

**THE  
MET**

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**Rei Kawakubo /  
Comme des Garçons  
Art of  
the In-Between**

"I like to work with space and emptiness."

Rei Kawakubo, 2000

Since founding Comme des Garçons ("like some boys") in 1969, the Tokyo-based designer Rei Kawakubo (born 1942) has consistently defined and redefined the aesthetics of our time. Season after season, collection after collection, she upends conventional notions of beauty and disrupts accepted characteristics of the fashionable body. Her fashions not only stand apart from the genealogy of clothing but also resist definition and confound interpretation. They can be read as Zen koans or riddles devised to baffle, bemuse, and bewilder. At the heart of her work are the koan *mu* (emptiness) and the related notion of *ma* (space), which coexist in the concept of the "in-between." This reveals itself as an aesthetic sensibility that establishes an unsettling zone of visual ambiguity and elusiveness.

"Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between" examines nine expressions of "in-betweenness" in Kawakubo's collections: Absence/Presence; Design/Not Design; Fashion/Antifashion; Model/Multiple; High/Low; Then/Now; Self/Other; Object/Subject; and Clothes/Not Clothes. It reveals how her designs occupy the spaces between these dualities—which have come to be seen as natural rather than social or cultural—and how they resolve and dissolve binary logic. Defying easy classification themselves, her clothes expose the artificiality, arbitrariness, and "emptiness" of conventional dichotomies. Kawakubo's art of the "in-between" generates meaningful mediations and connections as well as revolutionary innovations and transformations, offering endless possibilities for creation and re-creation.

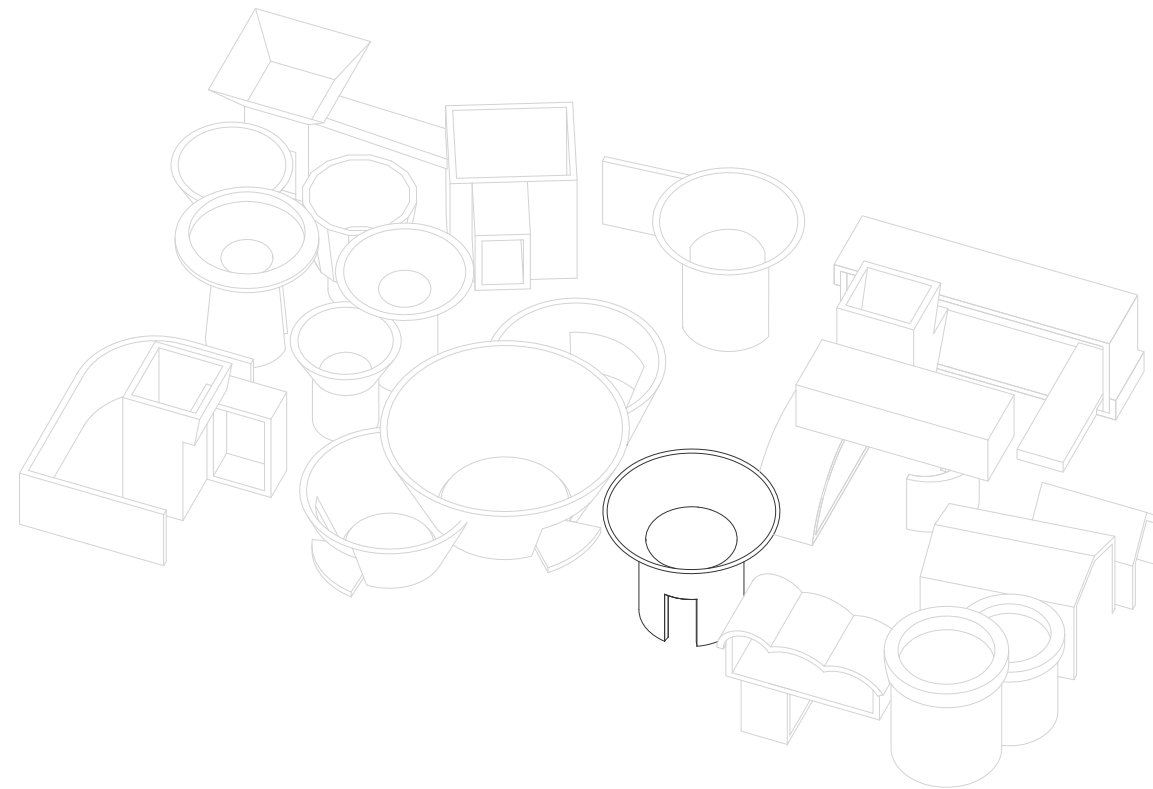
# 1. Absence / Presence

“My clothes and the spaces they inhabit are inseparable—they are one and the same. They convey the same vision, the same message, and the same sense of values.”

2017

- 1.1 2 Dimensions  
Autumn/winter 2012–13  
  
Jacket and skirt of red polyester felt
- 1.2 Body Meets Dress—  
Dress Meets Body  
Spring/summer 1997  
  
Dress and top of red stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 1.3 Body Meets Dress—  
Dress Meets Body  
Spring/summer 1997  
  
Dress and top of red stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 1.4 Invisible Clothes  
Spring/summer 2017  
  
Dress of red cotton velveteen and PVC

*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d'Ys.*



The concept of “in-betweenness” is reflected in the design of this exhibition—a collaboration between Kawakubo and The Met. *Mu* (emptiness) is suggested through the architectural leitmotif of the circle, which in Zen Buddhism symbolizes the void, and *ma* (space) is evoked through the interplay of structural forms. *Ma* expresses void as well as volume, a thing with and without shape—not defined by concrete boundaries. Amplified by the stark whiteness of the gallery surfaces, the visual effect is one of both absence and presence.

Kawakubo regards her fashions and their environments as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art.” This synthesis is reflected in the exhibition, designed as a complete expression of the Comme des Garçons “universe.” It is intended to be a holistic, immersive experience, facilitating a personal engagement with the fashions on display. A pathway is suggested by the numbers in this guide, beginning with these red ensembles that reflect Kawakubo’s enduring preoccupation with blurring the boundaries between body and dress. Visitors are encouraged, however, to forge their own paths and experience the exhibition as a voyage of discovery.

# 2. Design / Not Design

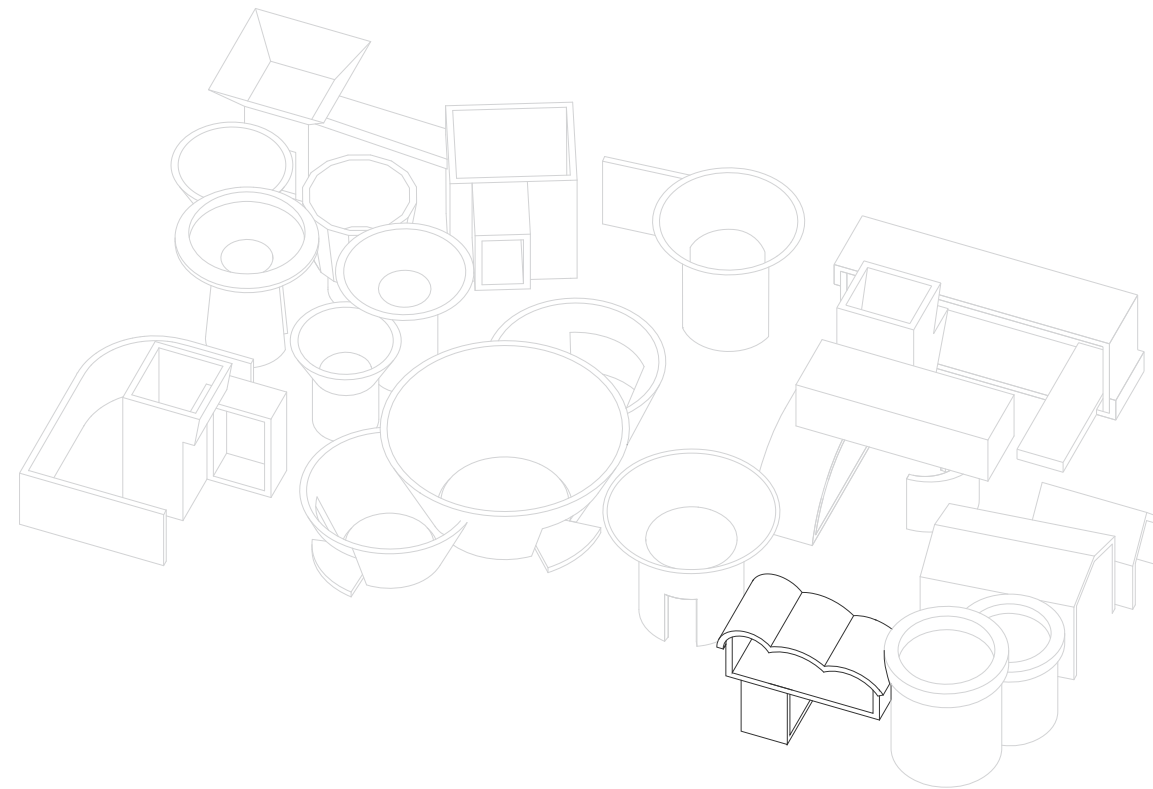
“I wasn’t limited to the confines of a pattern. Not being educated, not being taught how to design, I was able to visualize in a completely different context. And I still seem able to draw upon the unconventional.”

1993

- |     |   |     |  |      |  |      |  |
|-----|---|-----|--|------|--|------|--|
| 2.1 | The Future of Silhouette<br>Autumn/winter 2017–18<br>Dress of brown paper   | 2.6 | Wonderland<br>Autumn/winter 2009–10<br>Jacket of nude nylon tulle and white padded interfacing; shorts of nude stretch nylon                 | 2.10 | Fusion<br>Autumn/winter 1998–99<br>Top of brown cashmere plain weave and white cotton twill; skirt of brown cashmere plain weave, white cotton twill, and off-white wool interlining   | 2.13 | Adult Delinquent<br>Spring/summer 2010<br>Dress of off-white cotton velveteen appliquéd with white cotton muslin and white synthetic jacquard embroidered with clear sequins |
| 2.2 | Patchworks and X<br>Spring/summer 1983<br>Top of off-white cotton knit appliquéd with off-white cotton ribbon; dress of off-white cotton muslin and white rayon satin | 2.7 | Clustering Beauty<br>Spring/summer 1998<br>Dress of off-white cotton lawn  | 2.11 | Adult Punk<br>Autumn/winter 1997–98<br>Dress of synthetic gold lace and off-white wool-nylon open plain weave; shorts of purple stretch nylon and polyurethane   | 2.14 | Wonderland<br>Autumn/winter 2009–10<br>Jacket of nude nylon tulle and white padded interfacing; shorts of nude stretch nylon   |
| 2.3 | Crush<br>Spring/summer 2013<br>Vest and dress of off-white cotton canvas  | 2.8 | Clustering Beauty<br>Spring/summer 1998<br>Dress of off-white cotton lawn and polyester organza  | 2.12 | Adult Punk<br>Autumn/winter 1997–98<br>Dress of light brown polyester chiffon and organza, and white and gray polyester interlining overlaid with white polyester tulle and embroidered with gold thread in a floral motif; shorts of red stretch nylon and polyurethane |      | <i>Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d’Ys.</i>   |
| 2.4 | Crush<br>Spring/summer 2013<br>Vest and skirt of off-white cotton canvas  | 2.9 | Clustering Beauty<br>Spring/summer 1998<br>Dress of off-white cotton lawn with panels of pleated off-white cotton lawn and polyester organza |      |  |      |  |
| 2.5 | Crush<br>Spring/summer 2013<br>Vest and skirt of off-white cotton canvas  |     |  |      |  |      |  |

Design/Not Design explores Kawakubo’s intuitive approach to garment making. Having received no formal fashion training, Kawakubo pursues spontaneous and experimental techniques and methods of construction. Usually, her creative process begins with a single word or an abstract image conveyed to her patternmakers. She once presented a crumpled piece of paper to her team and requested a pattern that expressed similar qualities—as seen in a dress of brown paper shaped and twisted around the body from her collection *The Future of Silhouette*.

