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## GILLES DELEUZE

### Bodies-without-Organs in the Folds of Fashion

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‘the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities’  
(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 249)

#### INTRODUCTION

Imagine a philosopher who writes about the warp and woof of fabric; about the entanglement of fibres in felt; the variables and constants of embroidery; or the infinite, successive additions of fabric in patchwork. Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) was such a philosopher. His musings on textiles can be found in the chapter ‘The Smooth and the Striated’ in the famous book *A Thousand Plateaus* that he co-wrote with Félix Guattari (1987).

The example of the warp and woof of fabric shows both the richness and the quirkiness of Deleuze’s thought. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, fabric, but also music or mathematics, serve as ways of thinking about something that at first sight seems rather unrelated, in this case the organization of space. Deleuze and Guattari take the warp and weft of woven fabric as a model of *striated* (delineated) space, and the rolling or fulling of fibres in felt as a model for *smooth* (affective) space (1987: 475–77). Knitting, crochet, embroidery and patchwork are all interlacings between the striated and the smooth. From fabrics and textiles, Deleuze and Guattari move via capitalism and art to a revolutionary call for change, associatively throwing around ideas, in a chapter without a clear beginning, middle or end, in a book with ‘plateaus’ rather than a linear structure. Not only the structure of the book, but also the

language is feverish: ‘streaming, spiralling, zigzagging, snaking’ (499); or in a favourite word of Deleuze and Guattari, ‘rhizomatic’ – working through connections and networks instead of a hierarchical structure. No surprise, then, that their work often poses quite a challenge for a student.

Gilles Deleuze’s work is exciting because the main aim of his philosophy is to come up with new concepts so as to rethink and revitalize life (Colebrook, 2002b: xliii). In that sense, he is quite a radical, post-structuralist thinker, challenging set ways of thinking. His innovation and creativity, introducing many original notions that at first may appear perplexing and even bizarre, make it both stimulating and arduous to enter Deleuze’s thought. Many concepts are intertwined in such a way that it is not always easy to find a way to disentangle his rhizomatic network of concepts; here it is best to read introductory books or dictionaries (Colebrook, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Parr, 2005; Stivale, 2005; Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008). Although Deleuze’s concepts have hardly been applied to fashion yet, in my view they can be highly illuminating for the study of fashion. In this chapter I hope to show how certain concepts – becoming, the body-without-organs and the fold – give new insights on contemporary fashion.

Like other philosophers discussed in this book, Gilles Deleuze’s work is rich and prolific, but also dense and difficult. His thought can be situated within the post-structuralist endeavour of mostly French philosophers to recast Western metaphysics away from unitary identities and transcendental claims to truth. Contrary to a thinker like Derrida (see chapter 15) he abandons the linguistic frame of reference and critiques the concept of representation. Deleuze’s many books can be divided thematically into three distinct but interwoven strands:<sup>1</sup> 1) a history of philosophy, in which he gives a counter-genealogy of classical philosophy by reinterpreting philosophers in the margins, for example Spinoza, Hume, Leibniz, Nietzsche and Bergson; 2) his psychoanalytically infused work, which is a sustained critique of psychoanalysis and semiotics. This is most visible in the co-authored books with psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, especially in the two volumes on ‘capitalism and schizophrenia’ (as the subtitle runs): *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987); and 3) books on literature (Proust and Kafka), art (Francis Bacon) and cinema.

For Deleuze, theory ‘must be useful’; it must have a function and if it does not work, ‘the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate’, as he said in his conversation with historian Michel Foucault (1980 [1972]: 208). I therefore advocate a pragmatic approach, in that I am primarily interested in understanding fashion and not in philosophy or theory for

its own sake. A student of fashion does not need to aim at full mastery of philosophical concepts, but can – at least initially – follow Deleuze’s call to use theory ‘like a box of tools’ (1980 [1972]: 208). The first step is to get inspired by the creativity of Deleuze’s thought. Using Deleuze’s theories as a toolbox, this chapter discusses some of his most important concepts (some in co-authorship with Guattari) that are productive in relation to fashion: becoming, the body-without-organs and the fold. Of course, many other concepts are equally relevant or fruitful, but within the restricted space of an introductory chapter I have chosen these to illustrate how Deleuzian concepts can help grasp contemporary fashion.

