

The Bastard Art of Styling

by Jeppe
Ugelvig

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n March 1927, the young fashion writer (and soon to be internationally renowned designer) Elizabeth Hawes returned to Paris on a new job: *stylist*. The previous Fall, in her native New York City, she had stumbled upon a conspicuous box in *The New York Times*, an advertisement by the department store R. H. Macy (later, Macy's) for a Stylist, "to send to their Paris office." She didn't really know what a stylist was, and even after seven months in the job, never really found out—mostly, it meant up-keeping "good taste" amongst merchandise buyers, going to fashion shows, eating fancy lunches, and taking lots of taxi rides on her corporate expense account. To professionally identify what was *chic* was a highly nebulous activity, even to the stylist herself—but certainly, it involved a fair amount of client care, some quality control, and even a bit of product licensing and manufacturing.

"Styling," she would assert a decade later in her seminal polemic *Fashion is Spinach*, "is not definable because styling is a bastard art. It was one of those bright thoughts which flowered during the great prosperity. The department stores were in the money and their thoughts wandered to 'good taste.'"⁰¹ Hawes' early polemic about consumer taste-making as a practice and profession at the first economic boom of the 20th century offers an unlikely genealogy to a concept that remains deeply contested today. Style names the very movement of aesthetics in society—their groupings and location in time and place. In art history, the term indicates "networks of aesthetic practices" and is often mobilized as evidence of historical periodization.⁰² Style suggests how aesthetics are formed and maintained *in and as networks*, in various systems of production, distribution, and exchange. This is not only true for art but for visual culture most generally: think of networks of people, networks of commodities, as well as media and communication networks.

01 Elizabeth Hawes, *Fashion is Spinach*. New York: Random House, 1938, 80.

02 David Joselit, "The Power to Style," in *Texte Zur Kunst* Issue No. 88, December 2012, 174.

Photography: Cris Moor
Styling: Bernadette Van-Huy
Clothing: Bernadette Corporation



Thinkers struggle with the surface-level connotation of various period “styles,” and, as a result, do much to uncover their hidden philosophical depths instead of taking surface seriously as a space of operation. For *to actively style*—to progenerate style as a conscious activity—is a cursed, history-less practice. Often evoked to indicate a play of mere appearances, as superficial and mimetic, *styling* implies a working for the spectacle of consumption in order to package, to brand, to sell—be it the fashionable garment *du jour* or various art-historical movements. Yet styling says everything about the contemporary conditions of visual production. As a verb, it connotes a tactic: a dynamic tool for persuasion and communication through the bricolage of signifiers. Nothing escapes styling, insofar as styling is defined as the means by which things, practices, and people assume the status of networked images, circulating in systems of value.

Style has been asserted as the basic unit or currency of fashion due to its inherent ephemerality and supposed permanent changeability. The very term *la mode* derives from the Latin *modus*, meaning *manner*, or indeed—*style*. The late linguistic feminization of the masculine *le mode* (connoting, like in English, the general rules of operation and change), circa 1845, was birthed to encapsulate the “new” phenomenon of fashion (a cultural industry of forever-changing *modes*) as the *new mode* of consumer capitalist society—an industrialized society that reimagines its own desires anew each season, specifically, through lifestyle commodities. Famously, this transitory changeability and teleological thrust towards progression (“fashion keeps advancing”) fascinated the great modern thinkers,



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perhaps because it figured as the most succinct metaphor for modernity itself: fashion as *chronotechnics*, as a model of capitalist time.⁰³ In the 20th century (echoing Hawes' personal observations from the field), style became inextricably linked to the concept of class, as a system of aesthetic signification indicating either aspiration towards or rejection of socioeconomic tiers. All this, still, under the umbrella of consumerism: from aristos to punks, identification under late capitalism happens through buying into *stylized* ideas, that is, through the purchasing of aestheticized commodities in circulation. This modus operandi of culture rings true in every arena: everything can be *styled*, from feelings to bodies to knowledge itself, as every polemic of postmodernity will make sure to tell you. Styling is also the creative root of branding, styling instrumentalized and narrativized for the purpose of marketing, most often based on identification with aspirational tropes of good (and, sometimes, purposely bad) taste. In the global era of branding of everything (even, or *especially* identities, politics, and civic life), the social and political implications of styling continue to deepen and multiply.

Because of these fraught connotations, *styling* as an aesthetic practice tends to get a bad name. But while style *is* birthed from, indeed has become synonymous with, the evils of consumer-driven semicapitalism, it also serves as a way to navigate it—much like fashion itself. Against the grain of traditional cultural criticism, there are philosophical pushbacks from voices who have approached style as something more ineffable—ineffable even from the immaterial and subliminal forces of capitalist consumption.

