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Killer Couture:

Introduction

For the past several years I have spent most evenings in a similar pattern. I come home, change into pajamas, make a cup of tea, and idly read about one of two things: women's issues, or women's fashion. It has been impossible to avoid noticing the potentially contradictory nature of these interests, a conflict that plagues me with an uneasy guilt when I fantasize about purchasing a dress that was mass-produced in India or attempt to enjoy a fashion show that presents an unending stream of extremely thin, extremely white, extremely underage and extremely underpaid models. That fashion utilizes oppressive systems and produces oppressive messages is hardly a secret, but despite this, and despite my interest in social justice, I am not someone who hates fashion. I am not capable of being someone who wishes to dismantle the fashion system. I am too passionate about fashion both as an art form and a means for personal expression, and I am constantly forced to ask myself whether there is any ethical way to indulge this passion. Is it possible for me to joyfully participate in the fashion system and perhaps one day even work in the fashion industry without sacrificing my feminist and humanist principles? *Killer Couture* arose as an attempt to engage academically and artistically with the aspect of the fashion system that I personally find most troubling: fashion's relationship with the body.

Fashion has long existed as a visual form of social communication, serving as both a quotidian artistic expression and an assertion of identity. In this way, fashion is a

corporeal art form, one of the art forms most closely tied to the constant physicality of the human experience, while also serving as a vehicle for the perpetuation of ideological norms, including oppressive messages about the body. While participation in fashion is nearly mandatory, it can also be inaccessible: the fashion industry's limits on the creation and acclaim for plus-sized garments prevent persons with marginalized body types from accessing the language of fashion, which serves as an important tool of identity expression. This identity erasure is problematic for plus-size women, whose exclusion from the fashion conversation is both a cause and an expression of wider issues of injustice surrounding fat bodies.

This project is an attempt to counter, both intellectually and practically, fashion's implicit claim that fat bodies are inferior. The fashion system constitutes a multiplicity of cultural narratives and systemic pressures, and so there is no single answer to said claim: "the fashion system is the 'totality' of social relations and activities that are required for fashion to come into existence. To isolate just one dimension and to then declare it to be the source, the cause or the essence of fashion would be to fail to grasp the pattern of relationships that constitute fashion as a system" (Carter 2003: 145). With this in mind, I have attempted make multiple interrogations of fashion's relationship with the plus size consumer, considering the language of fashion, the plus size market, the wider food culture in which the fashion system is situated, the messages about the body produced by fashion system itself, the radical contextualization of fashion's rejection of the plus size body, and finally, my own attempt to design and create plus size garments in defiance of this rejection.

Theorizing Fashion as a Language

Our external appearance, acting as the visual representation or avatar of our social selves, is highly communicative. The body as a site of both speech and oppression is widely theorized: “the body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control” (Bordo 1993:165). The production and consumption of fashion is one way in which we speak and are spoken to, are oppressed or exert control over others. Fashion, as a tool of communication, is so articulate and so complex that it is, in a sense, its own language.

In his seminal text *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes establishes that both the physical garments and the abstract visual and verbal descriptions that accompany them constitute speech within the fashion system, and he sets out to create a semiology of this speech (Barthes 1983). According to the language of fashion, “fashionability” is a quality that garments have which accords them cultural significance. According to Barthes’ argument, “material stuff is being turned into language. The garment is being translated into a system of abstract, intellectual meanings and it is this final modality of the garment that Barthes sees as the true ‘fashionable garment.’ ‘Fashionability,’ argues Barthes, is a function of language, not the physical constitution of the real garment, or the style of the used garment” (Carter 2003: 151). It is in this way that a finished skirt is more culturally articulate than the fabric used to create that skirt, and that an advertising image of that skirt might be more articulate still. The skirt is a form of speech, and in our current fashion system, the size of the skirt is able to drastically change the meaning of what is being said.

If we accept the assertion that fashion is a language, we must acknowledge that it is an important one. If we can communicate through our clothing, then this is a form of communication in which absolutely everyone partakes. Our participation in the fashion conversation need not be willing or even conscious in order to speak comprehensibly in this language; we communicate through our garments by the mere act of wearing them, and even a refusal to wear them sends a message. While our intended meanings may not translate, and while the specific messages we send certainly are not a cultural universal, the fact of communication through clothing is consistent and unavoidable across cultural moment and place.

The essentially mandatory nature of the language of fashion suggests that this language should be taken seriously, as our ability or inability to communicate clearly in this language can have a real impact on our social capital and our relationships with others. Access to the vocabulary of this language—that is, the garments themselves—is integral to our successful use of the language. As a visual grammar is “a social resource of a particular group” (Tunther and van Leeuwen 1996: 3), disparate access to that grammar contributes to an oppressive inequality. While any one individual might at any time have limited access to the vocabulary of an important means of communication for a variety of reasons, the systemic prevention of an entire group from accessing that vocabulary and utilizing it successfully is extremely problematic. It is in this context that the widespread erasure of the plus size consumer and neglect of the plus size market constitutes a very real and meaningful form of oppression that cries out for exploration and remedy.

