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Taste and Transgression: Gender and Sexuality in the Contemporary Avant–Garde Fashion of Bernhard Willhelm

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Abstract

This article examines the avant-garde fashion of Los Angeles-based designer Bernhard Willhelm and how it simultaneously traverses the border between bourgeois respectability and "bad" taste, and challenges codes of heteronormative dress. Through analyses of specific collections and their representations, it demonstrates how Willhelm and his business partner Jutta Kraus interrogate and trouble fashion industry norms of beauty, gender, sexuality and race. Past menswear collections have featured traditionally feminine garments—skimpy body tanks, revealing hot pants, frilly peplums or "super mini-skirts"—while corresponding womenswear collections have comprised in part similar, if not identical garments. This

crossover reflects Willhelm and Kraus's desire to diversify menswear and challenge the fashion system's divisions between gendered dress. Their decorative, feminine forms dispute notions of propriety and directly contravene interpretations of modern (read: masculine) design as stripped of ornamentation. This article also considers the transgressions enacted when such garments are modeled by gay, pornographic and black male bodies. In so doing, Bernhard Willhelm actively refuses to perpetuate homogeneity by supporting diversity in its various forms.

KEYWORDS: Bernhard Willhelm, avant-garde, transgression, gender, sexuality

The MOCA Pacific Design Center's website described the exhibition *Bernhard Willhelm 3000: When Fashion Shows the Danger Then Fashion is the Danger* (2015) as a "response to the uniformity of consumerism in the 21 century as well as a forecast of the fashion experience in the 22 century." While the statement referred specifically to the homogeneity of consumer tastes and the LA-based brand's resistance to the conformity of fashion, the exhibition could be read as a critique of capitalism and the role of contemporary fashion within it. Having the appearance of something between a site-specific installation and a tradeshow, the exhibition performed a dual function as cultural spectacle and capitalistic enterprise. Navigating the grey area with culture and commerce, the MOCA LA gift shop sold tote bags that also appeared in the exhibition space itself. Each bag featured an image on one side, with a series of seemingly non-related phrases on the reverse. One tote displayed a 1980's photographic portrait of a male model, who leans his front against a large rock while coyly looking over his shoulder at the viewer. The model sports a mullet hairstyle, cropped pink T-shirt and acid-washed jeans that have been strategically ripped open to reveal the whole of his backside. On the other side of the bag, the phrase "Let's Just Say That It Involves Farm Animals" appears, an explicit nod to gay sexuality and the taboo of zoophilia and/or bestiality. This suggestive tote bag is only one way the avant-garde fashion of Bernhard Willhelm traverses the boundary between respectability and "bad" taste, while simultaneously making a statement in support of queer sexuality. When designed with such motivating forces in mind, vanguard fashion serves as a medium for political engagement, shifting acceptable notions of gendered dress and by extension, the performance and presentation of the body. In their fashions and their representations, Willhelm and his business partner Jutta Kraus continue the legacy of the historical artistic avant-garde in resisting hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality, questioning concepts of bourgeois decorum and taste, and purposefully queering such notions of propriety.

Body politics: challenging gender and sexuality in fashion

Willhelm and Kraus critique and subvert binaries of femininity and masculinity in their practice, at once blurring the boundaries between menswear and womenswear collections and queering conventions of beauty and attractiveness within the fashion system. Their Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show played with conventional codes of gender in both performance and staging. Set in a Parisian Mercedes Benz dealership on the Champs-Élysées, the presentation challenged the hypermasculine space of a car showroom. Models walked down the makeshift "runway," passing in front of a large backlit advertisement for the Mercedes C-Class Coupe, described in 2015 promotional material as "sporty" and "agile" with "strength to bare." Willhelm and Kraus employed professional female bodybuilder Rahel Ruch to strut and flex in a bikini during the runway show amongst a display of stacked tires and cars (Figure 1). When viewed against a cast of less-muscled male models, Ruch's presence intensified gender distinctions; the models then appeared feminized despite their relatively "manly" appearance. The embodied performances in the presentation put forth areas of liminality, where hypermasculinity, in relation to both the male and female body, questions and tests the boundaries of gender. Female bodybuilders such as Ruch pervert codes of femininity with their testosterone-fueled bodies and bulging muscles. This body type subverts conventional feminine ideals of curvaceousness based upon the contours of the breasts, waist, hips and backside, and instead places emphasis on muscular shoulders, arms and thighs. That the term "bodybuilder" requires the preceding "female" descriptor is an indication of its gendered status as a masculine practice. Yet, Ruch played the role of a car model—itself a feminine role—wearing a black Brazilian-cut swimsuit that revealed her toned backside, her body daintily perched atop platform stilettos. Her ensemble, replete with medium-length flat-ironed hair and painted nails, enforced her femininity, contrasting her masculine physique. In this way, her appearance is in line with bodybuilding industry guidelines, as some competitions require women to wear high heels, and many choose to compensate for their testosterone-fueled bodies by wearing heavily embellished show suits, coiffed hairstyles, jewelry and make-up, including false eyelashes and long, painted fingernails. As well, a number of women opt for breast augmentation surgery to regain breast shape lost after muscle development. Through this shaping and reshaping, the female bodybuilder's physique is queered and attempts to superimpose femininity (the delicate, the petite, the soft) on the masculinized body after the fact (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 88). Like Lisa Lyon, the first International Federation of BodyBuilding and Fitness (IFFB) World Women's Bodybuilding Champion and subject of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic series *Lady, Lisa Lyon* (1983), Ruch's muscular physique oscillates between femininity and masculinity and their respective connotations of beauty and strength. As such, her performance in the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show presented a complex

Figure 1
Bodybuilder Rahel Ruch at the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear runway show. Photograph: Shoji Fuji. Courtesy: Bernhard Willhelm.

series of masculinities and femininities that dispute a binary understanding of gender.

