**E/MOTION. FASHION IN TRANSITION**

Fashion is emotion, always in motion.

E/MOTION looks at the way fashion has served as a visual signifier of contemporary instabilities, concerns and emotions since the 1990s. This exhibition reflects on three tumultuous decades, on the societal transitions that shaped them and on the artistic responses of fashion designers to these disruptions.

Fashion sits at the very centre of contemporary life, and artists and designers play leading roles in constructing images and meaning in times of systemic change. Even when masquerading as nostalgia, gloom, euphoria or spectacle, fashion has been in constant dialogue with – and has even anticipated – different crises and changes. Like no other medium, fashion can magnify the raw emotions within society.

The exhibition themes are portals through which you are invited to explore social, political and psychological change. The exhibits are all mere symbols, icons or metaphors of their time. Some offer insights into critically dark truths about the world, whilst others provide humorous portrayals of what it is to be human in the world today.

MoMu interviewed designers and fashion students from eight different schools about their anxieties, ambitions and hopes for the future. At the end of the exhibition, these stories come together in ‘Phoenix’, an installation by director Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe and scenographers Jan Versweyveld and HuismanvanMerode, in collaboration with Opera Ballet Vlaanderen. Just as the phoenix rises from its ashes, so fashion will continue to reinvent itself.

**VANITAS**

Fashion exhibitions deploy mannequins to display clothes. The mannequin’s inherent lifelessness, however, forms an uncanny contrast with an exhibition that hopes to touch upon real human emotions. In the past decades the, mostly female, body became the playing field on which various societal emotions and transitions were reflected. This installation performs the very idea that the body finds itself under constant surveillance and scrutiny and is a response by the exhibition designers, in collaboration with director Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe, to this apparent lifelessness in museums.

**DISASTER**

At the end of the 1990s ‘disaster pictures’ that depicted the inevitability of death became a popular genre of fashion photography. These emphasized the physical frailty of the human body and acknowledged the violence of contemporary life. Advertisements and editorial shoots displayed the brutalized – mostly female – body in the midst of tragic

events, walking in ruins, or surviving explosions and crashes. Distressed- looking models also appeared on the runway, most prominently in Alexander McQueen’s early shows. Over the last two decades, such dark references to decay, mortality and nostalgia have been more often symbolically and visually incorporated into the design of actual garments.

**DRUGS**

Against a backdrop of recession, a deflated job market and pessimism about the future among the younger generation in the 1990s, the Heroin Chic look became popular in fashion imagery. Fragile-looking models with messy make-up and drugged expressions appeared not only in photography, but also in fashion shows. The emergence of the look was linked to the Junk Culture of contemporary movies about addiction, such as Trainspotting (1996). The embrace of heroin and unhealthy body images in fashion drew vitriol. After the turn of the millennium, the Heroin Chic look was replaced by a tanned, toned and – in contrast to its predecessor – ‘healthy’ looking body.

**VIRUS**

Our fear of death and disease during the past three decades has been further fuelled by various epidemics and pandemics, including HIV, swine flu and COVID-19. These health crises also affected the fashion industry. In the early 1990s, Benetton, the Italian fashion brand, ran controversial advertising campaigns referring to the AIDS crisis; while Martin Margiela created t-shirts for charity to encourage open conversations about AIDS; and Walter Van Beirendonck included rubber pieces as protective shields and printed messages about safe sex in his activist collections. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the face mask has emerged as a symbol of the crisis.

**BODY**

In the last few decades, the quest for the perfect, ’disciplined’ body has persisted, together with a fear of imperfection and ageing. Women have historically been required to maintain an external awareness of their own identity. The history of body manipulation is a long one, evolving in tandem with the complex relationships between socially mandated beauty ideals, technological advances and feminism. Today, harmful and restrictive body ideals are increasingly challenged by the progress in inclusivity, as well as movements around body positivity and body neutrality. A young generation of mostly female designers are addressing the female gaze by reclaiming hand techniques and craftsmanship’s that are traditionally considered ‘feminine’.

**A NEW ERA**

The euphoria of entering the new millennium ended abruptly in September 2001. The repercussions of the terrorist attacks in the USA were complex, violent and disruptive, changing the course of world politics. The attacks occurred on the fourth day of New York Fashion Week, making fashion journalists the first to report them. Though incomparable to the tragic loss of life, the financial impact of 9/11 forced many independent designers to file for bankruptcy or to look for outside investment. Another challenge occurred when, against the sudden trauma of 9/11, some of the Spring-Summer 2002 collections were reinterpreted by the press and buyers as inappropriate and insensitive. Some fashion photographers faced the same issues when a few editorials had to be cut at the last minute. In these, models were depicted falling from buildings or looked like survivors covered in dirt; they suddenly seemed too close to reality.

**CAMOUFLAGE**

Military references in fashion were often in direct response to pervasive images in the news about war and terror. In the last two decades, a series of terrorist attacks in European cities led to increased military presence. The surreal experience of encountering soldiers in camouflage uniforms – previously out of context in cities – heightened a sense of unease and fear. Directly or indirectly, these ongoing emotions of anxiety and terror prompted fashion designers to investigate the dichotomies between feeling protected and feeling threatened, between soldiers and female warriors.

