

In and Out of Fashion: Fashion Photography and the Museum

by

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Abstract

The past two decades have witnessed an increase in exhibitions of fashion photography in major international museums. This indicates not only the museum's burgeoning interest in other cultural forms but the acceptance of fashion photography into specific art contexts. This thesis examines two recent exhibitions of contemporary fashion photography: "Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990" at the Museum of Modern Art (April 16-June 28, 2004), the first exhibition of fashion photography at a major North American museum of art, and "Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now" at the International Center of Photography (January 16, 2009-May 3, 2009). These exhibitions sought to either confirm fashion photography's status as art or to illustrate its stylistic virtuosity. This thesis analyses both of these exhibitions in relation to the curatorial methods employed by each museum. It also considers how fashion photography's affective qualities and commercial origins highlight the problematic nature of a modernist approach to photography as well as its contemporary manifestations.

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Introduction

Fashion photography offers promises and lies. It depicts objects and experiences, solidifies the viewer's desire for them, and then obscures the cost of their ownership, all the while remaining bound to the rudimentary necessities of commerce. As Nancy Hall-Duncan writes, "the history of fashion photography is, quite simply, a record of those photographs made to show or sell clothing or accessories."¹ An enormous amount of capital is required to maintain this consumptive drive, a drive that, in turn, underpins global capitalism. James Schamus rightly observes, for instance, that Americans spend one-third of their G.D.P. convincing themselves to buy what they have made.² The photography of fashion developed in the nineteenth century in large part to enable such a network of persuasion. The genre's origins were social and economic, not artistic, in nature.

This economic imperative informs both historical and contemporary fashion photographs. The difference lies in contemporary fashion photography's inclination towards ever more fantastical versions of reality, aided by technology not available to early fashion photographers, who had to make do with such techniques as manual etching. Fashion photography has an attention-seeking nature and as it vies for attention

¹ Nancy Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, (New York: International Museum of Photography/Alpine Book Company, Inc., 1979) 9. Hall-Duncan's book was produced to accompany *The History of Fashion Photography*, one of the first American survey exhibitions of fashion photography.

² Carlo Rotello, "The Professor of Micropopularity," *The New York Times Magazine* (November 29, 2010) 55.

with other forms of spectacle it must become increasingly spectacular itself, an imperative that has resulted in its increasingly transgressive nature. More often than not fashion photographs mutate reality to signify the escapism or self-improvement offered by the item they seek to promote, opting for fiction over fact and impossibility over believability. The notion of the dreamscape, for instance, has been a nearly constant fixture of the genre and much of the literature on fashion photography hinges on the idea of unreal. Take, for example, such fashion book titles as *The Impossible Image*, *The Idealizing Vision* and *Extreme Beauty*.³

The fantasies fashion photography produces infiltrate not only the consumptive habits and consciousness of its viewers but the urban landscapes of major cities worldwide. This ubiquity belongs not just to fashion photography, of course, but to photography more generally. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes, photography has come to “mediate, if not wholly represent, the empirical world for most of the inhabitants of industrialized societies.”⁴ As commercial entities, fashion photographs contribute to the presence and potency of this mediation. Yet, fashion photography remains a generally under-theorized genre. This fact, coupled with its ubiquity, makes the absence of an

³ See Mark Sanders, Phil Poynter and Robin Derrick, *The Impossible Image: Fashion Photography in the Digital Age*, (London: Phaidon, 2000); *The Idealizing Vision: The Art of Fashion Photography*, (New York: Aperture, 1991); and Phyllis Posnick and Eva Respini, *Extreme Beauty in Vogue* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009); Further to the idea of the dreamscape Christopher Breward describes the tenuous connection between fashion photographs and the ways that clothes are actually worn: “The growing autonomy of the fashion press and the dissolution of a singular Parisian fashionable lead,” he writes, “gave rise to a modern visual language of fashion that valued symbolism over materiality and surrendered fashion illustration over to the creative realm of ‘the dream.’ In this sense mass reproduced fashion imagery can no longer be read as a direct commentary (if ever it really could) on the political economy of style as it is manufactured and worn.” From *Fashion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 122.

⁴ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photography After Art Photography,” *Photography at the Dock*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 104.

appropriate theoretical methodology surprising and still more necessary. In writings by Martin Lister and Douglas Crimp, for example, fashion photography is referred to in the form of a question mark, yet another example of photography's multiplicity. In their texts, the questions posed by fashion photographs are mentioned but invariably left unanswered.⁵

In this respect, any theoretical analysis of fashion photography must consider its presence in the museum. Rather than being confined to the realms of commerce – the billboard, flyer or magazine, for instance – fashion photography has been subsumed by high culture, and just as significantly, by the museum. The past twenty years have seen increased museological interest in a variety of cultural forms including vernacular and commercial photography and a parallel increase in exhibitions of fashion photography. Fashion photography's presence in the museum and subsequent designation as art require consideration for they are at the heart of the "interpretive problem" posed by fashion photographs.⁶ Its museological presence forces its adherence to a modernist principle that emphasizes authorship, the artist, and therefore the art of fashion photographers. Value is placed on the artist to the exclusion of other meanings and uses.⁷ Outlining the terms of

⁵ In "The Photographic Image in Digital Culture," Martin Lister describes how "one important outcome of this insistence on defining 'the photographic' in technological terms has been a related preoccupation with trying to read beneath all of its varied and contradictory social uses (the different practices of fashion...for instance). From "Extracts from Introduction to the Photographic Image in Digital Culture," *The Photography Reader*, Liz Wells, ed. (London: Routledge, 2003) 220.

⁶ Geoffrey Batchen, "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Photographies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (September 2008) 124.

⁷ As Douglas Crimp writes, "we must recognize that in order for this new aesthetic understanding to occur, other ways of understanding photography must be dismantled and destroyed." From "The Old Museum's Old, The Library's New Subject," *On the Museum's Ruins*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993) 75-76.

fashion photography's relationship to the museum will allow me to elaborate on the intrinsic qualities of the genre as well as the discourses that surround it.

If one considers fashion photography as exhibiting all the qualities of a game – irreverence, fantasy, and even irrelevance – then in general it exhibits a tethered freedom: a rejection of reality coupled with an adherence to visual conventions prescribed by commerce and inadequately contained by the designation of art. The terms of its origins are therefore not only too varied to be contained within art but too nefarious. Positioning fashion photography within the traditional discourse of art history means that its commercial origins, not to mention its ties to consumerism, are elided in favour of its artistic ones. This makes an analysis of fashion photography within the museum essential to its theorization.

In order to elaborate on the museum's relationship to fashion photography this thesis examines two exhibitions of fashion photography: "Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990" (Fig. 1) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and "Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now" (Fig. 2) at the International Center of Photography (ICP).⁸ The questions raised by these exhibitions center on the museum's treatment of fashion photography and where, for example, the museum positions it within the discourse of art history. "Fashioning Fiction" and "Weird Beauty" offer distinct curatorial strategies. When "Fashioning Fiction" opened in 2004, it was the MoMA's first exhibition

⁸ "Fashioning Fiction" (April 16-June 28, 2004) was held at MoMA Queens, a location that perhaps denotes its position in the hierarchy of the museum's exhibitions. I attended "Weird Beauty" (January 16-May 3, 2009) in 2009 and interviewed the curators, Vince Aletti and Carol Squiers, in 2011. Transcriptions of these interviews are included as an Appendix to this thesis.

of fashion photography. Twelve artists and a handful of commercial photographers were assembled under two themes: “Cinematic Takes” and “Personal Fictions.” These themes were designed to highlight the narrative tendencies that the curators, Susan Kismaric and Eva Respini, had observed in the work, and which they argued were significant because they signaled the photographs’ transcendence of commercial considerations as well as their alignment with art.

When curators Carol Squiers and Vince Aletti conceived of “Weird Beauty” at the ICP five years later, they did not look to “Fashioning Fiction.”⁹ Nonetheless, the latter remains a significant precedent as it was the first major show at a major museum in North America.¹⁰ This, in spite of the fact that fashion photography has been considered an art form since Baron Adolf de Meyer took his first photograph for *Vogue* in 1913 and the major practitioners of the form, among them Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, established their practices as early as the 1940s.¹¹ While “Fashioning Fiction” focused mainly on artists who moonlight as fashion photographers, “MoMA-certified” artists as Aletti calls them, “Weird Beauty” focused on applied photography by photographers whose work is

⁹ Carol Squiers. Interview by author. New York City, NY, February 22, 2011.

¹⁰ While the MoMA has a long history of collecting fashion photographs, the belatedness of the exhibition has been surprising to many, including Vince Aletti, who said, “the fact that “Fashioning Fiction” was the first ever show that MoMA did on fashion was unbelievable to me especially considering that Steichen was one of their first curators. How could that happen? Fashion photography has been interesting all along. They’ve done all kinds of vernacular shows, the picture press, and all kinds of snapshot shows. Fashion gets thrown to the side because it’s seen as elitist, commercial and frivolous. It’s not taken very seriously and with obvious exceptions it’s not collected.” Vince Aletti. Interview by author. New York City, NY, February 21, 2011.

¹¹ Elspeth Brown, “Rationalizing Consumption: Photography and Commercial Illustration,” *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture*, (Boston: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) 187.

seen primarily in magazines.¹² Featuring work by forty-two artists and photographers, the exhibition offered a cross-section of what the curators considered to be the best fashion photography from the two years prior.

Chapter One of this thesis, “Fashionable Photographs,” discusses both exhibitions. In addition, it considers how the curators of “Fashioning Fiction” position the work in the show as arising from the distinctly anti-fashion aesthetic of 1980s and 1990s fashion photography. While that photography has been widely circulated (there have been three exhibitions on 1990s fashion photography in international museums, for example), its realistic, anti-glamour tendencies were not entirely evident in the fashion photographs included in the exhibition. Yet it made sense that the MoMA would exhibit that kind of photography for its anti-commercial leanings would have enabled its consumption as art.

While Chapter One focuses on art, Chapter Two focuses on the commercial aspects of fashion photography. This chapter, “Alternate Fictions,” discusses how the inclusion of Pictorialism in early advertising photography signaled a new kind of appeal to consumers’ irrational desires. The chapter will consider the work of early American fashion photographer Lejaren à Hiller and is informed by Elspeth Brown’s book *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture*. I use the information outlined in this book, namely Brown’s description of the various forces at play in the rationalization of consumption, to show how the need to appeal to consumers informed the development of an aesthetic of fantasy. I argue that the

¹² Aletti, interview by author.

development of this fantastical aesthetic was driven by commerce, not art, as it has a historical basis in the development of early advertising photography.

Both of these exhibitions are considered within the theoretical framework laid out by Douglas Crimp in *On The Museum's Ruins* and Abigail Solomon-Godeau in *Photography at the Dock*. In these texts, the authors outline photography's relationship to the museum, to modernism, and to postmodernism. In particular, my discussion is informed by their analysis of photography's entrance into museum within the framework of modernism. As Crimp and Solomon-Godeau show, photography's museological history has been informed by its valuation as art and aesthetic contributions to art history. Within the modernist agenda set out by John Szarkowski, the influential and longstanding Director of the Department of Photography at MoMA, fashion photography fits easily into a paradigm of "photography-as-art" only if its commercial aspects are obscured.¹³ To Douglas Crimp this demonstrates an essential principle of modernism:

Szarkowski's ontology of photography makes photography a *modernist* medium...an art form that can distinguish itself in its essential qualities from all other art forms...Photography will hereafter be found in departments of photography or divisions of art and photography. Thus ghettoized, it will no longer primarily be *useful* within other discursive practices; it will no longer serve the purposes of information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage. The formerly plural field of photography will be henceforth be reduced to the single, all-encompassing *aesthetic*.¹⁴

¹³ Crimp, "The Old Museum's Old, The Library's New Subject," *On the Museum's Ruins*, 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

Szarkowski's ontological framework therefore emphasizes the photograph's artfulness, or capacity to be art. Inevitably, the photograph's other potential uses and meanings are repressed. The same goes for the museum's treatment of the fashion photograph: it is art only in so far as it is useless and useful only in so far as it can be commodified.

