

Long live the (im)material: Concept and materiality in Viktor&Rolf's fashion

Published as: D. Bruggeman & A. Van de Peer (2016) Long live the (im)material: Concept and materiality in Viktor&Rolf's fashion. *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. 3(1), pp. 7-16.

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Abstract

This article seeks to challenge the way in which journalistic and academic discourses on the conceptual fashion of Dutch designers Viktor&Rolf privilege ideas over the materiality of fashion. Whereas Viktor&Rolf have been considered predominantly as late-twentieth-century conceptual designers, we aim to offer an alternative reading of Viktor&Rolf's fashion practices. Through a detailed visual analysis of renowned Viktor&Rolf collections, *Russian Doll* (Autumn/Winter 1999–2000) and *Glamour Factory* (Autumn/Winter 2010–11), and a discourse analysis of the reception of these collections in the international fashion press, we propose to rethink their conceptual approach through a material lens. Reflecting on the dominant discourse of the conceptual in the field of fashion studies, we develop an argument on the inextricable entanglement of concept and materiality in terms of a material-discursive 'intra-action' (Barad 1996, 2003; Parkins 2008). Instead of viewing the materiality of fashion as a blank slate awaiting signification, we offer a reconceptualization of how the meanings, signs, values, concepts and ideas of fashion objects, and their material expression, are mutually constituted. By doing so, we provide a fresh perspective on the ways in which Viktor&Rolf's work can be understood as an intimate encounter between concept and materiality.

Keywords: conceptual fashion, materiality, Viktor&Rolf, intra-action

Introduction

The current academic and journalistic discourse on the work of Dutch designers Viktor&Rolf primarily considers their fashion practices to revolve along a conceptual axis (e.g. Bolton 2005; Evans and Frankel 2008). Moreover, the designers themselves actively engage in the development of their image as conceptual designers as they continuously stress the conceptual approach of their work. In an interview with fashion journalist Suzy Menkes about their presentation for their couture 2013–14 collection in Paris, Viktor&Rolf express that: ‘[w]e wanted to be as conceptual as possible to celebrate our 20 years’ (Menkes 2013: 13). This conceptualism in fashion design must be understood as the primacy of the idea. As Viktor Horsting explains: ‘for us choosing fabrics always came last. First we looked for an idea, then the shape, and finally the material that suited the shape’ (Horsting, quoted in Brouns 2013: 73). Or, as a journalist noted in the Dutch edition of *Vogue*: ‘The idea they wanted to convey often seemed more important than the possibility of wearing that idea’ (Van der Meer 2013: 45).

Over the past decades, this interpretation of conceptualism as the primacy of the idea has become prominent in fashion design, and since the 1980s it has been highly valued by the international fashion press (Van de Peer 2014). Admittedly, high-end fashion design has never been free of ideas. Designers in the early twentieth century did not merely create new clothes haphazardly without wondering about the stories they wished to tell or the ideas they sought to convey to the public. Paul Poiret, Gabrielle Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli, the most telling examples, also challenged the specific conventions of the fashion world and the wider societal field at the time by, for instance, dressing women in trousers (Poiret) and introducing unheard of fabrics into couture fashion (Chanel). Yet an actual acknowledgement of conceptual fashion as a specific strand of fashion design emerged only in the early 1980s with

the rise and success of Japanese designers Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons (Clark 2012: 67–68). This recognition was subsequently reinforced in the 1990s by Antwerp-trained conceptual designers, like Walter Van Beirendonck and Martin Margiela, and London-based designers, such as Hussein Chalayan and Alexander McQueen.

In order to understand conceptual fashion, fashion theorists often compare it to conceptual art. Hazel Clark, for instance, who states that ‘any reference to conceptual fashion immediately draws us towards the conceptual in art’, which was fully established in the 1970s and privileged ‘ideas over appearance, self-reflection over resolution, innovation and experimentation, and statements that posed questions but that rarely provided clear answers’ (Clark 2012: 67). Furthermore, philosopher Elisabeth Schellekens argues that philosophers of aesthetics view dematerialization as key to conceptual art, implying that the artistic value of the artwork lies in the ideas it conveys instead of in the (material) object itself (2007: 71–91). Another important feature of conceptual art is that the audience must understand the ideas on a mental plane without engaging with the aesthetics of the artwork in an imaginative, emotional and experiential way. Schellekens delineates three types of concepts that surface in conceptual art: (1) ideas on the nature of art and art institutions; (2) social-political ideas; and (3) philosophical ideas (2007: 76), which prove helpful for scholars in understanding the concepts that fashion designers express.

Conceptualism in fashion design has been interpreted in a similar vein as conceptual art, privileging image and concept over product, clothes and materiality of fashion, thus emphasizing the primacy of the idea. Nathalie Khan for example, argues that conceptual fashion is ‘not about forms and materials, but about ideas and meanings’ (2000: 122). When writing about Viktor&Rolf, Amy Spindler, fashion critic at the *New York Times*, equally claims that the intellectual outweighs the material and the experiential in conceptual fashion:

‘[t]o a world of pretty faces, empty heads, rakes for bodies and stiletto heels, they brought a brain’ (Spindler 2000: 6).