The ensembles in this section highlight strategies that recur in Kawakubo’s collections—fusion, imbalance, the unfinished, elimination, and design without design. These modes of expression, all rooted in a Zen Buddhist aesthetic principle known as *wabi-sabi*, converge in an outfit of ripped and patchworked white cotton jersey from her collection *Patchworks and X*; a dress with fifteen layers of raw-edged, unbleached cotton from *Clustering Beauty*; ensembles of flattened, layered, and stitched cotton canvas toiles from *Crush*; and garments featuring exposed and reconfigured pattern pieces from *Adult Punk*, *Fusion*, and *Adult Delinquent*.



# 3. Fashion / Antifashion

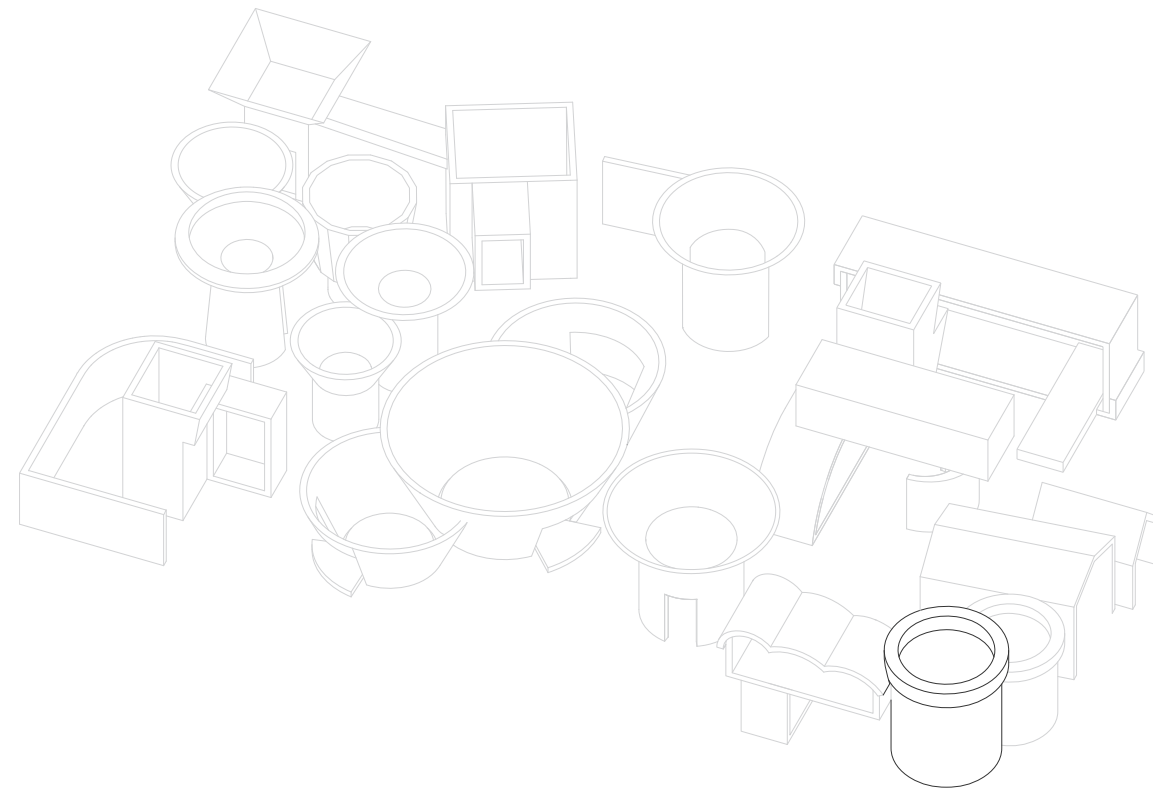
“I am not protesting against fashion. This is something else, another direction.”

1983

- |     |   |     |   |     |   |
|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|
| 3.1 | Twist, Silk + Jersey, Knits (Patchworks)<br>Autumn/winter 1984–85<br>Dress of navy wool jersey<br><br>The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Friends of The Costume Institute Gifts, 2010 (2010.304a, b) | 3.4 | Round Rubber<br>Spring/summer 1984<br>Dress of black and white cotton plain weave<br><br>Collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, gift of Comme des Garçons Co., Ltd.   | 3.7 | Gloves, Skirts, Quilted Big Coats<br>Autumn/winter 1983–84<br>Dress of black wool knit jacquard<br><br>Collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, gift of Comme des Garçons Co., Ltd. |
| 3.2 | Gloves, Skirts, Quilted Big Coats<br>Autumn/winter 1983–84<br>Dress of black and navy wool jersey<br><br>Collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, gift of Comme des Garçons Co., Ltd.                                   | 3.5 | Round Rubber<br>Spring/summer 1984<br>Dress of black linen; belt of black rubber<br><br>Collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, gift of Comme des Garçons Co., Ltd.  |     |   |
| 3.3 | Round Rubber<br>Spring/summer 1984<br>Dress of black cotton plain weave<br><br>Collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, gift of Comme des Garçons Co., Ltd.   | 3.6 | Gloves, Skirts, Quilted Big Coats<br>Autumn/winter 1983–84<br>Top of black wool-nylon plain weave; trouser of black wool-nylon jersey<br><br>Collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, gift of Comme des Garçons Co., Ltd. |     |   |

In 1979 Kawakubo became “dissatisfied” with her collections, which, to that point, had been infused with Japanese folkloric influences. As she explained: “I felt I should be doing something more directional, more powerful. . . . I decided to start from zero, from nothing, to do things that had not been done before, things with a strong image.” This rupture, the first of two in her career, established Kawakubo as the archetypal modernist designer, whose pursuit of originality (or what she calls “newness”) became the defining characteristic of every subsequent collection.

Fashion/Antifashion focuses on Kawakubo’s early 1980s collections, which elicited extreme reactions from critics when they were shown in Paris, owing to their repudiation of many prevailing canons of Western fashion. In terms of Kawakubo’s aesthetic of “in-betweenness,” these works are significant for introducing the concepts of *mu* (emptiness), expressed through the monochromatic—principally black—color palette, and *ma* (space), embodied in the outsize, shapeless, loose-fitting garments that create excess space between skin and fabric, body and clothing.



# 4. Model / Multiple

“Fashion is not art. You sell art to one person. Fashion comes in a series and it is a more social phenomenon.”  
1998

4.1 Abstract Excellence  
Spring/summer 2004  
Skirt of white brushed cotton faced with pink and white compound weave and black interfacing

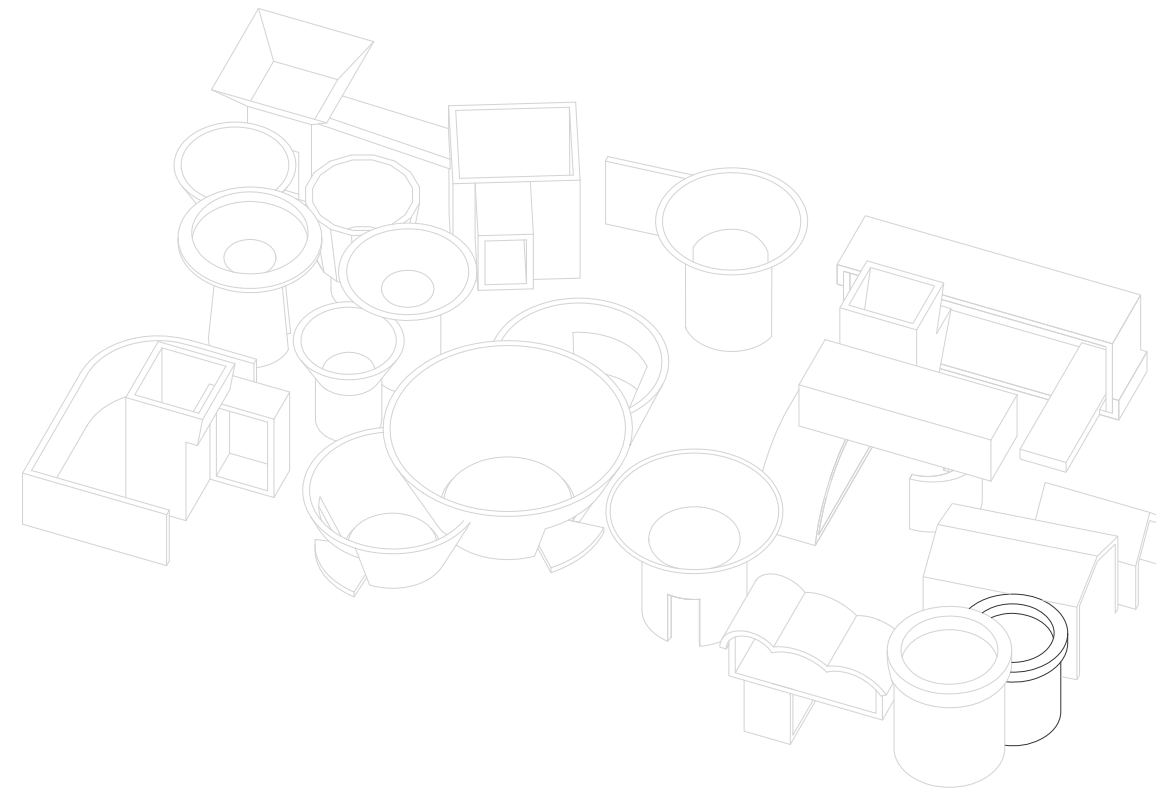
4.2 Abstract Excellence  
Spring/summer 2004  
Skirt of white cotton plain weave faced with white sateen and black interfacing

4.3 Abstract Excellence  
Spring/summer 2004  
Skirt of white cotton twill faced with navy synthetic and black interfacing

4.4 Abstract Excellence  
Spring/summer 2004  
Skirt of white and pink cotton-wool-nylon twill with black interfacing

4.5 Abstract Excellence  
Spring/summer 2004  
Skirt of white cotton twill faced with navy cotton plain weave and black interfacing

4.6 Abstract Excellence  
Spring/summer 2004  
Skirt of white cotton twill faced with navy cotton-silk plain weave and black interfacing



Beyond her pursuit of “newness,” Kawakubo exhibits several other preoccupations of avant-garde modernism. Perhaps the most notable is the tension between originality and reproduction, which is explored in *Model/Multiple* through the collection *Abstract Excellence*. Commenting on it at the time, Kawakubo explained: “[My focus was] designing from shapeless, abstract, intangible forms, not taking into account the body. The best item to express the collection is the skirt.”

In total, the collection features thirty-four skirts, several of which are displayed here. Through the conceits of seriality and repetition, the designer created the illusion of uniformity and standardization. However, subtle changes in color, fabric, and shape (the last achieved through slight shifts in the placement and direction of seams) mark each skirt as individual and distinctive. A meditation on variations of a single form, the collection represents a powerful statement on the unstable connection between unique artwork and mass-produced commodity.

Low

/

5. High

“There’s value in bad taste.”

