

# When Silence Speaks Volumes

ON MARTIN MARGIELA'S CULT OF INVISIBILITY AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FASHION SYSTEM

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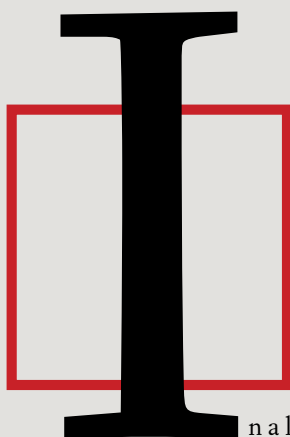
*Styled using MMM archive pieces by*

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<sup>1</sup> M McLaren, 'Has Anybody Here Seen My Old Friend Martin?', in *The New York Times, Style Magazine*, 2005, March 13.

“Dear Martin, we know each other, I believe, but have never met. I certainly don't know what you look like and have even contemplated the thought that you may be a ghost! Do you exist? Sometimes I think not.”<sup>1</sup>



In a letter correspondence between Maison Martin Margiela (MMM) and Malcolm McLaren featured in *The New York Times* in 2005, McLaren is probing for the faceless man behind the brand. Like many before him, McLaren also asks for a picture of Martin Margiela but his request is unsuccessful and left uncommented by the otherwise forthcoming 'we' with which MMM replies to all things public. The enigmatic Monsieur Margiela as a phantom of a fashion house is an intriguing yet compelling vision, as his last known appearance was allegedly in 1994<sup>2</sup> and one of the last photos was taken of him in 1997 (featured in the *New York Times*). No one, except for the close-knit group that worked with him, could really confirm his presence during his tenure or his departure when he left the house in 2008 or 2009.

Since his first collection in 1988, Martin Margiela has shunned publicity as well as having his photograph taken. Eschewing shared brand-

ing practices, the faceless label, as well as its aesthetic that is steeped in optical delusions, draws attention to the unquestioned practices, values and beliefs in fashion. The production of value in fashion is inextricably linked to the narrative of the label, the surrounding media discourse and shared cultural valuing. In their work on the cultural production of high fashion, Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut<sup>3</sup> argue that the value of a designer's label is symbolic rather than material. In a process, that Bourdieu and Delsaut call 'transsubstantiation', the garments take on the high value attached to the name.<sup>4</sup> Transsubstantiation refers to the Christian concept of communion in which there is a change of substance of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. A similar transferral of value takes place when a fashion label is valued for its name rather than its material qualities. In this process 'the label does not change the materiality of the product, but its social characteristic'<sup>5</sup>. According to Agnes Rocamora, symbolic production is the 'production of beliefs in the values'<sup>6</sup> of the work. Fundamental to how we engage with fashion labels are our shared beliefs and habitus that shape and inform our practices and tastes. Pursuing Bourdieu and Delsaut, the value of MMM, as with other fashion labels, is rooted in our belief in it. We may argue that it is MMM's tabi boots, the redesigned second-hand clothes or the craftsmanship of the Artisanal collection, tangible elements, that we treasure, but it is our belief in these that transubstantiate the physical objects into symbolic and immaterial value.

MMM makes a rare case of a fashion label that brands itself on anonymity, which is also perpetuated on the vestimentary level. Since the common branding practice of having a highly visible front man or woman, whose persona and private life embody the brand narrative, is eschewed, the meaning of MMM lies not just in its work but also in its ability to question the general functioning of the fashion system. Although, he is not addressing the fashion industry as such, Bourdieu's<sup>7</sup> approach to the fields of cultural production, such as art and literature, is apt to understanding the mechanisms of fashion. Bourdieu is interested in uncovering the logic of fields and their laws of functioning, which, he argues, are upheld by the shared belief in them and most significantly the reproduction of them: 'In order for a field to function, there have to be stakes and people prepared to play the game, endowed with a habitus that implies knowledge and recognition of the imminent laws of the field, the stakes, and so on'<sup>8</sup>. Some of the central laws of functioning that can be



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<sup>3</sup> P Bourdieu & Y Delsaut, 'Le Couturier et sa Griffe. Contribution à une Théorie de la Magie', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 1(1), 1975, pp. 7–36.

<sup>4</sup> A Rocamora, 'Fields of Fashion: Critical Insights into Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2 (3), 2002, pp. 341–362.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 348–349.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 349.

<sup>7</sup> P Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> P Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, Sage, London, 1993. p.72.

