

Even More Perverse than the Surrounding Terrain

A specific fashion choice can send one on a little vacation from oneself, allowing the garbed to release themselves from normal roles or obligations, surrendering to a certain style and its connotations. Perhaps it is for this reason that fashion has repeatedly drawn on the aesthetics of bondage, playing with references to the bound, who surrender themselves in a symbolic game. Those in the passive role allow themselves to temporarily be relieved of responsibility for themselves. Instead of making decisions and performing actions, they yield to the stern hands of those to whom they have given their permission and, often, precisely worded directives. Role-playing is a game in which both parties are directors, though one director remains masked in submission. More than anything else, fashion keeps flirting with theatrical displays of prearranged submission. For his Fall 2000 *Eshu* collection, Alexander McQueen designed a muzzle that inhibited speech in what amounts to a gag. Helmut Lang played with the word *bondage* in the 1990's, replacing the "o" with another "a" to make *bandage*. Then he substituted the usual straps and ropes with strips that looked like drawings that tied the body up tight. In doing so, the Vienna clothier was following someone else's suit: the parachute jackets from Vivienne Westwood and Malcom McLaren's London SEX shop. The two punk fashion pioneers had already combined parachute fastening belts with S&M elements in a Victorian/futuristic cross between straightjacket and fantasy uniform in the 1970's. In their vision of free fall bliss, the bellow pocket of the postmodern uniform morphed into a wearable sex toy. And it seems the game is anything but over—*Vêtements* stylist Lotta Volkova Adam recently confessed to finding uniforms "really sexy." It's their stereotypical stability that makes uniforms so tailor-made for S&M role playing—their allusive language sends unambiguous signals: police and military uniforms outfit wearers with symbolic superiority, while school uniforms depersonalize. Within the S&M scenario, strictly coded suits have a fetishistic ability to ward off the real. The legitimacy of the so-called real gets contested and suspended. The fetish costume allows its wearer to slip away into a more self-determined reality; it dissociates the wearer from normality and clips temporary wings onto the body. For all that, the technologies of the self and brief freedom in restraint within the S&M complex can only go so far toward being universally valid: their departure from reality only works on a bound playground. Fashion also grants the freedom of the game mostly because its rules only apply for a limited time, and every player knows that time is passing. Any fetish effect will quickly lose its power. Sure, amazing things do happen all the time in capitalist reality. But does that make them deserving of the honor of being called "magical"? Karl Marx thought so: in the section of *Capital* titled "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof", he illustrates the transformation from thing to commodity with a table doing a magical dance in a surreal revue. Once commodified, the table changes

"into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table turning' ever was." One can criticize Marx's metaphor for commodity fetishism—as Jean Baudrillard did—because it sublimates an insane process that is, in most cases, fundamentally profane with divine concepts. But at the end of the day, the table will still be dancing, and it can really knock your socks off. Beyond semantics, which don't usually calm the table down anyway, what I'm more interested in is whether the dancing table—magical or not—gets read as creepy or as an inviting opportunity. Does the audience to its dance bristle at how beside itself the thing is and try to bring it back down to earth and stasis, sedate it so they can plug the holes in its head? Or do they plunge into its ecstasy headfirst and speed up the dissociative progression? Contemporary design efforts to get a grip on the thing. Fashion, by contrast, or at least better fashion, applies itself to speeding up the party. Since fashion and design are working toward contrary ends, I cannot understand their conceptual fusion in "fashion design" and consider it a mistake. It's like pouring hot and cold water together in a lukewarm mix wherein every possible mediocrity will be marketable. Yet, fashion is definitely quite distinct from design and often constitutes a downright opponent. Good design should be innovative—following Dieter Rams' definition—otherwise it's superfluous. Fashion can come across as a step forward, but it doesn't have to. Anything that gets deemed an advance in fashion operates within a self-referential system whose progress can also turn retrograde, as in Gucci's recent retro sci-fi look. Regardless of whether the motion seems progressive or conservative, no advance outlives the moment anyway; it's all part of a game played in divine irreverence, something that exceeds most of design's capacity for humor, by the look of things. Design seriously means it and wants to do good. Design turns things into practical objects, while in fashion "there is no consideration for usability" (Kant). Maybe it's because of its eternal eye to usability and its will to beneficence that the products of design can feel so horrendously uplifting. Designers usually optimize things into the orders at hand, while fashion brings things at hand into disorder. Where's the common ground? Fashion can even toy with ugliness without missing a beat, while the expectation of designed objects is that they look "good". Fashion doesn't have to be comprehensible; it can pull off both the secretive and the mysterious, whereas design has to be self-explanatory. Unlike honest, sustainable design, fashion has no problem with acting wrong, ephemeral, or even phony. And finally, design opposes dissociative repurposing and fights the perverse reality of its surroundings. Fashion, by contrast, intensifies the departure from reality and makes an effort to enjoy it through overkill, almost as if bent on making itself even more perverse than the surrounding terrain.