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[REBELUTION 17]: Gender Bender

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[REBELUTION 17]: GENDER BENDER

by

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[REBELUTION 17]: GENDER BENDER

I. Introduction

Fashion is a cultural barometer that measures what is accepted and valued in society through the media in regards to gender. Because society has always perpetuated the gender binary throughout history and the fashion industry, the expansion of non-binary clothing throughout the fashion industry is a political movement that challenges this norm. The gender binary marginalizes individuals who do not conform to it. Therefore, fashion design and photography are the perfect mediums for political and “rebellious” expression as shown in my work. This liberates and empowers individuals who do not conform to the gender binary.

*Rebelution 17*, the second fashion line in my *Rebelution* series, promotes gender fluidity through the art of fashion. While my first series, *Rebelution 70*, focused on bold femininity, freedom, and the eclectic looks of the 1970s, *Rebelution 17* challenges and deconstructs the gender binary by creating gender neutral clothing for non-binary individuals who have not had the chance to express themselves authentically through their bodies and garments. In *Rebelution 17*, I utilize clothing design and photography to counter the norms of gender expression in fashion as a way to empower and liberate individuals who do not conform to traditional definitions and expressions of beauty in regards to gender identity and acceptability. Each gender-neutral ensemble in the series is a handmade original either created from scratch, or deconstructed from existing clothing. Once completed, the garments are then paired with models whose senses of identity complement the works, resulting in a platform that dismantles indoctrinated ideologies of gender expression.

The finished works you see before you are also featured in a Lookbook – a digital and physical collection of the photographs used to market fashion – that I have created, in order to
promote awareness of gender-neutral fashion and deconstruct industry norms. Both Rebelution 17 and Rebelution 70 can be viewed at www.francescainocentes.com.

II. The Art of Fashion

The etymology of the word, fashion, derives from the Latin word “factio”, which is where the word “faction” originates from: “Faction” has an obviously political sense; it already refers to conflict between groups and to the possession and exercise of power by different groups” (Malcolm 37). Therefore, “fashion” is a way in which different social groups communicate their identity and “establish their positions of power, dominance, and subservience” (Malcolm 40). In western society, fashion is a social construct that symbolizes one’s gender identity, class, capital, mode of communication, and style. All fashion is built on the notion that clothing is a form of non-verbal communication: “The garment…is the medium in which one sends a message to another person…The message is the sender’s intention and it is this that is transmitted by the garment in the communication process” (Barnard 27-28). Thus, one can say that the clothing itself is a person’s “second skin”, which is the skin that we choose to represent ourselves to the world. On top of our second skin is style, which is the way in which we choose to manipulate the clothing and communicate within social groups. The combination of clothing and style create fashion.

As Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas discuss in Fashion and Art, it is extremely important to discuss fashion history in terms of art history. Although the overlap between the history of fashion and art can be discussed in great detail, this paper will focus briefly on the history of fashion and art from the twentieth century in order to examine the issue of dismantling the gender binary in fashion in Rebelution 17. While many do not value fashion as art, one may
agree with many theorists, including art historian Anne Hollander, that fashion “is a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as the medium” (Geczy 3). Since fashion studies originated from anthropology, specifically, ethnography, sociology, and art history as a way to define dress as an indicator of class, gender, and kinship, one may argue that fashion should be respected on the same intellectual level as these fields (Geczy 6). But fashion is not respected on the same intellectual level as anthropology, specifically, ethnography, sociology, and art history because is associated with “the domain of the feminine and the body as opposed to art, which was deemed masculine and placed in the sphere of the mind and psyche” (Geczy 3). The merger of art and fashion stems from the fascination with the body as an artistic medium of creative expression. Yves Saint Laurent’s life companion, Pierre Berge, argued that “like cinema, painting, music literature, poetry, etc., fashion is an art if it is made by an artist”. Fashion designers’ education level on fine art and use of fine art components in their work can allow fashion designers to consider themselves artists; thus, having their brand be considered and respected as a work of art. The blur between fashion and art is that they “have aspects of visual culture, including form, color, and texture… Like art, fashion can be technically and conceptually rich, and the differences can be seen in the collaborations between designers and artists” (Geczy 24).

