

THE PICKET LINE CLOTHING

Up to you

“The robe does not make the monk” (character Faux Semblant in the Roman de la Rose, written between 1237 and 1280)

“Only a fool does not judge by appearance” (Oscar Wilde)

Designing fashion for the Alytus Art Strike

The idea originates from a 2006 article by fashion researcher and curator Deirdre Clemente, “Striking Ensembles: The Importance of Clothing on the Picket Line” (*Labor Studies Journal*). In her article, Clemente compares the clothing worn by female workers during two strike movements in the US, the 1909 shirtwaist strike in New York City and the late 1920s-early 1930s wave of strikes in the Southern textile mills.

Bright hues ensembles, hats adorned with feathers and faux flowers, jewellery, lace blouses, fur accessories, and French heels: Clemente describes the clothing of the shirtwaist strikers as an overdone “ladyhood” style made necessary by both the implicit “ban” on women protesting in the public space and the eagerness of the strikers (mostly immigrants) to display their knowledge of American culture. The strikers of the 1920s-1930s adopt a completely different style. They’re dressed in red, white, and blue regalia. They mix overall (typical men’s working wear) and men’s cap with feminine garments like hair barrettes, necklaces, blouses, silk stockings, and fire-engine red lipstick. Clemente explains these dramatic changes by on the one hand the rise of consumer culture and the transformation of fashion design into cultural phenomenon; on the other hand the strikers’ attempt to re-define femininity. These two styles might be in “stark contrast”, Clemente comments, yet “each group had created a ‘hybridized’ style that served as a visual representation of their cultural status as both women and workers.”

Now, that’s a fascinating idea. Which garments would we, as cultural producers and art strikers, choose to wear if we were to form a picket line? The question immediately brings forward a basic issue. For



Shirtwaist strikers, 1909



Strikers at the gate of a textile mill, 1934



Else von Freytag-von Loringhoven

centuries, people have displayed distinctive garments associated with their calling. So, is there anything in the way we (artists, curators, art critics, etc.) dress today that indicates the socio-professional category we belong to?

Non-bohemian rhapsody

Once upon a time artists were so proud of being artists that they screamed it in the face of the whole world. It was the good old time of bohemia in Europe and America. The way bohemians, the cultural producers of that time, dressed signified their unconventional, anti-bourgeois way of life. In other words, they favoured an “oppositional dress” that emphasized how separated they were from conformist majority (Wilson: 184). Clothing was part of their “experiments in living” (Virginia Nicholson). It was not to everybody’s taste as the case of Baudelaire proves: he disliked so much “the sartorial vulgarity of French bohemian circles” that he wore black in protest (Wilson: 183).

In Dada’s Greenwich Village, artists went hatless and dressed with a bluestocking uniform of loose shift and brown socks. One of the striking figures then was undoubtedly Else von Freytag-von Loringhoven with her black lipstick, her yellow powdered face, head shaved and painted in vermillion, and long ice-cream spoons for earrings. Same thing in 1930s Chelsea where female artists wore “full peasant dirndl skirts, tight waists, kerchiefs” and had an “exotically gipsyish appearance” (Wilson: 185). Montmartre, Camden Town, Schwabing, Soho: we could keep on reviewing bohemian fashion for hours.

Anyone who has ever attended an international contemporary art event knows it: 1) wherever we come from (Sao Paulo, Riga, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, or London), we all look the same; 2) we look utterly ordinary. The least we can say is that fancy is not our strong point. But conventional good taste yes. Would you wear a vegetable grater as a brooch and a Mexican blanket as a coat (as Else used to do), chances are that your colleagues would look at you as a retard who has mistaken an international art event for a circus fans’ gathering. At best, they would think you’re pathetically re-enacting some obscure avant-garde performance.

Let's face the truth: visual low-key uniformity reigns supreme in the contemporary art world. Does it mean that we're no longer proud of being cultural producers?

That being said, what is the Picket Line Clothing about?

Let's try not to listen to the faraway little bird telling us that we've thrown our sense of vocation and protest with eccentricity. There's no need to nostalgically lament about some loss of originality or boldness, nor to pit in judgmental way past colourful bohemian-ness against contemporary subdued non-style. No, what is of interest for us is rather how fashion might help us understand how we construct the image of the "cultural producer" for ourselves and for others.

The Picket Line Clothing started with a simple issue. If we are that ordinary and indistinguishable from other socio-professional categories, how are we supposed to make ourselves visible in the public space when needed? Clearly, it's way easier for nurses, postmen, or policemen, At least, they have their uniform. But we don't. So how the hell could people get why we're striking (protesting, fighting, criticizing, etc.) if they don't know who we are?

Over weeks though, as result of watching so many pictures of openings, conferences, and the like (by the way, I recommend the diary of Art Forum, it's "enlightening"), more issues surfaced. What if ordinariness were nothing more than a sneaky re-configuration, for initiate, of Sumptuary Laws [laws which in medieval Europe regulated the correlation between clothing, income, and status] paralleling the implicit mechanisms of exclusion and co-optation that rule the contemporary art world? Worse even: do we actually form a distinct socio-professional category?

This field of exploration is not entirely *Terra Incognita*. It is fair to think that you already have some answers to those questions. Yet, we can't venture into it completely unequipped. So here are a few hypotheses likely to provide us with guidance as we head toward our reconnaissance mission:

1. The absence of easily readable visual signifiers of our socio-professional category (if any) does not mean that visual signifiers do not

exist at all.

2. Past visual signifiers have been either replaced by new visual signifiers or recoded into new sets of meaning.

3. New visual signifiers accurately reflect the multilevel changes that inform and shape our socio-professional category (if any).

4. New visual signifiers re-inscribe in more subtle ways identificatory and hierarchical markers onto our socio-professional body (if any).



The main question raised by the Picket Line Clothing is whether dress can become a transformative experience when it comes to our relationship with and among ourselves, and with the others. In that sense, besides making our socio-professional category visible to a public that is not familiar with art and articulating via fashion our criticism toward a variety of issues affecting our job, the Picket Line Clothing is also an attempt to propose alternatives (for expressing ourselves, connecting to audiences, or handling our professional problems).

Concretely, how will it look like? At this stage, a couple of things can be said, based on the principle that fashion is and will remain the source of inspiration.

First, the Picket Line Clothing is about occupation of space (is it not what strike is about anyhow?). More exactly, it is about saturation of space. We have drawn here the lesson of medieval way of life (at least in the courts):

“To have power, it was necessary to give the impression of occupying as much visible space as possible. It was imperative to attract the eyes of others for status was overwhelmingly judged by appearances. Dressing a group of companions extended a lord’s personal appearance beyond the confines of his natural body, allowing him to inscribe himself on several bodies.” (Heller: 333).



Second, the Picket Line Clothing is conceived as visually pleasing, for both ourselves and others. It is again a demonstration in the US that gives the framework:

In January 1938 a fashion show called “Life without silk: from morning to midnight in cotton and rayon” was held in Washington at the initiative of the League of Women Shoppers (LWS). It promoted the boycott of silk imported from Japan in order to hamper the warfare Japan waged in China. While models paced the catwalk, another group demonstrated in the street, against the boycott this time: women representing the American Federation of Hosiery Workers (AFHW) (Glickman: 573), for fear of unemployment. Despite their radically opposed goals, the two groups shared similar strategies. They made it clear that showing a bit of leg and attractive garments was the most

effective mass communication weapon. Let’s remember it: beauty and ethics can go well hand in hand.



Works cited

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