The Plus Size Market

I realize that in order to successfully argue the oppressive neglect of the plus size market, I must first establish that this market does in fact exist. The assertion of the neglected plus size consumer is sometimes met with a certain amount of skepticism: who is this woman, and is she really willing to spend much money on clothes? The implicit claims in this incredulousness, which are likely to be linked to pervasive claims about the plus size body that originate in our food culture ('the plus size woman cares less about herself and is less successful than the straight size woman') and the fashion system ('the plus size woman cannot expect to look beautiful in clothes and should not involve herself with fashion'), are insidious and harmful, and must be discussed in greater detail. In comparison, the reality of the purchasing power of plus size consumers is fairly easy to establish. From a perspective of simple capitalism, the potential profitability of the plus size market and the extent to which it is underserved by the fashion system is truly remarkable.

It is interesting to note that a *majority* of female bodies in the United States fall into the stigmatized plus size category. The average American woman is a size 14, which is also, and likely not coincidentally, the size at which clothing begins to be considered "plus size" rather than "straight size" by the fashion industry (Gold 2009). In order to be included in the fashion system's category of acceptable bodies a consumer must be by definition below the average size. With roughly half of consumers considered plus size within the fashion system, it is shocking that "although Americans have grown steadily heavier in the last decade, women's plus-size clothing still makes up only 17 percent of the women's apparel market today" (Clifford 2010).

Furthermore, that 17 percent appears to be concentrated at the “low end” of the market, with mainstream fashion at a lower price point more available than higher status and more expensive fashion items, when compared to the availability of straight size items. While numerical data on this distribution is not available and an ethnography of high-end plus size fashion consumers would be useful, a preliminary survey of consumer voices through popular media and online platforms, in which consumers unanimously agree that it is difficult to find beautiful and well-crafted plus size items, suggests that there is indeed a market for high-end plus size fashion items (Gold 2009, Clifford 2010). The lack of availability of high fashion garments for plus size consumers is problematic, as a diversity of choice is a necessary in order for an individual to assemble a useful fashion vocabulary, and high status pieces are more articulate within the fashion language. The fashion system’s failure to produce these pieces constitutes a ghettoization of the plus size market which both reproduces cultural norms about plus size consumers and further stigmatizes those consumers within the fashion world.

The well-established correlation between obesity and poverty is often cited as the explanation for the underproduction of plus size garments in general and high end plus size garments in particular. What if plus size consumers cannot afford to buy clothing, thus rendering the venture unprofitable? Fashion producers claims that plus size clothing is more expensive to produce, and are concerned that plus size consumers will not buy it (Clifford 2010). This explanation is not entirely persuasive. The potentially lower profit margin on an individual plus size garment compared to an individual straight size garment due to the cost of fabric and special construction is dependent on the assumption that both garments are actually sold, and a run of plus size garments should be easier to

sell in the underserved plus size market than a similar run in the oversaturated straight size market.

Actual patterns of plus size consumption support the conjecture that plus size garments should be as profitable as straight size garments if produced to meet the needs of consumers. Plus size consumers contribute to overall fashion profits at disproportionately high rate considering the dearth of products available for their purchase: according to market research conducted in 2007, plus size clothing represented 26.3% of all sales dollars in the clothing market in 2006 (Dowd 2007). It is important to note that the term “plus size” exclusively describes women’s clothing and that the overall clothing market includes men’s clothing as well. Women’s plus size and men’s big and tall sales combined accounted for an incredible 43% of overall sales (Dowd 2007). Plus size sales alone were worth \$47 billion that year. Put simply, plus size clothing is outperforming straight size clothing in the current market.

As a purely economic perspective would assume that the fashion system would produce whatever fashion items are most profitable, there must be more to an explanation of the neglected plus size market than economics. What could be so compelling to individual producers of fashion that it would prevent them from pursuing an underserved, \$47 billion market? Another explanation provided by fashion producers is more credible: American Apparel representatives claim that plus size consumers are “not their demographic” as they do not represent their brand (Zelda Lilly 2010). It is my assertion that the culturally-informed disdain for the plus size consumer is so strong and so pervasive that it prevents them from seeing the plus size market’s potential profitability,

instead allowing them to cast the plus size consumer as morally and aesthetically unworthy of accessing the language of fashion.

The Body in Context

The beauty or non-beauty of any particular body is radically contextualized. Our currently beauty standard is the product of a particular cultural and aesthetic moment.

