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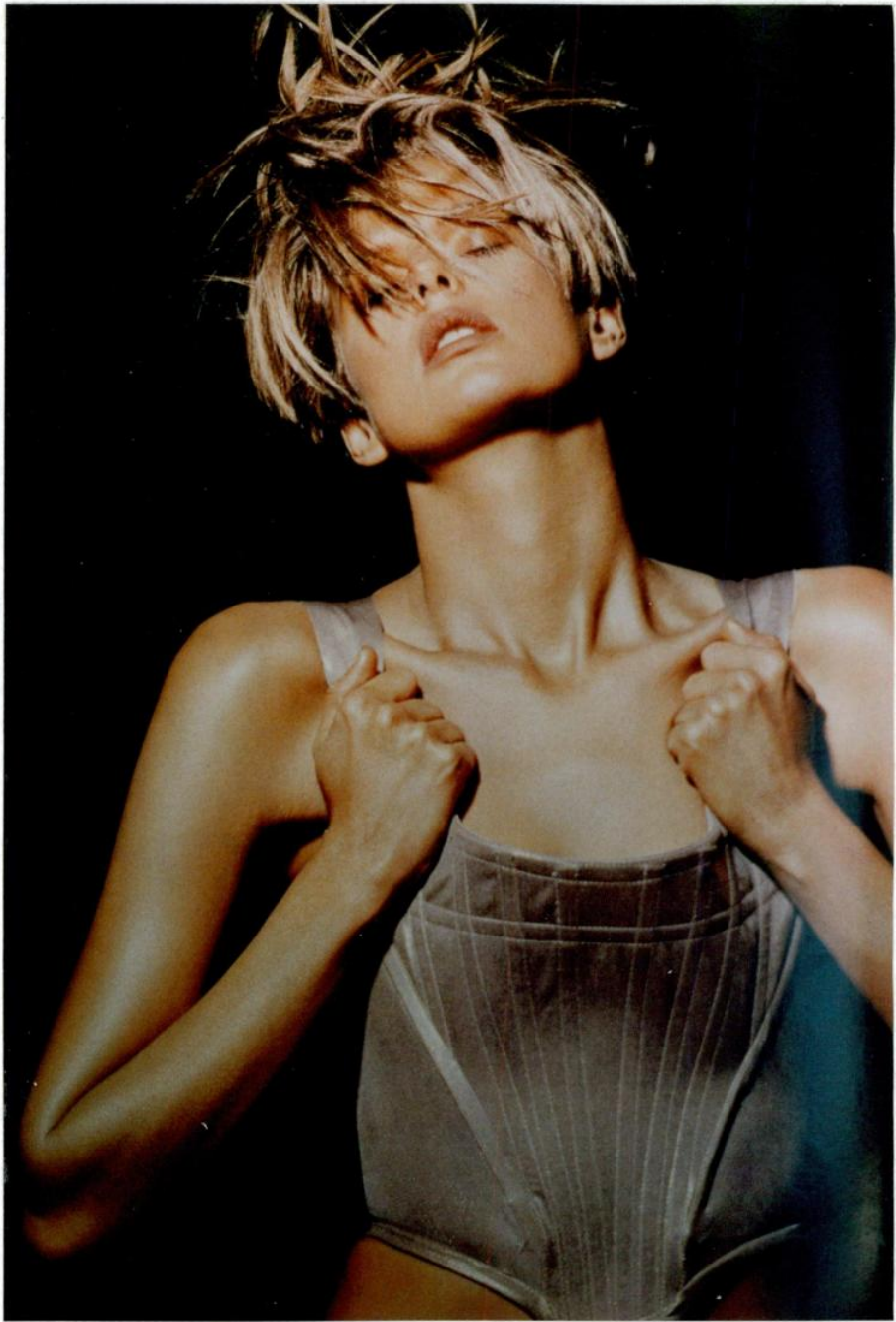
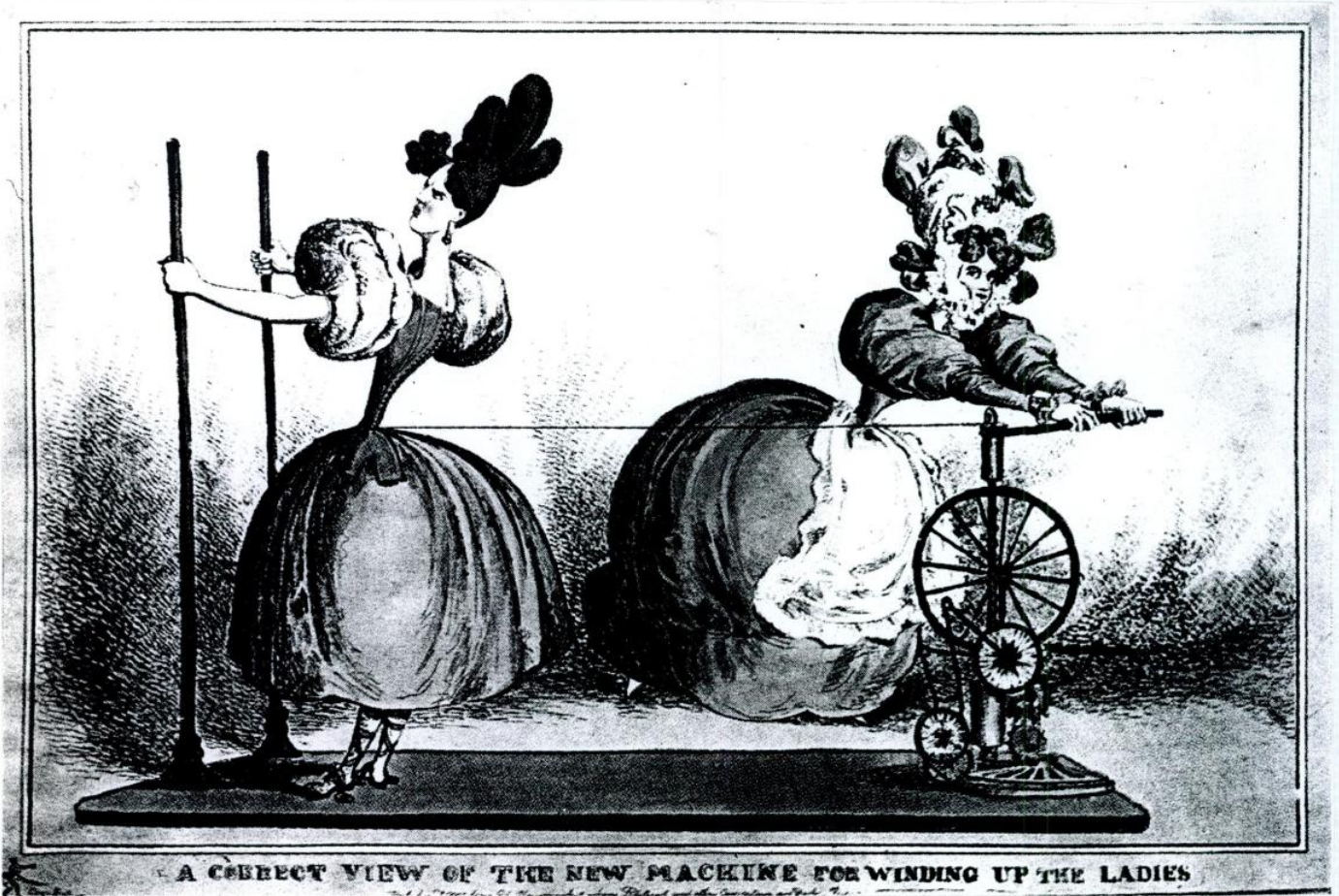


Fig 1





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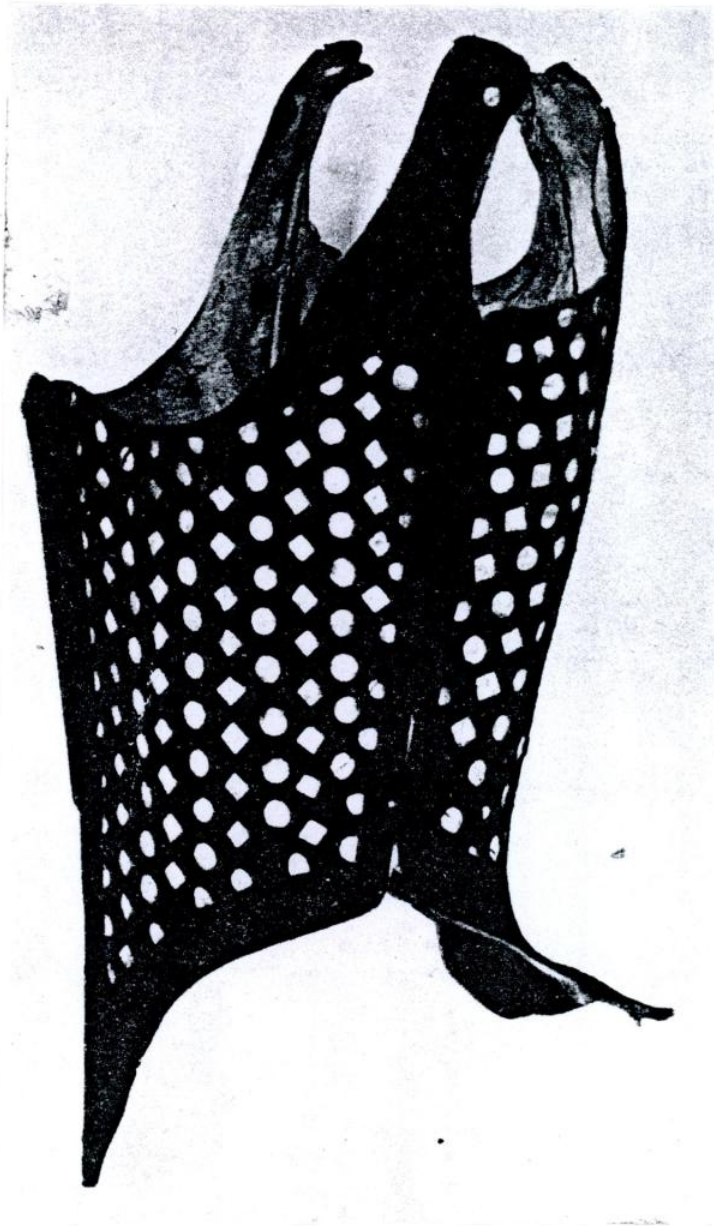


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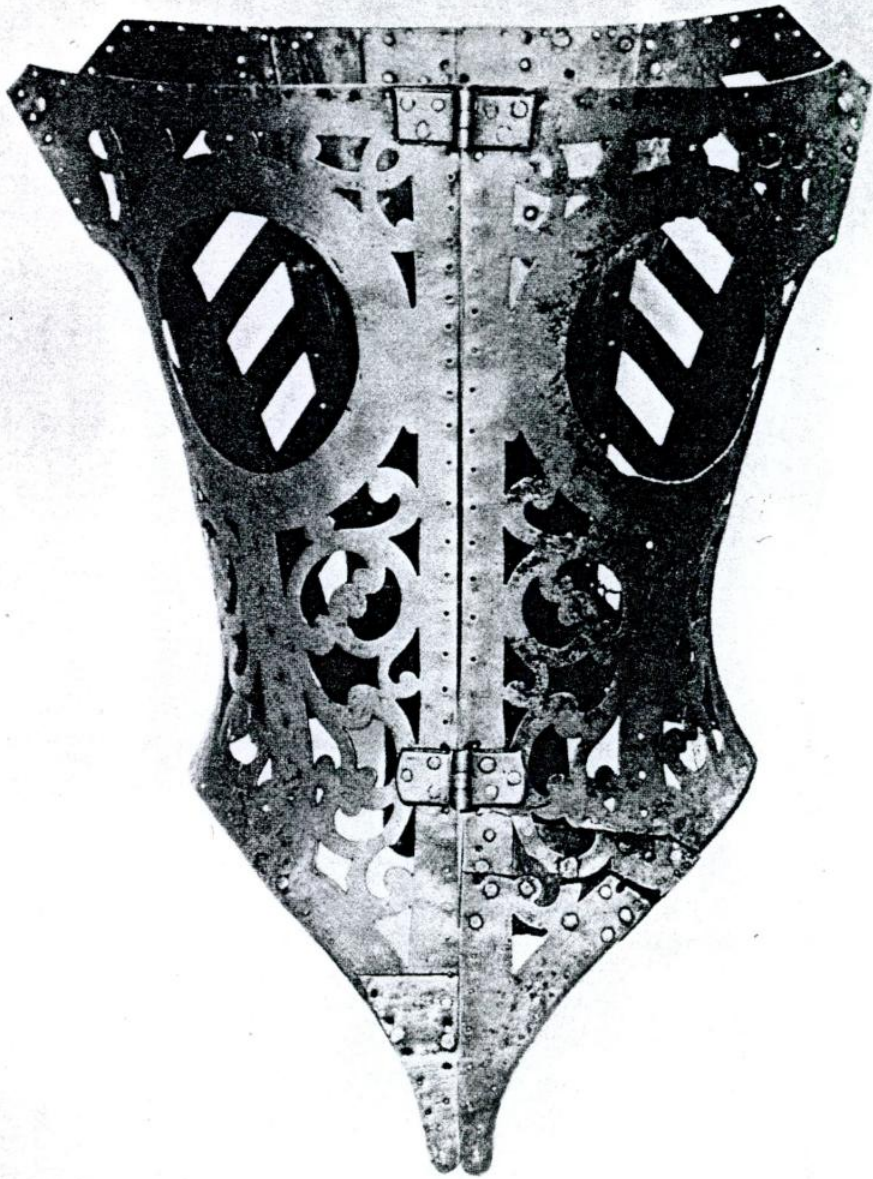
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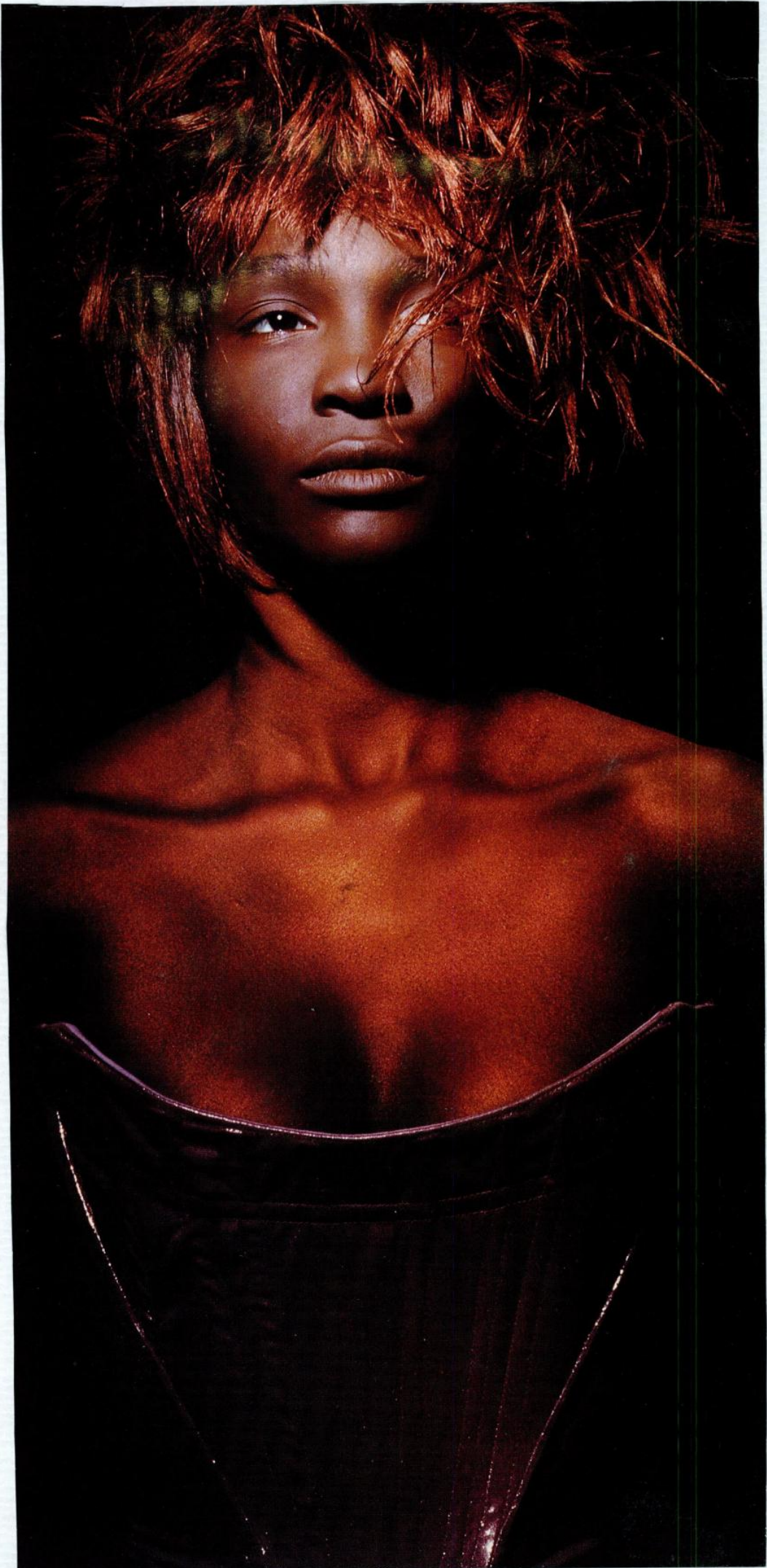


Fig 2



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

Department of Fashion and Textiles  
Faculty : Fashion.

THE CORSET - SUBJUGATION OR STRENGTH?

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design  
and Complementary Studies  
in Candidacy for the Degree of :

Batchelor of Design  
1992.

Department of Education  
Washington, D.C.

Office of the Secretary

Washington, D.C.

Office of the Secretary  
Department of Education  
Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have helped me in my research, either by giving their time or directing me to sources of information or enquiry.

This includes those who have corresponded with me, Kate Summerfield of the Buying Office at Brown's, and despite being busy designers themselves, Helen Storey and Vivienne Westwood, I would also like to thank Rigby and Peller, the corsetiers, while unable to give specific answers to my queries did offer alternative sources for me to investigate.

Grateful thanks also to my tutor, Dr. Nicola Gordon Bowe, for her patient advice and assistance.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is arguable that throughout the history of fashion, no other single item of clothing has come to embody such a site of contested meanings, as the corset. The difficulty in a uniform classification arises because of the disjunction between what was inherently symbolic, by the wearing of corsets, at the time when they formed an essential part of a woman's toilette, to the symbolism which became associated with them after they had ceased to be the fashionable mode or to orchestrate the fashionable silhouette. The latter day meanings, to which I shall be referring, were derived from various sources: reports in historical journals, critical examination of technical patterns, reference to erotic photographs but all largely rely on an unequivocal acceptance of the validity of later sociological and psychoanalytical analysis. These studies often served to categorise and stigmatise the corset as repressive, repulsive and representing, in the main, female subjugation in a patriarchal society.

This is characteristic of twentieth century fashion documentation generally; in the way it ascertains the merits and validity of a style, its evolution and repercussions. Because such arguments are often founded on hindsight, and critical appraisals are the result of often conflicting personalities and are largely sociologically influenced, inconsistencies in classification are bound to occur. This is augmented in the case of corsets, which persisted for decades even though they were restrictive and conducive to illhealth. Feminist theories have commented on the effects of fashion generally being imposed on women by men, to repress them in a world of male domination.<sup>1</sup>

While I can sympathise with the complex and varied theories, and acknowledge the validity of some, to which I shall be referring in my thesis, I do not feel obliged to accept unequivocally views which may be over biased and largely subjective eg;

1. This position was suggested by Susan Brownmiller in 1984 in her book *Femininity*. Brownmiller describes femininity as a powerful aesthetic that is built on a recognition of powerlessness.

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Women masochists, particularly subjected themselves to the tortures of the new happily extinct corset. Parenthetically the corset is not gone forever; it survives in a kind of chrysalis from where it will emerge in its perfect cruelty at any moment propitious for its resurrection. (28 p 224).

Armani, commenting on the trends in fashion in 1988 towards a glamorous re-written past. The recreation of overtly gendered styles and the corset;

"I realised that fashion was moving in a very brutal nostalgic and sometimes vulgar direction, and I refused it". (11 p 217).

