

THE AFFLUENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS FROM DIFFERENTIATION TO COLLECTIVISM (ON FASHION AND THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS)



Gergő Horváth, fragment for sketch of "HEY, I just called to say I won't be makin' it this fall", installation, photography, wood, drawings, variable dimensions, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Afluența clasei muncitoare de la diferențiere la colectivism (Despre modă și politica esteticii)

de Răzvan Ion

"Moda este un decor, un fundal sau o scenă, la fel ca în teatru."
(Roland Barthes)

Mecanismul prin care consumul este stimulat este de multe ori recunoscut ca „modă” sau, conceptual, drept „învecire preprogramată”. Definiții ale consumerismului de după cel de-al Doilea Război Mondial au evidențiat „fetișizarea” consumului, manipularea ideologică a consumatorului și proliferarea nevoilor. Dar se poate argumenta că acest consumerism este un efect al instabilității capitalismului, precum și al expansiunii lui, iar moda este un teren pe care s-au conturat noi forme de luptă între clase. Moda este un obicei, o deprindere colectivă.

Codurile sociale moderne permit grupului imediat inferior să imite gusturile și preferințele celui de deasupra sa. Conform acestui

model, grupurile cu un statut înalt sunt forțate să adopte stiluri noi pentru a-și menține superioritatea/diferența, gusturile filtrându-se în jos pe scara socială. Asta se întâmplă periodic, deci este creat un proces ciclic, generând mutațiile aparent misterioase pe care le numim modă. Moda nu mai este un element burghez, devine un lux necesar.

Prezentul actual nici măcar nu-și mai poate dobândi conștiința de sine pornind de la opoziția față de o epocă respinsă și depășită, de la opoziția față de o configurație a trecutului. Actualitatea poate să se întemeieze doar ca punct de intersecție între timp și eternitate. Cu această atingere directă între actualitate și eternitate, modernitatea nu

de Dior, desenele și reprodusele exacte având voie să apară doar la o lună după definire. Este cel mai relevant exemplu de inovație comercială și nu neapărat creativă.

Sunt mai multe legături care au fost făcute între clasa dominantă și consumerism, fetișizarea bunului de consum. Înmulțirea cursurilor denunță criza modei, fatală să captare în discurs, generalizarea spectacolului sau moartea imaginii indică îndeajuns de clar faptul că bătălia care avea ca obiect făgăduințele emancipării, iluziile și deziluziile istoriei, continuă astăzi pe tărâm estetic. Această estetică nu trebuie înțeleasă în sensul unei surprinderi perverse a politicii printr-o voință de artă, cum arată Rancière, prin gândirea unui popor ca operă de artă. Politica se referă la ceea ce se vede și la ceea ce se poate spune despre ceea ce se vede, la cei care au competența necesară pentru a vedea și calitatea de a spune, la proprietățile spațiilor și posibilitățile timpului. Regimul estetic desface corelația între subiect și modul de reprezentare.

Gândirea adevaratului pe care a moștenit-o tradiția gândirii critice relevă că obișnuitul devine frumos ca urmă a adevaratului. În opinia lui Rancière, teoria marxistă a fetișismului stă mărturie pentru asta în modul cel mai convingător cu putință: trebuie să smulgem marfa apărantei sale triviale și să facem din ea un obiect fantasmagoric, pentru a căi în ea expresia contradicțiilor unei societăți. Istoria savantă a vrut să facă selecții în configurația esteticopolitică ce-i conferă obiectul. A aplimat această fantasmagorie a adevaratului în conceptele sociologice pozitiviste ale mentalității expresiei și ale credinței/ignoranței.

În ceea ce privește identitatea, ea este un fenomen controversat. Dacă la naștere in-

dividul este o *tabula rasa*, atunci identitatea nu poate exista fără niște roluri mediate social. Oare ființa inferioară există cu adevărat, ca subiect ce transcende măștile și rolurile, sau este – aşa cum presupune Foucault – doar un rol modern? Oare atunci când pacientul, clientul sau chiar studentul este trimis în căutarea propriei identități, nu este el pus într-o situație disperată? Singura ieșire din această situație par să-o ofere identitatea surogat, iar specialistul se descurcă bine cu ele. Declararea măștilor și a rolurilor drept identități ar putea fi utilă pentru contactele noastre cotidiene cu cei din jur, dar astăzi nu îi mulțumește pe cei dorini de investigații mai profunde. În dialogul său despre *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger îl definește prin întoarcerea privirii dinspre o persoană pentru a o putea recunoaște.

