

MANIFESTO[®]



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WHERE THE ART IS

COS not only creates staples that take first rung in your wardrobes, they also know how and who to work with in order to conceive enduring spectacles. Enter the unique collaboration between COS designers Martin Andersson and Karin Gustafsson and interior designer André Fu.

If you were thinking of starting a fashion brand with the intention of opening 105 stores in 26 countries in the space of eight years, then you'd better have a pretty good idea of how to go about it. Not the kind of idea you'd find in any old fashion book, mind you. You'd need something in the realm of *exceptional*. Swedish-owned London-based brand COS is the posterchild for *less is more* – a mantra often sung within the fashion sphere without knowledge of its true potential – whose minimalist designs, adventurous collaboration choices, and smart compromise have pushed their brand a step ahead of the rest. Far from glorifying *not-so-basic* basic wardrobe staples, they – to people that know better – serve to preserve timelessness in designs that always look fresh, no matter the season. At COS, quality is within arm's reach (and purse's reach for that matter). If you wanted high-end excellence at a wallet-friendly price point, you'd go to COS. If you wanted something smart to wear for your next interview, but didn't have the funds or time to filter through Net-A-Porter, you'd go to COS. And if you were in need of a new white shirt because your old one had tragically undergone a coffee stain disaster, you'd go to COS. With a brand identity that strong, you tend to forget you're looking at a sister brand of H&M, let alone one that only offers a fraction of the variety in comparison to the latter. Recently, COS designers Martin Andersson and Karin Gustafsson returned to Hong Kong with a new conceptual idea in tow: A custom interior showroom to match their stylish wares that were inspired by the Mono-ha art movement. The backdrop simulated a fabricated urban landscape on Hong Kong's ferry pier – a scene like a stripped-down *Inception* film stage set 20 years into the future somewhere in Tokyo. Only the likes of someone like Hong Kong-born architect André Fu could have done it though, what with a knack for interior design that has brought him from the Waldorf Astoria to the Shangri-La. It is ideas like these that trump the typical fashion marketing strategies adopted by most brands of today. Fashion shows? Not simply, rather infused with a keen appreciation of art, theatricality, and well-rounded experience.

MANIFESTO: Architect André Fu has designed a special set-up for COS to present the clothes in Hong Kong. How did this collaboration happen?

MARTIN ANDERSSON: Well, we launched the

brand here in Hong Kong about three years ago and have experienced André's work.

KARIN GUSTAFSSON: So, obviously we admire his work. We think we have similarities with his aesthetic. We thought it'd be a nice and exciting match, really.

MA: Since we've returned, we really wanted to celebrate and we thought it would be a really great idea to bring André on board.

M: André, what are the highlights of the installation?

ANDRÉ FU: Well, the idea is really to embrace Asia – Hong Kong being the location they selected. I mean for me it's interesting because it's the first fashion presentation that I've done. And we have taken the whole concept to a much more conceptual level. So it's not an exhibition; it's not a fashion show. It's conceptual in the urban sense – we are pretty much taking the entire upper deck [of Central Pier]. But we are transforming into something... almost like a journey. Basically guests would enter the venue via a sequence of spaces, so it acts almost like layers of experiences. Obviously the finale is where the model presentation happens. It's about the paradigm of urban life in Asia.

M: Can you elaborate on the word urban?

MA: When we talk about customers, we think of a particular mindset. And we think of customers as a group of people who share a mindset. We call this a big city mindset, so it's very much of an urban one in the sense that customers enjoy the things that they find in a *big city* such as galleries, art shows...

KG: ... theatres. We believe that they have a huge interest in cultural life in general. Travel, too. That's also something that interests and inspires us. So we believe that our customers share that with us.

AF: The reason why we call it urban landscape is because so much of Asian life – life in Hong Kong, especially – is about being inside as much as outside. Lately there is so much celebration. I mean, people talk about things like hiking on the weekends... there are some subtle references to the collection in that.

KG: Yeah, that's actually what inspired the collection to begin with. It feels as though there's a need and an interest in raising nature and being close to nature and doing activities close to nature.

AF: Also, landscape is not just in terms of greenery. It's [about] landscape in the urban sense – about space in a city. The first moment you enter into the space, you'll actually walk into a glass cube, and you'll come out. That's an example of an encounter with this urban symbol. Within the model presentation, there will also be a few iconic features: One is a mirrored cube, and one is a cube made entirely of glass in which models will walk into. There are also all the interlocking steps and ramps that we have built within the whole installation. It's the juxtaposition of all these elements together that makes the whole experience. We hope that it's going to be interactive. Not just between the installation and the models, but also between the installation and the guests.

M: The core elements of COS are all about functionality and fabric research, but how do you guys define the brand?

MA: Function, I think, is definitely at the core of COS; in how you wear the garments, how you design them, but also in how there should be something for every occasion.

KG: There is always something for every occasion in our collection.

MA: We also love the idea of having a sense of timelessness. That's very important. Something that lasts beyond the seasons.

M: So is it right to assume that you don't take any references from the past, then?

MA: Well, I think we are obsessed with that here by reinventing them, putting little twists here and there. We are all modernists at heart as well, so we like the idea of the mid-century movement where a building designed in the '40s or '50s still looks so modern today. It's that idea of timelessness that really appeals to us.

KG: We work a lot with materials and the quality of materials. Tactility is extremely important. We always work a lot with the fabrics in the collection, such as the finishes. We like them to have a certain

(From left) Martin Andersson,
Karin Gustafsson, and André Fu



feel in your hands and we like them to perform in an interesting way. Very often we start off by draping the cloth on a dress to see the possibilities of the material.

