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The New Inquiry



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Off Brand

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interview

Permanent Display

Princess Hijab interviewed by Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, 6

essays

Can the White Girl Twerk? *by Ayesha A. Siddiqi, 11*

Swarovski Kristallnacht *by Haley Mlotek, 16*

The Wintourian Candidate *by Fiona Duncan, 23*

The Other Foot *by Alice Marwick, 31*

Digital Runways, Paper Dolls *by Minh-Ha T. Pham, 38*

On Rage and Swagger *by Evan Calder Williams, 46*

reviews

One-Dimensional Woman

*Charlotte Shane on Alissa Nutting's
Tampa, 52*

Epistemology Kills

*Nina Schloesser Tárano on Javier Marías's
The Infatuations, 58*

column

**Unsolicited Advice for Living in
the End Times** *by Michael Seidenberg, 63*



editorial note

WE ARE TOLD we must be clothed, and then that our clothes are not good enough. That fashion is predicated on this cruelty—making luxury of necessity, and necessity of a luxury—makes it as morally questionable as the behavior of foodies. Fine: We accept this. But we are also told that we must be bodies and that our bodies are not good enough,

and fashion (at least for those who fit into it) can provide an escape from the disappointment of our flesh.

Some of us feel we were born into the wrong body; for that, fashion is the first corrective. For others, fashion is the first rebellion. It lets teens differentiate themselves from the bunch of people they're stuck in a house with and told they look like. It allows them to belong to a group of their own design, or at least look as though they do.

When the white girl, ever the bearer of bad trends, seeks emancipation from her boredom by becoming other, she unwittingly borrows the tactics of her colonialist dad. Ayesha Siddiqi takes on the wages of house-twerk in the last essay on Miley Cyrus you will ever need to read. Of course, you can't twerk before you can swagger: Evan Calder Williams, in a letter from Rome, aligns swagger with rage, describing that "drunken, slippery tightrope walk at the edge of self-control."

From swagger descends "swag," the swank stuff you neither buy nor steal but are magically "gifted." Anyone can get free music or free food (provided their standards are low enough), and art objects are worth nothing unless they're purchased. Only in the world of fashion—where celebrities are given \$10,000 gowns for a night, and top editors get \$5,000 handbags at Christmas—is your success measured in your ability to not pay for shit. This is unsurprising: To get luxury goods free, it helps first to be able to afford them. Those who can't, blog—but while the fashion blogosphere promised democratization, it elected a series of white girls to the throne. Alice Marwick explores the anxiety of authenticity among luxury-less fashion bloggers (the sans-Colette, perhaps?)—those for whom the "real thing" means "like us," rather than "expensive."

If the Chinese luxury-goods market asked for authenticity, well, the market didn't get it. On virtual runways, as on real ones, models remain blindingly white—even when they're holograms at a Burberry opening in Beijing.

In "Digital Runways, Paper Dolls," Minh-Ha T. Pham shows the fantasy of digital disembodiment, by which you might be liberated from gender and race, to be a pile of the empire's new clothes. Striking back is the anonymous street artist Princess Hijab, interviewed by Maryam Monalia Ghavari on her black-marker "hijabization" of the (mostly white) faces of luxury advertisements in Paris.

But we would not be surprised to see Topshop selling ironic burqas come April. Their copywriters will struggle for a rhyme and will arrive, in the end, at "twerk." The age of digital reproduction has only sped up the longstanding cycle in which fashion, like a fifth-grader in an argument, imitates everything that screams against it.

For the most part, clothing at every price point adheres to a binary code. Garments are "men's" or "women's." Things are "in" or "out." You are *Vogue* or you are not *Vogue*, and Steve Oklyn, 63-year-old blogger and conspiracy theorist, responds with an emphatic *not*. Fiona Duncan interviews the outsider icon about high fashion as a "fabricated society of the spectacle" that has become perfectly controlled by corporations.

There's no better proof of the stranglehold than the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent exhibit titled "Punk: Chaos to Couture." In an essay that departs from "fashion as art" to address the power and responsibility of fashion as speech, Haley Mlotek finds the Met's exclusion of Nazi imagery from the show to be an act of censorship without morals or grounds.

Fashion posits its binaries only to collapse them—"white" and "ratchet," "punk" and "chic," "authenticity" and "style"—so it may build them again, and yet again. What remains fixed is the desire under dress. In selecting appearances, we want not only to be seen but sometimes to be heard before we speak. Fashion can be a weapon of the silenced, even when it is seized and wielded by those who have always talked loudest. ■



Permanent Display

PRINCESS HIJAB *interviewed by* MARYAM MONALISA GHARAVI

*While France bans face covering, one artist gave
fashion ads a hijabizing makeover*

SINCE FRANCE'S NATIONAL ban on face covering went into effect in 2010, the only recorded public assaults in Paris have been made against women wearing niqabs or burqas. This "act prohibiting the concealment of the face in public space" (loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public) forbids the wearing of veils, masks, balaclavas, and helmets unless they are worn for purposes of "safety" or "entertainment." Meanwhile, the sphere of fashion suffers no such prohibition: Runway shows and brand campaigns featuring face-covered models are free to proceed, without regulatory interference. Before the ban went into effect—in a sense anticipating it—an anonymous Parisian street artist who goes by Princess Hijab became known for "hijabizing" or blackening the faces

of women and men in fashion advertisements. These striking images, in which strategically placed paint partly obscures models' faces, circulated widely. Princess Hijab ceased the series in 2011, though the technique continues to crop up in the streets.

The New Inquiry editor-at-large Maryam Monalisa Gharavi interviews the artist.

Translated from the French by Max Fox, with Maryam Monalisa Gharavi and Atossa Araxia Abrahamian.

Photos by Antoine Brandt.

MARYAM MONALISA GHARAVI: *For years you de-faced and re-faced surfaces, specifically the surface of the face. Why the face?*

PRINCESS HIJAB: It was an accidental departure. The way it started was that I didn't have enough ink available. I realized I'd be more effective in covering only parts of images and that I should be sparing in my gestures. My proclivity is to focus mostly on the face.

The human face does so much social work in public. In a way, it's the site of an endless performance. Do you see the faces in your images as free from public performance—or free to perform a different kind of performance?

Socially, the face is on permanent display, so for me the masking of it was the real performance. Not showing one part was what changed our shared perception.

In your manifesto, "My Anti Day-Glo Fatwa," you wrote that you were acting against the visual terrorism of advertising by restoring images to "physical and mental integrity." I am fascinated by your word choice: "integrity" has multiple etymological and legal connections to "privacy." If your technique of blackening images restores their bodily integrity or autonomy, does it reflect also on privacy?

I tried to introduce a certain questioning into public space. By working on people's gaze with the practice of "hijabizing" in the subway, I was "Adbusting," far from the Ameri-

can references that were predominant in street art at the time. It was a way of reclaiming the self and the space for an (ephemeral) given time.

In one of the earlier ads you—for lack of better words—détourned, defaced, disfigured—there's something so literal and cliché about the way the Galeries Lafayette department store ad positioned the phrase France as high fashion and high fashion as France. Your defacement makes one turn to the original image again with a kind of renewed wonderment and alarm.

Between the why and the how there are different models of thought. Joining two things which are apparently contradictory can convey a particular strength. That's what interests me. My approach is openness.

Blackening them out or "hijabizing" them produces a very confrontational effect. The ads are no longer smiling, but glaring. My question is whether we need that effect to achieve confrontation. Is there something specific to face covering that achieves this state of confrontation or horror?

Hijabizing can't really explain itself very well. It was societal but also energetic and imaginary. This energy which seems to be very direct is linked to the very practice of street art, and I was able to express that through hijabization. There is in each of us something that we wish to exteriorize. You just need the trigger. For my part, the theme of fashion and urbanity was it. Who hasn't scribbled on a photo by pure reflex?

I have rarely seen race written about in relation to your work. That's surprising, since nearly all the models are white. You use a black marker to cover up their faces. Were you were wanting to provoke deep, if subconscious, fears of contamination, dirt, and messiness?

The images I used were those that sell advertisements. I can't help it if as you say they are often white.

France's niqab ban has been enforced since 2010 but you began imposing face coverings on models in ads well before then. How did the ban change your interventions or how you felt about them?

I began my work well before that event, so they weren't in fact related. However, I was able to take stock of the fact that my work had become more visible at that moment. It was strongly intensified by the different news events related to the phenomenon of the veil. Sometimes it seemed very funny to me, other times instructive. But it became rather consuming, especially when it was recuperated in an ideological or partisan manner.

Do you mean when others appropriated your images to suite their own agendas or cause?

I mean the dissemination of my work throughout the internet and in certain me-



dia has aroused varied reactions, and also some recovery. To limit or orient anyone is not my role.

How much time usually elapsed before the Paris police or an irate member of the public ripped down your work?

Thirty minutes.

The hijabized work you produced was set inside the subways of Paris, not the banlieues. There was little doubt about what audience you anticipated.

I like the language of the city. The language of the subway particularly compels me. There is a multitude of ideas and people there that motivates me. All the riders who pass through the subway come from everywhere, it seems to me, people from the *banlieues* included. In reality, they are the majority on public transit. I produced my work in public space for those who the city expels as far away as possible, toward the outside, toward the *banlieue*,

beyond the *banlieue*. They always come back on public transit: Chatelet, Gare Saint-Lazare, Champs Elysée and Gare du Nord.

Has the gothic always been an interest or influence in your work?

Yes, the intrusion of darkness in my work is a recurring attribute.

A few years have passed since your last hijabized work. What made you decide to stop working in that mode?

When I was doing that work it had its scope. Yet I always knew that other experiences were waiting for me afterward, because I was made to keep going in street art.

What work are you focusing on now?

It's different, but it's still street art. At the moment I'm working on a collaborative project with the homeless. I've gone up from the basements of the city to the surface with the purpose of exploring new territories. Therefore, I've chosen to collaborate with homeless people. At some point I conceived and set up a sort of "special fun tool" meant to be freely used by homeless people. Giving the homeless other ways of getting by was our main idea and we achieved it together. This new work is about the imagination and survival strategies linked to the precarity experienced in urban settings. The tool can help homeless people survive and create social connections that they really need, especially these days.

Just as your work endows a highly stylized and specific work with anonymity, you have

still managed to preserve your own. It's not a status many people aspire to, or if they do, feel they can successfully maintain. Beyond the legal concerns—like the necessity of concealing your identity in order to pull off this kind of work—how do you reflect on your anonymity? Can you speak to the power of anonymity, particularly in a society that disfavors it?

I think that anonymity is in itself already a form of expression. There may be some good reasons for wanting to keep it, especially in our era.

Do you still use your fashion disguise of a hoodie and a long black wig? Or do you no longer obscure your face?

I want to clarify that it was my real hair that I had sewn into the cloth. That was an integral part of my identity. The hair in my face was a bit shamanic. In fact it added more constraints. I saw poorly and I had to always guess at shapes to be able to work. That asked a lot of the other senses, like hearing and touch. Despite these difficulties, I always maintain this approach to the transformation of my appearance!

If I have to use a gender to refer to you I always choose gender-neutral or use a hyphen—her/him, she/he. Yet the Princess Hijab persona is female and that isn't unimportant in the world of street art largely dominated by men, or the world of your themes. How important is a gender characterization to you?

I am a fiction in all of this. ■



Can the White Girl Twerk?

by AYESHA A. SIDDIQI

The presumed generic whiteness of the mainstream U.S. audience means that white consumers decide not only what blackness is but also what they want out of it

THERE'S A FAMOUS scene in the 2004 Wayans brothers' comedy *White Chicks*: The opening bars of piano introduce Vanessa Carlton's "A Thousand Miles" and the car full of white girls squeals in delight before launching into the cloyingly earnest lyrics. Later a black man sings the song and, that's it, that's the whole joke.

Like the late aughts' "hipster," "white girl" is a label applied either dismissively or self-consciously. The tastes, habits, and concerns of the white girl, like those of the hipster, are often punch lines used as self-evident definitions for the label. Like a hipster's, the white girl's class status goes with-

out saying—there is no Twitter account for PoorWhiteGirlProblems.

Historically, white girlhood stood for the preservation of whiteness. Not just reproductively but as future missionaries, schoolteachers, moral custodians of the dark frontier—Columbia leading the way. Today the symbolic potency of white femininity is shifting.

Only outprivileged by white men, the white girl's assumed universality lets us project onto "white girl" our attitudes about race, gender, class, and the behavior appropriate within those parameters. The girlhood implied by the label is central to understanding

how it regulates not only white girls' behavior but everyone else's too.

The straight American "white girl" serves as the normative gender performance, the femininity from which all femininity deviates, through which all women of color are otherized. As the default, heteronormative white femininity must provide the ultimate foil to patriarchal masculinity. The "white girl" is vulnerable, trivial, and self-involved. Above all she is mainstream, either by consumer habits or design. Any resemblance to real-life white girls doesn't matter; all exceptions are exempt from consideration. For every witchy, androgynous Rooney Mara, there's a Taylor Swift, a Zooey Deschanel, and a Miley Cyrus. At least, there used to be a Miley Cyrus.

Her loyalty to the white girlhood she was born into via Hannah Montana is under scrutiny. No longer confined to a Disney contract, she dresses in cropped shirts, leather bras, and bondage-inspired Versace. She's taken cues from Rihanna and hip-hop culture at large and added gold chains, even a grill. Sixteen-year-old Miley had never heard a Jay Z song (despite the name-check in her hit single "Party in the USA"). Twenty-year-old Miley tweets screengrabs of her iPhone, boasting songs from Gucci Mane, French Montana, and Juicy J. She's recorded with the latter two.

It would be unfair to demand Miley remain faithful to her teenage aesthetic when no self-aware person does. And it would take a dull palette to assume she couldn't sincerely recognize the appeal of rap music and gold accessories. Her sincerity, however, is

irrelevant. Charges of cultural appropriation and the rampant slut shaming she now faces draw a narrow lens to her actions. In truth, Miley exemplifies the white impulse to shake the stigma its mainstream status affords while simultaneously exercising the power of whiteness to define blackness

She ties a bandana across her forehead like Tupac, or struggle-twerks—her ever-present tongue lolling out in challenge as she looks back at us. Each time it's a statement declaring this is cool because it's atypical, and it's atypical because according to her, it's black. Miley's look exists because racial drag carries cachet in cultures that commodify difference.

For all its black performers, the rap industry has been run by the white establishment and caters to the white consumer. The commercial success of gangsta rap wouldn't be possible without North America's largest demographic buying in. The commercial demand for sexually aggressive and violent rap is appreciably shaped by white teens in the suburbs looking to live out their fantasies via imagined black bodies. And in guiding the market, white consumers dictate the available imagery of blackness.

In the context of this limited representation, black people are cornered into owning all the stereotypes white consumers afford them, particularly when these consumers allegedly "act black." Black girls who don't twerk are made invisible because white consumers decide not only what blackness is but also what they want out of it.

Quoted as wanting something that "feels

black” for her new album, Miley Cyrus switches between embracing and distancing herself from the genre she seeks validation from. In a severe overestimation of her abilities, she said, “A lot of people wanted to try to make me the white Nicki Minaj. That’s not what I’m trying to do.” A month later: “Lil Kim is who I am on the inside.”

Like most dress-up games, racial drag is an exercise in fantasy, one that can exist only when femininity is constructed around whiteness, which in turn is constructed around purity. A desire to rebel against such a buttoned-up ethos leaves the white girl desperate for an identity through which to distinguish herself. To this end, Americans have always been able to use black people.

Black women’s sexuality has been historically presented as deviant and exaggerated, somehow more “primitive.” The thrill of appropriation lies in accessing the perceived authenticity of black sexuality, the success of appropriation lies in abandoning its natural form. Transfer to a white body elevates the action. It’s no longer primitive because while nonwhite culture is assumed to be rooted in instinct, white culture is one of intent. Elaborate nail art, like the kind Miley wears now, appears stylish on a white girl but described as “ghetto” on a black girl because on the white girl, it’s an aesthetic choice whereas black girls just don’t know any better. White people clamoring to up their cred by appropriating nonwhite culture do so hoping to be rewarded for choices that are falsely seen as inherent in people of color. It’s this savvy that Miley wants us to be convinced of.

