Critical Studies in Men's Fashion
Volume 7 Numbers 1 & 2
 https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf_00018_1
Received 29 December 2019; Accepted 1 September 2020

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On metamodernism: Virgil Abloh's borderless fashion practice

ABSTRACT

The contemporary global fashion system is at a unique point of convergence between 'high' and 'low' culture and across creative disciplines and representational spaces. Fashion designers are no longer confined to the catwalk, nor to the physical object of clothing, but are multi-hyphenate creators bringing together design principles from other fields such as architecture, graphic design and fine art. Within this shifting design landscape, 'meta' has entered the millennial colloquial vernacular to describe anything that is self-referential, and has become a trait common to a generation whose cultural production and direct way of communicating is based upon digital social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. The 'metamodern' is a nomenclature paradigm proposition for contemporary culture beyond that of postmodernism and proposes an oscillation between principles characteristic of both the modern and postmodern. This new metamodern paradigm will be aligned within this article and mapped against developments in the contemporary popular 'fashionscape'. This will include the close analysis of multi-hyphenate interdisciplinary design practitioner Virgil Abloh and examples of the global practice he has established including: his streetwear brand Off White™, his collaboration with Nike and the curation of his 2019 exhibition in Chicago, Figures of Speech.

KEYWORDS

Virgil Abloh
fashion
streetwear
democratization
collaboration
theory
metamodern

INTRODUCTION

In November 2017, independent magazine *System* asked the question 'What is Virgil Abloh?' (Wingfield 2017: 58). Inside the British publication, the editors asked leading fashion insiders 'what they really think' about the American designer, Edward Enninful, editor-in-chief of *British Vogue*, mused: 'Virgil's the perfect Renaissance man. He's stimulated by the world and the world is stimulated by him' (Wingfield 2017: 60). On the other hand, fashion writer and critic Angelo Flaccavento commented: 'Mr Abloh represents to me everything that is wrong about the fashion system right now' (Wingfield 2017: 61). These two binary positions reflect the expanding notions of what defines fashion in the twenty-first century. Abloh is a multi-hyphenate practitioner who works across the fields of fashion, fine art, architecture, graphic design, product design and music to not only rupture preconceived borders around creative fields, but to break the perceived boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture. As the ultimate self-referential designer, Abloh has triggered a cognitive dissonance in the fashion community due to the innate inability to categorize him. Abloh, the 'Renaissance man' (Torres 2016; Keltner DeValle 2017), has been welcomed into the high fashion European luxury system through his coveted streetwear interruptions with his equally blurry label Off White™. As the former creative director for musical auteur Kanye West, Abloh's collaborations with conglomerates such as Nike, IKEA and artists such as Takashi Murakami grant him street credibility and cultural cachet. In turn, they push forward the legacy of luxury interdisciplinary collaborations initiated most notably by Marc Jacob's tenure at Louis Vuitton in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in which the designer commissioned work by artists such as Murakami, Stephen Sprouse and Yayoi Kusama. Abloh's interdisciplinary practice fuses luxury and streetwear to create a new democratic fashion identity for both fashion maker and consumer. In 2019, Abloh's creative practice entered the canon of art history through his mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (MCA) curated by Michael Darling.

Abloh's canonization and meteoric success in redefining the cultural fashion sphere reflects upon wider discussions of transparency and authenticity that have bubbled to the surface in the contemporary fashion industry. Through dislocation, irony, pluralism and intertextuality, together with a very modern romantic vision of creative production, Abloh grants agency to the audience and consumer of contemporary fashion, opening its scope for new interpretation. This article will argue that Abloh's practice represents a shift of cultural aesthetics and thought beyond the postmodern, into developing a new paradigm of the 'metamodern'. With close reference to a range of examples, I will analyse his practice through the lens of principles that characterize this new canonical proposition, such as design identity, collaboration and interdisciplinarity that have championed fashion as a practice that is symptomatic of the current globalized borderless cultural context.

PROPOSING THE 'METAMODERN'

Where for Frederic Jameson, the modernist paradigm focused on the 'new', the 'postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the tell-tale instant after which it is no longer the same' (1991: x). Where modernism focused on a linear march towards progress, postmodernism proposes the idea that there are multiple historical narratives. Postmodernism was what Jameson terms a 'commodity rush' in which 'culture' had become a product

of its own (1991: x). Within contemporary fashion, branding and image have become more important than the fashion product itself in renegotiating the definition of 'luxury'. Yet, millennial fashion increasingly goes beyond the pure irony, detachment and angst that characterizes the postmodern milieu, by offering a romantic hopefulness that is driving contemporary culture and criticism forward.

