

Post No Bill:

The Transience of New York City Street Style

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Abstract: The sidewalks outside New York Fashion Week are lined with makeshift plywood walls. They are designed to keep pedestrians out of construction zones, but they have become the backdrops of innumerable “street style” photographs, portraits taken on city streets of self-appointed fashion “influencers” and other stylish “regular” people. Photographers, working to build a reputation within the fashion industry, take photos of editors, bloggers, club kids, and models, looking to do the same thing. The makeshift walls have become a site for the staging and performance of urban style. This photo essay documents the production of style in urban space, a transient process made semi-permanent through photography.

KEYWORDS

- photography
- street style
- New York
- Fashion Week
- urban space



FIGURE 1

Street style photograph of Kate Lanphear,
outside Peter Som in New York.
Brent Luvaas, 2013, photograph.

The sidewalks of Chelsea and the Meatpacking District, where most of the off-site venues of New York Fashion Week are located, are lined with cheap plywood walls, painted dark blue or dark green, with concrete slabs at their base, and industrial-strength staples holding them into place (**see fig. 1 and fig. 2**). Their shoddy construction bespeaks their intended impermanence. Nails poke through. Paint cracks and fades. The venation of the wood remains visible beneath. The walls, erected as barricades between pedestrians and the myriad multimillion-dollar construction projects that are in process at any given time in Manhattan, are covered with simple, bold warnings: POST NO BILL.

**For the most part, there are no bills posted.
The walls remain empty. Pedestrians pass
quickly by.**



FIGURE 2

Street style photograph outside Jeremy Scott in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph., New York.



FIGURE 3

Street style photograph of Jeannie Lee, 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

During New York Fashion Week, the fashion industry's semi-annual marketing blitz, where designers' collections are previewed six months before they hit the stores, most of those pedestrians are on their way to and from shows (see fig. 3). There are buyers for department stores and retail websites, editors for fashion magazines, journalists with notebooks in hand, hair stylists and make-up artists, models still made up in the palette of a previous show. There are even the occasional celebrities — A- list through D- list — shopping for gowns for awards season.

Most of the people who pass, however, have a less formal status in the industry. We could even call them usurpers, hijacking the machinery of fashion for their own personal ends.



FIGURE 4

Street style photograph outside Jeremy Scott in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2013, photograph.

There are bloggers and other would be “influencers,” promoting their lifestyle brands. There are downtown club kids looking to see and be seen (see fig. 4). There are any number of people just hanging out, taking in the action, gawking at the attendees, stopping by for a moment on their way to Chelsea Market. There is also the occasional vagrant, looking for a handout from the over-dressed or hiding out in a temporary shelter accidentally provided for them by construction crews erecting pedestrian rain tunnels. And there are photographers like me, shooting all the action on the sidewalks for websites, magazines, and blogs (Luvaas, *Street Style: An Ethnography of Fashion Blogging*).



FIGURE 5

Street style photograph of Greg Dacyshyn, 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

The photographers don't always know who is who among the passing crowd. Some social (media) climbers take advantage of that ambiguity. If they get shot by the right people, they might end up on Vogue.com or Refinery29. They might make some Fashion Week best-dressed list. They might forge an unlikely fashion career out of "street style stardom" (Luvaas "Internet Famous in Real Life: Becoming a Street Style Star at New York Fashion Week"), become minor online celebrities, famous for their look. Michelle Harper managed that feat. So did Nick Wooster. Now they wield "free agent" entrepreneur status in the industry, "VIP" stamped on their party invitations. Maybe the usurpers, too, can cross that invisible line that separates the fashion industry from everyone else, fake being "somebody" until they actually are.

Social media fame is fashion industry currency these days, and to attract it, fashion show attendees wear their style as ostentatiously as possible, like mobile billboards for a branded self. Some of them get noticed and stopped by photographers. Most of them don't.



The photographers remain crouched along the sidewalks, their heavy DSLRs resting on their knees. You can't always predict what will get them on their feet.