Arguing that fashion is a woman's pornography, gratifying women's highly developed sense of touch and their pleasure in their own bodies;

Girdles can encourage pelvic tumescence and, if they are long enough, cause albial friction during movement. (33 p 100).

I have always been interested in and intrigued by corsetry for a myriad reasons. My earliest recollection of an appreciation for laced stays was an illustration from a book of fairytales, which, because it left such a lasting impression on me - albeit coloured my judgement, in the association of the corset with mythical beauties in utopian lands - has persistently increased my desire to investigate corsets, the life experiences of those that actually wore them and the meanings they hold for other people.

That these meanings are sometimes subject to controversy has been an added stimulus to my curiosity; the curiosity of one whose generation did not inherit an almost religious adherence to strict codes of even stricter underwear.

The corset is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as: a woman's close fitting inner bodice, stiffened with whalebone and fastened by lacing or stays. Analogous to this is the definition of the corslet: a piece of armour covering the body; a garment, unusually tight fitting

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covering the body as distinct from the limbs. Since the re-emergence of the corset at almost every influential European designer show in 1991 the imagery and definitions long associated with it need to be re-evaluated, metaphorically; to fit, the woman of the nineties, not least because it is no longer exclusively underwear.

I want to explain the 'persona' of the corset; what it has meant, means or might mean. Through a judicious evaluation of its historical past, from the Elizabethan era to the Victorian era, I hope to illustrate how austere and confining the corsets were, why they had such social significance, and how this was the foundation for the legacy that lasted for four centuries.

In Chapter Two I will examine the efforts and consequences of attempts to abolish the corset in the nineteenth century. I will show how this is analogous to the feminist's struggle in the 1970's to be free from stereotypical images traditionally enforced by dress. Consequently the corset can be seen as an element of subjugation, physically and psychologically repressive.

Chapter Three analyses the changes in social culture since the 1960's which altered traditional perceptions relating to the intentions of dress, and the consequences of appropriating a particular image. By examining the influence of sub-cultures such as Punk in the Seventies, and music culture through the Eighties, the corset image conversely becomes associated with resistance, not submission, to social mores.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss how the corset has evolved to become mainstream fashion again, as distinct from sub-cultural. By examining some contemporary styles from international designers, and reference to styling in advertising and photography, the aspirational differences in the promulgation of the corset image will become evident.

'Appearance talks making statements about gender, sexuality, ethnicity



and class. In a sexually, racially and economically divided society all those visual statements add up to an evaluation of power,' (6 p 75).

It is this ideology of power, specifically related to the corset image, that I am going to explore.

This thesis, while concerned with the image of the corset migrating between subjugation and strength is not one charting fetishistic associations exclusively. I will refer to this but my main interest is in examining the traditions of female culture as a whole.

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## CHAPTER I

A conception of clothes as disguise is an ambivalent thought, for it is also conceivable that one can undoubtedly be revealed by clothes, rather than hidden. These conflicting thoughts have somiliar parallels in that they could refer to either the physical or psychological state; projecting an image of the body and an image of what kind of person the wearer is, projecting personality.

Whatever you choose to believe, the Elizabethans capitalized on both. The Tudor monarchs recognized the power of appearances and the potential advantages of looking and appearing powerful, implacable and rich. It was in the reign of Elizabeth I that we became so powerfully aware of the corset's affect. Of course it had existed for women in subtler forms since around AD 1000, (when attempts to make the waist small employed tight lacing from strategically placed holes along the side seams.) If 'the corset was born'<sup>1</sup> (8 p 23) then, it was not until it developed into the variety of mutations, which have served to forever embody the image of 'Gloriana' the Virgin Queen, that social and cultural associations related to it have had more scope and substance.

The prevailing image is one of rigid, aloof stiffness entailed by the adoption and adaption of the boned bodice or 'stays', which encased the female torso rigidly. The origin of the corset is attributable to the separation of bodice and skirt, fashionable at the beginning of the sixteenth century, which later became a desire to make the bodice tighter and skirt fuller.

Whether this new tightness in the bodice was due to eroticism in dress on the part of women, achieving what 'women had yearned for for centuries - a tiny waist, ' (8 p 23) or effected against feminine vanity, in trying to suppress natural curves, had to be qualified in light of strict dress codes - linked specifically with morality.

1. The author notes that the name 'corset' came into use at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Before this the term had been 'stays' in England or 'corps' in France. They all implied a tight fitting body garment.

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A DEVILISH FINE WOMAN

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In The Agony of Fashion, the author recounts that in the period of the Spanish court of Phillip II 1550 - 1600, attitudes towards the female body were not altogether favourable.

The bosom was a shape absolutely forbidden to women - the devil had placed it on the female body; it had to be hidden or its development prevented (4a p 33).

Thus the corset developed from the busc, a removable artificial support employed to keep the front part of the bodice rigid, thicker at the top and tapering towards a point, to the permanent inclusion of stays dispersed more frequently around the contours of the bodice - the sides and back. The stiffness was induced by utilising strong pliable wood, horn, whalebone, metal or ivory.

This book also recalls the supposition that pieces of lead were bound in the corsets of little girls, in the place where breasts ought to grow. From this, it seems apparent that the moral status of women was directly related to their appearance, and any deviation from the required aesthetic, would constitute vanity and be deemed sinful.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, it is interesting to speculate on the changes in the reign of Elizabeth I. The stays went on descending past the waist, resulting in an inverted triangle shape. This was achieved by lengthening the centre back and the centre front and the sides were slit forming tabs to accommodate for the hips. The whalebone was carried into the tabs to prevent the corset digging into the waist.

At its most exaggerated, court fashions in Elizabeth's reign were largely bisexual, due to the adoption of the corseted silhouette, having echoes in the torso of the male. It is interesting to examine this as a feature of power relations because this was the antithesis to the dominant stylistic trends of Henry VIII, where men's fashions emphasised burly male dominance and virility through the use of upper body padding.

2. This was a progression from fifteenth century ideas on the morality of women's dress and appearance, where fashions 'deception' and lies are constituted to be mortally sinful, and the offending items were forbidden under pain of excommunication. (30 p 23).

'Under Elizabeth's' influence men's dress lost the assertive shape' and 'became more dandyfied and romantic' (1 p 8). Yet the morality of dress for women is dubious here. It is interesting that as Elizabeth exploited her unmarried position to advantage by encouraging her court to celebrate her as 'Cynthia, Astrea and Diana, all goddesses famed for their chastity and purity,' (1 p 8) the corset became longer and more severe.

A contemporary reaction to the morality of women's fashions, takes the opposing view; claiming that the 'opening of their breasts, and discovering them to their wastes,' constitute elements of asserting the lustful nature of women (30 p 27).

This was a prelude to the softer more rounded silhouette gradually coming to prominence in the seventeenth century. Where the bosom had been suppressed up to the mid sixteenth century and bellies had swung forward, posture was affectedly different with new stays. The staymaker required a high standard of technical skill as patterns became more complicated, necessitating angled seams to carry whalebone, which influenced shape more. Now the bosom was thrust outwards; the body tilted forward and the buttocks stuck out behind.

The stays had, by the 1670's, become an essential part of a lady's toilette and remained compulsory wear for children alike up until the nineteenth century. Children's corsets were no less severe as contemporary sources illustrate;

The first reformation in my appearance was effected by a stay-maker. I stood on the window seat whilst a man measured me for the machine, which, in consideration of my youth, was to be only what was called half-boned, that is, instead of having the bones placed as close as they could lie, an interval of breadth of one was left vacant between each. Notwithstanding, the first day of wearing them was very nearly purgatory, and I question if I was sufficiently aware of the advantage of a fine shape to reconcile me to the punishment. (30 p 71).  
*Elizabeth Ham, Elizabeth Ham by Herself, c1792-3.*

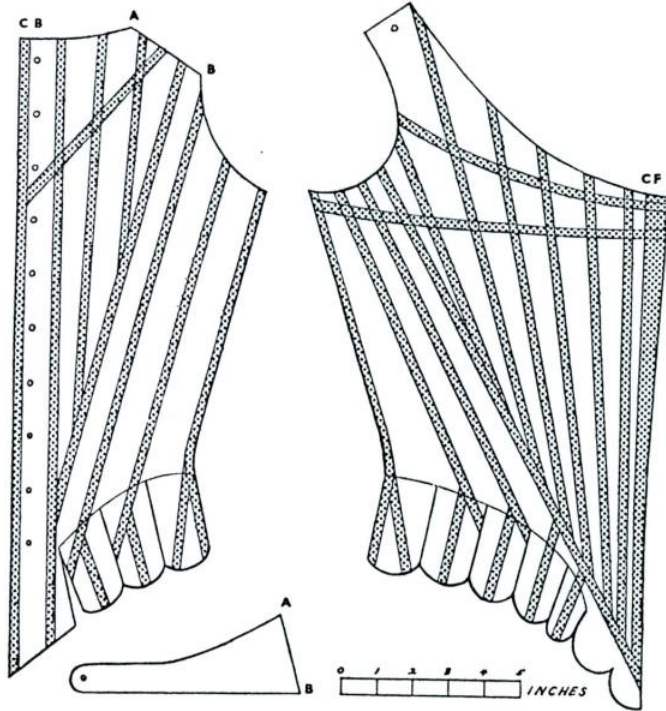
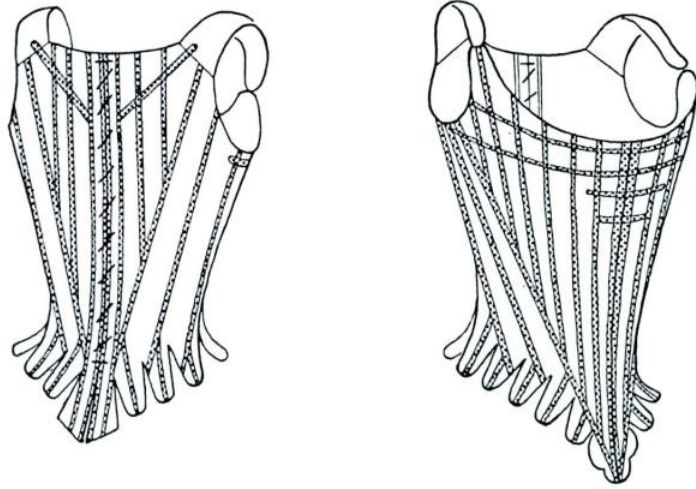
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THE "VERY THING" FOR LADIES  
 FOR AN ELEGANT FIGURE & GOOD HEALTH  
**HARNNESS' MAGNETIC CORSETS**

PRICE ONLY  $5\frac{1}{6}^d$   
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FOR WOMEN OF ALL AGES

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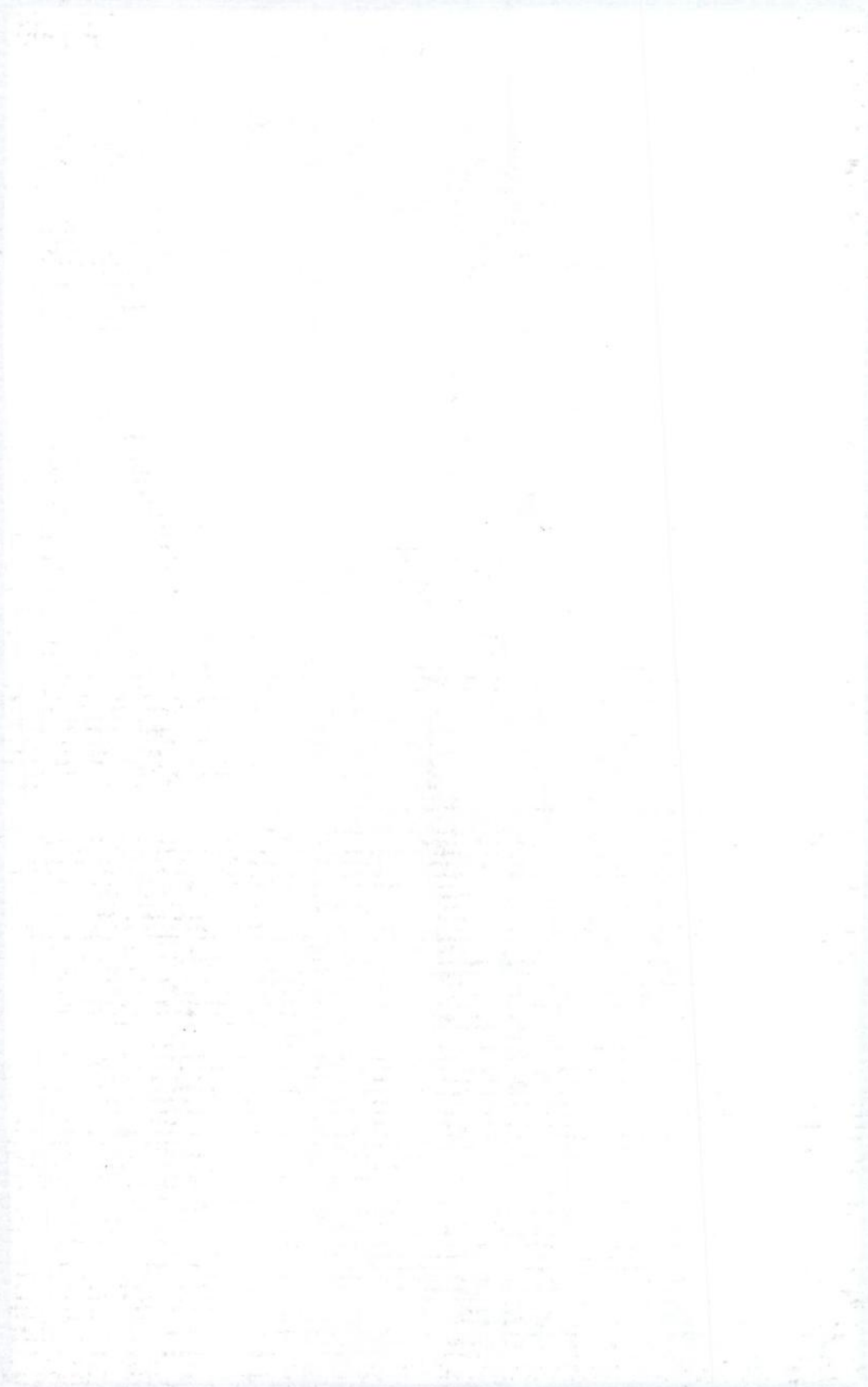
ONLY By wearing these perfectly designed Corsets the most awkward figure become graceful and elegant, the internal organs are speedily strengthened, ONLY  
**5/6** THE CHEST IS AIDED IN ITS HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT. **5/6**  
 And the entire system is invigorated.  
 Send at once Postal Order or Cheque for 5s. 6d. to the Secretary, C. Dept.  
**THE MEDICAL BATTERY CO., LIMITED.**  
 POST FREE

**52, OXFORD ST. LONDON, W.**

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Throughout the rest of the seventeenth century the fashionable bodice pushed the bosom up until it was raised over the top edge of the straight boned dress' (16 p 111). The new erotic emphasis on a forward tilting, stiff backed posture is completely new and is the forerunner of what is today the stereotypical woman's figure in erotic and pornographic fantasy - emphasising a big chest and buttocks and a small waist.

By the eighteenth century a high standard of skill had been reached with the addition of two or more curved pieces of bone across the bust to induce roundness. This new aesthetic of exaggerated female charms, was coupled with the corset becoming part of a gentleman's attire. In *The Agony of Fashion*, this is explained by the time being one of gaiety and little prudery, one where man did not always have to demonstrate his standing and his dignity. To combat deficiencies in physique (breasts of women, calves of men) padding was also provided by industry of the time.

It was not until gender became more clearly defined in dress in the nineteenth century that the more severe, hybrid varieties of corset were introduced.

'These were completely different from their predecessor stays because the emphasis was not on a rigid straight body but on curved lines flowing out from a small waist' (24 p 75).

This was a return to corset wearing after the aftermath of the French Revolution (1789) which had morally and aesthetically overturned social order, and introduced a brief fashion for looser styles of dress, based on the classical ideal.

The revival of corsets was extreme not only in relation to the interceding years but to the previous pre-revolution corsets. Contemporary articles are succinct in their approbation;

They not only tight lace, encase themselves in whalebone busks as in days gone by, but the corsets are now longer and stronger than ever. The corset of today not only confines the stomach, waist and



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shoulders but encircles and restricts the bust in such a way that a lady so encased cannot move at all. They cannot laugh, eat, bend, or turn around. They can hardly breathe. (30 p 98).  
*Journal des Dames et des Modes*, Jan. 1811.

The corset, though had remained the basis for all regional wear throughout the Revolution, as the loose flowing garments were not practical for the daily chores of peasants or farmer's wives. Thus, the incantion to 'liberty, equality and fraternity' and the subsequent loosening of styles was hypocritical, fashion wise because the revival of corsets brought yet a kind of ironic equality between classes, but not between the sexes. Women's sexuality was controlled once more through confinement in the corset, which returned 'to propogate virtue and modesty' (8 p 81).

The Victorian era more clearly defines the corset as a 'masterpiece of functional design operating on three levels; mechanical, aesthetic and moral' (22 p 103). In the first instance, together with the crinoline, it deprived or severely impaired easy movement, secondly, made all women conform to an ideal image that was not universally possible or healthy and thirdly, as an object of moral philosophy, defined women's sexuality explicitly through appearance. Its deeper significance was as a hallmark of virtue; 'an uncorseted woman reeked of licence; an unlaced waist was regarded as a vessel of sin' (22 p 111).

The strong symbolism associated with the corset helps to explain why the detrimental effects, referred to in this contemporary article went virtually ignored:

We are sorry to record (because we know of a very recent instance of its becoming fatal) the practice of pinching in the waist, by extreme tight lacing to a slenderness as unnatural as it is disagreeable, and unpleasing to the sight. The hideous and wasp-like fashion still prevails. (30 p 103)  
*La Belle Assemblée*, Dec, 1828.

This is analogous to the retrical feelings about womens breasts bound by rudimentary corsets in the sixteenth century, as I have referred to.

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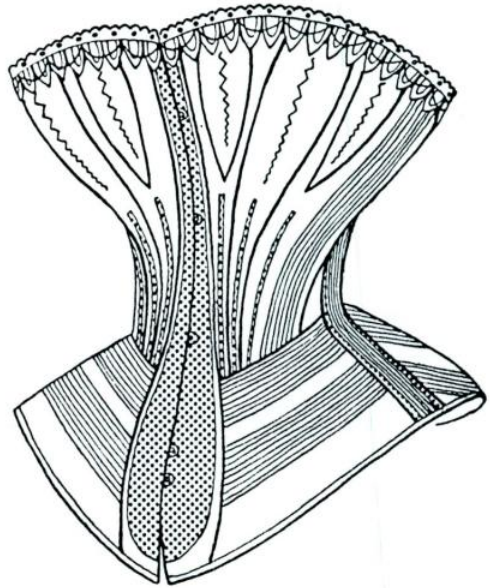
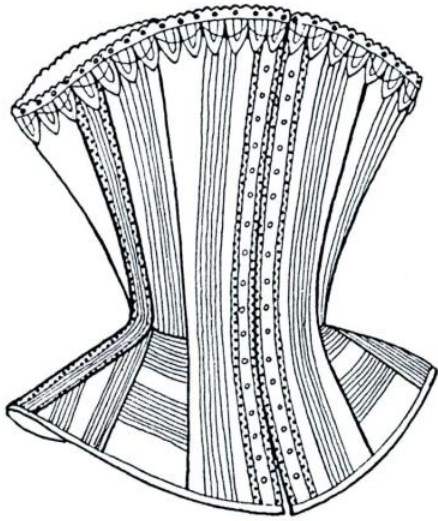
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The issue of virtue in the wearing of corsets did not arise for men, who continued to wear them 'through the entire eighteenth and part of the nineteenth centuries' (6 p 52).

The demise of the crinoline in 1868 greatly influenced corsets in that they became a feature in their own right, and began to mould a greater proportion of the figure. 'As the hermit crab selects the shell of the whelk and grows to its shape' (16 p 60), so the fashionable lady encased in whalebone grew to the desired silhouette. 'There would be hope only if one could be melted and poured into stays' (24 p 100). Through industrial advances such as steam moulding in the 1860's ('the corset when finished was heavily starched and dried to shape on a metal mannequin mould. (24 p 83) and more complicated cutting techniques (spoon busk) corsets became more restrictive than ever. Styles changed from the 'cuirasse', which was the prototype, to Louis XV' line which became harder, less rounded and made the body longer, to the 'S bend' which was the pinnacle in exaggeration.<sup>5</sup> 'This corset was a miracle of cutting and shaping' excessively complicated, and peaked between 1904-1905.