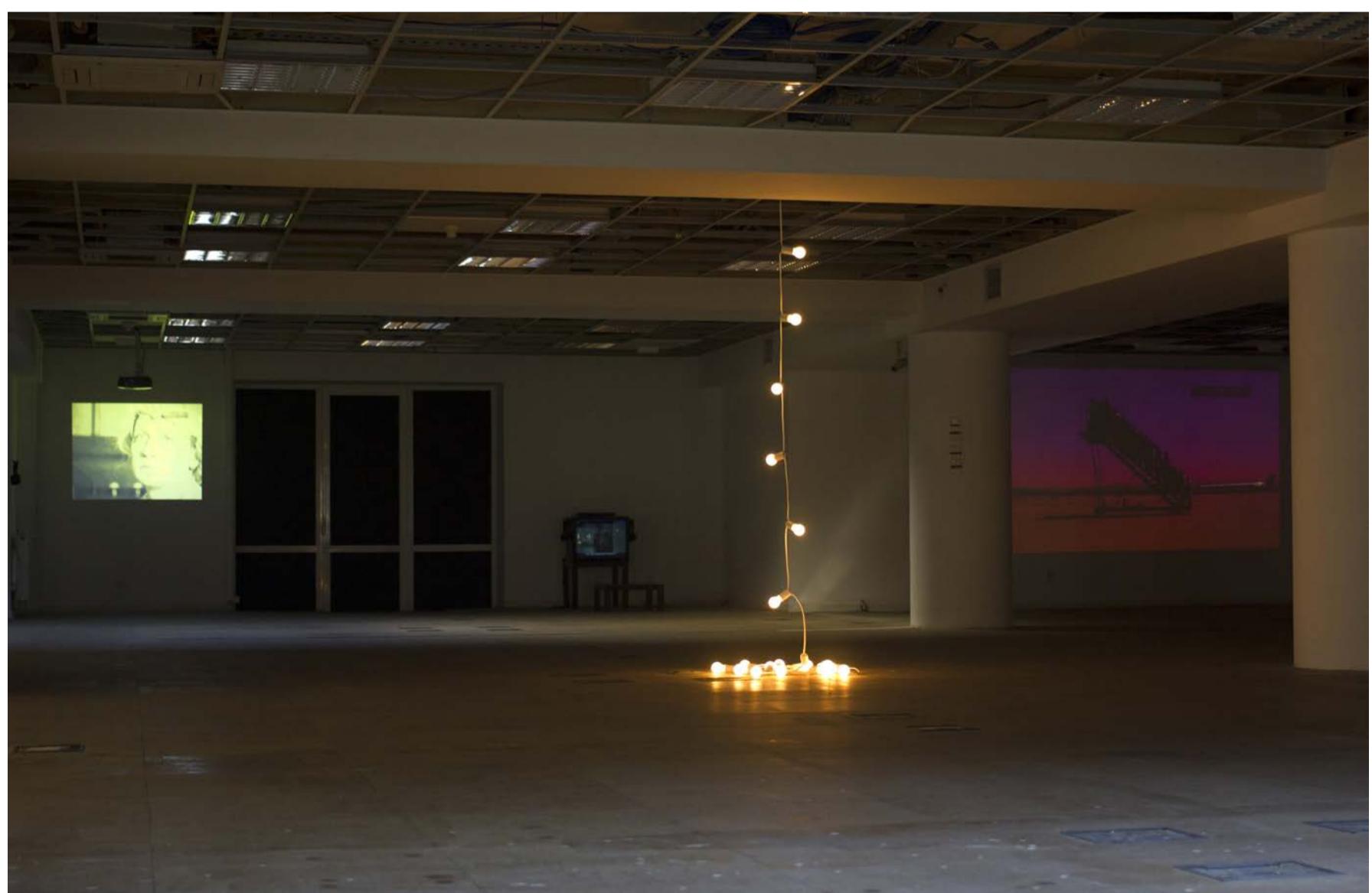
Strâns legată de un cod de personalitate imanent în aparentele publice era o dorință de controlare a acestor aparente prin creșterea conștiinței de sine. Comportamentul și conștiința sunt totuși într-o legătură ciudată; comportamentul vine înainte de conștiință. Este dezvăluit involuntar și dificil de controlat în avans, mai ales pentru că nu există reguli clare de cîdere a detaliilor miniaturnale; ele suntclare doar pentru inițiați și nu există un cod stabil utilizabil pentru a deveni un gentleman sau o femeie absolut respectabilă. În sexualitate, ca și în modă, odată ce oricine putea să treacă peste un anumit set de termeni, acei termeni devinu-ne importanți. Apare un set nou de indicații, un cod nou de penetrare; mistificarea personalității este continuată ca mistificare a bunurilor noi în magazine. Conștiința devine deci activitate retrospectivă, control a ceea ce a fost trăit, muncă de dezvăluire mai degrabă decât de pregătire. Dacă un caracter este afișat involuntar în prezent, poate fi controllat doar prin vederea lui la timpul trecut.

