

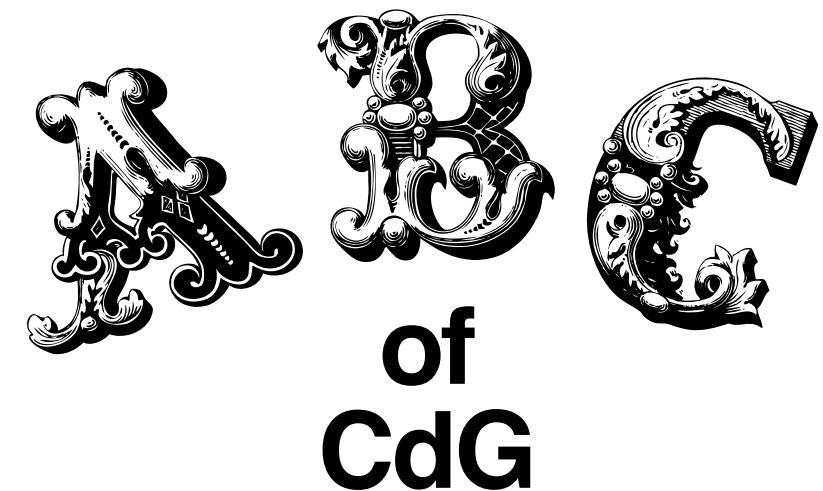
a fashion myth. Supposedly, on the final day, after the final sale, in a secret location, the remaining stock, the stuff absolutely no one in the world wanted even reduced in price by 80 percent, is burned in a giant bonfire so as to not end up in some common outlet shop. Even if this tale isn't true, couldn't we have the fire for the first time for real at my Baltimore shop? Think of the amazing photograph! Couldn't Rei light the first match herself? Think of the polyester-and-rayon-polluted smoke drifting over the Armistead Gardens neighborhood and the magic spell it could possibly cast on the unsuspecting neighbors. The ecstasy of rejection, the raptures of unavailability, and the open-sesame of Rei's vision could turn this beautiful downscale section of Baltimore into an international fashion mecca.

Rei, I have a wish list for you. I know you're busy. I realize you don't take "notes" (the new n-word for all film directors), but I just have some ideas for future outfits that I would happily pay you too much money for. I hate weddings; I've never had fun at one in my life. I know you've designed a black wedding dress with a white veil, and it was so cutting-edge *Modern Bride*. But how about something for *me* to wear to a wedding to take my mind off the romance pressure I feel pulsating around me? Something secret, because I'm not a rude person and you never want your outfit to upstage the bride's or groom's. How about an elegant black wool Vincent Price-type suit: on the outside so seemingly conservative and beautifully tailored, but inside lined with the fur of the mice who were living and nesting under the hood of my car in my garage, nibbling away at the engine's wiring harness and causing about a thousand dollars' worth of damage? Wearing fur coats always makes one look like an old person, but poisoned or trapped mouse-fur lining seems politically correct to me, especially when the same little fuckers had friends who were setting up house inside the exterior air-conditioning compressor of my Baltimore home and chewing on the wiring. If we hadn't discovered these little *Ben* and *Willard* movie-type wannabes and had turned on the cooling system the first hot day, these unwelcome squatters would have been ground up by the motor fan blades and their death fumes would have been piped into my home in all their decomposed glory. So what better purpose could their deaths have than to be recycled as fashion? Even their little heads could be designed as buttons for the inside pockets!

Let's talk about the suit pants. Couldn't they have faux "scraped knees"? You like to see people fall down – here's the perfect reminder for your customer of the one thing that gives you pleasure. You've already done shirts with triple collars, but how about one with an extra arm that hangs in the back under the coat that nobody but me would see or know about? Of course the tie, an item of clothing I love and you seem to rarely design, should be covered with clever soup stains. We know how hard and expensive it is to properly clean a tie, so you can now charge double the price and it will still be a deal, because you'd never have to take it to the dry cleaners.

My dream socks that you would create only for me would be mismatched and stretched out with holes where the big toe sticks through ("summer socks," we used to call these castaways). Your belts would go around me twice and would be tested for possible autoerotic strangulation use. It would be too vulgar to ask you to design faux "skidmark" underwear, so how about white boxers stained from purposely washing them with a load of brightly colored laundry?

But, Rei, my final wish is a pair of creepily sophisticated faux Pic 'N Pay shoes that I hope you'll design for me to wear inside my closed (as my will demands) coffin. Like the ones the Moe Howard look-alike, the "shoe bomber," wore that day on the airplane. Scruffy, ugly oxfords whose hideousness has been negated by your "relentless sobriety," as the critics have written. Shoes with wires and fuses hanging off them. And real dynamite inside. Scary and aggressive footwear – the perfect accessory to my final outfit. The worms go in, the worms go out; the worms play pinochle on my snout. Now I'll be ready to blast off into Comme des Garçons heaven.



