Subculture’s Identity

Subcultures are a form of social uprising, originating as part of the culture of mass media and consumerism. We are what we consume, how we look and a reflection of how we identify ourselves within our socioeconomic context. Therefore it is not surprising that visual identity has such an important place in subcultures. As dress and behavior codes are adopted by subcultures and defined by a lifestyle, by music, dialect, body language, accessories, clothing, transportation and so on. These factors make them visibly distinct from the primary culture. Subcultures start in many cases among minority groups. They are usually differentiated by a unique style and performance with different media types, for example, street performance, graffiti, body piercing, tattoos, dance and musical genre. They tend to push the boundaries of the popular culture. Punk, hip hop, surfing and skate boarding, are usually identified originally with youth who rebel against the accepted norms of mainstream.

Their level of nonconformist behavior depends on how far they want to push their message, how far they need to push the social boundaries to be noticed and what public image they chose for themselves. Punks with their body piercing, chains, hairstyle and color are much more provocative then the surfing subculture or the online zine communities. If Punk and Rap are associated with expressing hardships, the Hell’s Angels expresses anger and white supremacy. The hippies, and the burning man subculture are associated with expressing creativity, freedom, and drugs. Surfers can be associated with leisure. With the exception of online subcultures, it is very hard to separate a subculture from its visual identity because it is a crucial part of their distinction and voice.

Subculture’s style is designed to visually and functionally compliment the cultural components. It merges identity and function. For example Hip-hop started in New York’s ghettos as an alternative to gang life. They wear clothing in colors that reflected their graffiti. Their break dances were a rebellious expression against DJ disco. Their cloths expressed their individuality but were also designed to complement their break dance performances and accommodate the complicated moves involved. In their style there was an attempted to make the most out of limited resources. (2)

Even subcultures that appear strong and authentic, are really not that original because they reposition and re-contextualize ordinary commodities, appropriating common symbols with new meanings. They do that sometimes in a disturbing way to make it their own. Combinations of styles are taken to the extreme in order to communicate a message in language understood by the mainstream. (1) Ironically, this need to be visible in their uniqueness, once accomplished makes the style desirable and causes their dissemination within the culture they resist, a capitalistic culture that values the new for the sake for consumption. When a subculture’s style shows up in department stores, their unique identity and authenticity is lost.
However, as their style is being adopted into the mainstream culture and brings about change tension builds. Because the change is mostly out of context, and on the surface, it is not necessarily meaningful to the culture. For example Hip Hop fashion started with no intention to become a trend, but consequently became a billion dollar industry that crosses racial, economic, cultural and global boundaries. (2)

To purpose creating a subculture promoting the pro choice issue, I had to identify what aspects of society in this context I am rebelling against and appropriate a style to this point of view. The capitalistic culture widely uses sex and sexuality as a way to market products, without taking responsibility for the cultural consequences. Much of American’s political leadership and public in denial about this cultural reality, so providers of guidance, sex education, safe sex information and access to contraceptives are facing strong resistance. As a result growing unsafe sexual behavior is becoming a public and personal health hazard. To protest against this reality, I propose a Graffiti makeup and accessories line. By designing sexy clothing and underwear that advocate safe sex, and by using makeup to publicize the message I would like to encourage open dialog about safe sexual attitudes. I propose a fashion statement that brings back the sexy Madonna style of the 70’s with the message that safe sex is sexy and powerful.


(2) “From the Ghetto...to the Runway” http://rap.about.com/library/weekly/aa052501a.htm

(3) “Costly Compensation: Postmodern Fashion, Politics, Identity”
(Published in Modern Fiction Studies, 42, Spring 1996: 111-28.)
http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Vincent.B.Leitch-1/article3.html