Pierre Bourdieu merge mai departe și afirmă că nici o judecată de stil nu este innocentă. „Civilizația”, afirmă Eugen Rădescu, „nu înseamnă mașina cu aburi, ci înseamnă civilitatea. Ne-am pierdut civilizația – am devenit inocente aspiratoare de ignoranță, durere, patimă, ură, show”. Ce crud sentiment este „alegerea” pentru omul ce a trăit într-un sistem ce nu-i permitea acest lucru! Mai ales acum, cind este vorba despre o alegere personală și nu una comunitară. Individul simte nevoia să aleagă între aceste două directive. De cele mai multe ori o alege pe ultima. E mai simplă. Născocită din istoria sa recentă, trăită deja, asumată și experimentată.

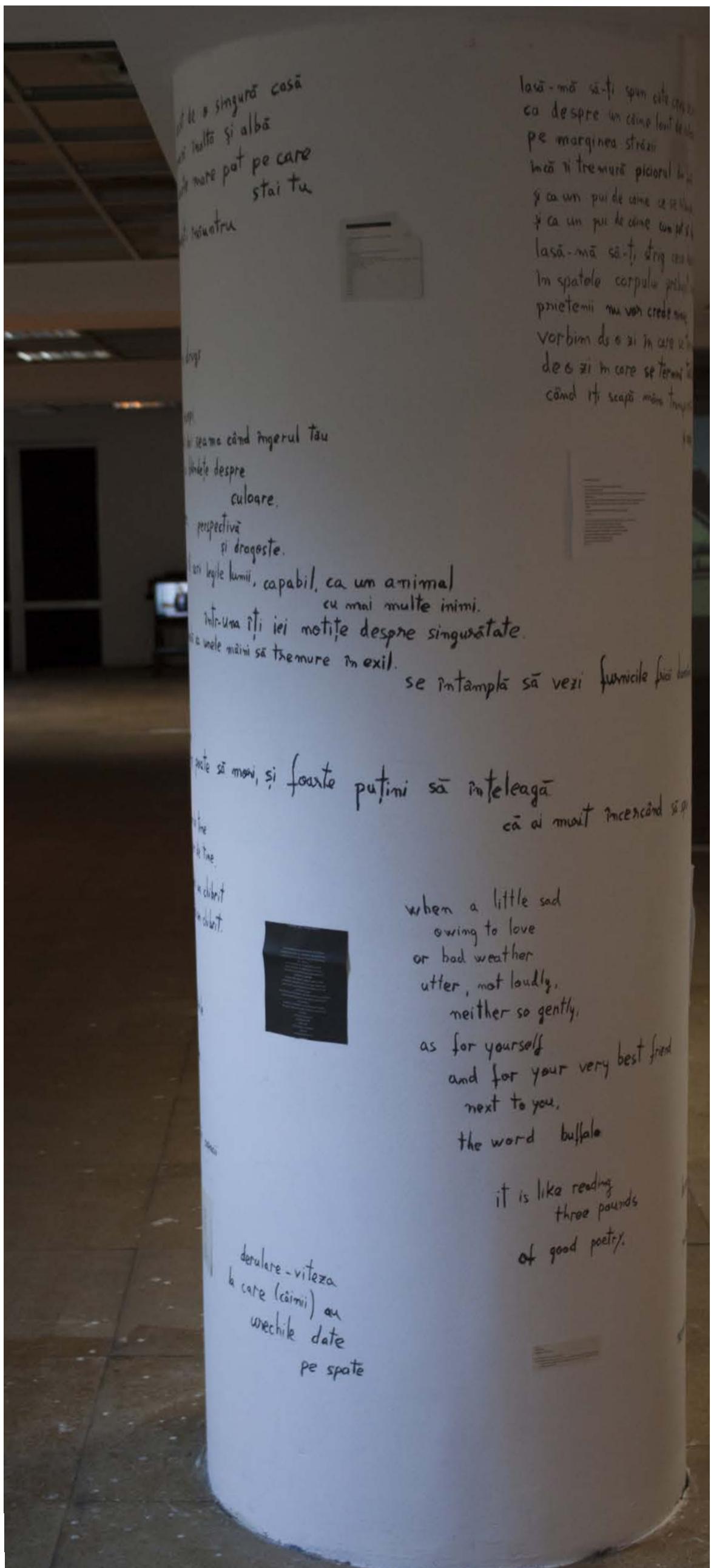
O istorie a nostalgiei nu este încă scrisă, dar această relație la timpul trecut a conștiinței cu comportamentul explică o diferență crucială. Trecutul este evocat nostalnic ca un timp al inocenței și al trăirilor modeste. În trecut cineva era realmente în viață numai dacă era capabil să dea sens trecutului; astfel confuzia prezentului ar putea fi facilitată. Aceasta este adevarul prin retrospectie. Terapia psihiatrică vine din acest simț al nostalgiei victoriene, la fel ca și cultul modern al tineretii – cult care determină fetișizarea produsului de consum, raportarea la publicațiile comerciale de modă, dorința de a te face mai dorit, diferențindu-te de cel de care, în teoria egalitară, nu ar fi necesar să te distanțezi prin posesia de bunuri.

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Installation view from the exhibition "The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)" curated by Răzvan Ion at Pavilion, Bucharest. Here: Vladislav Mamyshev (Cafe Elefant, video, black and white, sound, 2'45", 2008), Corneliu Porumbou (A trip to the city", short film, 19 min., 2003), Adrian Paci (Centro di permanenza temporanea, video, colour, sound, 5'30", 2007), Felix Gonzales-Torres (Untitled-Last Light, 24 matte light bulbs, electrical cable, dimmer switch, variable dimensions, 1993). Courtesy of the artists and www.pavilioncenter.ro.



Installation view from the exhibition "The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)" curated by Răzvan Ion at Pavilion, Bucharest. Here: Radu Nîtescu (Gringo, poetry written with black fineliner on the wall, bookpages, variable dimension, 2013). Courtesy of the artist and www.pavilioncenter.ro.

The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)

de Răzvan Ion

"Fashion is a decor, a background or a scene, in short, as a theater."(Roland Barthes)

The mechanism through which consumption is stimulated has often been acknowledged as "fashion" or, more conceptually, as "preprogrammed obsolescence". The definitions given to consumerism after the Second World War have distinguished "fetishization" of consumption, ideological manipulation of the consumer, and rapid increase of human needs. One can argue that this consumerism is an effect of the instability of capitalism and, concurrently, of its expansion, while fashion is a battlefield for the emerging new forms of interclass struggles. Fashion is a habit, a collective habit.

Modern social codes allow the immediately inferior group to imitate the tastes and preferences of the superior one. According to this model, groups of higher status are forced to adopt new styles in order to maintain their superiority or distinction; thus tastes strain down the social ladder. This happens periodically; hence a cyclic process is created, generating seemingly mysterious mutations that we call fashion. Fashion is not a bourgeois element, it becomes a necessary luxury.

