Story Number 2

I WAS HAVING A CONVERSATION about my contrary feelings towards feminism, when I realised, I’d been having that conversation with myself for some time. I am an advocate of women’s rights, and I am indebted to the women who fought for my privileges, I was moved to tears by a ‘Votes For Women’ sash at the Bishopsgate Archive (2024). But, I feel like a flaky feminist, a fence sitting feminist and I find too much feminism, well, too feminist. Feminism is so broad and nuanced, I didn’t know where I fitted in. I am not all of these things, I can’t stand for all these people, I am white, middle class and have privilege. Then I discovered post structuralist feminism and deconstructing. Exploring how language, power and discourse shape meaning, made me feel much more comfortable.

I was also in conversation with magazines and popular culture. I love popular culture and I love magazines. I love the light, entertaining, flippancy of magazines, a smorgasbord of bits to nibble and digest. Indulgent imagery. A feast for the eyes and a gentle stroke of my brain. Accessible and not demanding. Simultaneously, I am exhausted by the noise, commercialisation, commodification and representation of women. Lately, I feel shortchanged by magazines. I find, maybe one article, I want to read, the rest appears to be the same. The same people, saying the same surface level things, about the same other people.

So, I decided to explore the discursive construction of reality through Vogue magazine with a specific interest in what is lurking in the liminal. By using a wide variety of methods of deconstruction – zooming, decaying, offsetting, categorising, extracting, contexts, collage and stenciling – I explored the discursive construction of Vogue magazine and found hidden deep in the text an *other* story of Vogue.

I used print and digital as my material and my medium, as well as scale, wood and decay to deepen these explorations. I used the online Vogue Archive as it is home to 132 years’ worth of American Vogue and the physical Vogue Archive at Central Saint Martins, that is home to around eighty years of American Vogue. The source material is American not British, but I am British, I will use it to represent the West.

Turns out I’m not alone in looking for something *more*. When having a conversation with my friends they felt similar. In a mini survey of women who are Vogue’s target market (female, age 35-45, abc1\*) the conversation that emerged was of “regurgitated content” and “too many ads” (Mini Survey, 2025). Ellen McCracken notes how magazines are a vehicle for delivering audiences to advertisers through semiotics, “In most cases, the meaning systems are intensely successful in selling both copies of the magazine and the products advertised inside” (1993). In the thirty years since this was written, the editorial content itself, has also become commodified. Through deconstructing I found a dominance of commodification woven into picture captions, body copy and imagery.

But… magazines are wonderful constructions and have dedicated teams that make them (I know as I was one of them). Great journalists, great subjects, great photographers… Editorial teams work tirelessly for ‘the audience’. Where did the connection get disconnected?

Naomi Wolf argues at length of the negative impact of the ‘feminine ideals’ women’s magazines construct, perpetuate and iterate, “"Western beauty standards are the products of a capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal, white supremacist society, contrived to keep us consuming and consumed” (1991). Are editorial teams aware of the invisible context they are operating within—a context they are perpetuating, iterating and creating? That the systems and structures they make ‘choices’ within are constraining and restraining themselves and women? I had no idea the ‘choices’ I were making were constructing this discursive reality.

Vogue has constructed a ‘single story’ of itself. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the danger of the single story, to “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become” (2009). In the 1930s the contents page of Vogue changed significantly in language and design, with a shift from varied content for women—covering politics, feminism, capitalism, patriarchy, economics and class—to predominantly fashion. From 1930-2005 this intensified through red text, increased imagery and repetition of the word ‘fashion’. A narrowing Vogue’s interests. Vogue became consumed by consuming, controlled by money and men. Whose voice is really being heard through Vogue? The Vogue Archive spans 132 years, from 1892-present day, almost mirroring the four waves of feminism that started in 1810-present day. What a rich and vibrant archive of women this could have been, I thought reminiscently.

Roland Barthes used ‘mythology’ to uncover the meaning created within texts. Through a mythological lens I found layers of context constructed within every feature of Vogue. Every-single-thing was contextualised within celebrity, wealth, luxury or exclusivity. The influence of advertising overtaking the content and alienating the very audience they are trying to connect with. The danger of this single story is that the context naturalises and normalises it. The design of newsstand magazines is formulaic and homogenous. The danger is that it becomes invisible. The formal properties of design (paraded as the ‘right way’ in Cath Caldwell’s practical Guide to Editorial Design, 2000) are expected and accepted which goes unseen and deepens the myth that the content is, a reality.

But… by looking beyond the surface of what I was presented with, I deconstructed Vogue and found hidden deep within the text an *other* story. Moments of meaningful content that I clung to, that offered a widening of interests, rather than the analogue algorithm that Vogue has become. McCracken notes this passing contribution as further evidence of creating a discursive reality—that

“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 see her point (fence), but I also disagree. I like to think of this as the real voice, trying to be heard amongst all the noise, both visually and textually.

