

Mary Mary

BLACK, KARLA; A VERY IMPORTANT TIME FOR HANDBAGS, MISTAKES MADE AWAY FROM HOME - CATALOGUE ESSAY 2008

A VERY

IMPORTANT TIME FOR HANDBAGS

The handbag that Carla Bruni carried when she accompanied her husband, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, to meet the Queen in London was unusually and, therefore noticeably, small. In contrast, the red Hermes version that Katie Holmes had in her possession when she appeared on Good Morning America, without her husband Tom Cruise or baby Suri, was absolutely enormous.

At the moment 'status handbags' are prominent. Janet Street Porter wrote in The Independent that, "Bag fever [is an] illness that has gripped us for the last couple of years...the handbag stopped being something you stuck a packet of tissues, your purse and makeup in, and started to be an object so desirable that you would do almost anything to own one by the right designer... most of the ads in glossy magazines feature...women pushing, not their breasts towards us, but a handbag." (1)

Handbags are not inherently bad or anti-feminist. Their earliest versions, depicted in Egyptian hieroglyphs, were invented and used, initially, only by men. Since the 14th century, via their expensive materials and embellishments, they have denoted the financial and social standing of both sexes. The recently achieved completeness with which women now possess 'status handbags' exclusively for their own gender had its beginnings in the 1800s.

Farid Chenoune, the curator of an exhibition of bags at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, believes that the key to the handbag's importance in today's society is that it 'holds a secret'. (2)

Is a kept secret a powerful possession? Perhaps what gives the handbag its peculiar, even feminist, potency, is that it is not attractive to men. Unlike, for example, shoes or bras, it does not reshape the body and, therefore, does not send out a sexual message, or call in a man's aesthetic judgement. Separate from the body, it, paradoxically, somehow, often unlike the female body itself, belongs only to woman.

In the 1920s, the handbag was recognised as a symbol of woman's independence: she could now go where she wanted without a man to hold her belongings.

Handbags are part of an active, experiential life. They allow movement, at the same time as material possession. A handbag can exist completely outside of the shocked, stopped, self-conscious life as 'image' within which we feel watched, our attention drawn away from a physical connection with the world into worrying about how we look.

Movement is intrinsic to Simone De Beauvoir's idea of the independent woman who "wants to be

active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The modern woman... prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as man." (3)

If handbags are a signifier of status, then the size difference between Carla Bruni's and Katie Holmes' could indicate that, in public life, a lone woman now possesses most power.

A shift away from 'victim feminism' towards 'power feminism', is being encouraged in our generation.

In 'It Changed My Life', Betty Friedan famously said, "If you are serious about anything... to make it fashionable helps." (4) It is generally assumed that, while handbags are hugely fashionable right now, feminism is not.

This, according to Susan Faludi, is because of a 'backlash'. She claims that, since the early 1990s, both men and women have been 'anxiously remarking that it has all gone too far'. (5) Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley suggest in their third collection of essays, 'Who's Afraid of Feminism? Seeing Through the Backlash', that the 'whole subject of who women are and what they want challenges our division between public and private life' and, therefore, makes people uncomfortable. Could we, whilst retaining a view that feminism has not gone far enough, also pander to that discomfort? Could we keep what is judged 'too personal' or 'too political' private? Perhaps we already have. What if it is not true that feminism is unfashionable? What if, instead, it is actually just fashionable to keep one's feminism secret? Would such a stance be feminist at all? Possibly. If that secret were kept in the furtherance of a cause.

Disregarding whether or not the recent tendency to keep quiet is a conscious choice, would it have any power if actually adopted as a feminist tactic? What could such behaviour achieve? Who would it serve? Could it, for example, hamper the prevalent propensity in the art world to judge only women's work as gendered?

Judgemental gendering succeeds in putting any aesthetic achievements of form, colour, composition or structure secondary to the fact of an artist's femaleness. And goes some way towards encouraging agreement with the sentiment, expressed by a journalist to Betty Friedan in 1981, that "I don't want to be stuck today with a feminist label any more than I would want to be known as a 'dumb blonde' in the fifties. The 'libber' label limits and short-changes those who are tagged with it. And the irony is that it emerged from a philosophy that set out to destroy the notion of female tagging." (6)

Does the need of a woman, at any time in history, to engage with feminism come only from outside of herself? From a cultural judgement that presumes that the origins of her self expression must be different from those of any man? Rebecca West seemed to think so in 1931 when she said, "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from ►

