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Scruffy Masculinities. Gay bear representations in the runways of Walter Van Beirendonck's Spring/Summer 2010 *Wonder* collection.

Despite the vast research regarding non-conformative bodies, there is little material on the gay bear representation in fashion modelling. This article investigates the bear embodiment in the runway shows of Walter Van Beirendonck Spring/Summer 2010 Wonder. Critical visual analysis follows the gay bear symbolism in the video recordings of the runways, revealing how it challenges the fashion industry's body standards through body-inclusive gay bear embodiments.

Walter Van Beirendonck is a Belgian designer that belongs to the collective known as the Antwerp Six. Unlike the stylistic minimalism associated with the Antwerp Six and other Belgian designers such as Martin Margiela and Raf Simons, Van Beirendonck has a childlike, yet sexual and humorous aesthetic. During his career, he included into his design language themes regarding political, environmental, and human rights issues.

From the perspective of body inclusivity, his runways features a diverse cast of models of various ages and shapes. Gay bear embodiment occupies a significant space in his work as a designer, curator, and artist. Displaying gay bears in his fashion shows, Van Beirendonck challenged body politics of the fashion industry. Nowadays, plus-size models are common, but back in the 2000s fashionable bodies were generally thin and young. This article analyses the representation of a specific masculine non-normative embodiment, the gay bear, as it appears in the runways of Walter Van Beirendonck Spring/Summer 2010 *Wonder* collection.

1. What exactly is a gay bear?

Bear identity is primarily distinguished from other gay male identities by the physical attributes of being heavysset and hairy.¹ Born after the Stonewall riots in 1969, the bear movement grew during the 1980s in big American cities such as San Francisco and New York. Based on an ethic of care, the community embraced heavier and older men, favouring camaraderie instead of competition.²

The bear movement developed in the opposition to the gay clone, which was a hypermasculine form of embodiment, inspired by American 'blue-collars' workers. As described by Martin Levine in the book *Gay Macho*, the 'clone' was preeminent in cities like San Francisco and New York during the 1970s. To achieve an ultra-masculine appearance, clones developed a physique associated with weightlifters: 'gym bodies' with tight buttocks, 'washboard' stomachs, and pumped-up biceps and pectorals. This approach opened the possibility for a 'body fascism' that evaluated potential sex partners by the look, thus marginalizing the aging, the fat, or the effeminate.³

The gay bear community was born in this space of exclusion. Bears rejected the exaggerated masculinity of the clones in favour of a more 'authentic' masculinity. The bear culture was inclusive and embraced aging, non-confirmative bodies.⁴ Still, even if they created their identity in opposition to the gay clones, bears adopted the same uniforms consisting of flannel shirts, jeans, bandanas, and boots. This has become 'the bear wear'.⁵ The two images from fig. 1 and fig. 2 are covers of the Bear Magazine that was funded in San Francisco and promoted the gay bear imagery.

¹ Rusty Barrett: *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*. New York, NY 2017, S. 14.

² Les Wright: „A Concise History of Self-Identifying Bears“. *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*. New York, NY 1997, S. 29–30.

³ Brian Pronger: *Body Fascism: Salvation in the Technology of Physical Fitness*. Toronto 2002.

⁴ Shaun Cole: *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford 2000, S. 125.

⁵ Les Wright: *The Bear Book II Further Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*. New York 2001.

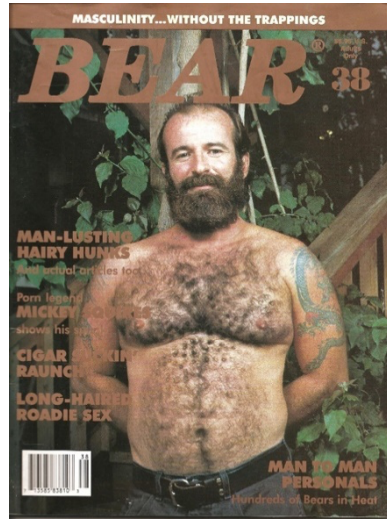


Figure 1 Cover of Bear Magazine No38, 1996



Figure 2 Figure 2 Cover of Bear Magazine No21, 1992

Initially confined to the West and East Coast, the bear community grew everywhere in the United States. During the 1990s, the movement found success in Europe, mainly in big towns.⁶

In general, fashion designers did not include gay bears as a source of inspiration or as models. Walter Van Beirendonck is the only menswear designer that represented them on his runways. Design elements referencing bear symbolism form one of the recurrent themes in his design language, which was repeated and detailed during his lengthy career. Mature, hairy, fat men were featured in several of his shows. The specific focus of this research are the bear models, as they walk on the runway of 2010 *Wonder* collection. My presentation aims to provide an answer to the following question: What is the contribution of the Belgian designer Walter Van Beirendonck to body inclusivity in the fashion industry?