Like white musicians before her, Miley stands to reap massive profits by straddling an insider-outsider status. Her video for “We Can’t Stop” doesn’t just reduce twerking black people to accessories; it’s a traditional relegation of roles. The lowest laborers in the cultural production of cool are black, and the (white) customer knows best. It’s a transaction predicated on pretending whites are outsiders to hip-hop culture. Therefore their participation distinguishes them as savvier than the average white or even black person. Meanwhile many can’t help but roll their eyes at a white girl fawned over for barely imitating styles and dances that many black women do better. As Azealia Banks put it on Twitter: “can this weird obsession white girls are having with being ‘ratchet’ go away???. . . . its actually rather embarrassing.”

The “obsession” results from the awkward sexism of white supremacy. If masculine aggression and blatant sexuality appeal to a white girl—maybe a white girl who spent her childhood on a Disney show—it’s only natural for her to appropriate the culture that’s been defined almost exclusively that way. And a society that has systematically devalued black women for centuries will again ignore them to satisfy a white girl’s grinning, self-conscious plea for attention.

Even rappers reserve a special place for



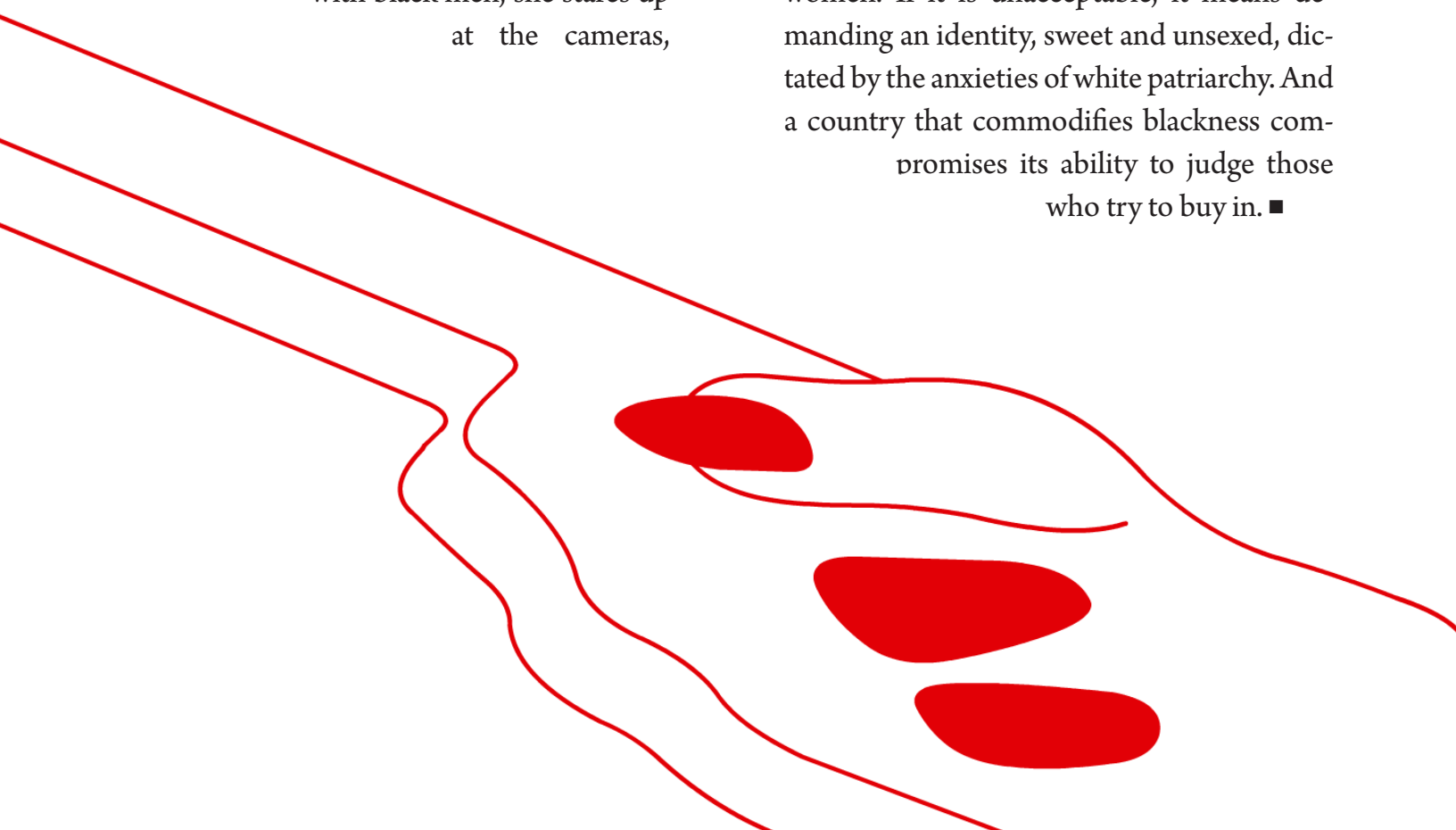
the white girl. With so many of America's racist policies motivated by a fear of miscegenation and a desire to protect white femininity, what better way to antagonize white men than through "their women"? Ice T gets "buck wild with the white freaks" while Kanye makes "champagne wishes" for "30 white bitches."

Miley—whose name has become synonymous in rap music with both white girl and "white girl," the slang for cocaine—will soon release an album with hip-hop's biggest names: Future, Big Sean, Tyler the Creator, and Pharrell Williams are all listed as features, with production from Mike WiLL, famous for his trap beats. In the past year Miley has danced onstage with Juicy J, featured in videos for Big Sean and Snoop Lion, and rapped on a French Montana song.

When Miley surrounds herself
with black men, she stares up
at the cameras,

daring us to voice a reflexive concern. It isn't just black women's sexuality she plays with but the men's as well, hinting at a risk she wants credit for not fearing. Miley never looked more like Billy Ray's insolent daughter than under Wiz Khalifa's tattooed arm. When there isn't a black rapper around to Instagram with, Miley posts selfies in a T-shirt emblazoned SEX, DRUGS, AND RAP, a trifecta that might just as well have read DOLLAR SIGN DOLLAR SIGN DOLLAR SIGN. In interviews she says "ratchet" instead of trashy and "weave" instead of extensions, self-consciously spitting out the words like cherry pits and seeing how they land.

Aping the styles available in pop culture shouldn't shock the way it has, but in contrasting so deeply with the "white girl" she's supposed to be, Miley earns both praise and scorn. If Miley's new look is acceptable, it requires a tolerance for undermining black women. If it is unacceptable, it means demanding an identity, sweet and unsexed, dictated by the anxieties of white patriarchy. And a country that commodifies blackness compromises its ability to judge those who try to buy in. ■





Swarovski Kristallnacht

by HALEY MLOTEK

Fashion as an industry suffers from the same authenticity and credibility crises as punk, and both have sought remedies in the same fascistic tropes

“Punk rock is a receding object: as one approaches, it disappears.”

—Stewart Home, *Punk: An Aesthetic*

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM of Art died for somebody’s sins, but not mine. The much-discussed retrospective “Punk: Chaos to Couture” aimed to draw a line from punk as a musical subculture to its influence on ready-to-wear and couture fashion. As the title implies, the Met wanted to take a disarrayed concept like punk and make it seem rigidly, almost fanatically, controlled.

Clothing speaks of more than just availability or comfort—every item speaks of a choice, however small, to align yourself with a certain ideology, culture, community. There is no opting out of getting dressed. But in our post-“Punk: Chaos to Couture” reality, it appears as though this established institution thinks fashion is merely rules and regulations intended to be decoded for profit, not parsed for truth. My sins belong to me.

The show, which ran from May 9 to August 14, 2013, was a blood sacrifice to the idea that fashion belongs in museums. Almost unanimously eviscerated by critics in publications like the *New York Times*,

the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, and the *Guardian*, reviews of “Chaos to Couture” read rather more like listicles of failure. The curator, Andrew Bolton, failed to capture the spirit of punk, or captured the wrong spirit, or didn’t draw a strong enough line from chaos to couture; whatever he did, he was doing it wrong. Anna Wintour, with her punk-themed annual Met Ball, failed to prove that “pink is punk,” as she quipped on the red carpet, rather like Chicks on the Right saying “feminism is self-reliance.” Audiences failed to be appropriately shocked, or impressed, or to care, and designers—save for Riccardo Tisci—failed to be sufficiently outraged.

Sasha Frere-Jones’s review was titled “The Day Punk Died Again,” as in the day the Met opened their punk exhibit. He points out that Bolton, as curator, was only really required to construct a narrative out of clothing—and didn’t. “It looks like two interns got Wikipedia out and put it together in an hour,” Frere-Jones tells me. “I don’t want to sound like I have anything against the curator, because I don’t. I mentioned in my post that he’s done other exhibits that were really well done. I honestly think my reaction to the punk thing is not disappointment or anger but just complete bafflement.”

Among the equally and bitterly confused were Jason Diamond in the *Paris Review*, who issued this warning: “If you show up at the Met looking for answers, you will probably be disappointed.” In the *New York Times*, Suzy Menkes called the exhibit “sanitized and bloodless,” while Jay Ruttenberg

of *Fashion Projects* points out that “the museum’s decision to identify famed designers laboring under multinational corporations as ‘D.I.Y.’ is laughable.” The people who know right from wrong and in from out quickly looked, judged, and dismissed.

But then, punk has always been a subculture that existed not so much in a vacuum as in a Petri dish. While most people who care about such labels know that, by definition, punk cannot be defined, there’s an entire canon of academic and critical writing about what punk is or was, means or meant. Greil Marcus, Dick Hebdige, Jon Savage—these are just a few of the people who attempted to explain or understand punk in thick academic texts. If Hebdige can just find out exactly *which* “heterogenous set of signifiers,” you know, the ones that are “liable to be superseded at any moment by others no less productive,” he might be able to “‘slip into’ significance to lose the sense of direction, the direction of self.”

What is it about punk that inspires this fevered inquisition? Punk could simply be a favorite of academics and fashion editors precisely because punk eludes easy definition. You could defend almost any choice or conclusion by saying you’re talking about one *specific* breed of punk, and your opponent is talking about another breed of punk, so their criticism is rendered moot.

Bolton said his goal was to “explore the huge impact punk has had on high fashion, on couture, and directional ready-to-wear.” So in lieu of the actual sweater worn by Johnny Rotten in 1976, we have a similar

sweater shown as part of Junya Watanabe's Fall/Winter 2006–07 collection. Instead of an actual jacket with safety pins worn by an actual punk musician, we have the 1994 Versace garment known as the "safety-pin dress," worn by Elizabeth Hurley.

Couture is tradition and exclusivity incarnate; it cannot exist without a strict adherence to heritage, as established in France by the Ministry of Industry, and by intensive training and lifelong dedication to a rigorous skill turned art form. Couture might be one of the most misunderstood terms emanating from the fashion industry—rather than shorthand for "really fancy," as some mall brands would like you to believe, the actual translation of couture is clothing made exclusively to measure for the wearer.

Punk is intended to *always* change, to *always* grow, and is defined by its supposed ability to include everyone at once, to see all sartorial choices as up for interpretation. In its purest form, couture is only meant to ever be worn by one person (and probably just once). Just because a customizable leather jacket is only ever owned by one person doesn't make it couture, because *bloody well everyone has the resources and ability to stick a pin in a leather jacket*. No one, unless his name is Karl Lagerfeld, has the ability to hijack a Parisian atelier and force them to add bondage straps to a pair of black jeans.

If Bolton's goal is to connect the influence of punk to high fashion, then he's achieved it through no intellectual labor on his part. Fashion is a vampire; punk, the loser subculture they've always wanted to suck dry.

By co-opting this particular breed of cool, mainstream fashion gets to try on a little rebellion, a little antiauthoritarian attitude, get itself a little dirty, prove it's still hip with the kids—and take off their customizable Chanel, as Bolton suggests, when they're ready to go back to their top rung of society.

They can take off the clothing items evoking World War II and Nazism and fascism, as punk frequently did, and exchange it for clothes made by actual anti-Semites and Nazi collaborators—like two of the designers frequently referred to in the exhibition, John Galliano and Chanel.

That's the real problem with staging a proper exhibition of punk proper. With context, a museum might explain why the artist's hatefulness matters as much as the art does. But, by reducing punk to an "influence" for *legitimate* fashion designers—i.e., legitimized by the preservationist, selective power of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—tourists get all the wittiness and cool with none of the bleaker complications. In other words, the Met doing punk is a lot like any American network remaking a well-liked British TV show.

Here, it's more than the *c*-word getting excised. The genealogy of punk is plastered with Nazi and fascist influences, signifiers, and signs. The Dead Boys had swastikas plastered all over their performances, while Ron Asheton flew a swastika flag at Iggy Pop's 1968 wedding. Siouxsie Sioux often wore swastika armbands. Songs like "Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World" by the Ramones satirically spoke from the point of view of a

Hitler Youth member. The Dead Kennedys took a more direct approach with their song “Nazi Punks Fuck Off.” In England, punk fashion was centered around SEX, the store owned and operated by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood. McLaren and Westwood incorporated the most politically charged imagery into their designs, favoring swastikas but also Marxist and situationist designs. “Look, sometimes a younger generation doesn’t want to inherit the history of an older generation, so we wanted to appropriate the swastika for ourselves,” said Malcolm McLaren in a 2007 interview. “We wanted to have a clean slate. We decided that we liked certain icons from the past and wanted to re-invent them.”

Vivienne Westwood has said that she was trying to prove, by incorporating swastikas in her SEX designs, the taboos of the previous generations no longer applied to her generation. Certainly Prince Harry would agree, but many critics do, too. Steven Lee Beeber argued that Nazi imagery in punk is the ultimate example of camp: “It’s anything but disrespectful to Jews because it is instead disrespectful to the Nazis. It is Jewish revenge ... rooted in comedy. When the punk bands used swastikas in a campy way, they were making clear the failed seriousness of those symbols and the risks—in this case extreme risks—of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling, like those of the ultra-patriotic National Socialists. Better to be ironic and detached than to trust unreliable emotions, pretending that they’re inarguable truths to be acted on.”

And still others were racist assholes, bring-

ing the larger problem of racism in mainstream culture into their tiny pocket of a community, creating more fractures, more hate. In her essay “It’s (Not) A White World,” Mimi Nguyen wrote, “I’m a girl who likes to lay it all on the table, so here it is: ‘whitestraightboy’ hegemony organizes punk. And I’m not just talking about its dominant demographic.” More recently, in her chapbook *Punk*, she talks about realizing “there is no necessary politics to punk, and furthermore, that radical politics were striated, sectarian, very often masculinist, and just as likely to reproduce hierarchies and fucked-up forms of gender, race, indigeneity, or sexuality.” The presence of Skrewdriver and other “White Power” musicians proved that for some people, the swastika or fascist imagery was not purely ironic. “Nazi Punk” became its own subgenre to distinguish the real Nazis.

IN “FASCINATING FASCISM,” Susan Sontag talked about the whitewashing (art-washing?) of Leni Riefenstahl’s lasting legacy as a filmmaker committed to truth and beauty as opposed to a propagandist working for an oppressively evil modern regime. In contrast to American uniforms, writes Sontag, “SS uniforms were tight, heavy, stiff ... SS seems to be the most perfect incarnation of fascism in its overt assertion of the righteousness of violence, the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior ... The SS was designed as an elite military community that would be not only supremely violent but also supremely beautiful.”

Every woman adores a fascist, like Sylvia Plath said: “the boot in the face, the brute.” The idea of clothing that does not move, rigid materials that force a body into an idealized appearance, are a key element to fetish gear, and nothing says “stand still while I make my commands” like a floor-length leather trench coat and a tightly laced, shined-to-perfection pair of black leather boots. The sexual and erotic element cannot be denied.

Likewise, the use of a recent collective horror can be cathartic for the person expressing it. Perhaps incorporating fascist or violent elements into contemporary clothing is a way to confront our collective anguish over the whole experience, the way Alexander McQueen claimed to do with his Highland Rape collection. This line of thinking doesn’t take into account the cathartic power for the person viewing the expression. Sometimes the designers claim coincidence, like Rei Kawakubo’s unfortunately staged Auschwitz-inspired show for *Sleep*. Or maybe it’s just a vicious cycle: After all, the most recent mainstream designer to explicitly invoke *The Night Porter* as inspiration was Louis Vuitton—the French brand that collaborated with the Vichy regime.

