavily in the Bernhard Willhelm universe; Willhelm presents a public-facing character that merges brand identity with the real life person, simultaneously blending fashion into quotidian life. I extended this notion of performance through a discussion of theatricality in Willhelm and Kraus's spectacular exhibitions and runway presentations; these displays merge various performance mediums and provide immersive viewing experiences for their audience. My examination of their fashion film

collaboration with Nick Knight considered how the Internet immerses the spectator – from a personal viewing space – into the world of Bernhard Willhelm. To conclude this chapter, I evaluated Willhelm and Kraus’s costuming and styling work for musicians and dancers and how their designs interface with artistic disciplines that too rely on bodily movement to produce their forms. This concept of movement and fluidity comes full circle, speaking to the dynamism and constant evolution that the avant-garde project and *Gesamtkunstwerk* embody in their contemporary iterations. Anke Finger and Danielle Follett articulate this sentiment in the continued narrative of the total work of art and its critical potential:

The adventures of the concept of the total artwork are not over. It has yet to adopt new and unpredictable incarnations; the notion of the gathered work, with every possible degree of cohesion, from the abstract absolute to utter material scatteredness, continues to resonate in the human psyche and its creations and will certainly inspire new manifestations. The unifying quality, if one may call it that, is the aesthetic practice of *bringing together* along with some kind of aspiration to a better collective future. (25)

In this sense, collective work born of aesthetic and disciplinary mixing strives toward a utopia. In coming together with other cultural producers, Willhelm and Kraus create community to combat atomization. In so doing, they present a total work of fashion that transforms the social order, and that at once responds to and struggles against the multiple faces of contemporary global capitalism.

There are a number of areas that would benefit from future study. In particular, fashion-time could be studied alongside the temporality of the avant-garde (Buck-Morss 2001) and John Roberts’s timely *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (2015) also would serve as an ideal platform from which to launch a more in depth analysis of Willhelm and Kraus’s articulation of fashion-time. As well, extended research on the role

of the Internet and technology in relation to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would make a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship on new media. Willhelm and Kraus trouble preconceived ideas of fashion and its objecthood whilst disrupting codes of gender and cultural homogeneity. The potential for extended scholarship on the many disciplines with which I have broached in this study is but one of the motivating forces for my project. Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive overview of contemporary fashion and the avant-garde, I view my research as a door opener to what I hope to be many more studies in the expanded fields of art and fashion.

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Appendix A: Figures**Figure 1**

Fibreglass “suit” work by Björk on the cover of her album *Volta* installed in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 2a

Photocrom of an unmarried woman wearing a traditional Black Forest *bollenhut*, 1900
Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the
following source:

http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bollenhut#mediaviewer/File:Schwarzwaelderin_in_Tracht_und_Bollenhut_1900.jpg



Figure 2b

Bernhard Willhelm *bollenhut* from the Autumn/Winter 1999-2000 womenswear collection

Photo: Charlene Lau

Figure 3

Reproduction of Aleksandr Rodchenko leather and wool artists' working suit, 1922/2005
Image omitted due to copyright restrictions.

For a reproduction please consult the following source:

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O297713/ensemble-rodchenko-aleksandr-mikhailovich/>



Figure 4

Japanese workwear influenced designs in a lookbook image from Bernhard Willhelm's Spring-Summer 2005 menswear collection

Photo: Charlene Lau

Figure 5

Japanese high altitude construction workers (*tobi shokunin*) wear baggy trousers known as *bukabuka zubon*

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: http://static1.shopify.com/s/files/1/0015/3992/files/top_middle.jpg

Figure 6

Varvara Stepanova's *sportodezdha* designs, 1924

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Radu Stern, *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) plate 14.

Figure 7

Models wearing workwear from the Kaseyama Co. *Shigotoshi Goyotashi Working Style Magazine*

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Kaseyama Co. *Shigotoshi Goyotashi Working Style Magazine*, (vol. 32: 2013), 4.

Figure 8

Drawings for Thayaht's one-piece *tuta* and women's *tuta*, 1918-1919

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Radu Stern, *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) 43.

Figure 9

Liubov Popova, *Textile Design* 1923–1924

Gouache on paper, 115 x 92 mm

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/liubov-popova-painting-textile-design>

Figure 10

A look from Bernhard Willhelm Spring/Summer 2007 menswear featuring *loferln* (Bavarian “legwarmer” socks)

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Mark Wilson and Sue-An van der Zijpp, eds., *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009) 218.

Figure 11

A look from Bernhard Willhelm Spring/Summer 2007 menswear featuring a floral print of *edelweiss*, gentian and Alpine roses

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Mark Wilson and Sue-An van der Zijpp, eds., *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009) 223.

Figure 12

A look from Bernhard Willhelm Spring/Summer 2007 menswear featuring Tyrolean folk dress hybridized with acid house

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Mark Wilson and Sue-An van der Zijpp, eds., *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009) 216.



Figure 13

“Ghosts” (Spring/Summer 2004) installation in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 14

“Flowers in Construction Work” (Spring/Summer 2003 womenswear) installation in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 15
“Tirolean Room” (Spring/Summer 2007 collection) installation in the exhibition
Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp
Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 16

“Trashed Room” (Autumn/Winter 2004-2005 womenswear) installation in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp
Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.fashionprojects.org/?p=255>



Figure 17

“Framed Ghetto Boys” (Autumn/Winter 2006-2007 menswear) installation in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008) at the ModeMuseum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 18

Installation view of *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010) at the Groninger Museum in Groningen, Netherlands

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/diary/2009/12/1/groninger-museum/>

Figure 19

Installation for Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010) at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, Netherlands

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhard-willhelm.com/exhibitions/bernhard-willhelm-jutta-kraus/>

Figure 20

Installation for the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger, Fashion is the Danger* (2015) at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles
Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source:

http://cdn.wallpaper.com/main/legacy/gallery/17056405/02_Bernhard_Willhelm.jpg

Figure 21

Installation for the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger, Fashion is the Danger* (2015) at MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles
Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.moca.org/exhibition/bernhard-willhelm-3000-when-fashion-shows-the-danger-then-fashion-is-the-danger>

Figure 22

Installation view of the exhibition *The House of Viktor & Rolf* (2008) Barbican Art Gallery, London

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.dezeen.com/2008/07/14/the-house-of-viktor-rolf/>

