

UNDERMINING CODES

The Third ICP Triennial of Photography and Video

International Center for Photography

New York City

October 2, 2009–January 17, 2010

The Third International Center for Photography (ICP) Triennial is a survey exhibition that attempts to redefine how the idea of fashion is interpreted. Entitled “Dress Codes,” the exhibition is a culmination of a year of fashion-related shows at ICP that included such historical and contemporary exhibitions as “Avedon Fashion 1944–2000,” “Edward Steichen: In High Fashion,” “The Condé Nast Years 1923–1937,” and “Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now.” “Dress Codes” is also ICP’s third triennial exhibition—their way of bringing together a diverse group of international artists under one specific theme. Unlike other venues that try to include multiple mediums in biennials (e.g., the Whitney or Venice), ICP limits the type of work shown to photography and video. That definition must now include the catch-all “multi-media/new-media” terminology and in “Dress Codes” new media is represented through a project by Cao Fei that takes place in *Second Life*. It is evident that there are historical precedents for all the artists chosen, making it necessary to identify a common trajectory through time in order to make connections between old and new. While the critique of an exhibition is not necessarily about tracing influence, no one works in a vacuum. The political nature of much of the work is one of the most daring and striking aspects of the exhibition. To favor content over aesthetics is rare, and the curators of this exhibition were adamant that much work speak to the political and social issues of nations while perhaps using the guise of “fashion” to do so. The range of work is as expansive as the uses of the mediums. One challenge with a large group exhibition is how to allot space and how to justify the discrepancy of the number of works shown by each artist. Some artists are given whole rooms or walls, while others are represented by a single work. How is it possible to evaluate a single piece by an artist like Barbara Kruger or Stan Douglas when it is seen in relation to a suite of works by artists including Valérie Belin, Olga Chernysheva, or Miyako Ishiuchi? Nonetheless, the organizers of the exhibition should be commended for the diversity of their choices. Citing statistics does not change the quality of the work on view; however, it is important to note that there are more women than men among the thirty-four artists, and eighteen countries are represented.

The exhibition catalog begins with a selection of fashion photographers—artists who are not, but could be, in the show, setting the tone that the works are all situated in history. Among the older artists in the show—all of whom are women—are Silvia Kolbowski, Kruger, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons. Why these artists? Most are associated with the “Pictures” generation and, other than Sherman, fashion is not typically associated with their work. Using their oeuvres as a point of departure, however, it is possible to forge connections with the rest of the exhibition. Although many of these relationships are obtuse, it becomes an interesting exercise in identifying influence. Breaking the work down categorically by influence, appropriationist

strategies are the most prevalent in the still works. Kruger and Rosler have influenced generations of artists who have taken montage of found images and text as a point of departure. It is a pleasure to see these artists in conjunction with works by Wangechi Mutu, Kota Ezawa, and Hank Willis Thomas. Mutu juxtaposes images of African women from a postcard book entitled *Women of the African Ark* (2002) with images taken from fashion, pornography, and other printed documents found in popular culture to discuss issues around women’s sexuality and its representation. Ezawa begins with images from the IKEA catalog and reduces the originals to blocks of bright color. His works comment on the desire for mass-produced products and the ease with which these objects can be reduced to basic forms. Willis Thomas removes the text from advertising images directed at African American audiences in order to expose stereotypes used to market to that audience. The other artists in the exhibition whose work utilizes images taken by others include Lorna Simpson, whose installation includes small photo-booth images of African Americans individually framed and hung salon style on the wall, and Kolbowski, whose work *After Atlas* (1996–present) amasses advertising images collected over the years, all of which reference other artists and art history. This projects relates to Fischli and Weiss’s recent installation “Sun Moon and Stars” (2007–08), as well as to Gerhard Richter’s long-term project *Atlas*, after which Kolbowski’s work is named.

Another substantial category of work could be called “dress up.” The influence of Sherman, who indulges in various types of role play in her photographs, is evident in these works. Yto Barrada, Belin, Thorsten Brinkmann, and Pinar Yolacan explore the layering of clothing and cosmetics on live and constructed figures. While Belin photographs models so heavily made up that they resemble mannequins, Brinkmann creates sculptural objects dressed to appear like figures wearing a colorful array of found clothing. The heads are obscured in Brinkmann’s work, often replaced by buckets or wraps of fabric. Barrada documents a woman who dresses up for political reasons. In her work, she reveals the layers of clothing worn by an elderly woman who transports contraband fabrics across the border between Tangier, Morocco and Ceuta, Spain. Yolacan designed garments using both local fabrics and animal products based on historical Portuguese fashions and had local Afro-Brazilian women pose for her wearing these richly colored and textured costumes. The clothing, simultaneously grotesque and beautiful, does not seem to influence the subject’s attitude or expression, as her gaze is unfettered by the presence of such awkward attire. Jeremy Kost documents openings, premieres,



Above

NEW! (\$2.99/ea) (2007) by Kota Ezawa; © Kota Ezawa; courtesy Murray Guy, New York



and other popular events through Polaroid portraits of attendees. Kost's work is predictable and seems to come out of the tradition of paparazzi photography, whereas Yolacan's work is original and unique.

Some of the static works engage in the construction of a narrative, and many of the time-based pieces tell a story over time, or through a series of images. Jacqueline Hassink documents the glamorous women who are hired to stand by the cars on display at international automobile shows.

Above

Untitled (Maria) (2007) by Pinar Yolacan; © Pinar Yolacan; courtesy the artist

David Rosetzky creates an intimate video portrait of actress Cate Blanchett. Ishiuchi documents the objects her mother left behind after her death, while Hu Yang documents families in their Shanghai homes and illuminates issues of class.

There are numerous works that engage with portraiture. Richard Learoyd, for example, uses a room-sized camera to make detailed full-scale portraits of his female subjects. Mickalene Thomas poses African American women in highly designed domestic interiors; Alice O'Malley makes black-and-white photographs of gay men and women—some nude, others elaborately dressed—all of whom are active participants in the current New York art and literary scene, while Chernysheva makes grainy black-and-white portraits of Russia's metro system workers. These artists engage with the traditions of portraiture in ways that push beyond the historical precedents of the work of Cecil Beaton, Brassai, Horst P. Horst, and Man Ray, outlined in the catalog.

Fantasy is another popular theme in "Dress Codes." Fei explores a world of fashion in *Second Life* while Nathalie Djurberg creates claymation videos that are a disturbing synthesis of her dreams and fairy tales in which five female characters change clothing as well as personalities. The depiction of inner fantasies can be traced back to Sherman as well as to artists like Pierre Molinier whose erotic photographs indulged in the intersection of observed and imagined realities.

Group exhibitions like "Dress Codes" are meant to be a survey of not just what is new, but also historical concepts and trends currently in vogue. By beginning with a specific but open-ended theme, the organizers of "Dress Codes" were able to bring together diverse points of view and undermine traditional notions of fashion or what it means to be fashionable. While most of the artists included in the exhibition understand their place in the continuum of photographic history and practice, it is refreshing to be able to create connections through the juxtaposition of artists not usually associated with one another. To that end, "Dress Codes" is a vibrant and challenging exhibition—one that takes time to view and to digest, but one that will be remembered for its curatorial breadth and the power of many of the individual works.

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