I don’t want to speculate as to who is a real Nazi and who’s just a poseur. Everyone loses in that conversation. But I *will* speculate about how and why an item of clothing can speak of a sum far greater than its parts.

Fashion as an industry suffers from the same problems as punk. Less a unifying industry term than a culture under constant observation, fashion is always forced to de-

fine itself, to prove its worth, its place, amid the long-standing belief that an interest in fashion (or, dads forbid, a career) is for the vain and vapid. Small percentages of the industry are held up as the definitive problems within it: Fashion is too inaccessible because haute couture exists; fashion is too destructive because fast fashion exists; fashion isn’t art because you can touch it.

The defense that fashion *is* art, however, always rings hollow. Contemporary visual art doesn’t have to defend itself; it gets to be haughty. Either you *get it* or you *don’t* and if you *don’t*, you can *get out*. Real art isn’t supposed to chase acceptance or titles from the asshole sitting at the top of whatever hierarchy your subculture has assigned itself. “Let’s be real,” a friend of mine said to me recently, “I love getting dressed and I do believe that fashion is important ... but the history of fashion is indefensible.” I agreed. The history of fashion is indefensible, if we’re talking about misogyny, racism, excess, vanity—in short, the vices that characterize the as-indefensible histories of literature, film, painting, pop.

The use of the swastika, outside historical or educational purposes, is banned in France and Germany. Outside of legislatures, the use of Nazi or fascist imagery will never be taken as a purely comedic or satirical measure; by Hitler’s design, “this symbol was also an eloquent expression of the will behind the movement ... the swastika signified the mission allotted to us—the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind and at the same time the triumph of the idea of creative work which is in itself and always will be anti-Se-

mitic.” Regardless of why swastikas were integrated into punk fashion, it is an irrefutable fact that they were always present. To ignore the truly vile aspects of punk expression in clothing in favor of an artfully deconstructed Rodarte knit glosses over the true realities of clothing as personal expression.

Perhaps fashion, like punk, cannot be defined as either an art form or commercially co-opted culture, but instead must be taken as individual expression, as speech, and held to the same standards we hold our God-given rights to say whatever we please. There are words and ideologies that we dare not mention—but for a generation who grew up in the shadow of Holocaust survivors, like the original punks in England and New York, clothing was a way to speak the unspeakable. The winners may write history, but the extent to which the Met have taken this cliché is too far. Galliano, Chanel, Versace, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have won, but that does not mean they have the legitimacy to dictate the conversation about punk aesthetics.

The notion that free speech exists at all is suspect, particularly as more and more countries lose the illusion that their government is not interested in monitoring their conversations. Clothing is one of the last few ways to communicate volumes without actually opening your mouth. To deny punk fashion its own agency, warts and swastikas and all, is a loss for the Met; the institution has forsaken an opportunity to confront fashion as hate speech and still stand by its validity as oracle.

In *Bodies of Work*, Kathy Acker—who

was punk as fuck and often evoked Nazi fetishes and racist imagery in her work—said, “The more I write my own novels, the more it seems to me that to write is to read.”

I understand what she means—the deeper I get inside fashion, the more it seems that fashion exists to be spoken. In 2006, Dodie Bellamy staged an exhibition with Acker’s clothing and jewelry, suspending a collection from the ceiling to create a “Kathy Forest,” as the exhibition was named. “Possessing such intimate effects of a woman I wasn’t so much friends with as in awe of, I felt compelled to write it all out,” Bellamy said, followed with her writings on “relics, ghosts, compulsive shopping, archives, makeup, our drive to mythologize the dead, Acker’s own self-mythologizing, the struggle among followers to define Acker, bitch fights, and the numina of DNA.”

Our drive to mythologize the dead is the same drive behind museum exhibitions. Museums are intended to preserve—if not in amber, then at least behind velvet ropes—the relics of what came before us. But punk isn’t necessarily dead. The limits of what the Met could or could not include are entirely subjective; while Acker could never be considered a legitimizing force for Nazism as an individual, the Met as an institution has the power to address clothing as seriously as they address watercolors or sculpture. If fashion is a conversation, then only choosing the most mainstream, commercially successful, and watered-down examples of punk fashion for the exhibition amounts to self-imposed censorship and an uninteresting, systematic silence. ■



The Wintourian Candidate

by FIONA DUNCAN

With high theory and unstable irony, Not Vogue strives to liberate us from the seductions of corporatized fashion

“THINK ABOUT THAT” is underlined thrice in the bottom-right corner of my notebook page. The date at the top is November 14, 2012. “NOT VOGUE” is printed carefully at center. The rest of my notes are barely legible scribbles, dashed like Dickinson:

*Celeb intellect vs. human intel —
History, herstoryonics — Who watches
the Watchmen? — Anna Wintour got
Obama re-elect? Look in2 power complex
behind mechanisms!!*

The man talks too fast for my made-up shorthand.

The man is Steve Oklyn, or that’s his nom de guerre adopted to protect his anonymity as he performs his avant-garde takedown of

the “fashion-industrial-media complex”—it’s a blog, Not Vogue.

I can’t recall how I first came across Not Vogue, but I gather it was around November 2, 2012, because that day I published a rushed article lauding its writer as the “World’s Greatest Fashion Critic,” a statement I still believe. Not Vogue dissects the fashion powers that be with the network sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the protest politics of Guy Debord, the irreverent humor of Marcel Duchamp, and the chops of Brion Gysin.

Not Vogue’s structure is simple: a standard white background, five posts per page, each post consisting of one image and a caption. 367 pages and counting. Not Vogue is all caps, strewn with highbrow references to

Virginia Dwan, William S. Burroughs, J.G. Ballard, Joseph Kosuth, Chris Burden, etc. etc. Some samples:

“IT’S FROM THE DEPTHS OF IMPOTENCE THAT FASHION DRAWS ITS VANITY” captions an image of Karl Lagerfeld with his Spring 2013 Chanel 2.55 hula hoop “it bag”.

“WE ARE ALL THAT MONEY CAN BUY 1985 BARBARA KRUGER” accompanies a party snap of Guinness fortune heir and couture collector Daphne with the red-soled-shoe designer Christian Louboutin.

“BODIES DEVOID OF MIND ARE STATUES IN THE MARKETPLACE EURIPIDES,” reads a portrait of Kate Moss, topless in a waterfall in Jamaica, shot by Terry Richardson for *Harper’s Bazaar*.

“THE RESULT IS ALWAYS THE SAME ADDICTION WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS,” undercuts an ad for a Saint Laurent Paris flagship store.

Not Vogue uses fashion’s currency—images divorced from referents (e.g. camo chic)—to map what Steve calls the “social web” of the high-fashion world. Repeat figures on Not Vogue include French editor and stylist Carine Roitfeld, photographer Terry Richardson, LVMH chairman Bernard Arnault, Saint Laurent designer Hedi Slimane, *Purple* magazine founder Olivier Zahm, Kering CEO François Pinault, Karl Lagerfeld, Kanye West, and, of course, *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour. “It’s basically Page Six of the 1 percent of the fashion industry” was how Steve once explained Not Vogue to me.

Whereas fashion uses textual anchorage

to produce visual tautology and brand belief (bold shoulders = power dressing, Ralph Lauren = classic Americana), Not Vogue uses titles to translate the underlying messages and structure of the fashion system. Borrowing heavily from French cultural theory (Debord, Baudrillard, Virilio), Not Vogue proclaims that fashion is a “fabricated society of the spectacle” owned and managed by “a network” of a wealthy few whose “single operative purpose” is promoting “addictive consumption” in order to produce capital. *Vogue*, the world’s leading fashion publication, with 23 international editions, is the emblem of this “propaganda platform.”

This is Consumerism 101, *Adbusters* stuff. Not Vogue’s anticonsumerist analysis isn’t new, but its application is. High fashion has largely escaped such scrutiny, perhaps because it’s a feminized field, Young-Girl territory, imagined as frivolous and so innocuous. Perhaps also because fashion does a good job at gatekeeping—keeping the insiders happy and outsiders disarmed. The fashion system’s central myth is that it’s a bastion of liberal mindedness and creative individuality, which it maybe once was, a place friendly to queers and shoe fetishes, to voyeurs and exhibitionists. That’s how I fell into this field. Fashion turned me on from a young age.

I was drawn to work in fashion because I’d been playing dress-up since earliest consciousness, because I believed in the power and beauty of performativity, because something about the way fabric moves on the body made my head throb heartlike. But one season covering international fashion weeks as a journalist—

four weeks of daily runway reporting, plus the people and parties in New York, London, Milan, and Paris—confirmed something I'd suspected but wished away: that fashion (or at least the fashion system, as opposed to the pure act of putting symbolic material on our bodies) is a business first and foremost, a multitrillion dollar global industry run by a group of power players and conglomerates. I learned that ad buys are traded for editorial coverage, that a critical review can get you banned from the runways, that press gifts are not just commonplace but often counted as salary, and that, Cathy Horyn aside, it is near impossible to make a living as a *critic* in the industry but if you're game to write press releases portending as journalism, you can fashion a handsome life for yourself.

More than the dress-up or the fabric-inspired mindbeat, fashion compelled me because the field is underwritten. Very little in the way of popular writing considers both the material reality and symbolic worth of fashion and dress, considers the field as we consider other cultural fields as worthy of critical discourse. What crushed me most about my foray into fashion journalism was a Word document I titled "EDITED OUT FUCK" (EOF), where I collected my writing that had been cut due to advertiser conflict. Finding Not Vogue was like discovering a Wikileaks of my EOF.

**An image came to him:
Muammar Gaddafi
next to *Vogue* editor
Anna Wintour—
“dictator of taste”—in
her own classic shades.**

NOT VOGUE'S AUTHORSHIP eluded my Google inquisition, so I made a plea in my November 2 praise piece for a contact. Within hours of posting, my inbox held three cryptic notes from strangers telling me they knew *the man I was looking for* and would alert him to my request. He contacted me. He said he liked my article and offered to meet. Less than two weeks later, there we were, in the basement of McNally Jackson, an independent bookstore in Nolita in New York City, his voice too loud, my hand too slow.

That first meeting, Steve—white, male, and over 60, in standard American dress (jeans, windbreaker), as visually anonymous as one can be—said that he was born and raised in New York, that he once worked at an indie bookstore, that he was several times over a junkie, that he had frequented Andy's Factories. He told me I looked like Molissa Fenley, a dancer he had been, at one time, well-acquainted with. He told about how, through her, he went to Japan in the early '80s and met Comme des Garçons designer

Rei Kawakubo. “Have you been to Japan? They would love you in Japan.”

He explained what prompted the blog. In 2010, Steve heard *Paris Vogue's* then editor in chief Carine Roitfeld tell a journalist, in response to a question about her editorial process, “You are *Vogue* or you are not *Vogue*.” Those two last

words, not *Vogue*, “just clicked,” and when something clicks for Steve, he checks if the domain name is available. Steve bought notvogue.com immediately without any project in mind.

Months passed, the URL lay dormant. In February 2011, as the Fall/Winter 2011–12 fashion weeks were getting underway, the Libyan civil war broke out. Flipping between the two continuous streams of news coverage, an image came to Steve: Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, known fashion plate—“you know, with his signature big sunglasses”—next to American *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour—“dictator of taste”—in her own classic shades. Not Vogue now had a logo.

Steve had a handful of flyers and 10 T-shirts made with the Not Vogue name and new logo (designed by someone who Steve will only call “collaborator No. 1”). They were distributed around New York. One made its way onto an billboard for the eyewear company Moscot starring fashion photographer Terry Richardson. That image would become the website’s first entry: July 8, 2011; the post is titled “NOT VOGUE 1 TERRY 0”. Over the next year-plus, Not Vogue’s fashion commentary grew increasingly complex, detailing all levels of the fashion industry, from its CEOs to its models. By November 2012, Not Vogue had posted nearly 200 pages of entries.

During our first meeting, Steve mostly talked at me. I listened gleefully, believing everything the man said. Steve speaks with authority—loudly but down to a hush when it’s important, as with the *need to know* intel.

He is an engaging storyteller with claimed firsthand accounts of the who’s who of New York’s cultural elite from the mid-’60s through today, from Joseph Beuys and Richard Hell to Keith Haring, Halston and Alexander Wang.

Later, when I started recording our conversations, I would discern that, more than all that, my conviction in Steve’s convictions likely had to do with his repetitive use of the segue “you know”:

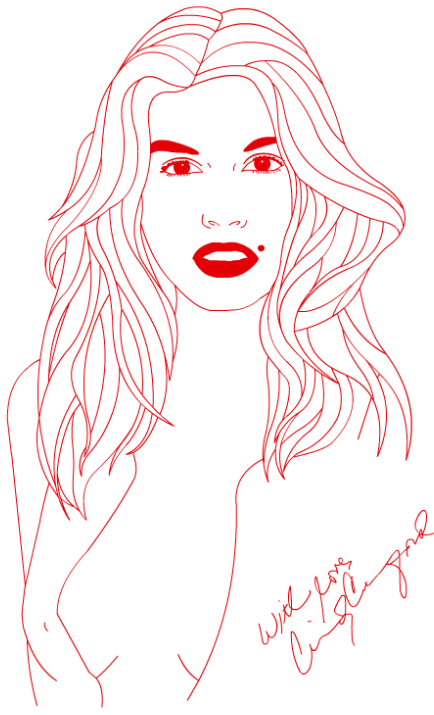
You know, Michael Jackson was enamored of Gaddafi. All of the militaristic aspects of his dress — that came from Gaddafi ... You know The Sartorialist? He’s just a failed Valentino showroom salesman ... You know Kanye is gay, right? Riccardo Tisci is his lover, Givenchy’s Creative Director, you know ...

One of Steve’s most memorable rants came during our first meeting. This was November 14, and everyone was still on about Barack Obama’s re-election. “You know, I’m not one for conspiracy theories,” Steve began, “but it is *my firm belief* that Anna was responsible for Obama’s re-election.”

The theory goes like this [story by Steve Oklyn with additional reporting by Fiona Duncan]:

Anna Wintour is one of Barack Obama’s top fundraisers. In 2012, the *New York Times* listed her as the President-elect’s fourth top “bundler,” having raised an estimated total of \$5,448,371 in campaign donations since 2007.

During this most recent election campaign, Wintour was rumored, in a story almost exclusively reported by right-wing



Imp Kerr

news media, to have blacklisted Republican Presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s wife Ann from designer donations. That story was never verified, but its flip side is well-documented: Wintour has regularly exercised her media power to support the Obamas. She arranged, for instance, for top American designers Marc Jacobs and Thakoon Panichgul to design pro-Obama products.

Under Wintour’s direction, in the years since Obama’s first campaign announcement, *Vogue* published more on the Obama family (mostly Michelle) than any other political figure, the most prominent piece being the September 2007 election lead-up feature on Michelle Obama, “The Natural” (“To the role of would-be First Lady, Michelle Obama brings modesty, dedication—and a reputation for truth-telling”), and the March 2009 post-inauguration Michelle Obama cover story, “The First Lady the World’s Been Waiting For.”

“Now, we know that the American voters that carried the election for Obama were

women.” I remember Steve leaning in to me, lowering his voice somewhat, and switching to the even more authoritative pronoun *we*. According to the 2012 American election exit polls, women made up about 54 percent of the electorate, with 55 percent of them voting for Obama. “Compare those numbers to the demographics of *Vogue* readers,” he said: 980,298 confirmed subscribers, 11,037,000 estimated readers, 87% of them female, median age: 37.9.

“Think about all the issues of *Vogue*,” Steve continued, “the stacks at every grocery-store checkout line, the back issues in every hair and nail salon across the country!” Think about Anna Wintour’s assertion that, “It’s no secret that I worked very hard for the president this campaign.” Think about her publication, which women buy for its aspirational content, persuading its readers that that Fall/Winter 2012–13 Doo Ri dress will go great with Michelle Obama as FLOTUS for 2013–2017.

“Think about that.”