Since the start of their collaboration in 1992, Viktor&Rolf have sought to express several of the concepts and ideas that are indeed central to conceptual art. We concur that ideas are significant to their work which can therefore be labelled as ‘conceptual fashion’. When taking a closer look at Viktor&Rolf’s collections and fashion shows, however, we observe a discrepancy between the prevalent perception of their designs as conceptual and the ways in which the materiality of the garments often comes to the fore. In this article, we therefore seek to question the way in which journalistic and academic discourses on Viktor&Rolf’s conceptual fashion privilege the idea. We do so by offering an alternative reading of their fashion practices. Through a detailed visual analysis of renowned Viktor&Rolf collections, such as *Russian Doll* (Autumn/Winter 1999–2000) and *Glamour Factory* (Autumn/Winter 2010–11), and a discourse analysis of the reception of these collections in the international fashion press, we explore the conceptual through the materiality of fashion, i.e. the actual material objects of their collections as well as the living, fashioned bodies on the runway (Entwistle 2000). In other words, we want to foreground matter, body and materiality within conceptual fashion. We propose to rethink the conceptual in Viktor&Rolf’s work through a material lens, allowing us to develop an argument on the inextricable interconnection between the concepts these designers seek to convey and their material expression. Thus, we will question the current non-materialist discourse of fashion studies, and propose to think in terms of an inextricable entanglement of the meanings, signs, values, concepts and ideas of fashion objects, and their material expression. We draw upon the idea that ‘[f]ashion is undoubtedly a discursive machine, but is also a site of intimate encounters between consuming subjects [...] and material things: garments, fabrics, accessories’ (Parkins 2008: 502).

In order to gain a deeper insight into the importance of rethinking conceptualism through a material lens, it is necessary first to discuss the dominant discourse of the immaterial, representational and semiotic facets of fashion, while reflecting on existing theories that address the relationship between materiality and the conceptual in the field of fashion studies. Secondly, we will examine the dominant conceptual understanding of Viktor&Rolf's work in greater detail by framing it in both a Dutch national context and in the transnational context of a new culture of fashion production. Next, we offer a close reading of the fashion shows *Russian Doll* and *Glamour Factory*, reflecting on the entanglement of concept and materiality in terms of a material-discursive 'intra-action' (Barad 1996, 2003; Parkins 2008). We conclude that Viktor&Rolf's fashion can be better understood in terms of an intimate encounter between materiality and concept.

(Im)materiality in fashion studies

In order to fully comprehend the relationship between materiality and the conceptual in contemporary fashion studies, it is necessary to address the ways in which the textual, semiotic, discursive and representational facets of fashion – i.e. the *immaterial* facets of fashion – have generally become the main focus of attention in fashion studies. In the course of the twentieth century, and around the turn of the twenty-first century, theories of consumption increasingly focus on the signs and meanings attached to material objects. In the field of fashion, Roland Barthes's famous work, *The Fashion System* (1983 [1967]), has significantly contributed to the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon of fashion in terms of a system of immaterial meanings. When Barthes published *Système de la Mode* in 1967, written between 1957 and 1963, his ideas had developed into a post-structuralist perspective. He increasingly moved towards a focus on representations of and writings on fashion, emphasizing the textual and discursive facets of fashion as a system of signification:

‘without discourse there is no total Fashion’ (Barthes 1983 [1967]: xi). Furthermore, Barthes argued that it is inherent to the commercial system of fashion to create ‘a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings; [...] in short, a simulacrum of the real object’ (1983 [1967]: xii). Instead of starting from actual material clothing objects, Barthes thus underlined the discursive aspects of fashion representations, writings and significations as a system in itself.

In addition, fashion is often viewed as a symbolic system of production and consumption. Cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has especially contributed to this perspective on fashion. His work is strongly connected to Thorstein Veblen’s theory, and is thus part of the paradigm of symbolic class distinction. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984 [1979]), Bourdieu argues that consumption needs to be conspicuous in order to be symbolic and signify specific classes in which taste is an important classifier. Although Bourdieu’s work offers insight into fashion as a field of symbolic production and consumption, fashion theorist Agnès Rocamora points out that it ‘has also shown some difficulties overcoming its fixation on status differentiation and on the role of objects as signs’ (2002: 343), which dismisses ‘the variety and complexity of people’s engagement with the objects of material culture’ (2002: 355).

Existing semiotic and sociological methodologies in fashion studies have been significant to the prevailing understanding of the phenomenon of fashion as a field of symbolic production and consumption and a system in which immaterial meanings, codes, signs and symbolic values circulate. Representation and signification have become dominant terms within fashion studies today, as cultural theorist Anneke Smelik claims, while arguing for the importance of developing fashion theory along new lines (2014: 38). The prevailing idea is that clothes are perceived ‘as “signs,” that is to say entities capable of conveying meaning (who I am, how much I earn, what kind of music I listen to, which religion I believe in [...]) and identifying and differentiating individuals within a community’ (Marchetti and

Quinz 2009: 117). In this sense, individuals are defined through the process of being “dressed” by social conventions and systems of representation’ (Entwistle 2000: 7–8), and thus dressed with layers of cultural meaning (Entwistle 2000: 143). Whereas the semiotic, discursive and representational facets of fashion have taken centre stage in contemporary fashion theory, this approach falls short in terms of acknowledging dress as an embodied practice, as Joanne Entwistle has convincingly argued (2000: 10).

