Official Rebrand and the Importance of Queer Adornment

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Official Rebrand and the Importance of Queer Adornment

My work can be inhabited and brought to life. It has progressed naturally from my prior work addressing bodies communicating inwardly and with other human or surrogate bodies. Although my work still focuses on physical interaction, it has been reoriented away from the tactile and emotional and towards the superficial. Currently, I experiment with communicating through bodily adornment, which can be more fluid, expressive, decisive, and controllable than the appearance of our physical bodies in isolation. Although taste and usage varies tremendously, clothing is a basic need. This makes fashion—the various trends and styles of dress—dynamic and universal, utilized to service innumerable functions. In my work, I contemplate myriad issues tied to fashion through altering discarded clothing under the brand I have developed: Official Rebrand. Additionally, I create sculptures and installations that address the complex relationship between fashion, self-expression and identity.

This shift to focus on surface-level appearances brings up a question that have long plagued me about fashion in western cultures: is it an entirely superficial pursuit? I would argue that, depending on the context, it can be superficial or deeply internal. For some bodies, a costume can be more authentic than the physique it covers. Style can be subversive and can constitute symbolic resistance. Style can unify groups excluded from mainstream society.

Though I gravitated towards fashion as a child, in my adolescence I distanced myself from it due to apprehensions about commercialism, materialism, and the pitfalls of superficial judgement. Coming into my queerness, I recognized a correlation between queerness, feeling “different,” and the need to express this difference. Although fortified by theory, my views on queer style are mostly empirical, based in my own experience and the research I conducted in my community.

I began my formal research last summer by asking many friends a series of questions about relationships between style, queerness, and Berlin. I sought to more concretely understand what I had absorbed over the past year in the creative and vivacious city and community that became my home. I interviewed many friends about style and its relationships

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to queerness within the context of Berlin culture. Their responses along with my own experiences have built the ideology that I reflect upon through sculptures, installations, garments.

I am compelled to make work that has a concrete purpose: expressing the identities and protecting the bodies of those who wish to wear it. I seek to make clothing and inspire others to make clothing that celebrates the wearer and contributes to a vivacious social atmosphere. Fashion, however, is a charged and complex subject, as it holds strong correlations to cultural and social status. Clothing physically rests upon body parts that signify race and gender, so making a garment to be animated by a wearer is inherently and limitlessly political as each garment is presented differently by its respective wearer. Thus, I use sculpture and installation to probe even deeper into various facets of fashion, away from the charged practice of making clothes that will be worn by someone. Often, my installations do not appear to be overtly about clothing; however, they address the internal and interpersonal relationships that influence identity and subsequently how humans present, perform and communicate identity to the world through the styling of clothes. In my parallel praxis of “rebranding” of used garments, I integrate these understandings back into wearable pieces.

Confined by my assigned gender and other bodily signifiers out of my control, I am empowered by the dynamic agency that experimenting with my style grants. Presenting myself in certain ways draws attention to facets of my identity that I feel more connected to than the manifestations of my static and inherited genetic code. I realized this by sporting a purse upon which I had drawn single and coupled figures.² Through this accessory, I communicated my current artistic preoccupation with physical communication, intimacy, and loneliness. I would much rather highlight that aspect of myself instead of, for example, my ascribed gender or young age. This realization, brought on by the function of a piece I made about bodies, prompted my shift in focus from the body to its adornment.

² Photo by Davis Tate, 2017.
I produce my work within a queer context. The signifying power of personal presentation can be particularly crucial for queer people, who may feel differently on the inside than they appear on the outside. In accordance with the scholarship of seminal queer theorist Judith Butler, I work around the notion that gender is not inherent but conditioned. From birth, we are primed to behave a certain way. Clothing options are integral to this socialized training. Babies labeled boys can not choose blue clothes themselves.