DURING OUR FIRST meeting, Steve praised every aspect of the article I'd written, "except there's one thing—you missed the humor." Not Vogue is supposed to be funny. Steve, in conversation, is funny. His speech is peppered with violent "ha"s. His Wintour rant ended in one. Both IRL and on Not Vogue, Steve will put things out there just to get a reaction. Because of this, it's hard to tell what Steve believes in, if anything.

He has never voted. By my estimation, he's a Libertarian. Self-interested and motivated, he moves through the world taking what he wants, including wealth; he is a financial success. He doesn't have kids or health insurance. He doesn't exude luxury, but he is comfortable around it. He is neither attractive nor unattractive. Steve has that kind of neutral male physicality I envy as a woman—the kind where your personality can make you categorically hot. By the book, Steve is Jewish, but he'll say he's, "you know, not." His work isn't in fashion, but it's related.

Not Vogue is an anonymous project, and Steve has been vehement that I preserve his anonymity. He insists that the anonymity is in place because Not Vogue is not about him. "Our society is based on some unsaid formula that defines a person's importance by a series of standards based on visibility," Steve wrote to me when I asked him to defend his anonymity. "NOT VOGUE is a message, not a personality. As an intellectual challenge and subsequently a social provocation the appropriate approach was to develop the project anonymously ... NOT VOGUE is fundamentally a process, not a product."

Steve has recently started to refer to Not Vogue as "a deprogramming tool," designed for the fashion dropouts and precarious believers like myself. Like the cultural theory it cites, Not Vogue makes the fashion follower work for his liberation. It's not condescending, but it is demanding—Not Vogue requires an understanding of anticapitalist and postmodern theory, but it gives you the tools to acquire that knowledge. (Follow the citations.) When Not Vogue's message does reveal itself to you, it's like, as Steve likes to say, "taking the red pill."

Not Vogue is garnering attention in and outside the fashion world. In the past year, Steve has fielded press from *Hunger* magazine, *Idol* magazine, *The American Reader*, *The Wild*, and PSFK. Most recently, Steve agreed to be filmed (in a ski mask) in a Q&A with the personal-style site StyleLikeU. Not Vogue has also collaborated with the German erotic magazine *Tissue* and the fashion-criticism journal *Address*. Last fall, Steve took out an ad on *Garage's* inside front cover: black and red text on a bright-yellow background that read FREE PUSSY RIOT followed a reproduction the 1991 Riot Grrrl Manifesto. This was directly across from a Prada ad.

For all his action in fashion, Steve doesn't actually care much about it. Whereas I want to critique the industry in order to better it, Steve wants to "liberate" individuals from the addictive regime of fashion consumption so that they can define selfhood on their own terms. I would like to see the industry become more inclusive in its beauty ideals, more conscientious in its environmental

impact, more fair in its labor practices, and generally a more hospitable place to the designers and consumers I believe in—in other words, slower paced and less commercial. I believe this can happen. Steve is not so socially conscious. He once told me that if he were my age, he would try to create an elite, expensive art object, a Hirst- or Koons-type good—a *handbag* was his idea. He would give the art market exactly what it wants, “play their game,” and, as he’s repeatedly advised me to do when considering a commercial contract, “take the money and run!”

IN EARLY 2013, I interviewed *Vogue* contributing editor André Leon Talley on the phone. Knowing he was an Obama supporter, I was curious: What policies would he like to see Obama pursue in the next four years? He jumped on the question enthusiastically (“I am so happy you asked”), but his answer was shrouded in fashion speak. “It’s just fabulous! Just wondrous,” Talley pronounced, “Obama’s re-election was just the best thing to happen in 2011 [*sic*]. I hope he can accomplish everything he wants to.”

When I suggested to Steve that Talley and Wintour’s superficial politics may be veiling some other, more serious agenda, he cut me down: “No, their interest is purely visual. They don’t know the issues. Why would they care? They’re rich. They have health insurance forever. They have life insurance forever. They have multimillion-dollar salaries. They get to fly around the world in private jets.”

If they’re so vacuous, I responded, why do

you spend so much energy deconstructing their ways? “Look,” he said, “the community that is at the inner core—the biggest problem is that they’re not visually interesting and they don’t seem to be particularly intelligent, and yet the amount of visual time they take up in the world is enormous. The only truly interesting thing is how much influence fashion, which is completely corporately controlled, has incurred on people’s sense of self. That’s where the politics are. That’s the big political issue!”

“This is an interesting era,” he continued, “because there are a few of us left—I’m 63—who can genuinely say that there used to be small groups of creatives in cities around the world, communities of criminal intellectuals. I mean, the drugs alone! We could’ve been arrested at any moment. I saw some 25-odd years where independent youth were living their lives, building their subcultures, with very little or no corporate involvement. It was great. It was healthy. It was fun. It was crazy. A lot of ideas. A lot of visual intelligence. And then all of a sudden these corporations got involved—it’s deadly. There is very little work today that is genuinely outlaw. Almost everything is commercial. I guess I’m just hoping, in the end, that Not *Vogue* might inspire some kids to go off and create their own self-determined project, to not be so guided by the predigested structure that’s out here now.” Steve gestured around the luxury-class courtyard of the Bowery Hotel where we were sitting, fixed his gaze back on me, and then went, for the umpteenth time this recording, “Ha!” ■



The Other Foot

by ALICE MARWICK

*The ideal of authenticity established a boundary
between the self and a complete surrender to capitalism.
Fashion bloggers live on both sides of the border*

IN A STARBUCKS in suburban North Carolina, Lara and I discussed Jane Aldridge, the then 17-year-old Sea of Shoes blogger whose YSL platforms and Miu Miu pumps are the envy of women three times her age. Dressed in a thrift-store caftan and clunky wooden shoes, Lara—a fashion blogger and vintage store proprietor—moaned, “Every post is about designer shoes that she’s gotten from her parents. Apparently they come from money. Lots and lots of money. It doesn’t give kids a good message, you know? Who can afford a pair of designer shoes when you’re 18?” She shook her head and sipped her chai latte.

Lara was not the first fashion blogger I’d

interviewed who cast a suspicious eye on Aldridge and her ilk, the ultra-luxury bloggers who’ve won seats next to editrices and movie stars at runway shows. (While “fashion blog” includes any blog about fashion, the men and women who post selfies of their own outfits are known as “personal style bloggers.”) Young women like Leandra Medine, the self-proclaimed “Man Repeller” (who still managed to get married in a Marchesa dress and crown of flowers); Rumi Neely of Fashion Toast; and Chiara Ferragni of Blonde Salad are the toasts of the fashion world—on- and off-line. Model-thin and chic, they post pictures on their blogs dressed head-to-toe in the same designer labels that appear in *Vogue* and



Harper's Bazaar, sit in the front row at fashion shows, and collaborate with labels.

But while *Vogue* spreads serve as well-understood fantasy for average American women, the flesh-and-blood fashion bloggers who wear these clothes evoke more ambivalence. The tension is palpable in Lara's voice: We expect the microfamous in social media to be more approachable, more like us, more *authentic*—distinct from the fashion

world's fetishization of absurdly expensive consumer goods, coat-hanger bodies, and impractical heels and gowns. Who are these ultra-luxury bloggers? How do they live what we always assumed were fantasies?

When asked about luxury bloggers like Sea of Shoes, Samantha, an Asian-American fashion blogger who grew up working class, said, "I can't look at [the blog] for too long. I'm like, I want those shoes, I want that bag. How does she get all these things? Who is she? Who are these people? I don't know." While it was a given that *Vogue* was a fantasy,

readers struggled with “real people” who wore clothes that appeared in its pages. Samantha sighed, “I’ve always had issues like this, just with class and with fashion. Because I didn’t grow up upper class, but I love fashion so much.”

The disconnect between fashion insiders’ world, where people wear Helmut Lang to the bodega and assistants buy Chloé bags on credit, and the way most women interact with fashion, is acute. With figures that clothes aren’t designed to fit, budgets that prioritize rent and food over designer labels, and work environs that look askance at leather skirts or peplum tops, most women learn to dress themselves through trial and error, picking up tips from friends and family and the odd gem of useful information in fashion magazines.

Personal style blogs are massively popular because many of them show the realities of navigating a love for fashion, a limited budget, and a nonmodel body simultaneously. As part of my research on authenticity in online communities, I began interviewing personal style bloggers, becoming more interested in girls and women who showed off clothes from Target or Goodwill than those who, like Medine and Eldridge, shop with family money. In trying to emulate the stylish figures from the fantastic scenarios played out

on runways and in magazine spreads, these women, with their nonmodel figures and noncelebrity budgets, demonstrated fashion’s inherent contradictions. Leather mini-dresses, feathered gowns, and metallic sequins collide with the reality of the size-14 American woman trying to look like *Scandal*’s Olivia Pope in a white dress from Ann Taylor Loft and a pair of Payless shoes. The women I interviewed came in all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, and ages, often posting pictures of incredibly mundane outfits bought at TJ Maxx. Others were immensely stylish but had microbudgets, relying on their copious amounts of free time to pick through discount bins and Goodwill racks. While many of them boasted only their mother and BFF as readers, others are earning a living—albeit a sort of art-student one—from their blog, though without the *Elle* features or Lanvin swag.

But while some personal style bloggers push boundaries—plus-size fashion bloggers like the fabulous Gabi Fresh take explicitly activist stances about the fashion industry’s nonrepresentative-

ness; Tavi Gevinson, the feminist teen founder of *Rookie* (a sort of *Sassy* reboot for the iPhone generation), poses in outfits that are more “weird tableau” than “sexy” or “chic”—the most celebrated personal style blogs reproduce many of the inequalities that made fashion feel

**The most celebrated
personal style
blogs reproduce many
of the inequalities that
make fashion
feel impersonal**

impersonal in the first place. Few of us look like Karlie Kloss, but we don't look like Jane Aldridge, either.

The constant parading of the one percent in celebrity tabloids and reality shows has created a familiarity with lifestyles of the rich and famous: brands, neighborhoods, décor, clothes. At the same time, it's a familiarity bred in confusion. Most Americans don't interact with anyone who makes over a million dollars a year. The glimpses we get from Rich Kids of Instagram or Sea of Shoes are immensely disconcerting because these kids are so unlike us, but clearly do not exist only in a fantasy world. On her blog, humorist Kelly Oxford posted a scathing letter to Leandra Medine's readers, writing:

Be realistic about what she is, she isn't 'like you', a small percentage of people are. She's the magazine that you oogle, and online it's hard to differentiate that sort of thing for some people ... her wealth vs. the majority of her reader base's non wealth will remain the elephant in the blog.

Only the very, very richest people in the U.S.—a subsection of a subslice of a sub-demographic—can dress the way fashion magazines suggest we should. But social media implies personal engagement between creator and audience. Fans expect celebrities who use social media to connect with them, whether by @-replying them on Twitter, posting personal pictures on Tumblr, or talking frankly about rumors and gossip. On Instagram, Rihanna's tattoos and blunt smoke and Justin Bieber's shirtless selfies imply a

backstage gaze into the banalities—always conflated with “realities”—of celebrity life. When social media offers us glimpses into the lives of those who *are* able to dress like the 1% but simultaneously talk the personal, relatable, intimate talk of microcelebrities (YouTube vloggers, mommy bloggers, online comic artists, and the like) we feel angry. We want disclosure. Where does your money come from? How can a 17-year-old afford these things when I can't? Why do some people have so very much more than others?

Fashion usually avoids confronting economic inequality and rarely admits to its own unreality, let alone suggests that the rich don't deserve more than the rest of us. Few of the personal style bloggers I interviewed would ever say something like that. But their plaintive cries betray them.

“AUTHENTICITY” IS THE predominant personal value of our time. It doesn't mean having good character, or being kind, or even being hot. No, it means... what does it mean, exactly?

That depends. A purveyor of a heritage brand might tell you that authenticity is a matter of being made in the USA by a family-owned company—a kinder, gentler, smaller-scale capitalism. A hip-hop artist might suggest authenticity means remembering your roots when you get rich, staying connected to your community, not pretending to be something you're not. A fashion blogger would say authenticity involves taking pictures of outfits you actually wear, disclosing clothing you

get for free, and providing small glimpses of your personal life. In a response to a blog survey, personal style blogger The Put Together Girl wrote, “How I determine whether a blog is authentic or not, is whether or not I’d like to be friends with you in real life. Could I grab a cup of coffee with you? Could I go shopping with you? I think the key question I ask is do you let me enough into your life that I see that you’re a person with high points and low points, good days and bad?” In contrast, blogger SilverGirl wrote, “If the person dresses over-the-top all the time. I get the feeling they are just playing dress-up and not living in what they are posting as their daily wear.” AlliXT, who wrote a blog focused on second-hand and green fashion, told me:

I stopped reading [certain blogs] altogether because every single outfit was courtesy of, courtesy of, courtesy of... it went from having a little bit of an authentic voice to just being marketing copy... I consume blogging because it’s not traditional media, and I feel that I can tune out some of the messages that, if I were watching TV, would just be there in my face constantly.

In these examples, authenticity is not about eschewing commercialism but resisting the urge to give yourself over to it completely. That is, authenticity serves as a strategy for establishing a boundary between capitalism and the self. It establishes a hard limit that, once crossed, demonstrates that you’ve allowed commercialism to encroach on you completely.

It’s often difficult for fashion bloggers to

maintain this boundary. With the current industry emphasis on word-of-mouth marketing, personal style bloggers, with their strong audience relationships, are catnip to marketers, who blanket them with free products, giveaways, and trips. While most fashion bloggers don’t get this type of attention, industry partnerships are a status marker to which many aspire. While their peers may be impressed with sponsors and advertisements, this can alienate readers, who often lust after the blogger’s personal style more than their readership.

Precisely because readers expect bloggers to be more “authentic” than fashion magazines, bloggers must strike a balance between keeping advertisers happy and maintaining their integrity. Liza of Style Blueprint told me, “To be authentic in what you’re writing about, it means that you fully support it. You have tried that face cream. And you didn’t just read about it, you tried it, you liked it, you support it, you think this is great.” As a result, almost all fashion bloggers have created, if only for themselves, a sense of where to draw the line. Some bloggers don’t accept “courtesy-of” goods, while others give them away to readers. Others will only display advertising from brands they like.

Regardless, the urge to sell out is always there. One woman I interviewed conceptualized her fashion blog as a way to get a post-college job. She hoped to show PR and marketing agencies her initiative by demonstrating her ability to attract advertisers and come up with creative sponsored posts. Fashion bloggers were in marketing whether

they liked it or not. For them, authenticity is really a synonym for *integrity*.

IS IT POSSIBLE to be authentic—to seem to possess integrity on the audience’s terms—when one’s wealth differentiates them from 99 percent of readers? Fabianne Jach of *The House in the Clouds* thought so. She wrote, “If someone is a super sharp dresser with the discretionary income one only dreams of, it’s not any more authentic of them to try to play it down to just appear ‘authentic.’” But for most of my interviewees the lifestyles and background of luxury bloggers with sumptuous wardrobes raised questions. *Third Floor Closet* wrote, “Have you ever looked at a blog and thought that what’s shown there couldn’t be true, that no one lives like this? How does that person live so glamorously every day? When does she work? How do I know she knows what she’s talking about? Is this for real? Is this authentic?!” The lack of economic disclosure on blogs like *Sea of Shoes*—which, after all, is written by a teenage girl—was a constant source of frustration for the bloggers I spoke to.

A few years ago, personal style blogs were held up as a symbol of the democratization of fashion, allowing average women into the inner sanctum formerly occupied by Wintour and Roitfeld. Today, the vast and obvious inequalities of the blog-eat-blog world proves how oxymoronic that is, and how very *la plus ça change* the world of fashion remains. For Aldridge and her ilk, luxury begets luxury, since bloggers like BryanBoy and Aimee

Song first came to prominence for their ease with designer clothes. High-end bloggers are advantaged from the start, since they can style and display luxury brands that are so coveted by readers. Now they’re also raking in sponsorship, styling, and appearance fees: *Women’s Wear Daily* reports that top bloggers like Medine, who boasts almost 4 million pageviews a month, make up to \$500,000 yearly. With this clout comes more attention from the industry, more money, more readers, and more designer clothes. (While few of the most popular bloggers identify so-called “courtesy-of” goods, it’s likely that not every Celine bag and Gucci sandal is purchased at Bergdorf’s.)

