



MOVEMENTS OF ONE

THE DESIGNER BEHIND COMME DES GARÇONS HAS DEFIED EXPECTATIONS, FROM CRAFTING GENDER-BENDING CLOTHING TO CHOOSING UNIQUE COLLABORATORS TO CREATING EXTRAORDINARY EMPORIUMS WHERE HER DESIGNS REACH THEIR WEARERS. **BY RON SHIPMON**

IN 1969, AN UNTRAINED DESIGNER ELEVATED COOL TO new heights when she introduced the world to her austere, deconstructed garments — in a palette of blacks, dark grays and whites. The woman is Rei Kawakubo, and this was the beginning of the birth of her “anti-

fashion” label Comme des Garçons (French for “like the boys”).

Kawakubo forever changed the way we thought about clothing. Her radical garments were androgynous and embraced the counterculture. She draped fabric around the body in unexpected, asymmetrical shapes

— accented with holes or frayed, unfinished edges. She challenged established notions of beauty and stood in direct contrast to bright, body-conscious clothing of other designers of the day, like Thierry Mugler.

Kawakubo claimed that her intention was not to cause a style revolution, but, by the 1981 debut of Comme de Garçons in Paris, that's what she had accomplished. At that point, she was already so famous in Japan, her black-clad legion of followers were dubbed "crows."

Her process is unique. "I never start a collection with some historical, social, cultural or any other concrete reference or memory," the oft-inscrutable Kawakubo told *The New York Times*. "I start every collection with one word."

BEHIND EVERY GREAT DESIGNER...

Kawakubo was born in Tokyo, the eldest of three children. Her mother was an English teacher and her father was an administrator at Keio University, where Rei also eventually studied literature and fine art.

The designer does not speak English, and so commonly communicates through her preferred spokesperson and translator, Adrian Joffe. Joffe is also the president of Comme des Garçons International, and is credited with softening the image of the audacious designer, whom he married in 1993. Together they've transformed Comme des Garçons into a multi-brand empire, whose annual revenues exceed \$200 million.

BETTER TOGETHER...

As a collaborator, Kawakubo can often be found exploring concepts through a multifaceted lens that incorporates her own unique ideas with the work of others. Examples include her 2008 designs with the Swedish fast-fashion chain H&M and her affiliation with Speedo, for which Comme des Garçons created graphics for an elite line of racer swimsuits.

However, long before those collaborations, Kawakubo shared her aesthetic philosophy with the late, legendary choreographer, Merce Cunningham. A kindred spirit, Cunningham also believed in engaging multiple artistic disciplines and aggressively pushing boundaries.

Their partnership yielded costumes for



Cunningham's seminal dance piece *Scenario*. Given free reign, Kawakubo was also responsible for the set design, and ultimately collaborated on stage and lighting concepts, as well.

"I was interested in the defiance and fusion of the dancers within a limited and fixed white frame." Kawakubo explained at the time of the piece's premiere in 1997. "I didn't want a 'stage' feeling, but more like a room, which the audience would feel they shared with the dancer." Kawakubo's spectacular *Scenario* costumes even went on to be exhibited in museums.

POINTS OF SALE...

In 2004 the fashion provocateur found herself inspired by the bustling past glory of Kensington Market, which was once a three-story indoor market in the Kensington area of London. In its heyday, the market catered to the hippie and bohemian cultures of the 1960s and 1970s.

Conceived as her own incarnation of Kensington, Kawakubo created a 21st-century emporium called Dover Street Market in London's fashionable Mayfair district. The high-end, multi-brand store features contemporary art and exclusive pieces by Prada, Yves Saint Laurent, and Louis Vuitton — designed specifically for her shop.

Seven years later, in 2012, she opened another in the commercial district of Ginza in Tokyo. And last year, just days before Christmas, NYC received one of its own — in a historic, seven-story, Beaux Arts building in the Kips Bay neighborhood of Manhattan.

Dover Street Market New York is a majestic, 18,000-square-foot wonderland for the style- and art-obsessed. Three elaborate, festooned pillars run vertically through six floors of the vast emporium, and the displays on each floor are carefully imagined, gender-bending tableaux. The space is designed entirely by Kawakubo, and she sets the tone for designer and artist offerings throughout. Among them are, of course, Comme des Garçons and its many offshoots — Play, Black and SHIRT — in addition to meticulously selected brands such as Saint Laurent, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Simone Rocha, Rick Owens and Andre Walker.

In December 2013, Kawakubo also launched the redesign of Comme des Garçons Chelsea, which had landed in NYC during February of 1999. The space was transformed into a luminous symphony of gold: Gold was infused

into furniture, curved walls, lamp shades, and to finish it off, two golden statues by Japanese contemporary artist Kohei Nawa.

