

on chicks on speed

first steps toward an analysis of the rules of (rough)

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*Some people think I'm vermin
because my parents, they're both German
got more faces than Cindy Sherman*

- Chicks on Speed

FASHION RULES¹

When Chicks on Speed, the Berlin-based all-female art/fashion/music-collective, released their 2002 12-inch single *Fashion Rules*, the record came with two, rather surprising covers. One of them shows the project's three members—Melissa Logan, Alex Murray—Leslie and Kiki Moore—in a photo studio, amidst a crowd of stylists who are adding finishing touches to their hair and makeup. A silver haired photographer, equipped with dark shades, mingles with the crowd of assistants, perhaps doing a light check.

Versed in the iconographies of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Wallpaper** and the like, we immediately identify the scene as a fashion shoot. Perhaps, if we are familiar with the Chicks' background, we remember that Kiki Moore—standing in the center receiving her final brush of makeup—was working as a fashion editor and stylist for German Condé Nast publications in Munich when she met the group's two other members, then students at the city's art academy; Melissa Logan was studying painting, and Alex Murray—Leslie, jewelry.

On the right-hand side of the picture we see Merrill Nisker (alias Peaches), Canadian expat and one of the international shining stars of clubland Berlin. The singer and musician, whose soft-porn live shows and recordings are still enthusiastically greeted by the city's party crowd—Fatherfucker is the current follow-up release to

her classic *The Teaches of Peaches*—appears in an unusually tame dress and pose, videotaping the crowd from the sidelines.

The entire scene is obviously staged. The stylists' gestures make only weak claims to spontaneity and stress, both cliché characteristics of fashion photography production. Peaches stands too close to actually capture anything on film and her camera, held in line with her profiled face, seems too far away from her eyes for her to adjust the lens. And why would Alex kneel down to receive her final makeup? Speaking of which: What are all the stylists for anyways? Taking care of the good looks of a band famous for putting on makeup in the dark, whose style champions crude smears of paint on their faces?

The contrast in this image between the Chicks' look—self made, roughly cut and sewn, drastically striped dresses and tops in neon orange, pink, white, and green (carefully avoiding the omnipresent tricolore of electroclash eighties revivalism: pink, white, and black)—and the smoothing labor of the fashion arbiters is more than obvious. It is echoed by the the group's logo, "CoS," awkwardly cut 'n' pasted from magazines and screenprinted textiles, that looms large in the background, standing edgily against the pristine environment of the professional photo studio.

Fashion Rules was also released in a limited edition of yellow marbled vinyl with a different cover image taken during the same shoot. In this one the crowd is gone and Chicks on Speed are left alone with a photographer who is having much less fun than the girls. He points his camera toward the group, an echo of Peaches's feigned attempt to videotape the shoot. The photographer is fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld, whom CoS sing about on "Fashion Rules":

*Dress up dummies for a little while
Crashed the crash party in real chicks style
Karl and his lens they like to watch
King of the thing
But we don't give a...
[...]
Fashion is for fashion people
It's hard to be cool if you don't follow these rules
Fashion is for fashion people
Get out there now and break the rules²*

FASHION ROUGH

The cooperation of Lagerfeld—his appearance with the group as well as his actual credit for the cover photos of *Fashion Rules*—is by no means the only interaction of Chicks on Speed with the protagonists and institutions of the professional fashion system. More recently CoS has collaborated with American wonderkid designer Jeremy Scott on designs for a series of "overalls for all."³ The Chicks wear these garments, tailored from typical CoS screenprinted cloth, on the cover of their last album, *99 cts*. The package that accompanies their first publication, *It's a Project*, contains patterns for do-it-yourself versions of the suits. The Chicks have played a concert at a Castelbajac runway show and set up a temporary recustomizing station at the Fondation Cartier in Paris—an event alluded to in "Fashion Rules" as "nicking off with logos at Cartier." Their song, "We Don't Play Guitars," was featured on the annual CD-sampler issued by Colette, the Parisian boutique for exclusive and selected avant-chic (the shop also sells CoS designs). The Paris department store Le Bon Marché provided the group with designer garments that CoS cut apart, rearranged into their

own designs, and modeled live in the Marché's shop windows. Adidas gave sneakers to CoS which they submitted to a rip, cut'n'paste treatment: "The most perfect product made even more perfect by taking the mass out of the produced," as Melissa Logan puts it.⁴ They sold the shoes via their website as a line called "Modifidas," for several hundred Euros per pair. Recently, the art academy at Arnhem, the Netherlands, invited CoS to teach a one-day fashion seminar.