Rather than normalizing young girls and women wearing luxury items, high-end personal style blogs bring into sharp relief the difference between the fashion industry and those who love it. This frank acknowledgment of budget constraints, especially when combined with condemnation of high fashion’s unrealities, reveals a push-pull relationship between the exclusivity industry that is fashion and the *sui generis* self-expression fetishized by personal personal style blogs. While luxury bloggers are embraced wholeheartedly by top brands, it’s only those who are outside fashion’s normative constraints who give fashion blogging any potentially democratizing or radical potential. Authenticity which seems increasingly like a meaningless buzzword, is a remnant of that potential, drawing a fine line between the aesthetic pleasure fashion can provide and the temptation to sacrifice oneself to it. ■



Digital Runways, Paper Dolls

by MINH-HA T. PHAM

*We know that fashion shows are overwhelmingly white.
What about virtual fashion shows?*

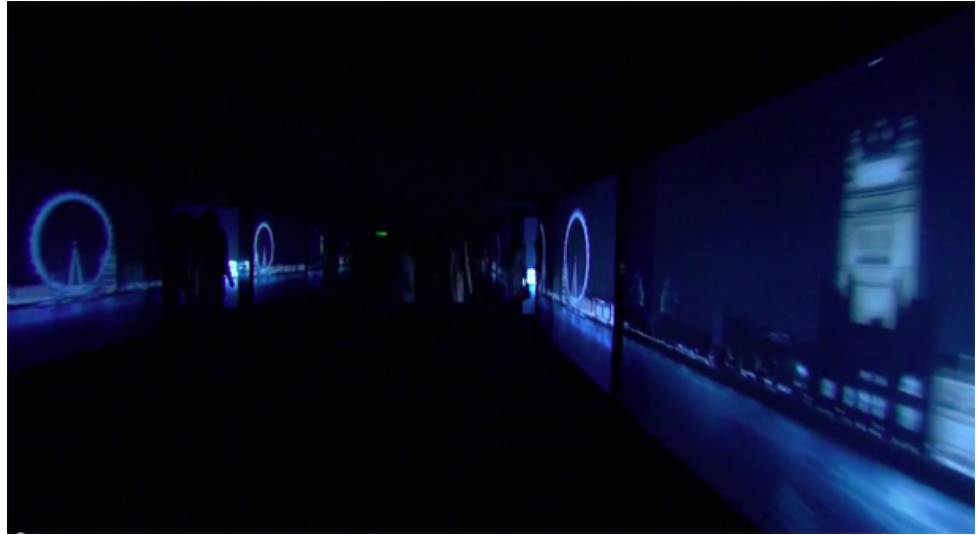
ON APRIL 13, 2011, the British fashion house Burberry celebrated the opening of its flagship store in Beijing. Approximately 1000 guests, belonging mostly to Chinese high society and the emergent class of Chinese luxury consumers, filled the 21,500-square-foot sound stage at Beijing Television Centre to experience the “Burberry Prorsum Autumn/Winter 2011 Hologram Runway Show.” As the name implies, the event was both a fashion show and a light show. Floor-to-ceiling video screens displayed immediately recognizable emblems of British culture: Big Ben, the London Eye, and fittingly, British fashion models dressed in Burberry trench coats carrying umbrellas printed with the iconic Burberry check. Demonstrating why the brand is

at the forefront of the digital fashion revolution (New York University’s think tank Luxury Lab ranked the company at the top of its Digital IQ Index in 2011 and 2012) the fashion models are computer-generated images based on white British models Cara Delevingne, Edie Campbell, and Sebastian Brice. Flying across a sky of London fog—their umbrellas serving as Mary Poppins-style parachutes—and landing in puddles of London rain, these larger-than-life size white female avatars displayed on the walls and ceiling of the Beijing Television Centre surround and dwarf the mostly Chinese audience.

As spectacular as this exhibition was, it was only a prelude to the main attraction: a

runway show of both real and holographic-like fashion models. “Holographic-like” because, despite numerous claims made by the trade and mainstream media, Burberry’s CG models are not true holograms but rather 2-D images captured from one (not multiple) angles and then digitally manipulated with 3-D effects. Still, the 3-D effect is so credible that distinguishing the flesh-and-blood models from their virtual counterparts is nearly impossible—until the virtual models identify themselves, either by multiplying into an image trail or evaporating in a cloud of glitter.

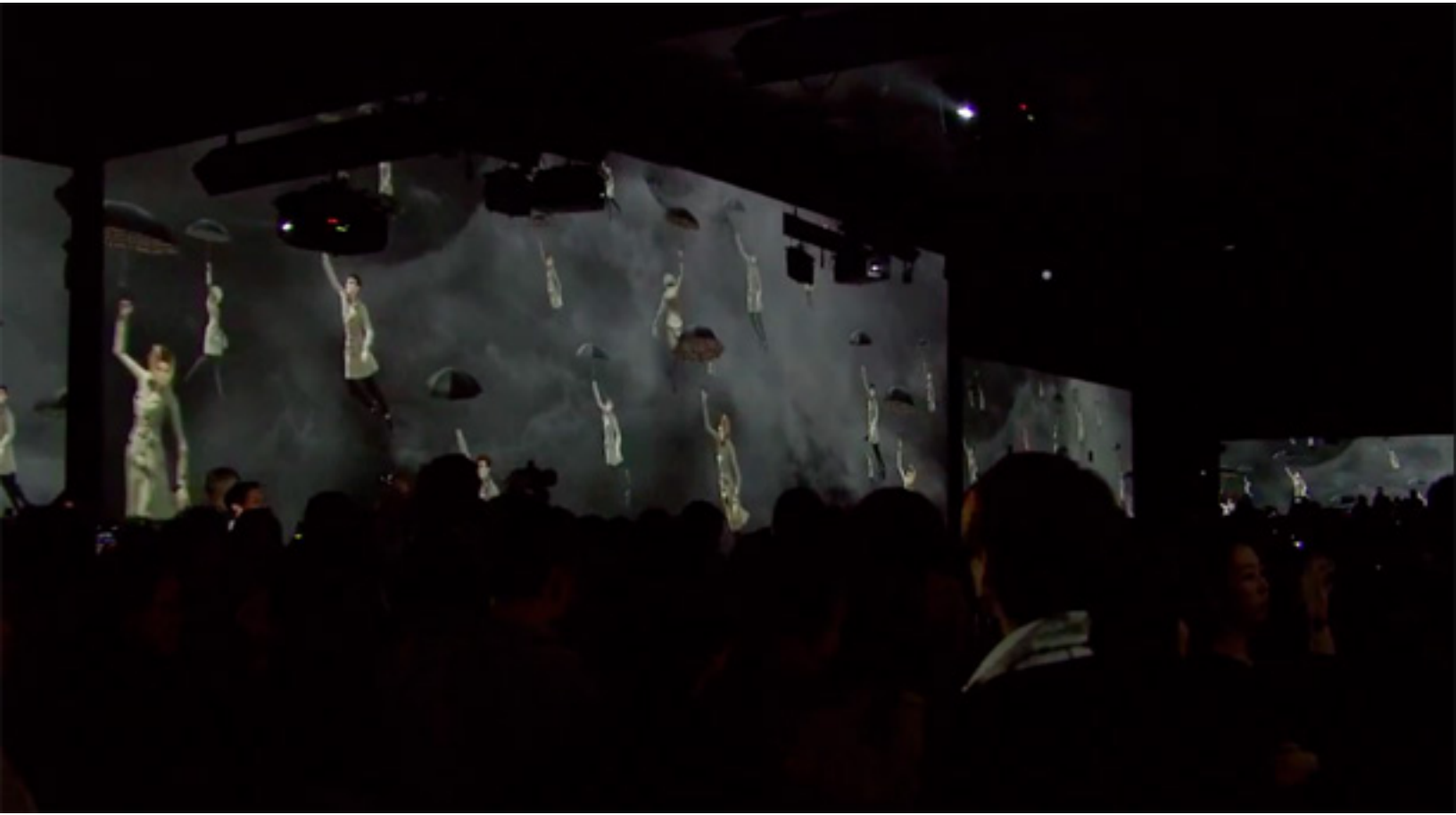
Burberry’s hologram show is telling of the contemporary moment in fashion when Asia, and particularly China, are becoming key luxury markets. For the past few years, one of the biggest financial-news stories has been China’s economic boom and the rise of Chinese luxury consumers. In 2011, the international accountancy firm Ernst & Young reported that China had become the world’s biggest IPO market. This was due in large part to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, which raised more than \$50 billion. That’s up 162 percent from 2009. Compare that with the far weaker U.K. IPO market (\$12 billion), still struggling to recover from an ongoing debt crisis in the euro zone. The



All screen grabs by author, from *Burberry Beijing 2011*

U.S. IPO market, at \$16.8 billion, isn’t faring much better.

No wonder, then, that luxury fashion companies based in Europe and the U.S.—Prada, Salvatore Ferragamo, Jimmy Choo, Coach, and others—opted to launch their IPOs in the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, or that a range of labels across the price-point spectrum—from Gap and Levi’s to Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Hermes—have been opening hundreds of stores across China since 2009. Gap’s plan to close more than 150 Gap stores in the U.S. and triple their stores in China by the end of 2013 is an effective account of these times. If we needed any more proof of the risen prominence of the Chinese fashion consumer, consider that some European and American brands have begun creating exclusive lines, tailor-made for this very market. These collections are “infused,” as the *Los Angeles Times* recently put it, “with Asian sensibilities in look, feel and size.” For Prada’s first-ever runway show



in China, the designer recreated her cotton dresses with radz mire silk and liberally appliqued sequins. Further strengthening China's hold on luxury goods is its steady expansion of the e-commerce market expect, which economists expect to outpace existing markets in the U.S., Britain, Japan, Germany, and France *combined* by 2020.

While China remains a poor country with an average annual per capita consumption of \$2,500 (the U.S. per capita average, by contrast, is \$30,000), China's fast-growing population of millionaires (1.1 million in 2012, more than double the reported number in 2007) and the Internet-enabled diffusion of Western consumer culture are quickly transforming this communist nation into what the *New York Times* has called "The Shoppers' Republic of China." Today, young

Chinese—mostly between 20 and 30—are buying luxury fashion and microblogging about it on Sina Weibo (China's version of Twitter), where fashion tips are one of the most popular trending topics.

To be sure, Chinese luxury consumers are not all moneyed. Many, like 22 year-old Lu Jing who earns \$943 per month at her advertising job, live on instant noodles and public transportation for months in order to save for a \$3200 Louis Vuitton handbag. Nonetheless, we are witnessing a remarkable historical shift in China's status in global fashion. Once "the world's factory," as Thuy Linh N. Tu writes in her book *The Beautiful Generation*, China is now poised to be the world's mall.

While the ascendancy of the Chinese fashion market and, more broadly, fashion's



economic shift towards Asia provides the backdrop for Burberry's presence in Beijing, the show treats Chinese consumers as if they are incidental. In an event that would seem a perfect occasion to showcase Asian models (real or otherwise) as reflections of their target consumers, Burberry presents a nearly all-white cast of fashion models. Rather than spotlight Chinese supermodels or at least use them as prototypes for the digital models, white models overwhelmingly outnumber non-white models on this virtual fashion runway—just as they do on real runways. Only two of the fashion avatars were based on non-white models (Jourdan Dunn, a black British model and Shu Pei Qin, the only Chinese or Asian model in the show).

In the Burberry show, the material significance of this moment in fashion history

is turned on its head as the relationship between Chinese consumers and Western luxury fashion companies is rearranged back into a techno-racial colonial world order. The establishing shots of Big Ben and the London Eye situate the iconic brand geographically. More crucially, though, they situate the brand within a history and discourse of technology that has served to rationalize racial hierarchies and differences. As Michael Adas has shown so well, technological discourse is deeply connected with racial discourse. In *Machines as the Measure of Men*, he writes:

Notions of white supremacy and racial superiority, jingoistic slogans for imperialist expansion, and the vision of a dichotomous world divided between the progressive and the backward have all been rooted in the conclusions drawn by 19th-century thinkers that



only peoples of European stock had initiated and carried through the scientific and industrial revolutions.

In other words, technological discourses of European “progress” are constituted against representations of tradition-bound racial “others” who are imagined as either stuck in or slow to move out of a primitive past. The non-West is imagined to be outside the technological time of the modern West. In technological discourse, racial difference is articulated as a temporal and spatial distance between the West and the non-West.

The images of Big Ben, the London Eye, and Burberry designs, accessories, and clothing draw a racial and national link between high fashion and high technology. While the event was physically located in Beijing, Burberry’s YouTube footage of awestruck

Chinese viewers snapping photos with their DSLRs and their smartphones render Beijing locals as admiring tourists or outsiders to the virtualized world of high fashion and high technology which, as the image of Big Ben reminds, is calibrated to London time and space. In the opening video, even the time and space of a dreary rainy day in London is idealized over and above the warm spring day in Beijing.

While Chinese consumers are becoming key and controlling players in the fashion market, the Burberry event all but erases this historical shift in economic and cultural power and rewrites history using a familiar narrative. Consider how Burberry’s chief creative officer Christopher Bailey describes the event: “It is a huge privilege to be flying the flag for Britain in the magnificent city of



Beijing.” Inadvertently, and so perhaps truthfully, Bailey maps a colonialist metaphor onto Burberry’s expansion into China.

If the visual images that begin the fashion show construct a scopic field organized around British technological time and space, then the actual fashion show, with its holographic fashion models outfitted in British fashions, is organized around the fantasy of digital disembodiment.

The allure of digital disembodiment is especially emphasized each time the holographic models are seen dissolving into digital glitter. This is an optical illusion of whiteness. In Shannon Winnubst’s discussion of what she terms “the infinite desire of disembodied whiteness,” she argues that disembodiment represents an ideal state of being in which “the messiness of material

vicissitudes” is transcended. In the context of fashion, the racial implications of “messiness” are routinely translated through a chain of signification like dirtiness, ugliness, and foreignness that are linked to nonwhite bodies and spaces in the Third World or nonwhite U.S. ghettos.

