

PORTRAIT WOMEN'S HISTORY MUSEUM

The New York-based duo behind the label Women's History Museum have managed to smuggle a political attitude through the back door of fashion, making things up as they go along, ignoring seasonal collections and traditional runway shows in favour of impromptu art exhibitions and collaborative, unwearable xenofashion. Without formal training in either art or fashion, Amanda McGowan and Mattie Rivkah Barringer make work out of the scraps and reused pieces other designers would rather leave behind. It's not haute, but it's couture.
By Victoria Campbell

Alien vs. Prêt-à-porter

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The tableau vivant of onlookers filed neck to neck against the walls of a narrow concourse during this year's New York Fashion week is now *history*. So is the tantric haze of sweat and body oil that rose from the narrow ramp as bodies pumped down the track, leaving just a foot's width margin of error for the turn. Nobody can get there first. The cybersexual overtones knitted into layered crochets *is* this season. Operating outside of fashion's seasonal rhythm, Women's History Museum – a "label" started by self-taught designers Amanda McGowan and Mattie Rivkah Barringer in 2014 – follows a different logic: "Our work is always a contradiction in terms, as we make fashion but do not adhere to the fashion calendar and find it actually impossible if we want to avoid death both physical and psychic." WHM's Collection 006 – SEZX debuts in February, working backwards from the fashion calendar towards the event horizon of the Real; the line is a pre-"Fall" order in the weeks leading up to global system collapse. A month from now we'll all be working as cam-girls and learning how to knit. Until then, we'll have to get used to the phenomenon of deterritorialisated markets, science-fiction ardour, and a new romanticism. This isn't "speculative fiction", it's "style": Xenopunk, like xenofeminism and xenopoetics, is an esoteric vector that seeks to escape the "natural", the "given", and the "origin". The prefix *xeno-* denotes a stranger, an alien – something unknown in relation to that which it encounters. Under the seams of a dress or article of clothing, a line of flight edges into overdrive. *Xenopunk is going out of style.*

Now Collection 006 ceaselessly circulates thanks to amateur-grade footage pre-scaled to the iPhone X. The photos depict garments constructed using textiles and objects of diverse historical and regional origin. The wearable object is a collapse of timelines and units that desubjectivise the body as the fashion itself accelerates. But WHM's relationship to the editorial image also makes visible candid moments in the life of an art community in the weeks leading up to its collapse: "We make clothing for specific people, but as in fashion, everything and everyone can change at the last moment." A few weeks after the collection's launch, it did, to say nothing of the models quarantined in plexiglass glory boxes gyrating in the red-light district of the imagination. These are the final days of the runway.

Within the structure of fashion's development, there are at least two passages. The first, a Darwinian evolution of the commodity form – in



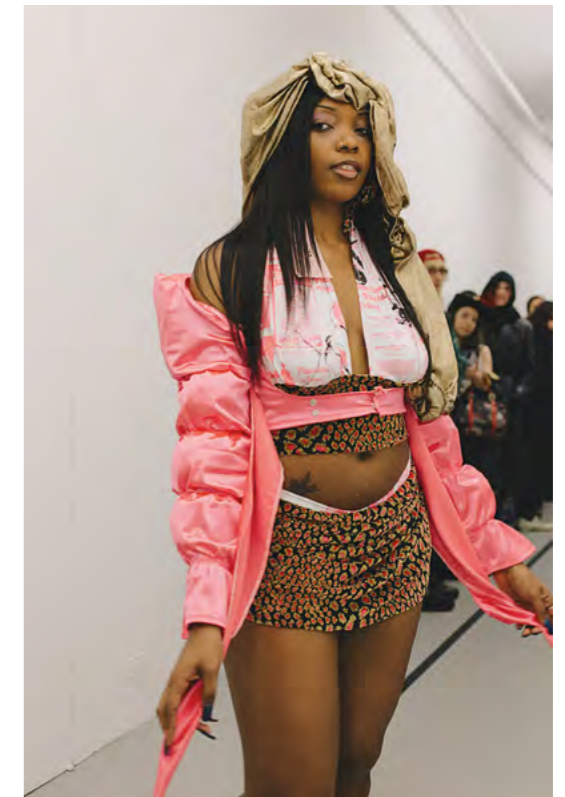
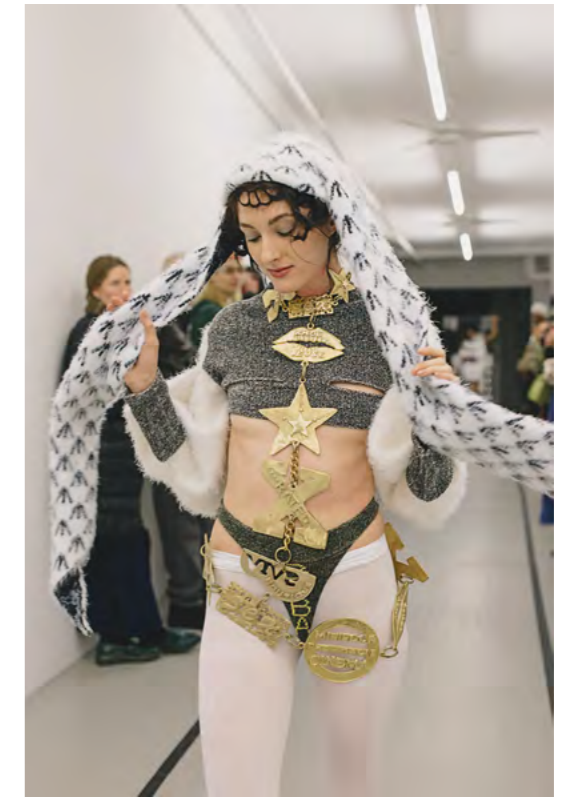
Collection 006 – SEZX
presented at Company Gallery, New York,
8 February 2020

