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Vestimentary Possibilities: the styling of Caroline Baker and Debbi Mason.

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Although they started their careers over a decade apart, the stylists Caroline Baker and Debbi Mason were motivated by similar principles: a willingness to present women as independent freethinkers, and a blatant disregard for the conservatism and commercialism of the fashion system. Despite initially being employed as fashion editors for magazines, they both went on to work as freelance stylists, collaborating closely with designers in the research, development and presentation of collections, and dressing advertising campaigns shot by notable fashion photographers. Reflecting on their careers, they provide an insight into the practices and processes of the stylist, a role which remains overlooked and is often misunderstood.

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Originally seen in Nova magazine in the late 1960s, the way Caroline Baker selected, combined and manipulated clothing in fashion images represented a new form of disruptive dressing, or *styling*. In the pictures, rainbow-coloured curtain trims are wrapped around calves to create layered legwear, oversized men's shirts are worn loose, braless, cinched at the waist with a striped satin tie, cream-lined rubber wellingtons are turned inside-out to create cuffed boots, or strings of beaded leather straps are pulled across bare breasts, repurposed as Amazonian armour. These images also drew attention to the stylist, they asked questions about the person who had assembled each creation. However, it wasn't until the 1980s that the stylist became a recognised role in fashion media. Although the job title had been used elsewhere earlier than this, freelance stylists started to be listed much more frequently for their contribution to magazine photography, particularly in the British 'style press'. This new wave of independent publications targeted young people; the magazines were decisively unisex, and the realisation that teenage boys and young men were equally valid consumers of fashion as their female peers led to an editorial mix of both menswear and womenswear and coverage of subject matter that appealed to all genders. The establishment of the stylist as a key role in the image-making process was nevertheless strengthened through being credited in mainstream women's publications, by titles that started using freelancers instead of in-house fashion editors, or who rebranded their editorial roles (as 'style editor' or 'style correspondent') to reflect a new-found interest in 'style' as a counterpoint to fashion. Certain fashion editors were particularly important in communicating the concept of styling to wider audiences. Caroline Baker was finally given the academic appreciation she deserved by the writer Alice Beard in 2013 ('Fun with Pins and Rope: How Caroline Baker Styled the Seventies') and has since been appraised in a more illustrative way in a book by Iain R. Webb, produced in collaboration with Baker herself ('Rebel Stylist' in 2021).

In many parts of Europe, the stylist ('styliste' or 'stilista') was first associated with industrial fashion, and the use of the term differentiated those who designed mass market fashions from the couturier, who created high-end, artisanal clothing. The rise of the stylist coincided with the increased credibility of ready-to-wear, and with a similar acknowledgment of subculture, or street style, as a source of fashion. As Baker explains, 'I started looking at what people were wearing on the streets. The term 'styling' hadn't even come into being at that time. It was a recognition of the fact that there was a fashion that wasn't just led by Vogue, it wasn't led by society women; you didn't have to have money. I was part of that group, of all these working girls who loved fashion, were really interested in it but we didn't have the cash to spend on designer clothing'. By 1980, Caroline Baker had already built a reputation as an innovative image-maker and fashion editor, cutting her teeth with Nova in 1967 before working at Vogue, then Cosmopolitan. Brought up in Argentina to an ex-pat British family, she had been sent to England after she finished her schooling. She enrolled in a secretarial college, and despite being reminded that it

was perhaps not the most appropriate career pathway ('You wear far too much make-up and dress too outrageously to ever be a success'), it led to temporary work with Shirley Conran at *The Observer*, and further introductions to Molly Parkin, the fashion editor at *Nova*. The magazine was pitched at a new type of woman – progressive, educated, feminist – and the fashion pages reflected this. When Parkin had a disagreement with the magazine's bosses, Baker was offered the role of fashion editor. She says the recruitment process was pretty casual and that beyond 'looking like I loved fashion', she wasn't expected to have prior experience.