All these collaborations, the give-and-take between Chicks on Speed and the professional fashion system, gain their full significance when considered in light of the group's self-professed "nonprofessionalism," or—more precisely—the group's practice of off-hand, non-skilled interventions in the field of fashion, music, and art. The group's entire output thrives on a quick, cheap to affordable, deliberately non-complex mode of production. No less important: their products openly signal their unsophisticated assembly. Your typical CoS dress either comes as a cut, screenprinted H&M top, as a scribbled tube of paper and cardboard, as a roughly sewn and stitched assemblage of leather fragments, or as plastic bags designed into a shape and stuck to the body by strips of gaffer tape—a material for which the group openly declares its preference in "We Don't Play Guitars":

*We like to use gaffa tape,
But we don't play guitars
Give us your gaffa tape
But we don't want your guitars*⁵

What we see, almost allegorized, in the meeting of Chicks on Speed and Karl Lagerfeld on the cover of Fashion Rules could perhaps best be described as a mode of production, with its specific look/aesthetic, clashing with a professionalized—and therefore foreign—environment.⁶ The mode of production in question could be called bricolage, the look: rough.

BRICOLAGE

Bricolage, as Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic analysis has it, is a technique that does not rely on a professional, systematizing method, nor is it dependent on (or capable of) the development of a systematically applicable set of instruments and tools:

"The bricoleur is able to execute a high number of diverse tasks; but, in contrast

to the engineer, he does not make each of these tasks depend on the availability of primary materials and utensils conceived and produced specifically for his project: his instrumental universe is closed, and the rule of his game is to always arrange himself with the means at hand, i.e., an ensemble of tools and materials which is at each single instant finite, uneven and heterogeneous, because the composition of the ensemble is not congruent with the current project, actually with no specific project at all, but the contingent result of all sorts of prior occasions."⁷

Due to its reliance on a contingent selection of tools and materials, bricolage will never develop into a systematic method.⁸ The engineer, in contrast, would come up with a fitted set of tools and perhaps even specifically developed material, which would allow for a precise execution of his project. This is why the professionalized engineer's product is characterized by a certain smoothness, whereas the bricoleur's output is always bound to appear uneven, rough, or improvable.

It is the incongruity between instruments and projects, interpreted as a strategic poverty of means, that has led to the association of bricolage with a number of non-establishment, or anti-establishment communities of producers—be it in music, art, or fashion. Historically the most visible is certainly the punk movement that tied its anarchist politics to a form of do-it-yourself non-professionalism. Indeed, punk serves as one of the more popular points of reference in analyses of Chicks on Speed's lo-finish aesthetics—the tube dresses, for example, are compared to outfits made by Westwood/McLaren in the seventies.⁹ Undoubtedly, CoS has their share of historical information: they do covers of the B-52s, The Normals, of Delta 5, and have performed collaborations with German early-eighties independent bands like Malaria and Die Goldenen Zitronen.

Yet, one should be careful not to align the Chicks too quickly with the anarchist, oppositional politics and aesthetics of punk and its offspring. The comparison is too easy, and fails for two reasons: first, because CoS doesn't share those movements' belief in opposing the system through acts of nihilistic transgression. This belief is no longer tenable because, second, the historical circumstances of production have changed so drastically that today, the techniques and looks of bricolage and rough have become

the object of mainstream desire, as well as fundamental contributions to the ongoing redesigns of the system. Indeed, it would be hopelessly naïve (and undialectical) to assume that this sort of non-finish as such could constitute something like an oppositional aesthetics today. It would also underestimate the group's savvy if one read their politics as reactionary, anarcho-oppositional.

