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Streetnotes

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3c60k4bj>

Journal

Streetnotes, 20(01)

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/S5201013629

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Streetstyle: an Interview with Susan B. Kaiser

Susan B. Kaiser and David Michalski

Abstract

Susan B. Kaiser discusses fashion and the city, including its geography of consumption and production, the relation between street style and the fashion industry, and how sartorial experimentation relates to social change.

Susan B. Kaiser is Professor of Women and Gender Studies, Textiles and Clothing, and the Cultural Studies Graduate Group, at the University of California at Davis. Her research and teaching interface between the fields of fashion studies and feminist cultural studies. Recent and current research addresses shifting articulations of masculinities; issues of space/place (i.e., rural, urban, suburban); and possibilities for critical fashion studies through popular and political cultural discourses. She is the author of *The Social Psychology of Clothing* (1997) and *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (forthcoming), and over 90 articles and book chapters in the fields of textile/fashion studies, sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, popular culture, and consumer behavior. She is a Fellow and Past President of the International Textile and Apparel Association, and was the first Nixon Distinguished Professor/Lecturer at Cornell University. She is currently organizing a critical fashion studies working group in the University of California system.

David Michalski: I am here with Susan Kaiser at the University of California, Davis on the twentieth of June, 2012 for an interview in *Streetnotes*. Thanks for agreeing to speak with me.

Susan Kaiser: You're very welcome.

DM

To begin, I would like to historicize the relationship between fashion and the city. Perhaps we can begin as Elizabeth Wilson does in her book, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, that is, the idea that fashion and the modern city grew up together. When you're introducing students to this relation between fashion and urban life, how do you begin? How do you disentangle or unfold this relationship?

SK

I try to talk about the relation in terms of visual culture. I discuss how people and the way they're dressed in our environment act as a source of stimulation. It makes sense that fashion is seen to take shape in such an environment, in a place where the population is fairly dense, and in a place where there is more stimulation and competition going on, with more people trying to do things to stand out as well as fit in. Fashion is most visible in the urban context. Most Western fashion historians talk about the city as the birthplace of fashion. Many, in fact, point to the Italian city-states of the thirteenth or fourteenth century as a birthplace of modern fashion.

DM

That's interesting. I've often read about the relation between fashion and the city beginning later, in particular, in Simmel's Berlin, but certainly in the Italian city-states, in the mercantile period, there was an influx of many remote cultures. Is fashion primarily stimulated by a scene where everyone gets off the boat dressed differently, or is there something else going on?

SK

Valerie Steele in her book on Paris fashion actually talks about the relation of fashion and the city in terms of such early beginnings in the Italian city-states. There she explains that people—especially young men—were wearing clothes that were progressively more fitted or colorful, and they did so as a way to both stand out and fit in. Steele identifies a competition that comes with the urban setting.

In my classes, I try to relate the tensions that stimulate fashion as a negotiation between two desires: the desire to stand out and the desire to fit in. I try to explain how these desires are influenced by exposure to visual stimuli and one's own social psychology and identity.

DM

The modern notion of fashion is a bit different from the older anthropological view, wherein fashion is formed by custom and tradition. Even today, in the wine world, there is this idea that wine is fundamentally represented by its place or origin, that is, its *terroir*. Is there a similar idea in fashion theory, that a certain place can influence the mode of dress?

SK

Yes, and that's a really interesting question, especially because with wine the grapes literally comes from the earth and a given location, whereas with fashion, especially urban fashion, people are migrating to the city and they're bringing some of their traditions with them, probably located in sites that were their homes, and yet they're also trying to fit in to this new environment. This is certainly something you see in New York City in the 19th century, when immigrants were coming and bringing some of their traditions with them, but they were also trying to fit in, and so there was a lot of mixing and matching that occurred. People really noticed this dynamic; observers frequently commented on the dress of young immigrant working-class women, for example.

DM

So fashion is different than costume, I mean, fashion is culturally-based, but it's also always something created in the mix, or in the situation.

SK

Right. I think so. This idea is in line with the mixed connotation of the word "fashion," which means both "to make" and "to do." Fashion is an ongoing project to express individuality, and it's also project to fit in to one's community or environment. What's interesting is that the urban experience makes these projects more difficult, as the definition of individuality and community is not very clear.