Babies designated as girls surely do not request bows to be attached to their bald heads. As they grow, boys and girls are expected to behave a certain way and visually signify their adherence to these norms with correspondingly “masculine” or “feminine” clothing styles. These expectations limit the potential for humans to independently and individually determine their own preferences. Though many people glean comfort and confidence from identifying with and performing along these socially prescribed binary expectations, gender norms are suffocating for others. As Butler stated in her June 2015 lecture celebrating the 25th anniversary of her foundational book, *Gender Trouble*, “life is more livable when we are not confined to categories that do not work for us, or categories that are imposed on us and take away our freedom.”

I created the installation *Uniform* to explore the impacts of unchanging institutionally imposed clothing categories. For the first seven years of my education, I

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was required to wear a plaid dress in the winter: a light blue one in the fall and spring, over a
white peter pan collared shirt, with brown leather shoes and blue knee socks or tights4. I felt
limited by this stiff uniform, and looked forward to “civies” (i.e. uniform free) days with absurd
excitement. Seven years of homogenizing repression animated by brief moments of joyful
expression led me to correlate freedom of dress with the celebration of individuality. For me,
clothing constitutes a form of self-expression that I could never take for granted. Uniforms may
unify, but they also erase individuality and promote a monolithic culture of obedience. I
criticized these intentions by starching all of my sisters’ and my old uniforms, so they stood up
on their own. I arranged them in a white-tiled group shower in rows of two, eerily evocative of a
class picture. A brief text written on the wall summed up my thoughts: the potential for
self-expression that uniforms wash away is mirrored by the alienation of these dresses from the
bodies they once inhabited. The variation in size of the garments communicated that although
bodies grow and mentalities change, the stagnancy of uniforms prevent personal growth by
limiting one’s ability to experiment with how they present themselves. Without the freedom to
try new things, it is difficult to discover what one likes. Someone may not know how
comfortable he feels in a skirt without trying one on. Such limitations are born both of formal
uniforms and constraining social expectations that people prescribe exclusively to styles and
trends deemed appropriate for them. Of course, most uniforms, institutional or otherwise, are
gendered.

In the hopes of making life more livable and enjoyable for those who do not wish to
conform to gendered parameters, I liberate clothes from their prior categorizations and social
expectations. I take formerly gendered garments and reintroduce them gender free. Each piece
is unique and thus does not promote a single “queer style.” I resist limitations brought on by
dominant expectations, binaries, and trends. I support style as a way to expand the definitions
of what it means it means to be a “boy,” “girl,” or any other gender. Although I work in the
visual, queerness is of course not confined to aesthetics. It is psychological, social,
institutional, historical, grammatical. It is internal; it is external. Through clothing, the boundary
between those two categories can dissolve. Although this extreme concern for appearances
may seem overly superficial, the importance of the surface should not be undervalued. Visibility
is an essential channel through which to express queer liberation and pride. Visibility mandates
recognition, and without recognition marginalized identities are erased.

Although huge strides have been made in the fields of cosmetic and gender reassignment surgery, these procedures are not universally accessible or necessary. While gender identity can constantly evolve, the sexed body itself is more permanent, as are surgical changes to it. Of course, expression through surgery and clothes are mutually inclusive. But I am not a doctor, I am an artist, so I focus on what is material and fluid: expression of identity through styling. People can change; so can clothes. People can possess multiple identities at once and wish to express them at different times. Thus, personal style is an essential mechanism for reckoning diverse and changeable interior and exterior selves. It can be both a portal and a shield for one’s personality, identity, mood.