To a certain extent both elements, CoS's technique and look, clearly share characteristic features with established systems of contemporary cultural production. In a historical situation that sees the failure of long term, large scale planning and construction projects—be they infrastructural, architectural, social, or systemic—bricolage has become the new technique for success. In a dynamic, flexible environment, bricolage responds to the crisis of planned and articulated construction. Layering and provisional adding succeeds where more complex modes of production fail because they simply can not keep up with the speed of obsolescence. Nike's slogan "Just do it" therefore governs the bricoleur's method, be it on the scale of contemporary (social) building—the period of the "social engineer" seems to have withered with socialism—or the comparatively modest project of CoS who, in their song "Sellout," advise their audience:

*do it
just do it-
exploit yourself
just sellout
cash cards
just sellout
Do it to yourself before it's done to you.*

Nothing signal the Chicks better when they sing:

*We're standing on stage with our microphones,
But we don't play guitars,
Got the Sherman up here with us,
But we don't play guitars
[...]
We like to use gaffa tape,
But we don't play guitars,
Give us your gaffa tape,
But we don't want your guitars*

The group understands that as bricoleurs they can make use of the Sherman digital filter bank, an electronic sampler "played" by CoS onstage, alongside the ultra-analog multi-task tool of gaffer tape—anything, as long as they don't have to learn to, professionally, play an instrument. Evenness and smoothness of execution don't matter, either on the level of tools and techniques,

or the product, which for CoS settles in some carboard-after-techno zone. CoS's technique and aesthetics clearly signify that bricolage does not entail a naïve return to the authentically hand-made, but a heterogeneity of means and structure. Where digital and analog are cut'n'pasted together, finish doesn't matter.

Or does it?

(“)ROUGH(“)

It surely does.

In the seventies it was the *look* of punk—the safety pin piercing the cheek and holding together the t-shirt rags—that conveyed the message of the wilfully dilettante and self-consuming production of bricolage.

Any attempt at interpreting a given technique that ignores the appearance of the technique's product falls prey to the delusion of “pure” analysis. In other words, in the realm of form (art, music, design, fashion, etc.), there is no such thing as a purely production-oriented analysis or practice. Further, if one intends to analyze oppositional practices of production, one is bound to face oppositional aesthetics. With respect to bricolage, this paradoxically means that despite the bricoleur's imperative to neglect the finish, this non-finish will never escape the realm of the aesthetic, and in fact under certain conditions will become of highest importance. With respect to Chicks on Speed's practice, the German economist Franz Liebl has clearly recognized this, emphasizing the importance of the *interface-value* generated by the group's mode of production.¹⁰

It is quite enlightening to observe that the characteristic non-finished, rough look of the bricolaged object does not necessarily reflect an oppositional position. On the contrary, if employed strategically, bricolage and roughness can be turned into a method and quality that position the producers not on the “outside” of their system, but right in its center, actually succeeding within its boundaries, and outdoing its regular players.

The most compelling example of this comes in the form of a study by the corporate consultant/architect/critic/theoretician Rem Koolhaas, who reminds his clients, i.e., Prada and its customers: “In a world where everything is shopping ... and shopping is everything ... what is luxury? Luxury is NOT shopping. [...] Luxury = ‘Rough’.”¹¹ Further,

“If everywhere is smooth, art becomes

that which maintains a quality of roughness. Common is smooth, unique is rough. Recorded is smooth, live is rough. Commercial is smooth, art is rough. Typical is smooth, invention is rough. In this future, luxury must be rough.”¹²

Certainly, Chicks on Speed cannot be accused of a similarly simplistic binarism that aligns “smooth” with recorded and “rough” with live. In fact, their practice demonstrates that roughness derives from an incongruity of various methods (e.g., digital cut'n'pasted with analog) employed together to realize a given project, not from some essential quality inherent to “liveness,” as such. In this sense, CoS is much closer to Claude Lévi-Strauss than to the Koolhaas approach, which is not structural but phenomena-oriented. However, Koolhaas's analysis captures something else, which is no less important. Namely, that roughness, if placed within an environment oversaturated with smoothness, attains the status of a desirable difference. Or, to employ Franz Liebl's terminology: roughness, understood as a quality of surface, can have a differential and therefore desirable interface-value.