There are far too many instances of racialized sartorial messiness to name in full here but Michael Kors’s AfriLuxe collection for his Spring 2012 campaign serves as an exemplary case. In the editorial, white models are neatly dressed in Kors’s latest collection while African bodies are photographed in, to quote the website Fashionista “dirty-looking earth tone caftans and cargo pants and cashmere sweaters with holes in them.” The tattered sweaters and the dirty clothes are sartorial signs for the “messiness of materiality” that racial bodies

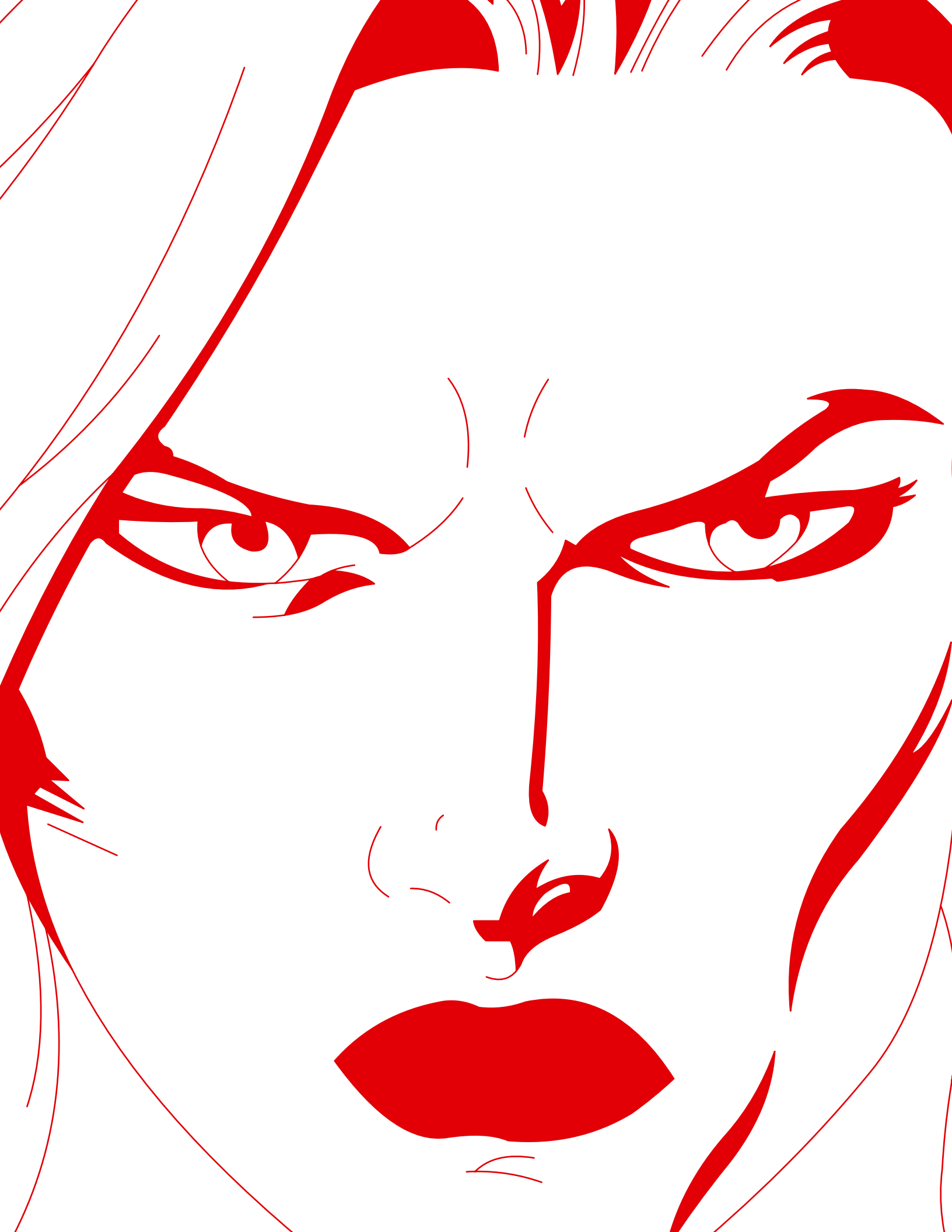
signify. The ragged clothes mark the Black bodies as fleshy, corporeal; they serve as material evidence of the hardness and realness of nonwhite bodies and experiences. In contrast, and with the help of lighting techniques, the white models in their designer fashions seem to float above the messy scene of the worn-through clothes and worn-out people.

In the Kors editorial as with the virtual fashion runway, physical and social transcendence are privileges of whiteness. Fashion's aspirational aura encourages consumers to want to be more than their bodies, transcending the limits of their "figure flaws" as well as bank accounts and closet spaces. Burberry's holographic models draw sartorial and racial aspirations seamlessly together: to be fashionable is to have the capacity of bodily transcendence is to be white. This is why virtual fashion runways are as homogeneous as their real life counterparts. Raced bodies (whether real or virtual) are burdened with the messiness of material embodiment whereas white bodies are allowed the possibility (and possibilities attached to) transcendence.

Since Burberry's Beijing show, other fashion companies—including mass brands like Diesel and Forever 21—have produced their own hologram shows. Those that have not are employing a wide range of digital communication media technologies and practices, from fashion blogs to Twitter to virtual fitting rooms. Fashion has doubtlessly embraced the digital age, to little surprise. The digital is the ideal medium with which to realize fashion's utopian promise of self-transformation, a promise exemplified

by fashion models themselves. The work of fashion models is to become something other than they are on each runway and in each photo shoot without carrying the burdens or the traces of their past selves. To realize this self-transformation, fashion demands an unmarked and malleable body—a clean slate, eminently inclined to modification. Thus, digital disembodiment is the ultimate realization of fashion's promise of easy or in the language of fashion "effortless" transformation. But like sartorial effortlessness, digital disembodiment is an illusion that functions by disavowing racial histories and bodies like the cheap labors of racialized women—mostly Asians and Latinas—who have historically provided the material basis upon which the transcendent hope of fashion is built.

Today, it is also the Chinese luxury fashion consumer that undergirds this fantasy. In and through the Burberry show, these material histories and relations are dissolved into those digital, glittering clouds of fashion dust. Once the dust clears, what is left behind is the live Chinese audience whose bodies are not constituted by the clean, scientific precision of binary codes but instead meat and bones, and all the messy textures, smells, and historical baggage they bring with them. If fashion's global economic foundations are shifting in ways that blur the meanings and power relations between communism and capitalism, East and West, racialized labor and elite consumption—and I think they are—then the fashion show is an attempt to reassemble these relations in the holographic model of the binary code. ■



On Rage and Swagger

by EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS

Fashion and swagger can never be the same thing. Swagger is the momentary containment of rage, being able to let it go—or not

An excerpt from Roman Letters, Oslo Editions (2011)

C,

When we spoke last, it was—and how could it not be?—of rioting and necessity, of taking and being taken by times you don't choose. Lust for what has nothing to do with sex, or perhaps only diagonally, and carrying yourself, getting carried, what could be a battering fury and its restraints, willed and imposed.

A couple of months earlier, we wrote back and forth about swagger, the political kind, an aesthetic but much more, those rare instances of walking tall and grinding and not cowering or self-pleasuring in its feelings of

being betrayed. Those women in China, the Black Panthers, the strident snappy dressers of autonomia, Toussaint, the particular withheld grin of the Kyrgyzstani man in fisherman sweater and fanny pack, strolling down the strewn road with a RPG and riot shield taken from the cops.

In Rome, where I'm trying to learn to talk differently, the word that bounces around my head the most is *la rabbia*—rage. Or better, in a falsely literalized equivalent, the rage, something you could come down with or become ruled by. The plague, the clap, the war, the day.

To become rabid, enraged—*arrabbiata*—like a dog, locked-jaw and foam, hating water and men and life.

Pasolini made a stunning film called *La Rabbia*—it's up there with Marechera's looting poem in being one of those singularly venomous examples of how "political art" doesn't have to make you loathe both politics and art. It was paired, in release, with a trashy little right-wing film to represent "two sides" of the spectrum, and even on its own terms, it loses its way politically, falls into the worst traps of Pasolini's thought. But rabidly, its seeking, incantational bile swallows the whole spectrum. When it lasts, and it doesn't last long enough, there is nothing that is not profoundly conservative, weak-tongued, and pettily fascist alongside it.

I've been thinking that swagger and rage are necessarily bound together. This is a first try to say something about that. In brief: Swagger is the manifested expression of a deferral, a deferral of rage's coming undone, coming apart, coming out. Of rage becoming raging. It is the held-out appearance of holding back what rage cannot be, cannot do while still being rage. Not just baring its teeth, but becoming the snarling consumption of whatever exists at a time.

And we swagger because we do not know how to part with our rage, which we cherish and press cutting close, but we learn to swagger—or rather, we're swaggered, briefly, while the wind blows and things burn and our hands are full—because we know it darkly all the same.

Scattered thoughts on each. Swagger, in the way we meant it, shouldn't be gendered as particularly male, not some cocksure masculinity. That would closer to the petty hysteria

of machismo, the solitary equivalent of that recurrent moment that you said makes you detest watching soccer in a bar, the hanging pause before the yells. I don't know what to call that, other than the gasp, and the after-the-fact nervous shoring up, of the urge simultaneously to belong and to be exception, to be one among many and to be the only man in the room.

Swagger has a form that is a swagger of objects, often mistaken for the swagger of who carries, wears, drives, uses those objects. (The meaning of its crass, truncated version swag, or swag bag, i.e. shitty cheap objects given or won, contains this.) For example, you can get decked out in new gear, in whatever appropriate social costume this means for you (meaning, you can carry, or pretend to be carried by, like you're spirit incarnate, the swagger of a hustler or of an anarchist, and there's no difference, it's just constellating things so as to be the pure surface form of what you declare to be, the pretense of an inhuman assemblage of style and intent, of total social instrumentality, so that there can be no mistaking, if you know the codes, if you're in the game). So when MJG boasts, "I don't really give a fuck 'bout swagger, I wear the same outfit three days," he's talking about that form, the kind of swagger that can be taken on or off.

Because the whole song, and beyond it the whole point of that kind of rap boast, is to claim you swagger whether or not you own swagger at that moment, i.e. came up from nothing but now have swagger to spare because you had that realest of real God-

given swagger from the start. (As he says elsewhere, “Your swagger is not my fashion,” meaning, first, that he’s not that interested in high-fashion and Gucci this Fendi that, and, second, that fashion and swagger can never be the same thing.)

The rage of objects, however, is the same rage as that of bodies and that of us.

And if we mean swagger, we don’t mean the essentialist fantasy of “you got it, or you don’t,” with its pathetic justification of getting rich because you deserved it, not because the random swerve of events pulled you golden up over the masses of the swaggerless.

Because what you have or don’t have, or what has you or doesn’t (or better: what has us and you feel as a hot stone in your intestines) is rage, and swagger is the just momentary sense—and the walk with it, and the angle of the head, and how a group surges briefly into view—of containing rage, being able to let it go or not. It’s a flirtation with both the possibility of being dangerous and deciding to not be, as if it’s always waiting, coiled-spring tense, rustling in the wings.

Swagger is the drunken, slippery tightrope walk at the edge of self-control, on the bent wire circling around a dense lodestone that is rage.

What of *la rabbia*, of rage?

It isn’t anger, which knows its source, and it isn’t fury, which is always a process of unfolding. The Furies were those who tore furiously.

One is in a rage beyond cause and enraged without target.

Rage isn’t pathological, and it isn’t hydraulic. It’s not something for Freud or for

Galen or even for Burton; it isn’t an outpouring or a flooding at the gates, echoing across the buoyed vessels of a crowd or drowning the skull of the one betrayed.

That’s just excitement or anger or raw hurt or, at its best, the contamination of an inchoate grouping of people that, germinally, begins a “we.”

Rage is a gathering that collects nothing.

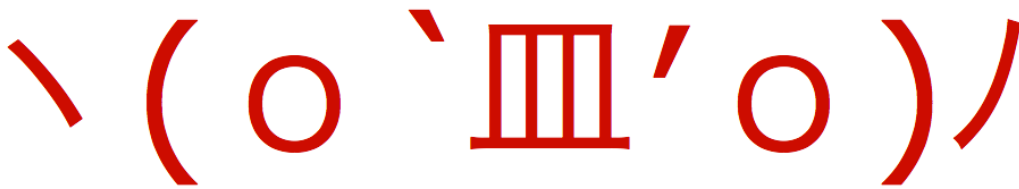
That swollen redness around an unhealing cut, not the infection or the pus, but that throbbing heat that threatens to spread, and it carries you on.

The humours can’t describe it, because it’s more than the choleric and because rage is closer to black bile—it is melancholy stopped up, the repetition of not mourning itself stuck. But it is not a liquid or a solid.

It is molasses thick and lightlessly hot, a curling worm of stone. It sticks in the throat and the veins. Not luminous and shedding, no luxuriance or life-giving expenditure, no navigation and beacon, it is pointless all the same. Stupid in its going-on, a dead star that didn’t take the hint, it burns in a tar night without shining and nothing is illuminated.

Rage is dumber than a split lip.

There are things that make us enraged, above all ways of death: when police kill unarmed teenagers, when states murder behind the veil of law, when bands of racists go cruising for brown targets. When they don’t even bother laying hands directly, when rates of profit change and work leaves or never came in the first place, when rent goes up and food costs more and wages don’t change accordingly, and all that happens is the walls get taller



and the guards get permission to open fire.

But rage forgets all this. It is the crucial idiotic center of the urge toward politics—that is, the practice of sharing space with other humans, the compression of bodies and urges into a polis—that has nothing to do with parties or laws. Rage is illegitimate, forgetful.

Lightlessly hot.

You can see it here, occasionally, on the walls, in the rarer graffiti, not the threadbare more of some name or some icon or what one

wants or doesn't want. But where the paint is closer to an acid and it has only stripped the sheen from the wall so that the words that come forward are the rage of building itself. A dusky stuck-throat singing, no expressive howl or yawp, no triumphal this but the seething that which is the bare scent of things.

Above all, rage doesn't think, but it is the thought of necessity. This is felt, not thought, in that buzzing in our ears, that blockage in the temples: for blockage is the real tactic and expression of what rage is. There's a stencil

I've seen twice in Rome, which doesn't read the classic *Prendiamoci la città*—we take the city—but *Blocca la città*—block the city, because the city here means the eternality of motion that makes it unlivable, a non-home, even as it builds and clears and builds once more. So rage wants not the purgative fantasy of destroying things or of taking, but simply of arresting, of throwing itself into the threshold, the road, the circuits, to make of its density a project, an interruption, and the end of projects. Rage is the prospect of the momentary, sticky freezing of the messiness of a situation, but not to make things black and white or provide some base friend-enemy optic, even as we think that if rage were unbound (which is to say, not rage at all, for it cannot unbind), if it were let loose it would give us that and we want it because it would be nice to have known externally what we think we know damn well. But rage doesn't reveal the correct line or the better deviation. It stops up our veins, and the veins of the city, and the heart is black for one buzzing instant that yawns out, and there is nothing to wait for, no clarification to come, now nor never.

The city's breath is held clutched by something that is not it.

None of this goes anywhere. But there's something about this city that makes it impossible for me not to think of rage. And more, to think about swagger in its briefer joys, when feeling tough is shot through with the vulnerable openness to what isn't you, feeling foreign and torn through with what you don't choose.

The knowing, barely, of our rage is an

opening to other winds.

Swagger opens to that, in its impossible speculative gesture of acting like rage could be expressed and used. If swagger is a walking tall, it's a wounded, blown-open walking, not stoically or stone-faced, but porous and without shine, pocked, the imagined scars over rage's nonclosure. Admitting we fuck up endlessly and don't know better, knowing that many things should not happen and should not exist and having no idea what should exist, or how, in their place.

Back to the immediate: This constant walking has me sunbaked, and the breeze isn't killing the heat. On my calves, there are tiny amber crystals of pus from where bugs bit me. My face feels alien to me, and I'm terribly sober at this table, and all this means that tonight I'm without swagger of any proud kind. And perhaps our whole counterworld, too, where a couple red flags mark not just a neighborhood but the fact that it's an exception, that these flags mean that over the city and country different colors fly, that our wanting has to wall itself away, perhaps at most dictating what kind of vocabulary we use for what sort of crowd is spilling out onto the street.

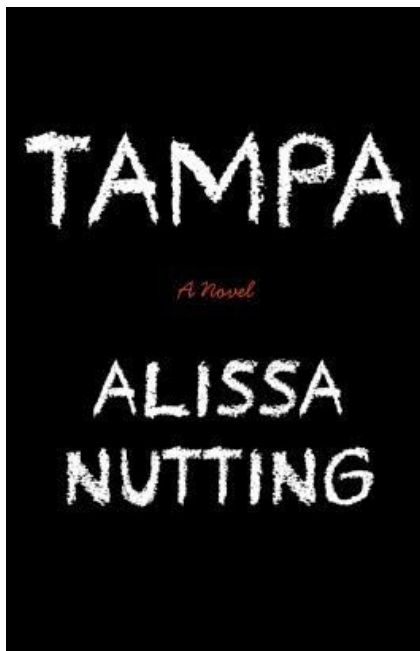
But still. But still we're that unhealing, that tide or torn edge. And though it is felt dark and unwelcome in the solitude of one body at a time, carried without destination or purpose, unsharable, still it belongs to no one, and that's the point in common.

Yours,
E

One-Dimensional Woman

By CHARLOTTE SHANE

It's hard to believe in Tampa's predatory protagonist not because she's too sexual, but because she's exclusively sexual



Alissa Nutting
Tampa
Ecco, 272 pages

UNTIL I WAS about eight or nine years old, I was best friends with a girl who would years later be charged with nearly 100 counts of child sex abuse, acts she committed and confessed to when barely in her 20s. As most media reported it, she was “having sex”¹ with several of her developmentally disabled students, including one as young as 12. Because she is not beautiful, the story neither went national nor garnered much local attention. Like many of my peers in the area, she’d had a child before she could legally drink and had likely settled on education as a default, hoping to avoid a life of minimum-wage retail jobs. One of my earliest memories is of sitting next to her on my swing set, realizing that she was so desperate to fit in that if I made up songs and asked her if she’d heard them on the radio she would say yes, and try to sing along with me.