Bordo usefully summarizes this moment:

“Many cultures, clearly, have revered expansiveness in women’s bodies and appetites. Some still do. But in the 1980’s and 1990’s an increasingly universal equation of slenderness with beauty and success has rendered the competing claims of cultural diversity even feebler. Men who were teenagers from the mid-seventies on, whatever their ethnic roots or economic class, are likely to view long, slim legs, a flat stomach, and a firm rear end as essentials of female beauty.”

(Bordo 1993: 103)

As I will discuss more extensively, this beauty standard is both pervasive and viciously enforced, so much so that the plus size body as a form of beauty is not only routinely rejected but entirely erased. From any perspective that is entirely immersed in the current cultural moment, it would seem that the beautiful plus size body is nonexistent, and furthermore, objectively impossible. The thin body is so strongly connected to misguided ideals of health and abstract ideals morality that we are able to frame our rejection of the plus size body as implicitly natural and correct. These assumptions stand in shameless contradiction of the rapidity with which the beauty standard for the body changes. Most designers who have the tools to create the vocabulary of fashion also have access to a long tradition in the visual arts of rendering beautiful an array of physical bodies which

do not meet today's beauty standard. While it is unlikely that most fashion designers would claim that these forms are not beautiful or artistic, or that fashion design is not an art form, they do repeatedly claim, implicitly or explicitly, that fashion design is not capable of dealing with a broader range of physical subjects.

I doubt this reticence to tackle the subject matter of Peter Paul Ruben or classical sculpture is a result of modesty on the part of fashion actors so much as it is a result of the real strength and potential oppressiveness of this moment in cultural beauty. This assertion is supported by the changing body types extolled as "naturally" beautiful even within the fashion system, and even within recent history. Lillian Russell (Figure 1), the most photographed woman in America in 1890, weighed over 200lbs and was praised for her "challenging, fleshly arresting beauty" (Bordo 1993: 102). My own grandmother still repeats the beauty standard that she learned as a child, which praised a roundness of "belly, bust and behind." Marilyn Monroe (Figure 2), whose precise dress sizes and measurements are heatedly debated in many discussions of the beautiful body, is perhaps the most-cited example of a woman whose beauty is disconnected from thinness. The recent death of Elizabeth Taylor and the release of a nude portrait of her (Figure 3) lead to a sudden and widespread attention on her body, and while a comparable body of a contemporary actress would likely be criticized for insufficient firmness, the culturally accepted fact of Elizabeth Taylor's perfect beauty is nonetheless consistently reproduced, even alongside images of supposed 'perfection' (Figure 4) which appear to contradict that message. These women are allowed to be beautiful when connected to their original context, thus contradicting the idea of a decontextualized and objective physical ideal: "Bodies are and always have been shaped according to the specific cultural moment.

There has never been a ‘natural’ body, a time when bodies were untainted by cultural practices” (Orbach 2009: 165). The production and reproduction of the physically beautiful body are symptomatic of wider cultural assertions from which they cannot be divorced as a mere display of clothing.

This erasure of plus size bodies perpetuated within the fashion industry is more coherent when examined within the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bordieu described “habitus” as:

“systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrated action of a conductor.” (Bordieu 1977: 72)

Habitus, as a structure of the mind, is characterized by the ideas, beliefs, sensibilities and tastes, which we have acquired through the process of existing within our cultures; habitus is not a result of the conscious decisions of actors so much as a result of our repetition of certain practices. It is also worth noting that we can consciously reorient our habitus, given some internal change in beliefs or motivation; we can challenge our own habitus, as I have attempted to do through my sewing and designs.

Our ideas about the body and tastes for certain body types in fashion are an example of habitus; through the repeated consumption of an accumulated set of images and ideas,

the fashion industry has developed tastes for certain types of bodies and a tendency to privilege some bodies and marginalize others; through consumption of the images and concepts perpetuated by the fashion industry, the public as a whole may develop similar habitus, which only serves to reinforce the fashion system's construction of a particular beauty ideal. Just as Bordieu points out that habitus is not the product of the orchestrated action of a conductor, I would like to clarify that despite references to a "fashion system" as described by Barthes, I am not theorizing a monolithic fashion system as a distinct actor with the agency necessary to make purposeful, considered actions. Rather, I wish to call attention to the series of practices within the fashion industry in aggregate by which, real people feel affected, regardless of the lack of unified intention on the part of the actors which comprise the fashion system.

Achieving clarity in this concept was one of the greatest theoretical challenges of my argument. I believe that there is a tendency to refer to "Fashion" as a distinct actor because, as a fashion consumer, that is often how the effects of the fashion system are experienced: it seems as though some overpowering, unified force, "Fashion," is *doing* things, and I imagine that this feeling is even stronger for consumers who are less privileged than I. The reality is that I, as a consumer, and particularly as an unusually privileged consumer, am a part of the fashion system. As people who are regularly hailed by fashion, who consume and reproduce the images, ideas, and physical products of fashion, we are all products of the fashion system.