Figure 23

“Farm Boy” tote bag, Spring/Summer 2015

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: https://store.wutberlin.com/ori/50084/goods_img/goods_7769_14.JPG



Figure 24

Cat-camouflage sweatshirt from the Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 25a

Camouflage jacket with *trompe l'oeil* prints of military medals and decorations, bullion fringes from the Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 25b

Camouflage jacket detail with *trompe l'oeil* epaulette print from the Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection

Photograph: Charlene Lau

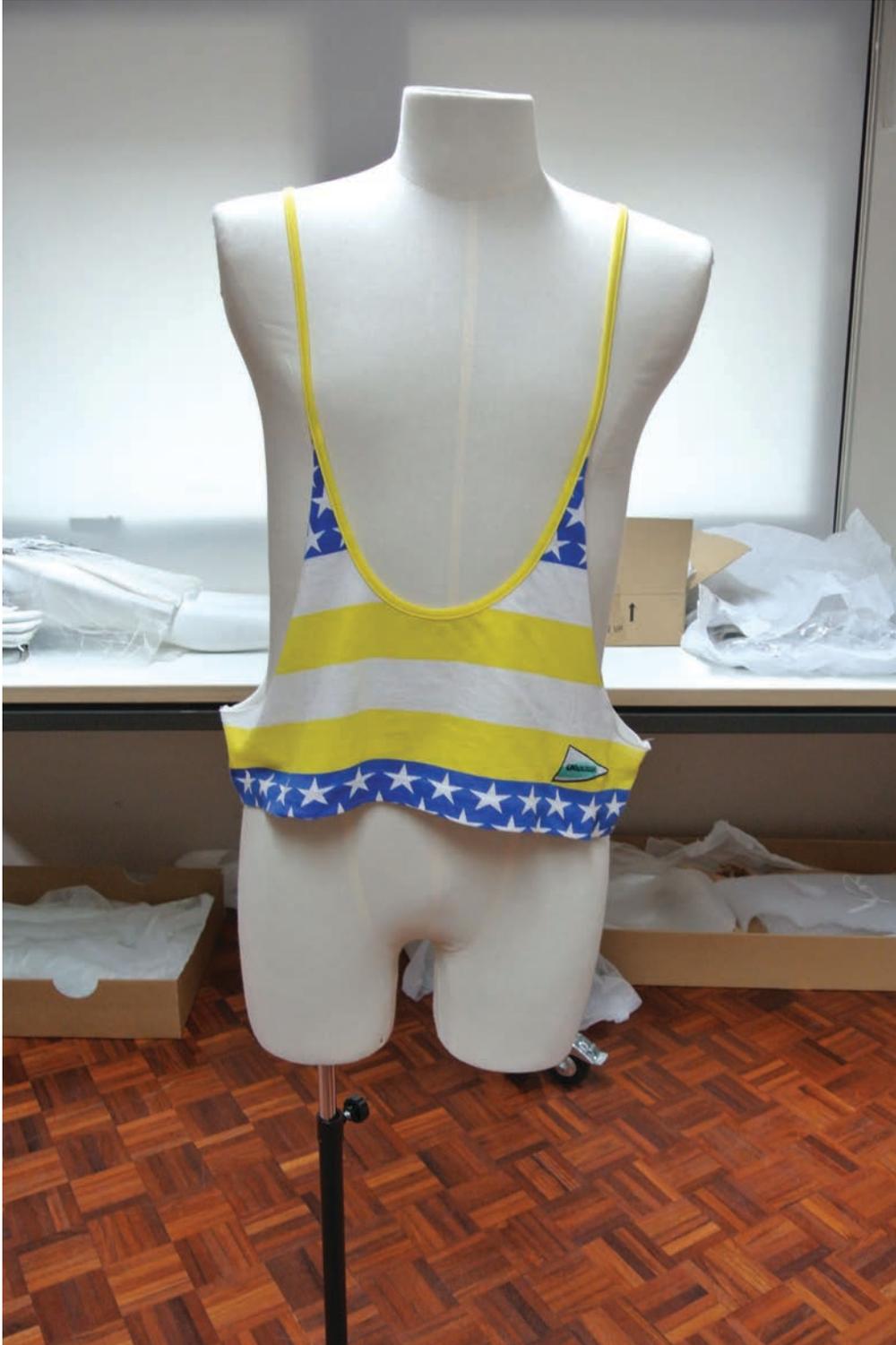


Figure 26
Singlet tank top from the Spring/Summer 2006 menswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 27

“Protest Room” (Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 womenswear) installation in the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel* (2007-2008), ModeMuseum, Antwerp
 Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 28

Karl Lagerfeld’s “Protest Collection” runway show for the Chanel Spring/Summer 2015, Grand Palais, Paris

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/sep/30/karl-lagerfeld-chanel-show-paris-fashion-week#img-2>



Figure 29

“I ♥ GAZA” skirt from the Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 30
“Suicidedoux” top and “I ♥ GAZA” skirt from the Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 31

Detail of "Sequoia" trousers from the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 menswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 32

Detail of “Angel Eyes” sweatshirt dress from the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003
womenswear collection

Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 33

Lookbook image for the Autumn/Winter 2005-2006 menswear collection

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/a-w-05-06-m/>

Figure 34

Bodybuilder Rahel Ruch at the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/s-s-12-m/>



Figure 35
“Be Into It” mankini from the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 36

“Twirly” super mini-skirt/peplum from the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 37

Matthew Marble in the lookbook for the Autumn/Winter 2014-2015 collection
Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the
following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/autumn-winter-14-15/>



Figure 38
Robe jacket from the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 39
“Watch Me” dress from Spring/Summer 2002 womenswear collection
Photograph: Charlene Lau