I’m exhausted with being sold to, sold off and sold out. I don’t need sensational headlines to make me read something, I don’t need nearly naked images to entice me to read on. I just want something to connect with, that makes me think, that challenges my view, that gives me another view, an insight, a light and accessible package, but a different way to see (Wolf, 1991).

I had a conversation with Elinor and Richard from Four Corners Book, where we discussed using a context to tell an *other* story. The series *Familiars* take classic novels and retells them through an artist’s eyes, but still in the form of a book. Recognisable, readable, understandable, but different. Bringing a new way of seeing something familiar. Films are doing the same. Hollywood formats are used to make a statement about race (American Fiction), class (Triangle of Sadness), society (Don’t Worry Darling) and expected beauty standards of women (The Substance). Having tried to break the design of magazines through deconstructing, what if I *used* the design of magazines to tell an *other* story. The marginalised, second story of Vogue?

On the surface it looks like Vogue, but when you look beyond the surface you find it is Not Vogue. It is a smorgasbord of diverse voices, from the past, present and future. In conversation with one another, in conversation with time, in conversation with Vogue and in conversation with you.

Its layout, fonts, size, shape, pagination, material, function and form is of Vogue. It has large indulgent imagery, sourced from its own archive, picture libraries and utilises publicity imagery, as magazines do. But the picture captions offer a contrary reading, a provocation, not a commodification. Headlines and standfirsts entice the reader in, without misleading them. The footer contextualises the content. Where it’s from, when it’s from, adding to the conversation, asking questions. Divided into three sections, the past regurgitates literal articles from Vogue’s history that offer conversation on what’s changed and what hasn’t changed—language, aesthetics and attitude have, but themes, not so much. The present takes online audio transcriptions as text to allow the actual voice to come through and to remove the editorial voice. The future takes inspiration from digital content creators, with the audience contributing features, sharing their interests, passions and knowledge, in their voice.

Not Vogue challenges the constructions of women’s magazines and the discursive reality created not only by Vogue, but by all women’s magazines on the newsstand. It shows women as more than consumers and surfaces. I hope that it will engage with women who read magazines, women who have stopped reading magazines and graphic designers interested in who they are really designing for. It challenges the wider systems and structures that magazines are created within by embodying feminist principles but looking like a capitalist product. Whilst Not Vogue is not a reality, I believe in the ethos and values of this project and will look for a commercial setting where this could become a reality. Not Vogue has changed the way I approach design, given me more confidence to design from my values, to use capitalist structures to my own advantage and to try and change the industry in a small way for those to come.

There is an open invitation to join the conversation by writing your own thoughts and comments on the pages, making a magazine a tool for conversation, an object to pass on, to share. An evolving archive of everybody. Challenging the context of how magazines are read, shared and preserved. An ephemeral object that is both of its time and place, but also an archive of the present for the future.

Clearly there are practical economic limitations to this form as a commercial viability. When thinking how this thinking can progress beyond the present, I am drawn to the commercial radio station of Six music. Commercially situated within the BBC, but home to an eclectic mix of sound, opinion and thought. Its values resonate through its content and align with the subtext of the context I am evolving. Could a reality be a Six music magazine that is an analogue extension of sound, that offers a truly diverse voice in a suffocating magazine market.

Creating a place of equality, not exclusivity. Where no one is right and no one is wrong; the start of a conversation. Conversation is inherently contrary, fluid, shape shifting, informing, challenging, undulating, wide, varied and interesting. Conversation is community, belonging, being heard and being seen.

Interviews and editorial content has become one way traffic. The editorial voice overwhelms the actual voice; there is no feedback from the reader. Vogue says its diverse, but is it only surface level diversity? Here is a Vogue that on the surface looks like Vogue. Its layout, fonts, size, shape, pagination, material, function and form is of Vogue. It has large indulgent imagery, sourced from its own archive, picture libraries and utilises publicity imagery, as magazines do. But the picture captions offer a contrary reading, a provocation, not a commodification. Headlines and standfirsts entice the reader in, without misleading them. The footer contextualises the content. Where it’s from, when it’s from, adding to the conversation. It is a smorgasbord of diverse voices, from the past, present and future. The past regurgitates literal articles from Vogue’s history that offer conversation on what’s changed and what hasn’t changed—language, aesthetics and attitudes, but themes, not so much. The present takes online audio and translates it to text to allow the actual voice to come through.

but guarded celebrities regurgitate the same guarded stories for fear of misrepresentation, and expectation of the context.