which one look surpasses another, season by season. The second, and closer to the ethos of WHM, is that of a cycle of development that does not top or erase what comes before, acknowledging that those ideas and forms are still in circulation. Collection 006 is a cryptoerotic entanglement of cyberpunk and the belle époque. Tesseract are trending; the shape is tiled into quilts and drawn over legs in street stockings, an elaboration of the dimensional complexity of skin. Also spotted are new horizons in escape-hatch aesthetics: Garter belts are bolstered to bodices and corsets that could satisfy government health and safety regulations. Xenopunk desiccates figure/ground in order to spatialise the relationship between inside and outside: coordinates in a system with no centre. Collection 006 is the sixth in a stream of collections that each attempt to breach the innate internal entropy of assemblage – with each garment being a one-off, whose point of origin is the total exhaustion of any look. It focuses on materials that are used to *bind*, *border*, *beckon*, or *break*, but never *transcend* their wearer.

In WHM's formula, the clothing is made *out* of textiles, and bodies are made *over into* clothing. Couture is a cryptography that you have to decode by scrambling and unscrambling patterns in design until the velocity of their effects begin to mirror an emergent "look". "It is important for the actor to understand *not too quickly*," Brecht wrote in his 1949 essay "A Short Organum for the Theatre". This is fashion backward, not fashion forward. It's utterly impervious to any existing product model with the exception of contemporary art.

The philosopher Nick Land defines templexity as that which is "self-cultivating – or auto-productive – complexity is time disintegration". This is a kind of internal entropy, if you will, shoved through the variables of narrative space. For Land, in his descriptions of postmodern Shanghai, the reinscription of twentieth-century Chinese motifs into twenty-first-century high modernism makes the city a "time machine". Fashion is also a kind of time machine. Dress is a structure of dramatisation that either corresponds to or – as in the case of WHM – interrupts the assumed linearity of fashion's progression.

A thread of antihumanist thought breaks loose in WHM's attempts to push the political/aesthetic horizons of art into fashion. While contemporary art is undeniably the mainframe for creating paradigms that champion – on top of the right to





Collection 006 – SEZX, 2020

Courtesy the artists



Collection 006 – SEZX, 2020



Magasin Freixenet (detail), 2019, Featuring photos by Tyler Jones, 30,5 x 20 cm, Cast plaster and decals; Installation view "Poupées Gonflables", Springsteen, Baltimore

participate in markets – the pursuit of new and unhinged modes of novelty production. As such, critiques of representation and formal improvisation, render the so-called “avant-garde” as merely a hang-over. Interstitiality is just an allegory for freelancing. Xenofeminism is a speculative politics that bypasses the steroidal tendencies in accelerationism by politicising alienation not as a symptom of capitalist development but as a way out – to alienate oneself from alienation by making oneself alien. If there is no alternative, it is because one cannot be known.

I would call WHM’s ethos a kind of “hyperstit(ch)iality”, by which is meant: to make runs in the stockings of time. Pay to play or lose data. Fashion shows are what the twenty-first century has instead of epic theatre. The best fashion presentations resemble brazenly low-budget Brechtian epics. Amateur upgrade to amateur models – a little bit more inept, a little bit more dispossessed – in order to make visible the materiality of ideological production. Measures are taken against the high-end editorial regime and then often adopted by it, in which case you can do it even worse the next time around. Real models do coke and crash-diet; others do K and experiment with hormones. On WHM’S runway one can spot designer Gogo Graham circling (are straight lines really necessary here?), long-time friends, family members, and/or kids cast straight off the JMZ train to Chinatown. The only thing these faces and bodies have in common is a formidable downtown ambivalence and few chances of getting a callback from Ford Models.