<sup>2</sup> S Mower, 'Margiela, be mine', in *Vogue* (UK edition), 2008, September.



said to apply to the field of fashion are based on distinct brand narratives, which are controlled by press offices and brand managers and are narrated and mediated by journalists; visible star designers and most importantly the readiness of the participating field members to perpetuate the shared practices such as participating in show schedules and giving interviews. Even other designers who can also be said to belong to an intellectual and purist sub-grouping of the field of fashion, such as Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons and Hussein Chalayan, participate in and reproduce the rules of the game with ad campaigns and by giving occasional interviews. MMM does not entirely disregard these practices—as it presents collections twice a year, has retail spaces, accessories and, as of late, even a fragrance—but it bends the rules of the fashion game and by doing so carves a niche that sits on the edge of the fashion system.



Margiela is the Houdini of fashion—only he was already invisible before he vanished from his house. Thus, his absence casts light on the making of myths. In a critique of dominant discourses, Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup> criticises how capitalist and bourgeois ideologies are veiled and significations are naturalised myths. According to Barthes, ideologies as myth act to disarm complexities and to make dominant values and beliefs natural and commonsense. Myths act to naturalise what is in fact cultural. Although Barthes is concerned primarily with the semiotic capacities of myths, the idea is fruitful to transfer to the field of fashion. Practices in fashion such as placing advertisements in magazines, giving interviews to the press and taking a bow after a show are naturalised, shared and reproduced by the members of the fashion industry who have internalised these cultural practices. By refusing to participate in these, Margiela and his house silently draw attention to both the veiling of the value of the work itself and the hype at work in fashion. Through MMM's nonattendance these naturalised mythologies are, if not unveiled, then challenged and their cultural construction is brought to the surface.

Yet by being invisible Margiela has created his own myth. Though he has bypassed 'face value', the value does not lie purely in his oeuvre but also in the shared belief in his myth. Without a face to worship, we are left

<sup>2</sup> R Barthes, *Mythologies*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1972.

<sup>10</sup> L James, 'Maison Martin Margiela and the Cult of Invisibility', 2009. <http://bit.ly/1aTSEF>

<sup>11</sup> S Mower, *Maison Martin Margiela review*, 2009. March 6. <http://bit.ly/dvGHVN>

<sup>12</sup> S Mower, *Maison Martin Margiela review*, 2009, October 2. <http://bit.ly/4os1E>

**"Margiela's invisibility is an ambivalent double act that both silently refuses to comply with the rules of the game of fashion as well as indirectly fuels the brand concept."**

<sup>13</sup> S Mower, *Maison Martin Margiela review*, 2009. March 6. <http://bit.ly/dvGHVN>

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, A Gill, 'Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 2 (1), 1998, pp. 25-50; C Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003; B Vinken, 'The New Nude', *Maison Martin Margiela*, Exhibition Catalogue, Province of Antwerp, Moma - Fashion Museum, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> C Evans, 'The Golden Dušman: A critical evaluation of the work of Martin Margiela and a review of Martin Margiela: Exhibition (9/4 1615)', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 2 (1), 1998, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> A Gill, 'Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 2 (1), 1998, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> J. D. Caputo (ed), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Fordham University Press, 2004.