The fact that the corset signified more than the aesthetic, for women, in the periods I have aforementioned, is notable, since it helps to explain the longevity and tolerance towards what was such a constricting garment. In a society that was largely homogeneous, where power was primarily patriarchal and status ascribed, it seems only logical to deduce that man was the instigator of constraints. It is interesting to note that corsets were always made by men.<sup>6</sup>

Socially, women were denied access to education, economics or the political arena, so these constraints manifest themselves in femininity

5. Never before or since has it been so complicated. It was constructed from numerous curved pieces - as many as ten to fifteen each side, plus gussets - all expertly joined together and traversed by a quantity of whalebone and steel of varying degrees of thickness and weight.
6. In the *Agony of Fashion* the author notes that corsets were always made by men - at first by blacksmiths, later on by corsetiers. In 1675 guilds of 'wool and linen - seamstresses' were founded; they were allowed to assist in the making of corsets, but it remained a man's job.

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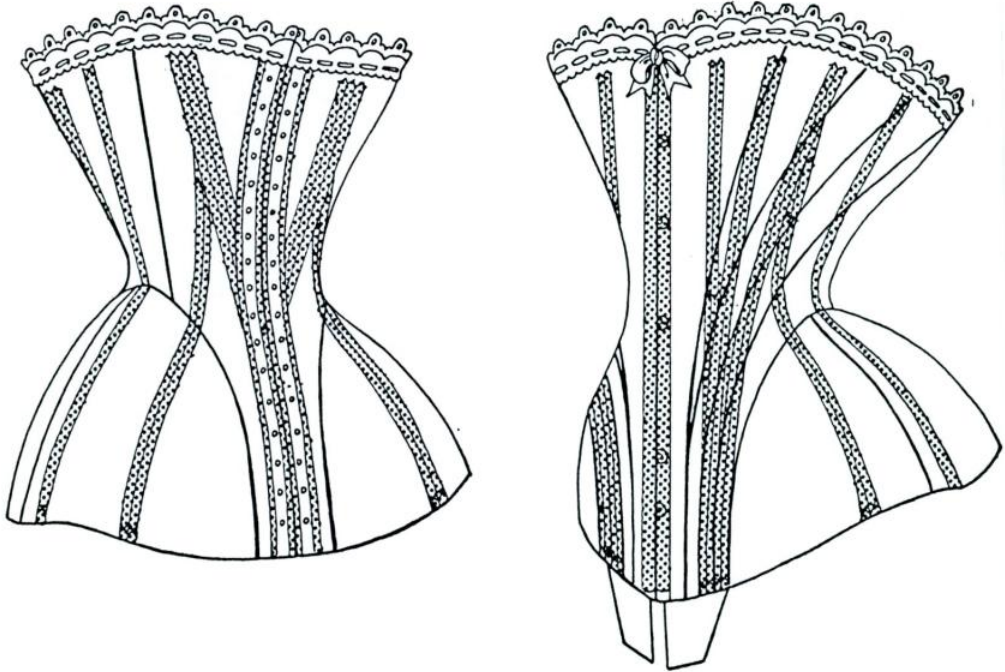
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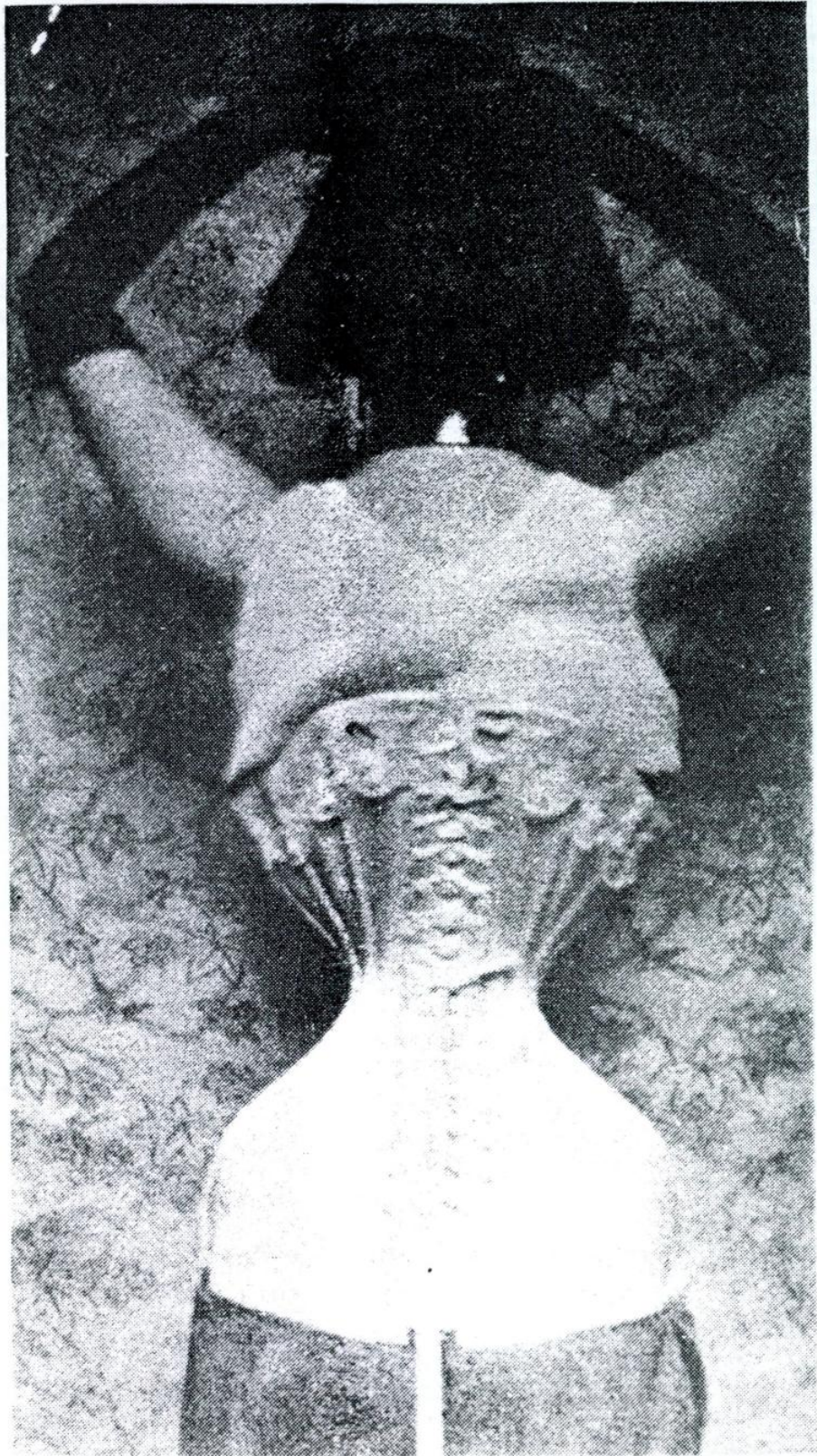




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itself; simply being female. Thorstein Veblen called women wearing corsets 'the foremost portraitist of the leisure class' (22 p 103)s. who were attired to be useless, decorative appendages to reflect and affirm their husband's wealth, social position and virility.

Since the industrial revolution, men, whose attire had become more sober, had lost the opulent elegance of their forefathers. Corseting women therefore, relegated them to be immobile, opulent reminders of a time past - an heirloom, an object to confirm or imply wealth.

This Veblenesque<sup>7</sup> theory of conspicuous consumption omits, however, more sinister repercussions. The Romantic ideal of feminine frailty, sensitivity and innocence, radiating somewhere between the spheres of angel and child, were aggregated in a fashion which often actualised those concepts of helplessness. Fainting females were the order of the day, ' (22 p 182) because the corset deformed internal organs and made it impossible to draw a deep breath. Prolonged use resulted in back muscles 'often atrophied to the point where they could not sit or stand for long unsupported ' (16 p 217). In order to conform to the desired aesthetic 'more than one determined woman achieved an 18 inch waist by the surgical removal of her lowest ribs' (3 p 254)

The adulation of the physically handicapped women was often corroborated by medical evidence of the day. Havelock Ellis wrote in 1910 that it was previously commonly supposed that there existed a real and fundamental difference in breathing between men and women, women's thoracic and men's abdominal. Conversely, an anecdote in the Agony of Fashion recalls a doctor advocating the wearing of corsets because 'better a sick woman than an ugly one' (8 p 182). The detrimental effects of corsets were realised slowly. Though they were blamed for 'diseases ranging from haemorrhoids to cancer (8 p 182), the signifier of virtue had increasingly erotic connotations. Contemporary articles in journals allude to this:

7. See Thorstein Veblen: The Theory of the Leisure Class.

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'The so-called evil of tight lacing is so much cant. To me the sensation is superb.' (25 p 156) and .....

My dear Louisa, you will laugh when I tell you that poor Winifred, who was reduced to be my gentlewoman's gentlewoman, broke two laces in endeavouring to draw my new French stays close. You know I am naturally small at bottom but now you might literally span me. You never saw such a doll. Then, they are so intolerably wide across the breast, that my arms are absolutely sore with them; and my sides so pinched - But it is the 'ton', and pride feels no pain. It is with these sentiments the ladies of the present age heal their wounds; to be admired, is a sufficient balsam. (30 p 68).

*Georgina Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, The Sylph 1778.*

If it can be supposed, then, that this eroticism operated on two levels; from a woman's point of view it was the sensation produced by wearing the corset, or auto erotic, for a man the stimulus was primarily visual, - I would argue that this has to be qualified by the psychological pressure on women to fulfill social expectations which were purely aesthetic.

It is notable that from now on, any attempt at social change for women, is generally accompanied by a change of emphasis in clothing.

## CHAPTER II

The emancipation in social conscience began around 1867, where wars in and outside Europe interrupted the status quo ideals, Women's role in society gained the added dimensions of active work or study, so long denied them. The first nurses, bookkeepers and apothecaries experienced the work ethic; which was regulated for the lower classes by laws, to redress exploitative conditions.

It is interesting to speculate whether this creeping mood of change had not already been anticipated in fashion, with the demise of the crinoline.

'From the point of view of composition, women could be thought of as having stepped out of the encircling bird cage to assume a forward looking attitude well suited to their sociological and educational aspirations' (25 p 38)

Acknowledging this, it is not surprising that attempts to banish the corset followed.

This proved a more difficult task because the corset was more than just a particular fashion, (i.e. contrasted to the crinoline, or tournure skirt silhouettes); it was the axis upon which everything else pivoted. This was almost a tautology. Since the sixteenth century, a woman's torso had been rigidly supported, except for a brief interlude during the time of revolution in France. Even though the revival of corsets after this was not embraced by everyone; they had returned to dictate silhouette.

'Though long waists, miserable busks and whalebone were abhorred by some, tyrant fashion is superior to reason and has to be followed at any cost.' (30)

*Journal des Modes*, Feb. 1820.

Despite acknowledging that the 'all too solid flesh would not melt, it was still neither possible nor desirable' (30 p 110) to abolish the corset'

The Reform Women's Group, initiated around 1890, was a movement dedicated to reform in dress for emancipated women.

Though they advocated a 'logical' and 'honest' approach to clothing; (i.e. any buttons that were purely decorative and did not serve as closings were both illogical and dishonest), these somewhat fanatical ideals were peripheral to their main agenda of fighting the corset.

The ideas of the movement did not really gain autonomy until the early 1900's when a number of journals operated which were sympathetic to the cause. In England, one of these 'Woman Worker' ran for a year monthly, then became the weekly newspaper of the Reform group. It included an article on some aspect of dress, ironically, contributed by a man, Charles E. Dawson, who claimed that;

'Anyone who has an eye for beauty will see that the Venus de Milo and other fine Greek statues are more beautiful, graceful and refined in form, than the figures one sees on the streets' (25 p 162).

Despite the articulation of discontent and supposed support by a number of men, information on alternatives for nineteenth century women to wear, was not forthcoming from them.

Another critical male author, appearing under the pseudonym of Luke Limner, though he castigated fashions for women in the 'Madra Natura Versus the Moloch of Fashion' - a social essay on the noxious effects of the corset - was still no feminist. His essay was hypocritical when aligned with his views on the negative uses of abandoning the corset;

It would prevent females with stronger heads than understanding walking our hospitals, as tight corsets might prevent "sweet girl graduates" from solving problems in occult sciences (3 p 42)

Thus, though he ascribed most of the trouble caused to women's health (in the wearing of corsets) to the inadequate education offered to them, he was not prepared to alter the status quo.



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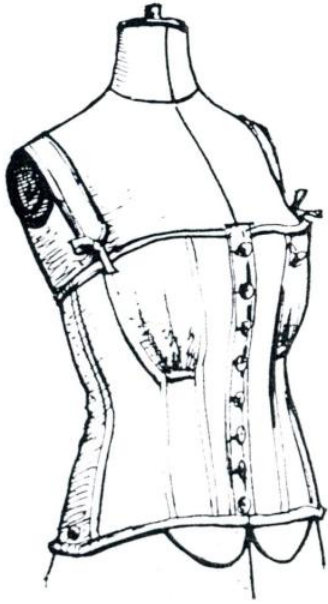
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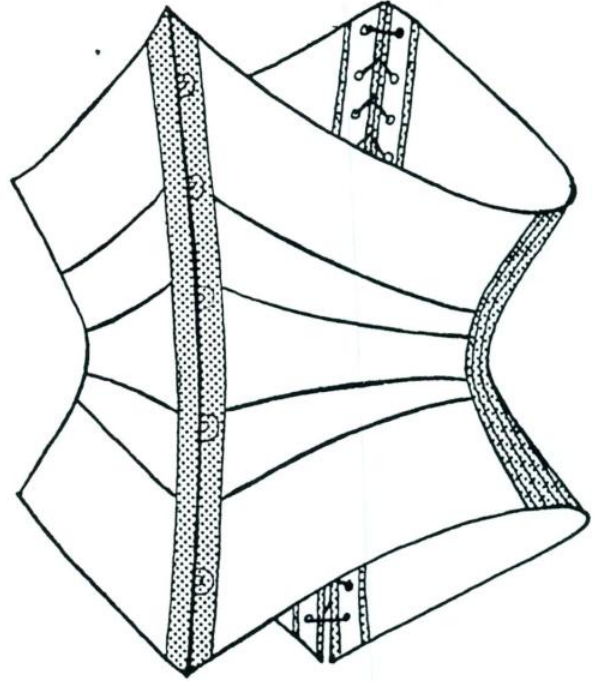
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Abolition of the corset, then, was a battle lost by the Reform movement. They had overlooked the social and moral significance attached to the corset, corroborated by the medical profession: 'A good corset is best, a bad corset is bad, no corset is worst' (8 p 106) and qualified by vanity and eroticism. However lighter weight corsets<sup>1</sup> had evolved from the influence of sports, at the beginning of the century and became general wear during the war (1914-1918). The 'bust bodice' which had evolved before the war as extra support for corsets without shoulder straps,<sup>2</sup> became the 'brassiere'.

Balzac observed that 'a woman's dress is a permanent revelation of her most secret thoughts, a language and a symbol'(19 p 31). The feminist movement of the mid-late twentieth century - a modern equivalent of the Dress Reform Movement, maybe - politicized this idea, but articulated that this image was imposed on women by men, who, by virtue of being male, held power in society. 'They sought to show that femininity was a heavy social varnish painted onto the human form' (2 p 29) to make a visual distinction, which presumed as innate distinction in abilities between men and women. 'If women looked different it became easier to justify unequal political, economic and social treatment' (10 p 29).

'A narrowness of waist betrays a narrowness of mind. When the ribs are contracted it is a sure sign that the intellect is also' (30 p 136). This aphorism upon tight lacing, which appeared in Punch magazine in 1858, though a satirical comment on the jolly of women's dedication to a fashion injurious to health, perhaps also illustrates men's attitudes to women's priorities.

1. The value of elastic in corsetry had long been appreciated but the quality was poor and as a corset material it did not really come into its own until the 1920's. See Corsets and Crinolines for further reading.
2. The corset for the average figure had ceased to have shoulder straps in the 1840's. Though they are seen from the 1890's down to 1914 on models specifically designed for wear with tailored suits.

The scope and range of subjects in which women were required or requested to have an opinion, was narrow - fashion being the exception - as it did not interfere with more ideological and commercial concerns in the male arena e.g. political or economic.

The fetishism associated with corsets is interesting when applied to the above aphorism. 'The very shape of the corset is an icon for the sexually dimorphic curves of the female body' (7 p 54). In the realm of Sado- Masochism (SM) and pornography, the corset is the unequivocal signifier of female, and often symbolises the power exchange of gender roles.

'That woman is beautiful! her fear makes her stunning' (34 p 76).

The 'games' of power and role reversal in S.M fantasy roleplaying were traditionally displaced in society in favour of the male. The corset became a signifier of woman as object, for man's pleasure, even though in SM, it is often symbolized as donating power, through the dominant role. In The Pornography of Representation, Suzanne Kappeler reiterates these feelings, claiming that the feminist struggle was one of women's right to define their bodies themselves and not to 'kill their own experience in an attempt to conform to existences created for them' (18 p 79).

The corset of the nineteenth century had evolved into the bra of the twentieth century, through an intermediary phase as the 'bust bodice', as I have previously outlined. Initially associated with greater freedom for women, (as it was primarily worn by those younger exponents of twentieth century emancipation, with the added accent of participation in sports) the bra was seized on by feminists as a cultural signifier of femaleness and thus the symbolic yardstick for differential treatment, and oppression. Wearing a bra, 'a vestigial corset' (7 p 6) was associated with conforming to a stereotyped femininity; discarding it signalled an end to that conformity.

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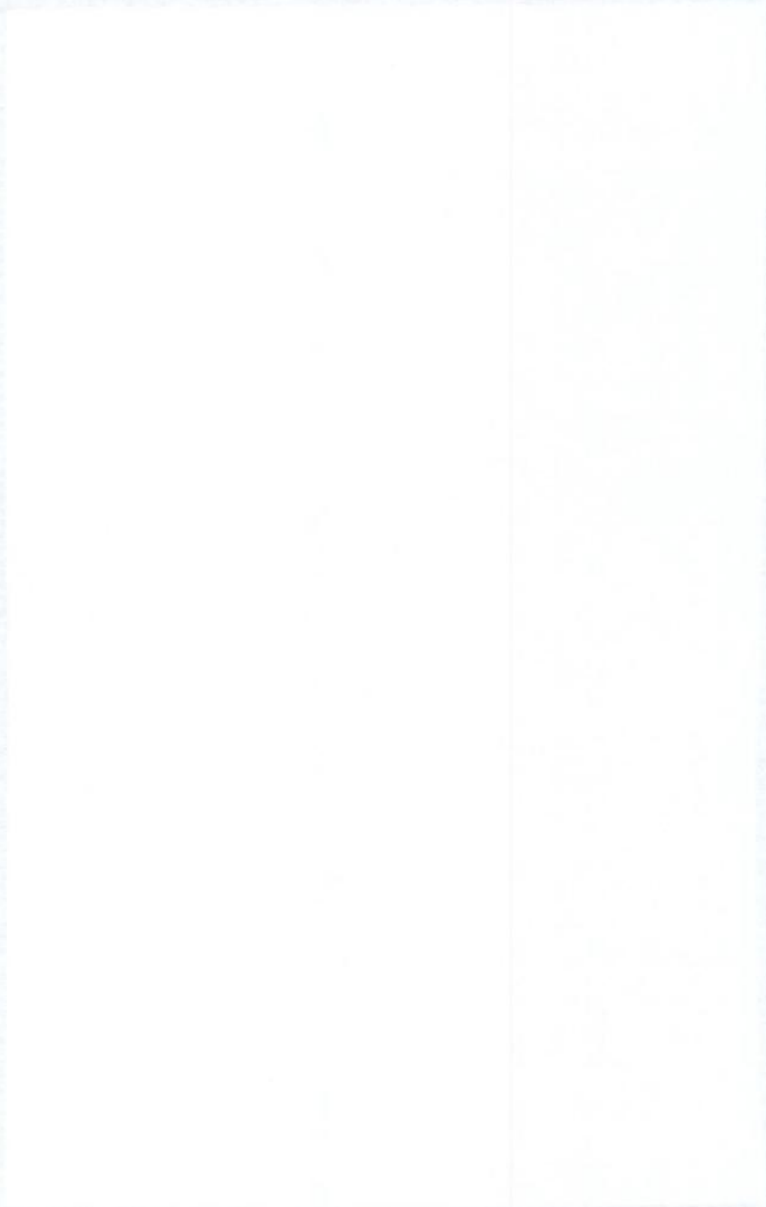


# LES BATTEUSES D'HOMMES

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**SACHER-MASOCH**

R. Dorn, Éditeur, 51, Rue Monsieur le Prince. Paris.

(vix)





Simone de Beauvoir analyses how 'in women the image is identified with the ego' (12 p 13). She considers the way in which each woman is condemned to narcissism by a culture that treats her as an object. 'By implication the preoccupation with dress and appearance is construed as a trap which prevents women from emancipating themselves' (7 p 6). This is further qualified by John Berger;

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object of vision; a sight. (6 p 47).

