

LINES, COLOR, AND CONTINUITY IN THE DESIGN OF *VACUUM*

Vacuum is the name of a third collection of high-quality women's dayware I designed in the course of this project that was originally conceived as the exploration of parallel creative paths in architectural and fashion design, but which gradually matured into a dialogue between architecture and fashion. In my previous collection, *Howl* (see chapter 4), I started out from the observation that inspiring confrontations with architectural images usually focused on the structural impression of buildings from the outside. An explicit attempt to explore the potential of the look from the outside first made me concentrate, in the design of *Howl*, on the actual physical interaction between the 'shell' of a building and its environment, resulting in a playful emphasis on 'texture', the property of an outer surface that partly results from its being 'weathered.' A natural next step seemed to be a focus on the visual experience of moving through a built-up landscape with architectural structures that are themselves motionless. That was my starting point for the next collection.

Motion and emptiness

When taking this next step, my primary source of inspiration was the visual experience of travelling on the Shinkansen, the bullet train, through heavily populated areas of Japan. This experience was very similar to what you see in Tim Lisko's open-shutter photographs, taken when he was himself travelling by Shinkansen from Tokyo to Osaka (see Lisko 2010). It is a trivial truth that the dynamics of architectural form (cf. Arnheim 1977) is based on the interplay between verticality and horizontality. As a result of the fast movement through the landscape, however, buildings become lines, verticality is transformed into horizontality. But in contrast to the Lisko pictures, where you no longer see any buildings at all, in real life there are still recognizable structures, while one never succeeds in holding on to them. As a result, the real-life experience is more ambiguous than the pictures, and buildings tend to become lines hiding recognizable but empty spaces. The impression of emptiness, of hollow shells, results from an inability to imagine inhabitants for the structures that keep flashing by. And buildings, just as clothes, are empty until inhabited.

For me, this experience soon became symbolic for the overload of images we are all confronted with today, not only in the outside world, but even more in our pursuit of

information through the new media, in particular the internet, which is permanently at our fingertips through a variety of portable devices. There is an endless stream of images. But we rarely know what is behind them. Even the news media must admit more and more often that the graphic pictures they broadcast of events in the world, originate in unknown places, lacking context, void of clear interpretability, full of ambiguity. The more images, sometimes, the less meaning we find.

It is this associative set of ideas and impressions that I wanted to capture in my next collection. But how does one translate an absence of substance or meaning into clothes? Before answering that question, I must briefly retrace my steps to the link with texture.

Texture and light

In architecture, texture has a double function. First of all, in the *tactile* realm, it relates to the quality of materials. Materials have special tactile effects. Thus, as said in Chapter 4, stone can be used in its natural regular state, it can be polished, or it can be chiselled into a rough or smooth surface. Second, there is also the *visual* realm, relating to the quality of light. Thus patterns of light can be produced by the way in which materials have been 'worked' (the chiselling of stone can be vertical, horizontal, or oblique), the way in which materials are put together in a building (e.g. with lines of bricks, boards that are placed horizontally or vertically, pieces that protrude or recede). The resulting visual effects of texture create impressions of movement, or they can be said to provide a surface with rhythm.

Similar observations about the link between the tactile and the visual have been made, as long as nearly half a century ago, from the point of view of a photographic approach to texture:

“An age of photography is likely to be an age of texture. With photographic skills and processes currently reaching an excellence little dreamed of fifty years ago, it is hardly surprising that our generation has taken a simultaneous interest in the look, touch, and feel of the worlds about us – an interest reflected in our clothing, our home furnishings, the very textures of our walls and the paintings we hang there.” (Brodatz 1966, p. vii)

Brodatz also stressed how strongly texture is influenced by light:

“Even an object in itself stationary – a chunk of granite, say, on a fence post on a sunny afternoon – would vary according to how and when it had been seen. Walk around the chunk of granite studying each of its sides and it would present a dozen different faces, as the angle, direction and intensity of the light varied. The same simple piece of stone would exhibit a myriad different shades of gray, depending upon the nature and intensity of the light source.” (ibid.)

In other words, visual impressions are constantly in motion. The fleeting impressions one gets when fastly moving through a landscape, therefore, are just an extreme form of what is always there.