A number of garments in the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear collection challenge gender-appropriate dressing in a convergence of the bawdy meets body. This is manifested most apparently in the "Be Into It" body tank, which resembles at best a women's one piece swimsuit, albeit, a revealing one (Figure 2). Made of a cotton jersey, the construction of the body tank is more similar to a T-shirt than a swimsuit, yet its silhouette creates an explicit point of focus, revealing and accentuating the backside and geni-

Figure 2
"Be Into It" mankini from the Spring/Summer 2012 menswear collection. Photograph: the author.

talia. To be further suggestive, a *trompe l'oeil* tuxedo front is printed along with the letters "XXL"—a motif that is pervasive in the collection—as if to gesture at the wearer's groin. At the same time, the faux tuxedo-front plays with the dressed-undressed opposition, itself evocative of male-strippers such as the ladies' entertainment company, the Chippendales. Worn most notably by the since retired, French gay pornographic actor François Sagat, the body tank's allusions to non-heteronormative sexuality are even starker. In a 2008 interview, Willhelm discusses the concept of sexiness in menswear:

Figure 3
"Twirly" super mini-skirt/peplum from the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear collection. Photograph: the author.

> Men's fashion in the last 10 years has been so much about the suit and looking kind of prep and normal. […] The body is something you actually can show and there are still some men who are not ashamed of their bodies and their sexuality. I grew up with the whole AIDS history and after that I think fashion became kind of baggy and sexless. I feel that it's time to kind of discover that sexiness again, but it isn't easy. (qtd. in Kowalewski 2008)

Although the body tank transgresses normative heterosexuality and dress, the body it reveals—that of muscular Sagat—adheres to conventions of the ideal body and norms in the gay porn industry. Willhelm and Kraus's menswear garments at once reinscribe the hypermasculine form maintained in gay porn while playing with the aesthetics of gender inversion. Skimpy shorts in the same collection deviate from traditional masculine codes of dress; one pair can be described as taking on the appearance of "hot pants," which are normally associated with womenswear but in this case, accentuate the muscular and taut male backside. Other shorts resemble cotton briefs overlaid with a gauzy chiffon-like material in the Spring/Summer 2011 and 2012 menswear collections. More transgressive is a series of extremely short, ruffled skirts from Spring/Summer 2011 that seem to reference peplums (Figure 3). Although traditionally considered to be a women's garment, the "super mini skirt" as it is labeled, is categorized as a menswear object in ModeMuseum collection in Antwerp, despite also appearing in the women's lookbook. Willhelm and Kraus's crossover garments reflect a desire to diversify menswear, as Willhelm contends: "But for men, there are not many things around focusing on the more creative side. Men deserve a little bit more than another suit or a shirt" (qtd. in Heyman 2010). In other words, garments such as the "super mini skirt" enhance an otherwise standardized uniform for menswear. Its frills are also largely decorative and therefore directly contravene interpretations of modern (read:

masculine) design as stripped of ornamentation. In his 1898 essay "Men's Fashion," architect Adolf Loos writes about the need for men to be unassumingly dressed (i.e. unadorned), as "[i]n good society, to be conspicuous is bad manners" (11); he would later become known for his essay "Ornament and Crime" (1908) in which he famously denounces ornamentation as anti-modern. Early modernist thinkers took on Loos's logic in developing their own aesthetic and design ideals, perpetuating the now overused dictum that form follows function. It is such lines of thought that have persisted in mainstream men's fashion in the contemporary moment; in the mid 1990s, for example, urban men concerned with personal grooming and self-adornment were disparagingly labeled as "metrosexuals." Given such precedents of modern masculinity, the peplum's appearance in the Bernhard Willhelm design vocabulary rests at the intersection between decoration, gender, class and taste; it crosses gender categories in suggesting similar or identical garments and silhouettes for both womenswear and menswear, but also confronts the gendered notion of adornment.

While it can be said that Willhelm and Kraus's truncated and figure-defining trouser bottoms are appropriate silhouettes for men's undergarments or swimwear, their decontextualization as daywear disturbs the categories of gender and plays with ideas of homosexuality and gay body culture. This is further compounded by Willhelm's reference to Sagat's look in the Spring/Summer 2012 collection as a "gay Jesus" and the models' explicit "Jesus looks" replete with crowns of thorns, styled shoulder-length hair, bronzed body makeup and electric blue contact lenses. The perversion of Christ as homosexual porn star recalls strategies of transgression in the punk subculture; the Sex Pistols's cover artwork for their 1977 single, "God Save the Queen," is one such parallel example that vandalizes the image of Queen Elizabeth II. Blasphemy, defacement, these are the characteristics of counter-culture that constitute a "self-consciously subversive *bricolage*" (Hebdige 1979, 123, italics in original). While the Bernhard Willhelm aesthetic is not "punk" in the sense of referring to the punk subculture's golden age in the 1970s, its intention to subvert and trouble convention is very much so rooted in this tradition. Furthermore, just as fast fashion has co-opted punk aesthetics, so too will mainstream culture reproduce seditious imagery and disturb heteronormativity in fashion; contemporary fashion cultures have already adopted gender neutral dressing, queer models and various forms of gender inversion. While Bernhard Willhelm is far from receiving household name recognition—the company functions more as an artistic enterprise than a conventional fashion brand—it seeks to articulate an inclusive space of belonging for non-conforming individuals. In this sense, Willhelm and Kraus also share in the history of punk in the creation of community through activism. For Bernhard Willhelm, success is tied to its celebration of queer bodies and qualitative impact on and representation of marginalized individuals outside of the fashion mainstream rather than on metrics such as brand reach and profit.