Thus, in the case of "Fashioning Fiction," the museum treated the work the way it would any other kind of modernist photography. In the catalogue essay, the curators, Susan Kismaric and Eva Respini, discussed the photographs' thematic and stylistic qualities. The essay repressed the photographs' commercial origins (the word "advertising" appears once) and denied their disposability by exhibiting them as prints. The essay emphasized the work of the single artist in lieu of explaining how fashion photography is actually made, which can be described as a directorial effort made up of the collaborative efforts of a team of people. Finally, the museum enlisted a corporate sponsor: the exhibition was made possible by Banana Republic.

Presented and read in this way, these images would not undermine the museum's discourse. But what do the exhibitions offer about fashion photography? Here I return to my original description of fashion photography's commercial origins and aesthetic codes. What do these exhibitions say, for instance, about its obsession with the future and its entrenched nostalgia, the way it steals from the past? Fashion photographs are not discriminatory; they steal from everywhere, mixing gender, fetishism, voyeurism, popular culture, celebrity culture and trauma. Their rhetoric could be considered a rhetoric of desire: for and about the body and its perfectibility, for and about consumption, and the

invasion and display of the personal – the photographs in both exhibitions focus primarily on the female form, the family, intimate relationships and private settings.¹⁵ And true to its definition as *fashion*, as something changeable, fashion photography seemingly has no connection to the world, and to the body, other than to mutate it.¹⁶ In light of this disconnection, one cannot talk about these images without addressing, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Peter Halley did in their review of “Fashion Fiction,” “the substantive issues” they raise: namely, that fashion photography necessitates a history that accounts for both its benign and insidious effects, from the way it has infiltrated the museum to the way it manipulates desire. These are effects that, of all photographic genres, it alone maintains.¹⁷

In “Dressing Down,” their 2004 review of “Fashioning Fiction” in *Artforum*, Solomon-Godeau and Halley point out that the exhibition’s main thesis belies the true concerns and effects of fashion photography. They suggest that the curators offer “bland and simplistic” platitudes about the successful overlap of artistic and commercial activity in lieu of real analysis. To this end they bitingly observe how “museological discourse is nothing if not euphoric.”¹⁸ Solomon-Godeau and Halley then go on to point out that

¹⁵ Paul O’Neill writes in “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse” that “exhibitions are, therefore, contemporary forms of rhetoric.” From *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick, eds. (London: Intellect, 2007) 14.

¹⁶ As James Laver states, “If we think that the female body is itself a beautiful object (and only Schopenhauer will disagree with us about this), what are we to think of what fashion has done to it.” One should of course not exclude the male body from this discussion. James Laver, “Fashion, Art and Beauty,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, November 1967, 119.

¹⁷ Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Peter Halley, “Modern Style: Dressing Down,” *Artforum*, Vol. 43, No. 9, May 2004, 194.

¹⁸ Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” *On the Museum’s Ruins*, 194.

“Fashioning Fiction” hinged on a historically incorrect and ideologically flawed curatorial thesis. As a counter-example, they offer the photographs in *Fashion: Photography of the Nineties*, a book that featured many of the same photographers included in “Fashioning Fiction.” The authors describe how in these photographs’ “sleaziness” and in their “uneuphoric insistence on the visibility of class” they “give the lie to the fashionable fictions that MoMA and other art institutions are now so eager to promote.”¹⁹

In essence, Solomon-Godeau and Halley take issue with the curators’ refusal to treat the images as though they had any impact other than in the context of art. They argue that the curatorial thesis ignores the aspects of fashion photography most worthy of analysis – aspects that have more to do with real-world effects than with art:

Surely contemporary fashion photography’s various plays with sex and gender, race and difference, are among its most significant elements. And surely another significant aspect of the genre is its ideological address, its complex orchestrations of spectatorial desire, projection, identification, fetishism, voyeurism and all the other psychic mechanisms that account for the power, the influence, and indeed the pleasure such pictures produce. Last but hardly least, there is the question of how such photographs – paradigms of the simulacral – impact on social reality.²⁰

The curators of “Fashioning Fiction” suggest that contemporary fashion photography is art destined for the museum. By contrast, in the ICP’s “Weird Beauty,” fashion photographs are evidence of the genre’s striking formal qualities. Yet, neither reading adequately analyzes fashion photography’s various meanings and uses. These exhibitions represent modernist readings of photography, readings that emphasize

¹⁹ Ibid, 196.

²⁰ Ibid, 195.

artfulness and aesthetics rather than affect and use. In this sense, they epitomize the dilemma inherent in positioning photography within the discourse of art history. As Geoffrey Batchen demonstrates in his essay “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn,” art historical readings exacerbate such a dilemma rather than seeking to resolve it:

Photography’s history is often still made to obey the look and basic organizing principles of art history...in general the art history of photography celebrates singular achievements and their moment of origin, so that even objects having multiple manifestations and meanings are treated as unique and individual events...repeating these principles in publications and exhibitions...tends to repress those attributes that make photography such a distinctive element of modern culture – for example, the reproducibility of the photograph...the complication of authorship... and the enmeshing of photographic practice within the tawdry commerce of consumer capitalism and mass production.²¹

In the essay, Batchen establishes that art history tells a very specific story about photography, one that fits easily into a modernist paradigm. Such a discourse precludes its complex commercial origins.

Batchen’s interest in art history and photography also informs my discussion. For although this thesis focuses on contemporary photographs their analysis is a historical matter. Photographs are inevitably understood within the histories that surround them and by way of the histories that are written about them. Historical readings are designed to underline value and importance. I argue that the very nature of fashion photography suggests a reversal of the dominant modes of historicizing photographs, modes that as Batchen observes, prioritize masters and masterworks. These modes appear insufficient to photography’s particular qualities as they fail to describe “photography as an historical

²¹ Batchen, “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn,” *Photographies*, 125.

phenomenon and cultural experience.”²² For Batchen, histories that are based in the realities of the object at hand can be alert not just to its status as art but to its “dissemination, reception and production” as well as the “aspects, whether visible (images and practices) or invisible (effects and experiences)” that make it what it is.²³ A consideration of how fashion photographs are produced, exhibited and received, as outlined in this thesis, is itself a response to Batchen’s call for a “transformed” art history.²⁴ As Solomon-Godeau and Halley demonstrate, fashion photography’s impact, “ideological address” and “orchestrations of desire” are key aspects of its production and reception. It is these aspects that must be elaborated on to explain the desire to create, consume and exhibit photographs of fashion.

²² Batchen, “Camera Lucida: Another Little History of Photography,” *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, 264.

²³ *Ibid*, 259.

²⁴ Batchen, “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn,” *Photographies*, 126.



Fig.1 "Fashioning Fiction" Installation View, 2004



Fig. 2 "Weird Beauty" Installation View, 2009

Chapter I

Fashionable Photographs:

“Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990” and

“Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now”

The museum allows a certain kind of relevancy to be enacted. Fashion photography exists, and the museum both asks and answers questions about the attention it deserves. The following discussion rests on the argument that the museum is a point of contact for the worlds of art, fashion and commerce, a place in which images are decoded and interpreted. This chapter considers the ways in which two museums, the ICP and the MoMA, treated fashion photography in order to highlight each museum’s theoretical framework and curatorial strategies.

Considered in its entirety, and not just from the perspective of photography, fashion might seem anathema to the museum’s interests and, indeed, it was until about the 1980s. For Karsten Schubert, Diana Vreeland’s turn as the head of the costume department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) between 1971 and 1984 forced a reconsideration of fashion as a cultural entity. Her curatorial agenda exemplified the museum’s embrace of other cultural forms and signified a new moment in museum history.

Yet, fashion, it seems, was always destined for the realms of high culture. While the museum may not have singlehandedly propelled fashion’s cultural popularity it

certainly reinforced it. As Edith Marie Pasquier writes, “high fashion has become to some extent demotic...whereas in some fields high art and popular culture have veered further and further apart, in dress the opposite has happened.”²⁵

For Schubert, Vreeland’s role denotes an overall “shift towards an audience-driven museum” and a related shift towards the display of art as “visual spectacle” not just at the MET but as an established trend within other institutions.²⁶ An historical timeline of fashion photography exhibitions demonstrates that, with few exceptions, fashion photographs were essentially excluded from major museums until the 1990s, a decade that witnessed an unprecedented increase in such shows. Solomon-Godeau and Halley pointed this out in 2004:

Over the past seven years alone, London’s National Portrait Gallery has exhibited the photographs of Bruce Weber and Mario Testino. Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie inaugurated its new building with a Helmut Newton retrospective, the Victoria and Albert Museum mounted “Imperfect Beauty: The Making of Contemporary Fashion Photographs” and Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art weighed in with “Chic Clicks: Creativity and Commerce in Contemporary Fashion Photography.”²⁷

To this list one could add very recent examples such as “Not in Fashion: Fashion and Photography in the 90s” at the Museum Für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt Am Main which opened in September 2010, among others.

²⁵ Edith-Marie Pasquier, “Discussion Forum,” *Words Without Pictures*, Alex Klein, ed. (New York: Aperture, 2010) 245.

²⁶ Karsten Schubert, *The Curator’s Egg: The Evolution of the Museum Concept from the French Revolution to the present day*. (London: One Off Press and Christie’s Books, 2000) 73.

²⁷ Solomon-Godeau and Halley, “Modern Style: Dressing Down,” *Artforum*, 194.

The museum's inclusion of more populist subject matter (and therefore more commercial objectives) would suggest it has simply internalized the logic of the shopping apparatus. Julia Noordegraaf attributes such a development to the emergence of an "experience-oriented economy," wherein museums focus on providing "experiences" and where visitors see a trip to the museum as a "leisure activity comparable to going shopping."²⁸ Thus, instead of museums removing themselves from the realms of popular culture one can say that they have embraced it wholeheartedly. Exhibitions of fashion photography are just one example of such an embrace. The proliferation of fashion photography exhibitions in major museums suggests that *The Economist's* 2001 prediction that someday there would be "two kinds of museums: the temples of high culture devoted to scholarly pursuits, and the entertainment centres catering to more popular taste," was in fact redundant.²⁹ One has only to look at a year's worth of exhibitions at any major museum to see that entertainment has been subsumed by the museum as a newfound priority.

The incentive to create these kinds of exhibitions rests, of course, in their popular appeal and the promise of large visitor numbers. As Schubert writes, "the history of the museum...could be viewed as a gradual shift of the visitor from the periphery to the centre of museal practice."³⁰ *Weird Beauty*, for instance, exceeded the ICP's visitor

²⁸ Julia Noordegraaf, "The Museum as Experience," *Strategies of Display*, (Rotterdam: NAI, 2004) 197-221.

²⁹ "When Merchants Enter the Temple," *The Economist*, April 19, 2001. http://www.economist.com/node/578920?story_id=578920.

³⁰ Schubert, *The Curator's Egg*, 70.

expectations.³¹ Even so, such populist exhibitions can still serve to underscore the schismatic beliefs of the institution: that scholarship must be at odds with funding or that an emphasis on attendance figures compromises the quality of an exhibition.

