

Daniell Cornell

## Imprisoning Desires

*Pleasure and power do not conceal or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another.*

*Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>*

In his new body of work, Adi Nes extends his strategic intervention into the visual rhetoric of masculinity and politics by appropriating and challenging the discourse of fashion. Most of the photographs first appeared in the Fall/Winter 2003 issue of *Vogue Hommes International*, underscoring the degree to which they derive their signifiers from the fashion world. Nevertheless, anyone opening the pages of the magazine to Nes's picture spread will recognize immediately that a wider field of discourse than trends in apparel marks his images. His images make visible the point often reiterated by fashion theorists that "the dressed body is a product of culture, the outcome of social forces pressing upon the body."<sup>2</sup>

In his photographs, Nes stages a series of visual encounters, revealing the network of culturally constructed associations that drive fashion, politics and social relations. By fabricating a faux prison set for his shoot, Nes draws fashion into a self-critique of its imprisoning aesthetic and at the same time critiques the ideological prisons that shape political realities. Fashion magazines traditionally rely on the discernible stylistic mediations produced by the camera, conveying the ideology of an image without calling attention to its doctrinaire message. The photographs embedded in their pages carry an implied but unspoken inflection under the guise of merely describing the clothes, poses, bearing, and attitude that are necessary to compel a desiring gaze. They visually enact what Tim Edwards calls "the politics of bodily regulation."<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, Nes's fashion photographs are a literal depiction of Foucault's panopticon, his symbolic trope for a regime of control that maintains its power by remaining invisible as it engages in maximal surveillance.<sup>4</sup> In his carefully staged images, Nes compels the invisible to reveal itself, forming a visual turn to capture what usually goes unseen. Fashion serves as a trope for the ways that our own attempts to achieve mastery can convince us to participate in the constraints proscribed by cultural assumptions. We look to the glossy images of the fashion industry for instruction about how to appear desirable, submitting to the dictates of consumerism instead of cultivating our own desires. However, in place of

instructing us about how to attract a desiring look, the regime of fashion photography actually inculcates in us the desire to be the object at which it wants us to look. It insures our continued commitment to consumption in the pursuit of something we can only dream to attain.

Nes is known for his consuming spectacles of attractive male bodies. In the past he has explored the discursive conditions of the heroic body in his deeply sensual photographs of soldiers from the Israeli Defense Force. In these army images from 1994-2000, Nes rarely depicts explicit evidence of the dangers that give the athletically fit, beautiful, young men in uniform their heroic appeal and erotic charge. Most often they are shown playing, relaxing, or sleeping, engaging in the more mundane moments that combat merely punctuates. Although invested with the signs of battle, the men in these photographs do not participate in any actual violence; rather, they suggest the traits of stereotypical masculinity through



*Untitled, 1994*

the aggression and destruction implicit in their military hardware, uniforms, and muscles (cat. 4).

A more recent set of photographs from 2000 presents the newly pubescent bodies of teenage boys from the development town of Kiryat Gat in the northern Negev where Nes spent his own adolescence. In them, Nes portrays the beauty of youth and the solipsistic preoccupation of the young with their own image (cat. 9). The budding potential of bodies on the brink of self-discovery enhances the seduction of these photographs as Nes uses the rhetoric of exploration to invoke masculine coming of age. In this way, the investigations of sexual awakening represented in his photographs serve as self-referential images, reflecting the spectator's own awareness of desire and its role in the formation of identity.<sup>5</sup> Through these photographs viewers see themselves looking and are made aware of the role desire plays in the structure of their look. Such photographs make manifest the necessity of disentangling whose desire and whose look organizes the visual exchange when locating the sexual charge encoded in the display of a specific body.

Of course, to consider the spectator's look is to venture into the territory of cultural politics. It raises the question of whose

viewpoint acquires priority in making sense of the image, and, as importantly, who and what is left out of the assumptions framing the photograph's reception. Within the history of photography, those questions have been central to discussions about the truth claims of documentary pictures.<sup>6</sup> However, it would be a mistake to situate Nes's images within a documentary tradition. Although the photographic scenarios that he captures appear to deploy the language of the recorded moment, their rhetoric is decidedly that of the performative spectacle, a visual language more firmly rooted in the vocabulary of film and its ability to harness the "act of showing and exhibition."<sup>7</sup>

The conditions of seeing are a central preoccupation in the study of film. The very circumstance of experiencing a world of light while shrouded in darkness lends itself to contemplations about the relationship between viewers and the observed. Within the context of viewing a film, this circumstance translates into a question about the conditions under which spectators invest themselves in a visual realm that so clearly uses artifice to create the illusion of immediacy. According to traditional film theories drawn from Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze, the medium of film encourages spectators to believe in an illusory mastery over their viewing experiences, which in turn allows them to control their investment in the events unfolding before them. However, this mastery is limited to the symbolic level that structures the viewing experience. What happens when the structuring symbolic network that gives meaning to the film's diegetic images is ruptured? Or even more radically when the perceived object looks back, implicating its spectators in the very web of symbolic associations from which they believed that the dark protected them?

It is this failure of mastery over the organizing realm of the symbolic order that Nes explores with such profound effect in his photographs. And it is no accident that his photographs have the look and feel of carefully staged film stills. Nes draws on the language of film much as a director might.<sup>8</sup> In fact, his elaborately constructed tableaux can gestate for months in his imagination as he collects the props and actors that are required to assemble the dramatic scenarios on which his photographs are based. Nes carefully plans each image, researching the best setting, finding the right looking models, choosing the precise accoutrements, rehearsing every position, gesture, and expression with the participants.<sup>9</sup> No detail is too small to be left to chance as Nes constructs the semantic field of objects that comprise each photograph.