2008

5.1 Elite Culture / Popular Culture

5.1.1 Ballerina Motorbike  
Spring/summer 2005  
Jacket of black leather;  
skirt of black polyester  
net; tutu of white  
polyester tulle

5.1.2 Ballerina Motorbike  
Spring/summer 2005  
Jacket of black leather;  
skirt of black polyester  
net; tutu of white nylon  
tulle

5.1.3 Ballerina Motorbike  
Spring/summer 2005  
Jacket of navy wool  
twill on foam with black  
leather lacing; tutu of  
pink and white polyester  
tulle; shorts of black  
neoprene

5.1.4 Ballerina Motorbike  
Spring/summer 2005  
Jacket of black leather;  
skirt of black polyester  
mesh with black leather  
lacing; tutu of black  
polyester tulle

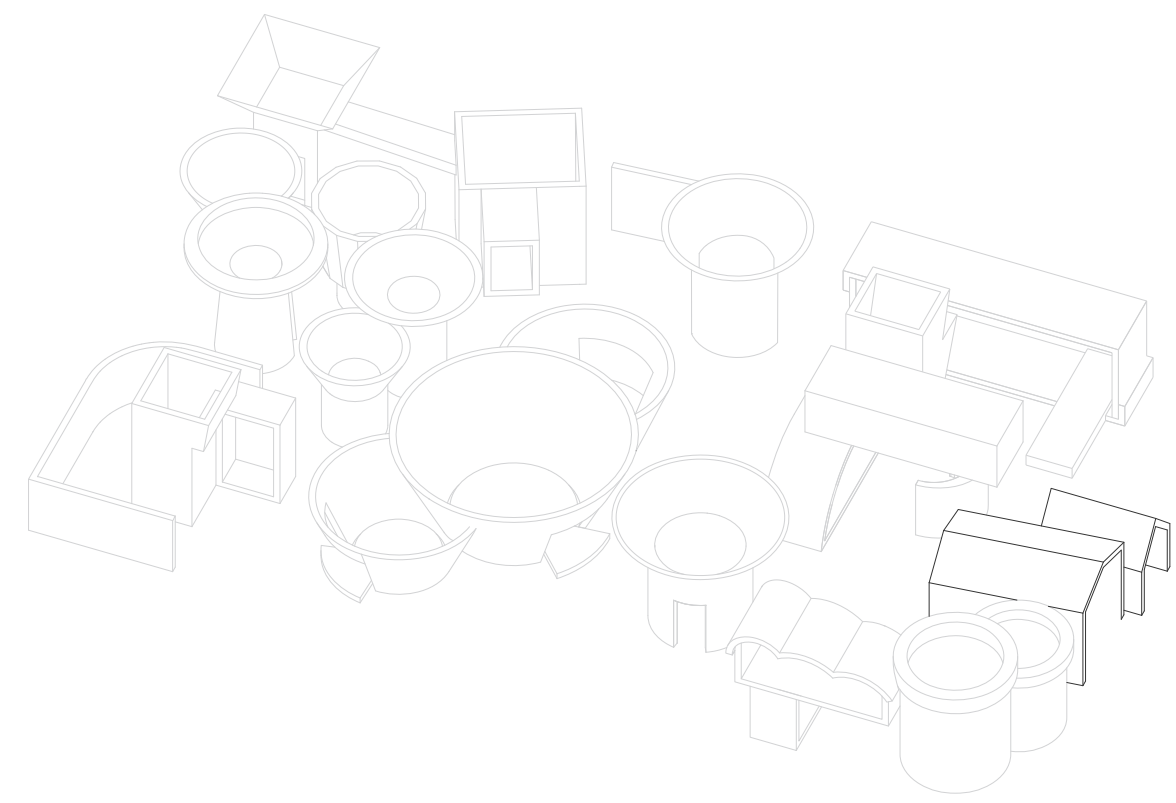
5.1.5 Ballerina Motorbike  
Spring/summer 2005  
Jacket of black leather;  
skirt of black polyester  
mesh with black leather  
lacing; tutu of black  
polyester tulle

*Heads and wigs created  
and styled by Julien d’Ys*

5.2 Good Taste / Bad Taste

5.2.1 Bad Taste  
Autumn/winter 2008–9  
Dress of white nylon tulle  
and synthetic plain weave  
with black elastic trim

5.2.2 Bad Taste  
Autumn/winter 2008–9  
Dress of white nylon tulle  
and synthetic plain weave  
with black elastic trim.



High/Low examines the ambiguous relationship between elite and popular culture—another modernist preoccupation—through Kawakubo’s collection *Motorbike Ballerina*. The ensembles combine tutus and leather jackets in an attempt to reconcile the “high” culture of ballet with the “low” subculture of bikers or “greasers.” Kawakubo described the collection as “Harley-Davidson loves Margot Fonteyn,” a reference to the American motorcycle manufacturer and the British prima ballerina.

The aesthetic language of street style has long fascinated Kawakubo. She often deploys it in parodic explorations of taste, as in the collection *Bad Taste*, which incorporates punk and fetish styles. Using textiles thought to be cheap, kitschy, and vulgar, such as nylon and polyester, the designer upends received notions of good taste and exposes inherent prejudices and bourgeois posturings in the precincts of elite culture.

Now

/

6. Then

“The right half of my brain likes tradition and history, the left wants to break the rules.”

2005

6.1 Past / Present / Future

6.1.1 White Drama  
Spring/summer 2012  
Top of white acrylic crochet; cage skirt of white silk satin with acrylic jersey and lace flowers wrapped in white synthetic net

6.1.2 White Drama  
Spring/summer 2012  
Top of white acrylic crochet; skirt of white synthetic net; underskirt of white polyester twill

6.1.3 Body Meets Dress—  
Dress Meets Body  
Spring/summer 1997  
Dress and top of white stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down

6.1.4 Inside Decoration  
Autumn/winter 2010–11  
Vest and skirt of white polyester flannel and wadding

6.1.5 Modern Sweetness  
Autumn/winter 1990–91  
Dress of white polyester wadding

6.1.6 Sweeter Than Sweet  
Autumn/winter 1995–96  
Top of white acrylic knit; skirt of white nylon chiffon embroidered with white and iridescent acrylic-wool thread with white polyester tulle

6.1.7 Sweeter Than Sweet  
Autumn/winter 1995–96  
Sweater of pink acrylic knit; skirt of pink and white nylon chiffon embroidered with pink and white acrylic thread with pink polyester tulle

6.2 Birth / Marriage / Death

6.2.1 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Dress of white and off-white cotton and synthetic lace embroidered with gold lace; shoulder pads of black polyurethane

6.2.2 Broken Bride  
Autumn/winter 2005–6  
Dress of beige cotton-silk habotai and charmeuse printed with a trompe-l’oeil dress and embroidered with a black silk velvet bow, polyester satin and tulle ruffles and passementerie

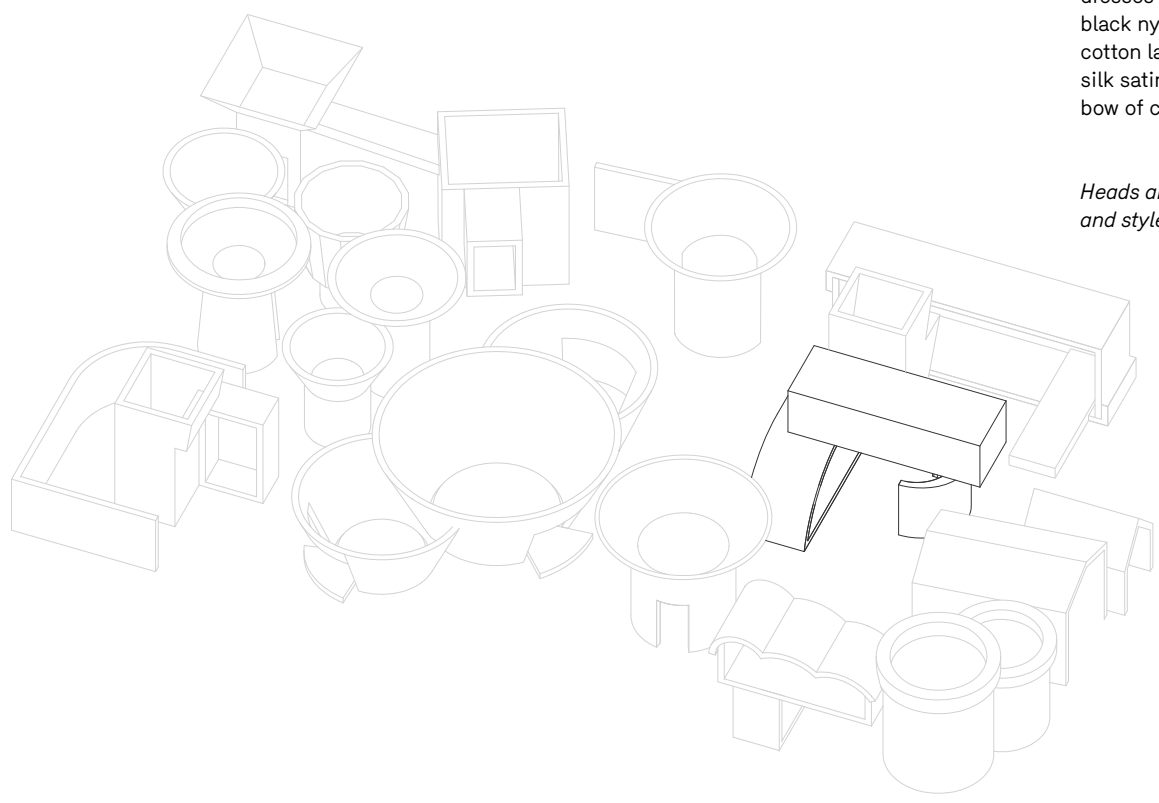
6.2.3 Broken Bride  
Autumn/winter 2005–6  
Dress of off-white silk-polyester chiffon and georgette printed with a trompe-l’oeil dress and embroidered with passementerie

6.2.4 Broken Bride  
Autumn/winter 2005–6  
Dress of white silk-polyester chiffon and georgette printed with a trompe-l’oeil dress and embroidered with passementerie

6.2.5 White Drama  
Spring/summer 2012  
Dress of white cotton poplin and polyester tulle with veil of cotton lace

6.2.6 White Drama  
Spring/summer 2012  
Dress of off-white cotton-polyester satin embroidered with acrylic flowers and synthetic lace

6.2.7 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Coat of black polyester lace and net with attached children’s dresses and bonnets of black nylon net, black cotton lawn, and black silk satin ribbon, and bow of cotton velveteen



Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d’Ys.

Kawakubo’s experiments with “in-betweenness” relate to the unfolding of modernism as an ongoing project. This idea is explored in Then/Now, which focuses on the designer’s relationship to time through the collections *Modern Sweetness*, *Sweeter Than Sweet*, *Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body*, *Inside Decoration*, and *White Drama*. Over the course of her career, Kawakubo has plumbed fashion history for inspiration. She has an affinity for the overblown silhouettes of the nineteenth century, achieved through bustles and crinolines. In her hands, however, the silhouettes are so radically and profoundly reconfigured as to eradicate history.

Kawakubo’s fashions impose an intense immediacy, stridently emphasizing the here and now. She brings into doubt both the logic of temporal continuity and the presumptive rhythm of life—birth, marriage, death—as seen in the *Broken Bride*, *White Drama*, and *Ceremony of Separation* collections. These fashions advocate a level of personal freedom that can only be attained in the intervals between a society’s life-stage traditions, thus subverting the ideologies encoded in the birth-marriage-death continuum.



“From the beginning, I dispensed with any pre-conceived notions about Western and Eastern social mores and cultures, as all these things are irrelevant to my world... I deliberately cast away all questions of upbringing, nationality, sociology and the like.”

