

# 周末 世界新公民读本 MODERN WEEKLY 画报

*No Jacket Required*

*By Alexandra Kohut-Cole*

*Serious office-wear burst onto the SS17 runways via twists, gender blurring, proportion-play and deconstruction. What's different about the new suit now and is it even relevant?*

For a long time the fashion silhouette has been anything but structured. But the suit has a newfound identity. Not since Yves Saint Laurent gave us Le Smoking in 1966 or Claude Montana the power suit in the Eighties' have suits been such big news.

The suit hit the SS17 runways in every which way bar the traditional. The deconstructed tailoring techniques that Rei Kawakubo first unleashed to the world in the Eighties' were rife. Ann Demeulemeester, her long-time disciple, featured beautifully tailored chaos of one-shouldered jackets, one-armed shirts, ribbon-like threads hanging, or a 'jacket' literally consisting of one red and white striped arm.

"I guess the suit is now viewed as some kind of anti-hero, a physical representation of all that is bad about an authoritarian, capitalist, patriarchal society. Designers enjoy nothing more than taking garments with iconic status and pulling them apart at the seams and reworking them in new ways, to say new things. Giorgio Armani literally took the stuffing out of suits in the 1980s." says Iain R Webb, professor of fashion & design, Kingston School of Art and fashion features editor at large for Rollacoaster magazine.

"Fashion is continually deconstructing itself and reinventing itself" he continues, "Whatever fashion believes to be au courant today will be deemed dull and bourgeois tomorrow. After a season or two of frayed hems and wobbly visible seams it comes as no surprise to be treated to precision tailoring and sharp-as-a-knife silhouettes, and vice versa, and so it goes on... There is nothing fashion finds more boring than itself".

Whether downright destruction or deconstruction, it still all failed to produce the shock value and awe that Rei Kawakubo achieved when she first showed her collections in Europe in the Eighties'. For SS17 her label Comme des Garçons, Comme des Garçons focused somewhat on tailoring in neutrals softened by ruffles. Louis Vuitton's Nicolas Ghesquiere explored tailoring in a vivid lime green complete with cutouts at the chest and arm of a long jacket with cropped trousers incorporating a zip at the front of the leg rather than the side. There were pinstripes and polka dot suits at Dolce & Gabbana with contrasting embellished embroidered lapels. Prada's graphic tailored tartan jackets paired garish combinations of orange with grey or yellow with red and were belted over brightly coloured micro shorts.

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years. The suit will be dressed up, dressed down, relaxed, formal, uber-aggressive and ridiculously romantic.”

The tough definitive suit has been thoughtfully re-worked into something more fluid, less bold and far softer than the old power suit, as now power can be conveyed in a less predictable silhouette. What is different about the new suit, is that “Its more bohemian, relaxed and decadent. Think the original supermodel Veruschka with a ‘suit’ painted onto her naked body”, explains Andrew Groves, course director of BA (hons) fashion design at the University of Westminster. “The suit suddenly feels subversive and exciting for a young generation who have never really known the revolutionary fun of dressing up in adult clothes and playing with the iconography and power that the suit embodies”.

Tomas Meier went for a more relaxed line putting men in slouchy trousers and tailored jacket combos of white, navy and double-breasted black for Bottega Veneta. Clare Waight Keller’s penultimate show for Chloe sent out informal suits in neutrals, Albert Kriemler’s tranquil vibe for Akris consisted of fluid jackets and relaxed shorts suits. And Anthony Vaccarello produced adaptations of Le Smoking tux every which way; a sublime long version spoke for itself not needing to be paired with anything else, and a cropped version worked well with a satin cumabund and what looked like skinny black jeans - others had just one arm or another the sleeves ripped off.

