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The Body En(w)raptured Contemporary Quilted Garments

Jane Przybysz

From the many different feminist theoretical perspectives that presently circulate in academia, I have chosen to re-view contemporary quilted garments and quilted garment style shows from a materialist feminist perspective.¹ Focusing on specific garments created for fashion shows sponsored by Fairfield Processing Corporation and Concord Fabrics, I aim to offer the reader a materialist feminist way of thinking about the possible meanings of any garment in any style show.

As a materialist feminist, my research methodology and interpretive strategies are informed by a particular set of assumptions. Unlike other kinds of feminists, I regard the differences that exist between men and women as primarily a product of culture. I do not believe that, because women are biologically equipped to carry a fetus, they are necessarily more nurturing, caring, peaceful, or “natural” than men. If women appear to exhibit more of these qualities than men, I attribute this not to biology, but to the material conditions and social relations that (re)produce “woman.” I am thus concerned with understanding how and why cultural, economic, political, and social institutions create “women” and “men.”

As a materialist feminist, I am suspicious of institutions that historically have been created by and served the interests of primarily white, affluent men, and I question the so-called “universality” of the values these institutions claim to represent. Within the context of existing social, economic, cultural, and political institutions, I—unlike the liberal feminist—am not out to prove I can be “just like a man.” For me, what it means to “be a man” is as much a fiction

as what it means to "be a woman." And unlike the cultural feminist, I do not consider myself innately different from or in any way superior to men. My aim is to understand the ways society creates categories of people called "women" and "men," categories which ultimately seem to limit the human potential of persons of both sexes. As a materialist feminist, I work within existing organizations with a critical awareness both of the ways in which those organizations oppress women and men, and of the differences that exist among women and among men in terms of class, race, and sexuality.

At present there exists only one in-depth scholarly analysis of the contemporary quilt revival—Lorre Marie Weidlich's "Quilting Transformed: An Anthropological Approach to the Quilt Revival."² In this 1986 doctoral dissertation, Weidlich discusses how embellished clothing worn by women at quilt events functions symbolically as both uniform and costume. As uniform, Weidlich says "embellished clothing announces quilters' affiliation" with other quilters by "show [ing] the incorporation of that activity into their own physical being." As costume, embellished clothing "disguises certain roles" and "advertises others." The roles it disguises, according to Weidlich, are that of housewife, mother, and working person; instead, "embellished clothing reflects a less central (but perhaps more passionately pursued) role." Unfortunately, Weidlich presents no analysis of the roles that quilters are "passionately" pursuing with the garments they create; nor does she consider the different meanings embellished garments have when worn or displayed in different contexts both at the quilt events and in quilters' everyday lives.³

Issues of power, gender, class, and race that are marginal to Weidlich's study are central to a materialist feminist analysis of the meanings of contemporary quilted garments and style shows. When and why do corporations become interested in producing quilted garment fashion shows? How does corporate sponsorship of style shows affect how and why women create quilted garments? Why has the making of embellished garments emerged as and continued to be primarily a "female" art form? What are the differences among the women who design and create quilted garments, and how does one account for the fact that this activity seems to appeal to women across class boundaries? Why is it that many of the women who make embellished garments do not make quilts? How does one ex-

plain the fact that it is mostly white women who are designing and making quilted and embellished garments in America? And why has the making of embellished garments emerged in the context of the present quilting revival and not, for example, during the quilting revival that occurred in America during the first quarter of the twentieth century?

It is certainly possible to describe contemporary quilted garments as simply the product of women expressing their creativity, and to characterize embellished garment style shows as wonderful opportunities for women to promote their talents and have fun. Re-viewing these garments and shows from a materialist feminist perspective, however, requires us to take them more seriously. Given the time, creative and emotional energy, and material resources some women invest in designing and making quilted and embellished garments, I believe embellished garments and the contexts in which they are displayed warrant serious attention. And although many or most women who make quilted garments do not consider themselves feminists, it seems to me that the questions raised by a materialist feminist analysis of the garments and the contexts in which they are modeled might be of interest to non-feminists and feminists alike.

In the summer of 1988, I attended Quilt Expo Europa in Salzburg, Austria, and for the first time saw a quilted garment fashion show. Presented by Concord Fabrics, the show offered a retrospective viewing of garments created for the Fairfield/Concord Fashion Show which, since 1979, has premiered annually at the Houston Quilt Festival.⁴ Also included in the show were garments made by European designers specifically for the event.

My response to the show was one of delight and confusion. As a quilter, I was awed by the design and technical virtuosity exhibited by the makers of these garments, and spellbound by the display of so many sumptuously colored, textured, and embellished fabrics. As a materialist feminist trying to decipher the meaning of these garments and of the fashion show as a whole, I was intrigued and troubled.