**HOME**

In this labyrinth that leads to nowhere, stories of timely issues surrounding representation, identity, cultural appropriation, origin and nostalgia come together. In the refugee crises of the 2010s, large numbers of people arrived in Europe from across the Mediterranean Sea in inhumane and precarious circumstances. Thousands lost their lives. Many fashion designers and artists took an activist stance towards this. As a result of the heightened visibility of young male refugees, menswear designers particularly were drawn to integrate utilitarian, functional and resilient clothing in the face of an uncertain future. Sometimes, these references were more subtle and poetic, commenting on the state of being ‘in transit’ or in between places. Subconsciously or otherwise, these garments acted as a kind of architecture designed to protect the wearer, as a form of self-preservation.

**ORIGIN & NOSTALGIA**

Finding a sense of home is connected to notions of origin and nostalgia. Nostalgia, however, can be used as a political rhetoric spreading nationalistic propaganda, in which newcomers are rendered as a threat to a nation’s historical continuity and prosperity. Fragments of history and nostalgic inspirations are part and parcel of the work of many contemporary designers; although most of them intentionally disrupt or ironically twist such narratives.

Historically, designers have found inspiration in other cultures and, by doing so, have appropriated references from other religions, identities and civilizations, without contextualizing or crediting their sources. It is only quite recently that fashion brands have begun to accept accountability for cultural appropriation. Another buoyant transition has been instigated by a new generation of young designers who, each in their own way, are contributing to the decolonization of the fashion industry. They choose to use their voices and collections as important platforms for activism, telling new stories and representing different communities. Radical inclusivity in fashion is a work in progress, but there are invigorating, hopeful and encouraging transitions now in place.

**INTERNET**

In the 1990s, computer culture expanded to include e-mail and, in the early 2000s, the use of mobile phones became commonplace. In the years since, people have entered an all-consuming digital experience of life, which similarly transformed fashion’s ecosystem. After the launch of social media platforms, the divide between private and public became ever more blurred, and fashion’s business models changed accordingly. Digitization and mass media broadened the way people perceive, share and consume fashion. The ‘democratization of fashion’, with fast fashion and online shopping, has had a severe impact on climate change, on the loss of biodiversity and is depleting Earth’s natural resources. Thanks to new technologies, however, opportunities are on the horizon which offer kinder, more environmentally aware and humane ways for designers to produce and share their work: from live streaming, digital showrooms and fashion films to collaborations with the gaming industry and promising advances in sustainable production.

**LES INDES GALANTES**

In 2017, the artist and filmmaker Clément Cogitore reinterpreted an excerpt from Rameau’s opéra-ballet Les Indes Galantes (1735), working with a group of Krump dancers. Initially showcased on the online platform of the Opéra de Paris, the full opéra-ballet was staged two years later. Cogitore and choreographer Bintou Dembélé wanted to connect worlds that do not usually get to meet, unlocking emotion precisely within the contrast of baroque opera and urban dance. In the 1990s, the Krump dance style emerged from African-American communities in LA, countering systemic violence through the cathartic medium of dance. In both Les Indes Galantes and Krump we are confronted with the inherent violence found within Western representa-tions of white versus non-white people.

**EGO**

The state of the economy has always had an influence – both consciously and subconsciously – on people’s predilection to display wealth through luxury fabrics, It Bags and logos; or to seek a more intimate, minimalist experience of fashion. In times of economic crisis, designers often choose to move away from logos as symbols of wealth, making minimalism the prevailing style during the early 1990s recession, and again after the financial crisis of 2008.

The recent democratization of high fashion manifested itself in designers launching more affordable collections for high-street labels such as H&M. Fashion has also increasingly embraced streetwear and athleisure as new carriers to display logos and branding.

The value of a designer label is symbolic, rather than economic. The idea of elevating everyday objects into a fashion context can be seen in Martin Margiela’s now iconic plastic bag piece, Balenciaga ‘market bags’ and the DHL t-shirt in the Vetements’ collection. This last one, especially, sparked debate around value and class appropriation in fashion.

**STREETWEAR**

Streetwear and sportswear brands have historically taken inspiration and appropriated styles from Black and street culture. Recently, the roles have been reversing as sportswear labels have been hiring more Black designers. Reebok appointed Kerby Jean-Raymond of Pyer Moss as their global creative director, and Grace Wales Bonner introduced a more personal cultural perspective in her collection for Adidas, to name just two.

As influential status symbols, and only recognizable to ‘people in the know’, sneaker culture manifests a new kind of conspicuous consumption.

**MINIMALISME**

Minimalist flagship stores in the 1990s, and to some extent still today, embraced the ambiguity between commercial retail and art gallery space. The ad campaigns similarly build on exclusivity and intelligence as a means of distinguishing themselves. Notable is their inclusion of all ages, rather than idealizing youth. Helmut Lang’s ad campaigns, for example, juxtaposed fashion photography with the work of artists and close collaborators such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Jenny Holzer. Juergen Teller’s 2015 campaign for Céline shows the portrait of 80-year-old-writer Joan Didion in a black shirt, large sunglasses and oversized golden pendant. This demonstrates how symbolic value, rather than product, is key to this kind of marketing.

**PHOENIX**

In order to reflect on the future of fashion, as well as on the recent past, numerous interviews with fashion students and established designers were conducted. The designers gave their personal views on a wide range of subjects. What impact does the digital (r)evolution have on their creativity? Are fashion shows important? Can fashion evoke genuine emotions? What is the importance of craftsmanship, local production and sustainability? And what do you hope for the future? Fragments of personal stories are brought together in a series of live performances by director, performer and countertenor Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe, in collaboration with Opera Ballet Vlaanderen.