DM

So cities and urban culture influence fashion, but in your work, you also deal with how fashion influences cities. Let's talk about this essay you coauthored with Leslie Rabin on fashion in San Francisco and Los Angeles published in *Fashion's World Cities*, edited by Christopher Breward and David Gilbert. It was interesting for me to read how the historical conditions of these cities produce certain styles, but also how fashion production systems, or what you call "networks of outsourcing" and "networks of production" also influence the way the city sees itself.

SK

Los Angeles is really interesting—just looking at the sites of the industry. The first clothes produced in the area were knitted undergarments (the forerunners of bathing suits). We might say that fashion and film “grew up” together to produce an idea of casual glamour, just as we’ve discussed the connection between fashion and the city. The production of women’s dresses and coats started in the downtown area in L.A., in high-rise buildings; then the industry started getting into casual sportswear and separates—tops and bottoms and skirts or swimwear. Then the factories started to migrate outward, because it was easier to outsource these smaller pieces or “separates.” So there’s a way in which the geography and migration of production is integrated with the very flow and form of materials and their construction: it’s easier to outsource parts or pieces, than a whole garment. I think there’s something about production and space that is really important.

DM

Most of the time when we think about consumption we think about trends. We think that what people want is what drives production. Is there another way to think about fashion? Do structures of production influence how we interact with clothes and how we decide what to wear?

SK

We could probably take a store like Forever 21, as an example, a company founded in Los Angeles. It’s a place where fashions turn around really quickly, where people get ideas about what they might wear from going into the store. A lot of the styles in there are knockoffs of other brands. It’s very current fashion, and caters to people who are attracted to the idea of wearing something once and posting it on Facebook, and once it’s on there, you know, that’s it. People don’t want to be dressed the same way. That’s one way fashion is changing, and not just on the streets—it’s even in the way the production is happening. The turnover factor is so incredibly fast.

DM

You can’t turn a profit selling the same shirt for ten years, and it also seems that what people really desire now is changing all the time. One gets the impression that the change seems to be accelerating, that’s what people are writing about.

SK

It seems to be about speed and flexibility. In consumption we see speed in the turnover of styles and we see flexibility demanded by consumers who want to mix and match things; in production we also see acceleration and flexibility in terms of speed of manufacturing, and we see flexibility in terms of the issues of flexible labor pools. This is really the m.o. of postmodern production.

DM

Which brings up another question, this phrase, “being out of fashion,” is this even possible today given that there are so many different styles? And also, the

same question put differently, is there such a thing as avant-garde in fashion?

SK

I think we have more looks going on simultaneously today than probably was the case in the 1960s, for example. It's not like there's one look for spring. There are—*looks*—for spring, so fashion is pluralized. But, it's not even so much *what* we wear as it is *how* we wear it. The way one is mixing and matching really sets one apart as having a unique style. Being "out of fashion" is a complicated concept because there's so much recycling. There are so many ways you can mix and match. Something could really be dated, but if you put it together with something else it "fashions it up," and it seems to work out okay.

I think that's what happens in street style. People are influenced by each other and get ideas. "Oh, I could wear my socks that way with that skirt" or something. This is the process part of fashion that seems really important.

DM

Is fashion something that you have to participate in? Does it demand a necessary level of engagement or play? This is question about fashion as a participatory game. Are we universally engaged or are there levels to it?

SK

I think maybe there are levels of awareness or levels of attention to the details—levels of consciousness in respect to picking up ideas. It may be something as simple as how to wear a hood, or a baseball cap, a backpack.

DM

So you basically can't opt out of the game of fashion.

SK

Well, I agree with Simmel when he argues you basically can't get out of the game: even a "no-club" club is a club. We're all part of this visual world, so we cannot really opt out of the larger game of fashion.

DM

A different question: there's a theory in consumer culture about lifestyles or tribes, so-called "neo-tribes"—and some say these formations are more important than class or race or other social formations of the past.

SK

You are referring to Michel Maffesoli's work, *The Time of Tribes*. I don't think anything is replacing class or gender or ethnicity. It's probably more likely that we're more conscious of their intersectionalities than we were in the past. We are beginning to think about subject positions like gender and sexuality and how they interplay with each other and intersect with other interests like music or sports or things like that. But I don't quite buy the idea that these "neo-tribes" are replacing fundamental issues like ethnicity—I think we're just more conscious of the intersectionalities.