FIGURE 6

Street style photograph of Miyako Belizzi, outside Jeremy Scott in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2015, photograph.

**FIGURE 7**

Street style photograph on 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

There is no uniformity to the styles that pass by, no one single demographic represented. There are industry insiders — mostly White, mostly women — in outfits loaned to them by brands and designed to demonstrate their elegant restraint. There are self-conscious outsiders — many Black, many Brown, some gender fluid, some trans — flaunting their street style as a means of being noticed on “their own terms” (Polhemus). They create their own “counterimages” to popular representation, then parade them in front of the lens (Kelley ix). Their very presence in these exclusive industry spaces is a political statement (Solnit 214), a mild form of provocation. There are also rich kids showing off their luxury duds, rappers signalling their ascent into high fashion. There are hundreds of games of distinction (Bourdieu) playing out on these sidewalks. The photographers freeze them into still frames (see Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*; Sontag) like accidental anthropologists (see fig. 6).

Most of the photos the photographers take are candid shots of people in motion. They focus on gestures — the inhale of a cigarette (**see fig. 5 and fig. 7**), the keying of a phone (**see fig. 8**) — those intimate acts of bodily hexis that challenge or re-inscribe social difference (Bourdieu). These are practiced gestures, acted out in front of a mirror before the events, done repeatedly in the privacy of one's home until they become second nature (Pham). Only then are they suitable for public consumption, once the performance is so thoroughly embodied there is no distance between it and them (Butler). The labour behind such acts of self-stylization is invisible (Duffy; Pham). It's meant to be. It would be a less convincing performance if it weren't. But that doesn't mean it's not work. The people who attend these shows have worked hard to make their gestures count, to perfect their look (Wissinger), to gain mastery over the gaze of others. They stylize their movements, enhance the rhythmicity of their walks. They do their best to draw the eyes of the photographers, then pretend to ignore them once they have. It is a kind of gentileperson's agreement between them.



FIGURE 8

Street style photograph of Danielle Bernstein, 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.



FIGURE 9

Street style photograph of Mari Malek, 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

“The streets,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his classic essay on the Parisian flâneur, “are the dwelling place of the collective,” that “eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that — in the space between the building fronts — experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls” (423). “For this collective,” he went on to write, “glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their ‘Post No Bills’ are its writing desk” (Benjamin 423). But what are the slapdash collective of New York Fashion Week writing at those desks? A soliloquy? A paean to urban living? A postcard home? Or just a scrappy paper sign, reading “Look at me, please!”

People come to New York City from all parts of the world to appear in front of these walls — Hong Kong, Paris, Japan, Sudan (**see fig. 9**) — though the walls were most likely not what they were imagining when they came. For them, New York was still brownstones and gothic high-rises, some vague promise of cinematic romance. They will leave with quite a different impression. The walls will become permanently associated with New York, a backdrop, a prop, a barrier. When I see that muddled dark blue or green in the background of other peoples' street style photographs, I recognize New York immediately (**see fig. 10 and fig. 11**).



FIGURE 10

Street style photograph on 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

**FIGURE 11**

Street style photograph of Mia Moretti, 15th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

The runways of New York Fashion Week, fashion journalists like to say in knowing, breathy voices, are no longer where the action is. Outside is. The sidewalks are the new catwalk (Menkes; Yarhi; Yi). Brands parade their wares on the borrowed bodies of self-appointed ambassadors. Magazines feature nearly as much coverage of the scene outside the shows as the outfits that walk within them. That's why there are so many photographers out there, shooting off twelve frames per second, and selling their whittled down images to W, i-D, and Elle. That's why so many wannabe influencers show up in their outlandish getups. The sidewalk is where you build your reputation as a street style star (Luvaas, "Internet Famous in Real Life: Becoming a Street Style Star at New York Fashion Week"; Luvaas, *Street Style: An Ethnography of Fashion Blogging*). It's where you get discovered by an industry with a notoriously insular gaze.