Such functions of fashion have been debated throughout art history. In Identification (1998) queer activist and art historian Jonathan D. Katz responds to many facets of Moira Roth’s esteemed 1977 essay The Aesthetic of Indifference, with a perspective long emancipated from the highly censored and homophobic McCarthy era in which the quietly subversive movement originated. Developed through his lived experience as a closeted homosexual as well as his extensive research in the realm of queer studies, Katz’ argument respectfully contests Roth’s reading of Duchamp’s performance of the dandy, appearing exaggeratedly attentive to his outward appearance, as a tragic shield, and poses Duchamp’s flamboyant attire as an empowering embodiment of the social construction of the self. Roth defines Marcel Duchamp’s dandyism as a performative decoy, notable style as a tool for distracting people from the artist’s troubled interior, “a self-conscious performance of a non-self-identical identity, a performance in which elegance and aloofness operated as a kind of shield against the recognition of painful self-truths.” Katz breaks down Roth’s reading of Duchamp’s performative dress as a reflection of the very societal understanding of the self as single, static, natural, and innate which Duchamp’s public dandyism challenged. Although I believe style can serve to protect the wearer, Katz’s more nuanced argument reflects the progression in certain societal understandings of gender, following positive change brought on by the advancement of queer studies.

Katz cites dandy icon Oscar Wilde’s depictions of a self constructed within various public arenas, whose interior tendencies and desires are born of performative social

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7 Ibid., 57.
expectations.\textsuperscript{8} This assertion that there is no “natural” or inborn self which is free from societal influence gets to the core of queer theory before the academic discourse even began. Katz suggests considering Duchamp’s dandyism through a multiplicitous notion of self, as an “embodiment of a new social constructionist perspective, wherein the commonsense, essentialized self of old is not only vacated but critiqued.”\textsuperscript{9} Through style, a visual manifestation of the self, the aesthetic merging of interior to exterior, people can explore and express the varied facets of their identities. Who we are is inextricable from how we present ourselves, and the fluid agency of style provides an important vehicle for understanding and communicating our authentic selves.

Although dressing eccentrically and against societal norms is not always practical, for some, such style can afford much comfort. One who feels divergent from the expectations assigned on the basis of their inborn appearance will likely not feel right dressing in accordance with dominant cisgender, heterosexual norms. People deserve the freedom to decide for themselves what feels right, uninhibited by societal dictations. When I interviewed fashion editor and Berlin style icon, Salome Mallari, she summed it up perfectly:

Fashion is a huge thing for queer people in terms of expressing their identity (not that anyone has to do this). It’s a way of changing yourself to look the way you feel on the inside and for me it helps to project my felt-self to the outside world. I feel infinitely better dressing femme in public and not hiding those femme feelings.\textsuperscript{10}

In many societies today, queer lives are more livable and visible than when Roth interpreted Duchamp’s style as a performative decoy hiding “painful self-truths,” instead of being a truth itself. Individually or collectively, style can be an honest and creative celebration of the self, or a symbolic rejection of dominant culture. It can be a public performance. This function of fashion helps build queer communities that challenge norms of sexual identity and gender expression. In a more recent interview Salome Mallari told OE Magazine,

The way I dress is also how I meet my friends. It attracts the people I’m interested in because, you know, it’s a huge expression of my identity and personality. For example, I don’t really identify with any gender, but I feel quite feminine so fashion is a way of expressing that.\textsuperscript{11}

This response testifies to how superficial judgement, despite its materialistic connotations, can assist certain kinds of community building. For one whose styled self feels truer than their physical body, fashion can be a means to foster friendship and celebrate commonalities.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 57- 58.
\textsuperscript{10} Mallari, Salome. "Queer Fashion In Berlin". Berlin, Germany, 2016,.
Coming together in public, drawing attention to, and celebrating an identity that is historically marginalized and erased makes queer celebrations not only fun, but essential. Queer gatherings signify political demands. According to Butler, they “can send a shockwave into society as if to say we, the invisible ones, we exist.” The inevitable risk in such assembling makes gathering together and celebrating queer existence of utmost importance.

In Berlin’s queer party scene, public and private overlap. This overlap creates a unique performance space mostly within clubs, bars, and parks. Semi-private, such events are generally free from threat of queerphobic violence and harassment that can occur on the street. Although parties are never entirely safe spaces, inhibitions are lower at these events and the culture fostered and spreads into community life outside of designated party spaces. Event organizer Geovane Pedro Di Bortoli said on the matter,

Berlin allows one to perform with no boundaries, no matter where or what! It is all about self-expression, either as art or just as a personal experience. Parties are an extension of the feeling of being in Berlin, freedom as its highest level. In the end everyone around you is performing, which gives to the scene a special touch found only in this particular little german bubble.