Many of the garments defied easy categorization as daytime or evening wear, as formal or informal wear, as indoor or outdoor attire, as junior, misses or women's wear. Several garments were made to be reversible. A *Flyfishing Woman's Evening Attire* consisted of sporty-

looking, cotton appliqued pants and vest, thus straying far from and perhaps even parodying what most people would consider appropriate "evening attire." Were quilters playing with and disrupting the categories according to which we ordinarily dress and define who we are and how we should behave according to the time of day, place, gender, age, marital status, class and race? If so, it would seem that—for some women—making quilted and embellished garments might be a way of manipulating and resisting society's idea of what constitutes an ideal American woman.⁵ Making embellished garments might be an act of rebellion, a form of political action. Indeed, when *God Save the Queen* by Kim Masopust turned out to be a floor-length, black velvet coat depicting Henry VIII and all his dead wives, I felt I was watching a moment of feminist theater.⁶ Didn't Henry's wives die because they failed to perform their role as "wife" and produce a male heir to the throne?

The degree to which many of the garments seemed to avoid prescribing an ideal female body type was remarkable. Georgia Bonesteel's *That Cotton Pickin' Garment*, Vickie Martin's *Midnight Beauty*, and Bonnie Benson's *Jewel of India* were all unfitted, tunic-like garments that might accommodate any number of body sizes and shapes. And by refusing to reveal, to focus on, or fetishize any part of the female body (the breasts, the legs, the waist, the hips), all of these garments seemed to frustrate "the male gaze" that feminist film critics have identified as one of the mechanisms by which women come to act, not in their own interests, but in the interests of men.

In the 1970s, film scholar Laura Mulvey began looking at the way narrative films construct an ideal spectator.⁷ Since the vast majority of films are shot by men with the eye of the camera simulating the point of view of the main character of the story who, in most cases, is male, she suggested that the ideal spectator constructed by most narrative films is male. She posited that "woman" in these films is positioned as "other" in relation to "man," and becomes that which is exchanged among the male characters in the film, and between the male hero of the film and the male spectator.

But what happens when women watch these films? On the one hand, the female spectator is obliged to identify with the male hero, in whose eyes "woman" is generally one of three things: the passive object of male sexual desire, the self-sacrificing helpmeet who helps

man achieve his goals, or the obstacle to be vanquished. Because women are usually denied any active role in the film narrative itself, women watching these films are forced to identify with one of these three kinds of women. Understandably, most choose to identify with the object of male sexual desire or with the woman who erases herself for his benefit. Eventually, feminist film theorists argue, the female spectator comes to experience both these roles as pleasurable because of her identification with the male gaze of the hero. In other words, women watching narrative films internalize "the male gaze" and come to enjoy playing out the kinds of passive roles that make them desirable and attractive to men. Instead of perceiving and enjoying their "selves" in a subject position, capable of acting in and upon the world, women tend to perceive and enjoy their "selves" in an object position, in relation to "the male gaze."⁸

What was exciting about so many of the garments shown in Salzburg was that they seemed to potentially frustrate "the male gaze." By refusing to represent "woman" as a fetishized sex object or self-sacrificing helpmeet, many of the garments potentially disrupted white male-dominant cultural narratives. Finally, garments which were quilted and embellished in a way that invited close inspection threatened to collapse the physical distance that seems to make voyeurism possible.

But there were several things about the fashion show that troubled me. First, this was the only event at Quilt Expo Europa that was introduced by a man. George Gleitman, President of Concord's Home Sewing Division, delivered the opening remarks for the fashion show.⁹

Second, I was dubious of the comparison that Priscilla Miller, Sales Executive for Concord Fabrics and fashion show commentator, made between this fashion show and the tradition of the quilting bee. Early in the program she said, "Just as in the old-fashioned quilting bees, this has been a volunteer afternoon, and we have quite a cadre of young women from among you who have volunteered both to help backstage and to model." The idea of the quilting bee implies a collective enterprise in which everyone participates as equals. Each woman who joins in a quilting bee theoretically has the right to ask help from all the women she helps; there is a reciprocal relationship among the quilters. Miller's comment seemed to mask the uneven

power relationship that exists between corporate sponsors of the show and the quilters whose volunteer labor (that invested in the design and making of the garments and that used to mount the show) made it possible.

