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The Spaces In-Between  
Of Zen Buddhism and the Avant-Garde in Fashion

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“I learned about space between the body and the fabric from the traditional kimono... not the style, but the space”

Issey Miyake (qtd. in English 20)

In examining the works of Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto, one finds an undeniable, deep relationship between each designer and the spiritual past of Japan. Their designs express the aesthetic values of Zen Buddhism, transformed through a modern, avant-garde lens. With each collection, these designers dismantle the traditions of Western fashion while building on the rich history of Japanese clothing, particularly the history of kimono. Though the work of Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto may differ from traditional kimono in a purely stylistic sense, the underlying concepts are strikingly similar. In bringing these concepts to Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese designers completely changed the world of fashion, launching it into a new era dominated by the avant-garde and the innovative.

To fully comprehend the work of Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto, as well as the tradition of the kimono, one must first find an understanding of Zen Buddhist aesthetic philosophy. In traditional Zen philosophy, the two-fold concept of wabi-sabi is a way of being which focuses on the acceptance of impermanence and imperfection (“Wabi and Sabi: The Aesthetics of Solitude”). Wabi dictates conduct from a philosophical perspective, focusing on solitude and introspection, whereas sabi is concerned with the outward expression of aesthetic values (“Wabi and Sabi: The Aesthetics of Solitude”). The two concepts were not always linked; wabi came into use during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, while sabi was only developed out of wabi in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (“Wabi and Sabi: The Aesthetics of Solitude”).

Wabi was originally associated with poverty the loneliness one experienced as a hermit; however, by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, self-imposed isolation and poverty came to be seen as signs of spiritual richness, and wabi came to refer to independence from materiality (“Wabi and Sabi: The Aesthetics of Solitude”). It was from this concept that sabi was born. As an aesthetic construct, sabi translates Zen principles into artistic principles; it places emphasis on natural processes which result in objects that are irregular and asymmetrical (“Wabi and Sabi: The Aesthetics of Solitude”).

Beyond wabi-sabi, there are seven aesthetic principles of Zen Buddhism: kanso, or simplicity; fukinsei (asymmetry/irregularity); koko (austere sublimity); shizen (naturalness); datsuzaku (freedom from routine); seijaku (stillness/tranquility); and yugen (profound depth) (Lomas 1725). For purposes of analyzing the works of Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto, each of these concepts must be properly outlined.

Kanso refers to the beauty that can be achieved through simplicity and the absence of clutter (Lomas 1725). Simplicity in both form and concept strips away the illusory ornament which distracts from the essence of a thing, allowing the truth of the object to be seen and felt (Lomas 1726). Fukinsei shows preference to the irregular and asymmetrical, which are regarded as truer representations of the natural world for they capture the dynamic, transitory nature of the organic world (Lomas 1727). Under this concept, all naturally occurring phenomena are viewed as perfect and complete expressions of reality (Lomas 1727). Koko finds beauty in objects that show their age through visible weathering and decay; this principle is managed using space and restraint in design (Lomas 1729).

Shizen manifests as creation without contrivance or premeditation; design flows naturally from the creator with a spontaneity that is born from an intimate knowledge of the medium or

phenomenon represented (Lomas 1731). Datsuzaku mandates that creators view the world with freshness, not through traditional constructs (Lomas 1733). The principle of seijaku encompasses the artist's state of mind at the time of creation, the work itself, and the reaction that the creation elicits – all must be untroubled and tranquil (Lomas 1733). The final principle, yugen, insists that restraint be exercised in imbuing art with meaning; an artist must subtly hint at depth in their work, the mystery should be sensed on an intuitive level without overt references (Lomas 1734). Of these principles, those expressed best in the clothing that shall be analyzed are kanso, fukinsei, koko, and shizen.

The principles of Zen Buddhism are seen in the art of kimono design. The kimono is a simple garment. In its most basic form a kimono is a rectangular, one-piece, front-wrap garment; the body of the kimono is formed with two long panels, and the sleeves with two smaller panels; the kimono is wrapped left side over right around the body and held closed by an obi sash (fig. 1) (Van Assche 7). The form of the kimono is simple, adhering to the concept of kanso, and allows for flowing movement, which satisfies the desire for dynamism under fukinsei. And the kimono's shape puts emphasis on the space between the wearer's body and the garment, which will be discussed further in relation to contemporary design. Over the kimono's long history, it has been altered many times, but the basic form has changed little, and it has always honored the principles of Zen Buddhism.