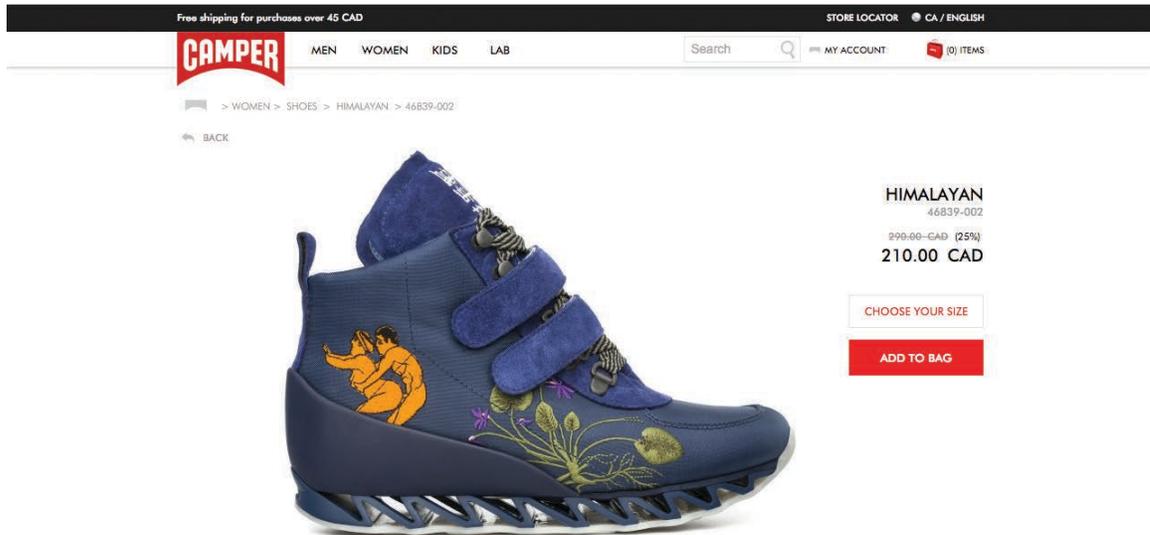


Figure 40

“Himalayan” shoe from the Bernhard Willhelm x Camper Together collaboration, Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 women’s collection

Source: http://www.camper.com/en_CA/women/shoes/himalayan/camper-himalayan-46839-002

Figure 41

François Sagat wears a mankini in a lookbook image from the Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Mark Wilson and Sue-An van der Zijpp, eds., *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009) 178.

Figure 42

A runway look from the Autumn/Winter 2012-2013 menswear collection

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/a-w-12-13-m/>

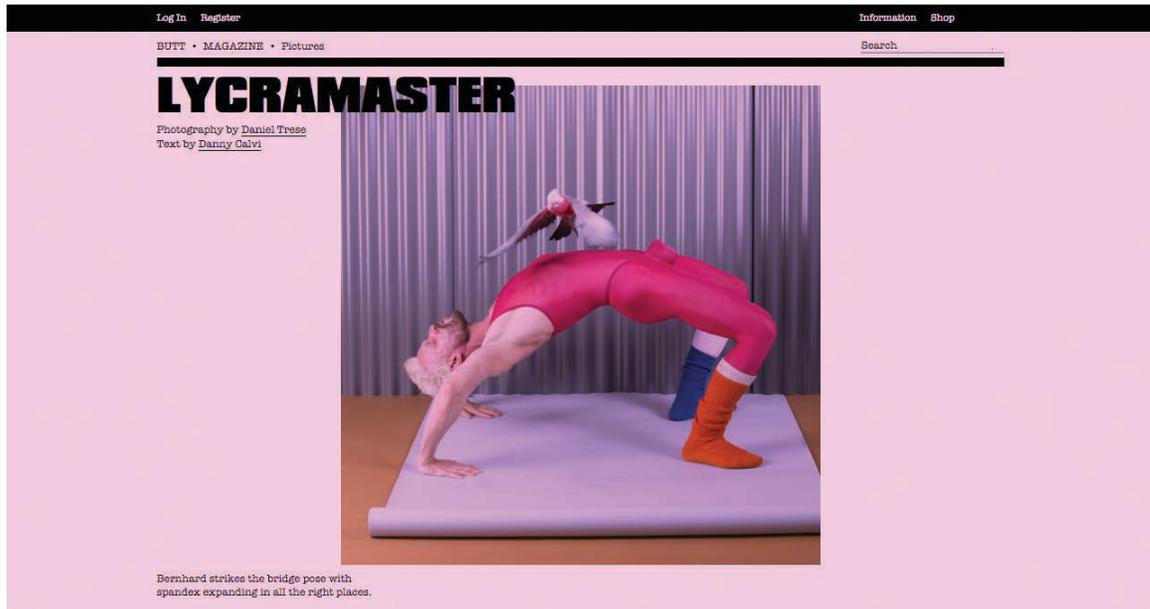


Figure 43

A screen capture of the *BUTT* magazine interview with Bernhard Willhelm, wearing a leotard from the Spring/Summer 2015 collection

Source: <http://www.buttmagazine.com/magazine/pictures/lycramaster/>



Figure 44

“Sac” dress from the Autumn/Winter 2009-2010 womenswear collection

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 45

Trousers from the Spring/Summer 2004 menswear collection featuring equestrian motifs appropriated from French luxury brand, Hermès