While the museum's melding of high and low appears to be a *fait accompli*, the presence of fashion within its halls still incurs a certain level of skepticism or, at the very least, a degree of unease. Historical exhibitions seem to produce less anxiety than their contemporary counterparts.³² The curators of "Fashioning Fiction," as Solomon-Godeau and Halley point out, were anxious to historicize the moment they were describing by positioning it within a particular decade, the 1990s of the title, even though much of the work did not fit exclusively within a ten-year period. And while reviews unanimously praised the historical exhibitions on view at the ICP at same time as "Weird Beauty" – "Edward Steichen: In High Fashion, The Condé Nast Years 1923–1937" and "Not a Fashion Photograph," also curated by Vince Aletti – the reviews of "Weird Beauty" were mixed. Blake Gopnik, for instance, wrote in *The Washington Post* that "Weird Beauty" left him feeling "puzzled" but praised the other two exhibitions.³³ In addition, many of the

³¹ Aletti, interview by author. Vince Aletti said that "the public response was beyond what we could have expected. It was one of the most popular shows at ICP in years and it constantly built an audience the longer it was up. So that was really unexpected and exciting to us. We had no idea whether this would go over with anybody outside of a small group of people who could be excited." According to the ICP, they had 58,000 visitors. Email from Kelly Heisler, Marketing and Communications at ICP, April 6, 2011.

³² As Vince Aletti told me, "I think that for so much fashion photography...it takes people fifty years for people to appreciate great work: Cecil Beaton, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Guy Bourdin, Helmut Newton. It has to be a long time ago before they see it as art. From my point of view that does not make sense. It is art right now and it is happening in the pages of your magazine. For me that is why it is important to have it out there, to see it in this larger context." Aletti, interview by author.

³³ Blake Gopnik, "Off the (Magazine) Rack: In 'Weird Beauty,' Fashion Puts a Familiar Face Forward," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/29/AR2009012903696.html>.

reviews of “Fashioning Fiction” pointed to either the art world’s limited “flirtation” with fashion or its “notorious” allergy to it.³⁴ It seems one cannot write about fashion photography without validating (or not) its inscription into the art world or commenting on the once divided, now united fronts of art and commerce, as the curators of “Fashioning Fiction” did.

Although these exhibitions exemplify the relatively new museological interest in popular forms of culture, which has in turn been affirmed by healthy visitor numbers, they still resist the formulas usually applied to large blockbusters and exhibitions of fine art. Most of the photographers in both exhibitions were not household names and there was no single name, other than perhaps Cindy Sherman, who could provide such a draw. At the same time, Squiers and Aletti maintained separately that the absence of “art stars,” and a reliance on primarily European magazines, gave them a unique opportunity to present material that had not been seen in a museum. Aletti outlined this more explicitly by stating that he was “conscious of the fact that this was new for most people and for most museum-goers.” He went on to say that:

Unless they were looking at the same fashion magazines that we were looking at, many of which were from Europe and not on everybody’s coffee tables, they wouldn’t have seen these pictures. And even if they did come across them in *Vogue* they might not have seen them in quite the same way.³⁵

³⁴ Angel Chang describes how “the art world has flirted with fashion” throughout the twentieth century in “Exhibition Review: ‘Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990,’” *Fashion Theory*, (Vol. 9, Issue 3) 361. Sarah Valdez writes, “First the art world has been notoriously afflicted with an allergy to fashion.” From “Exhibition: “Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990,” <http://www.lookonline.com/momaexhibition.html>.

³⁵ Aletti, interview by author.

One striking similarity between “Fashioning Fiction” and “Weird Beauty” was the marked overlap of artists. The same argument could be made for many of the shows that followed and preceded them. Half of the artists in “Fashioning Fiction” were also in “Weird Beauty.” Likewise, Glen Luchford’s Prada campaign, featured in “Fashioning Fiction,” had also been seen in the Victoria & Albert’s “Imperfect Beauty” as had work by Craig McDean and Juergen Teller. “Chic Clicks” at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston included Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Mikael Jansson, Glen Luchford, Collier Schorr, Cindy Sherman, Larry Sultan and Matthias Vriens, all of whom were either in “Fashioning Fiction” or “Weird Beauty.” The myopia continues: some of the magazines referenced in the “Fashioning Fiction” catalogue essay as examples of the magazine world’s ability to meld art and fashion, such as *W* magazine and *Purple Fashion*, also served as the primary source of material for “Weird Beauty.”

And yet there are differences too, many of which stem from the varying priorities of each museum. Prior to “Weird Beauty,” the ICP had organized many exhibitions of fashion photography. The most significant of these included ones on George Hoyningen-Huehne in 1980, Horst P. Horst in 1984, and Martin Munkasci in 2007. MoMA had not organized a fashion exhibition before 2004 and has not since. While MoMA offered a historical analysis of the photographs, focusing on what it called a “particularly inventive development in the 1990s,” “Weird Beauty,” according to Aletti, focused on the last two years of fashion photography and “privileged fashion photographers, people who work

strictly in fashion.”³⁶ While ICP provided no historical context for the work, the curators did credit the fashion stylists on its wall labels; MoMA did not. And while the “Fashioning Fiction” curators insisted on the importance of the magazine as the point of origin for the work (all of the photographs in the exhibition were made on commission, as the curators point out, as editorials or advertisements), they nevertheless exhibited it as framed prints. “Weird Beauty” affirmed the importance of magazines, particularly European ones, by showing tear sheets almost exclusively. Yet both exhibitions removed the *original* original context of the photographs (and therefore the markings of commerce) in the pages of a magazine seen in its entirety, itself a vehicle designed to sell.

The media attention paid to “Fashioning Fiction” befitted an exhibition that included the stars of the art and fashion worlds. The exhibition was lauded by *The New York Times* in a full colour front-page story in the “Arts & Leisure” section five days before it opened on April 16, 2004. The article took the form of a panel discussion between the *Times* fashion editor Ginia Bellafante, Holly Brubach, a former fashion editor for *The New York Times Magazine*, and Rosalind Krauss, a Professor of Art History at Columbia University. While Krauss was the least garrulous of the three panelists, her comments were also the most incisive. In reference to “Fashioning Fiction” she declared, for example, that she did not “look at works of art or visual material in terms of narrative.” “I am not,” she went on to say, “into comic books.”³⁷

³⁶ “Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990.” April 16-June 28, 2004. MoMA QNS, The Museum of Modern Art, Queens. Media Release; Aletti, interview by author.

³⁷ Bellafante, “Art that Wears \$780 Shoes,” *The New York Times*, 29.

The exhibition was divided into two thematic groupings. “Cinematic Takes” included the work of Cedric Buchet, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Cindy Sherman, Ellen von Unwerth and Glen Luchford. “Personal Fictions” included Mario Sorrenti, Nan Goldin, Simon Leigh, Tina Barney, Steven Meisel, Juergen Teller and Larry Sultan. To the curators, the work of these two groups reflected “two of the dominant narrative modes in fashion photography of the last decade:” the cinema and the snapshot. The curators argue that these two themes are also “central to contemporary art photography.”³⁸ They therefore align the interests of fashion and art early on in the essay and then go on to argue that such an alignment resulted from fashion photography’s desire to escape its own confines, to transcend commerce, “to communicate narratives outside the world of fashion, and to move toward “a new vernacular” about life as it is now lived.³⁹ In other words, its natural progression included a move into the upper echelons of culture.

Furthermore, the curators suggest that the work in “Fashioning Fiction” should be read as evidence of an overall movement in the 1990s away from glamorous fashion photographs. Essential to this movement was a group of magazines founded in the 1980s: *i-D*, *The Face* and *Arena*, all of which were based in London, and *Dazed and Confused* and *Visionnaire*, both of which were founded in the 1990s. The photography published in those magazines represented a fundamental shift in the aesthetics and interests of fashion photographs. The magazines did not offer the standard fare of their counterparts: pretty

³⁸ Susan Kismaric and Eva Respini, *Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004) 12-31.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

pictures of pretty people doing pretty things. Often poorly lit and badly framed, the photographs found in their pages explored a plethora of situations that could not be regarded as aesthetically appealing. Predictably enough, this aesthetic eventually infiltrated the museum.⁴⁰ Making the “clothing subservient to sensibility and narrative” and distancing themselves from commercial constraints served to increase the photographers’ value to the museum.⁴¹

This anti-glamour aesthetic was found not just in editorial fashion spreads but also in art. While Cindy Sherman worked independently of those photographers, her fashion photographs can also be read as an indictment of the genre, an interest supported by the more avant-garde designers she worked with. Sherman’s *Untitled #132* (Fig. 3), produced for the 1984 Dorothee Bis campaign, was the first image one saw when entering the gallery. Krauss responded to this photograph by observing that even though “fashion photography claims to be about display...it taps into an admission that fashion is a kind of defense, that women hide behind clothes.”⁴² *Untitled #132* is a self-portrait of Sherman in a red and yellow dress, her face covered in a material that mars her skin. That skin sets the tone for what was to come: in the following series of self-portraits, Sherman captures

⁴⁰ There has been a great deal of interest in the 1990s from the standpoint of museums. The V & A exhibition “Imperfect Beauty” (September 28, 2000-March 18, 2001) examined British fashion photography as did “Not In Fashion” (September 25, 2010-January 9, 2011) a decade later. Many of the photographers that emerged out of the movement remain the most prominent fashion photographers working today such as David Sims, Juergen Teller, Craig McDean and Nick Knight. Only Teller and Glen Luchford were represented in “Fashioning Fiction” but it was the aesthetic of all these photographers that represented such an enormous stylistic shift for the curators.

⁴¹ Bellafante, “Art that Wears \$780 Shoes,” *The New York Times*, C1.

⁴² *Ibid*, 29.

the various types that populate the fashion industry, most of them hideous, overstuffed and overdressed.

Sherman's portraits were followed by Juergen Teller's unflattering portraits of various couture clients, their luxurious clothing denigrated by the camera's harsh flash (Fig. 4). Teller and Sherman's portraits were joined by Larry Sultan's mild Americana for Kate Spade (Fig. 5), Steven Meisel's version of the same for *Italian Vogue* (Fig. 6) and so on and so forth, all of which demonstrates the ways in which the fashion world both celebrates and rejects itself. The more complex images, such as Teller's or Sherman's, either skewer or send up the fashion world, and borrow the visual tropes of the genre to comment on its narrowness. Sherman and Teller have been the most successful at exposing the defenses Krauss refers to and the most successful at revealing the flaws of the fashion world. They are also arguably two of its most celebrated photographers.

In an attempt to contextualize this new breed of fashion photographs, the curators situated them within an historical timeline. Their catalogue essay traces the development of the modern fashion photograph starting with Baron de Meyer and ending with Meisel. The problem with this method of historical analysis is that there appears to be only one possible outcome of such a trajectory: fashion photography's eventual transformation into art. By positioning the photographs in the show within a specific historical context, the context of masterworks, that outcome is made to appear both inevitable and unambiguous. Thomas Crow describes this as being the particular purview of the museum:

Validated fine art, the art of the museums, is that special preserve where the commodity character of modern cultural production is sealed off from apprehension. There the aggressively reiterated pretense is that traditional forms have survived unaltered and remain available as an experience outside history.⁴³

The historical patterns the curators describe suggest that fashion photography's rejection of commercial constraints—the clothes, and the models—reached its peak in the 1990s. By examining other historical timelines, however, a different pattern emerges. Fashion photography has been in a process of upheaval since it began, rejecting what it did not to see fit to use and embracing what it did.⁴⁴

The curators also take great pains to point out that the photographers in the exhibition were attempting to distance themselves from a visual value system in which “privilege is absolute,” privilege being an important current of fashion photography from its very inception.⁴⁵ Yet there is nothing in these images that is not about privilege, that does not either denounce it or celebrate it, and that is not infused with the boredom afforded only by wealth. This can be seen in everything from Tina Barney's photographs of families in their country enclaves, such as *The Pool Construction* (Fig. 7) to the spectre haunting Glen Luchford's Prada ads (Fig. 8). In spite of a professed attachment by their makers to an anti-fashion aesthetic, these photographs remain firmly attached to glamour and privilege.

