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# performing fashion: senseless acts of gender



Frances Neyra Claudio, *Donnie*, archival pigment print, 32" x 40" (unframed), edition 1 of 3 + 2AP, 2018

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## PERFORMING FASHION: SENSELESS ACTS OF GENDER

Our current cultural moment in fashion is infused with new ideologies surrounding gender and gender identity. Gender and gender identity are no longer predicated on a predetermined notion of one's biological existence and especially do not conform to traditional, patriarchal, heteronormative dress codes. Fashion as the communication vessel of gender has historically never had such a grey area. The exhibition, *performing fashion: senseless acts of gender* exemplifies this 'lifestyle' with original black and white photography and documentary film exploring gender identities. Fashion is always part of dress (Barthes, 2006, p. 9) and human clothing is a complete phenomenon (Barthes, 2006, p.21). Roland Barthes is one of the most highly regarded and critical voices in discussing the semiotics of the fashion system and the clothing it creates. If we approach fashion from a purely sociological perspective, one cannot discount discussions on the matter as rhetoric. Clothing concerns all of the human person, all of the body, all the relationships of man to body as well as the relationships of the body to society (Barthes, 2006, p. 96). Clothes are visual representation of our identity and are layered with meanings (Gligorovska, 2011). When fashion is discussed, a distinction must be made between clothing, dress, dressing, and style with their nuanced differences.

Dressing means the personal mode with which the wearer adopts (albeit badly) the dress that is proposed to them by their social group. It can have a morphological, psychological or circumstantial meaning but it is not sociological. Dress is the proper object of sociological and historical research. (Barthes, 2006, p.9)

Although clothing may have its limitations, it provides the freedom to express oneself and create a new body without altering the surface of the skin (McMahon, 2014, p.320). Fashion becomes the object and the objectified when constructing a gender identity, binary or otherwise. Fashion is an important instrument in a heightened consciousness of

gendered individuality (Wilson, 2003, p. 120). Fashion has historically had an infatuation with difference as part of a sensation for transformation and social distinction (Mackinney-Valentin, 2017, p. 66). This difference is sometimes embraced but in other instances, it is rebuked creating the 'alternative style', especially when the difference goes beyond *la mode* and ventures into the actualization of self through clothing and dress. The alternative style can be understood as a set of signs, borrowed from male clothing and consisting of items that were used separately or together, that subtly changed the overall effect of female clothing. Mainstream fashion certainly continuously changes its own definitions of masculinity and femininity and plays with gender all the time (Wilson, *Deviant Dress*, 1990, p. 69).

Engendered garments have been a part of clothing and dress that precedes the existence of a fashion system. What has changed significantly is the level of performativity since the eighteenth century and the increase in fluidity since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that blur the lines of gender. Gender identities and the position of relative power in which they exist have been challenged and contested by fashion and clothing (Barnard, 2002, p. 141). And clothes are one of the most visible markers of gender. Fashion defines gender, and renders it visible (Buckley, 2002). Gender and identity are constructed and projected through clothing and dress with fashion playing a crucial role in the formation of modern identity through its articulation of the body, gender and sexuality.

Identity, because it is never in a moment of critical repose, because it resists the forces of suspension or negation, and because it neither begins nor ends at a point of total immobility, draws its very life- blood from the restless operations of identification, one of the most powerful but least understood mechanisms of cultural self-fashioning. (Fuss 1992, p. 716)

Fashion is a concept that signifies additional and alluring values attached to clothing, which are enticing to 'consumers' of fashion (Kawamura, 2005, p 4). Fashion is a

seductive and distracting force, driving the self to abandon itself to the lures of the world (Vinken, 2005, p.18). The codes of fashion are visual—consciously or subconsciously they articulate social, sexual, or cultural messages in public or private spaces (Gligorovska, 2011). Fashion, clothing and dress impact the actual body of the wearer and societal order because we use them as identifiers and signifiers. The fashion system's role in identity creation offers arguments on the relationships between societal codes and systems of clothing that include the interplay of revelation and concealment of men's and women's bodies (Craik, 1994).