John Berger's reflection is interesting in that not only does it define men in relation to surveyors of power, approximating the female image, but it also suggests the power a woman has in choosing that image, constructing a particular 'sight'

Feminists of the 1970 's had dressed to exude indifference and practicality, underlining the lack of labour involved in self presentation. This was in keeping with de Beauvoir's stance on fashion. However, the departure from mainstream fashion, seen as liberating, paradoxically alluded to the effort involved in a creation of an alter image / ego. The superficial classification of approximating subordination with a stereotypical femininity, historically enforced by the corset or, later, bra, was realised and reworked by feminists throughout the seventies and eighties. It is an ideology which is based on the validity of a woman's right to choose her appearance, but is qualified by the growing aceticism in society in the implications of those choices.

The corset image has therefore sustained certain classifications but has simultaneously manipulated and subverted dogma about oppression or subjugation. This altercation gains validity from the changes in social culture since the sixties, which changed the perceptions of society then and subsequent generations. Style

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increasingly came to replace content.



### CHAPTER III

If the Establishment can be defined as 'constituting an elite of taste and culture in its broadest sense'<sup>1</sup> it must therefore encompass those persons and/or institutions who transmit and maintain cultural values.

In the past, as I have outlined in previous chapters, the self confident promulgation of values in society was from a male perspective, where status was ascribed and customs and traditions were derived from a patriarchal viewpoint.

In theory, society of the twentieth century has developed in terms of womens emanapiation and participation. In practice though, the ratio of men to women in the political and power making arena is far from equal. It is fair, then, to say that the Establishment in Britain up to the 1960's, was a world largely inhabited by men. Historically, the influence exerted by the Establishment or ruling elite operated through the institutions of the Church<sup>2</sup> and Government. Henry Fairlie qualifies this for modern industrialized society. He includes posh newspapers, (The Times), Media, Financial Insititions etc as culture arbiters of style taste and influence.

The 60's was necessarily and notoriously anti-Establishment because the spheres within which the Establishment moved were not easily infiltrated. Change also had to have a new direction because social dictates were being eroded and reinterpreted by a youth culture. Pop and rock music provided a new language, outlets and credibility for the new freedom in attitudes, appearance and actions that prevailed and was perceived by society as a whole.

Fashion embraced the new moderism that was anti-Establishment; immediacy, impermanance and artificiality.

1. Henry Fairlie, in The Spectator 1964.  
(See 47 p 146).

2. As I have outlined in chapter one, where in the Middle Ages and the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries codes of dress were very specifically linked to the morality of the wearer.



An obsession with man-made fabrics evolved to include diverse sources from plastic, PVC, to shiny vinyl promulgating a futuristic feel.

Though aesthetic standards had been reinvented by the youth, the women's movement recognised that it was still false freedom for women, 'whose sexual identity was still defined or positioned by their appearance in the schizophrenic antitheses between consecutive 'irreconcilable demands on femininity' (12 p 2) - the space nymphet followed by the natural earth mother, as a hippy.

That the initial reaction of the Feminist Movement was an ideologically over simplified concept of the 'authentic self', in refusing to acknowledge the complexity of appearances, serves to emphasise the influence of subsequent rock'n pop culture on the politics of appearance.

Through Glam Rock and Punk the ideological roles perceived were challenged. This was especially important for women who always had to interpret their own meaning through men's eyes, as the objective usual image.<sup>3</sup>

'Glam Rock' challenged the male heterosexual domination of conventional society by pointing not to female repression' so much as to the false premises of that masculinity (16 p 215).

Through flamboyant costumes and masquerade, it also insisted that sexuality was not part of an individual's essential being but a role that could be chosen and enacted. Sexuality was not only subjectified but publicized and subsequently became more open to objective classification. The focus of attention had deviated from a traditional pre-occupation with women's sexuality inherent in codes of dress, to that of men's sexuality because of the unfamiliar alter egos they adopted.

Through Glam Rock the ideological incoherence of image and orifice

3. See Chapter II, Berger 'Men act and women appear ....'







was expressed as being a dichotomy of created contradiction, and though this had significance for women it was predominantly instigated by male rock stars (Bowie and Lou Reed propagated a taste for androgyny and gender confusion).

It was not until Punk in the late 70's that women began to take an active part in their definition. This was an exercise of power in what could be represented.

The significance of Punk in relation to the changing conventions for women, visually and socially is more acute when contrasted with Wendy Chapkis' observation that 'women get politicized as they get older'. In her book 'Beauty Secrets - Women and the politics of appearance' she argues that younger women are treated more equally than they ever will be again. Punk was, though, an ambitious experiment by the young to avoid definitions that are inevitably imposed, by subverting the cultural elements traditionally responsible for these definitions.

They jettisoned conventional prettiness and sought instead to look tough, menacing and threatening. In doing so they pinpointed the masquerade of femininity, the unholy alliance of femininity, naturalness, good taste and behaviour. (14 p 18).

Meanings bestowed by history were sophisticatedly manipulated through clothes; the corset was forefront in this confrontation. Traditionally associated subjugation in a patriarchal society, sexual deviance or degradation in Sado Masochism, and conformity to idealised image of femininity the corset provided a wealth of sources from which to confound and confuse society, using it as a style in a strategy of resistance.

Punk women reinterpreted the normal codes, relating to women's appearance, class and sexuality. This was a refusal to submit to the pressure as women to be what they appeared! (12 p 19). In the case of Punk women, the corset was accompanied by the paraphernalia of bondage - belts, straps, chains, and paired with confrontational make-





up, and an attitude alluding not to the obvious sexual connotations, as nonchalance for social mores and preconceptions. Fetishistic corsets in Punk pointed to the failure of categorisation to mean anything in contemporary commodity culture. This was a prerequisite for style which followed and exerted influence in other ways.

Blitz culture or New Romantic Style was both analogous to and the antithesis of Punk. Though its style origins were similar in being structured by a manipulation of stereotypical images and assumption, it was towards transvestism, and disavowed the change of deviance.

Femininity was the commodity which male cross dressing invested heavily in signalling 'a tribal refusal to recognise or acknowledge difference' (12 p 40). This further displaced the notion of the unequivocal 'togetherness of femininity and female; the image versus the reality; the biological versus the metaphysical'.

It is interesting to note that men often opted for 'outrageous corseted satin' (12 p 46) dresses, as an element in power (power in terms of a sub-culture to frighten or confuse).

Blitz culture also spearheaded a club scene and magazines which co-existed symbiotically, documenting their activities, Blitz, I - D, The Face.

The vox pop coverage of ordinary people in their own clothes by I - D magazine turned the street into a catwalk on which people modelled their identities. This is far removed from the Veblenesque<sup>4</sup> idea of conspicuous consumption, because this time the emphasis was on an individualistic, deliberately construed deviously artificial, and maybe transient image.

The ideology of subverting power innately signified by gender, through the appropriation of symbolic clothes, became sometimes, statements of pure fashion.

4. See Chapter I. Veblen 'Women wearing corsets, the foremost portraitist of the leisure class'.

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MALE CROSS-DRESSING

MALE CROSS-DRESSING



However, this 'fashion for fashions sake' was dislocated and paradoxically reiterated;

The pop charts are full of boys dressed up as girls. The fashion magazines are full of girls looking like boys. The issue is not the bending of genders, it's the breaking down of sexual stereotypes. Women don't want to be seen in the stale, confining images. The new fetish, the new sex object is men. (The Face, 53, Sep. '84).

Despite masculinity replacing femininity as a commodity in the 'Buffalo Boy' male orientated and eroticised ideal which followed, its objectives had significance for women. This became not so much trying to appropriate elements of a man's wardrobe, but in the overall styling i.e. 'The clothes are peripheral - the look is all' (12 p 53). The invocation to convey attitude, to 'carry it off', separated from the actual significance of clothes, developed a concept of styling (originating in Punk) which is one of the most important features to consider in assessing the revival of corsets in the Nineties.

Eventually developments in feminism were made which had assimilated important lessons; that the stereotypes and assumptions about a particular image are the result of a subjectivication of meaning by the beholder.

Janet Radcliffe Richards in The Sceptical Feminist in 1980, argued that feminism and fashion might not be mutually exclusive. In this book she justifies that a woman might dress to please herself or a man because of the recognition of dress being a legitimate freedom or 'art' of a woman. This is paralleled with the recognition that gender and sex increasingly appear as areas of fashion and style rather than biology or identity and that equality of mind does not reside in any exclusive aesthetic.

Created elements of shared culture continued to erode the old role models of society, as improved communications in the 1980's augmented the internationalism of society.

This became most notable in the music world where the trans migratory nature of the pop video is a case study in point. Through it the features of an increasingly pluralist society are diffused.

The styles, method and futuristic essence of video disseminated through all forms of expression.

'Microtechnology and computer generated images such as Max Meadroom were co-opted in fashion as a fantasy of the robot or automation as personality; a fantasy which was underwritten by the idea of the body as a genetically coded machine' (12 p 62).

This anticipated the body building and health craze of the 80's, which had implications for both sexes. The eroticism of the body as male or female became eclipsed by the solipsism of the remodeled body, through the discipline of workout.

Bombarded with mass media images, both men and women with aspiration to style have been encouraged to perceive fashion as a performance and game.

In the film 'The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover' in 1989, many of the costumes were from Jean Paul Gaultier's regular collection. The highlight was a full length black satin corset dress, worn by one of the principal characters, Helen Mirren.

Highly styled T.V. shows like 'Miami Vice' (which invested heavily in designer fashion) by increasingly relying on the added discourse of music as an interplay to action, mirrored the format of many pop videos, interlinking and emphasising the idea of performance with fashion and music.

In a post modern society the issues of worth and worthlessness are easily inverted. Whereas pop videos aimed for a corollary with art, it more often drew its attention to advertising. It all depends on how you read it.

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pose une essence pure des choses, une vérité originale qu'il faudrait tenter en permanence, par-



Ci-dessus : Madonna, ou l'ambiguïté du « naturel ».  
En haut à droite : Coco Chanel photographiée  
par Roger Schall en 1937,  
une apologie de la sophistication.

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Fig 17



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Fig 18

Madonna nonchalantly commented on the loss of her virginity as a 'career move'; Richard Branson call his airline 'Virgin' and sold condoms in his record shops.

The amalgamation of all the cultural vagaries (instigated predominately by subcultures) since the 1960's characterized the new 'Disestablishment'? Defined as an 'elite which boasts the pleasure of the flesh and the imagination'(47 p 146), the sentiment seems a flashback to the 60's. They are not so mutually compatible in light of the cognitive developments for women along the way, as I have mentioned. This becomes apparent in the context of the changing female iconography of Madonna. Originally perceived as a blank cerebral canvas of showy sexuality, she is redefined for the 90's as an icon, intelligent in business and directionary in her aims and in her life. David Geffen corroborates this in 'Interview' magazine circa Jan. 1992.

'Madonna is the embodiment of the modern woman of legend. Instead of being stultified as an object, Madonna is a trailblazer who has confronted prejudice, smitten the obstacles of convention, and distorted boundaries into challenges with the power of new will and inspiration. She is a beauty in control of her body, her image, her life and her art'.

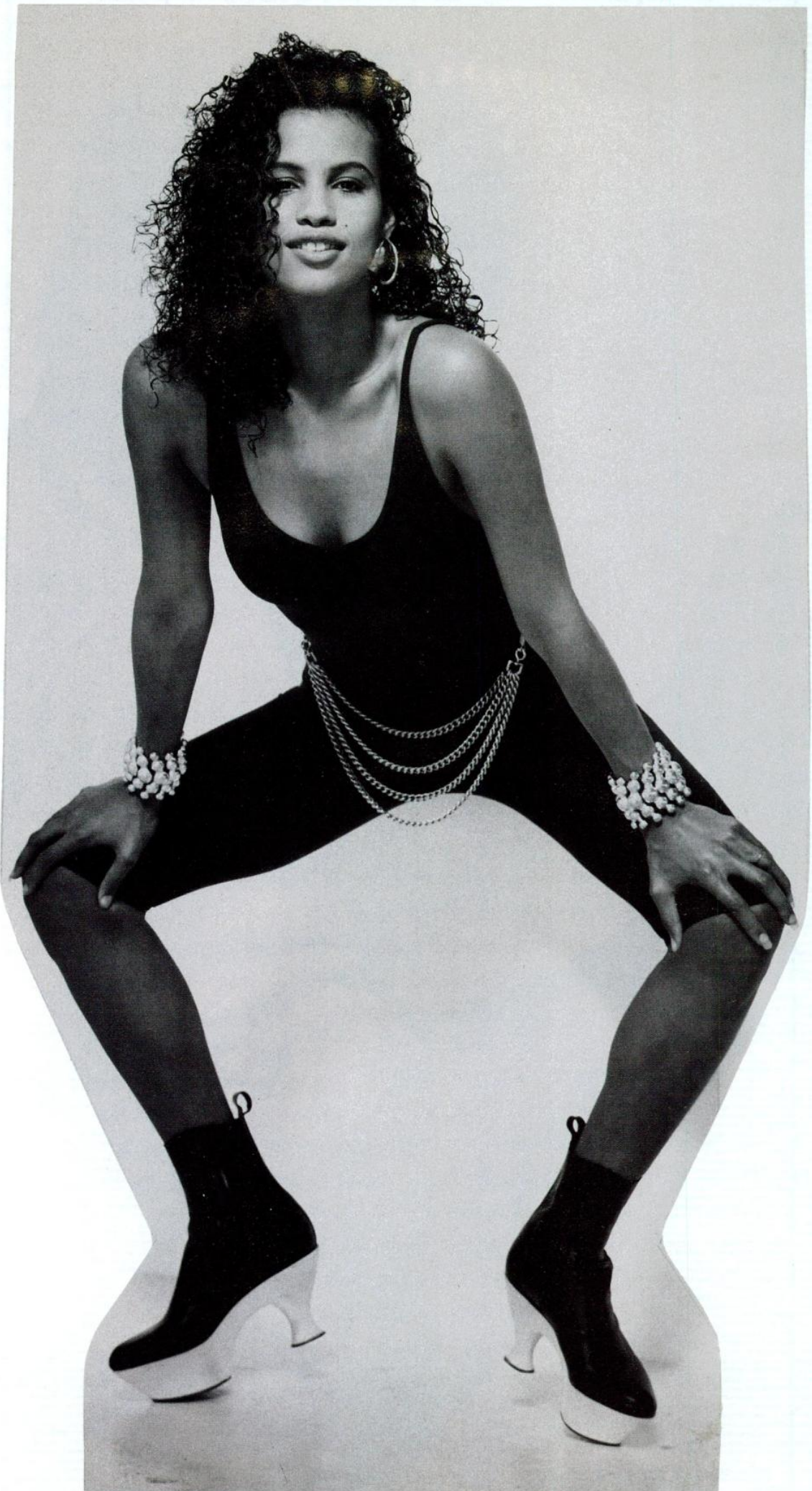
That this career has become increasingly more successful in relation to more unrestrained sexuality and stereotypical role playing, is not now the issue, even for feminists. Her public personality ecotised for professional reasons is acceptable because she is the agent of the manipulation.

This is interesting to consider in relation to the corset because it is with Madonna that the sartorial paradoxes (of it being simultaneously a sexual invitation and a cage of subjugation and restraint) are blatantly parodied but in a confident, albeit provocative, way. Thus she inverts social and historic dogma surrounding the corset and reinterprets it as a signifier of strength and singlemindedness.

This typifies the direction of fashion for the 90's woman. The 'curious hybrid that is the dramatic new fashion' (10 p 175) blurs the difference between performers and spectators in a melange of styles from such disparate sources as space, eighteenth century salon, tribal and ethnic and urban minimalist. However, these inspirational themes have in common the unifying symbol of the corset.



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NENEH CHERRY

## CHAPTER IV

Fashion accompanies power and provides fantasy. In the 90's music became further influential as an area where fundamental issues in mass culture and society were worked out. New role models introduced new cultural moote points.

Rap music's origin and focus was black, streetwise and urban. Once marginalized as predominantly ethnic and aggressive, in the Nineties it became mainstream and evolved to softer sounds, integrated with other styles. Strong females are associated with Rap (which itself as a genre projects a strong stylistic identity and hard 'don't mess with me' image). Neneh Cherry conversely appeared on 'Top of the Pops' in 1989 seven months pregnant in a lycra mini, and in a black bra on the cover of her debut album, 'Raw like Sushi'. The cultural acoutrements of knuckledusters and gold chains were there, but the disavowal of male induced baggy clothes, in image perception, had significance for the strenth of femininity.

Siobhan Fathey reiterates this:

She looked so fantastic and so pregnant ..... what's wrong with it? That was brillant, it makes such rubbish of this pretence that everyone's gotta be 18 and virginal to be on television. I'd dressed to disguise it, I was mislead; (53 p 81).