⁴³ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 25.

⁴⁴ Hall-Duncan describes how in the 1960s designers were outraged that clothes were being “downgraded to mere props for far-out fashion photography.” From “Furor Over Fashions: Far-Out Photography,” *Time*, 86 (3 December 1964). Quoted in *The History of Fashion Photography*, 66.

⁴⁵ Kismaric and Respini, “*Fashioning Fiction*” in *Photography Since 1990*, 13.

In “Fashioning Fiction” and “Weird Beauty” one sees both artists who were invested in resisting traditional art photography, such as Cindy Sherman, and photographers who elaborated on the modernist principle of art about art: their fashion photographs adhere to the conventions of fashion photographs and are about fashion and not much else. As this latter group is constituted from photographers, not artists, their work is produced for commercial and not artistic ends.

Thus, all of the artists represented in both exhibitions use photographs for different means. Their photographs also have different points of origin. This point further underscores the way that fashion photographs straddle both art and commerce. As such, characterizing all the photographs as art glosses over their differences. Indeed, the artist Philip-Lorca diCorcia, whose work was in both “Fashioning Fiction” and “Weird Beauty,” expressed a sense of bewilderment at the combination of photographers in the show. diCorcia’s comments signal the lack of critical unanimity on what constitutes a fashion photographer, let alone a fashion photograph:

I question whether the museum, as a highbrow cultural entity, felt obliged to include some of their usual suspects, like Cindy Sherman and others who are probably pretty peripheral to fashion photography, in an attempt to back up their position in case anyone criticized them...but people in the fashion world will not think half of the photographers on show here are players at all, while the art world will say that the fashion photographers featured are not the most interesting photographers out there.⁴⁶

While “Fashioning Fiction” sought to elucidate and confirm the overlap between fashion and art, “Weird Beauty” sought to highlight the visual inventiveness of the

⁴⁶ Helen Walters, “Commercial Artists,” *Creative Review* (May 2004) 48.

fashion photograph. “Weird Beauty” lacked the extensive catalogue produced for “Fashioning Fiction” but its premise could be summed up as evidencing the genre’s inventiveness, its imperative to impress, and true to the exhibition title, its idiosyncratic tendencies. The work’s appeal, to Roberta Smith, stemmed from its “exploitation” of the “latest cultural trends” and not from a desire to align itself with art.⁴⁷ The curators describe how, for example, the photographs are “hooked to a mood, a style, or an allusion,” and “take their cues from youth culture, art history, or fairy tales.”⁴⁸

An examination of these exhibitions demonstrates that while “Fashioning Fiction” removed the photographs from their original context, “Weird Beauty” returned each photograph back to its original “mode of address.”⁴⁹ By returning it back to its context as a fashion photograph, the curators reasserted the importance of context for determining the essential nature of the fashion photograph. Reinscribed in this way the exhibition reconfirmed its status as a commercial entity, but an artful one nonetheless.

For “Weird Beauty” curator Carol Squiers, the significance of the images lay in their imaginative qualities. Yet to Squiers the images were not just an example of “imagination for imagination’s sake:”

[These photographers] are reflecting on what is going on around them, like every other photographer. It was interesting to see the way they worked narratives about violence...about dysfunctional relationships, about the

⁴⁷ Roberta Smith, “Fashion Forward: Not for the Fainthearted.” *The New York Times*. January 23, 2009, C33. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/23/arts/design/23phot.html>

⁴⁸ Vince Aletti and Carol Squiers, “Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now” Wall Text, International Center of Photography, January 16, 2009-May 3, 2009.

⁴⁹ Solomon-Godeau and Halley, “Modern Style: Dressing Down,” *Artforum* 195.

insanities of celebrity and [they did so] in a very particular way...if you think about it the parameters of fashion photography are very narrow and these photographers come up with something that's engaging month in and month out...there was just a level of invention that is not in photography in the art world at this point.⁵⁰

This level of inventiveness, however, was not to be confused with freedom. In my conversation with Squiers she emphasized the conditional nature of the photographs and said that freedom was a “tricky word” to use with regards to fashion photographers. What she saw in the work instead was “a level of permission” not found elsewhere. She went on to say, for example, that these images were valuable for the way they “pushed the image to the edge of legibility.”⁵¹ They do this in a variety of ways, extending their subject matter to absurd or surreal subjects, all enabled by the latest technology. This subject will be taken up in the next chapter for fashion photography's relationship to technology reinforces its conditional nature. As Solomon-Godeau writes, the “photographer's aspirations” are “perpetually circumscribed by industrial decisions.”⁵² However, to say fashion photographs are prescribed by technology is not to suggest they are somehow banal – they might be bound up with technology but they are not limited by it. As the next chapter demonstrates, fashion photographs employ technology to replace ordinary, pedestrian reality with abject fantasy.

⁵⁰ Squiers, interview by author.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Solomon-Godeau and Halley, “Photography after Art Photography,” *Photography at the Dock*, 110.



Fig. 3 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #132*, 1984



Fig. 4 Juergen Teller, *France Goldman, Paris*, 1999



Fig. 5 Larry Sultan, Untitled photograph from “Visiting Tennessee,”
Kate Spade advertising campaign, 2002



Fig. 6 Steven Meisel, Untitled photograph from “The Good Life,” *Vogue Italia*, 1997



Fig. 7 Tina Barney, *The Pool Construction*, 1999



Fig. 8 Glen Luchford, Untitled photograph from Prada advertising campaign, 1997

Chapter II

Alternate Fictions

Cecil Beaton hinted at fashion photography's compulsiveness to image glamour as early as 1938 in an article entitled "I Am Gorged With Glamour Photography." In the article, Beaton points to a certain fatigue with the conscripted nature of fashion photography:

I want to make photographs of very elegant women taking the grit out of their eyes, or blowing their noses, or taking lipstick off their teeth. Behaving like human beings in other words. It would be gorgeous instead of illustrating a woman in a sports suit in a studio...but naturally that would be forbidden.⁵³

It would be many years before fashion photography was allowed to show women being anything other than glamorous. And while glamour remains a constant, it has taken on a decidedly contemporary form, one that is no longer bound to the social mores that Beaton described but whose artistic license is enabled by a range of photographic techniques, the most important of which is retouching.

The history of image manipulation has been coterminous with the history of photography – they have always co-existed. Retouching represents the desire to perfect an image, a desire expressed most lucidly and explicitly by fashion photography. What I aim to outline in this chapter is both fashion photography's development of a visual language fraught with subjectivity and emotion, a language created to appeal to a consumer, and its connection to a technology that has enabled that same impulse. In this chapter, I argue

⁵³ Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, 202.

that fashion photography's fascination with the perfectibility of images has a historical basis and has been realized through digital technology. Both history and technology produced the same ends: the development of a specific aesthetic code designed to stimulate consumer desire. This chapter is also an attempt to position fashion photography within a debate that thus far has concentrated on the division between the analog and digital image but that has not necessarily been addressed within the context of fashion photography, a genre that has long since rejected the analog image.

For an example of fashion photography's relationship to digital imaging, one has only to look to the work of Pascal Danguin, a retoucher who shapes many of the photographs in the world's most widely circulated magazines. In her profile of Danguin in *The New Yorker* Lauren Collins demonstrates the extent of his involvement in a single sentence: "In the March issue of *Vogue* Danguin tweaked a hundred and forty-four images: a hundred and seven advertisements (Estée Lauder, Gucci, Dior, etc.), thirty-six fashion pictures, and the cover, featuring Drew Barrymore."⁵⁴ Considered the "unwritten author" of the "newest areas of contemporary image-making," figures like Danguin remain uncredited within magazines even while their presence demonstrates the unprecedented level of alteration required to construct fashion images, the degree of involvement in the images by people other than the photographer, and finally, the complexity of the whole infrastructure of fashion.⁵⁵ This kind of photography, by definition, defies convenience.

⁵⁴ Lauren Collins, "Pixel Perfect: Pascal Danguin's Virtual Reality," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2008. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/12/080512fa_fact_collins.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

From both a historical and a contemporary standpoint fashion photography embodies the contrast between the rational, as represented by progress and technological advancement, and the irrational. It has realized this even within its own images. A cross-section of images from *Weird Beauty* includes Michael Thompson's classical portrait of a model, the length of her neck tweaked just to the edge of distortion (Fig. 9) and Miles Aldridge's image of a hyperreal lipsticked mouth, whose crass commercialism reeks of 1980s excess but could only have been produced with the latest digital technology (Fig. 10). In other words, in fashion photographs historical references are achieved through digital means.

In *The Corporate Eye* Elspeth Brown offers another way to frame this idea. How was it possible, she asks, that the rise of the modern advertising industry included both "increased efficiency, rationalization, and systematic selling" as well as a reliance on photography's ability to appeal to irrational impulses and desires.⁵⁶ Here Brown shows the way that early advertising photography enforced rational corporate behaviour while seeking to perpetuate irrational consumer desire. Gilles Lipovetsky points to this same contradiction when he asks how an "age dominated by technology, an age in which the world is subjugated by reason," could also be "the age of fashion in all its unreasonableness?"⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Brown, *The Corporate Eye*, 5.

⁵⁷ Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 4.

While the first modern fashion photographs are attributed to Baron Adolf de Meyer, Brown repositions another figure as central to the development of the genre: Lejaren à Hiller. Hiller's original and elaborate use of photographic illustrations provided a solution to a new "problem" faced by American businesses: how to create a demand for the overflow of newly available and industrially produced goods.⁵⁸ Initially, the development of elaborate photographic illustrations enabled advertisers to "surround mass-produced goods" with "an aura of uniqueness" designed to stimulate consumption. By contrast, photography was sought after for its ability to provide accuracy and therefore to appeal to the rational self. Brown describes how early advertising photography corresponded with advertisers' belief that consumers made purchases based on rationality. Hiller was able to provide advertisements, and the products contained within them, with the aura of mystery and fantasy they suddenly required. This was enabled by his embrace of Pictorialism.⁵⁹

From the mid-1890s up until World War I, Pictorialism represented a central artistic movement typified by the work of such figures as Edward Steichen. Brown, however, argues that its reach extended far beyond art photographers to commercial ones. Pictorialism was marked by an emotional and spiritual intensity and with its soft focus and painterly effects, Pictorialist photographs exemplified the importance of "non material realities" which Hiller later translated for use in advertising. As Brown writes,

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Corporate Eye*, 160.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 163-165.

“aesthetic innovations made in pursuit of the irrational become yoked, through advertising, to the rationalization of consumption.”⁶⁰

Initially, this meant that advertisers chose illustration over photography. As Brown writes, “ while photography offered realism, defined as the faithful reproduction of precise detail, for many years it failed to offer art – and art was becoming increasingly indispensable to advertising.” Art became an essential tool to address the consumer’s “non-rational impulses.”⁶¹ Photography quickly adapted to this preference, and Brown demonstrates that Hiller’s work was instrumental to this adaptation. It was Hiller’s work that showed potential clients (his would later include Corning, Steinway and General Electric) how photography could be useful to them, a usefulness further enabled by his embrace of Pictorialism.

As social mores have relaxed, the same impulse to appeal to the non-rational self has been expressed but in more extreme ways. Photography has become the arena where our private fears and desires can be played out publicly and represented back to us in visual form. Valerie Steele writes, for example, of the indispensability of sexuality to the genre. “Voyeurism and exhibitionism,” she suggests, “are intrinsic to fashion photography, as they are to fashion itself.” After all, says Steele, “sexual disorientation

⁶⁰ Ibid, 190.