CREATIVE OUTLETS...

This year, Kawakubo embarks on her latest unconventional project: a collaboration with *Raw Vision*, the internationally renowned magazine of "Outsider Art" (art produced by untrained artists). To celebrate its 25th anniversary, she'll use its vast reservoir of images and layouts to create 30 mini-magazines to be dispersed worldwide. The project will also include art installations in 10 of her stores.

The collaboration seems a good fit because, like Kawakubo, Outsider Artists choose their own methods, materials, rationales and rules. They are sometimes referred to as "art movements of one."

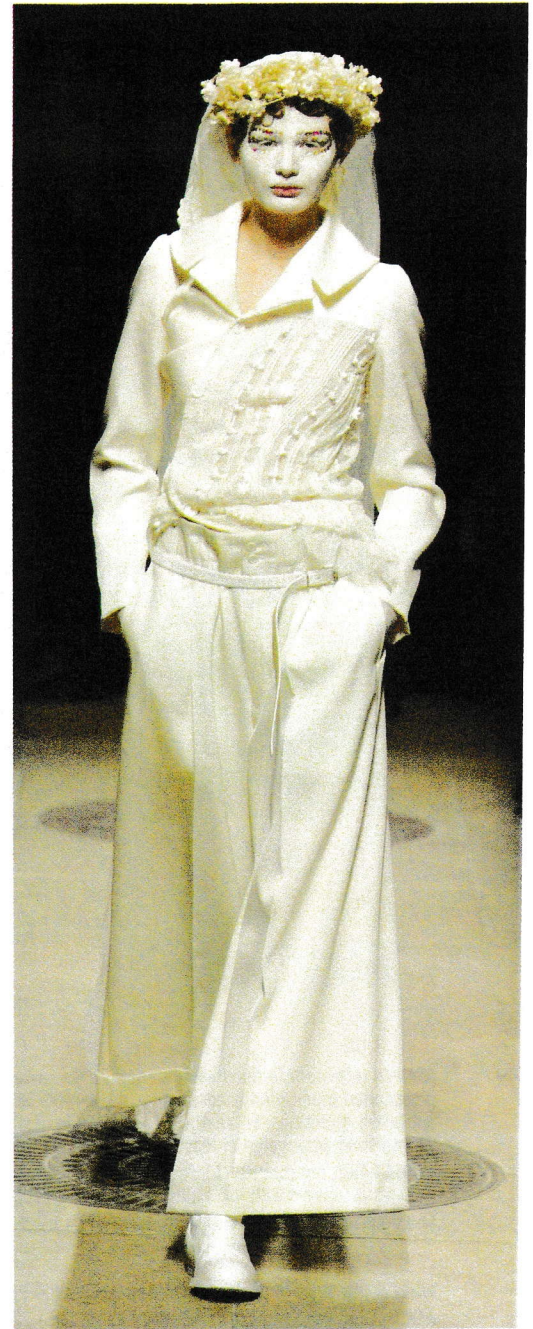
Luxury brand Louis Vuitton described Kawakubo as "iconoclastic" when they invited her (along with Christian Louboutin, Karl Lagerfeld, Frank Gehry, Marc Newson and contemporary artist Cindy Sherman) to celebrate its globally-recognized "Monogram" (traditionally composed of stylized flowers and the letters "L" and "V") in celebration of the label's 160th anniversary. The designers were challenged to develop a bag or piece that would also integrate their own creative attitudes, and the results are slated to be available in mid-October.

Regarding the project, Louis Vuitton's executive vice president Delphine Arnault said, "We have assembled an amazing group of talents — geniuses, I would say. Each one is among the best in his or her field."

ONE VISION...

Kawakubo has famously said, "All things are part of one vision and are inextricably linked." For over four and a half decades Rei Kawakubo has given the world clear examples of how all things are inextricably linked — skillfully navigating and interweaving many disciplines. She has become the editor of her own magazine *Sense*, and guest editor of the high-art publication *Visionaire*. She is a graphic designer, interior designer, store owner and even a creator of unisex perfumes.

And, as she approaches her 72nd birthday on October 11, 2014, she continues to recalibrate what is edgy, new and cool: "If I do



something I think is new, it will be misunderstood, but if people like it, I will be disappointed because I haven't pushed them enough," said Kawakubo. "The more people hate it, maybe the newer it is. Because the fundamental human problem is that people are afraid of change."

May she continue to challenge us all to change anyway. ■

To see more of Kawakubo's work, visit doverstreetmarket.com or comme-des-garcons.com.