The kimono has a rich history with its origins in formal Chinese court robes; the style of robe was adopted by Japan in the seventh century where the robes were called agekubi (high-neck) and tarikubu (front wrap neck) (Van Assche 8). These robes were exclusively worn by members of the nobility, with agekubi worn by men and tarikubu worn by women (Van Assche 8). During the Heian period, the tarikubu evolved into the kosode, still reserved for nobles;

commoners adopted kosode-like garments, but they were made from plant fibers instead of the silk enjoyed by the nobility (Van Assche 8). Kosode have small sleeve openings, which distinguish them from other styles of kimono.

Sleeves are incredibly important for identifying the period and style of a kimono, as the design of the kimono's body rarely changed (Van Assche 8). There are four main types of kimono: kosode, which have small sleeve openings; osode, which have large sleeve openings; hirosode, which have wide sleeves; and furisode, which have long, swinging sleeves (Van Assche 8). During the Meiji period, the kosode was the dominant dress; it was also during this time that the general term 'kimono', meaning 'thing to wear', came into use (Van Assche 9).

It was during the Meiji period that restrictions on clothing based on class were slowly lifted (Van Assche 17). Until that point, Japanese society had been governed by a long-standing hierarchy which ranked people into one of four classes: samurai (military elite); nomin (farmers); artisans (konin); and merchants (shonin); for each class there were laws which defined acceptable behavior and acceptable dress (Van Assche 17). These laws became harsher under the Tokugawa shogunate with the Tempo Reforms (1841-1843), which attempted to limit production of luxury items, including clothing (Van Assche 17). These reforms were primarily targeted at wealthy merchants who, to dodge these reforms, developed a new style of dress characterized by bland outer garments made in neutral tones, like blue-gray (or nezumi-iro, literally meaning 'mouse color') (fig. 2) (Van Assche 17). From a distance, these garments appear plain but upon closer inspection, their intricate motifs are revealed. Underneath these garments, townspeople would wear extravagant undergarments and accessorize with carved ivory netsuke toggles tucked into the obi; the hidden nature of these details added an element of sensuality to the style, and the

trend came to be referred to as 'iki', meaning 'cool chic' (Van Assche 17). The style continued after the Tempo Reforms were lifted and well into the Meiji period.

The Meiji period saw increased exchange of fashions between Japan and Europe, after Japan opened itself to the outside world in 1854 (Van Assche 17). This is evidenced by an article written of the 1878 Paris International Exhibition which states: "The trump card this time was played by the Orient, with the art of China and Japan. Here even the greatest mistresses of European crafts lay down their weapons in shame" (Wichmann 18). The Europeans were instantly fascinated by Japanese textiles. European women's fashions from 1860-1900 were strongly influenced by the Japanese kimono; fashionable persons were attracted primarily attracted to the brightly colored silks and patterns more than the kimono's form – the reverse is be true of the 1980s when contemporary Japanese designers reentered Europe (Wichmann 19).

While the Europeans were enraptured by Japanese clothing, Japan's government was focused on becoming more Western through its policy of Civilization and Enlightenment (Van Assche 22). This manifested in attempts by the government to make Japanese citizens dress in European attire. And while many Japanese men adopted the Western styles, most Japanese women continued to wear kimono; the reason being that kimono were more suited to the Japanese lifestyle than European women's clothing (Van Assche 23). However, as time marched on, it became clear that the kimono would not be suited to the daily activities of the modern world.

European clothing of the early twentieth century continued this trend towards Japanese fashion. 'Kimonomania' appeared in the work of Paul Poiret, who's designs were often loose-fitting and nonrestrictive; the work of Madeleine Vionnet also appears to have been influence by kimono, with its geometric lines and flat construction which came to be synonymous with

fashion of the 1920s (English 17-18). However, the trends of the 1930s and 1940s saw the fall of 'japonisme', especially once World War II began.

Following World War II, Japanese society was increasingly influenced by American pop culture; however, by the 1960s, a renewed respect for indigenous culture developed as backlash against foreign pop culture (English 20). Also, in the 1960s, Japan saw an economic and industrial boom, which gave Japanese designers the opportunity to explore new consumer technology (da Cruz). It is during this time that Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto begin their work in the fashion industry.

