

Research of Power Exchange in Art Practice: Clothes & Class



Research Methods and Methodologies in Practice

8.12.2023

Word Count - Critical Evaluation: 576 / Essay: 3294

Master of Letters in Fine Art

Essay and Critical Evaluation

Contents

<i>Critical Evaluation</i>	3
<i>1 Introduction</i>	5
<i>2 Research Orientation and Methodologies</i>	6
<i>3 Clothing and status symbols</i>	7
<i>3.1 The globalization of aesthetic consciousness</i>	10
<i>3.1.1 Personal commodification</i>	14
<i>3.2 Situational appropriation</i>	15
<i>4 Conclusion: Outcomes & Issues</i>	16
<i>Bibliography</i>	18
<i>Illustrations</i>	19

Critical Evaluation

In my practice, I have been exploring the mechanics of power. I've always been puzzled by the symbols of human identity. Why do people dress this way or that way. Why do people have professional uniforms? Whenever I look back at the selfies I post on social media, I sometimes don't recognise myself. Is that the real me? Is it a subjective expression after a selection of angles, or is it a flat slideshow of portraits? My identity can be changed at any time by the way I dress on the outside. I sometimes can't help but prepare outfits for different occasions. I sometimes can't tell if I'm in everyday life or in a play. I look back at my own behavioural responses under different types of clothing. It seems to be all about getting into the character under that costume. Do I autonomously choose the costume or does the costume shape who I am?

I tried photography at first. I tried two types of photography, one was a selfie and the other was taking a picture of myself in the mirror. The reflection in the mirror is my own shadow, and I think it's a false illusion. The mirror reflects my different expressions as if I'm in dialogue with my inner self.

I selected two typical dichotomous characters from the above eight groups. I mainly researched Cindy Sherman's work and Diane Torr's go drag! I again experimented with taking selfies with the camera directly in front of myself, a typical male and a typical female, respectively. Men always appear more confident and at ease in their everyday poses, and their poses will have a larger footprint. Whereas women's poses in everyday life are usually



Fig.1 Dialogue, 1989.2, Xiao Lu, installation



Fig.2 Untitled (Self-Portrait with Sun Tan), Cindy Sherman

ambiguous, small and pleasing. I still kept the mirrors in the post exhibition. I chose to combine the photographs from this shoot with it for the exhibition. The portraits and mirrors were placed side by side on the wall, with the mirror placed in the middle of the portraits. The self portraits on both sides are like another other. The reflection in the mirror is the temporary present me, but not the real me. I made an act. I smashed the mirror in the middle of the

two portraits at the opening. The process of knocking in the mirror is eliminating myself in the mirror.

In the following weeks, I thought about whether the form of photography was too homogeneous. Firstly, I tried to use collage to eliminate identity and reconstruct myself. Secondly, I tried to paint self-portraits, which might better express my inner self. Thirdly, I tried along the lines of self-portrait photography, using black squares to cover my eyes, or naming the different classes of people I play with completely opposite names. Fourthly, I tried to make masks out of clay sculptures. Masks are just like in our daily lives, and we all may appear in different social masks for different occasions. In the end, I still choose to use photography to express my concept for the time being. Because photography is more realistic than other ways. But maybe in the future I will try again to use other ways to do my work. I think it is important to focus on exploring a theme in the process of continuous research. I hope I can break through the bottleneck of photography. I realised the limitations of my past research methods.

