

Name: Aileen Kwun  
Title: Lady GaGa is a Machine for Dancing  
Info: written for Alexandra Lange's Architecture and Urban Criticism course, Fall 2009, School of Visual Arts, Design Criticism MFA; posted on dcrit.sva.edu in May 2010

Warholian pop princess, poster child of "neon noir," hermaphroditic Ann Coulter doppelganger, butter face, the list goes on: Lady GaGa, née Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, has been called a lot of things more ridiculous than her own stage name—which, as it turns out, is actually a reference to the Freddie Mercury song, "Radio Ga Ga"—but she doesn't seem to mind. When asked what media spin she despised most in a recent interview with Jay Leno, GaGa answered with sassy affectation, "That I'm from Yonkers. I love the Bronx, but I'm just not from Yonkers... somehow, whenever I try to edit this on Wikipedia, it just won't let me and I get so angry..." Though the pantsless pop star may be wont to never wear a top and bottom at the same time, she takes the jabs of the press with good grace.

But the latest descriptor of GaGa to fly off the webpage these days—"architectural," referring to her conceptual, avant-garde stage outfits—is not a mocking criticism, but rather, a glimmer of affirmation for the pop star's larger, deeper ambitions.

The term "architectural" has become an increasingly common term in the fashion industry to describe pieces that are more geometric and sculptural, as opposed to, say, frilly or flowy. More critical dialogue about the interplay between fashion and architecture has grown much in recent years, most notably since the show "Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture" exhibited in the winter of 2007 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. It was a landmark show that brought to light similar construction methods, processes and purposes in the design of clothing and buildings. Both practices, at their most basic conceits, serve to shelter and protect the body. And both design objects are loaded with visual codes that carry great personal, social, and cultural expressions of its users. A well-worn flannel shirt, for example, has become generally synonymous with

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grunge rock culture of the 1990s, while an austere, rectilinear curtain wall skyscraper instantly brings to mind corporate office culture of the 1960s.

The intellectual parallels of the two practices are substantial, but use of the word "architectural" has since trickled down to more a liberal use in mainstream fashion media. This fall, retail giant Urban Outfitters, best known for peddling edgier looks to the mall-friendly suburban set, superficially marketed their collection of clunky wedges and boots as "A new idea: architectural heels." And if a similar application to the dressings of a pop musician as mainstream as GaGa is any indication, architectural is clearly a word that has become a comfortable part of everyday vocabulary. It's certainly the *mot de jour*, but in the case of Lady GaGa, its use is duly warranted. More than merely clothe herself in geometric or structurally stringent clothing, GaGa pushes the very definition of architectural fashions to the extreme by self-consciously treating her body and identity as an object to be packaged and consumed by a mass consumer market. In the process of her meticulous, multi-layered self-construction, Lady GaGa becomes the puppeteer to her own marionette—and the mastermind architect behind her own, multimedia, meta-pop project.

When GaGa first appeared on the scene in early 2008, she seemed not so different from her pop contemporaries, with peroxide blond hair, pale skin, and generous amounts of sexed-up raunch. Just barely staying within these broad parameters of the typical American pop star—only *occasionally* sporting an ironic (one can hope) Mystic Tan, severely applied to achieve the color of a burnt tangerine—most every other component of her physical appearance has pushed the envelope to the extreme. Despite what her debut single "Just Dance" may plead, her thoughtful instrumentation of performance beckons audiences to do much more than just that. "I'm defying all the

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preconceptions we have of popstars," she testifies. "I'm just trying to change the world one sequin at a time."