Style is a central component of the performances that constitute these gatherings where the public/private, exterior/interior, and male/female binaries rupture. Although there is no limit to queer styles--some even satirize and fetishize the macho aesthetic that represents queer oppression--dressing in a way that diverges from the mainstream is a celebratory signifier of unity in difference.

People meet, friendships develop, and different styles converge at these gatherings, altogether creating a visual melting pot of aesthetic exchange. Relationships formed from these environments impact ideology and which is subsequently manifested through style. Butler talks about the formation of the self in the preface of Gender Trouble,

Certain features of the world, including people we know and lose, do become “internal” features of the self, but they are transformed through that interiorization, and that inner world, as Kleinians call it, is constituted precisely as a consequence of the interiorization that a psyche forms. Like the relationships we form, the styles of clothing that we are exposed to is a large visual feature of the world that we internalize. During my senior thesis exhibition, Bathroom Party, I created Everything I Am Is Because Of You, a set of four installations in adjacent toilet stalls.

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13 De Bortoli, Geovane Pedro. "Parties And Performance In Berlin". Germany, 2016.,
exploring relationships that heavily influenced me within the celebratory queer setting described above. This work featured take aways, tiny plastic bags of candy on the floor of one stall, and a tray of sticky buns rested on top of a toilet in another. These gifts are homages to the give and take of friendships, how they build both who we are and thus how we present ourselves. This four-part installation is indebted to Félix González-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, which invites the viewer to ingest a piece of the work, 175 pounds of colorfully wrapped candy, a memorial to his lover Ross, who’s healthy weight was 175 pounds before his body slowly succumbed to AIDS. Although the edibles in *Everything I Am Is Because Of You* do not represent the ingesting of a body devoured by disease, both works mirror the consumption of a separate entity, the interiorization of another as a catalyst for constant self-development.

One of the stalls features the iconic “penis print” of my mentor, visionary Berlin fashion designer and multimedia artist, Fábio M Silva. Last May, I assisted Fábio install a pop-up-shop in a toilet stall\(^\text{15}\) at TrashEra, a semi-annual queer party that celebrates creative and sexual freedom.\(^\text{16}\) This experience that no doubt inspired the form of these installations. We papered every surface with simplified yet expressive drawings of penises in no particular order. Initially, I felt uncomfortable taking part in this overt celebration the male

\(^{15}\) Photo by Andrea Nucifora, 2016.

\(^{16}\) TrashEra statement I collaborated on: “We are a COMMUNITY of PEOPLE from all over the WORLD UNIFIED by the need for the FREEDOM to EXPLORE in what WE REALLY ARE, in that which makes us UNIQUE and DIFFERENT but EQUAL at the same time. Our INTENTION is to GENERATE, DEVELOP and PROMOTE spaces and events of REUNION and INTERACTION where ART coexists with TECHNO and, without restraint to dress and undress as we want, we can explore FRIENDSHIP, SEXUALITY and LOVE through DANCE. Parties in which WE ARE FREE to investigate, with EMPATHY, CONSCIOUSNESS and RESPECT, some of our limits so we can OPEN our MINDS to different VIEWS, IDEAS and WAYS of EXPERIMENTING LIFE. Our idea of PARTY is not to get drunk or wasted to avoid REALITY, but to find the PERFECT STATE OF MIND to SHARE, ENJOY and CELEBRATE in HARMONY, all together having FUN.” Because TRASH IS NOT GARBAGE; TrashEra is our way to BE, to CREATE, and above all, to EXPRESS what WE ARE.