These observations also put a question mark behind common definitions of texture. Earlier (in my previous chapter) I quoted the Oxford English Dictionary, defining texture as “the representation of the structure and minute moulding of a surface (esp. of the skin), as distinct from its colour.” But how distinct can texture be from color, if texture and light are so closely related, at least as soon as texture is perceived not just as a tactile phenomenon but also as a visual property?

This question touches the issue of synesthesia, the phenomenon that different kinds of sensory experiences can sometimes be – and often are – connected with each other. It is the awareness of this phenomenon that has given rise to various kinds of experimental arts in which conscious attempts are made to break through the borderlines that often separate art forms connected with a single sensory domain: *son et lumière* shows, odoramas, visual music or color music, and the like. As early as 1973, in a fascinating book about architecture and the human sciences, Geoffrey Broadbent emphasized the need for design in architecture to take into account the inevitable interaction between environment, structure, society, and psychology when imagining how people would react to certain properties of buildings. Thus large windows may satisfy the need for light, but at the same time they will make a building more vulnerable to outside noise. And “enough is known to suggest that the person who feels cool because the wall is painted blue may not be deceiving himself” (Broadbent 1973, p. 120).

Going back to the question concerning the possible relationship between texture and color, it is worth quoting van Leeuwen (2011, p. 37):

“The term texture is used to cover a range of colour qualities such as transparency and lustre, but also actual textural qualities that influence colour, such as roughness and smoothness. Rougher textures make colours seem darker and warmer, while ‘smooth,

shiny surfaces are usually rendered in a cool temperature' [...]. Impressionist painters were newly interested in the materiality of paint, using rough canvas and stiff paints to create visible brush strokes, and ever since then, texture, the materiality of the materials used by the artists, has continued to play a role in art."

The synesthetic mingling of tactile effects, color, and temperature is clear in this quote. In his own theory of color, van Leeuwen proposes an analysis in terms of a number of gradable dimensions: value (i.e. the grey scale, from maximally light/white to totally dark/black), saturation (i.e. the scale from a pure manifestation of a color to a grey with just a hint of that color), purity (i.e. the scale from maximum purity of a color to maximum hybridity or mixedness), transparency (i.e. the scale from transparent to opaque, with translucency in between), luminosity (i.e. the ability of a color to 'glow from within' – a property to be found more in lighter saturated colors than in darker, less saturated ones), luminescence (i.e. the property of being emitted by a light source, such as a television screen or neon lights), lustre (i.e. the reflectiveness of colored surfaces), temperature (i.e. the scale from blue/cold to red/warm), modulation (i.e. the scale from fully modulated to totally flat color), and differentiation (i.e. a property of color schemes, from monochrome to a highly varied palette). While it may be strange that 'texture' seems absent from this set of analytical dimensions, it is closely related to 'modulation.' Moreover – and this is the reason for the excursion into van Leeuwen's account – it should be clear that all other dimensions lend themselves to color schemes or 'differentiation' on one and the same surface, thus creating textured impressions.

All design makes use of texture, light, and color for the production of tactile and visual effects. Describing his own experience, the Italian designer and architect Alessandro Mendini:

"I have always treated the matter of colour in a very distinctive way. I may rely on rules and methodologies, but they spring from instinct, not from optico-scientific or spiritualistic facts. Colour is perceived with the eyes. Therefore, it is one of the elements of reaction to the five senses, like flavour, taste, sound, smell ... Colour might be like taste, or a kind of olfaction, a sort of sound. Indeed there are similarities. There is something slightly culinary about putting colours together in a building, in an object, don't you think? And similarly, it is a rhythmic thing. In theories of colour, in fact, colour is repeatedly said to correspond to tones, sounds." (Mendini 2001, p. 238; in Koolhaas et al. 2001)

All of this is recognizable in the choices I made for *Vacuum*.

Lines, colors, continuity

Returning to the basic design question for this collection: How can one translate an absence of substance or meaning into clothes? The answer lies in an attempt to take into account the synesthetic connections between texture, light, and color. In order to do so, I focused on three properties: lines, colors, and continuity.