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There was also a reconceptualisation feel going on at established houses. At Dior, Maria Grazia Chiuri, in her debut show for the house, quoted Christian Dior’s “fashion is evolution and revolution” statement and promptly sent tailored fencing suits down the runway. She also re-interpreted the New Look of 1947, “practically the new bar jacket” she quipped in the recent television documentary “Inside Dior”. At Chanel, Lagerfeld’s sci fi robots refused to steal the thunder of the beauty of his tweed suit parade – a staple of the house since the original cardigan suits launched in 1925 and re-worked again in all their glory.

Perhaps all this emphasis on tailoring is a backlash against the recent fragility of clothes? “There has been an explosion; fashion is being produced in overwhelming quantities, but of course most of it has no meaning, because it has no history, no tradition. The avant-garde starts to look for things that carry meanings and messages. Tailoring is loaded with those”, says Griffiths.

Balenciaga morphed jackets into enormous proportions giving the impression they were hanging off a tiny frame, while an optical illusion was created so that the legs appeared to have been somehow drastically shrunk by the spandex thigh boot leggings that enshrouded them. A similar silhouette for women was given the same treatment – a pin stripe outsize jacket and micro skirt dwarfed the legs encased in golden greige spandex right down to the toe. Over at Celine, Phoebe Philo sent out

enormous long jackets and wide cropped trousers flaring out to a sort of fringing that flapped past the ankle. Olivier Theyskens teamed a long black tux style jacket with micro flippy skirts.

The suit has been making a spectacle of itself. It is important to Thom Browne to put on a dramatic show and create a fashion phenomenon to present his clothes and he succeeded in his SS17 show to produce a marvel without overshadowing the clothes themselves. "Showing my collection in a certain context is very important to me", he explains. "I don't feel that I need to show my classic grey suit in a show. I like to provoke and make people think. By putting on these entertaining and fun shows with provocative designs make the grey suit, which is essentially where all my collections originate, more interesting".

He put on a formidable display where the models walked out in dresses created out of a cartoon-like but stunning trompe l'oeil effect as if the suit was drawn onto the body. It was an illusion of a traditional tailored suit but which was in reality one dress that unzipped at the back, as if it was a wetsuit, to reveal a swimsuit. "The men's SS17 collection concept came from the idea of a wetsuit being translated into tailored clothing and creating an outfit that had one zipper in the back to take off the entire outfit" explained Browne "The women's SS17 collection was a continuation of this exploration".

He has been playing with proportion and the shrunken suits idea for a while, "When I first started, the proportions I introduced were not accepted nor understood well, but I felt that if I liked it, that there must be other people who would appreciate it as well" he says, "My intention has always been to provoke people and to make people think about the possibilities in menswear and tailoring. What has now become my classic silhouette also came about with this intention". He wanted to show how, "tailored clothing can be different and cool and different from what people perceived it to be." At the time when he started his collection "everyone wore jeans and t-shirts and they wore them everywhere. So in a sense the suit became the attire of the 'anti-establishment'".

There was a specific blurring of gender lines for SS17. At Gucci, Alessandro Michele styled a very man-ish tweed waistcoat and trousers on a woman complete with buttoned up shirt and tie. And Balenciaga's men carried the massive statement 'shopping' bags in hands manicured in the same style as for the women – with sharp, vermilion nails more resembling claws. "Designers have always existed on the outskirts of society, a place where formal hierarchy and stereotypical gender roles are fiercely challenged. The blurring of gender, currently labelled gender fluidity, may be making headline news but fashion has long since played with this imagery, one example being the trend for Unisex garments in the 1960s. Fashion has often co-opted an authoritarian wardrobe. Punk girls wore ties with string vests in the 1970s while downtown hipsters softened suits by accessorising with Converse plimsolls in the 1990s. Does a shoulder pad still equate to power or is it now purely a way to add width to a silhouette. As the modern representation of self via social media has become more manipulated and cartoon-like then it makes sense that our clothes will play their part in this exaggerated image making" says Webb.