phallus, a powerful and violent symbol. When I aired my concerns, Fábio told me it was not about the male, it was about the universal. “Everyone draws dicks as a child.” As I hardly knew what penises were when I was a child, I most certainly did not draw them. I could however, relate to the youthful and symbolic rebellion such doodles constitute. This “naughty” act of self-expression resists the predominant adult narrative that sexuality is dirty and bad. Installed at TrashEra, the playful print is extremely poignant. As my understanding of gender has expanded, I have come to understand that drawing the penis does not have to symbolize a celebration of masculinity. It is a part that can be shared by cismen, trans, and nonbinary people alike. By deconstructing my associations of the penis with masculinity and violence, I can see the organ as a body part that does not have to correlate to a gender or a set of gendered stereotypes to be appreciated. In fact, the simple infantilized rendering of the penises, actually pokes fun at the ridiculousness of masculinity (fixed masculine expectations ?) and the correlation of penises with power.\footnote{17}

Style is a powerful means to deemphasise the body’s gendered coding. It is a tool of subversion, a signifier of individual and collective identity, as described by sociologist and media theorist, Dick Hebdige, author of \textit{Subculture: The Meaning of Style}. Analyzing case studies of various twentieth century youth subcultures in the United Kingdom, Hebdige explains how their alternative looks signify rejection of the prevailing and confining norms they are subject to. These fringe cultures are inevitably commodified, marketed to the mainstream, and thus contained through the ubiquitous power of commercialism.\footnote{18} With this in mind, Official Rebrand aims to avoid curating a dominant, commodifiable queer aesthetic by producing collections with porous boundaries and diverse aesthetics, presented on the terms of the models animating the garments. OR (Official Rebrand) seeks to rebrand the very definition of “brand,” resisting monolithic authorship through inclusivity and participation.

At Official Rebrand’s core is is the fundamental appreciation for style as an an empowering tool for self-determination. In accordance with its material and commercial nature, fashion plays out in a classed arena. My approach to the “industry” is founded on an idealistic desire to level this playing field. Through this project, I promote self-expression that transcends social status. Among other factors, intersections of gender, race, class, religion, and geography can limit one’s freedom to express their true self through clothing. In many social and cultural spaces, clothes that draw attention to the wearer and project aspects of

\footnote{17} Silva, Fábio M. "Fashion, Queerness, And The Penis Print". Berlin, Germany, 2016,.
the wearer’s (non-normative) identity can infringe upon the wearer’s safety. The threat of violence that looms, though to varied degrees. As a queer brand, it is something to be cognizant of and work against. OR cannot solve these persistent problems; indeed, no single art work or legislation could. OR hopes however, to address these issues creatively by providing tools for empowerment and promoting freedom of self-expression. OR encourages people to take personal agency. Anyone can rebrand any garment. In this act of modification, the sanctity of the pre-packaged product is rejected, revealing the expressive power of self-determination.

Although Official Rebrand undeniably functions within a capitalist market, the brand’s production works differently than that of traditional corporations, in its sourcing of raw materials exclusively from discarded clothes. It questions standard supply chains and models of production. Altering, painting, drawing, and printing on used garments imbues formerly discarded human shells with new life. Consumed and discarded, they are reimagined and consumed again. The reuse of such objects also questions notions of originality and the sanctity of products that are prepackaged for us. The cyclical nature of these metamorphosed pieces nods to the extinction of original material. No idea is new in a world of excessive accumulation of objects and ideas. Creations and concepts are just reinterpreted. The changeability of these clothes, highlighted by the treatments they undergo, also references the fluidity of identity. For me, this choice is both conceptual and environmental.

For his works that similarly blur the boundaries between art and garment, interdisciplinary artist Nick Cave, known widely for his “soundsuits,” justifies his sourcing of used objects,

Giving new life to a spent object is important. It is also with these types of materials that we see opportunities. The history, how it was used, worn, or abused in the past adds a layer of richness that a newly minted material does not have. In dialogue with this concern for the pasts of objects, the next collection of garments will center around the histories of the transformed clothes, researching the places and processes that birthed them, that made them possible and therefore alterable.

