

New Orthopaedic Boots and Incontinence Panties

Michael Shamash, 2004

Clothes are a vitally important part of how we construct our world. By wearing them we make a statement as to whom we are and how we want to be perceived. They are part signpost and part camouflage. Many people, though, still find the world of fashion as daunting; a hinterland of conflicting styles, images and messages as to your self-definition. To the disabled person it is an even more impenetrable with a panoply of garments that often seem to be utterly insensitive to our impairments sold in a setting that is never structured with our needs in mind or physically constructed to ensure that the process of acquisition is a straightforward one. Yet, being aware of the positive aspects of our appearance could mark a major step in an exciting self-realisation of both identity and potential.

In fact it could be argued that until relatively recently the main images of disabled person's clothing were exhibits in the history of disabled peoples' exclusion from mainstream society. The stereotypical images of the person with the mental health problems wearing the ill-fitted suit covered in badges, the person with learning disabilities invariably wearing leggings and the wheelchair user always wearing grey slacks. We were dressed, we didn't wear clothes.

I worked for an organisation of disabled people in west London and when looking through the local authority archive all the images of disabled people seemed to be wearing the dreariest, greyest garments whilst some local dignitary dressed in fur coats and pearls smiled benevolently at these dowdy poor unfortunates. The clothes that were specifically designed for the disabled community were there expressly to meet medical needs not to ensure social inclusion and parity. Yet disabled people were not inherently less fashion conscious; they had simply never been given the chance to use their apparel as a form of expression.

I have been fortunate in having a fashion-aware family so it was always taken for granted that I would be dressed in a like manner to my non-impaired peers. Like everyone we can all look back at some of the fashion disasters that we embarked upon in the name of style-consciousness. As a person of restricted growth the main problem seemed to be getting trousers cut and tapered otherwise it invariably seemed as if you were single-handedly embarking on

a campaign to bring back loon pants. I remember my father once criticised me for wearing a pink sweater, as it would make me too conspicuous. I had to explain that if I wore a grey suit I would still be noticeable so I might just as well wear the clothes that I want. To oppressed groups clothing is a means of asserting your strength through your identity. We can see direct parallels with the black and lesbian and gay community.

Disabled people are too often perceived as a set of social problems not as individuals for whom society's disabling denies us a chance to show our own particular sensibilities. I am not denying the power of collective struggle within the disabled person's movement but I feel that our individuality and idiosyncrasy can get lost too easily. We do have style; our dignity against prejudice bears evidence to this and it is therefore so important that it can be expressed.

A major advance, therefore, came when the London based style magazine "Dazed and Confused" had in April 1998 an edition with the fashion designer Alexander McQueen as the guest editor. He commissioned the acclaimed photographer Nick Knight to do a photo shoot of people with a range of impairments wearing creations designed by a range of renowned innovative designers including Comme des Garçons, Hussein Charlayan and Owen Gaster. Here at last was a chance to show disabled people in a context, which emphasised beauty and attraction. Here were visually engaging, gorgeous images which gave the participants their own beauty. Impairment was sexy.

At the time it seemed as if the shoot would mark a new stage in the reclamation of fashionable style by disabled people. One of the participants, Aimee Mullins had stylish prosthetic legs designed which allowed rapid movement and the wearing of skirts which would traditionally have revealed ungainly plastic limbs. There were people with different impairments looking stunning. The show would be seen to cock a snoot at the dominant images of able-bodied conventions of beauty. Another participant, Catherine Long commented that due to a missing arm she had felt uncomfortable wearing sleeveless garments but could now feel emboldened to do this. "It was a big thing for me to do...it was quite liberating to find out I could do that"(Susannah Frankel, The Guardian, London, August 29th 1998).

As another of the participants the actor, Mat Fraser, stated at the time, "I'm so fucked off with body fascism...The fundamental issue is that we, as disabled people are invisible, we're suffering from apartheid and we're most of all invisible in fashion and advertising.

To be given the opportunity to turn the page on that was something we couldn't refuse". "I know mates of mine will say," Who the hell d'you think you are, Naomi Campbell? The fact is there will always be a fashion world and we should be changing it from the inside as well as the outside". (Ibid).

There was at the time concerns voiced that the disabled persons' movement would regard the photos as irrelevant and a diversion. There were worries expressed that the separation from the mainstream of fashion could reinforce the idea of difference and exclusion. As Clara Smyth of the Royal National Institute of the Deaf (RNID) remarked,"by actually choosing a group of disabled people and photographing them together they are reinforcing the myth that they are different or special, thereby reinforcing...prejudice"(Ibid). The participation of organisations such as the Greater London Association of Disabled People (GLAD) ensured that it would attain greater credibility amongst the disabled community. As Brenda Ellis from GLAD stated," Okay, it's only a fashion shoot, but it's there to raise people's awareness and it's a very useful way of saying that we're not all pathetic people living miserable lives which is how society tends to portray us"(Ibid).

