

## FASHION, ART AND ROCK-AND-ROLL

Lily Fraser

"Artists of the past created works out of bronze, in marble...even with televisions; [b]ut there is one quality they have never used, and that is the quality of love and tenderness that we human beings have for what does not last." (Jeanne-Claude, 2006)<sup>1</sup>



Lily Fraser, *Preliminary Sketch (of Cake)*, acrylic on canvas, 148 x 102 cm, 2007 (courtesy of the artist).

### PART ONE

Clothing is an heir to postmodernist art and thinking. The theatre of art – culture – critically probes its own content. Art's relationship to culture becomes a chicken and egg scenario. Early theatrical/art events such as public executions, ritual dancing, religious communion, puppetry, political satire and bardship, provided strong shared experiences allowing the investigation of cultural boundaries and relationships through interpretation and response. The cultural dialogue debating where 'god' ended and the 'self' began often meant violent uprisings and oppression. Concepts of the self infused relationships with religion, politics and science and all forms of everyday life and art practice with questions about value and power. The 'self' – especially the poor and exploited 'self' is described and protected via legislation explicating dominant moral restrictions and cultural taboos. Ideas about the central position and importance of the 'individual' continue to flourish, forming a negotiated equality.

The art-making practices of postmodern artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Vivian Westwood (before the chronological advent of that era) addressed the collision of culture with the body/self. Each of these artists created works which involved placing the body at its centre, and the 'self's' response to the world around them as the focus. These artists created mythocentric, exaggerated selves of high drama that flowed in and out of their work and dealings with the public. These presented selves and

artworks share a commonality of 'baseness', placing themselves in opposition to what is accepted as 'nice and clean'. By their persistence and commitment, they helped to create new understandings about value that bypasses traditional ideas of virtue. Willingness to bring their 'base' offerings to the public helped break down art's already disintegrating singular aesthetic and conceptual boundaries.

Artists taking advantage of the reinterpretation of these boundaries, such as those involved with Surrealism, Minimalism and Abstract art, pushed and probed their own particular positions. Techniques using conceptuality as a divining aesthetic flourished. Primitive ideas of degradation and decay permeated art. The boundaries between life and art became heavily contested; and responses became mediated by performance. Art-making practices developed to include following and recording, imprinting and collecting trace. Temporary works, the privileging of degraded media (bodily excretions, paper and fabric) and making art primarily about sex helped set new artistic precedents. The minutiae of culture and experience became art's most pressing discourse, as well as the eternal pointing to art by *art*.

Punk did much to bring art and the quotidian of cultural minutiae together. Punk's art/fashion fusion extends from a lineage of social/political 'movements' that rejected dominant cultural parameters (these movements include the Teddy Boys, Rockers, the Beats, Flappers, conscientious objectors, vegetarians etc.) and they dictated fashion and behaviour. Punk's participants asserted a lack of interest in the more powerful social body, the state, having authority over their choices. Music's base or primal mystical nature and complex social relationship made it the perfect conduit to explore ideas about the 'self' and cultural and personal identity and personae. It is my assertion that this rebellion developed in unknowing exchange with the artistic and life style choices of artists involved with such movements as Surrealism, Fluxus etc., illustrating the journey from art to cultural exchange on the street.

The implications of punk's crossover to mainstream culture from its extreme, dangerous roots are staggering. Rock and rolls (sic) theatre of fun,

fashion, sex, art and intelligence describes a rhizomic relationship to the sensibilities of taste and style. The importance of art, fashion and music to everyday high/low culture should not be underestimated. Fashion has so many positions, all with multiple variances, that it can't help creating a rich heterogeneous display for/of interaction. Art stars and music stars have fused, creating the rock-star-artist.

## PART TWO

Contemporary artists dealing with fabric and its accoutrements, such as Australia's Mikala Dwyer and New Zealand's Violet Fagan and Susan Jowsey, use textiles and culturally superficial knick-knacks in their assemblages. Pretty vintage frocks delicately stained with multicoloured felt pens adorn the walls of Fagan's art shows. By manipulating context to help shift meaning, Fagan challenges the consignment of everyday objects to passivity. She plays on the objects' surfaces and points again and again to their 'other' positions. And while she addresses the assembled objects' histories she also constructs new, more dangerous ones for them.

Susan Jowsey's work simultaneously includes a historical and contemporary point of view. In her delicate work *Flutter*, Jowsey screenprints images of birds onto the gallery walls with light pink foundation (make-up). These motifs bridge the space between the memory of the audience (personal-smell, -touch, -taste, -texture and public-social value) and the work's practical realities - their delicacy, fragility and the inevitability of their erasure. Jowsey is participating in the discourse on where the edges of use and value lie, reassigning assumptions about beauty and value. An insistence on subjugated media, plastic birds, stained blankets, stitch and soap as art helps clarify her position as investigator and recorder:

*True Love* is a 'painting' from a series, made of nail polish on canvas board by Mikala Dwyer. At the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (in New Zealand) where I saw this piece, a table had been set up for children to make their own 'Mikala Dwyer' with card and nail polish, pointing to postmodernist art's desire to mix humour with purpose and value. A need to explore possible other interpretations of materials, to shift and

examine their function, both practically and socially, appears to drive Dwyer's work. Her reckless use of colour and materials inevitably throws up ideas that juxtapose with each other and respond to the forms she has created. Dwyer places herself well within art's discourse by mimicking art's registers of colour, form and context, and her work cannot be defined simply by her collapsed sculptural/craft aesthetic.