If you’re planning on Googling the above details in the hope of finding pictures, I warn you there are quite a few cases that fit the profile. After just a cursory search for female-teacher-on-male-student action—even with

1. News outlets regularly refer to teacher-student predation as the elder party “having sex with” instead of “raping” the victim, and it’s worth noting that while that obfuscating phrasing may be more regularly extended to female teachers, it often comes into use when male teachers are accused of sexual assault, too.

the addendum of “special education”—the results indicate a near epidemic of such abuse. Consider this extensive list of female teachers convicted of inappropriate sexual contact with their students, then remember that, though recent, it’s hardly comprehensive. Then think of all the women committing the same crimes who are never caught.

Alissa Nutting’s *Tampa*, a novel about a predatory eighth-grade English teacher, describes obsessive sexual desire, specifically the desire of a beautiful young woman, that both does and doesn’t resemble these real-life stories. Much has been made of the book’s opening sentence—“I spent the night before my first day of teaching in an excited loop of hushed masturbation”—and it is the appropriate hook for the explicit catalog of carnal activity that follows. Twenty-six-year-old Celeste smears her wetness on school desks and “wallpaper[s her] cervix” with a card bearing the signature of a student crush. In preparation and anticipation for her eventual intercourse with a 14-year-old student, Jack, Celeste vibrates herself, wears open-nipple bras while teaching, and imagines digging through a boy’s trash at home in search of a specially used tissue. These initial passages are outrageous, funny, and, in the less sexually extreme moments, arousing.

Some reviewers have placed great emphasis on that last component, praising (or condemning) Nutting for making readers complicit in Celeste’s perversion with detailed sex scenes, but it’s not quite as scandalous as all that. In these early stages, Celeste masturbates without ever having physical contact

with a minor. And it’s worth remembering that accurate descriptions of arousal are reliably arousing in and of themselves, so when we read about a woman (or man) becoming increasingly turned on, our response tends to be in kind.

But Nutting is impressively rigorous about ruining whatever excitement her text might provoke by forcing us to face the fact that Celeste’s desires are unmistakably that of a pedophile (hebephile, if you’re being picky). This is not a woman drawn to a star jock who happens to be three months shy of 18. She emphatically rejects “specimens” with signs of adult maturation: facial hair, deepened voices, muscular arms. When she rhapsodizes about her preferred students, it’s their underdeveloped state that she focuses on, fetishizing tentativeness, uncertainty, and a “diminutive leanness.” She responds to skinny ankles and “boxy flatness,” eschewing the contours that come with age. “He was the very last link of androgyny that puberty would permit him,” she thinks of her chosen conquest. We come away not with the feeling that adolescent boys are sexy, but rather the conviction that it wouldn’t remotely be a turn-on to sexually assault a kid.

Celeste is identifiably a sociopath. Of her husband, she thinks, “His pain seemed like such an internal, private thing, no different from excrement—something to be dealt with in private. But here he was, putting it before me and making me smell it.” In spite of her taboo actions, she sees herself as a reasonable person who shouldn’t be held responsible for her sexual aggression. When reflecting on



Imp Kerr

the possibility of giving birth to a male child, she decides that “at a certain age it would be impossible to ignore him, and I would never want to *force that transgression upon myself.*” (My emphasis.) Celeste’s indifference toward everyone, particularly the young objects of her desire, is one of the several ways Nutting flips the cultural script. Pop psychology holds that women are uniquely emotion-

ally vulnerable, especially during sex; Celeste is Machiavellian, impervious to attachment. If anything, sex makes her colder and more calculating.

The rather too careful continuity of that personality is only briefly complicated, when later in the book Celeste refers to her desires as an “affliction” and wonders once if Jack feels “too molested.” After she’s forced to

face consequences for what she's done, she marvels that "in merely following my own desire I'd been catapulted ... into a realm of punishment."

The realization feels especially hollow because Celeste is amoral but not stupid; she has always been aware that getting caught would create problems, mostly in the form of obstacles preventing future sexual contact with minors. Celeste's nonchalantly selfish and self-justifying voice is so eerily consistent that these small deviations register as just that, and not as an indication of any depth of character. After their first instance of intercourse, Celeste observes that Jack "didn't seem traumatized or the victim ... He looked improved." Is she rationalizing in response to society's disapproval? (She can't be rationalizing for her own purposes, since she is incapable of feeling guilt or remorse.) Earlier in the book, she has relished the idea of one of her former students as an adult, masturbating to one of her advances while remaining tortured, "unsure and hungry for clarity," because of that early encounter. Does she truly believe that Jack is better for their experience?

If so, it doesn't stick. After a series of increasingly extreme, Celeste-contingent personal disasters, Jack is "broken for good," too emotionally desolate to have the

boyish energy or innocence that originally attracted her to him. The only time we see Celeste suffer is when she encounters something she finds repugnant, like adult male lust or an unattractive woman, or when she's denied sex with boys, but this pain is apparently enough for her to assume a nihilistic attitude. At the end of her affair with Jack, she recognizes Jack's "understanding that the world could be a terrible place. His eyes said that no one at all was looking out for him ... My eyes stared back and told him that he was right." This is the Celeste we know, the same one who asked herself, "Why did anyone pretend human relationships had value?"

The most peculiar element of Celeste's improbably cohesive personality are her visions, which are not particularly funny or plausible (even in the context of her habitually extreme thoughts) and instead resemble psychotic breaks. When her husband, Ford, rides next to her in the same car where she'd

deflowered Jack, she imagines Jack "writhing unseen" under her husband, "being suffocated as we drove." It's in that same car that she glances regularly into her rear-view mirror after school to make sure Jack isn't following "with the fly of his jeans unzipped" and within which she images a giant Jack bending down and crushing the convertible's roof with the head of

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his dangling penis. At home, she fantasizes about “boys on television” as “tadpoles who grew in Ford’s stomach until they were ... large enough to rip their way out in a violent mass birth.” These bizarre interludes, intended to be satirical, overembellish the already exaggerated figure of Celeste. The more directly sexual reveries make the same point about her egotism and appetite, and far more effectively.

IN INTERVIEWS, NUTTING speaks of *Tampa* as a book with many priorities, a novel on a mission to (a) give the world a predatory female protagonist, (b) expose the sexism that colors our reception of female teacher–male student exploitation, and (c) highlight the role our worship of female beauty and youth plays within that sexism. That she has accomplished the first item is indisputable, and she introduces much convincing evidence for the last as well. Yet to what end does one point out sexist apologies for female predators if not to bring attention to the harm done to their victims? Here, *Tampa* makes a case that’s cursory at best.

Because Celeste is our narrator and sole source of information, her inability to empathize with the boys she preys upon renders our understanding of them extremely limited. We know that she escapes justice, but our desire to see her punished is dependent on knowledge that she’s more or less morally bankrupt and isn’t about things being made right with her victims. In fact, given the powerful allegiance protagonists can inspire in

spite of their obvious flaws, I wouldn’t be surprised if many readers root *against* a jail sentence.

To further complicate matters, Jack’s trauma is primarily caused by a variety of outlandish events related to his relationship with Celeste as opposed to being a direct result of the sex itself. What’s more, a considerable amount of the sadness he reveals is in large part due to his realization that Celeste was only using him, not in love with him. The tacit suggestion is that if Celeste were motivated by love or planned to marry Jack once he’d graduated high school—as Mary Kay Letourneau, Kimberly Bynum, and Sarah Jones planned with their onetime victims²—Jack would have ended up happier than he does at the novel’s end. With the introduction of Celeste’s second conquest, Boyd, Nutting further elides the boys’ suffering. In spite of sustaining a serious head wound at the hands of the jealous Jack, Boyd becomes a better (albeit still very young) man, newly “confident” and “ecstatic,” “nearly buoyant” with pride. (“Was he sorry that it had happened? His smile said it all.”)

Nutting has stated that she didn’t want Celeste to have any sympathetic qualities because we’re already so prone to excuse the behavior of beautiful female predators, but Celeste is so cartoonishly libido-driven that she’s a caricature. After seeing a student adjust his genitals through his pants, for example,

2. Letourneau and Bynum are each now married to their respective former students; Sarah Jones is engaged.

she is so transported by her lust that she “grip[s] the side of [her] desk for support, working hard to speak just a few more words ... without sounding like a labored asthmatic.” Nutting renders Celeste’s amorality in chillingly persuasive detail but sacrifices the plausibility of her sexual nature for purposes of satire. One reviewer wrote that she had “some difficulty believing in a woman with Celeste’s particular voraciousness”—a sadly predictable response.

Rationally, we know that truly perverse sexual mania is not limited to one gender or another and that plenty of women are motivated by and passionate about highly satisfying sex—Celeste’s numerous orgasms are enviable, even if the circumstances through which she achieves them are not—but these truths are lost in exaggeration. (Those reveries about husband-killing tadpoles and death by giant penis don’t help.) Celeste is so monomaniacal in her pursuit of sex with pubescent boys that she ceases to seem like a real threat, or even real at all.

It’s useless to complain that *Tampa* should have had a different protagonist; Celeste *is* the story, the story is highly entertaining, and Nutting was not beholden to create any particular “correct” representation of a teacher who coerces her students. But when I think of the real-life victims of such a figure, and the real-life victims of my former friend, the seriousness of the damage done to them contrasts sharply with the odd weightlessness of this novel. And as a novelist Nutting *should* be beholden if not to correctness than to reality. By creating a narrator expressly to

fulfill a certain purpose and therefore too one-dimensionally heartless to be believed, Nutting lost the chance to say something more profound about the complexity of desire and suffering. After all, the problem with excusing beautiful women who transgress sexually isn’t merely that doing so is shallow and sexist. The problem is that excusing such women lets them do terrible things again.

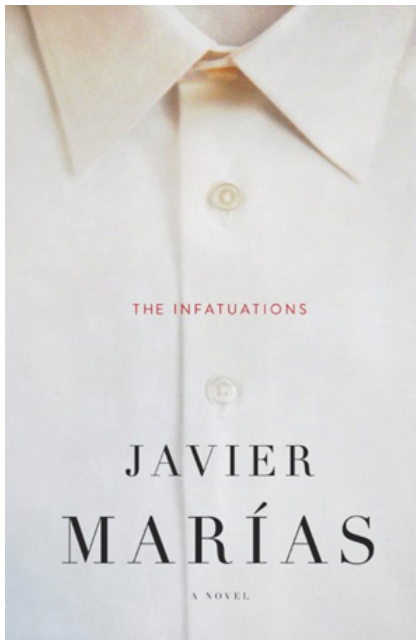
Tampa may encourage some readers to rethink their instinctual, excusatory reaction to the next new report of a female teacher having assaulted a male student, wondering if the woman is a calculating monster instead of a lonely young professional or a neglected wife, but the addition of this possibility hardly seems like great progress. At the book’s end, Celeste is a free woman who has learned nothing, spends most of her time on the beach, and uses tourist boys for sex by pretending she’s a college student who mistook them for closer to her own age. Does Nutting think we should find this behavior as disturbing as Celeste’s machinations as a teacher? With the power dynamic no longer in place but the age difference intact, are the beach boys victimized in the same way her former students were? Are they victims at all? In answer to these difficult questions *Tampa* ultimately offers few insights.

My former friend, if you’re curious, served jail time and has since been released. Locals who remember her crimes leave online reviews of any retail business unwise enough to hire her, asking why the store gives haven to a child molester. ■

Epistemology Kills

By NINA SCHLOESSER TÁRANO

The appeal of a murder is knowing that it has happened to someone else



Javier Marías
The Infatuations
Knopf, 352 pages

A WOMAN PRESSES her ear to a door. On the other side, her lover and a strange man are talking. She has reason to suspect they've committed a murder, and realizes that it's foolish to eavesdrop. What if she hears something conclusive, proof that her lover has killed someone? She'll become a witness, responsible for what she knows. She'll have to hide her knowledge from her lover. If he guesses that she knows, she may become a target. Yet she continues to listen, as any of us would. "The temptation," she says, "is irresistible, even if we realize that it will do us no good. Especially when the process of knowing has already begun."

The woman is María Dolz, the narrator of Javier Marías's sprawling and spectacular new novel, *The Infatuations*. Marías is wildly successful in Spain, often called Spain's greatest living writer, and critically venerated throughout Europe, but he remains relatively unknown to U.S. readers. Published in Spain in 2011, *The Infatuations* is a hefty and patience-requiring book that also seems capable of flying off the shelves. Marías has long been described as a cerebral writer, meaning that his prose showcases his intelligence, but also meaning that it satisfies a desire for sophistication thought

to belong particularly to brainy readers. The opposite of *cerebral*, in this context, might be *accessible*, as we tend to call writing that aims for simplicity, which is a form of inclusiveness. This book, it turns out, is accessible. It hooks into a kind of desire that is all but ubiquitous. All men by nature desire to know, says Aristotle. To enjoy this book, and to get into trouble because of this book, all you have to be is curious.

This is in no small part because *The Infatuations* is a murder mystery. Who can resist a good one? We learn on the first page that a man has been stabbed to death. María Dolz happens to know this man. For years, she's seen him and his wife at the café where they habitually breakfast. She admires their elegance and camaraderie and calls them, privately, the Perfect Couple. When she finds out that the man, Miguel Desvern, has been murdered, she approaches the woman to offer her condolences. Soon she's invited to the couple's home, where she meets the lush-lipped, enigmatic Javier Díaz-Varela, who was Desvern's best friend. She becomes his lover, and their entanglement gradually sheds new light on the murder. The final plot twist begins by seeming so ludicrous as to be insulting and ends by being chillingly, thrillingly persuasive.

The image with which *The Infatuations* opens—a newspaper photo of Desvern “stabbed several times, with his shirt half off, and about to become a dead man”—is a glinting, unmistakable hook. Satisfying our curiosity about Desvern's death—finding out how it was that his murderer attacked, how

many times he was stabbed and in which parts of his body, how long he took to die—is a thoroughly pleasurable sensation. Of course, that's the thing about murder mysteries: Unlike murders, they're pleasurable, and they're pleasurable because they're safe. They provoke and then satisfy our desire to come face to face with the worst that could happen. At the same time, they reassure us that the only possible place for such an encounter is in a work of fiction. Close the book, and the danger goes away.

As we're racing to find out the gory details of the stabbing, we are, of course, in the company of María Dolz, our narrator. It's she who's doing the investigating, Googling “Desvern murder” and scanning online newspapers. Dolz is in her late 30s and works at a publishing house in Madrid. She's an acerbic, even supercilious narrator, prone to severe judgments of others, particularly of their sartorial choices. Good taste is the thing in the world that most impresses her. Whenever she thinks of the photo of the dying Desvern, “with his wounds on display ... lying sprawled in the middle of the street in a pool of blood,” she's disgusted and launches into a rant against people who enjoy consuming images of violence. Dolz takes a scalpel to these “disturbed individuals” fascinated by the tragedies of others and peels back their worldliness to expose their fear. She imagines their self-comforting thoughts: “The person I can see before me isn't me, it's someone else. It's not me because I can see his face and it's not mine. I can read his name in the papers and it's not mine either, it's not the same, not

my name.” It’s hard to miss that the fear being exposed is our own.

Being dissected doesn’t feel safe, especially when the blade exposes something we didn’t know about ourselves. Late in the novel, we find Dolz listening to a story of someone’s horrendous misfortune. Her lover, Díaz-Varela, is telling the story, and Dolz, good taste gone to hell, is fascinated by its gruesomeness. But she doesn’t believe the story. Neither do we. For one thing, the suffering of the stricken person is too monstrous to be believed. For another, Díaz-Varela simply isn’t to be trusted. Realizing that Dolz doesn’t believe the story, Díaz-Varela makes no effort to prove its factuality. Instead, he tells her condescendingly, “Don’t worry, that particular [awful tragedy] is, fortunately, very infrequent and very rare. Nothing like that will happen to you... [It] would be too much of a coincidence.” We understand that he’s speaking not to Dolz but to us. What’s astonishing is the effect his words have. Condescending as his tone is, and baseless as his prognostication is (he can’t know, after all, what will or won’t happen to us), we are helplessly relieved by his words. Thank goodness, says the gut, in the split second before consciousness steps in. Thank goodness I don’t have to worry about it happening to me. Instantly, the story of the tragedy seems more plausible. It turns out that our former disbelief didn’t have much to do with a concern for truth. It was merely selfish, self-protective. For a frightening instant, we glimpse the current of denial on which we float toward death.