Whole images are dead. 'The modernist notion of the woman in motion replaced 'being' with 'doing' (10 p 128) that the corset has re-emerged as the focus of fashion is, therefore, ironic. It featured in almost every European influential designer show in Summer 1991. The collections of Mugler, Gaultier, Helen Storey, Vivienne Westwood, Dolce and Gabanna and Versache, to name some, all incorporate the corset directly, or as a major influence. The sources of inspiration revealed in cut, though often reniniscent of latter day construction, cannot qualify the present corsets as representing the ideals of their predecssor in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

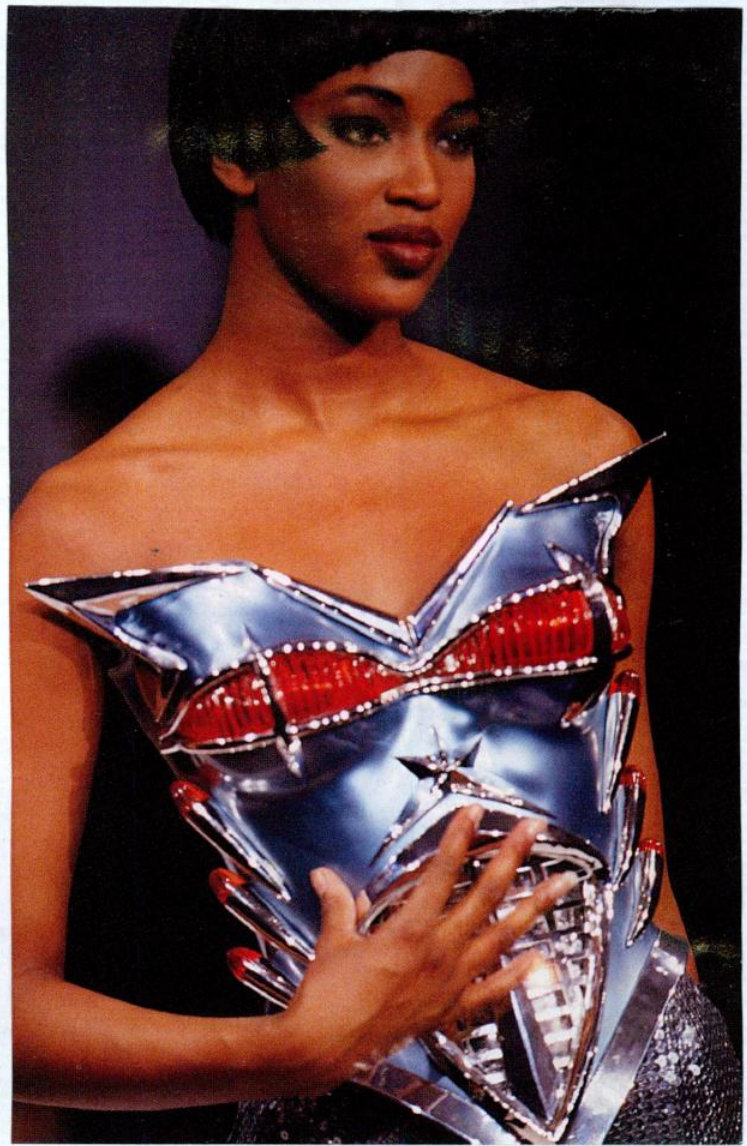


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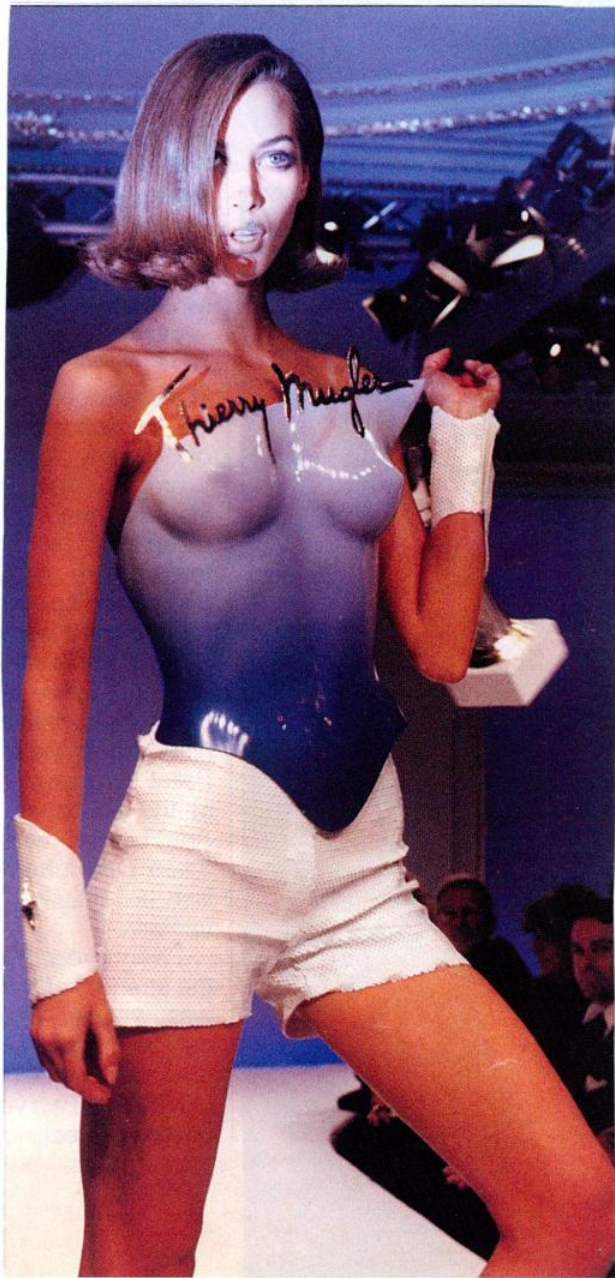


Fig 8



Fig 6



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Fig 4

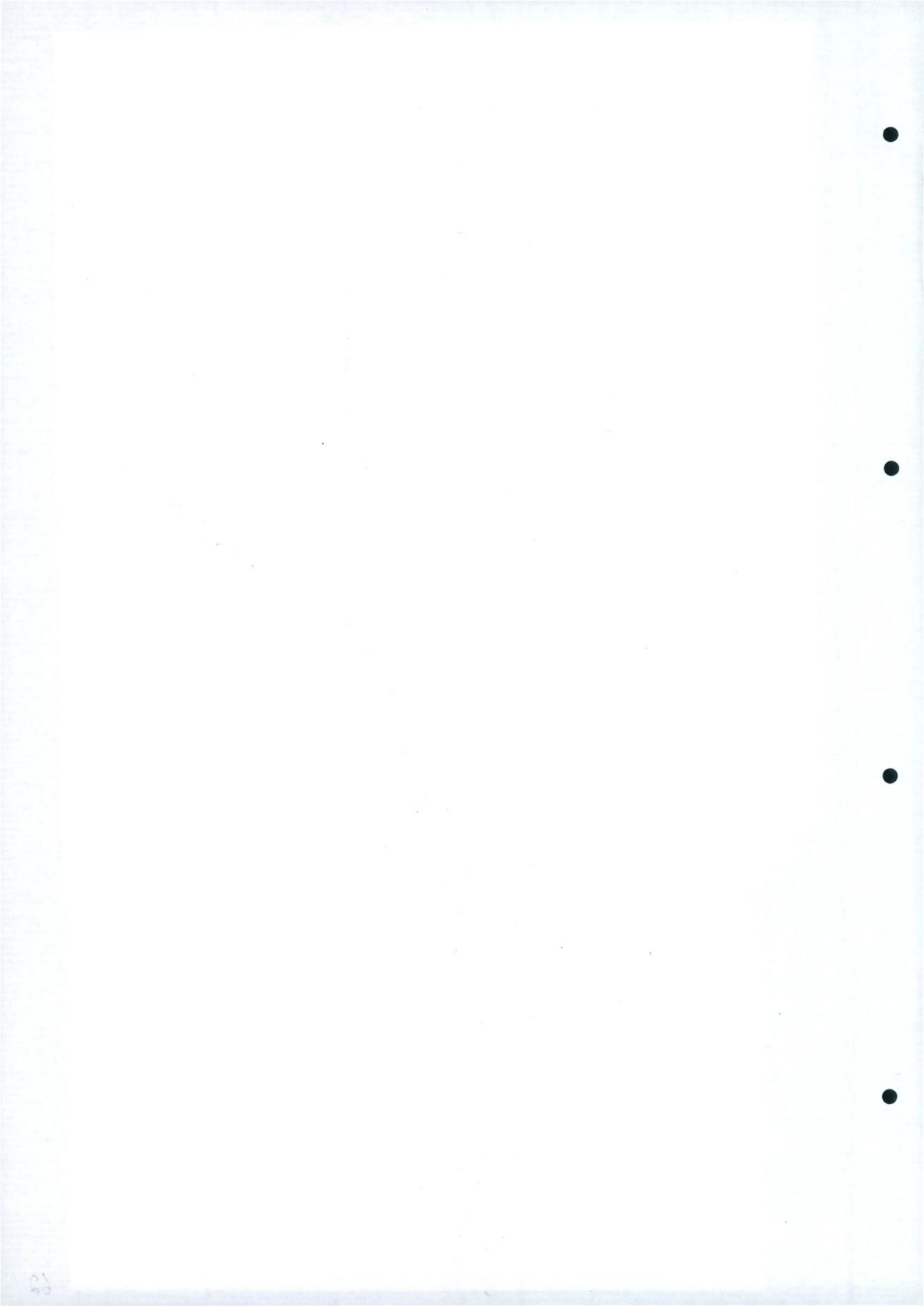






Fig 20



Fig 20



Fig 24



Fig 24

Westwoods's corset is one loosely based on the seventeenth century type which forced the breasts upwards by heavy boning. Gaultiers interpretations on the theme have been prolific. His 'contemporary corset with a sense of history in reminiscent of the tabbed corset which came into use in Elizabeth I reign. Here, the comparisons end. What is said of Westwood; 'that she creates fashion by changing the meanings of the garments she reclaims or recycles; (8 p 145) is more or less a tautology, in relation to the more modernist corsets. Mugler's space-age corset conjures up images of graphic illustrators' fantasy women warriors. Helen Storey's bullet corset continues the theme but in a more explicit, non-conformist and identifiable way, in the use of traditional, defiant symbols of warfare i.e. camouflage and bullets. Storey is defined as a neofeminist designer (50 p 46). In defense of her 'Rage' Collection of '91 in which the bullet corset featured, she asserts that she sees it as 'more liberating than restricting' because its 'against compromise'.

The strength of her conviction is augmented by the obvious fetishistic associations, rarely favourable to women, inherent in the adoption of the corset image of itself as well as the specific adornment.

It is interesting, so, to note that Dolce and Gabanna reiterate these sentiments, though their inspiration is less the modern woman, but the peasant culture of the Italian south. Their corset bustiers are inspired by the strength and pride of poor people, whose memory has impressed them.

D and G deny that corsets serve to manipulate women by constraint.

'To us, it seems negative and grotesque to put a woman in armour that is based on male needs (44 p 5). That this is a disavowal of the old fashioned corsets is evident, but it simultaneously invites speculation on the more outrageous modern equivalents.

The theme of corsets, analogous to armour has been reinterpreted in

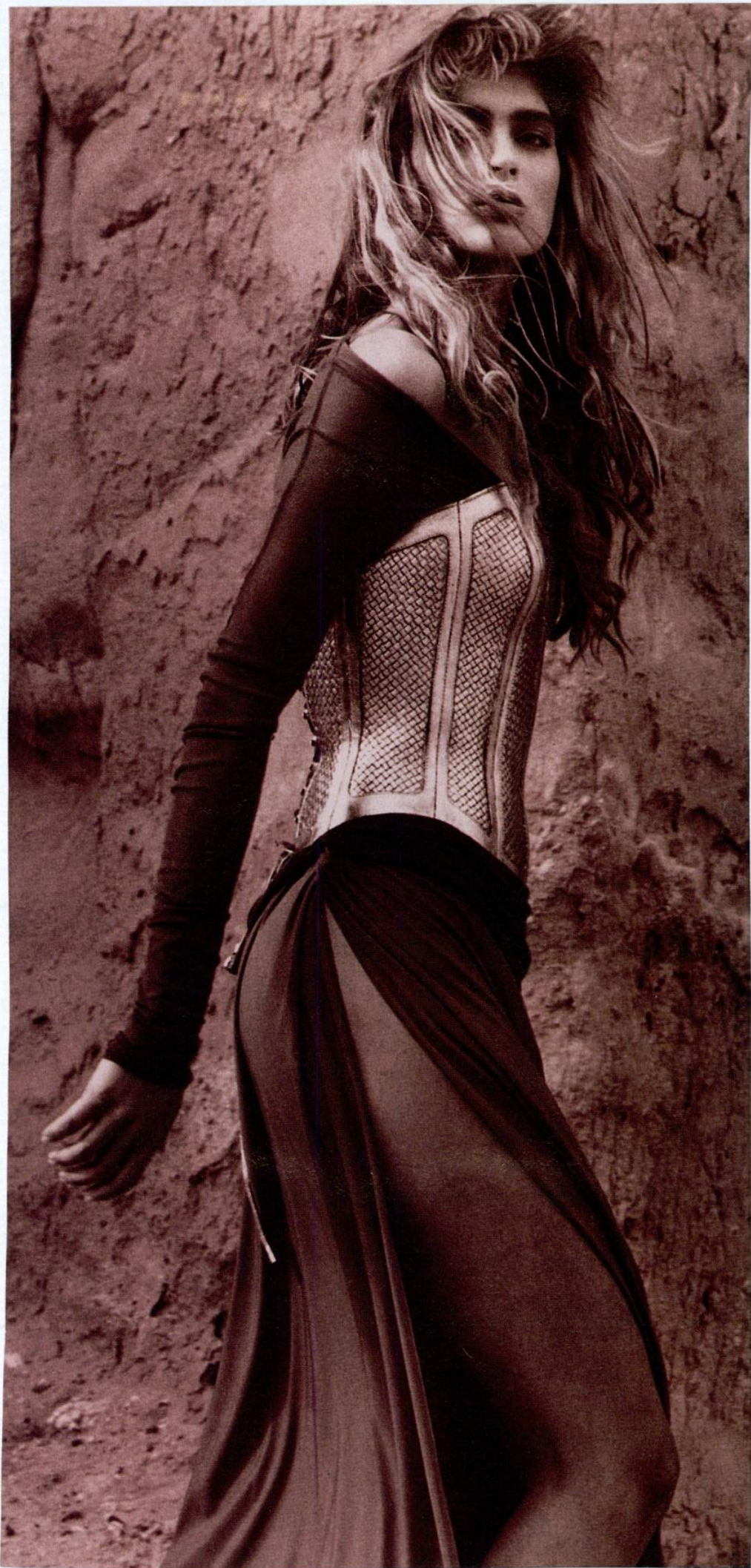


Fig 13





Fig 15





Fig 13

21



Fig 11



Fig 11 (b)



Fig 11



Fig 11 (b)



Fig 12

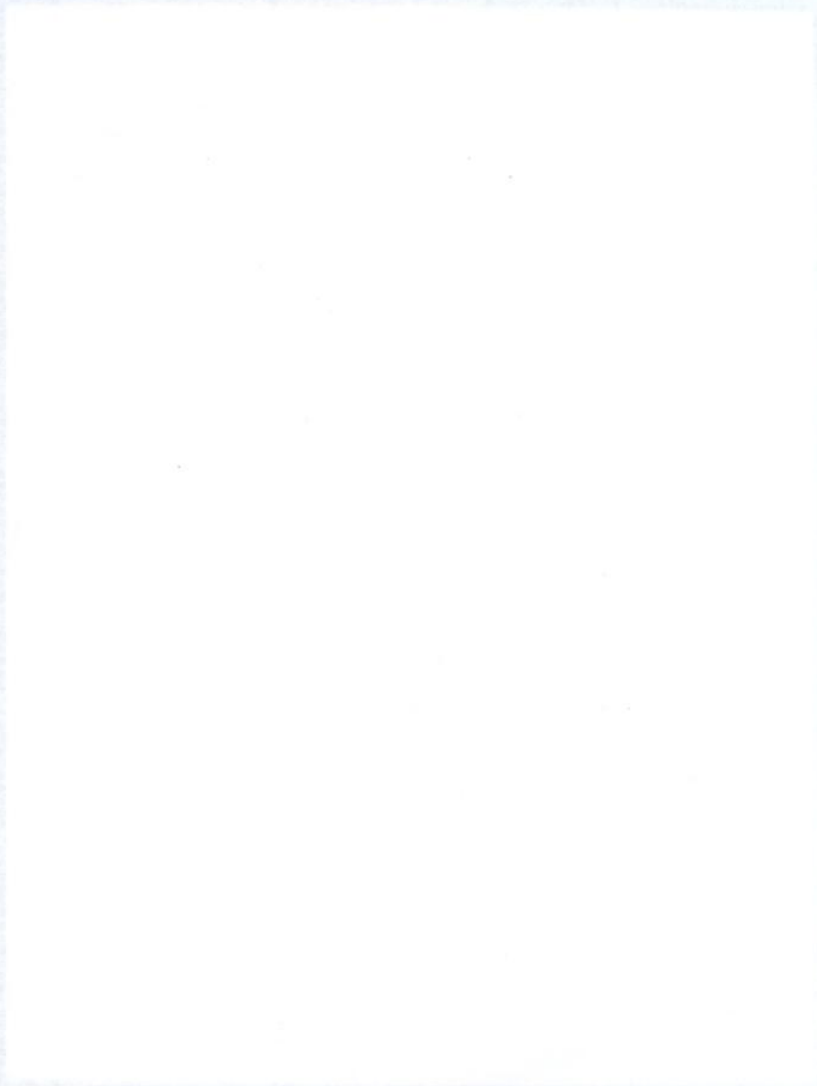


Fig. 12.





Fig 10

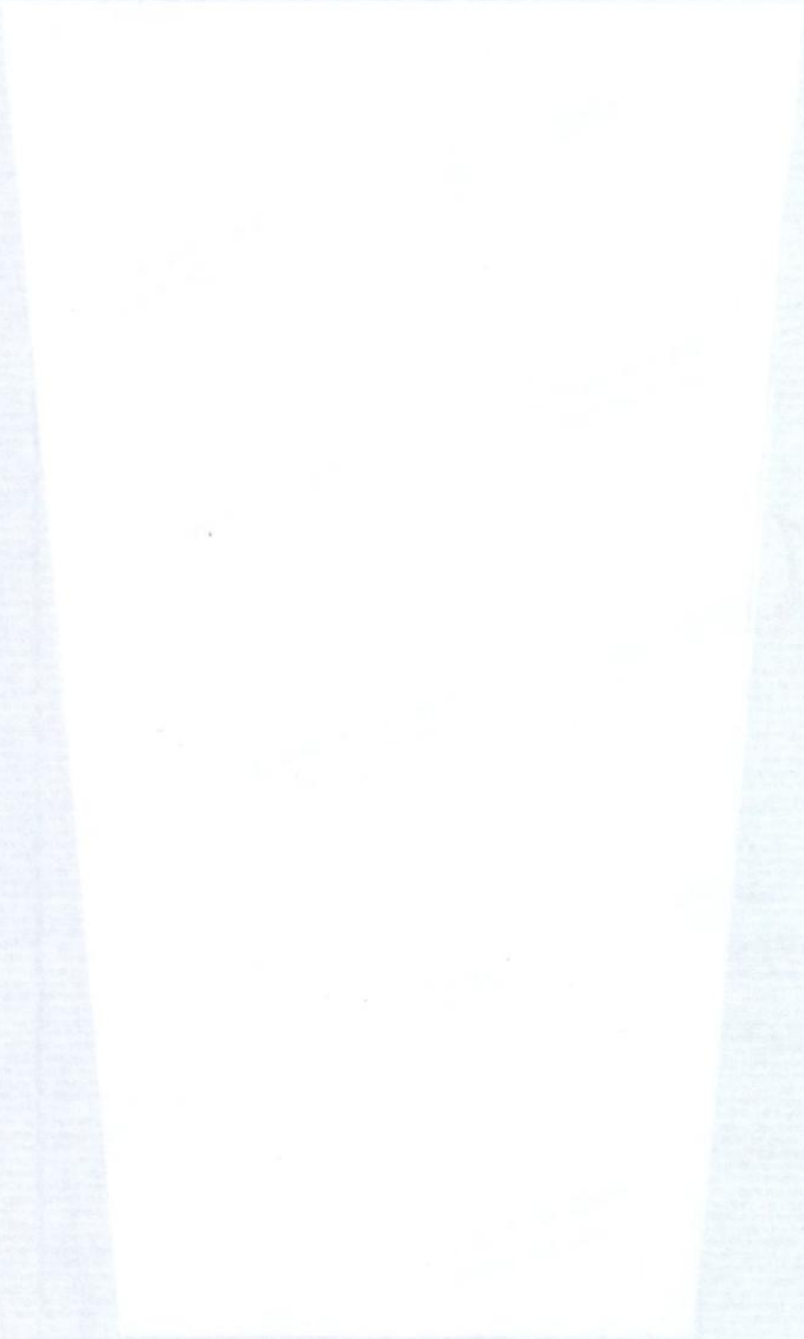


Fig 10

the symbols of warfare, defense and mysticism. The breastplate has become the neo-corset of the nineties.

Whittaker and Malem have likened theirs to a Roman gladiators costume, with slashed leather tabs from the hips - but its focus is unequivocally female, where it presupposes an analogy with the mythical female Amazonian warriors. Another gilded leather corset (Fig.13) evokes an image of the pristine strength of woman, albeit goddess. Mugler's signature breastplate in perspex and his chrome like cadillac bustier, while witty interpretations are futuristic clothes for imaginary planetary horizons.

The corset / breastplate dichotomy is explored too by fashion designer / sculptor, Isse Miyake. One of his designs in perspex relates the modern corset to its predecessor in an intelligent, revealing and thought provoking way. The fetishistic associations are explicit in (Fig 11) choice and colour of materials, i.e. black PVC and perspex, and in the silhouette. This is corroborated by styling, which implies the model's subservience, fear, and approbation (as if 'caught in the act'). She is the central focus of the shot; the one who is reproved - with her hands held up in the air, in the classic stance of the criminal. We do not see her accomplices, and can only assume they are male.

Another design incorporating metal rings of various radial lengths, (Fig 12) which accommodate for the curves and hollows of the torso, is perhaps influenced by African tribal customs where, the rings signify beauty.