Nothing proves this better than the widespread popularity of Chicks on Speed in the fashion world, to which Lagerfeld's appearance on the *Fashion Rules* cover testifies. It is not surprising that at one point Prada stores soundtracked shopping with Chicks on Speed albums.¹³ The net gain which the ordinary actor or fashion institution derives from mingling with the Chicks constitutes a manifest surplus in roughness, street credibility, and “cutting edginess”—because the edge cuts rough. Slavoj Žižek succinctly articulates the rules of the system when he states: “to be truly in, you have to break those rules in a certain way; if you're only in, you're out.”¹⁴ This fundamental insight reveals the full meaning of the CoS lyrics from “Fashion Rules”:

Fashion is for fashion people

It's hard to be cool if you don't follow these rules

Fashion is for fashion people

Get out there now and break the rules

Although it might be hard to be cool if one doesn't follow the system's rules, sturdy obedience is not the answer either. It might guarantee a fine to mediocre performance, but in the long run it might also lead to a complete expulsion from the hot and active parts of the system, which are, as CoS proves, not necessarily located where the fashion industry resides. Whoever

fails to introduce difference to the system will be punished by exclusion from it.

On the other hand, when establishing the formula $Luxury = \text{“Rough”}$, Koolhaas also accounts for the swiftness with which roughness and non-finish can be co-opted by the system. When rough turns into “rough,” a new smoothness has been put in place, and roughness is transformed from a material quality into an object of reference and signification.¹⁵ A central hope that grounds the political program of leftist Cultural Studies, namely that an act of consumption might serve as a genuine method for the production of ‘alternative’, ‘dissident’, or ‘oppositional’ subjectivities, finds its corrective here. The system consumes, too. And it consumes fast. The way from rough to “rough” is short, and a system rich in roughness can convert these elements that naïve thought might conceive as ‘oppositional’ into systemic advantages. Even the term and practice known as ‘critique’ has been appropriated by economic consultants as a systemic optimization of capitalism.¹⁶ Adorno would have shuddered.

The genuine problem one encounters when pursuing this train of thought takes the form of a question: Are oppositional aesthetics possible at all, or do they merely constitute a reservoir of freshness needed to perpetuate some systemic *status quo* which would otherwise collapse into inertia?

COS RULE OK

Obviously, there is no unequivocal answer to this problem. Probably the worst possible response would consist in searching for univocity, thus denying the structural ambiguity of the situation we are facing.

The problem of rough and “rough” is by no means unique. Rather, it can claim a certain exemplarity for negotiating a modern system's insides and—supposed—outsides, i.e., its mechanisms of differentiation and distinction. Another current example that comes to mind is the popular concept and practice of autopoiesis, or self-organization. As understood by a number of artists' groups or collectives, the term describes a self-determined and open, non-linear way of collaboration and coexistence. In this respect, autopoiesis inherits the function of the seemingly old-fashioned concept of autonomy. Yet, this understanding denotes only one of many contemporary interpretations and executions of self-organization. For systems theory, from

Varela/Maturana to Luhmann, autopoiesis describes nothing but the fundamental functioning of any given systemic configuration, from nature to society.¹⁷ Self-organization has also been co-opted by contemporary economic theory which turns it into a modern way of (non)managing companies, businesses, or markets, or, for that matter, having employees self-design their now shared office space. Autopoiesis thus appears on both sides of the spectrum, “alternative/oppositional/self-determined” as well as “managerial/established/profit-oriented,” and even in the middle as a purely descriptive term that explains how systems function.

