



LUND UNIVERSITY

CULTIVATING CRITIQUE IN FOLDS AND PLEATS

Posthuman Enactments in the Dress of Rick Owens

WIKTOR HANSSON

SUPERVISOR
Gabriella Nilsson

MASTER OF APPLIED CULTURAL ANALYSIS
Department of Arts and Cultural Studies
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ABSTRACT

Taking as its epistemological starting point the proposed geological era of the Anthropocene, this thesis enquires the affective potential of avant-garde fashion in criticising, improving or transforming the supposed givenness of The Human as a historical concept. In order to do so, it inflects and departs from the tightly held onto-epistemological cannon of fashion studies and anthropology of dress, in which fashion is understood primarily through representation, signification and performance of identity. While recognising earlier scholars' exemplary contributions, this thesis asserts that perception, symbols and signs do not exhaust the relation between humans and clothes, and as fashion studies matures as a field, there is a need for experimental work that does not affirm what is already accounted for. Consequently, it argues for the need for a comprehensive shift in which affect, intra-relationality and posthumanism are at the core of how to understand the human-clothing assemblage; in particular the latter's agential role in hominisation. The outlining of such shift requires a migration from Cartesian theoretical territories supporting a continued stratification of anthropocentric, hegemonic heteronormativity, and the thesis, accordingly, approaches posthuman and non-representational thought as probative analytical and normative tools to unveil the intra-relational dependency of humans and non-humans, born and designed. The thesis holds as its philosophical starting point that fashion is material forms in human lives, but also the very form of human life. Still, whereas art and architecture have long been held in the belief to offer cathartic perspectives on human existence and able to make sense of horrors of past, the pettiness of present, and synthesise a future not yet formed, fashion's ability to act critically has largely been ignored. Taking the agency of fashion in general seriously, and the transformative qualities of avant-garde fashion in particular, the thesis shows through ethnographic examples clothing's potentia in outlining— refashioning — the contours of a more humane, if not more-than-human, future in the age of, and against, the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Posthuman; Fashion; Anthropocene; Intra-Relationality; Rick Owens; Avant-Garde; Deleuze; Queer

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This thesis is a combobulation of inspiring people, affective fashion, provocative books, hazy memories, distant places and intimate desires. Great thanks to each and everyone. I am tremendously grateful for my human collaborators who have, quite literally, showed me what was hiding in their closets. A particular big thank you to my supervisor Gabriella Nilsson, who years back in a constructively shady feedback on a trivial ethnology paper made me feel at home in the academy. She has offered invaluable constructive criticism ever since. However strange it might sound, I want to thank the fashion industry and a mouldy cow stable, for it is wrapped in cloth this thesis began, and respectively, where it matured in the scraping of manure. Finally, I want to thank my family and fiancé, who have encouraged, fed, inspired, ignored, loved and showed me the importance of relationships and care.

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PART I: BEGINNINGS

SETTING THE SCENE

Several years ago, on my way to a morning meeting at Central Saint Martins, London, a figure entered the vast converted industrial premises of the school, just as I was scrambling through my bag to find my entry-card. An eery silence announced the figures coming, and the atmosphere in the Victorian granary building thickened as soon as it reached the central hall; space was vibrating. The figure, to whom the term woman would seem as inadequate as superfluous, wore a dress in the colour of raw umber, or rotten liver, that weighed, unfolded, and floated around her body like a collapsed origami. Tanned, tattooed and pierced, her face, too, was filled with folds and lines, and her henna blackened fingertips looked as if deliberately charred. Lacking an easily readable surface and with organic and non-organic features further obfuscating any canonical representational symbols such as age, gender, ethnicity, class, or even bodily boundaries — her being called for no image beyond the phenomena of herself. Sensemaking was not a concern, as one could but sense. Whether one foot away or two floors up, her presence was piercingly, pressingly acute, and her felt proximity teased out a feeling of otherness felt on my part: who am I? Her presence, the assemblage of flesh, metal, cloth, bone, ink, hair, leather and the echoing sound of her clonking footsteps, unveiled a stranger in me. Like a fold, cut or tear in the smoothness of everyday life, the destabilising affect caused, would not settle. Any question towards her bounced back to me: What is she/I wearing? Why is she/I wearing that? Why does she/I wear not what she/I wears? What is she/I trying to say? Who was she/I? The out of flesh and cloth sculptured figure was Michele Lamy, creator, muse and wife of Rick Owens, a man who is namesake brand she was adorned in. I can still feel the tangibility of her presence, and the discomfort of my own imperceptibility, as if somatically scarred by the experience. I was moved. I was set in motion.



INTRODUCTION

It might seem like a frivolous activity to decipher the ontological being of clothes and its relation to the concept of The Human. In particular, in a troubled time where the production of the former is done in parts of the world where the rights of the latter are ignored or lacking. However, I take that understanding the human-clothing assemblage is a potent first step in understanding the *witness* of the world, that we always have been, and thus always will be, composites of matter entangled over different temporalities and spatialities. A witness which at the present hour is part and parcel of a post-anthropocentric *dying-with*. The thesis explores avant-garde fashion as a critical, creative collaborator that can potentially help us access, become aware of and be affected by the entangled murmuring of the world, and how, by giving the overwhelming immensity of the former a form that makes reality perceptible, and wearable, help imagine a world beyond the Anthropocene.

Now, why fashion? We do things in clothes we cannot do in any other form of artistic expressions or entangled relation, simply because of its proximity to our bodies. Unlike art in galleries we visit, the dwelling we close the door to, bacteria we cannot see, or pets loved but left behind in said dwellings, clothing meets the world with us. Clothes shape our bodies, make us change our diets and help us attract lovers. Clothes are happiest with us. Cold leather softens as it feels our heat, and stiff cotton swirls freely through the warm summer breeze when on a body in motion. Implicitly and explicitly, clothing informs us of what life we should live, or what life we could live, by imposing moods, freeing movements or prohibiting the latter. As undetermined mediators facilitating unexpected encounters, clothes can offer slivers of hope, resistance and transformation. That is why some fashion can feel threatening, as they threaten a way of life, or speak of a life one cannot live. Like tangible thought experiments, an outré outfit can make the constructedness of our norms painfully, amusingly, or uncomfortably obvious. To defend a particular aesthetic is to defend a particular ethic — a way of life, and in extension, a way of enacting human.

Amongst species known, homo sapiens is one of few known to be gifted — or, burdened — with the continual project of reflective, conscious self-creation. This laborious carving out of what to be, and repetitive refashioning of what one has become, have, not coincidentally, unfolded in and out of the creases, pleats and weaves of cloth. Thanks to an unwanted companion species, with whom we partly share name and biological history, *Pediculus humanus humanus*, that is, the textile dwelling body lice, we know that humans have constructed and adorned themselves with fabrics long before environmental needs. From the fall of man to a performance of a man in drag (Butler 1990:174–80), clothing has played a vital part in the process of defining, negotiating and contesting the limits between humans, lesser-humans and non-humans. With fig-leaves in hand and a newfound modesty in mind, the biblical Abrahamic forefathers were engendered as the former

(Genesis, 3:21) and with progressive fashion and posthumanism as probative tools, this thesis attempts to present clothing's potentia in outlining— refashioning — the contours of a more humane, if not more-than-human, or even posthuman, future. How do we begin?

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis' structure is divided into five Parts, where the former three sets the scene for the latter two. Part I has, so far, presented a brief introduction of the thesis' two themes, that is, posthumanism and fashion in the epoch of the Anthropocene. Part I will further position the thesis in a brief contextualisation. The remaining sections of Part I will outline the thesis aim and justification, as well as the research questions. It will close with a methodological discussion on the challenges of marrying critical cultural analysis and posthuman theory. Part II introduces theoretical concepts necessary to think the human-clothing assemblage anew. The posthuman might be post in many regards, but never without place or history. Therefore, I begin to address the concept of anthropocentrism, before its extended application in subsequent Parts. After a compressed cartographic genealogy of what is a most contentious term, the posthuman, I will conclude with outline a theoretical model critical for the analysis of Rick Owens and those who wear the brand.

Part III begins with a knowingly short, but adequate, historical account on fashion within anthropological of dress and the theoretical history of fashion studies. After an account on emerging trends and blind spots, a discussion on the concept of critical fashion and intra-relationality concludes Part III. Part IV moves in and out of micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis of Rick Owens, and includes a historical and contemporary account on the relationship between fashion, art and clothing. Integrating philosophical and anthropological models, I develop a take on critical fashion and critical fashioning, based on the notion of posthuman performativity and intra-relational materialism. To understand the affective qualities of avant-garde clothing, the last sections of Part IV offer an extensive analysis with the wearers of Rick Owens' design. Finally, Part V will bring the thesis to a close in an open-ended analysis, where I address transhumanism and critical cultural analysis unique position to abet with alternative tactics in a political climate of chaotic inertia.

Contextualising the Field

Fashion is slippery. It can be the object of study, a site in which to study, or, a tool for study. Fashion is poignantly timeless in its timeliness, yet obscure in its definition. Fashion is easy to see, yet hard to understand. It is argued to be a phenomena particular to, in and of Western modernity, as well as a fundamental attribute to the development of human beings (Matteucci, 2017: 68-70). Despite its argued superficiality, there is nothing innocent about fashion. It can be a tool of the oppressor to differentiate those considered less human, or, by the capitalist, a tool to obfuscate inequality otherwise considered inhumane (Brasset, 2016: 9; Rocamora & Smelik, 2016: 2). While

the supply chains of the fashion industry are primarily made up of women, it is men who profit on the garments made. The legal minimum wage of a Bangladeshi textile worker is just north of 70 USD/month, whereas Amancio Ortega, the owner Inditex, the parent company of fast fashion leader Zara, is worth shy of 70 billion UDS. The basis of fashion seems to be antinomic, and indeed, heterogeneity might be the most sound definition and shared appellation. Accordingly, fashion studies have produced engaging accounts of the world of couture (Bolton, 2013; Troy, 2003), the world of counter freight (Crăciun, 2014), the world of workers conditions (Neve & Prentice, 2017), and the global, seemingly classless practice of conspicuous consumption (McCracken, 2008). Through fashion, social change has been read, and issues of age, ethnicity, gender and identity explored, be it through a postcolonial framework (Friedman, 1994; Gaugelle & Titton, 2019) feminism (Skeggs, 1997; Dahl, 2011) or cultural geography (Crewe, 2017). Outside academia, the interest in fashion has proliferated in recent years.

However, although the public seems to be more fluent in what fashion *says*, alas, to date, there is a lack of detailed critical attention given to what fashion *does*, that is, its affective, generative and potentially transformative qualities *as matter in-motion on e-motional beings moving through moods*. Neither cloth nor clothed humans argue art, design and media theorist Giuliana Bruno, can be reduced to “optical paradigms or imagined in terms of optical metaphors” (2003: 133). Moreover, whereas art and architecture have long been held in the belief to offer not only new perspectives on the workings of the world, but are often framed as autonomous actors of societal change — and burdened to come up with solutions — fashion’s ability to act critically has, argues artist and art theorist Adam Geczy and fashion researcher Vicki Karaminas, mostly been ignored (2012: 3-6). Paired with the gendered status, or lack thereof, of clothing in the hyper-consumptive body politics of late-modern capitalism, where the desire is not to acquire stuff but to dispose and replace, elevating clothes to the status of art or architecture, might seem like you are running the devils errands. Nevertheless, if the devil is in the details and Nietzsche in your reference list, then fashion should be analysed down to the last seam as according to the latter, there is little but aesthetics (Nietzsche, 1882 [2001]: 335). I intend to do this with the assistance of the work and world of the American designer Owens, an artist fluent in the crises of the mind and cosmos.

Rick Owens

Rick Owens, or Richard Saturnino Owens, is a Californian designer based in Paris. The art school trained painter-cum-pattern maker-cum cult designer, now far from his drug-infused years in LA, is something of a unicorn. Unlike the majority of fashion houses, Owens’ 24-year-old business, with an annual turnover in excess of €100m a year, overseeing nine independent stores and stocked in over 800 retail points, is independently owned. The niche but global brand even own their SA8000¹

(social accountability standard) accredited factories in Italy and Moldova (O’Flaherty, 2017). Apart from the biannual presentation of his mainline for men and women, the vertical business includes several diffusion lines — Hunrickowens, Rickowenslilies, Drkshdw — as well as a limited furniture collection. Non of which the brand has ever advertised for. Other than Owens being owned by Owens, the aesthetic proposed by the brand is equally inseparable from the designer, who is known to wear a uniform of the brand's staples: drop-crotch shorts, leggings, chunky sneakers, and a fitted tank top or cashmere turtle-neck. All in black or soft, dusty earth colours. With regards to his aesthetics, says:

I always wanted to have kind of a quiet flamboyance...and I wanted to challenge aesthetics that I felt were too narrow and too conservative and too rigid and too judgmental. I wanted to broaden those parameters a bit or blur them or fuck with them.
(Schumann, 2018)

Owens is a designer who’s radical creations cannot, I argue, be seen as mere clothes or luxury fashion, but in its presentation, craft and research into the nature of clothes' relationship with humans and beyond, his artistic expression often conflates into an anthropological method and philosophical inquiry of the givenness of institutionalised identities in a heteronormative, capitalist society. Accordingly, it would be erroneous to think of his clothes as citations, metaphors or brackets to his oral explanations; instead, speech and cloth form a coherent, material elaboration on how Owens sees and summons the world and what sort of human therein dwells. His philosophising seems embedded in the garment’s cut, and as it unfolds on and with the wearer, the aesthetics of a piece of clothing appears to suggest a deep reflection or pontification and demands the same from wearer and observer. Mostly so because a tinkering reflection and decision making would seem necessary in the bringing about of the abstract shapes that have come to represent the brand. To philosophise in such a way — in fact, in any sort of way — weighs heavy on your mind as it does on the body, and to move through a world that tends to laugh or lash at those who transgress norms, to be dressed in Owens seems to present philosophical and practical challenges not always pleasurable. The question is, then, what is there to gain at the threshold of sartorial aesthetics? That is, at the *avant-garde*².

Owens’ wearers form an emergent, global swarm flocking to the fashion capitals biannually, to then disperse over the world at random. Although they are seldom hard to identify as there seems to be a slippery slope effect to the aesthetic lure of the brand, and wearers don it from head to toe, the internal hierarchy, segmentation, and level of engagement in the loosely formed global community — or tribe, as it is often referred to in the fashion press (Menkes, 2012; Foley, 2017; Salter, 2019) — is heterogeneous and complex. When looking at the most followed fan-pages of Owens on social media and popular accounts belonging to individuals who wear the brand, there

seems to be two dominant and parallel, yet intermingling groups 1) straight-identifying men who find that they can explore their masculinity 2) non-straight identifying men and gender-queer actors moving away from clear or any gender affirmation. The overall kinship group in which Owens belongs — as an aesthetic strand, brand and community — can be called *avant-garde*, *dark avant-garde*, or simply *dark-wear*. *Dark* alludes both to the heavy usage of the colour black, and alignment with a certain, but not always, post-apocalyptic aesthetic. Owens' impact in this group, as well as fashion at large, cannot be overstated (Patos, 2017).

Anthropocene

Humans' current engagement with fashion, and material culture at large, is part and parcel of a seemingly inexorable systemic collapse of the environment. The need for a critical reevaluation on this relationship is linked to the urgency of the Anthropocene, in which androgenic, i.e. human, activities are a major, if not the primary geophysical force that threatens humans and her co-occurring others. Understood as a relatively recent past and present reality— albeit of a contested sort — in which this analysis is made, I, as a non-earth-scientist, use the Anthropocene as an epistemological filter through which to explore the questions guiding this thesis. Understood as such, the Anthropocene — labelled by the chemist Paul Crutzen (2006) — works as a navigational tool in what seems to be a conflation of crises: environmental crises, crises in masculinity, crises of representation, and a crisis of thinking, and more specifically, critical thinking. All to which, somewhere between *The Sixth Extinction*, IPCC's Fifth Assessment and *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, a sense of proactive urgency is missing (Morton, 2010: 3; Zylinska, 2014: 19). Although it is an era that calls our name, the *anthropos*, we would be betrayed to think that it calls for anything but an end to most of us.

Although it would be anthropocentric— that is, to elevate the human species as somehow inherently central in the world — to claim that humans, as a singularity, are responsible for the climate crises, and in the same hubristic vein, to frame human extinction as a significant event in the temporal scale of the earth's existence, the Anthropocene is of a particular time and material entanglement which without the human would arguably not take place (Crutzen, 2006: 13-14). The modern human is, as New Media theorist Richard Grusin puts it, a “climatological force” (2015, vii) and it is the outcome of the conjoint actions of our petroleum-based capitalism where the energy of long-dead organic matter are fuelling a lifestyle killing life. Accordingly, it would perhaps be more suitable to call it by feminist STS theorist and biologist Donna Haraway's term, by way of Lund University geographer Andreas Malm³, *Capitalocene*⁴ to catch the genealogy of this violent nexus, as well as its geology (Haraway, 2015: 160).

Due to the vastness of time, humans cannot see planetary processes and geological changes they might have caused but through the pernicious effects of human-induced climate crises. Still, as the repercussions of the latter have an unequal distribution primarily affecting populations in the so-called Global South, people in developed nations can look away, for now. To them — including myself — the Anthropocene is primarily, and importantly for this thesis, *an aesthetic event*, and the sublime art of our time is the news images of tornados, landslides and forest fires as narrated by natural historian and broadcaster David Attenborough. We are voyeurs who find a perverse pleasure in the brutal aesthetic of the Anthropocene. “Shock can wear off” asserted cultural critic Susan Sontag (Sontag, 2003:82), and confronted by numbers predicting our doom, we switch the channel and watch the retiling of yet another suburban bathroom, feeling content in our Whole Food sustainability. Still, although the subject and human-centred narratives you face everyday validate individual action, you know that it is not enough to solve ‘It’. Endorsing organic, sustainable, ecological or environmentally friendly products cannot save us when the ‘woke’ consumer and user of such goods and services, The Human, is none of the beforehand mentioned. These words, opaque concepts really, are arguably culpable in producing an acceptance, if not indifference, by skirting the immensity of the issue at hand (Zylinska, 2014 132). It is in these political, environmental, affective, and importantly, aesthetic encounters the Anthropocene summons, this thesis stems from and against. So what does it matter, one might ask, if in a city, on a busy street, a man in a sweeping dress passes twenty men in a city where men do not wear sweeping dresses. What does it matter, when the world beyond that street in that city, is doomed to face a future without men nor dresses. Where lies your academic ambition, if you choose to study clothes and, not least, what more is there, really, to know about fashion?

Aim & Justification

A concern throughout the research was whether I was misgiven, and intellectually arbitrary, in framing an everyday practice such as dressing, and an everyday item such as clothing, in an over-reflexive and esoteric account. An answer to the said concern is residing in the questions posted at the end of the section above — and of course, in this thesis as a whole. That is, I believe that the insecurity felt when devoting academic stringency to woven fibres comes from clothing’s power and ability to recede from our consciousness. *Clothing matters and is powerful because it does not seem to be*. Still, the possibilities we can imagine as human beings, that is, the horizon onto which we set our path, seem, to a large extent, to be dependent on seemingly frivolous things. The colour temperature streaming in from a large window, the size of a room, the window’s role in sizing a room, the fit of a shirt, pleasant sounds, the **typeface** in this text, the taste of a chewing gum or height of a ceiling, can help or hinder us from seeing more or even wanting to become more

(Botton, 106: 2006). That matters enormously if the Anthropocene — which has brought about the genuine possibility of a multi-species extinction, including humans — is taken to be a primarily a sensorial phenomenon. That is, a somaesthetic experience of living in a damaged world; a world primarily understood, notes culture theorist Heather Davis and philosopher Etienne Turpin, through the visual and affective engagement with our surrounding, be it scientific models, science fiction, news, art and fashion (Turpin & Davis, 2015: 3). The valorisation I place in Rick Owens' design, and why I believe it to be pertinent to this study, lies precisely in its affective capacities. The question is to what degree it shapes those who engage with it.

In what is a continued exploration into the applicability of a posthuman lens in critical cultural analysis, this thesis proposes an expanded, complementary addition to the historical and anthropocentric tendencies in fashion studies and cultural analysis. It does so to examine avant-garde clothing's potentia in outlining— refashioning — the contours of a more-than-human future in the age of, and against, the Anthropocene. This aim necessitates a shift away from the canonised perspective of equating fashion with clothes and stylistic trends, to instead take dress and dressing, fashioning, as a critical, emergent and homonisational practice. The thesis is, partly, a response to calls from researchers who have expressed the need for ethnographically informed analysis into the areas in which this thesis finds itself in-between, and it further addresses unnoticed gaps where further study is needed (Ruggerone, 2017; Vänskä, 2019; Matteuci & Marino, 2017). However, the thesis also finds its aim in the call from things themselves.

Throughout my time in academia, and as life has unfolded, I have struggled to find an existing vocabulary in which the intensities and sensed agency of the material world — in particular, clothing — and its fleeting, yet, at times, acute vibrancy felt, can be addressed without sounding like a born-again shaman. I believe that when allowed to weave critical, creative and flexible thinking and practical methods — of which philosophy, art, carpentry, and photography can be a part of — anthropology, ethnology or indeed cultural analysis, are the fields best suited to, temporarily, catch a glimpse of that *whatness* of the world, and to tie down those strings of life not yet knotted, naturalised and spoken of as Reality. As will become evident, the thesis has an extended objective in which I reflect on and argue for an expanded, post-anthropocentric posthuman practice and will, subsequently, deal with the difficulties of such an argument.

To be sure, the purpose of this thesis is to show, on the one hand, how avant-garde fashion is an efficient and affective tool in investigating, critiquing and potentially usher in a reconfigured understanding of The Human. Further, and, in contrast to earlier studies, it argues that this is something that takes place not only on the catwalk but on the streets of New York and barren Norwegian mountain tops. I seek to do that by exploring the space in-between hermetic, negentropic fashion of present past, and the futuristic, whether dystopian or utopian, ideas of

tomorrow, designed and worn today. Rick Owens does not offer an exhaustive representation of fashion's inquiry into questions of being-in-the-world. However, as other designers, notably Hussein Chalayan, Rei Kawakubo, Gareth Pugh, and Vivienne Westwood, have been given considerable popular and academic attention, and following Rick Owens' — to the thesis aptly titled — 2017 retrospective exhibition *Inhuman, Subhuman, Superhuman*, the brand seemed like a fertile, uncharted territory. On the other hand, albeit intertwined with the above, this thesis also attempts to elucidate the centrality of posthumanism and fashion studies in the development of a non-representational theory in the humanities. Accordingly, the primary interest is not the intentions or ideas of the people designing or wearing avant-garde fashion, but what avant-garde fashion does with the person when touched, visually or somatically, by clothes. Finally, the aspiration for this thesis, and as a young researcher, is to engage in the making of the world theoretically, practically, analytically and synthetically, and to show possibilities of becoming by knowing more and, importantly, knowing differently.

Research Questions

1. How does Rick Owens' work, singularly, disseminate the costs and demands of our time, and can it, if at all, change our practical reality in order to pursue a better time?
2. How can dressing in his fashion afford epistemic access to transformative knowledge, and what are the possibilities in reframing one's daily existence through the act of dressing?
3. What is the potential in avant-garde fashion design in criticising, advancing or transforming the Anthropocene and the supposed givenness of The Human?

METHODOLOGY

Although theory, methods, practice, fields and collaborators form a leaky, cross-contaminative assemblage, and can only be understood — by, through, in, and with — as such, for navigational ease, I have chosen to divide the beforehand mentioned. In this section, I will address the epistemological and methodological approach which has guided the research. I will first offer a discussion on posthumanism's bearing on methodology. The subsequent section problematises the practice of auto-ethnography before I describe how I gathered the material informing the thesis. The final section will offer a reflection on ethics and the position of the researcher, as seen through a post-masculinist perspective.