In her article on 'post-postmodernism' Marcia Morgado (2014) states that the postmodern era in culture is waning. The very 'conditions that characterized postmodernism are giving way to new circumstances' and a new 'cultural ethos' that replaces, or comes to 'occupy a place within or beside' the postmodern condition is emerging (Morgado 2014: 314). There have, of course, been other attempts at nomenclature in this rapidly developing digital age: Nicholas Bourriard has offered *altermodernism* (2009); Gilles Lipovetsky proposed *hypermodernism* (2005) and Alan Kirby suggested *digimodernism* (2009). I argue that the term *metamodernism* aligns more articulately with the digital millennial idiom, particularly in relation to the evolution of fashion culture.

Metamodernism denotes an oscillation between modern attachment and postmodern detachment (Knudsen 2013: n.pag.). Taking the theory coined and extrapolated by scholars Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in 1975 and then Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker in 2010, who stated 'metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 2). This conceptual oscillation of the metamodern can be applied to what I define as the 'borderless' nature of contemporary fashion practice. Vermeulen and van den Akker's manifesto states that the metamodern:

> oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.
>
> (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 2)

The metamodern mentality embraces a multitude of subjectivities, and wherein postmodernism emphasized a compartmentalizing of the self (race, gender and sexuality), 'metamodernism' embraces the ability to occupy and share these subjectivities fluidly. While these distinctions are important, how they develop, intersect and interact will in turn help form collective and individual identities (Abramson 2015: n.pag.). Derived from the Greek 'Metaxis', the prefix 'meta' is used by Plato to describe the condition of 'in-betweenness' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 2). Conversely, in the twenty-first century, the prefix 'meta' has entered the common millennial colloquial vernacular as a standalone word that describes anything that is self-referential – a trait common to a generation whose cultural production and direct way of communicating is based upon digital social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. Memes and gifs have become indicators of intellect and cultural cachet, leveraged as the new aesthetic language of global digital communication.

Ideas of reconstruction, instead of deconstruction, are central to 'metamodern' principles (Abramson 2015: n.pag.). Practitioners come to the field of fashion from many different entry points and both cross and collapse disciplinary borders. This article will draw upon three of Sam Abramson's ten key principles of metamodernism (2015) to analyse Abloh's overarching

creative practice: design identity, interdisciplinarity and collaboration. Like most cultural paradigms, the 'metamodern' can be said to have emerged in response to political, environmental and economic upheavals of the late twentieth century (Abramson 2015: n.pag.). Metamodernism, according to Alexandra Dumitrescu, becomes a search for authenticity that allows 'the fragmented self to integrate in new configurations of meaning' (2016: n.pag.). Collaboration becomes central to fashion designers' search for authenticity, through encouraging a wider dialogue with creative communities. Negotiating this authenticity within this globalized technetronic era is reflected in the disclosure of process and conceptualization of projects, which is integral to my analysis of Abloh's practice. Drawing upon work by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2015) and Abramson (2015) to analyse case studies of Abloh's highly influential, divergent creative work, this article will theorize the zeitgeist of a new metamodern condition. By its very speculative nature, this article offers a descriptive, rather than prescriptive application of a heuristic approach at theorizing the 'now'.

FASHION 'HYPE' IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CANONIZING 'STREETWEAR'

Definitions of streetwear

Virgil Abloh is the leader of a new guard of fashion designers who within the last five years have elevated the subcultural style of 'streetwear', and heralded it into the world of high fashion with his label Off White™ and recent rise to Louis Vuitton menswear's artistic director. He sits alongside other streetwear designers such as Shane Oliver of Hood By Air, Telfar Clemens of Telfar, Heron Preston and even Demna Gvasalia whose work all fits under the umbrella of 'streetwear' fashion speaking to a generation of 'hypebeasts'. Hypebeast is a name given to someone who follows trends to impress others or to gain cultural cachet; it is referred to mostly in regard to streetwear brands in which cult limited edition fashion items gain iconic status.

Within the realm of fashion, streetwear has emerged out of the 'in between' spaces of modern life, those quotidian urban spaces such as a skate park or a subway station. Previously relegated to the realm of subculture, streetwear has now entered the realm of luxury fashion thanks to the adoption of product drops in commercial brand models, and the trend-based drive for the need of sartorial comfort, what Ted Polhemus would call a 'bubbling-up' of style that creates a 'fully fledged creative democracy' (Polhemus 1994: 12). In 1966, couturier Yves Saint Laurent heralded in the age of the ready-to-wear with collections that included mix and match separates in practical and comfortable knit and synthetic fabrics designed for the modern woman. The 'casualisation' of fashion has only accelerated since (Stoppard cited in Darling 2019: 135) but it also belongs to a longer history of casual wear, which designers such as Jean Patou and Coco Chanel advanced in the early twentieth century. Coined as a term by trailblazing African American designer Willi Smith in the 1970s to describe the idea of an oversized casual silhouette, 'streetwear' developed out of sportswear, workwear and combat wear (Adz and Stone 2018: 23). Hoodies, sneakers, combat boots, cargo pants and bomber jackets are all common streetwear references. The re-contextualization of such utilitarian styles of clothing 'freed the garments from their original intended use' (Adz and Stone 2018: 23), as hip hop and skater subcultures adopted them in the late twentieth century on the streets of cities like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. 'Streetwear' is about remixing and adapting these elements and reconstructing

something completely new. Labels rely on logos emblazoned on garments to broadcast what brand someone is wearing, and the logos themselves have become just as recognizable as those of Gucci or Louis Vuitton monograms. New York-based skate brand Supreme, created by James Jebbia, has become the most famous of 'streetwear' brands, mastering the game of limited edition 'drops' of product that have created the culture of customer queues outside storefronts, waiting for stores to open so that they can get their hands on the products that inevitably sell out in minutes and are often rapidly resold online in a secondary market for huge profits.