What we see is just as important as what we don't see. In the infamous words of John Berger in his *ways of seeing*, the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. It is necessary to identify the salient signifiers in dress as they relate to the construction of the choices an individual makes when selecting their wardrobes; inevitably leading to comparisons between late twentieth-century America and nineteenth-century France to be unpacked to show the correlations in clothing pertinent to lifestyle, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and social status (Crane, 2000).

What is at stake in clothing is a particular meaning of the body, of the person (Barthes, 1996, p.96). Fashion fully illuminates Butler's position on the common notion that one's sex is a pre-cultural, anatomical given and that one's gender is a psychocultural epiphenomenon based on one's sex (Butler, 2004). Butler is of the mind that gender is a social construct and that people perceive themselves based on both nurture and nature, rather than a purely binary precursor of male or female and that meaning, adamant about the performative nature of gender. Fashion and clothing reproduce sex and gender identities and positions (Barnard, 2002). Gender performativity is fully exemplified in perceptions of femininity and masculinity, particularly and specifically in clothing and dress, allowing for the most simplistic understanding of binary expression.

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler, 1999)

The construction of gender is subject to social influences and flows along a continuum (Lunceford, 2010). The established norms that govern gender (and sexuality) come to fruition in fashion. Fashion can be seen as a language that we use in order to be able to communicate our identity with others (Gligorovska, 2011).

The language of fashion was created by a heteronormative, patriarchal group of men who sought the use of clothing and dress to establish and enforce social order. Any individual who spoke a different dialect was relegated to categorical otherness. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself (Butler, 1999). The Oxford definition of performativity is the power of language to effect change in the world: language does not simply describe the world but may instead (or also) function as a form of social action. For the purposes of our research, we will focus on Judith Butler's interpretation of performativity as it pertains to gender with the combination of the two, proving Barthes' belief system on the language of fashion.

Although we wear clothing every day, we often do so as if by autopilot and exhibit a remarkable uniformity in our choices. Men and women tend to wear specific styles, colors, fabrics and articles of clothing. These choices are not based

on essential requirements for our bodies, but rather on socially constructed norms of gender (Lunceford, 2010).

From the eighteenth century sobriety began to creep in and western men experienced a change that has been called "the great masculine renunciation" (Steele, 1997, pp. 2-3). Fashion became feminized in the nineteenth century, when expression of sexual difference through the clothing was more important than the social order (Steele, 1989). Distinctions between men's and women's dress increased in the nineteenth century, a situation that continued into the twentieth century (Michelman, 2010). This also represents a period of creation of engendered garments that encouraged assimilation into specific gender roles for men and women, placing men in a position of power to support a heteronormative patriarchy. The power of the patriarch manifested itself in men dressing in a masculine manner and women dressing in a feminine manner. When men decided to get serious about the economy, they pawned their heels onto women (Brennan, 2011, p. 232).

Fashion and clothing reproduce sex and gender identities and positions (Barnard, 2002). The state created and society maintains the exclusivity of the gender binary (Naz, 2014). The construction of a public identity through clothing and dress became a marker of not just gender throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, but status and sexuality. There is a strong bondage between fashion and society, and according to Barthes (Barthes, 2006, p. 91), an absence of fashion corresponds to a totally stagnant nature of society. Social theorists from Marx to Foucault tend to emphasize the ways in which dominant discourses concerning, for example, class and sexuality influence behavior and attitudes (Crane, 2000, p. 99). Wearing the socially accepted, gender specific garments was demonstrative of participation in the established social order of heteronormative identity and sexuality. Craik (2009) comments that the body is trained to perform in socially accepted ways by harnessing movement, gesture and demeanor until they become second nature. Gender roles and categories are most vulnerable to critique

when they are most valorized and most ardently coveted and admired (Gligorovska, 2011). An individual's wardrobe illustrated their compliance with traditional, binary gender roles rooted in the extremities of femininity and masculinity.