As a whole, Willhelm and Kraus's menswear and womenswear collections are not so easily differentiated from each other, and the collections are often displayed in concert. Some items such as the aforementioned

"super mini skirt" from Spring/Summer 2011 are shown in both collections, with little or no variation, while other garments: leggings, robes, dress-like tunics, appear to be gender nonspecific. Recent collections have conflated both menswear and womenswear into one presentation or lookbook, making the designs increasingly more gender neutral. The Autumn/Winter 2014–2015 collection features two separate lookbooks, each shot by a different photographer. Both lookbooks destabilize fixed gender identities in the sense that the womenswear and menswear collections are nearly indiscernible from one another and all models, regardless of gender, wear everything in the collection from dresses, skirts and leggings to various suit combinations. To add another layer of ambiguity, gender codes are further remixed with genderqueer, transgendered or cross-dressing male models wearing long, painted nails, jewelry, high-heeled shoes and make-up; all have visible body hair (Figure 4). Without industry differentiations between menswear and womenswear, Willhelm and Kraus's avant-garde fashions are neither fully masculine nor feminine and inhabit a space of in-betweeness. Barring the early womenswear only collections in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Bernhard Willhelm has never been one to strictly adhere to definitions of gender. In this way, Willhelm and Kraus's rejection of gender norms can be compared to punk's subversion of socially constructed categories of femininity and masculinity. According to the cultural critic and theorist Dick Hebidge, punks transgress gender categories through their disruption of beauty: "Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with the traditional feminine lore of cosmetics. Contrary to the advice of every woman's magazine, make-up for both boys and girls was worn to be seen" (1979, 107). Seen in this light, Willhelm and Kraus's designs function in a way similar to punk's anti-fashion; their archetypal women and men are neither feminine nor masculine and a large proportion of their garments tend towards the unisex. This punk-unisex position is plainly conveyed in the banana-themed Spring/Summer 2016 collection entitled "69," which features male and female models wearing genderless looks with a heavy dose of sexual connotation. The garments focus on an appreciation of the phallus and are directed towards both a queer gaze and any gaze that is not that of a straight male. Textual statements printed on the garments include "2 cute 2 b str8," "WILL WORK FOR [image of a banana]" or a shirt that announces "POSITION OF THE DAY" in combination with an image of two unpeeled bananas positioned to suggest simultaneous oral sex.

Willhelm and Kraus's resistance against mainstream ideals of gender is also conveyed in designs that do not conform to the body or adhere to modern conceptions of Western gendered dress. In the case of women's fashion, the concept of fashion as an enhancer of the body—whether it is to elongate, compress or stretch it into a fashionable shape—is oftentimes of foremost importance. Willhelm and Kraus regularly construct loose and baggy garments for their women's collections that obscure the shape of the body underneath. The styling in their womenswear runway presentations

Figure 4
Matthew Marble in the lookbook for the Autumn/Winter 2014–2015 collection. Photograph: Natasha Goldenberg. Courtesy: Bernhard Willhelm.

and lookbook photographs often pair looks with flat shoes or sneakers, shoes that traditionally have been seen as "anti-high heels" in fashion. Current social expectations of gendered dress are reversed: menswear silhouettes are formfitting, while womenswear looks are more free-flowing and voluminous. Both interpretations provide alternative views of sexual attractiveness and communicate a progressive notion of the fashioned self as sexually ambiguous. Through gender fluid fashion and representation, Willhelm and Kraus promote the acceptance of multiple gender identities, eschewing binary gender categories and destabilizing heteronormative sexuality.

Against notions of taste: challenging a bourgeois construct of fashion

Willhelm and Kraus alter the category of fashion by confronting conventional bourgeois notions of good taste and conspicuous consumption and questioning fashion as a function of class distinction. I take this idea of altering categories from Peter Bürger's assertion that "the avant-gardistes profoundly modified the category of the work of art" (1984, 51) as they attempted to destroy the autonomy of art in the bourgeois social order and reintegrate it into the praxis of everyday life. Similarly, Willhelm and Kraus reconfigure the concept of fashion as an aesthetic commodity, proposing their designs as agents to resist the class-based structures of fashion. In critiquing bourgeois conventions of taste and consumption, they simultaneously assess the conformist values of the bourgeois as a whole. In *Bernhard Willhelm 3000*, Willhelm and Kraus offered their fashion as an alternative to the uniformity of mass consumerism, a cure-all for what ails the current state of fashion. In situating themselves against sameness, they promote diversity on a greater scale; their aesthetic nonconformity is politically and unequivocally tied to their stance on issues of race, gender and sexuality. Their radical designs are a form of protest, and counter the overwhelming amount of bourgeois material consumption as a means of moral betterment. Although the premise of *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* states that the exhibition examines the conformity of (unconscious or uncritical) consumerism rather than consumption outright, the latter is implicit in an understanding of the former.

Willhelm and Kraus's resistance to traditional notions of good taste and the beauty of the fashion object recalls Marcel Duchamp's claim of aesthetic indifference with his readymades. Their designs teeter between decorum and impropriety and aim to disrupt the visual codes of both conventional and avant-garde fashion. In self-consciously using strategies such as humor and absurdity, Willhelm and Kraus abscond from the decidedly more "serious" avant-gardism that has come to represent Belgian fashion. Willhelm contends that he occupies a position contrary to his avant-garde forebears in Belgian fashion:

> The Belgians were the exact opposite of me: unassuming and discreet. In the world of fashion there has to be the occasional indiscretion. With a lot of Belgian designers, you can look at the first or the twentieth collection and you can't tell the difference. They're still clinging to the same idea. I was always thinking to myself—come on, lighten up! (qtd. in Politi 2010, 120)

Here, seriousness and discretion are equated with "good" taste and the observation of decorum, where humor is lowbrow "bad" taste. These characteristics of solemnity can also be extended to apply to avant-gar-

de designers outside of the Antwerp School. A 2013 exhibition at Frankfurt's Museum Angewandte Kunst entitled *Outer Dark. Continuing after Fashion*—curated by Mahret Kupka and Matthias Wagner K and designed by past Bernhard Willehlm collaborator Žana Bošnjak—focused on anti-fashion, specifically that of designers such as Ann Demeulemeester, Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, and Alexander McQueen, all of whose fashions are considered avant-garde, dark in color (i.e. black) and somber in concept. In contrast, Willhelm and Kraus offer a light-hearted alternative to the "dark" and serious avant-gardism, and as a result, diversify the aesthetic of vanguard fashion. Speaking on the topic of uniformity and conformity in high-end fashion in relation, Willhelm hints at his distaste for the equations between taste, solemnity and class: "I don't want to see bourgeois Parisians who take themselves so seriously in their upper-class ghettos and think they are better. I find it very uninspiring" (qtd. in Kowalewski 2008). In this sense, Willhelm and Kraus's deviation from both norms of the avant-garde and aims of the broader fashion industry is tinged with an element of class warfare, and not a mere exercise of aesthetic experimentation against the hegemony within contemporary vanguard fashion itself.