Even the editors, once safely ensconced in simple black, huddled with their notebooks in the corners of the runway (Menkes), recognize the power of the sidewalk. They too dress up to be seen on it. They too build their brands on social media engagement, leverage their followings to maximize their market appeal. But that doesn't mean they don't resent the new job requirements. Editors now have to carry out the never-ending "glamour labour" (Wissinger) once reserved for models and stylists.

Of course, the sidewalks have always been where urban style takes place (Hebdige; Polhemus; Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*), those spaces of transience through which the city's inhabitants pass in a state of alternately-conscious somnambulance (Benjamin).

**In urban space, style occurs in passing.
It moves on. Only as a photograph does
it take on the feel of permanence**
(see fig. 12 and fig. 13).



FIGURE 12

Street style photograph outside Jeremy Scott in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2013, photograph.

**FIGURE 13**

Street style photograph of Linda Tol, 14th street in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2016, photograph.

Most of the people attending New York Fashion Week pass by these walls without notice. No photographer singles them out. No editor selects them for media coverage. Some populations seem particularly invisible to the lens: Black and Brown people, LGBTQ youth, women over the age of 50, anyone over size 6 (Mears; Sadre-Orafai). They sidestep a human barrier of young Nordic blondes to make their way to the entrance. Other populations find themselves in momentary favour: Asian twenty-somethings with a distinctly middle-brow sensibility, the imagined key to opening up a huge new market without alienating an old one (Pham). The sidewalks, that is, are structured by the same racial hierarchies as elite fashion magazines and the personal blogosphere (Pham). Not everyone can make the sidewalk work for them. Not everyone can get the cameras to click for them. Not everyone can be a social media star.

And not everyone can stand what they become if they succeed in doing so: a two-dimensional representation that ossifies what was once fluid. Likes are addictive, followers like drugs (Marwick; Turkle). Once you figure out your thing and build a following around it, your followers expect you to stick to it; and once you stick to it, it's no longer clear that it's yours at all. It gets harder and harder to express yourself when your personal brand is locked in to one particular look or scheme. Self becomes trapped in a wardrobe of its own creation. The city becomes a cage.

There is, then, a reality to the danger that the makeshift walls warn us about. It's just not, perhaps, the danger the city imagines.



FIGURE 14

Street style photograph of Lainy Hedaya, outside Public School in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.



FIGURE 15

Street style photographers outside Milk Studios in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2014, photograph.

The city, claims Roland Barthes, is a text, and those who move through it are both its readers and its writers (**"Semiology and Urbanism"**; see fig. 14 and fig. 16). What message do these makeshift walls impart? What is the meaning of their text?

"Post no bill," they read in simple, laconic prose. Leave no mark, they might as well say. Pass through without a trace. The city, hidden behind these walls, does not belong to you.

Every season of New York Fashion Week seems to bring out more photographers (see fig. 15), cradling their Blue Bottle coffees in one hand, their cameras in the other, while lingering in pedestrian zones designed for movement. They are clots in the urban arteries (Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*), blocks in flow. Like the people that pass, photographers use this space to build their reputations, establish their own online brands (Luvaas, *Street Style: An Ethnography of Fashion Blogging*). They need the sidewalks to show what they can do. Yet every season, the space allotted to those photographers gets smaller. More construction zones. More traffic cones. The city seems to be conspiring against street style photography, even while benefiting from its associations. And as the fashion industry devises new methods to thwart the interlopers — smaller shows, harder to reach venues, online only presentations — the interlopers devise new methods to get noticed. Outfits get more extreme. Editors borrow sports cars from luxury brands. Influencers dance in the icy roadways while the shutters click (Luvaas, “Internet Famous in Real Life: Becoming a Street Style Star at New York Fashion Week”).

This is how urban style evolves: as a series of improvised, embodied performances played out on someone else’s stage.



FIGURE 16

Street style photograph outside Jeremy Scott in New York. Brent Luvaas, 2013, photograph.

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