Whereas Miyake comments with the cold, anti-fashion detachment of an artist, Mugler is blatant in his suggestions. His shows are staged to accommodate for the fantasies embodied in the clothes themselves. They are extraordinary and spectacular, and the models eclipse reality, portraying fantasy heroines in 'imaginary adventures' (54 p 19). He protests that 'these are the clothes women want to wear, not images forced upon them by men'. Brenda Pollen suggests that by such an uncompromising indulgence in his 'technicolour vision of women', Mugler undeniably mocks all those 'cliches of female





Fig 30



Fig 29



Fig 31



18 217

18



Fig 32



Fig 35

desirability and virtue, rendering them monstrous and ridiculous, revealing them for the two dimensional parodies they are.' (54 p 19).

This delineates the aspirations of the most unconventional designers, (Westwood, Gaultier, Helen Storey) regarding the corset image and outlines the ironic attitude necessary to 'carry it off'. The pristine exponent of irony in this context is, of course, Vivienne Westwood, whose more direct translation from history, (originally teamed with the mini - crini ) comparatively increases the irony.

Kate Summerfield, buyer at Browns; the prestigious London store specialising in designer clothes; gives a customer profile of the modern corset. Her assertion that it is worn by a 'confident, outgoing' person 'who wants to make an impact' is mirrored in the sentiments of designer Azzedine Alaia, who feels that 'the woman functions with spirit rather than just the body.

Alaia has explored the corset through Faux- leopard skin, which perhaps is a sublime reference to the 'man-eating female' who preys on men who misjudge the image for a trapped female fantasy (Fig 29). Also reminiscent of the wild untamed woman is his corset trimmed with string, which is like African grass (Fig 30).

The disfunction between the elements of subjugation and strength, in the non-compatibility between antique and modern corsets is more realized by an examination of how they are worn and how the materials perform in achieving a similar silhouette.

For a greater part, stretch materials, not only in the form of elastic (which had been used in the nineteenth century, but not very successfully) but through the modern fibre, Lycra, incorporated in actual fabrics, are used.

Alain uses stretch wool-cashmere, stretch velvet, Delie and Gabanna, stretch cotton, Gaultier's is also stretch. At Chloe, stretch silk, Westwood, although heavily boned in front, has frequently elasticized

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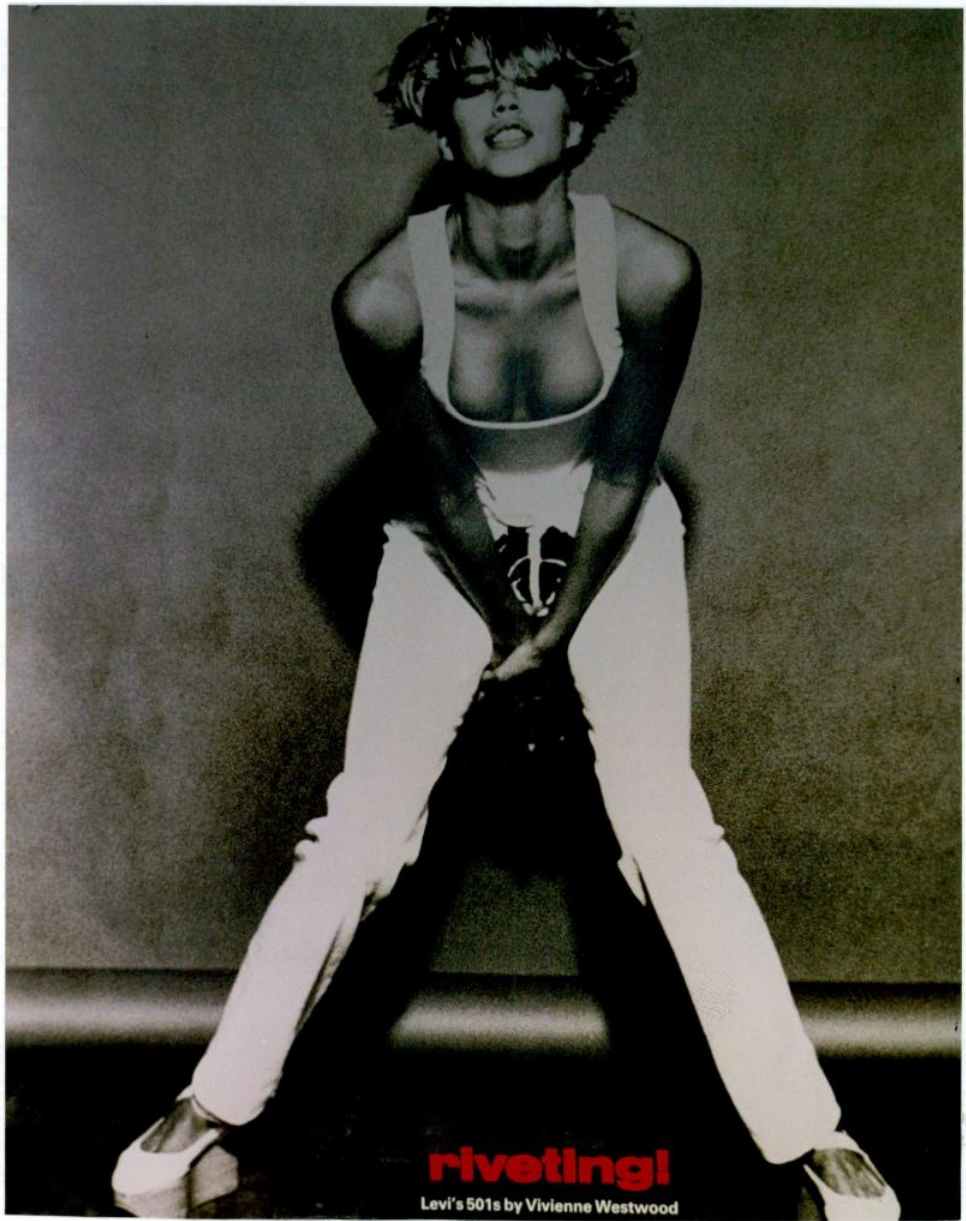
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Fig 9



**riveting!**  
Levi's 501s by Vivienne Westwood



sides and back. She has also featured a corset in crochet.

The antithesis of these, in the sci-fi adaptations of Mugler (Fig. 7.8) and A Girl Called Austin (Fig. 9), perspex and metal reciprocally, are still conducive to movement because they are paired with leggings, hotpants or short skirts and are worn as show pieces not conventional garments. The analogy with jewellery or body ornaments is not discountable.

This modern interpretation, of adaptability and suitability is paramount to a critical valuation of 'the corset.

In a fashion spread promoting Levi jeans (the epitome of the freedom and democracy in fashion). Vivienne Westwood customises them by pairing them with her corset (and adding a fig leaf, which featured in her collection of 1989 - another ironic reworking of an old tradition - biblical.)

Whereas women were confined to a uniform ideal in past centuries. Nineties fashion is 'not a list of permanent looks but a lighthearted rundown of independent styles' (11 p 163).

Although clothes still relate to the identity of the wearer, they also reflect chosen lifestyles. The film Working Girl, 1986 and The Accused 1988, examine the relationship between style and content in the context of the modern woman. The Accused argues that a woman does not deserve to be raped for flirting even if she looks provocative. Working Girl examines the notion of the work ethic which contradicts this, and dress for success is the best strategy. This must be seen in light of the business world where conformity in dress is a mark of superiority and security, and clothes emphasise similarities rather than differences. How Cinderella' made it to the ball, (In this case, promotion to executive status) is the stuff of fable. Melanie Griffith's character realises that self help, self reliance and self confidence aided by her adoption of an acceptable, convincing image will turn her world around. That this is not a submissive retreat to the appropriation

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VIVIENNE  
WESTWOOD

Fig 38



of set codes of dress is emphasised by the punchline.....

'I have a head for business and a body for sin' underlines the notion that she is in control of both - or that wearing a sexy outfit out of office hours does not negate her intelligence.

The duality of such a statement is echoed on the catwalks from Milan to Paris, New York to London, where classy, classic, casuals are perennial. Yet the highlights have been corsets again. Katherine Hamnett in some way justifies this. She asserts that 'today there is no excuse for women not to be equal to men; But that doesn't mean men and women have to stop playing games' (7 p 50)

Feminist thoughts reiterate this sentiment.:

The point is not only to increase the diversity of images of female sexuality, but to move beyond the passivity of the sexually attractive (6p 40). and:

A re-evaluation of gender symbols and a reclamation of some aspects of masculine and female for use some of the time by all of us does not necessarily imply an acceptance of pre-feminist subservience (9 p. 137)

The aspirational differences of to-day's corset are foregrounded in concepts of styling which parody and invert traditional images. The Western theme, prominent in predictions for 1992, expounds this. The corset is reworked, yet again, but paired with archetypal male accessories e.g. leather chaps, tough cowboy boots or biker boots, or features in an adventurous pose (Fig ). The saloon girl, an extension of the theme, parodies the female side.

Typically, Vivienne Westwood's 'cowgirl corset' is an unconventional interpretation (Fig 38 ). Paired with ubiquitous denim (shorts), the boned front corset, her perennial design, is shortened to the midriff and incorporated into a shirt. Likewise, Katherine Hamnett's laceup corset (Fig 39) is reminiscent of the saloon girl's, but loses its silky, frilly associations fashioned in denim and paired with the archetypal exponent of





Fig 39

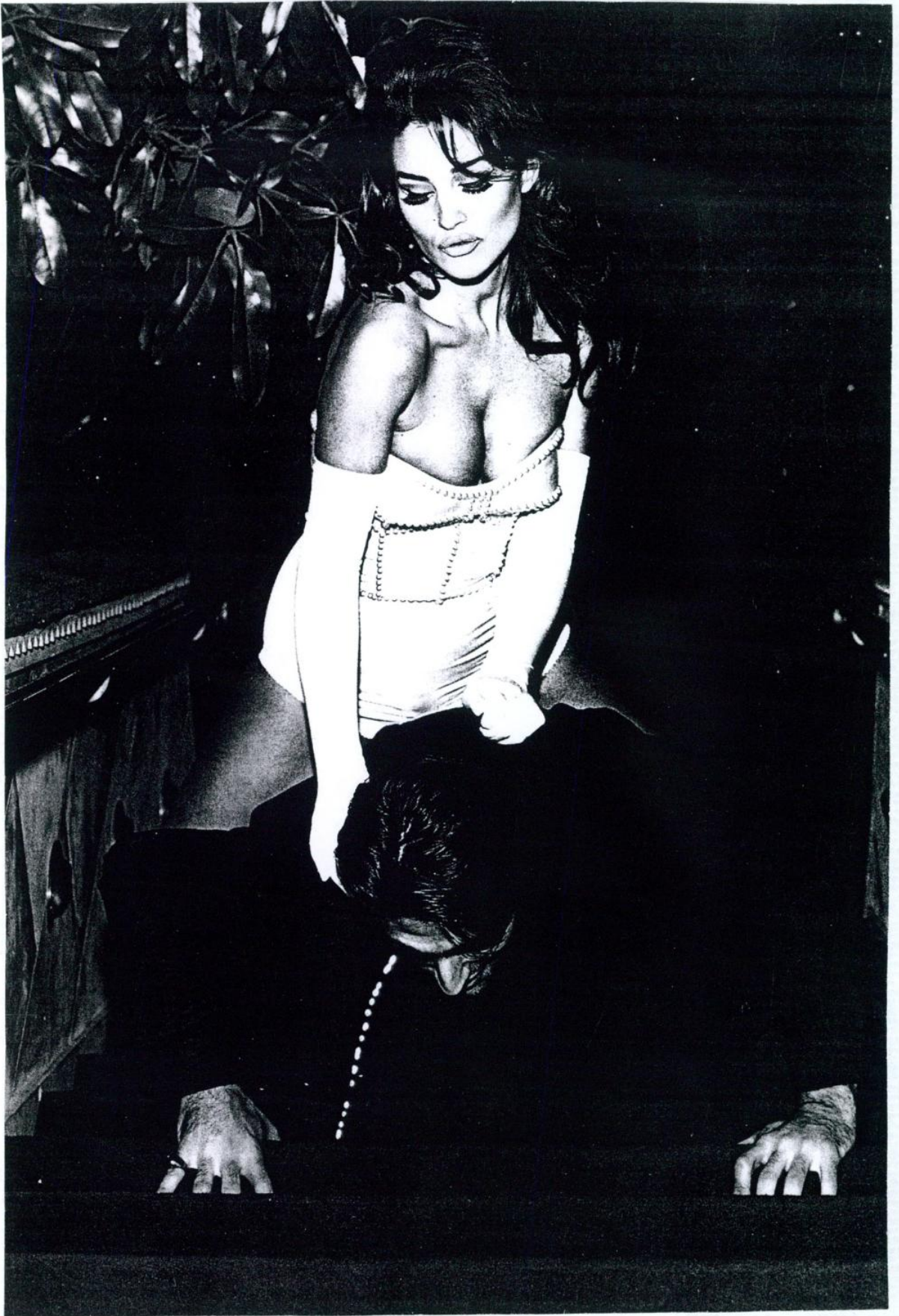


Fig 47

Fig. 11

modern easy style, the lycra 'body'.

Dolce and Gabbana's adverts have more in common with the image of the femme fatale (Fig 47(b)) than the peasants of the Italian south. One of these (Fig 47) features a woman in a defiant pose, standing over a man, stooped on a stairs, who looks as if he has been struck by her.

Vivienne Westwood's gold corset (Fig ) and Thierry Mugler's cadillac bustier both featured in the 'Battle for Planet' fashion spread styled in *The Face* (55 p 36), which suggested the allegory that the wearer is a superhero, defiant and adventurous.

The importance of styling in the foregrounding of context and aspirations is acute also in the witty feature which appeared in *Lei* magazine (Figs 37a+b). The almost surreal concoction which featured celery sticks in place of angled whalebone and another, broken cups and saucers, parodied the corset image in a new way. The flagrant irony of the broken cups and saucers corset transcends old notions of subjugation in whalebone, and alludes to more relevant, contemporary examples: tied to the kitchen sink! In the same way the celery corset maybe a reference to the emphasis on diet to-day which has replaced the corset as a way of achieving an ideal body shape. Conversely, because the model is smiling unaffectedly it could be construed as a celebration in the fact that women are not repressed in whalebone anymore, and the celery could symbolise the new naturalness and anti didactic nature of fashion for women to-day.

The amalgamation of styling joined with the greater aceticism in fashion, and the freedom in both new materials and in experimenting with identities cannot relegate the corset to signifying repressive images for women anymore. Such a view would be myopic and would discount the relevance of style often replacing content.

con gli  
occhi»

**STORIE DELLA MODA**

# ...E tutto in pezze

COSTRUITI UNO PER UNO CON I MATERIALI PIÙ STRAVAGANTI, I CORPETTI

Di LAVINIA RITTATORE. Foto di DAVIDE MOSCONI

Verdura di plastica su un bustino in tessuto

Fig 37 (a)



Fig 84 (a)

del suo  
arom  
e dei s  
color



# piccolo taglio

E GIOVANNA GRIMOLDI SEMBRANO NATI NEL PAESE DEI BALOCCHI

Corpetto con chicchi di caffè e cocci di

Fig 37 (b)