She was given the brief to challenge the way that fashion had been presented to women and recalls that they deliberately set out to shock. There are recurring themes in the way she constructed outfits for *Nova*, which did not align with the fashion presented in other magazines. Publications were generally obliged to show a full look from each designer, whereas Baker used random objects, antique pieces or second-hand clothing and mixed them with designer pieces. The addition of unconventional accessories, gadgets sourced from DIY stores, haberdashers, or the kitchen drawers, led to her being gently mocked by others: 'Michael Roberts once did a 'take the piss out of me' story in *Tatler* where the girl who was supposed to be me had everything hanging from her, even loo rolls hanging from her waist'. She claims to have introduced the safety pin as a fashion accessory prior to its reappropriation by the punks and she dressed models in legwarmers way before Abba ruined their credibility as a fashion statement. Baker says that it is important to remember how conservative attitudes to clothing were at the time: 'I was sent out when I was at *Nova* to do a talk up North. I had my nails green because you could buy that nail varnish at Kensington market and I remember this woman in the audience standing up and saying, 'Do you think it's alright to go to work with green nails?' and I realised that people were just disgusted, you know, a woman's nails were supposed to be red.' Her styling for *Nova* also incorporated menswear, army surplus and sportswear. There is clear influence on the work presented in the style press (*The Face*, *Blitz* and *i-D*), and on the younger generation of stylists like Ray Petri, Simon Foxton or Judy Blame. The style press gave Baker renewed relevance after her stints at *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*, where her approach hadn't always been appreciated. She says that she was forced to become aware of 'the industry', of the hierarchies and interdependent relationships between advertisers, designers and magazines. When Terry Jones, who had been art director at *Vogue*, asked her to do some work for *i-D* when he launched it, she relished the opportunity for creative freedom that she had missed.

There are further links with punk. She worked closely with Vivienne Westwood in the early 1980s, contributing to the formation and presentation of collections, including *Nostalgia of Mud*. Although she also worked with John Rocha and Katharine Hamnett in the production of catwalk shows, she says that her role with Westwood differed because she was involved during the research stages, and credits her for introducing her to historical clothing as a resource in a way she hadn't previously considered. The list of collaborators she accumulated across several decades includes many of the most lauded talents in photography – Sarah Moon, Deborah Turbeville, Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin, Harri Peccinotti, Hans Feurer and Mark Lebon. Editorial work enabled her to gain respect because credits appeared in print. One of her more globally exposed projects was a series of *Benetton* campaigns she produced with Oliviero Toscani, for which she was not credited at the time but which contains many of the symbolic markers of her mix-and-match signature style. The campaign ('United Colours') showed pairs, or groups, of young people dressed in combinations of clothing from around the world. Although not without its critics, the project arguably cast a broader range of ethnicities than had formerly been seen in advertising.

There is a lineage that can be traced from *Nova*, which addressed the feminists of the late-1960s and early-1970s, through to the British version of *Elle* when it launched towards the end of 1985. *Elle* could be considered *post-feminist* in the way it spoke to the new generation of consumerist, independent, working women. *Nova* had suggested an alternative life for women, whereas *Elle* asserted that two decades later it finally existed. The fashion pages featured in the two publications were offering a visual exploration of modern womanhood, of how a contemporary British woman could be. Despite a short stint on a fashion design course at Ravensbourne in London, Debbi Mason, like Baker, also worked up through the ranks, starting as assistant fashion editor at the

Evening Standard newspaper. She was then headhunted to work for Now magazine, then by the mid-1980s became junior fashion editor at Harpers and Queen, before becoming the fashion editor at Miss London, a role she classes as 'my first grown-up job on my own'. In the editorial images she produced for these publications, you can see the stylistic traits that became associated with her later image-making, particularly those she produced with the photographer Eddy Kohli.

