

the upper body. I still remember the artist Larry Rivers in the 70ies telling me how you'd see Marlene Dietrich at Bloomingdales trying on shoes and she still had great legs. On the one hand the exposure of the legs signals youthful sexiness on the other hand it is something that older clients can also do, they can show off their legs and the legs often look quite good.

FAQ: "The more naked skin, the sexier!" Does that equation still apply in fashion?

VALERIE STEELE: Naked skin is understood as a sign of freedom and at the same time

It is criticized as a sign of the sexualization of men and women. The idea that naked skin is a sign of freedom is based on the false assumption that clothing is something artificial and that there is a natural body if you do without it. Yet the naked body has long been a social construct: Even newborns - and what could be more natural than a just-born baby - are already shaped by the culture from which they come. The baby of a malnourished mother will naturally look smaller and thinner than that of a mother in good health. Our bodies are already significantly conditioned at birth - by where we grow up and under what circumstances.

FAQ: Sex in fashion has always been a way of breaking taboos: you mentioned the topic of miniskirts, another is fetish fashion. It was considered scandalous when Madonna wore Gaultier's cone bra on her Blond Ambition tour in April 1990 and by doing so toyed with elements of fetish wear. On the other hand it was socially acceptable to walk down the red carpet in BDSM masks with varnish and spikes at the MET Gala last September. Are there any taboos left today when it comes to fashion and sex?

VALERIE STEELE: Back in 1997, when I published my book "Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power," I talked to fetish people, like leather fetishists, about the Versace show at the time, which featured many BDSM looks. I thought they would find it as fantastic as I did, but they outright hated it: "Horrible," they said, "in the past you could look at someone and guess what sex they wanted. But now it's just a fashion statement." Fetish fashion today is just a style statement meant to express sexiness. I find it interesting that there are many more taboos now than there were in the 70s and 80s.

FAQ: Which can you think of?

VALERIE STEELE: Well, pedophilia. Fashion all the time played with underage girls. And kinderwhore looks and that will be really squashed instantly now. And lots of looks which were being seen as being anti-female or racial fantasies about sex. Today these would be like 'You can't do that that's so bad.' Today, however, for a campaign like Calvin's, in which older men coax young adults into sexual poses as part of a casting, there'd be an outrage immediately. In the late '90s, on the other hand, it ran for a few

weeks on MTV before being stopped. It used to be normal for models to be just 15 years old, but today they have to be of legal age to work internationally. Every generation has its own mass phobias of sex that deviates from the prevailing norm and other misconduct. Each new generation rediscovers sex, each develops its own fears. However, I find that fashion is increasingly questioned because of its bad influence on people.

FAQ: Do you disapprove?

VALERIE STEELE: Not necessarily, but I look at trends and fashions in their historical context. Even the US president was opposed to the Heroin Chic of the 90s. He said, "We can't advertise that." I was less worried about it. The childlike body of a Kate Moss, who was considered an icon of this grunge

Valerie Steele

Born in 1955, this fashion historian, curator, publicist, and author, who earned her doctorate at Yale, never gets bored with fashion and physical culture.

Over the past twenty years, she has curated nearly forty exhibitions. She never hides behind scientific jargon; she's driven by caffeine, aqua gymnastics and an inexhaustible curiosity.



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look, was also a reaction to the Amazonian models of the 80s. Naming and contextualizing it that way doesn't mean you're in favor of pedophilia.

FAQ: There is currently a great egalisation of the sexes in fashion: Women have been wearing men's clothing for decades, and now more and more men are slipping into women's clothing, and fashion happily adopts this trend. Do you think this will change our idea of gender and sexuality?