The concept of streetwear is born out of what Adz and Stone comment: 'a human reaction to the wounds of growing up in the sub/urban environment', and express a physical manifestation of a post-traumatic response triggered by racist and classist structures of oppression, particularly palpable for African American communities (Adz and Stone 2018: 24). Combining the seemingly authentic subcultural style of streetwear and the extravagant hierarchical high fashion system, Abloh acknowledges the barriers between the two, that is, namely the 'social, cultural, and even racial stereotypes that separates them' (Stoppard cited in Darling 2019: 136). On the commodification and recuperation of streetwear into the luxury fashion realm, it is important to note that 'street culture was born out of feelings of powerlessness and alienation' (Adz and Stone 2018: 24) but that it is also 'about communal solidarities connecting across lines that normally polarize, separate and divide' (Adz and Stone 2018: 26).

The meteoric rise of brands like Abloh's Off White™ is testament to streetwear's entrance into the luxury sphere. The difference between Abloh and other designers, who have adopted streetwear aesthetics into their designs, such as Marc Jacob's 'grunge' collection from 1992, is that Abloh arrives *from* the subculture of streetwear rather than *appropriates* the culture. In discussing Abloh's contribution to streetwear, Lou Stoppard argues that:

> Rather than starting with a hypothetical woman or man in mind […] as so many fashion brands do, these 'streetwear' brands begin with a physical space or geographic meeting point. Real people, rather than the imagined.
>
> (Stoppard cited in Darling 2019: 136)

If 'streetwear' bubbled-up to the realm of high fashion in the time of the postmodern then its democratic and widespread proliferation in the second decade of the twenty-first century emerges from the metamodern ability to transcend hierarchies through the digital fashionscape (see Geczy and Karaminas 2012). Rather streetwear cultural aesthetics and identities trickle across the multiple creative fields they occupy due to the contemporary engagement of the internet.

Hype in the digital age

Through the capitalist spectacle of the Instagram 'influencer' who dominates the digital world, the linear hierarchy and timeline formed by the twentieth-century fashion system has broken down. With the instantaneous availability of images and video content via Instagram, the general public does not have to wait months for the catwalk collections to be shown in magazines and for looks to trickle down to the stores. Fashion influencers have ostensibly

replaced the editors and buyers, with designers increasingly adhering to a 'see now, buy now' process to avoid fast fashion copycats. What has replaced the coveting and the waiting of the previous system in the contemporary zeitgeist is hype.

Abloh himself says that the only tool of his trade that he needs is his iPhone, a digital tool to create a global community of collaborators (Abloh 2017: Harvard GRS). What this digital community also instigates is the concept of hype. Hype has catapulted Abloh's fashion career through time-limited 'drops'. Clothing itself is not the main focus for Abloh, rather he is 'driven by ideas – a way of living and being, not a style of garment' (Stoppard cited in Darling 2019: 137). His multiple collaborations with commercial conglomerate companies such as Nike and IKEA, sit alongside more highbrow collaborations such as his exhibition installation with artist Takashi Murakami. He is prolific, also DJing under the title Flat White at fashion and art events all over the world, which instigates a democratic accessibility to Abloh unlike that of other designers.

Hype is created through dislocation and displacement; not adhering to the strict seasonal presentations and releases of the previous fashion system is one of these. Drops promoted through Instagram fuel fashion forward followers propensity to covet goods, creating desire and maximizing the hype associated with a brand. Products and experiences that include Abloh or the branding of Abloh sell out quickly. Take for example his collaboration with Nike on the Air Jordan 1 sneaker that is incredibly difficult to buy and the aforementioned *System* magazine edition, which is now selling on the secondary market for hundreds of dollars. Abloh has banked considerably on hype and brands without borders, through personal connections with mononymous celebrity influencers and models such as the Hadids and Jenners. The 'disenfranchised' may spark inspiration for streetwear brands, but 'only the fortunate can make it popular' (Delistraty 2017: n.pag.). Questions of appropriation and commodification are integral to the collapsing of high and low cultural boundaries. Selling t-shirts at $500 each automatically disenfranchises the very people – such as skateboarders – who initially influenced the created product. This rhetoric of exclusion however does not do justice to Abloh's creative output and practice. Whether his product is affordable or not is redundant. Through his status as a DJ and associations with youth culture, together with the consistency of his design codes, Abloh's appeal extends beyond the stereotypical consumers of luxury items.