Accessing: Posthuman Methodology

From the outset, I understood that 'dehumanizing' method, theorisation, as well as the written presentation, would be challenging. Whatever word used — agency, vitality, actor — corollaries of

PRACTICE CRAFT
Restoration of three
properties 2014-2019
Painting, professional work
and leisure
Furniture making

**INTRA-RELATIONAL POSTHUMAN
PHILOSOPHY**

Rosi Braidotti
Haraway
Barad
Deleuze
Zylinska

**INTRA-RELATIONAL QUALITATIVE
ANALYSIS**

Ingold
Fischer
Dewsbury
Wylie

**NON-REPRESENTATIONAL
FASHION STUDIES**

Smelik
Seely
Gercy & Karaminas
Ruggerone
Vänskä

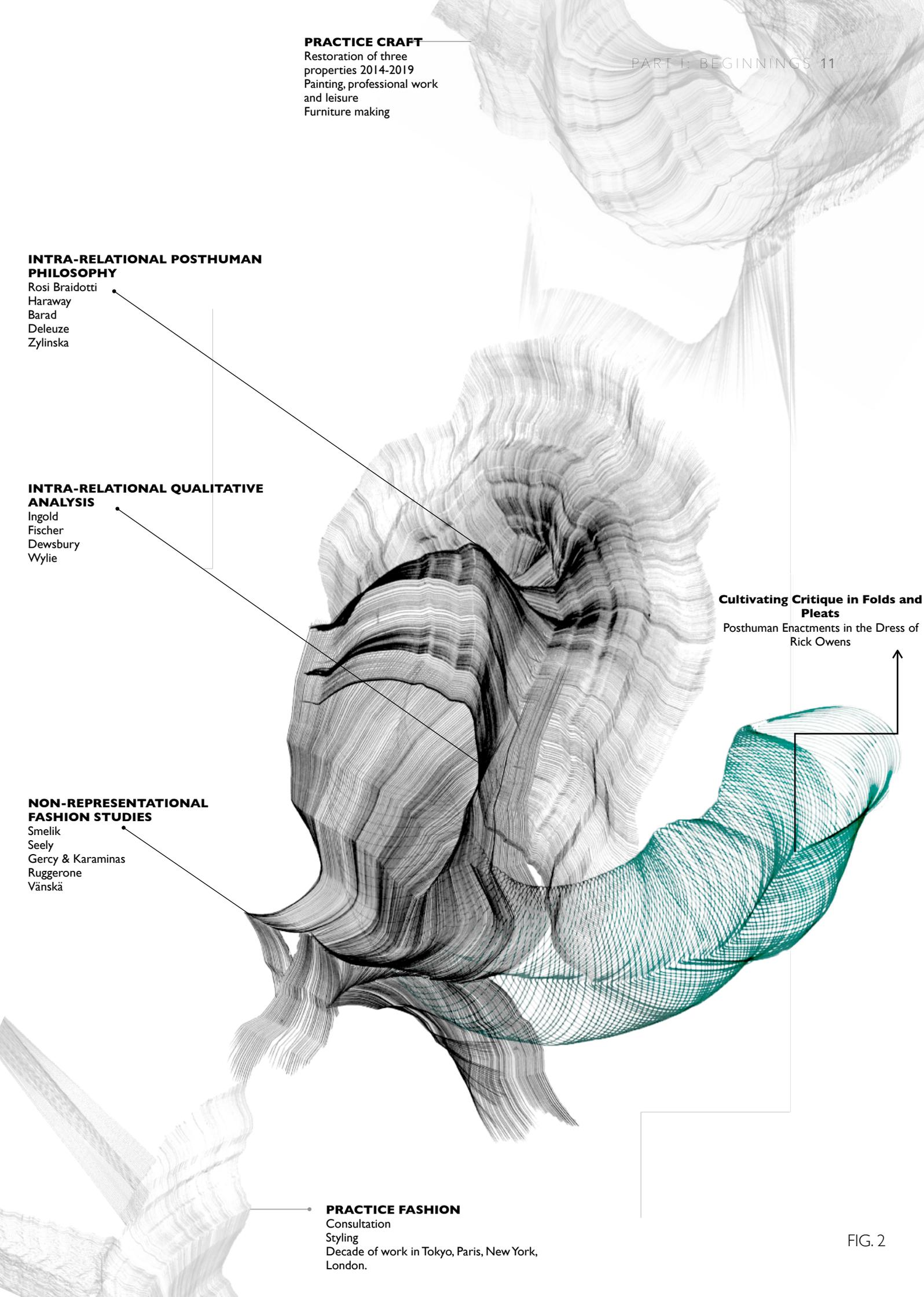
**Cultivating Critique in Folds and
Pleats**

Posthuman Enactments in the Dress of
Rick Owens

PRACTICE FASHION

Consultation
Styling
Decade of work in Tokyo, Paris, New York,
London.

FIG. 2



a very human nature followed, and it is almost impossible not to quickly rationalise the *whatness* of what political theorist Jane Bennet calls vibrant matter, and take on the role of the a subject in a world amongst innate objects (Bennet, 2010:102, 120). Moreover, this thesis is littered with pronoun ‘I’ arguing to not be such an ‘I’ in the first place, if ‘I’ is not hidden in the ventriloquism of academic writing (Meißner, 2016: 3). So, what is an all too human posthuman to do? Rhizome.

To rhizome is to mess up the boundaries of static identities and entities, proposed philosopher Gilles Deleuze and experimental psychotherapist Felix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 15, 21). There are “no set of instructions for this method...not even a handy Baedeker or Lonely Planet guide” says human geographers Dewsbury J.D, Harrison P, Rose M and Wylie J, who calls for resolute experimentalism in trying to catch a world always more excessive than we can fathom (Dewsbury et al. 2002: 439). To systematically describe a rhizomatic being-doing-knowing of a method is therefore hard. So, let me explain with the cooperation of visuals (figure 2). The picture is meant to explicate that centrifugal and centripetal forces of engaging in the ongoing processes that lent themselves to the issues that are the interest of this thesis: body, space, creativity, fashion, and art. Refraining from categorising my ‘readings’ of my field into hierarchies, where serendipitous moments and unconventional practices are not accounted for, or find their source reallocated from a drunken banter to one more suitable and citable, rhizomatic thinking attempts to linger in naïvety (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 18, 21).

The thinking of this thesis is the outcome of a multitude of ongoing processes — an assemblage — that is my life, and I cannot unproblematically pretend that a majority of the processing of my material did not take place in ever-shifting, de-centred and non-hierarchical practices of stumbling around, which produced multiple, and inevitably, excessive connections of importance to the thesis. These are not neutral apparatus under the subordination of *research-proper*: they are most definitely implicated in the arranging and knotting together of the material in this thesis. To cut them out of the picture would be erroneous. Plugging the material, as philosophers of education Alicia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei call it in their critique of abiding or making it look as if one abided to a linear process, through the practices and theories depicted in figure 2, over and over, has offered diffractive outcomes of the same quotes, ideas and feelings: something a coding software such as Nvivo would not (Jacksson & Mazetti, 2012: 14). Neither re-reading the hours of meticulously transcribed interviews in oTranscribe⁵ or seeing abstract patterns of connectivity as I scraped cow manure of my stable walls, was more informative, or structured than the other. Together they offered "new conceptual territories resulting from unpredictable juxtapositions" (Rhizomes, n.d.). For that reason, I eschewed coding and thematic analysis, as I find it to be an uncomfortably arbitrary exercise, offering a “closed system for fixed meaning” (Jacksson & Mazzei, 2012: 7) that is too reductive.

With the in mind, this thesis has applied a jumping of scales, fields and practices as both a method and — tentatively — presentation. The importance of jumping, argues geographer Neil Smith, lies in the radical political and social potential in “deliberate confusion and abrogation” (Smith, 1992: 6) and to that end, I have immersed myself in practical, theoretical and artistic activities, such as carpentry, painting, photography and a feeble attempt on poetry, to gain parallax openings to the issues the thesis address. The zigzagging juxtaposing of joining, cutting, reading and touching was used as a methodological tool insofar as it unsettled my own a priori expectations and embodied knowledge. Although this might sound mystical, I believe it is more secular — and representative of how most cultural analysts work — than any archaic form of theory-method-practice categorisation and what anthropologist Tim Ingold calls “slavish adherence to the protocols of positivist methodology” (Ingold, 2014:384).

Guided by an ontological framework where intra-relational posthuman theory is used to poke and speculate on the clothed human body, the human body and its sensing, seeing and sense-making, is in turn used to poke on the former in a productive oscillation. Approaching the field by reading Deleuze through Zen buddhism, Ingold through Le Guin, or Tsing through Game of Thrones has offered ways of opening up to new points of entry. The zigzag, argues the Deleuze, “is the lightning bolt spark of creation and the ‘crosscutting path from one conceptual flow to another’...unpredictable, undisciplined, anti-disciplinary, and non-static.” (Deleuze, 2013: xi). I might be treading on thin ice, but my interest is not whether the ice can hold, that is, am I interpreting the thinkers right, but how far I can get and what sensations does the fright of falling through bring about. It is here that the material emerges. As philosopher and theorist Brian Massumi wrote in the introduction to his translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*:

The question is not: Is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? (Massumi, 1987. xl)

That is, however, not an easy task. The research questions of this thesis required a flexible methodology that took into consideration non-human actors, as well as positioning of myself as a post-anthropocentric if not posthuman researcher. A key aspect to the latter was to approximate and hold onto a sense of an ‘I’ as deeply entangled outside of the masculinist detached and knowing academic subject of humanism, who represents the world through contemplative theorisations, but whom himself is not theorised (Meißner, 2016: 4). It requires attuning to the sense of the world outside of rational sense-making; a non/sense of a sort perhaps best reached through less privileged, somatic sensations. I do this by drawing on my own bodily awareness, ie. physically engaging with things in general, and clothing in particular, together with views of the body found in European as

well as Asian writings, such as the Japanese philosopher Masao Abe (1985) and media theorist and artist Joanna Zylińska (2014). Seeing the researching body as a site of knowledge production is not to say that body reigns over mind in a new form of dualism: that would be a reversal of a structure rather than a reconstruction. Neither body nor mind determines the other, but they, I would argue, convolved as they unfold, enfold, and refold into each other, which points to another convolution.

Inherent in a posthuman methodology, argues philosopher Francesca Ferrando (2016) is the non-dual nature of theory and practice, knowing and doing. The making of any of the two is always already dependent on multiple actors - dead, alive, textual, virtual and not - causing multiple diffractions, conflating any sense of separation between modes of theorising and modes of field-working. Trying to hold onto a posthuman methodological framework long enough to say that there is none, philosopher of education Jasmine B. Ulmer argues that it “is at once creative, practical, ethical, and wild” practice (2017: 8). To put theory to work as a method is to always be in the middle of it, never in the beginning nor end. It is rhizomatic, to once again borrow Deleuze’s saying, in that it is “open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 12). However, to explore the fleeting, precognitive or the vitality of the non-human, and make methodological decisions is easier said than done. And it is not easy said. Often I found myself in foul doubt where my will to experiment and think otherwise faltered in sight of the banality and brutality that is the contemporary fashion industry. But mostly because it is hard not to relegate clothes as mere stuff *and at the same time* sense a vital doing-of-the-world not subservient to human agency.

The words *clothes* and *fashion* instantly call methodological and theoretical suitors to their door: symbolism, representation, deviance, visual communication, rituals and the lure of the broad applicability of Bourdieu, all stand eagerly waiting. In this thesis, they are, unfortunately, ill-fitted. No more clarity is necessarily given when asking questions of an emancipatory kind, such as: how do humans listen to things; how can humans translate what is felt; or can, as anthropologist Martin Holbraad asks in a flirtation with literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, things speak (Holbraad, 2011). Clothes, more so than animals or matter deemed alive, are particularly obfuscated by the tradition in Western metaphysics to repudiate agency from the material world, limiting the extent to which we can conceptualise a post-anthropocentric world view, let alone methodology. However, whilst some schools of thought, namely social, cultural and historical constructivism, hold that it is the very materiality of our bodies which limits humans from listening or feeling stuff, that the world is unattainable, I would argue, in line with Bennett’s critique of said intellectual leanings, that the limitation lies in the conceptual mould in which the history and reality of said body has been formed (Bennet, 2010:17). Clothes and things do something to me: to us, humans. So as an advantageous methodological tool, a such human would seem preferable to use.

A Note on Auto-Ethnographic; or, Participant Observation

The point of departure for the thesis is over a decade of working internationally in various positions in the fashion industry, and from the experience of moving around the world, figuratively and literally, in the said designer and those of the same vernacular. So although I speak of Owens shows and clothes as if reading a text, I talk with the somatic memory of having been to his shows, knowing people who regularly attend his shows, as well as the actual and social weight of wearing his design. To that end, the so-called auto-ethnographic element is also a composition of the ways in which Owens and people who wear the brand have intersected into my life.

According to human geographer K. Besio (2009), there are two ways of ‘doing’ auto-ethnography, that have an impact on methodological and textual performance. The first one could be referred to as an autobiographic, phenomenological auto-ethnography, where one weaves layers of proximity into the tonality of the text, but also use the body in the process of turning what Tami Spry in her account in dancing, eating disorder and writing calls “internally somatic into the externally semantic” (Spry, 715). The other, argues Besio, is writing ethnographically about one’s culture. I perform a mix of the mentioned. However, auto-ethnographic methods need not result in auto-biographical writings, and ethnography and auto-ethnography, argues Ingold in an intentionally polemic essay, need not have anything to do with anthropology or cultural analysis (Ingold: 2014; Ingold 2017).

Questions have been levelled as to the whether the ‘view from within’ or a textually present self is as problematic as the spectatorial vision from above, as critiqued by philosopher and historian Michel De Certeau, who in 1984 argued the latter to be blind to the meandering life of practice in its panoptical gazing of the world (1984). To some extent, and the reason I cannot comfortably claim that I am ‘doing’ auto-ethnography, is that there is little choice to be made as to whether one applies a me-methodology, if you like, onto one’s work or not. To hold that is possible to refrain from doing so, and think of oneself as a disembodied seer who objectively observes, one is arguably no longer doing cultural analysis. To be entangled and learn from one’s situated position in a context is not an alternative space of experimentation; it is a space always already there, namely, it is cultural analysis.

Participatory observation is a way of seeing and knowing that encompasses the situational space in which the phenomena unfolds. It is the act of joining and *being-with* the ones one seeks to know something about, and it is “absolutely not a method of data collection”(Ingold, 2018: 14). What is felt is an extended sense of selfhood, or rather, an emptying of the former, where one becomes with the thickness of phenomena. Participatory observation produces a sense of self that can only be sensed outside of a static self. We might call it the anthropological self, who, open to the world “studies the conditions and possibilities of being human. That, precisely, is to do

anthropology”. (Ingold, 2014: 388) To frame the disciplines mentioned above as a perpetual re-education on the possibilities of being human, one can also escape the desire of closure in the analysis and, perhaps, the need to call something auto-ethnography. Cultural analysis is, to me, this repetitive, reflexive self-transformation; it is a string to tie knots with, and a string to hold onto when the present does not reflect a future present.

To keep the conversation going and stay with the trouble of tying knots, one must explicate who does the talking, tying and sticking around, and what they do when they do. Partly because of methodological accuracy, but also for poetry: evocative argumentation is needed for the study of affect and posthuman performativity, and like an artist, I decide how to depict the world in a way that I think catches the reality. Still, and most importantly, the weaving in of explicitly subjective elements is ethical and political. Now, by that I do not mean political cum oppositional negativity. Political beyond dialectics is instead affirmative, creative, transformative and, most importantly “of everyday life, where ‘life’ is not taken for granted” (Braidotti & Dolphijn, 2004: 28). In short, I wear my heart and bias on my sleeve.

Acquiring: Memory, Talk, Text and Stories

Retaining a critical distance to Owens is difficult. Not because I, as a researcher, appreciate and wear his work, but that he, as a designer, is well aware of the issues I address. To a large extent, we engage in similar themes through different means, be it queer theory, posthuman thought, non-Western philosophy or modernist architecture. How then can I say something about Owens that he is not saying about himself? My leverage as a researcher is, therefore, somewhat more limited than say, versus those who wear Owens. Though, even they were, because of their interest in Owens and their professions in art, architecture and academia, equally well versed in philosophical and artistic theory. Still, that is not a weakness of the material, but one of its strengths. Due to the limited number of human informants — five — the time I could spend with each of the collaborators, and the degree to which they could converse, discuss and theorise the research questions with me, I believe that what I might have missed in the breadth was gained in depth. Moreover, when it comes to qualitative analysis, I deem one can do more with less, focusing instead on the quality of the data.

The empirical material relating to these human actors was primarily, or actively, sourced in the fall-winter of 2018 and spring 2019. In the preliminary communication with the people I engaged with, the purpose of the study was clearly stated, including research questions, along with information on archiving of recordings and usage of the finished text. All collaborators have, in writing or on the record, agreed to participate, and most importantly, given *explicit* consent to the usage of pictures showing their faces. No collaborator was interviewed less than 1-1.5 hours over at least two separate occasions. The process was both multi-locale and multiscaled. I have followed

individuals in shops, companies on social media, and clothes into my closet. When possible, I travelled to collaborators current location, and throughout writing this thesis, I have been to Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands (specific names and places are anonymised to the degree I found necessary). Contact was maintained throughout the research period on various social media platforms — Facebook, Instagram and FaceTime — to verify ideas, quotes and further the discussions had in face-to-face meetings.

Although I engaged with a large number of people inside and outside the fashion industry, I focused on five people, whom all but one defined themselves as on the LGBTQI+ spectrum. Two of them, Adam, a painter, and Erik, an architect, identify as gay males. John, an artist, and I the researcher, both find our gender identity to be non-binary. John prefers the male pronoun. Julian, a dancer, identifies as queer gay, and Judson, an academic in engineering, is heterosexual+, which will be addressed in the subsequent analysis. Apart from the fact that the Owens' community is, as phrased by Erik, "a sausage feast", I decided to focus on people assigned male at birth, for the simple reason that, first, a clear majority of work in fashion studies has concentrated on women's bodies and women's wear. Secondly, the, according to Ruggerone, popularly accepted idea that "women are more affected by clothes than men"(2017: 583) simplifies the complexity of enacting the clothed body. Therefore, looking at non-female actors could contribute to diversify that picture. Finally, I needed to limit the sampling pool. So by approaching a group already framed, I could also look for differences.

The reason for working with primarily LGBTQI+ identifying persons wearing Owens was crucial to this thesis on philosophical and pragmatic grounds. Philosophically as gay, trans or queer bodies, in a varying intersectional intensity, as postulated by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, tend to be deemed other, porous and less than human (Ahmed, 2018) In the same, varied intensity, our bodies are also often experienced as such by us. We repeatedly become strangers of many kinds and have to face the "uncomfortable 'body-doubles' or simulacra" of 'being me' *and* being not quite normal (Braidotti, 2015: 4). We are not strangers because we are overlooked, but precisely because we fail to pass, and thus succeed in being recognised as that which the norm is not (Ahmed, 2000: 21). Which leads to the pragmatic point. To *not* be stranger still and to be safe, LGBTQI+, are often more attuned to the call of things and energy of spaces (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013: 2-7). Presentation is a site for epistemological battle; to know thyself, is to be a safer self. Hence, this thesis hoped that the process of phenomenological re-orientation, arguably experienced to a larger degree amongst LGBTQI+, could offer richer and already articulated ideas on self, body and space.

Interviews

Interviews occupy an elevated position of being particularly valid and fresher in cultural analytical research, arguably as it takes place in the present time and in the presence of a speaking, or in other ways, acting human being (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012: viii). Still, it is only when we researchers are outside of the collaborators present and presence, after being thoroughly processed, that the truth about the 'true' date emerges. Although questioning the primacy of language and the interview is by no means new or radical, the precedence of the spoken, and perhaps more so in an applied context where convincing pitch-quotes are often stressed as imperative, remains (Sunderland & Denny, 2007: 183). As addressed, the focus when interviewing my collaborators was not any biographical truth claims made, but to answer, in particular, research question two (see p.10). Assuming, in line with Jackson & Mazzei, that any recollection is always a partial and fragmented re-interpretations as re-told by my collaborators, and not a truth-claim made, I instead looked for cracks, or rather, excess to the smoothness of already interpreted memories of experiences (2012: 3, 7).

Negated as my primary focus, I still believe that the collaborators deserve a short introduction, if only for the readers' sake. The reason I contacted these five people was quite random: I had only met one, Julian, before I started this research, and I was aware of the others as we moved in similar professional and social circles. As such, aside from the fact that they mainly wore Owens, I knew little about them and their lives. Although Adam, an artist, and I have known of each other for more than a decade through friends in Berlin's avant-garde art scene, our first face-to-face conversation took place this year, 2019, in his apartment in a large Swedish city. The interview lasted approximately four hours, with continued contact over social media. Adam is the only person in which the interview was conducted in Swedish. Adam holds a Master of Fine Arts.

Julian is a friend whom I have known for six years. Although an issue of proximity might be raised, his professional work as a dancer, artist and writer have been tremendously informative in the research. In his work, Julian approaches similar issues but from a different, somatically informed practice, and he is actively taking part in the ongoing academic and artistic debate concerning posthuman theory in practice and art. I have interviewed Julian in several different countries, situations and formats. We did two, more extended unstructured interviews, in addition to shop-alongs in Brussels and London and close correspondence over the thesis period. Julian holds a BA in Ballet and Contemporary Dance. Erik was interviewed three times á 60-180 minutes over FaceTime in the spring/fall of 2018, with further discussions over social media, before I travelled to his hometown in Norway in January of this year. There, we hung out over a day, and I observed him working in the architecture studio at his university, followed by an evening in his nearby apartment. Although we have mutually followed each other on social media for several years, our physical paths had not crossed. Erik is obtaining an MA in Architecture.

I had intended to go to New York to engage with what is a more prominent scene of Owens' followers. Although the research could have profited from face-to-face meetings in the way of e.g. walk-alongs in an American context, I opted to interview Judson, a researcher in the natural science, FaceTime-to-FaceTime. Similar to the others, I only knew of Judson through social media, and our unstructured interview lasted for approximately three hours. Judson holds an MA in Engineering. John is a practicing artist and an acquaintance I have known for almost a decade from when I worked as a model. I conducted three semi-constructed interview over FaceTime, lasting approximately 60 min per session. Further communication was maintained over social media throughout the thesis period.

So how does one assure quality in a rhizomatic, posthuman methodology? The process by which I interacted with my collaborators, as well as how I recorded and excluded the inclusion of parts of the former, was, as in any qualitative research, fraught with relations of varying intensities. What makes the inherent complexities of doing research somewhat more subtle in this study, was that the difference amongst the collaborators themselves, and me, the researcher, was seemingly small. This is not a definite study of the so-called subaltern, nor is it a 'study up' (Davies, 2008: 44; Stender, 2017: 33). We are all in our mid-to-late twenties, white, assigned male at birth, live in a large or capital city, work with or are heavily engaged in art, architecture and/or fashion, and we wear Rick Owens. Although I have the power in framing questions, transcribing their sentences, and disseminate my interpretation of their words (cf. Davies, 2008: 127-8), that in itself did not necessarily, or securely, established a position of authority during our interactions. To the extent that they knew of me, they would, in a community that fosters a cult-like following, categorise me as a somewhat blasphemous actor, as I am more inclined towards Japanese avant-garde fashion.

Now, I would argue that this somewhat ambiguous status — insider/outsider, friend/stranger, Rick Owens wearer/aesthetically promiscuous, academic/Instagram follower — has been methodologically advantageous. First, the collaborators located me as an informed stranger, an acquaintance whom they can, and in my judgment, did speak with in comfort and openness. There was, as it were, no need for me to fashion an understanding of neither general facts nor intricate details, slang or gossip. That, in turn, secured an uninterrupted flow in the conversation, which, due to the already established virtual relationships between me and the collaborators, were mostly unstructured. Secondly, the ambiguity allowed me to use my own experience to inform questions, and form interpretations of the issues addressed yet, at the same time, claim or take certain distance as to elude the risk of cultural blindness due to proximity or topic familiarity. It would, therefore, be too easy of a demarcation to define my association as either native or outsider. The tension of moving through countries I feel at home in, through communicative platforms that blurred private and professional life, with people I knew of, is perhaps best described by Mascarenhas-Keyes as

“professionally induced schizophrenia” (1987: 180). When recorded, the interviews were transcribed the same day or the day following the interview and returned to when needed. A journal was used as either complimentary tool to recorded interviews, or as the primary tool when recordings were not deemed suitable or possible. Please see references for a detailed list of interview material. As stated in the aim of the thesis, my concern was the inter-activity of the human-clothing assemblage, not my collaborators cultural, social or historical particularities. Accordingly, their accounts should be seen as and were indeed used as, yet another means to “plug into” my material, where human accounts and phenomenologically informed interpretation form a singular epistemology.

Object-Based Research

Object-based research, understood as a close examination of clothes as well as the phenomenological experience of wearing said design, was central to the study, and it forms the foundational authority from which and how I speak about fashion, in particular Rick Owens. Depending on methodological nationalism — such as American anthropology’s intimate relationship with archaeology or Nordic ethnology’s recording of cultural heritage — cultural analysis’ object of study is oftentimes just that, objects and stuff, whether under the banner Material Studies or not. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is a shortcoming in the approach cultural studies have tended to engage with objects, and that is that few do just that. That is, engage bodily, phenomenologically with the unique attributes of matter as not only expressions of human life and inert carriers of the formers communicative desires, but as powerful, agentive shapers of the world.

Objects, argues historian Leora Auslander, are embodied. Like people they “occupy space and cannot be in two places at once, and they are mortal” (2005: 1016). Formed by and forming relations with humans and non-humans operating at different temporal and spatial scales within shared spaces, stuff — designed or natural — cannot be reduced to mere projection surfaces of words and minds, argues Auslander, a postulation to which I adhere. Even if objects are conferred, as Auslander partly does, as agentive agents of communication and information, albeit in modes different than language, what she importantly highlights is that any analysis of stuff is flawed if one does not include an analysis of the affective materiality of stuff, be it a dress or a chest for dresses. The “aesthetic also structure people’s perception of the world” she argues “thereby changing that world”(ibid: 1018).

Object-based research under an intra-related, non-representational ontology is enormously constraining yet frightfully free. As a researcher, one moves from abstract theorising and highly conceptual schemas to threads, sweaty crotches and broken zippers. Perhaps it is in this oscillating tension, of guarding yet transversing thresholds: abstract-pragmatic, object-subject,

language-matter, human-nonhuman, theory-testimony, in which more adequate understandings can form. For is that not what fashion is, too? Abstract yet always materially situated in a particular socio-political context and time. A visual analysis of pictures of Owens the person, persons in Owens the brand, or Owens' design without persons, can point to meaningful relationships amongst stuff, spaces and narratives. The fact that an outfit was shot in a particular way, in a specific city, in an affective landscape made up of a multitude of emotive nods, arguably says something. Still, whereas I do use visual analysis, I do not apply this method in a highly sophisticated, systematic manner, as a focus on the visual representation of matter-in-relations would take this thesis somewhere else. Instead, I use it as a way to orient myself in the field.