Willhelm and Kraus's collections also repeatedly feature bathrobe or dressing gown-like garments, bringing to mind the concept of underdressing or the undressed (Figure 5). These seemingly untailored forms evoke resistance against established modes of smart Western dress, as tailored garments force the body to perform in an upright manner, restraining and holding it in place. The wearer of tailored dress, cut and shaped to provide structure, conveys industriousness, and by extension the ideal, contained and moral bourgeois body. Good taste in fashion is aligned with orderliness and this is exemplified in menswear by the tailored, somber and understated "sophistication" advocated by the British nineteenth-century dandy Beau Brummell. Brummell streamlined the heavily ornamented style in fashion at the time, reducing the male silhouette to include a top hat; a neatly tied cravat; tan, fitted and full-length breeches worn inside Hessian boots, and a dark-colored, double breasted tailcoat. As the availability of clerical work increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dark-colored suit became the prevailing uniform for bourgeois men, which still persists to some degree in many white-collar professions today. On the other hand, Willhelm and Kraus's free-flowing and relaxed silhouettes harken back to the smocks of Gustav Klimt and his Vienna Secessionist friends, garments that were designed for comfort and ease of natural body movement.

To employ a term from Hebdige, Willhelm and Kraus's designs can, at points, be seen as "noise"; they are disruptions in the landscape of good taste. Loud patterns assault the eyes and clash with preconceived ideas of bourgeois sobriety in appropriate dress. In this way, Willhelm and Kraus deliberately attempt to re-order conventions of taste:

Figure 5
Robe jacket from the Spring/Summer 2011 menswear collection. Photograph: the author.

> Each and every collection is an experiment involving the question of how I can manage to juggle good and bad taste, or rather, what people perceive as bad taste. I'm interested in what actually influences taste in our society. What I love about fashion is that it is all about overcoming that threshold of embarrassment. There are always some pieces that let you act something out—a feeling, or bad taste, or maybe just a provocative concept. (Willhelm qtd. in Harms 2009, 22)

Their outrageous looks elicit strong reactions to their work; indifference is not likely. In looks from the Autumn/Winter 2012–2013 menswear and

Spring/Summer 2013 womenswear collections, large graphic icons from road signage and euro, yen, and dollar signs are splashed across the garments. The aggressive and outlandish pattern of currency symbols at once humors and comments on ostentatious displays of wealth. This is unrestrained kitsch; the prints are garish, tacky, without apology and the antithesis to bourgeois refinement. As Granata notes, Willhelm and Kraus's work plays off the idea of "low camp" with its excess (2017, 140), its visual maximalism queering buttoned-down propriety. Such bold graphic textile designs are a hallmark of Bernhard Willhelm's aesthetic and speak to their desired audience and use; while likely inappropriate for the corporate boardroom, the vivid garments are suited to performance and play, and have become a cult favorite with queer performers whose office is the club.

Transgressing codes of decency in dress

Willhelm and Kraus defy bourgeois constructs of appropriate dress and modest display with their revealing and suggestive designs. The "Watch Me" garment from the Spring/Summer 2002 womenswear collection is a long, lingerie-like georgette dress which features an embroidered *trompe l'oeil* brassiere-shaped section with eyes, a "nose" stitched around the belly button area, and an embroidered mouth that functions as over-the-clothes underwear (Figure 6). Despite the sheerness of the material, a stitched outline of a female form on the front and back of the dress provides further sexual suggestion, leaving little to the imagination. The Spring/Summer 2012 womenswear collection featured a number of dresses and tops with openings to display breasts. From this season, the "Metropolissy" dress exposes the breasts through large gaping holes in the fabric; an appliquéd vertical arrow points toward the breasts, its head settling in between them, while its "feathers" are strategically placed over the groin for cover. Another dress in the same collection fulfills a similar function as a cutout area reveals a large section of the upper torso, and three appliquéd arrows point to the crotch. The cutouts and slashes suggest obscenity and vulgarity to the point of comedy. Although the collection lookbook featured a male model wearing the "Metropolissy" dress, it nevertheless scandalizes through mere suggestion of the body that lies underneath. It alters the common perception of male breasts, unlike female breasts, in that they are rarely seen as erogenous zones. There is something inherently surrealist at play in these dresses, as Willhelm and Kraus appear to take direct visual quotations from Belgian surrealist René Magritte and his paintings *Le Viol* (1934) and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1947). The former makes crude associations to the female body—breasts, navel and genitalia with the eyes, nose and mouth—while the latter depicts a nightgown-like garment onto which naked breasts have been painted. Like Magritte's perplexing and salacious sexual imagery, Willhelm and Kraus mine the uncon-

Figure 6
"Watch Me" dress from Spring/Summer 2002 womenswear collection. Photograph: the author.

scious, serving up Freudian associations. What is hidden deep within the recesses of the mind for many is mere surface material for them; normally cloaked body parts seem to, at points, burst out of the garments. These sartorial lewd gestures challenge conservative models of elegance and luxury exalted in high-end fashion designs such as Christian Dior's now classic late 1940's and early 1950's "New Look" suits and dresses or Hubert de Givenchy's "little black dress" designed for Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly character in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961).