Moreover, the actual material objects of fashion often disappear into the realms of the semiotic, discursive and representational as well. As Ulrich Lehmann states, it is remarkable that ‘[f]ashion in its presently codified state – that is as a commodity, social signifier, brand – is very rarely discussed as a material fact; it is almost exclusively perceived in its representation through the media’.¹ The ways in which the actual material objects of fashion are often disregarded should also be understood in the context of the capitalist field of fashion consumption, in which surplus value is continuously added to the products. As Lehmann puts forward, ‘the relation between the exchange value of textiles or clothes and the surplus value generated by the designer’s/producer’s work in turning material product into fashionable commodity or experience heightens fashion’s dependency on a capitalist socio-economic structure’ (2014). In a similar vein, cultural historian Giorgio Riello argues that in the discourse of fashion, ‘the object is often present not in its materiality but as an object of consumption’ (2011). Moreover, in *Fashion-ology* (2005) fashion theorist Yuniya Kawamura offers a distinction between clothing as a material product and fashion as a symbolic, immaterial product. She argues that ‘[f]ashion is a concept that separates itself from other words which are often used as synonyms of fashion, such as clothing, garments and apparel. Those words refer to tangible objects while fashion is an intangible object’ (2005: 2). In addition, she stresses that fashion is a ‘symbolic product which has no content substance by/in

itself' (Kawamura 2005: 2). From this perspective, fashion can thus be understood as intangible, immaterial and symbolic, while clothing is its tangible and material basis.

Riello (2011) also distinguishes between fashion as material objects and as an immaterial concept and claims that this distinction is the basis of two diverse approaches to the study of fashion, i.e. (1) the study of dress and costume, mostly from a cultural or art historical point of view, and (2) fashion theory or fashion studies. With regard to the first approach, in the 1980s art historian Jules Prown defined 'material culture' as 'the study through artifacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time' (1982: 1). In this sense, objects are the primary data for a scholarly branch of cultural history or cultural anthropology, which is a way of reading culture *through* material objects. Based on Prown's object-based approach, Valerie Steele developed a material-culture methodology to study fashion by focusing on several stages of garment analyses: (1) a formal analysis of the object; (2) a close analysis of the interaction between the users and the objects; and (3) a stage of interpretation and speculation (Steele 1998a: 327–35). With regard to dress history, Lou Taylor (2002, 2004) has also argued for the importance of studying dress from an object-based approach and museology, emphasizing the material culture of dress history, while recognizing the value of various contemporary approaches. Comparable to Riello, Taylor also pointed out the difference between approaches that either focus on immaterial meanings or on material objects:

a researcher whose eye is fixed on the cultural 'meanings' of clothes may well take no interest in learning the detailed style and manufacturing minutiae of the garments. In reverse, the meanings of the clothing s/he cares for may well never be cared for by an object-based specialist. (Taylor 2002: 2)

In order to bridge the gap between these different approaches, Riello argues for the importance of viewing fashion as both an (immaterial) idea and an (material) object simultaneously, and proposes another methodology to study what he calls ‘the material culture of fashion’ (Riello 2011). With the term ‘material culture’ he refers to ‘the modalities and dynamics through which objects take on meaning (and one of these is that of fashion) in human lives’, and continues arguing that ‘material culture places itself on an intermediary plane between the material and the conceptual’ (Riello 2011). As such we believe that reevaluating the materiality of fashion objects and highlighting the entwinement of concept and materiality will help to move beyond the idea that ‘objects signify or represent us and that they are principally signs and symbols that stand for persons’ (Miller 2010: 10). Although representations and significations are a crucial part of fashion, it is important to draw more attention to clothing as material objects as well as to the physical and experiential dimensions of the dressed human body in the field of fashion studies. Therefore, it is important to draw more attention to theories that highlight the inextricable interconnection between material objects and immaterial ideas.

With the rise of deconstructionist fashion, scholars have analysed conceptual approaches of fashion from a material-culture perspective, discussing fashion in relation to its materiality. An interesting example is the work of Caroline Evans on deconstructionist designer Martin Margiela’s ‘use and transformation of second-hand clothing in the field of high fashion’ (1998: 74). Evans demonstrates how Margiela starts with raw materials with the lowest exchange value in the fashion system, converting it into something that ‘has the highest status, not just in the art world, where cultural capital is all, but equally in the fashion world, where economic capital is not insignificant’ (1998: 82–83). As these garments are saturated with historical meanings, bringing back to life their forgotten history, Evans shows how Margiela’s work exemplifies the ways in which surplus value is continuously added to

textiles in the fashion system. In doing so, she also highlights ‘the transformations and reversals he effects with this material’ (1998: 75). Also focusing on deconstruction in fashion, Alison Gill underlines the importance of acknowledging ‘the immaterial domain that has arrived with the material forms of fashion’ since ‘fashion both designs and is designed by an empire of signs that propel and commutate at an ever-increasing speed’ (1998: 27). Yet she significantly states that clothes ‘do not have, and never have had, a singular origin, meaning, or function’ (1998: 36), and suggests that deconstruction fashion has the capacity to

reflect on the nexus of making, wearing, thinking and dwelling that happens in fashion and people’s relations with all clothing; making and wearing clothes are processes by which presence, thought, meaning, and form are transported through garments and into the places in which we will dwell. (Gill 1998: 42)

This points out the way in which fashion can help us to reconsider and reflect on the material dimensions of clothing and our relation to fashion objects. In her work on deconstruction fashion and the grotesque, Francesca Granata also used an object-based approach as one of her methods, emphasizing the need for a material culture analysis to study experimental fashion (2012: 70–71). At the same time, as Granata argues, ‘the intra-media nature of fashion [...] calls for a range of methodological approaches, which are poached from a number of different disciplines’ (2012: 74). In their article, ‘Approaches to material culture: The sociology of fashion and clothing’ (2006), Diana Crane and Laura Bovone propose a theoretical framework for studying material culture, such as fashionable clothing, by outlining five approaches on the relation between material culture and symbolic values. Fashion, here, thus functions as an example of ‘the creation and attribution of symbolic values to material culture’ (Crane and Bovone 2006: 320). Although the interrelation between material objects and immaterial symbolic values deserves more attention in fashion studies, it must be noted

that these fashion theorists have acknowledged materiality in conceptual fashion practices. Also Hazel Clark observed the emphasis on cloth, cut and silhouette in Japanese conceptual fashion and noted that ‘the most successful conceptual fashion, in the effective transmission of ideas [...] has benefitted substantially from the skills of its designers’ (2012: 74).