This is one case in which the passive voice might be the most appropriate and accurate way of describing a series of effects. When discussing the fashion system, a statement that "X is affected by the fashion system in Y way" is likely to be more true

from both a theoretical and experiential standpoint than a statement that “the fashion system does Y to X.” The effects of the fashion system are not of the fashion system as an actor, but rather the effects of the actions of a series of actors with real agency: designers, producers, magazine editors, garment workers, tabloid writers, celebrities, fashion buyers, marketing teams, market researchers, and every day consumers, among others. Together, the decisions that these actors make become part of our cultural habitus and form the fashion, and the actions of these real actors, in aggregate, do have real effects. Things happen as a result of the fashion system, but the fashion system (and, in a similar manner, the “food system) do not do things. And yet, so many important things are done: it is in the context of the food system that plus sized bodies are produced, and in the context of the fashion system that they are reproduced and hegemonically marginalized.

“Fat” and the Food Culture

The fashion language, the plus size market, and the problematic relationship between them exist within the context of a food culture that simultaneously creates and shames plus size bodies. Anyone examining our contemporary food system—that is, the systems in place that produce, market, sell, distribute, value and devalue our food--would have difficulty missing the fact that people are getting larger over time, and the resulting panic and outrage over same is equally hard to miss. The upward trend in body size is the natural result of our food system; a variety of factors within this system will inevitably produce larger bodies, and the broad trend towards obesity is not surprising. Nevertheless, the food culture also produces a broad rhetoric of shame surrounding the growth of the body, and overwhelmingly places blame for plus size bodies on the

individual, despite the numerous systemic factors which substantially contribute to a culture-wide increase in body size.

There are a number of well-documented factors that contribute to the increase in obesity: our increasingly sedentary lifestyles, our increasingly processed foods and growing portion sizes, the decrease in leisure time that might allow us to pursue physically active entertainments or cook for ourselves, the introduction of new technologies which increase the appeal of more sedentary leisure activities and, as Susie Orbach argued in *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, a cultural obsession with weight that encourages an unhealthy attitude towards food and the body. The discussions on all of these issues are useful and intensive, but a detailed exploration of each of them would be out of place here. Instead, I would like to focus on our relationship with sugar as one particular contributing factor which is both emblematic of the pressures that are placed on the individual consumer within the food system and an issue of personal interest to me. Sugar exists simultaneously as one of the most difficult substances to avoid in the foods available to us, and one of the substances which we are most intensely blamed for failing to avoid, thus illustrating the manner in which our bodies are simultaneously produced and attacked within our food culture.

I have a particular interest in the proliferation of HFCS and added sugars in American food, due to my own experiences attempting to avoid these sweeteners. Since childhood, I have had a strong physical intolerance for refined sugar, reacting to it with nausea, fatigue, headaches, mood swings, and worst of all, overwhelming cravings for more sugar. It is difficult to convince a child that she should not eat the school cafeteria food or have a slice of cake at her friends' birthday parties, and it has only been as an

adult that I have been able to make a relatively successful attempt at excluding HFCS and added sugars from my diet. It has been a struggle not to view my short lifetime of previous unsuccessful attempts to avoid sugar and the resulting weight and health struggles as a personal failure, but having gained a stronger understanding of the food system I am more aware of the powerful pressure that I and other consumers are struggling against. HFCS and added sweeteners have become increasingly common in American food, currently representing 16% of all calorie intake (Bray et. al 2004: 537). The increased production and consumption of sweetened foods is part of a concentrated marketing push that promotes the very foods that most negatively impact our health:

“The increased calories in American diets come from eating more food in general, but especially more of foods high in fat (meat, dairy, fried foods, grain dishes with added fat), sugar (soft drinks, juice drinks and dessert), and salt (snack foods). It can hardly be a coincidence that these are just foods that are the most profitable to the food industry and that it most vigorously promotes” (Nestle 2007:10).

It is therefore unsurprising that “a marked increase in the use of HFCS, and therefore in total fructose consumption, preceded the obesity epidemic in the United States” (Bray et. al 2004: 537), as HFCS is both a profitable use of excess corn and heavily promoted. Furthermore, human beings have a natural predilection towards sweetness, which is then reinforced by cultural constructions encouraging sugar consumption, as discussed by Sidney W. Mintz in his *Sweetness and Power*. In many cases, the combined force of our natural enjoyment of sweetness and the cultural assumption that we will enjoy it can be powerful enough to override any negative results of sugar consumption: “To date, there have been no reports on any group with a nonsugar tradition rejecting the introduction of sugar, sweetened condensed milk, sweetened beverages, sweetmeats, pastries,

confectionary, or other sweet dietary items into the culture. In fact, a recent study on sucrose intolerance in northern Alaskan Eskimos revealed that sucrose-intolerant individuals continued to consume sucrose despite the discomfort associated with the offending items” (Mintz 1985: 15). If I, as a relatively privileged and educated young adult, have such a difficult time avoiding added sweeteners, how can I expect others to resist this sort of pressure? How can I blame them for failing to do so?