Willhelm and Kraus further test the limits of social acceptability with their choice of imagery on their designs. A number of garments in the Autumn/Winter 2015–2016 collection are constructed from textiles onto

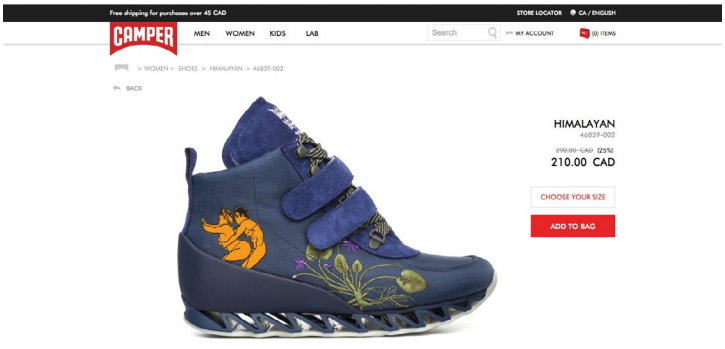

Figure 7
Screen capture from the Camper.com website of the "Himalayan" shoe from the Bernhard Willhelm x Camper Together collaboration, Autumn/Winter 2015–2016 women's collection. Source: http://www.camper.com/en_CA/women/shoes/himalayan/camper-himalayan-46839-002

which a montage of faces in the throes of sexual climax—that Willhelm describes as "gay Madonnas in ecstasy" (qtd. in Blanks 2015)—have been printed. While these images are sexually suggestive and waver between decency and obscenity, Willhelm and Kraus have also gone so far as to depict the act of coitus in their fashion. Between 2008 and 2015, they collaborated with mainstream Spanish footwear brand Camper for the line Camper Together. One recurring style known as the "Himalayan," is a sneaker boot named for its zig-zag structured midsole and labeled accordingly as a "transgressor sneaker." Specifically, the Autumn/Winter 2014–2015 women's collection featured a Himalayan that at first glance appears to display charming embroideries of flora and insects. A closer look reveals that the outer heel bears embroidery depicting a buxom, nude female and muscular male engaging in sexual intercourse (Figure 7). This carnal display is made more graphic due to the fact that the embroidery portrays an unconventional sexual position; the male figure, whose penis is partially visible, grasps the female's breasts, penetrating her from behind at an angle that may refer to anal sex. Rendered in a style that can be likened to black and red figure techniques on fifth- and sixth-century Greek pottery, the embroidery is taken out of context and placed in the milieu of mid-range contemporary fashion that is distributed widely and accessible online. While erotic acts have historically been depicted in various visual art forms including Athenian pots, Pompeian frescoes, and Japanese *Shunga* prints, the Camper shoe infringes on unwritten moral code with its titillating imagery, unabashedly displayed on an item of everyday clothing meant to be worn in public. As a case in point, controversy erupted in 2015 when fourteen-year old Willow Smith, the daughter of Hollywood actors Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith, posted a photo of herself on the image-sharing social media network, Instagram wearing a vintage shirt by French designer Jean Paul Gaultier. The shirt features a print of female torso, nude from the breasts to navel. While Smith was fully clothed in this long-sleeved T-shirt (and presumably trousers), the image of the uncovered breasts instigated a wave of disapproval on the Internet for its provocativeness. While the controversy was largely centered around the younger Smith's age, a similar T-shirt entitled "Tits" by Vivienne Westwood and

partner Malcolm McLaren was worn by British rock musician Siouxsie Sioux in 1976—later reissued in the 1990s and again by American directional retailers Opening Ceremony in 2015—continues to shock today.

Although sexually explicit depictions of the human (often female) body proliferate in Western art history, to view such imagery on an everyday object beyond the walls of the art gallery or museum tests the boundaries of bourgeois respectability and mainstream sexuality. Such visibility places sexual politics at the forefront of fashion and contemporary culture more generally, questioning and disrupting the male gaze. Fashion achieves a status similar, if not equal to art when placed in the context of a museum or gallery. Outside of this environment, fashion is reduced to its first order of meaning as clothing, a practical object meant to cover the body. That the corporeal nature of dress simultaneously reveals and conceals the body, demonstrates the innate sexual quality of clothing. Sexual imagery on garments can be seen as conveying the wearer's exhibitionism or perversion and by extension, resistance to cultural norms. The case of the Camper sneaker is exceptionally curious because revealing dress is, to a certain extent, widely acceptable in the West and frequently worn by celebrities in the entertainment industry on and off screen. Furthermore, it is has become generally acceptable to show sexual acts or sexual imagery through many artistic and visual mediums including film, photography, television, literature, and the performing arts. In the past, racy fashion photography for the youth-focused clothing chain American Apparel has featured pornographic actors, nudity and models in sexually suggestive poses that displayed nude breasts, pubic hair and/or genitalia. Willhelm and Kraus equate fashion, however, with human sexuality in their depictions of sexual nature in and on their designs. They proffer "kink," that is, alternative modes of sexuality outside a mainstream interpretation of sexual attractiveness, subverting the idea of clothing as a body covering for modesty. In the MOCA exhibition, a series of wooden spanking paddles with phrases including "Attitude Adjuster," "Red Hot Modernismo" and "Starke Jungs" (German for "Strong Guys") were shown in the gallery and made available for purchase in the museum gift shop. Here, open and plural notions of sexual practices—in this case, spanking or bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism (BDSM) more broadly—are condoned, where the paddles fall under the guise of museum souvenirs rather than their usual context as erotic implements in a sex shop. In the exhibition space, the paddles were styled as if they were fashion accessories, resembling wristlet wallets that are currently ubiquitous in mainstream fashion. The presence of the spanking paddles violated codes of decorum in public space, where sex is often sanitized for public consumption even inside the walls of the museum. In museums, "tasteful" female nudes are deemed artful, where the eroticism of Gustav Klimt paintings or Egon Schiele drawings is tamed and made palatable for mass audiences. On the other hand, references to sexual perversity often go unrepresented in the cultural institutions; if they are displayed, they are seen as pornographic, as they cross the line between morality and indecency. The political implication of Willhelm and Kraus's

transgression is twofold: firstly, they dare to display an uninhibited view of human sexual desire in a public space contravening bourgeois decorum and secondly, the sexuality that they do stage is one of deviance and unconventional practice. In this way, their fashion plays with the politics of sexuality and presents a proliferation of sexual behaviors and identities. Examples such as these reveal how Willhelm and Kraus's practice mirrors that of Gaultier, who has been testing the limits of moral decency in his designs with his transformation of undergarments into outer garments, and liberal references to BDSM and other sexual fetishes since the 1980s. Like Gaultier, their kinky designs produce an uninhibited, open sexuality and sex positivity that disrupts restrictive bourgeois conventions of good taste and respectability.