Third, there were garments that looked as if they'd been made to activate a "male gaze." *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Ann Boyce, for example, looked as much like "his" dream as hers. An evening gown with a fitted, low-cut bodice and sleeves off the shoulder conspicuously displaying the breasts, neck, and shoulders, this garment seemed to fetishize the female body. Likewise, Kim Masopust's *Pavo Cristatus* (Latin for "peacock"), while covering the entire body, clung to the breasts and cinched the waist in a manner that emphasized the hourglass-like female figure that supposedly sends men swooning.¹⁰

The way the garments were modeled and described also seemed, for the most part, to construct a male gaze and traditional male narratives in which women do not act as subjects of their own, but in accordance with the desires of men. What most people have come to know as the traditional fashion show format—the proscenium stage with a runway jutting out into the audience—was disturbingly familiar, reminding me of the Miss America pageants I avidly watched until I realized that there was something peculiar about young women being awarded scholarships based on how they looked (to men? to women viewing from the point of view of the male gaze?) in bathing suits and evening gowns. Also, words like "feminine," "ladylike," and "to the moment" were used to characterize garments as if those terms were universally understood and valued.¹¹

Finally, unlike the women attending the conference who came in all shapes, sizes, and ages, the women who volunteered or were asked to volunteer were mostly young and mostly slender. (It wasn't until later that I learned that all garments for the Concord/Fairfield Fashion Show must be made a size ten.) Moreover, watching this fashion show foregrounded for me the startling absence of women of color at this conference. Not one model was black, Hispanic, or Asian.¹²

Months later, when I began to prepare this essay, I contacted Debbie Driscoll at Fairfield Processing who was kind enough to loan me slides from three previous fashion shows, as well as the programs that listed the names of the garments and their makers. Looking

over the programs, again it seemed as if the titles some women had given their garments indicated that fashion show participants aimed to represent "woman" as a desiring subject. Titles like *Hot Ice*, *Wild Thing*, *Dance Electric*, *Tropical Heat*, *Things That Go Bump in the Night*, *I Wanna Dance With Some Body*, *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, and *Spacial Palatial Dancin'* . . . *The Black Hole Strut* seemed to construct "woman" as unrestrained, sensuous, moving to her own rhythms, her own desires. The "queen theme" was still there. And there were additional categories suggested by the titles.

A strong dream/fantasy motif ran through the different fashion show programs: *California Dreamin'*, *Desert Moon Dream*, *Dreaming Down Under*, *Fantasia*, *Super Star Fantasy*, *Fan-see This*. Another group of titles seemed to express a similar metaphysical yearning for movement, for change, for another mode of being: *Vision Quest*, *Crystal Transformation*, *Extension*, *Cruising the Planet*.

But the way the garments were represented in the slides—by all-American-looking, white, young, size-ten women posed according to the conventions of fashion photography for the male gaze—neutralized to a large extent the challenge some of these garments might have presented, were they to have been photographed on or in the presence of the women who made them. In other words, the degree to which some of these garments might have functioned as a critique of dominant cultural constructions of "woman" as comforter, as wife, as mother, as America, had been all but erased by the way they were represented in the slides. The slides position the garments, position "woman" as the object of a male gaze.¹³

The garment I chose to consider in depth was Virginia Avery's *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, as shown in a slide being modeled by a young professional model. Like many other quilters, I have a high professional and personal regard for Virginia Avery. I believed that, while she might not agree with my analysis of her work, she would welcome serious consideration of the work of women fiber artists like herself. In addition, the outfit is "problematic" in a way that is useful for the purpose of this essay.

Talking with Virginia Avery, I learned that the garments she designs allow her to "work through a creative idea," and the fashion shows are an opportunity to "compete with other artists and create something that will stand out and be indicative of my creativity and

will command the respect of my peers." With the garment she entitled *There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, she "wanted something that looked a little bit sedate from the outside, but pretty racy from the inside. And I really thought of the flapper time . . . very short and flippy clothes . . . on women out for a good time, having a lot of fun."¹⁴

Were it not for being invited to participate in the Concord/Fairfield Fashion Show, Avery says she's not sure she'd be making these garments. Clearly, however, they function practically as a form of self-promotion. Since the fashion shows travel both nationally and internationally, Avery's name—already well known and respected amongst quilters—remains highly visible in the quilt community. After the garments tour, she will often use them as teaching tools in the workshops she gives. And if they are something she'd wear, well, then she might even wear the garment.

If they are something she'd wear? Why would she make something she wouldn't wear? Avery indicates that, in thinking about designing the garments she makes for style shows, her primary consideration is how they will look on the runway. She aims for a "good runway effect," a look that will be "striking" and "effective" from a distance. The relationship between the garment she creates, her body, and her "self" seems secondary, incidental.¹⁵ When speaking about *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, for example, she indicates that while she might choose to wear the coat, she wouldn't wear the flapper-like dress she ultimately created as part of the outfit she designed. It isn't "her."