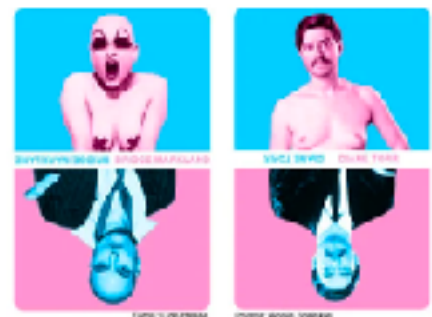


Fig.3 go drag!, 2002, Diane Torr



Fig.4 The Clay Model in Process, Artist's Photograph

RESEARCH OF POWER EXCHANGE IN ART PRACTICE: CLOTHES & CLASS

1 Introduction

This article mainly introduces my research methodology in the project. My project outline is

power exchange. I first practiced three themes, femininity, identity, and

appearance anxiety. Among them, I found that I was most interested in the relationship between

identity and class. Therefore, this is what I continue to dig into in the first phase. The project as a whole includes the following three parts:

First, the research content and research methods of the project, in which I started from visual research and material research to carry out my work. In the second part, I investigate philosophical theories: clothing and status symbols and theories of popular aesthetic consciousness and globalization. The third part is the stage summary of the project.

My inspiration comes from life. I find that when I wear different types of clothes, people have different attitudes towards me, and I enter into different types of "character" personalities. For example, when I perform the same behavior in a suit and a casual leather coat, the other person's acceptance of my behavior is completely opposite. I've always wondered whether clothes shape people's identity, or whether people define



Fig.5 Statue, 2023.11, Chen Caiyun



Fig.6 Her Hero, 2023.9, Chen Caiyun



Fig.7 Artificial flowers that never fades, 2023.10, Chen Caiyun

the class symbols of clothing. Or maybe the two complement each other.

Lifestyle, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity are more meaningful to individuals in constructing their wardrobes.¹ Today, clothes worn at work signify social class, but leisure clothes convey meanings ranging from trite to political. In today's multicode societies, clothes inhibit as well



Fig. 8 Research Mindmap

as facilitate communication between highly fragmented social groups.² Why do people dress the way they do? How does clothing contribute to a person's identity as a man or woman, as a white-collar professional or blue-collar worker, as a preppie, yuppie, or nerd? How is it that dress no longer denotes social class so much as lifestyle?

We define our identity by consuming goods. Identity, religion, culture, politics. Everything in the world is defined by people themselves.

2 Research Orientation and Methodologies

Identity is always asking who am I? Where am I from? Where to? Identity is a subjective sense of self, based on our experiences, beliefs, values, memories, and culture. Identity is often created in relation to or in contrast to others, providing a framework for us to better understand our place in a complex society. Our identity comes from many aspects - race, gender, sex, relationships, family, work, interests,

¹ Crane, Diana. *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

² Crane, Diana. *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

nationality, beliefs, religious practices, and group membership - but cannot be defined by any one of them. Psychologist Erikson believes that the identity crisis is the biggest



Fig. 9 Status Anxiety-Alain de Botton

challenge to people's mental health, especially the nothingness and meaninglessness that have plagued people since the 20th century.³ In modern times, the crisis of self-identity is still affecting us in all aspects,

such as occupation, gender, age, birthplace, appearance (including racial characteristics), education, the places we have stayed, the books we have read, the organizations we have joined, the friends and family we know, my thoughts, my political leanings, the diseases I have had, my hobbies, and so on, and still constantly and changing the definition of "who I am." At the same time, the depression, anxiety, crisis, and discrimination caused by the crisis of self-identity remain helpless.

Marx said that people is a synthesis of social relations.⁴ And the social relations that make up a person are people's identities. Stripped of these labels and relationships, what is ultimately left of man? People are used to using different identities in the face of various interpersonal relationships, and their psychology and behavior have changed, so when lovers see each other's different faces, will they feel strange? Of all the identities, which is closer to the self?

3 Clothing and status symbols

³ Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and society*. WW Norton & Company, 1993.