Photograph: Charlene Lau

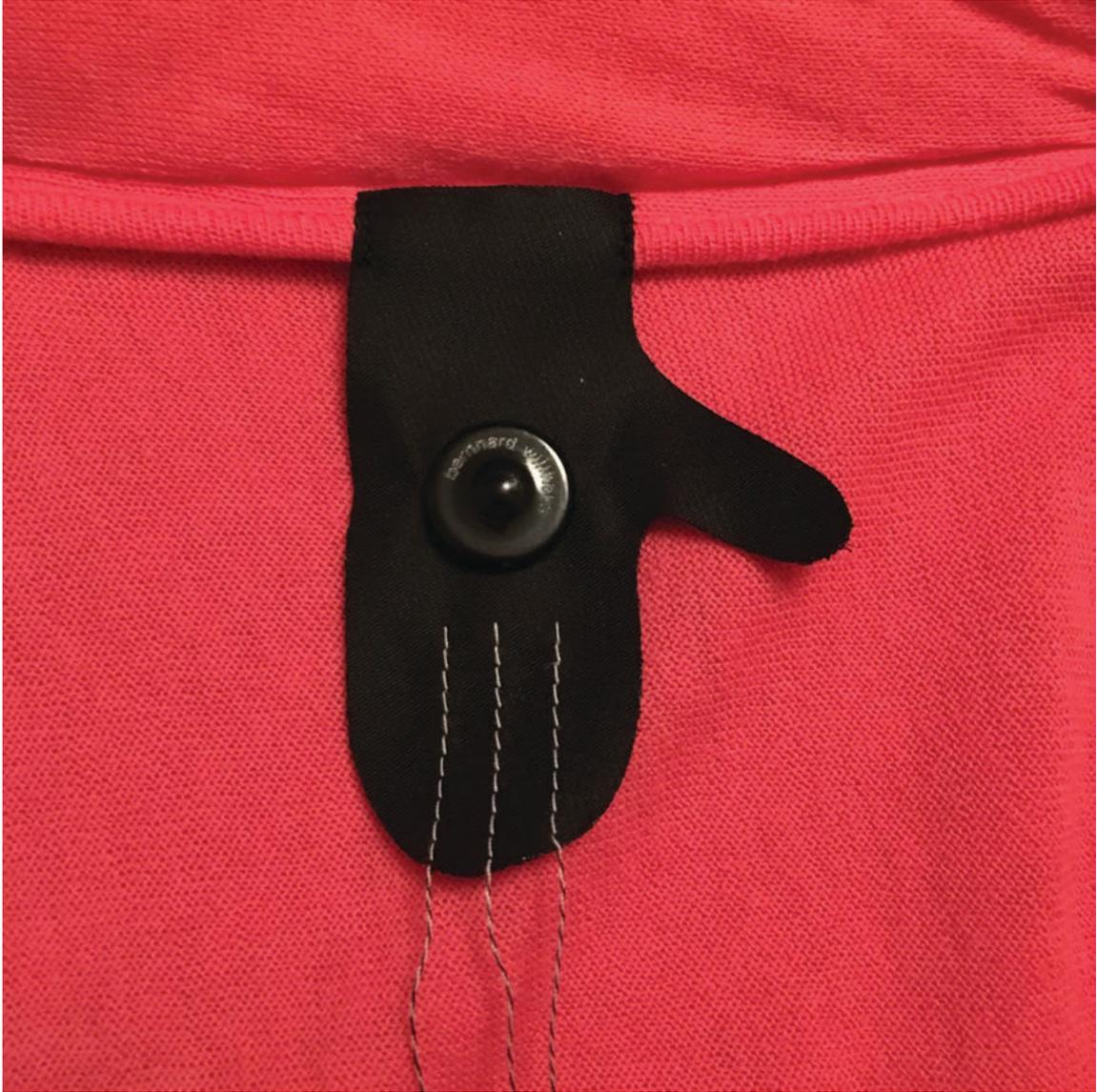


Figure 46

A Bernhard Willhelm monkey paw tag

Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 47

View of the Bernhard Willhelm boutique at PARCO

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.itemidem.com/item/52>

Figure 48

Model with leaf blower during the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear runway show in the Marais area of Paris

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/s-s-11-m/>

Figure 49

A page from the Autumn/Winter 2002-2003 collection lookbook

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Mark Wilson and Sue-An van der Zijpp, eds., *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009) 379.



Figure 50

Screenshot of the Bernhard Willhelm Instagram account

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/bernhardwillhelm/?hl=en>



Figure 51

Screenshot of the slideshow accompanying *T Magazine* blog post “A Paris Designer Sets up a Creative Commune in the Hollywood Hills” in which George Kostopoulos arrests Bernhard Willhelm at his Hollywood Hills live/work space.

Photograph: Daniel Trese

Source: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/29/t-magazine/a-paris-designer-sets-up-a-creative-commune-in-the-hollywood-hills.html?_r=0#slideshow/100000003019836/100000003019851

Figure 52

Installation view of the Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 womenswear collection at the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus* (2009-2010), Groninger Museum Groningen, Netherlands

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.dance.nl/uploads/images/articles/org/4510.jpg>

Figure 53

A sausage sculpture sits amongst the audience at the Bernhard Willhelm Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 menswear collection presentation

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: *Bernhard Willhelm: Het Totaal Rappel*, (Antwerp: Fashion Museum of the Province of Antwerp, 2007) n. pag.



Figure 54

Installation view of *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History*
(2012-2013) Middelheim Museum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 55

Installation view of *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History* (2012-2013) Middelheim Museum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 56

Installation view of *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History* (2012-2013) Middelheim Museum, Antwerp

Photograph: Charlene Lau



Figure 57

Hand-sculpted clay hotdog pendant necklace for the Spring/Summer 2009 womenswear collection runway presentation

Photograph: Charlene Lau

Figure 58

Tableau vivant from the Autumn/Winter 2010-2011 womenswear runway presentation, Palais Brongniart, Place de la Bourse

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/a-w-10-11/>

Figure 59

Model at the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection runway presentation. Installation in collaboration with Elie Hay at Palais Brongniart, Place de la Bourse

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source:

Figure 60

Model at the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection runway presentation. Installation in collaboration with Elie Hay at Palais Brongniart, Place de la Bourse

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/s-s-13-m/>

Figure 61

A dancer from The William Forsythe Company Frankfurt during the runway performance for the Autumn/Winter 2013-2014 collection, Place du Carrousel, Louvre

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://www.bernhardwillhelm.com/collections/detail/a-w-13-14/>

Figure 62

Björk and her all-female brass band in Bernhard Willhelm costumes for the Volta Tour (2007)

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Mark Wilson and Sue-An van der Zijpp, eds., *Bernhard Willhelm & Jutta Kraus*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009) 151.

Figure 63

Dancers in Bernhard Willhelm costumes from the final Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet performance, Brooklyn Academy of Music

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://eddagudmundsdottir.com/Costume-Design-2/Ceder-Lake-BAM>

Appendix B: Interview with Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus

On September 30, 2013, I met with Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus during Paris Fashion Week. The conversation was recorded in the courtyard of a building in the third *arrondissement*. Inside the building, buying appointments were being held.

Charlene Lau: How would you define your fashion and how does it fit into the fashion world?

Bernhard Willhelm: I think fashion is a lot about the surface and I like to scratch the surface a little bit. You have to dig a little into things, things which are not so pleasant. I always say beauty alone doesn't interest me too much. If it's only about beauty, in the classic sense, it can get very flat and very boring. So [fashion] is also a form of protest against norms of beauty. What's also very important is [to] experiment. I think to experiment eventually a new form of beauty could develop. What interests me is more the process than the actual product, because each collection you do is a process.

CL: How would you describe your process?

BW: Everyday, I try to discover something new. It's a lot about giving the idea a chance.

CL: Jutta, would you agree with that in terms of your collaboration?

Jutta Kraus: It's also that this process takes a long time. That's what we do everyday. The result is very fast and immediately we go over to the next step, the next collection.

CL: Do you see your ideas as being very critical of the fashion industry then, that you are anti-traditional beauty?

