



MEA CULPA *

SU FRIEDRICH

I used to read *Vogue* "for the photography" the way I read *Playboy* "for the articles."

Help keep America beautiful

— *Cosmetics ad*

To assemble the props for this project, I spent an afternoon in the room-sized closet of Helen, a clothes maniac. When I lived with her, I was always carrying on about "the renunciation of material wealth as a primary political act"; I return one year later more humble, less certain that this renunciation is actually as easy as they make it seem.

We are well past the days when beauty was an idle woman's way of passing the time — and we're secure enough to know the difference. Today, when time is something no one has enough of — when women have jobs, families, and half a dozen other commitments — caring about yourself isn't the icing on the cake. It's one of the responsibilities of everyday life to look as well as you can . . . for yourself . . . and for the delight of others.

— *Vogue's "Point of View," 1975*

Helen is a perfect resource because of her indiscriminate attachment to all clothes. On the same day she'll buy a satin kimono, suede pantsuit and pink mohair sweater and then pack them away and continue to wear her Hellenisms. If I were a Freudian, I'd triumphantly claim her for my "clothes as a sexual surrogate" thesis. But I'm more interested in squeezing the lifeblood out of the deadly aphorism: Clothes Make The Woman.

Tonight, I feel as ethereal as a silken butterfly. This afternoon, I helped him change a tire. Is it magic, the moonlight, or Cheryl Baron's slither of silk?

— *Clothing ad in Vogue*

I must remain alert during this project, wary of its seduction. I have what some people consider the bad habit of rarely confronting myself in the mirror. In fact I'm usually surprised to see myself. My appearance runs the short course from plain lesbian feminist to affordably classy dyke. Even these images seem rigidly codified and I am confused and dissatisfied with them.

Do you blame me for wanting to be a man — free in a man-made world? Do you blame me for hating again to resume a woman's clothes and just belong? — Cora Anderson in 1914, who, after living as a man, in man's dress, and marrying a woman, was "exposed" and ordered by a court to resume wearing female clothes (cited in Gay American History)

Gentlemen prefer tuxedos . . . When it's you. In your best . . . double breasted satin tux. . .

— *Clothing ad in The New York Times, 1976*

It's a guilty struggle, indulging in fantasies of myself in new clothes and roles and then rejecting each of them on "political principle": material projection of self seems at odds with a serious commitment . . . And then the cycle twists and I defend artifice as a great form of subversion.

Women stride in boots.

Little vests are super — little fur vests, little vests in gold at night . . . Don't let anyone talk you into one of those suit-with-a-vest routines — a take-off on men's clothes is not what it's all about. . .

— *Clothing ad in Vogue, 1976*

There is no intrinsic sin in riding astride a horse, or in wearing boots and breeches, but there is harm in violating those decent rules by which the conduct of either sex is regulated.

— *London Medical Times, 1897*
(quoted in *Gay American History*)

So now, disguised as a "project," I'm exposing myself to an overwhelming array of visual, emotional and intellectual costumes and it's becoming very difficult to overcome the predetermined identities built into these clothes.

The wearing of one scent alone can become as much a part of a woman's behavior as the way she speaks, parts her hair, wears down her lipstick . . . and it's deliberate.

— *Editorial comment in Vogue*

I usually don't think of myself as having the same soft curves that I see displayed everywhere. I imagine that they belong to women with very different perceptions of themselves. But no . . . in the right clothes I'd be indistinguishable from them. Breasts, legs, pink, smooth, a mute smile.

And then I know that underneath they're as full of blood and guts as I am.

She dresses for herself but we dress her. — *Clothing ad in Vogue*

More than a way of dressing, Halston is a way of life.

— *Clothing ad in Vogue*

Helen's attic.

I slip on an apricot satin gown. It gleams. Soft, fantastically soft, cool on my thighs, hanging loosely over my breasts. My usual garb doesn't exact such erotic responses from my skin. I begin to act out a seduction but it's very unclear whom I'm seducing. I enter a male fantasy. I see more clearly than ever the motives for this madness.

I was nine years old, reading comic books in the seclusion of my back porch. Eagerly, I flipped to the Frederick's of Hollywood ad in the back, my fingers slowly tracing the outlines of those drawings, lingering over the firm pointed breasts and outrageously full hips. Stroking, stroking. Squeezing my eyes shut I dreamt of perfect curves and crevices, of cleavage and sculpted limbs on those crazy high heels.