2011

## 7.1 East / West

### 7.1.1 Cubisme Spring/summer 2007

Jacket of red nylon tulle with panels of off-white wool-polyester voltaire printed red and black; skirt of white nylon tulle and red rayon flocking

### 7.1.2 Cubisme Spring/summer 2007

Dress of white nylon tulle with lapels of black triacetate-polyester and red rayon flocking

### 7.1.3 Cubisme Spring/summer 2007

Vest of navy wool-polyester gabardine and red polyester chiffon; skirt of red nylon tulle

### 7.1.4 Lost Empire Spring/summer 2006

Jacket of red wool twill with red, yellow, and navy wool tartan; skirt of cotton poplin printed in polychrome tartan pattern

### 7.1.5 Lost Empire Spring/summer 2006

Jacket of red polyester crepe; pants of red, yellow, and navy wool tartan

### 7.1.6 Inside Decoration Autumn/winter 2010–11

Top of polychrome padded wool tartan and white cotton muslin; shorts of red, black, and yellow padded wool tartan

### 7.1.7 Inside Decoration Autumn/winter 2010–11

Top of polychrome padded wool tartan and white cotton muslin; shorts of red, navy, and green padded wool tartan

### 7.1.8 Inside Decoration Autumn/winter 2010–11

Jacket of red, black, and white padded wool tartan; shorts of red, navy, and green wool tartan

## 7.2 Male / Female

### 7.2.1 Persona Autumn/winter 2006–7

Jacket and shorts of black wool worsted; shirt of white cotton poplin

### 7.2.2 Persona Autumn/winter 2006–7

Jacket of black wool check tweed; shorts of black wool worsted; shirt of white cotton poplin

### 7.2.3 The Infinity of Tailoring Autumn/winter 2013–14

Suit of black polyester twill with polyester fringe

### 7.2.4 The Infinity of Tailoring Autumn/winter 2013–14

Suit of gray, black, and white polyester Glen plaid

### 7.2.5 The Infinity of Tailoring Autumn/winter 2013–14

Suit of navy polyester sharkskin

## 7.3 Child / Adult

### 7.3.1 2 Dimensions Autumn/winter 2012–13

Dress of blue and pink polyester felt

### 7.3.2 Cacophony Spring/summer 2008

Dress of pink padded polyester chiffon and cotton plain weave frill

### 7.3.3 Not Making Clothing Spring/summer 2014

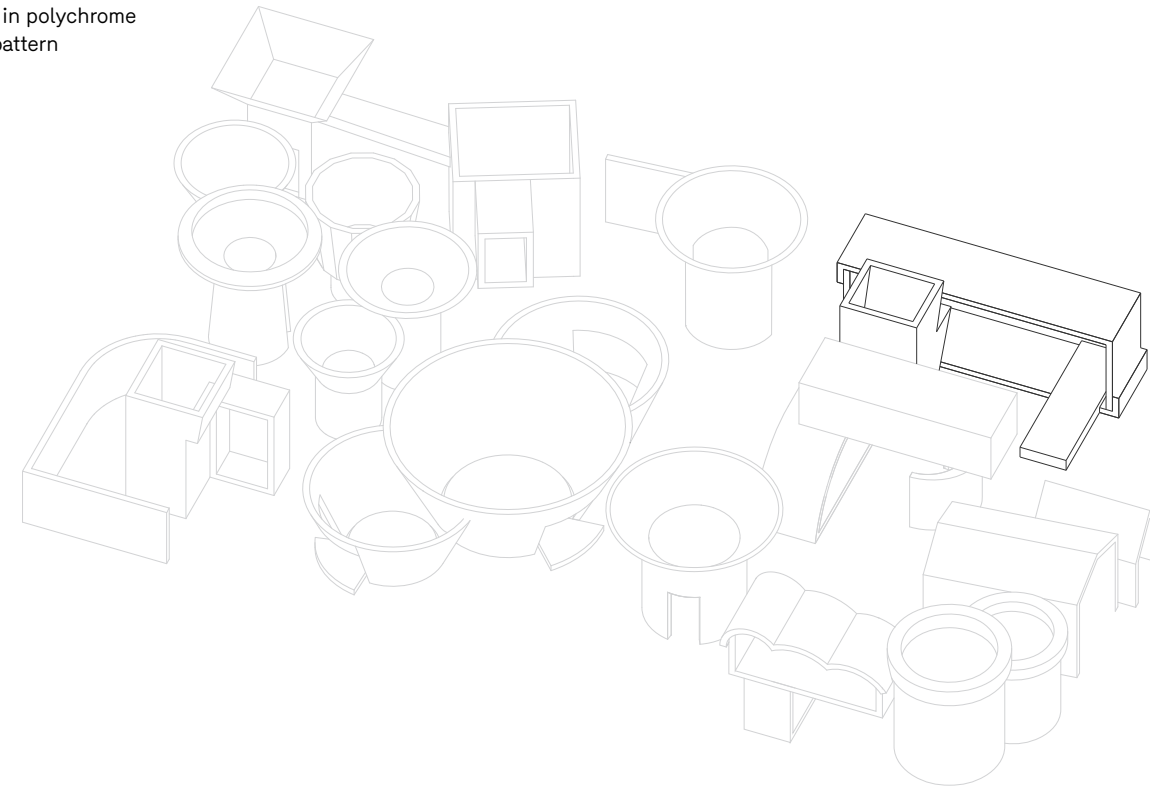
Dress of pink polyester paper; cage of padded white cotton duck

### 7.3.4 Not Making Clothing Spring/summer 2014

Dress of pink polyester paper printed with a polychrome floral motif and appliquéd with a self-fabric stuffed bear

Self/Other highlights Kawakubo's exploration of hybrid identities that blur the boundaries of conventional definitions of culture, gender, and age. The works featured in the East/West and Male/Female subsections combine Eastern and Western and masculine and feminine clothing traditions. Historically, these are loosely defined by wrapping and draping in relation to Eastern and feminine garments and by tailoring with respect to Western and masculine garments.

The fashions in Male/Female also fuse types of clothing typically associated with men and women—such as trousers and skirts—into one outfit. The creation of hybrid identities through fusion is further surveyed in Child/Adult, which focuses on ensembles that not only challenge the rules of age-appropriate dressing but also engage the concept of *kawaii* (cuteness)—a key aspect of Japanese popular culture defined by playfulness and performativity. The notion of *kawaii* is taken to its extreme in a pink floral dress featuring an oversize stuffed teddy bear camouflaged within its frills and folds.



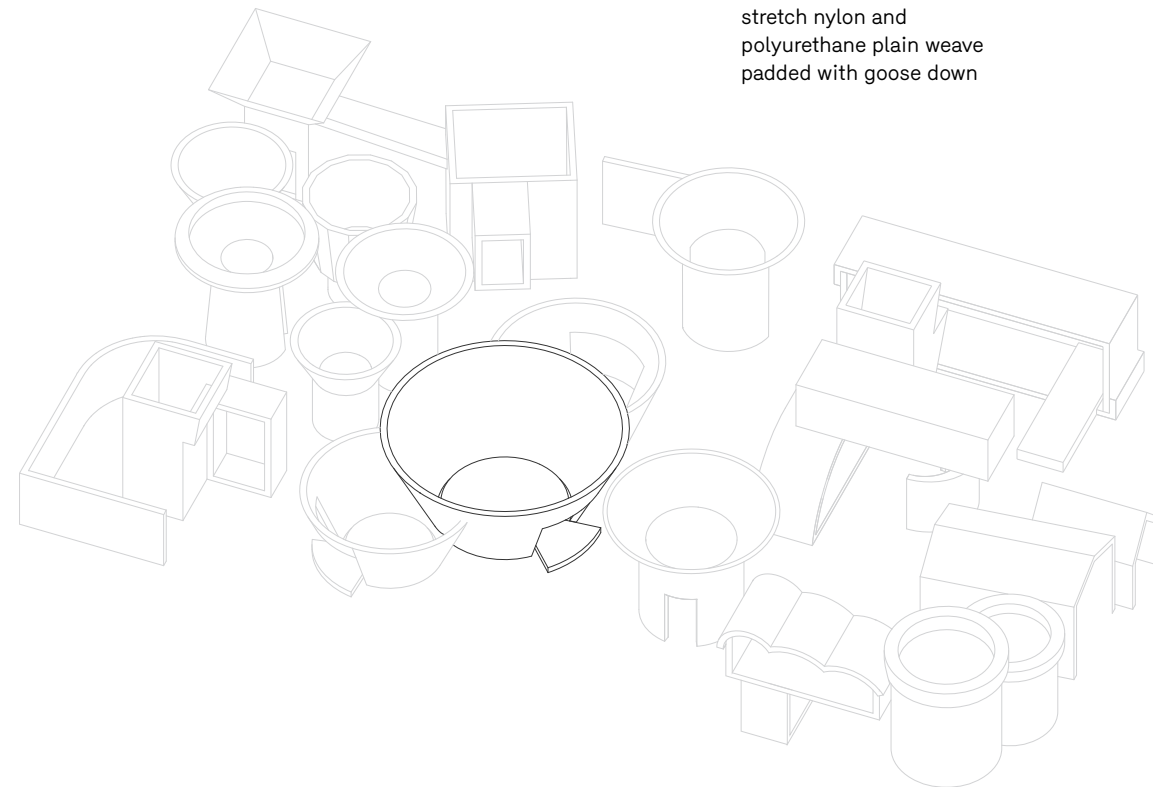
# Subject

# 8. Object

"I want to rethink the body, so the body and the dress become one."

1997

- Excerpts from Merce Cunningham's *Scenario* dance performance, 1997  
Courtesy of the Merce Cunningham Trust
- 8.1 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Top of gray-and-white gingham and skirt of navy-and-white gingham, both stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.2 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Coat and skirt of navy stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.3 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Dress of gray-and-white gingham stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.4 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Jacket and skirt of blue-and-white gingham stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.5 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Jacket and skirt of pink-and-white gingham stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.6 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Dress of blue-and-white gingham stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.7 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Top of red-and-white gingham and skirt of beige-and-white gingham, both stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.8 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Top and skirt of red stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.9 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Dress of red-and-white gingham stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down
- 8.10 Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body Spring/summer 1997  
Coat and skirt of red stretch nylon and polyurethane plain weave padded with goose down