⁴ Engels, Friedrich. Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie: mit Anhang: Karl Marx über Feuerbach vom Jahre 1845. Dietz, 1888. Volume 3, Page 6-8, Theses on Feuerbach [1], (Marx's manuscript, 1845)

Clothing is a basic human need, and clothing also touches on deeper human needs. We all crave belonging, acceptance. Dressing in a similar fashion to your peers is an outward manifestation of this desire. Personal self-esteem and confidence are also linked to dressing in a way that makes people feel comfortable and comfortable,

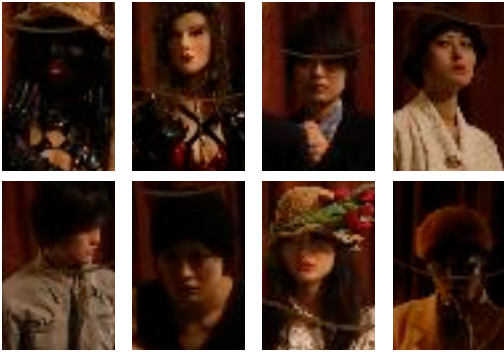


Fig. 10 The Shooting in Process, Artist's Photograph

and some people even want to use their logos to win respect from others. For some people, dressing up is also a way to express themselves and show creativity. The fashion industry is taking advantage of these needs, pushing people to buy more and more products.

People has to maintain an outward image of belonging to a particular social group, and appropriate dress is an important aspect of that outward image. The same class shows similarity in dress. Clothing is the external expression of our thinking about the current situation of existence. Spinoza's concept of existence is a form that changes the nature of existence. Existence itself has no external essence, which means that the conditions or ways of living occupy the process of life.⁵ Thus, the body is conceived as a conductor with various expressive capacities, and these forms are states of being in which the body interacts with the world at a particular time." Therefore, the service of clothing to the body is no longer important, instead it is subjective and ideological. Outer clothing is interpreted as inner and undermines the traditional meaning of the body wearing it.

⁵ de Spinoza, Benedictus. *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*. Nijhoff, 1914. Part I, Proposition 7

As one of the most visible markers of social status and gender, clothing thus effectively maintains or subverts symbolic boundaries and shows how people of different eras perceived their place in the social structure and reconciled different status boundaries. Do more revealing clothes mean more open society? What is the deep meaning of the "symbol" behind the vision? As one of the most visible markers of social status and gender, clothing thus effectively maintains or subverts symbolic boundaries and shows how people of different eras perceived their place in the social structure and reconciled different status boundaries. Clothing used to be an important indicator of social class. Before the Industrial Revolution and the mechanized production of clothing, clothing was often the most expensive possession of the poor, who were likely to have only one set of clothes, and clothing became the most direct manifestation of class differences.



Fig. 11 The College in Process, Artist's Photograph

In the changing process of clothing fashion, the power of women has a role that cannot be ignored. In the pre-industrial era, or early industrialization, women's clothing was in a weak position, and men's clothing dominated both in price and quantity. However, in the face of the rise of women's status, women began to break the boundaries of their own clothing symbols, and women's clothing began to transform into "alternative" diversification, and the constraint power of traditional women's clothing gradually faded. While some well-known artists are leading the fashion trend, women have gradually become the main body of fashion consumption. In this evolution process, clothing has changed from the embodiment of social hierarchy to a simple consumer, and has become one of the commodities consumed. Clothing has been

given more functions and types, clothing is increasingly diversified, and the corresponding fashion organization formed for clothing has come into being. Fashion companies, fashion designers and maverick individuals together constitute the driving force of clothing fashion change, and even slowly appear anti-fashion, deviant trend. Since fashion is more female as the main body, but the majority of women for the so-called fashion in the end what kind of attitude? Has fashion become a subversion of traditional society? This is another criticism of clothing in the face of its own function and fashion aesthetics.

One misconception is that fashion is not social, and this is well reflected in academic research. It is difficult for the academic community to agree with the practice of linking fashion elements with academic research. Perhaps we will habitually believe that fashion, fashion is a way for women to pursue beauty, it does not have a universal gender meaning, that is, men are not included in it. Fashion and fashion are the behavior of appearance modification, it is also easy to be identified as "superficial", then it is more difficult to base on the level of fashion and clothing, to explore the social and democratic expression through them. Since fashion and clothing are almost for viewing, perhaps today we should have a new understanding of it. Women, "models," who appear in promotional images and display venues, are considered "objects to be viewed." They can easily be objectified as tools to cater to the audience's aesthetic needs.