In this article we build upon this existing work on the relation between the material and the immaterial in the field of fashion studies. We aim to give special attention to the materiality of fashion objects and to dress as an embodied practice (Entwistle 2000). By critically reflecting on the (conceptual) fashion practices of Viktor&Rolf, we will focus on the interrelation between the concepts and ideas of fashion objects and their material – as well as bodily – expression. Before doing so, we will first contextualize the conceptual fashion practices of Viktor&Rolf.

The discourse of Viktor&Rolf’s conceptual approach in context

After their graduation from the Arnhem Academy of Art and Design in the Netherlands in 1992, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren moved to the fashion centre of Paris, where they started to make haute couture. They won three prizes for their first collection *Hyères* (1993) in the competition Salon Européen des Jeunes Stylistes at the ‘Festival International de Mode et de Photographie in Hyères’, southern France. In the following years the designers’ work expressed several of the concepts that are inherent to conceptual art. Their work deliberately questioned social-political conventions and, more importantly, it challenged the assumptions of the fashion system itself. They subverted ‘not just the format of the catwalk show but also the time and space of fashion itself, thereby unsettling the viewer’s normal experience of it’ (Sheffield and Bush 2008: 6). Addressing the temporality of the continuously changing fashion dynamics and of fast fashion cycles they, for instance, created posters that read ‘Viktor&Rolf on strike’ instead of releasing a collection for the next season.

Until 2000, when a Japanese investor helped to start their ready-to-wear label, Viktor&Rolf designed couture collections. They have recurrently stated that until that time only museums bought their pieces (Brouns 2013: 71; Teunissen 2011: 163–64). In the early stages of their career, the designers crossed easily from fashion into the art world as they produced several fashion installations in art galleries in different cities in Europe. This has greatly contributed to their image as conceptual designers: ‘Viktor&Rolf brought an intellectual approach to the fashion process via art’ (Chang 2010: 709). In keeping with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993) often-cited observation on the distance that cultural producers take from economic capital to safeguard one’s symbolic capital, Viktor&Rolf’s lack of commercial success in their early years further tapped into their artistic or somewhat highbrow prestige, which gave them ‘a reputation as top-end conceptual designers who generated images and ideas rather than commercial fashion’ (Evans 2008: 10). Since their collection A/W 2000–01, Viktor&Rolf work within the more commercially-oriented context of ready-to-wear, while the launch of their perfume Flowerbomb in 2005 has also been important to their commercial success. Yet because of the ironic, probing elements that still figure prominently in their commercially-oriented endeavours, the media as well as scholars often conceive of them as artists (e.g. Boelsma 2000: 23; Bolton 2005: 17; Kuijpers 2003: 2; Martin 1999; Sheffield and Bush 2008: 6; Spindler 2000: 7–8), or as performance artists (Smelik 2007: 64–72) for whom ‘fashion is their medium’ (Alonso and Eisner 2002: 109).

We frame Viktor&Rolf’s fashion practices, first, in the national context of Dutch fashion and, second, in relation to the shift that the global culture of fashion production has witnessed from material production to image production (Kawamura 2005). Viktor&Rolf’s conceptual fashion practices developed in the context of the early 1990s, when Dutch fashion designers began to relate their designs to a particular ‘Dutch modernistic conceptual design tradition in graphic design, architecture, and interior design’ (Teunissen 2011: 159). From this

perspective, Viktor&Rolf's work can be viewed as part of the conceptual, modernistic approach to fashion that is regularly considered to be 'typically Dutch' (Van den Berg 2009: 56). Their early reception as conceptual designers and artists by the international fashion press at that time is thus connected to an existing concept-oriented tradition in the world of Dutch design. This context has been essential to Viktor&Rolf's fashion practices as well as to the interpretation of the press, which soon coined their style as 'Dutch Modernism' (Teunissen 2011: 159).

Moreover, the fashion duo's emphasis on the ideas they wish to convey is also rooted in a global culture of fashion production, a development that goes hand-in-hand with the dematerialization and representational focus in the realm of fashion. With the demise of Parisian haute couture in the late 1960s and the institutionalization of ready-to-wear in the mid-1970s, fashion production increasingly started to focus on brand and image production. In this new fashion culture the international fashion press valorized less the values of craftsmanship and beauty which were more attributed to fashion items in a culture of material production (Van de Peer 2014). In this new production culture, designers are expected to bring attention to their brand, image and personal style, rather than the products they have on offer each season (Crane 2000; Kawamura 2005). As phrased in the British newspaper *The Independent*, specifically with regard to Viktor&Rolf: '[w]hat Viktor&Rolf have in abundance is ideas and on planet fashion it may be only the concept that matters' (Lowthorpe 1999: 9). This move from material to image production and conceptual fashion is made lucid by the genre of haute couture itself which, in the period leading up to the 1970s, had developed from the centre of innovation in material-fashion construction to a somewhat passé institution that could not keep up with the desire for change which ready-to-wear now epitomized in its emphasis on brand, image and storytelling (Steele 1998b). By the turn of the twenty-first century, couture had regained some of its centrality within the new image-minded

fashion culture by seeking to become the laboratory of fashion. However, couture now seemingly focused on concept-experiments and to a lesser extent on material-experiments. Viktor&Rolf's choice in the early 1990s to make haute couture must be related to this genre's new focus on concept-experimentation and image production. As Viktor&Rolf recently noted: 'the couture shows have made us pretty famous in a short time, and that's how we were able to start prêt-à-porter' (Snoeren, quoted in Brouns 2013: 73). As of 2013, the designers again present couture in addition to their ready-to-wear collections, but 'during the couture week we present our theatrical conceptual side' (Snoeren, quoted in Brouns: 74).