First of all, I wanted to incorporate the *lines* that flash by when looking at buildings from a fast-moving train. In addition to pleated pieces which I also incorporated (more or less as a trade mark by this time – see my accounts of *Shift* and *Howl*) into the new collection, some lined fabrics were chosen to define its visual texture. In keeping with the concept and the sources of inspiration, lines had to be horizontal. They could not be allowed to dominate all pieces, and they had to be blurred rather than distinct. The result is the extremely subtle hint of lines in pieces as depicted in Images 49, 50, and 51.



Images 49, 50, 51. The lines of *Vacuum*

Second, all *colors* mixed together in fast movement or rotation produce white, an indistinct color, often perceived as the absence of color. Therefore, lighter values (in van Leeuwen's terminology) had to dominate the collection (as in Images 49, as well as 52 to 55).



Images 52 to 55. The light colors of *Vacuum*

Slight differentiations, however, were introduced to further stress the symbolism of the light colors. This is already visible in Image 55, but even more so in the bomber jacket of Image 56, where subtle hints of color, i.e. hints of meaning, stick out from behind a pale foreground.



Image 56. A hint of meaning in the bomber jacket

The third design property molding the collection into a reflection of the concepts behind it, is *continuity*. Fast movement through a built-up landscape does not only produce horizontality and lightness, but also a blurred continuity of shapes. There are two design features of *Vacuum* that reflect this. First of all, many of the collection pieces were designed as indiscrete shapes, constructed out of just two or three pattern pieces. The indiscreteness is striking, for instance, in Image 57. In addition, distinct elements such as pockets are patterned in such a way as to fade away against the background of the garment. An example can be seen in Image 58, where pockets become visible only because they are used.



Image 57. Continuity in design



Image 58. Continuity in design - note the pockets

Moodboards are meant to be general evocations of the concept and atmosphere of a collection. The one depicted in Image 59 was put up in the Paris showroom where the collection was presented. It contains all the basic ingredients: fragments of Lisko pictures showing only lines and continuous patches of color, pictures of a 1970's road trip through seemingly empty American countryside, and pictures of some pieces from the collection, often against an equally suggestive background.



Image 59. *Vacuum* moodboard (Paris showroom)

Just for the sake of completeness: as on earlier occasions, I worked only with high-quality Japanese textiles. Specifically, the collection is made of cotton twills, denim with a hint of stretch, striped cotton shirtings, vintage-like slow woven sweat (as described in the previous chapter), bright speckled rib, pastel linen jerseys, the softest cotton jersey, and also some polyester pleats (as described in chapter 3).

What's in a name?

As usual, the label of the collection, *Vacuum*, did not come until after the design work was over. Even then, it was not an easy choice, and the search for it was reminiscent of the struggle it took to shape the design idea itself. But somehow the result felt like the absolute opposite of the original impressions and experiences of fleeting emptiness that I started out from. This was a collection I was satisfied with. In other words, it was far from empty, it did have meaning. That may have been the reason why I chose to send invitations for the showroom with the structure of a pineapple, a well-filled and tasty fruit (see Image 60).



Image 60. Invitation for the *Vacuum* showroom

In retrospect, the feeling of satisfaction may also have been related to the fact that the photoshoot – as will be clear from all the pictures above – took place in a setting saturated with thousands of impressions, the rich Parisian urban environment. The results simply confirmed a further truth about the functioning of colors (as well as shapes):

“Colours rarely come separately. Even the ‘little black dress’ combines with the tones of the skin and the hair of its wearer; even the colour field painting hangs on a white wall. Artists and theorists alike have always seen colours as interactive, brightening or dulling each other, harmonizing or clashing.” (van Leeuwen 2011, p. 65)

Putting the clothes against the background of a real and familiar lifeworld produced additional differentiation and continuity, obviously filling them with the meaning that seemed lacking in the architectural landscape that originally moved me to design the way I did. Placing the collection in this context was very intentional. But the effect was merely accidental, showing that the emergence of sense – as with other types of artistic production – does not end when the design work is finished.

Yet, there must have been something ominous about the name *Vacuum*. Just days after the prototypes were shown during the fashion week in Paris, the company handcrafting the pleats which I had been incorporating into all my collections so far, filed for bankruptcy. This left me with a vacuum indeed and confronted me again with the institutional and economic embeddedness of fashion, described so accurately by sociologists.

Vacuum try-outs



Some technical drawings for *Vacuum*



The *Vacuum* showroom



More from the *Vacuum* lookbook