A significant marker in GaGa's "fashion monster evolution," as *New York Magazine* has called it, was her appearance on the *Ellen Degeneres* show in May of this year. Following her performance, she sat down for a brief interview wearing a headpiece that took the form of an intergalactic set of orbits. A series of golden rings differing in width and diameter suspended about her dome, rotating and shifting in different axes at each gesture and slight nod of the head. Reminiscent of a chemistry model demonstrating the orbital movement of electrons around a nucleus, the effect was—both literally and figuratively—atomic. One particularly inspired *Flavorpill* blogger gushed that the headpiece recalled French neoclassical architect Etienne Boulee's famous 1784 proposal of a cenotaph for Issac Newton, a large spherical structure that was a practice of purity in geometrical forms. Though the headpiece, designed by London-based milliner Nasir Mazhar, was but one of many pieces worn by GaGa that could qualify as architectural, none so aptly defined the thought it sent spinning in everybody's minds: Lady GaGa is an alien from another universe.

On a follow-up appearance on the show earlier this month, Ellen sat astounded at the development of GaGa's increasingly outré outfits. Armed with a montage of some of the most brow-raising examples she's worn—the majority of them coming from avant-garde fashion designers such as Jean Charles de Castelbajac, Hussein Chalayan, and Philip Treacy—Ellen said, "I see these runway shows, and I think, who buys them? Well, you do." For GaGa, the art of role-play and high fashion are one the same. Her curation of pieces from these notoriously conceptual designers highlights the increasingly experimental nature of contemporary fashion design. The age-old

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design principle of "form follows function" is turned upside-down, as the abstract, sculptural forms of her costumes question the very function of clothing and its relation to the body. Amounting to more than a mere game of dress-up, GaGa's intellectualized selection of fashion pieces is central to her performative role as a pop star. "I always have a vision—when I'm writing a song I'm always thinking about the clothes, and the way I'm going to sing," she said in one interview. "How I move, that kind of stuff is written into the song. It's not just a song and I'm not just gonna stand onstage and sing."

In a recent guest performance on *Gossip Girl*, GaGa appears onstage in a blood red gown with a form-fitting, lacey bodice that gives way to a thirty-foot long, sequined train. Aside from the X-shaped nipple pasties she cheekily applies over the dress, it's a conservative choice of costume, and a rare occasion in which we find her, for once, fully clothed. The dress has a romantic, gothic feel, with its heavy, dramatic draping. It's much less rigid and sculptural than many of her past stage costumes, but its architectural qualities come forth—not through reference or form, as with the globular headpiece she wore on *Ellen*, but in function. As she emerges forward from the smoky, backlit curtain, the large drape of the dress serves to cloak a team of stagehands that move with her about the stage. The stagehands are presumably there so the Lady doth not trip upon the monstrously huge gown, but their presence serves a grander orchestration of performance: as she slowly slinks towards a tall ladder at the height of the song's chorus, her minions use the train as a blanketing device, wafting the fabric around to envelope the ladder, and eventually, the entire stage. In the closing shot of the scene, GaGa stands fifteen feet in the air—atop the

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now inconspicuously masked ladder-like a bloody, phantasmagoric specter that has emerged from the underworld.

In an instance of affirmation for her elaborate, architectural performances both on the stage and off, Lady GaGa's latest accoutrement to startle the press was a hat designed by the famous Los Angeles-based architect Frank Gehry—his very first chapeau. Blurring the boundaries between architecture, stage prop, and fashion piece, Gehry's hat design caused even the *New Yorker* to report on GaGa's costuming. "Since I've never designed a hat before, I was afraid she wouldn't be able to walk," Gehry explains in the *New Yorker* piece. "I did have an idea that involved people with sticks holding it up, walking behind her. I didn't know how far I could go with this thing." Described as the "millinery version of the Walt Disney Hall," the Gehry-for-GaGa hat looks like a crumpled up, silver turban, a mish-mash of polygonal fabric bits that peel back to reveal a glittery crystal ball, one that even the most clairvoyant of palm readers might only hope to own.