Both the tradition of Dutch design and the new culture of fashion production help to understand the context within which Viktor&Rolf's conceptual approach to fashion developed. Moreover, as we have seen, their early work within the art scene greatly contributed to their image as conceptual designers. At the beginning of their career, Rolf Snoeren mentioned that

sometimes I have the sense a piece is already finished when you've had the idea. Then comes the tedious task of putting it together. But even when the garment is made, the most important thing is the whole concept *around* it. (Snoeren, quoted in Todd 1998: 98, emphasis added)

It is significant that Snoeren phrases their approach – metaphorically speaking – as draping the concept over the materiality of clothing, conceiving of the matter of fashion as merely the carrier of ideas. Viktor&Rolf thus seem to reiterate the current academic and journalistic discourse on the conceptual in fashion design, which draws upon scholarly debates on concept-oriented approaches in the arts. Hence, in conceptual fashion the ideas conveyed have often become detached from the materiality of the clothes or from sensorial experience, which is regularly expressed in terms of metaphors of time and space: matter that *follows* the idea, or ideas draped *around* matter.

As Linda Sandino argues in her work on design, art and crafts as material expressions, ‘concentration on the conceptual aspect of design and the resolution of functional, performance and manufacturing objectives obscured the experience of the objects’ materiality’ (2004: 284). Sandino draws upon the work of philosophers Peter-Paul Verbeek and Petran Kockelkoren, who have argued in their essay ‘Matter matters’ (1997) that modernism has led us away from matter towards the idea of function, and emphasize a revaluation of materiality:

[T]he very design of products up until now has been directed to the ideas they represent and not to the products themselves. [...] If our attachment only concerns this immaterial aspect and not the object itself, it is destined to remain secondary. It can easily be replaced at any time by another artefact with the same immaterial quality. In order to increase product lifetime, we therefore think that designers should not only create things that are meaningful, but things in which meaning is firmly anchored in their materiality. (Verbeek and Kockelkoren, cited in Sandino 2004: 285)

Following this line of thought, in this article we want to highlight how meaning is anchored in materiality in the work of designers Viktor&Rolf. As art theorist Barbara Bolt argues, a renewed interest in materiality as well as embodiment is of great importance for the creative arts, since its ‘very materiality has disappeared into the textual, the linguistic and the discursive’ (2013: 4) – which is particularly true for clothing and fashion, as argued above. Bolt points out that ‘art *is* a material practice and that materiality of matter lies at the core of creative practice. Dance, theatre and fashion, as embodied practices, engage the matter of bodies’ (Bolt 2013: 5, original emphasis).

Building upon the existing work on conceptual fashion and materiality (e.g. Evans 1998; Gill 1998; Granata 2012), we want to rethink the conceptualism of Viktor&Rolf’s work through a material lens and develop an argument on the inextricable entanglement between

concept and materiality – both fashion objects and living, fashioned bodies – in terms of a material-discursive ‘intra-action’ (Barad 1996, 2003; Parkins 2008). We will now do so by discussing Viktor&Rolf’s renowned fashion shows *Russian Doll* and *Glamour Factory*.

Viktor&Rolf’s intra-actions between concept and materiality

Wearing a short, jute dress in its natural colour, the fashion model Maggie Rizer stands motionless on the catwalk on a revolving pedestal like a ‘toy ballerina in a music box’ (Evans 2003: 181). In this couture show, *Russian Doll* (Autumn/Winter 1999–2000), Viktor&Rolf dress Rizer in real time onstage. After the initial jute dress, they add eight subsequent layers of couture dresses. Repetitively, different layers are placed on top of each other, comparable to a Russian Matryoshka doll. Rizer finally wears the entire collection at once, while her ‘head appeared to have shrunk to the size of a walnut’ (Horyn 1999: 1). Caroline Evans and fashion editor Susannah Frankel interpret this show as a way of ‘[e]schewing the catwalk convention of a procession in which each model wears one outfit’ (2008: 88). Additionally, one may argue that Viktor&Rolf subvert the conventions of the catwalk by visualizing the backstage process of dressing the models.

The journalistic and scholarly reception of this fashion show emphasizes different concepts and offers a number of interpretations. For instance, as a fashion journalist states in *The Independent*:

The ‘Russian Doll’ typifies *the layers of ideas* involved in Viktor&Rolf’s work. On the one hand, it paid homage to the idea that couture is supposed to be a laboratory of ideas, the garments too avant-garde to be actually worn by the masses; on the other hand, it parodied couture as ludicrously inaccessible. (Lowthorpe 2001: 35, emphasis added)

Fashion scholars who analyse *Russian Doll* also tend to read this fashion show in ways that privilege the concept, arguing for instance that the show functions as a parody or critique of the ways in which the fashion system operates. ‘The whole presentation was an exercise in the sedimentation of fashion,’ writes Evans, ‘making formal the way in which it continually expands on existing currency’ (2003: 182). In a similar vein, fashion scholar Alistair O’Neill argues that

[t]his idea of fashion being produced as a form of thematic display that evolves by the process of accumulation, is *an idea made material* by Viktor&Rolf in their 1998 collection where they dressed a single model in ten outfits one on top of the other like a Russian doll. (O’Neill 2005: 182, emphasis added)