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ever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.” (7)

In the early 20th century, when ‘first-wave’ feminists demanded civil and political equality and in the 1970s, when ‘second-wave’ feminism gave prominence to sexual and family rights for women, it was necessary to speak up and to point to one’s femaleness. If change were to be effected then everything about a woman’s private life had to become public property, in order that inequalities be most obviously seen. This attitude was epitomised by the popular 1970s slogan, ‘The personal is the political’. I am in no doubt that this statement continues to be true. However refusal to disclose that which is ‘too’ personal is political also. Couldn’t keeping quiet about the fact of our gender now be an equally provocative stance? If everyone is pointing out that I am a woman, should I join in? Isn’t that a trap? Isn’t it collusion? By pointing at that part of myself don’t I concur with what is being said, which is something like, ‘we will accept you only if you admit that you are problematic. Since your femaleness is an issue for us, we would welcome and appreciate your engagement with that.’

However, if women’s power is now being represented, not by speaking freely but by carrying around material possessions, aren’t we in danger of, again, invoking the wrath Germaine Greer waged against Natasha Walter’s new feminism? Although Walter, Greer argues, assumes that feminism was, by the late 1990s, all about ‘money, sex and fashion’, “It was not until feminists of my own generation began to assert with apparent seriousness that feminism had gone too far that the fire flared up in my belly. When the lifestyle feminists had gone just far enough, giving them the right to ‘have it all’, i.e. money, it would have been inexcusable to remain silent.” (8)

Naomi Wolf, though, continues to say that, since there has been a ‘genderquake’, with more women than ever in powerful positions, we have permission to ‘stop complaining’ and give up ‘victim feminism’.

In ‘Sisterhood, Interrupted’, written in 2007, Deborah Siegel explains that, its replacement, ‘power feminism’, has been criticised by some ‘second-wavers’ for encouraging younger women to equate only sex with power; to actually believe they can get what they want solely by reclaiming a sexualised female image.

However, if this were indeed a true description of the new ‘power feminism’ said to be upon us, if sex were our only route to power, wouldn’t we be spending more money on shoes and bras than handbags? And this is not the case.

In her anthology of personal essays, ‘Jane Sexes It Up’, Merri Lisa Johnson suggests that, while sexual bravado is part of a new wave of feminism, those engaged in it are “lodged between the idea of liberation and its incomplete execution.” (9)

So does the emergence of the ‘status handbag’ push us any closer to an endgame? Does it at least show that woman’s power, once intrinsically linked

to man’s and then reliant on her collective gender group, is now held by the individual?

Is this sardonic and economic phenomenon also symbolic of a general, societal power shift from the up to the down? Although most of the symbols of patriarchal power, especially the religious ones like, for example, the sceptre, can be held up high, wielding power and control over others, the handbag really only lends itself, by its gravitational propensity, to hang down towards the ground. But is the ground actually a more secure place? A place where desire for power over others transforms into a wish for possession only of one’s self?

Hundreds of years ago young women, just like today’s ‘sexually brave’ generation, were encouraged to wield their physical beauty as power. But, even in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft knew that “taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison.” (10)

What is ultimate power? Is it a future breaking-out of the prison of my gender? Or is it power enough that, now, in order to get what I want, I, alone, need know it?

I want to make abstract not figurative art; I want to prioritise material experience over language; I want formal aesthetics rather than narrative, autobiographical detail; I want the lived life to be primary, not the looked-at image. How much is all of that determined by the fact that I am a woman? Since I cannot tell, it will have to be my secret.

(1) Street Porter, Janet, ‘Handbags Are More Addictive Than Drink, Drugs Or Dreary Sex’ *The Independent On Sunday* April 29th, 2007.

(2) Chenoune, Farid, ‘Carried Away: All About Bags’, *The Vandome Press*, 2005.

(3) De Beauvoir, Simone, ‘The Second Sex’, Bantam Books, 1965. Originally published 1949.

(4) Walters, Margaret, ‘Feminism’, *Oxford University Press*, 2005.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Ibid.

(8) Greer, Germaine, ‘The Whole Woman’, *Transworld Publishers*, 2000.

(9) Siegel, Deborah, ‘Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women To Girls Gone Wild’, *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2007.

(10) Wollstonecraft, Mary, ‘A Vindication Of The Rights Of Woman’, *Penguin Books*, 1992. Originally published 1792.