Elaborate dress codes such as those in the 1950s that had women in a permanent state of femininity, extended the fashion cycle of Christian Dior's 1947 new look, while their male counterparts wore suits and more serious attire to exemplify their masculinity. In addition, purveyors of culture provide gender-symbolic dress that encourages others to attribute masculine or feminine gender and to act on the basis of these attributions (Barnes, 1997). The power of the patriarchy encourages all genders to fashion their bodies according to heterosexual male standards, regardless of their private and personal sexual orientation.

Due to the intimacy with the body, clothes are a critical tool for representation of different identities, and they are highly effective in endlessly constituting but never fixing them (Craik, 2009). Our bodies and our clothes are key factors in our articulations and representations of gender as a subject position and as a mode of subjectivity (Kaiser, 2012, p. 131). Non-binary gender performativity in fashion is disruptive as it alters socially accepted signifiers of male and female through clothing and dress. Dressing the body in opposition to engendered biological roles places an individual in direct opposition to the patriarchy. That patriarchy mandates that men and women enact their biological gender when dressing their bodies. Clothing and dress provide for the variable, visible iterations of conscious efforts to create and establish a public identity. Self-consciousness, it must be remembered, is generally an epistemological advance. One would need a special argument to show that the self-consciousness connected with an awareness of and interest in one's appearance is inherently retrograde (Hanson, 1990, p.119).

Fashion divides, but also has the tendency to erase the division of the sexes (Gligorovska, 2011). Identity has increasingly come to be considered fluid and flexible (Rocamora, 2016, p. 11). Modern fashion plays endlessly with the distinction between

masculinity and femininity (Gligorovska, 2011). Individuals can use clothing and dress to create and perform myriad public appearances of gender. The word 'appearance', so taken for granted as a part of the vocabulary of grooming and fashion, actually acknowledges the performance element in dress (Wilson, *Deviant Dress*, 1990, p. 36). Much of the gender intersection with fashion is based in the garments themselves and the cumulative effect of appearance (Barnard, 2002). Fashion is known to playfully cross traditional gender boundaries, expose stereotypes, and reveal society's artificial construction of femininity (Wilson, 2003). Yves Saint Laurent thumbed his nose at this construction of gender through fashion and pushed those boundaries to their fullest in 1975 with the release of his *Le Smoking* collection accompanied by provocative photography with women not just wearing a man's suit, but performing as men. Gender specific dress is of course closely linked to sexuality (Barnes, 1997), suggesting how masculinity is learned (Craik, 2009, p. 143). Fashion and clothing are instrumental in the process of socialization into sexual and gender roles (Barnard, 2002).

In constructing identity fashion is not, however, concerned only with gender (Wilson, 2003). Gender and sexuality have always challenged the world of fashion (Gligorovska, 2011). Gender, sex, and sexuality are often incorrectly presented synonymously, but they are from the same entity, as is the expression of both. Despite its seemingly clear distinction, sex transcends the generally held binary of male/female (Lunceford, 2010). Sex, sexuality, and gender are completely different pieces of a person's identity (McMahon, 2014). Sex is determined by biological, physical markers such as genitalia and secondary sex characteristics; Gender, on the other hand, is the social construction of how one of a particular sex should behave (Lunceford, 2010). Gender identities are not fixed but they are always in the process of making (Gligorovska, 2011). The term gender identity refers to the construction of an identity due to interaction within a social environment but also due to the realization of a person's existence as a man or a woman. Oakley (2000) notes that to be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network and personality as it is of



possessing a particular set of genitals. Fashion and clothing reproduce sex and gender identities and positions (Barnard, 2002, p. 141). The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body (Butler, 1999).

