



DEMINA'S GLITTERING TRASH

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I've always been enthralled by a story Raf Simons told in an early interview about going to see an early Martin Margiela show in 1989. The show was in a dilapidated playground in an out-of-the-way corner of Paris mostly inhabited by North African immigrants. Models walked down the dirty runway in tattered sweaters and fraying dresses and tops made of plastic bags. Photos show elegant young models sharing the runway with smiling children. Simons, a college student studying industrial design at the time, cites this show as the moment that showed him he wanted to be a fashion designer. The show is celebrated now as a pivotal moment in Margiela's career, an early indication of the direction fashion would take in the nineties.

The fashion show is a rare, unique, little-regarded form of art, if it can be called a form of art at all. Anyone living in a modest-sized city can be sure that somewhere nearby a band is playing, films are being projected, plays are being performed, classical music being conducted. Yet fashion shows are consolidated in only a few cities: Paris, New York, and Milan. Entrance is guaranteed to a small clan of the famous, the wealthy, the well-connected. Tickets are not offered for sale. No repeat performances are ever given. For the average college student or devotee of fashion, an experience like Simons' is out of reach. Like a good club, fashion shows exclude most in order to maintain an aura of importance.

Unlike a good club, a fashion show is endlessly photographed. For the great swarm of the interested and uninvited, there is always a recording of a fashion show, still photos uploaded swiftly to the internet, a video sometimes arriving much later. For most, however, the show itself remains elusive, the world it conjures out of reach. Fashion brands count on runway shows and their visual documentation because they offer their audience the fantasy of inclusion: buy these clothes and you'll be part of the universe represented by these photos, by this inaccessible event. Of course, this is part of the duty of the marketing team, and the same work done by the fashion

show is done by ad campaigns and fashion magazine editorials.

Fashion needs an audience. It needs velvet ropes to keep most away. If you're feeling good, that's a problem. Of course, this has nothing to do with personal style, which is about disregarding rules, accepting your limitations—whether they're physical, practical, or financial—and making do with what you have. An old friend of mine liked to wear his sweater inside out, so the seams and the stitching showed and it looked ragged and avant garde. That's style. Fashion, on the contrary, is neverending business. All that's original gets absorbed by the fashion apparatus, repackaged and sold to a credulous, paying audience. The fashion industry is like an army on the move, always marching forward, pillaging subcultures, past eras (or sometimes even very recent ones), and foreign cultures for new ideas, disregarding what's practical or ethical in order to keep moving forward and keep selling new product; yes it's all very fun and all to get involved, to watch, from a distance, the runway shows happening every few months in Paris, New York, London, and Milan, the different directions the industry takes as time passes, the emergence of new trends, new voices. It's an endless diversion, keeping up with what's in fashion. There will never be an end to the new stuff you can buy, the promise seems to be, even though what's new is often not so new at all.

In some cases, with certain designers, the clothes are designed with such care, and the vision unveiled is so coherent that the failings of the fashion industry are rendered irrelevant. Maybe every devotee of fashion is only a victim of beauty. For example, there's Jun Takahashi's Spring 2003 show for Undercover, "Scab," which featured abrasive, grungy clothes in white and black, covered in patches inspired by crustpunks and tribal prints, but anyone who cares about fashion could offer some example of their own.

The ludicrousness of fashion is justified by the artistry of a few gifted artists—by those sev-



eral people each generation who, rather than following the current of the industry, sense the directions culture is taking. Brands now fly new flags too. They promise democratization—as if an industry premised on pricing out most people can now be opened up to most people—and sustainability—without considering whether the industry’s constant production of more goods may be as great a problem as the methods by which those goods are made.

The Georgian designer Demna, creative director of Balenciaga and founder of Vetements, is the contemporary avatar for fashion’s ludicrous exclusivity. He, more than any other figure in the world of clothing, has been attentive to the cultural temperature, to the dramatic and hideous mood of the late 2010s, and has found a way to make t-shirts and track pants into articles of terrible stupid beauty. Demna’s work courts ridicule and has found a following among the most tasteless of our new aristocracy: crypto millionaires, soundcloud rappers, Kim Kardashian. But despite the noisy tastelessness of these baggy, bulky, logo-maniac clothes, Demna’s designs remain covetable—you can’t help but want them, want to be seen in them, want to be the one who gets them.

Demna made his debut with Vetements’ post-Soviet clothes, meant to reflect his youth spent in impoverished Georgia after the fall of communism. Demna’s provocative clothes tell us something about fashion and desire. As Natasha Stagg writes in her essay “Fashion Film,” “we like our desires to be made complex

by fashion... we want, and we self-display our wants, and we self-flagellate for wanting.” Demna became famous for Vetements’ ugly-chic sensibility: big oversized hoodies with logos referencing the detritus of Western civilization, like Bounce detergent and the film *Titanic*; shabby floral-print dresses, heels meant to resemble bic lighters, vinyl kitchen aprons, patchwork t-shirts. A pivotal breakthrough for the brand was the first look in Vetements’ 2016 show, which featured a bright yellow t-shirt, a very slightly modified version of the uniform worn by workers for the delivery company DHL, which went viral in the days after the show.

There are a few easy ways to make sense of Demna’s popularity and success, which brought him, days after the spring 2016 show, to the post of creative director of Balenciaga, a post he’s held for 8 years. Often, reference is made to Demna’s prior work at Maison Martin Margiela, the fact that he attended the Royal Academy of Antwerp, as Margiela and the ‘Antwerp 6’ school of designers did. Demna’s craftsmanship and technical skill is emphasized, as is the inspiration he took from Margiela, borrowing motifs such as oversized clothing, scribbled-on shoes, and an overall deconstructionist philosophy. Another way to understand his success is by framing Vetements and even Demna’s later work at Balenciaga as a deeply personal expression of who he is, a reflection of the environment he grew up in in Georgia in the turbulent 90s. Demna has said, for instance, that while he learned to love oversized clothing when he worked at Margiela, as a child he wore items several sizes



too big because he wouldn't outgrow them as quickly and have to buy more.

Viewed another way, Demna was just tapped into the zeitgeist. His brand rose to popularity at the same time as that of another post-Soviet designer, Gosha Rubchinskiy; maybe he sensed that around the mid-2010s, the current was bending towards the nasty, the trashy, the ugly—Vetements' success owing to the same cultural climate that created Soundcloud rap and Trump's presidency.

All of this may be true, but Demna's work also understands the workings of fashion, a field where success comes to those who make no effort to court approval. Demna's designs—the DHL t-shirt, the bulky Triple S sneakers at Balenciaga—often went viral because they were being mocked, as were the customers who bought them at lavish prices, and he for his lack of originality. But this didn't matter to those who would become his customers—the nouveau riche, sneakerheads with a taste for big logos, celebrities with knowing stylists, and the creative class. Wearing Vetements, or Balenciaga, courts attention. The clothes are flashy and seem to be, at times, tasteless, but they elicit a reaction. This is true in the real world and online—many of Demna's designs, like a line of clothes with a

'Balenciaga' logo modeled after that of Bernie Sanders, or his hot pink platform crocs, photograph well.

To wear Demna's clothes is to advertise: not only your awareness of fashion, which may lead you to spend thousands of dollars on an oversized nylon parka resembling the clothing worn by refugees, or 500 on a Balenciaga t-shirt, but also your spending power; you can afford the luxury of luxury clothing. What makes many of Demna's designs luxury is the magical spell of the brand name. These clothes tease, beg their audience to turn away with their embrace of the low, the common, the trashy. To wear them is to embrace the ludicrousness of fashion; the inexplicable cost only adds to the pleasure of wearing them.