DM

But when you discuss this with your students, perhaps there's the larger sociological problem of structure and agency. The notion of the "neo-tribe" seems to err on the side of this ultimate free agency, which maps very well to the ideology of consumption itself: "You can do anything you want and be anything you want through participation in the market." But there's this older idea that you're always sort of being manipulated by the market and what you think is your own style is actually something that's been prepared for you. How do you deal with that?

SK

Well, right at the outset I try to frame my classes in terms of the need to get beyond binary oppositions, to move beyond either/or thinking, and to talk about the tensions as productive tensions. In place of either/or, we think both/and. It is a way of knowing, which comes out of African-American feminist thought, and in Simmel's idea of identifying and differentiating at the same time. I think there is a similar dynamic to the relation between structure and agency:—we can never forget about one or the other. We have to think about them in tension and hold them together. It's a matter of degree to which we do that because situations vary, but I think it's dangerous to totally separate them, to celebrate consumer agency to the point that we lose sight of issues of class, access and availability, and gender and sexuality and so on.

At the same time critical theorists, some of whom focus on fashion or other forms of popular culture as something that can have no creative or subversive edge—I don't buy that either. I think there's always a need to mediate structure and agency.

I think that the main thing about fashion is that there's always this possibility or hope of resisting the mainstream and doing something that speaks in opposition to it. There is, at least, something that can be played with, both in resisting, and in experimenting with fitting in, at the same time.

Some people really want to express opposition to the status quo, but the problem is that over time their efforts often get appropriated back into the mainstream. Even the zoot suit was filtered into mainstream menswear, which became looser in cut in the 1950s. Things that took on meaning as forms of resistance get absorbed back into mainstream style, but this is not to say resistance is futile. Agency is more about the *process* than the style itself, the process of articulating agency. This process is influenced by categories such as age, class, and gender and the way these categories intersect, but these categories don't dictate the process. If they did one would just have to accept that things will never change.

DM

If one looks at history of social movements, it seems that there is always a style related to each movement, one, perhaps involved in the very creation of the movements.

SK

Fashion is really a way of representing and articulating social movements. There are lots of examples: Afrocentric styles in the 1970s or feminist resistance, in the refusal to tease hair, just wearing it long and straight, or not wearing makeup, which ends up as the "natural makeup" look, which was actually pretty hard to achieve. One thing we learn from social movements is that appearance is not "natural." Rather, it is constructed: what we do to our bodies and what we hang on our bodies and apply to our bodies. It's a process of experimentation. Some people may be more into the game than others, but overall it's still an ongoing process. In fact, this experimentation only makes sense in the context of a social movement.

DM

This leads me back to the question about the way you see the relation between consumption and production in fashion. Again, in your article comparing San Francisco and Los Angeles, you outline a complicated relation, one that takes urban geography into account. I wonder if that's something people are becoming more aware of, that fashion is a complete process rather than something you just buy and put on.

SK

In my classes I talk about the cultural studies model: the circuit of culture. This includes production, representation, consumption, identity and regulation. I've adapted this for style and fashion to acknowledge the flow of materials, but it's also important to think about the site of production. In Los Angeles, for instance, the site of production used to be downtown, not far from the major department stores. So in the 1930s when garment workers went on strike they would dress up and picket right outside the major department stores—at the site of production and the site of distribution. And of course, consumers would be coming in and out of the store, so they saw these young female immigrant workers wearing fashionable clothes they had made—clothes that were similar to what the female shoppers had just bought. These shoppers saw women who knew how to sew and make clothes and didn't look like the way people pictured working-class women. Yet, there they were, letting people know about their working conditions. It was all right there and this synergy really made an impression.

It's hard to see the connection between production and consumption nowadays. The site of production is often offshore or otherwise pretty far afield, disconnected from consumers. There's still some production in downtown L.A., but it's not near the major retail hubs. Now the department stores aren't close to the factories anymore, and it's all kind of disconnected.

Yet, even as the major trend has been to move production out from the city, or offshore, there are notable exceptions. One sees these in San Francisco, and in Los Angeles as well. There are small production sites, where designers are creating and making, for example environmentally friendly or upcycled fashions and selling these clothes directly to the consumer, working right there in the shop making things.