The fashion industry has always been preoccupied with the thin line between masculinity and femininity (Gligorovska, 2011). *Fashion's Double: Representations of Fashion in Painting, Photography and Film* (Geezy, 2016) touches on myriad components within the cultural history of fashion, examining how meanings are represented through clothing and dress in photography and how it impacts identities. Gender bending is not a new story in the Western society (Gligorovska, 2011). There exists a natural, almost inherent perception of a binary and biased gender with a definitively heteronormative correlation of sex to a binary gender system even with consideration for an alternative style. Gender is something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characteristics of the individual (Goffman, 1997).

Individuals choose their signifiers and those decisions are generally based on heteronormative, patriarchal standards of how a man or woman should adorn their bodies based on a binary gender spectrum. Both femininity and masculinity are performances that bodies internalize until they become second nature (Craik, 2009, p. 140). However, there is a growing subculture of those who perform their gender identity in direct opposition to those expectations. Playing with gender is about defamiliarization (Naz, 2014). There are engendered stereotypes present in certain styles of clothing and dress based on their perceived levels of femininity or masculinity (Tiggeman, 2012). Women have borrowed from elements of men's dress throughout the history of Western dress, but there has been little to no reciprocity. Men; however, who borrow elements from women's dress, become part of the counterculture, despite the emergence of androgyny.

One intriguing refinement of fashion's historic tendency to exploit masculine versus feminine instability in gender identity has been to periodically resort to androgyny

as way of addressing the problem (Davis, 1992). Androgyny in gendered appearances became widespread beginning in the 1960s (Michelman, 2010). "Androgyny" is often described by philosophers, poets, and theologians as a state of exalted being, the ideal completion of humanity in a condition of transcendence; as such, the image of wholeness paradoxically utilizes sexual symbols only to leave the body behind, to attain stasis and perfection beyond gender, sexuality and desire (Garber, 1996, p. 207). The term is derived from the Greek words for male and female suggesting as a state intermediate between masculinity and femininity (Gligorovska, 2011).

The androgyne, a figure both male and female, pictured in classical and Renaissance art and literature as a transcendent and harmonious union of opposites (Garber, 1996, p. 207). In terms of gender identity, androgynous is a person that does not fit into the masculine versus feminine criteria (Gligorovska, 2011). The ubiquitous concept of androgynous dressing became a fashion trend well into the 1970s and 1980s led by international celebrities including Grace Jones, David Bowie and Prince. What is being presented with androgyny in postmodern society can be interpreted as manoeuvre of its performativity (Gligorovska, 2011).

Using fashion as a determining factor of the gender of an individual is an archaic means of identification. Yet gender, like fashion, is ever-changing and should not be considered static. The fluidity in fashion is mirrored in gender fluidity as evidenced in the photographs by Frances Neyra Claudio and documentary film by Porscha Dallas in *performing fashion: senseless acts of gender*. The future is held out as a place of fluid identities, where being male and being female is strictly a matter of external attributes: identity is no longer determined by gender, but is assumed through the appropriation of roles (Malossi, 2000). Clothes don't make the man, nor do they make the woman. And neither does gender.

As Simone de Beauvoir said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."



Figure 1: The bar jacket from Christian Dior defined the "New Look" in 1947,  
Association Willy Maywald/ADAGP, Paris 2017



Figure 2: Yves Saint Laurent, French Vogue, Rue Aubriot, Paris, 1975. Helmut Newton



Figure 3: Grace Jones performs live at The Carre Theatre in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1981.  
Rob Verhors/Redferns





Figure4: David Bowie for Diamond Dog, 1974. Terry O'Neill



Figure 5: Prince in Heels. Unknown.