⁶¹ Ibid, 167-168.

makes for great theatre.”⁶² In this sense the commercial impulse that drove the aesthetic of early advertising photography has been compounded by the representation of ever more intimate desires. The representation of wanton behaviour reached its apogee in the work of Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin in the 1970s but the drama of the “implied physical threat,” exemplified by the work of Bourdin, still infuses fashion photography today.⁶³

Brown’s text addresses early beliefs around photography’s facticity. Within the context of early advertising, she traces a shift in emphasis away from photography’s truthfulness. As Martha Rosler and others have shown, the belief in photography’s objectivity was a firmly held one, but was an nevertheless an idea only, and one with a historically contingent basis.⁶⁴ Since its inception photography has been dogged by a debate around the very question of its veracity. More recently, digital photography has

⁶² Valerie Steele, “Erotic Allure,” *The Idealizing Vision: The Art of Fashion Photography*, Andrew Wilkes, ed. (New York: Aperture, 1991) 81; to Susan Sontag photography appears to mitigate a fundamental curiosity about things one may never experience. In this sense, fashion photography adheres to her description of photography as both narcissistic and depersonalizing. “It offers,” she writes, “in one easy habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others – allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation.” From *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1973) 167-168.

⁶³ Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, 201.

⁶⁴ Martha Rosler, “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations,” <http://www.artic.edu/~pcarroll/rosler.html>. The concern about digital imagery’s betrayal of reality implies that there was in fact a reality to be lost. Yet the attribution of objectivity, and therefore truth, to photography is something Rosler, John Tagg and Martin Lister argue is a social construction, crucial to the photograph’s evidentiary uses by nineteenth century social institutions. For Lister, all photographic meanings are bound up with the historical manifestations of power. To him it was not “self-evident that a photographic image was more truthful than any other kind of image,” it only became so. This argument is relevant to fashion photography, and digital images more generally, as they become further and further removed from any notion of a real object. The widespread use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) in commercial imagery shows a continuing trend towards images created from digital information with no connection to any kind of traditional photograph. Surely this adds another dimension to the debate around photography’s truth value. From “Extracts from Introduction to the Photographic Image in Digital Culture,” *The Photography Reader*, Liz Wells, Ed. (London: Routledge, 2003) 223.

joined the debate-by calling into question the very meaning of the photographic. No longer tied to film, or to a material object, photography has imploded into “a pliable sequence of digital codes and electronic impulses.”⁶⁵ To many this implosion has signaled the end of traditional definitions of photography.

Image manipulation, moreover, appears to require a new framework for the understanding of images since manipulated photographs demonstrate no attachment to the world making the value system established by analog photography valueless. Tod Papageorge underscores how technology continues to displace photographs from the traditional triumvirate of camera, photograph and object:

Photography as an independent creative medium will be remembered...as a quaint niche-practice of the past. Art, art-process, and artists will have absorbed it utterly: if any photograph can be anything at all (given the ability of digital manipulation to make it so), what logical relation will such a picture bear to those produced within the severe and limited practice of classic, “conventional” photography? What an end, Photography finally Art!⁶⁶

This ability to be “anything at all” seems to belong, in particular, to the fashion photograph. Its mutability has been key to its survival and fashion photographers have internalized this. To make a high-end commercial image the ratio of camera to computer is about 50:50: fifty per cent is captured in camera and fifty per cent is produced through

⁶⁵ Batchen, “Photogenics,” *The Photography Reader*, 234; It should also be said that much of the literature on digitization that I refer to was written in the 1990s as a response, arguably, to the Internet’s early commercial activities. Geoffrey Batchen and others took up the issue by examining its effects not just on the truth value of photography but also on history itself – on the way images are used to record and detail events and on the role digitization and corporate ownership might play in determining which images are made available to the public and therefore which history gets told.

⁶⁶ Tod Papageorge, “Questionnaire/Tod Papageorge,” *Words Without Pictures*, 39.

retouching. As Dangin's work shows, an entire sub-industry of retouchers exists to make this happen.

Yet what Martha Rosler and John Tagg, and also Geoffrey Batchen and Martin Lister, refer to when they write about photography are representations that have a specific use: documentary, portrait, historical, etc. Rosler makes this distinction in "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations" when she states that the debate around digital manipulation centers on images in which retouching is "not just as a form of artistic reflexivity." As she observes, "commerce and entertainment still provide the most widely accepted rationales for manipulation."⁶⁷ Hiller's photographs underscore this point.

Moreover, fashion images, if not extensively manipulated, are often generated from other images. Collins describes the ease with which Dangin produced a new city skyline:

Behind the pair [of models] were the blurry lights of New York in the rain. Or so it looked...A restaurant marquee in the top left corner of the image was borrowed from a picture of Shanghai. The opposite side...looked inert...so he imported a white storefront from Amsterdam."⁶⁸

Thus, all the qualities of uniqueness that are attached to the idea of the original, and are circumscribed by its referent, are dispersed.

When considered in relation to fashion photography, what part of the debate even applies? From the standpoint of facticity: very little of it. Fashion photography never

⁶⁷ Rosler, "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations," <http://www.artic.edu/~pcarroll/rosler.html>.

⁶⁸ Collins, "Pixel Perfect: Pascal Dangin's Virtual Reality," *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/12/080512fa_fact_collins.

professed to accurate representations of reality. But from the standpoint of production, a great deal: the overall shift in the manner of photography's production does encompass fashion photography, not least because fashion photography reiterates photography's various roles as commercial entity and as art.

Still, fashion photographs highlight some of photography's contradictions. Its images are constructed with a computer and they lack any reference to reality. Yet exhibitions often emphasize their materiality, as well as the visceral experience they provide. In "Weird Beauty," for example, Squiers and Aletti originally wanted to provide magazines for visitors to look at although concerns about their fragility prevented this. Moreover fashion photography highlights photography's maneuverability, a tendency with consequences beyond just the elongation of a neck. Rosler points to the historical repercussions of digital manipulation when she asks, "what if anything" would the impulse to move things around "tell us about ourselves?"⁶⁹ In light of fashion photography, what does it mean, for example, to represent something that never existed? What does it mean to alter something that did? Fashion photographs, and exhibitions of fashion photography, reinforce their own superfluity as well as their "adherence to commerce or entertainment" by eliding these very questions.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Rosler, "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations."

⁷⁰ Ibid.



Fig. 9 Michael Thompson, *Ruffled Neck*, 2007



Fig. 10 Miles Aldridge, *Spot The Fake #1*, 2006

Conclusion

This essay has considered two key aspects of fashion photography: its role in the museum and relatedly, its role in commercial advertising. In this thesis I argue that both of these roles are fundamental to an understanding of fashion photography. The museum's elision of its commercial aspects reconfirms both the repressive modernist response to photography as well as the importance of a historical reading of photography that compensates for its contingencies. My solution in this thesis has not been to disregard art historical discourses but to outline the way that they operate in relation to fashion photography. In this sense, Abigail Solomon-Godeau's assertion that a reading of photography must be informed by its relationship to "institutional spaces" becomes ever more essential:

A critical reading of modernist values does not devolve on the "failure" of modernism, any more than a discussion of postmodernist photographic practice implies a criterion of success. Rather, what is at stake in art photography or postmodernism concerns their respective agendas and how as art practices they are positioned – or how they choose to position themselves – in relation to their institutional spaces...the space of exhibition [and] all the discursive formations – canons, art and photography histories, criticism.⁷¹

The presence of fashion photographs in the museum underlines their cultural status and importance. But what does the museum say is important about them? The curators of "Fashioning Fiction" highlighted the photographs' aspiration to the status of art and their transcendence of commerce. In this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate what

⁷¹ Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Art Photography," *Photography at the Dock*, 118.

happens when fashion photography enters the museum and the ways in which its other purposes, meanings and uses, the majority of which are commercial, are occluded. In this thesis, however, I distinguish between the fashion photographs included in the museum and those whose distribution circulation remains within industrial spheres. As Olivier Zahm writes, apart from “a few famous names” fashion photography remains an “anonymous stylistic and visual enterprise.”⁷² These commercial aspects require consideration, for they not only highlight the “interpretive problem” posed by photography but expose the particular operations of modernism. Fashion photography operates within the market as well as the precincts of art.⁷³ Within modernism, it fits into either one or the other but not both. Moreover, fashion photographs seem intent on obscuring all categorizations. They collapse high and low culture into one frame (a lowbrow snapshot aesthetic paired with couture, for example) while maintaining ties to both. They are preoccupied with power, wealth and status and render this visually, or else they reject them outright. This applies to the whole range of fashion images, from catalogue photographs to the pages of *Vogue*.

As I have shown, those fashion photographs declared to be worthy of the museum are never entirely immune to commerce. Not only has the contemporary museum sought to reproduce the consumptive experiences offered by shopping centres, but as Thomas

⁷² Olivier Zahm, “On the Marked Change in Fashion Photography,” *The Fashion Reader*, Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun, eds., (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2007), 265. Zahm is the editor and founder of Purple, a magazine that has published the work of many of the artists and photographers in both “Fashioning Fiction” and “Weird Beauty.”

⁷³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 260.

Crow suggests, the project of modernism and the avant-garde has always relied on mass culture. Indeed, fashion photography's museological presence raises the larger question of why the museum, the bastion of high culture, would involve itself with mass culture at all? To Crow, their involvement with each other exemplifies a long cyclical relationship between modernism and mass culture, a recuperative relationship in which the avant-garde turns to "marginal forms" and "dislocates the apparently fixed terms of that hierarchy into new...configurations."⁷⁴ To Crow this relationship is a fundamentally productive one.

Described in simplistic terms, fashion photography appears to be a mere reflection of culture. Nancy Hall-Duncan, for example, calls it an "index in miniature to culture and society."⁷⁵ Not surprisingly, the same arguments have been applied to fashion. "In a sense," quipped Yves Saint Laurent, "Fashion follows Time and is perpetuated by it. Fashion is a mirror reflecting the soul of an era."⁷⁶ Fashion photography does share fashion's mutability as well as its responsiveness to cultural norms and interests. Yet the analogy of the mirror reflects the same ideology that Positivism yielded with regards to photography, an ideology that has long since been rejected: that the camera does not lie, that the relationship of photography to truth exists at a 1:1 ratio.

Fashion photography's adherence to fantasy in visual form inevitably leads to arguments for its irrelevance and superfluity as well as its irresponsibility. As Hall-

⁷⁴ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 33.

⁷⁵ Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, Preface.

Duncan writes, “it is the twofold stigma of commercialism and materialism that makes fashion one of the few types of photography whose very values are called into question.”⁷⁷ Likewise, claims for the negative repercussions of fashion photographs are often provoked by the impossible standards of beauty it upholds as well as its objectification of women (women and beauty being two constants of the genre). As Rhonda Garelick wrote recently in *The New York Times*, fashion is nothing if not elitist, in all senses of the word. Describing designer John Galliano’s now infamous tirade against a stranger in a bar Garelick writes, “like a fascist demagogue of yore, he was declaring that she did not belong to the gilded group who wear the right boots, and from this Mr. Galliano slid effortlessly to a condemnation of her very flesh, and a wish for her death.”⁷⁸

Meanwhile, any discussion of fashion photography’s importance needs to be tempered with a degree of irony. While fashion photography contends with significant ideas, such as fantasies, fears and desires, its domain is nevertheless the disposable pages of fashion magazines. In this sense, Adam Gopnik’s line of questioning in “Sweet Revolution” appears entirely relevant to the genre. In the essay Gopnik wonders why dessert, with its lexicon of elaborate concoctions, has become an essential part of our meals:

Dessert is aspirational, it’s the one part of the meal you don’t have to eat. It’s the purest part of the meal: the art part. But it’s also the greediest part, the eat-it-in-a-closet part. We don’t have to have it, and we do...the real

⁷⁷ Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, 9.

