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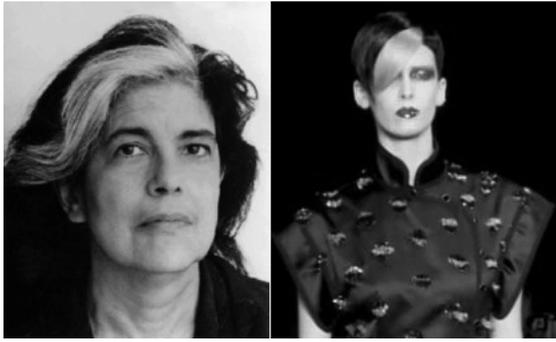
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Notes on "Notes on Camp"

📅 April 18, 2011 (<http://www.flarearts.org/?p=229>) 👤 Flare Arts (<http://www.flarearts.org/?author=2>)

Mention camp aesthetics in any discussion about art and inevitably, the conversation bifurcates faster than one can say "Vite! Vite!" at a Parisian fashion show. Earlier this month, Invisible Exports (<http://www.invisible-exports.com/>) opened *Notes On Notes on "Camp"* (http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/26_notesoncamp/notesonnotes.html), an exhibition examining a fraction of camp's contemporary aesthetic through the Sontag essay (http://interglacial.com/%7Eesburke/pub/prose/Susan_Sontag_-_Notes_on_Camp.html) that popularized it.

When it was published in 1964, camp was just gaining pop momentum in the U.S. Sontag's definition of camp was strict and formal—with all the training, pacing and glory of an academic marathon. But Sontag quantified the most enduring qualities of camp: "...unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it."



Left: Susan Sontag. Right: Kristina Salinovic in Marc Jacob's SS/2011 54 piece collection for Louis Vuitton.

That might give pause, for a great deal of consumer goods today are marketed through camp aesthetic—but what is termed "sophistication" hardly meets camp. That wasn't the case with Marc Jacob's *Spring/Summer '11* collection for Louis Vuitton during Paris Fashion Week. What immediately stood out in the first model down the runway was the white streak in her hair, à la Sontag. On each seat, the program notes included a quote from the Sontag essay, Note 49: "The relation between boredom and camp taste cannot be overestimated. Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence."

"I love art writing because it offends regular people and keeps them away." – John Waters ⁽¹⁾



Cary Leibowitz. *I Told You I Was Wearing This*, 2008. Diptych, latex on wood panels 24 x 24 inches each.

Duality being intrinsic to camp sensibility, Marc Jacobs' sartorial interpretation of camp—sequin sashes! chinoiserie! taxidermic tigers! Donna Summer!—paired two definitions of frivolity and opulence (camp, high-brow wealth). By commenting on the inflexibility of 'taste', Marc Jacobs (who can basically do whatever he wants) magnified classist contradictions. Very, very shiny classist contradictions. Fashion and design being barometers of consumer sophistication, it is unthinkable that another prominent gay designer (let's say, Tom Ford) would mount a show as Jacobs did. Like camp, sophistication has its own irony and facade but Camp is consistently impervious to the sophisticate's aspirational pretension.

Rule Number 1: "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization." – Susan Sontag

Notes on Notes on "Camp" (http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/26_notesoncamp/notesonnotes.html) at Invisible Exports revisits camp not as extravagant and performative domain, but as a tool for examining identity. The curators state that "Camp remains a curiously vital tool for those laboring amidst disaffected generations but hoping to forge new meaning—a personal meaning, an operatic performance of

self, private history and identity—from a common aesthetic patrimony." Finding new range and contemporary nuance in a variety of camp sensibility, the show features sculpture, video, painting, installation and photography by: Duke & Battersby, Mike Bouchet, Nicole Cherubini, Vaginal Davis, Jeremy Kost, Jessica Labatte, Cary Leibowitz, Robert Melee, Bob Mizer, Brent Owens, John Waters and Karlheinz Weinberger.