In the relationship between art and fashion, art breaks down its own traditional role in high society and can now be seen in terms of consumption and popular culture. Exhibiting fashion, especially haute couture, in museums has increased the overlap between art and fashion. In addition, many fashion designers still continue to reference works of fine artists in their garments: Coco Chanel, Sonia Delaunay, and Yves Saint Lauren have appropriated elements of impressionist, expressionist, minimalist, and op art styles into their garments ("The Art of
Fashion”). Coco Chanel and Pablo Picasso collaborated when producing costumes and backdrops for the Ballet Russes; “Sonia Delaunay designed clothes and textiles in tandem with her vivid artworks”; and Yves Saint Laurent used Piet Mondrian’s bold abstractions in six A-line dresses in 1965 ("The Art of Fashion").

III. Gender and Fashion

Brands are using their name as a political tool in order to advocate for “gender fluidity” and “androgyny”, but not specifically individuals who identify as non-binary. Brands and the press use terms like “gender fluidity” and “androgyny” interchangeably, and do not refer to the gender identity of the non-binary, which is a problematic issue for how gender is communicated in the fashion industry. For instance, Givenchy has launched campaigns for gender fluidity in their Autumn Winter 2010 and Spring Summer 2014 collections as shown in Figure 1 while “Coco Mademoiselle: The Film – Chanel” features actress, Keira Knightley, riding a motorcycle dressed in a nude business suit instead of black more to challenge the male stereotype of the iconic masculine male business suit rather advocate for “gender fluidity” as shown in Figure 2. Although these collections are gender fluid, Coco Chanel and Givenchy are gender binary brands and have only launched androgynous campaigns to catch onto a fashion trend and stay true to the brand’s history and values once the season is over. There are only a few brands that are solely “androgynous” and are mainly European-based, including Claire Barrow, too good, 69, and NotEqual. Thus, it is the perfect opportunity to fill the gap in this market through Rebelution 17.
This issue of how gender is communicated in fashion resurfaces when designers are asked, “Who is your muse?” For womenswear, the answer is always a strong, bold, feminine, independent woman; never a non-binary individual. The act of always defaulting to the norm of a feminine woman perpetuates the gender binary and tells society that this is how a woman should look and represent herself. A traditional female garment ensemble ideally consists of a dress made out of either chiffon, velvet, silk billowing in the wind around the legs and accentuating the female figure, particularly the bust and waist. Embellishments include ruffles and jewels that overlay bright, soft-toned, and pastel colors of the fabrics. Accessories include a jacket, gloves, heeled shoes, and a handbag. For menswear, the answer is always a successful, professional, “macho”, emotionless man; also, never a non-binary individual. A traditional male garment
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ideally consists of broader jackets with a button down dress shirt that hugs the biceps and triceps and tapered pants that are made of wool, polyester, cotton, tweed, and linen. This typical business suit is usually worn with loafers or oxfords, a bow-tie or necktie depending on the occasion, briefcase, and suit. These characteristics of female and male fashion seems too simple and obvious to state in this discussion, but it is important to examine more closely especially in terms of fabrics and silhouettes in order to deconstruct the gender binary and create a genderless garment.

Fashion and clothing reproduce sex and gender by indoctrinating societal norms of how men and women should look. In *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard argues, “Because dress is so intimately related to our bodies, because it is thus profoundly connected to our sexual and gender identities, fashion is uniquely able to unsettle and unnerve us” (111). Society divides sex strictly between man and women biologically based on their separate reproductive organs and their respective physiological functions. While “to be properly feminine is to be modest, caring and nurturing while to be properly masculine is to be aggressive, domineering and employed outside the home” (Barnard 111). While clothing in the fashion industry is traditionally made to appeal to the masses and the gender binary, Rebelution 17 questions indoctrinated ideals of gender and provides people with non-binary clothing options.

In order to create a politically correct future in the fashion industry regarding non-binary representation, we need to examine Michael Foucault’s bio-politics and panopticon theories, as well as Judith Butler’s radical ideologies on gender identity. Society must further eradicate the gender binary in order to create a politically correct, more open-minded industry. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues, “Gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (10).
Cis-heterosexual men in western society and even more so in East Asian cultures still perceive women as unpredictable, hormonal, docile, and passive beings. In addition, these men insist that the female identity is only fulfilled when women have babies, and that they need to be sexually appealing, but not sexually active. With the emergence of Hollywood in the 1920s, clothing accentuated a feminine woman’s legs and then her low back in the 1930s. This relates to Foucault’s panopticon theory where these feminine women are being “watched” by the male gaze. These preconceived notions of women and the female identity directly relates to Foucault’s panopticon ideology, which argues that society is structured like the panopticon in a prison where everyone is watching you and what you do, and how society is extremely oppressive (199). Foucault explains how the panopticon directly results in the binary division:

“Authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal abnormal) and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is, where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.)” (199).