I'm too old for it. . . . I no longer wear things with just straps at the shoulders, and it's too short for me. I'm much more comfortable in a longer length. . . . My tastes have changed. I'm no longer comfortable in a sleeveless or strap dress or in a very short one. I wear pants almost all the time. I find pants so practical and so comfortable.

Without talking to Avery I would have assumed that *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town* was an extension of her "self. And yet, it appears that this is not the case—that aesthetic considerations override Avery's concern with personal self-expression.

There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight is an outfit that consists of a black, sleeveless, knee-length sheath dress; a full-cut,

quilted, ankle-length coat which is black on the outside and lined with panels of yellow, pink, purple and green; a multi-colored body ornament composed of squares of fabric, beads and tassels; and a multicolored evening pouch. The slide made available to me by Fairfield Processing Corporation represents *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* on the size ten body of a young, white, all-American-looking woman. She is posed according to the conventions of fashion photography, smiling, in heels, hips thrust slightly forward, her left knee bent and angled towards her right leg so that the profile of her calf is visible to the camera. It is a pose that seems to freeze her as the passive, anonymous, silent object of male desire. It is a pose that seems to construct me as a male spectator. How might one begin to interpret the possible meanings of this garment?

I try to imagine the garment without the model in the picture and ask: **What kind of body is being articulated?** There seem to be two. There is the straight, narrow-hipped, flat-chested body suggested by the sheath dress and there is another, less constrained, less clearly articulated body suggested by the coat and the body ornament, either of which looks as if it might accommodate any number of body types.

In an article entitled "Buying and Selling the LOOK," Kate Davy considers the way that garments historically have constructed ideal female body types.¹⁶ She is especially concerned with those historical periods in which a slender, small-breasted, thin-hipped, boyish body type has been most fashionable: the last quarter of the nineteenth century when appearing "consumptive" was *la mode*; the roaring twenties that brought us the flapper look; and the 1960s, when the Twiggy look made its debut. Observing that boyish bodies seem to become fashionable when women have organized most successfully to promote social and political change, Davy suggests that this is perhaps no accident. Since most women do not "naturally" have this type of body, clothing that requires boyish figures encourages women to expend considerable time, energy, and money on diets, exercise programs, and sometimes even surgical procedures to make their bodies "fit." In extreme cases, women become bulimic or anorexic in their efforts to achieve the "look."

What better way to undermine women's presence as social and political actors in the public sphere than to promote a "look" that most women do not measure up to—or down to, as the case may

be? If women with the time and economic means to work for political change can be kept perpetually dissatisfied with bodies—especially hips and thighs—that are never thin enough, and perpetually busy trying to achieve whatever look is being promoted as fashionable and attractive to men, it is unlikely they will find the time, energy, or self-esteem they need to be politically vocal or visible. Davy's article leaves one wondering: Is it just a coincidence that the Twiggy look became the rage in 1967, the year that the National Organization for Women was founded?

When I look at the sheath dress that is part of *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, I note that it seems to prescribe the boyish body that most women don't have. The coat and body ornament, however, are not so prescriptive. The coat appears to have enormous raglan sleeves, no padding at the shoulders, and it flares towards the bottom. The body ornament is stitched in the fashion of coats of mail and looks as if it would conform to whatever shape it was slipped over.

The second question I ask myself when attempting to get at the possible meanings of a garment is: What kind of female subject does this outfit construct? Or, in other words: **What cultural narratives does this outfit suggest and what is "woman's" position in these narratives?** Again, I try to imagine the outfit apart from the model in the slide, because as soon as the garment is on a body, that body—its size, age, color, and the way it moves or is posed—largely shapes its meaning.

While it is difficult to recall my reading of this outfit before I interviewed Ms. Avery and before I read the article about the outfit she wrote for *Threads Magazine*,¹⁷ my notes indicate that what struck me about this outfit was the way it juxtaposed, played with, and confused categories according to which we conventionally read clothing and read "woman." The different parts of the outfit seem to suggest different cultural narratives so that it becomes virtually impossible to attribute any one meaning to it.

For me, the narrative that the slip-dress suggests is that of a young professional woman at a cocktail party who wants to be taken seriously, yet to appear attractive to men. The dress flattens, straightens, and thereby desexualizes the torso, but displays the shoulders, arms, and legs. Her body is there for men to see, but not in a way that

might be interpreted as sexually aggressive or threatening. The potential wearer of this garment might be intellectually challenging, but she presents herself as the passive object of male sexual desire.