If this book were only a murder mystery

with a hidden agenda—namely, to expose the messy nature of our relationship to the suffering of others—its project would be interesting enough. In fact, the novel’s scope is more diffuse and surprising than that. One of Marías’s hallmarks is a provocative plot, but another is the way in which plot turns out to be only a hanger for the great, luxuriant garment of his digressions. In this book, the action, crucial as it is, accounts for perhaps 10 percent of the page count. Scenes are rare. Interactions between characters, as well as movements of characters through space, exist to provide triggers—occasions for one character or another to launch into a meditation on human experience, or a response to a work of literature (*Macbeth*, *The Three Musketeers*), or a moral thought experiment.

While they’re discoursing, all the characters sound the same. It’s hard not to assume that the voice they share—sharp, erudite, capable of thinking in page-long sentences—is that of Marías himself. The tension of the narrative flags when plot falls away, and as we turn the pages, part of us is waiting for Marías to circle back to the action. Another part, though, forgets the action and becomes interested in the digression itself. We begin to wonder about our own thoughts on the topic Marías is exhausting. We want to *know*. This wanting to know isn’t curiosity, exactly, but a slower-burning interest; we can feed it as fuel to our patience. The real genius of this book is that it will make you shut the book, lean back in your chair, and consider an abstract and formidable question.

For example: the nature of time. Early in

the book, Dolz attempts to console Desvern's grieving widow, Luisa Alday, by reminding her that his suffering was very brief and is now over. Alday refuses to be comforted. "Yes, that's what most people believe," she says. "That what has happened should hurt us less than what is happening, or that things are somehow more bearable when they're over... But that's like believing that it's less serious for someone to be dead than dying, which doesn't really make much sense, does it? The most painful and irremediable thing is that the person has died; and the fact that the death is over and done with doesn't mean that the person didn't experience it."

The metaphysical land mine here is the reminder that the past, like the present, is *real*. Think about this, and it will explode your notions of the passage of time. Day to day, we take for granted that we move forward. We're preoccupied by the future, since we're moving toward it, and we feel, or are told we should feel, the past drop away and recede behind us. But the past is still *real*, the way someone who's far away is still real. It's feasible that our sense of moving forward through time is only an illusion, attributable to the decay of our memories. If we cease to be haunted by our dead, it's not because they are not real but because we have forgotten them.

Later in the book, Díaz-Varela contests what

seems self-evident about our relationship to past events: that we are capable of regretting them. "What seems like a tragic anomaly today will be perceived as an inevitable and even desirable normality, given that it will have happened," he says. "The force of events is so overwhelming that we all end up more or less accepting our story." Surely we can all point to something in our past and say: *This* I have not accepted; *this* I regret. And yet it's also true that everything that happens to us becomes part of our sense of ourselves.

Díaz-Varela invents an example, a man whose father was cruelly murdered in the Spanish Civil War. This imaginary man "is a victim of Spanish violence, a tragic orphan; that fact shapes and defines and determines him." Had he not lost his father to violence, "he would be a different person, and he has no idea who that person would be. He can neither see nor imagine himself, he doesn't know how he would have turned out, and how he would have got on with that living father, if he would have hated or loved him

or felt quite indifferent, and, above all, he cannot imagine himself without that background of grief and rancor that has always accompanied him." In a sense, we can't wish that the past hadn't happened, because if it hadn't, a stranger would be standing in our shoes.

Díaz-Varela even claims we are incapable, after

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enough time has gone by, of missing our dead. “We can miss [them] safe in the knowledge that our proclaimed desires will never be granted,” he says, “and that there is no possible return, that [they] can no longer intervene in our existence.” Alday might counter that if missing a dead person feels safe, we are not actually missing them, but failing to confront the reality of their having died. Though her perceptions and Díaz-Varela’s seem opposed, they aren’t really incompatible. Each of them is arguing that the present is an overwhelming, all-consuming state. It’s simply that each of them is experiencing a different present. Alday is freshly bereaved, and it’s the nature of terrible grief that it feels as if it will last forever. Díaz-Varela’s cold peak of logic can only be reached in the absence of urgent emotion.

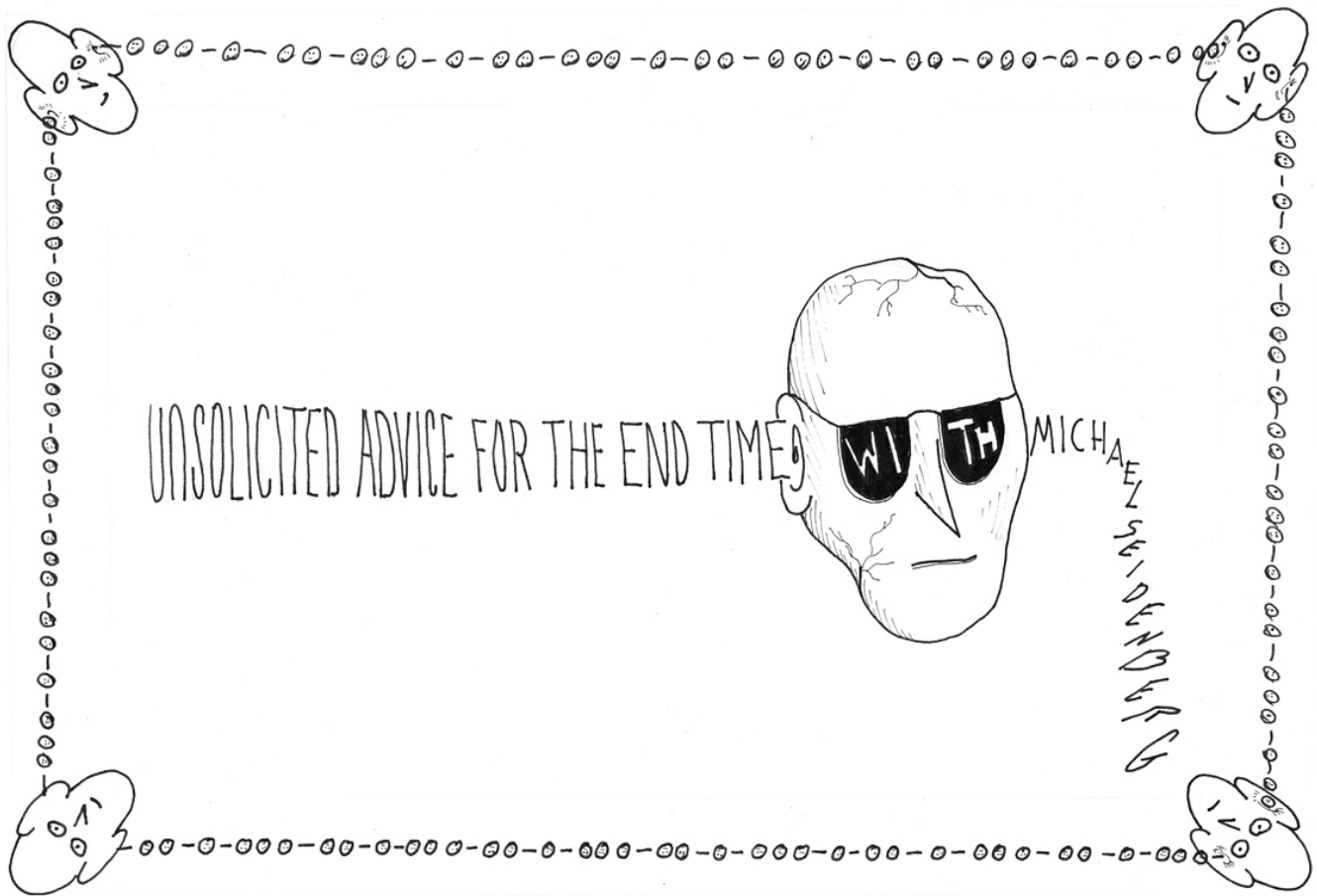
The title of this book suggests that urgent emotion is at its center—that the novel has something to teach us about what it’s like to be madly in love. In fact, the titular infatuations (“fallings-in-love” would be closer to the Spanish noun *enamoramientos*, but would make for an awkward title) are difficult to care about. Dolz is in love with Díaz-Varela; Díaz-Varela is in love with Alday. They exhibit warped behavior, as people in love do, but it’s hard to take their risk of pain seriously. Maybe it’s because infatuation is a physical crisis, and Marías does not trouble to locate the reader in an ardent body. Maybe it’s because he rarely allows his characters to experience conflict in scene.

Attempting to diagnose the problem, of course, implies that there is a problem—that the chief role of characters in fiction is

to make us take their pain seriously. Marías wouldn’t agree. At one point in this book, Díaz-Varela claims that what actually happens in a novel “is the least of it ... What matters are the possibilities and ideas.” Ideas are what Marías loves, what he works to make us take seriously. In a sense, his characters are themselves only digressions—subordinate to the idea at hand, a way of elaborating upon it.

Essayist Phillip Lopate has spoken eloquently of the digression as a formal prose technique. “The chief role of the digression,” he says (speaking of essays, not of fiction), “is to amass all the dimensions of understanding that the [writer] can accumulate by bringing in as many contexts as a problem or insight can sustain without overburdening it.” Marías’s characters serve exactly the same role. Perhaps *The Infatuations* is a novel that’s on the verge of being a personal essay. If there’s something unsatisfactory about the book, that’s it.

But forget the characters’ love affairs. The point of reading this book is to have a love affair with *it*, with the rambling, hubristic, magisterial project of it. If we think of prose itself as the surface of a book and of the ideas conveyed as its interior, then this book, like most infatuating things, possesses great surface beauty. Marías’s prose is graceful, rhythmic, and exact. His longtime translator, Margaret Jull Costa, does smart, elegant justice to his sentences. A description by Dolz of Díaz-Varela in mid-peroration perfectly describes how you’ll feel about Marías if this book succeeds in infatuating you. “While he continued to expatiate,” she says, “I couldn’t take my eyes off of him.” ■



I HAVE A dream of all people living out the end times squeezing every little bit of joy out of every last moment. But I may not get there with you. I worry sometimes as I give this advice that it won't be used as I intended—that rather than being helpful it might wind up being hurtful.

This worries me, not my own impending doom. Someone has to go first, and if there is a heaven (which I doubt), the first responders will get a good seat. No, it's for all of you that I fear. What if I haven't been clear enough in my counseling? All my pointers could turn out to be pointless, my directions a distraction.

I'm starting to think I might have made my suggestions too understandable. It doesn't always help to be intelligible. Sometimes a healthy lack of lucidity, with just a soupçon

of incoherence, can help one achieve the proper mind set to get where we want to be.

I might explicitly tell you how important it is to respect the past if you want the most out of your limited future, but I wouldn't want you to end up like the Lunardelli clan in Italy. They are winemakers, and to show their respect for those that have come before them, they have released a series of Nazi-related wines for the past 20 years. They say they are not anti-Semitic, explaining that it's all about history. They believe their sense of history is broad, as they have also produced some tasty Stalin and Mussolini vintages, and of course for the ladies, a spunky Eva Braun zinfandel.

I say too much history. No offense, Clio, but history is history. We have been tethered to the truth for far too long. We ache to get

everyone join hands
the **END TIME** is for **EVERYBODY**



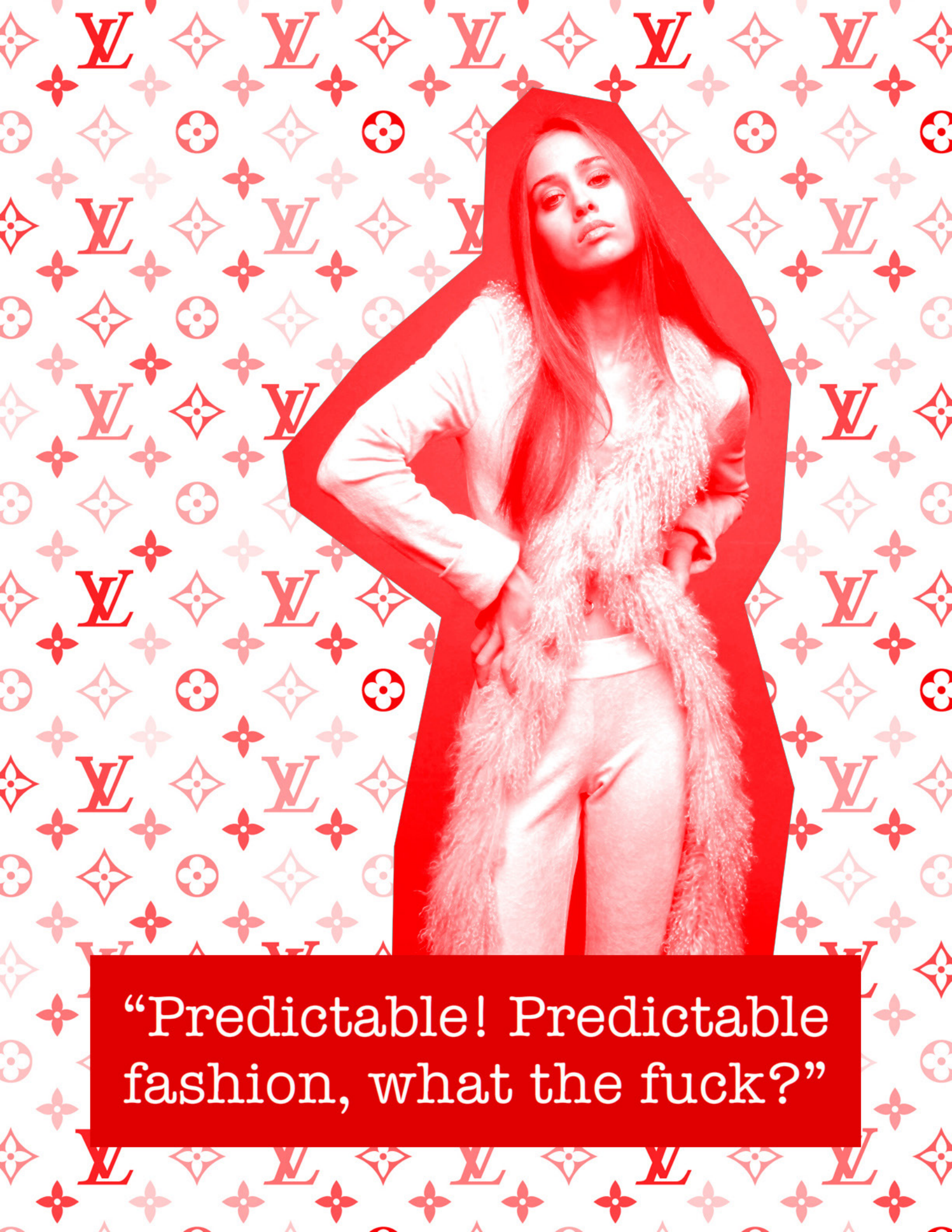
back and we need to get back to that gray area, that womb for wayfarers of peace and peace of mind.

I suggest now that we have to abandon history for it's more user-friendly neighbor, gistory. In point of fact, we need to stop paying such fealty to factuality: There is no one truth, and memory is a sieve. We need the truth that soothes and the remembrances that move us along. Often right beside the reality we have come to accept lives a slightly altered version that wants you to be happy. You just have to trust it. Gistory is and always will be there for you; it has your back. It's your wingman and your fair witness. It can turn madness into genius and sadness into glee.

Think of it like the history of art: Art begins literal but then when it needs to, it advances

into more creative ways of approaching life. I'm not asking you to go all abstract expressionist in your rearranging of reality, but certainly a little impressionism can go a long way. Any idiot can see what's going on right in front of their eyes, but it takes a visionary with that necessary sense of ambiguity to distinguish what they see from what they think they've seen. You get the gist ... well I hope you do.

If you've been reading this column for a while, I have hopefully rope-a-doped you into the proper state of muddled thinking you're going to need to come along with me and to continue on after I'm gone. If we've learned anything, it's that no matter how much you learn about life or how great an attitude you have, you might still be eating your breakfast in a sinkhole. ■



“Predictable! Predictable fashion, what the fuck?”