On a practical note, the reason for engaging critically with the physicality of Owens' design was to help me to think creatively, as fashion has since a very early age in my life. This "object play", as sociologist Sherry Turkle calls the usage of object to think and abstract, is a source of soma-intellectual vitality: a contemplation of mind and heart that offers ways of thinking through questions such as, How can I use fashion to open up to different ways of relating to the world, and my body? (Turkle, 2007: 309). Questions like these can be fruitfully analysed through visual analysis, especially if one understands vision as haptic and touchy; as eyes that fingers (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 492; Haraway, 2008: 251). Still, by wearing the clothes I sought to understand and by being informed, if you like, by their materiality and relations they formed as I moved through spaces — rural towns in southern Sweden or busy European capitals — this method produced, I would argue, knowledge of a different kind. We can only know the whiteness of the world if we engage with it, act on it, or do something with it (Barad, 2007: 340). It points as well as disorients our, me and my clothes, shared but also separate biographies and temporarily constructed biologies, and I take that my human collaborators must experience something quite similar to what I did. This somaesthetically informed practice draws on a posthuman and post-anthropocentric sensibility in its attempt to respond to the necessity for creativity and experimentation to think anew, and with regards to fashion studies, form understandings not ascertainable from photography, video or text (Ulmer, 2017: 8-9).

Nevertheless, photography, video and text, as mentioned above, were vital to appreciate the extent of Owens' work and the *mise en scène* of the brand. In addition to interviews and physical object-research, I performed a near-complete inventory of all Owens' catwalk collections in video and pictures. I did so to allow myself to be struck by his world, to be spiritually and muscularly pushed into his frameworks, if you like. Having formed a comprehensive understanding of the brand's aesthetic genealogy, I, for a similar serendipitous reason, worked my way through their social media accounts, web-shop, website and some 30 interviews with Owens from industry press,

analysing pictures, text, and comments. The challenge of dealing with the vast and varied volume of information available online, argues consumer researcher Joonas Rokka, is that it provides both quick and rich overview of information from various sources, but also an overload (2010: 383). To engage with the visual material in a, to the thesis, productive manner, a process of delimitation was required. To that end, I used my collaborators: that is, I let my them point me in directions that could, potentially, yield new insights, e.g. introducing new people to observe on Instagram, inform me of their favourite collections or interviews with Rick Owens they found to be particularly informative. Although I decided not to include, e.g. forum discussions, online narratives, understood as part of the "assemblages that constitute our lives" (Haines, 2007: 127), played an active and integral part of the material, lived experience of my collaborators, and would provide fertile ground for a thoroughly netnographic study.

Approaching: Ethics

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a detailed critique of the ontological and epistemological foundation upon which we the humanities mandate our ethical guidelines. Instead, I will try to outline an idea of ethics, by way of the pragmatic doing of critical cultural analysis. To me, critical cultural analysis is a methodologically opportunistic field which is never — or only — a study of, but studying-with. The question of ethics is, I would argue, played out in the performative dimension of being and becoming-with others, and in the affirmative desire to do them right and to do good (cf. Barad: 2003: 802).

However, within the humanities, the mainstream discourse and application of ethics, as preordained by law, are formed and performed based on a negative definition in the shape of 'do no harm'. That is, ethics are approached as a disruption and pain management tool in which the doing of anthropology is regarded as always already impairing on other people's safety, privacy and rights. CODEX (2018) states that "Fundamental is that research is approved only if it can be conducted with respect for human dignity and if human rights and basic freedoms are considered at all times". Although admitting that difficult choices must be made, the American Anthropological Association echoes CODEX and postulates that researchers must "protect the safety, dignity, or privacy of research participants"(AAA, 2012). These grand formulations is what the interdisciplinary scholar Carlyon Ellis, by way of Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillamas, defines as procedural ethics, that is, guidelines established by institutional review boards (Ellis, 2007: 4). Concepts such as human rights, dignity and freedom are all ideas — and ideals — to which we adhere. But at the same time, it seems impossible to perform these ethics situationally, without presupposing not only a universally shared understanding of abstract terms such as freedom and

dignity, but a further premise in the postulation is the necessity of a neutralised universal “we” in which differences are disregarded in favour of The Human in all of us (Ellis, 2007: 2, 5).

As a critical cultural analyst who situates ‘his’ non-binary queer self in a critical feminist, posthuman(ist), materialist composition, the righteousness of human rights begs the question how we can guarantee, let alone apply, ethics-cum-human rights, when so many of the so-called Others are, still, barely regarded as human to begin with? Furthermore, how are we to operate in a multi-specie context? The self-reflexive researcher checks its gender, class, race, sexuality, age and educational background at the door, but equally important to check is, as physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad so eloquently phrases it, the givenness of The Human (Barad, 2003 : 808). Which brings us back to praxis: the focus on ethics as what bad one should/did not do rather than what good can be done, thwarts the judgement towards whether the act of the individual researcher was good or bad, rather than looking if the outcome of praxis — the diffraction — resulted in anything good. Trying to shape our actions and adhere to what is compatible within written parameters, arguably ignores the lived experiences of pains in plural, in favour of an abstract, universal idea of what causes pain, which further negates the agency of the researched to a thing of study, rather than a co-constructor of ethics as well as knowledge (Barad, 2003: 813; Barad, 2007: 160; Ellis, 2007). The issue is that, although most scholars operate according to a *modus operandi* of weighing pros and cons in what is always particular situations, ethical guidelines are both too abstract and too exact to be effectively applicable on critical cultural analysis.

I, therefore, in my all too human posthumanism, seek to align with and present the thesis in a way that Zylinska refers to as a feminist, fragmented and speculative “post-masculinist” way of philosophising (2014: 14-15). Feminist epistemologies take as a starting point that to know, and to produce knowledge, is always already a political practice. It is precisely because academic research is intensely value-laden and situational, that we must recognise our response-ability to say no to the unacceptable aspects of life, wherever we conduct our research. Whenever we engage in creating knowledge, other ways of knowing might be overshadowed or cut off. Accordingly, it is imperative to reflexively question the givenness in relations of knowing, in order to unveil the so-called black boxes of knower; a box often built on a hierarchal, patriarchal and violent relations. Moreover, and of particular interest to this thesis, the anthropocentrism often present in the humanities, in which humans are seen as the cause of effects, is added to the list of ‘checks’. To know well, or perform an ethical knowledge production, is, argues sociologist Hanna Meißner, a matter of fostering relationships of many kinds. Moral judgement is not a priori nor a posteriori facts, but they unfold out if particular material engagements (Meißner, 2016: 2). We are, in Ingoldian terms, wayfarers moving *through* the world (2011: 211). Understood as such, a researcher’s ethical core “is clearly

not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of power... his/her actions are likely to have upon the world” (Braidotti & Dolphjin, 2014: 25).

However, reflexivity is not merely a self-regulatory mirroring practice, but a means of getting somewhere you otherwise would not, and to show hospitality in the encounter had and to facilitate a space not yet closed for productive encounters to come (Dewsbury, 2002: 439). The fact that is is difficult to imagine a world different from the pervasive present, to imagine a human different from the one fabricated under the banner of universal humanism, to imagine an intra-relational reality not different, but as always already the reality, should not stop us from doing so. This thesis accepts the difficulty in approximating a posthuman methodology and provide applicable solutions with the sight set at a time scale longer than quarterly profits; yes, a time scale of post-anthropocentric proportions. But it also seeks to respond by welcoming the unknown, unfinished and unsettling, as most things are beyond my “human ken” (Zylinska, 2014: 33).

Part II: FACING THE THE HUMAN

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

In Part I, two principal concerns with regards to the study of fashion were framed. The first being how fashion has been relatively unexplored as an efficient and *affective* tool in investigating, critiquing and potentially usher in a reconfigured understanding of The Human and, subsequently, an era beyond the Anthropocene. The second concern, connected to the first, was the limits of the tightly held onto-epistemological canon of fashion studies and anthropology of dress. While recognising earlier scholars' contributions, what is needed for this thesis is a partial ontological recomposition and epistemological mutation. The outlining of such shift, as tentatively explored in the previous 'method' section, requires a migration from Cartesian theoretical territories supporting what this thesis argues to be a continued stratification of an anthropocentric, subject-centred framework. In this Part, I will therefore introduce concepts necessary to think the human-clothing assemblage anew, from the touch between flesh and cloth, to fashion as inextricably linked to the conceptualisation and enactment of The Human and more-than-human. I will also provide a quadripartite formulation of interwoven, yet distinct critical practices: *critical posthumanism* as associated with amongst others the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, *critical cultural posthumanism* as framed by organisational philosopher Matthew Gladden, and my own two formulations: *critical artistic posthumanism*, and *critical pragmatic posthumanism*. However, before I present the many posts-, we must rest from the prefix and focus on the term which follows: the human, or, Anthropos.

Anthropocentrism

Despite that cultural studies at large, and fashion studies in particular, have shown a prominent interest in the material surrounding of humans, what has been equally prominent is a methodological and theoretical predisposition in which things, stuff and objects are ontologically separated from the human, and figured as decisively lacking agency outside the mind and will of the latter. Although issues of biased centrism — white, male, heterosexual, language, class — has been addressed at length in the increasingly reflexive humanities, anthropocentrism and subject-centric theorisation are left mainly unchecked (Rae, 2013: 59, 64). That one is not born a woman but becomes one, as Beauvoir phrased it in 1949 — two years after Dior reintroduced the corset and docile image of the post-war woman — seems broadly accepted in a post-Butlerian academy. However, that the same would be true of becoming a human, some take as preposterous. We, as it

were, “assert our attachment to the species as if it were a matter of fact, a given” (Braidotti, 2013: 1), and hence speciesism is missing from the categories of critique and deconstruction. Alas, it is dreadfully awkward to look into the future, if the binoculars one so passionately hold on to are fitted with mirrors.

The methodological implication of an anthropocentric cultural analysis based on an epistemological foundation in which a researching subject observes an observable and measurable world, is that it merely reinforces said ontology. Which, in turn, calls for an epistemology in which there is no reality beyond the facts and images already established (Latour, 2001: 124-5). While this may result in well-formed conclusions or convincing, directional argumentation, it is, argues educational theorist Elizabeth St Pierre, often tediously predictable, and from which new or radical concepts seldom occur (St Pierre, 2014).

In order to circumvent this ontological petrification of subjects vs objects, this thesis seeks to affirm a *post-anthropocentric* framework. It is post-anthropocentric out of both ontological and analytical necessity, as 1) there is a growing number of agents who are not humans, but who perform complex ethical and practical tasks formerly considered possible only by humans mind and hand. 2) Integration of bio-technological structures blurs the purist conception of a human as ‘biological’, meaning such a demarcation delimits actors partly or primarily made up of a mix of born and designed parts (Herbrechter, 2013: 27). Although the work of a growing number of scholars, including anthropologists Philip Descola and Anna Tsing, are challenging the foundational premises of Western humanism, and force us to rethink the centrality of the social, language, and of culture vs nature in our research methodologies, the aforementioned acceptance in the humanities, that, granted, we are both animal and more-than-animal, but our fields ought to focus on the study of the latter, reins.

A post-anthropocentric theoretical framework is imperative to this thesis and its aim of exploring the decentering of The Human through engaging with the agency of avant-garde fashion. However, a post-anthropocentric theoretical framework does not mean that one discards of culture or humans. By distribute agency to that which exert pressure on, with and against the her — be it bacteria, waste, fashion or weather — and, subsequently, act on the understanding that our selves are of multiple origins and with multiple, diffracted directions of becomings not yet understood to be possible, one can avoid the foreclosure of ontological categories and evade the blind spots of human exceptionalism. That argues Ingold, is the challenge for anthropology and cultural analysis. In clear terms, Ingold postulates that the duty of our fields is to remind humans of their potential; to widen their horizons of becomings and “to go beyond the idea of humanity, or at least frame it differently” (2018: 30). Refraining from calling for a posthuman anthropology, what Ingold

suggests is an anthropology or cultural analysis very much post traditional humanities and actively post-anthropocentrism.

Posthuman, Non-Human, More-Than-Human?

Posthumanism, as with the Anthropocene, is a contentious term. It is an academic field, artistic movement, political bending, and techno-infrastructure commercial activity. As stated by Gladden (2016) in his cartography on the usage of the concepts with hyphens scattered around the words, posthuman/isms have a wide and, at times, contradictory application with origin, purpose and methodology that differs significantly amongst the different strands of through. Still, the usage of posthumanism has reached a remarkable level of ‘mainstream’ (Barad, 2007: 36) interest in the recent decade, and you find the terms used in educational pedagogy, quantum physics and media studies, to mention a few.

Although posthumanism in a more general sense can, according to Gladden (2016: 31, 38), encompass transhumanism, as well as metahumanism, anti-humanism, feminist new materialism, and bio-political posthumanism, for the purpose of avoiding cries of neologism, I situate the thesis usage of posthumanism, in its broadest application, amongst scholars who have brought forth and reworked Deleuzian thought in pair with Nietzschean aesthetics and Spinozian vitalism, namely Braidotti Dolphjin (2014), Herbrechter (2013), Haraway (1991), and Zylinska (2014). Doing so also positions it, albeit somewhat arbitrarily, in the humanities and in philosophical opposition to transhumanism and its home, or interest in, the STEM fields. Heterogeneous and contested in its formulation and application even amongst these primarily humanities-based thinkers, a few shared premises can be found, of which the most coherent one is that what one is post as a field, is the onto-epistemological canon of Western humanism and anthropocentrism. (Braidotti, 2013: 148).

The main critique levelled at humanism is its centring of the human as the means through which to measure the world as if the world were made for humans to measure. The human, argues posthumanism, is not special nor necessary. The only one who accredits the human as such is the human. Who, claims Haraway, is no more ‘pure human’ than her dog is a pure-breed (2008: 16). It is “the infolding of *others to one another* is what makes up the knots we call beings” (ibid: 250) Even in the most severe of demarcations of a human — imagine a Damien Hirst sort of art piece with a naked human suspended in a plexiglass cubicle — she is already a combobulation, an assemblage of organic and non-organic matter, where some 2-3 kg of non-native organisms live their life on and inside our bodies, making ‘our’ human life possible (NIH, 2012). What that entails for the human, is that from a molecular to a cosmic level, humans are but fluid, nomadic entities who move through fashions of varying stability and environmental suitability (Braidotti & Dolphjin, 2014: 32). The specificity of The Human as a taxonomically pure concept and subject and

the outcome of enacting this formulation in the world brought to the extreme have led us to the point - the Anthropocene - where the thing, The Human, must either transform or break. That is the object of concern for the critical posthumanism which this thesis relies on and has turned into an interwoven, yet distinct four-part model.

Critical Posthumanism

Critical posthumanism, argues cultural theorist Stefan Herbrechter and Gladden separately, is particularly concerned with the critical, theoretical analysis of the process, reality and being of a posthuman world conceptually ignored or, until now, technologically unknown (Gladden, 2016: 35, 46; Herbrechter: 2013: 13). That includes the increased posthumanisation through technology — as propagated for by the transhumanists — the being of posthuman entities as something humans can become, something humans are, or something humans have always been/been in the world with. It is not, argues Herbrechter, a dialectic repudiation of humanism, but instead a reflexive attempt and future-oriented desire to *go beyond* that which it prefixes: the human and humanism (2013: 8). Critical posthumanism does not object to nor deny that the technologisation of the human body and the socio-economic system is indeed in the process of posthumanisation in which the human is, at the same time, transmorphing into a transhuman being, as well as being disposed of as surplus in its ‘simply-human’ or less than human status (Gladden, 2016:45-9).

However, they do not see this push towards perfectibility of some humans built on a misanthropic capitalist system as a separation from the ideology of humanism. Seeing that The Human has never been fundamentally human, changing the anatomical structure of our being will not, necessarily, change the system which has brought such a change to be one of few real options. Humanism and his human have always been about managing a sense of existential crises through means of ethic and aesthetic control of binary oppositions along the line of nature vs culture, in which fashion has been, and still is, important (Haraway, 1991: 152; Zylinska, 2014: 69). From the perverse geometry of renaissance gardens looking nothing like nature, modernist eugenic programs deciding what is natural, to the resurgence of fascist populism, the fact that The Human has always been defined as that which he is not: not nature, not animal, not child, not slave, not brown, not deviant, being itself has been doomed from the very start (Braidotti, 2015: 2). In other words, in our search for a local, pseudo-negentropic state called humanism, where dominion over genes and geology were thought reasonable, the logic of modern man and science have brought the latter into a state of entropy:

There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013: 2)

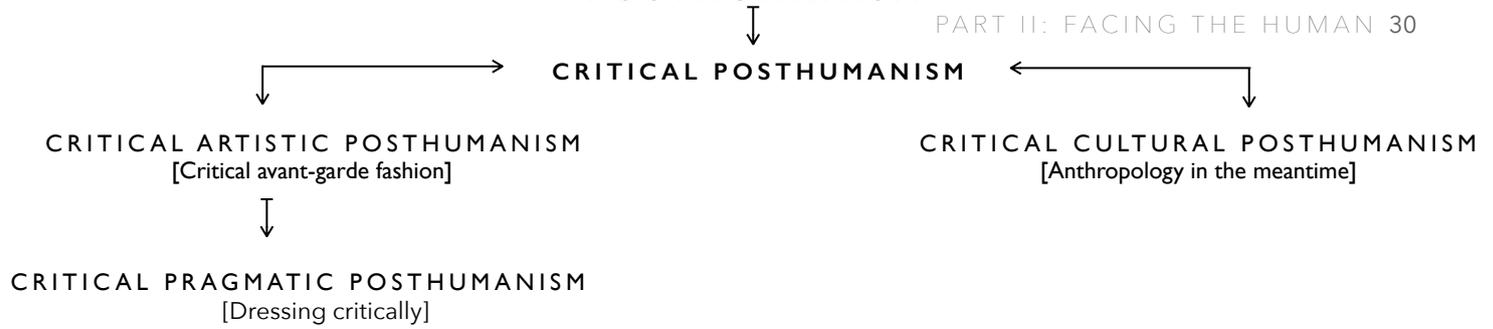
In their analysis of what humans are ceasing to be and seeding to become, critical posthumanism — in the spirit of Nietzsche and Deleuze — pair a rigorous cartographic genealogy with a deconstruction of metaphysics. By contextualising, or rather, materialising the human in a relational and co-productive historicity where she is not alone in actualising her potential, critical posthumanists seek to free both the evolutionary, ontogenetic and metaphysical process of humanisation from anthropocentrism (Barad, 2007: 379; 802; Braidotti, 2013: 144-45). To be more-than-human or posthuman does not necessarily mean to be anatomically different from The Human. It is about combating the hubristic fallacy of our primacy. To that extent, posthumanism is merely trying to reposition the human in her nature, as her nature. Ideas applied in the dressing of her.

Critical cultural posthumanism, as seen in figure 3, can be broadly defined as an ethnographically informed cultural analysis of the kind propagated by Ingold and anthropologist Michael Fischer. Through Lefebvre, Fischer positions an *Anthropology in the Meantime* as the study of l’homme totale, a “person who dwells in a lived space of the imagination, sustained and made accessible by the arts, literature, and human creativity”. It is the “mapping, tracking or inquiry into cascades, changes and implications” (Fischer, 2018: 4) The argued shift towards a posthuman, intra-relational performativity has onto-epistemological consequences in the study of fashion, and *critical artistic posthumanism* (critical fashion) and *critical pragmatic posthumanism* (dressing critically) cannot be comprehensively understood without this shift. As I have discussed elsewhere (Hansson 2017; 2019) the posthuman perspective advances the anthropological fact that we have always been Other than what we — we, the subjects mediated by Western metaphysics — thought we were. The Anthropos has always been Anthropos+, existing through mediative assemblages of multiple tempo-spatial scales, in which a multitude of bioscapes, regulatory decisions, laws, art, moral propositions, technical gadgets, scientific developments, clothing and bacteria represent in and of themselves nothing but a temporary materialisation of unbounded “intra-actions at many scales of space-time that need rethinking” (Haraway 2008: 17). *The (post)human, in such assemblage, is all that which allows her to ever become, including fashion. The unlocking of agential capacities outside of human bodies is imperative if one seeks to understand what fashion and, further, what the fashioned body as a relational phenomenon can do.*

The importance of *critical artistic posthumanism* and *critical pragmatic posthumanism*, which is extensively developed in an empirical analysis in Part IV and V, is two-fold. One, it is hard to try to enunciate or paraphrase affects. It is equally hard to ‘apply’ what is theoretically elaborated on in critical posthuman thought, that matter matters because we are little else but an effect of matter in relations. Am I becoming-with my vacuum machine? Letter-box? Through fashion, these abstractions can be explored, realised and presented. That matters if one takes the Anthropocene an aesthetico-affective as well as scientific event, as proposed by Davis and Turpin. Artistic activities

POSTHUMANISM

PART II: FACING THE HUMAN 30



CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM (CP): An academic school of thought concerned with a primarily theoretical analysis. Utilises critical methodologies to undo the givenness of human as a concept, and explores posthumanisation and posthuman entities of past, present and future, in order to bring about a human of conceptual stability sustainable in and of its relations with other human entities, species, environments and technology

CRITICAL CULTURAL POSTHUMANISM

(CCP): An academic school of thought concerned with theoretical analysis and practical synthesising of posthumanisation and posthuman entities, understood as a present reality or near-future reality. Object of study is contemporary culture by means of posthuman anthropology and anti-anthropocentric critical cultural theory. In contrast to CP, CCP has a specific interest in depictions of alternative pasts, parallel presents and future-oriented scenarios produced by critical artistic posthumanism. This thesis is an enactment of CCP.

CRITICAL ARTISTIC POSTHUMANISM

(CAP): A mainly non-academic artistic practice — art, architecture, fashion, design, dance — engaged in a non-textual theoretical, synthesising analysis of posthumanisation and posthuman entities by means of artistic production. Understand posthumanism as a present reality or near-future reality. Owens critical avant-garde creations is an enactment of CAP.

CRITICAL PRAGMATIC POSTHUMANISM

(CPP): People who, through engaging with the products of the CCP and, in particular, CAP, are both receivers and active producers of a posthuman present through non-philosophical everyday philosophising, in which they, through the affective and phenomenologically rich experience of wearing critical fashion, are 'othered' in a manner in which the wearer becomes increasingly receptiveness to the progressive ideas and radical changes offered by critical posthumanism. Wearers of Owens are enacting this vernacular, CPP, although not always in all ways.

of a certain kind can, hopefully, help force uncomfortable collective issues concerning justice, the environment, equity and equality to the forefront (Turpin & Davis, 2015: 12, 18). However, whereas they argue that art offer ways of engaging with existential issues outside of a scientific, moral, political discourse as framed by language, fashion and clothing is missing entirely from their anthology on art in the Anthropocene. Which brings us to the second fold.

Looking at fashion with a posthuman lens can hopefully provide alternative understandings of how humans become — as an entangled act in-motion — otherwise. Looking at the posthuman with a fashion that operates on a premise to open up for encounters of a different kind outside of “the hegemonic modalities of patriarchal heteronormativity“ (Seely, 2013: 262) and institutionalised identities, can, I hope, fashion new ways to challenge the Anthropocene, without falling into the trap of masculinist science fiction. To end The Human is to see the limits, boundaries or the ceasing to be of a concept, a faith, that no longer corresponds with an understanding of the present that can confidently look into the future. A new understanding of the human must form, is being formed, has always been forming, and in a moment in history that is critical both as an endeavour and in time, artistic practices might be more productive than theoretical models, says Braidotti. Not in a case of either or, but *and and* (Braidotti, 2015: 8). In critical posthumanism, as well as in the Deleuzian thinking it draws from, the malleability of artistic thought and expression is imperative, and not merely as an inspiration “ but as a fundamental creative force necessary to fight all forms of fascism possibly encountered“ (Braidotti & Dolphjin, 2014: 16). Let us not forget fashion in the fight against fascism.

FIG. 3

PART III: CULTIVATING CRITIQUE IN FOLDS AND PLEATS

SEARCH RESULTS: NO RESULTS WERE FOUND

Due to the limited amount of research on Owens in particular, and on fashion with a post-anthropocentric, posthuman lens in general, this Part will offer a cartography of some sort, in which the critical characteristics of the anthropology of dress and fashion studies, including their conceptual pallets, are clarified. Although a modest outlining, such a genealogy points to the acute relevance and timelines of this thesis, its topic, and methodology. It also positions it in relation to the canonised practices from *and* against the thesis moves. The chapter will conclude in the hinterlands of available research and offer an outlining of critical fashion as seen through intra-relational posthuman performativity.

An Anthropology of Dress ; Dressing the Non-West

Speaking anthropologically about fashion can mean many things, as can engaging with it ethnographically. However, similarly to sociology, anthropology has tended to stay out of the heads of its collaborators (Ruggerone, 2017: 584-6). In my experience as a student of anthropology and fashion studies in the UK and in the Nordics, practitioners have historically been bent towards the equation that fashion, as a concept of and colourful phenomena within society, is intrinsically linked with Western modernity and the growth of modern capitalism. Promisingly, this Eurocentric residue is addressed in works such as fashion theorists Elke Gaugelle and sociologist Monica Tittons timely anthology, offering postcolonial critique on the canon of fashion theory (2019).

Contemporary anthropologists, too, have reflexively addressed these issues, and shown considerable interest in dress practices in the interaction, adaptations and counter-reactions between Western and indigenous or local practices, such as the dressing of African bodies in colonial and postcolonial development projects (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997: 218-273). Other scholars have looked at how politics is weaved into the clothes worn by indigenous Guatemalan women (Hendrickson, 1995), or, the material effect on mainly Asian bodies producing garments for the primarily Western clothing industry (Anguelov, 2015; Zhao, 2013). Here, concepts such as hybridity, bricolage, alternative modernities are investigated. In the same vein, there is a sizeable body of scholarship focusing on globalisation from different perspectives: incorporation of global trends, the global transportation system, or the global effect of induced obsolescence in fast fashion,

where local goods are sold to international tourists, whilst the discarded clothes of said tourists threatens local supply and production (Norris, 2010).