GaGa's choice of large sculptural hats treat the head as temple, as if to gesture—to the wider public upon which her artistic message seems to be completely lost—that far from being a clueless pop star, she has a prized brain sitting atop her shoulders. One incensed blog commenter seethed, "I've hated her. I still hate her. She's just peacocking with her outfits," while another bashed, "It seems to me that her dreary, whiny old lounge act was getting her nowhere so she had to trash herself up to get noticed." What these detractors fail to realize, however, is that Lady GaGa's provoking fashions are meant to alarm. Unlike other pop stars heavily covered in tabloids and on the web, the commotions of spectacle surrounding GaGa are never stolen moments from her personal life. Rather, every snapshot captured

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by paparazzi comes across as an intentional, constructed part of her oeuvre, a legitimate staged performance. It's telling that even those who have never heard GaGa's songs indubitably know of her for any other number of reasons, now iconic of her celebrity: her proclivity for pantyhose over pants, paired with a leotard; the coy sarcasm present in her television interviews; her performance at this year's MTV's Video Music Awards, in which she flailed onstage in a lace bodysuit doused in blood; the list goes on. Riding in a yellow cab in Manhattan, they may have even caught the music video of her latest single, "Bad Romance," premiering on backseat LED navigation systems all over the city in November.

All of these performances are consistently presented spectacles, carefully orchestrated by the art school dropout. "How do I make pop, commercial art be taken as seriously as fine art?" GaGa postulated in an interview with the *London Sunday Times*. "How do I make music and performances that are thought-provoking, fresh and future?" It's a lofty goal to take on as a one-woman act, but with the help of a design collective that she lovingly calls the "Haus of GaGa," she is able to turn her personal meta-pop project into a palpable reality.

Members of the Haus of Gaga, the Lady explains, are her collaborators in creating the public, performative entity of Lady GaGa. "In this industry, you get a lot of stylists and producers thrown at you, but this is my own creative team... Everyone is under 26 and we do everything together." Though the Haus elves stay offstage, she never shies to give them due credit: almost every video and performance is precluded with a marquee announcing it as collective artistic product of the Haus of GaGa.

The pretentious name of her production team may be a small tip-off to her art school education, but its referential properties are, too, a part of

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her master plan. For the facetious spelling of "Haus" uncannily brings to mind another certain art and design collective sharing those four letters—the Bauhaus. In a nod to the growing popular interest in architecture, perhaps, the MoMA opened up an extensive exhibit on the influential school of avant-garde art, "Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity," earlier this fall in the main concourse of its building. Founded in Weimar by architect Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus—German for "House of Building" or "Building School"—sought to rethink the form of modern life through the consolidation of all of the various art and design disciplines under one comprehensive system. But the school's utopian goals have continued to remain closer to myth than reality. The influence of Bauhaus has superficially materialized in the present-day as a slick set of rectilinear aesthetics and primary colors—limited characteristics defining only the last era of its three-part history—and the majority of prototypes designed by its students, exemplars of function and utility intended for mass consumption, never even reached production. Now relegated to the sterile vitrines of museums, the Bauhaus may have failed to reach mass acceptance and popularity in its day, but nearly a hundred years later, the school might just have found a successful—if unlikely—progenitor in Lady GaGa.

With her own carefully selected team of fashion stylists, stage designers, media planners, and choreographers, Lady GaGa is the leader of her own avant-garde art and design workshop. Balancing bodily architecture, stage design, fashion, multimedia platforms, music and performance together, her pop star entity encapsulates a broad range of productions that both entertain the public and question art and life in the post-modern age. In our Internet era where information is prolific, easily accessed and fluidly exchanged, curating is creating. And, through its pointed curation of

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avant-garde outfits and performative tools, the Haus of GaGa masterfully presents—"for eyes that do not see"—the state of popular culture today.

The collective product of a wide range of artists and designers, Lady GaGa is the successful prototype of a post-modern pop star brought into reality: a bonafide piece of living, breathing architecture, an intricately designed construction intended for mass consumption. If Germanotta (that's GaGa's real last name, lest you forget) is to the Haus of GaGa what Walter Gropius was to the Bauhaus, then Lady GaGa, as the sculpted, architectural art project of its collective students, might just be the greatest, pop-leaning *gesamtkunstwerk* of our time.