Russian Doll thus allows for a variety of readings, all of which capture important parts of Viktor&Rolf’s conceptual approach in this collection. Yet the focus on concepts and ideas ‘made material’ still implies the primacy of the idea which is subsequently translated into the fabrics, textiles and materials of the collection. When relating these ‘materialized ideas’ to the prevailing journalistic and scholarly interpretations of conceptual fashion practices, the question arises whether the one-sided focus on immaterial ideas adequately captures Viktor&Rolf’s fashion practices. As Schellekens argues, propositional knowledge, e.g. reading, writing and speaking about an artwork, cannot entirely encompass the ideas the work seeks to convey (2007: 81–82). Rather, the medium of the work of art assists in having its audience *experience* the concepts, anchoring the cognitive value of conceptual art in the public’s everyday phenomenological experience, because ‘we engage with it [the concept] in an emphatic and imaginative manner’ (Schellekens 2007: 83). In other words, the medium of conceptual art is not secondary to the ideas conveyed. Similarly, the material medium of conceptual fashion is intricately linked to the abstract questions posed or the concepts

expressed. As we can see in Viktor&Rolf's work, fashion design may question its own system of production or critique wider societal issues. Yet rather than such ideas coming first, in our view both concept and materiality are constituted through a reciprocal and relational process, instead of being separate entities that subsequently interact with one another.

In *Russian Doll* we see the dynamic process and act of dressing presented as a continuous practice. Each garment is connected in different ways to the previous one, completing the unfinished elements of the previous layer (Smelik 2007: 70). During the process of the act of dressing, we witness the model's visible, continuous transformation. The attention of the audience is drawn to this process and experience (Spindler 2000: 7; Smelik 2007: 70). As Viktor&Rolf dress Rizer with increasingly larger-sized dresses, the materiality and the tactility of the garments are foregrounded (Smelik 2007: 69). The contrasts between the different fabrics and materials, such as jute, silk, satin and lace, and the heavily embroidered dresses with crystals, highlight the material quality of these clothing items. Each layer seems to be a preparation for the next, and 'the preparations acted as pieces in a puzzle, each new layer completing or mirroring a detail or an element on the preceding tier' (Evans and Frankel 2008: 88). The materiality of the items, and the connections between the different pieces of cloth, are emphasized in addition to the processual, transformational nature of the show.

Anneke Smelik argues that the clothes are highlighted *as* material fabrics during this fashion show (2007: 69). By referring to film theorist Laura Marks's notion of 'haptic visuality' (Marks 2000, 2002) – a type of visuality that draws on the senses (Marks 2002: 2) – Smelik emphasizes the possible tactile relationship between the viewer and the object during a fashion show. She argues that fashion shows potentially offer 'haptic experiences' when the tactility of the object is emphasized. As viewers we are, then, not simply voyeurs looking at the fashion show from a distance, but we crave touching the object (Smelik 2007: 70–71).

During the show *Russian Doll*, this tactile, material quality of the dresses is enhanced by the way in which Viktor&Rolf contrast traditional couture materials and finishing with more unconventional ones. At the start of the show the model wears a jute dress which has loose threads, as if some have been liberated from their function of ‘holding together’ the structure of the weave, giving it an unfinished quality. Whereas the first layer was made of the unconventional fabric of jute, the second layer is a more conventional lace couture dress. Viktor&Rolf emphasize the heavily embroidered dresses and combine conventional couture materials such as lace and crystals and the conventional paisley design, with the unconventional fabric of jute.

Additionally, as the show progresses, the model’s physicality is put centre stage. Each layer of clothing increasingly outgrows her petite, fragile body. In the end, when wearing the nine outfits, she almost staggers, and we can barely see her head. As viewers, we may become aware of the heavy weight of the clothes as well as the warmth of all the layers that the model must be experiencing. In this show we thus witness the physical as well as material encounters of Viktor&Rolf; the materiality of the couture dresses; and the physical body of Rizer. The ‘layers of ideas involved in Viktor&Rolf’s work’ (Lowthorpe 2001: 35) are here interconnected to layers of cloth.

In order to develop a deeper insight into the mutual constituency of the material and the conceptual in fashion design, we propose to read this entanglement in terms of feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad’s concept of ‘intra-action’ (Barad 2003: 815; see also Barad 1996). Instead of an interaction, which ‘presumes the prior existence of independent entities’, as Barad’s work helps to understand, an intra-action can be viewed as a reciprocal process of two entities emerging through the process of their relational intra-action (2003: 815). In this sense, entities thus emerge through the process of their mutual creation. As Barad specifically discusses intra-actions between materiality and discourse as well as matter and

concept, her insights hold great potential to develop a better understanding of fashion as a material-discursive phenomenon (Parkins 2008), and to rethink conceptual fashion through materiality. Coming from physics, Barad draws upon sources from the hard sciences to develop her philosophical theoretical framework. Barad's work, specifically, fruitfully builds upon the framework of early-twentieth-century Danish physicist Niels Bohr to explore the mutuality of matter and meaning: 'Bohr's insight that concepts are not ideational but rather are actual physical arrangements is clearly an insistence on the materiality of meaning making' (Barad 2003: 820). Intra-actions are always already material-discursive practices. Barad follows Bohr's argument that discourse is not simply "supported" or "sustained" through material practices', and emphasizes that 'Bohr's point entails a much more intimate relationship between concepts and materiality' (2003: 820). This perspective enables an understanding of how matter and concepts are mutually determined through their intra-actions. As Barad argues: '[m]atter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification' (2003: 821). Rather,

materiality is discursive [...], just as discursive practices are always already material [...]. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. [...] matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. (Barad 2003: 822–23)

Barad emphasizes that she is not advocating a naive holistic approach in which matter and meaning magically unite (1996: 187). On the contrary, the theory she proposes has political implications as it draws attention to, what she calls, 'the constructed cut' separating seemingly essentialized and mutually exclusive entities. She refers to, for instance, the dualisms of nature–culture, object–subject and matter–meaning as constructed cuts, while emphasizing that the boundaries between these entities are not fixed, and proposes to destabilize them

(Barad 1996: 182–88). These binary oppositions and the constructed boundaries between them are political in the sense that the two entities often stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other, subordinating one to the other within specific power structures. Barad calls into question these dualisms and rather argues for the inseparability of these entities, viewing all phenomena as dynamic intra-actions.