AF: The word modernist is a really good word. I see myself as a modernist too. People often see me as an artist with a very modernist design spread. It's Asian but I don't categorise it as Asian or Western, it's about things that surround us. I also want to talk about the perception of luxury – it's evolving as well. I gear more towards a different level of luxury; one that is a lot more relaxed – that the way I see luxury is going. In terms of things I typically do, even the super high-end spaces, it's about people being comfortable sans the superficial layer of glamour. It's about the thoughtfulness and sense of comfort. These are the core values of the things I'm trying to create. Aesthetic-wise, though, it can be quite vivid. But the underlying layer is really about the basic functions. These things can often be easily forgotten, but they are important. For me, that's the modernist part of my aesthetic.

M: Since the mother company is from Sweden, where do you see the Scandinavian influences in your work?

MA: We have a Scandinavian heritage, for sure. I mean, we are both from Sweden (*Laughs*), which is a coincidence. But we are of course owned by a Swedish company, and there is Scandinavian heritage there. We talked about us being a modernist and a functionalist, which have strong links to Swedish design.

KG: No matter where we come from, it seems like our team takes an interest in mid-century modern pieces that are mostly from Scandinavia.

MA: When we put together our seasonal design concepts, we tend to look at modern art and architecture, but every season we also come back to the great Scandinavian masters such as [Arne] Jacobsen. It's like a neverending source of inspiration for us. It also comes through in our store interior.

M: André, have any of the Scandinavian influences shaped your design perspective?

AF: I came from a fairly minimalistic background so I was exposed to Scandinavian design. It's that kind of aesthetic that appeals to me. Obviously with the work I'm doing out here, it really depends on the context.

M: Do you work better under restrictions or with lots of freedom?

KG: Well I don't really feel that we are restricted. We have a really tight frame as something we set ourselves. But within that frame, there are so many ways to be creative. Obviously we have to follow a fast pace, because that's how it always is. But since

we work a lot with our garments, we review them many times before we sign it off to go to store. That in itself is a long process.

MA: With our framework, the word restriction sounds too negative because it's actually our strength. It's our DNA, and so we are sure of what COS is. We hope that comes through in the garments, even though it might just be a white shirt.

KG: A certain finish could make all the difference.

AF: Ultimately we are all working for that international clientele. Things are sometimes location specific and sometimes they're not. For example, if I didn't have to work on this pier, I might have come up with something completely different. And since I work in many different cities in Asia, I have to make sure that my work has that sense of placement. I wouldn't know Indonesian culture as well as a local for instance. But in the process of collaboration I start to understand different cultures, so I try to use a way of interpretation that expresses it. References always have to sit within the context of where they are. So if you are in Bali, you want to feel that you're in Bali. I've had to design a Japanese restaurant in Tokyo before, but why ask me over thousands of other local designers? It's because of the fresh perspective.

M: Speaking of culture, is there any cultural reference you have discovered recently that you want to implement in future?

KG: Travel is very important to us.

MA: Yeah I mean when we travel, like when we come here, we always take time out to visit galleries and the local scene. So inspiration usually comes from anywhere. For fall-winter, we looked to Japan, both in the aesthetic and also the art movements there.

M: So the COS office is based in London. What are the pros of cons of being there?

KG: London is a really amazing place to live if you are creative because there is so much going on. The music scene is great, the museums are amazing, the shows, the street markets... there is so much on offer. The parks are lovely, so you can still get close to nature for relaxing. It's also easy to get around the rest of the UK.

MA: My favourite part of it is that it is such an international city – probably one of the most. All the cultures there really mix; that's great. You can have food from every kind of cuisine. I love that. Cons? I guess because it's so big that if you have a friend living on the other side of the city, you'll hardly be able to see each other.

M: What kind of challenges are you facing at COS?

KG: It's almost more of a challenge we set ourselves every season: to keep the bar high. To really offer amazing quality for the best prices; not only quality just in the physical sense, but also in the design sense. We want our garments to last in people's wardrobes for more than one season. If you're not questioning yourself, you won't grow.

M: How do you think COS has changed the fashion scene, in that you are the pioneers of launching minimalist and modernist design in more of a fast fashion retail environment?

MA: We compare ourselves to our past achievements. We see ourselves as our biggest competitors.

KG: We want the collections – men's, women's, and kids' – to feel like they're coming from one brand even though it's a big team behind it. It's all about the brand.

M: André, would you consider designing, say, a fashion store in future?

AF: Yes, I would. Fashion or not fashion, I'm working with brands too but they happen to be hotel brands. And hotel brands, like fashion brands, have different core values. I categorise my clients into two categories: one is established – hoteliers that have many hotels and have guidelines extensive as encyclopaedias.

M: Are there any personal touches you have put into the COS collections?

KG: The thing with our collections is that there is a team behind them.

MA: Well, I come from a tailoring background so that's where my strength lies – very traditional tailoring; Saville Row techniques. And so I wanted to bring that sense of craftsmanship on board for the brand.

AF: For me, I hope that my audience can see me in very different lights. This, as I said, is probably the most conceptual work I've ever done. For COS, I see this collaboration as fashion going forward; that luxury is not necessarily governed by the price, but by the taste and the quality. And that's where I think the excitement comes in.

M: It's good that you mentioned the word luxury. Would you consider the word appropriate to COS?

KG: We don't speak about luxury in that way. We see the collections as something for everyone, and as accessible to everyone. It should have a certain price point, but it should be quality that everyone can get a taste of.

www.cosstores.com

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