CURATING A DESIGN IDENTITY: DESIGN CODES ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Design codes and principles

Abloh has curated a designed identity through a number of design principles that trickle across all of his creative outputs, creating a consistent harmony of function and design. Within the specific design codes that he uses, an oscillation between modern and postmodern principles can be identified. In October 2017, Abloh gave a live-streamed guest lecture at Harvard Graduate School of Design where he outlined his creative methodologies to an open arena, making process a collaborative endeavour. By emphasizing the importance of looking back at and recognizing where one stands in the lineage of previous artists and art movements (Abloh 2017: Harvard GRS), Abloh boldly claimed his place within the art historical narrative, stating that through the age of contemporary art comes 'streetwear'. Through placing streetwear within this

art historical narrative, Abloh is taking ownership over the validity of his fashion practice. He has disrupted the divisions of high and popular culture across the different territories of fashion, music, art, architecture and industrial and graphic design. Owning his own place within the zeitgeist and subsequently situating his work within a historical narrative, Abloh reflects a somewhat earnest utopian vision of the power of streetwear.

The visual language characteristic of Abloh's practice manifests across all of his chosen projects, whether that be in fashion collections, product or conceptual art pieces as well as advertising accoutrements. Diagonal black and white lines, quotation marks, and bold Helvetica typography have all been instrumental in developing a consistent and recognizable design language that has established Abloh's brand. Dadaist avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp has been a consistent reference for Abloh's creative practice, particularly the artist's 'Readymades', the quotidian found objects Duchamp first exhibited in 1915 as art in a gallery context, which consequently threw into question the very notion of what art is. Abloh's listed manifesto offers a dualism, in which the designer recognizes both the concept of the 'readymade' and the sense of irony that its re-contextualization signifies. The reference is relevant to the copy-paste logic of the internet era (Bettridge 2017: n.pag.) and is exemplified in the ironic undertones of Abloh's collaborative practice signified through the 'c/o' (care of) he includes in all projects as a signature.

The first principle of Abloh's personal design language states that a 'new idea based on recognizable parts' is leveraged to evoke human emotion and irony. The diagonal black and white lines that have become synonymous with Off White™ create an identifiable brand identity through their quotidian mundaneness. Taking recognizable graphic design elements from the street (in this case, pedestrian crossings) and placing them on garments and communication materials creates a covetable design identity that is broadly recognizable and can trickle easily across multiple disciplinary projects. Beyond this, when placed on a luxury item to be consumed, this everyday graphic takes on new meaning as it transforms into corporate branding and comments on 'the frivolity of consumer culture and the perceived value of clothing' (Geczy and Karaminas 2020: 72). By taking a classic shoe such as the Nike Air Force 1 and writing 'shoelaces' on its shoelaces, Abloh changes the perception of an existent object that is already imbued with a great deal of emotional cultural context. Figure 1 presents evidence of this design language through the advertising billboards and sneaker installation at Abloh's retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (MCA). As with Duchamp's iconic urinal artwork, Abloh re-contextualizes the found object and creates new meanings for a new audience. The Off-White™ brand logo itself is indicative of Abloh's canny marketing intuition; it consists of a monochromatic Helvetica type with quotation marks bracketing the name, along with a small '™' copyrighting the logo. The quotation marks connote a certain irony that presents this idea of everything in fashion being referential of something that has come before. Abloh defines the brand simply as, 'the gray area between black and white as the color Off-White™'; a suitably metamodern name for the technetronic globalized era.

As a creative director, the design codes that Abloh applies to both his own label and collaborative projects speak to a cohesiveness, covetability and hype that he creates through the intersecting nature of his practice. To quote the designer:

Figure 1: Installation view, Virgil Abloh: 'Figures of Speech', *MCA Chicago. 10 June–29 September 2019. Photograph: Nathan Keay. © MCA Chicago.*

> Why can't something super commercial be artful? Why can't something popular be artful? And why do garments that don't have words on them deserve higher esteem? This is the new clash between commerce and art. And it's happening in fashion, because fashion is the industrial arm of the art world. And all the kids who studied art are working in fashion now…
>
> (Bettridge 2017: n.pag.)

Through specific and effective design codes Abloh negotiates between modern aesthetic design principles and postmodern re-contextualization and deconstruction to create a new fashion identity that is entirely of the current global digital context. His practice is highly referential; Abloh works under the pretence that there are no new ideas (postmodern), but an unconscious collective of creativity progressively working together towards the future (modern). He has stated that his design process is inherently part of a larger creative progressive zeitgeist: '[a]s designers and artists we exist as a result of the many iterations before us, and we're collectively trekking in the same direction' (Abloh 2017: Harvard lecture). Editor of independent fashion magazine *032c*, Joerg Koch claimed in the *Financial Times* that: '[i]t doesn't matter if it is art or fashion or design. Everything is digital. Everything is accessible. There's no future, there's no past, there's just the Big Flat Now' (Porter 2018: n.pag.). Koch argues that the traditional ways of thinking about fashion and retail are irrelevant and that brand borders are blurring. They are more multifaceted and not

solely centred around the spectacle of the seasonal runway show. Fashion is taking a position of no parameters and expanding territories in terms of how it is created and expressed.