The current present cannot even achieve its self-

awareness off the opposition to a rejected outdated epoch, off the opposition to a configuration of the past. Actuality can be established only as a junction point between time and eternity. With this direct touch between actuality and eternity, modernity does not get rid of its decay, but its triteness. In Baudelaire's view, modernity is thought out in such a manner that the transitional moment finds acknowledgement as the authentic past of a present still to come. It proves itself to be what will someday become classic; "classic" is now the "lightning bolt" of a new world that will have no durability whatsoever; a world doomed to destruction at the very moment of its birth. Habermas says that this perception of time, radicalized once more in surrealism, establishes the kinship between modernity and fashion.

Benjamin constructs the collocation "current time" – "Jetzeit" –, in which one can find scattered shards of the messianic, perfect time, with the help of the imitation motive, that has become rather immaterial, and that can be detected in the manifestations of fashion: "The French Revolution identified itself with a reversed Rome. It invoked Ancient Rome as fashion invokes an attire from the past. Fashion has a special scene for

the actuality, no matter where it may be moving along among the thickets of the past. It represents the leap to the past.. The same leap of history is a dialectical one, in the image Marx used to conceive the revolution". Benjamin rebels not solely against the borrowed normativity of an understanding of history created by imitating models, but he also fights against both conceptions that already capture and cancel out the challenge of the new and unexpected, on the ground of the modern understanding of history.

There have been numerous accounts on fashion that acknowledge its function in the process of expressing the class difference in the capitalist society, but they tend to perceive it as an organism acting automatically for the benefits of the dominant or privileged classes. The financial affluence of the middle class, together with the massive consumption, are seen as means of exclusion – failure to identify with other groups. The affluence of the middle class is seen as a means of imitation – identification with other groups. It is believed that mass production threatens to erode, to absorb, or to trivialize the differences between the classes, transforming the preservation of the "distinction" into the prerogative of the



Installation view from the exhibition "The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)" curated by Răzvan Ion at Pavilion, Bucharest. Here: Gergő Horváth (- some kind of mental decay -, installation with sound 5'26"on loop, chair, slide projection, variable dimension, 2011), Maria Balea (Working Class Heroes, collage of found photographs, found wooden base, industrial lamp, heater, 2012). Courtesy of the artist and www.pavilioncenter.ro.



Installation view from the exhibition "The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)" curated by Răzvan Ion at Pavilion, Bucharest. Here: Cosmin Grădinaru (Untitled-framed photo of a pin-up girl as a housekeeper, installation with wooden photo frame, black and white foundphotograph, wooden plinth, price label, variable dimension, 2012). Courtesy of the artist and www.pavilioncenter.ro.

privileged and elite groups. As a result, those who belong to the subordinate groups, instead of developing their own methods of exclusion, crave the ones from the higher status groups. An effect of reproducing social structures or imitating social behaviors follows close. According to the logic of the egalitarian society, when people don't have to exhibit the social differences, they will not do so. If the law and the anonymity allow you to "escape" by being anyone you choose to be, then you will not try to redefine yourself. However, egalitarian logic quits functioning when applied to an *ancien régime* city. Despite the fact that there is a desire to observe dress codes, while doing so, people hope to impose a pattern on the mixture of strangers from the streets.

Life is more acceptable from a social point of view if people are perceived as they wish to be, and not as they really are. When thinking of this, clothes have a meaning that is independent of their wearer or his body. The body is a shape that needs decorating. The social aura has to be created. This discrepancy shows the moral and ethical decay of a majority that wishes to have the power of decision, yet ends up in a deplorable state of psychosis, generated by the lack of recognition, despite all the accessories used. Dress codes serve well as means of regulating street behavior if people are arbitrarily identified by those with a lower intellectual or educational position. The fact that people are not what they wear – at least not a significant majority of them – is less important than their desire to wear something that can be easily recognizable. This problem has created a new relation between clothing and cars; it has generated a new accessory. Even the human being becomes a kind of accessory, and those with whom some kind of association is produced respond to a determined, generalized aesthetic tendency. (Habermas)

Fetishism and spectacularization create the illusion of a change in the conditions of existence. The selection of tastes and interests in fashion is considered a means of social improvement, and the modern woman or the modern man are perceived as a spectacle used to display wealth and distinction. But, in the same time, they are not acknowledged as indicators of an authentic social change, but as means of disguising or denying socio-economic differences.