Official Rebrand’s materials do not come from a single source or follow a single style; likewise, OR is not a monolithic author. Although the attached portfolio consists of work that I, Mimi Leggett, created, anyone can Officially Rebrand. The brand is inclusive, encouraging

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individuals to take personal agency through participation. Anyone can take a pen or a pair of scissors to a shirt and render it more personal and expressive. This twist to traditional brand mechanics aims to challenge typical business structure, manifested through both collectivity and individualism.

While Official Rebrand has been growing over the course of the past year, the project is still in its infancy. Going forward, OR will continue to organize clothing swaps, collaborative runway shows, and develop a website featuring online tutorials. Written and visual instructions would cover general fabric painting, drawing, heat binding techniques as well as specific alterations involving cutting and basic sewing. For example: fold up the bottom of a shirt up to make a shorter top with pockets going all the way around it.

The business model will reallocate funds made from selling rebranded clothes to facilitate free clothing modification workshops as well as contribute to organizations fighting queerphobia.

OR looks to the legendary queer painter Keith Haring for inspiration, recognizing and utilizing the brand’s position within a world unfortunately dominated by consumerism. For both Haring and OR, commercial success is a means to an end, not the goal in and of itself. This is implicit in Haring’s legacy as even after achieving international fame, the artist continued to create unlicensed public art works, drawing on paper covering old advertisements in New York City subway stations. He risked arrest to give his art away, enriching daily lives of commuters. Indeed, he was arrested multiple times for creating these public works.

Though not necessarily “street art,” Official Rebrand is public art. German artist and politician Joseph Beuys’ asserted that everyone is an artist and every act, if done consciously, can be art. This bold conceptual framework championed art as the sole means to revolutionary social progress, to deconstruct the oppressive effects of the dysfunctional social systems governing human life. Overturning order and implementing a functional and just social system would create a new “total work of art,” or Gesamtkunstwerk.

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20 Photo by: Davis Tate, 2017.
OR does not expect to overturn capitalism and completely revolutionize all civilization. OR does, however, see itself as a social sculpture that aims to enrich lives by offering free resources for self-expression through altering clothing. As an ever-growing collection of individual garments and infinite performances involved in making and wearing those clothes, OR can be seen as a dynamic living installation that contributes to a move visually diverse and vivacious world. The clothes may be viewed as single pieces of art, but are more powerful when animated by a wearer, and complimented by other pieces. Indeed, style is no single garment, but how a series of pieces are arranged together on a body\textsuperscript{22}. This arrangement can be vital part of performing the self, an act that can be art if you see it as such.

Official Rebrand’s social sculpture aims to cloud the boundaries dividing fashion and arts and art and life. The project’s runway debut took place during my senior thesis exhibition, the fluxus-inspired \textit{Bathroom Party}. The performances of preparing for and walking in the fashion show were integrated into the event space, confusing the boundaries between real and unreal. The entrance was swarmed with people applying makeup and taking selfies reflected in a large mirror along with a background imploring “WORSHIP ME” in large red letters. Clothes and fabric markers were provided for on-the-spot rebranding; guests were invited to strut in their creations on the catwalk. The setup caused attendees to feel implicated in the performance. It asked them to perform as well. But were they already performing? Is life a performance? Do we create a portrait of ourselves every day? OR seeks to ask everyone these questions, but not to answer them for anyone.

My open definition of what is or is or is not art has fueled my desire to create objects that seamlessly integrate into everyday life. In 2012 I began analyzing everything I encountered as art. This practice enriched my experience of the world tremendously, making me more thoughtful and appreciative. Likewise, by living with works of art that are designed as such, not just encountered, I feel my quality of life infinitely improved. I find comfort in my sculptural pillows, painted comforter cover, and the numerous prints of my friends’ photography on my walls. Creating and wearing clothing that celebrates artistic engagement has the same effect.