While it would be problematic to declare that consumers have no choice in what they eat because it may deny them agency, I believe that it is important to examine the context within which consumers are making their choices. Marion Nestle does a skillful job unpacking the pressures and contradictory advice consumers face as they attempt to navigate our food culture: “The eat less message is at the root of much of the controversy over nutrition advice. It directly conflicts with food industry demands that people eat more of their products. Thus food industries work hard to oppose and undermine “eat less” messages” (Nestle 2007: 3). When we discuss overconsumption as a cause of the obesity epidemic in we often ignore the overwhelming pressure to overconsume, and the deliberate and concentrated efforts that exist to create that pressure.

Food companies spend more than \$11 billion annually on direct consumer advertisement (Nestle 2007: 28). Despite the prevalence of advertising in daily life, most consumers severely underestimate the extent to which advertising impacts their own choices: “Most of us believe that we choose foods for reasons of personal taste, convenience, and cost; we deny that we can be manipulated by advertising or other marketing practices” (Nestle 2007: 2).

While advertisers rely on this hubris, our delusions about our own ability to resist \$11 billion of advertising are fairly harmless until we turn them outward and project this expectation onto others. To declare that advertising does not affect me is merely arrogant, but to blame others for being affected lacks either awareness or compassion. The intersectionality between obesity, race, and class further problematizes this attitude: rhetoric against obesity, which casts oppressed individuals as lazy, stupid, uninformed, greedy, and ultimately responsible for their situation, reproduces oppressive messages traditionally used against people of color and the poor.

It is hardly possible to overestimate the prevalence and viciousness of these messages in our food culture: “Increasingly, the size and shape of the body have come to operate as a marker of personal, internal order (or disorder)—as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual.” (Bordo 1993: 193). The rhetoric surrounding the body in our culture has a contradictory tendency to identify the systemic pressures that encourage obesity, and revile individuals who ‘fail’ to resist those pressures. It is important to note that this is a cultural attitude which does not exist independently from an overproducing food system, but rather is rather a reaction to it: “Excess body weight came to be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will. These associations are possible only in a culture of overabundance—that is, in a society in which those who control the production of ‘culture’ have more than enough to eat. The moral requirement to diet depends on the material preconditions that make the choice to diet an option and the possibility of personal ‘excess’ a reality.” (Bordo 1993: 192). The rhetoric describing this supposed moral requirement, which does not express a universal moral ideal but rather a complex cultural reality, can range in tone from

saccharine concern for the individual as a justification for invasive criticism, to a stern advocacy of personal responsibility, to shameless disgust.

Dan Jones provides a useful example of this rhetoric in his article *There is No Sacred Right to be a Lazy Fat Slob*:

“Rather than waggle our fingers at society and the media for encouraging people to seek thinner, more defined bodies, it might just make sense to welcome any possible way by which we can cause people to take responsibility for their fatness ... But if we are not to punish the fat, then why not at least reward the thin with a tax or national insurance rebate if you can prove with a GP’s certificate that your BMI (body mass index) is within a safe range? ... Those of us who try to trim our waistlines, shave the convexities of our buttocks, or prevent our own jowls from strangling us: we’re the good guys. And we should be rewarded. It irks me that ‘poor you’ apologists like Orbach chide those who worry about their weight and let the corpulent majority off the hook. It bothers me that I pay the same national insurance contributions as folk who waddle around all fat and clumsy when I am statistically far less likely to hospitalize myself through my love of cakes.” (Jones 2009)

This article is notable not only for its rhetoric of shame, but for the fact that between his advocacy of “responsibility” and “punishment,” Jones actually acknowledges the systemic pressure faced by the people he criticizes but immediately disregards it in favor of yet another attack:

“Almost everything about modern life inclines us towards fatness. We are sedentary workers, sugar junkies and motorized transport addicts. We disdain

manual labor. Our national dish — whether it's fish and chips or chicken tikka masala — is takeaway. We have neglected physical exercise in our schools and instead successfully indoctrinated in our children the supreme right of the individual, by which it's okay to be anything you want, even if that thing is a lazy fat slob.” (Jones 2009)

Jones even mentions *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (for the purpose of mocking Orbach) and suggests several reasonable programs to reduce obesity, such as increasing nutritional education in schools and helping people afford gym memberships through state subsidy. Nevertheless, Jones central proposition is to legitimize the cultural body hierarchy through a discriminatory BMI-based system of taxation (Jones 2009).

Jones' article demonstrates that the rhetoric of blame is not merely a result of ignorance. Even those who are aware of the problematic relationship between the food system and the body and who are familiar with the literature on the topic may reproduce the cultural message that the plus size body is physically inferior, and the person who inhabits it is morally inferior. It is in this way that both real, physical fatness and “fatness” as a concept are produced, and subsequently condemned. Within the food system, “fat” bodies are produced, and within the fashion system, they are marginalized.