Issey Miyake, born in 1939, was the first to venture into fashion design and the first to travel to Paris, the central hub of the fashion industry. In 1965, after receiving a degree in graphic design from Tama University, Miyake traveled to Paris to study at L'Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture (Kawamura 199). The following year, Miyake apprenticed under famed French couturier, Guy Laroche; and two years later, in 1968, Miyake became assistant to Hubert de Givenchy, the iconic founder of Givenchy (Kawamura 199). This five-year period of travel gave Miyake a way into the international fashion world, which made his entrance into the Paris fashion scene in the mid-1970s much easier. In 1970, Miyake returned to Tokyo to found Miyake Design Studio; three years later, he was invited to do a show in Paris, and in 1975 he opened a boutique there (Kawamura 199).

Miyake's early designs are greatly influenced by his Japanese heritage, which may be a result of the resurgence in Japanese pride during the 1960s. In 1971, Miyake, with the help of textile designer Makiko Minagawa and graphic designer Tadanori Yokoo, did a collection using fabric prints of yakuza gangster tattoos, which are altered to include images of Janis Joplin and

Jimi Hendrix (fig. 3) (Beward 95). With these designs, Miyake merges Japanese and American culture.

Miyake also incorporates many traditional Japanese textile design techniques, such as sashiko quilting; this style of quilting traditionally has durable qualities for use in martial arts, but Miyake softens the textile for use in outerwear (Beward 95). Traditional kimono techniques of draping and pleating are present throughout Miyake oeuvre, which he uses to create space; in the Japanese mindset, clothing is used to wrap the body and enclose space, it is this space between the body and the cloth, called *ma*, which gives the garment natural freedom and movement (English 21).

Most of Miyake's designs of the 1970s and early 1980s experiment with the relationship between flesh and fabric; and though he never designed for the specific purpose of expressing Japanese ideas or identity, his concepts were influenced by Japanese modes of thought and design. His original 1976 designs for *A Piece of Cloth* rely on fundamental construction, with simple squares to which sleeves could be attached, drawing on the tradition of kimono while rejecting Western garment construction (fig. 4) (Beward 95). This focus on simplicity continues in 1981 with *Clothes for Real Life*, which promotes simple cuts and practical fabric choices (Beward 95). However, the mid-1980s marks a shift in Miyake's career, as his focus moves from simple forms to sculptural garments and the expression of the avant-garde.

This shift may have been caused by the arrival of Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo into Paris in 1981. It is difficult to address the early work of one of these designers without reference to the other, as many of their first shows were done together. Their first show in Paris in April 1981 shook the city's fashion scene, as was their intent; originally, Yamamoto was going to be the only designer in the show, but he convinced Kawakubo to join because he wanted



to cause the greatest impact possible (Kawamura 200). Like Miyake, Yamamoto and Kawakubo had already experienced success in Japan before entering Paris, with Yamamoto's self-titled label established in 1972 and Kawakubo's Comme des Garçons established in 1973 (Kawamura 198). Together, the two carefully planned their arrival in Paris, a move that would prove beneficial to the designers and the entirety of fashion.

Yohji Yamamoto was born in 1943 and graduated from Keio University, afterwards going to Bunka School of Fashion to study fashion design (Kawamura 199). In 1968, he went to Paris and attempted to sell his drawings to magazines; but none of his work sold and he returned to Japan one year later (Kawamura 200). After establishing his label in 1972 and opening his company the following year, Yamamoto began showing in Tokyo and planning his entry into the Paris fashion scene (Kawamura 200). Yamamoto convinced Kawakubo to show with him in Paris in 1981 during the official Prêt-à-Porter season.

Rei Kawakubo was born in 1942, founding her iconic label Comme des Garçons in 1969 ("Rei Kawakubo / Comme des Garçons: The Art of the In-Between."). She formally established her company in 1973, and the brand enjoyed great success in the Japanese market (Breward 230). Kawakubo studied literature and philosophy at Keio University, where she familiarized herself with debates relating to women's status in society – this may have influenced her in her mission to question stereotypical depictions of women in Western fashion (English 69). Rei Kawakubo is widely considered one of the most important designers of the twentieth century; she is cited by many designers as a foundational influence, including: Alexander McQueen; John Galliano; Helmut Long; Martin Margiela; Ann Demeulemeester; Jil Sander; Miucca

Prada; Donna Karan; and Marc Jacobs (English 68). Though she has reached legend status in the fashion world, Kawakubo's early work is still intertwined with the work of Yohji Yamamoto.