⁶ Tommy McCann: „Atlantic Crossing: The Development of the Eurobear“ *The Bear Book*. New York 1997, S. 255.

2. One show, two cities

I will perform visual analysis of the moving images of bear models as they appear in the video recordings of Walter Van Beirendonck Spring/Summer 2010, *Wonder* collection.⁷ *Wonder* was presented twice, in Paris and San Francisco. Each runway had a different line-up of models.

The Paris runway show took place on the 26th of June 2009. The video recording is extracted from the website of the official retrospective exhibition, *Dream the World Awake* curated by Mode Museum Antwerp (MoMu).⁸ San Francisco's presentation was modelled by members of the local bear community, and it does not have an official recording. Still, with the limited material of backstage videos and amateur recordings, I analyse the composure of the cast, because the gesture of presenting the show in the town where the bear community was born, invites to a dialogue.⁹ Three different videos from YouTube are the sources that reveal the models on the runway and backstage, as well as the feedback of the audience. A photo collage of the entire presentation is extracted from the YouTube account 'Bearnigno', while the backstage video is sourced from the YouTube profile 'Tokyo SF'.¹⁰ The third source consists of an amateur video uploaded on YouTube by Ron Doughty that filmed the finale from the perspective of a spectator. This recording is significant because it

⁷ Mode Museum Antwerp: „Walter Van Beirendonck Summer 2010 Wonder“. http://waltervanbeirendonck.momu.be/en/video_summer2010.php, (zit. 05.04.2021).

⁸ Mode Museum Antwerp: „Walter Van Beirendonck, Dream The World Awake“. http://waltervanbeirendonck.momu.be/en/video_summer2012.php, (zit. 05.04.2021).

⁹ Bearnigno: „Fashion Bears Rules!. Walter Van Beirendonck Wonder® -COS!“ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHuNK_cMymk, (zit. 07.04.2021). ; Tokyo SF: „Underwear Bears, Walter van Beirendonck, Berkley“. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ILmau6mzGyk>, (zit. 15.05.2021).; Rob Doughty: „Walter Van Beirendonck Berkeley, CA Show Pt. 2 Underwear!“ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN79pmxrkIY>, (zit. 15.05.2021).

¹⁰ Tokyo SF: „Underwear Bears, Walter van Beirendonck, Berkley“. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ILmau6mzGyk>, (zit. 15.05.2021).; Bearnigno: „Fashion Bears Rules!. Walter Van Beirendonck Wonder® -COS!“ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHuNK_cMymk, (zit. 07.04.2021).

documents the reaction of the audience at the finale when all the underwear models walk on the runway.¹¹

3. Visual Analysis

The method for visual analysis was extracted from the article “Male Images in the Gay Mass Media and Bear-Oriented Magazines: Analysis and Contrast”, by Philip Locke included in *The Bear Book*.¹² Locke observes that it is hard to define bears due to the diversity of body types within the community and chooses few operational criteria that can help to identify the presence of the bears in the images included in gay media. His main criteria are:

- the presence and absence of facial hair and body hair,
- body weight and muscles, with a division between slimmer, muscular, and heavier bodies
- grey hair (as a visual indicator of age).

This is the set of rules that I will use to analyse and classify the images of the models walking on the runway. Locke’s method is used with some alterations and omissions. Gray/greying refers to greying of hair and/or beard. Heavier/slimmer bodies are interpreted according to a subjective norm by watching the video images of the models. Heavier bodies possess a larger body. Muscle bears are muscular men with a slimmer silhouette.¹³

The categorizations are purely visual, and they do not refer to the actual body type, sex, or age of the models, but the visual appearance of body shapes and silhouettes. Categorization proved to be difficult since the material consists of video recordings, thus I have chosen functional factors that can act as visual indicators for a performance of age, shape, and gender.

¹¹ Rob Doughty: „Walter Van Beirendonck Berkeley, CA Show Pt. 2 Underwear!“. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN79pmxrKIY>, (zit. 15.05.2021).

¹² Philip Locke: „Male Images in the Gay Mass Media and Bear-Oriented Magazines: Analysis and Contrast“. *The Bear Book : Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*. New York 1997, S. 103–40.

¹³ Ebd., S. 111.