It is this sense of self-empowerment that makes fashion whilst on one level utterly superficial at a deeper level very profound. The in-your-face quality of the "Dazed and Confused" issue served both to shock but also to make apparent the fashion awareness which, disabled people can have. It also marked an attempt to expand commonly held perceptions of beauty. As Nick Knight commented," This was never a shoot that aimed to hide disability...my aim was to push back the boundaries of what is and isn't beautiful. There should be a lot more things like this but instead of opening up they're getting narrower all the time"(Susannah Frankel, August 29th 1998). The responses of the participants, although aware of the contradictions inherent in the process generally felt the experience to be a very positive one. As Catherine Long remarked, "I thought it was a brilliant opportunity but I did feel really weird being the centre of attention (Ibid)".

For a brief moment it seemed that the world of fashion design and photography would embrace the concept of inclusion. Other initiatives emerged including the setting up of the Nottingham-based organisation, Awear. It was made clear in purely commercial terms how much of the market the major clothing producers and designers were losing by neglecting the fashion needs of people with impairments. A forum was established with

major clothing retailers to ensure that the needs of the disabled clothes consumer would be catered for.

The next major moment in the development of the disabled person's fashion scene was in April 12th 2000 when the London access organisation, Artsline, organised an inclusive fashion show entitled *In Our Fashion*. The show took place at the Camden Centre in Kings Cross and featured a broad selection of designers including avant-garde designers, Bourhan Basma and Helen David, major high street brands such as Marks and Spencer's, specialist disabled clothes suppliers, Wearable and a young hearing impaired designer, Sam Noble. The models, likewise, included people with a range of impairments.

As Wayne Hemingway of Red or Dead, another participating designer noted, "Fashion needs a kick up the arse. The fashion industry needs to be more accepting and adopt a more ethical code on who it dresses and how. Fashion has always been an extension of personality and fashion styles need to be created which reflect the richness of disabled people's lives" (Michael Shamash, *The Guardian London*, April 7th, 2000). A whole new bright horizon seemed to be opening up with both specialist clothing manufacturers aiming for trendiness and mainstream manufacturers at last preparing to engage with style-conscious disabled people. Stores such as Selfridges were looking towards developing their shopping and alteration services in a more disabled person-friendly direction.

Other organisations of disabled people were starting to see fashion as a means of highlighting their activities in a manner that seemed to accentuate an affirmative perception of disabled people. A London based organisation of disabled people, Action Disability Kensington and Chelsea (ADKC) held a fund-raising fashion show in Kensington Town Hall using solely disabled models and the response was extremely positive. Leonard Cheshire even launched VisABLE 2000 a scheme to launch the career of a fashion model with an impairment. As one of the participants, Alice, stated somewhat optimistically, "It's about time that advertisers changed their tune. It shouldn't be important that someone in a photograph is disabled" (Jane Hughes, *The Evening Standard*, London, May 3rd, 2000). Yet after this hiatus the whole scene seemed to die a death. Why did this happen?

There are many possible explanations. Alexander McQueen never used the position of strength, which, was the outcome of the "Dazed and Confused" edition to develop an ongoing fashion awareness of how disabled people could be incorporated within

the fashion establishment at every level. At the time, unlike Knight, he eschewed any political analysis of what he was doing. "I'm not doing this to save the world or anything", he said at the time. "They've got so much dignity and there is not a lot of dignity in high fashion. I think they (the participants) are all really beautiful. I just wanted them to be treated like everyone else"(Susannah Frankel, The Guardian, Manchester, August, 29th 1998. Neither was there any real commitment shown by any style or fashion magazines to develop this theme. If more curvaceous models were eschewed what chance was there for a person with a visible impairment?

Criticisms could also be made about the Artsline show. Despite a glut of initial publicity including an article written by myself in the Guardian and radio appearances the turnout to the event was poor. The Camden Centre at the back of Camden Town Hall was hardly the most glamorous setting for a fashion show and the media and celebrity profile was very limited. Neither factor was exactly aided by the night of the show having remarkably unseasonable cold, wet weather. Artsline did not recoup their costs as a consequence, which ensured no real commitment to make this a regular event. There was also a clear sense that the disability movement did not see the style, image and presentation of disabled people as a priority.

