

DRIES VAN NOTEN:
ONE HUNDRED SHOWS,
THE STORY SO FAR

Tim Blanks



Show 65: Men Spring/Summer 2009

In the way that any creative endeavour speaks volumes about its creator, it can be enlightening to look at a collection as the most recent chapter in a designer's autobiography. Dries Van Noten demands that kind of consideration, because his story has not only been about what he showed. From the very beginning, the way he showed it has had equal weight. A hundred shows, a hundred chapters, creating one of the most impressive narratives in fashion. So, it makes sense that his own words would do it full justice, with a little objective perspective here and there.

Dries came of age during a time when Paris was seething with fashion grandeur. Like their London counterparts, the students from Antwerp's Royal Academy made the seasonal pilgrimage.

Dries Van Noten: In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the big shows were Montana, Mugler, Kenzo, and Jean Paul Gaultier, my hero. I saw Yohji Yamamoto's first show in Paris. It was always a struggle to make fake tickets. Often, it was Bill Cunningham who got us in. He was very happy to see us. 'Fashion shows are for people like you, not old people,' he'd say. There wasn't a lot of staging in those early shows. They were more like tableaux. Seeing a Montana show, the clothes were so huge, and it was twelve models at the same time. The choreography was that they would strike a pose. You didn't need a lot of gimmicks around that. And of course, you had that music!

Dries began offering his designs for men and women for the Autumn/Winter 1986 season.

We didn't have the money to produce a show, but we wanted to communicate, so we made postcards and small catalogues we could show to stores that might be interested in buying our collection. We sought to create a story, an atmosphere with photography. We dreamed of translating that into a fashion show as soon as we had the budget.

It took eleven seasons. But on the 5th of July 1991, the dream came true when Dries showed his menswear for Spring/Summer 1992 in the basement of the Hotel Saint-James and Albany on the Rue de Rivoli. It was a couple of months after Gianni Versace had sealed the deal on the supermodel phenomenon, with Evangelista, Turlington, Campbell and Crawford mouthing their way down the catwalk to George Michael's 'Freedom '90.' It was also the same year that Vivienne Westwood made her Paris debut in Azzedine Alaïa's studio in the Marais. Dries' quirky Commedia del'Arte concept was already on another plane.

It was important to do a show, not just a simple catwalk presentation. I wanted to bring people into my way of thinking about clothes, to share the emotions I wanted to share with them and the aesthetic of the way I live, at home with my partner Patrick Vangheluwe. We like to create an atmosphere. So we had rolls of

fresh grass, which we assumed were going to stay bright green in the cool and dark of the basement. but of course the grass turned brown. We had to spend the whole night spray-painting it green.

I felt the purpose of a show was to let stores see what the designer was thinking. The mixture of press and buyers came later. Today's shows are mainly purely visual marketing tools. What's actually being shown — the collection — isn't as important anymore. It's overall message that counts. But for us, it has always been *talking* about the show, the collection and the emotion, creating a sphere of influence, an oral history, that was important. There were important people in the room who could spread the word that there was a new designer.

It wasn't about having photos everywhere, because they weren't really even being published. You had *Marie Claire Bis*, and the little supplement that *Vogue Italia* published, and every photo was at a strange angle, because the photographers were shooting up from the side of the catwalk. The most important people were sitting where the photographers are now. When we made our first book, we didn't even have photographs of the first shows. For these books, we had to use stills from any low-grade video we could find. Today, we have twelve photographers, and a huge video crew.

In my three-decade-or-so experience of fashion shows, very few designers have been canny enough to capitalize on the full sensory experience that fashion can access. Stated baldly, you can feed the eyes much more successfully if you feed the emotions and stomachs too. Christian Lacroix's pre-show spreads were things of utter beauty. So were Oscar de la Renta's Balmain buffets. To this day, Miuccia Prada subtly reinforces the essence of her collections with the cocktails and specific little canapés she serves for each new season.