Like Miyake, Yamamoto and Kawakubo are influenced by traditional Japanese aesthetics. They are both influenced by kimono design, but, like Miyake, their work focuses on the underlying concepts of the kimono more than the physical form of the garment; it is the space between the body and the fabric that is most important, not the outer forms (English 72) Both designers find beauty in the unfinished and irregular; in the context of Zen Buddhism, this translates to an appreciation of simplicity and imperfection, and designs which embody the concept of *fukinsei* (fig. 5). Their 1981 joint collection is characterized by designs that are anti-glamorous, anti-aesthetic, asexual, and anti-consumptive; the garments are monochromatic, asymmetrical, and loose-fitting (English 38). Critics said the models looked like cadavers, with shaved heads or messy hair, pale skin, and blue lips; many interpreted the collection as a reaction to the turmoil experienced by Japan following World War 2 (English 39).

The collection was met with mixed reactions; some critics hailed Yamamoto and Kawakubo as revolutionaries, others called their designs 'Post-Hiroshima' fashion (Kawamura 196). Their designs were provocative and completely shook the Parisian fashion community. The following season, Yamamoto and Kawakubo were included in the French Fashion Federation's list of shows, and they were not to be missed (Kawamura 201). At the time, Miyake had already been included in the official list of shows; but the arrival of Yamamoto and Kawakubo further pronounced his presence in Paris, and he experienced an increase in exposure alongside them (Kawamura 200). Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo became key players in both the French and international fashion systems for the rest of the 1980s; together they were the leaders of 'Japanese Avant-Garde Fashion' (Kawamura 196).

Once they were in the public eye, Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo had immense power over the visual landscape of fashion, and their influence completely changed the way people design. Their influence is best explained by Charlotte DuCann of Vogue, who writes that avant-garde Japanese fashion was “the supreme modern style, the style that yanked fashion from its seventies nostalgia right into the monochrome eighties... No other country has singlehandedly caused quite so much outrage and adulation in such a short time as Japan” (qtd. in Steele 130).

As previously stated, Miyake’s work shifted in the mid-1980s; this shift sees Miyake challenge the idea of what a garment can be as he explores fashion as soft sculpture. His designs encompass a wide variety of visual influence, but he generally maintains an affinity for natural, biomorphic shapes. This is seen in his 1985 design *Seashell*, in which Miyake uses alternating stripes of red, lavender, and pink between sculptural pleats to push the limits of textile work (fig. 6). He made use of pleating again in *Cicada Pleats*, a 1989 design which Miyake created to mimic the appearance of an outer-skin, similar to those of insects (fig. 7) (English 22).

Miyake’s most iconic project, *A-POC* (A Piece of Cloth), began in 1998 as garments cut from tubes of Raschel-knit material, a warp-knit fabric that resembles netting (fig. 8) (English 15). The principal guiding *A-POC* was to respect the integrity of the material without cutting into the cloth, a concept that takes cues from the construction of kimono; Miyake also wanted to create garments that are fully customizable, the wearer is encouraged to cut the garment in any way they choose (English 15). Miyake’s legacy continues to thrive because he does not shy away from the avant-garde and he allows textiles to hold the spotlight over his own ego.

One of the most influential garments to come out of ‘Japanese Avant-Garde Fashion’ of the 1980s is Rei Kawakubo’s iconic ripped sweater, which she referred to as *Lace Sweater* (fig. 9). The sweater can be read as Kawakubo’s response to standardized, mass-produced clothing; in an explanation of the method used to make her ripped sweaters, Kawakubo says:

The machines that make fabric are more and more making uniform, flawless textures. I like it when something is off, not perfect. Handweaving is the best way to do this. Since this isn’t always possible, we loosen a screw of the machines here and there so they can’t do exactly what they’re supposed to do. (qtd. in Steele 128)