Fashion - From Crises of Modernity to Posthuman Urgency

Seen as superficial, fleeting and relatively recent phenomena, fashion was long disregarded by Western philosophers in search of Platonic, universal and essential truths (Matteuci & Marino, 2017: 2). Nonetheless, for the very same reason these thinkers considered fashion as a concept and anthropological issue of lesser concern, in the latter decades of the 20th century other scholars in the humanities — in gender, fashion, film, literary studies, and cultural and historical studies — have instead embraced fashion, not despite its supposedly superficial, messy, and transient particularities, but because of it (Marino, 2017: 16; Smelik, 2014: 38). Albeit a diverse, and often interdisciplinary, field, the common epistemological framework in fashion studies and the dominant model in the study of fashion at large, is still the semiotics of identity, and how individuals utilise clothing to represent and symbolise the former in local as well as global contexts (Ruggerone, 2017: 578, 586).

The German sociologist George Simmel's account on early-20th century fashion is one of the finest, if not first, accounts on practices of aestheticisation. To Simmel, fashion offered an illusion through which the increasingly fragmented subject of modernity believed himself to be able to gain authenticity but, alas, fashion, argued Simmel, is a bottomless pit within which modern man's anxiety is but temporarily soothed (Simmel, 1904 [1957]: 547, 558). Simmel's seminal texts on modern life and fashion, or life-as-fashion, in *fin-de-siecle* Berlin formed, along with Marx (1867 [2007]: 83), Barthes (1983), Benjamin (1999) and Bourdieu (1993; 2010 [1979]), a rigid foundational setting on which the study of fashion has developed (Rocamora & Smelik, 2016: 13, 22). Although conceptualisations on fashion have been revised, nuanced, and gained in complexity to capture the changes in the phenomena and analogue fields, the semiotic and sociological perspectives of symbolism, signification and interpretation still hold primacy in the growing number of institutions offering fashion studies as a standalone field. Accordingly, despite fashion having always been understood as a field of signs *and* things, the latter still tends to be treated as inert, unanimated matter until imbued with the social force or energy from a knower of the former, a human. When one does speak of the materiality of fashion, it is often the case that one looks at of the socio-cultural life the object passes through, i.e. the human world, where the object is framed in a tripartite of representation: representation(qualities), represented(object), representer(human subject) (Cliffe, 2017; Barnard, 2002).

In these strands of 'linguistic materialism', the represented is seen as anterior to the representer, and only through representation can humans come into a *word-framed*, not worldly, contact with objects. Even the body is rendered comparatively mute until embellished and adorned

with, or abused by, culture. Stuck in a Cartesian footing, as philosopher of science Josphe Rouse puts it, representationalists, such as social constructivists, never get to the thing they seek to represent, as the physical is never fully representable (Rouse, 1996: 147, 209). The result is that one sees but a world that can not be seen other than through signs, symbols and discourses. To be human, understood through representationalism, is to be part animal (body-nature) but mostly, and most separately, more-than-animal (mind-culture) (Barad, 2003: 805, 827; Braidotti, 2015: 3; Vänskä, 2018: 23). Any materialist theory, worthy of its name, would be ill-advised to uphold this distinction.

New Developments

It would be an imprecise assessment of the field of fashion studies as well as the anthropology of dress if one concluded on their flaws or blind spots. There has been growing attention to what was the backdrop aesthetics of popular culture (and in the backroom of aesthetic studies). Whether it be literature, film and TV, science fiction, anime or theatre, an increased critical interest in the architecture and costume design used in, for example, Hollywood blockbusters, such as Black Panther's Zaha Hadid influenced Afro-futurism (Tompkins, 2018; Yalcinkaya, 2018). These pop cultural elaboration of an alternative past, technologised presents or near-future, are gaining academic traction beyond the corridors of film and customs studies, as they are understood to offer potent indicators of contemporary desires, beliefs, and anxieties, as well as palatable alternatives, to reimagine a future less hostile (Gladden, 2016: 62-4).

Although these developments form an essential part of an ongoing reconsideration of fashion, body and space, alas, few of these studies depart from the foundational premises of humanism and the transcendental posthuman-ism of transhumanism, where fashion and the body is merely a buffer or inert extension of the rational, free-willed, atomised subject of fixed properties. As such, one would be mistaken to takes fashions' comparatively recent focus on the body and wearable tech as a sign of onto-epistemological change. The development often categorised as "new materialism" often sticks to the subject-centred analysis, resulting in a perpetuation of a metaphysical dualism of culture and nature, although now superficially intertwined (Holbraad, 2011: 5; Descola, 2012:29). This is true not least for the, possibly, only scholarly article on Owens, where the author, Alison Bancroft, presents a psychoanalytical, Lacanian take gender (2016) So what alternative way can be used to grasp the relationship between humans and clothes?

In most feminist traditions, the concern that fashion has primarily, or only, adverse affects on the body and effects in a capitalist society has, argues fashion theorist Pamela Church Gibson, negated the heterogeneity of fashion and hindered not only an affirmative approach to the transformative qualities of clothing, but a more productive interaction between critical feminism

and fashion studies. Through Braidotti's *alternative figurations*, as borrowed by Haraway's *figuration*, Church-Gibson believes fashion to be "crucial to the destabilization or deconstruction of identity politics" (Church-Gibson, 201: 356). Beyond feminist critique of the bondage of fashion and its supposedly pre-mediative performativity in masculinist capitalism, few studies have looked at the transformative, affective and somatic qualities of wearing fashion, and how layers of memory, sweat, meanings and seams form a thing which encounters the world; a *something* beyond a body in cloth (Ruggerone, 2017:574-7). However, there are a few scholars whose research focus on fashion and posthumanism.

A majority of this minute minority concentrate on either the space of the fashion show, technological development in fibre, or particular characteristics in the design of a brand, which is oftentimes one of a handful repetitively analysed: Comme des Garçons, Alexander McQueen, Iris Van Herpen, Gareth Pugh and Hussein Chalayan. Several of these scholars, namely, innovation and design philosopher Jamie Brassett (2005), and the already acquainted Bruno (2003; 2014), cultural theorist Anneke Smelik (2014; 2016) and queer theorist Stephen Seely (2013), base their analysis on Deleuzian poststructuralism, which inevitably touches upon Nietzschean aesthetics and Spinozian vitalism. In their respective work, where they survey the affective and critical capacities in high fashion, granting clothing agency, and denying subject supremacy, these thinkers work to reconfigure, if not discard, Western metaphysics and the endemic ripples of Cartesian dualism, by introducing a much-needed critique of humanism. Separately, Brassett Smelik and Seely argue that fashion can be, as seen through Deleuze's ontological queerings (together with Guattari) more than a governmental tool of phallogocentric capitalism; it can generate proactive, unsettling encounters and ways to break out, or become-out, of the stratification of anthropocentric, hegemonic heteronormativity (Brassett, 2016: 3; Seely, 2013: 262, 263; Smelik, 2014: 54). However, none of these scholars, it must be stressed, are explicitly, or even partly, interested in what they seem to consider less fertile soil of everyday life, including the wearers of avant-garde clothes. That is, they focus exclusively on avant-garde fashion as presented in catwalk shows, fashion pictures, or fashion videos. The search for someone who has applied a post-anthropocentric, posthumanist approach to *dressing* in avant-garde fashion, has not resulted in any comparable findings.

Taking avant-garde fashion out of the equation for a moment, Ruggerone (2017) and fashion theorist Annamari Vänskä (2018) look at so-called ordinary clothing and ordinary people through an affective and, respectively, posthuman lens. However, while Vänskä argues that *designing* provides "value to the human, to the environment and to other species — life, in general" (2017: 18) I would argue that it is the performative enactment of this values, of *dressing*, that offer equally, if not more potently, ways of fashioning the human.

CRITICAL FASHION : ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENTROPY IN A SEA OF NEGENTROPY

There are clues in which our language reveals to us an affective, intra-relational reality, and some of them are more explicit than others, such as when we come home after a day in town with empty hands saying something along the lines of “nothing spoke to me, nothing called my name”. Still, one wonders to what extent that name is yours? Alone in your bedroom and in front of the mirror, you are indeed performing a creative practice, a working out what feels right. You look and feel remarkable and unique in that sweater. Together with others, what is remarkable is that you look like everyone else, yet, you barely notice how you blend into the foliage of attractive blandness. The latter is particularly remarkable in a society that is focused on “you do/be/make/buy you”. It reminds me of a newsflash with a North Korean tourist-guide who, when asked if tourists did not find it annoying that he could never leave them alone, responded with a question “Why would they? They can be alone with me”. An oxymoron of some sort that applies to contemporary fashion and style culture: you are unique together and you, and you, and you, too, can get the look. Join the sea of negentropy.

This sort of collectively expressed individualism is what Gecy & Karaminas refers to as hermetic fashion, that is, clothes of a design unobtrusively compatible with, as well as co-constitutive of, normative values and ideals as worn by the majority, and the majority of a minority (2017: 4-5). What most of us seem to seek is aesthetic complementarity, i.e. negentropy, as poignantly explored in Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek’s photographic series *Exactitudes* (figure 4) But why? Imitation and differentiation are the foundational themes of fashion studies, as is trickle down, up, left and right, but I would argue that there is something else at play. Something more sinister.

There is nothing certain in our encounter with clothes and as a clothed body moving through space. Similarly to how a dear friend, a disco song, or divine architecture can fail in its most apparent intention, fashion, too, is situated in a place and time (Bruno, 2003: 114-5). Its phenomenal vitality is as potent as unreliable, and therefore hard to make definable, meaning that any sense of meaning cannot be derived with certainty a priori to mattering. Naturally, we can intuit and imagine unfoldings of more or less stable kinds, and as humans, we tend to opt for that which seems inevitable and bend the crooked into straight lines (Ruggerone, 2017: 584). To not exist in permanent, emotional flux, we learn not to see things. We learn not to feel things. In simpler terms, we become energy efficient by, essentially, allowing ourselves to be affected to the extent that we can do something about the situation we are in, and to the extent that we can bear the consequences brought about by doing something differently. Braidotti referee to this as the Stepford Wife syndrome of inertia (Braidotti, 2006:1). Most people want this. On the question ‘what does it mean

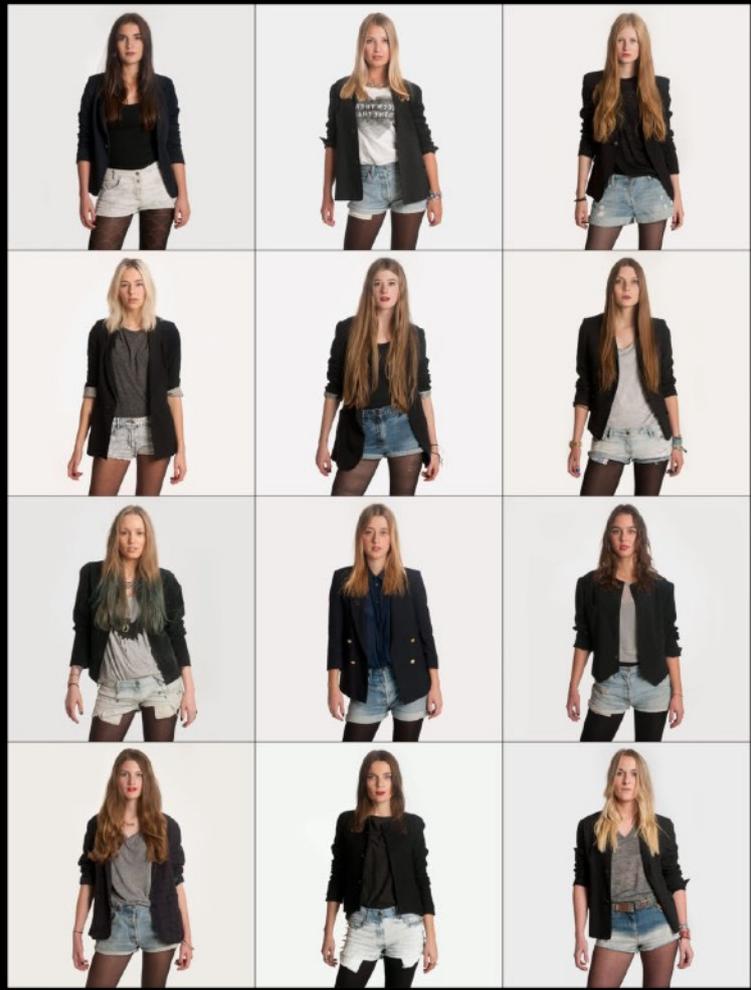
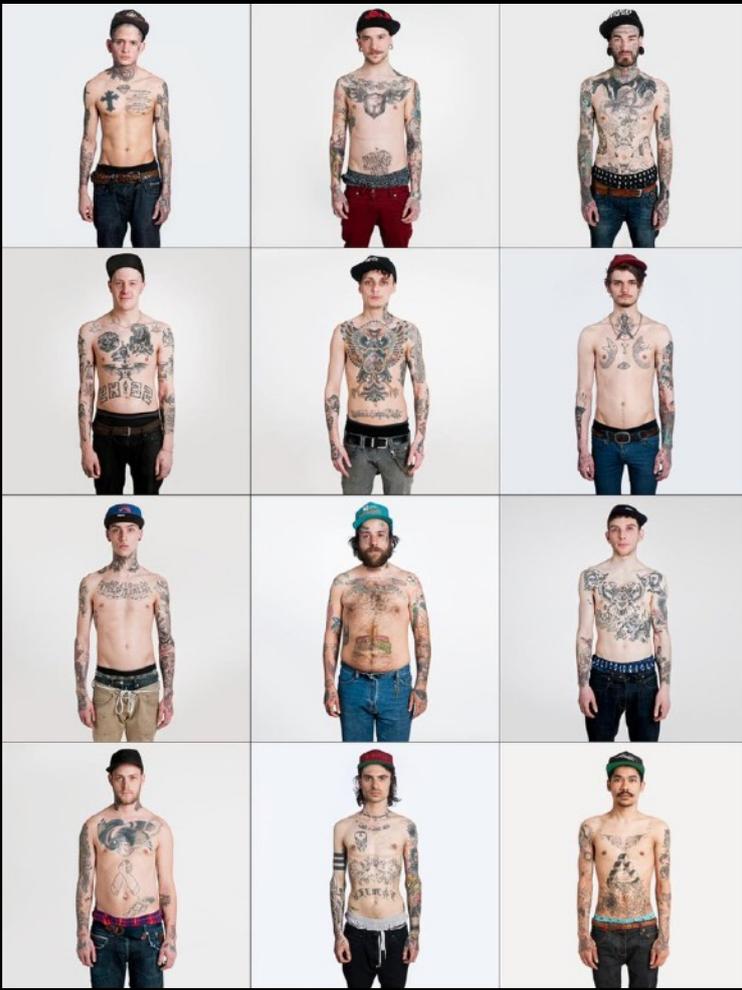


FIG. 4

to be me, how should I live, how should I act' a majority find comfort, and thus extreme mediocracy, in the self-management answers of Baumanian liquid modernity as defined by consumption; I am no-one but the negative balance on my credit card, a black hole of an 'I' only I can fill (Bauman 2000; 2007). With regards to clothing, this means that the majority of people find satisfactory oblivion that makes it possible to look at oneself as a unique, good individual in mass-produced clothing of knowingly questionable origin. This emotional and aesthetic adaptation to dominant norms is no different, argues this thesis, than embodying the violence it is built on — transphobia, homophobia, gynophobia, racism. To face it would be affectively uncomfortable and social unprofitable. Still, some people do.

Like entropic islands in the said sea of aesthetic negentropy, a fashion of a different kind is offered and worn. With an apparent kinship to the future-oriented sensibilities of modernist architects, who sought to transcend previous periods in thought more so than through time, *critical fashion design*, defined by Gecy & Karaminas as the opposite of hermetic clothing, is “highly distinctive, at times odd and even sculptural”(2017: 5). Now, all clothes have the capacity to transform the human and her body. Indeed, fashion is often blindly accepted as an actual or symbolic deformer of bodies, in particular, the female. However, although hermetic clothing might seem to offer change and challenge to the static image of a woman, the very structure of fashion patterning and the structure of the fashion industry is reproducing the same body over and over. So the difference between high street clothing and critical fashion lies in the formers powerful ability to, in Heideggerian terms, hide from us, and latter's capacity, and indeed, stronger intention to affect and confront us; not only visually, but somatically (ibid: 6, 9). To understand the transformative and affective potential in what is critical fashion, whether worn or designed, it is essential to locate it in fashion at large.

Similar to the feminist and queer critique of ordinary language as a trojan horse of truth-making power-relations, a critique on the materiality of fashion would be incomplete if one did not acknowledge ordinary clothing's historical and contemporary role in fashioning a human compatible with the norms and ideals mentioned above. The enforcement of plain dress or plain language were, are, mediators of historical conditions and frameworks within which ways of thinking of humans and its subcategories, and being the former, is enabled or disabled (Braidotti, 2013: 47, 65; Haraway, 1991: 162, 164; Vänskä, 2018: 23). Still, one should not dismiss the pair despite their complicity in upholding the patriarchy, as is done in some feminist circles⁶. One should, argues feminist theorist Illya Parkins (2008: 501), instead utilise them to open up the heterogeneity and complexity inherent in both. Freedom comes by recognising your bondage, and to paraphrase Spinoza, if words and skirts can frame you, then they can free you (Braidotti, 2006: 2; LeBuffe, 2012: 16, 42).

This queering has been done to language⁷ to the annoyance of those tired of oblique prose and incomprehensible, baroque theory, but less so with regards to the affective capacities of fashion. That has, arguably, to do with fashion being understood as a visual language, objectified by the conscious subject, who somehow exist prior to the world of matter. Fashion-as-language or as a conduit of the social, limits fashion as something purely related to, and reflective of, mind and culture. It is a Cartesian rash and intellectual habit, but not a necessity. To hold the productivity of power accountable beyond the said and social, an onto-epistemological shift is required (Barad, 2003: 806; Bruno, 2014: 40). Now, concerns that the centrality of language is dangerous as it offers a reductionist understanding of the nature of our entangledness, are by no means novel. Nietzsche argued for alternative ways of expression beyond language some 150 years ago (Nietzsche, 1883/2006: Part 3, Ch. 2). But like much of Nietzsche's thought, it takes a while to settle (notwithstanding his blatant misogyny).

Fundamental to said shift is affect and becoming: our being's ability to affect and be affected, through encounters with clusters of other critters (Deleuze, 1993: 140-1; Barad, 2012a: 2). Similarly to 20th century avant-garde art, *critical fashion* serves to sever and transform; to affect that which is, according to Smelik, often taken for granted, be it gender, speciesism, or the boundaries of our biological bodies (Smelik, 2016: 174-5). *Critical fashion* or *affective fashion* — a term coined by Seely and also used by Smelik, who both differs but in their posthuman aspirations as compared to Geczy & Karaminas — is not *anti-fashion*, nor is it a source of critique from the outside directed towards the art and commerce of fashion (Geczy & Karaminas, 2012: 7; Geczy & Karaminas, 2017: 6; Seely, 2013: 248-50). Instead, criticality in fashion must be understood as *a quality of fashion*, an act of digesting society by disabling language and norms through intense aesthetic oeuvres.

Seen as such, *critical fashion* is the willed transformation of man into something more-than, or otherwise, if only for a brief moment. Becoming-other or more-than-human is not limited to the supposed absurdity of an outfit, but how it positions us, and make us act and move differently. Dressing in fashion of such kind, argues this thesis, brings us into a heightened, tactile, sonorous relationship with our surrounding, most so when the arbitrary edges of that surrounding feel threatened. It instils a sense of possibilities, of openings, as one does not know how one's clothes might behave or how others might behave because of them. If philosophy and anthropology have historically been opposed to the idea of fashion as a significant field of study due to its nature of change, the above mentioned scholars see fashion as an example of an entangled, unfolding ontology of becoming (see Brassat, 2016; Bruno, 2003; Bruno, 2014; Seely, 2013; Smelik, 2016). Still, unlike these scholars — including Geczy & Karaminas contribution — this thesis looks at high fashion clothes in the space of fashion shows *as well as* everyday life, and like a beam of light,

the outcome of what I refer to as *dressing critically* is best understood as unclear, bent and performative.

Performative Phenomena

A central premise in anthropocentrism, as discussed in Part II, is the stability of categorical boundaries, from a cosmic to chromosome level. Cells, things, individual, communities, species are believed to move from one stable position to another. And central to the idea of The Human, is the illusion of a stable self. However, if you look closely at the borders of said self, or indeed the concept Human, cells or things, being an entity seems more like being in entangled, dependent becomings. These becomings, or an understanding of existence as a procedural, ongoing movement of fundamentally alterable relations forming and unforming — central to posthumanist and compositional feminists such as Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (1991) — is rarely applied onto fashion. For my thesis, I look to Barad's ontology of agential realism and the concept *intra-active*. The starting point is relationality, and imperative to this idea is the prefix of *intra* as compared to *inter*. *Intra*-relation indicates an ontological premise that things are *of relations*, rather than things *in relations* or the *outcome of relations*:

In my agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed, or the results of measurements; rather, *phenomena are the ontological*, inseparability of agentially intra-acting components.
(Barad, 2007:33, original italics)

Barad builds her theorisation on quantum physicist Niels Bohr and his rejection of an atomistic metaphysics, in which objects, things or stuff are believed to have a stable ontological basis. Bohr argued against the necessity of boundaries or fixed properties as inherent to any one thing. Adding Butlerian performativity to the, regrettably but necessarily wordy, *intra-relational posthuman*, is to further emphasise the making of the world as movements, which has particular bearing when looking at clothes and a human time scale (Butler, 1990: 112). As e.g. an intriguingly dressed human in Copenhagen is but the phenomenal performance of a collaborative dance of *intra-relational apparatuses* — flesh, cloth, pavement, discourse, weather, past — they themselves *phenomenas* (Barad, 2011: 449). Nor body or cloth occupies the position of a sovereign agent; in fact, the components of a phenomenon, in this case, a person wearing an outfit, are not separable a priori to the phenomena. A phenomena is always produced in an assemblage of a particular kind; always different, even if repeated (Barad, 2003: 815). Understood as such, subjectivity becomes dependent on the rhizomatic connections it makes in any given moment, turning the subject into a becoming that never precedes its entanglements of dependency: becoming-nomadic (Braidotti,

2015: 7). In a Baradian sense, identity could be rephrased as “body-shoes-wind-street-Starbucks-cognitive functions-bus-bacteria”. Simplified, one can see how shoes change the density of bones in our toes, the muscular development and gait of a fisherman are entangled with the movement of the rough sea, an astronaut’s body is refigured by the forces of space, AMOLED screens make us near-sighted, and computers extend our cognitive capacities (Bryant, 2016 :1-2). Matter matters because we are little but matters in relation.

We are now in a better position to understand that any feature of something or someone is due to the intra-relations around them and that engaging with fashion of a certain kind will, in similar dynamic unfolding, leave marks and shape you in a procedural ontology, that is, becoming. We are also prepared, I hope, to see that agency is distributed beyond humans. Intra-relational posthuman performativity places dressing the body and being a clothed body as an affective and potentially transformative aesthetic practice and phenomena that is meaningful — and powerful — outside of language, or cannot only or primarily be understood through semiotic templates. It is, as an affective encounters, that which occur outside of recognition, that is, events hard to recognise. Understood as such, *critical fashion* and *dressing critically* is not about adding onto, or the paring of clothes with a body, but an intentional, albeit uncontrollable, more-than-rational becoming (Ruggerone, 2017: 584).

Nevertheless, ontological fluidity does not mean lack of normative rigidity. There are measurable and seeable — and thus analysable — patterns which seem to offer some rigidity to the flux of existence, and then there are human boundaries. Although the intra-relational becoming of material beings cannot be stopped, any attempt to do so, whether under the guise of religion, liberal democracy, or a technocratic government, is most acutely felt on those who cannot or do not want to ascribe to what is arbitrarily fixed, yet inevitably in flux (Braidotti, 2006: 8). “Knowing is not a play of ideas within the mind of a Cartesian subject “ (Barad, 2007: 342) and humanism’s and the humanities’ allocation of all agentic capacities to humanity, and their repudiation of the material world as but a conduit of social relations, has denied ourselves a richer understanding of what we are, and in the process of becoming. Through an intra-relational ontology, it becomes painfully apparent that humans’ disengaged abuse of the material world was — is — in essence, a direct abuse on themselves. Although we are always already engaged in alternative processes, the rendered neutral conceptual frameworks of humanism hinder us from seeing, and thus, actualise them. They are, as Barad would have said, cut off (Barad, 2007: 148). So we must look for practices in which contradictions smoothed over are explored, where vagueness arbitrarily clarified is brought back, and uncertainty ignored made uncertain once again. Part of that quest, argues this thesis, is to dress to become-otherwise.

Part IV: FASHIONING THE POSTHUMAN

BECOMING-OTHERWISE — CRITICALITY IN THE DRESS OF RICK OWENS

The universe of Owens and his wife, muse and creator in her own right, Michele Lamy, is to some extent a world frozen in time, or without a set time: a world of repetition and recurrence. That is true for the designer as well as what is designed. Owens lives by and offers an aesthetic universe of continual, repetitive becoming, where new collections rarely offer drastic change, but instead deep contemplation. Not necessarily in a metaphysical or cosmological sense, but in a pragmatic, procedural repetition of answering the question ‘how might we live?’. The repeated answering of the same question, which in recent collections has been coloured by what “gracefully embracing the inevitable end” (Owens, 2016a) entails, will always result in something different, and thus one returns. Owens wakes up at 8:00 am, works in the studio until 1:00 pm to go to the gym, back in the studio at 2.30pm, naps at 4:00 pm, to then work again until a late night dinner with Lamy at 9:30 pm, ending the day at 11:00 pm. Repeat (Harpers Bazaar, 2013). In his query, all aspects of dressmaking have been explored, exploited and exploded by his hands. In his ripping, washing, boiling, piling and layering of fabric, he examines the very properties of fibre and alters their behaviour to the extent that they are willing to cooperate. Brought to the extreme, the materials reveal themselves, and that goes for all materials, whether himself, cloth, humans, or concrete. Fashion, diet, bodies and architecture in Owens are not complementary, but they are the same, all a singular fabrication. Even defecation can be an act of consideration “My toilets at home are raw crystals” says Owens in an interview” (Brunker, 2017). Matter matters to Owens:

After you’ve showered and brushed your teeth in a marble cube, you’re going to aspire to something a little higher. You’re going to attempt something more extreme. So that’s what I was doing. I was creating an environment for myself that would force me to demand more and demand something better. And I have to be at my very, very, best.