Hybrid design identity

Since 2018, Abloh has gained the same popularity (or infamy) as other designers Gvasalia of Vetements and Balenciaga, and Alessandro Michele of Gucci. Off White™ collections have been shown at Paris Fashion Week every season since 2016. Abloh's success with Off White™ and now Louis Vuitton menswear no doubt leaves some credit to his association with infamous megastar avant-garde musician Kanye West with whom he has worked since 2002 as creative consultant to West's creative 'think tank' Donda (Morency 2016: n.pag.). Some would undermine Abloh's success in the cultural consciousness as a direct consequence of this relationship; however, in interviews (Bettridge 2017; Morency 2016; Solway 2017), Abloh speaks very little about the relationship, seemingly not as an avoidance but as more of an abstraction, speaking rather about their collective of 'creatives' as a whole and the left of field entrance point they paved into fashion, this entrance point being from a completely different creative field, that of architecture then music and graphic and product design.

Like West, Abloh has created a cult of personality around his brand not unlike the infamy surrounding other 'creative directors' of the past two decades such as Rick Owens, Alexander McQueen and even on a different level Martin Margiela, who is often referenced by both Abloh and West as an aspirational design influence.

Rather than gaining this 'cult of personality' through technical and creative excellence, Abloh has gained status through collaborations with other big brands, Nike and Adidas, respectively.

Prior to establishing Off White™ with the support of the Italian The New Guards Group, Pyrex Vision (formed in 2012) was Abloh's first independent envisioning of a streetwear label that was also a societal commentary. The brand reflected the growing popularity of rap artists such as A$AP Rocky whose style was a mash up of 'high' and 'low' fashion by mixing Rick Owens with streetwear brands such as Palace or Supreme (Kansara 2018: n.pag.). Pyrex Vision consisted of hoodies, t-shirts, basketball shorts and flannel shirts with varsity lettering and Renaissance art reproductions from the likes of Caravaggio (see Figure 2). Abloh here juxtaposes the 'high' and the 'low' recentering and de-contextualizing the narrative of the clothing's wearers. A highly intertextual tactic gives cultural cachet to the fashion object while democratizing the access to some of art history's great masters. This historical revivalism in fashion incorporates Abloh into a lineage of fashion designer's who invoke Walter Benjamin's *Tigersprung* (Tiger's Leap), the concept of fashion that leaps into the past to create an ever-evolving future (see: Lehmann 1999). British designer Vivienne Westwood took the frivolous Rococo paintings of French artist François Boucher and placed them on corsets in 1990. The difference here in Abloh's work is the placement of a classical Renaissance image on an everyday streetwear item of clothing. The re-contextualization of the painting within this contemporary framework works to claim Abloh as somewhat of a millennial Renaissance man. Intertextuality has continued to be an important element to Abloh's practice with his constant references to great master architects and artists, both historical and contemporary, 'I don't

Figure 2: Installation view, Virgil Abloh: 'Figures of Speech', *MCA Chicago. 10 June–29 September 2019. Photograph: Nathan Keay. © MCA Chicago.*

come from where I'm supposed to come from, so I have to prove that this is design, that this is art, that this is valid' (Solway 2017: n.pag.). By referencing artists like Caravaggio and Duchamp in his practice, Abloh is able to gain credibility and cachet in a notoriously hermetic fashion industry. The metamodern concept embraces a multitude of subjectivities whereas the postmodern emphasized a compartmentalizing of the self (race, gender and sexuality). Metamodernism therefore embraces the ability to occupy and share these subjectivities, and while these distinctions are important, how they develop, intersect and interact will in turn help form collective and individual identities (Abramson 2015: n.pag.).

The centring of a first-generation African American artist born to immigrant parents from Ghana is particularly significant in the context of the fashion industry. It is important framing when discussing Abloh's design identity and his subsequent popularity, particularly with his position as artistic director for menswear at Louis Vuitton. He is one of only a few Black designers, alongside Oliver Rousting of Balmain and Ozwald Boateng formerly of Givenchy Homme, to be appointed to such a position in the hierarchical realm of Parisian luxury fashion. In an age beyond postmodernism, these conversations about race are important in the reconstruction of an industry whose very foundations are shifting.