Adding the body ornament, however, confuses this narrative. The bright, multi- and metallic-colored squares of fabric sewn on the diagonal like chain mail, further flatten the upper torso, seeming to guard yet draw attention to the chest. I am reminded of the multi-colored jester's costume composed of colorful diamond shapes. The strings of beads, smaller cloth squares, and tassels that hang freely from the waist of the body ornament playfully tease and titillate. The body ornament appears to eroticize the torso but curiously makes it less available. The sheath dress causes the torso of the body to virtually disappear (black is the color all women wear to look thinner), but the body ornament brings it back to life. The woman who would wear this could hardly be described as the passive object of male sexual desire. As she moves the body ornament would brush against her body, tickling her at the same time as it teases the viewer's eye. The body ornament thus seems autoerotic as well as a means of inviting the male gaze.

Adding the coat further complicates the picture. It covers the shoulders, the arms and potentially even the legs. The silhouette created at the side seams of the large raglan sleeves and the body of the coat, as well as along the bottom of the coat, is reminiscent of the stylized Christmas trees all children draw. Gold coins stitched at each point of a would-be branch weight them down so that they appear more like prairie points than branches.¹⁸

What might this coat mean? Borrowing the image of a tree from nature, does this coat portray "woman" as nature or is it intended as a parody of "woman" as nature? Are the gold coins stitched to the outside of the coat intended as a kind of commentary upon the way in which, since the industrial revolution, middle- and upper-class women increasingly have assumed less productive roles in society and more a display function—displaying the wealth and status of their husbands upon whom they have become economically dependent?¹⁹ Or does this garment collaborate with the body ornament to conjure the image of "woman" as jester? Certainly the pointed edges of the coat, and the brightly colored panels of fabric that comprise the lining are suggestive of jesters' costumes. Is Avery playing

with the conventions of what is considered appropriate lining? Most contemporary coats are decoratively colored on the outside, and lined with a solid, neutral fabric. The coat in *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* is black on the outside and multi-colored on the inside.

In effect, the outfit seems to construct a female subject which is multiple and variable, depending on the way the different garments that make up the outfit are worn. When all three pieces are worn together, they construct a "look," a "woman" who is not easy to peg according to conventional male narratives as "ingenue," "married housewife," or "working mother." The "woman" this garment constructs is not an unambiguous, passive object of male sexual desire, and she is clearly not the helpmeet type. More likely than not, this outfit is suggestive of the kind of "woman" the male hero of a film might perceive to be an obstacle; she seems controlled yet outspoken, sensuous, witty, self-possessed, and something of a rebel. In other words, she appears to have a mind and desires of her own.

Up to this point, I've tried to analyze *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* from a purely visual point of view apart from the body on which the outfit has been represented in the slide. Now I find it necessary to ask: **How does the title a quilt artist assigns an outfit inflect its meaning?**

As a musician who plays piano in a Dixieland jazz band, Avery often entitles the garments she makes with titles of popular songs, as she has done with *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*. The lyrics of many popular songs, especially older songs, unfortunately position "woman" as the passive object of male sexual desire. But the way Avery uses this title, seems to position "woman" as the speaker, as the person actively seeking a "hot time" later that evening. Overall, then, it seems as if *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* constructs a "woman" who negotiates two bodies—that which seeks the approval of the male gaze and that which experiences itself as having a mind and body with desires of their own. The result is an outfit that defies easy categorization, and that implicitly resists traditional male narratives in which woman represents either the object of male sexual desire or the eternal comforter—wife, mother, and America.

Yet any analysis of the possible meanings of contemporary quilted

and embellished garments designed for style shows must consider: 1) **How do the rules for participating in the style show shape the kinds of garments quilt artists design and create?** and 2) **How does the way the garments are presented affect the way we read the meaning of the clothing?**

Invitations to participate in the Concord/Fairfield Processing Fashion Show go out every January, and the garments must be completed by August. Designers are not paid either for their work or for the rights to tour their garments both nationally and internationally for one year after the show's premiere in Houston. Many quilters, however, perceive the visibility that the show affords them as compensatory. Participating sponsors also make free materials and notions available to the designers.

There are only four guidelines for participating in the show.

(1) The designer must use Fairfield batting somewhere in the garment. This does not seem to limit quilters in any way since there are no criteria as to how much one has to use or where one uses it. This rule does insure, however, that every garment represents and promotes Fairfield Processing Corporation.

(2) Garments must be made a size ten. For women who do not make garments as extensions of their personal selves, but rather for the show, this does not pose a problem. Put another way, this rule seems to discourage women from thinking of these garments as expression of their "selves" and to encourage them to design garments for the show to achieve a good runway look. For designers who happen to wear size ten clothes and want to wear the garments they make, this rule makes no difference. But generally speaking, by prescribing an ideal body type that the bodies of most women do not match, this rule potentially alienates the quilt artist who is not a size ten from her own body, and discourages her from creating garments that play with or challenge that culturally constructed ideal.

