

There hasn’t been this much skin in a long time. Bare-chested male models parade at Versace, accompanied by women with skirts slit up to their hips. Miniskirts at Miu Miu barely cover the bottoms and appear alongside cable-knit sweaters and oxford shirts, cropped to not only bear the tummy but also end a hair’s breadth below the bust. The Mini dresses at Dior end two handbreadths below the pubic bone. Anal plugs and love balls as silver jewelry top off a collection with lots of latex and lace at Gucci. There’s no doubt about it: Sex is back!

Its comeback after more than two years is no coincidence. On the one hand, we are freeing ourselves from the demands and restrictions of the pandemic, on the other hand, we are re-negotiating sexuality as a society: It is all about sexual identity and freedom - and notions of what (good) sex is in the first place. And fashion plays a big part in all this.

Let’s start with the new lust for fetish fashion: Madonna wore a black patent leather outfit by the latex couture label Atsuko Kudo to the MTV Video Music Awards, Kim Kardashian wore not only head to toe black at the Met Gala, but included an all-covering face mask - by Balenciaga. And actor Evan Mock walked the MET’s red carpet in a studded bondage mask made of patent leather. As this is hardly a BDSM-coming out, is it trying to take a well-calculated risk?

“No”, says Andrew Groves, a former designer at Alexander McQueen and fashion design professor at British Westminster University, “rather than the outward appearance of fetish, I believe we’ve been in a mental BDSM relationship with our governments for the last two years. They’ve dictated what we must wear, when we may leave the house, and who we may or may not kiss.” Early on in the pandemic, Groves started to look into face masks because he was convinced, they would shape fashion. „Masks and face coverings are a very good way of ‘othering’ people. We may or may not know who has been vaccinated or not, but with masks they have become a clear visible sign of who is being compliant to the new social norms.“ That’s one of the reasons they have such a polarizing effect. „During my research on face masks last year, I was astounded at how quickly face masks and PPE scrubs were being worn within pornographic films”, he say, “We introduced mandates for wearing face masks in the UK in March, and by May, they were appearing online in porn shoots. This kind of recontextualization is also a way of overcoming trauma.“

Fetish fashion as a way of overcoming pandemic horrors – fair enough. But what about the amount of naked skin that’s on display in current collections? What kind of liberation is that about? Are the naked male torsos, the deep female cleavages and the skimpy miniskirts not a mere replica of the traditional distinction between male and female? On the contrary.

For every miniskirt for women, there are three for men. The many collections that have traditional men’s garb worn by women and traditional womens wear worn by men are testament to the ongoing debate about

diversity and the freedom to declare one’s gender by individual choice. Raf Simons, for example, shows his skirts made of the finest wool in straight cuts on men and women, Francesco Risso tailors dresses covered with colorful flowers or decorated with wide block stripes for men at Marni. He says: „Currently more men than women want to wear dresses!“ He points out that the abolition of dress conventions according to gender does not mean that there are no explicitly feminine and masculine fashions, but that they continue to exist, but can be worn by everyone at whim (interview, page 70).

Gender norms and how to overcome them are only one aspect of Jonathan W. Anderson’s work. When the Irish designer dresses men in skirts, leaves their chests naked, and fits them with lots of neon-colored details and accessories, his aim is to convey a „message of electrifying hope and optimism.” For this, he returns to the Ibiza of his childhood. It was there that he first experienced a rave in the early ,90s and was impressed by the energy of the mass event. „I remember watching them and thinking’ here and now they could take over the world.“ Looking to the rave culture of the ,90s, Anderson’s current fashion evokes the possibility of breaking out of the confines of pandemic isolation, back into public space and into a hedonistic communal pleasure where all forms of sex and intimacy are possible.

Currently a contrary position is getting attention as well: Asexuality or „graysexuality“ focusses on the question of whether good sex could perhaps also be sex that one consciously does not have. In Germany, for example, young people are having sex later and later, and more than half of them are older than 17 at their „first” time. This has nothing to do with sex fatigue, but rather with the idea of believing sex to be something special rather than meaningless - and consequently wanting to experience it with the „right” person. Asexuality and „graysexuality“, on the other hand, refer to the lack of interest in sex or desire for it. New York historian Valerie Steele, curator of the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology, suggests that „normcore,“ a fashion trend characterized by inconspicuous dress, might be an equivalent (interview, page 90). Essayist and activist Sophie Lewis on the other hand points to the fact that sex is being looed at differently altogether. Instead of focusing on performance and achievement, the emphasis is on self-care and well-being: „In a better world, jogging pants would certainly have very erotic connotations“, she says. (see essay, page 74).

Lewis is convinced that the pandemic also had positive effects on sexuality and identity formation: for trans women, for example, the face mask was a helpful accessory because it protected them from critical glances at their stubble. And the lack of public exposure was also a shelter that allowed some trans people to come out, away from the broader public. Andrew Groves of Westminster University is more critical of the impact of the pandemic.

“I believe that our relationship with our bodies

Sex is back! After the pandemic’s restrictions life is all about rediscovery. Right now we’re re-negotiating what sexual freedom, sexual identity and (good) sex mean for us. And all that with the help of fashion.

IMAGE:
I
Suits all genders:
This schoolgirl look
by Dior can be
worn by both men
and women



has shifted dramatically in the last two years”, he says, “Our lives have been devoid of the external audiences for which we might normally dress. Because the majority of us have stayed at home or engaged in limited social interactions, we have dressed for ourselves, for comfort and self-assurance. Simultaneously, our bodies, and more importantly, the bodies of others, have become the imagined sites of disease rather than desire. There

are clear parallels with the 1980s AIDS crisis, which elicited both prurient and transgressive responses. I see something similar happening now as people either fight to reclaim their body autonomy or relinquish it to the state. “For him, the current lust for sexually charged fashion is, above all, an expression of an attempt at liberation: “Right now one of the most radical things you can do is fuck.” ♦