Therefore, the classification that I adopted in my analysis is the following:

- All non-bears have slimmer, hairless bodies, without facial hair,
- All bears have beards/body hair,
- Chubby bears are defined as individuals with a less slim silhouette,
- Muscle bears have a slimmer, muscular silhouette,
- Cubs represent younger-looking bears,
- Polar bears are individuals with white hair (including beard and body hair).

4. Fashionable Male Bodies of the 2010s

What are the body types accepted in modelling? The general assessment, on which most fashion scholars agree is that fashionable bodies must be fit, young, and slim. I will briefly describe the menswear silhouette of the 2010s to compare it with the silhouettes proposed by Walter Van Beirendonck on the runway of *Wonder*.

During the 1980s and 1990s, models were hypermasculine and featured big, muscular physiques, reflecting the commodifying of the male body in developed capitalism.¹⁴ The beginning of the 2000s marks a clear departure from the hypermasculine silhouettes of the earlier decades. Hedi Slimane, Raf Simons, Commes Des Garçons created new silhouettes for new masculinities. Nick Rees-Roberts describes the influence on menswear by Hedi Slimane at the turn of the century.¹⁵ On the runway, he employed models looking like slim, asexual boys. Slimane focused on adolescence as a model for a more ambiguous masculinity, “stripped of any overtly sexual allure”.¹⁶ After he departed from Dior, the designer was used as a yardstick by which to measure the male silhouette. High fashion brands and emerging mid-range labels re-appropriated and extended the

¹⁴ Mark Simpson: *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity*. London 1994.; Tim Edwards: *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity and Consumer Society*. London 1997.

¹⁵ Nick Rees-Roberts: „Boys Keep Swinging: The Fashion Iconography of Hedi Slimane“. *Fashion Theory* 17:1 (2013), S. 7–26.

¹⁶ Ebd., S. 17.

Dior Homme template.¹⁷ This silhouette was still highly influential in the era when Van Beirendonck launched his 2010 collection, *Wonder*. He delimited himself from this shape and proposed vastly different alternatives.

5. Wonder

The runway shows of the *Wonder* collection were presented twice, at Paris Fashion Week and in San Francisco, at Berkeley University. The Paris show features a cast of 30 men. All of them have hairy bodies and shaved heads (or short hair). The collection contains 13 muscle bears, 9 chubby bears, 7 cubs, and 1 polar bear. The San Francisco show has a larger cast of 39 men, which consists of 10 muscle bears, 17 chubby bears, 7 polar bears, and 5 cubs. In a backstage interview in Paris, Van Beirendonck admitted that his casting was a statement towards the body politics of the fashion industry: “The idea was as a reaction to all the skinny models in the fashion world, to those girls with anorexia. I wanted to put on the catwalk these big men with beards.”¹⁸

The video recording of the Paris show starts with the dance song “Warp 1.9” by The Bloody Beetroots Feat. Steve Aoki, while the models walk on the runway at a fast pace. The audience watches from both sides on a stage always bright, with no light changes. The music consist of a long mix of the same song. At the end of the show, Walter Van Beirendonck salutes the audience. He is dressed in garments from the *Wonder* collection. After his exit, as seen in fig.3, all the models assemble onstage, only to be upstaged by another group of bears. They are fit, white, muscular, and wear only socks, shoes, and white underwear with a ‘W’ sewn in red across the crotch.

The fashion presentation of *Wonder* understands the necessity to create a buzz on the internet. The finale was made to be recorded and shared on

¹⁷ Ebd., S. 22–23.

¹⁸ Sylvia Rubin and Beth Hughes: „Hip Belgian Designer Brightens BAMscape. SFGate“. <https://www.sfgate.com/living/article/Hip-Belgian-designer-brightens-BAMscape-3262669.php#photo-2412085>, (zit. 05.04.2021).



Figure 3 The finale of S/S Wonder, Paris, 2010

social media, not only by the members of the gay bear community but by anyone interested in fashion. Asked during an interview about the casting for *Wonder* show, Van Beirendonck answered that: “For the Wonderbear show in Paris, I casted through social media and online, directly in the bear community, which meanwhile became a huge community”¹⁹.

Most of the models are slimmer and fit, falling into a category that embodies ideal bearish qualities. They perform an idealized version of bear, also known as the ‘superbear’. This body type is defined by Philip Locke, who suggested the hypothesis that most of the images presented in bear media represent an idealized version of a bear, which he calls the ‘superbear’ stereotype.²⁰ Locke stated that bear media appeared as a response to sleek, smooth-skinned body types marketed in mass media magazines. Men who did not fit the stereotypes could find alternative sources of images where they could see men like themselves. At the same time, these magazines had to sell, and to do that, presented images that readers could find sexually exciting; therefore, the editors choose models that represent the ideals of the “bear image”. These ‘superbears’ represent men of ideal bearish beauty.²¹

¹⁹ Oliver Leone: „10 Questions With Walter Van Beirendonck.“. <https://yourfashionarchive.com/10-questions-with-walter-van-beirendonck/>, (zit. 21.03.2021).