Figure 6: Salvador Dali by Irving Penn, 1947



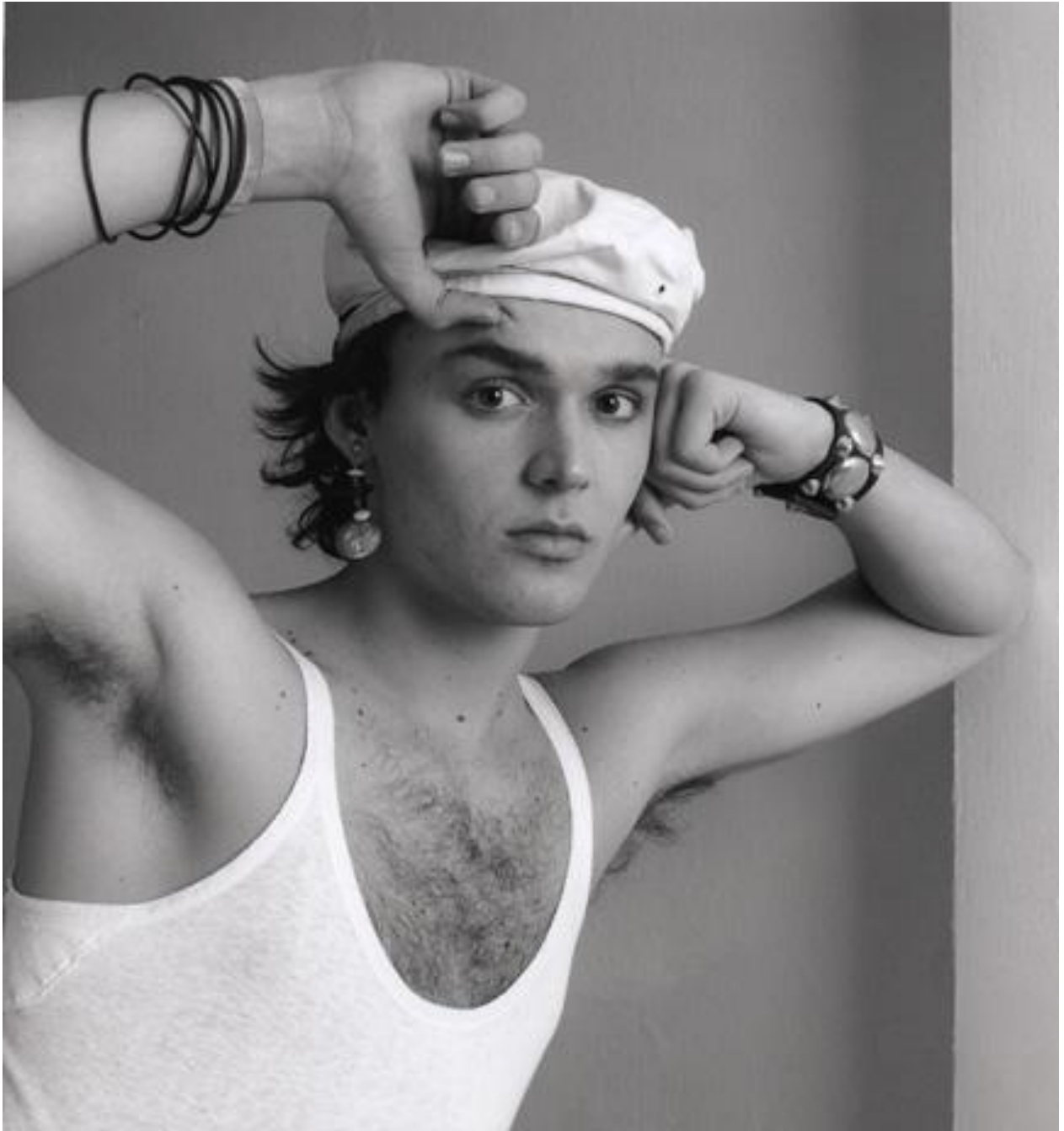


Figure 7: David LaChapelle by Edward Mapplethorpe, 1984.



Figure 2: Untitled Film Still #35, Cindy Sherman, 1979.



Figure 9: Shea, *Genderqueer* by Dave Naz, 2014.

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