Interestingly, Barad's work has become part of the theoretical discourse of 'new materialism' (see e.g. Barrett and Bolt 2013; Bennett and Joyce 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012; Smelik 2014). This emerging, new-materialist development traverses different disciplines such as philosophy, feminist theory, cultural theory and the arts. New materialism proposes a renewed focus on materiality that incorporates bodily matter, allowing for the study of matter and meaning in their entanglement (Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012: 91). Whereas clothing often 'becomes reduced to its ability to signify something that seems more real – society or social relations – as though these things exist above or prior to their own materiality' (Miller 2005: 2), a new-materialist approach to fashion allows to take into account living, fashioned bodies, embodied subjects and the actual materiality of fashion objects – while simultaneously acknowledging the entwinement of matter and meaning (Bruggeman 2014). Drawing on Barad's new-materialist work, feminist theorist Ilya Parkins argues that fashion is simultaneously material and discursive (2008: 502). Comparable to Entwistle's argument on the interconnection between clothing, the body and the self (2000: 10), Parkins asserts that 'very often a *psychic* intimacy between subject and garment, subject and fashion, prevails along with the material intimacy of body and garment' (Parkins 2008: 507, original emphasis). The intimacy between subject and object, body and garment, and thus human matter and non-human matter must be understood within the context of fashion as a discursive machine (Parkins 2008). It is thus essential to take into account the clothed body as a corporeal entity as well as the materiality of fashion objects, but we cannot separate these

elements from the representational, semiotic and discursive facets of fashion, since '[c]lothing, of course, is discursively saturated: it is always shaped and contextualized by fashion' (Parkins 2008: 507).

Parkins points out that '[j]ust as with human subjects, non-human matter is involved in the production of meaning' (2008: 504). The materiality of clothing in the field of fashion is thus material-discursive in itself, and the concepts and materiality of fashion mutually come into being through their intra-actions. A designed fashion object is not simply passively awaiting signification, or awaiting a concept to be attached to it. In other words, abstract ideas in fashion design do not stand alone. Rather, they are ideas only in their expression through the specific materiality of clothes, e.g. the fabrics, colours, the cut, and the designers' transformative encounters with these materials. Consequently, the ideas that fashion journalists and scholars attach to this fashion show cannot be separated from the materials that bring these concepts to expression. For instance, the reading of Viktor&Rolf's collection and fashion show as a critique of the fashion system is partly a result of the ways in which they contrast conventional and unconventional couture fabrics and materials. Moreover, through the onstage material encounters between the hands of the couturiers, the model's physical body and the materiality of the garments, the designers actually subvert the conventions of the catwalk.

A similar onstage process takes place in Viktor&Rolf's Autumn/Winter 2010–11 fashion show, for which the Dutch design duo Studio Job developed the scenography that consists of imagery of industrial machines and technical tools. As a Dutch fashion journalist writes, 'backstage Rolf Snoeren tells us that the concept was a "glamour factory"' (Koning 2010). Whereas in *Russian Doll*, Rizer entered the catwalk wearing just one outfit before being dressed with nine layers, *Glamour Factory* opens with the model Kristen McMenamy wearing ten layers. Because of this physically demanding task, she is wobbling on her high

heels while stepping onto a rotating platform in the middle of the catwalk. Viktor&Rolf take centre stage, stand beside her and take off her tweed cape, while a second model in a body stocking appears and also steps onto the rotating platform. Subsequently, the designers dress the second model with the clothing item they had just taken off McMenemy, creating an interesting dynamic between the processes of undressing and dressing at the same time. During this process the cape becomes a coat for the second model. While McMenemy stays on the revolving platform, the second model walks down the catwalk before going off-stage again, and a third model appears. This turns into a repetitive practice with different models and clothing items. Systematically, McMenemy is undressed layer after layer, while Viktor&Rolf are simultaneously dressing the other models with the items they have just taken off. At a certain point, when McMenemy is wearing no more than a pink bodysuit, the same process continues in reverse: McMenemy is dressed again with layers of clothing items taken off the other models. Cloth continuously meets and makes connections with other bodies and with other fabrics, while undergoing transformations itself as the function of the garments changes in the process: capes become coats, coats become dresses. With machinelike precision and meticulous timing, Viktor&Rolf dress and undress the models, as if they are operating in a factory of transformation, constantly producing new connections between different bodies and material fabrics.

In their *Glamour Factory*, they are engaged in an almost machinic process of assembling, disassembling and reassembling. This is a ‘show that revolved (literally) around industry in every way imaginable’, writes an editor of *Wallpaper* (Anon. 2010), both literally as well as conceptually. *Glamour Factory* could be interpreted in many different ways, such as a critical reflection on the industry of fashion; the abundant overproduction of clothes; or the contrast between fashion as a glamorous industry and the controversial reality of the manufacturing of clothing. A Dutch fashion journalist states that ‘the clash between industry

and glamour was also visible in the shiny ankle boots with tough rubber soles' (Koning 2010).