⁰³ Philipp Ekardt, *Benjamin on Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

The fashion critic Kennedy Fraser, for one, in a 1973 essay simply titled "Style," distanced the word from "its humble relative, good taste." She goes on, and I permit myself to quote at length:

While style and taste have been known to intermingle in the past, the currently widening gap between them reminds us once more of their fundamental enmity. The world of the merely tasteful—a trim edifice of bourgeois conformities, with narrow slots to be filled and straight lines to be toed—is bound to barricade itself, in the end, against style, which is individualistic, aristocratic, and reckless. Taste concerns itself with broad, lifetime progress, and never makes mistakes; style moves by fits and starts and is occasionally glorious. Style differs from elegance, too, yet they often keep company, since elegance is generally regarded as a prime object in the quest for style. But elegance is static and hermetic, and the moments of its attainment in a life of style are like so many cathedrals along the route of a comprehensive cultural tour. Style requires allegiance to a creed whose shifting nature makes it all the more demanding. But then style is more rewarding than the ways of elegance or taste: it is more akin to a philosophy, and it is surely closer to an art.

Fraser identifies styles not as the result of a process of class-driven aesthetic commodification, but rather as an active agent against it. *True style*, she suggests, *surrounds* taste, but ultimately escapes it. Her following study of 70s celebrity Bianca Jagger ("her style works by exploiting, adapting, and anticipating the trends that course in broad, slow movements through the mass of the people")⁰⁴ presents styling as a

⁰⁴ Kennedy Fraser, *The Fashionable Mind: Reflections on Fashion, 1970-1982*. New York: Knopf, 1985, 89.

discursive cultural practice performed through the body, aligning herself with the more romantic voices of modernity such as Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, who similarly approached self-styling rather literally as a philosophy or an art (most vividly in the figure of the Dandy)—that is to say as a critical strategy for their times. This strategy, Fraser rummages further, is one of both recklessness and calculation, of precarious balance between the phony and the childish; it is eternally impulsive, vulgar even, in so far as vulgarity means “loudness, unseemliness, and anything that goes too far.”⁰⁵ This definition of style is distinctly active in contrast to its periodizing homonym: this kind of style is not any stabilized “look” as much as it is a form of labor: it indicates not a surface, but an active *play with surfaces*, an art of persuasion. Style, here, is an operation; it is a mode of intellectual production.

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o operate in the space of surfaces has previously been proposed as a critical cultural tactic, particularly by those excluded from what has traditionally been considered profound and intellectually legitimate: women, queers, and the ethnically marginalized. Indeed, the agency of styles and sartorial surfaces forms the very basis of fashion studies, founded as it is on a feminist epistemology contesting the frivolous ephemerality of dress practices. More recently, “camp”—the *style* of excess and the gaudy—has been proposed by Matthew Tinkcom not only as an expression of dissident sex/gender difference, but as a critical philosophy of modernity’s commodity culture.⁰⁶ In theorizing Black popular culture, Stuart Hall

once observed “how, within the black repertoire, style—which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar coating on the pill—has become itself the subject of what is going on... think of how these cultures have used the body—as if it was, and often it was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation.”⁰⁷ Both positions understand style and styling as critically engaging with Marxist theories of capitalist production on numerous levels and doing so through prisms of identity, representation, and the social. Engaging Hall, Monica Miller has more recently pinpointed the distinct possibility in style as a critical mode of signification: style, she asserts, signals and communicates, cloaks and performs (depending on who is looking), and takes *looking* (looking like, looking at) seriously as a space of agency. On the Black Dandy, for example, she writes that:

*The figure's stylin' out visualizes an awareness of the way in which all identities are styled and manipulated, let out or hemmed in. Yet, since black bodies are often already "theatricalized spectacles," aware of their "third-person consciousness," the black body in the dandy's clothes, his signature use of style, displays the possibilities and impediments of this identity construction particularly for racialized subjects. As he changes clothes and strikes a pose, the black dandy performs sameness and difference, safety and danger, all the while telling a story about self and society.*⁰⁸

07 Stuart Hall, “What Is the ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. by Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992.

08 Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 7.

Styling, here, becomes a semantic tool to navigate violent processes of visual spectacularization and self-alienation. To signify through style, Miller asserts, is “to repeat, revise, reverse, or transform what has come before, continually raising the stakes in a kind of expressive poker.”⁰⁹ Whether through music, dance, oral or written narrative, or dress, styling is self-reflexive and historiographic, but de-stabilizes the idea of historical progression all the same.

