



Some nerve

In fashion as in art, what shocks initially can come to look classic. But what's shocking anymore? Katherine Betts looks at the avant-garde today, and Steven Meisel pays tribute to some artistic innovators.

Sisters of protest: Inspired by a performance piece by Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy, a trio of fashion rebels causes a stir in Hussein Chalayan's wool hood capes. Details, stores, see In This Issue.

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antidote to Eisenhower blandness. In the seventies punk rockers stuck a safety pin in the neck of disco.

But today is anything shocking? An artist such as Damien Hirst may try to freak bourgeois sensibilities with his dismembered cows in vats of formaldehyde, but his grotesque tableaux are an attempt to elicit a response from a numb and cynical culture. You've seen it all, haven't you? You've been desensitized by Hollywood, bombarded by Madison Avenue, and assaulted by the media pitching every last detail of Demi Moore's separation. Sex oozes out of the Internet, teenagers kill one another in school, people torch themselves on the evening news. It's hard for any avant-garde statement to top that.

But there's only so much numbness people can take. At a certain point numbness itself becomes a provocation, and one of the places you particularly see it is in fashion. Fashion depends on the radical response that has characterized the avant-garde in all facets of culture. By definition anybody who is interested in fashion is interested in the avant-garde. Fashion needs—thrives on, even requires—the shock and confusion of the unacceptable. It's that shock and confusion that create excitement and feed new ideas into the fashion mainstream.

The truth is Ralph Lauren will probably never design a nun's habit. His business is not based on alienating and discomfiting customers but on helping them look "right"—generally speaking, they want to fit in, not stand out. They buy Ralph Lauren because he makes some of the most reliable uniforms of the Establishment—clothes for deal-making and country clubs and fly-fishing trips to Montana. He has no intention of halting pedestrians on Forty-seventh Street. But like all mainstream designers, he will often borrow an idea from the fringe to freshen up his latest collection. It may just be a roundabout reference, nothing

Lines of defense: Melton wool and winding coils of iron in Junya Watanabe's fall collection echo Christo and Jeanne-Claude's use of fabric as either structure or shroud. Details, stores, see In This Issue.

too extreme, a hint of the original, a button from the habit, so to speak. From Chalayan's strange black wool hoods, for example, Lauren may derive a collection in a palette darker than usual.

However slight or subtle, these references drawn from the avant-garde are fashion's creative fuel. When Alexander McQueen was the ringleader of the avant-garde, he scandalized London with his outrageously low-cut bumster pants. But it took barely six months for his hipster look to crowd the shops up and down the Avenue Montaigne, Canal Street, and Seventh Avenue. Ann Demeulemeester was cutting unorthodox patterns in Antwerp, but her radical spirit was in the same place as McQueen, and like his bumster pants, her sloppy I-just-got-out-of-bed pantsuits inspired a horde of mainstream imitations.

On avant-garde idea in fashion—especially when it's a really strange one—can live on long after the designer is gone, its influence extending for years. The ghost of

Rudi Gernreich hangs over Miuccia Prada's fall collection. Those short, stiff pleated skirts echo the sixties, and the red, white, and black palette is Gernreich's. In Junya Watanabe's fall collection of melton-wool capes with metal hula-hoops threaded through the hems, it is hard to miss the reference to Pierre Cardin's radical metal body jewelry, circa 1966. Cardin, considered one of the most avant-garde designers of the sixties, became one of the most mainstream by virtually inventing the idea of licensing in fashion.

Even after avant-garde designers have been absorbed by the mainstream and become commercially successful, their initial statements often remain their most indelible ones. As Gernreich said about his shocking topless bathing suit of 1964, which became *the* avant-garde statement, "Think of something in your life that took one-sixtieth of a second to do. Now imagine having to spend the rest of your life talking about it." Long after McQueen was picked up by Givenchy, his bold ideas—the risks he took early in his career—are still the images associated with his signature. Many consumers may buy McQueen's more conventional Givenchy suit, but they remember the bumster pants. People often want the frisson of the avant-garde without the reality of it—we'll take Mr. Chalayan's black outfit, but can we leave the knitting needles home?