3.1 The globalization of aesthetic consciousness

The Industrial Revolution fundamentally changed manufacturing, emphasizing the pursuit of profit and thus transforming the economy, politics and culture. It has greatly expanded human capabilities while also contributing to global disparities in

wealth and development. All this is reflected in the culture of our time. Contemporary culture has excessive power to influence economic and political structures, education and the media. Their pervasive influence is manifested in social value judgment, aesthetic education and philosophy. The cultural landscape has also been influenced by the Western capitalist framework and its associated concepts of democracy, freedom, and partial socialism. An entire system has been formed to shape aesthetics from these conditions, through luxury brands, mass media, trendy fashion, art education, and advertising. It reflects capitalist values and aesthetic tendencies in every respect.

In the highly developed commercial society, the more concentrated the capital, the slower the class flow, of course, even the right to aesthetic is handed over to the capital. Life is full of advertisements and works that define beauty. Skin care and beauty industries claim to delay aging and preserve beauty; Fashion luxury products use brand premium to create their own aesthetic taste; Various recreational activities also seem to be committed to obtaining the right of interpretation of aesthetics. Only under such aesthetic hegemony, people are brainwashed by the bombardment of information from all directions, and their thoughts are gradually contained by advertisers.

In social networks, mass media renderings, and circles of friends, there is one word that most people resist incompetence: be themselves. But why does the more emphasis on being yourself, the more everyone ends up doing the same thing? The same Instagram photos, the same beauty, the same makeup, the same life status, the gym punch photo. These days, a certain lipstick is popular, and you will find that everyone has one at the end, and a certain style of dress is popular, and everyone goes

to consume it. This is because, in the context of social networks and mass media, the essence of being yourself is to turn yourself into a commodity: everyone is creating their own person, producing themselves, becoming a commodity for others to consume. The essence is to build yourself as a brand. In this process, everyone puts too much attention and energy on building themselves, falling into pathological narcissism.

Social networks give us easy access to a variety of circles that, like department store shelves, display all self-images and let us choose our ideal self. Although it seems diverse, in fact, the top and sought after image of each ideal self has only one appearance. As pickers, we seem free, but in fact it is just the freedom that the business lets us choose, an illusion of freedom, the freedom of appearance makes it unnecessary for you to imagine and explore more possibilities. Templates are limited, and images that don't fit the template will be ruthlessly banished and segregated. By choosing, we select a certain self and continue to learn and deepen this self-image. Then, using this as a template, everyone focuses on building themselves, with the goal of getting infinitely close to the highest ideal image of their chosen circle. If you find yourself in the slightest bit different from the ideal self, there will be endless anxiety and disgust. And if we happen to be close to this ideal self, we will be sought after by the circle. Everyone in the circle has the same self-image goal, and the longer you are in the circle, the more you realize that everyone is a copy. Other people effortlessly affirmed me who was close to the ideal image through liking, which made my narcissism deepen and expand continuously, in an attempt to get more praise and recognition from the circle. This self-expansion is empty, it makes us more and more closed, more and more isolated, trapped in a small circle. And in the circle, you will find that it is all similar to

you or even the same people, we will find it difficult to access new things, but day after day immersed in the existing things increasingly empty boredom, brewing depression and self-loathing, and isolated from the world, in the circle echo chamber infinite repetition of the same sound, self-alienation. Capital sells you an image of your ideal self and tells you that the gap between you and that ideal self can be overcome through consumption. By promoting the obsession of being yourself, capital successfully persuaded everyone to put too much energy into creating themselves, and shaped a line of artificial beauty, making people become slaves to 'be themselves', and obediently contribute time and money.