In the more discreet magazines of high school and college I recognized Frederick's aesthetic translated into Tasteful and Chic. They had merely disguised it as "The Fresh Young Look" and "The New Romanticism."

In 1678 Abbe Jacques Boileau published "A just and seasonable Reprehension of naked Breasts, etc."

— *Quoted in The Unfashionable Human Body*

Feeling guilty: "How can I worry about the world of fashion while the world out there is falling apart?" The World and The Fashion World? It's clear how divisive and misleading man-made categories are.

I recall the months of hours spent in Catholic girls' high school earning the admiration of friends and the disapproval of the nuns. Their typically "altruistic" rationale for our hideous uniforms was that they were freeing our energy for pursuits more honorable than vanity, but by basing this rationale on their priorities (chastity before comfort) rather than our own, they were destined to fail. Precisely because everything was so ugly (to our self-conscious eyes) we spent that precious energy undermining the dress code.

Red bras or naked breasts shone through the thin white blouses, high heels and gym shoes replaced the tyrannical saddle shoe, arms were laden with clattering jewelry, eyes and lips and nails changed color every day, and 3:00 brought the hysterical rush to change into presentable street clothes.

The consciousness of being perfectly dressed may bestow a peace such as religion cannot give.
— Herbert Spencer

In the days when I should have been daydreaming about boys, I was busy admiring magazine models, my classmates, and myself. I was being trained to appreciate the artificial and real curves, gestures and textures of women, but while I never wanted that physical perfection in those to whom I was emotionally attracted, I demanded it of myself. It seemed, however, that the harder I tried to achieve that perfection, the more elusive it became. I saw how arbitrary the rules actually were; I learned to laugh and to formulate some of my own ideas.

Powerful feelings of rejection set in: even my most stalwart friends were trying to "grow up," to dress and act "maturely." In response, I discovered nervous habits, too much unwanted attention, too little love, self-consciousness and ANGER.

Thanks for the anger.

"Dressing should be exactly that—a tasteful overlaying that brings out the best in me. And you know what: This is the year I can really be me!" We understand you at Saks Fifth Avenue.

— Clothing ad in Vogue

Like most mothers, mine is respectful of Culture. I once went with her to The Ballet, in old jeans, my favorite peasant blouse, and without shoes. I try now, seven years later, to remember her shame, and her rage (at me). She asked, "Why do you DO it?", sounding as if I was poisoning babies. But I don't predicate my appearance on how effectively it will offend others. I am confronting how I alone want to dress. If I am ostracized because I dress like a "slob" or a "dyke," she mutters something about my "deserving" it. They all do. The impulse to please her, to conform, is a glass splinter in my gut, dangerous to extract but fatal to ignore. What else can I do but try?

I admit the monster in me. I salute the witch. My ancestors were proud and fierce and slaughtered. My sisters remember. We remind each other, we snarl.

Spot tip: to reduce a too-full upper lip, outline it with a white pencil and smudge it down.
— Beauty tips in Vogue

I go to Woolworths for makeup for this project. I have to work some black magic on my unkempt face. I expertly "blush on,"

frost my lips, sculpt my lids with manufactured nature.

Why does it feel so natural to perform this ritual? I want to feel terribly strange. I want to experience it with the same bewilderment that someone from a preindustrial culture would feel on seeing the first photograph of herself, but I feel as if I'd never been away from it.

The Papuans, for instance, have a high regard for the vibrating buttocks of their women who early learn to cultivate a provocative walk.
— in The Unfashionable Human Body

— First in class to shave my legs. Brave.

— Discarded my bra with my Catholicism. Subversive.

— Wore sandals and a long braid at the university. Intellectual.

— Feel professional in my velvet jacket. Adult.

I see how powerfully Their definitions have defined my reactions, how much my spontaneity has been predetermined. This affects not only how I "choose" to dress but how I respond to others.

The "Ahh, I *thought* so" when a woman's actions fit her appearance.

And the delightful confusion when a woman in Ladydrag gets ANGRY, gets FURIOUS.

The disappointment when gym shoes and labyris protect a hypocrite.

The disorienting pleasure when a "butchy" woman speaks tenderly to me.

How ludicrous.

But I challenge anyone to say that she doesn't go through the same gyrations.

I hate it. I hate it and I keep doing it.

Everyone tells me not to worry, "Everyone does it."

A lousy argument.

Whatever happened to self-definition? To inner-directed fantasy?