For the boys it was take your pick from sharp or relaxed suits instead of slouchy street

or sports wear. Does this mean suits can now be anything we want them to be for boys and girls to be worn outside the traditional suit-wearing constraints of office-dom? “Wearing a suit to a nightclub” says Webb, “definitely makes more of a radical fashion statement than donning low-slung joggers and a slouchy oversized sweatshirt. East End poster boy Charles Jeffrey loves a suit, even if it is a tad drunk.”

What’s different about the new suit? According to Andrew Groves, its “A concerted move to a more formal, disciplined and adult approach to dressing, a move away from the ubiquitous uniform of sweatshirts and jogging bottoms. The formality of the suit doesn’t mean that it can’t also be fun, sexy or flirtatious.”

For SS17, Max Mara did a chic black belted jumpsuit and a classic tailored jacket, a slope shouldered bomber jacket with mid calf skirt, all-white jumpsuits and suits in tropical prints. The colour palette was black, white cobalt blue and citrus. Transformed into something that the wearer, male or female, would choose to wear rather than being compelled to, these suits are not for their original function of office-wear. Was it a case of ripping up the rulebook to start again? “We were inspired by the tropical radicalism of Lina Bo Bardi. She was intellectual, an activist, she challenged the status quo. She would have relished taking a starchy and rather moribund concept like the suit and redefining it. Our black wool mohair tailoring matches sharp jackets with curvy all in ones for a new kind of voluptuous minimalism. We loved how as a designer she embraced new technology; we took performance fabrics and hi-tech construction techniques from the sports track and fashioned them into their exact antithesis- suits. Bringing opposites together creates energy, the suit is transformed not only in its appearance but in its meaning” explained Griffiths.

“To redesign something you have to start from first principles. In this instance I just tried to imagine what Bo Bardi would have done. It's not so much a question of ripping up the rulebook as re-interpreting the rules”. He continues, “The 'traditional' man's suit evolved from the sober wardrobe of the country squire, discreet, and practical. In time that discreet look came to be associated with power, so in a sense the suit has always been about the subversion of meaning. By introducing this athletic element, we were simply twisting the meaning one more time...Where once it defined the traditionalist, the suit now says 'I'm smart and cool, times are tough but I can think my way through this”.

Is it that the suit is perceived a sure thing in this world of uncertain politics? “In these fast-changing economic and politically uncertain times, people reach for the certainty that the suit represents”, says Groves “never more than now. In times of economic uncertainty, men and woman have always reached for the authority and power that the suit gives”.

The fashion industry is in a stage of flux, maybe it needs some structured tailoring? “It is not just the fashion industry that is in flux”, says Webb, “the world is in a very weird place with everything that was a given being turned on it's head. Fashion reflects social change. It is not surprising that fashion designers might now proffer clothes that provide structure and a sense of security”.

But is the suit relevant any more with relaxed dress codes and people increasingly working from home? “Just when something seems irrelevant; that's the time to bring it back”, says Griffiths, “Max Mara helped define the rigid codes of power dressing in the 80's, where the suit was the central item. With this collection we wanted to celebrate how far women have come. There was a time when they rejected the suit, now they embrace it in an individualistic new incarnation”.

So is the suit still relevant to fashion? “Is fashion relevant to the thousands, millions of people, men and women, who go to work everyday - the same way they did in the 1960s and 80s - and are required to wear a suit as part of a dress code for their chosen professions”, asks Webb, “a suit still has the power to say something”.

Elsa Schiapparrelli, who famously collaborated on outrageous designs with surrealist artist Salvador Dali in the Thirties', proclaimed, “In difficult times fashion is always outrageous”. So going by this logic, perhaps the suit— once symbol of all that is tidy, conservative and traditional – is now an emblem of the outrageous?

“For many the suit represents the uniform of the establishment and all the negative connotations that goes with that” explains Webb. “Fashion loves nothing more than to take such an anachronistic, emblematic and potent item of clothing and debunk it by transforming it into a fashionable must-have”.