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BORDERLESS FASHION PRACTICE: CONTEMPORARY FASHION IN THE METAMODERN AGE, VANESSA GERRIE (2023)

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In *Borderless Fashion Practice: Contemporary Fashion in the Metamodern Age*, Vanessa Gerrie argues that within the context of twenty-first century western fashion, designers are deliberately blurring disciplinary boundaries in terms of the creative methods that they employ, the design principles that they uphold, and the digital means by which they communicate fashion to consumers. As a scholar in art history and theory, Gerrie is well equipped to write this book, which guides readers through a rich examination of four case studies: Virgil Abloh, Aitor Throup, Iris van Herpen and Eckhaus Latta – whose work disrupts disciplinary boundaries among art, technology, architecture, science and graphic design. She refers to their fashion practices as *borderless fashion*, proposing that this term offers ‘a conceptual framework that maps and describes how fashion designers are working in the current socio-cultural context’ (158).

Borders certainly mark a pertinent topic of conversation at present. There has been a resurgence of media and scholarly interest in what constitutes a border, as international warfare, migration, emerging climate crisis, right-wing populism, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and polarizing social media debates bring the significance of geographic and political boundaries into sharp relief. The recent 2024 Design History Society conference, *Border Control: Excursion, Incursion and Exclusion*, is a case in point. Gerrie, however, takes a less overtly political view of the topic, underlining that ‘the borders I refer to are not specifically geographical’ (1). This does not make the text any less valid. Indeed, it might be attributed to the moment in time at which Gerrie is writing, since this book (published in 2023) constitutes her Ph.D. thesis, completed at Massey University, New Zealand in 2020. Scholarship is fast responding to our rapidly changing world as the implications of shifting borders – past, present and future – are being debated and interrogated, raising scepticism about the ability of fashion practitioners to overcome divides, whether physical or digital, human or non-human, or indeed geopolitical.

Gerrie situates her study firmly within the interdisciplinary field of fashion studies. She defines ‘fashion’ in the expanded field as not simply physical garments but the various ways in which they have been mediated in the past decade, taking trend forecaster Li Edelkoort’s (2015) widely discussed *Anti-Fashion Manifesto* as a call to arms to interrogate the mythology of the star designer. Gerrie’s research process is clear and thorough, based on close

consideration of existing literature on the topic and textual analysis of primary sources that include *Vogue Runway*'s live-streamed video presentations, runway performances and panel discussions shown on digital platforms YouTube and SHOWstudio, press releases, magazine profiles on specific designers and relevant exhibition catalogues, as well as internet-mediated research.

The book is carefully set up, whereby the first half takes the form of an expanded literature review, establishing the theoretical framework of the cultural paradigm 'metamodernism', and outlining the historical factors that have led to the development of what Gerrie terms a 'borderless fashion practice' (1). Gerrie guides the reader meticulously through the key factors deemed intrinsic to mapping how and why contemporary designers active over the past ten years are working collaboratively and conceptually across various disciplines, thus calling into question the validity of the lone creative genius Edelkoort posed objection to. She discusses how fashion's entrance into the academy as a valid area of study has paved the way for expanded definitions of what constitutes 'fashion'; disciplinary intersections with art, and increased collaborations between artists, architects and designers; the development of conceptual fashion and its expansion beyond the traditional catwalk; and finally, fashion's 'democratization'. The author could have expanded upon this latter point in a bit more depth to consider not just increased access to fashion via social media, but equally to interrogate the transnational political economy of labour that still underpins a dominant fashion system and exposes its various 'sacrifice zones': those geographic locations that are deemed dispensable in the interests of capital extraction and expansion.

Whilst the relationship between metamodernism and fashion marks uncharted terrain in the field of fashion studies, it is this theoretical framework that strikes me as unconvincing, rather than Gerrie's research. Metamodernism is a neologism coined in 1975 by literary scholar Mas'ud Zavarzadeh that has gained traction since the 2010s in the writing of cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, who use it to articulate the apparently 'new' post-postmodern symptoms indicated by twenty-first century reconfigurations of capitalist societies and neo-liberal economies. Vermeulen and van den Akker define metamodernism as a term that 'should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism' (13). Such self-referential definitions (much like the ubiquitous use of the term 'meta') warrant further interrogation by Gerrie if using this theory to examine the creative output of her four primary case studies. I query if there might be a more persuasive theoretical lens to articulate the developments in fashion practice that have moved beyond the postmodern (if indeed they have) and to underline the boundaries that are being disrupted by globalization and digital culture over the last decade.

The second half of the book focuses on four case studies – Virgil Abloh, Aitor Throup, Iris van Herpen and Eckhaus Latta – and Gerrie meticulously examines their history, work and outputs to map metamodern principles such as 'design identity, interdisciplinarity, collaboration and hybrid spaces' against their designs (95). Her case study methodology seeks to consider how these four designers can be used to chart similar practices of pluralism, hybridity and multiple subjectivities in design practice more broadly. These designers remain under-researched in fashion studies, and Gerrie's close analysis has much to offer. Abloh is presented as the 'Renaissance Man', working across fashion, architecture, fine arts, music, product design and graphic design to disrupt

the boundaries of 'high' and 'low' culture. Throup, meanwhile, is examined for his research-driven conceptual design practice. Van Herpen is celebrated for her intermingling of technology and science, whilst Latta's community-based practice is interrogated for the breaking up of gender binaries. Ultimately, whilst the theoretical framework of metamodernism that underpins the study raises questions, and more engagement with the political would be welcomed, Gerrie provides a clear and informative analysis of these four designers, seamlessly weaving through her discussion on the rich overlaps that exist between fashion and art, past and present.

Across the entire book, Gerrie provides a clear structure whereby the first half outlines the key factors she deems intrinsic to the development of a borderless fashion practice by drawing on existing literature, whilst the second half applies these ideas to four case studies that reveal the extent of her primary research. There is much to be gained from reading about these four contemporary designers, but the author could perhaps have articulated more clearly at times what was at stake in her selection of key traits understood to be metamodern within their work. Rather than applying metamodernism quite so dogmatically to her case studies, there was room for a lively interrogation of where these designers may have illuminated the limitations of the concept itself.

REFERENCE

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