## BECOMING

Deleuze’s thought is affirmative: he is fundamentally a creative and positive thinker who is interested in transformation and metamorphosis (Braidotti, 2002). It is not just a negative critique of what is wrong in the world, but rather a thinking-along with the world in order to change it. The main concept that runs throughout Deleuze’s philosophy is ‘becoming’ (Colebrook, 2002a; Braidotti, 2006). Pitched against the static notion of ‘being’ that is so prevalent in the West (just think of Hamlet’s famous words ‘to be or not to be’), ‘becoming’ is a practice of change and of ‘repetitions with a difference’, to refer to the title of one of Deleuze’s most important books (Deleuze, 1994 [1968]). With each repetition – of a gesture, a thought, a desire, a way of dressing – one can make little changes and hence differ from what one was before. The continuous process of creative transformations is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) understand by ‘becoming-other’. Becoming implies a different way of thinking about human identity: not rigid and fixed from cradle to grave, but fluid and flexible throughout life. Human identity is capable of morphing into new directions, participating in movement, crossing a threshold, finding a line of flight, or jumping to the next plateau.

Becoming is about creating alliances or encounters, not only with other living beings but also with art, fashion or popular culture (O’Sullivan, 2006). By focusing on the process of becoming, Deleuze is more interested in the affects, forces and intensities of life than in meanings and significations. For him, the central question of art, for example, is not what it means, but what it *does* (Colebrook, 2002b: xlv; O’Sullivan, 2006: 43). How does it affect you or me? What kind of encounter happens between the work of art and you or me? What possibilities does it open? Transposing it to fashion, the question

then is not ‘what does it mean?’, but rather ‘what does fashion do?’ Does dressing in a certain way enable you or me to develop new parts of identity? Or does it fix you or me in a role? A different line of enquiry would be what fashion does to consumer society, the environment or to workers in factories.

Fashion today, especially in more artistic representations like catwalk shows or fashion photography, is often about creative performances, affective experiences and flexible relations, defying any fixed meanings or stable identities. At the same time, the fashion system may fix identities, for example in specific class or gender roles. There is a certain paradox: on the one hand, fashion is, or rather pretends to be, forever changing and innovating. It sometimes shocks society, for instance by taking underwear as material for *haute couture* (Chanel’s jerseys, Westwood’s corsets), designing trousers for women (YSL’s tuxedo), or skirts for men (Gaultier), turning clothes inside out, strewing them with holes, shredding sweaters and patchworking them together (Comme des Garçons), creating dresses upside down (Viktor & Rolf) or by making outrageous designs that no-one except a few pop icons could ever possibly wear in normal life. On the other hand, fashion follows change only with marginal differentiation (Lipovetsky, 2002), laying down rules as to what (not) to wear this season. As Georg Simmel already remarked at the beginning of last century, fashion is a social and cultural system that tells individuals and groups how to dress and behave, moulding people into static identities (Simmel, 1950; see chapter 4 in this book). While many people are convinced that the way they dress expresses their unique individuality, they are, in fact, highly conformist to the capitalist demands of a fashion system that sells and even brands authenticity (Smelik, 2011).