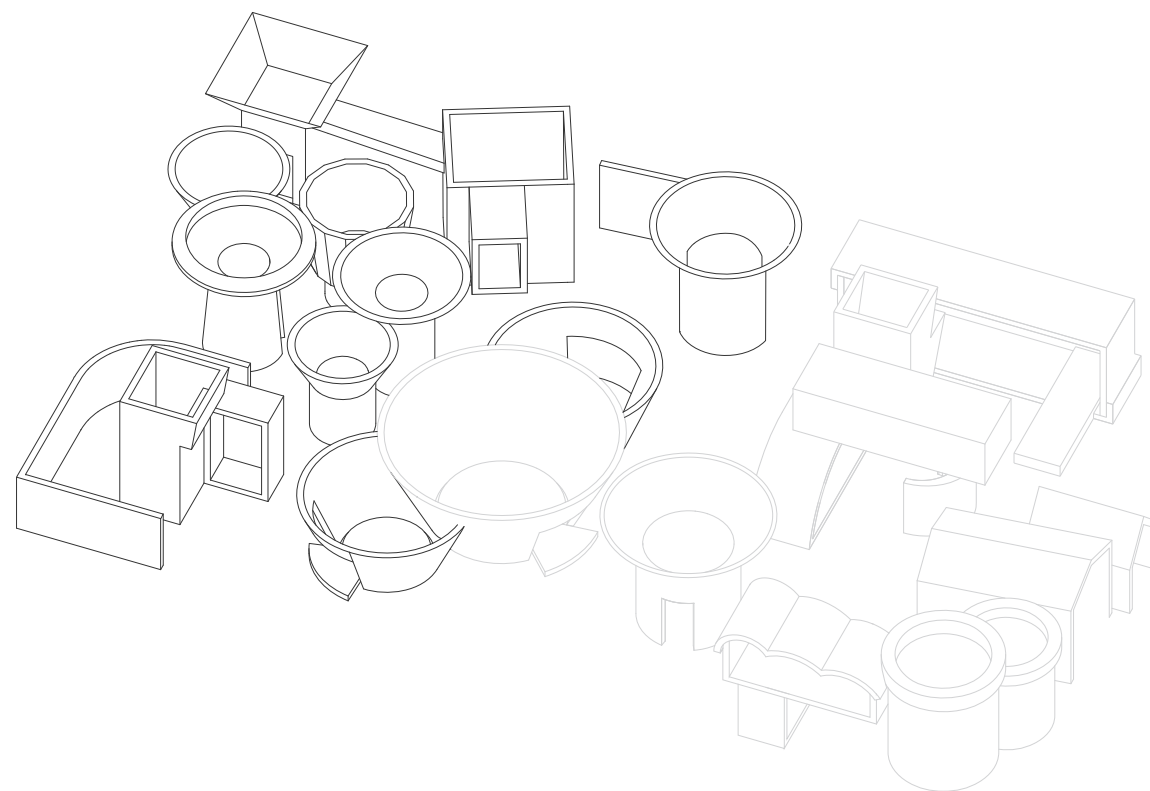
Object/Subject considers hybrid bodies. Its focus is Kawakubo's collection *Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body*, which proposes a radical rethinking of the human form through down-padded garments of stretch nylon and polyurethane in a range of colors and patterns—including girlish bubblegum pink and powder blue gingham. Most of the paddings are arranged asymmetrically, creating bulbous swellings that present an illusion of dysmorphia and subvert the traditional language of the fashionable body (small waist, slim hips, pert bottom, flat stomach, and small, high breasts).

References to tumors and hunchbacks abound in reviews of the collection, which critics christened "lumps and bumps"—a moniker that suggests a body diseased, deformed, or monstrous. Morphologically, the collection blurs the boundaries between dress and body, object and subject. This effect is heightened in movement, a fact exploited by choreographer Merce Cunningham in the forty-minute dance *Scenario*, a collaboration with Kawakubo that premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on October 14, 1997. Kawakubo explained, "When the natural movements of dance are repelled and refuted, you get new forms."

# 9. Clothes / Not Clothes

"If we say 'these are clothes,' it's all very usual, so we said 'these are not clothes.' It sounds like a Zen dialogue, but it is very simple."

2014



Kawakubo's revolutionary experiments with "in-betweenness" are taken to their logical conclusion in Clothes/Not Clothes. Its eight subsections present examples from the designer's most recent collections, all produced following the second rupture in her career. In 2014 Kawakubo became frustrated with her design process, which she felt hindered her pursuit of "newness." Adopting a radical method of creation with the intention of "not making clothes," she aspired to translate her ideas directly into forms, or "objects for the body."

The "objects for the body" featured in Clothes/Not Clothes represent Kawakubo's most profound and transgressive realizations of "forms that have never before existed in fashion." Examples of earlier clothes that presage themes and motifs explored in the designer's recent collections are presented alongside their "not clothes" counterparts. While the former insist on their viability as apparel, the latter exist as purely aesthetic and abstract expressions. They share formal qualities with sculpture as well as conceptual and performance artworks, but Kawakubo has always preferred the epithet "worker" to "artist." Even so, she recently has begun to consider fashion as art, opening up yet another in-between space—Fashion/Art.

# Function

# 9.1 Form

“Personally, I don’t care about function at all... When I hear ‘where could you wear that?’ or ‘it’s not very wearable,’ or ‘who would wear that?’ to me it’s just a sign that someone missed the point.”

2012

9.1.1 Tomorrow’s Black  
Spring/summer 2009

Top and skirt of black polyurethane-rayon faux leather

9.1.2 Not Making Clothing  
Spring/summer 2014

Dress of black nylon net, wool plain weave, polyester tulle, and cupra organza

9.1.3 Not Making Clothing  
Spring/summer 2014

Dress of black wool-mohair plain weave and black cotton twill

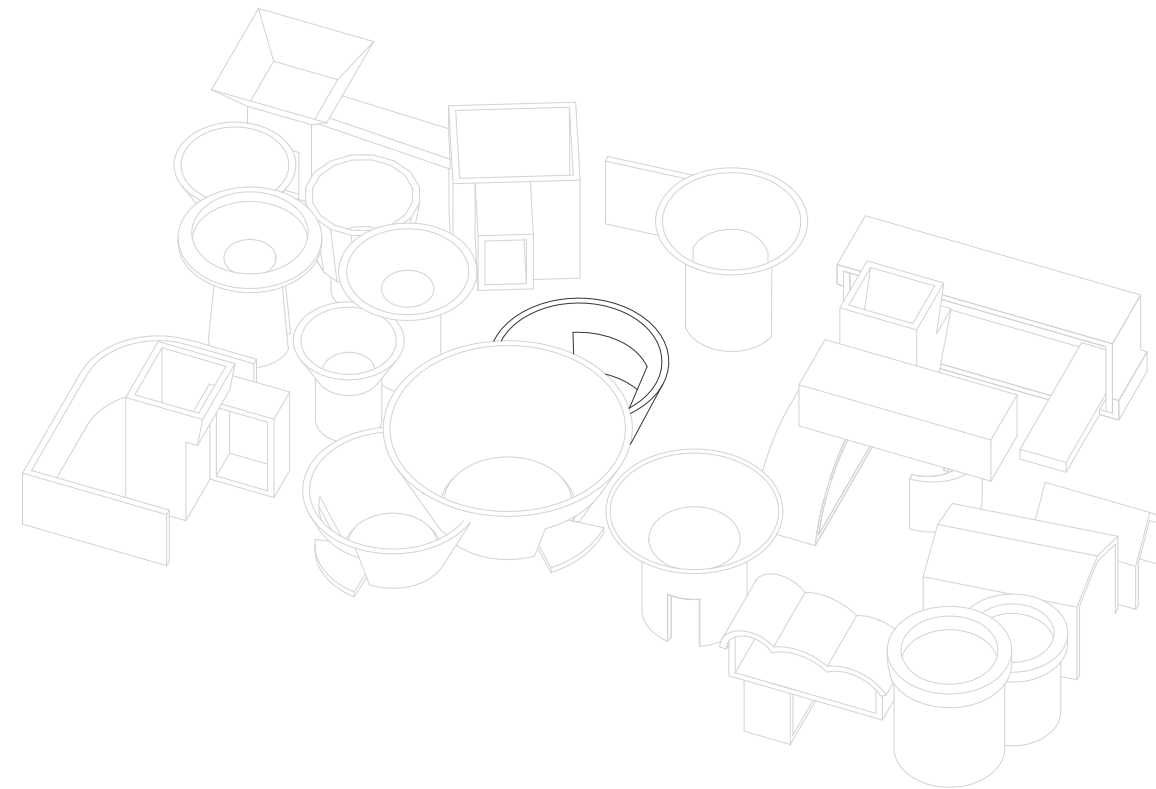
9.1.4 Not Making Clothing  
Spring/summer 2014

Dress of black polyester taffeta and black lycra

9.1.5 Not Making Clothing  
Spring/summer 2014

Dress of black rayon-polyester velvet and synthetic mesh; harness of black silk-cotton twill

*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d’Ys.*



Form/Function features *Not Making Clothing*, the first collection Kawakubo produced in response to her aspiration to design “objects for the body.” The title is a statement of intent, a declaration of her determination to favor pure form. In terms of process, she sought to abandon her previous design experience and create from the viewpoint of a naive child or untrained artist. She explained, “I wished there was a new psychedelic drug that allowed me to see the world differently, through the eyes of an outsider.”

These designs break with traditional fashions in their relationship to the human figure. Abstract shapes and three-dimensional structures stand apart from the body, and eccentric silhouettes and exaggerated proportions—reminiscent of doll clothing—threaten to obscure and overwhelm the figure. While there is a definite fissure between *Not Making Clothing* and her preceding work, there are notable aesthetic, technical, and thematic similarities, as is apparent from the ensemble from her 2009 collection *Tomorrow’s Black*. In addition to the color black, it has a similar body-obscuring silhouette, achieved through the piecing together of irregular and outsize pattern pieces.

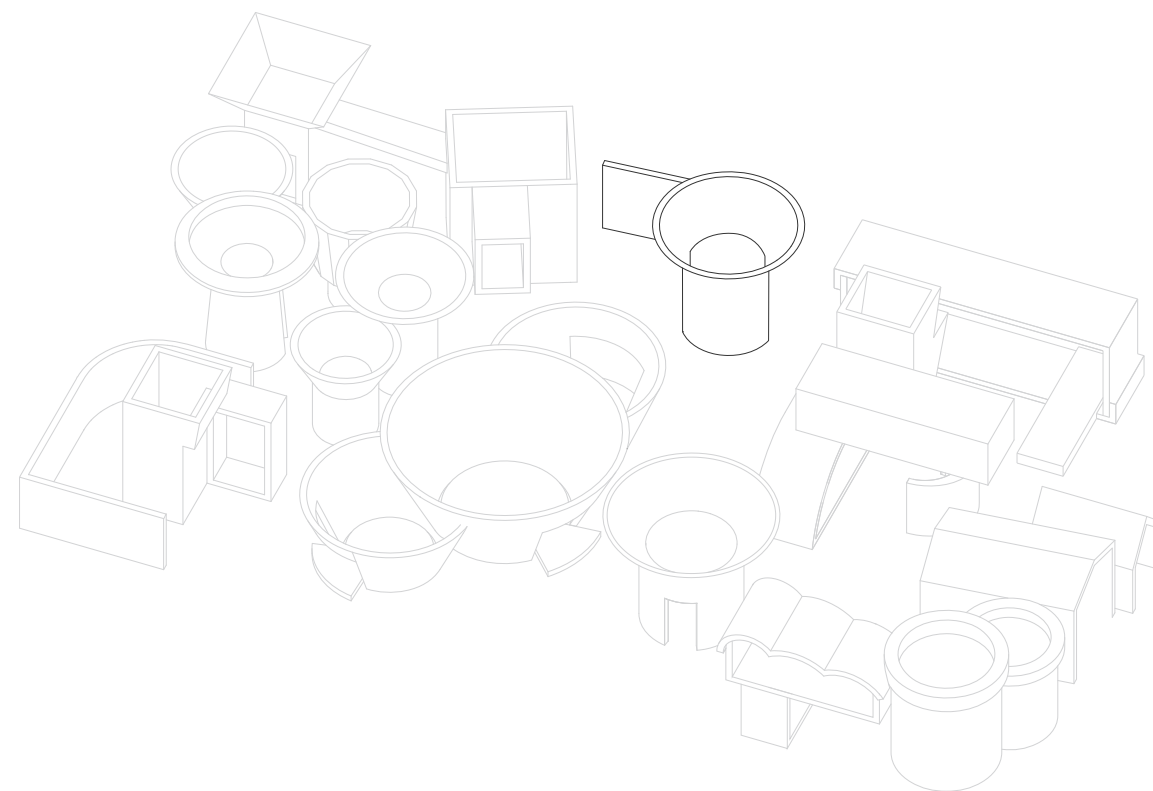
# 9.2 Abstraction / Representation

“Things that have never been seen before have a tendency to be somewhat abstract, but making art is not my intention at all. All my effort is oriented towards giving form to clothes that have never been seen before.”