You might ask if anybody wore Mc-

Queen's bumster pants. But the question doesn't matter. Such is the nature of avant-garde experience that you don't have to like what you see. Some outfits are not meant to "work." When Rei Kawakubo sent models down her runway a couple of seasons ago in dresses with cushions built into awkward places—the hips, the middle of the back—she was not courting commercial success. She was lucky if she sold 50. Critics denounced the designs as "tumor" dresses. But Kawakubo weathered the outrage, and her larger achievement—her avant-garde triumph—was that she gave people a chance to feel passionately about fashion. She woke them up, roused voices that had been silenced by complacency. The tumor dress stopped traffic like a trio of Forty-seventh Street nuns.

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And while nobody incorporated Kawakubo's lumpy ideas at the time, two years later, a number of designers are padding and cushioning their clothes—albeit in more conventional places than Kawakubo's "tumors."

Another example of an avant-garde statement that did not sit well with the critics was 25-year-old American designer Jeremy Scott's third show in Paris. Scott was so determined to shock the jaded Parisians that he ill-advisedly shouted out "Vive l'avant-garde," which made him seem more self-conscious than radical. Even though fashion followers were put off by his attitude and his gaudy gold lamé, NFL-scale

shoulder pads, they were intrigued by his ambition. Every fashion editor in Paris was at that show, drawn by the buzz, by the prospect of another car wreck, or—could it be?—something original. Oh, the horror!

The problem, of course, is that you cannot stalk surprise. These fashion epiphanies come from a haphazard intersection of individual creative vision and broad cultural trends. Would Scott's fur shoulders have been perceived as avant-garde if they had been shown in 1987, alongside the statuesque ice maidens of Thierry Mugler and Claude Montana? Only in our minimalist times, when the silhouette is rail-thin and embellishment is a sin, does Scott look awkward, which is to say intriguingly different.

Avant-garde designers are products of their generation and reflect their times. Emerging from the youth culture of the rebellious sixties, Cardin, Courrèges, and Paco Rabanne invented a futuristic aesthetic while Neil Armstrong was walking on the moon. Japanese designers like Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo landed in Paris in the overstyled early eighties—just in time to slash and deconstruct the blow-dried Barbie look. They cleared a path for Martin Margiela, who flung anonymity in the face of the status-conscious eighties, sewing blank labels into his collections. His clothes had a rough, homespun look that seemed incongruous with the glossy gotta-have-it times. Today it's hard to find a young designer who isn't inspired by Margiela in some form. In many ways, his ideas about negating status and convention were the precursor to the identity confusion that preoccupies nineties designers like Chalayan.

So where—and what—is the avant-garde in the nineties landscape of uniforms? If we've lost the capacity to be surprised or shocked, what can designers do to stop traffic? Where do you find new ideas under a blanket of khaki? The short answer: youth culture. Many young designers haunt skateboarding parks; they watch music videos; they prowl the Internet. For those who have grown up on the Web, anonymity and identity are key themes. Some of Chalayan's ideas spring from a feeling of alienation. "I'm interested in the influence of technology and the way we feel lost and small in the endless possibilities of technology," he explains. "I'm interested in the loss of identity, the idea that exploring 'the other' can make you lose yourself."

Computers have provided a kind of democratic arena for young designers. The rage in London is a store called Vexed Generation where two techno-obsessed ex-music producers sell bulletproof nylon vests and high-necked fleece jackets to an inter-

national crowd. You don't even have to go to London to buy their stuff; you can order it on their Web site. The only hitch: Before you can access the merchandise, you have to read through a series of political articles they've posted. If you don't take the time to read the propaganda, you get kicked off the site. It may sound more like an Establishment conspiracy than an avant-garde revolution, but Adam Thorpe and Joe Hunter's clothes are selling, and their brand of utility chic is already influencing the mainstream. In their respective collections, Gucci and Chanel offer cargo pants and Velcro-striped Teva-like sandals.

Chalayan and the Vexed guys are trying to break down the parameters of fashion and place it in a larger context. Although he admits that his shows are ultimately commercial endeavors, Chalayan uses them to explore societal issues. He ended his spring 1998 show in London with a line of women in deconstructed chadors, from fully naked to fully veiled. The show was shocking in the finest avant-garde tradition: It set out to shock. But it was also powerful in its direct religious allusions and references to the paradox of Muslim women's dress codes. On one hand, Chalayan was saying, women are imprisoned in the chador. On the other, they're liberated from social judgment, free not to be seen as physical objects. People left his show provoked, bewildered, and stunned. Of course, some critics dismissed it as pretentious. But Chalayan was hired four months later by the giant cashmere company Tse.

