



Giotto, *The Crucifixion*
(detail), ca. 1305,
fresco, Scrovegni Chapel,
Padua, Italy.

ALEXANDER NAGEL

BEFORE IT WAS a record-player needle, a stylus was a tool used to write or draw. We go from *stylus* to *style* when we shift from reading these marks in a drawing as symbols and begin looking at them seismically, as traces of an activity. But even that is not enough. To say that a line must have been produced by a vigorous stroke of the hand is still a forensic, not a stylistic, observation. When we say that such a stroke indicates a fiery mood or temperament in its maker, or that it embodies an ideology of freedom, then we are talking in terms of style. If you extend this mode of interpretation further, you get to the idea that products of all kinds—shoes, say, or cathedrals—bear the mark of a community, or of a time now past. Style is “never anything but metaphor,” as Roland Barthes wrote.

The art historian Heinrich Wölfflin once said that a concept of style could be applied to past eras of art but not to modern works. Earlier works of art actually expressed their time, whereas in modern times styles change like fancy dresses being tried on for a masquerade. “We have really no longer any right to talk of styles, but only of fashions.” This fable of style devolving into fashion represents a remarkable effort to stave off the unthinkable—that there has never been style, that there have only ever been fashions. It also reverses what is likely to have been the actual historical sequence, which is that the fascinating and disturbing spectacle of changing fashions, put on view by the art of different periods, made it seem necessary to come up with a theory of style. I am still trying to understand why this theorizing began happening in the fifteenth century in Europe.

Clothes perform a fairly limited range of functions, and yet, as observers since antiquity have noted, they vary wildly from place to place and over time. The words for custom and costume are identical in some languages. Yet even as we try to fix the image of fashions—this is the way “the Turks” dress, this is the fashion of the Directoire—fashions themselves are in continual change, recycling old

styles or adopting foreign styles as they do, thus confusing times and places. The first art historians are, perhaps, Shakespeare's dandyish "hot bloods between fourteen and five-and-thirty" who borrow from the outdated fashions seen in old paintings and tapestries and ancient stained-glass windows (*Much Ado About Nothing*, act 3, scene 3). Which is to say they were art historians only by the way. Later art historians apparently let go of the performative aspect, preferring to keep the tapestry in its time, or rather to maintain the fiction that it embodies a style and therefore "a time."

The hot bloods know it's a game. When they pull a past style into the present they are exploding it, revealing it to be neither past nor really a defined style at all. Perhaps they recognize that those styles are themselves the patchwork products of earlier raids and so are capable of being "released" into other times. The latest getups make the present unrecognizable to itself, not really present or even a "time" at all. These sound like willful interventions, but in fact it is not actually the hot bloods who are trying on fashions, let alone attempting to express themselves or their time. It is "the fashion"—a "deformed thief," Shakespeare calls it—that tries *them*, turning them about and fashioning them as this or as that. Negative capability of this sort is, on the surface, all flux and change; in reality, it puts one out of season and into an oblique relation to time.

Le style est l'homme même. Lured by this line, I have read Buffon's 1753 discourse several times. Until now I found the statement annoying, an unusable piece of Enlightenment universalism. That is, I disliked it for all the good reasons that Lacan noted in 1966 and in a very 1966 sort of way: Are we certain we know anymore what it might mean to refer to *l'homme*, etc.? But now I think Buffon's figure is imprinted with pre-Enlightenment wisdom; it is a metaphor asking to be taken literally. Style is the man when the man himself is a stylus—as in geomancy, when one's body becomes a seismic needle for registering, in ink or sand or some other substance, the signals of the cosmos. If the man is the instrument, then the figures he makes are both by him and not by him.

The sixteenth-century technician of memory, rhetorician, Kabbalist, and onetime geomancer Giulio Camillo Delminio once described the process: "And truly as I was in the midst of casting the figure, the action of my hand so perfectly fixed my mind to the movements of the heavens that my intention was completely absorbed. . . . [I]t seemed to me that every truth of heaven poured itself into the figure [I was making]. And if anyone were to interrupt me, or if the pen ran out of ink and forced

me to return to the inkwell before I could complete the figure, then it seemed to me that I could not make any judgments on the basis of that figure, because the course of my intention had been interrupted." Did his figures look like Renaissance art? Did they have a style? A kind of unconscious shadowing of the church art of the time, these works have not made it down to us. For church authorities, such markings were either (fraudulently) too much by the man himself or (worryingly) too little. And lay art lovers failed to see them as proper works worth collecting, perhaps because they lacked style. Delminio prefaced his account by saying he no longer cast figures, calling it a vain art. □

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RYAN MCGINLEY

MY PHOTOGRAPHS are about removal: bringing people to nondescript locations, to places that aren't recognizable, removing their clothes, capturing them with a very limited style palette. I try to think about how timelessness, isolation, and style interact.

This year, I began a series of studio portraits, completely changing the look of my work—removing the color, removing the landscape, leaving nothing but a person and a white backdrop. The most important part was casting: finding people who were at a specific time in life, their late teens or early twenties, an exploratory age when you have a lot of free time and before you realize what you really want to do. We did a casting search for three years and then, out of thousands, selected two hundred people to shoot, ultimately narrowing down that selection to eighty-seven finished portraits.

Since all that's left is someone standing there nude, the work is really about the remaining details—all the homemade tattoos or haircuts; how the person moves or holds their body. At the same time, I think of black-and-white portraiture styles from Avedon to Hujar to Arbus to early gay magazines such as *Physique Pictorial*, contributing to that tradition.

Shooting editorially for magazines or for an advertising campaign—whether pictures of M.I.A. or a short film with Tilda Swinton for Pringle of Scotland—becomes another process of elimination and addition. Recently, I photographed Winter Olympics athletes for the *New York Times Magazine*; when I first started doing research for the project,