DM

It seems like a very expensive form of production, but also one that commands a very high price. It reminds me of a phenomenon I see in the food industry, where one also sees a greater distance between production and consumption, a remoteness which may not be all that remote. Accompanying this remoteness, however, is an emergent desire for closeness. One wants to know who grew one's vegetables, or who sewed one's clothes. Here in Northern California, in San Francisco, one sees a desire to bridge that gap between production and consumption. At the same time, however, the desire for local products serves to create new niche markets, markets with a higher degree of profitability than mass market, because it's very hard to make a profit selling thousands and thousands of units of the same thing.

SK

Right, this is a problem.

DM

It's what I call "the dialectic of taste," because on the one hand we are trying to break through this remote relation, the relation established by mass production, but this is happening just as that relation seems like it's on its last legs anyway.

SK

And class issues really come to the fore in terms of who is able to afford to produce in this way, and consume in this way. It's quite a dilemma.

DM

I want to ask another question about the geography of urban fashion. Nowadays, it is often very expensive to live in the heart of the city. How does this process of gentrification affect urban fashion? There's an issue of cooptation or the appropriation of urban styles, and this was something that people from the suburbs or from outside the city were accused of doing to the city, but now I wonder if the city center itself has been appropriated.

SK

Well, in the case of San Francisco, before the dot-com era in the South of Market area where many of the factories were, you could still get a hold of fabric and thread and pretty basic things like that. But, and as I understand it, during the dot-com era it became much more of a virtual space, and the rent went up, and it became gentrified. It was harder for people to afford to

produce there, it was hard to get the materials, which is just crucial for fashion, and so it became much harder to produce in San Francisco. And when the dot-com bubble burst, some of the people who had been in that business got back into the apparel business, but in a much more virtual way (for example, e-commerce) than before.

DM

Before that, production in the city was related to the number of stores that sold buttons and threads and pieces and things like that—you could probably just walk around and get ideas from different materials?

SK

Yes, to some extent, and there had to be some kind of distribution system too, even if it was just wholesalers coming around. But if you lose the dynamic of that place you're not going to have people coming around selling their zippers or their buttons or whatever....For example, and this is totally off the subject, but it has to do with the flow of materials. A few years ago I started noticing that the zippers in women's dresses were shiny and silver, that they weren't blending in with the back of the garment, and it finally occurred to me, oh, it's easier to distribute neutral zippers!

It became fashionable not to hem a skirt, to just cut it off, so that's it just raw edges. For someone who grew up sewing it's just heresy, you know? But now it's okay? And then you realize, oh, that's because it's cheaper, and this is a flexible system and it requires less labor.

There ends up being less specificity in the colors and there's more of a tendency to just have a generic zipper, and it can even be a fashionable thing to have a shiny silver zipper—so the materials and the flexibility of distributing those materials, as well as labor issues, shape fashion.

DM

Let's talk about the relation of the fashion industry to street style. The industry appropriates images and street styles of historically marginalized communities and transforms them into market trends. What is the appeal associated with such images and styles? And how does the commodification affect the communities from which these styles emerged?

SK

A good example of this process is hip-hop fashion and the way it's been appropriated by the fashion industry without necessarily benefitting the people who actually created the styles. Again, it's *how* they wear things, *how* they wear their baseball caps or how they wear their pants or how loose the shirts are. But one thing that's interesting about a style like hip hop is that there have been African American producers like Fubu (For Us, By Us) and Cross Colours. And people in the hip-hop industry (like Sean John) have started their own businesses, have tried to give back to the African American community—and at

least try to acknowledge the source of the inspiration, instead of just using it as a way to allude to urban edginess on the runway, generating anxiety, and capitalizing on that.

DM

Isn't there a built in limit to using urban tropes as a sign for some sort of abstract edginess? If street style is a performance—the way something is worn and the gestures around it—then any adoption of it opens one to the accusation of being a poseur, or not keeping it real. I don't know if that's still a stinging criticism these days.

SK

I think that because street style is often so fresh, that because people are always switching it up in subtle ways, it keeps the industry going—trying to capture those changes and capitalize on them. It's a never-ending process, and that's why they hire cool-hunters just to go take pictures of kids on the street and try to figure out a new way to wear this or that.