Elinor Peace Bailey is one quilt artist who has found a creative solution to the problem posed by this rule.²⁰ After making her first garment for the style show a size ten—a size she herself cannot wear—she henceforth chose to use a T-dress pattern that can later be adapted for her to wear, and concentrated on quilting and embellishing a one-size-fits-all tabard to be worn over the dress. I wonder how many other women have been required to be similarly creative or

to view the garment they make as something they create “for the show” and not for their “selves”?

It is easy to understand, from the point of view of corporate sponsors who hire professional models for the Houston show, why asking quilt artists to make size ten garments makes perfect sense. While there are now modeling agencies that represent larger women, most professional runway models wear size ten garments. Also, having garments be approximately the same size facilitates the process of selecting volunteers from local quilt guilds to model the garments in shows mounted after Houston. Yet given the negative body image most women have, it is equally easy to imagine how potentially self-alienating it might be for a woman to expend a tremendous amount of volunteer time, creative energy, and sometimes money to create a garment she cannot wear.²¹

(3) Style show participants must submit a complete outfit—not just a jacket or a skirt. From the point of view of corporate sponsors, as well as that of the quilt artists I’ve interviewed, this rule—like the size ten rule—makes perfect sense and is not perceived as a limitation. This way Fairfield ensures that the outfit modeled is the total “look” intended by the designer, not a collaboration between the designer and Fairfield Processing staff. If designers only submitted a jacket, for example, someone at Fairfield would be in the position of having to choose the pants, skirt, or dress over which the jacket would be modeled. I don’t perceive this rule to be a limitation, except in instances where designers interpret “complete outfit” as “complete matching outfit.” But, certainly, this rule did not prevent Avery from creating an outfit that gave off mixed messages and potentially disrupted conventional cultural narratives that position “woman” as either the passive object of male sexual desire or his self-sacrificing helpmeet.

(4) The quilter must title her garment. This is where quilt artists are given the opportunity to have a voice in how their garments will be represented and interpreted. Surveying the titles quilt artists give their garments indicate that this is indeed a venue for them to frame their garment as, in some sense, a cultural critique. Titles like *I Only Make Samplers* and *My Own Little Statement* used to characterize garments that are far from “humble” or “little” seem ironically to critique the notion that “woman” should be meek or

self-effacing. The many titles with references to “heat” and/or “dancing” seem to present an idea of “woman” as a sensuous, desiring subject, rather than the passive object of male sexual desire. Finally, the kinds of dreams and fantasies suggested by many of the titles bear little resemblance to the kinds of dreams and fantasies (of men, of marriage, of motherhood) that conventional cultural narratives portray women as having.

Quilted and embellished clothing—even outfits created for a specific style show—can have very different meanings in different contexts. Virginia Avery has made it very clear that she made *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*—not for herself, but to achieve a stunning runway look. But just as an exercise, suppose we imagine Avery waking up one Sunday morning and choosing to wear the outfit to church. Since most Christian doctrine—regardless of denomination—discourages women from experiencing their bodies, their “selves” as pleasurable outside the institutions of marriage and motherhood, many members of the congregation would be likely to find Avery’s wearing *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* offensive. A materialist feminist, however, might read and applaud her action as a powerful statement about the rights of any woman, but especially an older woman, to express a desiring, sensuous, sexual self.

If Avery chose to have *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* modeled only in style shows mounted with non-professional models, the outfit might represent an opportunity for other women to “try on” or rehearse a sensuous, desiring “self” that the culture at large does not nurture. To the extent that life follows art, that we learn through imitation, through mimesis, *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* might serve as an agent for change in the bodies, the self-perceptions, and, ultimately, the lives of both the women who wear the outfit, and the women in the audience who imagine themselves wearing the outfit.

The Concord/Fairfield Fashion Show draws upon the conventions of commercial fashion shows, making use of a combined proscenium/thrust stage with little or no ornamentation that might distract from or contextualize the garments shown. The fashion show narrator stands behind a podium in a position of authority with the only microphoned voice. Models appear from an invisible off-stage space and parade silently in a manner intended to obscure their

bodies, their selves, to insure that the garment remains the focus of attention. A largely silent audience observes from a distance.

While most people perceive the conventional fashion show format as "natural," it in fact encodes very definite hierarchical power relations and constructs the ideal spectator as "male." This became very apparent at Quilt Expo Europa when, immediately following the fashion show, other garments were modeled by their makers in a show and tell session. Approaching from the audience, quilters mounted the stage, used the microphone to give voice to information that contextualized the garment they wore, and then modeled the garment they made on their own bodies in a manner that—more often than not—could not be described as self-effacing. In the show and tell session, no longer were silent, self-effacing women modeling garments made by invisible authors being presented by a fashion show narrator for the viewing pleasure of the audience. Audience members were representing their garments and their "selves" for other audience members.