“Fat” and the Fashion System

It is in this context that we find a fashion system which mirrors our food culture's moral rejection of plus size bodies by rejecting them aesthetically. In addition to its simple failure to allow plus size consumers access to a meaningful fashion vocabulary by producing fashionable plus size garments, the fashion system consistently produces messages implicitly and explicitly denigrating the plus size body.

The language of fashion is conducted visually, through garments, drawings of garments, and images intended to sell garments, and it follows that fashion's discussion of images of the body would shed light on the way in which the physical body is constructed, contextualized, and given value within the fashion system. One instructional book on fashion illustration says of the body: "In fashion design drawings, the nude figure is for dressing a garment, and no realistic rendition is necessary. Smooth out the joints and muscles and render them as clean lines. Note also that the nude figure does not remain constant. Adjust the widths of the shoulders, waist and hips according to the current fashion and balance of the garments" (Watanabe 2008: 41). Within the fashion garments are not viewed merely as a means of displaying the body; rather the body is viewed as a means of displaying the products of fashion. It is therefore unsurprising that the 'realistic' or un-tampered-with body is sacrificed in favor of an ideal body that foregrounds the garment, and that the idea of drastically altering the body to highlight aspects of the clothes is naturalized within the fashion system. The subjugation of the body to the clothes is common knowledge to some extent, with the concept of the model as a 'walking clothes hanger' serving as a useful cliché. This again calls into question the excuses offered by designers who claim that designing for the plus size market is not as economically or artistically rewarding as designing for the straight size market; if they were designing to highlight the body, the size of the body in question would not pose a problem, but it is easier to see how they might object to a body that is more visible behind the clothes. In the fashion system, the physical body becomes a potential distraction from the clothing it is meant to display, and the extent to which it is able to interfere must be minimized.

The continuum along which either the body or the garments are foregrounded is correlated to the garment's distance from high fashion. Most consumers shop for clothing to display their bodies and communicate something about themselves rather than merely to perpetuate the designer's vision, and mainstream fashion is less likely to demand extreme body compliance than high status fashion, but fashion at every level asserts that the body should be altered to fit fashionable ideals, and participants in the fashion system are likely to view a noncompliant body as an aesthetic offense.

One recent example is an article run by mainstream fashion magazine *Marie Claire*, in which the author, Maura Kelly, expresses her unbridled disgust at being forced to look at the obese:

“So anyway, yes, I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other ... because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room — just like I'd find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroine addict slumping in a chair.” (Kelly 2010)

The article received thousands of comments, both agreeing and disagreeing with her complete aesthetic rejection of the plus size body. While this article is unusual both in the extremity of its message and the widespread attention it received, it is notable that the article is still live on *Marie Claire*'s website and that no voices of disagreement have stemmed from the fashion establishment.

Marie Claire is a popular magazine, but the situation in high fashion is actually even more extreme; while the production of fashionable garments tends to discriminate

against the technically plus sized, fashion images and rhetoric define the “beautiful” body in a far more limited fashion. While the plus-size market officially begins at size 14, body oppression can start at much smaller sizes. The fashion industry produces “sample sizes,” which are the sizes created to fit models and the sizes traditionally considered “thin” and, therefore, attractive. Sample sizes include 0, 2, and 4 (Vesilind 2009). These are the sizes that high fashion privileges as beautiful, which both creates and reflects the attitude of the majority of women who have access to the highest end of the fashion vocabulary.

In a forum that caters to the Washington, D.C. elite, noted socialite and philanthropist Andrea Rodgers reinforced her own status reinforced body acceptability guidelines through her discussion of dress size and sexual appeal:

“Her most famous prescription came in February 2007, during a discussion about women’s weight. She wrote: ‘There is no such thing as a toned size 10! I’m sorry. If you are bigger than a 4 you need to lose some weight. How women can go around being confident as a 10, I have no clue. I just can’t see them wanting to have sex with lights on, or having a guy see them walk around the room undressed.’ Rodgers says her comment got misquoted and twisted around in the real world ...

Nonetheless, the thread secured her status as an important poster.” (Valdez 2007)

It is unlikely to be coincidental that Rodgers characterized a size 4, which is the largest sample size in the fashion industry, as the largest size at which a woman may appropriately be viewed by others, and considered beautiful.

Could there be a simpler metaphor for our right to participate in public life and interact with society than the idea of walking across the room? Kelly asserts that a plus size woman who walks across the room is committing an aesthetic wrong against her. Rodgers claims that any woman who is not thin enough to be a fashion model should be ashamed to be seen walking across the room. Meanwhile the fashion industry, verbally silent on the issue of a plus size woman walking across a room, speaks volumes in its own language when it employs fashion models of sizes 0, 2, and 4 to do just that.