⁷⁸ Rhonda Garelick, “High Fascism,” *The New York Times*, (March 8, 2011) A21, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/opinion/07Garelick.html>.

question is this...how did this thing, this spice, sugar, become a staple?
How did a whole way of cooking creep up from sweetness?⁷⁹

Like dessert, fashion photography represents the most excessive and inessential part of the daily diet of images in industrialized countries. Yet, it is, as Gopnik suggests of dessert, a staple fundamental, in this case, of global consumerism. Fashion photography is everywhere, limited not just to museum walls but found anywhere commercial activity might be and affirmed, moreover, by the suggestion of status that clings to it. For Caroline Evans, a dress and a photograph no longer exist in one single form or can even be understood as such – they are now commodity forms with the capacity to be read in myriad ways. As commodity forms they are able to “insert” themselves “into a wider network of signs, operating simultaneously in many registers...as image, as cultural capital, as consumer goods, as fetish, art exhibition...show invitation, or collectible magazine.”⁸⁰ The fashion photograph’s ubiquity and recurring themes of sex, violence and trauma make it both inescapable and ripe for analysis.

And yet fashion photography poses certain problems: first, despite its ubiquity it remains a generally under theorized field and second, it poses problems for historical readings of photography, and therefore for its inclusion in the museum. These two issues appear to go hand in hand. Nicola White and Ian Griffiths describe this contradiction in their writing on fashion:

⁷⁹ Adam Gopnik, “Notes of a Gastronome: Sweet Revolution, The Power of the Pastry Chef,” *The New Yorker* (January 3, 2011) 51.

⁸⁰ Caroline Evans, “Yesterday’s Emblems and Tomorrow’s Commodities: The Return of the Repressed in Fashion Imagery Today,” *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, Bruzzi, Stella and Pamela Church Gibson, eds. (London & New York: Routledge, 2001) 96.

The contemporary appetite for fashion is insatiable, and yet it seems that the practical realities of the fashion business are little known to very few other than those who work within it, including it appears to the many authors of academic discourses on the subject...that a subject's theory should be thus divorced from its practice is unusual.⁸¹

Thus while there has been extensive writing on photography and on fashion, the literature on fashion photography is comparatively small. Multiple books have been written on meaning in fashion, far fewer on meaning in fashion photography. Likewise, the first designated fashion photography program was just announced in the last year.⁸² This has repercussions specific to this thesis for museological approaches to contemporary fashion photography appear to be under theorized as well. Solomon-Godeau and Halley point this out in "Dressing Down." To them "Fashioning Fiction" grappled with subject matter that had not only already been "demonstrated" but was also "largely unanalyzed."⁸³

The myriad images realized by the fashion industry grapple with the same triumvirate: a model, a dress, and a room. I hesitate to call this triumvirate restrictive, for in spite of it fashion photography demonstrates an interminable drive for reinvention. This drive gets realized more often than not in specific forms, and fashion photography's embrace of technology has enabled it to embrace ever more distinctly idealized ones.

⁸¹ Nicola White and Ian Griffiths, "Introduction: The Fashion Business: Theory, Practice, Image," *The Fashion Business: Theory, Practice, Image*, White, Nicola and Ian Griffiths, eds, (Oxford: Berg, 2000) 2.

⁸² As of Fall 2011 a Master of Professional Studies (MPS) in Fashion Photography will be offered at the School of Visual Arts at New York University. The program's "leading figures from the fashion industry" will include "renowned retoucher Pascal Danguin; photographers Nick Knight, Solve Sundsbo and Tim Walker...Vince Aletti of *The New Yorker*; Carol Squiers of the International Center of Photography and Eva Respini of The Museum of Modern Art, New York" among others. ---. "SVA Enlists Pascal Danguin, Nick Knight, Ryan McGinley and More for a Pioneering New Program." <http://www.schoolofvisualarts.edu/news/index.jsp?sid0=228>.

⁸³ Solomon-Godeau and Halley, "Modern Style: Dressing Down," *Artforum*, 194.

These have a historical precedent and remain rooted in fashion's embrace of the stylistic qualities associated with emotion and subjectivity.

In turn, these images embody photography's ability to act on the viewer. Logic would dictate that there must be something incredibly persuasive about the images fashion photographers produce – they work. For one, fashion photography seems to realize the long-held conception of the act of photographing as an act of desire. As Mark Wyse suggests, “the photographic act is an act like no other, and it carries the weight of desire with it. The photographer falls for his subject, his desire, his view.”⁸⁴ In fashion photography this has been realized in a very particular way. The drive to produce a beautiful image, and to elicit desire, is always within its purview.

That being said, can fashion photography not also be regarded, as Geoffrey Batchen says about photography, as lying to “reveal a greater truth?”⁸⁵ This thesis is in fact an attempt to tease out the circularity of argument made by the fashion image. That, for instance, it visualizes cultural interests and personal concerns at the same time as it distorts them and that it belongs to art history but problematizes traditional art historical readings.

Finally, what can one say of fashion photography's historical significance beyond the museum? If the identity of a photograph is bound to its social system, what can be

⁸⁴ Mark Wyse, “Too Drunk To Fuck (On the Anxiety of Photography),” *Words Without Pictures*, 92.

⁸⁵ Batchen, “Camera Lucida: Another Little History of Photography,” *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, 261.

said of the system bound to fashion photographs?⁸⁶ To Gilles Lipovetsky, fashion can be understood as a “mirror that allows us to see what constitutes our most remarkable historical destiny: the negation of the age-old power of the traditional past, the frenzied modern passion for novelty, the celebration of the social present.”⁸⁷ This negation of the past appears to be borne not only of a “frenzied passion” for the new but also of an ensuing desire to resist the past, to refuse to bear it out. Unlike many other forms of photography, fashion photography has no interest in a verifiable record of event or incident – historical references, and by proxy, history, are open territories to be invaded and pillaged at will. The extensive manipulation of fashion photographs reinforces this and underlines their usefulness to commerce.

The implication is that fashion photography looks back only in so far as it can take what it needs from the past, thus revealing itself as the predatory commercial activity that it is. In this way, it expresses the same inclinations as any other form of commerce, all of which demonstrate an incessant forward drive. As John Berger writes, “the capitalist need for ceaseless economic expansion requires the subjective fear that the past, if one does not progress fast enough, may claim its own and avenge itself; it requires that its workers

⁸⁶ In *The Burden of Representation* John Tagg writes, “What alone unites the diversity of sites in which photography operates is the social formation itself...photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence.” From “A Democracy of the Image: Photographic Portraiture and Commodity Production,” *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1993) 63.

⁸⁷ Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 4.

look back with fear on their own past.”⁸⁸ This provides one explanation for what may be, at heart, the impulse behind fashion photography’s most negative aspects.⁸⁹

After all, fashion photography makes its connection to the market explicit, not just as a promoter of luxury goods or as prints bought and sold, but to the selling of a dream. Susan Buck-Morss writes about this in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, in which she outlines the fall of the Soviet Union and the catastrophic effects of the global embrace of mass utopia and its correlate, mass consumption. Fashion photography rose up in the context of the dream of modernity, the ‘dreamworld’ of Buck-Morss’s title, a world that equates happiness with material wealth.⁹⁰ It seems worth asking what part fashion photography has played in this equation, and what it can be held responsible for. Such a question also returns us to Solomon-Godeau and Halley’s insistence on circumscribing the impact of photographs of fashion. Fashion photography looks the way it does because the construction of desire is only not effective but essential to the functions of global capitalism. In this sense, fashion photographs are not only incitements but symbols of discontent and souvenirs of our excess.

⁸⁸ John Berger, “Manhattan,” *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger*, (New York: Vintage, 1993) 65.

⁸⁹ Martha Rosler describes this fixation on the present when she writes: “If a consumer culture centers on the manipulation of desire, then controlling time and space is a small matter, for desire knows only the present – so we need only control the fantasies of the moment.” *Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations*,” <http://www.artic.edu/~pcarroll/rosler.html>.

⁹⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, “Dreamworlds of Mass Culture.” *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) ix-x.

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APPENDIX A:

Vince Aletti. Interview by author. New York City, NY, February 21, 2011.

Q: I wondered if you could talk about the reasons for “Weird Beauty” and the impetus more generally for the “Year in Fashion?”

A: “Weird Beauty” was a late addition to the schedule. First of all, the “Year of Fashion” was something that Brian Wallis at ICP conceived of a way to pull together a number of different shows but the anchor for the year was clearly the Avedon show. Once that show was secured the “Year of Fashion” was built around it. We hadn’t thought of doing a contemporary show but Brian was the one who urged us to take that on. Carol [Squiers] and I were both a little wary of how to make it work but once we hit on the idea of using tear sheets it made the whole thing a lot easier and more pleasurable.

I was involved with a show called “Face of Fashion” in London at the National Portrait Gallery. I had been asked to do the catalogue essay for that show. The idea was fashion photographers working in portraiture, so it was an interesting range of people. When Susan Bright was organizing it I was very aware of the process. I kept saying where’s Bruce Weber? Where’s Mario Testino?

Q: And why weren’t they included?

A: For various reasons they didn’t want to be in a group show. Carol had had similar experiences with trying to organize contemporary shows. A lot of photographers do not want to be in group shows, they wanted to have their own showcase.

Q: Fashion photographers in particular?

A: Irving Penn was very famous for not wanting to be in group shows and Avedon too. There’s almost a tradition in fashion of this kind of difficulty. When we hit on the idea of doing tear sheets instead of doing individual prints it made it so much easier. We didn’t have to think about permission, we didn’t have to think about asking people whether they wanted to be in the show or not. We just could totally do it on our own and make our own decisions based strictly on the material available.

Both Carol and I also felt that using tear sheets was the most representative way to show the work. Through the course of organizing the show I kept saying that fashion photography, for the most part, doesn’t exist as single images, it exists as a series of images in a story. And some of those images can be taken out and live on their own but most of them work best when you see them as a story. We wanted to show how the magazine works and to show the work in context. That was really crucial.

Q: I was curious about the title itself, where did that come from, what was it meant to suggest, was it an obvious thing that came out of the work?

A: It came at the end. It's a title Carol had used previously at the Palladium in the 1980s.

Q: At the nightclub?

A: At the nightclub on 14th Street. She curated several photography shows at that space. The people behind it were very conscious of making art part of the experience. There was a huge Keith Haring backdrop on the dance floor, there was a very large Francesco Clemente mural on one wall, and I think there was a Basquiat mural on another one of the walls.

Q: Was this in the 1980s as well?

A: Yes it was post-Studio 54. It was a smart club in terms of the design, they had a long corridor that became an occasional exhibition space. "Weird Beauty" was the title that Carol had used for one of her shows and it just applied to this one too. We did end up with a very strange group of images. We also wanted to find a title that would say something about the work but also be suggestive rather than totally descriptive.

Q: Were there any precedents for the show? Either other exhibitions of fashion photography or ones that included tear sheets?

A: No.

Q: And do you know of any others that have used tear sheets?

A: One of the great things about ICP is that they're very conscious of photography in context and they've done a lot of shows relating to the magazine and the book. They've done lots of tear sheet related shows but never with fashion. When Carol was a curator at PS1 she did shows that worked with primary material and with tear sheets, but I don't think she ever did a show that had a whole sequence like the ones that we used in "Weird Beauty." In that show we tried to show as many images as possible from one story.