BW: I mean, one thing is to be critical, the other one is to be ironic. I think when you take beauty too seriously it's just suffocating. [The fashion system] is a very restrictive system, so I to keep it free and that includes breaking rules or adapting the rules to your own way of making and thinking. There is no reason to be anti-. When you are anti-, it's a different approach, but still, with that approach you can break something or change it and make it your own. It's not about saying "this is beauty or this is not beauty," it's about giving ugly things a chance. Beauty needs ugliness. Or it needs irony. I think it's important to be ironic about these things.

It's not only about being anti- or being really extreme, it's all about the nuances.

CL: With irony comes humour too, and of course there is a lot of humour in your work.

BW: Definitely, I think life without humour is unbearable.

CL: Do you see that your background being from the Black Forest and Bavaria is very essential to your work, the light-heartedness versus the stereotype of Germans being

serious?

BW: I think Germans are not serious, I think German people are very kinky.

CL: (to Jutta) Would you agree with that?

JK: I think that the Germans don't really care about fashion. Fashion was never important in this country. And that's, I think a good side. They never took it so seriously. I mean of course they have traditions.

BW: No, but the Second World War changed everything for Germany. Berlin was a big fashion city in the 1920s/30s. The Charleston was invented there. There were pimps, pushers, prostitutes already in that time, so let's call it this kind of chic which is still around in fashion that was developed in Berlin in that time. But now German fashion...they tried to bring it back to Berlin, but I don't know if I'm supposed to say that Germans don't care about fashion.

JK: But if you compare to Japan, they really love fashion so much more than we do.

BW: [The Germans] see it more as a status symbol, or they just see it as a functional thing. And of course Germans love to buy cheap.

JK: And they love functional things for sure.

BW: But you know, I'm [haven't been] in Germany since I was 18, so who am I to say what Germany is now? I left it behind. But then as you say there are still roots and so things from your upbringing and from German clothes. This is for sure the folklore costumes worn at certain occasions. Of course there is the Oktoberfest which became like tourist kitsch, but it's still a living culture; it's still used [as] costume now. That folkloric costume [is] kind of like a tourist costume. It's like going to Hawaii and suddenly everyone brings you little flower things and you're in the rhythm, and it's the same in Bavaria in a way, you get your beer and eventually you would feel German. Clothes always make you feel something when you wear a traditional German thing. Give clothing a chance. Peace, it's another thing, folkloric, okay, yes.

CL: With art, the avant-garde has a place in history as being a very political kind of thing, and social thing. So, and your fashion has been described as avant-garde. Do you see your fashion as avant-garde?

BW: Avant-garde is putting a label on things. What does it mean? Is it extreme underground or does it mean it's just fashion? Maybe avant-garde is just fashion in the end. It doesn't mean anything. Not right now.

CL: What is avant-garde fashion, then?

BW: All the fashion can be avant-garde depending on the light you put it in. If you put

something ugly in the beautiful light, it can be avant-garde fashion.

JK: I think it's avant-garde in the way [that] maybe not everybody understands what we are doing or that it's so abstract sometimes. People sometimes don't really understand what it is about.

BW: No, I think in the case it's avant-garde, there should be concept. In a way they can be very conceptual collections, but who am I to say if this is avant-garde? Obviously, any/every concept in a way, each collection needs a story and eventually has a concept, but is that avant-garde?

CL: In the way that many artists don't think, "I am an avant-garde artist," the same could be said with you. You're just making things.

BW: I'm just a fashion designer [who] makes clothes. Eventually there is a concept.

CL: With training in Antwerp and the Belgian avant-garde, did that shape the way you saw or did things? Did it make you want to do your own thing and not be a part of it?

BW: This is a difficult question because I don't know anything else. It just happened, I was there at this time. We were the second, the third generation after the Antwerp Six. It's a very new history started in the 80s. Going to Paris and showing. It just opened certain doors. There was some interest from the outside world for Belgian fashion.

JK: But I think they pushed all the students to do really their own thing. You see how different people work coming out of the academy. So, there must be something.

BW: Because there were certain doors opened. Everybody really was doing his best to become a designer.

JK: And do something different.

BW: And in my year there was Kris Van Assche, Haider Ackermann was two years with me, there were certain people who are now doing things in Paris, you know. Something came out definitely and it shows that eventually, it helps you to develop your own ideas. But I don't know if there is a certain style you can call the Antwerp style. I think it's all very mixed.

The Antwerp style is very influenced by the Japanese. I would call Margiela, and Demeulemeester conceptual collections, which were influenced by the Japanese. Then there was Walter Van Beirendonck, which was maybe, if you look at Kansai Yamamoto and these kinds of people from the early 70s/80s you can say it comes more from that column. And then Dries Van Noten; he's a businessman.

I couldn't say there is one connection of avant-garde or avant-garde style. You couldn't call Dries Van Noten avant-garde, for example.

CL: That's the difficulty of trying to define the avant-garde, is that it doesn't look just one way.

BW: [Avant-garde] doesn't mean anything. Avant-garde this is not what is for me avant-garde, it is for each person who and how he perceives the clothes and then what kind of image you have from the clothes.

Which depends on the branding, giving it a stand.

CL: The reason why I think of your work as avant-garde, is because you do collaborate with artists very regularly. And it's not just in the same way that Marc Jacobs at Louis Vuitton just asks an artist to do some handbags. You actually really collaborate with artists.

I was at your exhibition in 2007 [at MoMu]. It was the first time I was in Antwerp, and I hadn't seen your work before. At the time I was an artist. I thought, "I don't even know where to place this. It looks like art to me, but I know it's also fashion." So, can you talk about the relationship between fashion and art?

BW: Isn't it funny that it only depends on the context. In the end, it's only clothes, but it depends, do you place them on people, do you place them on a mannequin, or do you place them in a museum? It's all the different fields of fashion can operate, and it can work. As you said there have been many links together with artists, if it fits, if it's a good collaboration. In the best case, both sides can get something out of it. This is how I see the collaborations. You have to work with some people who also get something from you and the other way.

With Louis Vuitton it's a different thing, it's a pay cheque, so it depends a little bit how we operate and let's call us independent, medium-successful, still operating after 15 years kind of designers. Then, yeah, these are the kinds of the collaborations which keep [us] alive. Once you have input the energy, you get it from both sides. It's essential now, these kinds of collaborations.