2015

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 9.2.1 No Theme<br>(Multiple Personalities,<br>Psychological Fear)<br>Spring/summer 2011<br><br>Conjoined dress of black<br>polyurethane and black<br>and gray cotton canvas | 9.2.5 Invisible Clothes<br>Spring/summer 2017<br><br>Dress of navy wool-<br>cotton twill, black velvet,<br>and white cotton plain<br>weave                 |
| 9.2.2 No Theme<br>(Multiple Personalities,<br>Psychological Fear)<br>Spring/summer 2011<br><br>Dress of black cotton-<br>polyester-nylon<br>compound weave                  | 9.2.6 Invisible Clothes<br>Spring/summer 2017<br><br>Dress of black wool<br>barathea; underdress of<br>black cotton velveteen                              |
| 9.2.3 Invisible Clothes<br>Spring/summer 2017<br><br>Dress of navy quilted<br>wool-cotton plain weave<br>and white cotton poplin  | 9.2.7 Invisible Clothes<br>Spring/summer 2017<br><br>Dress of navy wool twill<br>with collars of black<br>cotton velveteen and<br>white cotton plain weave |
| 9.2.4 Invisible Clothes<br>Spring/summer 2017<br><br>Dress of navy wool twill   | 9.2.8 Invisible Clothes<br>Spring/summer 2017<br><br>Dress of black wool twill<br>and cotton velveteen   |

*Heads and wigs created  
and styled by Julien d'Ys.*



Abstraction / Representation features *Invisible Clothes*, which Kawakubo considers “the clearest and most extreme version of Comme des Garçons.” The abstract, sculptural qualities of the ensembles are emblematic of her indifference to the “representational” characteristics of clothing. Several of the garments comprise multiple versions merged together, an idea also evident in the 2011 collection *No Theme (Multiple Personalities, Psychological Fear)*. Unlike the earlier pieces, however, the more recent ones disrupt and dissolve any hierarchy between body and dress.

The garments included in *Invisible Clothes* challenge the dominance of the body by obscuring, displacing, and in some instances eliminating figural elements such as the sleeve, bodice, neckline, and waistline. As the figure recedes into volume and planarity or dematerializes through fragmentation, body and dress become interdependent and indistinguishable. Of these designs, Kawakubo noted: “If you say clothes are to be worn, then perhaps they are not really clothes. . . . They are not art, but they don’t have to be clothes, either.”

# 9.3 Beautiful / Grotesque

"I learned that beautiful things for me are not necessarily beautiful to everyone else, but they could well be something very scary."

2005

9.3.1 Holes  
Autumn/winter 1982–83  
Sweater of black wool knit; T-shirt of white cotton jersey; skirt of black cotton jersey

9.3.2 Holes  
Autumn/winter 1982–83  
Sweater of black wool knit; T-shirt of white cotton jersey; skirt of black cotton jersey

9.3.3 MONSTER  
Autumn/winter 2014–15  
Sweater of black wool-nylon knit with padded hood

9.3.4 MONSTER  
Autumn/winter 2014–15  
Sweater of gray wool-nylon knit

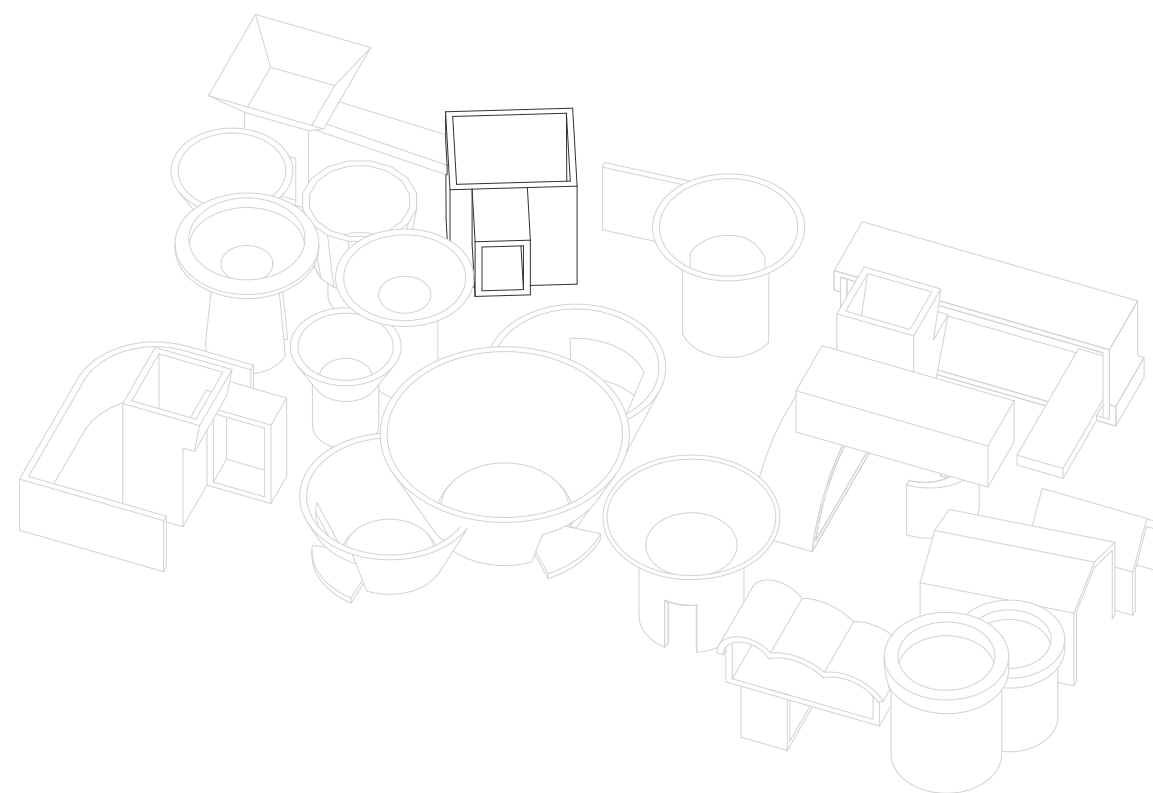
9.3.5 MONSTER  
Autumn/winter 2014–15  
Jacket of gray, brown, and navy wool-nylon knit

9.3.6 MONSTER  
Autumn/winter 2014–15  
Jacket of black, brown, and gray wool gabardine with cage of brown and gray polyester-wool knit

9.3.7 MONSTER  
Autumn/winter 2014–15

Dress of gray, brown, and blue wool-polyester worsted and black-and-white polyester-wool knit

*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d'Ys.*



Kawakubo's notions of beauty have rarely conformed to accepted standards. The expressions of *mu*, *ma*, and *wabi-sabi* in her early 1980s collections, unfamiliar to most Western audiences, were interpreted by some observers as grotesque or offensive. An iconic black sweater pierced with holes from 1982 exemplifies what many critics called Kawakubo's "ugly aesthetic." She dubbed it her "lace" sweater, clarifying: "To me they're not tears. Those are openings that give the fabric another dimension. The cutout might be considered another form of lace."

A similar "ugly aesthetic" is evident in the more recent collection *MONSTER*, whose title refers to "the craziness of humanity, the fear we all have, the feeling of going beyond common sense, the absence of ordinariness, expressed by something extremely big, by something that could be ugly or beautiful." The garments confine and constrict the figure in twisted and knotted tubes of dark knitted wool. Like the "lace" sweater, these uncanny and unsettling forms both contest and expand the accepted limits of beauty.

# Peace



# War

# 9.4

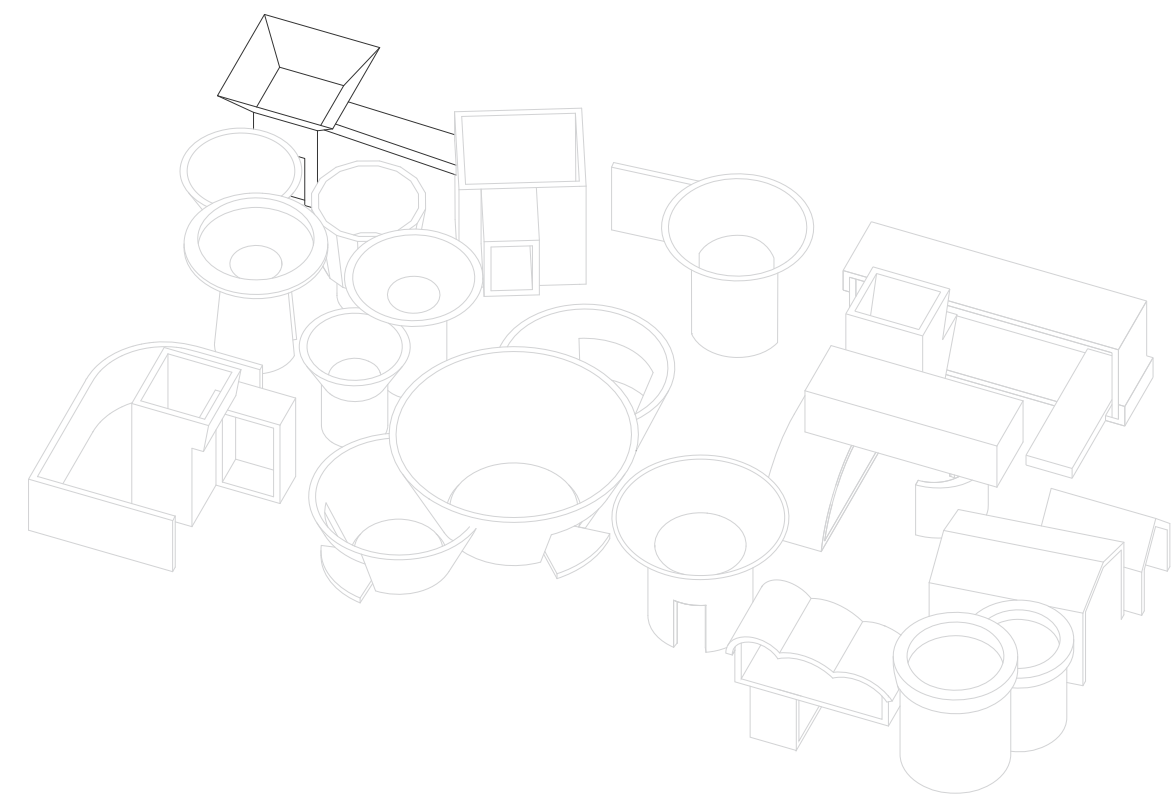
“One cannot fight the battle without freedom. I think the best way to find that battle, which equals the unyielding spirit, is in the realm of creation.”

2010

- 9.4.1 Blood and Roses  
Spring/summer 2015  
Dress of white quilted cotton plain weave, satin, and nylon, and underdress of white cotton jersey, both printed with red splatter pattern
- 9.4.2 Blood and Roses  
Spring/summer 2015  
Jacket of red cotton poplin and white cotton jersey printed with red splatter pattern; shorts of red polyurethane with skirt of red padded cotton duck
- 9.4.3 Blood and Roses  
Spring/summer 2015  
Dress of red wool felt, nylon, and cotton velveteen
- 9.4.4 Blood and Roses  
Spring/summer 2015  
Coat of red cotton velveteen; shorts of red polyurethane
- 9.4.5 Blood and Roses  
Spring/summer 2015  
Coat of black wool crepe with harness of red cotton ribbon and rosettes of silk-polyester satin and red cotton jersey, poplin, and lawn
- 9.4.6 Blood and Roses  
Spring/summer 2015  
Top and skirt of red polyester satin and cotton plain weave
- 9.4.7 Flowering Clothes  
Autumn/winter 1996–97  
Coat of red rayon-cotton damask velvet; dress of off-white cotton muslin
- 9.4.8 Flowering Clothes  
Autumn/winter 1996–97  
Coat of red rayon flocked faille; dress of off-white cotton muslin
- 9.4.9 Flowering Clothes  
Autumn/winter 1996–97  
Coat of red cupra-rayon devoré velvet; dress of off-white cotton muslin  
  
*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d'Ys.*

For Kawakubo, creation is linked to defiance and a frustration with the status quo: “Many times a theme for a collection arises from a feeling of anger or indignation at conditions in society. The origin of an idea is found in not being satisfied with what exists already.” At the same time, she has said, “I have no desire to make my own designs into messages addressing the issues of our world.” When it comes to the zeitgeist, she tends to engage with it symbolically and conceptually.