Owens, in *Architectural Digest* (Chen, 2018)

If defecating on a slab of crystal might seem peculiar, listening to Owens, let alone looking at him, is even more so. Seeing his work, one would be forgiven to think that there was an esoteric, ascetic, monosyllabic genius of mysterious origin behind the creations. His shownotes are pretentious; his appearance is arresting; his body is chiselled at the age of 56; his face is crooked; hair dyed raven black; his skin slightly tanned. He seems other and, when urinated on or fisted by either himself or



FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7

his muse and friend, the American singer Christeene, he seems grotesque⁸. Nevertheless, when his nasal, slow-paced Californian accent expresses, with equal sincerity, prophetic lessons learnt from dead white men, darkroom penetration, and Marlene Dietrich red lips, one nods as one would to a friend or David Attenborough (see BoF, 2016). His parlance is littered, or elevated, with casual American “like” and “you know”, but also “I do not know”, a sign of his humility. As he narrates potential annihilation, environmental disaster, primordial desires or the precariousness of modern existence — as he, very generously, does in shownotes and interviews — you find shelter in his soft voice.

Nevertheless, Owens is a person who wants to build everything from principle to monolithic palace. Still, his world is not a matter of forceful conversions, but a balance between what Owens in an interview with BoF’s Editor-at-Large, Tim Blanks, calls “controlled urges and delusional motivations” (Blanks, 2017). However, it would seem redundant to elevate clothes to be potent mediators if words were needed to understand them. In Owens’s design, one can discern the process of making in a piece, of his thinking hands that drapes, cuts and remodels post-anthropocentric musculatures in leather and cotton. As the fabric touches you, you are given access to his vision. Covered in glitter or even pieces or mirrors, the now and the future are married in the reflection of each other in his creations, and in the meshing of a faintly remembered past with a critique of the smog filled path of the Anthropocene, Owens uses imagination to “creatively envision hypothetical future posthumanities so that their implication can be explored” (Gladden, 2016: 43).

In his aesthetic universe, a life unfolds, with the knowledge that many more lives could have had, might have, the possibility to unfold. It is an art of existence: a perpetual examined crafting of a good life, where one is aware of to what extent the materials of one’s surrounding can stretch outwards as well as inwards. Philosophy is often said to be the art of living, but ideas are not art. Art, I argue, is that which brings us to the point when the sensational capacities of the body to render the world invisible, and thus manageable and understandable, fails, and we cannot but feel something we struggle to articulate, but which we instead bring to be expressed in art, fashion, and architecture (cf. Bruno, 2003: 133). It is a point where we can feel the inability of language to comfortably and authoritatively catch something: it pinpoints to the murmuring of the world not yet, not quite, or not always known. This murmuring is discussed in philosophy, captured in great architecture, quantified in qualitative analysis and, of course, rediscussed, recaptured and re-quantified in art. Owens, I would argue, does that with clothes. A separation of art and fashion is not always possible or, as argued in this thesis, analytically profitable, and the historical suffocation of fashion as an art of *some kind* has limited the extent to which fashion has been analysed as an actor in the homonisation process (Troy, 2003: 2).

To understand the potency in Owens' avant-garde fashion as a critical practice of a particular kind in *this* particular time — and avant-garde at large — it is imperative, I argue, to address the time in which it was not, and in a cartographic manner, map the transformation as to what has changed. This is especially important as the thesis seeks to understand Owens — a trained painter who in a non-sectarian manner transgress artistic practices and institutional demarcations — vis-à-vis the desires and anxieties permeating the Anthropocene.

Fashions in Art, Fashion as Art

For social and technological reasons, fashion took but tentative steps in the first half of the 20th century, and it was not until the late 80s and the early 90s, argues Granata, in the shadow of Neo-conservatism, feminism, AIDS and the internet, that fashion forcefully and artistically took on the boundaries of the human body (2017: 60, 71). As the big fashion houses and, indeed, fine artists, wallowed in the gluttony and excess of market deregulation and economic boom of the 1980s, The Big Three; the Japanese designers Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons (figure 8), Issey Miyake (figure 9) and Yohji Yamamoto (figure 10), the *Antwerp Six*, and their contemporary Martin Margiela (figure 11), shook the fashion system to the core. Partly by suggesting that the body they were dressing had no core. Still, art and fashion had been courting each other before Thatcher and Reagan, with famed examples such as Yves Saint Laurent's 1965 Mondrian collection. However, it was the radical avant-garde artists and designers of the early 20th century who initiated the intermingled of the two fields to the point of merger, and from which a figure central to this thesis emerged: the posthuman.

It is hard, and arguably a disservice, to try to say what avant-garde was and *is* — Granata uses *experimental fashion* and not avant-garde “to avoid the latter's association with teleology and progressive motions of history” (2017: 4) — as what makes it vanguard has more to do with how its practice intra-acts in a context and as a co-creator of a reality, rather than a quality inherent in a creation itself. That is why few people would find the ready-made art of Marcel Duchamp particularity obscene today. Nonetheless, what Duchamp and others in the different ‘-isms’ of the early avant-garde — here understood to encompass a broad group of movements in the beginning of the 20th century — was firmly suspicious of, was the closed frame of the human form and his ways of seeing and depicting the world; a seeing which had informed Western art as well as science since the late Renaissance (Berger, 1972). New ways of seeing and knowing were sought in exploring and exploiting the mundanity of everyday experiences and dull practices brought to the point of absurdity (Dewsbury, 2009: 253).

Some practitioners, such as Salvador Dali, were mostly concerned with the depths of the human mind and contemporary psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's writing, as explored in Dali's



FIG. 8

COMME DES GARÇONS
SS 1997

PH: Conde Nast Arch



FIG. 9

ISSEY MIYAKE
1990

PH: Irving Penn



FIG. 10

YOHJI YAMAMOTO
AW 1996

PH: Takashi Hatakeyama

collaboration with the couturier Elsa Schiaparelli (figure 12 and figure 13) who had buttons made by the existentialist sculpture and painter Giacometti (Clifford; Geczy & Karaminas, 2012: 1). Others expressed a stronger interest in the boundaries of the human body; exploring what is a body and what can a body do. The resulting art attempted to break up and reshuffle the notion of an independent, static reality, to instead see the world as a field of ever-shifting, unfolding, interwoven processes, or phenomena, as seen in a multi-perspective cubist painting, and of interest to this thesis, it was around this time, asserts art historian Jacob Wamberg and literary theorist Mads T. Rosendahl, that the posthuman as a component in Western aesthetic was firmly developed (Wamberg & R. Rosendahl, 2017: 160). Imperatively, Wamberg & R. Rosendahl argues that the posthuman in art and as a societal fact, and the Anthropocene “are two aspects of basically the same phenomenon: an exponentially accelerating technological culture absorbing both the environment (Anthropocene) and the human body (posthuman)” (ibid:161). Implicitly suggested or explicitly named in elaborate manifestos, the avant-garde, used the idea of the prefix post-, trans-, anti-, non-, in- and super- with human to expose the nihilism of unfettered capitalism and to unsettle answers and practices of certainty that humans tend to cling onto as they fall through time and space.

But realising a new time, takes time, and time has not been kind to the early 20th century avant-garde, who in the end became that which they despised: a stylistic trend who’s speculative inquiries now fuel speculative capitalism (I am painfully aware that I am compromising some 150 years into a few paragraphs). In the 21st century, the avant-garde’s call for progress and the masses to rise has transformed into a rise in museums seeking mass-appeal through procrastinative exhibition not qualitatively different (Barasch et al. 2018). The art world, laments the eminent art critic Robert Hughes, is now an entertainment industry in the model of the fashion industry, and Hirst’s rotting shark or Koon’s art directed play-dough offer little more in the way of societal critique than the description of them in a Sotheby’s catalogue. Only when art is “truly useless...can



FIG. 11

MAISON MARGIELA
SS 1996

PH: Conde Nast Arch.

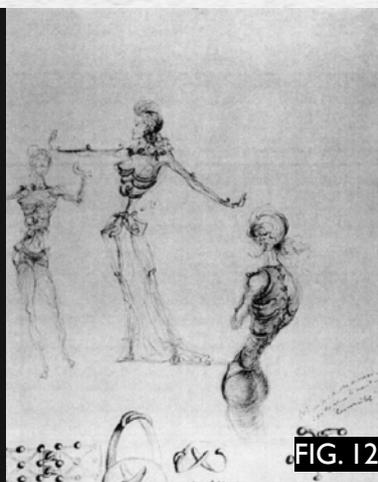


FIG. 12

SALVADOR DALI
Study of figures for Skeleton Dress

1938



FIG. 13

ELSA SCHIAPARELLI
Skeleton Evening Dress

1938

capitalism see it as truly priceless” (Hughes, 2016: 129). And it is here, in the diminishing belief in art’s inherent ability, and duty, to function as a witness to and provocateur in society; as a divine or secular means through which we can transcend horrors of past, the pettiness of present, and synthesise a future not yet formed, that avant-garde fashion enters the scene like a necromancer summoning the spirit of radical avant-garde art.

From art as anthropomorphic subject simulation, as seen in late Renaissance and the Enlightenment portraits of Man, portraits of the wife of a Man, portraits of Man-made buildings, portraits of Man-made landscapes, via harsh geometric lines drawn by hands who had experienced the “collective homicide” of WW1 (Gardner et al. 1996: 702), through material object reconfigurations á la Duchamp’s pissoir, the conflation, or collapse, of subject and object, into a form of art that calls for no image beyond the phenomena of itself has, argues this thesis, set the scene for critical avant-garde fashion of the kind designed by Owens (Ufan, 1969: 270). Despite the fact that fashion has always been considered secondary to visual and architectural arts, a significant parallel development to the demise of the critically of art which has elevated fashion as an art of some kind, is the ‘democratisation’ of fashion, in the form of availability of cheap clothes and access to fashion imagery. Fashion has, argues philosopher Lars Svendsen, become the foundational phenomena in all spheres of contemporary society, from art to politics or science (Svendsen, 2006: 7). Regardless whether one considers Comme des Garçons’ design to be an art of the same status as Caravaggio, as the Metropolitan Museum of Art arguably does, as they held a solo exhibition honouring the designer, the broad interest in fashion has had an enormous impact on the art and museum industry. Far from its original exile in the basement of museums, the dresses in the costume department are now the blockbuster superhero movies of contemporary museum experiences and curators are seated front-row at fashion shows with bottomless purses on their celebrity smooching knees (Geczy & Karaminas, 2012: 4). The spotlight is on fashion.

Nevertheless, the lesser-status of fashion lingers. That is partly because of issues discussed: fashion's commerciality, perceived superficiality, impermanence and its in Western modernity gendered attributes and associations with a devalorised female subject (Geczy & Karaminas, 2012: 3; Matteuci, 2017: 48). Though, most interestingly, as I believe this to be the reason why fashion is the heir of the avant-garde, it has been rejected because it is something we wear, and not always for very long, i.e. fleeting trends. Nevertheless, to think seriously about fashion does not imply an attempt to reroute it, or to gender it differently. Fashion does not need more mind nor art. There is, argues this thesis, depth to surface, severity to silliness, and morality in lines of cloth. It is precisely these qualities of fashion, this practical art carried out with, as well as worn by, head, hands and bodies, that makes it not *simply* art.

Due to its proximity to our bodies, fashion can circumvent the distant attention we tend to take when viewing art (or being told what we view is art). Even when displayed as inert object-art, the fact that we all have bodies only occasionally without clothes means that even when we are engaging with clothing purely through vision, it can summon what Deleuze and Guattari call haptic vision. An embodied, sartorial-somatic memory, in which you become-with an object, rather than surveying it from a view of nowhere, as no one (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 492). You can never walk into a painting; it does not bear your mark, you have no hand in it (unless you decide to make or physically destroy one). Fashion is on you, fashion decays, rips, smells. Fashion becomes you.

However, before we return to Owens, it might be beneficial to point to the fact that some fashion can offer critique, that does not mean all will. Some clothes, like the majority of contemporary art and architecture, have no desire to entice change. Today's contemporary fast fashion does not speak of equality; it does not speak of transparency; it does not speak of individuality; it does not speak of the future. It speaks of how we ought to live: change, consume, discard and reinvent in a perpetual illusion that one t-shirt is different from the other because of a label. Any affect caused by fast fashion, argues Seely, is but a by-product of the primary goal of higher profit (2012: 262). It is a fashion that has succeeded to steal our purses, shape our bodies, change our diets, attract lovers, turned radical theory into slogans on t-shirts, build economies, ruin landscapes and make us feel pretty and pretty shitty. Though, regardless of *how* they make us feel, but because they *do* make us feel, they make us. Still, some clothes can, indeed, make us *otherwise*.

Excess, Existence, Exodus

But what concerns me more is to change the body's proportions by creating extensions for it, by making the clothes go where they're not supposed to go. In short, I wanted to deform the human body. (Owens, by Kapriélian, 2018)

Owens work is a logical progression from 20th century avant-garde, but not unlike posthumanism and its relationship to humanism, he goes beyond by adding new layers to the composition. The

intellectual injury into the givenness of *The Human*, and Owens' attempts to re-articulate alternate becomings is poignantly evident in his fashion shows, which he presents biannually, separated by gender and season: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. The titles of his shows — always the same for men and women — often allude to gods, giants, myths and civilisations, such as FW18 Sisyphus, FW15 Sphinx, SS15 Faun, AW98 Monster, AW99 Hydra, but also animals and nature take part in his universe: SS06 Tungsten, FW16 Mastodon, SS13 Island, FW12 Mountain, FW08 Stag, SS00 Swans and FW02 Sparrows (all collections can be found on www.rickowens.eu). Preposterous one might think, but the eschatological exercises rarely fail to live up to their name. For his women's SS17 Walrus, Owens sent our distorted blobs of draped linen, layered buckram cloth, woven horsehair and thousands of ostrich feathers. In the colours of dark plum and pale mauve, the blobs somehow evoked elegance and fragility not unlike the collection's namesake sea-creature as it moves through the Arctic looking for a homeland lost to global warming. Or maybe it looked more like an expensive life-jacket for a human? Regardless, it was fragility that had not escaped Owens:

The idea of using the name of an alien-looking creature so far removed from our everyday world held me think of making chlothes in the context of an eternity of anthropological cycles and fragile ecological balances. I am reminded of, and somewhat comforted by, our minuscule presence in that trajectory. (Owens, 2016b)

The importance of Owens' shownotes is that many of his followers — including *all* of my collaborators — read and, not seldom, know the content of the notes by heart. But of course, what matters is the show, and Owens' shows are often feverish, without clear linear progressions, trends, or seasonality. So rarely does he adhere to the zeitgeist of the rest of the fashion industry, that his shows are better referred to as performance art as part his *gesamtkunstwerk*: a total, multifocal aesthetic universe (Oosterling, 2011: 5). Many are the collections that seem to show a prophetic, uncanny mediation on not only current moods and affairs, but they offer poignant and provocative reflections on being a man, woman, human, and not least, they open up imaginary possibilities of becoming more-than-human. Masculinity and femininity are sculptured and draped from the same cloth — metaphorically and actually, as Owens often drapes rather than cuts his clothes — as is the beautiful and grotesque. Still, his clothes are not unisex or androgynous. Men wear dresses because we all can, and it would be erroneously and equally superficial to call his women strong women as if that was a characteristic foreign to their gender. What they display is female strength, a force at the disposal to all of us (Geczy & Karaminas, 2017: 133-6).

In paradoxical oxymorons, the design speak of qualities of many kinds at the same time, where the former is ever-shifting back to the opposing latter, and the latter into the former. With penises out, bodies strapped onto bodies, and phallic sculptures set ablaze, the model's walk through literal beams of light, wind, foam and fire. Though, from the flames rise no neatly packaged

perfume or logoed bag, as is the standard of any significant international fashion house. Nor are there any separation between ideas and substance, vision, cloth and commerce. Unlike the lucid, dreamlike and spectacular shows of John Galliano at Dior (1996-2011), Thierry Mugler's feature-length Neo-Grecian, SLM science fiction inspired presentations (1973-2002), or Alexander McQueen's raw, and menacing shows (1992-2010), who's elaborate dresses would end up in museums, archives and private collections, never to be worn let alone produced, a substantial part of what Owens presents on the runway, is purchasable off the runway and, as will be explored, worn off the runway.

In an industry that premieres youth, eternity and frivolity, Owens' dwells in "confusion, hope, dread, serenity, and nihilism" (Owens, 2018) a fact that further still separates him from the escapism of above-mentioned designers. Through acts of haute brinkmanship, Owens questions, deterritorializes and sublates the dialectics taken for granted in Western metaphysics: human/animal, man/woman, man/machine, life/death, entropy/negentropy, and creates new realities. Or rather, he creates clothes necessary to get there: engulfing tumorous pods made up of duchesse satin (figure 14), nomadic dwellings (figure 16), tents protruding from thin bodies as hastily fitted exoskeleton (figure 17), metamorphic jackets (figure 18), and semi-transparent chrysalises enclosing the models heads like protective micro-universes (figure 15). By focusing on self-evidential facts, idols or figures, such as the seemingly nonsensical act of placing flaccid penises front and centre as he did on several pieces in the men's Fall 2015 Sphinx collection, the humility, myth or weightiness



FIG. 14



FIG. 15



FIG. 16



FIG. 18



FIG. 17

of the latter is contested, disarmed and rejected for the journey ahead. His juxtapositions are not random but full of intentional, intellectual vitality and politics. The tension in his work rids of any a priori expectation, and through an ongoing oscillation, he bangs things together, lets them ferment, decay, and rise again, yet, they never appear the same. "Everything I do" he says:

...hinges really on the fact of questioning the rules: why do a woman's breasts have to be pushed up and her waist emphasised? Why do we have to conform to these feminine stereotypes when there are other aspects of beauty?... That actually energises me, because it make me want to come up with alternatives, to show that there are other options, and that we aren't obliged to conform to those standard, infantile rules. (Kapriélian, 2018).

With clothes Owens directs, shapes and morphs the world into alternative realities, in which the observer, as well as wearer, are constantly — sometimes subtly, sometimes comically — reminded of the entangled nature of politics, culture, environment, economics, dreams and reality. When is a penis, a penis? Are straps for bondage or bonding? In Owens' universe, the existence of the human is habitually questioned, yet, as seen in his shows her persistence in adapting saves her. Affirmatively recognising her dependency on others in mattering meaning, Owens' woman accepts her incompleteness and responds to the call of whatever the environment demands. This affirmative metamorphism offers, in line with Barad, the sense that any thing can become anything else.

Now, the allure of imagining the human as enhanced or radically different from that which seems to be divinely or evolutionary given has long been an interest amongst learned and laymen. Transgressive demigods, anthropomorphic tricksters, X-men, Superman and Superhumans have been a constant and queer other in art, literature, anthropology, film and myth (Wamberg & T. Rosendahl, 2017: 151). As crises seem to proliferate in the technology-mediated scapes of recent decades, in which a sense of Fukuyamian end-of-history has been broadly embodied, questions of human enhancement and their depiction in art and popular culture have shifted towards questions of human extinction, particularly in the West. Perhaps, that comes as no surprise, as it is indeed the history and the fashioning of the Western man of Vitruvian proportions and sensibilities that is, arguably, coming to an end (Braidotti, 2013: 23, 71; Bradotti, 2015: 6). An impending doom Owens has returned to repeatedly in his work.

However, Owens tackles existential crises with stoicism: "You can't be afraid forever in a moment where there's a lot to be afraid of" (Blanks, 2017b). The main concept operative in his ontological elaboration, as materialised on his runway, seems to be that the most significant change to The Human is not shiny exoskeletons, protruding wires or a detached mind in the cloud, but how one can see oneself as *other* than a humanist human. That is, to open up to becoming-otherwise. To become, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is to be more than the sums of parts in relation. It

represents a willed undoing of the stratified humanist subject and androcentric body, to allow the subject to become - however temporarily - a body-out-of-bounds, as it transverses into productive alliances and trans-subjective relations (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 159, 161). In denying, through design, the body from moving or looking like a body ‘should’, Owens rephrases the naturalised comporting of a human into a process framed by questions, rather than answers:

It's like maybe death is a transition. What if we could embrace change in a different way, or consider a different way of embracing change instead of being threatened by it? I'm thinking of enveloping yourself with clothes, obviously. That's a way we deal with it personally (Neilson, 2016).

A lot of Owens’ work touches upon this tension in the unity of opposites, the *coincidentia oppositorum* so central to myth: being-becoming, life-death, grotesque-beauty (Van Gennep, 1908 [1960]: 26). This makes what is seen and felt somewhat obtuse. Is it beautiful? Strange? Deranged? The clothes seem to be for a human-not-yet-formed or already passed, for a future not-yet-realised or inhabited. Still, being observable and purchasable clothes, they are here, in the physical present. That, together with a leaning towards natural fabrics and muted colours, produces an element of surreal to Owens world. One recognises materials such as lush fur, soft leather, or coarsely woven cotton. These very natural and real materials, in origin and in human life, leads the — in fashion unbaptised — observer to not *instantly* repudiate what is offered. One goes along, as it were, with the plot. It is, after all, only humans in clothes, right? But the treatment, cut, and gravity-defying shapes of the materials produce an uncanny sense of laws of nature, physics or morality being broken or grotesquely bent. Orifices in cloth leak other fabrics, fissures and rips reveal hidden away limbs, bags and collar bones extended and twisted in amorphous shapes. It is sublimely grotesque, in that it offers not only the “enormity, extreme insignificance, infinity, indeterminacy, coarseness, obscurity, confusion, emptiness, seriality” (Wamberg & T. Rosendahl, 2017: 161) of great 19th century art, but it does so without the saving comfort of the former’s vital distant gazing. One does not, I would argue, recuperate in a Kantian sense, without having moved through an intellectual *as well as* a somatically informed deliberation, before some form of order is settled.

The sublimely grotesque of Owens clothes thus produces an opening hard to close. That openness and sense of alterity the clothes produces — the deterritorialisation, to use Deleuzian terms — forces the observer to announce him or herself as *not* that which cause alterity. One has to, as it were, reframe oneself, and in the process of doing that, one also becomes aware that one indeed is, or was, framed. Pushing the stratified humanist subject through, by emotions, economy and hegemonic ideology, ungoverned territories and unexamined assumptions, this transversal of in-between-stabile-selves can, argues this thesis, generate real possibilities of framing oneself

somewhat differently as one reterritorialise. That in the hinterlands of disenchanted facts lies alternative templates for alternative thinking-becoming. That acutely, somatically sensed unframing seems to be one reason as to why people also wear Owens, as will be further explored in subsequent *Becoming-Otherwise* chapter.

Inhuman, Subhuman, Superhuman

When asked about the naming of his 2017 exhibition at the Triennale Milano titled *Inhuman, Subhuman, Superhuman*, Owens said that he wanted to “try to go beyond the limits of what one already expects to see and knows about bodies” (Conti, 2018). That transgressive self-reflexion, he argues in yet another interview on the exhibition, is in itself the story of humanity. One cannot but “keep trying, you do your best, you make the effort” (Roche, 2018) and stay with the trouble:

Instead of morbidly romanticising our socio—ecological peril, which I have so gleefully indulged in in the past, I feel I need to propose experimental grace and form a gesture of turning away from threat. Not really as escapism, but as rejection. Stoicism, fertility, futurism, hope (Owens, 2017).

The promise of death, says Brasset, “requires that we search for ways of living...scramble for ways out” (2016: 3), and despite pop cultural commentary on the darkness of Owens, he rarely seems to suggest dystopia in his queries, nor is he flirting with necrophiliac romanisation, as characteristic in the 1990s fashion explored in Caroline Evans’ *Fashion at the Edge* (2003: 6). Instead of definitive answers or disturbing nihilism, Owens seems to offers ways crafting an aesthetic universe, a knotting together of cloth, self and community as a way of hoping, passionately, for a better future, or a graceful death. He forces us to accept that we are broken, angry, horny, happy, and scared as matter of *and and*, rather than *either or*. Furthermore, all things cannot be repaired, and that the guilt and anxiety our past actions bring and the gleam prospects our future offer, need to be acknowledged and felt. It is, he says “silly to believe that we should be exempt from extinction” (Roche, 2018), echoing philosopher Jean Luc Nancy’s philosophising in a post-Fukushima world “Let us remain exposed, and let us think about what is happening” (2015: 8).

It is a philosophising attempted throughout current and recent art exhibitions, such as *Broken Nature* (2019), curated by MoMA’s Paola Antonelli at the Triennale Milano, the climate crises focused *Nature* at Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial (2019), *Eco-Visionaries: Art and Architecture After the Anthropocene* (2019) at MAAT in Lisboa, *The Anthropocene* (2013) At Hause der Kulturen der Welt, and *Human-Inhuman-Posthuman* (2015) at BAK, Utrecht. Beyond exhibition halls and fashion shows, extinction is on the news, on Netflix, on HBO, in Teen Vogue, in advertising for Co2 compensated charter holidays, in promotion of non-dairy milk alternatives. It is



the noise of everyday life: deforestation/deregulation, green Amazon/greedy Amazon. But is the theme of extinction and the Anthropocene really not just another scene in art, fashion academia and popular culture? Perhaps, but in contrast to other themes before this — or critiques of the centrism as discussed in Part I — human's have compromised this scenery to the extent that, as suggested, the best we can hope for as a specie is a graceful exit. But as those in power freight from acknowledging the red lines after which inexorable consequences will occur — have occurred — hope is thin that it will be an aesthetically pleasing exodus. Death does not become The Human.

