Story Number 1

I love magazines. I’ve loved magazines since I was a teenager and made a whole one for my A Level Media Studies project on an electric typewriter and photocopier. I worked as a designer of commercial magazines for 12 years in London. Having had the privilege of working in magazines, I come to this project from the position of the designer. I acknowledge there are an abundance of independent magazines, and fanzines, that challenge newsstand magazines in form, frequency, size, design, circulation, distribution and position, but I am interested in the mass ideologies that news stand magazines perpetuate, iterate, create.

I will use the Vogue Archive as my material as it is home to 132 years’ of American Vogue. I will also use the physical Vogue archive in Central Saint Martin’s Library. I will use print and digital to deconstruct Vogue, the two mediums the magazine is created in and distributed through; the two mediums that currently challenge the industry.

I deconstructed Vogue, from a post structuralist feminist perspective, to see what lay beneath the surface. To challenge the perception of Vogue, to explore the role of design in creating discursive realities, to defend the editorial teams that make magazines. But what I found was contrary. A medium that was contrary, material that was contrary, form that was contrary, and personal realisations, that were, contrary.

*Vogue*. A magazine. (Magazine: a type of thin book with large pages and a paper cover that contains articles and photographs and is published every week or month; Magazine: a part of a gun in which cartridges are stored (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

*Vogue*. A magazine for women; A magazine made by women for women, created within a capitalist and patriarchal system. A magazine as a cultural, social, political, technical and economic reflection of the time and space in which it is created; A magazine found in shops, hotel lobbies, on coffee tables; in waiting rooms, by toilets and discarded on public transport; A magazine, an ephemeral object and an archive, a temporal custodian of time and culture and a time capsule of fashions and trends. A magazine is contrary.

There are many branches of feminism that span four ‘waves’ feminism from 1810 to present day. I am not a voice on all the branches of feminism, but I support and advocate all forms of feminism. I am white, middle class and Western. I am an advocate for women’s rights and am indebted to those who fought for the privileges I have today. I am in no way an expert on feminism. I find some of the texts challenging, difficult. Vogue spans three centuries, from 1892 to present day. Running almost parallel to feminism. A history of feminism? Contrary.

Feminist Naomi Wolf focuses on the construction of the ‘feminine ideal’ in women’s magazines and notes how magazines are social constructions created to perpetuate and consolidate control over women, and to maintain their role as consumers; "Western beauty standards are the products of a capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal, white supremacist society, contrived to keep us consuming and consumed” (1993). Wolf acknowledges the invisible power structures behind the magazine, that controls the content. These repetitive and increasingly dominating capitalist ideologies are noted too by Ellen McCracken, “Consequently, because of published reluctance to deviate from techniques that have bright financial success and despite the appearance of change and innovation, there is strong structural continuity in these magazines…”

I found this to be true when categorising Vogue content from 1892 to 2025, (not very successfully - it was nuanced and misleading), what emerged was a shift in language and layout design that foregrounded fashion. Around 1930 subheadings appeared in a larger font, this ‘progression’ peaked in the 90s with ‘fashion’ being first, red text, and multiple headings starting with fashion. Vogue went rogue and lost its soul.

But, there has been a shift in women’s perceptions of women’s magazines since 1993. I conducted a small survey of Vogue target readers (females with a high disposable income aged 35-35, abc ref) and found women were disenchanted with the medium, citing “too many adverts” and “regurgitating content” (Survey, 2025). Vogue is consumed by consuming, alienating the very audience it is trying to attract. Contrary.

To explore this more deeply, I used print and digital to deconstruct Vogue, the mediums Vogue is primarily disseminated through, and the channels that challenge Vogue in the current technological and economic climate. Using the online Vogue Archive and the physical archive at Central Saint Martins, I deconstructed American Vogue and found layers of contexts building a socially constructed narrative. I used PDFs from the digital archive and digitally deconstructed content. Initially based on Judith Butler’s premise that gender is socially constructed, I started to explore social construction of the most recent issue I could access (February 2025). It wasn’t just gender that was constructed, there was a whole discursive reality. Using Barthes system of mythology in deconstruction I found every sentence was contextualised within a socially constructed world of celebrity, exclusivity, class and privilege. Layers of contexts were informing, justifying and reinforcing this single narrative. A recursive reality. Repetitive and formulaic design, language and contexts normalise the content, creating a world you are simultaneously part of, but equally will never be part of. Contrary.