With a definition of the body that is based on the body's changeability to suit fashionable ideals, and within the context of a food culture in which attacks on individual plus size bodies are not only acceptable but pervasive, fashion actors are able to dictate the terms upon which a body may be considered beautiful, and to decline to allow those whose bodies are implicitly and explicitly deemed unacceptable to participate in the fashion conversation.

IV. Killer Couture: My Response

I reject the claim that plus size bodies are inferior, not merely from an intellectual perspective but from an artistic perspective as well: the unwillingness of mainstream designers to embrace the plus size market has lead me to attempt to design and create plus size clothing myself. This task is artistically, intellectually, and practically challenging; it has required me to learn new skills, and more dauntingly, to examine my own assumptions about beauty and the body. How does one design an artistically beautiful garment for a plus size body?

While the arguments of designers who claim that they do not design for plus size consumers because those consumers will stigmatize their brand are extremely

problematic, it is at least possible to see how this belief derives the rejection of plus sized bodies within the broader context of our food culture and the fashion system. I find designers who declare the impossibility of creating artistically meritorious fashion items for plus sized bodies considerably less persuasive; while this belief is grounded in the same systems, it lacks any critical consideration of cultural context. Furthermore, I believe it to be verifiably false.

When I began this project nearly a year ago I was unable to perform even the most basic sewing tasks; my attempt to repair a shirt by replacing a button was actually the subject of one of my first blog posts about *Killer Couture*. Nevertheless, I ran out and immediately bought a pile of ambitious books about sewing, drafting and design. In my enthusiasm I set about trying to recreate the beautiful images and complex designs in those books, with rather laughable results.

Realizing that I needed help, I embarked on a series of sewing lessons: I took lessons at both Sew L.A. and Marcia Bloom in my native California, learning sewing styles that were rather extremist: an obsession with perfect seams at the former, and a rejection of sewing preparations as basic as consulting a pattern at the latter. Once the academic year resumed, I began to take lessons with Alison from Bits of Thread in D.C. and found a sewing style that maximized my effectiveness while minimizing my anxiety: being well-prepared was encouraged, but mistakes were not considered a disaster.

I became familiar with the machine through practice exercises such as making a tote bag (a favorite of the beginning sewing lesson, and any beginning seamstress will end up making numerous tote bags), mending my clothes, hemming my own jeans, and eventually making a skirt from a pattern. Having completed this last task, I considered

myself equipped to look critically at the patterns offered to plus size consumers and alter them to suit my own vision. After dashing off some impractical and disproportionate sketches, I purchased my own sewing machine, several yards of fabric, and a series of private sewing lessons with Alison.

My creation of the final pieces owes a good deal to Alison, who guided me as I worked on the garments with increasing independence and creative license. I had the most help with the jacket (Figure 6), which also conforms most closely to the McCalls pattern from which it was derived: I removed the original collar, added the embellishments at the shoulder, and shortened the length, but beyond these alterations it is essentially the jacket from the pattern. The dress (Figure 6) followed a Very Easy Vogue pattern and its relative simplicity allowed me more freedom for alterations: I removed the sleeves, changed the neckline, and added a contrast panel in the front. Having finished these pieces, I was able to make the skirt (Figure 6, far right) from a pattern of my own design, and I created the belt (Figure 6, far left) without any pattern at all. I am quite proud of the pieces I have created: I feel that they are an articulate rejection of the idea that a garment cannot be simultaneously plus size and beautiful, a belief that appeared to be shared by my models, who as plus size women reacted positively to the garments I produced.

Learning to sew, though it took a good deal of time (and a significant investment of capital) was not the most difficult aspect of creating beautiful plus size garments. Rather, it was my own internalization of the hegemonic demonization of plus size bodies. Despite my reading on the subject and my sincere intellectual belief that the messages we receive about plus size bodies are oppressive and incorrect, I am nevertheless a part of the

fashion system and answerable to its habitus, and in my original drafting and construction phase I fought an ongoing battle against my own perception of my designs as unattractive because those designs were not designed to minimize the visible body size of my models. It was a fight against “flattering”: I am as susceptible as anyone to the assertions that plus size bodies should be made to look smaller, and plus size garments which do not accomplish this are an artistic failure.

In my designs, I have chosen to challenge these assertions not only by producing plus size garments, but by producing plus size garments which decline to pay homage to the beauty standard of thinness. Advice widely given to plus size consumers on how to dress fashionably implicitly or explicitly advises them to do so by choosing garments specifically to make themselves look smaller: they are cautioned to avoid garments that are too loose, too tight, too revealing, too brightly colored, too adventurously shaped and too boldly designed. Outside of explicitly fat-activist fashion spaces, it is difficult to find advice for plus size consumers that does not at some point advocate a dark colored wrap-dress or a subtly embellished flowy top with “flattering” jeans; essentially, the most inoffensively acceptable and linguistically invisible fashion items available. The implicit message is that plus size bodies do not deserve to be seen, and fashion’s only obligation to plus size consumers is to camouflage them as well as possible.