Queering the boundaries of propriety

Willhelm and Kraus simultaneously uphold queer identity and destabilize binary categories of heterosexuality in their resistance to conventions of bourgeois conformity and decorum. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick locates the term "queer" as a fluctuating, yet unifying concept in her introduction to *Tendencies*, a collection of essays from the 1980s and early 1990s:

> Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word "queer" itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root - *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*. Titles and subtitles that at various times I've attached to the essays in *Tendencies* tend toward "across" formulations: *across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across perversions*." […] Keenly, it is relational, and strange. (1993, xii)

In this sense, the descriptor "queer" indicates fluidity, amorphousness and openness, simultaneously bridging gaps between diverse notions of gender and sexuality. Sedgwick's inclusion of the conventional definition of "queer" as strange or odd is an indication of how the term can serve a disruptive function in the face of normalcy. In conceiving the category of "queer theory," Teresa de Lauretis identifies the need for unity and inclusion of difference over adherence to the labels of "gay" or "lesbian":

> In a sense, the term "Queer Theory" was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them or at the very least problematize them. (1991, x)

Both Sedgwick and De Lauretis define "queer" as a concept that fundamentally defies and troubles social constructions and categories. Taking these seminal writings into account, I seek to emphasize that I am not attempting the Sisyphean task of defining a queer fashion. Rather, I discuss such fashions and fashioning of the queer body as a "queering," as Annamari Vänskä (2014) has discussed in her exhibition reviews of *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (Museum at FIT, 2013) and the Brooklyn Museum stop of the touring blockbuster *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* (2011–2016). At its core, queered style aims to disturb (hetero)normative codes of behavior and being, inhabiting an ideological space in which bourgeois values of tastefulness and restraint do not apply. As such, queered fashion is fundamentally disruptive to the political and social order, as it is an "outward expression of the imponderable disorder of sex, a necessary crack in the symbolic order of sexuality" (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 6) and an outright resistance to conservatism.

Garments such as Willhelm and Kraus's "mankini" from the Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection queer notions of acceptable and modest dress (Figure 8). Fittingly worn by Sagat, the mankini's overt sexuality—there is an orifice for the penis and the backside is completely exposed—at once dictates and questions its function as clothing. Is it intended for everyday wear or should it be relegated to the area of fetishwear or lingerie? Styled as a wrestling singlet, albeit offering less coverage, Willhelm and Kraus propose that the "mankini" can also be utilized as sportswear in an unorthodox pairing of fetish meets the mainstream. Its item description in the Bernhard Willhelm online shop offered little in the way of context as it stated that the garment is "a brief pant with brace straps and a black trim," a description which effectively normalizes it as an everyday (under) garment and offers no suggestions as to other intended uses. In comparison, American designer Rick Owens sent models down the runway for his Autumn/Winter 2015–2016 menswear collection in monk-like garments that framed and offered orifices for the models' uncovered penises. Aside from the discrete "penis-flashing," the overall collection is sexually staid and almost puritanical in its cloaking of the body. While Owens's presentation features male frontal nudity, this is not connected to an inherent queer sexuality of the garments or models themselves. Unlike the Owens case, Willhelm and Kraus's "mankini" is deliberately designed to showcase male genitalia for sexual gratification and fetish, explicitly aimed at a gay male audience. Garments such as these challenge conventions of binary gender and sanitized (hetero)sexuality and dissent from an understanding of bourgeois respectability and appropriate dress.

Willhelm and Kraus's pervasive agitation of conventional sexuality is reflected in their casting decisions for models. Sagat was a recurring model for the brand, and a muse both on and off the runway; this concept of the muse is intriguing on a number of levels. Firstly, the muse in Greek mythology and context of fashion connotes a female figure, and is therefore

Figure 8
François Sagat wears a mankini in a lookbook image from the Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection. Photograph: Maria Ziegelböck. Courtesy: Bernhard Willhelm.

a label that culturally applies specifically to a woman rather than a man. Secondly, although muscular, Sagat is neither tall nor slim; this simultaneously put him at odds with the fashion industry's ideal for menswear and placing him in line with the gay porn ideal. Thirdly, his profession in the adult film industry situated him on uncertain moral ground. Simply put, he did not fit an established mold of propriety or moral uprightness. Featured in a calendar for the Spring/Summer 2008 campaign, Sagat is photographed in a multitude of provocative poses: in one image, he bends forward on all fours and exhibits his bare backside, from which a bouquet of flowers emerges; another close-up shot consists of Sagat wearing a mankini with a small American flag hanging from his erect penis; the following

image shows him fitting his penis into the tailpipe of a car. In her analysis of the carnivalesque in the work of Bernhard Willhelm, Francesca Granata asserts how the calendar—which parodies pin-up trade calendars such as the famed Pirelli Calendar—"invokes and queers gay and straight erotica and porn imagery through the choice of subject, garments and poses" (2017, 146). The employment of Sagat, however, is not an isolated case. Willhelm and Kraus took to the Internet to cast male strippers as models for their Spring/Summer 2004 menswear runway presentation. Strategies such as these are a move against the limited and professionalized industry norms of beauty and taste as promoted by multinational modelling agencies. Rather than uphold standards of homogeneous attractiveness, Willhelm and Kraus advocate for diversity and equity in fashion and society more generally. They push the limits of representation and present alternatives to the fashion mainstream's dominant depictions of the ideal body. In the past, Gaultier has had a blatant disregard for conventions of the fashion industry and he famously placed newspaper classified ads in the French daily newspaper *Libération* reading, "Non-conformist designer seeks unusual models—the conventionally pretty need not apply" (qtd. in Bondil 2011, 18). Willhelm and Kraus follow in this tradition of avant-garde fashion, rejecting the structure of the fashion system and breaking with heteronormativity.