Thus an important era in the development of a sense of style for and by disabled people petered out more with whimper than bang. This does not undo the value of the projects. The organisations that emerged in this period have disappeared. Awear which, had such grand plans for the ongoing development of greater inclusion, has closed down and its phone number is now that of a private citizen in the Nottingham area. Wearable, the Scottish based company which wanted to develop the range of simple, stylish clothes for people with a range of mobility problems has gone bankrupt and is now back in business but with a much more restricted range.

However the issue of fashion for people with impairments cannot go away. With Part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act coming into force in October fashion designers, manufacturers and retailers cannot remain impervious to the needs of disabled people. The possibility of litigation may hasten this process. Fashion shops are still too often utterly inaccessible with steep stairs, poor lighting and shelving and unhelpful labelling. In order to address this issue the Disability Rights Commission has published a leaflet with the glamorous title of "SP5R: Improving access to goods and services for disabled customers (clothes shop)(DRC,

London, 2003)". This makes practical suggestions as to what measures can be taken to improve access to the retail-clothing environment. However the disabled person is seen as being simply a consumer.

In spite of moves such as these there is far too little participation by disabled people in the selling and designing of garments. When I was in Switzerland I noticed that their crutches were funky, lightweight models in bright colours presumably made by ski manufacturers. This should be the norm. There is a real need for local authorities and the Health Service to ensure that fashionable good design is a factor in the purchasing and service commissioning process. Impairment is a fact and not a shame.

What clothes are manufactured seem not to be designed with any sense of personal elegance in mind but merely to cover up catheters and prostheses. Whilst looking up this subject on the Internet I found an advert for an American company called "Finally it fits"(www.finallyitfits.com). Fashion is reduced to some tragic function bereft of any pleasure. I also found a guide with handy hints for the clothed disabled person such as "avoid clothes with descriptions like nursing home apparel, health care apparel or bib"(looksmart@www.findarticles.com). Or more peculiarly, "when you are interested in a product ask how long the company has been in business (Ibid)". I only want to buy a shirt not the shop. Even the few available specialist clothing company catalogues have a functional quality that eschews style and flair. The successor of Wearable advertises its products as "wheelchair clothing" which does seem to bypass the person wearing the clothing. The number of articles that I could use for this paper ceased to exist after 2000. I did find one article in the Belfast Times about a fashion show for wheelchair users in 2002 but this was on a small-scale (Sandra Chapman, Belfast News Letter, Belfast, May 22nd, 2002).

It is important that issues of social policy are addressed in terms of meeting the needs of disabled people in the twenty-first century. It is however equally necessary that we are not seen simply as the end product of some nexus of unmet needs that can be rectified by perfect social planning. Disabled people are so much more than an accessible bus or an adapted building. You could, perhaps, be accused of seeing the disability and not the person. What is the point of having social models of disability when your own social self-construction is not being heeded? We all need to feel attractive and inclusive fashion is a vital step in the full self-realisation of the potential of disabled people.

A holistic model of disability needs to be developed which has the courage to move away from an entirely social policy centred model. There is little point in using the accessible bus if there is nowhere to go and you feel ugly when you get there. In turn disability related studies would be incorporated in a far greater range of academic disciplines. Why don't design courses have disability-related elements? Disability needs to be seen more in terms of its cultural profile and the projection of assertive, differently stylish disabled people is integral to this process.

On a practical level there needs to be far greater participation by disabled people at all stages in the fashion industry. People with impairments who envisage these impairments not as a problem but as an exciting creative challenge could design clothes. People with visual impairments could have clothing created where the emphasis is centred on texture. Alteration services should be much more widely available and less costly. Major retailers could also undertake specialist clothing needs. The layout of fashion stores should be designed not to mystify but to be accessible and inclusive.

I went to the Paris Fashion Shows two years ago and I was probably the only evidently disabled person there. High fashion has to develop awareness of difference. Different bodies would be wearing different clothing differently making beauty accessible to all. The debate about inclusive involvement in the portrayal of fashion has to be concluded and then put into a meaningful practice. As Nick Knight said, "The idea that the photographer is the one person and everyone else is a nothing is rubbish..." (Sarah Brown, Knight Vision, British Journal of Photography, December 13th 2000). For the title of the paper I used (or misused) the title of an album, New Boots and Panties by Ian Drury, one of the few disabled performers to make it in the music world. Traditionally orthopaedic boots and incontinence panties were part of the disabled community's oppression. I would like them to be reclaimed as fashion items. Disabled people could then escape the margins and strut their stuff in the fashion page and on the main stage.

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