Q: Were there any disadvantages to showing the work in that way?

A: From my point of view no. There was the question of how to put them on the wall and how to mount them. The material is fragile. I would have just stuck them up on the wall with push pins but that just wouldn't have worked in the long run. In the museum people

are tempted to touch the walls and mounting them on heavy board gave them some substance.

Q: And some permanence?

A: It helped. The other question was how to get it up on the wall and how much work would fit in the show. We had tons of material.

Q: There were many photographers, at least forty.

A: Yes, there were a lot of photographers that we used several times. We fit a tremendous amount of work in the end but we had to make space for the individual framed elements. So it was a jigsaw puzzle in a way.

Presenting the work in that way also enabled us to be really current. I don't think we went back any further than two years. I would have loved to have one section of the wall that changed every month but that just would have been too crazy.

I was also conscious of the fact that the work was new for most people and for most museum-goers. Unless they were looking at the same fashion magazines that we were looking at, many of which were from Europe and not on everybody's coffee table, they wouldn't have seen these pictures. And even if they did come across them in *Vogue* they might not have seen them in quite the same way. We were aware that we were presenting material that hadn't been in a museum at all and that was really valuable and interesting for us.

Q: How did you choose the photographers?

A: We chose the pictures. If we had discovered that we didn't have any Steven Klein or Steven Meisel we would have included them too. But really we chose the pictures. This meant that we left out photographers that were really strong but that didn't work for one reason or another. A lot of it was determined by how the pictures worked together. Some things we liked just fell out because they didn't work with other things.

Q: Was there too much overlap?

A: Yes, too many similarities or they seemed incompatible. In the end I think we were surprised by some of the photographers who were very well represented even though we had no intention of playing up one photographer or another. One of things we were very conscious of was wanting to privilege fashion photographers.

Q: As opposed to artists that moonlight as fashion photographers?

A: Collier Schorr, who I love, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, we really wanted to have them as part of the mix. But we didn't want to overload it with people who were just using fashion occasionally. We wanted to really show people who work strictly in fashion. That became the source of several decisions in terms of balance.

Q: Why was that important? Because they don't get seen in that context?

A: Because they don't get into museums and because we know a lot of the work by Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman. The last time there was a big fashion show in a museum was "Fashioning Fiction" at MoMA, and that was primarily MoMA-certified photographers who were working in fashion with a few fashion photographers to balance it out. We were really conscious of moving in the other direction and showing fashion photographers.

Q: Were you trying to pinpoint a cultural moment? You said you wanted to show that had been produced within the last two years. Was the idea to show a cross-section of work that was recent, a snapshot of what was happening in the fashion world?

A: Yes and no. Again, the primary thing was the work itself. It was the stories that ended up interesting us and exciting us that kept coming to the fore. So we weren't trying to make a particular statement at the beginning and we weren't trying to pinpoint a moment in fashion. We were really trying to show what strong work there was out there. We didn't have a concept in mind going in. We really let the material drive the shape of the show.

That said we also wanted it to be super current. Both of us went into this thinking that this wasn't a particularly exciting moment for fashion photography but in the end we found so much good work. I had already written about this: the feeling that everyone was coasting, that everyone had done their best work. But we found really good material in spite of that first impression of where we were in fashion. I don't think either of us felt that we were showing lesser work. And to return to my original point, both of us were very conscious of showcasing material that most people going to the ICP would had never seen.

Q: How was the response to the show?

A: Roberta Smith's *New York Times* review was a rave. It was so enthusiastic and so smart and very thoughtful about fashion photography. It was really amazing to us that she didn't take a superficial attitude toward it. She was really into the material and really understood it and explained it beautifully to people. This came out within the first two weeks of the show and we got a number of other positive reviews.

The public response was also beyond what we could have expected. It was one of the most popular shows at ICP in years and it constantly built an audience the longer it

was up. That was exciting to us as we had no idea whether this would go over with anybody outside of a small group of people. ICP is also really good about bringing in an education component so they had lots of students there but clearly word of mouth was really positive. Every time I went it was mobbed. It's the kind of show that once people get into there's so much to look at and so much detail. It's not something you just sort of walk through, it's something you can really spend some time with.

Q: Were you and the ICP surprised?

A: Yes. Well ICP was very uneasy about the show about the whole "Year of Fashion" once it was underway. The whole downturn in the market happened the previous September. It was a very bad economic time. They were very nervous about mounting a big fashion show in January when everyone was still uneasy about the economy. They were worried that it was frivolous, that people would see it as insulting to the serious mood of the time. And in fact there was nothing said about that at all. I think it was a revelation to a lot of people, it was lively, interesting, sexy material. And it was contextualized by the three shows at ICP. The Steichen downstairs provided a ballast of history and the beginning of fashion photography, and then my show, "This Is Not a Fashion Photograph," dealt with what fashion photography draws from as far as images in the culture. It was a well-balanced group of shows. But "Weird Beauty" was the one that I think got most of the buzz going.

Q: Why do you think that was?

A: Because it was new, because it was lively, and because it was contemporary. If people had seen the material before they likely hadn't spent much time with it. Even women who look at fashion magazines don't think much about the work as photography. It was a way of making people stop and look at material that they might see all the time and point out that these are great photographers. I go to to shows every week.

There were many times that I would spend a Saturday in Chelsea and feel like it wasn't a very exciting day and then I'd come back and spend time with a fashion magazine that was more lively and intelligent than a lot of the work I had seen in the galleries. So it was partly that impulse: that people should look at this work and see it more seriously.

Q: From your perspective, what might be the appeal of shows like this and what do you see as important ideas, themes, etc. in the work itself? How are they important from a cultural perspective?

A: I don't know whether I can claim that it is. From my point of view, if it is great photography then it should be seen and not ghettoized. For so much fashion photography it takes people fifty years to appreciate great work. Cecil Beaton, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton are all examples of this. It has to be a long time ago before they see it as art. That doesn't make sense. It's art right now and it's happening in the pages of your magazine.

For me that's why it's important to have it out there, to see it in this larger context. I don't think that museums or collectors appreciate the work that's being made right now. I don't care if it doesn't have any heavy intellectual content as long as it's lively and smart. I think Steven Meisel is one of the greatest contemporary photographers, but hardly anybody sees him in that way. They see him as a fashion photographer and that's it. I think that's a mistake.

Q: You don't think of the references they draw on?

A: I do. It is fascinating to me that somebody's drawing on Caravaggio or Tamara de Lempincka. When you see these interesting references that is part of the appreciation of the work. But there is such a range of things in fashion photographs that you could not really make a broad statement about them.

Q: You mean in terms of the genre itself?

A: Yes. There's always a lot of different contradictory things going on and I resist the idea of making a broad statement about what it all means. "Weird Beauty" does capture a range but there were many different styles from Bruce Weber to Michael Thompson. To make an overall statement about all of them is almost impossible.

Q: And the show really didn't try to do that either.

A: Right, I was constantly saying look, look at magazines, it is all out there, it is not like you have to go to an obscure museum to find it.

Q: But you did mention the word ghettoized. Do you think that fashion photography has been ghettoized or under theorized?

A: Probably not under theorized. From my point of view everything is over theorized. But it has been ghettoized in a lot of ways. The fact that "Fashioning Fiction" was the first ever show that MoMA did on fashion was unbelievable to me especially considering that Steichen was one of their first curators. How could that happen? Fashion photography has been interesting all along. They've done all kinds of vernacular shows, the picture press,

and all kinds of snapshot shows. Fashion gets thrown to the side because it's seen as elitist, commercial and frivolous. It's not taken very seriously and with obvious exceptions it's not collected.

A: What do you like about it fashion photography?

Q: That's a hard question to answer.

A: I know initially you wrote about music.

Q: It is a hard question for me to answer because I could care less about the clothes. I'm not really interested in fashion. I'm really interested in photography, and especially applied photography and commercial photography. I love editorial work. And fashion is one of those areas that is particularly lively. So many interesting people have come out of it and so many interesting people have made it one of their key areas.

Avedon is probably the main reason why I got interested in fashion. The range of his work and the fact that he was doing portraits at the same time that he was doing fashion. And the idea that fashion photography can be so reflective of this moment, of the way we live and the way we look. In a lot of ways I think it is important that fashion is ephemeral. It is supposed to reflect the moment. That was another one of the ideas behind "Weird Beauty," we didn't intend to make a historical show.

Q: Fashion does this very collaborate aspect to it, it's a very collaborative undertaking. Do you think that's important when looking at the work?

A: No. When you look at old fashion magazines none of that was in there, the photographer got a credit and that was it. It's only recently that you get the sense of the production and how collaborative it is and how much the photographer is like a director. But I still prefer to think of the photographer as the auteur, as the person who decides what that image looks like. For photographers like [Steven] Meisel and Steven Klein the hair and makeup is crucial to the way those pictures look in the end but it is still their picture.

Q: Was the relationship between fashion and the Internet, and the way that the Internet has changed the accessibility of fashion images, a consideration when putting this show together?

A: Not a big one. We had one or two monitors of Internet material but we had an intern researching that for us and we really didn't find very much that was exciting. There was

tons of runway material but very little that seemed like the equivalent of fashion photography online, except for Nick Knight's SHOWstudio.

I'm kind of old fashioned in that way. I like to flip the page and I like the quality of the page. I think one of the things that came up for both of us was that the quality of the image on the page was sometimes even more interesting than the image in the frame. Some of the printing is gorgeous, especially in European magazines. They just look really, really rich.

It was an unexpected pleasure for us to be able to mount these pictures and have them really have presence on the wall. I still feel for me that it's that experience of flipping through a magazine that's much more interesting than seeing exactly those same pictures online. We did try to take that into account but were disappointed with what we came up with.

Q: Everyone talks about how magazines are dying but it may be one area where print still has some kind of primacy, with fashion magazines in particular, and where the Internet hasn't become a valid substitute.

A: I think it has become a great footnote. I love *The Sartorialist*. That material looks great when it appears in the magazine but it does belong online in an interesting way. If I'm not seeing the online stuff I don't feel like I'm missing something. Whereas if I don't see the latest magazine I can't go on to the next day.

Q: Will the ICP do more fashion exhibitions?

A: I hope so. I am working on a *Harper's Bazaar* show for them in September but it is very contemporary. It is *Harper's Bazaar's* last ten years.

Q: Has it been an interesting show to work on?

A: It's just getting underway. I'm pretty familiar with the material and I think there is a lot to draw upon. I would also love to revisit "Weird Beauty" ten years down the line and see who is still working and who is interesting. There has to be a Steven Meisel show, we have been talking about that for a long time. I would love to do it.

APPENDIX B:

Carol Squiers. Interview by author. New York City, NY, February 22, 2011.

Q: What were the overall reasons for the “Weird Beauty” exhibition?

A: I think there were a lot of different things that came together. We have a longstanding interest in fashion photography. ICP first started showing fashion photography within a few years after it opened. William [Bill] Ewing was here as a curator and did several fashion photography shows, Horst and Hoyningen-Huehne and a Munkacsy show.

When our director Buzz Hartshorn was a curator he and Merry Foresta, who was at the Smithsonian at the time, did a Man Ray fashion show too. Bill was the one who set the precedent. God only knows what Cornell Capa thought of it--he founded ICP as a kind of Kunsthalle to display and protect photojournalism. I can't speak for Cornell because I never talked to him about it.

Q: Did the ICP's interest in fashion precede that of the MoMA's?

A: You would have to talk to MoMA about their position relative to fashion photography but my impression of the other museums in New York doing photography is that they are really focused on photography that is made by artists as art rather than photography that is made for some other purpose.

Q: Vince Aletti mentioned that there was no intention originally to do a show of contemporary work and that Avedon was the focus.