... there is a woman among the Snakes who once dreamed that she was a man and killed animals in the chase. Upon waking, she assumed her husband's garments, took his gun and went out to test the virtue of her dream; she killed a deer. Since that time she has not left off man's costume ... by some fearless actions she has obtained the title of "brave" and the privilege of admittance to the council of chiefs. Nothing less than another dream could make her return to her gown.

— Pierre-Jean de Smet (quoted in Gay American History)

The danger lies in rebelling on Their terms, replacing one dictate with another. Are we really appeased now that we can wear pants to work? No ... we embrace the egalitarianism of pants and then create socioeconomic distinctions between pants, slacks and trousers, between fine and grubby pants.

Fashion changes, but its significance remains: style costs money. We have been taught to be grateful for the "democratic" variety in our lives, but our clothes reflect our economic tyranny. Not only can few of us afford the ever-changing demands of fashion, but we are also destroying animals and the earth to satiate our insatiable "needs."

This isn't a fixed reality, it's been built from egocentric and ruthless fantasies. Alter the fantasy and we alter the reality.

The mystery of fashion is that this sudden change of detail is imposed on women: they cannot escape it ... In matters of style, women obey some hidden law analogous to the one that decides the colors of the wings of birds or the petals of flowers.

— in Feminine Fulfillment

We must begin to believe in a value-free body aesthetic; free choice will come only when the options aren't value-laden.

I'm tired of sad-looking women, of drab suffragettes, of dull and unbecoming colors.
— Valentino, clothing designer

Trying to extricate myself.

Trying to think without Do's and Don'ts, feminine and masculine, fame or famine.

Growing up a Catholic middle-class white girl taught me the value of disobedience. I have a vivid sense of my difference and I want to exploit this to catalyze a reaction, to force a confrontation of values.

My appearance is an immediate, nonverbal statement and what I do subsequently either confirms or destroys people's assumptions; they don't want to hear an articulate defense of my "bad habits." They want room to condescend.

They tell me I'd "improve my chances" if I wore the right things. Chances? Is this a lottery? Who are they to decide my worth?

I know that we need to feel okay about ourselves, but the question here is using clothes to get or keep privilege.

... as hard times were crowding upon us, I made up my mind to dress in men's attire to seek labor as I was used to men's work. And as I might work harder at housekeeping and get only a dollar per week, and I was capable of doing men's work and getting men's wages, I resolved to try.

— Lucy Ann Lobdell, 1854, age 25

When I feel jealous of women who "survive" by wearing the right trinkets smells shoes colors, I remind myself that with the game comes the terror of losing. I had assumed that being a dyke meant not playing the game, but I'm in the same trap as an obedient sister. She has to remain desirable by Their standards while I have to continually fight Their insistence that I be desirable. I fall into the trap of thinking that I had no interest in being desirable.

Of course I do, but not on Their terms.

There is a way of dressing — a way of looking — that to American women is like a way of life. It has to do with a certain free-wheeling casualness and dash that goes through and through and up and down.
— Vogue Slob.

... elegant clothing becomes your coat of arms, by which others will recognize that this is indeed yourself. A rag can be eminently elegant, as we see in Andalusia with the beggars ... We understand that elegance is not conferred by luxury but rather by poverty; the latter brings us close to a state of nature where nothing is useless.
— in Feminine Fulfillment Hippie.

Thank you, Arthur Richards. At last, someone recognized that women prefer what gentlemen prefer. And that's the fit and quality of menswear tailoring.
— Vogue Dyke.

Confidence is a Lady in a Leon Levin.
— Vogue Ballbreaker.

The new bareness ... and what it takes to wear it.
— Vogue Whore.

People resent anyone who won't dress "nicely." We defile their sanctified spaces.

"Irreverent!"

"It's just a phase."

"When I was your age..."

I am not a string of phases. I am no age.

In childhood they taught me that acceptance and success would come only with conformity. But my acceptance of myself has come only through nonconformity. They call me selfish because I don't want to validate their "need" for discretion and propriety, their need to belong. I answer that the incessant craving to be legitimate is the corrupting force in all of us.

I don't want to have to dress like a man to get in.

I'm not interested in looking like a Lady to receive sanction.

I'm tired of being fooled by flannel shirts.

I'm not a feminist because of my boots.

What are we all trying so desperately to "get into" anyway? Who wants to rent a room in a burning building?



* During Catholic mass, the assembled chant "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa" (through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault) as they beat their breasts three times.

Thank you Helen for your clothes, and Amy Sillman and Cynthia Carr for assisting in the photography, and Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Crowell, 1976), Bernard Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1974) and Jean Guilton, *Feminine Fulfillment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1965).

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