VALERIE STEELE: Nobody can just wear what they like, neither in the past nor today. But there is more flexibility. Women have copied men for centuries, because of their greater status and privilege. In the Renaissance, they took off their veils and wore men's hats instead. So men stopped wearing hats. Earrings, bracelets, jewelry - all of these were a natural part of men's fashion during the Renaissance. But what women imitated, men discarded. So there was quite a stir when, in the 1970s and early 1980s, men began to have their ears pierced again and to wear earrings. They were reclaiming their "inner pirate," going: I can be a manly man and wear earrings at the same time. Gay men dared to take this step first, followed by straight men like competitive athletes, whoms virility wasn't in doubt. But if you think men can just put on a skirt today is sorely mistaken. Outside of big cities like New York and Berlin, that's not the case. I had an intern with long blond curls who always carried around a handbag studded with sparkling gemstones. He was from Wyoming, where gay young men like him are quite at risk of being killed, and I wondered how he had survived there before managing to escape to New York. In urban centers, there is a growing fluidity between the sexes, especially in the younger generations. In rural areas, on the other hand, the younger generation is becoming more conservative.

FAQ: How do you think this is going to evolve in the future? In Eastern European countries, for example, the freedom to live one's sexual identity is being rigorously curtailed.

VALERIE STEELE: Yes. In many parts of the world, from Africa to Eastern Europe, there has been a backlash against gay liberation. As a result, LGBTQ people are really in danger of being arrested, raped, and even killed. In some places, such as Africa and Latin America, anti-gay politics are being subsidized by American evangelicals. In other places, the Orthodox Church or radical Islamic forces are behind this movement. That's why it's a bit early to go let's move on with the sexual revolution. Not so fast!

FAQ: Fashion is tackling issues like sex and gender, we're seeing trends like sex positivity - that promotes the acceptance of sexual orientation and its various forms of expression - gaining track on a broader level. At the same time there are studies suggesting that younger people are having sex later, and possibly less. Is there a fashion equivalent for

that as well?

VALERIE STEELE: I can't tell if there's an anti-sexual fashion. What might be perceived as that could have many other meanings. When we look at normcore for example: That's a statement against other forms of extreme fashion looks and has different layers of meaning. I am tempted to wonder if there's something in the way that children are being raised that makes them anxious towards sexuality. Or whether it has something to do with different patterns of interacting with other people of their age. A lot of people mostly communicate online and are isolated from other people.

FAQ: One finding in a recent study on youth sexuality is that trust and comfort are more important in relationships today than the actual sexual act.

VALERIE STEELE: In psychology, sex drive and attachment theory go together. In your example, they're separated. I see an equivalent to that in fashion: the emphasis is on being visually sexy, not sexy as a means to an end, to attract someone to actually go to bed with you. That visual sexiness is only meant to be a pose that you show on Instagram. It's just an image that's not linked to an action.

FAQ: You mentioned the importance of the internet. Digital fashion is becoming more and more important, it's much easier to invent your identity on the internet, where you can sort of put it on and take it off at the click of a button.

VALERIE STEELE: Imagery of sex without the behavior is a fleeing from the body basically. You can jerk off at home alone while watching someone on the internet. But that is not one body interacting with another. A person is their body in so many ways. It's not only their body but includes their body. So a kind of sexuality that divorces you from your body is a very strange one. In Freud's days sexuality was the taboo, nowadays the body is more of a taboo.

FAQ: Is it too real?

VALERIE STEELE: Fashion is an embodied practice. Fashions are made to be worn on the body, and really, it's not just clothes all sort of adornments, your make up your accessories etc. - it's all about the body, and in particular the surface and extensions of the body. So, I think that's fundamental to any understanding of fashion and I think it applies both to men and women equally. It's important for fashion to be looking at male bodies and female bodies alike. And looking into bodies that aren't binary and don't fit into any of these two categories. But I think that's crucial. That's why cyber fashion, animal crossings and avatars are a very strange concept of fashion to me. That's fashion that's just not related to the body at all but related to images online. I am very interested in the dress fashion body combination. I think fashion therefore plays a very important role in self fashioning, not just fashioning your body but who you think of yourself as being. ♣

Anyone who thinks that men today can simply slip into skirts today is very much mistaken. Outside of big cities like New York and Berlin, that's not the case.

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Valerie Steele keeps a sharp eye on fashion, preferably through cat-eye glasses