Stuart Hall (1996) offers two definitions of cultural identity in specific regard to the African diaspora. The first is the idea of a shared collective identity that represents a common history and ancestry (Hall 1996: 113). The second definition recognizes and reflects the fact that cultural identities are

under constant transformation, which is to say cultural identity is not a 'fixed essence rooted in the past' (Hall 1996: 114), but that it is 'subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power' (Hall 1996: 113). Abloh was brought up in America, but born in Accra, Ghana, and recognizes the hybrid nature of his cultural identity, which is arguably reflected in his hybrid global fashion practice. His identity sits in the 'in-between metaxis', negotiating between not only cultural identities but also creative disciplines.

Abloh's first collection for Louis Vuitton menswear in June 2018 (a position he claimed at the end of 2017, following the lead of Kim Jones, the designer infamous for the Supreme x Louis Vuitton collaboration) found simple inspiration in the traditional colour spectrum. The clothes themselves heralded in a new age of masculine silhouettes with soft tailoring and diaphanous fabrics mixed with streetwear elements such as sneakers and plastic chains draping classic monogrammed Vuitton totes in holographic leather. The show was an historical moment and felt like a shift had occurred within the European luxury market. The very fact that a young African American designer is at the head of one of the largest and most prestigious European fashion houses with a long history of (White) high cultural prestige says a lot about the changing face of the commercial fashion system and the decentring that is happening in regard to culture. Alongside this, Abloh is a designer that does not come from a traditionally trained fashion background and came to fashion sideways through a subculture he had a hand in evolving.

COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN DISCIPLINES

Virgil Abloh's alignment with streetwear culture has seen him collaborate consistently with utility sportswear brand Nike. His invested interest in art and the progression of art history has seen him collaborate with Jenny Holzer and Takashi Murakami. Other collaborations with the likes of Swedish furniture conglomerate IKEA, perfume company Byredo and even French water company Evian, speak to an interest in fashion's cultural production beyond that of the garment. For his Off White™ collection presented at Pitti Uomo in Florence 2017, the designer collaborated with artist Jenny Holzer. A return to the strategy of postmodern artists and designers to convey social commentary is being utilized by some contemporary fashion designers in an increasingly over-saturated market that is being criticized for its ecological damage, in what Geczy and Karaminas describe as 'critical fashion practice' (2017). This collaboration manifested in the runway presentation for the collection. The invite to the show was a bright orange t-shirt with life jacket instructions screen-printed on the front, and on the back there was a text that read, 'I will never forgive the ocean', the quote was taken from UK-based Iranian refugee writer Omid Shams (Madsen 2017: n.pag.). Holzer's part came in the form of two films projected onto the side of the Palazzo Pitti with her signature walls of text as the content, the projections shifted through various texts during the duration of the show as the models walked in front. In one film were the poems of Polish Second World War resistance fighter Anna Świrszczyńska, the other film consisted of a compilation of poems related to conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Palestine by seven poets from the region living in exile overseas. The disruptive installation was a way for Abloh to add to the political conversation about the global refugee crisis, using his platform as a way to start further conversation. On the installation, Abloh commented that his intention was progress, 'I'm using my platform to nudge things along in a direction that is, I

guess, a little more utopian' (Madsen 2017: n.pag.). With these kinds of collaborations, Abloh proves that fashion no longer has to be just clothes, it can also be the metaphysical cultural production of fashion and the utilization of its platform to progress critical conversations.

Gallery exhibitions have become integral platforms in which to communicate the multidisciplinary work of fashion designers such as Abloh. They have become a site of collaboration and experimentation for fashion practitioners who are moving away from the hierarchical infrastructure of the runway show. Abloh and Japanese artist Takashi Murakami have an ongoing relationship that has manifested in multiple collaborative projects pushing past and rupturing disciplinary boundaries. Most recently, they created an installation at the Gagosian Gallery in London called *Future History* that coincided with London Fashion Week 2018. The installation consisted of a mash-up of both practitioners' aesthetic signifiers. Murakami represented a convergence of maximalist pop imagery derived from references spanning from Japanese painting and *otaku* subculture to western art history and American hip hop culture. To quote the press release for the show,

> The duo's ironic and insouciant artistic gestures are designed to disrupt the divisions and tiers of stratified cultural production. The sculpture *Life itself* (2018) is a kind of architectural carapace designed by Abloh to house one of Murakami's brightly sinister flower sculptures.
>
> (Abloh and Murakami 2018: n.pag., original emphasis)

Cultural theorist Paul Virilio has spoken about the 'delocalisation' of art commenting that art is no longer found exclusively in galleries or in museums but 'where mutating social situations condense…' (Coles 2007: 122). With this idea of 'delocalisation' in mind, I argue that the twenty-first century has seen a 'delocalisation' of fashion as it has progressively moved in the opposite way, beyond the runway and even beyond the body and into spaces such as the gallery oscillating between the conceptual and the physical, and the commercial and artistic.