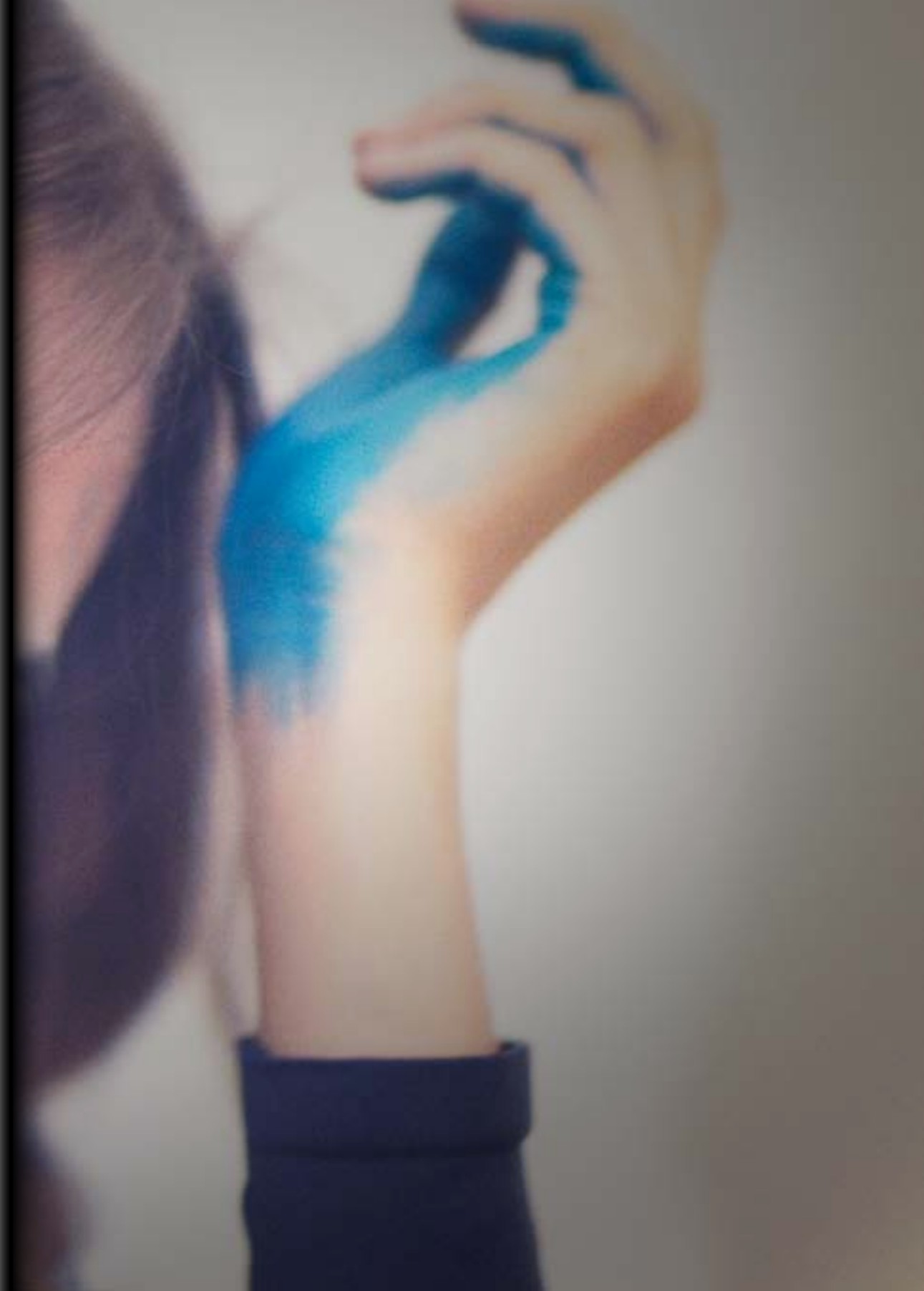
<sup>18</sup> A Milner & J Browitt, *Contemporary Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London, 2002. p. 115.

with a 'cult of invisibility'<sup>10</sup> that adds value to the label via what appears to be a non-branding ideology. Thus, Margiela's invisibility is an ambivalent double act that both silently refuses to comply with the rules of the game of fashion as well as indirectly fuels the brand concept. As a faceless myth residing in the imagination of his followers and in the representation of his brand, he remains an imagined persona, as aura detached from flesh. However, MMM's ideology does not sidestep actual branding. Albeit quietly, the actual label, sewn into to the back of the garment with four white stitches, acts as an emblem of membership. The stitches initiate the wearer into a cult of insiders that understand the silent code of Margiela. Allegedly, Renzo Russo, the owner of Diesel who bought MMM in 2002, has the stitches tattooed on the back of his neck.

The aura of Monsieur Margiela seemed to work like a spell, as the press also perpetuated his myth by treasuring his 'genius contributions to drive fashion forward'<sup>11</sup>. But when he left the house unfavourable reviews followed. Needless to say, the quality and the reviews of collections vary but it was as if respect went along with the invisible front man, and the s/s 10 collection was deemed 'a stuttering, ill-sequenced pastiche of the rigorous, witty, avant-garde thinking that used to stream out here'<sup>12</sup>, and the previous season the collection was of 'so little consequence'<sup>13</sup>. The question is, have the collections been poorer or less coherent since his departure, or is the truth that since the spirit of the man left the house, the press no longer holds it sacred and has stopped believing in it? Known for its flat structure, the collections have always been a result of teamwork, a point confirmed through MMM's plural 'we'. The underlying belief of MMM is not just the disavowal of the cult of the designer genius; it is a belief that fashion is a shared practice, and not a solitary activity.



MMM's work has fittingly been labelled deconstructivist<sup>14</sup>. Unpicking his work, writers have emphasized the 'transformation of second-hand clothing'<sup>15</sup> and how it brings to the surface 'the operations of clothing'<sup>16</sup>. Derridean deconstruction as a movement within literary criticism seeks to expose the text's contradictions, instabilities and unexpected relationships and stretch meanings beyond boundaries<sup>17</sup>, 'pushing textual meaning to its limits, in order to discover the differences within the text, the ways it fails to say what it means to say'<sup>18</sup>. Inherent in deconstruction in its literary origin is the belief that the text holds a critical distance to itself and the analyst's job is to dismantle the text's structure. Used in a fashion context,



<sup>19</sup> B Vinken, 'The New Nude', *Maison Martin Margiela*. Exhibition Catalogue, Province of Antwerp: Momu - Fashion Museum, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> K Debo, 'Maison Martin Margiela "20"'. The exhibition', *Maison Martin Margiela*, Exhibition Catalogue, Province of Antwerp: Momu - Fashion Museum, 2008. p.12.