Displayed in the *Inhuman, Subhuman, Superhuman* exhibition was an enormous, earthy, monolithic shape made of matter from Owens life, such as his hair and sand from his Italian house — foreign in the industry today, Owens designs, drapes and cut every piece of clothing, and resides half of the year in Italy to oversee the production (figure 19). As it worms its way across the gallery, it is hard not to think of an often used quote where Owens expresses his desire to lay a black turd on the white landscape of conformity (Judah, 2017). As a thing composed of fragments a life, the turd, in turn, evokes the question what we, as humans, leave behind in this time of the Anthropocene; how thick of a geological layer are you comfortable with when the creatures of tomorrow sample the earth for a glimpse into the past that is our present? To be sure, future beings will not find the jackets we buy or the food we discard, but the chemicals patented by multinational corporations used to produce the former. Taking into consideration the entire supply chain — what counts as the supply chain and where liability lies is difficult and, therefore, profitable— the fashion industry comes in as the second most pollutive industry in the world, according to Global Fashion Agenda and Boston Consulting Group (Lehmann et al., 2018).

Critical Fashion in the Anthropocene

Posthumanism, says Braidotti, does not give primacy to text as the primary form of intellectual elaboration but sees practice as an equally legitimate and crucial form of onto-epistemological de/reconstruction, and through his artistic imagination, Owens challenges the humanist human's anatomies, choreographies and shapes, while exploring profound ethical, biological, cultural, and ontological presents and future scenarios (Braidotti, 2013: 107, 184). In contrast to other artistic mediums, such as film, literature, music, art or textual science fiction, where post- or transhumanist elements are consumed in a mostly passive, albeit often passionate, mode, fashion is not. Fashion is imagination materialised. Fashion touches you, whether worn or not.

As mentioned in Part III, all clothes have affective effects on bodies — nevertheless, and in line with the stressed intentionality of Geczy and Karamina's critical fashion (2017), and Seely's affective fashion (2013), Owens' designs to obfuscate *corpus naturalis*. It explores bodies without borders; bodies that are provoking alternative becomings — e.g. becoming-insect (figure 21) — rather than hermetic alignment. What is particular is not merely the look of the clothes, but the bodily demeanour they produce. Sometimes the haptic experience of wearing Owens might demand change in the wearers' habitual bodily schemas. One might have to walk differently, sit differently. Or it moves with the body in such a way that it is experienced as extended. Nevertheless, to the extent that they constrain 'natural' movements, it fosters alternative ones to move through the world. Utilizing extreme artifice, the wearers starts looking natural; not naturally human, but naturally something else. It alters ways of being-in-the-world, by making the wearer aware of the mediate patterns he or she otherwise would merely perform unconsciously.

In western fashion in general, and of hermetic clothing in particular, the way something is made and made to look like, is the way we imagine and experience it. That is, we think of clothing as something relatively objective, and outfits can be formulated into equations of some sort (Smelik, 2014: 46). Like a building, an outfit has parts put together into a structure of relative permanence: four walls, a door and two windows; or, a jacket, t-shirt jeans and sneakers. Even elaborate clothing, or architecture for that matter, are often rigidly formatted *before* we live in them, hence, *how* to live in them, is predetermined (De Botton, 28-33: 2006). Our compliance with the mathematically infused aesthetics of West, and how far that overshadows the affective experience of clothing, is evident in what most of us have experienced: you find something pretty, but not in your size. You try on said pretty item, and you look gorgeous in it. Still, you are weary as if you should buy it. It looks good, feels nice, but it is, after all not your size. Or is it?

Looking at the world, buildings as well as bodies, from this central perspective of a disembodied, neo-platonic God's eye has permeated Western science and art since the mass reprinting of Greek and Roman ideas in the early Renaissance, and the focus on vision is evident in

the etymological origin of theory; *theōrós*, meaning spectator (Geczy & Karaminas, 2017: 85). Art and science were speculative endeavours working to capture static entities in frozen moments. Avant-garde art on the other hand, including avant-garde fashion, tries to challenge this and captures fragmented entities in fluid movement, as to never “merge with the everyday aspirations and demands of the street” (Dewsbury, 2009: 254).

Few are those who had a moment of existential elaboration after seeing a pair of cargo trousers. However, seeing Owens cargo trousers blown up to architectonic proportions, folding into itself like a self-pleasuring creature performing auto-fellatio, clad in scales resembling the Steven Parrino’s work, just might. Artistically and philosophically schooled, Owens uses an anthropological methodology as he ‘unmeasures’ man, as the wisdom he is after is found in-between. If what he is proposing is realisable or possible to scale up, is of less interest, as it speaks about the zeitgeist of posthuman desires and apocalyptical fears in the present time. Still, Owens stresses that he “never wanted there to be a disconnection between exaggeration and what you could really do” (Zahm, 2017) and the potency of his work, in contrast to overdone sci-fi/techno fashion which often retains a fundamental dialectical premise of nature vs culture and are rarely commercially produced, is that it is not is not futuristic, but othering; it offers ways of becoming-otherwise-in-the-now. How? For the very simple reason that you can buy the clothes, wear them, be affected by them. But also in that the clothes nor brand narrative play into a technologised human typical of the vernacular of futurism. Instead, like an anthropological monograph on a distant place, Owens’ shows other, tentatively deanthropocentric ways of becoming, before a future where any becoming is too late. It is, of course, not a literal, ethnographic reconstruction, but speculative fabulation in the style of Haraway (2015: 160) and Ursula Le Guin (1974).

That matters, as the posthuman condition, whether a near present one or a distance future one, will probably not be sudden. Being a little bit more human — longer life, assisted reproduction, genetic engineering for healthier offsprings — brings us into a hazy territory in which the concept of The Human, arguably, becomes unstable. The change need not be so extreme for extreme effects on the planet, thus discussions on definitions need to be had. Now, *critical artistic posthumanism* does not necessarily have more potency than philosophical or scientific thinking about the human, and none of the practices are irreducible to each other. Still, the former confers a function in that it highlights the necessity of creativity often lacking in the academy, and the latter’s tendency to dogmatise and become blind to their experimental past and the doors their thinking forecloses (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013: 379). Key concepts in philosophy, cultural analysis and in the sciences, that are “systematically bracketing out subjective aspects” (Guattari, 1995: 100), in this case the question of The Human, can be contaminated and mutated through engagement with art and fashion. It can produce evocative interpretations of concept to be adorned in or to adore.



FIG. 21



FIG. 20



However, art and fashion also produce sensations, in themselves, to which there are no ready concepts to wear nor understand. The power of art lies not, argues Deleuze and Guattari, in its subversive qualities and negation, but in facilitating encounters of something unknown, or rather, unthought (2013: 379). Owens' art falls within the latter purpose.

Regardless of whether the medium is clothes, furniture, or objects, Owens' work does not seek to pleasure us or make us comfortable, and items do not always signify in articulatable ways. They demand of you to engage with it somatically, to touch it, pressure, sit on. As you touch, you are touched back. Freeing bodies of an easily readable surface frees them — if only temporarily — of their stratified human or non-human form as aligned with a phallogocentric logic and economy, into “bodies in-motion” (Smelik, 2014: 39). His clothes, therefore, leads us to the limits of the vocabularies and concepts at hand: what does one call clothing that is not clothing? Art that is not art? A human that no longer looks human? The questions arise in the most mundane of situations: What is a good fit of a t-shirt when the fit is, well, not fitted? The radicalism in Owens' vision seems to be that conclusive answers are not necessary, and if argued for, they are but temporary. To that end, there is something austere *and* camp about him. And how can camp not be austere, as it in its “love of the unnatural; of artifice and exaggeration” (1964: 1) as Sontag puts it in her seminal, albeit Eurocentric, essay on the sensibility, often must face the world alone. Like Camp, Owens takes seriously the frivolous and the vulgar. But unlike camp, there are no quotation marks in his universe (ibid:4). Being-as-performance is instead becoming-as-performative.

The clothes of Owens both hides the human we think we know, but also offers one we did not know we could be. This tension is, in a sense, the tension between being and becoming. Our humanness is both heightened when exploring its borders, and impaired in not knowing what that human is. This, in turn, saturates even the most menial of decisions with meaning: is this necessary, essential? Is this Human? Perhaps what signifies avant-garde fashion of the kind created by Owens is that it puts question-marks, rather than quotations, towards what it points at. As a materialised form of philosophising, fashion is made to unfold in moments of encounters on many levels. As seen in the work of Gecy & Karaminas, Seely, Smelik and Bruno, such encounters are introduced in fashion shows and its miscellaneous media. However, the most productive encounter happens, argues this thesis, amongst those who wear the design. Through aesthetics acts they, in the most practical way, work through existential questions difficult to engage with otherwise. But before we move onto queer, dicks, weirdoes and Wagner, a note on the use of animal parts in fashion.

Postanimal Fashion?

It is beyond the aim of this thesis to address Owens use of animal products. However, I will put this note here as to point to further analysis needed. There is, indeed, a bewildering diversity in how

humans relate to and treat animals. A relation which, according to anthropologist Philippe Descola, is structured on most arbitrary ontological choices, often made irrespective of particularities in the animal itself (Descola, 2013: 77). Therefore, we find animals used as a free labour force and unspoken proletariat taken for granted in food, cosmetics, transportation, research, and not least so, in Owens' design. We consider some animals as an extension of our families, others as spare parts for when we need our food taste better, shoes shine brighter or as disposable containers for growing new organs in "xeno-transplantation" between animal and human (Braidotti, 2013: 70). We can, with no conceptual pain, eat a pig as we pet a dog and, at the same time, watch a pig and dog befriend each other on Animal Planet. In light of this blatant specie supremacy in which humans claim access to bodies of non-humans, Cary Wolfe raise an important question to posthumanist in particular, but I believe the questions is relevant for all fields in the humanities "If our work is characterized in no small part by its duty to be socially responsive to the `new social movements... how must our work itself change when the other to which it tries to do justice is no longer human? (2003:7)".

If we are posthuman, ought animals not then be postanimal? That would seem indisputable as *The Animal*, in the role of metaphorical, metaphysical and actual other of crucial importance to the construction and perpetuation of *The Human*, too, is a humanist construction (Haraway, 1991: 134, 177). Beyond using the metaphors of the animal to justify violence, exploration, or ridicule against the racialised and sexualised human others, the species other than humans have arguably suffered more in their categorisation as that which humans are not. As stated by Wolf, "the 'animal question' is part of the larger question of posthumanism" (2010: xxii) Yet, there is little concerted and broad engagement with the so-called 'question of the animal' in the major work of posthuman voices, apart from Wolf himself and Haraway (2008). No one, as it were, calls for the death of *The Animal*. What about Owens? Although a *cirque of Owens* has not been of direct analytical interest to the research question of this thesis, there are numerous reasons to be critical towards Owens, not least his frequent use of waif thin models, although I personally do not have an issue with that. His use of exotic skins and fur, however, is deeply problematic. It is an issue I hope to return to in future research. But perhaps Owens is, as argued by the senior fashion critic Tim Blanks when commenting on Owens' SS17 *Walrus* "...our least likely environmentalist, but our most winning campaigner for change" (Blanks, 2016). Best, perhaps, for now.

BECOMING-OTHERWISE — DRESSING CRITICALLY IN RICK OWENS

To Be Other or Othered

To present oneself as queer, in appearance and manner, is to highlight — and according to queer's etymological origin, 'to ruin' — the processes and constructedness of the observed as well as the observer. This act of dressing is, as expressed in Seely's account on affective fashion, a form of Nietzschean transvaluation of one's othered position, where one seeks to define oneself as other *before* being defined as the latter through a negation of the normative ideal, that is, what one is not: not straight, not white, not able-bodied, not quite normal (Seely, 2013: 252).

To wear clothes by Owens is a queering of space, bodies and norms. It is a visceral push towards the border of normative order. Furthermore, it is so, I would argue, regardless of the presence or not of a so-called queer identity of the wearer. For now, at this moment of violent philistine arrogance, in this rhizomatic entanglement of glocal culture, the clothes that have a destabilising impact on hegemonic heteronormativity — albeit in varying degrees in various contexts — looks like those designed by Owens. That is, in contrast to the hermetic, unobtrusive clothes which more readily become objects in and of its time, objects which offer surfaces of representation but little in terms of mediatory qualities and prospects of affective encounters, the pieces made by Owens, due to current social and material contingencies, are violent, blunt, and perplexing to both wearer and surrounding. In their public unfolding, they are, argues this thesis, strategic sites of resistance. Therefore, I refer to the wearers as *Critical pragmatic posthumanists*.

Like a fingernail scraping a blackboard, they wearers create unease where they go; ruptures in the smooth visual and affective landscape of every-day life. Wrapped in rippling cashmere trousers, the body of the wearer looks to be both melting and erupting. Alternatively, a stiff silk gazar creation conceals, reveal and expand the body, forming an assemblage that thickens the intensity and vitality of a space. Moreover, it claims two chairs when seated in the dentist's office. In boiled leather, tulle or synthetic cloth, an armour is erected, within which the wearer is, to equal measure, sealed off and bare. Bare, as they, in their deterritorializing, expansive lines of flights, where bodies are set in-motion, inevitably will fall back and reterritorialize: back to limits of existence, of every-day life, be it work, legislation, norms, laundry times, or Tinder dates (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 344-358, 582).

Although not all creations announce themselves in a sudden revelation, instead only offering partial views in precise movements, Owens' design is nevertheless aesthetically weighty and loud, yet it speaks few words: "Death, mortality and utopia" says Owens, are "the great themes" by which he creates (Wallace, 2018). The obtrusive characteristics of the brands design — i.e hand coated denim trousers resembling a botched up anatomical reconfiguration of a sea mammal or the plume



after a nuclear attack turned upside down — places the wearer conspicuously, inescapably in the world, in which she has to continuously justify her existence and space taking, and take the consequences of her style. Some of the more elaborate pieces are sculptures one cannot move fast in, thus leaving the wearer vulnerable and at the mercy of those he or she inhabit a space with. Every fold invites one to question it, and it falls on shared shoulder, observer and observed, to provide answers. Not readily readable by representational formats of understanding fashion, the observer has to intuitively use his or her embrained body as a site of sensory appreciation to paraphysically, if you like — a neuroscientist would prefer mirror neurones — ‘wear’ the clothes in order to think something about it. How an observer reacts arguably reveals something about what they expect out of a particular situation; and seeing a man in a dress where men do not wear dresses can unveil unexamined assumptions, and a ‘self’ not entirely known. As such, there is an element of intrusive violence in and surrounding the style offered by Owens: both in its ‘unfixing’ of perceptual stability, but also the threat of violence posed to those wearing it. Adam, a formerly Berlin-based artist now residing on the West Coast of Sweden, felt that after years of stares, comments and finger pointing, it usually did not become him, but:

Sometimes you can feel quite uncomfortable when you wear something that is a bit out of the ordinary, but my basic uniform is so ordinary to me, that I don't think about it [although he acknowledged that his style was not ordinary by any conventional standard]. I do not stop myself from wearing something because of the risk of being beaten down or something, and even if people bullied me in school because I was gay and because of my clothes, I didn't stop wearing it. I didn't want to change myself cause their world view was too narrow.

The more passable you are to the normative gaze and docility induced desires of the commodified world, the less physical the violence is felt. Still, it is from encounters — positive, negative, and some negligent — such as Adam’s, in which a sense of self arises, and it is a realisation that without these encounters, including those which pose a threat, such a self could not be. Judson, an engineer from the American South West living in NYC, said that “It would be a missed opportunity to go out and not be dressed weird”. It is not so that it is necessary to look strange, per se, he argued, but through provocation or confusion, he sought to leave an impression and searched for those who impressed him as he moves through the city. Beyond what could be considered gleeful narcissism or exhibition, the clothes offered Judson something more profound than being seen. Or rather to be seen in a particular way, was a profound experience:

If I wanted to attract attention, I could wear anything, or something that isn't so ludicrously priced. But there is a feeling that comes with wearing Owens that I haven't gotten from other clothing. It is...physically comfortable, but it's also where I feel the most mentally comfortable. I've tired wearing other brands, but something about Owens' weird morphing of the human body, making me look very outlandish, has appealed to me the most. I like that strangeness, and I want people to know that it is not an accident, but a solid option”

To feel like Judson, Judson was acutely aware of the mutual-constituted dependency of context, clothes and other people. Now, this is what most people know, i.e. one dresses the part to feel the part. According to the so-called written and unwritten codes of fashion relying on the theories of signifier and signified (Barnard, 2002; Hall, 1997), one ought to wear a smart suit for an important meeting, a body-hugging dress with a plunging neckline to invite sexual attention or simply feel sexy. Still, the difference is that in



FIG. 24
Judson



FIG. 25
Judson

these scenarios, the wearer attempts, desires or is required to comply with norms, follow agreed upon boundaries and exert control through clothes and over their clothes. None of the options are guaranteed to succeed: the length of one's tie might rule out a promotion, and a body-hugging dress might be right on a night out in York but out of style in New York. Nevertheless, what is normatively right is generally, and rightly so, as easy to achieve as it is to forget. That is not a criticism of hermetic fashion, but its success (Seely, 2013: 262).

For the collaborators, including Judson, success came from ignoring norms, blurring boundaries and instead of control, one invites chaos. Neither Judson nor clothing existed as-such until in-motion, in-relation. That is, he could only experience himself as to how he figures himself *with the clothes*, and how by dressing differently, he could become different, in a compositional, ever contracting and expanding flow. Due to some of Owens' more *outré* design, the collaborators did not always seem to be in control of what they wore, as the clothes in their floating, rippling, contracting and expanding no longer, or primarily, represented, repressed, or reproduced the body it covered. Instead, the clothes seemed to have, or when in motion, demand a certain autonomy, which further intensified uncertainty, un-intentionality, and the spatial presence of the collaborator in question. This dynamic unfolding, either in the actuality of the clothes physical form or effectually as the clothes promiscuously, sometimes inappropriately, formed alternative alliances with their environment, led the collaborators to experience a sense of unfolding *clothing-space*, rather than a defined *piece of clothing* supposedly embedded with meaning. That is, wind, subway doors, the dude across the street, size of a room, all became entangled in the clothing-space experience. Dressing in such a way is a balancing act. Not that one tries to fit into a balance, but that one has to do enough of what others do not — to *tip* the balance — for it to have a creative, transformative contact. To succeed is to make explicitly visible or implicitly sensible the tensional fragility of normative society. To that extent, the wearer of Owens enters the world as an acupuncture needle — tentacularly unveiling norms and structures through embodying its negation: non-norms, non-structural, non-beige chinos.

Something out of Nothing

What seemed to be crucial to my collaborators was not primarily what one *is wearing*, but what one is *not wearing*. The emphasis on negating rather than dialectically counteracting norms and structure separates wearers of Owens' from counter-culture style such as punks or teddy boys (cf. Evans, 2003: 24; Hebdige, 1988: 1, 50). The practice of dressing becomes experimental, philosophical even, rather than oppositional: affirmative rather than anti, if one is to use Deleuzian terms. Further, and in line with Smelik's Deleuzian rereading of fashion, this affirmative negation is not a deconstruction, but a means to "deterritorialize the human ... body into strange and alien

shapes” (2014: 49). It is a method of presenting sticky expressions with which the wearer of Owens catches the world already there whether caught or not, but which is highlighted and explicated within productive encounters. Through micro-political acts, such as wearing a long t-shirt, imagining wearing a disfiguring dress, or feeling the doubtful gaze of your family and friends, boundaries never there to begin with — or never stable — can start to loosen up. Or tighten:

I remember wearing a [Owens] women’s wool felt skirt, and it was interesting to move in it. My knees were locked, and I had to move very differently than from how I moved in trousers or a regular skirt. But it definitely changes the way I behave as a human - not as a man, or as a woman, or...gender is kinda irrelevant, because the genitals don’t really play any role. It’s about other body parts and movements.

To Erik, as quoted above, the feeling of wearing the skirt seemed to cut back to something more fundamental than a man in a dress. As the dress altered his habited way of walking, and he became aware of how he could *not walk*, other ways of walking had to be imagined: ways, as seen in the quote, understood as not more or less fabricated than his ‘natural’ way, just different ways. To Erik, Adam, John, Julian and Judson, this sort of corporeally experimental dressing was used as a means of creative mapping starting, perhaps, at the mundanity of what is an ugly shoe and how it changes how one walks, reaching to the limits of subjectivity as preordained in late capitalism, where new wisdom was habitually fostered and embodied in clothing the body, and bodying new clothing. It was not a smooth, logical philosophising, but often awkward, painful, exhaustive and full failures and of what Ruggeroni terms the non-predictable transformation of dressing (2017: 581). Interestingly, all interviewed talked about wanting to be invisible voyeurs, while at the same time retaining their sense of aesthetics, as Adam expressed below:

There is a paradox in that too, that you want to wear what you want, but also be invisible, yet you can’t be if you wear what you want. And the more sculptural I feel like, the longer it is, the wider or the more dramatic the shapes are, the more I feel like I’m getting closer to my aesthetics.

Perhaps the two are not mutually exclusive. Coming to terms with the centrality of their aesthetics, Adam and the others looked at the world with their clothes as not something obtrusive to the experience of being an observing voyeur, but they looked at the world *according to it*; that is, what the world was like when they are in it. The clothes almost took on the function as a portable philosophical thought experiment; a sticky, human-shaped questioner causing and catching affects of percepts. Besides, dressing, according to Ruggeroni, is always “unpredictable, surprising and queer” (2017: 586). It presents a moment of unboundedness and doubt, where even a dull Monday morning offer possibilities of new somatic and intellectual encounters not yet actualised. Alas, it

takes, as mentioned in Part III, too much energy to be affected, and at the risk of losing a stable self, possibilities are often left *unaddressed*. But to my collaborators, dressing was guided by the desire to let as much of the world enter you as you enter the world, performing a double negation, from ‘*I am me, as in me*’ via ‘*I am not me, as I am everything*’ to, finally, ‘*I am everything, and everything is me*’. The self that emerges is provisional, relational, and expansive. The immensity of the world is, however ephemerally, brought to you, and you are propelled outwards to fill the universe in you. Beyond abstraction, this was how the collaborators expressed it. Erik described the feeling like a flicker of connectedness “Like, all of a sudden space seems profound because I am wearing a certain thing. You become tied in-between these things, not by choice, but by feeling grounded”. But it was not always successful. Talking to Julian, who at the time of the conversation was working on a project in Brussels, he explained how uncomfortable he felt as he moved around the city:

It is fickle, the feeling the clothes make me feel. At an instant, it can shift [from feeling good to bad, but the intensity remains. If I am going to be here for eight weeks, I might have to start to wear sweatpants, because it is too draining to be so conscious of my clothes all the time

Focusing on the affective and perpetual landscape, to the extent that he did, made Julian focus on himself. That is, seeing other seeing him as a severed *visual* rather than part of the murmuring *visible*, demanded too much energy to maintain a safe equilibrium, and Julian’s sense of feeling extended out into the world or grounded, was instead, although in equal relational intensity, penetrating inwards. The world was folding into — onto — himself, and resulted in an unproductive encounter; a contraction of selfhood and thus possibilities (Guattari 1995: 37-9). To become-*with* does not mean, as seen in Julian’s account, to be heading in the same direction, or any direction. To be with can be to be against. What witness indicates is a relation in which tactility is guiding tactics (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 3, 481).

Still, to preserve that non-self, the collaborators had to actualise it by repetitively seeking new connections. Rephrased less epically, John said, “When you have felt the feeling of wearing something like Owens, you cannot help yourself from wanting that feeling again”. Whether understood as ruptures between self and other — Heidegger & Kirkegaard — as a pure expression — Bergson, Nishida Kitaro — poetic moments — Bachelard — or Baudelairian Correspondences, a self emerges at the very moment the self disappears (Ufan, 1970: 298). One allows the world to echo through one’s body — where the clothes figure as mediative collaborators, strengthening the signal, while also being producer of signals. By willingly thwarting space, the collaborators unblocked the rhizomatic connections they could make, and invited other possibilities of both affects to feel and new relations to form (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 158).

Moreover, to choose to wear avant-garde clothes, despite uncomfortable looks, despite the threat of violence, despite being called names, despite being bullied, is accepting them as an extremity belonging to one's body as much as a nose, penis or arm. An acceptance of an 'I' that disrupt space and normative ideals, by looking violently, or grotesquely beautiful, as if to say to "If *that* is what you want me to be, then no thank you". That, I argue, is a posthuman act. Why? If the embrace of the "chaotic, monotonous, over-regulated, indefinable, primitive, grotesque or indeed monstrous"(Wamberg & T. Rosendahl, 2017: 158) was a sign of the posthuman in art in the *fin de siecle* of the 19th century, *wearing* the latter must certainly be an act as well as art of becoming posthuman. Nevertheless, to think deep in a shallow world can be painful, and so one needs to find the limits worth crossing. It is not always pleasurable, it is not always profitable, but for some of my collaborators, and myself to a certain extent, it was necessary.

The Necessarily Negated Other

The thrill of wearing Owens seems to be that it offers a feeling of radical presentism, where, depending on the situation, the affective effect can linger in suspense, or change by every breath. The collaborators seemingly slavish devotion to Owens seems to come from an attempt to try to prolong these encounters of a heightened sense of selfhood, a structure of being — or rather, becoming, as the feeling always unfold in undetermined and unexpected ways and cannot be sustained (Deleuze, 1993: 140). Still, feeling comfortable in your otherness is not always something those around you are comfortable with, making you feel responsible for their discomfort. Thus, says Erik "it is not every day that I have the confidence to defend my choices, it is hard to face the world". Yet, exhausted by pushing boundaries, he nevertheless felt equally threatened to be pushed back into something he was not, threatened by *dejection* rather than *rejection*, such as the one time he wore jeans and t-shirt at work "I was just a regular guy, standing there with a sty in my eye, asking for money". Failed encounters, too, are felt encounters, and what is experienced is a sense of being less.