You can embrace technology out there on the fringe, or you can reject it. Many designers of Chalayan's generation have felt the alienation he describes and run the other way. Rejecting the technological automation and mass-market sameness of clothes, they create on a small scale, making everything by hand. In the anonymous, awkward tradition of Margiela, obscure New York-based designers Susan Cianciolo and Elisa Jimenez have formed a kind of cottage industry that might be called avant-garde couture.

Cianciolo lives and works in a Chinatown loft overlooking a bunch of sweatshops, yet her craft-y aesthetic couldn't be farther from the industrial sensibility of the neighborhood. Not only does she make everything by hand, she sometimes asks artist friends to help out—requesting they crochet a sleeve or hack the collar off a jacket. At her shows, she asks the models to read poetry on the runway. Last fall she showed in a gallery in Paris, using sleeping models to demonstrate the theme of relaxation and comfort. Like Chalayan, Cian-

ciolo is looking for a human touch, a connection in a world of high-tech alienation. "When you make something, you create it out of love," she explains. "That's how you create. It carries your emotions and you enjoy it."

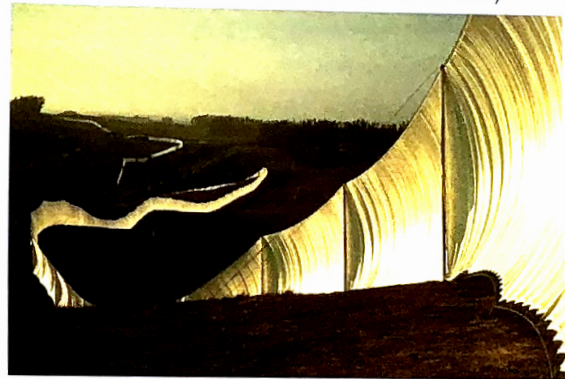
Elisa Jimenez also creates clothes out of love. She got into fashion a few years ago when working on an art project called the Gold-In-Mean. The idea was to combine theories of physics with alchemy, so she spun golden webs of nylon thread all over the city. To her surprise, people wanted to buy the dress she wore while spinning. Word of mouth spread among her stylist friends, and soon Jimenez was peeling off her dresses and selling them at parties. Now she creates one-of-a-kind pieces for special clients who come to the tiny walk-up studio in Hell's Kitchen that she calls "The Hunger World." Elisa, who feels very strongly about "interactive moments," sews her scraps of fabric remnants onto her clients while they wait. "Creative acts are special moments," she says. "They have meaning, and I think people responded to my clothes because we're all looking for meaning."

For Cianciolo, Jimenez, and Chalayan, their ideas come from their reactions to the culture around them. They design as much to express themselves and give life to their feelings as to earn a living. Their clothes may make you think about fashion in a larger context, but they don't necessarily make you want to get out your credit card. Chalayan admits it is difficult to negotiate the line between art and commerce. He isn't really trying to be "an artist," he says; he wants to sell clothes, but he also wants to say something. He doesn't always know what he wants to say, but he learns as he goes along. Every collection teaches him something about fashion and about himself. And that, in the end, is the fate of anyone who responds to the lure of the avant-garde. You realize you can't deliberately try to find the new and the surprising. Surprise has to find you. □

From provocation to inspiration



In Mourning and in Rage, a 1977 media protest of violence against women by Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy



Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence*, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California 1972–76



Photo-Markers, by Robert Smithson, 1968, from *Six Stops on a Section*



Eric Fischl's 1986 oil painting *Far Rockaway*



Top photo by Warren McArthur, courtesy of Gensevoort Gallery; lounge chair by M. Fisher, Salsbury, Salsbury

Off-kilter: Elisa Jimenez's home-cut white Lycra top and skirt with unfinished edges are charged with the same innocence and awkward self-consciousness as painter Eric Fischl's deadpan portraits of private, unlikely moments in late-20th-century American life. Details, stores, see In This Issue.