Excerpted from *ROIE MODELS* by John Waters.  
Published in June by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC, forthcoming in December from Beautiful Books Ltd in the UK.  
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## ADVERTISING

Alice Rawsthorn: “Comme des Garçons’ Shirt campaigns are a beacon of inspired eccentricity. Since they began 11 years ago, the ads have featured everything from icebergs, graffiti, blues lyrics, 16th-century Flemish paintings, trucks, dogs, birds, vintage pins, cave paintings, trucks, dogs, street photography, Pet Shop Boys’ lyrics, underground comics, punk poetry, shredded 1970s porn, the winners of a literary booby prize for the worst opening sentences of novels, a recycled trade advertising campaign, bizarre amateur inventions and the self-portraits of an unknown Danish amateur artist to – once but only once – a bunch of people actually wearing shirts.”

Ronnie Cooke Newhouse: “I’ve always been a big fan of Rei’s. I was one of four people who started *Details* magazine in the 1980s. Rei was a sort of demigod to us, and we were one of the first magazines to cover her, if not the first in America. When I later became creative director of Barney’s (the New York department store) I got to know Rei and Adrian Joffe. We stayed in touch when I left Barney’s, and when I opened my (design) studio in London they spoke to me about working with them.”



Alice Rawsthorn: “Perhaps because the Shirt campaigns are conceived by a creative director who edits the contents from ready-made imagery rather than by the fashion designer and photographer who produce them, the only consistent thing about them is their inconsistency. Yet collectively they build a compelling portrait of the brand as well as of its creators and the people who will wear the clothes.”

Alice Rawsthorn, “CDG Advertisements,” *Paradis* #5, Fall/Winter 2009.



## ANIMAL

# “I LOVE ALL ANIMALS.”

Rei Kawakubo in Ronnie Cooke Newhouse, “Rei Kawakubo,” *Interview Magazine*, November 2008.

## ANTI-FASHION

“In addition to consistently creating collections of clothes that challenge other designers to think outside conventional modes of production and beauty, Rei Kawakubo has also built a considerable international business. In this sense, her contribution could never be regarded as outside or ‘anti’ the fashion industry, though at times its aesthetic may appear to be delightfully at odds with prevailing trends.”

Penny Martin, *The Power of Witches*, Showstudio, 2004.



The first Comme des Garçons store in the world, 1976

## AOYAMA

The Tokyo neighborhood is the origin and continued nucleus of the Comme des Garçons universe, where the label’s first store opened in 1976, and home to this date of its offices, studios and mother flagship.

## ARCHITECTURE

“Architecture has been largely unable to accept the excessive and formless nature of shopping.” So declared Rem Koolhaas, et al, in a well-known book from 2002. But since the late Seventies and Eighties, when she opened her first, then-radically minimalist boutiques – one was entirely empty, a stunt others are still repeating more than two decades later – Rei Kawakubo has been bringing both excess and formlessness to architecture. Consider her store design heyday of the 1990s and early Noughts – a golden era of blue-dotted glass



Tokyo



New York

and swooping hand-brushed aluminum (Tokyo Aoyama and New York Chelsea, respectively, both designed by Future Systems); of spinning stools in shocking red (Paris, by Ab Rogers and Shona Kitchen); of monolithic black (Kyoto, attributed to Kawakubo herself).

Working with other designers – or more frequently, with her longtime collaborator, the Japanese architect Takao Kawasaki – Kawakubo has brought to retail architecture the same brilliantly warped, twisted sensibility that she’s given her fashion. That is to say, in her hands, the body becomes just as deformed as the space it inhabits with the result being, often enough, elusive. Her temporary Comme des Garçons guerilla stores can be given credit (or blame) for the recent pop-up shop mania. Her Dover Street Market, with all its tin-shack and Porta-Potty accoutrements, blurs the distinction between department store, luxury flagship and flea market. With Kawakubo, you’re never quite sure where the thing itself begins and the idea of it ends; her shops are less like spaces than, well, concepts (but please don’t call them “concept shops”).

Which is why Kawakubo has in many ways been one of the most interesting architects around. To be sure, her stores have been chockfull of spatial acrobatics; but they have just as easily disappeared. Koolhaas may have had his “epicenters” (as he called his Prada flagships), but Kawakubo was one of the first to realize that architecture, like shopping and fashion, is fleeting.

ARIC CHEN, design critic, for *O32c*.

## ARRIVAL

# “I never intended to start a revolution. I only came to Paris with the intention of

# showing what I thought was strong and beautiful. It just happened that my notion was different from everyone else’s.”

Rei Kawakubo in Judith Thurman, “The Misfit,” *The New Yorker*, July 4, 2005.

“It’s a choice, one that implies a different approach. French eroticism stands no chance in this game, as the sensitive points of our feminine mythology – waist, hips, thighs – are quite simply avoided”

French journalist on seeing a Comme des Garçons collection in 1984, cited by Olivier Saillard, *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* (Paris) 2010.

## AVANT-GARDE

Rei Kawakubo believes that being avant-garde has become a cliché.