Dries's fourth menswear show, for Autumn/Winter 1993, confronted him with a unique problem. A friterie in the doorway of the venue permeated the atmosphere with a fast-food stink. Here, necessity truly proved the mother of artful invention, inspiring a hospitable inclination for catering that would climax with his 50th show, a chandelier-lit dinner party for 500, with the models parading down the middle of the table, like Julie Christie in Darling.

The only way we could make the smell less intrusive was to incorporate it, serving people French fries — and Belgian beer. We immediately saw the impact it made, shifting important buyers out of their comfort zones. They were standing there with their fries and their beer and the last thing they could worry about was whether their hair was OK. So everyone enjoyed the moment. That was how food became a medium for us to tell the story in a different way. Like the goulash for the 'Gypsies' collection (Show 23). It made our guests feel more welcome, more looked after, saying we appreciated their presence. Today, the scale and expense have changed so much, and expectations are so high,

#51 MEN'S AUTUMN/WINTER 2005-06

For Dries Van Noten's 50th show, the women presenting the collection had paraded down formally-laid banquet tables, under the glitter of dozens of chandeliers. Realizing that the opulence, the very decadence of such a spectacle would be unmatched, Van Noten's sane reaction for his 51st show was austerity. There were now bare light bulbs, wooden planks lining the space at the École des Beaux Arts, and, rather than a lush soundtrack, the voices of a man and a woman, reviewing their relationship. (The dialogue was written by novelist Paul Auster, which meant that the lovers were speaking in *lausterities*, but that was surely sheer coincidence.)

In keeping with this pared-back concept, Dries pictured an artistic community in Moscow during the 1970s, where he imagined some creative re-purposing would have been necessary to re-model dandyism as an act of aesthetic defiance — like layering a shaggy fur coat over Motocross pants in gunmetal blue leather. Or pairing vintagey washed cotton shirts — whose collars and plackets were embroidered in patterns of skewed Mayan (there was oversized knitwear with the same echo) — with traditional English checks.

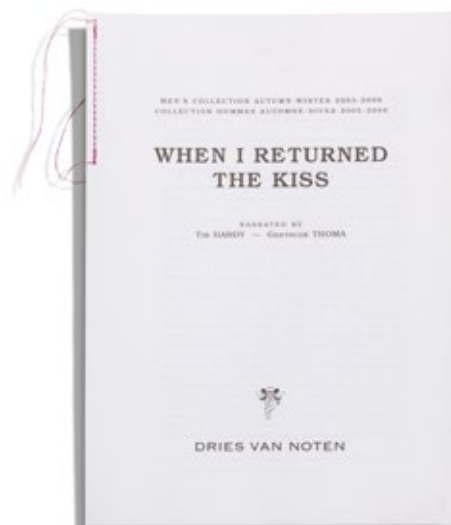
The models sauntered down the catwalk, smoking cigarettes, languidly echoing a French film noir. Lapels sported purple orchids on coats lined with rabbit fur. Tuxedo shirts and gaudy silk ties dressed up daywear. 'They're the kind of details that change how you look at a guy,' the designer mused. 'They warp the codes.' Austerity or not, this felt like an entirely appropriate launching pad for Van Noten's next 50 shows.

Theme: When I Returned the Kiss

Date: Saturday 29 January 2005, Time: 8.30 pm

Location: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris

Music: Texts by Paul Auster





#56 WOMEN'S AUTUMN/WINTER 2006-07

The audience for this show was met with a runway fluttering with copper leaf, a 'golden catwalk' as Dries puts it. Where the clothes were concerned, a more toned-down sobriety inspired by menswear belied opulent embroideries and prints, evoking treasures of the Ottoman Empire seen on a trip to Istanbul's Topkapi Palace. 'The silhouettes are quite clean,' he confirms, 'but the embroideries were among the most elaborate we had ever created. We really pushed that in this collection.' Among the more intricate examples were gold sequins, entirely over-embroidered with true red yarn. The company that produces Dries Van Noten neckties lent the studio their antique wooden looms to weave the opulent jacquards for fluid dresses and structured jackets. Some featured the crescent moon, first seen on the Ottoman flag in 1844, here adorning an evening gown, for example.

