

# RADICAL CHARACTERS IN FASHION BY ATOPOS CVC.

Vassilis ZIDIANAKIS, Artistic Director, ATOPOS Contemporary Visual Culture

*The ancient Greeks used the word atapos to mean strange, unclassifiable, odd, eccentric, extraordinary, unnatural, displaced in space and time, out of place and absurd (or, as we would say today, post-modern). Socrates was said to have been very atapos. In his book A Lover's Discourse: Fragments, Roland Barthes teases further meanings from this fascinating word: atapos is 'of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality', resisting 'description, definition and language' and 'unqualifiable' (roughly, to be unable to describe or attribute a quality or characteristic to something). We are our bodies and yet our bodies – abstract constructions of our culture – are always and inevitably atapos to ourselves.*

*There is no such thing as 'natural beauty' – what is deemed to be attractive and desirable in one culture or era may be deemed hideous and repulsive in another. Human beauty (and the definition of what is ugly, healthy and unhealthy, etc.) really is in the eye of the beholder – and that beholder resides within a particular socio-cultural system.*

*It is not simply that different cultures shift the ideals of beauty and the desirable a little bit here or there. When we look back in human history and across different cultures (and subcultures in our own society today) what is astounding is the extent to which the body is completely reinvented over and over again in all sorts of radically different ways – ways which possess that strange, unnatural, outrageous 'ceaselessly unforeseen originality' which Barthes put at the heart of the ancient Greeks' notion of atapos. It is as if our species is determined to take the body as far as possible (and it is mind-boggling just how far even technologically 'primitive' peoples have succeeded in this) away from its biological starting point.*

*Why? What do we have against our natural bodies? Nothing as such. It is just that we desperately need our bodies (our customized, transformed, re-invented bodies) to perform another, symbolic function: the body as signifier. (Ted Polhemus. Atopic Bodies. From: NOT A TOY. Fashioning Radical Characters)*

ATOPOS Contemporary Visual Culture (ATOPOS cvc) presented in 2011 the results of its 3-year research on the theme of Contemporary Character design in fashion and costume, in the form of an exhibition titled ARRRGH! Monsters in Fashion (Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece) and a fully illustrated publication titled NOT A TOY. Fashioning Radical Characters (published by Pictoplasma Publishing, Berlin, Germany).

The cry of ARRRGH! continues ATOPOS' 'tradition' of using sounds for titles as we did for RRIPPP!, our previous exhibition in 2007, about the use of paper in fashion.

What is a Monster? For the ancient Greeks, except for the obvious meanings still in use today, the word 'monster' described everything strange that had to be given an explanation. Monsters were not just the repulsive, supernatural and frightening beasts, but also the astonishing, heavenly phenomena of the world and universe that surrounded them. Anything that could not be explained was a Monster.

ARRRGH! The cry of surprise, fear and worry and also of bottled up, inner concern, that urges to escape and express itself, but fails to do so. It is the anger we keep within ourselves for our own lives, for ourselves, for the Other. The 'Other' who is opposite us and with whom we rightly want to communicate, however strange, however different, however inexplicable, however much of a Monster they may seem to our own eyes.

The NOT A TOY title has been inspired by the packaging used for 3-dimensional vinyl characters. Their packaging bears the inscription 'Not a Toy', which signifies its destination as a product aimed at adults rather than children, despite its toy-like appearance.

The Contemporary Characters phenomenon first appeared in the USA at the beginning of the 20th Century and boomed intensively in Japan during the decades that followed the end of World War II. Today, it is an inextricable part of contemporary global culture, addressing a very broad and diverse audience.

Contemporary Characters are creations made by artists; they are designer figures with a peculiar form that express imaginary concepts. Their constant influence, which has expanded in many fields of artistic production in recent years, redefines the established norms of aesthetics. Contemporary Characters are reduced and abstract figures with a strong anthropomorphic appeal and bold graphical silhouette. They have been designed with the intention of highlighting each figure's specific features that their creator wants to animate.

In ancient Greek, the word 'character' - *χαρακτήρ* - denotes a 'point - *σημείο* - created by engraving on any kind of solid substance'. It also has the meaning of 'bearing a distinctive, facial trait, or having a particular way of thinking and acting'. The word 'character' originates from the same root as the verb *χαράσσω* - to engrave, which also means 'to design'. What is interesting to notice here is that the ancient Greek word for 'character', contains within its meaning the definition of design.

Therefore, Contemporary Characters can be either 2- or 3-dimensional figures, with diverse characteristics and traits. They can be similar to either humans or animals, to supernatural beings or Monsters or their characteristics can be completely abstract. From the '90s onwards, Contemporary Characters have flooded cultural and artistic production on a global scale; they have playfully sampled and remixed their way through visual codes and media, confronting the viewer head-on, regardless of cultural background. They now appear in many forms of artistic production - from street art and video games, to vinyl toys, animation and cinema, object and product design, graphic design, photography, artist's sketchbooks and fashion.

This phenomenon is having an enormous influence on a new generation of fashion designers. With their work they constantly renegotiate the relationship between body and garment. They explore the potentials of the human figure, and produce endless transformations and fantastical creations by mixing visual and sartorial codes.