Debord's landscape society is based on the great changes that have taken place in modern times compared to the industrial age. What used to be a social situation to satisfy people's material production has now become a situation in which private time is dominated by the image. Debord's focus is on the field of "daily life"⁶ constructed by consumption outside the field of production - society, capital, and state ideology using the landscape to occupy People's Daily life time. During labor time, people are under the control of machine systems or are always in a passive position from the spread of labor groups. On the other hand, the landscape society achieves full control over people by dominating most of the non-working time, which is manifested in building a pseudo-world permeating People's Daily life through culture and mass media, and then treating all human consumable time as raw materials for new products. People not only do not get rid of slavery and passivity in the non-working time, but also in the non-working time. And this false landscape blurs the differences between people and

⁶ Guy. Commentaires sur la société du spectacle. G. Lebovici, 1988.

classes, which is similar to one of Marcuse's one-dimensional situations⁷, that is, the fact that human beings are developing in a one-dimensional way at the cultural level because they share the same information to cover class differences.

3.1.1 Personal commodification

In relatively ancient times, the original and most important function of human clothing was to keep people warm and dry, and clothing was mainly used for survival. In today's society, however, heating and cooling and a stable home environment have made the original role of clothing less absolute, and thus the nature of clothing has shifted from the utilitarian to the social. Clothing defines how we are perceived. Clothing can be what we want it to be, and it exudes the character and social status that we want it to. In all social patterns, the shape and sense of clothing encompasses both personal wealth and taste, and economist George Taylor has shown this to be true in his work on the 'Hemline Index'⁸, which shows that when a country's economy is in the doldrums and people are struggling to make ends meet, women are more likely to be in a situation where the economy is in the doldrums and people are struggling to make ends meet. Taylor says that when a country's economy is in the doldrums and people are struggling to make ends meet, women tend to wear longer skirts. When the economy improves and people have more money, women tend to wear shorter skirts.

Fashion and clothing have always played an important role in society. They are not only fabrics that cover the body, but also a form of expression and a means of

⁷ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press, 1994.

⁸ Škrinjarić, Tihana. "Hemline Index Theory: empirical analysis with Google data." *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 13.3 (2020): 325-333.

social identity. In the field of fashion there is the notion that changing fashion is a microcosm of changing social systems and is a modern concept. It can even be said that its essence is the modernity of Western society. So who is influencing fashion? It is based on two simple social factors: the values of the class of people that are given special attention when society is in full bloom; and the position of men and women in this concept. Dressing is a necessary part of life for both men and women, presenting oneself through dress, and then allowing that self to be scrutinised by the outside world, which results in the way others treat one's self. The power and influence of image is limitless, from influencing the outcome of a race (Hill and Barton, 2005) to influencing one's performance at a job interview (Forsythe, 2006).

3.2 Situational appropriation

Symbolic interactionists have extensively established the principle that the self is formed in interactions with others. Despite this enormous contribution, this view often sidewalks discussion of the relationship between the body and the self, ignoring power systems and the ways in which they affect the self and the body. Power relations not only give the actor identity and status, but also regulate the legal power form.

Cultural industries promote consumption by constantly turning differences into similarities. Fashion and clothing has always been a sign of status and wealth. As Braudel said, "If the society is in a stable state, then the change of clothing is insignificant, only when the social order is seriously disrupted, the dress will change significantly, clothing is a language."⁹

⁹ Braudel, Fernand. *Civilization and capitalism, 15th-18th century, vol. II: The wheels of commerce. Vol. 2.* Univ of California Press, 1992.

But with the proliferation of Vivian Westwood and punk styles, traditional notions of quality were shattered.¹⁰ For the first time, low-quality or low-quality aesthetics entered people's vision and became the ideological carrier of challenging traditional dress concepts of wealth, class and status, and subcultures were brought into the so-called high culture. Hermatic fashion features practical and understated T-shirts, suits, dresses, etc. The value base of classic fashion was shaken by Winkelmann's homophobia. Subcultures become part of the language of fashion, and situationism becomes Marxism.