Willhelm and Kraus go beyond championing gay positive messages and make pronouncements in support of interracial gay sexuality. In the Autumn/Winter 2012–2013, a number of models wore bandanas that proudly announced, "I ♥ BLACK COCK" (Figure 9). Although this unrestrained proclamation of love for the black phallus feeds into the stereotype of black males as possessing larger than average-size penises, it is more than a declaration intended to shock with its sexually explicit message. Rather, it is a statement that challenges assumptions of the black male body and its common association with heterosexual masculinity. In his analysis of Mapplethorpe's *Black Males* series, Kobena Mercer writes that it is difficult to determine whether the shocking images embrace or subvert racist stereotyping, but that Mapplethorpe rather "throws the binary structure of the question back to the spectator…" (1991, 189). I argue that Willhelm's unequivocal appreciation of "black cock" too navigates a fine line between reaffirming fallacious ideas of the relationship between sex and race, and espousal for cultural diversity. Nevertheless, it is Willhelm and Kraus's "I ♥ BLACK COCK" statement that intentionally attempts to disrupt white heteronormativity and bourgeois decorum. In the catalog for the 1994 exhibition *Black Male* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, curator Thelma Golden remarks on Mapplethorpe's black male bodies, stating that "[t]he reception of the photographs, the controversy they provoked, speaks volumes about the fear of black masculinity and more specifically of the lust and loathing of the big, black dick" (1994, 33). This black manhood is later articulated in an essay in the same catalog by Herman Gray, who calls attention to racist interpretations of black masculinity as "incompetent, oversexed, and uncivil—ultimately a threat to middle-class notions

Figure 9
A runway look from the Autumn/Winter 2012–2013 menswear collection. Photograph: Shoji Fuji. Courtesy: Bernhard Willhelm.

of white womanhood, family, and the nation" (1994, 178). If the black male is seen as counter to the white, repressed, bourgeois body, a gay black male body is yet more transgressive in its opposition to hegemony of white heterosexual masculinity. Thus, any representation of the gay black male simultaneously poses a challenge to the power relationship between the racial and sexual Other and its oppressor, and violates the dominant paradigm privileging whiteness, straightness and manliness, three characteristics that define moral rectitude and the "normal" body.

References to the gay black male abound in *Bernhard Willhelm 3000*. The exhibition included an enlarged wall text quoting an "Editor's Note" from the March 1999 issue of *Black Inches*, a now defunct American gay

pornographic magazine which featured black men exclusively. Large blow-up photographs of Willhelm and two black models—Jamal Berotte and gay pornographic actor and escort Cutler X—are featured prominently in the exhibition. In one photograph, all three wear leotards, with Berotte and Cutler X on all fours and Willhelm mounting the latter from behind. A different photograph shows Berotte and Cutler X standing while Willhelm crouches and attempts to catch a glimpse of Cutler X's penis from underneath his jacket. Various other photographs capture Willhelm and Berotte kissing; Willhelm seemingly about to spank Berotte with two paddles in hand; Willhelm and Berotte touching each other's leotard-covered backsides; and Berotte and Cutler X positioned in other suggestive homoerotic stances. In another installation, two large, black, inflatable and human-shaped figures have television screens mounted in their abdomens and are seated on either side of the room. One screen shows a video of Cutler X in profile, waist up and nude with his mouth open; the complementary screen displays Willhelm facing Cutler X, and the two exchange an arc of white stars back and forth between their open mouths. The video seems to refer to the ejaculation and ingestion of semen, a visual theme that has appeared previously in Willhelm and Kraus's practice. On the website splash page for Willhelm and Kraus's Autumn/Winter 2014–2015 collection, a male model cranes his neck upwards with his mouth open to receive continuous white, viscous stream from above. In addition, their legal business name for operations in Los Angeles "California Creaming" is a deliberately lewd pun, conflating ejaculatory fluids with the 1965 The Mamas and the Papas' song "California Dreamin'." Taken together, Granata argues that pornographic imagery and references to bodily excretions in Willhelm and Kraus's work are instances of "carnivalesque debasement in the service of mocking pervasive moral codes and social conventions" (2017, 146). Returning to *Bernhard Willhelm 3000*, Willhelm notes in *Interview Magazine* that he is in Hollywood "which is quite white" and that Cutler X is "a role model for interracial gay sex" (qtd. in Cutler X 2015), a perspective proudly intoned in the exhibition images. As a political statement, such imagery and connotation both rallies for cultural and sexual diversity and defies the demonization and the "fear of black masculinity" that Golden identifies (1994, 178).

Willhelm has been upfront with his own sexuality as a gay man from early on in his practice. He actively promotes the idea of "sex without second thoughts" and acknowledges the relationship between his role as designer and the definition of his sexuality (Willhelm qtd. in Harms 2007). In 2001, he was a cover model for the inaugural issue of *BUTT* Magazine, a gay interest magazine that features articles alongside erotic photography. For the feature entitled "Bernhard Willhelm: German Fashion Designer Designs Clothes and Likes Designing with a Hard-On," Turner Prize-winning photographer Wolfgang Tillmans captured Willhelm—a self-proclaimed exhibitionist—casually reclining nude on an unmade bed. Lying amidst a pile of clothes the photograph gives the impression that he has just disrobed. The next photograph features him also nude, sitting atop a pillow on a bed,