The volume of collaborations and projects Abloh has participated in contributes to the insistence of his brand into the cultural consciousness. An ongoing partnership with Nike has seen Abloh's design features adorn the side of limited edition sneakers that have been released through 'drops', for example his collection 'The Ten', which was released in October 2017. The covetable nature of these releases, with their signature design principles, has pushed their resell prices up to four figure numbers. In a 'textbook' that accompanied the collection's release, Abloh and Nike exposed the process of the collaboration and the 'reconstruction' Abloh went through to recreate ten classic Nike sneaker silhouettes, or to quote, 'Ten Icons Reconstructed' (Abloh cited in Warnett 2017: 17). This idea of reconstruction plays on postmodern concepts of deconstruction, by deconstructing the iconic sneakers and reconstructing them with his personal design principles, Abloh has created a 'meta' fashion object that reveals the product's past, present and future. The multifaceted ways in which he communicated this collection, through the online 'Textbook', in store retail launches, and through live videos via Instagram, Abloh has created an authenticity in his design persona that relies on the accessibility of him as a practitioner that has only been made available due to the technetronic era.[1]

1. 'Technetronic' refers to something that is shaped or influenced by changes in communication technology.

Other designers such as Rick Owens have delved into the practice of furniture making as a sideline venture to their predominant fashion practice but none so ostentatious and 'meta' as Abloh's collaboration with Swedish homeware giant IKEA. Unveiled at IKEA's 'Democratic Design Day' in Älmhult, Sweden in June 2018, Virgil Abloh's furniture capsule collection for the Swedish company paid homage to the millennial lifestyle. The collection consists of classic utilitarian Persian rugs, daybeds and classic modernist Paul McCobb style chairs, all with the added twist of Abloh's design codes such as the inverted commas bracketing juxtaposed words, which is a reference to the 'meme' culture millennials have grown up with. Speaking with architect Rem Koolhaas on the research he undertook for the collaboration Abloh states:

> it started out as an aesthetic, but has become more of a survey. It's turned into travelling the world, interviewing millennials, and finding out how they understand the objects they live with. Where they place importance. How they live with their roommates.
>
> (Wingfield 2017: n.pag.)

An object that speaks to the current climate of reduce and reuse, Abloh designed for the collaboration a glass cabinet with wooden framing as a place for the owner to display shoes or objects. The purpose of which is to make visible purchases that are so often hidden away in wardrobes and draws. Through displaying them in a glass cabinet and plinth, Abloh hopes to encourage thoughtfulness in regard to over-consumption (Gibson 2018: n.pag.). With tactics such as these, this collaboration is the most democratic for the designer. Fashion is both 'material culture and transitory, inhabiting the realm of concepts and images and linked to production and industry' (Hancock 2014: n.pag.). Abloh's collaborations are a manifestation of this oscillation between the commercial and non-commercial twenty-first-century fashion sentiment. The amalgamation of these projects and collaborations all solidify Abloh's design identity. The earnestness of the prolific nature of them creates a democratic access that allows many different access points to Abloh's design identity. His fashion practice is dislocated into many spheres, creating a rhizomatic map of work that oscillates and trickles across cultural terrain, communicated through spaces both physical and digital.

'VIRGIL ABLOH: *FIGURES OF SPEECH*': A MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE

The 2019 Museum of Contemporary Art's retrospective of Abloh's sprawling multidisciplinary practice reflected not only on the multifaceted nature of Abloh as a creative agent, but also on how his practice reflects on millennial culture and the contemporary zeitgeist. Exhibiting work from his eponymous labels, Pyrex Vision and Off White™, it also incorporated objects from his DJing career (see Figure 3) as well as objects from his collaborations with Nike and IKEA and a collaborative film with American artist Arthur Jafa. To catalogue this exhibition, the curator Michael Darling employed a specifically designed taxonomy that included two information classification systems: 'discipline' and 'topic'. The 'disciplines' included: album packaging, architecture, engineering, fashion, furniture, graphic design, music, painting, photography/video, product design, sculpture and set design, while the 'topics' consisted of: advertising/branding, language, race, readymade, social commentary, subverting the norm, transparency and tourist/purist. This taxonomy was created to