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ontemporary professional stylists know this better than anyone else: as master semioticians, they procure style on-demand, and do so within the precarious space of the fashion industry, be it in editorials or in advertisements. Unlike Hawes’ foray into the interwar fashion industry, the modern-day “stylist” emerged towards the end of the 20th century, coinciding with the switch to a post-Fordist culture industry where representation of fashion in/as media began to overtake the importance of product manufacture. In 1998, Angela McRobbie—the stylist’s first theorist—identified styling as the intermediary labor “between the design work itself and the creation of a broader environment or setting for that work.”¹⁰ The stylist, she observed, puts things and people into particular and “styled” relationships with other things and people; it is a networking practice that draws on the largest visual vocabulary of our times (consumer goods) and its various professional interlocutors (designers, models, make-up artists, editors, photographers, celebrities, brands, etc.) in order to tell stories through signifiers—be it through the tucking of a shirt or the closing of a button. The stylist may be trained in fine art or photogra-

09 Ibid, 14.

10 Angela McRobbie, *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry*. London: Routledge, 1998, 157.

05 Ibid, 77.

06 Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002.

phy, and straddles numerous cultures spheres with ease; she is almost certainly a freelancer. Contrary to the artist or the couturier, the stylist's practice follows the logics of circulation in real-time. The notion of originality or artistic *inventio* is replaced by dynamic responsiveness to media networks; it is practice of perpetual movement, a reflexive form of production by way of information accumulation and (re-)distribution.

The stylist is an emblematic figure of today because she is an artistic author native to post-Fordist capitalism—sometimes also referred to as Art Director, Creative Director, or simply Consultant (consults on what? *Style*, of course!). She is someone who deepens her critical visual practice directly alongside its commercial advancement in various markets—corporate branding, celebrity, advertising, retail—much like the fine artist once had to at the birth of bourgeois capitalism.¹¹ These activities, however, do not oppose each other as much as they play up to one another, or crack open new hybrid spaces of critical agency: under post-Fordism, the distinction between inside/outside feels not only like a romanticism, but as a veritable fiction. Contrary to most fine art (whose existential crisis with

commercialism remains unresolved), styling offers itself as a practice of dynamic constructivism and subversion in a world of commodity fetishism, labor precarity, and algorithmic branding. Like art, styling is able to aesthetically mimic the conventions of itself (its superficiality and blankness) or those of other practices, but unlike art, it is *actually* able to switch its operative logics to those outside of its industry or conventional media—just take a look at any stylist's CV. By switching these logics, styling, as Philipp Ekardt has shown, develops aesthetic practices that are yet nameless, and does so all the time;¹² its manoeuvres repeatedly displace the basis of its own operation, moves sideways and forward, into other spheres of cultures. Styling is—has to be—self-reflexive. *It is a bastard art.*

Styling, like fashion, haunts art history. Its mimetic qualities and aesthetic dynamism runs through post-digital practices of the new millennium back to the postmodernist break of the 1970s and 80s, on to conceptual art's "aesthetics of administration," to Dada, and beyond. As David Joselit has remarked, "styling offers distinctive opportunities for artists: its purpose is to manipulate and transform the status quo;" it is an opportunistic tool "directed at claiming power in the present."¹³ Alongside a history of reactionary anti-aestheticism in art—prompted by the assumption of aesthetics' automatic complicity in the commercial aestheticization of everyday life—runs an art history both preoccupied with and operating in the sphere of the stylized. To make one's art "look" like the thing one is critiquing has been the crux of much artistic

¹² Philipp Ekardt, "In Defense of Styling" in *Texte Zur Kunst*, Issue 95, September 2014, 86.

¹³ Joselit, 2012, 74.

¹¹ As Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt have argued, following Peter Bürger, art's quest for aesthetic autonomy designates a particular social relation that developed historically with the distinction of manual and intellectual labor in the courtly arts of the Middle Ages. With the rise of bourgeois capitalist society, art would eventually come to be rendered an inherently "useless" sphere of cultural production so as to not ideologically collide with its former feudal or religious use-values, and suddenly had to compete in the marketplace of aesthetic commodities and services. See Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*. London: Mute Books, 2016. Stakemeier and Vishmidt builds on the historical materialist analysis of artistic autonomy by Peter Bürger and his 1984 book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, where he himself draws on the writing on autonomy by Berthold Hinz. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 36.