Each piece was distinguished in its own right. Distinctly masculine elements included double-breasted evening jackets and coats, classic wool tailoring fabrics and shirting. Finally, 'I always said I was never going to make a four-sleeved jacket,' Dries smiles, 'but there it was.' These pieces seem almost to embrace their wearer, a gentle gesture that tempers an otherwise sharp line. Less unashamedly romantic — or just plain shameless — invitees flew onto the catwalk before leaving the venue and filled their pockets with what they believed was pure gold.

Theme: Ottoman

Date: Wednesday 1 March 2006, Time: 2.00 pm

Location: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris

Music: Balanescu Quartet, 'Still with Me' (Tom Pintens mix)











#63 MEN'S AUTUMN/WINTER 2008-09

After Spring's urban wear extravaganza, Dries returned to Paris and his own sense of classicism. But he was interested in a different take. 'Playing with things you know, but in a different way,' he explained. 'The familiar reshuffled, the expected as unexpected.' He started from the ground up, with a catwalk that evoked a classic herringbone parquet pattern out of strips of packing tape.

Reshuffling the familiar meant workwear cut from satin, pyjama shirts and pants offered as daywear, worn under a brushed tweed topcoat, and sober cuffed grey flannel pants with a judo-tie waist. Prints from vintage foulard silks were combined to create new patterns for coats and luxurious scarves. As for things you thought you knew, one shirt that looked like worn old flannel was actually madras organza, needle-punched onto wool. Further proof, as if any were needed, that Dries Van Noten is a master of fashion illusion.

Unexpected were punk details, like the bondage straps on pinstriped pants, and the bum-flaps on shirts in banker-striped poplin. The Vorticist motifs hand-painted on those same poplins might not have been punk, but they were certainly unexpected. So was Paul Hanlon's slicked-back hair with the razor-sharp part, painted with a strip of bright colour, or the trad brogues in distinctly un-trad red ostrich. Unconventional classicism equalled subverted formalism.

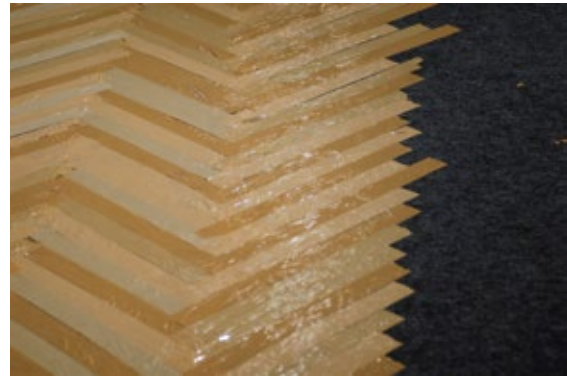
Theme: Unconventional Classicism

Date: Thursday 17 January 2008, Time: 7.00 pm

Location: Couvent des Cordeliers, Paris

Music: Live performance by Olafur Arnalds

Hair: Paul Hanlon

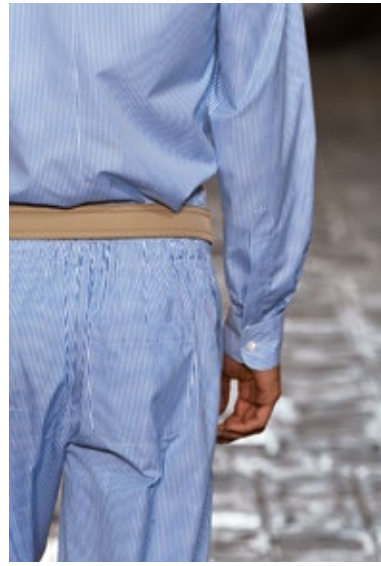












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