A parallel example with higher proximity to the negotiations of in and out, of on and off, comes—like CoS—from contemporary Berlin where Comme des Garçons has recently opened a so-called guerrilla store.¹⁸ The shop is located in the derelict rooms of the Brecht-Haus’s ex-bookstore and the Dorotheenstädtischer Friedhof occupies the building’s adjacent lot. It is aptly placed in the vicinity of the tombs of two major philosophers and practitioners of autonomy and freedom—the cemetery houses the graves of both Hegel and Brecht. The fashion store not only occupies the space where literature used to be circulated, it also claims the concept of guerrilla shopping from the subversive consumer and turns it into a systemic advantage for an established fashion company. Cynically, but probably appropriately stated: CdG now shops the subversive shopper—and exhibits some lessons learned from the system’s outside. The company has opened the store for a limited time, one year, and declares it will close its guerrilla branch even if it is turning a profit.

What seems an unusual concept for an establishment fashion boutique is no news to Berlin’s club scene. Whoever goes out in the city’s illegal, semi-legal, or at least hidden clubs and bars moves in a fluctuating system of temporary spaces where a club no longer signifies a stable locale, but rather a community of organizers, djs, vjs, and their guests. They might take residence in a building, backyard, cellar, etc., but will leave after a couple of months or a year—often dictated by necessity in a city that undergoes a perpetual process of construction and reconversion of post-socialist voids and buildings.¹⁹ The club might close down for a while, reopen at a different spot, or equally often the entire project just disbands.

It is significant that the origins of CoS lie precisely in such an environment. When the group met in Munich in the mid-90s, their first appear-

ance was as organizers and hosts of a migrating, temporary club or party—the Maria Bar, soon to be renamed Seppi Bar. Similarly, the group’s first record label, Stop Records, was conceived as a temporary, finite enterprise: the label’s 7-inch releases were numbered counting down from ten to one, zero marking the predetermined point of the project’s dissolution. As Melissa Logan explains to *The Face* and its readers:

“It’s a suicide label . . . a countdown from ten to zero When we hit zero, that’s the end. What’s wrong with the world is that everybody tries to make everything so big so that it takes over and maybe this concept of self-destruction is the right way. We’re exploring a system of building up a label by, um . . . Building it down.” [completed by Alex Murray Leslie]²⁰

Transience appears as a calculated and desired quality to the de-constructive entrepreneur and her/his enterprise, be it the club host, the label owner, or—now with Comme des Garçons—an international fashion company’s local boutique. It has taken only a couple of years for CdG to appropriate the “alternative” model of organization initially championed by CoS and the like, and turn it into a retail concept.

Word has spread that transience increases the value of an experience in ways that money can’t buy.²¹ At a point when companies recognized that advantages and differences need not be articulated materially but structurally, the off-model crosses over into the mainstream, which will, one way or another, turn it into a concept for deriving profit.

It remains to be seen in what way CoS’s current strategy of selling-out (*Do it to yourself before it’s done to you*), negotiates the tensions between on and off, in and out. Their recent self-marketing package—a book which comes in a CoS-printed bag, along with designs for the “overalls for all,” a dress, and a CD, continues the group’s ongoing strategy of ripping off the mainstream: “It isn’t inevitable that big business will just use you. You can use them. You can steal ideas off the mainstream just as much as they steal ideas off you,” explains Alex Murray-Leslie.²²

The important contribution that CoS brings to the field of oppositional aesthetics is their complete awareness of the mechanisms of in/out and on/off. The Chicks never naïvely position their work as safely detached from the system. On the

contrary, they know about its fundamental implication, and understand the differential nature of contemporary cultural production. Likewise, they never make a claim to some unmediated form of authenticity. They work with and through the institutions, partially appropriating the appropriative mainstream, by recustomizing Adidas into “Modifidas,” by submitting H&M to a Chicks on Speed-treatment, and then cashing in on the financial and cultural profit, or by stealing the marketing strategy of a Top-40 band. And if a scribbled Chicks font makes its way onto the cover of *The Face* after the group has released a new CD, Chicks on Speed have successfully entered the mainstream—hacked into it, as it were—and left their aesthetic trace. The crucial question that any kind of oppositional aesthetics today is bound to face will need to be answered by the further development of CoS’s practice: How to a) detect and b) react to the moment where the lines from “We Don’t Play Guitars”—

*We can go shopping in the supermarket,
But we don’t play guitars
We shop more than other people
But we don’t play guitars*

—have reversed themselves. What can be done, one needs to wonder, if one is being turned into a supermarket open for free shopping to the system? ◀

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NOTES

¹ Without the expertise and judgement of Heike Föll, which she has been sharing generously with me in our ongoing spoken and written exchange, my understanding of CoS wouldn't be half of what it is now.

