



To Signify Dreams on the Surface of the Body

by Michela Moscufo

OTMA's Body

Gavin Brown's Enterprise (291 Grand St) | January 19 - February 25, 2018

Omega Workshop: An Experiment in Counter-Fashion

Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts | January 26 - March 10, 2018

At this time, "it would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments."¹

Franz Boas

Digging through tattered piles of mass-produced garments Rivkah Barringer and Amanda McGowan, founders of the fashion collective Women's History Museum (WHM), hungrily scavenge for evidence of past luxury. They find a silk ribbon emblazoned with the Gucci logo, a draped train of opalescent pink taffeta, starched crinoline or the remains of a velvet corset, and although the bits of cloth are frayed and irregular in form, they are stitched together into elegant haute-couture and everyday wear. In the collection currently showing at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, the fabric remains of moneyed dream-states, specifically aristocratic, are re-appropriated with ad-hoc brutality. Starting from the premise that fashion is only an accumulation of material signs worn on the body, the WHM displays an alternative mode of production which manages to showcase opulence independent of wealth *and* be anti-corporate, anti-consumer culture, gender fluid, collaborative, sensitive to sustainability, while maintaining the premium of self-expression which is so important to fashion.



Installation view of Women's History Museum, OTMA's Body, 2017, Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Courtesy the artists and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, Rome. Photo: Lance Brewer

In this fourth show of works from the Women's History Museum, "OTMA" refers to the acronym the young Romanov princesses—Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia Nikolaevna—referred to themselves by in letters and diaries before they were executed on the eve of the Russian Revolution. Acting as their medium and fellow femme-collective, the WHM has turned Gavin Brown's gallery into a space for anyone to play dress-up and in fact often to wear drag. The delight is in wringing something new out of a mass of material and

significations dating back to the monarchies and their demise. As Claude Levi-Strauss notes in *Savage Mind*, with bricolage there is no clear project except experimentation and permutation. The aim is to participate in the circulation of debris and it's re-imagining lest it becomes "fossilized evidence"² of a past rendered inaccessible.

The Women's History Museum mines the archive of our historical subconscious, using magazine clippings, baby-blue fake suede, shredded ace bandages, imitation rabbit fur, pearly rubber salvaged from exercise balls, translucent opalescent printed silk, shimmering plastic tear-drop beads, and shoe laces, to create bricolage accessories, props, and ready-to-wear fashion.

Alternately, in the Garment District, synchronized with New York Fashion Week, are visions of counter-fashion within the realm of commercial production under the name of the Omega Workshop, which includes work ranging from Andrea Zittel's minimalist uniforms for "investigative" living and Anti-Surveillance jackets to "QueerCrip" work-out clothes. The artists/designers in this show all agree: at this moment in time we have arrived at the limit, *Omega*, for Fashion as we have come to know it. Yet the task of this collective is to shift the values of the fashion economy from within. In the gallery space of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, commercial codes are ubiquitous: there are prototypes, and patterns, plastic hang-tags and labels. The ethos is productive—utilitarian, constructivist, athletic—the curators are eager to present alternatives that are ready-to-wear. In worker cooperatives such as "friends of light" all producers hand make locally-sourced jackets and own equal shares in the company. A Hippie collective, led by ex-garment industry laborer Frau Fiber, teaches the craft and meaning of poncho-making. Jennifer Moon and Fawn Krieger, following Andrea Zittel's "Institute," have each designed minimalist uniforms to be worn daily for years. The Omega Workshop remains committed to questions of usage and distribution, while avoiding questions of self-expression. And because the WHM is committed to self-expression—an account of personal identity through choices—they acknowledge that the ability to make such decisions necessitates economic and political subversion of the current fashion industry. This is why they work directly in the redistribution of material resources that precede commerce.

But what we experience at Gavin Brown is radical play. On a handbag, cut-out images of an illustrated Joan of Arc and a bald alien/cyborg/doll with heavily applied make-up are referents of non-conforming androgyny, collaged with historically feminized matter—a segment of needlepoint, tufts of satin, sequined-lycra—wrapped in plastic and embroidered in a frenzy of multi-colored patterning. This is the kind of fashion that is transparent in its traffic of material signs. Alternatives to store-bought fantasies are thus materialized; signs proliferate and newly possible fantastical meanings accumulate—of gender transformation, time-travel, or role-play.



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The WHM's refusal to participate in the "formalized" fashion economy, specifically in the exploitative mass production of fabric and garments, means it uses only what is at hand, or can be scavenged, "odds and ends," as Levi-Strauss suggests. Yet it imitates luxury by weaving together an excess of signs. This is the

semiotic surplus value where economically there is none. As declared by Junior LaBeija in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991) directed by Jennie Livingston, opulence, or O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E, means that “you own everything; everything is yours.” This is the true fantasy that takes root on the margins of the economy—invented both by choice and by scarcity. This is the dream the clothes signify: that you can be whatever you want to be. As bricolage appropriates commercial codes, the goal of production is reoriented “to signify dreams on the surface of the body.”³

Notes

Franz Boas, in Introduction to James Teit, Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia, *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, VI (1898), 18.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. The University of Chicago Press, 1966. 22.

https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/evxxz4/womens-history-museum-is-the-strange-subversive-design-collective-to-know

Levi-Strauss. 21

CONTRIBUTOR

Michela Moscufo

Michela Moscufo is the Development Associate at the *Brooklyn Rail*.

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