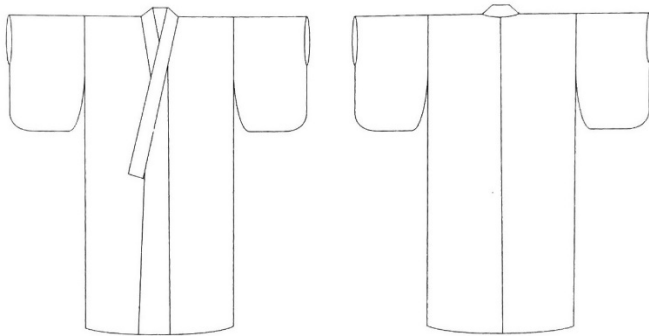
This garment started the distressed clothing trend that continues to be popular in 2019, over thirty years after Kawakubo started it (Smith). This is not the only trend that Kawakubo is credited with starting; the unfinished aesthetic that her early work is known for has influenced most contemporary designers, and it most recently experienced a resurgence in 2017, when Versace and Saint Laurent used unpolished garments in their collections (Smith). And sale of raw-hemmed jeans went up 179% in 2017 after Kawakubo used raw hems in one of her collections (Smith). Kawakubo’s influence brings aspects of Zen Buddhist aesthetic philosophy to mainstream Western fashion, even if Western designers are unaware that they are creating Zen garments.

However, Kawakubo’s legacy goes far beyond distressed clothing. Arguably the most important avant-garde designer of the last century, Kawakubo’s work has changed fashion in unimaginable ways. And her legacy was honored in 2017 at the Met Gala, when she became the second living designer to have a Met Gala themed after her work. The exhibition, titled *Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between*, examines Kawakubo’s work as it exists in the space between nine conventional dualities: Absence/Presence; Design/Not Design;

Fashion/Antifashion; Model/Multiple; High/Low; Then/Now; and Clothes/Not Clothes (“Rei Kawakubo / Comme des Garçons: The Art of the In-Between.”). Design/Not Design explores Kawakubo’s intuitive approach to garment making, having no official fashion training; this is expressed in designs based on imbalance and the unfinished, similar to the Zen Buddhist principal of shizen (fig. 10). At the heart of Kawakubo’s work are the concepts mu, meaning ‘emptiness’, and ma, meaning ‘space’. There is an undeniable link between the work of Rei Kawakubo and Zen Buddhist aesthetic philosophy, which she translates beautifully into a language of avant-garde design.

And this language has permeated through the fashion industry, impacted young designers across the globe. Contemporary designers Pierre Davis, Joshua Homic, Victor Barragan, Christopher Peters, and Raffaella Hanley all cite Rei Kawakubo and Comme des Garçons as inspirations for their design (Romack). The influence of Comme des Garçons, as well as Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake, is felt in the work of contemporary designer Ji Won Choi. Her collection *EXCESSIVISM* highlights the issue of consumer waste and market saturation, issues addressed by Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo (“Ji Won Choi”). The garments in the collection are designed to be multifunctional; the designer explains “Each stripe represents a garment and it’s multiplied so that excessiveness comes to life to symbolize over consumption” (fig. 11) (“Ji Won Choi”). Though this collection is specifically inspired by the contemporary art movement Excessivism, Ji Won Choi’s avant-garde design shows the influence of Japanese Avant-Garde of the 1980s. In fact, one could argue that all contemporary avant-garde design owes something to the Japanese designers of the 1970s and 1980s, who first inspired commercial fashion to question Western aesthetics and the limits of clothing.

Appendix



**Fig. 1** Kimono front and back. Van Assche, Annie. “Interweavings: Kimono Past and Present.” *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*, edited by Annie Van Assche. 5 Continents, 2005, p. 8.



**Fig. 2** *Kimono with Blossoming Plum Tree*. Second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. “Kimono with Blossoming Plum Tree, second half of the 19th century.” *Metmuseum.org*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45385?&searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=A.D.+1800-1900&ao=on&ft=kimono&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=13>.



**Fig. 3** Miyake, Issey. *Dress “Tattoo”*. Autumn/Winter 1971, The Kyoto Costume Institute, Kyoto. “Dress ‘Tattoo.’” *KCI Digital Archive*, Kyoto Costume Institute, [www.kci.or.jp/en/archives/digital\\_archives/1970s/KCI\\_250](http://www.kci.or.jp/en/archives/digital_archives/1970s/KCI_250).