Still, the model of the outcasts can threaten this clarity. Historically speaking, the rules are shaken by the emergence of dandism and, later on, of hipsters. Only the disguise of the historical costume can reveal the eternal beauty – Benjamin conferred later on this behavior the expression of the dialectical image. The role of the young dandy consists of directing in an aggressive, though a world-weary manner, this sort of extravagances and to exhibit extravagances through provocative means. The young dandy combines idleness and fashion-related issues with the pleasure of flabbergasting – while he will never be flabbergasted. He is the expert in ephemeral pleasure of the instant that generates the novelty: "He seeks that something which, with your permission, I want to characterize as 'modernity'; because there is no better word to express the idea in question. The important thing for him is to take away from fashion everything that fashion wishes to render poetic in its historic side and eternal in its ephemeral side". (Habermas)

After the Second World War the working class was perceived as divided between "the marginals" (who were thought to be rejecting commodities) and the majority (passive consumers). For example, the subcultural (masculinized) style is different from the cultural (feminized) mass fash-

ion. As long as the activities of the middle class women were associated with devaluated cultural practices, the culture of the male working class enjoyed the status of a subversive culture, on account of the fact that goods are either refused, or creatively appropriated – such in DIY.

The theories presented above provided information for more recent approaches, such as the analysis of affluence as an ideology which seems to create a classless society by disguising or subduing differences. The phenomena of affluence and privatization, together with the increased consumption of non-essential goods in the domestic field, have been used as key concepts in analyzing the thawing of tension after the Second World War, even if it was thought that there is an image of a classless society lying underneath it. Differences are mustered in the leisure industry, in order to bring forth the identification of consumers – and to bring forth what seems to constitute different groups of consumers.

In these surveys excessive consumption, the downward trickle, and the affluence as ideology are notions which are based on understanding culture as a simple expression of socio-economic relations rather than as a place of active production of values and meanings associated with certain social classes.

The developments to which the terms "affluence" and "privatization" refer can be described more accurately as "mass markets" and "gender-based consumption", as these are the aims of the economic strategies created by the leisure industries, that were rather profit-oriented and not an outcome of the philanthropic democratization.

Mass media also address to certain market segments, therefore the afflux of information and influence flows mainly inside groups, rather than between groups. Within this system people who choose what becomes fashionable, such as the fashion editors from the major magazines and retail fashion buyers, act as agents for the specific sections to which the fashion consumers belong, and whose tastes and preferences have to be anticipated by them. Thus the roots of change in fashion design, manufacturing, and marketing are a reaction to the wish expressed by the majority of consumers. Thus, creativity is generated in the same way as for any other consumer good. The image denotes restraint, something different from the necessary functionality, yet the image of utility continues to represent an ideal for the professionals whose task is to regulate and socialize consumption.

The narcissistic identification with the objects does not eliminate the ability to fetishize or objectify them from a voyeuristic point of view. Instead of labeling narcissism and exhibitionism as ineluctably feminine, and fetishism and voyeurism as ineluctably masculine, as many other theorists have stated, we must accept these tendencies are interdependent, even though they are different for women and men.

Christian Dior has been dubbed "the modernizer of *haute couture*", as he pioneered the system through which manufacturers and shop sellers could sell a Christian Dior original copy and clothes based on paper patterns copyrighted by Dior, with the drawings and the exact reproductions being free for release only a month after the fashion presentation. This is the most relevant example of commercial innovation, even if not necessarily a creative one.

A number of connections has been made between the dominant class, consumerism, and the fetishization of the consumer goods. The proliferation of the discourses denouncing the fashion crisis, its fatal confinement into speech, the generalization of the show, or the death of image are clear indications of the fact that the battle whose object has been the promises of emancipation, the illusions, and disillusionments of history, continues to this day on in the aesthetic realm. As Rancière points out, this aesthetics should not be interpreted as a perverted astonishment of politics through the will to art, through a people's thinking as a work of art. Politics refers to what can be seen, to what can be said about what can be seen, to those who have the necessary competence to see and the prerogative to talk, to the space properties and time possibilities. The aesthetic regime unfolds the correlation between the subject and the mode of representation.