Becoming – a process of transformation and metamorphosis – implies what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have called a process of territorialization, de-territorialization and re-territorialization. A certain territory – for example the field of fashion – is not necessarily a static notion, but rather an assemblage with ‘a mobile and shifting centre’ (Parr, 2005: 275). Such a territory can be de-territorialized by ‘a line of flight’, Deleuze and Guattari’s term for an escape route out, stimulating a process of becoming (1987: 88). Given that change is inherent to any territory, it will also be re-territorialized in search of renewed stability and structure. Fashion design, catwalk shows and fashion photography thus sometimes de-territorialize ways of dressing, which means that they move beyond a representational meaning of garments, beyond the familiar contours of the human body, and hence beyond fixed forms of identity. Ready-to-wear fashion and the fashion system as a whole, however, often serve as a tool for territorialization. From production

to consumption the fashion system appeals to guidelines on how to dress and shape identity in a mould (Braslett, 2005), and the media are an important part of this process; just think of make-over, make-under or how-to-dress-for-success programmes.

An analysis of fashion would on the one hand involve tracing processes of territorialization – how does a fashion design, show or photograph code meanings, organize bodies, segment groups, stratify production and consumption and striate space? On the other hand, one can look for the moments of de-territorialization, those instances where a fashion design, show or photograph opens up meanings, liberates bodies, escapes segmentation, creates lines of flight and produces rhizomes, assemblages and smooth space. In this chapter I mostly follow this latter line of enquiry. For Deleuze such a critical exploration is never a game of either/or, because flows of affect, forces and intensities rhizomically connect different nodes in multiple networks. On any plateau, any territory, there are moments in time or spots in space, where territorialization, de-territorialization and re-territorialization take place. A process of becoming thus implies continual moving, transforming and metamorphosing.

## MULTIPLE BECOMINGS

‘Becoming is a verb’, write Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 239). But who or what does one become? To put it in a Nietzschean way, you become who you are.<sup>2</sup> However, in Deleuze and Guattari’s view ‘you’ is an ego-centred, self-aggrandizing, narcissistic entity that is ‘organized, signified, subjected’ (1987: 161). This is the fixed and confined self that one should leave behind, if only temporarily, by experimenting and looking for new ways of becoming. In one of their most beautiful sentences, which also serves as the epigram for this chapter, they write: ‘in fact, the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 249). The self is a node in a network of multiple relations, and to set its desires flowing, one has to create connections with others – animals, plants, machines, molecules. They want ‘you’ to stretch your boundaries and ‘become-woman’, ‘become-animal’, ‘become-machine’, ‘become-molecular’ and even ‘become-imperceptible’.<sup>3</sup>

This may sound abstract, but when we turn to myth or art examples are easy to find: from Ovid’s to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* people have turned into animals, trees or insects. Horror or fantasy movies are keen on such

transformations, from a fly or rat to vampires and werewolves. Science fiction is a genre where many humans have changed into an alien, machine or cyborg. Fashion is a particularly interesting field, because it moves between the imaginary realm and the material object. While art and popular culture can still be dismissed as mere fantasy, fashion actually produces material objects to be worn on the body. Examples abound. Take the becoming-animal, and then not just the obvious use of fur, but rather the creeping, crawling and flying insects in the Lanvin collection of 2013. Or the use of fantastically coloured plumes and feathers in fashion, as in Alexander McQueen's spectacular 'bird' collection 'Voss' (2001), or Jean Paul Gaultier's equally flamboyant collection of 2011, and, in fact, in many of McQueen's or Gaultier's other collections as well.<sup>4</sup> Just as remarkable was Alexander McQueen's collection 'Plato's Atlantis' (2010) in which the models were dressed in reptile-patterned, digitally printed dresses. The alien look was enhanced by grotesque shoes and make-up, hairdo or accessories that made the models look like some fantastical breed of monster. Of course, the process of becoming does not literally mean that one transforms into an insect, bird or robot by donning 'animalistic' dresses, but rather that one forms alliances with different affects, forces and intensities of life. The models become-other in an assemblage of fur, feathers, bones and bodies.

Becoming-machine is also prominent in avant-garde fashion designs in what I call the field of 'cybercouture' (Smelik, 2016 forthcoming). Technology is one of the major factors in affecting our identity and changing the relation to our own body. The scientist who launched the term 'cyborg' in 1960, Manfred Clynes, said: 'Homo sapiens, when he puts on a pair of glasses, has already changed' (cited in Gray, 1995: 49, original emphasis). If this is the case for normal glasses, just imagine how the human body and identity change with Google glasses; the new 'geek chic' (Quinn, 2002: 97) that Diane von Furstenberg brought to fashion in 2012.