I think that there's a lot to be learned from street style. Sometimes it's a matter of capturing an overall trend that's common, and other times it's a matter of finding the most strikingly different looks. Street style can be a competitive thing, such as in the case of the Harajuku street style looks in the Tokyo neighborhood where kids, especially young girls, come from all over Tokyo or the countryside, to dress up in order to be photographed.

DM

The consumer becomes the designer. The street is their public runway.

SK

And in fact some of them do go on to become designers, so it's a way to develop one's DIY ability and foster a career from it.

I think we may, however, draw too much from street style in two diverging, either/or ways. It seems like it goes either toward the common denominator or to the most shocking thing that you see on the street. Real changes in fashion probably occur in between these poles of conformity and radical difference.

DM

Is fashion authenticity derived from individual creative genius or is it achieved by those who are really skilled at the craft of fashion? You mentioned the importance of sewing and knowing how to obtain materials. Does one need to be somewhat of an industry insider?

SK

Authenticity to me is such an interesting concept because there are different kinds of authenticity. There's the creative genius kind, whether it's a designer or a consumer putting together a really novel look, or there's cultural or ethnic

authenticity, and all of these end up getting appropriated somehow, and they're not necessarily distinct from each other, so it's hard to know if people are talking about artistic or ethnic authenticity or whatever we're talking about: Whose idea was this; who did it first? What is the cultural history of this style, and what does it mean for one's cultural history to be co-opted and sold and tossed aside as being out of style next season? I think there are all kinds of issues around authenticity. In fact, there's probably an authenticating narrative about fashion arising from the streets, wherein street style is framed as being the true source of inspiration. Fashion designers pick up on that and appropriate it, so they will be viewed as authentic on the runway. So it's interesting how authenticity is such a slippery concept that moves from the street to the runway and back again.

DM

Did you see this recent debate in the *New York Times* on the question on the globalization of street style? It basically asks whether or not globalization and the Internet have a homogenizing influence. I can understand this argument, but at the same time the amount of sources and options people see today has never been greater.

SK

There's a global paradox in which we have heterogeneity and homogeneity at the same time: a process of homogenization is blurring cultural differences, but at the same time there are many more options, although it may not always feel like it. When you go online and search, you can find some things that are really different, so it seems like globalization has us going in both directions at once. This is a paradox that also applies to other areas of consumption, such as food.

Globalization has also privileged the idea of the world city. I've been thinking about this lately. In the media, not only are cities more represented than rural areas, but only certain cities are represented. Everyone around the world watches these shows on TV, or on the Internet, and they see the same cities again and again. That's why there's such a fascination with the idea of a world city in fashion, and so much concern about which cities get anointed with that label.

DM

There is a lot of attention placed on the so-called world cities, but you have written about other kinds of relations between fashion and place. What other ways are there to support fashion communities in cities, even in the medium-sized or smaller cities—ways that might allow these cities to participate in this kind of creative social activity?

SK

There was actually a community event at the Yerba Buena Center in San Francisco a couple of years ago that Leslie Rabine and I participated in that was really exciting—it was about fashion in San Francisco, and it acknowledged the

role cultural histories and ethnicities and small designers play. The work of these local designers was shown. There were fashion shows and discussions about fashion as a sense of place. It was a community event, and an interesting alternative to the fashion week model. Too often cities end up doing the same thing—drawing from what might be called a toolkit, which says, if you want to be a fashion city, these are the things you need to do. And it doesn't seem like one size is going to fit all places, so it probably needs to be tailored for different locations and different concepts.

DM

One more thing: is there anything like "slow fashion," like slow food, a model that's different from this high stakes of world city fashions?

SK

I think so. There is a lot of discussion about sustainability and there is more attention paid to materials and where they come from, and more concern about the waste factor. Some people are talking about slow fashion as a way to slow fashion down, a way to produce and consume fashion in a more sustainable way, paying attention to place as a site of production.

It's a little harder than with food, I think, because not everyone is able to produce their own clothing. Yet, there are discussions like this, and there are people doing experiments, trying only to produce clothing and wear clothing—all the materials and all the labor, including where the cotton is grown, everything—within a certain radius.

I think my latest interest in rural fashion has to do with this idea, the idea that something may be learned by slowing things down. Today, everybody's online getting their photos posted and there's this technological acceleration in the pace of fashion. By slowing it down, there may be some way to think through its processes in a more questioning, sustainable way.

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