**Fig. 4** Miyake, Issey. *Cocoon Coat*. 1976. “The Concepts and Work of Issey Miyake.” MIYAKE DESIGN STUDIO, [mds.isseymiyake.com/im/en/work](http://mds.isseymiyake.com/im/en/work).



**Fig. 5** Yamamoto, Yohji. *Jacket, Dress and Pants*. Spring/Summer 1983, The Kyoto Costume Institute, Kyoto. Fukai, Akiko, editor. *Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century*. Taschen, 2002, p. 557.

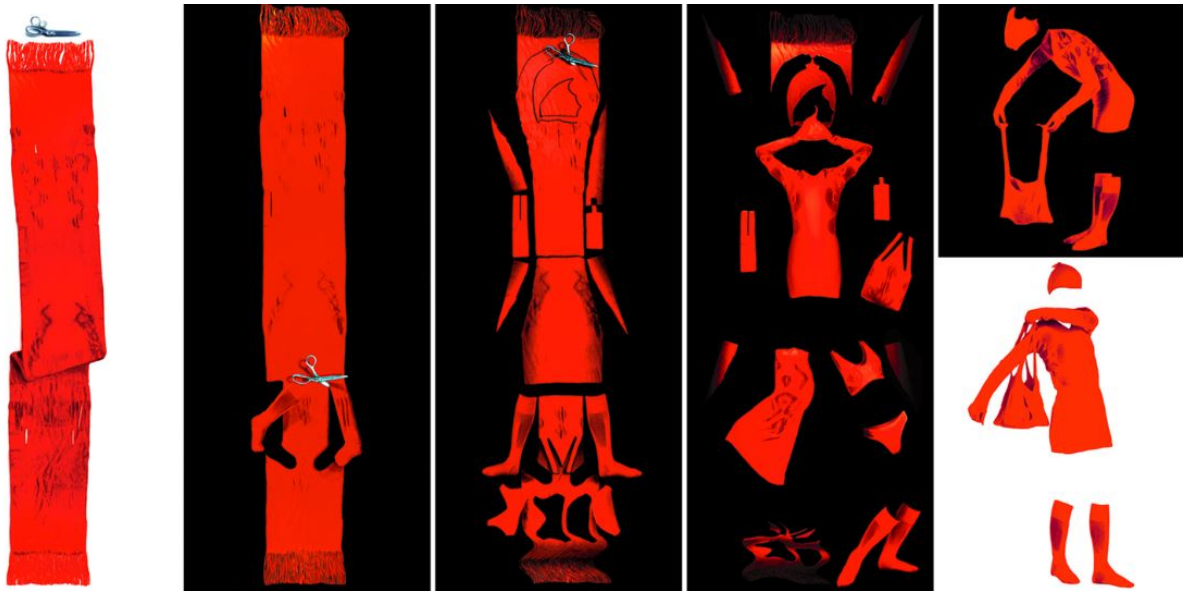


**Fig. 6** Miyake, Issey. *Seashell*. 1985, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. “Seashell | Issey Miyake.” Metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2003.79.16>.





**Fig. 7** Miyake, Issey. Dress. 1989, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. “Dress | Issey Miyake.” Metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2003.79.3](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2003.79.3).



**Fig. 8** Dai, Fujiwara and Issey Miyake. A-POC Queen Textile. 1997, Museum of Modern Art, New York. “Issey Miyake, Fujiwara Dai. A-POC Queen Textile. 1997 | MoMA.” MoMA, The Museum of Modern Art, [www.moma.org/collection/works/100361](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/100361).



**Fig. 9** Kawakubo, Rei. *Jumper*. 1982, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. “Jumper | Kawakubo, Rei.” *V&A Search the Collections*, Victoria and Albert Museum. [collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73390/jumper-kawakubo-rei](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73390/jumper-kawakubo-rei).



**Fig. 10** Comme des Garçons, *Spring 1998 Ready-to-Wear*, spring/summer 1998. Borrelli-Persson, Laird. “Comme Des Garçons Spring 1998 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show.” *Vogue*, Vogue, 4 May 2017, [www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1998-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons/slideshow/collection#3](http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1998-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons/slideshow/collection#3).



**Fig. 11** Won Choi, Ji. *Excessivism*. 2017. "EXCESSIVISM." *NOT JUST A LABEL*, [www.notjustalabel.com/collection/ji/excessivism](http://www.notjustalabel.com/collection/ji/excessivism).

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