John Waters. *Rush*, 2009. Polyurethane, oil, PVC plastic, 18 x 66 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

For *Notes*, the curators selected works from mid to lower frequencies of the camp spectrum. But humor isn't sacrificed. On the contrary. The first piece viewers see is Water's *Rush*. This piece alone bridges realness, humor and the utterly gross in a coded, low-key delivery. Low-key compared to High Camp, that is. Beyond a cultivated and sublime devotion to ironic swagger and facade, this and other works in the show challenge camp's most feared horror: the naturally honest, the political.



Brent Owens. *Softie Log*, 2009. Log, plaster, wooden dowel stock, enamel spray paint. 61 x 14 x 13 inches. Courtesy of English Kills.

In *Softie Log* the opulence of Camp has been averted in visual form. To me, this piece is minimal without being minimalist. "Camp is...a quality discoverable in objects" (Note 3) and *Softie Log* is entirely composed of heightened sensual triggers: the cool smoothness of buttery ice cream, a crunch of bark. Elsewhere, I might have read this piece differently, perhaps as

metaphor for sensation vis-à-vis sensuality. But in this context, *Softee Log* brings nature (bark) and artifice (sugar 'n' sprinkles) together—the ultimate camp faux-pas. I saw it as though the pervasiveness of artifice feared nature so much that it inevitably became ensconced in it.

Sontag traces the roots of Camp to "...mannerist artists like Pontormo, Rosso, and Caravaggio, or the extraordinarily theatrical painting of Georges de La Tour, or Euphuism (Lyly, etc.) in literature." Although Sontag's exposes camp as a playground of duality and ironic meanings, the works chosen for this show are assertive, funny and honest. Contrary to expectation, the exhibition isn't an amalgamation of double-entendres and posturing. It is in fact, the opposite of that. These works reflect their milieu, just as Sontag's definition of camp in 1964 exposes the aesthetic in relation to early '60s affluence, extravagance and eccentric vignettes of private articulation.



Jessica Labatte. *The Economy*, 2008. Archival inkjet, mounted and framed, 63 x 50 inches. Courtesy of Golden.

The show further breaks from Sontag's dictums by including a semi-politicized work: Labatte's *The Economy*, 2008. Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (http://interglacial.com/%7Eesburke/pub/prose/Susan_Sontag_-_Notes_on_Camp.html) rigidly limit the aesthetic to remaining "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical." As Sontag feared, irony became a contagious cultural pathos, but the selections in this show certainly defy that stance.

Like a prism to which all other surfaces are subdued, Melee's *Disco Tray* (http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/26_notesoncamp/notes_5.html) is 100% pure camp. For me, this was the only piece that captured camp as itemized by Sontag. Other exhibition selections (including other works by Melee) challenge some of her key concepts about camp. While Mizer's *Unknown (Marine)* (http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/26_notesoncamp/notes_11.html) doesn't at all prescribe to Sontag's Note 9 ("Camp taste...consists in going against the grain of

one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine..." Jeremy Kost' (http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/26_notesoncamp/notes_17.html)s work directly addresses reconciliation of form and femininity. If camp sees the world in quotation marks, as Sontag writes, Bouchet's *Ribs* (http://www.invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/26_notesoncamp/notes_15.html) is hilarious in its scale, technically well executed but quietly violent. It feels too aggressive to be considered camp, yet far too exaggerated not to be.

I saw this show before rereading the original "Notes on Camp". After seeing the exhibition and spending some quality time with the essay, Note 47 left me curious: "It was Wilde who formulated an important element of the camp sensibility...[he] declared that a doorknob could be as admirable as a painting. When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonniere, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic esprit of Camp." So, does that also mean that Wilde simultaneously anticipated the readymade? If "what was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic" (Note 31), is Wilde's claim not a precedent for much of modern art?

(1) <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/honigman/honigman1-12-04.asp>
<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/honigman/honigman1-12-04.asp>

Notes on Notes on "Camp" will be exhibited until May 8, 2011 at the Invisible Exports Gallery (<http://www.invisible-exports.com/>), 14A Orchard Street, New York NY.

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