CL: What artists are you looking at right now that you can say are influencing your work?

BW: At moment I just look at blogs. If there is still anarchy, it's the Internet. And there's no censorship and there is no one on the Internet who tells you this is art or this is just porn. So, I like this kind of anarchy. And of course I look at a lot of art things but I couldn't tell you now this artist or that artist. I don't want to name-drop. There are so many good artists out there. I kind of like the anonymity of the Internet [in that it] has this kind of wide range of being arty and just farty.

CL: I saw your exhibition at the Middelheim Museum and so that was an instance of you actually curating art objects.

BW: That was more art than fart. But also I tried to put in the library. In case you don't like the art you can always pick up a book. So it's all about multi-tasking.

CL: Is it all about undefined fields?

BW: Absolutely. People that you know want to play with their mobile phone and we have a conversation, you know. It's absolutely okay. We are all multi-tasking.

CL: Can you talk about the experience of curating the exhibition at the Middelheim, and the process?

JK: They showed us the archive of the sculptures that they had in the stock, and then there were some really big artists and some really unknown [ones of] all periods. We could make a selection of [them], but there was not that much work that we could really make a concept about. Finally, we just chose things we liked and then we made the set-up for it. But it was very interesting to see how they collected art in Antwerp for outside over the years.

BW: We used all the archive that was not possible to show outside. So, there was one little archive. Four sculptures which could only be shown inside, so we worked with those ones. And it's like a collection from I would say 1910 until now.

There was a Rodin...so Rodin was maybe the oldest.

CL: You said that the Middelheim exhibition was not fashion, so did you just change focus?

BW: I change focus [for] everything. This is a bit my thing. I'm a gypsy. It's like every ten minutes I get fed up and I have to leave, you. Enough Antwerp, enough Paris, and now we just moved to L.A. So it's a little bit different, every ten years I need to move.

JK: No, but it's good to do projects that have nothing to do with fashion, of course. It's always a challenge to do something different. Because normally people always want clothes from us. Every project is always related to clothes, and it's not so interesting then.

CL: So you really want to move outside [fashion]? If you had an exhibition where you were given free rein and it did not have to be art or fashion, what would you put in it?

BW: I would love to do a garden. That's like my new thing, but this is a different thing, it's just something which grows.

CL: You see all of your work as being related somehow.

BW: If you are a creative person, you just have so many things eventually to express. And fashion is one of [them for us]. Once you know that you have to, it's very easy to

adapt it to different fields. And that could be anything. It's a certain kind of openness, I think [that] as a creative person you say "let's try and do something" and I think it's really about giving new fields a chance. Of course there is linkage in fashion and art and what we are doing. I like craft, this is maybe the reason why I would like to work with different materials, not only with fabric.

CL: Your move to L.A., can you talk maybe a little about that? That's quite recent?

JK: It's very recent, yeah. We just landed, actually.

BW: I think America always influenced my thinking and my work. And it also influences our world politics. It's very obvious how influenced we are by America. So I see it always as a very exotic place for me, America is more exotic than any coconut island. It's really the world where I am thinking there is the surface and then when you dive into it, it can be real, but also not real. It's a culture [that] as a European, I idealize.

JK: Everybody knows L.A. from the movies.

BW: The biggest stars, they're all from America. And the Americans invented jeans, T-shirts and the sweatshirt, and I still see myself working off of these items. You don't need more in order to be here today. You need a jeans and a t-shirt and sweatshirt and you are set. You don't need an evening dress for a red carpet.

When I grew up in the 80s/90s, these items were imported from America and they were really desirable, especially to us. Even it was so simple but it had this certain touch of sexiness, freedom or America. I still can feel it in America, there is something about this. And then, we went to L.A. It's a surface, but as I said I want to scratch the surface.

CL: Okay. There's definitely a lot underneath that surface of L.A.

BW: There's a surface under the surface.

CL: Yes, there's another one, and then another one...

BW: So many layers. That's what's nice about America. A lot of people can't stand it because it all seems so superficial, but I can find the things I like, and I can also [be] in my own way. You have to look behind things. You don't take things how they are.

CL: Your interest in America is especially as an influence...you've used stars and stripes in your collection before upside-down.

BW: Yeah, we put them upside-down. But it's also a little bit ironic because I always like that you could make anything famous just by printing the American flag. Some people pin their fortunes on the American flag and Ralph Lauren put the English preppy style into fashion. And it looks more English than American. That's why I think he is a good designer. I find it very honest. More honest than to wear a red carpet dress. I mean if you

work for a house, let's mention Marc Jacobs, he also has complained that [models] all pose in the same three-quarter pose, I mean, how boring is that? If everybody you know was to have the same strapless thing in a three-quarter pose...

JK: And they have looked like this for ten years.

BW: And they look really stereotyped.

JK: And they don't change. It's always the same.

BW: Stereotyped dolls. So, for me this is also the mystery about America. Everybody still has this faulty Hollywood in mind and this defines glamour.

CL: With your interest in the U.S., would it be sincere interest in it because you're fascinated by it, but also you're trying to be ironic about it, at the same time?

BW: I see it more like being curious. To be honest, I've been there for two weeks, so let's see how I deal with it after half a year.

JK: Maybe in two years, we'll hate it. Or we love it, or I don't know. It's difficult to say.

BW: I think we have to dive into it.

But, my generation has taken so many ideals and ideas away that suddenly you have to be serious, you have to be realistic, you cannot make mistakes anymore. There's no place for experimentation. There is a lot of pressure right now, especially for the young generation. I feel that very much. The fashion business changed. Ten years ago, it was different than now. I'm quite curious now how this is going to develop.

CL: So, you're serious about the fashion business?

BW: Because can you be ironic your whole life? Or is there a time where you go serious or maybe you never grow up. But then it's like Peter Pan, it's tragic. Look at Michael Jackson. There are really no rules, but you have to maybe adapt [to] it.

CL: There is a certain amount of seriousness even though your fashion is humorous or ironic. As you say, you've been working for fifteen years. You're putting in the work so there has to be some kind of seriousness.

JK: But it's not only that we have to do clothing you can wear, it's also we like to do clothing which people want to wear. You know, it's not only that we are forced to do that because of doing a business.

BW: But there is already the French people who complain so much so I decided not to be too complain-y, since I'm allowed to live in their country. And now I'm going away.