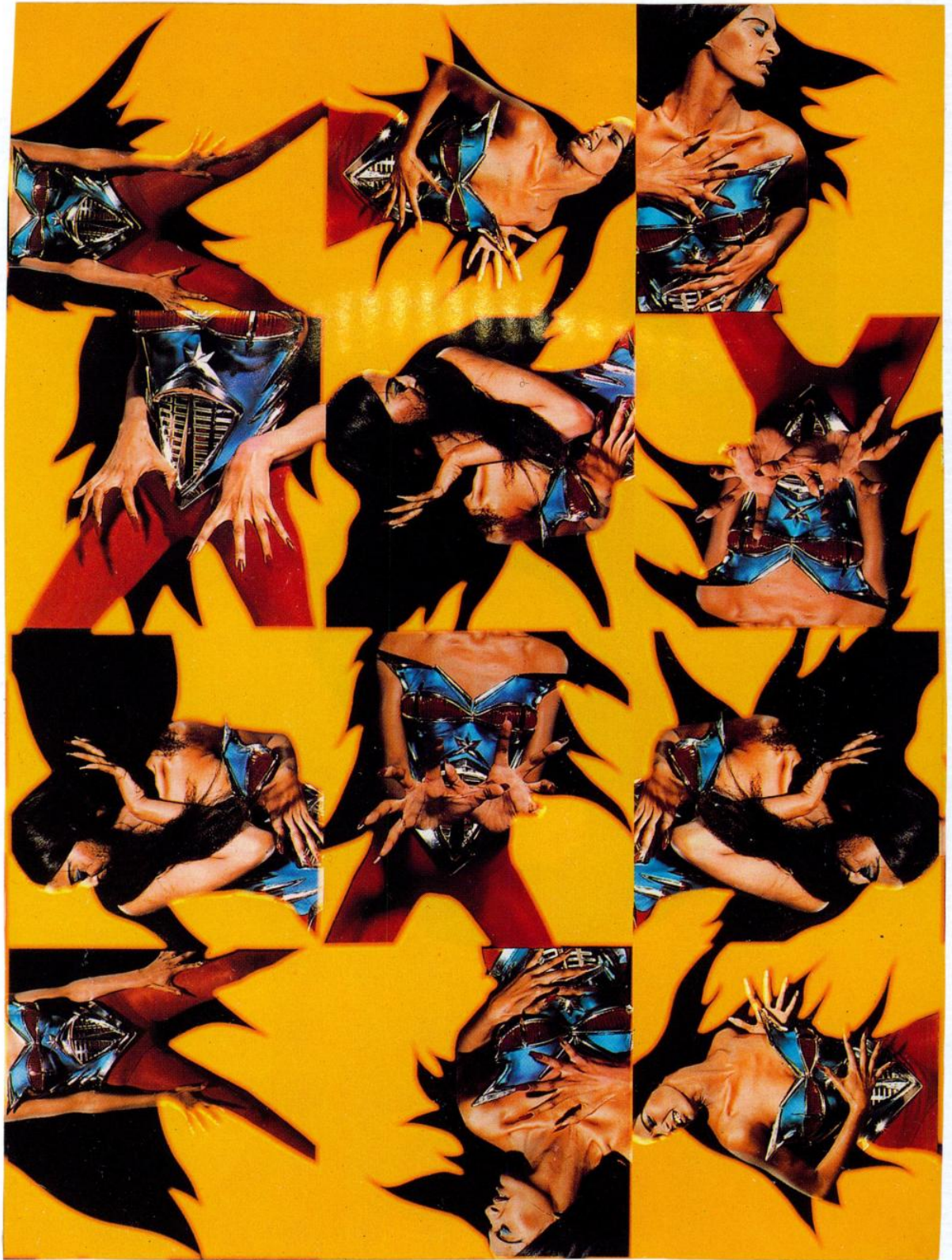


Fig 45



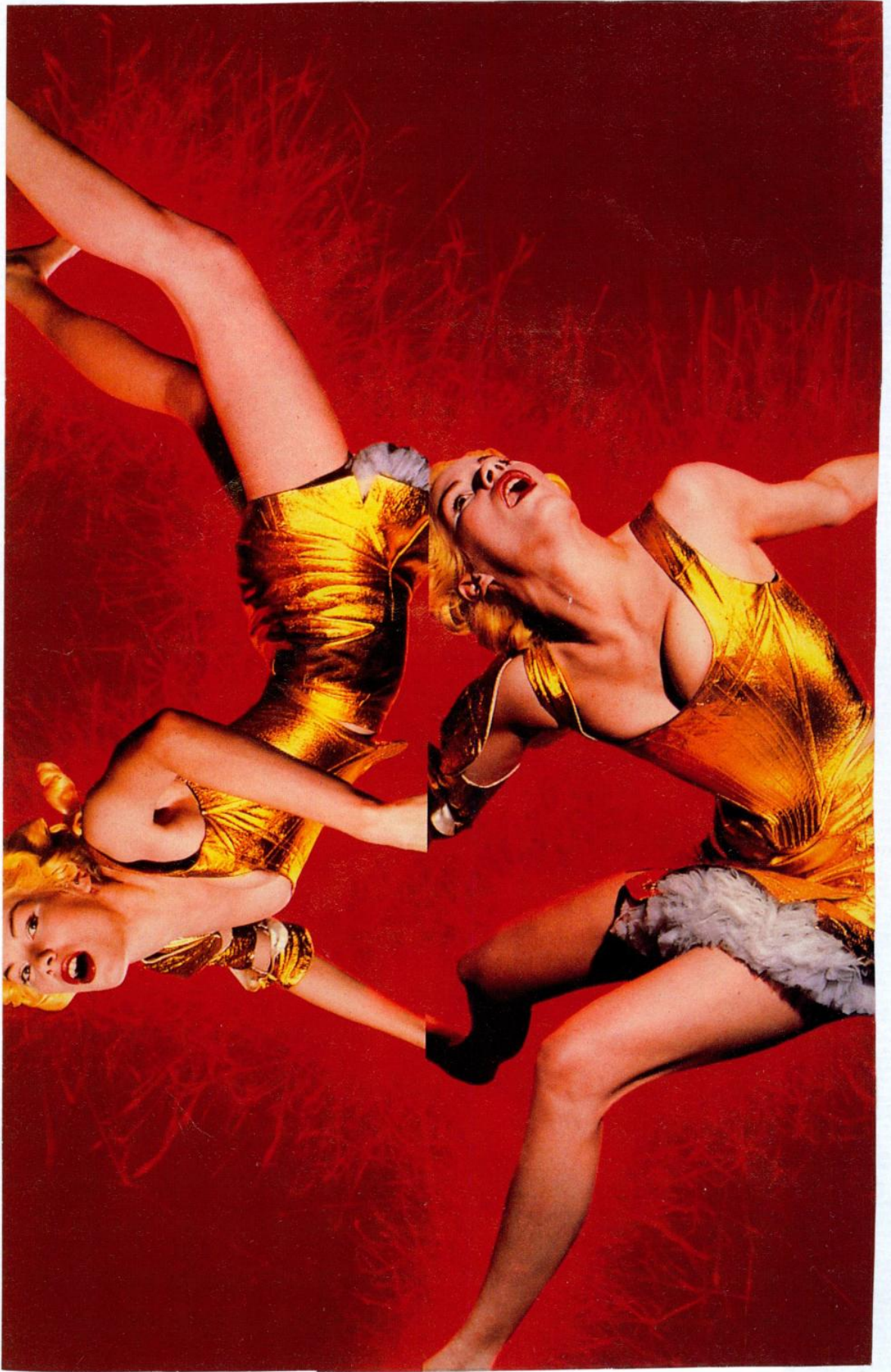


Fig 46

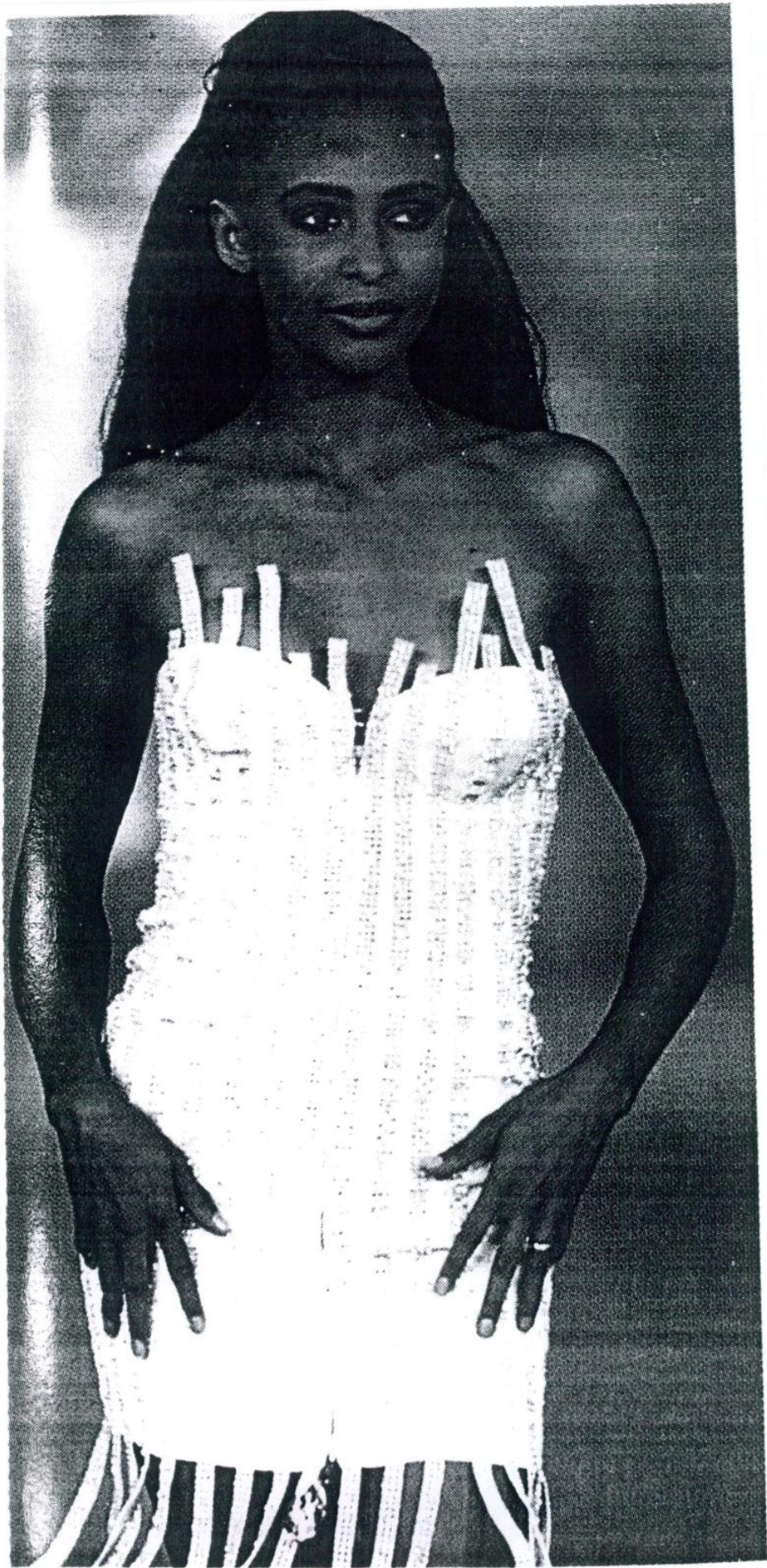


Fig 23

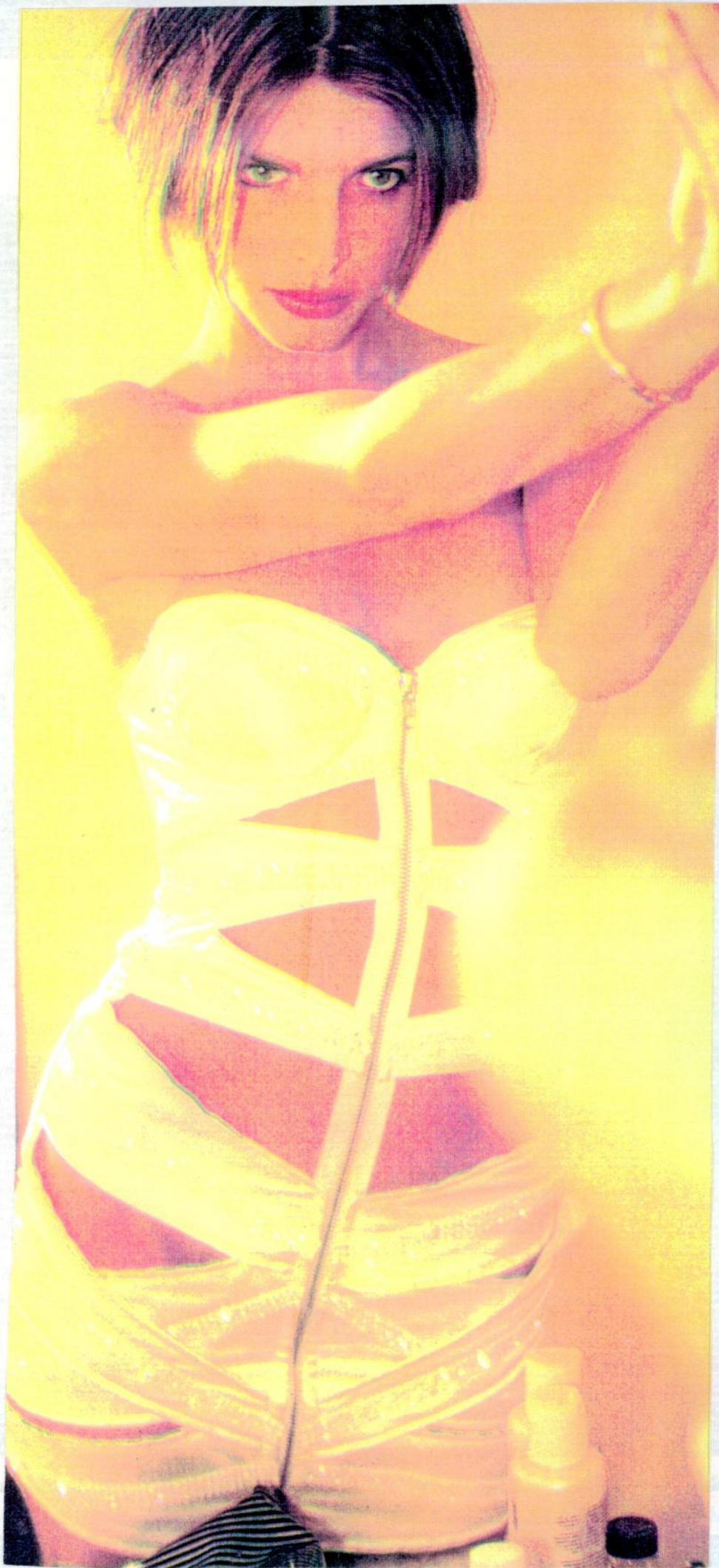
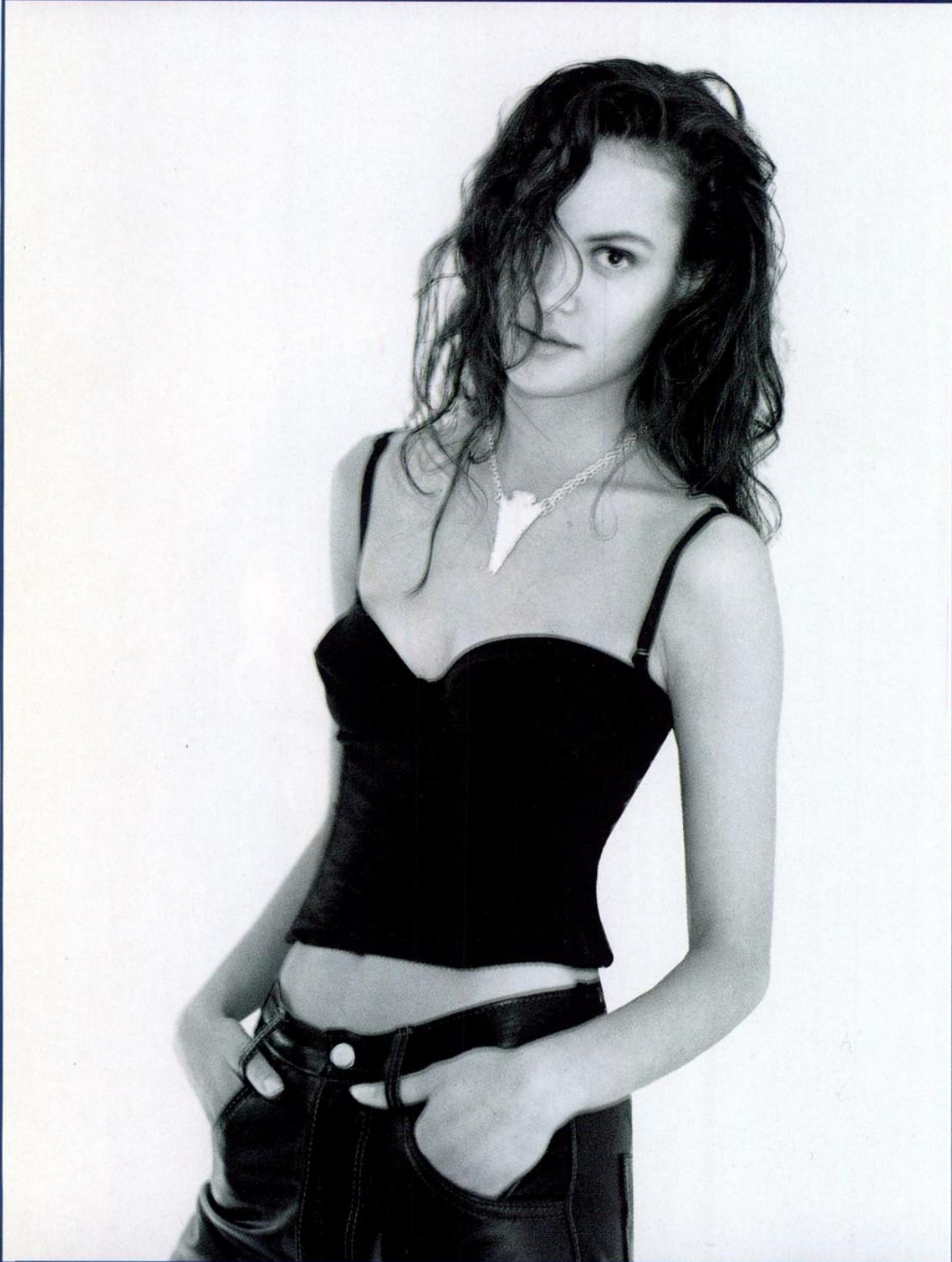


Fig 21

# ELLE

DESIGNER OFFER



# BARE ESSENTIAL

HELEN STOREY BUSTIER

Fig 22

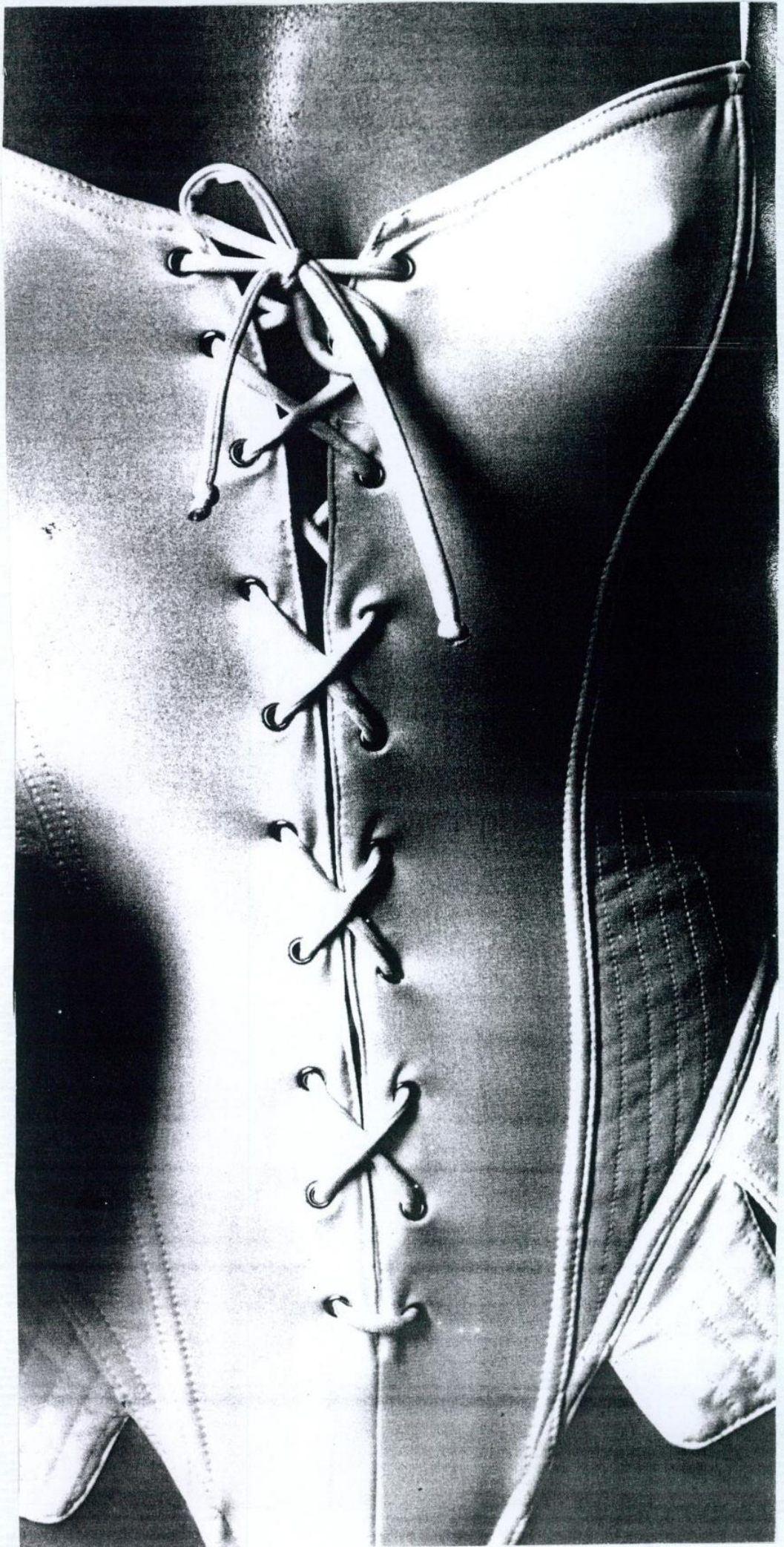


Fig 33



Fig 43

Q. R. L. L. L. L. L.

113 117



Fig 36



Fig 30



Amongst the joys of this spring are hot new designer looks at cool

# spring out sister

prices. These sister labels to the major collections are just right for those who love sensational big name fashion without the usual price tags.

VAULTIER'S JUNIOR RANGE.  
LEFT: SLEEVELESS DRESS, £107; HOODED JACKET, £95.  
HI-TOPS, £29.99,  
MATCHSTICK. RIGHT:  
SHORT-SLEEVED MINI DRESS, £70; CUT-OUT JACKET, £60. HI-TOPS, £64.99, TRAVEL FOX AT OFFICE SHOES. ▶



Fig 25

Fig 52



Fig 26

Fig 26

## CONCLUSION

In The Importance of Wearing Clothes, Laurence Langner analyses the relationship between clothes and social conduct, more specifically, the authenticity of the behavior patterns of which clothes are symbolic. This is paradoxical in the case of the corset which has held different meanings for various people throughout the ages.

In the past, as I have outlined, the influence of the corset, symbolising virtue, augmented with the morality ascribed to codes of dress, was repressive both psychologically and physically. Deviation from didactic ideals was deemed sinful, and this served to sentence women to an ideal image of femininity. The corset was worn by all classes of women, whether or not they had an ideal body shape: it was ubiquitous and even children did not escape its enforced constraint.

That the demise of severe styles towards the middle of the nineteenth century, was accompanied by greater freedoms for women in society, is indicative of how the corset can be confidently associated with subjugation in a patriarchal society.

The submissive and fetishistic associations, parodied and inverted by Punk in the Seventies, shocked society into new perceptions about female sexuality, traditionally expounded in coded dress and behaviour. The corset had evolved to signify a new strength: self definition.