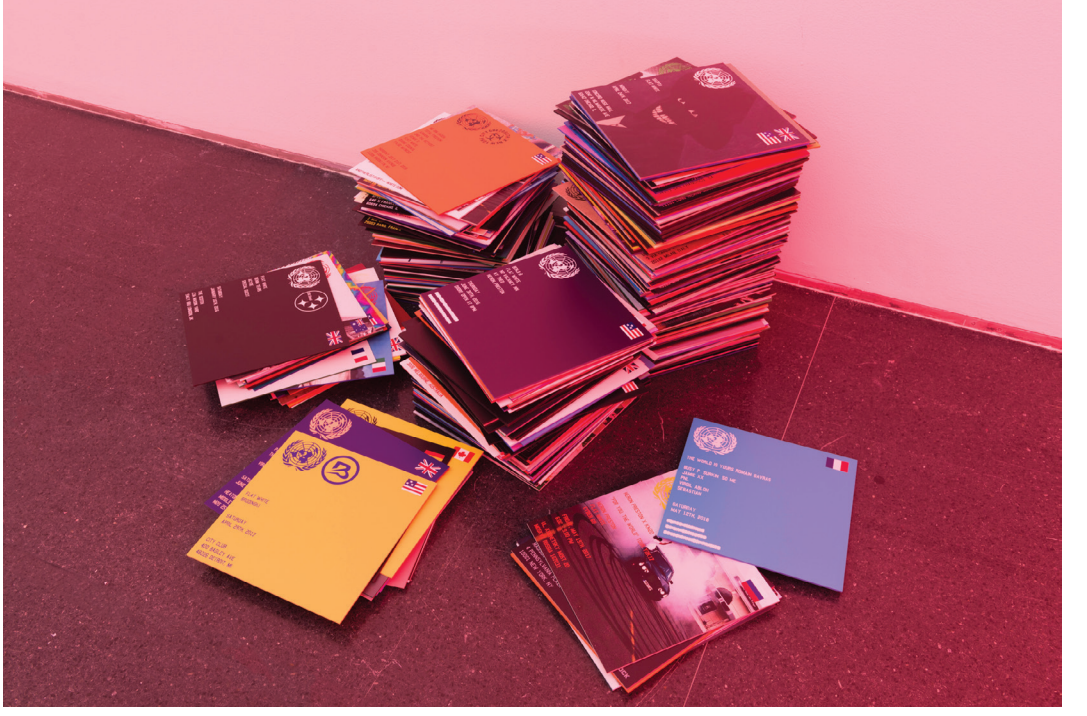

Figure 3: Installation view, Virgil Abloh: 'Figures of Speech', *MCA Chicago. 10 June–29 September 2019. Work shown: Virgil Abloh,* Flat White DJ Flyers *2015–18, 2019. Print on board. Private collection. Photograph: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.*

'make the conventions of museum cataloguing fit the practice and output of an artist working in a wide range of disciplines and roles' (Darling 2019: 2). Speaking on contemporary architecture practice in regard to Abloh's work, Koolhaas stated in the exhibition catalogue that Abloh's cumulative practice is at a moment in which 'the break up of borders around professions that were once isolated and are now protecting their invasion by a generation of self-declared wunderkinds amplified by self-organized social media' (Koolhaas cited in Darling 2019: 18). Abloh's ability to occupy multiple spheres speaks to the wider context of dissolving creative disciplinary boundaries and the democratic accessibility this allows for consuming audiences. Having a public institution exhibit a catalogue exhibition of a living fashion designer's work, tells us a lot about the cultural value we as a society place on fashion as a cultural phenomena. It also confirms the idea that fashion is something beyond that of the embodied physical garment and when the fashion concept is placed within a context beyond that of the runway catwalk and retail space, the ways that it is consumed by an audience take on a completely different value system. This value system is one based on active interaction and immersion.

CONCLUSION

The prolific nature of Abloh's practice and hype that surrounds his name and the output of product and content that he produces is unmatched by any other designer working within the realm of fashion today. Abloh has managed since 2012, to cultivate an identity that seeks to hold on to his roots in art and architecture and streetwear culture while successfully existing in the realm of high luxury fashion. To quote an article on the designer, 'YEEZY is Kanye and Kanye is YEEZY. Similarly, Virgil is Off-White™ and Off-White™ is Virgil, creating all-encompassing super brands' (Menendez 2017: n.pag.). Although this is true, Abloh remains democratic about his success stating in an Instagram

post about his first Louis Vuitton show that '[y]ou can do it too'. In the age of Virgil Abloh and millennial internet culture where everything is referential, the culture of fashion has become a product of its own.

The 'metamodern' as a proposition for interrogating the aesthetic and cultural expressions of contemporary fashion beyond postmodernism is inherently defined by the globalized, borderless and technetronic nature of contemporary society. What we can see of it in the practice of Virgil Abloh is the way in which he moves seamlessly between disciplines, centralizing fashion while blurring the boundaries of what can be defined as such, predominantly through the multiple collaborations with practitioners from other fields and the 'delocalisation' of where 'fashion' has traditionally existed, which is within rigid class systems and on the rarefied runway. Vermeulen and van den Akker's idea of the metamodern oscillation is epitomized in Abloh's work as he moves between modernist design principles and postmodern ironic deconstruction tactics for the products he creates. His connection to youth culture and luxury fashion audiences gives him leverage to address important sociocultural and political issues such as racial diversity, environmental impact and global politics, and make them known to new audiences. Virgil Abloh builds upon the history of modern and postmodern cultural aesthetics to centre fashion as both a physical and metaphysical driver of criticality and progress, which is a utopic thought for an industry that is so frequently self reflexively commenting on its own end.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Gerrie, Vanessa (2020), 'On metamodernism: Virgil Abloh's borderless fashion practice', *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, 7:1&2, pp. 73–90, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf_00018_1

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