Hussein Chalayan is one of those designers moving between fashion, art and technology. For his renowned 'Aeroplane Dress' from the collection 'Echoform' (1999) and the 'Remote Control Dress' from 'Before Minus Now' (2000) he worked with hi-tech materials that are also used in the construction of aeroplanes. The dresses were aerodynamic in form and equipped with a computer system that could move the different glass fibre panels of the dresses, revealing the skin of the model. In a short film that Chalayan made with Marcus Tomlinson in 1999, a female model wearing the 'Aeroplane Dress' revolves on a pedestal, while the panels of the dress move open at ever increasing speed, and then move down till they stand still again (Evans,

2003: 271). With the sound of a propeller, the film suggests that the model is like an aeroplane taking off and landing. The movements of the panels in the dresses reveal the vulnerable body under it. Rather than being wearable – the hard panels prevent sitting in them – the dresses reveal a reflection on the intimate relationship between the soft body and the hard technology (Evans, 2003: 274). Chalayan's designs explore and push the boundaries between body and technology, looking for new forms of embodiment and bodily experience. The becoming-machine suggests engaging affectively with the technology that surrounds us and vice versa.

The notion of 'becoming-machine' is particularly relevant in the field of 'wearable technology' (Quinn, 2002) or 'fashionable technology' (Seymour, 2009). Complex systems of microprocessors, motors, sensors, solar panels, LEDs or interactive interfaces are wired into the fabric, textile or clothing, turning them into smart garments that have a certain agency of their own. Some recent examples are wearable communication in the 'Twitdress' that singer Imogen Heap wore for the Grammy Awards in 2010; wearable robotics in the 'Robotic Spider Dress' by Anouk Wipprecht (2012), or wearable solar panels in the 'Solar Dress' by Pauline van Dongen (2013). Integrating technology into our clothes, for example as already actualized in sportswear, will have an impact on how we experience our bodies and our selves. By wearing them on our bodies, we relate intimately to technical objects and materials. Exploring the wearer's corporeal and sensorial boundaries, fashionable technologies enable the body to perform identity in and through the clothes. This extends the possibilities and functions of fashion as an embodied performance. Understanding identity as a bodily practice that is performed time and time again – that is, as a repetition-with-a-difference – fashionable technology offers alternative and new ways of transforming identities.

Becoming-animal and becoming-machine are examples of the transformative process of becoming through fashion designs. The de-territorialization of the human body through the extravagant designs of high fashion or the use of wearable technology invite a reflection on new forms of embodiment and even identity. By reshaping the human body beyond its finite contours, these designs offer an encounter with otherness, opening up to the alien world of insects, birds, or cyborgs and posthumans. Such encounters suggest 'that all bodies possess an inherent capacity for transformation', as Stephen Seely puts it (2013: 251). As such, fashion designs provoke a dynamic process of multiple becomings.

## HOW DOES A BODY-WITHOUT-ORGANS DRESS?

Becoming, for Deleuze and Guattari, is a process of undoing the 'organized, signified, subjected' body. Becoming is therefore key to another of their innovative concepts: the 'Body-without-Organs'; often abbreviated as BwO (1987: 161). The idea of the body-without-organs is to undo the organization of the embodied 'self' as a fixed form of identity. This does not mean that the body should get rid of its organs – which would amount to suicide – but rather that one should re-organize the way in which the body is given meaning. Deleuze and Guattari claim that 'The enemy is the organism', that is, the way in which the organs are organized (1987: 158). As Seely argues, 'of all art forms, fashion is perhaps the one most bound to a normative image of the human body' (2013: 258). This is of course most true for idealized images of flawless femininity and perfect female bodies. The notion of the body-without-organs can therefore help to counter these normative images of what a body should look like. In undoing – tentatively and temporarily – the central organization of the body, identity can become more fluid and flexible. As fashion often probes the limits of what a body can do or what it can become, the notion of the body-without-organs helps to see how such designs set the body in motion, potentially freeing it from a territorialized understanding of its matter.