I feel that the corset is a particularly apt symbol for the Nineties because of the duality of its associations: virtue, historically foregrounded, and deviance or lust, more traditionally signified. These two qualities are simultaneously evoked in the social and sexual politics of the Nineties. The invocation to motherhood is currently suggested by the emphasis on the bust and gendered

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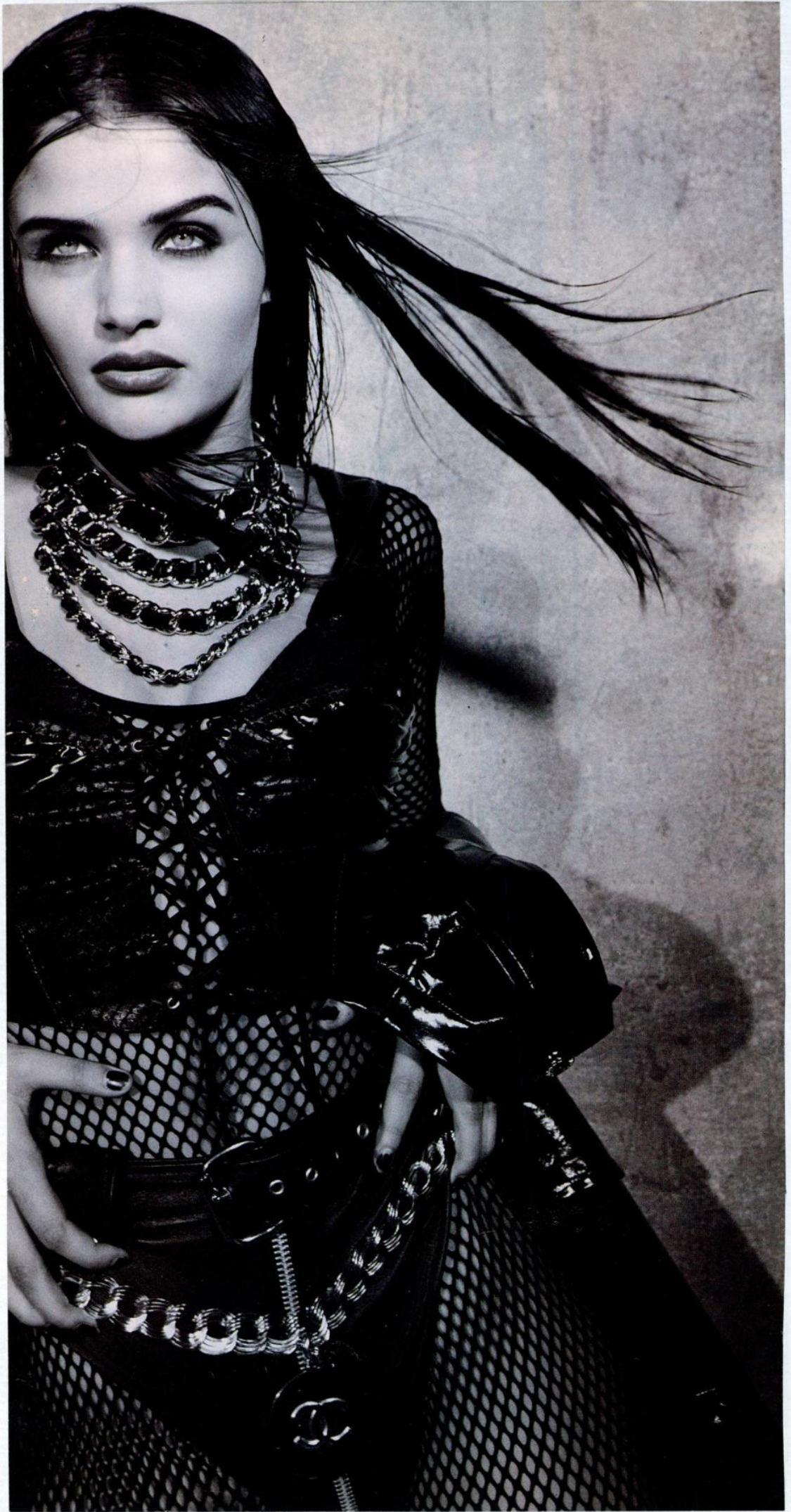


Fig 42  
96



110  
110  
110



Fig 3

Fig 3

clothing. Monogomy is advocated because the AIDSdebate has introduced a new puritanism about promiscuity. Azzedine Alaia reiterates this idea: 'Now that bodies are just for looking at, 3D flesh is the key' (36 p 123).

That the revival of the corset could be seen as a reaffirmation in traditional sexual codes is an over simplified view, in my opinion. It disavows the cognitive developments for women since their days as showcases for conspicuous consumption, as Veblen stated, or baby making machines, before social emancipation offered new avenues to self worth.

It is interesting to speculate on Frank Mort's views on the AIDS issue. In Dangerous Sexualities, the invocation to homosexuals not to 'lose sight of their long term objectives' (24 p 219), is criticized as being 'a vision of our sexual future that is ungendered' (24 p 219). He goes on to say that :

Men, whose constructed sexualities, identities, pleasures have been completely written into many of the structures of social and political domination are as traditional holders of power, now divided.

This has implications for women, not least in their power to parody stereotypical images, explicitly through the corset. That this is submitting to societies desire for gendered images is a fallacy when the aspirational differences of the wearers are often ironic.

Katherine Hamnett statement that; 'Women buy clothes primarily to get laid' (11 p 150) thoroughly discredits any semblance to traditional virtue.

The corset, as I have described in Chapter Four has been reinterpreted, not least through styling, which on the whole, emphasises the inherent strength of femininity approaching a new century.

That this change in attitudes and perceptions is due to the influence of strong female role models, documented through the media, is undeniable, them being simultaneously products and mediators of culture. That this is a tautology is not necessarily true. Never before have women been so confident in their strength; never before have they been so visible in the articulation and influence of the multifaceted nature of femininity.

When is a corset, not a corset, could be the reciprocal question. To day women have learned more than how to comply. In a society which neither sex owns and both share, there can only be compromise.

The subjugation of the patriarchal society has been replaced by the strength and confidence of women freed from conventions. Karl Lagerfeld sums it up; 'women can look like spinsters; they can look like sex symbols - it's simply an attitude.' (11 p 149).

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The suspension of the national society has been...  
The... of women...  
The... of women...

# CORSET

Photographed by Herb Ritts

Starring Naomi Campbell  
Squeezed in at the end: Djimon  
Styling by Joe McKenna



Fig 28 (a)



Fig 28 (a)

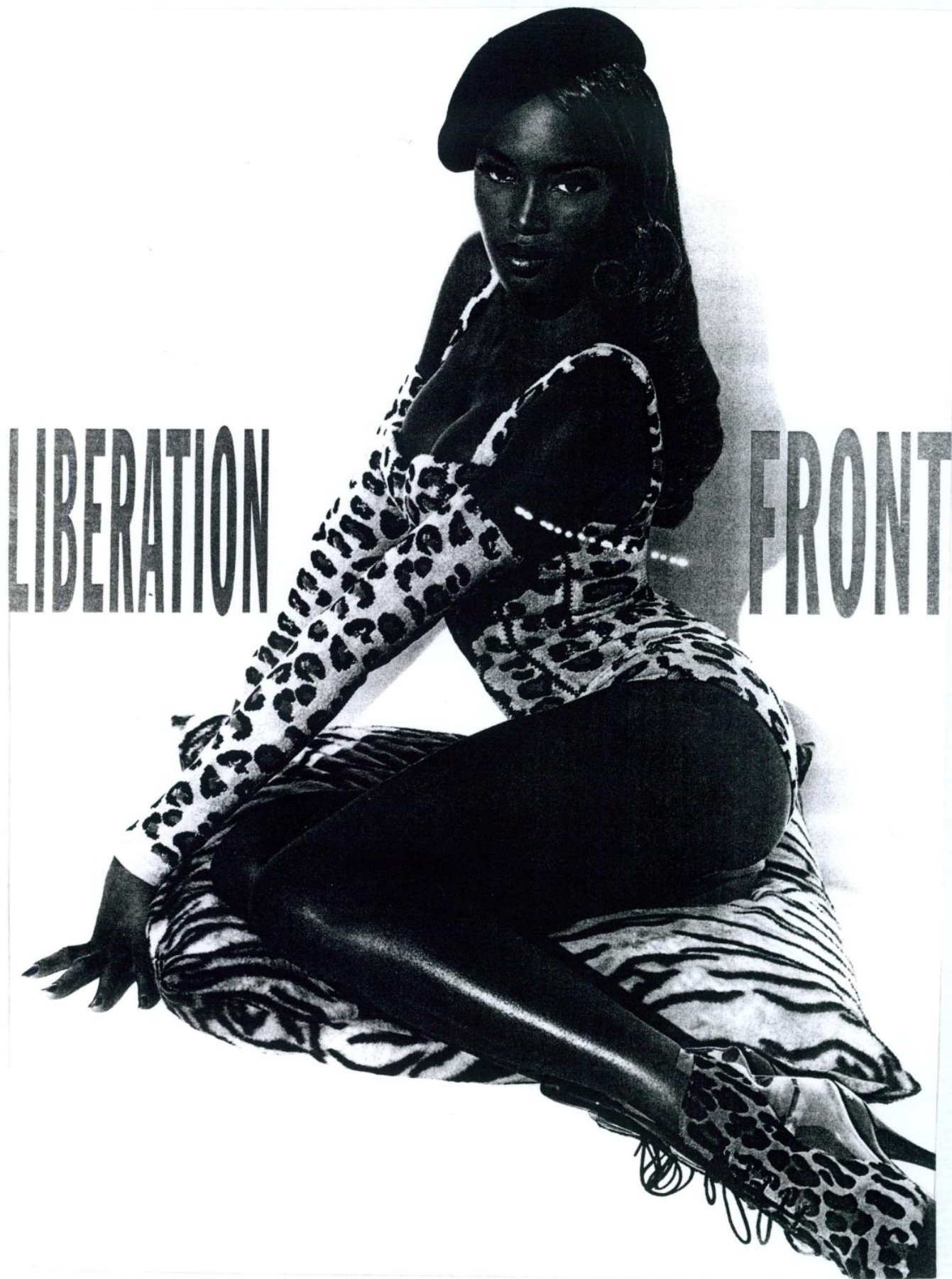


Fig 28

Fig 28

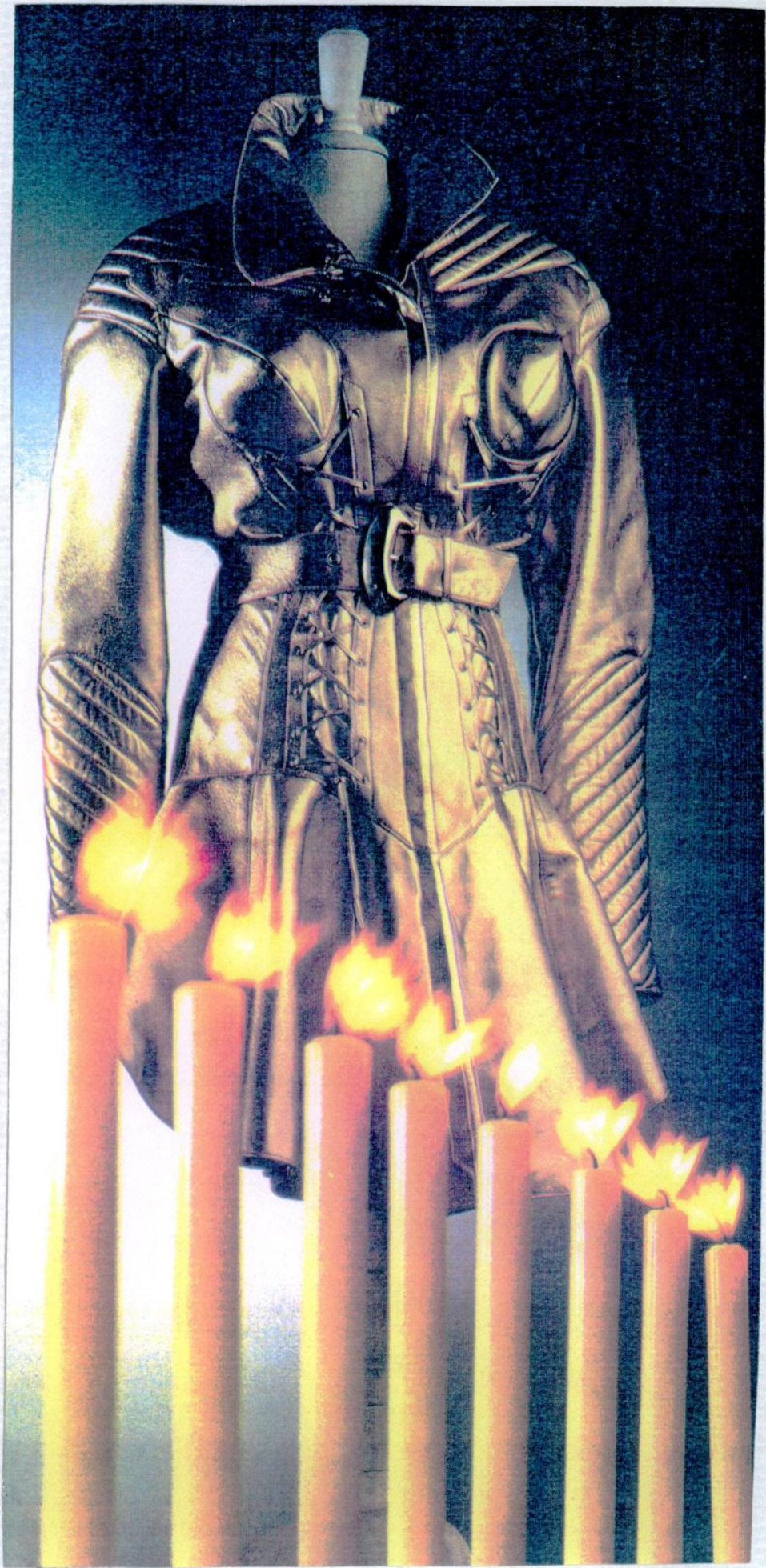


Fig 35



Fig 32

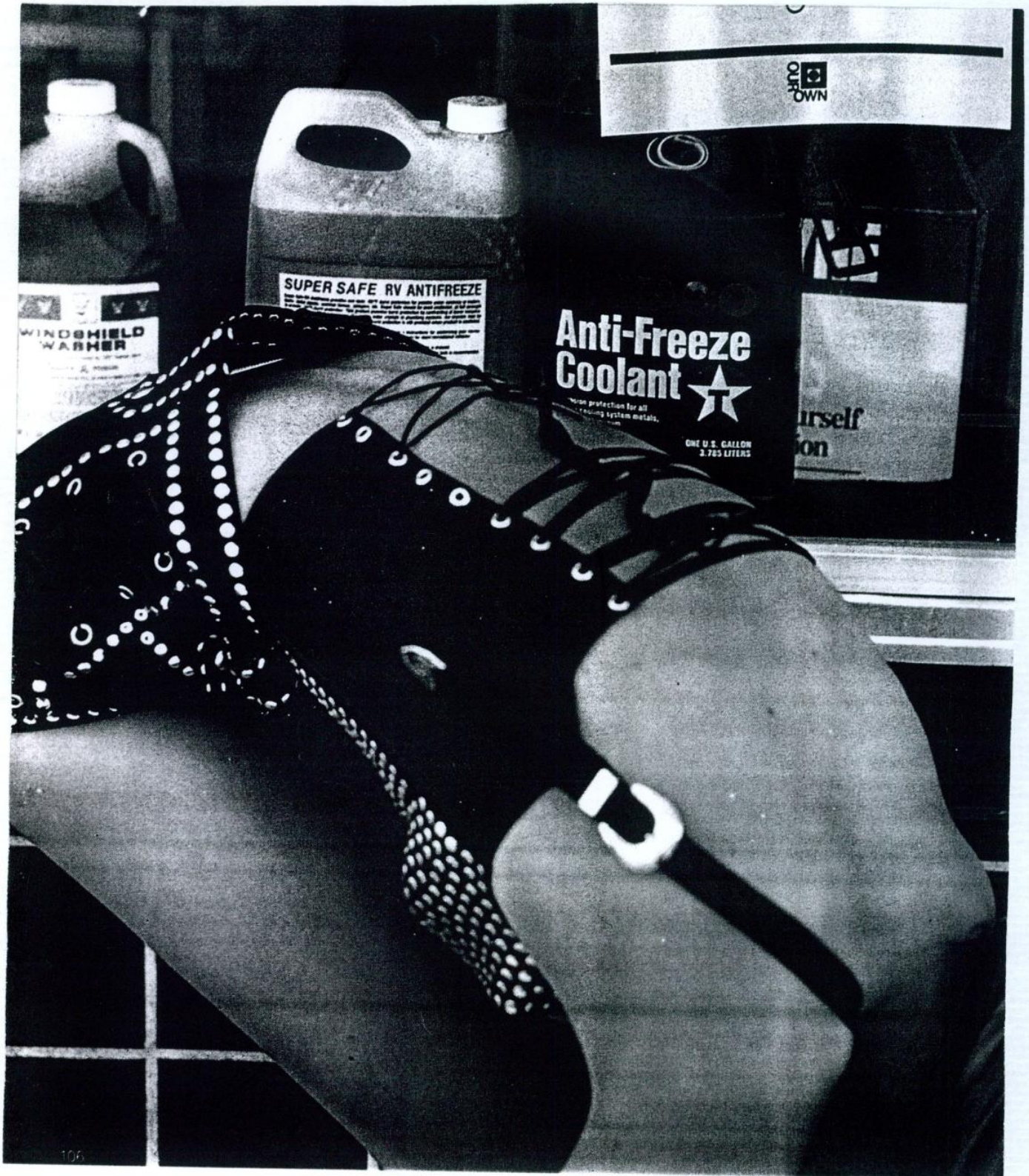


Fig 27

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR  
FROM: SAC, NEW YORK (100-100000)

RE: [Illegible]

DATE: [Illegible]

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Fig 41

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Fig 40



Fig 40



Fig 14



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Fig 47 (b)

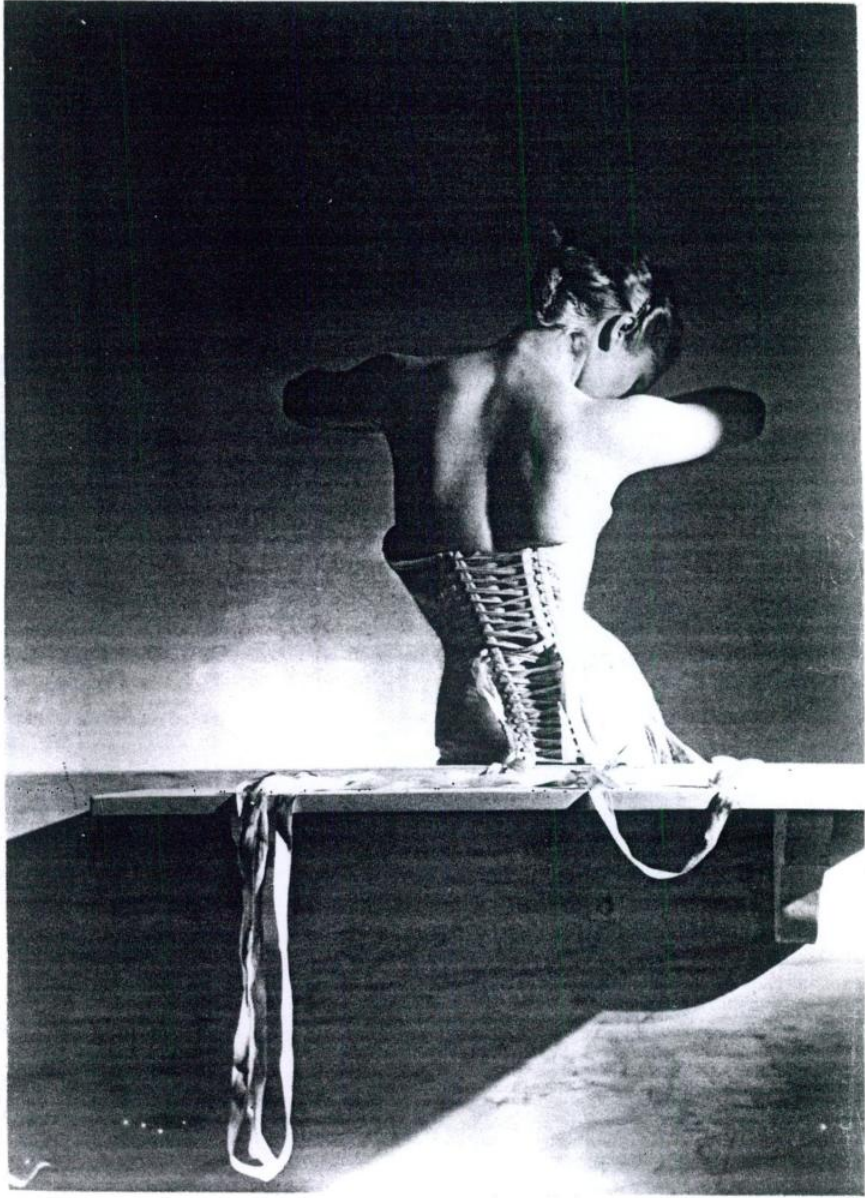


Fig 16