A prime example is the role of flowers—a recurring motif for the designer—which is explored in *War/Peace* through two collections: *Flowering Clothes* and its later “not clothes” counterpart, *Blood and Roses*. While the former focuses on flowers as positive symbols of energy, strength, and happiness, the latter mines their darker, more somber and disturbing connotations. It addresses the historical significance of roses as “connected with blood and wars . . . political conflict, religious strife, and power struggles.” Roses and blood appear in both literal and abstract form, and both are represented through the color palette—an unvarying, uncompromising poppy red.



“Nothing new can come out of a situation without suffering.”

2014

9.5.1 Square  
Autumn/winter 2003–4  
Dress of black wool-rayon compound weave; skirt of white cotton poplin

9.5.2 Square  
Autumn/winter 2003–4  
Dress of navy wool-rayon compound weave; trousers of white cotton poplin

9.5.3 Square  
Autumn/winter 2003–4  
Dress of navy silk compound weave; trousers of white cotton poplin

9.5.4 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Dress of white cotton muslin

9.5.5 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Dress of white cotton muslin

9.5.6 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Coat of black synthetic satin, black cotton velveteen, and white synthetic organza faced with white synthetic tulle embroidered with gold lace and trimmed with white fur; shorts of white synthetic organza embroidered with gold cord

9.5.7 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Jacket and dress of white polyester and rayon net embroidered with gold nylon thread and trimmed with gold silk lace, gold polyester-rayon lamé ruffles, and gold polyester ribbon

9.5.8 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16

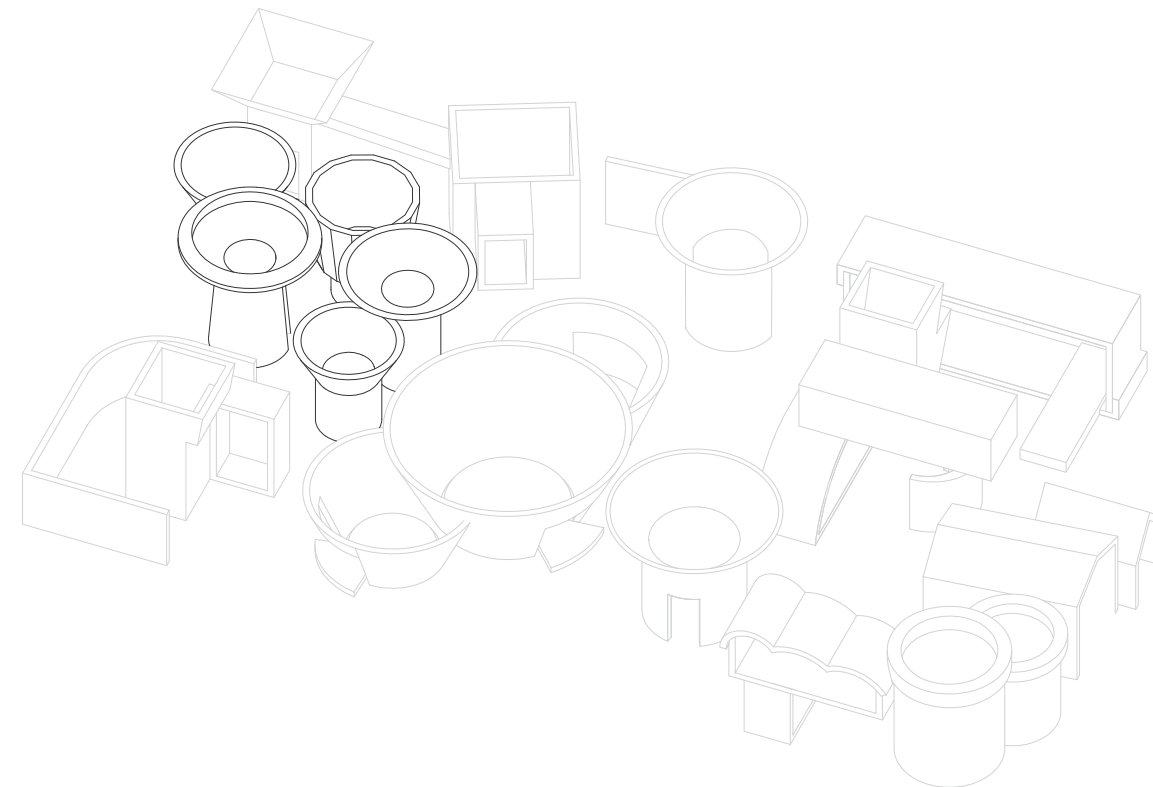
Dress of black cotton-rayon chiffon and nylon tulle faced with black lace and padded with white synthetic wadding

9.5.9 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Dress of white wool-cotton lace embroidered with synthetic tulle, chiffon, fur, and cotton muslin and trimmed with black wool twill

9.5.10 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Dress of black wool twill and white wool-cotton lace

9.5.11 Ceremony of Separation  
Autumn/winter 2015–16  
Dress of black synthetic lace padded with black and white nylon tulle

*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d'Ys.*



While Kawakubo has been described as an “intellectual” designer, she insists that her work deals with her “feelings, instincts, doubts, and fears.” Her collections contain deeply personal and self-reflective narratives imbued with intense emotions and profound spirituality. These expressive dimensions are explored in *Life/Loss*, which elaborates on the themes of transition and temporality examined in *Then/Now*, extending them through the concepts of memory and memorialization.

It focuses on the collection *Ceremony of Separation*, whose title refers to the ways in which “the beauty and power of ceremony can alleviate the pain of separating, for the one departing as well as for the one saying goodbye.” Tinged with sadness and despair, the garments—with their majestic and monumental silhouettes—can be interpreted as ponderous expressions of mourning dress. Rendered in delicate black, white, and gold lace, they represent a poignant meditation on the fragility of life and the finality of death. Several ensembles are comprised of wrapped bundles, reminiscent of the earlier collection *Square*, in which every garment is constructed from a single piece of square fabric. Like their “not clothes” descendants, these precursors represent meditations on ritualistic practice, in this case the tradition of pilgrimage.



"I remember reading about the way a novelist works. It said that he doesn't think up an outline and write from the top. He writes bits and pieces and puts them together at the end. That sounded familiar to me."

2012

9.6.1 Blue Witch  
Spring/summer 2016  
Dress of navy and blue rayon-cotton faux velvet

9.6.2 Blue Witch  
Spring/summer 2016  
Dress of black and brown rayon-cotton faux fur with polyester-silk twill and polyester feathers

9.6.3 Blue Witch  
Spring/summer 2016  
Dress of black polyester stretch plain weave and black and brown polyester faux fur with polyester feathers

9.6.4 Blue Witch  
Spring/summer 2016  
Dress of blue rayon-cotton faux astrakhan with black polyester feathers

9.6.5 Blue Witch  
Spring/summer 2016  
Dress of blue rayon-cotton faux astrakhan with black polyester feathers

9.6.6 Blue Witch  
Spring/summer 2016  
Dress of blue and navy rayon-cotton faux velvet with black polyester feathers

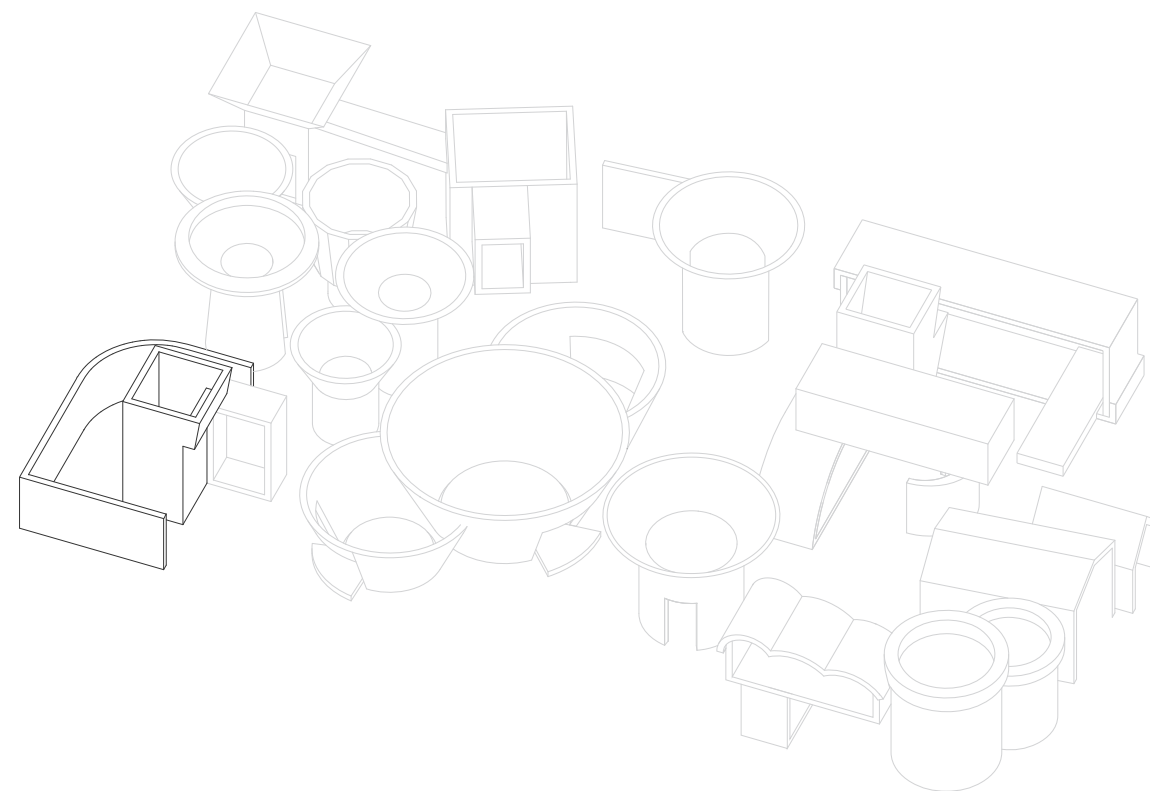
9.6.7 Lilith  
Autumn/winter 1992–93  
Dress of black stretch nylon; vest of black wool plain weave; skirt of black wool felt

9.6.8 Dark Romance, Witch  
Autumn/winter 2004–5  
Jacket of black cupra-silk satin and synthetic taffeta; top of black polyester tulle; skirt of black wool-silk satin and white muslin

9.6.9 Dark Romance, Witch  
Autumn/winter 2004–5

Jacket and skirt of black cupra-silk satin and synthetic taffeta, with taffeta panels embroidered with glass beads, brown synthetic felt, and black feathers; top of black polyester tulle

*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d'Ys.*



Fact/Fiction addresses Kawakubo's storytelling tendencies through selections from three thematically linked collections—*Blue Witch* and its predecessors *Lilith* (named for a murderous demoness from Babylonian mythology) and *Dark Romance, Witch*. While the designer regards witches as strong, powerful, and often misunderstood, she resists interpretations of the garments as feminist statements. "I am not a feminist," she has said. Nor is she a fantasist: "I don't have much in the way of daydreams or fanciful imagination. I'm actually a realist."