Hidden deep within the text were snippets of meaningful content. Lyrical half sentences emerged through deconstructing by absence, that were without judgment and more, natural: “when he smiles, which he does freely and often”, “the Taatit rugs of the Shetland Islands”, “That’s the way Zac thinks, with a generosity of spirit”, “I’ll always remember how he graciously withdrew”. Political comment “…Trump returns to the White House is, in a word, bewildering”, “The Food and Drug Administration hasn’t approved a single one, and the supplement marketplace remains unregulated.” As well as humorous “Oi, Irish boy” with a bit of 19th Century literature “Undeterred I plough ahead, but wait, no, I am distracted” (Vogue, 2025). It was contrary.

Hall states, there is always an oppositional reading to be read. The reader can reject the narrative and construct a new meaning from the text based on their own position or culture (1973). Separating the socially constructed content from non-socially constructed content by absence, created two distinct readings of Vogue. The sheer abundance of colour, imagery and information, with multiple contexts informing and reinforcing each other, left no space for alternative thought, or breath. An overwhelming bombardment of commercialised, contextualised same. That is not only present in Vogue, but across all women’s magazines, across all newsstands. Ellen McCracken acknowledges this alternative content in Vogue, arguing that it is used to further sedate women:

“In addition, printing one or two of the responses from feminists gives the magazine the image of a fair, evenhanded treatment of the issues, as well as the appearance of the incorporation of pro-feminism into its editorial pages. The publishers perhaps hope that both feminists and no-feminists will find something to their liking on the pages of Vogue.” (1993)

I’m a romantic, I believe in the non-socially constructed content. Deconstructing through absence gave insights to structure, design and hierarchy, as most of this content was body copy and found at the end of articles. How can I redress the balance?

I had the privilege of talking with Elinor and Richard from Four Corners Books. We discussed their Familiars series. A set of books that retold classic novels through the eyes of an artist, creating beautiful, simple books that create new meaning to these lost narratives. The Heart of Darkness is a novel from 1899 retold in the format of a glossy magazine. Based on Vogue, the size, format and paper created a new reading of this classic, using devices of magazines, such as full bleed images, to punctuate the story. We discussed using a context to tell an alternative story. We discussed material to help tell that story.

Through a dilapidated billboard at East Croydon train station, I explored scale and material in relation to context and commercialisation. Taking features from the past and layering them at inflated sizes to draw attention to what has got lost in Vogue’s single narrative. The material of the billboard was wood; warped by time, with rusty tears of a lived life, decaying as it is left forgotten, no longer in fashion, wearing the right clothes. The ephemeral nature of material and fashion. Which led me to explore paper as meaning.

Paper. Paper the source of a magazine. A natural source that goes through a man-made process. Motivated by money and profit. Vogue. A natural source (woman) that goes through a man-made process. Motivated by money and profit.

Ink. A varnish, a shiny gloss that sticks to the surface. As old as time, the first oil based ink glossed the pages of the Guttenberg Bible in 1455. The first mass produced metal movable type book. A book of text in two columns. Vogue. A magazine designed in two columns (sometimes three). Vogue. A magazine where the ink of adverts saturate and suffocate the pages. Fashion. A shiny gloss that sticks to the surface. Medium, material and form all affirming and confirming one another.

Paper. A fragile material. Easily ripped, dog eared, crumpled, wrinkled, decays, deteriorates over time. Humans. Fragile, wrinkled, decay, deteriorate over time. A magazine. An object to have and to hold, to touch and the cherish, a physical connection to texture, people and communities. Contrary.

I had been deconstructing to disrupt the formal properties, structure and context of content of the magazine. What if I use the medium, material and form to tell a different story. One that is contrary to Vogue. One that speaks of issues that are not of fashion or beauty, that are not commercialised or commodified. One where you can hear the authors voice, not the editorial tone. One that takes past, present and future to create a meaningful story, that appeals to the mass that challenges the dominant ideology of what women’s magazines are. With a side of contrary.