In *The International Herald Tribune*, fashion journalist Suzy Menkes discusses how the fashion show overshadows the clothes of this collection when comparing Viktor&Rolf to Alexander McQueen:

In fact, after the loss of Alexander McQueen, this design duo [Viktor&Rolf] is the best example of imaginative showmanship. But there is one huge difference: the clothes. Whereas Mr. McQueen's presentations were a framework for the collection, the V&R clothes were eclipsed. All in black and white, with some fine rounded coats with deep lapels, a slender wrap coatdress, a wisp of black chiffon and a finale of big-skirted sculpted creations that looked as menacing as birds of prey – the show, not a winter wardrobe, was the focus. (Menkes 2010: 10)

Also, fashion journalist Eric Wilson emphasizes the 'great show' in his review for the *New York Times*, and seemed disappointed by the fashion:

the thought occurred that a great show does not necessarily equal great fashion. [...] But for all the peeling of layers and possible metaphors therein (please, let it not be about the rebirth of fashion), all you were really left with was a bunch of reversible clothes. (Wilson 2010: 8)

Interestingly, this quote expresses a search for possible metaphors, concepts or ideas connected to the 'peeling of layers', as well as a slight resistance to a too-conceptual approach of fashion and a desire for more attention to the fashionable clothing objects of the collection. In this case, perhaps the designers themselves constructed a cut between the concept and the materiality of this collection, by emphasizing the primacy of the concept. This example again demonstrates the importance of designing 'things in which meaning is firmly anchored in their materiality' (Verbeek and Kockelkoren, cited in Sandino 2004: 285).

Nevertheless, a close reading of this fashion show exposes the ‘material intimacy of body and garment’ (Parkins 2008: 507), as well as the material encounters between the garments, the hands of the designers and the bodily matter of the models. We see the process of assembling onstage, yet, evidently, in the process of actually making this collection prior to this fashion show numerous creative, transformative and material connections had already been made. The actual material garments are manufactured in actual textile factories, yet, in contrast, in the show *Glamour Factory* we see performances of these material intimacies. Onstage, Viktor&Rolf let different clothes encounter each other as well as the models’ bodies. The pieces of cloth undergo metamorphoses as their function changes through the encounters with different bodies (capas become coats, coats become dresses), and the dressed models transform as they are constantly assembled, disassembled and reassembled. Because of the constructed cut between concept and materiality, whether created by designers, journalists or scholars, we propose to rethink Viktor&Rolf’s conceptual fashion – and perhaps all conceptual fashion – in terms of endless transformative encounters between for instance, fabrics, textiles, shapes, patterns, the hands and tools of the designers and pattern cutters, or the bodies of the wearers. This could function as an affirmative way of highlighting fashion’s matter and materiality, i.e. physical, experiential, living bodies as well as fashion objects, which, in our view, deserves more attention in the discursive and immaterial world of fashion.

Conclusion

Whereas Viktor&Rolf are often conceived of as conceptual designers engaged with immaterial meanings and artistic ideas, these designers – and especially their technical staff – are moreover involved in material practices, thinking in terms of textiles, fabrics, patterns, shapes, colours, etc. Although this may seem evident to fashion designers or pattern cutters, this materialism is often disregarded in journalistic discourse and in the field of fashion

studies. Fashion critics have discursively constructed the materiality of fashion to be the mere carrier of abstract ideas; cutting fashion matter from fashion concept. This suggests the political acts in which they have been continuously engaged, inscribing fashion design in a well-established tradition in which '[l]anguage matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter' (Barad 2003: 801).

Building upon the existing work on material culture in relation to (conceptual) fashion (e.g. Clark 2012; Crane and Bovone 2006; Evans 1998; Gill 1998; Granata 2012; Riello 2011;), in this article we proposed to rethink Viktor&Rolf's fashion practices in terms of a continuous intra-action between matter and concept, in which neither concept nor material object is pre-existent. Moreover, we have argued that the new materialist work of both Barad (1996, 2003) and Parkins (2008) offers an important contribution to contemporary fashion studies, as it helps to understand the entanglement between matter and meaning, matter and discourse, and the material and immaterial. Both the materiality of clothing objects and the bodily matter of the wearers deserve more attention in fashion studies. We have argued that journalistic and academic discourses on the work of Viktor&Rolf may better understand their fashion as a reciprocal material-discursive practice, in which concepts and materiality intra-act in an intimate relationship. Viktor&Rolf think the immaterial materially.

In the field of fashion, it is important to highlight the actual matter of fashion. The physical body of the wearer, the sensorial experience of being dressed and the actual textiles of the garments deserve more attention in contemporary fashion studies. Further research may, first, explore theoretically how concepts and ideas are actually woven into the fabrics of fashion; and second, may further investigate how it can be that scholars in fashion studies have generally engaged in discursive practices dismissing the materiality of fashion. Fashion means and fashion matters.

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the editors of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Emanuela Mora, Agnès Rocamora and Paolo Volonté, for the opportunity to contribute to this journal. In addition, the authors are grateful to Professor Anneke Smelik (Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands) for her inspiration, valuable discussions and useful comments that helped improve this article.

This work is part of the research programme, 'Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World', which is financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). The Fund for Scientific Research Flanders (FWO) provided the generous financial support for the qualitative study of fashion media.

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¹ Ulrich Lehmann, keynote lecture on ‘Fashion and Materialism’, as part of the ‘Stuff: Fashion and New Materialism’ study-day organized by Professor Anneke Smelik in collaboration with the Netherlands Institute of Cultural Analysis (NICA), Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, 7 June 2013.