A: What happened was that Bill [Ewing] came to ICP and said I'm doing shows on Edward Steichen and are you interested in taking either one of them? The first thing was that we committed to taking the Steichen fashion show. I started working on that show. I had done a lot of research on fashion in the early 1980s and as I went through the checklist I started think of photographs that I had seen by Steichen that I was not seeing on Bill's checklist. I was just supposed to be an organizing curator but I became a curator on the show because I started tossing some photos into the mix.

Then the idea for doing more than one fashion show at one time came up. I am actually not sure what the genesis was for that, I think our chief curator, Brian Wallis, suggested Avedon. I had written about Avedon and I knew his work and we went and talked to the Avedon foundation. By this time we realized I could not do this entire year of fashion photography shows by myself it would have been too much. So Vince [Aletti] was brought on board. And then the idea came up, but I don't know whose idea it was, to do contemporary fashion as a way to contextualize the Steichen show.

Vince has a fabulous collection of fashion magazines so we figured we could research in those magazines to come up with something. It's funny because one of the

first times Vince and I talked about this he said well, “The great days of contemporary fashion photography are really over, it was really ten years ago” and I said well that may be true for some kind of breakthrough fashion photography but I think to do something on fashion photography now. My experience with photographers is that you can always find something good.

Q: With fashion photographers?

A: With any photographers.

Q: Meaning there is good work out there no matter what?

A: Yes. That is just from years of working at a photography magazine. I was an editor at *American Photo* and whatever the editorial idea was we could always find something good to back it up. So I started working on Avedon, then we had in place those three things: Steichen, “Weird Beauty,” which didn’t have a name to begin with, and Avedon.

Q: That makes perfect sense.

A: The institution had a trustee who was extremely interested in fashion photography and we were very excited to be able to continue ICP’s engagement with fashion photography.

Q: Where has your interest in fashion photography come from?

A: I got an assignment from a magazine, a short-lived magazine called *Camera Arts*. They asked me if I wanted to do something on fashion photography and I said I would do something on fashion photography in the 1930s. Condé Nast let me come every day and sit in their library which I did for eight months. This was when I was a freelancer and could do things like that. I was completely blown away, it was page after page of amazing stuff, this electric thing and I ended up writing a couple of articles about it.

In 1980 I got a job as a curator, a photography curator at PS1. At the time PS1 was an alternative space so being a photography curator there you had to invent what that meant. I did a couple of more conventional shows and then I realized I didn’t have to do that. The director of PS1 at the time, Alanna Heiss, was fine with whatever we wanted to do. I had been cutting pictures out of magazines for a while.

Q: For your own interest?

A: Yes, I was kind of obsessed with the way pictures looked in print. I started doing shows of the things that I had cut out instead of using original prints. I did a show about *The New York Times* called “In and Out of Power” which was about what the photographs

were like that were printed directly under the masthead for three months straight. I cut out every picture.

Q: What did they generally show under the masthead?

A: Men doing things with other men.

Q: That was the recurring theme?

A: Yes. Once I realized that I was going to have a show that was all men talking to each other and shaking hands or shooting each other I made a little section that was called “Women and Other Things.” In order to find pictures of women I had to go to the women’s section in the newspaper and I would find things like Nancy Reagan sitting with a dog in her lap. The women were in domesticated, trivialized roles and the men were all ruling the world.

Q: Not much has changed.

A: Although men are now leading amazing revolutions in the Middle East. I also did a couple things with fashion and tear sheets when I was at PS1. That was enabled by a friend of mine named Susan Shaw, a photographer who had a collection of *French Vogue*’s from the 1970s that she let me cut up. That was also when I first realized the fabulous reproduction quality of European magazines versus American magazines. That show was called “Women of Distinction.” It was all fashion photography both from *French Vogue* and from US magazines. I used American *Vogue* too because I wanted Avedon and Penn.

Q: So you’ve always been aware of fashion photography and involved with it?

A: When I became an editor first at *American Photographer* and then *American Photo* we did a lot of fashion.

Q: Did the magazine have a particular mandate?

A: The magazine was more interested in applied photography than it was in art photography although I would muscle art in there as much as I could. Once the photography market took off the magazine got more interested in collecting and in art photography because the prices were going up.

Q: Were there any precedents for “Weird Beauty” that you felt were important or were there other shows within the last decade that were in any way influential?

A: My joke to myself about “Weird Beauty” is that after thirty years I came back to cutting pictures out of magazines and sticking them on boards on the wall like I did at PS. Given Vince’s interest in magazines we agreed right away that we would do tear sheets. It would have been impossible to go out and get original prints from all these fashion photographers-- they do not make prints. Really the precedent was that I had a predilection for working that way anyway and we had a great resource. We did not cut up Vince’s magazine collection, we got magazines from the publishers.

“Weird Beauty” was a title I had used for a show at the old Palladium, I did a couple of shows there. That show was a mixture of applied photography and art photography that was purposefully crazy juxtapositions of work. I remember that there was a Warhol print with pigs in it and that was sandwiched between a very glamorous fashion photograph and a beautiful photograph of a child. It was a club, you could be playful, you didn’t have to have a big idea.

Q: Speaking of which I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the appeal and importance of a show like “Weird Beauty?”

A: It was interesting to me as a curator because I realized how visually inventive fashion photographers could be. They had a certain freedom with the kinds of narratives they could structure within their stories, and the amount of space that they were given in European magazines, and with the effects they could get using the computer. It gave them a way to intervene in the image that was beyond painterly. People sometimes compare it to painting but in fact you can do things with the computer that you can’t with paint. You can employ the malleability of paint but also the great representational quality of film. We could also show people something that they had not seen before because these magazines are extremely expensive and they have very small circulations and most people don’t look at them. A general audience at this institution would never have seen any of these images. And it is very rare that you can show people something that they have never seen before.

Q: Do you find that?

A: When I say seen before I mean that the pictures had not been reproduced at some point somewhere. The pictures are usually pictures that are reproduced once in this one place. And if you missed the issue of *10* or *V* you didn’t see it.

Q: Is that what people responded to? The fact that it was brand new for them?

A: It was brand new for them but it was visually really fascinating. It was fascinating in terms of the narrative tropes that the photographers were pursuing and it was fascinating in terms of how a fashion photograph could be interpreted in this day and age. What could a fashion photograph be that might have no clothes in it? Or where you cannot see the

clothes or the product very well?

Q: Is it about imagination for it's own sake?

A: I don't think that it's imagination just for it's own sake. I think that like every other photographer they are reflecting on what's going on around them. It was interesting to see the way they worked narratives about violence and dysfunctional relationships and about the insanities of celebrity. They were doing it from their point of view and in a particular way. If you think about it the parameters of fashion photography are very narrow--it's basically a woman in a dress. These photographers have to come up with something that's engaging month in and month out. It makes sense to me that they would cast as wide a net as possible in terms of the subjects and visual strategies they felt they could use. There was just a level of invention in that work that is not in photography in the art world at this point.

Q: Is it a level of freedom?

A: It is, but that's a tricky word. It's a level of permission that people do not have in the art world. And since that's mainly the world that I live in I felt that this was valuable to see images that were tremendously energetic and that really pushed the image to the edge of legibility. This is something that is going on in the art world but in a different way.

Q: How is it different?

A: People in the art world do not have the object as the product and they do not have a product they have to show although they are addressing an audience just like magazine photographers.

Q: Do you think the work is trivialized at all because it is connected to fashion? By this I mean in terms of how it is received or viewed.

A: It's a different animal. I'm not going to make a case for it being Paul Strand's early abstract images. It's not groundbreaking in the way we think of things being groundbreaking in the art world although now that pastiche and appropriation are such an overriding language within art production we are not focused on that unique vision anymore. It is fashion photography, it does not claim to be more than that.

Q: I wondered if you had any thoughts on the museum's ability to address technological changes. Is it important for the museum to address, reflect, or approximate these things in any way? This could mean both for the way the photographs are made and the way they are consumed.

A: Could you clarify that?

Q: There are two separate questions. One is how it is made, the other is how it is consumed. My first question is what can the museum offer that a magazine cannot? If these images are consumed in particular ways, is it the museum's role to respond to that? What does it mean to put them in a museum when they are so disposable? I was interested to know if any of these things came up.

A: All of these things are always coming up, it is an ongoing debate within photography. My feeling about showing things in their original context is that there is a gigantic world of difference. We were interested in the sensual experience that you have when you look at a magazine, when you turn a page and you are confronted with an image for the first time. This is why we did multiple pages from stories. But there is a materiality to the magazine, to the experience of going through the magazine, which Vince and I both feel is important. While we could not let people flip through magazines because they would have been destroyed this was as close as we could come to giving them that experience.

Really the question is one of materiality. As Haidy Geismar, a visual anthropologist, recently pointed out digital images have materiality too, it's just a different kind of materiality than the printed page. Look at the great lengths that the Europeans and the people who do these high-end magazines go to to get a reproduction quality that is so fine and lush. It's like having an experience, it's not like looking at a thing on your computer screen. The screen basically levels everything down to the same quality. This is the exact opposite, this kind of printing permits each photographer to have his or her own vision of what that image should feel like printed on a page.

Q: You mentioned that this idea comes up all the time. Let's say most images are now consumed or seen as jpegs, does that affect the way you consider displaying images in a place like the ICP?

A: We are grappling with what new technology should be within a museum, it really is an ongoing debate. Most images may be consumed online but most images online are not that great. I come out of an editorial and curatorial tradition in which people pick images and they make decision about images. That is one of the things we are involved in in a museum, we are selecting images for people to look at for one reason or another.

Q: And that will not change.

A: That will not change. We will add more technology, we will do more technologically driven things as soon as things come along that are fabulous and there are a lot of things that are not fabulous.

Q: Do you see that elsewhere as well? The experience of looking at a magazine is not that easy translate.

A: The experience of looking at anything, the experience of looking at photojournalism, the experience of looking at art. The experience of looking at the front cover of *The New York Times* the day after the success of the Egyptian revolution. There was a picture that showed the young people in Cairo sweeping up the square. That was so moving to me and there was something about the immediacy of that on the front page of the *Times*. They had a revolution and instead of looting and burning things down they cleaned up. There is a level of civilization involved in that that was extraordinary to me.

I wanted have a copy of the picture that I could hang up but I did not want to cut up that copy of *The New York Times* so I went online and I found the picture and I printed it out but losing that context of the *Times* made it much less powerful.

Q: As an image on its own? Why do you think that was?

A: We have been schooled to look at news images within news stories within newspapers and now that newspapers are moving to the Internet they are really more worried about how to get their advertising base moved to the Internet than they are about the kind of care that goes into traditional picture display in traditional newspapers. It is not translating as an experience. All the same information may be there and the Internet gives you the opportunity to have more pictures but it's not the same experience for the viewer to see it.

Q: My last question was about museums using media, and in particular social media, in new ways. How is that being dealt with?

A: We are definitely going to see more technology in the galleries. Someone here is working on cell phone tours, all of that will hopefully enrich that experience for the viewer. You have to walk a fine line between making everything about technology and preserving the direct experience of art. That again is an ongoing debate: how much is there going to be, what is it going to be. As a museum it is ever more important to us to preserve and exhibit objects as more and more things go online. Why would people who sit at home for hours online come in to the museum to just go online again?

Q: To see a screen.

A: At this point in time it seems like all people want to see is screens but that has proved not to be true when you give people compelling things to look at. It is a balancing act. It is the job of the museum to preserve things that have already happened as well as to look

to the future. Who knew that photographic paper would become virtually obsolete in my lifetime? It's shocking but it is what is happening and we just have to figure out how to preserve what we can so that people in future will have some idea of what it was like.