Now, this aesthetic strategy has a strong influence on contemporary fashion design. International artists create playful dresses, avant-garde costumes and hairstyles, re inventing the human body and sending their radical, new Characters onto the catwalk and beyond.

*In short, these days both avant-garde fashion designers and performance artists are searching for primary experiences. What lies hidden behind a person or an identity? And what constitutes identity in a globalised, secularised society in which we see ourselves both as*

*a citizen of the world and as a member of a local community? Besides our real lives we now also lead virtual, digital lives on internet. And who do we become when we look within ourselves and give our fears and fantasies free rein? These are the issues and uncertainties addressed by designers and artists in the book Not a Toy.*

*The result is that today we no longer see fashion as the post-modern, non-committal game that Jean Paul Gaultier introduced in the 1980s and in which every known historical style is shuffled together. In 2010 we are trying to fathom the deeper meanings of body and clothing. At this point we have realised that the idea that body and clothing can communicate 'individuality' is an illusion; how unique can we really be in a branded world, with our G-star jeans, Gucci glasses and Louis Vuitton bag? But if we no longer wish to communicate our identity through our clothing, what are we actually communicating?*

*Avant-garde fashion, like art, is increasingly becoming a reflection of the repressed tensions and discrepancies that mark contemporary culture. As Richard Martin puts it, since the 1960s fashion has actually become the ideal medium for expressing our relationship with ourselves and with the world around us.* (Jose Teunissen, Beyond the Individual, Fashion and identity research. From: NOT A TOY. Fashioning Radical Characters)

Creations by designers featured in both the publication and exhibition have been specifically selected because of their renewed views on fashion, that redefine both this field and contemporary visual culture in general. Their experimental creations, combining a plurality of elements to produce unique characteristics, function as complete environments that constantly produce and designate unique perspectives of the world we live in.

The designers' final results in fabric, shape and volume become hybrids with augmented forms, vibrant colours and amorphous features. Human characteristics of the face and the body are distorted and recomposed with zoomorphic or imaginary traits.

Catwalk shows become the main arena for experimentation. Through these, designers dispatch their ideas and creations, using vibrant colours and extraordinary visuals, and creating their trademark identity. Catwalks become spaces where strange creatures, humanoid figures and abstract bodies meet the world of everyday reality. Contemporary creations transgress any previous concept of fashion and break through traditional ideals related to form, movement and expression of the human body.

*Both fashion shows and contemporary character design exist as unique hybrids of art, design, popular culture and commerce. Although both forms are devoid of traditional narrative elements--most notably a plot--they are firmly rooted in the world of performance and theater. Separately, both constructs are ideal tools for branding, tapping into our consumer sensibilities and emphasizing spectacle. Interestingly, as designers merge the two forms, what results is not simply a fashion show with integrated characters, but arguably a new form altogether. Like an unexpected result from a seemingly straightforward chemical experiment, the character/ fashion show hybrid is not simply a sum of its parts. Instead, the themes and motivations that can be mined from each form separately are multiplied and exaggerated in surprising ways.*

*Second life, gaming, and virtual reality have established an alternative arena for multiple activities or personalities, providing an outlet for anonymous expression. Avatars stand in*

*for our physical bodies, and we are no longer tied to our genetic make-up but can choose what we want to look like, our character traits, and act out in ways we would never dare in reality. This advanced form of role-play realized on the catwalk provides designers with a perfect system for expressing their vision without interference--freeing them from supermodel personalities upstaging the designs, from depicting a certain ethnicity or gender, or limiting the performance to a specific time or place.* (Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox. Characters On Parade: Contemporary Character Design Invades the Runway. From: NOT A TOY. Fashioning Radical Characters)

NOT A TOY and ARRRGH! are the result of the first international research on the phenomenon of the bizarre, radical and monstrous Characters in fashion and costume.

Some of the fashion designers whose work featured in the research are:

Comme des Garçons, Alexander McQueen, Maison Martin Margiela, Issey Miyake and Dai Fujiwara, Walter Van Beirendonck, Junya Watanabe, LUCYANDBART, Jean-Charles De Castelbajac, Mareunrol's, Bas Kosters, Henrik Vibskov, Dr NOKI's NHS, Nick Cave, Charlie Le Mindu, Hideki Seo, Hussein Chalayan, Makoto Azuma, Giles Deacon, Boris Hoppek, Craig Green, Shin Murayama, Gareth Pugh, Bernhard Willhelm, Iris Van Herpen, Rejina Pyo, Cassette Playa and Gary Card, Andrea Ayala Closa, Giorgos Turlas, Digitaria, Piers Atkinson and Pyuupiru, amongst others.

The phenomenon of Character Design is always evolving and growing. The next stop of ARRRGH! will be in La Gaîté Lyrique in Paris, February 2013.

ATOPOS CVC is a non-profit Cultural Organisation, founded in 2003 in Athens by Stamos Fafalios and Vassilis Zidianakis. Its aim is to implement innovative projects of contemporary visual culture, with particular emphasis on the human figure and costume. It operates by researching projects of international interest, collaborating with designers and artists and realising new ideas in the form of exhibitions, publications, performances and events.