

The Gendered Dress

Dress - A one-piece garment for a woman or girl that covers the body and extends down over the legs. [Oxford Dictionary]

The dress is strongly identified with women, even to this day when most women and girls in the Western world are free to wear pants. Dictionary definitions define the dress as a women's garment, and it serves as the icon to distinguish women from men on bathroom doors and in digital graphics, while men would hardly be seen wearing a dress in public.

Despite the advances in women's freedom, equality and power since the second wave of feminism, or, rather as a backlash against it, women are judged, even more so by their outward appearance and controlled by norms of beauty and youth - as argued by Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*.

With this emphasis on beauty, the dress plays an important role in the appearance of the woman. It puts her in a bind, for if she looks too attractive, she will not be taken seriously in, invoking the stereotype that beauty and brains are incompatible. Moreover, she stands the risk of being blamed for harassment or even rape, for "asking for it" by wearing a provocative dress.

The 100 mostly female and a dozen male artists we invited to participate in *Her Dress, Her Symbol – Antea Revisited* were asked for works on the subject of 'dress'. We enabled them to interpret this item of clothing according to their own understanding, with the only direction, be it implicit, provided by the context of this exhibit – marking 25 years since the founding of the Antea Gallery for feminist art in Jerusalem.

It is fascinating to see the diversity of interpretations of this garment among the works we received, and the wide variety of burning issues they raise. Such as the seductiveness of little girl's dresses; the openness of the dress at the bottom, making

her vulnerable to sexual predation; the bridal gown as (still) the dream dress of most women; the uncertainty of many women about their appearance; the dressed/undressed woman and the masculine gaze; the dress as trying on identities, men in dress, gender fluidity; the dress as an indicator of social status; as identification of the Other; memory and the dress as material remains; the question if dressmaking is women's work.

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