

The vintage Kawakubo years were 1982 and '83. Conventions were overthrown or remodelled with irony. In Paris, models stormed the catwalks wrapped and twisted in layers of fabric, silhouettes exaggerated almost to the point of caricature. Ripped and torn, pallid and vaguely bruised, they looked like the last stragglers from the Foreign Legion. The sinister overtones were magnified when flashes of lightening illuminated the catwalk. There were sweaters that were all sleeve, bound Medusa-like about the body. Others that looked like the aftermath of a moths' Last Supper were in fact realized by industrial sabotage typical of Kawakubo's irreverent approach. 'The machines that are making fabrics are more and more making uniform, flawless textures. I like it when something is off – not perfect. Hand weaving is the best was to achieve this. Since that isn't always possible we loosen a screw of the machines here and there so they can't do exactly what they're supposed to do.'

It was relentless and aggressive. It didn't particularly function as clothing. The 'confrontational' dressing of Vivienne Westwood was raised to the level of the exquisite. The glossy idealization of high fashion had its magnetic poles in a twist.

'What I do is not influenced by what has happened in fashion or culture. I work from obscure abstract images to create a fresh concept of beauty' (says Kawakubo).

Comme des Garçons seemed to lock into a certain consumer level. It was designer but I went beyond the label syndrome. It retained a subversive undercurrent, it demanded independence – a certain discipline. When, just a few seasons back, Kawakubo fused the monochrome aggression with a sweetly cloying collection, more body-conscious and in cocktail pastels, the devotees erupted in howls of betrayal. Kawakubo denies any political messages in her work. When she hears such howls, she is liable to retreat into a shell. 'I am not an artist. I make clothes.'

The fashion market in Japan throws the different reading of her clothes between East and West into perspective. Outside Japan Comme sold a minimal \$5 million last year, a sum that can hardly keep afloat the substantial chain of boutiques established to promote the image abroad...In Japan, meanwhile, Comme's turnover was \$39m last year. As in Teenage Britain, so in Japan, style is a prime language, but there the parallel ends. The kind of affluence Japanese youth enjoy today vanished in the UK with the sixties.

Jane Withers, 'Black the Zero Option: Rei Kawakubo', *The Face*, 1987