Collection 006 is the bastard offspring of the post-Forever 21 rag trade and a well-cultivated eBay watchlist, but in WHM’s Choose Your Own Adventure game, players can insert coins and out pops a Brechtian bordello. (There is no single history, just other histories.) Obviously, the models that reveal the most skin are the ones stacked with the most clothing: thongs are stretched over jodhpurs, and corsets constructed out of reinforcement ribbon are works of meticulous construction, undermined by street-grade fishnets that mirror the quilted matter on display. Many garments leave gaping holes where entire panels should be. What

gets revealed is not skin but the promiscuous process of production itself, where the more offensive parts of the commodity get revealed. Remember those scenes in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), where the bums do a fashion show in costume? In Brecht, “Outfit A: A Victim of the Progress of Modern Traffic” reveals body mutation; “Outfit B: Victim of the Art of War”, has fake military medals; “Outfit C: Victim of the Industrial Boom”, is designed to make the wearer look as uneducated as possible; don’t forget “Outfit D – Celia! You’ve been drinking again!” *The Threepenny Opera* is set in a costume shop for vagrants and also a whorehouse, whereas WHM’s SEZX collection has the effect of a bootleg copy of the movie *The Fifth Element* (1997) screened in a twenty-four-hour casino. WHM is far less cynical than their Weimar counterparts: they make a point not to capitalise on trauma. Yet they extol a seductive criticality in the face of a world dominated by commodity exchange.

Counterfashion, or counterconstruction, might be more appropriate labels for Barringer and McGowan’s activities than the “total rebuke of fashion” claimed by the press. Resistance breeds persistence. The enigmatic duo doesn’t seem to care as much about breaking history as they do about twisting it. According to the Xenofeminism Manifesto, “Alienation is the labour of freedom’s construction.” What even *happened* after Fashion Week? And what year is it again? Whatever the future holds, it’s evident that Barringer and McGowan will be weaving the materiality of the past into the matrix of the future until meltdown: they’re still pushing deadline on the apocalypse, but gone are the days of doing runway on a roll of hardware tape and cramming everybody into the hallway to watch.

According to Barringer and McGowan, “We did not attend art or fashion school. We now see this as an advantage to how we work,” claiming finally, “there is no identity strategy.” Operating here is the kind of high-risk amateurism that results in either abject failure or the formation of a new and powerful ethics. Helping to construct many of the set designs and exhibition fabrications is

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Barringer's father. "My father (Steve Barringer) has helped us fabricate many of our set designs and some artworks, and both parents are really supportive and usually present at our shows." They want to teach a class on women and fashion one day – Silvia Federici is on the reading list – though not before they put their museum inside a department store. I wouldn't be surprised if the two knew witchcraft. When asked how online content production impacts the direction of their work, they shrug it off. An early photoshoot in a parking garage utilises the vernacular of mid-2000s Myspace photography: low contrast, desaturated, full frontal flash. It all flies in the face of the high-production centrefold or splash page in which five or six glossy images bolster the imposed rarity of the product advertised. The sheer quantity of content is what's important here: clothing is always already social media, why try to tailor the internet? None of this is about rarity. It's more about excess: having too much, being too much, showing too much. Their runway photography doesn't isolate the model but confuses wearers and onlookers. Upload everything. Let the users decide what should survive.

Xenocouture suggests clothing that, like our class identities, might be broken, or torn, or otherwise take considerable time to work over. Collection 002 circulates in the kind of prefab domestic settings associated with sub-subleases and Craigslist ads. The garments occupy the grey zone of done and undone. There's a material surplus here, but it's impoverished. The protagonists of WHM are denizens of a peripheral order, intersexed nomads who have more time to sew and source than they do to sell and shop: a circuit of value on the periphery of cultural production. This is anti-imperialist fashion. Clothing that personifies not the Other but the self – style is whomever you're talking to at the moment. The eponymous "women" is an unstable referent: the xenofeminist who takes T with no particular goal or outcome in mind but the autoexperimentation involved in othering the self.

What's important here is not the mode of production behind novelty but the new forms of consumption that it engenders. Is it better to have

no class than to have too much of it? Ask Susan Cianciolo and Bernadette Van-Huy how to tell the difference between a style and a political aesthetic. What stops their absorption into the totalising sphere of commodities?

It depends on what the image is trying to redeem. WHM's aesthetic is a messy, ambiguous territory that individualises the multitude by trapping the body in various states of dress and undress, so that the subject is never whole. What gets communicated in the WHM fashion image is that the garments on display, as commodities, can never "complete" the buyer or wearer as is intended by traditional marketing. "Western fashion is generally too obsessed with a false notion of 'wearability' and use-value within a hyper-capitalist hamster wheel which we all inhabit," Barringer and McGowan write.