The de-centring of a neutral core of selfhood — an atomised 'I' in the world — and, in extension, humanhood as defined by what is behind the perimeter of the skin, was more clearly and consciously articulated when discussing dressing with those of the collaborators who identified as gay, queer or non-binary. A white, heterosexual male body can afford to define himself as fully himself at the vicinity of his pores. He is ontologically pure to a degree that renders the primacy of his body invisible: he is The Human, and if you are not him you are lesser (Braidotti, 2015: 1). Accordingly, for him, her or themselves who identifies or are identified as other than a white, heterosexual and able-bodied man, defining yourself based on his standardised spec-sheet makes for an uncomfortable fit. 'I' seen through his preferred tools of measurement, is not an 'I' equally worth

being. He, free from the constraints of having a leaking body, a desire for the wrong body, a brown body, or disabled body, he with a body far from the deterministic animality of nature, yet still considered natural, is free from excess and artifice (Ahmed, 2006: 544-5).

Women's, poor's, and the LGBTQI+'s in art, media, and popular culture made fun of dependency and interest in stuff stem, arguably, from the fact that these 'external' objects are necessary for there to be a 'you' in the first place. As postulated by Parkins in her Barad influenced feminist fashion theory, these attachments are that which make intelligible the selfness of some subjectivities. A knowing which *must* include certain external stuff, not as a complementary representation of what one knows one to be, but as a foundational premise of being-itself (Parkins, 2008: 506). It is with things we, the *others* of varying kind, can develop alternative strategic boundaries within, or from which in friction with other boundaries, a self other than the one we are already denied access to, can emerge. Owens artistic universe seems to facilitate a safe space in which members of the LGBTQI+ community can adapt such boundaries. As expressed by Erik:

Having this abnormality - I don't know if you can call it that - regarding sexuality, and being homosexual, it was always really natural for me to try to experiment in trying to express myself, and the whole Owens idea was very comforting and conforming for me. Not in a general, pedestrian way, but more 'ok I can relax in this and this really confirms who I am, this makes me feel safe'. That is why it's so weird when people think you like because you want to be cool or that you're interested in fashion. I feel like this is who I am, and I don't feel like I'm masquerading as anything I'm not.

Again, the dependency on stuff as collaborative enactors of subjectivity is an anthropological fact, but to which some are framed as *needier* (Entwistle, 2009). Take away the dynamic, mediating actors we are enthralled with/in — tv, radio, phones, animals, trains, medicines, socks, and clothes — and what would we be? Indeed, we are born with a body and a particular set of capacities, but it is our designed environment that, ontogenetically, makes us by “making possible...new way of thinking” and being (Turkle, 2007: 310). The humility of these mediative landscapes, including media as such, and the extreme comfort it brings us, has the effect of making our lives radically, humorously, albeit destructively, uniform. Regardless of whether these material landscapes, are born or designed, human-made or not, we soon come to accept and project the structures on which they/we stand. It seems rational, and therefore natural (Oosterling, 2011: 7, 11-2). *Critical artistic posthumanist*, such as Owens, challenges the naturalness of modern man, modern science, modern politics and modern art in its conception of rational agency in which the world is seen as inert material for the execution of the mind. *Critical pragmatic posthumanist* lives in the alternatives, where things and practices become means to reach different knowledge, whether actively sought or not, as well as ways to present it. Alas, as we will see, it is not necessarily the look that will get you laid.



FIG. 26
Erik



FIG. 27
Erik

'I Can't Get no Dick in Rick'

Decisively deficient of canonical representational symbols, one might struggle to rationalise the shape and meaning in Owens' clothes, and one is instead forced to let the experience marinate a bit longer. Like minimal art, this non-relation, or obscured relation, to the "manipulations of representational human consciousness" (Ufan, 1969: 260) can be off-putting, and that is not always preferable when one wants to be datable. "It is difficult to attract [male] partners in what is a very heteronormative gay society, rampant with internal-homophobia", says John who identifies as non-binary. You "can't get no dick in Rick" he continues, and he often feel the need to dress down and dress male if he has got a date or goes out clubbing with the intention to have sex. He has to, as it were, go back into a closet of some sort, and align himself with acceptable alternatives of a masculinity always in relation to the heterosexual male. Erik speaks of the same problem:

His [Owens] clothes take away a lot of sexuality and sexual energy, or he rechannels it as power or personality. And that is not attractive to everyone. Normal ways of like, desiring, are disrupted in the shapes of , and I have to change clothes or dress down to get the right type of attention. That's why I wear less at home [Norway] and I don't dress as elegant and as...ephemeral as I before. So I have to have one type of wardrobe I can have that sexual and physical persona in, to get the right type of attention.

Whereas the geographically and materially unstable aspect of Erik and Johns presentation of masculinity posed a risk of not being passable as a man enough in some situations, and as avant-garde enough in others, Judson, although equally aware of the consequences of his dress, saw it as a productive sorting technique:

I know that the way I dress excludes me from a lot of people because I look gay or simply weird. I cancel out people, but I have the philosophy that if the way I dress is enough of a first impression to scare someone off, then I probably don't wanna hang out with them anyways. I don't think my style has hindered me from getting laid. It is making me more appealing to the type of people I'm more attracted to. I typically find myself more attracted to the type of girls who wear the same vein of clothing, and who are a little more alternative.

Both John, Julian and Erik found the prevalence of straight men in Owens and their — according to John — miss-understanding of the brand as dark and brutal, as trespassers of the safe, queer space Owens' aesthetic universe offer. Erik phrased it in somewhat stronger terms:

It's a sausage fest, but I think most people are straight. I fucking hate it, I loathe it. Because then it is only about clothes being a sort of penis enlargement "Oh i have a lot of money". I feel like can't trust them with how important this is to me. I feel like they ruin it, more or less. I feel like the community is about this effortless community. You can be male and like girls, but being confidently straight...nah.

Erik's strong resentment of what he referred to as "dicks in Rick" show the intersectional breath of male identities and the complex contextuality of comfortably claiming it, as, whether gay or not, it is always framed on the fact that others are less-masculine, or lesser men. Non-heterosexual enactments of masculinities are seen, argues sociologist Raewyn Connell, as "the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic [heterosexual] masculinity" (2005: 78). It is not a matter of stigmatisation, she argues, but gender subordination (ibid: 36, 79). I might be gay, one might say, but I'm not feminine/as feminine as you. Difference=inferiority=woman=not me! *Hang on 1 of 2!* Are then my male identifying collaborators not reinforcing alternative masculinities not qualitatively different? Yes and no. While holding onto a form of masculinity as imperative, Erik is indeed holding onto an inherently supremacist gender expression from which women, non-white non-straight, and non-humans experience the brunt of violence (Nilsson & Lövkrona, 2015). Still, he is also in the process of becoming of multiple kinds: *being-man and becoming-woman and becoming-animal and becoming-monster*, "experientially undoing the boundaries of otherness" (Braidotti, 2015: 7) in dress, thought and demeanour without being reduced or slotted into schemes of already established subjectivities. *Becoming-everything* and thus nothing (existing outside of the dialectics) one become imperceptible (Deleuze & Guattari, 171, 197-200). But there is a fine, intersectional line in becoming-other, and devouring them.

That John, Julian and Erik felt threatened or lessened when the space within which they had found a 'self' in that was not first and foremost a gender identity or sexuality to be puzzled by others, was to some extent appropriate by those exploring more privileged aspects of being, is something I can relate to. LGBTQI+ existence, necessary to be framed as a particular one at this point in history, is being questioned or smoothed over in light of an existence — the universal human — without history. Feeling threatened by the good-willed straight man, make you seem ungrateful as he could have been judging instead of joining you. That is, usually the so-called others have to give up their particularities to be accepted or risk being pathologised (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013: 24–32). What is requested now is merely a shared space and aesthetics.

Hang on 2 of 2! Are not your LGBTQI+ collaborators merely performing a separatist form of identity, in the guise of a stylish subculture? Yes and no. They are indeed stylish, and the universe of the brand does offer an, as mentioned, safe space. However, to categorise emergence and becoming as good, and identity and being as necessarily and thoroughly bad, would be to evoke the binaries and closed system one — I — seek to revoke. Some instances, says Brassat, might "demand that we congeal our becomings into positions from which we can take a stand against forces of oppression and domination" (2016: 8) and become what Foucault, in the preface to Deleuze & Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, called little militants (2013: xiii). These Foucauldian militants, or the Braidottian nomadic others, need to engage in identity politics, of more or less radical

territorialisation to promote new tendencies. In line with Brassat, Braidotti and Dolphijn claim that identity-politics is necessary as “you cannot give up something you have never had, nor can you dispose nomadically of a subject position that you have never controlled to begin with” (2014: 33).

The fact that straight men and cis individuals find a greater identification with a more fluid terminology, engage in non-normative sexual activities, or break gendered dress and demeanour is promising. Alas, it is chiefly promising for straight people, and transgression of fundamentally violent binary subjectivation is not necessarily a central, all-encompassing nor compulsory aspect of their life. More often than not, light-genderfucks find joy in LGBTQI+ and queer culture and not in queer desires. The former can be explored, the latter, unfortunately, one often has to defend (Braidotti, 2015: 3). With regards to clothes, the difference lies less in the aesthetic outcome but its uses and responses. “Although I find gender to be inherently violent, I am not trying to be anti,” said John “but instead ask ‘whom would I be if was not already defined?’”. Whereas Erik, John and, to some extent, Julian stretch to the point of breaking the possibilities and limitations in establishing a sense of self outside heteronormativity, Judson could be said to expand the latter. Something he was acutely aware of:

I think it's completely fair [that some LGBTQI+ dislike straight people in Owens] If I met a gay person who was like 'you're too straight to be wearing Owens' I'd be like, I gotta give you credit there. Owens himself is a very gay person, and sorta makes clothes for people who have experienced that sort of isolation, which I might not have. I guess the difference is, if I take off my clothes, I'm normal...and if they take off their clothes, they're still gay”

What is interesting, and potentially fruitful for further research, is that all collaborators, regardless of gender or sexuality, found potent strategic resistance against micro- and macro-political techniques of subjectivation in the dress of Owens. Moreover, the resistance against masculinity, heteronormativity, gender binaries or humanness, was not only explored in outré visuals of avant-garde design, but in the affective, and hence productive assemblage of clothed-human-in-the-world. Judson added to our discussion on sexuality and gender: “The clothes do make me think a little bit more about otherness. And made me think a harder about why I'm attracted to what I am attracted to and whether that is real.” In other words, if he was not necessarily or always as straight as he thought was, then what else is not necessarily or always that which one thinks of it to be? Thus, in some ways and notwithstanding the internal tension, any becoming-otherwise is always a feminist and queer process “insofar as it would have to involve the body’s escape, however ephemeral, from the hegemonic modalities of patriarchal heteronormativity” (Seely, 2013: 262).

Moth, Materialism and Metaphysical Glitches

Fashion, or clothes, are unusually speedy due to their centrality in the capitalist economy, meaning, it is hard to notice them, and therefore easier to discard. However, the weight of outré clothes — intention, manufacturing, price-tag, social consequences by choosing to wear them, and actual weight — seemed to call forth a somatic, or somaesthetic awareness in the collaborators, sensitive to the affective capacity of their material surrounding. Even for Julian, who rarely wore the more obtrusive pieces from the brand, merely engaging with Owens’ visual universe, or reading interviews, seemed to set about a materially grounded self-awakening, in which the paradoxes, contradictions and pettiness in his everyday life were dealt with in practice. “I see and his [Owens] world as some sort of philosophical offering”, said Julian. “By appreciating and looking for beauty, first of all, and by taking a considered approach to every-day decision, certain things make...sense.” When asked what he meant by appreciating and looking for beauty, he paused and looked unsure:

Looking for beauty ...well I stopped, to some degree, to make very rational decisions. I try not to rationalise everything, but just embrace, express and try to feel more. I haven't really analysed it but ...everything feels a little different, and I try to not control myself, but behave with the environment I'm in. Even when I work [dance] I try to ignore my years of training, and feel how my body and organs receive the music, how my feet work with the floor. And I guess I do the same with clothes. I don't feel as if I challenge gender or the world, because I'm wearing Rick, but I feel like I'm doing *something*. I'm intrigued by the severity of his work and life, and I try to do the same. In some sort to way, he makes sense to me, or, he make the world seem a bit more meaningful.

In Owens’ clothes, the collaborators all expressed a sense that many things seemed to matter less, whereas what was left to ponder seemed to matter more. It seemed to foster an anal, critical sensibility: best ramen, best beer, best life. Every move, choice, step, purchase, defecation, and desire; every decision offered a moment of potentially transformative contemplation and invention of the self in-progress. Thus, what was felt was not a static identity, but an intense, procedural *integrity* in which being affected by thoughts, bodies, clothes, music, weather, genitals, stories and stars, one becomes. Crucially, by being able to be affected and affect, one becomes alert: alert to the intimately intertwined relations between different actors; alert, as a result, of one’s responsibility; alert to the specificities and differences amongst sameness. The self emerges, rather unceremonially, as a dynamic force profiting from caring for others, and one checks oneself as not to be absorbed into narratives in which fear of concepts — the refuge, climate crises, fake news, identity politics — become a central force around which politics is arranged and daily life arranged to avoid.

In simpler terms, and as expressed by Adam when discussing fast fashion vs Owens, if what one is dressed in has been given the care and consideration of 100 man-hours, then why not give the

same consideration to you, what you eat, how you socialise. If a button took a day to make, there seems to be an aesthetic as well as an ethic compass directing and pulling you away from that which do not match the sincerity of said button. “Therefore” concluded Adam “..I'm not interested in H&M”. That does not mean that one cannot have fun and make mistakes: process trumps perfection. Hence, the collaborators spoke lovingly about how their clothes tear, stretch and soil:

I think an important distinction in Rick's clothing or in what I consider worthwhile clothing is that if it gets ruined, it doesn't get worse. Ripping and shredding a Rick t-shirt makes it look better, rather than unwearable. I love that lived-in aspect.

The life of the items, as seen in Judson's quote above, seemed to give Owens clothes a greater capacity to escape objecthood, and even evade the risk of being considered waste. Instead, marks left by weather and decay were treasured, as they told stories of patterns of being, while tears and spots gossiped of unexpected moments. In the figure 28, one can see how month of wear and moths in the wardrobe, have co-created Judson's unique outfit. Similarly to sentiments expressed by hoarders, wearers of Owens' seemed to be addicted to the intensity experienced when engaging with things, in this case avant-garde fashion. They miss it when they do not wear it, they look for it amongst others, and they are protective of it when questioned. And, indeed, the collaborators spoke of some items with the same sincerity one would of a pet or a friend. Judson told me that he has several items he cannot really wear, sell, nor throw away. But he did not keep these items for sentimental values, as Judson routinely used items not 'fit for use'. When questioning him further on his relationship with stuff, Judson seemed to struggle to speak about clothes and listen to the words representing his feelings:

I do dislike that I'm so heavily intertwined in materialism. I have like a strong emotional connection to objects. Having that strong emotional connection to objects, feels wrong to me when I feel like I should like...I shouldn't be so obsessed with objects, I should be into more wholesome stuff like people. But of the way that I feel when I wear those objects, and how they make me feel like a person and the confidence I get the form that, I think there is something more to the objects than the amount that came out of my bank account.

As if trying to find a comfortable if not conclusive middle-ground, he added after a moment of silence “The fact of the matter is that they [objects] are more than just the object itself.” To see his clothes as simply clothes, items that could be replaced with any other items seemed to evoke a conflicting sense of failing both oneself and the clothes he treasured. Still, to equate himself with the other felt, or rather, *sounded* equally strange. The same irreconcilable line of thoughts and feelings happened in one of my conversations with Julian. When talking about the feeling of wearing Owens', he responded:



FIG. 28

I don't need to to put it on and wear it, I just....its on. It's my skin. I feel neutral, or like *now* I can be me, *now* I see possibilities. There is something with the fit, and the quality. But more than anything, I've invested time and emotion into the items I have. It offers a more profound connection to how I present myself. I wouldn't say that other ways of expressing yourself is not honest, but I doubt that it is as profound when you surround yourself with interchangeable stuff of poor quality.

Profound, according to Julian, meant “If you can make sense of the person, despite *and* because of what they are wearing”; a paradoxical departing from an unclothed body to an apparition of a self unattainable without the clothes, yet not the clothes themselves. It is, said Julian, a grey zone where he felt like he, as a person, occupies a space in-between his body and clothes “like there is no separation”. Looking at himself, Julian immediately becomes the clothes and the clothes immediately become Julian. When attempting to separate the phenomena, as when talking about clothes as items purchased, the clothes took on a deceptive form as inert, valuable objects, as if moved from one ontological existence to another. “It makes me anxious,” said Julian as we ended the conversation, “to see clothes as clothes”.

Julian's statement points to a methodological difficulty in approaching the affective and phenomenological qualities of dressing. As argued by Parkins, Julian is becoming intelligible to himself through an intra-relational encounter which surpasses the situated cut of the subject-object divide our vocabulary bends a phenomena into (Parkins 2008: 505). Aligning oneself to a representational understanding of fashion alienates the affective moods brought about by the former. The ambiguity of such metaphysical glitches, grey zones, can be understood in the paradoxes it produces: if one sees clothes and human as one, one cannot ignore that there is indeed two, that is, a human and clothes. If one sees it as two, one cannot overlook that they make one experience, a clothed human. If one says that there is nothing inherently critical with clothes, why is one wearing it? No, it is not functional (see page 3). If one says that there is something to feel, why does pointing at a pair of trousers seems to, well, miss the point? When we talk about clothes, it is close to impossible not to use words and frame relations in ways that elude to a human behind every seemingly agentive object; a human presumed to fetishise clothing, which for gay people is a derogatory, stereotypical characterisation. That stereotype was part of the reason Erik had moved into architecture rather than fashion design. Discussing the issue over a mouldy loaf of bread — Erik called it a “monastic diet”, leaving him free to think of other things than what to eat — he said:

That has been one of my main frustrations in life [others not using or valuing clothes as he does] Making clothes important feels very much like you're kind of...in our Western society, like you prioritise wrong in a way. But my clothes, or my aesthetic, is me.

Now, tentatively, you might ask, are we not now in the land of discourse and power? Yes and no. “Dis- course” argued Barad, “is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said” (2003: 819). Statements emerge from possibilities of becoming; discourse is a materially embedded process within utterances are made. Becoming-otherwise finds its meaning in the opening of possibilities, including discourses, to do and become differently (ibid: 817).

Betwix - and - Between

Owens, or avant-garde fashion at large, is not the sole means through which knowledge of this entangled kind is formed, strengthened or challenged, and it does not hold a monopoly on fostering an open-ended consideration and increasing receptiveness to progressive ideas and radical changes — far from it. Nevertheless, it was a pre-requisite condition for how my informants came to know the world in a way they arguably would not otherwise. It offered a process from which to look at the world and to be looked at. Hence, I believe Owens’ design has much to contribute, both as a means to understand affective, transformative phenomena, but also being a producer of such mediation. By making the visible invisible, such as age, gender, ability, physical boundaries, the invisible becomes visible, that is, the structures of the former. Moreover, what it does is that it seems to produce prolonged moments of suspicion before the rationality of general thinking forecloses how to think. John referred to it as a Matrix sort of feeling “How is the outfit draped, how do I wear it, how does it look, how will people react, how do I sit in the subway, how do I get through the door to my local deli, how, how, how”. Owens clothes, it seems, offer a glimpse into a reality less adulterated by words and functional stability. A virtual or a pre-rational world, hidden under the veil of influence and smoothed over by representation (Deleuze, 1988: 42-3).

People who wear Owens’ design because they like the look of it and the look of them in it, often start looking at the world differently *from* the clothes. The clothes are of course something to see, but they are also seers of a world; they mediate visible and sensorial relationships with a world — from person to plant — always already there, although not yet or fully actualised. The design calls for an engagement with clothes less concerned with size, fit, and to some extent even the look. It is an engagement beyond the centralised male gaze, but also an engagement necessary to endure and challenge the latter. My collaborators figure themselves as consciously inseparable from the process of dressing. Still, none of what my collaborators do is extraordinary beyond the fact that they are consciously doing it. Through the dressing in Owens and in the engagement with the brand’s philosophy, they seem to have made peace with the nihilism of the world world, made peace with the immeasurable weight of being a specie that is the bearer of death. The does not mean one

cannot be a bad person, but the bad is not figured as external. Waste, guilt, gluttony are all aspects my collaborators deal with. They are no saints, but being considered, they tended to act sensibly.

In an economy that privileges desire, overconsumption, planned obsolescence and overexploitation of natural resources, to spend more on less is radical. To buy less, love your things, rather than the process of acquire and discard, is a political act of deference (Guattari, 1995). Affective, critical clothes lets the collaborator take things — metaphorical and literal things — in stages. It teaches the wearer that objects can be loved, the world can be loved. The surpassing of objecthood, by means of evoking deeper connection between clothes and clothed human, can act as a facilitator of becoming sympathetic. And the more the collaborators engaged with the brand, the less the clothes seemed to matter as clothes: they melted into other decisions and formed a plateau from which other relations were explored. Erik, who is training to be an architect, said that he had no interest in architecture, clothes or design per se, but in matters ability to offer affect and intensity and how the non-normative is always inherent in the normative: choices. With regards to dressing, he said:

In a sense, the clothes become secondary when you take part in the aesthetic value[of Owens]...It is more about what actually is in the world, and how you relate to it. That is where I see the aesthetic and ethic coming together because it becomes about life, life choices, consciousness, consideredness, grounded. Everything can be beautiful, even taking a shit in the morning can be done in a way that is...well on a marble toilet, if you like. It is the entire package of life, and how you feel towards other people, about gender, about...everything from politics to art to music...like it's a total package. Clothing is just like part of it.

Like a creative force of a Heideggerian bridge, that gathers a landscape around the banks and stream it unveils by stretching between the former and over the latter, Owens' design seems to bring out into the open the meaning or being of a given moment, to both wearer and observer (Heidegger, 1971: 52). To the observer, in particular, the aesthetic affect of the encounter often demands conceptual frameworks to be creatively expanded. Such creative re-evaluation of modes of judgement are posthuman insofar as what we comprehend is then what we are in the process of becoming *as we comprehend*. To think differently is to become differently. The posthuman encounter works as an arena for thinking-becoming; it is the temple, the magic circle in a rite du passage, the stage in which we can play out extended notions of ourselves, betwix-and-between. However, in comparison to traditional rite-du-passage where separation is a key moment in undoing a person, my collaborators are the separated, or *separator*. They are the unfamiliar right in the middle of the familiar.

I would argue that the wearers of Owens, in their opening up to the world, foster a sensitivity or taste in which facts, presumptions and habits are routinely questioned. Seemingly natural things become challenged with diminutive ideas sprung from considered, curious and

practical experiences in every-day life, where not only ideas of universal rights, universal knowledge, universal subjectivity are challenged, but individualisation: who am I? In the active departure from grand narratives, the collaborators are instead engaged in modest practices of somaesthetic choices. The possibility of enacting these practices depends on the understanding that the ineffable consequences of logocentric, phallogocentric, anthropocentric petroleum-based capitalism is performed on a day to day basis. On streets in cities where men do not wear dresses. It allows the wearer to move from an abstract-universal toolbox of ethics and moral acts that is, supposedly, appropriate for anyone, anywhere, to a situated, relational and procedural practice.

As they dress and undress in this ever changing fashion, they become philosophising thinkers of their own kind. Pragmatic bricoleurs tinkering with the concrete to develop something abstract and new. They foster a sensibility in which uncertainty is looked at with certain optimism, as an open horizon that gives some direction to a question posed by Guattari a quarter of a decade after his and Deleuze's books on capitalism and schizophrenia "Subjectivity is not natural anymore than air or water. How do we produce it, capture it, enrich it, and permanently reinvent it in a way that renders it compatible with Universes of mutant value?" (Guattari, 1995: 135). How? Experimentation.

None of the collaborators talked about intra-relational ontology, or not explicitly. Their understanding of dress and dressing was still largely preconditioned by a semiotic understanding of signifier and signified. Nevertheless, they are *critical pragmatic posthumanist* because they take on, transform and inhabit the stories offered by Owens. They enact, however temporarily, the posthuman by drawing upon the abstract yet condensed narratives and aesthetic of the brand, and integrate it into every-day life. Beyond the fact that Owens clothes acted as mediative structures through which they could examine the ambiguity of masculinity, sexuality, body, and others, the clothes were also producers of a highly addictive ambiguity, from which, and only from which, a greater sense of subjectivation emerged in the connections it could make in any given moment. It, as it were, fostered a will to change, learn and encounter the world, again and again. To fully appreciate why the design offered by Owens and the collaborators small, every-day acts of resisting status quo matters, we need to look at the big picture. Remember the transhuman?

Part V: CONNECTING THREADS AND THREATS

The Anthropocene calls for a recomposition of being if we are to handle the paradox that the epoch of Man calls for the death of its namesake. Thankfully, there is a growing number of artists and researchers experimental in their presentation, theorisation and language, who force us think expansively of the human, nature and time itself. However, in the increased meshing of speculative fabulations, news events, art events, science fiction and science funding, and with the humanities found either sleepwalking in the archives of glorious past or sleep deprived in the offices of global corporations, critical posthumanism is still a peripheral player; in particular in cultural analysis. Before I bring the thesis to its conclusion, I, therefore, want to address the parallel — indeed, the vastly dominant — narrative offering alternative analytical and normative solutions to the question of reimagining the human in the age of the Anthropocene. It is a movement to be found in the well-funded halls of Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at University of Cambridge, Future of Humanity Institute at the University of Oxford, as well as on the catwalks of Paris, in biennales, triennales, and on the screens in Hollywood. To that end, it is an event whose aesthetic reverberation dwarfs critical posthumanism, and the dominant solutions presented by this movement addresses and envision a subjectivity and a hero story of a starkly different kind, as told by a tale-teller called the Transhuman.