Though I did not create a visual language intentionally evocative of Keith Haring’s, studying his work in high school undoubtedly left a significant impact on both my artistic ideology and aesthetic. Haring’s images are recognizable; though the figures are not heavily

\textsuperscript{22} Koch, Tobias. "Queer Style". 2016.
detailed, they are expressive and open in their simplicity. This simplified style makes his work engaging to all sorts of viewers, from art critics to young children. I embrace a similar minimal pictorial style, that is highly expressive without much detail.

Haring was often criticized for his highly commercialized art. Reproduced onto countless T-shirts and keychains, his work bridged the worlds of high art and mainstream culture. In our market-driven society that spans both the highfalutin art world and mass culture, purchasable products are a straightforward channel through which to proliferate a message. Consumption often carries negative connotations, and indeed the environment teems with morbid accumulations of waste. OR plays within this material excess; it does not solve the problem, but provokes its consideration. Consumables can be consumed again; used items can generate new lives. Indeed, culture, and its subsequent consumption is integral to human survival. Wear clothes or freeze. Eat or starve. Drink up or dry up. More abstractly, the expressive agency that personal adornment can grant can be vital for emotional survival. Consumed and discarded as gendered products, OR reincarnates them gender-free, creating alternatives for consumption free from gendered constraints.

In my work, fashion and art converge in a way that defies categorization. As with the interior/exterior and male/female binaries that I wish to dissolve, I also challenge the notions that these two fields are distinctly separate. As we see ever increasing numbers of fashion exhibitions achieving immense success in museums, artists and designers debate heatedly over whether or not fashion is art. I created *These Shoes Have Been Painted And Are Therefore Art* to challenge strident divisions between what is and isn’t art. I gathered various shoes, painted them white, and presented them, arranged them within a glass case. The paint, sharing color and material with the modern white cube gallery space rendered these shoes unequivocally “art objects.” Although processed, these shoes did not permanently lose their function. Painting them bestowed a second function, without erasing the original one. They are still wearable, they are still products of “fashion.” Many OR shoes undergo the same process, challenging the boundaries between fashion and art.

Although the line between fashion and art is contentious, it cannot be denied that the classifications repeatedly converge in capitalism’s ubiquitous and unbalanced playing field. In our globalized market-driven society, artists consistently collaborate with labels, all over the high to low-end spectrum. Works of deceased artists as well are commercialized, such as Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and of course Keith Haring whose legacies are both celebrated and marketed through campaigns like SPRZ NY, a faction of UNIQLO that takes the
work of various artists and puts it on all kinds of wearables. Although the design and artistry invested in their translation of contemporary masterpieces to graphic T’s is dubious, by introducing adaptations of art works into stores, they expose these artists to people who may never have heard of them.

Judging by its somewhat haphazard slapping of art images onto garments, SPRZ NY does not advocate that fashion is art, but uses fashion and its corresponding consumability as a mean to promote access and enthusiasm for art. Through a more cynical lens, they use the appeal of art as a way to promote their own brand. Questions of motivations arise; there is no clear answer, as the function of this merchandising mechanism appears differently depending on who is viewing or consuming it. Regardless of if this “art for all” motive is genuine or constructed, the retail conglomerate uses their corporate power to actively promotes access to art. UNIQLO sponsors free friday nights at MoMA, an integral art institution with prohibitively steep entrance fees. At their New York City flagship store UNIQLO runs events that teach homeless children about artists featured in their SPRZ NY collections, and give these children the opportunity to express themselves by drawing and painting on clothes. Such opportunities can help children learn things they may not have known about themselves. Maybe they love how it feels to paint on a shirt and then be recognized for that unique creation, differentiating them from a homogenous group they might be labeled under. Maybe they are inspired to learn more about art or find other ways to express how they feel.