CL: I've been looking at the collections at MoMu for the past weeks. I was looking at the Autumn/Winter 2007-2008 womenswear collection where you used the Georg Grosz, the Dada Death mask. What were you thinking when you included that association?

JK: This is weed collection, no?

BW: It was inspired by blowing. It was my Amsterdam period, I smoked a lot of weed. And, I inhaled, and it's legal in Amsterdam. But on the other hand, this Dada Georg Grosz thing...it was so interesting because he actually really wore it in the streets, and I think we are all mortal, we all have to die. And eventually we had it in a vision and this was about having a vision and to feel alive. It was a very psychedelic collection. And having a vision experiencing things in a different way. I mean, weed-blowing can be very calming. It also can be very colourful, to experience new shapes. I mean there were a lot of new shapes in that collection; it almost looked like a Tim Burton movie.

CL: I noticed some of the style names were Japanese as well.

BW: Yeah, or the character. Creating the character and like Georg Grosz, this Dada thing, was first or the first I know who created his own character Dada Death. It sounds like a character, Mr. Dada Death, you know?

CL: Do you have an interest in Dada in general? I know that Surrealism comes up a lot when people talk about your work. Did you think about that or it mostly the image of Dada Death?

BW: The thing I always admit is that I like to put things in a different light. It's about giving things a chance that already exist, but I [make] a little twist. It's about the nuances. I realized that after fifteen years, you don't have to invent the world every time.

CL: Would you describe some of your visions, or inspirations as surreal, or as being sort of this weird, as being like Dada?

BW: No, I feel more like Dalí, who never wanted to be a Surrealist but could stand on it.

CL: So if you chose one, you would be Dalí.

BW: No, I mean, what is surrealist? It's a bit like Magritte. Is it a pipe or not a pipe? But in the end it's a pipe with a cloudy background. Is it surrealist then? I don't know. What associations do you have with a Magritte? Maybe then, as you said, it's surrealist because it evokes all the different perceptions of people and everybody interprets in a different way, yes. Is that surrealist? Don't ask me. I'm not an art historian.

CL: We struggle with that in art history too where we try to, you want to be authoritative, but at the same time you don't want to be make a pronouncement of truth.

JK: But I like to give words to things, yeah.

BW: But what I like about surrealism is that it questions the perception. Is it pipe or is it a symbolic thing, or is it a symbol for something else? And when there's a mystery, there's magic. And hopefully you have that with fashion also. It's all about the mystery. Nobody tells you why this costs five hundred euros and this one fifty euros. It's about what you associate with it.

CL: That makes a lot of sense in looking at your work, this idea of perception, so that's coming together for me a lot. In speaking of perception, has anyone ever been offended by any of your clothes?

JK: Maybe the Americans, when we turned the flag around. Don't think so?

BW: No, I would say no. It's only clothes.

CL: So it's not that serious?

BW: You don't offend somebody with clothes. Maybe by wearing no clothes. But not with clothes.

CL: There's the one poster of you [both] where you're nude?

JK: It's the telephone? It was an invitation, actually. It was in our bathroom in rue Martel.

BW: I think people have more problems with nudity than actually with clothes. I have to say, still. It's something very in us. The Roman way is not to be nude in public. And nobody knows why. Whoever said it's not possible?

CL: There is this one dress called Metropolissy and it's a women's dress where there are holes for the breasts, an arrow and then there are sort of like feathers by the vagina? Are you trying to create something questioning nudity?

BW: No. First of all, it's a pattern experiment, it's like slashes on strategic places. Eventually they would reveal parts of the body or cover it. You can wear that with a t-shirt under it and it's a normal t-shirt or if you want to be revealing and play with your nipples eventually it's a good t-shirt for that as well. I mean it's all multi-functional.

CL: I'm also thinking about the 2008 men's collection, I think from spring-summer with François Sagat, and the great image of him putting his penis into a muffler.

BW: You know the funny thing is this little body suit with the penis-hole you can find now in every sex shop, so I created that! It is also something which is important in gay fashion now, and for me François Sagat is one of those people you immediately recognize because he created his own style and look. And he did porn, so anyway, porno-chic 2000 and...

JK: And he's a fashion designer.

BW: He used to be a fashion student also. And now he created this kind of icon of himself. So it's all linked, and as I said I find the anarchy of the Internet important and of course in that anarchy you also have a lot of porn. Like the only place people like to show themselves naked, or there is this certain kind of exhibitionism is on the Internet. When people want to be liberal with their sexuality and exhibitionistic, the Internet is the place to be. It has also to do with the AIDS crisis and with the technological revolution.

CL: Clearly your work is really influenced by the Internet as of the past, maybe five years? But do you think you are moving in that direction, especially with Geoffrey Lillemon and his work? Is that the direction that you want to move in?

BW: I just feel that [the Internet] is a very important platform to work on. I think there are more possibilities [online] than doing traditional fashion shows which tend to be far more expensive things. So, it's also a question of how you invest your money more and more. Because in Paris now, the fashion shows [are] done in a very traditional way. Everybody fights for the same models and the fashion show is a lot of money. So if you want to be experimental, you'd rather spend not so much money but you make an impact by the possibilities you have; that can be on the Internet or it can be a presentation in a gallery but with [smaller] budgets.

JK: If you do a fashion show, you have the fashion journalists who come, and they do all the fashion shows, they come all the time. But if you do it on the Internet, you have a complete different public.

CL: So it's more democratic in many ways. How would you describe your audience and the people who buy your clothes? Are they club kids?

BW: It's both. We have Japanese links; our biggest support has been Japan and Japanese street fashion. It fits in there because there are no rules. I think in the countries with a lot of dress rules, it's not so easy for us. Like for example, Germany for us. It's very strict in a way because people express themselves with clothes. It's really high fashion or it's really low fashion, but it doesn't mix [in Germany]. In Japan, it's a little bit different. The high and the low, the men and the women, they mix in a more natural way than they do in Europe, for sure.

CL: It's interesting you bring that up because there is this idea of street level fashion in your practice and then it's not cheap, for example. So maybe some people looking at it on the Internet cannot afford it. It's sort of this high/low sort of thing. But if you could – you have collaborated with Camper, for example – would you consider having something that was a little bit more democratic as a product if it was financially viable?

