

Bree Person

DENIM AND IDENTITY

Intro

As a clothes enthusiast I'm usually excited to talk about clothes. I dedicate days to go extreme thrifting to find the right outfits, the right style that will make me feel edgy and look like a conscious thinker. Clothes are a way of speaking to people, it can show where you're from, the type of interests you might have and your personal beliefs. Everyone curates a self when they are choosing what clothes to wear.

Denim became a big part of my life when I started working at the Gap in Times Square. The main feature of the Gap is their denim wear. I can name denim types from its, texture, fitting, stitching, quality and color.

Welcome to the Gap

The Gap projects itself to be a brand like no other because of its denim and passion for social justice. I worked with the Gap for about 6 months. The orientation was the longest I've ever been through. It was for three hours where they educated employees on the Do's and Dont's of the business, but also on how the Gap has become to be such a high in demand brand. The Gap aims to be a 'progressive' brand, they are pro-LGBTQUA and they do fundraisers for the homeless and organizations like 'The Door'. The Door is a non-profit organization that provides the LGBTQ community and teens of color the necessary resources to get a job, find housing, or just have a safe space for them to go to.

During my time with the Gap I've seen many people of different, races, genders, ethnicities and cultures come inside of the Gap. The location definitely played a part in the diversity, I was stationed in Times Square. Every month employees were given the opportunity to help teens that went to organizations like 'The Door' raise money for various events or projects.

A lot of my time was spent at the Gap. I was a part time associate but once you spend 8 hours a day 4 times a week folding, sizing, sorting and nurturing denim it feels pretty much like full time. My shifts were from 6pm to 3 in the morning. During the day I worked at the YMCA. My life was challenging around this time. What I did appreciate about both jobs was the choice to wear denim. The Gap's dress code wasn't super strict. Like many big Brand stores we were told what we couldn't wear; no other brand's logos in the store, no spaghetti strap tops, no tank tops, all shirts have to have a sleeve, skirts and shorts have to be touching your knees, no sequins or bright colors, closed toed shoes and no slippers. Employees were encouraged to wear denim. So I wore denim everyday. I worked 6 days a week in denim. It was easier to transition from one job to the next if I wore denim to both. All of my co-workers wore denim. We actually loved wearing denim. It's such a better option than wearing all black to work, which most establishments prefer. There was a type of pride to working at the Gap that I've had in comparison to the shame I've had working at other stores that required me to wear all black. Wearing all black can be limiting and it yells service worker. Denim can have the tone of, that's a worker but they're cool.

When I'm not at work I'm either sleeping, hanging out with friends or family or creating an installation. Most of my installations are a projection of the environment I am in or of how I feel. Denim was a big part of my life and I decided to construct an installation out of denim. With every installation I read a book that helps me to synthesize what I'm feeling and how to translate that into my work.

I copped a book called, "Clothing As Material Culture" by Susan Kuchler and Daniel Miller. Chapter after chapter broke down ways in which we express ourselves through cloth. One chapter that stuck with me the is, "The Material Culture of New Fibres". I will dive deeper into the relevance later on into the paper.

First Viewing

Most of my work have public viewings. On July 7th from 3pm - 7pm I was able to get booked for an event space. The curator of the event was a post grad student at Purchase that wanted to give artists a platform for their work. Her name is Mariah and her company is called SPCC.

The day of the event was a night to remember. I was in collaboration with a stylist and a photographer this day. The stylist had many garments of different fittings so people had options. My installation was in place for anyone who wanted to do whatever they wanted on them. There were a couple people who slept on them and a lot of people who just wanted pictures. My goal was to get people to interact but it turned into something performative. Flick after flick after

flick, I had almost ten people pose in my piece. I was very happy with how comfortable people were to interact with my piece.



Photography: Barbara Gabriellee

Event Space: Mariah Davenport

Models: Left: Alex

Right: John



Photography: Barbara Gabrielle

Event Space: Mariah Davenport

Model: Shakeema

Denim Identity

Back at school and I need a senior project. The first thing I thought was my installation could turn into my senior project. I could talk about how our clothes construct a type of identity, a denim identity. First I had to understand what my identity meant to me and why that mattered for this installation. Why denim? So I copped another book called, “The Self Illusion: How the Social Brain Creates Identity” by Bruce Hood. The chapter that resonated most with my experiences with the Gap is, “How the Tribe Made Me”. It speaks a lot on conformity. It read me

too well, the Gap did some brainwashing. Wear denim, sell denim, preach denim and also here's a 50 percent discount on all merchandise. I realized I wore denim all the time, as I scrolled past pictures on my instagram, I saw how many fits had the same denim material. I spent a lot of time at the Gap and I did buy clothes when the discounts were in full effect. I didn't have to buy them though. I didn't have to construct an installation out of denim but I did, "When we conform, it is not so much the power of the group or peer pressure that shapes our behavior, but rather our desire to be accepted. Our need to conform is a powerful force that shapes us and literally changes the way we think" (Hood, 197). So Hood had me here. I knew I couldn't be the only one under this denim wave so typed in hashtag denim into my search box on instagram. One of the first images that lit up my screen was of three black women all dressed in denim. Their clothes were immaculate and I had to know more. I pressed my thumb down on my screen and was directed to their page. The description under this picture read, "Women in South Sudan have little to celebrate when it comes to their rights" (Instagram handle: Iammarimalek). A hashtag that was accompanied by others read, denim day. Turns out denim day is a whole movement where people wear denim to bring awareness towards sexual violence, it's campaign has been running for over twenty years, more information can be found at [denim day info.org](http://denimdayinfo.org). This made me think of other ways that denim has been used as way to connect to other groups.