Let me expand on the de-territorializing designs of the Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen as examples of bodies-without-organs. In 'Biopiracy' (2014) the models were caught in something that looked like spider webs, and as in much of Van Herpen's work, the 3D printed designs seemed to be made out of wafts of smoke, falls of water, rings of twisted leaves or rhizomatic folds of bones. In a unique play of endless loops, folds, waves, bends, curls, wrinkles and circles, baroque shapes open and close. Forms undulate and fluctuate. Materials ripple, waver and swing. Van Herpen's sensitive visual language is not captured in traditional flowing fabrics like silk, satin, tulle or organza, but in hard materials such as leather, metal, plastic, synthetic polyesters and hi-tech fabrics. She succeeds in catching a wave of water in an intangible form, a becoming-water in 'Crystallization' (2011), or a becoming-smoke in a design from the collection 'Refinery Smoke' (2008). Through her designs the models cross the boundaries of what a body can look like and become in-between characters: between humans and animals in 'Fragile Futurity' (2008), between mummy and doll in 'Mummification' (2009), between skeleton and body in 'Capriole' (2011), between man and cyborg in 'Chemical Crow' (2008), between the virtual and material in 'Escapism' (2011) and between organic





**10.1** Capriole, F/W 2011, by Iris van Herpen, photograph by Peter Stigter.

and artificial in 'Hybrid Holism' (2012) or 'Wilderness Embodied' (2013). The multiple becomings are then effectuated by bodies-without-organs, challenging a stratification of self and identity.

As Deleuze and Guattari claim, 'we are continually stratified' (1987: 159); and this is often the case for the field of ready-to-wear. Van Herpen's futuristic designs, however, point to ways of de-organizing, de-stratifying and de-territorializing the human body. In her experiment with form and matter she calls for a different relation to the, mostly female, body. The designs come across as futuristic, morphing new silhouettes, inviting the wearer to inhabit the freedom of co-creating the body into new shapes. It is in that sense that she produces bodies-without-organs. Looking at any of her innovative designs one can see how the body-without-organs is dynamic, opening up to a multiplicity of lines, notches, gaps, holes and fissures. Considering the territorializing function of much of the fashion system, Van Herpen's bodies-without-organs are highly revolutionary and politically relevant. There are, of course, darker examples of bodies-without-organs in the world of fashion, for example the anorexic body of models or the heroin



**10.2** LucyandBart,  
Germination Day  
One, 2008.

chic aesthetic of fashion photography of the 1990s, portraying bodies that ‘are moving fast toward their limit-points: toward schizophrenia, overdose, unconsciousness, death’ (Malins, 2010: 175).

Not only images in fashion media, but perhaps many high fashion designs are slightly frightening for people precisely because they push the boundaries of what a body could do, unleashing normative ideas of what a body should look like. A most fascinating example is provided by the Dutch artist Bart Hess, who has produced many body-without-organs by dressing the naked, often male, body in a range of materials like toothpicks, shaving foam, grass, pins and needles, earth, shards of plastic and even dripping slime. Bart Hess alters the appearance of the human body or the human face into fascinating forms beyond recognition. The pictures here show the project ‘Germination’ that Hess developed together with artist Lucy McRae as the duo LucyandBart. A male body is dressed in a padded suit that was created by stuffing tights with sawdust. This image is reminiscent both of the ‘Lumps and Bumps’ collection by Rei Kawakubo from 1997 and the Michelin logo of the little man made of tyres. The image changes, however, because the



**10.3** LucyandBart,  
Germination Day Eight, 2008.

material was covered in grass seed and left in a wading pool for over a week, after which it had grown into real grass. Here we find images that express perfectly, if not literally, the becoming of a Deleuzian body-without-organs.