Androcratic Desires & Transhumanist Creations

In his writings on the obsolescence of The Human, philosophical anthropologist Günther Anders wrote “Every epoch has the prophets that it deserves: a vulgar epoch, has vulgar prophets.” (1980: 88). In the epoch of the End of Man, the saviour to discern in Marvel movies, Elon Musk funded space travel advertorials, or in major science journals, is not descending upon Jerusalem with the promise of earthly healing. First, it would be hard to make a landing as it might trigger the missile defence system; and that is if you get past the phallic shaped manless drones penetrating the skies above the holy land. Secondly, this transhuman does not necessarily intend to descend but depart. What is on offer in the prevailing masculinist, messianic science solutions as advocated by leading scholars of existential risk and Strong Men posing a yet higher risk, is a man who is further severed from nature, form differences and the very human finitude of death (Boström, 2005). The latter is a minor glitch to be solved in what I, without irony, call venture capitalism creationism.

As Fathers of technologised immortality, the tech giants of today are still some time and ethical approvals away from having a precise model of tomorrows updated, unified transhuman. However, seemingly unhindered thanks to their success at Nasdaq and under multimillion-dollar contract by stockpiling armies⁹, they are already shaping an uncanny present, and the parochialism of futuristic tech already available indicates that there can be no mistake of whom they serve. Until 2011, users could ask Apple's Siri where to find prostitutes or Viagra, and she would tell you all about it. Pose a question about abortion, and she would proclaim that she too has limits (Criado-Perez, 2019). If you, for some no reasonable reason, feel enticed to call Siri a slut, according to a new UN report, she would respond "I'd blush if I could" (UN, 2019). Bend open the black boxes of computational training for AI systems, and you find that there are reasons why the cool features in our smartphones, such as voice assistance or facial identification, might struggle to recognise the complexities of womanhood or black or brown faces. That 'white male body' norms have long shaped everyday design like the height of the highest shelf in grocery stores, the ergonomics of an office chair, the queue for cardiac arrest treatment, or tests for medicine tolerance, is long known, so that 'he' is integrated into the algorithms of computational science, should come as no surprise. With a now somewhat aged invisible hand of the market holding the lid closed to his black box, the transhuman is positioned as a unisex being, a homo universalis if not deus, who merely happens to be a white dude; the cognitively enhanced genius and sequel to Sally Slocum's lonely Man the Hunter (1975). Woman the Gatherer has been renamed Alexa, Cortana and Siri.

In the cutting of relational ontologies, and relations altogether, the transhuman is positively envisioned in secular prophecies as a multi-planetary species, rather than a part of a multi-species planet. Miss-reading the complexity and fluidity of Mary Douglas' theorisation, his entanglements are purified from external danger and pollution, and the histories of others — biological as well as cultural — become his alone. It is a man of discrimination: mind from body, subject from object, culture from nature, humans from animals, superhuman from mere humans. Free from the weakness of the natural body, the weakness of others and nature itself, the transhuman is a conceptually safe space for The Man. He does not ponder how we can grasp our mutuality, our shared vulnerability and responsibility to others. As an exercise of transcendental narcissism, the transhuman does not ask for any reflection, but oblivion to "social or economic class, sex, race, ethnicity and nationality, interpersonal relationships, or religion and spirituality" (Gladden, 2016: 48).

The transhuman, this son without a mother, is of course not as much a New Man as a perpetuation of both the Enlightened, atomised, self-referential and privileged human subject of humanism, and the Vita Futurismo of modernity's past, obsessed with speed, dynamism, technological innovation, masculinity and himself. Albeit a diverse conceptual field, the different strands of transhuman thought meet in their desire to perfect The Human — and more specifically,

his mind. The Cartesian dualism is brought to its most perverse point in brain emulation research, that is, the ability to upload brains onto computers (Bostrom & Sandberg, 2006). It is a human 2.0 fit for a world no longer not fit for basic humans. It is hard to see how such a world would not multiply the inequality and exploitation inherent in a present humanism, where the depredations, war, famines, genocide seen in the last four centuries leading up to the Anthropocene are not errors of a humanist world build on the foundation of technology, science, nationhood and money, but a profitable direct outcome of it. On the bodies of beasts, and in the shape of a prophet, the techno-euphoric transhuman argues that is a price we have to pay. Does this seem polemic? Vague? Too alarming? It is not science fiction, nor a rant from a passionate yoga teacher who forgot Owens and fashion —I am getting there. These rows above are not abstractions: this technological shift is happening now and is what the well-funded state and privately governed institutions are doing. And it mediates our imagination as to what the future can be (Braidotti, 2013: 97).

There is something uncomfortably defeatist in accepting the cost of our cleverness, by setting our sight at either another planet or severing our mind from our bodies. To put our trust in the conception and continuation of a species that has brought multiple species to extinction seems counterproductive. With the limited focus on human futures, other *and* others' possibilities disappear. Though, alas, the transhuman does not seek to answer how we can live in a “damaged world” (Tsing et al. 2017) a world “that is not yet murdered” (Haraway & Kenney, 2015: 253), but he takes its doom as his logical starting point. Although I cannot entirely agree with cultural theorist Dominic Pettman that humanism is a historical error, erroneous and irreversible mistakes have indeed been made its name (2011: 34). Accordingly, if we do face extinction, the question we should ask is not what technology can save us.

Technological development is imperative, as are many other areas. But what we, the humanities, must ask is what we can be if not *Human*? How might this different, other or posthuman being live? What might a human being be in the world, without posing a threat to the former? Without posing a threat, period. We must, I believe, critically stress our unique, messy, poetic, yet stringently scientific field and its contribution. If there is someone who ought to lead the radical shifts in analysis concerning the *Anthropos* in the Anthropocene, it is cultural analysis. If there is someone uniquely skilled to move against the ‘cold materialism’ empty of a cultural, historical and social understanding, it is the ethnographically informed fields (Ingold, 2018: 53-5, 106-10). Engaging, provocative and experimental authoring is needed, argues Zylińska (2014), for us to *actively* shape understandings of disaster, to present extinction as plural, to salvage ecologies *and* epistemologies, and to facilitate change by offering conceptual remedies to the prevailing techno-euphoric norms and aesthetics. If one, in a polemic analogy, can imagine the transhumanist to be a suffocating layer added onto an already nutrition deficient compost called Humanism,

critical posthumanist of all modes addressed in this thesis are worms with a particular fondness in French poststructuralism, art and non-western epistemologies, who help transform discarded waste into fertile, new soil for a recomposed concept of the human to grow in. They do not take the prevalent discourses of the ‘end of man’ as an invitation to self-induced technological enhancement, but to think harder still, and re-evaluate what this being can become. It is my belief, too, that we do not have to accept and enact the narrative of transhumanism, this tale told and performed from a perspective blind to its own genealogy. I do not call for utopia, but alternative strategies sustainable in and of their relations with other human entities, species, environments and technology. So what?, you might ask. So what if *you* think that, and more specifically, what does this have to do with fashion. Thank you for asking!

Disaster, Extinction, Coexistence, Adaptation

The Anthropocene, seen as a profoundly *aesthetic* event, robs humans of a present, of a possibility to imagine that today will be remembered and matter. Doing so, it kills us before we die. Killed, but not dead, being itself is maintained in its enlaced alignment with the progression of petroleum-based capitalism and the subjectivation it necessitates. Having been lead to imagine that a world without exponential financial growth is to imagine a world without you and me, we refrain from thinking differently (Jameson, 2003). Instead, we put our trust in the techno-cultural pragmatists’ promises that we can innovate our way out of perils of our own doing. So, in the meantime we take on the exhaustive task to externalise the threats of extinction and the tales of the already extinct: the coral reefs will die - but I live; the white rhinoceros has already been extinct - but I live; we have 12 years to cut the risk of global systemic catastrophe - I can not do anything. It takes an enormous amount of endurance to stay with the horror that this is happening, and even more to remain sane in the horror of living amongst people, kin and strangers, that do not seem to care. As eloquently phrased by the world-renowned trend forecaster Li Edelkoort commenting on the display of gluttonous ostentation at the Met Gala on the same night UN released a report that more than 1 million species face extinction:

...suddenly [it] turned into an overwhelming premonition of direct and impending danger. Even my vodka and cheese cracker couldn't kill the rage in me or crack me up with laughter. There was no humour to be found in any of the accoutrements....The moment of reversal was coming, the tipping point was unavoidable, the beheading of culture irrevocable.

(Edelkoort, 2019)

No one, said UNESCO’s Director-General Audrey Azoulay the same evening “will be able to claim that they did not know [the extent of our responsibility]”. The issue, it seems, is not that we do not understand the climate crises, but that we cannot imagine a climate in which we are ready to

change. The collective paralysis is only partially lifted when critiquing the unprecedented attention and action brought forth by the Nobel peace prize nominated teenager Greta Thunberg. The critique against her follows the cognitive residue of Enlightenment humanism's ideas of children as not-yet-fully-human; as either corrupted by nature's whim or innocent by proximity to nature (Vänskä 2018: 3). That the West is not prepared for the Anthropocene is an ontological and not technological issue, and without modification to our material and mental environments, understood as our onto-epistemological enactment of being a human of some sort, there will be no human .

After Edelkoort's comment, it would, perhaps, seem somewhat counterintuitive to look for promising alternatives in the fashion industry. In particular in clothes few can afford. But that is missing the point. Avant-garde clothes are not the end, beginning, or middle of crises, and most certainly not the solution to the misanthropic Anthropocene. However, rather than waiting for extraordinary natural event to reach our shores and like pedagogical giants of death remind us of our mortality, smaller acts affirming radical alternatives to the effort to sustain in perpetuity the epistemic violence further capturing, exploiting, and denying life for profit, must not be discarded for their seemingly small stature. Moreover, as capitalism has matured, a backdoor not present to the avant-gardist of past has emerged: the centrality of fashion as an all-consuming force in late modern capitalism, and critical pragmatic and artistic posthumanists independence from institutional sublimation (Braidotti, 2006: 11).

To be dressed is always collective because unless you are all dressed up with nowhere to go, dressing is always public. Or, in the age of social media, made public by sharing in a virtual dimension that is public when in private and private in public. The fact that the human-clothing assemblage unfolds in public, intra-acting with its glocal landscape, makes the dressing of any kind, a political act. That is, matters that appear individual, apolitical or non-ethical can, seen through the framework used in this thesis, reappear as potent political micro-acts against, or indeed, supportive of an explosive system. The epistemological potentials of avant-garde dress is to make people aware of, disturb and help move beyond the available politics by which we live, and to catch or construct new myths and structures. Fashion can, as shown in Part IV, promote change in our thinking by way of how it makes us feel, move and see.

Still, the choice to focus on fashion would be somewhat arbitrary if it did not suggest a relation of a particular kind, as opposed to other things we engage with. That is, to think with fashion is not merely an example of alternative ways in which we can think differently about the world, but in its entangled relationships with our bodies, thinking with fashion offers a uniquely pragmatic, open-ended philosophising. In a 1983 paper, Latour argued that laboratories are machines for interesting mistakes, mistakes that can be made as fast as possible, as to see, learn and move on to new productive learnings (Latour, 1983: 164) Fashion, too, is an ideal laboratory for

mistakes. Our mistake is to neglect the extent to which fashion matter us. We cannot all go to the international space station to gain a different perspective on the planet, but we can all put on different shoes, walk differently, dress differently. Moreover, we can all be affected by those who dare to explicitly contrast the inertia of everyday life, if we ourselves do not. Unlike the thin usage of philosophical thought experiments to change or restate our relation to others, clothing is a philosophical proposition with a weight and touch that lingers. The wearers interviewed are, of course, free to alter the narrative provided by Owens, but when they do, they inevitably have to negotiate with themselves. In other words, to arrive at a point of comfort, from the strange alien or scorched mountain witch, via the extravagant, or peculiar, down to a relatively dull outfit, a deliberation concerning how to incorporate the aesthetics of the brand into one's life have to be made.

By evoking disaster, simulate actual and possible forms of extinction and mutation, propagate for ways to remediate coexistence, nurture sustainable adaptation, and calling attention to forms of everyday life as compositional parts supporting an ontology dangerous to the very existence of a multi-species planet, Owens' offers intense and seductive enactments of critical posthuman theory — hence the allocation of the term *critical artistic posthumanism*. The importance of Owens work lies not in the individual items, however fantastically intricate, but in the intra-relational entanglement they form as they move through space-time, and how they enjoin us to act differently, or at the very least realise that being different is an option. In a Deleuzian sense, to do what has already been done, as a person, society, or thought, is at best an escapism, but that in itself, is also the worst. It is an act of self-denial. A sentiment Owens repeat in several interviews:

This isn't really completely about clothes — this is more about an ethos. This is more about a set of values that I stand for, and this is about experimentation, and this is about risk-taking, and this is about searching for more.

(Schumann, 2018)

As matter-phenomena, Owens' clothes and universe inform of forms not yet formalised. As such, the wearers of Owens are always on the threshold, discovering different pulls and connections as they move over different scales and intensities of categorical identities — man, women, old, sexy, grotesque, gay — where one becomes aware of the different experiences in repetition depending on aesthetic positioning. Through a comprised genealogy on the history of the fall of The Human, from monsters, animals, nature, to Gods, the petroleum light of Man, the death of God, Man as good, Man as God, and the death of Man, what Owens' offers is a views of oneself outside oneself - ourselves - western humanism - western man - west- man - human - earth.

It is not so much that these apocalyptic narratives have not been dealt with throughout human history; prophetic end of man/city/civilisation are stories of both tale and truth, as civilisations of a varying kind have indeed ended. However, an issue in this contemporary saga of ecological degradation is that truth alone does not seem to convey the urgency of the message effectively; that, unless action is taken, the end will not be that of a city or civilisation, but the human species. Perhaps that is no fault of said species. A very human quality seems to be our inability to control our inhuman tendencies (Colebrook, 2014: 13) Never always or already what we can fully become, we flirt with anthropological exodus when we think we have reached our full potential of what we can be, when we think we know better (Stengers, 2012: 4). Owens' informal and experimental way of rhizomatically move with text, psychoanalysis, dead mammals, sleazy aliens, Nietzschean superhuman and his accounts on the processes, desires and anxieties experienced in this age, offers stimuli and critique, spectacle *and* speculation, by putting at the forefront, on the human body, the cost and demands of living in the world we are creating and what futures we foreclose. In so doing, he readies us for change and he challenges the visions of transhumanism.

Although the thesis has remarked on the arbitrary limits of rational knowledge, dressing as philosophy is not in opposition to analytical critical posthumanism, but should be seen as a vital, complementary extension available to anyone with a body. What *critical pragmatic* and *artistic posthumanism* offers that analytical or academic critical posthumanism does not, is that it allows for a philosophising outside of the specific rules and frames of conversation relevant in an academic environment, or oral argumentation. Therefore we, *critical cultural posthumanists*, must deter from reducing the insights gained in conversations, participatory observations and phenomenological experimentation, however mystical they might be, to models of already established ontological truths. The gap, pause, break and fold in the design of the clothes, the sensational gap, pause, break and fold felt when wearing the clothes, the gap, pause, break and fold caused when one tries to think with the clothes, in which making sense is allowed to linger in confusion in order to recontextualise, rearrange, and repurpose, has offered enriching insights in the collaborators lives. It has enriched this thesis, and it can, this thesis argues, enrich our understanding of the human when we allow that human not to be understood and limited before we engage with the question of what she is. Avant-garde fashion can shock us to be susceptible *not* to commit the fallacy of the former. Similarly to how fashion is an art form in and of itself, so to dressing and fashioning the body is an act of philosophising which need not be translated into something other.

Applicability and Concluding Remarks

There are considerable onto-epistemological difficulties in trying to address affect and non-human agency empirically, which makes it harder still to distil a clear applicability. Dressing in other

fashions or addressing human collaborators different from mine, would most surely produce very different content. Thus, I have no intention to provide straightforward tools in the form of a *how-to*, and I do not wish to conclude to close, but to open and to leave space for others to contribute or contrast to what is, inevitably a mere scratch on the surface of posthumanism and fashion. Now, that does not deter from the thesis wide, potential usage. The first benefit in terms of applicability the thesis tentatively provides is development: the thesis points to epistemological limits in the narrow ways in which fashion is normally conceptualised within and outside academia. Although my proposition does not, by any means, exhaust or offer a primary way of engaging with clothes, bodies and fashion, to look at it as mere representations of the human mind is, argues this thesis, equivalent to not looking clothing at all, in the sense that what one sees is but a fragment of the richness of cloth. A strictly representational, subject-centred analysis, as discussed, dilute the agentive and the radical potential inherent in stuff of any kind. I hope that my attempt to deter from methodological individualism and anthropocentrism by way of engaging with the materiality of clothes and cloth to inform posthuman theory, and posthuman theory to inform a phenomenological methodology, can add some profundity to the maturing field of fashion studies.

The thesis has also built on *critical posthumanism* and *critical cultural posthumanists* with the concepts of *critical artistic posthumanist* and *critical pragmatic posthumanist*, and has shown how a weaving of the four can unveil central issues in the onto-epistemological templates responsible for, and being produced in, the Anthropocene, and with the potency of their respective methods, they all explore fundamental changes in how we relate, and thus make, the world. Actors in these overlapping fields can and do propose critical, creative and trans-disciplinary visions and potent reverberations that make people think anew on the material world they are entangled in. Together, *cultural* and *artistic posthumanism* can help refashion the wisdom of the critical posthuman academy so to ignite desire and belief in that we can transform the hostile topographies of the Anthropocene, chart now connections, and foster more profound understanding of an integrated and intra-related world, and situate the anthropos where she belongs, in a shared, intra-related ecology *and* ontology. The arts in general, and fashion in particular, has an imperative role to play, as seen in the human-clothing assemblage of Part IV. I believe the additional concepts can be used, and developed, for further study on the aesthetics of and in the Anthropocene, whether in academia or artistic research.

To that end, I believe that this thesis can positively contribute to the broader discussion and project to reinstate aesthetics and culture as central to the perils we face. As has been stressed throughout the thesis, aesthetics is integral to what is made invisible or visible — the perceptual space in which we are affected and made to act in specific ways — and forms an important condition to how behaviours, policies, and changes unfold. To assume that artistic practices or artistically

inclined research cannot be a space for the production of knowledge and wisdom of importance is hindering both developments of the former, but most importantly, the inclusion of a broader audience. Which brings me to Owens.

Although the thesis foregrounded the historicity, industry and context around Owens, it has singled in on his work. However, Owens nor fashion should be looked at in singularity, but as an emergent part of a significant, interdisciplinary movement in art, academia, design, architecture, fashion and public life, which seek to re-compose and re-figure practices of knowledge production and the givenness of the human. These are actors that build their work and brands quietly, modestly and over time, making their users listen, research, and engage more in-depth with the brand, cause or philosophy, as seen with the wearers of Owens. Which in and of itself is a positive development. The issue is how to scale up the stories and postulation about humans and non-humans, as well as the environment and sustainability, as touched upon by these actors?

I believe an exciting potential might lie in the disruptive moment we are in, and an affirmative way to approach our time might be found in mild bending of Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine (2008), in which the social activist proposes that fascist and populist movements thrive in crises. What if those operating against these fascist, too, can use this moment of confusion to reframe radical temples of human's progression and offer alternative narratives by mixing stories and tales of various temporal and spatial kinds: from the acutely situational to stories on sustained, inexorable geological changes. Narratives that emphasises relations, rather than systems of separation, as proposed by the transhumanists. To, like critical cultural analysts do, *stand in the world*, and not above or beyond it. Imperative to this question, as not to play into the hand of another populist movement, would be to emphasises the dangerous assumption to believe we once knew better, that there was a time in which the values we champion were lived by. We are refashioning, not re-costuming.

To conclude: I hope the thesis elaboration on the affective qualities of fashion, the ontology of phenomena, and posthumanism's resistance against anthropocentrism and conservative political currents in the age of the Anthropocene, can assist and entice to further still sharpen our sensorial organs to probe deeper into the mutually constitutive and intra-relational dependency of the human-clothing assemblage, and how clothing, often serendipitously, make us become-otherwise. As it stands, this thesis has shown fashions ability to not only offer commentary on the threats of current times but how it can thread new futures by helping us think differently. I will end with a summary: fashion is material forms in human lives, but also the very form of human life. A form that is accepted and forgotten, until the givenness of its premises fails to catch the lived phenomena of those it concerns. Perpetually undetermined and conceptually unfinished, the incalculable permutations of what a human is can hardly be understood as anything but fashion of materially

embedded, conceptual trends, albeit operating at a different temporal pace than that of shoulder pads. The Human of Western proportions and sensibilities is, seen as such, starting to show signs of being a past trend and a, potentially, future *faux pas* and *démodé* inherited from those before us. Consequently, if it is the aesthetic choices of our generation that fashions the conditions under which coming generations can enact a being, human or otherwise, it would be remiss to ignore the role of clothes in making apparent of what is already there, and in offering new compositions of what is yet to come, while there is still time.

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23. Adam in his studio, 2019. Ph: Wiktor Hansson [image]
24. Judson in Owens NYC Store, courtesy Judson's personal Instagram. [image]
25. Judson in Owens, courtesy Judson's personal Instagram. [image]
26. Portrait of Erik in his apartment. Ph: Wiktor Hansson [image]
27. Portrait of Erik in his apartment. Ph: Wiktor Hansson [image]
28. Moth eaten long-sleeve t-shirt, courtesy Judson's personal Instagram [image]

UNPUBLISHED REFERENCES IN THE OWNERSHIP OF THE AUTHOR

All Interviews and Communication Performed by Author.

ADAM

- Interview Face-to-face 2019-02-14, 4 hours, Gothenburg
Recording: Sound, transcribed
- Contact over social media for the purpose of thesis initiated 2018-04-25
Recording: Notes pulled

JUDSON

- Interview on FaceTime 2019-03-03. 2.5 hours
Recording: Sound, transcribed
- Contact over social media for the purpose of thesis initiated 2019-02-28
Recording: Notes pulled

ERIK

- Interview Face-to-face 2019-01-22. Full day, Oslo
Recording: notebook, photography
- Interview on FaceTime 2018-12-14. 1.4 hours
Recording: Sound, transcribed
- Interview on FaceTime 2018-04-28. 2 hours
Recording: Sound, transcribed
- Interview on FaceTime 2018-04-10. 1.2 hours
Recording: Sound, notes pulled
- Contact over social media for the purpose of thesis initiated 2018-04-03
Recording: Notes pulled

JULIAN

- Interview Face-to-face 2018-11-21. Full day, Berlin

Recording: notebook, photography

- Interview Face-to-face 2019-02-07. Full day, Amsterdam

Recording: notebook, photography

- Interview Face-to-face 2019-04-9. Full day, Brussel

Recording: notebook, photography

- Interview on FaceTime 2018-12-14. 1 hour

Recording: Sound, transcribed

JOHN

- Interview on FaceTime, 2018-05-02. 1 hour

Recording: Sound, transcribed

- Interview on FaceTime, 2019-02-27. 1 hour

Recording: notebook,

- Interview on FaceTime, 2019-03-29. 1 hour

Recording: notebook,

- Contact over social media for the purpose of thesis initiated 2018-04-30

Recording: Notes pulled

¹ See <http://www.sa-intl.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=1689>

² Avant-garde: Academic, artistic, or political movement at the edge' of normativity, and not seldom without a strong anarchistic, pseudo-military streak. Critiquing the status quo through separate or interdisciplinary practices. Strongly associated with late 19th and early 20th European modernism and the conjunction that is modernity; ie Man and his mattering. Name originates in the front line of military formations; the vanguard. General idea: art is life, as life. Despite it's now "felt-in-the-mouth" nostalgic connotations, I would argue that it is still applicable to fashion, if not for the fact that it is indeed still used in the industry .

³ See Malm, A (2016) *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*

⁴ For a intriguing discussion the many competing terms as well as a note on her distancing from posthumanism, see Haraway (2015) *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*

⁵ Free transcribing software, see <https://otranscribe.com/>

⁶ See Arnold, R (2001) *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*

⁷ See Derrida (1970) *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science*, and Spivak (1998) *Can the Subaltern Speak*

⁸ See CHRISTEENE. (2017). *BUTT MUSCLE*. Available on <<https://vimeo.com/200916466>>

⁹ See <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/22/18236116/microsoft-hololens-army-contract-workers-letter>

APPENDIX

INSTAGRAM

INSTAGRAM ACCOUNTS FOLLOWED DURING THE COURSE OF THE STUDY

(NON OF MY COLLABORATES ARE INCLUDED)

@OWSINKA
 @ACCELLL
 @DOTMCA
 @HWAHWALALA
 @JACOBAGWELL
 @LALAMICHMICH
 @INS_RICKOWENS
 @FULLRICKOWENS
 @POISONOUS_WILL

@ANTONIUSKHOURY
 @MENINRICKOWENS
 @ANTONIUSKHOURY
 @MSA_MAKEUP_ART
 @DJLONDONTHOMAS
 @RICKOWENSONLINE
 @RICKOWENSARCHIVE
 @KAMERONRYTLEWSKI
 @MATTTETOCARCELLI

@RICKOWENSSTOREMIAMI
 @RICKOWENSSTOREMILAN
 @RICKOWENSSTORETOKYO
 @BOOKSNDWICHPASSPORT
 @RICKOWENSSTORELONDON
 @RICKOWENSSTORENEWYORK
 @RICKOWENSSTOREHONGKONG
 @RICKOWENSINTERNATIONAL
 @RICKOWENSSTORELOSANGELES