Corporations like UNIQLO and their partnerships with institutions like MoMA strive to bring creative and innovative products into everyday life. As clothing is both a social and climatological requirement, we have no choice but to participate in fashion. This poises clothing as a perfect means through which to communicate to large audiences. It can integrate design and creativity into both public and private realms. It makes high art more accessible to mass culture. This commitment to spreading art is certainly excellent publicity, highlighting UNIQLO’s philanthropy, rather than its immense success as a global retailer. This “art for everyone” mantra can be seen as a crafty branding strategy or an honest effort on behalf of a corporation to positively impact on the world. However you perceive it, the effects are two-fold.

Both the art world and the fashion industry are grounded in the unfortunate reality of capitalism, putting immense emphasis on the importance of ownership. These consumerist

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value structures are at once inescapable and readily available to be manipulated. I can prove my reverence for Keith Haring’s work if I can physically possess it. I am unable to buy a painting, but I can demonstrate my appreciation by investing in a T-shirt or postcard. Although inherently materialistic, commodifiable objects can help us communicate both to ourselves and to others what we value. Commodification of creativity and consumer obsession with material objects is deeply ensconced in modern society. Many people value money and stuff more than they value other people. This consumption obsession however, can be taken advantage of to promote positive ends, such as universal accessibility to art and the ability to express one’s true self.

Though nothing could completely cure society from its obsession with material consumption and confining expectations, I make work that strives for progress and agency. My works from last year focused on the body and through my experience and research, I have moved forward to focus on something more controllable, what that surrounds the body instead. To my overstimulated psyche and in light of my existence in today’s fast-changing world, this shift towards fluidity seems more relevant than contemplating the (relatively stagnant) human physique. By individualizing and reintroducing reused garments I play with problems of obsessive consumption, simultaneously critiquing and taking advantage of western excess.

I hope to create a more varied social and visual landscape. I work towards freedom of self-expression within the material confines of overflowing waste. By giving discarded gendered garments a second life, unique and gender free, I advocate for the positive changes I wish to see in the world. Through providing tools for taking agency, both as purchasable gender free garments and sharing skills, I hope to counterbalance the inability to control fixed genetics with the expressive empowerment fashion can render.
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Fábio M Silva
Kristna Paabus
Nannette Yannuzzi-Macias
Johnny Coleman
Sarah Schuster
Davis Tate
Brielle
Piera Bochner
Maggie Middleton
Justin Bongi
Jacob Dancy
Salome Mallari
Geovane Pedro De Bortoli
Rosa De La Rosa
Kyle Kapaun
Andrea Nucifora
Mary Fischer
Sarah Snider
Dan Dalton
artist statement

My work is grounded in a dialogue between art and fashion. With a background in video, installation, and painting, I now use repurposed clothes as my primary material; I reconstruct them into fiber sculpture or reinvented garments. The nature of my objects ranges greatly, from alienated clothing with irrational proportions to pajamas painted with tense lovers. In altering and regenerating, I mirror the conceptual accumulation and subsequent appropriation common to both art and fashion. Recycling explores the value of originality and reinterpretation. This action is also one of empowerment in its disregard for the typical sanctity of consumer products. Furthermore, renewing old clothing references the psychological, political, and environmental consequences of excessive accumulation and consumption.

The parallel practices of art and fashion in my work inform each other in both their material and the contemplation of fashion’s function. My fascination with the meaning behind personal style derives from how what we wear signifies, particularly within the queer communities of which I am a part. Style can subvert social constraints such as gender norms and socioeconomic stratification. Style can veil a troubled mentality or festively externalize one’s interior—a celebration that, outside of safe spaces, is subject to attack. Style can present a problematic dichotomy between necessary self-expression and superficial judgement within a classist culture.

My work is for anyone who wears clothes and wants to contemplate the significance of clothing as more than just a social and climatological necessity.

A product of an overstimulated era, I grapple with a multitude of themes ranging from personal allegories of dependency and delusion, the hyperreality born of internet culture, authenticity in a materialistic world, and the postmodern extinction of originality. Self-conscious of my own individual formation and perspective, I do not direct beholders to specific conclusions, and instead aim to promote interaction and reflection on their own terms.

- MI Leggett
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