debate of the past 40 years: is there efficacy to be found in corporate mimicry, or does it only further the spectacularized self-reflexive spirit of rampant neocapitalism? Do consumer culture and other stylized spheres (like politics) not reproduce its own aesthetic most perfectly—why, then, should artists bother? But this either/or-type scenario—between aesthetics and anti-aesthetics—misperceives not only the aesthetic immanence of capitalism (i.e., that nothing escapes it), but the very nature of styling. Styling cannot be reduced to aesthetic mimesis of any given signifier (what is also called “appropriation”) so as to unveil its ideological underpinnings. Styling, rather, is a realist art that is exactly what it does; it activates signifiers in order to use them and take them somewhere, elsewhere. It is a performative in the pure Derridean sense. Styling is an art of claiming power and attention in circuits of images and objects—for whichever end or purpose. Hawking back to McRobbie’s original definition, styling is inherently networked and precarious; it doesn’t have a medium or form, but assumes them as it moves restlessly through networks of visual production in search for opportunities, *for work*. Whether one is styling to be seen, to disappear, to be confused with or mistaken for, styling is a strategic play with optics. This process is political, too: “*who styles and who is styled? Who has the power to style?*”¹⁴

In our current networked age, styling has taken a new relevance in the analysis of visual culture, now increasingly in the hands of corporate digital platforms and their algorithmic logics of image circulation. To *network* has taken a new technological meaning in the global age of platforms like Instagram, and the stakes of the game have risen both

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Ibid

socially and professionally for aesthetic producers everywhere. As Michael Sanchez has shown, the popularity in the art world of early web 2.0 visual aggregators like Contemporary Art Daily forced young artists to “style” their art and exhibitions in accordance to these novel digital interfaces, established by the accumulative logics of smartphone-based taste-makers. Aggregators filter, by way of audience feedback, a world saturated by commodified information to present “content,” and producers must self-style accordingly in order to sustain themselves in its ever-more totalizing visual templates. Aggregators is where images go to network, which even enabled Sanchez, in 2013, to identify trending styles—antigestural painting and neo-Surrealist objects specifically—as emblematic of their moment, as metaphors not so much of isolated practices but of the aggregator itself.¹⁵ Adding to this, Joselit suggests that the very phenomenon of “contemporary art” is itself an aggregate style, a brand for a loose set of aesthetic tendencies distinct in its global immediacy in biennales, art fairs, and the internet. The fashion world, of course, has worked like this for centuries; its media apparatus is far more developed, and its workers more agile in self-rendering and re-rendering in accordance to the market. Fashion photography is perhaps the most rapacious of aggregate imagery, deeply intertwined in various systems of economic, symbolic, and speculative value. It is telling that the very definition of *aggregate* is “constituted by the collection of many particles or units into

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Michael Sanchez, “Art and Transmission” in *Artforum*, Summer 2013. Via artforum.com/print/201306/2011-art-and-transmission-41241

one body, mass, or amount; collective, whole, total.”¹⁶ Isn’t that the very definition of styling—a play with material information to form images? Styling isn’t native to the internet, either: it was Bernadette Van Huy, occasional stylist and member of the perpetually self-styling art collective Bernadette Corporation that once remarked how the 90s fashion world functioned like an “internet before the internet.”¹⁷ Filter bubbles have long been a thing, just think of any subculture or local avant-garde of the late 20th century. Networked styling, rather, is the natural way of navigating post-Fordist media worlds—as subjects, as bodies, as workers. The art world, deeply seeped in old-world modes of professional patronage, was just a little late to join the game, a game that includes precarious media workers of all kind, from female fashion influencers in China to corporate magazine CEOs in Rio de Janeiro.

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David Joselit, “On Aggregators.” October 146 (October 1, 2013), 12.

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“Bernadette Corporation” on *We Find Wildness*. Via we-find-wildness.com/2012/09/bernadette-corporation



nce a behind-the-scenes fashion worker—integral yet in the background—the stylist’s immaterial ways

have become the modus operandi of the contemporary fashion world, overtaking the fashion designer/couturier as the most fetishized author. The stylist reigns on Instagram and other visual feeds because they cater to her cater to her native language—the language of networking, of grabbing attention. Styling is both dangerous and revolutionary; it is a form of power. Styling is an opportunistic tool, a tool to claim power in an increasingly networked and algorithmic present. Styling is the art of our times. Not only artists, designers, but producers of all kind, must embrace it in order to challenge this present—to uncover new spaces of agency, transformation, and revolution within aesthetic consumer society. ✂