This is a body-without-organs at its most extreme; it is a dis-organized and de-territorialized body without a pre-ordained meaning or function. By growing the grass slowly, LucyandBart almost literally show the temporal process of becoming; it takes time to become-other. In 'Germination' they have produced a body-without-organs through a process of 'becoming-grass'. High fashion, like art, can thus liberate the materiality of the body into 'flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 162). Weird perhaps, but in the very lumps and bumps covered by grass, LucyandBart radically undercut any

notion of an idealized, stratified, body. As the grass grows, the human body reveals the constant flux of becoming.

## FOLDS OF FASHION

Another way of approaching the transformative process of becoming is through Deleuze's notion of 'the fold', which he develops in his book on the philosopher Leibniz and the Baroque (Deleuze, 1993).<sup>5</sup> For Deleuze, the Baroque is a world where 'everything folds, unfolds, refolds' (Conley, 2005: 170). While Deleuze – rather abstractly – argues that the fold is a dynamic and creative force equivalent to a process of infinite becoming, he takes the fold quite literally in his discussion of the typical mannerism of the Baroque period. This is expressed not only in painting or sculpture, but also in the Baroque style of dress:

The fold can be recognized first of all in the textile model of the kind implied by garments: fabric or clothing has to free its own folds from its usual subordination to the finite body it covers. If there is an inherently Baroque costume, it is broad, in descending waves, billowing and flaring, surrounding the body with its independent folds, ever-multiplying, never betraying those of the body beneath: a system like *rhingrave-canons* – ample breeches bedecked with ribbons – but also vested doublets, flowing cloaks, enormous flaps, overflowing shirts, everything that forms the great Baroque contribution to clothing of the seventeenth century.

(Deleuze, 1993: 121)

We don't have to go back to the period of the Baroque to find pleats, creases, draperies, furrows, bows and ribbons; contemporary fashion overflows with them. The fold can be taken literally in garments, but also metaphorically as a concept to understand the process of becoming. In both cases it functions as an interface between the inside and the outside, depth and surface, being and appearing, and as such demolishes binary oppositions.

Deleuze suggests that clothing surrounds the body and that consequently the fold is autonomous and no longer submitted to the human body that it covers (1993: 122). In the extravagance of Baroque clothing – but one can equally think of designs by John Galiano or Alexander McQueen, the deconstructionist fashion of Japanese designers<sup>6</sup> or even of the pleats and bows in ready-to-wear – the fold is no longer tied to the body, but takes on a life of

its own. It is this gap that allows the person who wears the clothes to commence a process of becoming.

The key point here is that Deleuze's notion of the fold undoes a binary opposition between inside and outside, between appearance and essence: 'for the fold announces that the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside' (O'Sullivan, 2005: 103). Identity is made up of a variety of foldings, from the material body and its dressings to the immaterial time of memory or desire. This insight involves a fundamental critique of the idea that fashion is a superficial game of exteriority covering over a 'deep' self hidden in the interior folds of the soul. Such a simple opposition does not hold. Rather, the self is a set of folds – folding-in and folding-out – not unlike the folds of the garments we wear in daily life. As fashion often probes the limits of signification or of what a body can do, the notion of the fold helps to see how designs set the body in motion, liberating it from the dominant modes of identity in the consumerist world of fast fashion. In the following paragraph I further explore the fold, or the process of folding, as a practice of becoming (Deleuze, 1993: 37; see also O'Sullivan, 2005: 102–4), through the fashion designs of yet another Dutch example, the duo Viktor & Rolf.