In the Situationist International,¹¹ capitalist society has passed from the stage of production alienation in Marx's period to the stage of consumption alienation, and commodity fetishism has been replaced by landscape fetishism. The purpose of anti-consumption is to create new consumption, and the anti-landscape itself creates new landscapes. A subculture is also a symbol. People are always visual animals, staring at different symbols and reflexes to be rock punk hippies. Dressing up in place is one's own people, or a priori decide what kind of person you are, what kind of person you should be, and then put your own value system to set, to sew, to self-hypnotize. But such results tend to be narrow, and often become more stereotypical when the few available materials are turned over and over and distilled into tags.

4 Conclusion: Outcomes & Issues

I'm constantly reflexively photographing myself, and I'm constantly thinking about why geography, nationality, gender, human groups are antagonistic. In the post-

¹⁰ Crane, Diana. *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

¹¹ Deocrd, G. E. "Internationale situationniste." (1958).

Cold War era, a new framework for globalization has emerged, supported by the West and its political institutions and monopolies. Political and cultural discourse is dominated by the need for profit. Finally, I would like to conclude with a quote from *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* by Benedict Anderson: The reason why these artifacts were created at the end of the 18th century is actually a result of spontaneous extraction from the complex "convergence" process of various independent historical forces; Once created, however, they become "patterned" and, in varying states of consciousness, can be transplanted into many and varied social spheres, can absorb as many and varied political and ideological combinations, and can be absorbed by these forces.¹²

Keywords: Identity politics, Stratum, Clothes, Gender binary

¹² Anderson, Benedict. "Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism." *The new social theory reader*. Routledge, 2020. 282-288.

Bibliography

1. Crane, Diana. Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
2. Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and simulation. University of Michigan press, 1994.
3. Swartz, David. Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
4. O'Neill, John. Five Bodies: Re-figuring Relationships. Sage, 2004.
5. Nead, Lynda. The female nude: art, obscenity and sexuality. Routledge, 2002.
6. Cooper, Frederick, and Rogers Brubaker. "Beyond "identity"." (2000).
7. Geczy, Adam, and Vicki Karaminas. Critical fashion practice: From westwood to van Beirendonck. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
8. Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and society*. WW Norton & Company, 1993.
9. Engels, Friedrich. Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie: mit Anhang: Karl Marx über Feuerbach vom Jahre 1845. Dietz, 1888. Volume 3, Page 6-8, Theses on Feuerbach [1], (Marx's manuscript, 1845)
10. de Spinoza, Benedictus. *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*. Nijhoff, 1914. Part I, Proposition 7
11. Debord, Guy. *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*. G. Lebovici, 1988.
12. Anderson, Benedict. "Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism." *The new social theory reader*. Routledge, 2020. 282-288.
13. Braudel, Fernand. *Civilization and capitalism, 15th-18th century, vol. II: The wheels of commerce*. Vol. 2. Univ of California Press, 1992.

14. Hall, Stuart. "Culture and power." *Radical Philosophy* 86.27 (1997): 24-41.

15. Swartz, David. *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*.

University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Illustrations

1. Fig.1 Dialogue, 1989.2, Xiao Lu, installation
2. Fig.2 Untitled (Self-Portrait with Sun Tan), Cindy Sherman
3. Fig.3 go drag!, 2002, Diane Torr
4. Fig.4 The Clay Model in Process, Artist's Photograph
5. Fig.5 Statue, 2023.11, Chen Caiyun
6. Fig.6 Her Hero, 2023.9, Chen Caiyun
7. Fig.7 Artificial flowers that never fades, 2023.10, Chen Caiyun
8. Fig. 8 Research Mindmap
9. Fig. 9 Status Anxiety-Alain de Botton
10. Fig. 10 The Shooting in Process, Artist's Photograph
11. Fig. 11 The College in Process, Artist's Photograph