²⁰ Philip Locke: „Male Images in the Gay Mass Media and Bear-Oriented Magazines: Analysis and Contrast“. *The Bear Book*. New York 1997.

²¹ Ebd., S. 133.



Figure 5 Bear model S/S Wonder, San Francisco, 2009

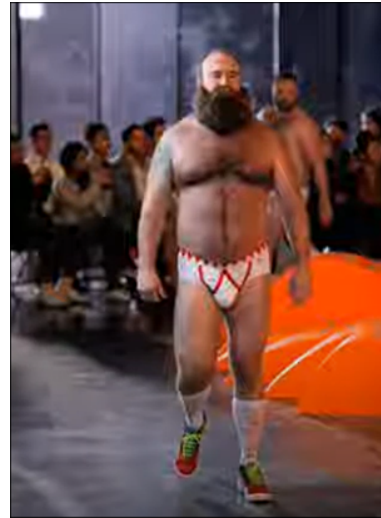


Figure 4 Bear model with long beard S/S Wonder, San Francisco, 2009

The San Francisco show is modelled by members of the local bear community and includes a higher number of chubby and polar bears (as seen in fig. 4 and fig. 5). On his official website, Walter Van Beirendonck names and thanks to each one of the models, a unique gesture that implies that his relationship with the models was personal. Looking at the video recordings of the San Francisco show, one can notice the joy and excitement of the models, as well as of the audience. At the finale, the crowd claps and cheers, and the gesture goes way beyond the appreciation of the clothes. It is the joy of the city that gave birth to all the embodiments of gay masculinities such as the clone, the leatherman, and the bear.



Figure 6 The Finale of S/S Wonder, San Francisco, 2009

As seen in fig. 6, the garments are modelled by people belonging to this subculture, in the city that created it. From the total of 39 models, most of them are polar bears and chubby bears, a far cry from the men of ideal bearish beauty from the Paris show. The models do not resemble the look of mainstream fashion models. They have chubby bodies and unedited beards that were not altered by hairstylists or makeup artists. This suggests the possibility that the San Francisco bear subculture still functions as a community that passes its values from generation to generation, while the Paris cast is comprised of superbears that create a different type of social bond, mediated by their interactions on social media.

The Paris fashion show is less inclusive and focuses on superbear bodies, which are young, conventionally attractive, and fit (fig. 7 and fig. 8). The San Francisco show features aging and unedited bodies, with long beards and big bellies, reflecting the diversity of a community that is geographically localized, and connected to its heritage. Both collections suggest body types that are outside the standards imposed by the fashion industry on fashionable bodies and led the way to the current trend, which includes plus size and older models into the runways. The presentation from Paris still stands out in comparison with the other shows from the same season.



Figure 8 Model wearing a pink shirt dress with the text “Hi!”, S/S Wonder, Paris, 2009



Figure 7 Model wearing a khaki skirt, S/S Wonder, Paris, 2009

From the perspective of Locke’s method of identifying and analysing bear bodies, *Wonder* show from San Francisco features a larger number of chubby and polar bears. The cast of the underwear models closing the Paris *Wonder* show is formed of white, muscular, fit men, as opposed to a more inclusive finale in San Francisco that contains a larger number of chubby and polar bears. This choice suggests a shift in the representation of bear bodies. The superbear becomes preeminent as the body type favoured by social media. The runway shows reflect the development of the bear subculture which started in San Francisco as an underground movement fuelled by an ethic of care and ended as a mainstream global phenomenon.

Van Beirendonck’s *Wonder* runway functioned as an explicit challenge to dominant representations of masculinity. Ignoring the diversity of male body types, the fashion industry of the 2010s implied that the range of acceptable fashionable bodies was extremely limited. Van Beirendonck’s multitude of shapes, suggested a more authentic and less overtly constructed masculinity. By experimenting with the silhouette and with the language of masculinity, Walter Van Beirendonck expanded the conditions of possibility in the field of fashion. His contribution to menswear fashion is significant not only at the level of form and aesthetic but also as a manipulation of the visual semantics of masculinity. His runway shows represent a safe space where non-normative bodies were represented as attractive, sexy, and worthy. Models with different ages and shapes were featured simultaneously in the selected fashion shows on the same runway, as equal.