Producers of the Concord/Fairfield style show seem to be sensitive to these issues. At Quilt Expo Europa, fashion show commentator Priscilla Miller introduced many of the garments with biographical information about the quilt artists, sometimes quoting them directly. She introduced the volunteer models by name. Miller also wore a quilted garment which she had commissioned from one of the artists, which in some sense, made her "just one of us" instead of a corporate representative. Because the models had been festival participants, they were known by many in the audience and this seemed to mediate the voyeuristic distance and male gaze invoked by the proscenium stage which constructs "woman" as the passive object of male desire.

The extent to which a style show depends on the conventions of theatrical representation used by commercial fashion shows, in large part, determines the extent to which any garment can propose or argue for social or political change. The more the male gaze and the hierarchical power relations generated by that representational frame are disrupted and/or foregrounded, the greater the possibility that "woman" can become culturally audible and visible as something other than the passive object of male desires.

Producers of the Fairfield/Concord show have traditionally orga-

nized garments in a given year's show according to some theme. The outfits in the 1986 show were grouped under headings inspired by the names of painters, headings like Mostly Monet, Really Renoir, and Mystical Miro.²² In 1987 jewels were the common denominator among categories: Splendidly Sapphire, Traditionally Topaz, and Romantically Rose Quartz. The 1988 show was organized around the names of constellations: Creatively Corona Borealis, Comfortably Columbia, and Graphically Gemini. Beginning with the 1988 show, producers experimented with coordinating music with the various sections. The garment that opened the 1988 show—*Be a Sport!* by Jeanne DeWitt—was modeled to the theme song from the film “Rocky.”

How do the themes chosen by style show producers affect how we interpret the garments we see? Grouping garments primarily according to how they will look together, Donna Wilder placed *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* in the category “Lively Lynx” along with *Sweet Sixteen* by Jean Wells Keenan and *Silk Trade—Thank you, Marco Polo!* by Carol Higley Lane. Would we have read Avery's outfit differently had it been grouped with other outfits according to the themes implied by the titles designers had given their creations? What if *There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* appeared with *Things That Go Bump in the Night* by Charlotte Warr Anderson, *Wild Thing* by Gayle Earley, and *Dance Electric* by Susan Deal under a heading that read “Quilters Hot to Trot” or “Women on the Loose”? Does organizing shows around themes that do not seem to emerge from or be inspired by the titles designers give their garments neutralize or deflect attention away from the degree to which many of these outfits potentially critique conventional cultural ideas of “woman”? Does grouping garments according to how they “look” together rather than according to themes suggested by garment titles privilege the aesthetic dimension of the garments at the expense of the social or political dimensions?

How does the music used to frame a garment affect its meaning? When the theme song from “Rocky” is played as *Be A Sport!* is modeled, how does the audience interpret that outfit? *Be A Sport!* consists of a pair of white polyester satin running shorts worn with an embellished, white satin warm-up jacket: and its title seems intended to be ironic. When someone says, “Be a sport,” she generally means “Be a good loser” or “Make the best of a bad situation.” With

the garment she created, Jeanne DeWitt seems to be saying just the opposite: Don't Be A Good Sport! Don't settle for less than what you want! The garment implicitly critiques the idea that "woman" should be self-denying, self-effacing, or self-sacrificing.

On comes the theme song from "Rocky," a film about a mediocre club fighter who—given the opportunity—works to reach his potential. In the process, he effects a transformation upon the mouse of a pet shop clerk he woos from an unfashionably plain girl into a fashionably beautiful woman. When we hear this music and watch a young, white, conventionally pretty woman model a white satiny gym outfit, what do we see? Do we imagine that the model is the quilt artist who, like Rocky, is a person who, given the opportunity to participate in a style show—to become culturally visible—works to reach her potential? Do we see the professional model as the girlfriend, the fashionably beautiful woman Rocky makes of the ugly duckling pet store clerk? Or does the song just wash over us and make no difference whatever in how we read this outfit?

How might we interpret *Be A Sport!* if, instead of hearing the theme song from "Rocky," we listened to Helen Reddy singing, "If I have to, I can do anything. I am strong, I am invincible, I am WOMAN," from her song, "I Am Woman"? It seems that the music one chooses to represent an outfit or group of outfits potentially selects, amplifies, and/or mutes particular interpretations of an outfit.²³

In 1989, Czechoslovakian-born artist Jana Sterbak created an imposing motorized skirt made of aluminum strips which she called *Remote Control I* to be modeled by a woman wearing a white leotard and tights in art museum contexts. The skirt can be operated by the woman wearing it. It can be programmed to move independently of whether or not anyone is wearing it. And it can be operated by persons not wearing the garment.