## BASQUIAT, JEAN-MICHEL



Jean-Michel Basquiat, model, on the Comme des Garçons runway; Paris, Spring-Summer 1987

## BERLIN

“Joffe and I spent a day in Berlin at a CommedesGarçons ‘guerilla store,’ which then occupied the former bookshop of the Brecht Museum, on a seedy block in the eastern sector of the city. It is part of an experiment in alternative retailing (inconspicuous consumption) which the company launched in 2004 ... Each of the stores is an ephemeral installation that opens without fanfare and closes after a year. Their decorating budgets are less than the price of some handbags at GUCCI and PRADA and original fixtures, including raw cinder blocks and peeling wallpaper, are left as they are found. Brecht might have approved the poetic clothes and the proletarian mise en scène, if not the insurrectionary conceit. ‘But the word “guerilla” as Rei understands it isn’t political,’ Joffe says. ‘It refers to a small group of likeminded spirits at odds with the majority. She’s fascinated by the Amish, for example and the Orthodox Jews.’”

Thurman, 2005.

## BROKEN BRIDE



Universally admired collection, Autumn/Winter 2005. The audience received its presentation at the Ecole des Beaux Arts with a seven-minute ovation. Through it, Kawakubo remained backstage. “It wasn’t simply a collection about weddings, although that may have been the first word. By breaking the rules of wedding dresses, by going behind the idea, there was born the further information that marriage is not necessarily happy.”

Rei Kawakubo in Suzy Menkes, “Positive Energy: Comme at 40,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2009.

## BUSINESS

“Unlike many fashion designers who find themselves embedded in industrial or financial conglomerates, Kawakubo is president of her own company of 450 employees and retains overall responsibility for both creative and business decisions. Nothing she does is an indulgence; all her work is part of a carefully considered strategy in which economic success is an essential part of maintaining her creative independence.”

Sudjic, 1990.



“She’s in control of every facet of her multimillion-dollar brand Comme des Garçons... This mellifluous phrase characterizes a philosophy of freedom when it comes to clothing construction... as well as presentation style and marketing strategy.”

Dolores Slowinski, “Fashion is not Art,” *Detroit Metro Times*, February 2008.



As the fashion industry was being turned upside down by the Great Recession of 2008, desperately slashing prices and cutting costs, Rei Kawakubo chose a different strategy altogether. She launched Comme des Garçons Black, a brand new recession-friendly collection that reprised the best selling styles from the brand’s archive at honest price points. It was a characteristically business-savvy move by a designer who has deftly managed the fine line between creativity and commerciality. Loyal fans of the brand kept coming back to Comme des Garçons, even if times were tough and money was tight.

Not all of Kawakubo’s avant-garde peers have fared as well. Despite his immense creative talent, the recession brought Yohji Yamamoto’s business to its knees, just before it was saved at the last minute by a private equity investor. On the other end of the spectrum, fashion genius Martin Margiela quietly left his eponymous label when its owner, Staff International, began the crass commercialisation which served to alienate

Margiela’s core cult customer base, even if it managed to grow the business’ top line revenues.

So what’s the secret to Comme des Garçons’ success?

Kawakubo has been discreetly building a multi-brand fashion business, all under the Comme des Garçons banner. From the runway collection to Comme des Garçons Black to Play Comme des Garçons, a healthy fragrance business including collaborations with Daphne Guinness and Stephen Jones, as well ongoing CdG labels for Junya Watanabe, Fumito Ganryu and Tao Kurihara, there is plenty of choice for all types of consumers. And all of it offers a special piece of that Comme des Garçons spirit, unadulterated. In short, Kawakubo has maintained her fashion integrity, while building an enviable global fashion business as well.

Kawakubo once told Suzy Menkes, “It is true to say that I ‘design’ the company, not just clothes. Creation does not end with just the clothes. New interesting business ideas, revolutionary retail strategies, unexpected collaborations, nurturing of in-house talent, all are examples of Comme des Garçons’ creation.” Perhaps this is the most important point of all. Rather than seeing business-thinking as a blight on the face of her conceptual approach to fashion, she views it as central to her creative process.

IMRAN AMED, Founder and Editor in Chief, *The Business of Fashion*, for 032c



**“If as Andy Warhol proposed, ‘Business art is the step after art,’ Comme des**

## Garçons is its fashion manifestation.

Kawakubo is a fascinating anomaly, since her artistic practice remains legible and assertive, even in the context of its uncompromised commercial intent. The disparate parts of her business – the architecture and fixtures of her shops, the typography of her graphic programs, the siting of her boutiques, the collaboration with artists, photographers, musicians, and architects, the selection of her employees, the unconventional models in her runway presentations and their hair and make-up, even her terse epigrammatic responses in interviews – comprise a unified project.”

Harold Koda, “Rei Kawakubo and the Art of Fashion,” *Refusing Fashion* exhibition catalogue, MOCAD 2008.



As Sonya Park, a stylist in Tokyo who knows Kawakubo well, said recently, “She makes her profit so that she can do something new the next season. It’s always about the next project.”

Cathy Horyn, “Gang of Four,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2008.



### CELEBRATION

“I went to the Comme des Garçons shop in Aoyama to see if there was a dress I could wear for the Pritzker ceremony. And I asked one of the store salesperson if there was anything good to wear for the ceremony. He kindly informed that to Kawakubo-san, and Kawakubo-san suggested to make something special for the special occasion. She first showed me some dresses from last collection