The Presidents way of connecting to the people through denim is very fascinating to me. Barack Obama in mom jeans is a revelation, but he isn't the first to do it. Rosie Swash says it best, "Nothing says 'I'm an All-American guy' like the rugged blue of a pair of jeans, and, as these pictures show, male presidents, VP's and office aspirants often reach for a trusty bit of stonewash

when they want to brand themselves as a man of the people” (Walsh, Men’s Fashion) Rosie Walsh is a writer for “The Guardian” and her article is titled, “The presidential love of denim-an Illustration Guide”, in this article she has pictures of Romney, Bush, Clinton, Obama and Carter all in denim as they give talks to the public that aren’t hosted in the white house. Denim is the cloth for the people, “Spanning worlds and time, a substantial anthropological record speaks eloquently of the ways in which cloth and clothing materialize social and political statuses, convey and consolidate identity, mediate social relations and not only reflect social change but also create it, acting as Schneider (1994) shows an agent of history by giving cultural form to innovative dynamic moments” (O’connor, page 41). This is from the chapter, “The Material Culture of New Fibres”, which can be found in the book, “Clothing as Material Culture” by Susan Kuchler, and David Miller.

What’s the conversation behind denim?

Denim has started the conversation for different movements. Denim seems to make political statements, but also is a cloth for the people, “Once viewed simply as mere artifacts, it is now recognized that cloth and clothing are culturally constructed commodities with complex symbolic properties, transmitting purity and pollution, linking past and present, transforming through belief, carrying fundamental values” (O’Connor, 41). The question of performance starts to come into play though, now recognizing in which the ways it is used by these different groups, “I lived for my jeans, and as a result I assumed the exterior behavior of one who wears jeans. In any case, I assumed a demeanor. It’s strange that the traditionally most informal and

anti-etiquette should be the one that so strongly imposes an etiquette” (Umberto Eco, Lumbar Thought). In this essay, Umberto Eco talks about how he stands and where he places his hands and how he sits. I found it very interesting that this is how he felt in denim. Does denim invoke conscious thinking?

I'm back to the drawing board and I realize I need to create an activity for people to do in my installation. So I set up my installation on the main mall of the campus and I set a mirror facing them, an old plastic fan, a standing plant, a chair, a table, a bag of balloons and two shag throws. On the table is a notebook and a pen, I gave anyone the option to write how they felt inside of the book. The activity was for them to rearrange the objects that's in the installation. Before I move forward, the installation is a 10 by 8 foot denim rug and a denim wall, which basically is a large cloth of denim heaped over a clothes rack that is 6 feet. I was thinking for a while to have different types of denim clothes for people to try on but that seemed too much like the last event that was hosted with the SPCC project. I wanted to see how people would perform in the denim as a place to be in instead of something to wear and the feelings that are evoked through that. I had a total of eight people interact with me this day. Only one person moved around the objects, others sat in it and wrote things in the book. The handwriting for me is illegible but that doesn't invalidate their thoughts. What was interesting to me was how many people asked me if they should take off their shoes while at the last event, people just stepped on the denim, I did not mind either way. The one person that moved items around brought the table to the center of the rug with the chair behind it and blew up balloons to the size of their fist and proceeded to sit on them. It was the peak of my day.

How It Was Made

ITEMS:

8 x 10 ft shag rug

15 YARDS of denim

Black thread

One Sewing needle

The shag rug was old, dingy and stained from years of usage. Black marks covered the beige areas almost like freckles on a face. Two maybe three adult bodies could spread across over the whole rug. It was comfortable, managed my nights that I couldn't find sleep on my bed, the floor was its own escape.

I bought denim, 15 yards of it, I cut it down to 10 yards for the rug. I stretched my body over the denim to accurately measure the length to fit over the rug. My measurements were off but I knew how to patch it up.

The denim was heavy and rough to the touch, nothing like the shag rug. It had its freshly new scent that made me willing to work with it more. Denim is one of the most durable fabrics. That

is if you have non-stretch from the bolt with no tampering. It is hard, When my feet are rubbed against the fabric my skin starts to ash, it dries up. The smell is like a fresh iron. I threw the denim over the rug, sat on the edge of it and prepared by needle and thread. It has been awhile since I have sewn anything. I take the edge of the rug in all its thickness and penetrate it from the back to the front where it is met with the denim. It took more force that predicted, my skin on my fingers squeezed tightly against the needle as I continued to sew around the denim and rug. Unaware of where exactly the needle would come out at times my fingers would bleed from it poking into my skin.

It took three days. I sewed around the rug making knots and tightening loose holes. By the second day I had less blood staining the edges of the rug/denim. The second day it rained, the jean had a foul smell to it. It smelled old and worn, it was sitting out on a patio, the patio had covering but it didn't keep all the rain from hitting parts of the fabric. I worked anyway. My socks were drenched and it made foot marks on the denim that I knew wouldn't stay. It became more difficult to sew though. My thread wasn't as dry, it took twice as much time to get it through the rug and denim without it bunching together and knotting on its own. The third day it was humid and damp, the denim had more dry patches than wet though. I finished off the corners this day, the rug/denim was complete.

The denim on the floor would be hard but it being sewed onto the rug gave it lift and comfort. The shag rug post installment was cleaner, more approachable style forward. The edges of the rug were bunched because of the amateur work of my needle in thread that gave the

transformation more character, which is me trying to feel better about my lack of precision.

Anyway it was done, the rug/denim is heavier and layered, ready for more bodies to occupy its space.

Citations:

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