### VIKTOR & ROLF: SPIRALLING UP WITH BOWS AND RIBBONS

Known for 'their exaggerated silhouettes and noteworthy runway performances' (Chang, 2010: 710), Viktor & Rolf's haute couture designs often centre on provocation and the baroque. Take for instance the potentially de-territorializing function of the collection 'Atomic Bomb' (1998–99). Viktor & Rolf stuffed the garments with large balloons or padding, resembling the mushroom cloud shape of a nuclear bomb. They showed the colourful clothes twice, once with the balloons or paddings, and once without them. The 'anticlimax', as they dubbed the unstuffed designs, hung in loose large folds around the body, festively enhanced with garlands. The designs thus integrated the elements of festivity and war, indicating the confusion whether people would 'either be partying or become victims of weapons of mass destruction' in the approaching millennium (Spindler and Siersema, 2000: 26).

The collection is an exploration of the potential function of clothes to de-territorialize the familiar form of the body, and especially of the idealized body shape circulating in contemporary consumer culture. Deforming the body through padding is a recurrent element in Viktor & Rolf designs,

which is important in understanding how ‘the process [of becoming] also has the power to deterritorialize bodies from certain dominant modes of stratification’ (Seely, 2013: 263). This kind of fashion pushes the limits of what a body can become. De-territorialization is a logistical precondition for a process of becoming, which unsettles the familiar territory of the striated world of fashion. The fold can be understood as such a movement of de-territorialization by which one leaves the familiar terrain of idealized body shapes, unified wholes or striated structures.

Viktor & Rolf’s ‘Flowerbomb’ collection (2005) showed the same principle of reversal. In the extravagant show of the ‘Flowerbomb’ collection, the models first donned black motor helmets and black clothes. After the spectacular launch of Viktor & Rolf’s first perfume, called Flowerbomb, the models returned with their faces made up in pink and dressed in the same designs but now in exuberant colours. The dresses were constructed out of giant bows and ribbons, which have since become a trademark of Viktor & Rolf; their latest perfume launched in 2014, ‘Bonbon’ also takes the bow as its main aesthetic form. Bows, knots, ribbons, frills, ruffles and all such trimmings can be taken as variations on the fold. Watching the models walk down the catwalk one sees the bows and ribbons bob up and down, flowing and billowing around the body.

The motion of the clothes gives an idea of the body as in-corporeal, a body of passions, affect and intensity. Giuliana Bruno has pointed to the quality of motion as emotion in clothes: ‘Home of the fold, fashion resides with the reversible continuity that, rather than separating, provides a breathing membrane – a skin – to the world. Sensorially speaking, clothes come alive in (e)motion’ (Bruno, 2010: 225). Take for example Viktor & Rolf’s collection ‘Bedtime Story’ (2006/7), where the garments were enwrapped in or as duvets and cushions: satin pillows with *broderie anglaise* became gargantuan collars; bed sheets became sumptuous gowns; duvets became quilted coats and ruffled sheets became cascading gowns of folds (Evans and Frankel, 2008: 164). The bedroom theme created warmth and intimacy, where the many folds of the sculptural clothes presented opportunities to relate differently to the surrounding world. This kind of ‘affective fashion’, as Seely (2013) calls it, reveals the transformative power of avant-garde fashion; in their exaggeration and excess Viktor & Rolf’s designs defy the commodification of the female body.

The fold is a concept that helps us to think of identity as a process of becoming, functioning as an interface between the inside and the outside, depth and surface, being and appearing. In that context, we can understand



**10.4** Flowerbomb, S/S 2005, by Viktor & Rolf, photograph by Peter Stigter.

Viktor & Rolf's experimental designs as an invitation to engage the wearer in the creative process of becoming, by transforming the body, and perhaps reinventing the self. In creating fold after fold, crease after wrinkle, bow after ribbon, Viktor & Rolf's designs create an infinite play of becoming.