I would suggest that *Remote Control I* challenges us to think about the meaning(s) of clothing in a way that is relevant to the study of contemporary quilted garments. Interpreting the meaning(s) of any quilted garment involves careful consideration of 1) what the garment might communicate on the body of the artist in particular contexts and what she aims to communicate with the garment; 2) what the garment communicates independent of the artist's body or her intentions; and 3) how people other than the artist shape its meaning(s).

Looking at the outfits some contemporary quilt artists are creating in light of the titles they are assigning their work, I see an emergent materialist feminist voice creating a space for real age-, class-, and race-specific women to experience their "bodies" and their "selves" outside conventional, dominant cultural narratives. But I am concerned that the way these garments are represented in style shows sometimes mutes the voice that I want and need to hear.

Acknowledgments

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Notes and References

1. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator As Critic*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1988).
2. Lorre Marie Weidlich, "Quilting Transformed: An Anthropological Approach to the Quilt Revival" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas—Austin, 1986), 69–77.
3. At the Houston quilt festival, for example, embellished garments are formally presented at the invitational Fairfield/Concord Fashion Show, in a non-juried fashion show in which garmentmakers model their own creations, and at show and tell sessions. All information about the Fairfield/Concord Fashion Show was obtained in phone interviews with Debbie Driscoll (September 7, 1989) and Donna Wilder (February 14, 1990).
4. The annual invitational fashion show at the Houston Quilt Festival is jointly sponsored by Fairfield Processing Corporation—manufacturer of batting—and Concord Fabrics. The subsequent tour of the show is made possible by Fairfield Processing Corporation alone.
5. For discussions of clothing as politically resistant, see Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Kaja Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse" in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

6. It should be noted that, while the title of Masopust's garment seems to constitute the coat as a kind of critique of the way in which Henry VIII's wives were done away with, the coat **must** be accompanied by the title to have this meaning. Henry VIII is displayed most prominently on the center/back of the coat, while his wives are relegated to the coat's edges. Masopust saves the queens, but in the same position they always were, relative to Henry VIII.
7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16 (1975), 3:6-18.
8. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); and E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?" in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Snitow, Stansell & Thompson, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 309-27.
9. This is not to suggest that all events at quilt conferences need be introduced by women. I find the idea of more men quilting, more men at quilt festivals, and more men giving introductions to quilt events perfectly acceptable, even desirable. Had Michael James introduced the show, I don't think I'd have flinched. But, to me, Gleitman represented "the male gaze" in the form of a corporate seal of approval.
10. These sexually suggestive messages were not unambiguous. With *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the quilted and embellished panel that hung in front from the waist to the floor functioned in counterpoint to the low neckline, seeming to guard and block access to that part of the female body. Similarly, the multilayered, heavily embellished petals of the skirt of *Pavo Cristatus* made it appear impenetrable.
11. The commentary usually provided by Donna Wilder at the Houston festival apparently focuses much more on the techniques of garment construction and embellishment used by the quilt artist.
12. That women of color were not "models" or otherwise visible at Quilt Expo Europa is, of course, no one's fault. It is simply an observation I believe worth considering. In fact, the Fairfield/Concord show stage in Houston has, for the past several years, featured an African-American model.
13. The slides for the 1988 fashion show were taken by Brad Stanton. The fact that he is a man, however, is not what constructs the male gaze. It is the fact that the women in the slides are posed in a way that suggests they are doing nothing but showing their bodies, their "selves" for men.
14. Virginia Avery, interview with author, New York, NY, October 4, 1989.
15. Donna Wilder believes that the vast majority of women who design

and make garments for the Fairfield/Concord Fashion Show do not do so with their own bodies in mind.

16. Kate Davy, "Buying and Selling the LOOK," *PARACHUTE* (Summer 1986):22-24. See also Frigga Haug's *Female Sexualization*, trans. Erica Carter (London: Verso Books, 1983).
17. Virginia Avery, "Hot Time in Houston: Inside a Fairfield Fashion Show Extravaganza." *Threads Magazine* 25 (October/November 1989): 50-51.
18. For a description of prairie points, see *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, no. 154, 30.
19. Elizabeth Ewen and Stuart Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).
20. Eleanor Peace Bailey, telephone interview, October 7, 1989.
21. Wilder indicates that, in fact, many garments made for the show are not a size ten, but more a size twelve. This might indicate that many women are being "creative" about finding solutions to the problems this rule potentially poses.
22. I found it ironic and disturbing that not one artist referred to in the categories was a woman.
23. Donna Wilder indicates that her aim, when selecting music, is to find upbeat instrumental pieces that the audience will recognize.