<sup>21</sup> B Vinken, 'The New Nude', *Maison Martin Margiela*, Exhibition Catalogue, Province of Antwerp: Momu - Fashion Museum, 2008, p. 113.

deconstruction makes the construction of the garments explicit and destroys the principles of it as well as of fashion's underpinning structure—hence its French coinage *La mode détruy*. MMM's vestimentary deconstruction of redesigned and reassembled second-hand clothes, the 'Replica' garments, which interweaves the aura of the past with a new horizon, the frequent use of trompe l'oeil effects (flesh colour bodies s/s 07, tattoos on transparent t-shirts s/s 89, 'mud-covered' pumps s/s 06), the hiding of identity with 'incognito' sunglasses (s/s 08) and the many 'unfinished' designs that bring to light their construction and assembly instil the garments with an internal dynamic of exposure and concealment. Other examples of deconstruction at work are the toile cotton dress intaĉt with dart indications and handwritten instructions (A/W 97-98) and the Stockman dummy jacket in coarse linen (s/s 97), which lay bare the design process as if it were an exercise in fashion, an *étude sur la mode*.

Both MMM's design team and salespeople wear white work coats, which not just mimics the ones worn in haute couture ateliers, Barbara Vinken<sup>19</sup> also notes their resemblance to surgeons' *blouses blanches*. Precisely the laboratory process is central to the Artisanal line's laborious dissecting and reassembling of, for instance, vintage sandals that are turned into a jacket (s/s 06) and vintage leather belts which are assembled as a pair of jeans. On a vestimentary level, MMM's work is deconstructive in that the 'traces of the production process are literally turned inside out'.<sup>20</sup>

Also the presentations of the collections challenge the shared, perpetuated practices of fashion: the use of life-sized puppets (A/W 98-99), amateur models (in the early shows), the street as catwalk ('Semi-couture' s/s 97), long fringes hiding the eyes of the models (A/W 00-01) and cloth covering the face (A/W 95-96)—all pursue the idea of the 'in-famous'<sup>21</sup>. Additionally, there are the unconventional show invitations including an ad in the miscellaneous column in *Paris Boum Boum* (A/W 89-90) and a telegram (s/s 89). Embedded in these tangible objects is the subtle questioning of the naturalised constructs, the *je ne sais quoi* practices, of the fashion industry. Steering clear of standard practices, by denying us faces and identities and randomly seating the audience at the early shows, the spirit of MMM's deconstruction lies in its capacity to move beyond the garments,

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distorting and questioning the norms and boundaries of the fashion system and its cultural practices which are so often taken for granted.



MMM is fashion on fashion—both as garments and as a system. Chris Dercon fittingly calls Martin Margiela's work 'meta-fashion'<sup>22</sup>. In addition to its vestimentary cunningness, the magic of MMM is rooted in its treatment of fashion, its system and laws of functioning as a self-reflexive exercise. MMM is not anti-fashion nor is it in opposition to fashion, instead it renders the construction of fashion garments explicit through sincere craftsmanship. Through deconstruction we are offered an abstraction of fashion as garments and system. Besides the vestimentary level, the significance of Margiela and his team is their tampering with the norms of the fashion system. As if holding up a mirror, MMM offers a reflection of fashion, in which naturalised, taken for granted, practices are both exposed and modified. Still, Margiela does not escape the valuing of the label by refusing to participate in the game and reproduce the practices. What remains of Margiela, the man who was not there, is a ghost who, by not wanting to play the game of celebrity fashion, has ambivalently confirmed fashion's imperative myth making. As a magic lantern, Martin Margiela uses fashion as a veiling device through which he both appeared and disappeared. ▼

<sup>22</sup> C Dercon, 'Fashion Like the Dark Side of the Moon: the Moon Ray', in *Maison Martin Margiela*, Rizzoli, New York, 2009, p.136.









PAGES 138&141, 143—144, 146—155

PHOTOGRAPHER: Ola Rindal

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FASHION ASSISTANT: Fanny Zakrisson

MAKE UP: Fusako Okuno AT ARTLIST

HAIR: Nicolas Eldin AT ARTLIST

MODELS: Marlena Szosa AT NATHALIE, Madisyn Ritland AT SILENT