In the examples that I discussed I primarily looked at avant-garde fashion designs worn by models on the catwalk or in artistic photo shoots. The question is whether the creative process of becoming can be attributed to this kind of fashion that is closer to art than to commercial commodity. I want to suggest that the process of becoming can move beyond the model on the catwalk or in the picture, onto the viewer or consumer, in that she or he desires or imagines wearing the designs. Fashion functions in-between, because the potential consumer moves in-between looking at a design and desiring to or imagining wearing it. Through that moment of desire and identification the viewer becomes the model who is wearing the avant-garde design. While consumers may never wear actual designs with lumps on the back, a pillow on the head, bows billowing in the air, they are familiar with

the feel of folds, ruffles and pleats surrounding the body. They can imagine the endless potentialities of the fold and of the body-without-organs that it produces. They may see how such dress design frees the body from the territorialized understanding of its matter; liberating the materiality of the body into something continuously changing, mobile and fluid. Or, to put it differently, fashion designers create conditions to actualize multiple becomings.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have arranged an encounter between the different fields of Deleuze's thought and contemporary fashion. I have shown how the concepts of becoming, body-without-organs and the fold can illuminate certain aspects of fashion, and vice versa, how fashion can in turn re-animate those concepts. This chapter can only suggest a few ways in which Deleuze's work can be applied to fashion; it is up to students and scholars of fashion to open up the toolbox and focus on the many creative, intensive and affective aspects of dress and adornment. There is certainly a high potential for understanding contemporary fashion through Deleuzian concepts like 'rhizome', 'faciality', 'assemblage' or 'difference'. For example, one can think of the rhizomatics of trends in fashion, or analyse the faces of top models as the empty containers of normative perfection. Another compelling path could be to pursue Deleuze's claim that we have moved from a disciplinary society to a society of control (Deleuze, 1992); what are the implications for fashion? A possible take is a political critique of fashion, by focusing on the schizophrenic aspects of capitalism, as demonstrated by consumers' callous denial of the rude exploitation of people and resources in the fashion industry. But capitalism today is also about the insidious commodification of emotion or the ruthless capitalization of the self, new systems of affect in which fashion is a prominent and complicit actor. Yet another possibility is to develop an ecological perspective on sustainability through the idea of a 'becoming-world' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994).

The main point of Deleuze's thought is to understand the prevailing regime of affect today, and fashion may be one of the best entries to take the temperature of the present. The next step is to search for possible pockets of resistance; how and where does fashion resist the present? For Deleuze resistance can be achieved by creativity. The question then becomes where and how fashion designers or the fashion system co-opt, solidify and territorialize, and where and how they create a critical engagement with our times or a new orientation



towards the future. The act of thinking is for Gilles Deleuze an encounter with what you do not know (yet). It is therefore always a creative act: 'rather, it is a question [...] of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind' (Deleuze, 1994: 8). Deleuze's work is thus a call to 'think through fashion' differently; that is, to invent, rotate, whirl, gravitate, dance or leap through the field of fashion.

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## NOTES

- 1 I take this characterization of Deleuze's work from a research seminar that Rosi Braidotti and I have taught for the Dutch Research School of Literary Studies in The Netherlands, from 2006 to 2012.
- 2 'Become who you are' is a famous idea from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885).
- 3 Deleuze and Guattari claim in *A Thousand Plateaus* that each series of becomings starts with the 'becoming-woman', because in patriarchy woman is always the 'other' of man, as the classical feminist analysis of Simone de Beauvoir argued. The 'becoming-woman' has been criticized by Deleuzian feminists, for example Braidotti (2002, 2006) and Buchanan and Colebrook (2000) and for fashion by Thanem and Wallenberg (2010: 7). A gender-sensitive analysis of 'becoming-woman' would be highly welcome in the field of fashion, considering the demands on the 'body beautiful' for both genders.
- 4 The Fashion Museum of Antwerp dedicated an exhibition and symposium to the use of plumes and feathers in fashion, entitled 'Birds of Paradise' (2014).
- 5 This part of the chapter is based on an article in which I have explored more extensively the notion of Deleuze's 'Fold' for fashion (Smelik, 2014).
- 6 The folding, wrapping and tying of cloth in non-Western styles of dress and fashion achieve similar modes of becoming; see Smelik (2014) for a first exploration of Japanese designers in this respect.

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