arms resting on bent knees, penis out. In the last photograph, he runs an iron over an ironing board leaning vertically against the wall, wearing only knee-high socks and white briefs with a strategically placed hole exhibiting his backside, presumably intended for rear-entry penetration. A more recent *BUTT* article published to coincide with *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* includes a photograph from the exhibition of Willhelm in a yoga bridge pose in which he wears a leotard that is specifically designed to accentuate and cradle the penis (Figure 10): "The suits and underwear have a special pattern which works with a double pouch/built-in cockring-cockadoo. The first layer has a hole with elastic for the cockring effect, the second layer has an anatomic shape which pulls the fabric over" (Willhelm qtd. in Calvi 2015). In designs such as these, a clear connection between the role of sex and sexuality in fashion can be made. Willhelm has previously acknowledged how clothing is important in the prelude to sex, paraphrasing the late fashion patron Isabella Blow: "You put something on in order to get laid" (qtd. in Cutler X 2015). The form-fitting men's garments speak to the notion of gay masculinity and the fit male body, ideals of which can be traced back to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings on Hellenic standards of beauty and form, and their revival through Adolf Brand's writings *Der Eigene*, the first known gay journal (1891–1931) (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 78). The idealization of the Hellenic-influenced gay body (re)claims masculinity for itself and is one of many plural identities and practices in modern homosexuality. In his history of homosexuality, gender and queer studies scholar David M. Halperin argues that pre-homosexual discourses of effeminacy, pederasty/sodomy, friendship/male love and passivity or inversion need to be separated from homosexuality (2002, 109). Rather, homosexuality is the confluence of three conditions: psychological orientation, desire and sexual behavior that unite against the category of heterosexuality and cannot be reduced to a series of binary roles (Halperin 2002, 131–133). In Halperin's view, homosexuality is inclusive of all desires and practices: ""Homosexuality" refers to *all* same-sex sexual desire and behavior, whether hierarchical or mutual, gender-polarized or ungendered, latent or actual, mental or physical. And, perhaps most important of all, it makes *homosexual object-choice itself* function as a marker of sexual and social difference" (2002, 131–132, italics in original). This theorization of homosexuality is confirmed in the catalog-zine that accompanies the *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* exhibition. On the cover is an image of a cast aluminum pacifier from the Spring/Summer 2015 collection alongside a dedication that reads "To Bernhard / your friend Cx / your favorite Top." The back cover showcases the corresponding script "To my favorite power Bottom Bernhard / Cutler X." This enactment of gay masculinity allows for a complication and diversification of roles within homosexual identity in which Willhelm is the active "receiver" and Cutler X is the "giver." While these roles speak to the sexual politics of gay male relations, they also acknowledge and trouble the power dynamics of race and the complicated reality of depictions of interracial sex.

Figure 10
Bernhard Willhelm wearing a leotard from the Spring/Summer 2015 collection. Photograph: Daniel Trese. Courtesy: Bernhard Willhelm.

Willhelm and Kraus promote multiplicitous queer identities beyond the gay male in their casting of models. The Los Angeles-based genderqueer/transgender artist-musician-performer Matthew Marble makes an appearance in recent Bernhard Willhelm promotion material, first as a model for the Autumn/Winter 2014–2015 collection, and secondly as an exhibition guide for *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* in a video spot produced for MOCAtv, MOCA's YouTube channel. In the video, Marble, who was born male but identifies with feminine pronouns, sports long straight tresses along with full makeup, a Bernhard Willhelm current season off-the-shoulder mini dress and high-heeled sandals. Partway through the video, she also plays an archetypal but camp interpretation of a "cleaning lady" character that comically dusts, vacuums and sponge cleans various parts of the exhibi-

tion. Willhelm and Kraus have been explicit in their support for transgendered persons. When asked in an interview who they would like to dress, Willhelm responded with Caitlyn Jenner (previously Bruce), the former Olympic athlete and reality show celebrity who has been public with her transition to a woman. For Willhelm, Jenner is "a great question of gender" whose identity serves as an ultimate act of individuality and a defiant demonstration against conformity (qtd. in Finster 2015). A blown-up poster entitled "The Beautification of Bruce" in *Bernhard Willhelm 3000* features text comprised various quotes from unnamed sources concerning Jenner's process of transition, including cosmetic surgery treatments and surface transformations related to hair, makeup and undergarments. While the identifications of "queer" and "trans" are not necessarily synonymous, it is evident that Willhelm and Krauss take an activist approach to diversity in sexual and gender identity. Through various visual means, they champion gender and sexual equality, which represents their greater vision of social justice for an inclusive, progressive society. In so doing, they resist the propriety of contained bourgeois and heteronormative corporeality.

Conclusion

At its core, the world of Bernhard Willhelm is political. Willhelm and Kraus enable their practice as a platform for socio-political and cultural critique while articulating a radical fashion that enacts change and shapes fashion and the visual world. Their clothes radically diverge from mainstream aesthetics, rejecting conventional codes of gender, sexuality and bourgeois values. In so doing, the brand engages and makes visible marginalized communities and cultural groups external to hegemonic white, masculine, bourgeois heteronormativity. While Willhelm and Kraus's fashion does not reach a broad audience—there no longer is a Bernhard Willhelm retail or online store, garments are only available in niche boutiques and exhibition attendance numbers and YouTube views are in the thousands—it represents a group of individuals who are positioned outside of mainstream culture and whom identify politically with their radical values. Here, political action is inscribed on or conveyed directly by the clothing and also in the bodies that wear it, whether models or consumers. Willhelm and Kraus push forth with their political agenda and refuse to compromise their creative freedom in order to increase the brand's commercial value, a move that does not follow capitalist logic. Although their cultural production thrives in and occupies a perceptible space in the fashion industry, the designers critique and refuse to be complicit in the standards and ideals perpetuated by the fashion system. Rather, they position themselves as an independent, political conscience of the fashion industry and an alternative in reaction to the homogeneity that has come to be identified with multinational luxury fashion brands and conglomerates. As a result of its involvement in these multiple facets of politics, Bernhard Willhelm transforms everyday life through a commitment to a political fashion and puts fashion forward as a powerful form of protest.

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