This binary division implies that non-binary individuals are still being forced to pick between dressing female or male. As previously mentioned, dressing female represents the docile and passive being while dressing male represents the rigid, emotionally unavailable, macho persona. What is ironic about this gender mold is that many of the greatest fashion designers of the past have been gay men. Valerie Steele in A queer history of fashion: from the closet to the catwalk questions, “Do gay styles set trends that straight people follow? Or do gay men have a special relationship with fashion” (7). Even though these designers are part of the LGBTQ
spectrum, they do not represent the non-binary, “gender fluidity”, and “androgyne” in their brands. Such designers include Cristobal Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and Alexander McQueen.

IV. Rebelution 17

In order to explore these ideas of the overlap between fashion and art, and issues of gender in the fashion industry, Rebelution 17 is focused on pushing gender neutral designs that function as works of art, more so than commercialized clothing instead of basing the editorial on high-street and luxury brands like I did at the London College of Fashion. The idea of creating a second Rebelution series is built on the fashion drawing, styling, photography, and creative directing skills I have acquired during my semester abroad in London. The first Rebelution series, Rebelution 70 can be viewed at www.francescainocentes.com. As previously discussed, Rebelution 70 is an editorial that focuses on bold femininity and eclectic looks of the 1970s, one of the four themes my styling class had to choose from for a project.

The main high fashion designers and artists who inspired the high fashion garment in Rebelution 17 are Salvador Dali, Elsa Schiaparelli, Marc Jacobs, and Alexander McQueen. Although high fashion is not as accessible to the masses as mass-produced garments and everyday clothing, high fashion sets the trends in mass produced fashion. For instance, the creative director of Balmain Paris, Olivier Rousteing, collaborated with H&M in 2015 to make his brand more financially accessible to fans who cannot afford high fashion in efforts to make luxury and haute couture more affordable. Similarly, the slip silk dresses made by Givenchy in Spring Summer 2016 was mass produced with cheaper fabric and finishes by almost every high street and more accessible brands such as H&M, Zara, and Forever 21, and & Other Stories. I am
talking about disrupting the norm, making alternatives, and describing current gender tropes in terms of the high fashion sector in order to pave the way of allowing the non-binary and trend of “androgynous” clothing to argue against high fashion gender binary brands. Since mass producing brands such as the ones mentioned above make high fashion trends more accessible to the masses, I believe that this is a good strategy for making audiences and consumers more aware of the non-binary. For instance, Alexander Wang’s sporty, deconstructed, and androgynous Spring Summer 2016 collection is referenced in Zara’s “ungendered” clothing line that is mass produced with cheaper fabrics and finishes. Both Alexander Wang’s Spring Summer 2016 collection and Zara’s “ungendered” clothing line include a sporty aesthetic, denim, raw unfinished hems, and cotton as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Alexander Wang’s Spring Summer 2016 collection (Phelps) and Zara’s “ungendered” clothing line (Cherrington)](image)

The “Hand Bra” from the collaboration between Dali and Schiaparelli inspired the high fashion denim piece titled, “F*ck You”, in Rebelution 17. What fascinates me most about this
style is the ability of these artists to make the composition look “real” and make viewers believe in surreal imagery. The position of the hands in the “Hand Bra” inspired the position of the hands for the denim “F*ck You” garment. Rather than using soft, feminine hands like Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dali, I used the middle finger sign with a raw hem. While most would consider this raw hem part of an unfinished work of art, I deliberately chose to use this unfinished look as also referenced in Alexander Wang’s Spring Summer 2016 collection in order to symbolize the ongoing process of deconstructing the gender binary. Like the “Hand Bra”, the position of the soft, feminine hands in the “Trompe l’Oeil” Beaded Dress from 1986 also inspired the position of the hands in the “F*ck You” garment, which is saying f*ck the gender binary in order to bring more attention to the idea of deconstructing it through its aggressive, “rebellious”, yet angry tone as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. “Hand Bra” by Salvador Dali and Elsa Schiaparelli (Martin), “Trompe l’Oeil” by Marc Jacobs (Martin), Sketch of “F*ck You” in Rebelution 17 by Francesca Inocentes