² Most CoS lyrics are online at www.phinnweb.com/links/artists/CoS/lyrics.

³ Scott gets credit on the track "Coventry" where CoS sing, *Jeremy moved to Rome, Italiano style, Gave up all that fashion jazz, And says that with a smile.*

⁴ As quoted in Franz Liebl: Unbekannte Theorieobjekte der Trendforschung (XLII)—Der Bastler als Schnittstelle von Cultural Studies, Soziologie und Marketing, http://notesweb.uni-wh.de/wg/wiwi/wgwiwi.nsf/name/Bastler_als_Schnittstelle-DE.

⁵ On the significance and theoretical implications of the uses of gaffer tape for the practice proposed by Chicks on Speed, see the article co-authored by Heike Föll and me "The Look of Gaffer," published as "actionbutton." *Neuerwerbungen der Sammlung der Bundesrepublik im Hamburger Bahnhof. Neue Review. Art in Berlin.* No. 2 (July 2003), pp. 24-25.

⁶ In "The Look of Gaffer," Heike Föll and I offer a first account of this type of making and look.

⁷ My translation. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*. Paris (Plon) 1962, p. 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27. Lévi-Strauss writes, "The ensemble of the means of the bricoleur is thus not definable by a project [...] it is defined only by its instrumentality." My translation.

⁹ Douglas Wolk, "Digital Artcore." *Spin*, December 2000, p. 180. At www.phinnweb.com/links/artists/CoS/media/spin.html.

¹⁰ Franz Liebl, "Interface-Value: Treiber der New Economy." Lecture at the Hochschule für Gestaltung, Offenbach on July 5, 2001. At http://www.hfg-offenbach.de/div/daten7/pdf/07_05_liebltext.pdf.

¹¹ Rem Koolhaas, *OMA/AMO: Prada. Milan (Fondazione Prada Edizioni) 2001.* no p.

¹² *Ibid.* It is certainly not by chance that Koolhaas's dichotomy of smooth and rough echoes the opposition of the raw and the cooked established by Lévi-Strauss, whose definition of bricolage is quoted above.

¹³ Melissa Logan in an interview with Darius James for *NY Press* at www.nypress.com/15/6/news&columns/feature.cfm.

¹⁴ As quoted in Liebl, *Unbekannte Theorieobjekte*: „Um wirklich in zu sein, mußt Du die Regeln auf eine bestimmte Weise brechen ; wenn Du nur in bist, bist Du out.“

¹⁵ To be accurate one should also note that CoS's practice of bricolage and roughness always already contains some element of signification and referentiality, too. As I have pointed out above, the Chicks' bricolaged output always explicitly exhibits its non-finish.

¹⁶ Liebl: Interface-Value.

¹⁷ Compare the entry Autopoeisis in Claudio Baraldi, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elene Esposito: *GLU. Glossar zu Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme*. Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 1997, pp. 32. As well as Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco G. Varela: *Autopoeisis and Cognition*. Boston (Reidel) 1980.

¹⁸ www.guerrilla-store.com, www.taz.de/pt/2004/02/16/a0272.nf/text and NYT from February 17, 2004.

¹⁹ Photo documentation in Martin Eberle, "Temporary Spaces." Berlin (Die Gestalten Verlag) 2001.

²⁰ In an interview for *The Face*, Vol. 3, No 34, Nov. 1999, p. 29. Also at www.phinnweb.com/links/artists/CoS/media/face.html.

²¹ Compare the lyrics, *Choice is the choice [...] This is much better than what money can buy*, in CoS's song, "The floating pyramid over Frankfurt that the taxi driver saw when he was landing."

²² In an interview for *AMP* at www.phinnweb.com/links/artists/CoS/media/amp.html.