The meditation upon the genuine, which has been inherited by the tradition of critical thinking, reveals that the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the genuine. In Rancière's opinion, Marxist theory on fetishism ascertains this idea in the most persuasive way: we must strip the commodity of its trivial appearance and make it a phantasmagoric object, in order to interpret it as the expression of the contradictions existing within the society. Scholar history sought to make a selection in the aesthetic-politic configuration that confers the object. It flattened this phantasmagoria of the genuine into positivist sociological concepts of mentality/expression and of faith/ignorance.

As for the identity, it remains a controversial phenomenon. If the individual at birth is a blank slate, then identity cannot exist without some socially mediated roles. Does the inferior being truly exist as a subject transcending masks and roles or – as Foucault presumes – is he only a

modern role? When the patient, the client, or the student is dispatched on a quest for his own identity, isn't he or she put in a desperate situation? The only way out of this situation seems to be offered by the surrogate identities, and the specialist manages them well. Asserting masks and roles as identities could prove useful for our daily interactions with the people around us, yet it does not suffice for those who are prone to further investigations. In his dialogue on *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger defines it as averting one's eyes from a person in order to identify him or her.

In close connection to an immanent personality code concerning public appearances, there lies a desire to control these appearances by increasing self-awareness. Nevertheless, behavior and consciousness are oddly connected; behavior comes before consciousness. Behavior is involuntarily revealed, and is difficult to control in advance, especially because there are no plain rules for reading small details; these are plain for insiders only, and one cannot find a stable code to employ in order to become a gentleman or an absolutely respectable woman. In sexuality, as well as in fashion, once you can surpass a certain set of terms, these terms become unimportant. There emerge a new set of clues, a new penetration code; the mystification of personality is carried forward in stores as mystification of new commodities. Thus consciousness becomes a retrospective activity, a control of what has been lived, an endeavor towards disclosure rather than to training. If a character is involuntarily displayed into the present, he or she can be controlled only by watching it in the past tense.

Pierre Bourdieu goes even further, stating that no judgment of taste is innocent. "Civilization doesn't mean the steam engine, but it means civility," asserts Eugen Rădescu, "the ability to have civic relationships, to follow judicial norms. Somehow, all these attributes are lost. We have forgotten our civility; we have lost our civilization. We have become innocent vacuum cleaners and we are sucking in ignorance, pain, ardor, hatred, show." What a cruel feeling the "choice" is for a man who lived in a system that didn't allow it; especially now, when we talk about an individual choice, not a communal one. The individual feels the urge to choose between these two directives. He chooses the second most of the time. It is simpler. It arises from his recent history, it has already been lived, assumed, experimented.

A history of nostalgia has yet to be written, but this past tense relation of behavior with consciousness explains a crucial distinction. The past is nostalgically remembered as a time of innocence and modest experiences. In the past one was truly alive only if one was able to give a meaning to the past; hence the confusion of the present could be facilitated. This is the truth through retrospection. Psychoanalytic therapy arises from this sense of Victorian nostalgia, as well as the modern youth cult. The modern youth cult establishes the fetishization of the consumer good, the permanent resort to the commercial fashion magazines, the wish to become more desirable, while differentiating from those one should not distance through the possession of goods, according to the egalitarian theory.

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(Translated and adapted by Radu Pavel Gheo)

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Installation view from the exhibition "The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)" curated by Răzvan Ion at Pavilion, Bucharest. Here: Gergő Horváth (~ some kind of mental decay ~, installation with sound 5'26"on loop, chair, slide projection, variable dimension, 2011). Courtesy of the artist and www.pavilioncenter.ro.



Installation view from the exhibition "The Affluence of the Working Class from Differentiation to Collectivism (On Fashion and the Politics of Aesthetics)" curated by Răzvan Ion at Pavilion, Bucharest. Here: Andu Simion (Bayram, photo installation, chromatone, 12 wood frames 10x15cm, 2012). Courtesy of the artist and www.pavilioncenter.ro.

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