The “F*ck You” piece is made out of a dark blue wax denim fabric, nude stiff tulle, black lycra, and five red and white Swarovski crystal buttons located on each of the middle fingers. Denim is a commonly used fabric for both male and female garments, so it was a perfect fabric
for creating a garment that did not specifically identify as male or female. The denim was used to create the slit skirt-pants that are attached to the denim belt and are completely slit on the inner and outer lining of the pants in order to avoid accentuating the thighs and calves; thus, giving a more gender neutral look on the body while allowing it to function either as a skirt or pants. The nude stiff tulle is used to create a box cut shirt that did not accentuate the waist, arms, or shoulders; thus, giving a gender neutral look on the body. The black lycra was used to create a visible underwear with the middle finger. The location of the middle finger particularly on the breasts and crotch brings attention to these sexual organs in order to tell viewers that the individual wearing it is not defined by the human body’s sexual organs.

The theatrical aspect of high fashion, particularly the works of Elsa Schiaparelli and Alexander McQueen, inspired why I chose high fashion particularly for “F*ck You”. What was most inspiring about Alexander McQueen’s *Voss* catwalk was that McQueen had the audience sit around a mirrored cube where the models walk around inside as shown in Figure 5. This notion also parallels the position of the non-binary individuals in Michel Foucault’s theory of the panopticon where society forces them to pick either male or female in the gender binary. In addition, McQueen’s use of non-traditional materials, such as mussel-shells, ostrich feathers, jigsaw puzzle pieces, stuffed eagles, miniature castle and rats, and microscope slides, and also the set of this Spring Summer 2001 Ready-To-Wear collection drew attention to his work. McQueen’s collection is considered “art”, since it has now been exhibited as “Savage Beauty” in art galleries worldwide, including the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.
In addition, a street wear, deconstructed denim ensemble consisting of a jacket, top, and pants was deconstructed from my own existing garments to juxtapose the high fashion “F*ck You” garment as shown in Figure 6. Similarly, the arms of the jacket were removed and repositioned on the shoulders to make a cape and the pants of the jeans were slit on the inside and outside of each leg to avoid accentuating the arms and legs. The top was recreated and repurposed from an old pair of jeans: the front of the top is from the back pockets of the jeans and zipper was repurposed as a half-zip shirt.
The aesthetic for the Lookbook was minimalistic and industrial. I photographed the models and garments at the R. Michael Shanahan Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California. During the shoot, I directed each of the poses, which were inspired by the works of fashion photographers I discovered on Instagram, including Lauren Kai and Studio Felt TV. In addition, I decided to keep the hair and makeup simple and minimalistic to complement the Lookbook’s aesthetic: filled-in eyebrows, mascara, foundation, bronzer, and highlight to contour the facial structure. The hairstyles also have a non-binary look with an asymmetrical part cut down to the shoulders and the hair tied back in a low bun, which are both hairstyles that men and women would wear. The minimalistic and industrial color palette of greys, whites, dark blue, and dark green along with wooden and concrete textures in the photographs resonated a modern, simple, sharp, yet bold take on examining gender in the fashion industry.
V. Conclusion

Since issues surrounding non-binary, “gender fluidity”, and “androgyny” are present in the fashion industry, it is necessary to examine how the fashion industry represents gender identity. Although this project does not provide a complete solution to this problem of gender in fashion, *Rebelution 17* draws more attention to the issues of the gender binary through the garments’ designs and photography. This juxtaposition between the high fashion garment and the mass produced garment comments on the disconnect between which clothing is financially accessible to the masses along with the efforts to make non-binary clothing more accepted in the fashion industry. As previously discussed, high fashion sets the trends for what is sold in mass-produced garments, so this juxtaposition addresses the process of setting the trends, particularly the non-binary, in the fashion industry.

As seen on [www.francscainocentes.com](http://www.francscainocentes.com), the Lookbook for *Rebelution 17* narrates the relationship between the models and their gender identity through the garments along with the relationship between high fashion and mass-produced, accessible fashion. The purpose of designing non-binary garments and showcasing them in a Lookbook is to empower and liberate individuals who do not conform to the standards of beauty in regards to gender identity and acceptability, and to dismantle audiences’ indoctrinated ideology of the gender binary. As previously discussed, the Lookbook is a collection of the photographs used to market garments by photographing them on models who make the garments come to life by expressing through their bodies the gender identity they are representing. The combination of the theatrical designs of the garments, the juxtaposition between the high fashion and mass produced garments, the industrial location of the photoshoot, and the display of the garments in the Lookbook with a minimalistic aesthetic in *Rebelution 17* creates further awareness of non-binary clothing.
Bibliography