This clothing is nothing if not *unwearable*: clasps, straps, buckles, and broken appliqués gesture towards the draconian elements of Western industrial production and trap wearers in an infinite cycle of *getting dressed*. When we get dressed, we participate in the production of the self as a social construction; when we get undressed, we reveal ourselves as Other, and *how* we get undressed is a positive, not a negative, process. WHM's non-models walk the naked gallows of the social, wearing garments that might not function as clothing at all. In Collection 002, garments are ripped to shards and layered over one another. That anyone can be Other as long as one is able to shift the way one sees the self makes separation a given if not the goal. "Don't cross that line!" – the very fabric of the social, the human, the self is coming undone. But what if this is not the side-effect of a "failed system", but the handiwork of those picking at the seams of its construction?

Barringer and McGowan tangle the assumed hierarchies of material, technique, and functionality. They are "raw material's complicity", according to Reza Negarestani's seminal cyberpunk text *Cyclonopedia* (2008), where wearers are invited to see themselves as subjects formed as much through the process of wearing clothing as they would be making clothing. The garments are

Courtesy the artists and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome



Installation view "Women's History Museum: OTMA's Body"
Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2018

collaborators not commodities. Wearers may have a hand in the actual construction of the garment or extend that de/construction over to a realm of taste-making and -unmaking. The resulting singularities resist absorption into capital's processes of valorisation, though perhaps only temporarily. But it's fashion's temporality, not its permanence, that affords the medium its ability to construct the genre and grammar of a now.

Chain-link collared belts, bellybutton-revealing button-downs, bad screenprinting, tart cards (those used by prostitutes to advertise their services), animal prints, Lucite kitten heels, ruched body suits in traumatic polyester, leg warmers, 1890s Parisian punk underwear, and skirts your parents wouldn't let you leave the house in, regardless of your actual gender. Cuffs, ties, loops. Cheap eyeliner, cheap makeup, cheap heels. Expensive labels. The one-off garment is treated as an everyday material thing that like a damaged chain-link fence becomes a matrix of events. Invitations, perhaps, for another garment. Unfinished horizons. Low-grade metallics fused with polyblends, Edwardian fabrics, antique unmentionables. You can screen-print on all of it, turning the given textiles into documents. All culture is appropriation. The author isn't dead, they're just not *anyone*.

If catastrophe, as Amy Ireland suggests, is another word for novelty, then WHM advances the notion that alienation could be another word for freedom. WHM is not looking for an answer to the political in fashion, but is using fashion as a means to extend the range of predeterminations beyond mere seasonal collections. The fashion label tugs at the xenofeminist demand for "superior forms of corruption" even as they take centre stage in a fashion and art world obsessed with moral maintenance. "Why would they need to explain themselves for having trans, gender non-conforming, African-American, Hispanic, Asian or white models of all different body sizes?" Reba Maybury implores, in her coverage of their 2018 presentation at New York's St. Marks Church, responding to an industry that celebrates "anti-fashion" and "anti-aesthetic" strategies so that they can ultimately deflect them. Destruction is a political statement. Deconstruction is the undoing of the political.

The object of xenocouture is not alienation but the careful objectification of subjectivation, which is neither a subjective nor objective reality. Xenopraxis entails a departure from the self as a means to multiply its possibilities. We're as



Donna, 2017, mixed media, dimensions variable
Installation view "Women's History Museum: OTMA's Body", Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2018

Courtesy the artists and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome



View of "Women's History Museum: her bed surrounded by machines" 2018
schwarzescafé / Luma Westbau, Zurich

conditioned to empathise with some subjects as we feel estranged by others. Why not start to render those differences illegible? Xenocouture divests its historical representations in order to re-invest, perilously, in anti-static time. It discharges the veil of the self, and does not remove it, but liquidates it – excites it – as if there could be any reality behind it that did not change once the film were removed. And this is necessarily

something to be antagonised, so that what gets thrown into crisis, again and again, is how we understand ourselves in relation to the external. WHM favours artifice over authenticity, but what comes to mind is the honesty of an approach made possible by a small-scale fashion house that materialises production by leaving open the circuits of collaboration and enterprise. Fashion is just another word for nothing left to lose.

WOMEN'S HISTORY MUSEUM, founded in New York in 2015, and still based there, is the moniker under which Mattie Rivkah Barringer and Amanda McGowan make work. Recent solo shows have taken place at schwarzescafé / Luma Westbau, Zurich, and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York (both 2018). Group shows include among others: "Autour de ma chambre", The Community, Paris, France; "Kathy Acker: Who Wants to Be Human All the Time", Performance Space, New York (both 2018); "Prick up Your Ears by Taylor Trabulus", Karma International, Los Angeles; "SMK Fridays: Institute for Success 2.0", Staten Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark; "Crumbling World Runway with Ser Serpas" at MoMA PS1, New York (all 2017).

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