With this in mind, I set out to design garments that are visually interesting, using bright colors, bold patterns, volume, embellishments that avoid ‘pretty’ and actively court the strange or grotesque, and even the dreaded color white, all in order to draw attention to the body rather than attempt to hide it. I have attempted to design garments that claim cultural space and fulfill a higher aesthetic purpose than merely making my models

appear slimmer. Whether I am able to do so beautifully is a matter of opinion, but I have found that doing so *practically* has been more than achievable.

From the perspective of a radically contextualized beauty standard, the supposed difficulty of the beautiful plus size garment is absurd. Fashion has successfully been produced for plus size bodies before, and it is both my hope and my prediction that it will be again. My own attempt to produce beautiful garments that purposely disregard contemporary fashion wisdom is unlikely to spark any sort of design revolution, but rather an attempt to provide practical support to my assertion that our concept of the beautiful body is hardly some natural, objective and inherently truthful ideal, but rather a radically contextualized set of cultural beliefs that can be critically interrogated, challenged, and changed.

Conclusion

This paper is not meant to suggest that we as consumers should reject the food culture and the fashion system wholesale. It would hardly be useful to recommend that we all learn to grow our own food and sew our own clothes. Rather, I believe that we should question the pressure experienced by consumers “take responsibility.”

The mantra of personal responsibility is a powerful one, and it should not be one-sided. We are ordered to take personal responsibility for the shape of our bodies, and in response I suggest that we hold our cultural systems equally accountable, and begin to expect the actors within the food system to take responsibility for producing those bodies, and the actors within the fashion system to take responsibility for the pressures they put on those bodies and the messages they produce regarding them. It is my personal responsibility to, within the confines of my abilities, responsibilities and resources make

the best decisions I can for myself and my body. It is not my personal responsibility to change my body to suit the ideals perpetuated within the fashion system while simultaneously respecting the profit margins of the big players in the food system. It is not my responsibility to reproduce the messages that I receive from these systems about some physical incarnation of my personal worth, and it is not my responsibility to docilely accommodate the mess that our ideas about our bodies have become in the context of our food culture and the fashion system.

Rather, I would like to suggest that someone who purports to create clothes for bodies but can only create them for one type of body is not particularly good at his or her job. Furthermore, an industry which is hesitant to attempt to sell its product to an extremely eager and underserved market out of some combination of snobbery and cowardice is doing something wrong. Finally, it is my assertion that if someone who, eight months ago, was not capable of sewing a button on to a shirt was willing to challenge her own beliefs about beauty and at least attempt to create beautiful plus size garments, it is reasonable to expect fashion producers with far greater talent and resources to make the same attempt, and to succeed.

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Figure 2: Marilyn Monroe (Powolny 1952)



Figure 3: Elizabeth Taylor (McDowall 1956)



Figure 4: The Pussycat Dolls (White 2005)

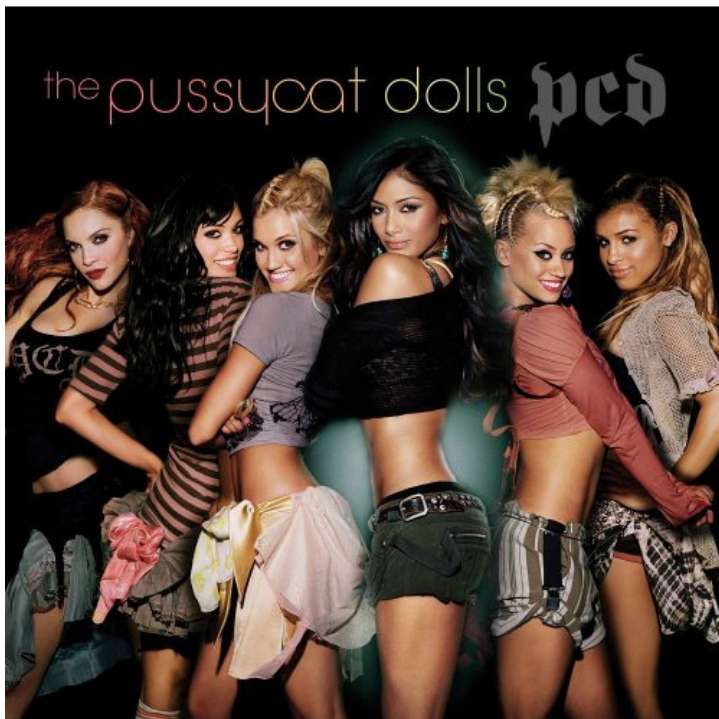


Figure 5: Poster 1 (Caffey 2011)



Figure 6: Poster 2 (Caffey 2011)



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