Being approached by Sally Brampton to join Elle could be considered a turning point in her career. The style press had contributed to broader awareness of the stylist's role, and Brampton built on this, ensuring that they were credited in each issue, and were almost always given second billing after the photographer. Although she fulfilled a salaried role initially, she pushed to become freelance, recognising the opportunity to style for other publications. She worked for The Face, Arena, and the Italian versions of Vogue and Marie Claire. As fashion director at Elle, she was responsible for managing the fashion department, but also for 'producing' her own pages, and enjoyed that she was still involved in hands-on styling. By the beginning of the 1990s, she was keen to explore other ways of working, and was approached by Gaby Doppolt to join her at Mademoiselle in New York, a magazine with heritage (it launched in the 1930s) but in need of a change of editorial direction. She moved across the Atlantic and stayed for several years, building a successful career as a stylist off the back of her editorial credentials. She was represented by Art + Commerce, and this gave her the opportunity to do more well-paid advertising work (Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret and L'Oréal) and with celebrity clients (Julia Roberts and Oprah Winfrey). Her definition of styling, when asked to describe her own motivations and aesthetic, are similar to Baker's. She says that Brampton encouraged them to 'break the rules' and that she was allowed more freedom than perhaps stylists are given today. 'We were mixing designers quite irreverently', she recalls, 'I would put Armani with Comme des Garçons; whatever I felt like doing'. In her styling work there is an evident readiness to customise and use clothing items in irregular ways – clothing is folded, bunched, ruched, or cropped to create new shapes.

Mason enjoyed travelling and feels that *Elle* mixed travel journalism with fashion in a more meaningful way than had previously been seen: 'I'd always had a bit of problem with going somewhere breathtakingly beautiful but just using it as a backdrop, as if it was an outdoor studio.' The location photography that Mason produced at that time has a rich narrative, and the stories being told through the choice of clothing and performance of the models are of strong women – nomads, explorers or pioneers. This sense of narrative has carried through to the textile artworks she now creates. Despite giving up styling, she maintains an interest in fashion: 'I like looking at Vogue but I don't want to be part of that anymore. I think I've kind of outgrown it. In a way that isn't kind of pompous or anything, but I just feel as though I've done it.' She recognises that the period when she started out was important for stylists, that she represented a new approach to presenting fashion: 'The time when I was working, there was a lot of freedom, and that's fantastic. Also, at that point stylists were being recognised as individuals as well. So, they were building a reputation for themselves, and people were recognising the style of their work.' Common to the two stylists is the conflict they encountered when attempting to express themselves creatively in a more tightly controlled editorial environment. Neither had a particularly successful tenure at Vogue. Baker recalls the resistance from editor Bea Miller when she worked for a few years at British Vogue in the mid-1970s, and Mason lasted even less time at US Vogue twenty years later, clashing with Anna Wintour on more than one occasion. There is sense of playfulness to the way both stylists worked, pulling out unexpected combinations of shapes, colours or patterns from the dressing-up box of available options; what the sociologist Paolo Volonté calls 'vestimentary possibilities'. Both feel that styling should propose what people *could* wear, rather than dictate what people *should* wear.

Fashion styling can be pedestrian. It can involve selecting outfits that blend with a chosen narrative, that are consistent with a story in the way that costume for film or television is expected to be accurate and appropriate. Baker comments on the 'minimalism' that emerged in 1990s fashion and, although there were many exceptions, there was a tendency towards a more 'realist' approach to narrative in the styling of fashion photography in this decade. In more performative versions of styling, the fashion becomes unshackled from the narrative, dislocating

the storyline by doing something unexpected with a piece of clothing, or the juxtaposition of items. Certain silhouettes or clothing combinations define fashion at a particular moment in time. These silhouettes or combinations may have come from designers, but what stylists like Baker and Mason did was take existing clothing to create further fashions, expanding on the designer's intentions or following an altogether different vision. These were stylists who asserted themselves as creators of fashion, rather than merely being dressers, ciphers for the designs, trends or themes fed to them by fashion authorities.