Importantly, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen earlier used fabrics in their artwork, continuing historical conversations about value and permanence. Artists such as Gretchen Albrecht later investigated the qualities of their canvases by applying paint speculatively, with their support material helping to generate meaning. Painting and sculptural practices can include responding to the material questions posed by fabric. Re-using the discarded remnants of painterly activities for jewellery and clothing and so forth allows for less wastage of materials (in line with environmental concerns), as well as addressing the complexities of erasure and reconstruction as a way to generate meaning.

By using textiles and its trappings, each of these artists nods to fashion and the position of craft and fabric in history. Their artworks illuminate a far corner of fashion's parameters where fabric itself becomes central and important in a practice. The exploration of the implications of fabric has a fetishistic edge, a symbolic love that describes more than just materiality. It offers important, cryptic messages, coded with unspeakable earnestness about the state of the world and its values. By being prepared to tackle everything, art has thus entered into a discourse with culture in relation to the everyday, the everyday life of the fabrics we wear close to our self/body.

### PART THREE

While some claim to not care a fig for clothing, cloths are unavoidably worn next to the naked skin, as well as being both practical and representational. Clothing – and its function within culture and in relation to sub-cultures and in working against these constructs – describes the accumulated spatio-temporal exp-eriences of the individual.<sup>2</sup> Clothing speaks to and from the unconscious, explicating desire and

status. Fashion's immediacy and rich contextual nature means that aesthetic values are easily subverted by fascination and desire. High and low styles are meaningfully distorted by our active participation. Watching, wearing, making, pretending; the play and equality promised by post-modernism is delivered by clothing.

While our attire may point to our desire for status and sense of self, our clothes equally describe a culture that has little to do with individuality. In our fast-paced postmodern utopic playground, novelty is an exponentially increasing phenomenon, exactly because we yearn for some sign of individuality. The consumption of media products and the simple accumulated experiences of our fellow humans have created a rich vein of potential life experiences or choices you could make, have, or wear:

The multiplication of media images has helped create an ever-increasing commonality, an endless exchange of signs and symbols to create ever-multiplying 'realities'. Whilst the notion that humans are like physical holograms endlessly reflecting our continuously imprinting selves at each other might sound a little chilly, it does provide a liberating sense in that by accepting that it is being done *by me*, I become the subject, rather than the object that it is being done to.

To my mind, identity and self-presentation are part of a rhizomic reality described by Jean Baudrillard as the "hyper-real". Baudrillard's system<sup>3</sup> takes notice of the functional (what the object does, e.g. a toaster cooks bread) and exchange (money, trade etc.) values of society as well as the more subjective symbolic (cultural/tribal) and sign (status/desire) value of 'things'. This framework helps us to understand clothing's importance in culture.

While notions of functional and exchange value are easily understood as being practical and familiar; the symbolic and sign value of clothes is what helps create the culturally hysterical response generated by clothing. Events like the Stella McCartney<sup>4</sup> line launch at Target (Australia) and its aftermath demonstrate fashion's blind desire driven by status. The ridiculous proliferation of popularised images and slogans from Chairman Mao (people's hero?) to Napoleon Dynamites' 'vote for Pedro' point to an important

cultural conversation. The accessibility of cultural stimuli and the desire to be inventive, or to seek status and identity, means that what may pass as exclusive and specific (art, punk, or Chanel suits) will eventually return to the everyday. This cross-pollination between politics, fashion, art, and cultural intelligence is done with almost no effort on the part of the world's citizens. It is as easy as breathing.

And as long as an individual can never escape the complex array of media and cultural images and information that is presented to them, this will hold true. Simply by being, we each participate and contribute to the ever-extending definitions in our collective dictionary. The multiplicity of viewpoints

afforded us by postmodernism allows us to digest and contemplate the complexities of our communities, and of our relationship with the shirts on our backs. To dismiss fashion as 'trivial' is beside the point. The clothed body (like the unclothed body) is the inscribed body.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Quoted in Cathy Newman, "Christo and Jeanne-Claude Unwrapped", *National Geographic*, November 2006: 36-41.
- 2 These statements reflect my own poetic musings on culture with ideas loosely related to my reading of Carl Jung's biography *Jung* by Deirdre Bair, reminding me of the complex development of ideas of the unconscious and the "Tribal" mind. See Deirdre Bair, *Jung* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2003).
- 3 Jean Baudrillard, "Subjective Discourse of the Non-Functional System of Objects", in *Revenge of the Crystal* (London: Pluto, 1993).
- 4 Jen Melocco, "Surviving the Stella Wars", *The Sydney Daily Telegraph*, March 12, 2007: "There were scenes of pandemonium at the Bondi Junction Target store as women tried to grab hold of the limited edition range by the top line British designer. 'Someone just ripped a jacket out of my hands,' said Lori Herbert of Vaucluse. Another woman, who refused to give her name, said a clothes rack had been rammed into her side and she feared for her safety in the crowd." "Up to 300 women started queuing outside the store since 6.30am intent on bagging a bargain". Rachel Wells and Peter Weekes, "Many Unhappy Returns for Stella", *The Sunday Age*, April 15, 2007. "When *The Sunday Age* visited the retail giant's Bourke Street store soon after the launch, racks were laden with hundreds of the unwanted designer garments – many being returns from disappointed customers who admit to having been 'sucked in by the hype'. One such shopper is 26-year-old marketing director Georgia Moore, who drove from Fitzroy to Target's Bendigo store to try to avoid the opening day crush. She spent \$2000 on the designer threads, only to return all but two of the garments last week. Her sister spent \$800 the same day and has since returned the lot."
- 5 Also see Marcia Morgado's article entitled "The Semiotics of Extraordinary Dress: A Structural Analysis and Interpretation, in *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 2007; 25: 131-155 concerning many of the ideas posited in this perspective.

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