BW: I think everything is democratic. I think most of the young people, they like to go and save up for a piece. If you can't afford it, you have to wait until the sales. Then it's

affordable again. If you really want something, you can just buy a cheaper item or you can buy an accessory and you buy shoes. These are all items which are not too expensive. It's not free, but [those] who love fashion, eventually they spend more on fashion than on travelling. The people, the range is really from very young to quite old also. I mean this time we showed a lookbook on older people and I find it also interesting because old is the new young.

JK: It suits them very well.

BW: The people who are sixty, they look like forty. And also, I think the new generations are really more open towards different influences because they grew up in a digital age, so [will be] really very different in the future.

CL: How did you come up with that concept for the lookbook using "mature models"?

BW: In L.A. it is all about being young. And to shoot in old people, it made sense.

JK: And everybody wants to be young and wants to look young.

BW: But then it's also good to show that you can look cool when you're old.

CL: It's really trying to sort of break down these barriers between age and shape.

BW: And it always has been more difficult for women to get older than for men. I would like to break [from] that. I think it's nice too. There are a few old people and they have this kind of proudness to be old and they look great. It's more interesting to see someone old and [still have] a certain spirit. Because with a lot of people, after feeling [old] at one point they stop living and they're still wearing the same thing. And we really are opening [up to] try to have an evolution in style. And it's not good to get sentimental about your past.

Maybe fashion helps you to keep the now.

CL: Yes, absolutely. Fashion is about the now, but then it's always trying to stay one step ahead. Are you interested in diversity as a concept? You have used many models of different ethnicities and shapes. Is that a very conscious decision?

BW: You just kind of feel it's necessary. I'm from Germany and you really need all that mix because that's what's missing, that ethnic mix. You have that much more [of that] in France or in America, but not in Germany. Maybe that's also a reason why I want to show it over and over again. I find it very important. The world is getting much smaller and much closer and that mix is essential. I was very fascinated by the exotic always, and by people from other places. What they do, what they eat, how/what they wear, and what they think you. It's kind of an exchange which keeps you alive.

CL: All this mixing, do you see that something could be offensive sometimes? I'm

thinking specifically of a collection from autumn/winter 2005-2006.

BW: It's just when you take the piss, you better take them with a smile. So if you offend people, you also have to take the consequences.

CL: In this specific collection, [there are] black models and then there's what looks like cocaine or something like that.

BW: I don't find it offensive, I just find it so offensive that all these drug issues are so blocked out of the media, because there is a moral censorship policy to drugs. Everybody of my generation was using drugs and people are even dying of the drugs. But never mind they chose to use it and to die, so it's their decision. I see drugs in a much more social context. They are very important, and also drugs they separate people. I mean in Paris, it's the city of cocaine, Berlin is maybe the city of ketamine, and then my background was from the ecstasy parties, you know, when techno arrived in Germany, it has a lot to do with our generation. Sorry to say, it's something definitely worth talking about. It's the groups which take which kind of drugs, and they also dress in a certain way.

CL: With those images, the first thing I thought [was] "Oh, it's drug culture and American hip-hop."

BW: Pimps, pushers, prostitutes. It's still part of the fashion and it's always been a part of the fashion. The rock and roll, I have had enough [of it], because it ended up somewhere on the high street.

CL: When you use things like hip-hop, is that ironic or sincere? Or is that exotic or how to do you see that?

BW: Hip-hop?

CL: Some of the earlier collections with just like really wide pants, trousers.

JK: I think it just shows an interest in this culture.

BW: The guy with the low-hanging crotch and the next season it's a guy with a high crotch. You explore something, have fun with it, give the hip-hop people also something.

JK: They're proud.

BW: And they have their own way of wearing things, and to explore that if you work with the models and stuff and how they put the clothes, and how they see the clothes. I find it interesting and fascinating that finally you do something and then it's on that person. It obviously does something to the person, or it does something to me. There's an interaction between people. And of course music always gives it a group. And it interacts with certain nationalities or ethnicities' styles. I've been doing it with many groups. This

time maybe old people, then hip-hop, Japanese guys...

JK: And then in the nineties, kind of raver...

BW: And they're all part of our time now.

CL: But being contemporary, being in the now.

BW: About being contemporary...that's what it's about. And as I said, there are no rules how to operate in fashion. Sometimes you have to work in the back way in order to come to the front of it. Once you have a big success, it doesn't mean you have success for the next season.

It's just sometimes even not good to be theoretical about your work. For example, the Japanese don't give any interviews because they say the clothes talk. I'm also a little bit like [that]. Who are you to say, it's only clothes. Sometimes it's also good not to say too much about it. Once you say something, you get a stamp. This you have to remember in life. So sometimes it's also good to leave things open. I don't want to give too much interpretation about the collection. If everybody interprets it in a different way, it's more than okay. I'm open to different interpretations of my work. It's not black and white, there are many nuances.

CL: That's very generous too.

JK: It's interesting to read what do people think about it.

CL: And you never think, "Oh, that's wrong, or they totally didn't get it"?

BW: I'm sometimes surprised that they see that you didn't even think about that. It's a way of communication with people.

CL: I have one last question. How do you measure a design's success or effectiveness?

BW: Each collection is a failure. And then we just ask ourselves, did we fail good or not? Now we have to do a better one next time.

JK: No, but it even changes; you see a collection and then you like some pieces, you don't like some pieces, and you think, this works well. And then maybe a week later you already think different about it. It depends on the day.

CL: And when people buy things and they're very popular, are they surprising to you?

JK: Always. I'm always surprised what people like in the end.

CL: I guess it's that surprise and mystery that you were talking about.

BW: You give them a choice and then people have to decide themselves, because I don't have my own shops. So maybe that would be something for the future, to have your own world where you can show things that you want to show. That's like one of the wishes I still have. It is good to have a space and you put the stuff the way you want it, you know, and people can see that. I miss that a little bit, I have to say.

JK: People come from all over the world, and it's quite interesting because everybody has a different culture and comes from a different climate. So they react completely differently to the items. It's always interesting what they are into.

BW: I also realize that in fact, there's not so much of an effect to show a presentation right now in Paris because there are too many shows. People actually come to see the clothes and not to see the show. A lot of retailers don't even have time to go to shows. They look at it the next day on Style.com.

CL: Now it's even instant. Five minutes after the show, it's on Style.com

BW: That's also the thing. [Fashion] moves faster. So, and I want to move slower. It's all about speeding things down right now. This instant satisfaction of everything, I don't believe in it. I don't believe in it when it comes to my private life.