The ensembles, however, are unmistakably empowering and otherworldly in their forms and silhouettes. Early pieces take the rigidity and severity of men's formal wear and dismantle them through the surrealist strategy of unexpected displacements. In *Lilith* a jacket is relocated to the lower half of the body, while in *Dark Romance* garments are twisted out of alignment and skirts reveal vestigial sleeves. *Blue Witch* heightens this surrealism through distortions of scale that create a storybook-like sense of disorientation and destabilization.



“Am I an anarchist? In the sense that anarchy equals freedom, yes. Anarchy means freedom, but it also means chaos.”

2016

9.7.1 Adult Delinquent  
Spring/summer 2010  
Dress of polychrome cotton-polyester jacquard, purple cotton velveteen, and red polyester chiffon embroidered with red sequins

9.7.2 Adult Delinquent  
Spring/summer 2010  
Top of light brown polyester chiffon and cotton velveteen; skirt of polychrome cotton-polyester jacquard, purple cotton velveteen, and red polyester chiffon embroidered with red sequins; shoulder pads of black polyurethane

9.7.3 18th-Century Punk  
Autumn/winter 2016–17  
Jumpsuit of polychrome quilted rayon-polyester jacquard; arms harness of red PVC and black cotton twill

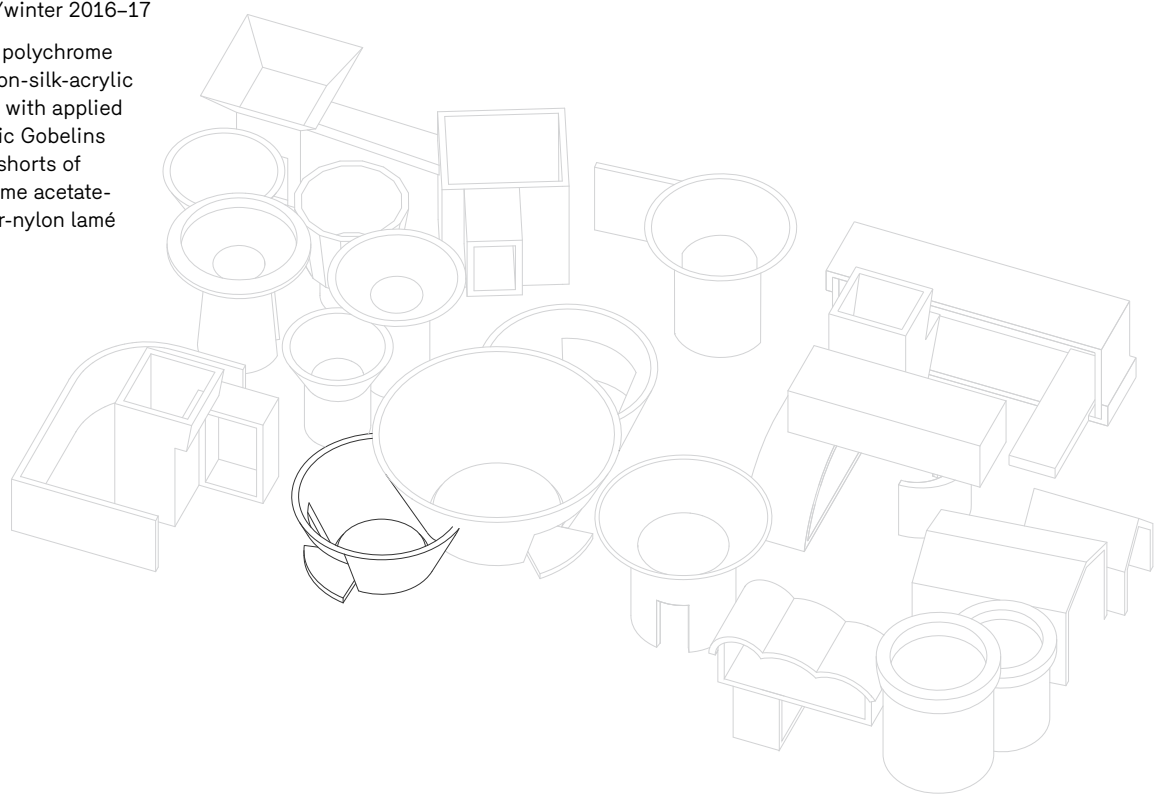
9.7.4 18th-Century Punk  
Autumn/winter 2016–17  
Dress of polychrome lamé rayon-silk-acrylic jacquard with applied self-fabric Gobelins flowers; shorts of polychrome acetate-polyester-nylon lamé jacquard

9.7.5 18th-Century Punk  
Autumn/winter 2016–17  
Dress and jacket of pink polyurethane

9.7.6 18th-Century Punk  
Autumn/winter 2016–17  
Dress and trousers of polychrome acetate-polyester-nylon lamé jacquard

9.7.7 18th-Century Punk  
Autumn/winter 2016–17  
Jumpsuit of polychrome silk-rayon-acrylic-nylon-polyester jacquard with metal snaps

*Heads and wigs created and styled by Julien d’Ys.*



When Kawakubo established Comme des Garçons in 1973, her sole purpose was personal autonomy. “Independence has always been of greatest importance to me,” she has stated. Like the search for “newness,” the pursuit of freedom—freedom from convention and freedom of expression—is a defining attribute of her fashions. This quest has fueled her ongoing interest in street style, particularly punk: “I’ve always liked the [punk] spirit in the sense that it’s against the run of the mill, the normal way of doing things. . . . Punk is against flattery.”

Kawakubo also has a deep respect for history, however, and the dynamic between tradition and transgression is examined in Order/Chaos through her collection *18th-Century Punk*. The clothes conflate the pneumatic structures and hyperbolic silhouettes of the 1700s with the leitmotifs of 1970s punk, including fetishistic hardware, harnesses, fastenings, and materials such as plastic in Pepto-Bismol pink. Their anachronistic employment of multicolored floral jacquards (not available until the 1800s), often pieced and collaged together, recalls an earlier punk-inspired collection, *Adult Delinquent*. At the time of its making, Kawakubo declared, “I am an adult delinquent to the end.”

# 9.8 Bound / Unbound

"I never give myself any boundaries or let them interfere with my work."

2011

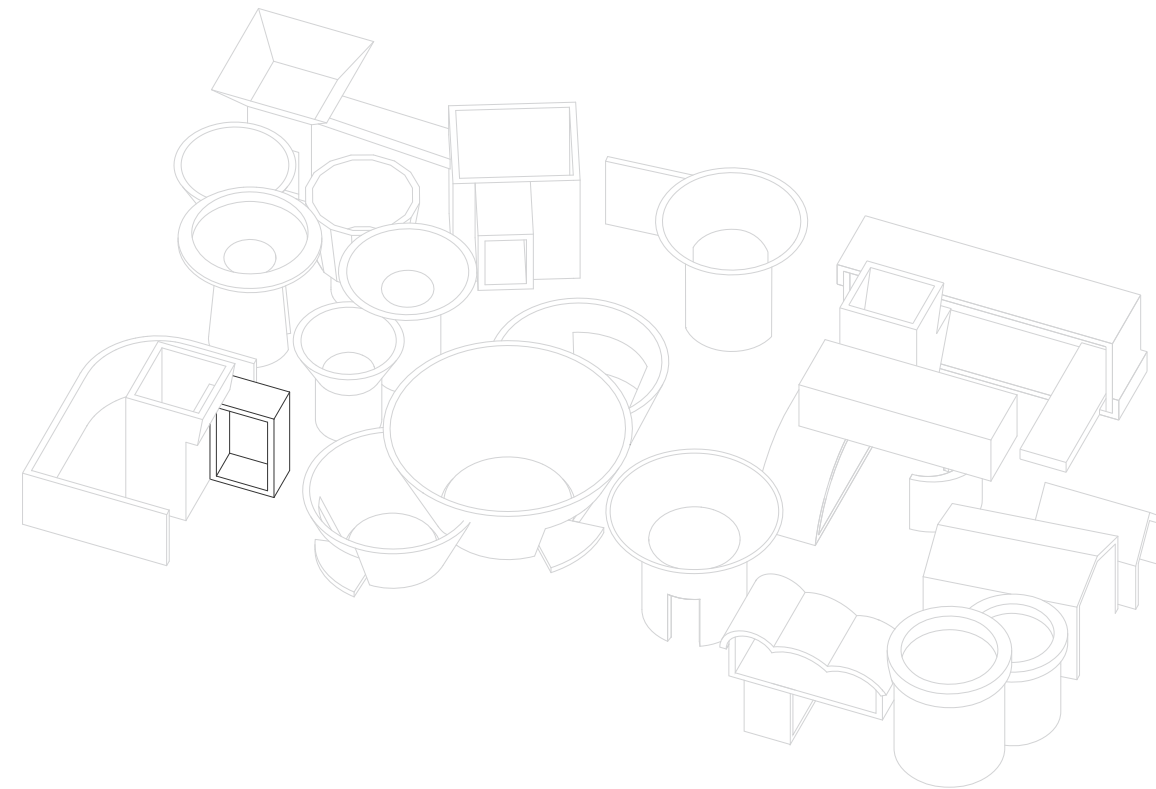
9.8.1 The Future of Silhouette  
Autumn/winter 2017-18

Dress of white synthetic  
wadding

9.8.2 The Future of Silhouette  
Autumn/winter 2017-18

Dress of white synthetic  
wadding

*Heads and wigs created  
and styled by Julien d'Ys.*



The exhibition concludes with two "objects for the body" from Kawakubo's most recent collection, *The Future of Silhouette*, made from what the designer describes as "non-fabrics," or non-woven, non-fashion materials. Here, white synthetic wadding recalls her earlier crinoline-like ensembles featured in *Then/Now*. While the shapes of those garments have their origins in the mid-nineteenth century, however, the forms of these pieces—distorted, malformed hourglasses—have no historical or, for that matter, social or cultural referents. This links them to the eccentric, engorged creations from *Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body*, except that these works notably lack openings for the arms.

Despite the fact that these pieces bind the body physically, they unbind and liberate it culturally. Fashion, by its very nature, is defined by a society's idealized representation of the female form. These two "objects for the body," however, not only dismiss but also contest and subvert accepted canons. Early in her career, Kawakubo explained, "I work around the figure, but I am never limited by what the figure has to be." In her hands, the dressed body is freed from bounded notions of place, period, and purpose, fully occupying and expressing an "art of the in-between."

All garments are by  
Rei Kawakubo (Japanese, born  
1942) for Comme des Garçons  
(Japanese, founded 1969).

Unless otherwise noted,  
all works are courtesy of  
Comme des Garçons.

This guide accompanies the  
exhibition "Rei Kawakubo/  
Comme des Garçons: Art of  
the In-Between," on view at  
The Metropolitan Museum of  
Art, New York, from May 4 to  
September 4, 2017.

#MetKawakubo

# Exhibition Map

- 1. Absence / Presence
- 2. Design / Not Design
- 3. Fashion / Antifashion
- 4. Model / Multiple
- 5. High / Low
  - 5.1 Elite Culture / Popular Culture
  - 5.2 Good Taste / Bad Taste
- 6. Then / Now
  - 6.1 Past / Present / Future
  - 6.2 Birth / Marriage / Death
- 7. Self / Other
  - 7.1 East / West
  - 7.2 Male / Female
  - 7.3 Child / Adult
- 8. Object / Subject
- 9. Clothes / Not Clothes
  - 9.1 Form / Function
  - 9.2 Abstraction / Representation
  - 9.3 Beautiful / Grotesque
  - 9.4 War / Peace
  - 9.5 Life / Loss
  - 9.6 Fact / Fiction
  - 9.7 Order / Chaos
  - 9.8 Bound / Unbound

