ILOVE FASHION

"You can't dress up in the revolutions of your parents."

BY CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

irst, a clarification. To say "I love fashion" is much like saying "I love dogs," or "I love democracy." To love democracy is not to love it at all times and under every banner, like, say, when the wrong man wins the popular vote. And loving dogs does not mean smiling through a mauling. Fashion has many dark edges, many contemptible characters shuffling through its ranks, and, at the end of the day, you may believe it possesses neither the soul of art nor the spirit of good faith—that it is, in effect, the glorification of merchandise. And who wants to live in a wilderness of handbags and pleated drop-sleeves? Most of us who survive on our wits have been taught to distrust capitalism even as we spend a good deal of our time making money. Viewed one way, fashion is glamorous capitalism. It has also been blamed for eating disorders, the devaluation of religion, coded rape fantasies, the collapse of meaning, the rise of a superficial generation, the death of subculture, the feminization of men, and the emascu-

lation of women (though, for the record, so has rock 'n' roll). We are wary of paying for instant character, and rightfully so. But what are we left with? Does this mean that we should feel guilty for enjoying clothes designed for us—victims for wanting something new and strange, suckers for advertising—as if we'd be better off wearing raw-cotton jumpsuits so long as they aren't Prada, Adam Kimmel, or Ann Demeulemeester?

Early on in my career, I used to say that there were only two places that a Malaysian drag queen could find honest work in New York—at Lucky Cheng's or at *Visionaire*. Ten years later, I still believe this. Like art, fashion subsists as one of the

few professional avenues that take in the darker horses. I'm thankful for an industry that has routinely lifted up the eccentricities and marginal lifestyles of its key players and turned their efforts into products that reach far into zones where old stereotypes still dominate. You can't blame people for playing the only game they were let in on.

Fashion has often been noted for sucking the meaning out of subversive signifiers and peddling them as popular wares, thereby destroying their once-volatile expression—when even avant-garde designers like Viktor & Rolf use safety pins in their Fall 2008 collection, they are appropriating punk without keeping true to its trash rebellion, its spectacular refusal (even with "no" written across the models' faces). Of course, one part of fashion is business. Let's admit this now. Fashion has to dress the world's population and likewise pay for all of the mills, designers, retailers, clerks, magazines, and advertisers invested in it. But subversion is fashion too. Mainstream and subculture work as strategic dance partners here. The point of subculture is always to fight against the hegemony, and when their signs become appropriated or outdated, the resistant have to find new, unexpected,

jarring visual methods of revolt. If this game of invent-and-take weren't built into the system, most women today would still be wearing house dresses, and a leather jacket would still mean trouble. You can't dress up in the revolutions of your parents. It's nostalgic to think there was a time when clothes were clothes that signified and they should never have been intruded on by Chanel or H&M. In this way, fashion becomes a personal system of expressing either acceptance or dissent. Fashion is one of the few consistent—or willingly inconsistent—ways in which we show who we are as individuals. It literally sticks to the body.

But isn't it so vacuous? Isn't it the pretty gimmick built around empty desire? I used to think so, but I also think there is a time when personal responsibility on issues of emptiness or meaning has to come to bear. Are you really less of a person for wearing a logo? That seems like a rather dark prognosis for anyone's identity. Not all creative radicals work outside of the system. There are

plenty of groundbreaking designers who indeed advertise, make money, and sell on the third floor of Barney's who are still following a vision of art and exploration. Even elitists need to recognize that real change (that word these days!) succeeds best when it meets the world with some sort of handshake. Is fashion art? Really, the more interesting questions is "Has art become fashion?" So far that is still the ugly unaskable. Fine art makes a critical stink about being compared to fashion because it knows how close that gets to admitting what really controls its revolutions—the market. Is it more dubious to create with the full acknowledgement that, yes, this will be tagged with a

yes, this will be tagged with a price, it is part of an economy that does dictate it to a degree, or to pretend that you are still employing liberatory gestures outside the order while you and your gallery are getting fat from the byproduct? I almost admire the honesty of the fashion world. It makes no bones about recognizing how much the market plays a role in its developments. Art could use a more honest mirror in its dressing room.

Ultimately the downside of fashion is the fetishizing of the evershifting object. But the upside is that it still can be an individual play of decisions. If we have to walk around in these balls of fabric, those willing to roll the dice can use them, screw with them, turn them into billboards or bellwethers. Even to hate fashion is still to realize its power, and anything that has power can be used, appropriated, or rechanneled. We do not want our lives to become lifestyles, as luxury brands are quick to create. But the best way not to become slaves to fashion is to embrace its potential. Slaves don't hug their masters. Refusal isn't revolution. Try that one on.

Christopher Bollen was the editor of V magazine and VMAN and a contributing editor of Visionaire until two seconds ago when he just told us that, no big deal, he is replacing Ingrid Sischy as the new editor in chief of Interview magazine.