*Untitled, 2000*

Equally important are the light effects in these photographs. Nes invests his scenes with the artificial extremes of cinematic lighting to heighten the melodramatic theatricality of his compositions. The extremes that give cinematic language its recognizable vocabulary are made explicit in the calculated staging of actors and the intense play of light and shadow across their bodies (cat. 2). Consistent with the rhetoric of the film still, Nes's goal is to produce a synecdoche, a singular momentary event that encapsulates the larger narrative. And because narrative is a rhetorical structure organized around the drive toward a desired conclusion, it is important to ask what desired end Nes is pursuing

through his visual narratives. In this Nes mines terrain made familiar by contemporary photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Wall, all of whom use a vocabulary of visual spectacle taken from film, intervening in the narrative drive of the photograph by deflecting an obvious conclusion into unfamiliar terrain. In the resulting circuit of signification, viewers experience unsettling scenarios that no longer mirror their expectations, forcing them to confront a gap between fantasy and the real. Such photographic spectacles draw attention to the artifice that sets in motion the spectator's involvement with the image.



*Untitled, 1996*

Spectacle is a mode of presentation that relies on excessive display to heighten the visceral experiences of spectators, and film has been especially congenial to its effects. As the film still, the fashion photograph also draws on this rhetoric, deploying spectacle in order to give priority to the visual pleasures on which cinema relies. Derek Jarman was particularly adept at combining fashion and cinematic spectacles to create meanings that are conveyed more through allusion and resonance than narrative cohesion. Much of his work intervenes in traditional assumptions through elaborate sets and unusual costumes, whose visual displacements result in narratives that interrupt the operation of normative cultural attitudes about gender and politics. It is not surprising, then, that many of Nes's photographs have the look and feel of stills taken from Jarman's films. Both artists seduce viewers into desires that are at odds with the usual goals of the narratives they reference.

## II

The current group of Nes's photographs appeared in the fall/winter 2003 *Vogue Hommes International* as part of a special fashion section based on six Middle Eastern cities: Cairo, Tel Aviv, Beirut, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Kuwait City. Although his spread was identified in the magazine as Tel Aviv, this was a construction of the editors. In point of fact, consistent with the staged tableaux of Nes's other photographs, the prison setting does not document a real location but is a cinematic fabrication. Whereas the photographers of the other spreads attempt actually to record the character of the cities that serve as the backdrop for their fashion shoots, Nes expresses the character of life in Israel through visual figures that turn on the power relations and claustrophobic experience of incarceration. The jail serves as a metaphor of a closed society that confines everyone, locking them together in an interdependent series of affiliations.

Although the figure of the jail does mobilize the suggestions of confinement, restraint, and isolation associated with a closed society, Nes takes the figure farther, creating a powerful web of signifiers that speaks to the issue of mastery. He brings together discursive contexts that usually remain distinct in order to discover how they might comment on each other. Fashion, politics, and sexuality establish arenas of engagement that reinforce the hegemonic power of prevailing cultural norms. When considered together, rather than as separate spheres, their boundaries become blurred. Fashion historian Anne Hollander describes a similar

blurring when she writes about women wearing suits. The usual links between power and masculinity no longer appear inevitable as the meaning of fashion extends beyond the implications of sartorial style that are the primary concern of designers and runways.<sup>10</sup> The resulting semiotic intervention ruptures the seemingly closed visual codes of these representational systems, revealing the assumptions that work to frame the meanings produced by them.

The first photograph of the spread (cat. 10) introduces the language of mastery as a question of inside versus outside, a motif that circulates throughout most of the images. Nes's signature figure, the well-muscled, handsome, heroic body that defines classic masculinity, stands in front of prison bars. Behind him are a corridor and a bare cell with twin cots. The logical assumption is that the photograph has been taken inside this prisoner's own cell. However, nothing in the image confirms this hypothesis, and it is impossible to know with certainty whether the man standing before the spectator is inside or outside the bars behind him, whether he is a prisoner or not.

The man's hands behind his back introduce a further ambiguity. Is his pose a result of handcuffs or is it merely the swaggering stance of a fashion model? And what of the spectator? The closely defined space and direct gaze of the man create an intensely confrontational image that raises questions about how such men are viewed. There is a decidedly homoerotic charge in this encounter, its most potent signifier the gap between the shirt and pants, exposing a slice of skin and suggesting a vulnerability that contradicts the dominance indicated by the subject's muscled torso and direct gaze at the viewer. In this image, Nes announces one of his central themes, bringing the presence of otherness into the public eye by demonstrating that who is inside and who is outside are complicated assessments often driven by indeterminate assumptions.

The photograph of five men in a lineup (cat. 13) directly addresses the question of who belongs on the outside and who on the inside. This scenario replicates the common practice of lining up a criminal suspect with others who appear similar but are assumed to be innocent. Inevitably, this practice also plays into stereotypical attitudes by lining up people who are presumed to be interchangeable. In Nes's photograph, five men are assembled together who look very different, demonstrating the range of heritage possibilities that comprise men of Middle Eastern descent. The short depth of field blurs the ends of the lineup and brings the central figure into sharp relief. Nes thus enlists the vocabulary of





*Untitled, 1998*

the photographic medium as a signifier of the shaping power of the spectator's point of view. His photograph reminds us that given the very real political tensions created by Israeli and Palestinian separatists, stereotypes become both inevitable and dangerous as they produce a notion of otherness in an attempt to establish mastery over such a volatile situation.

However, in place of his usual virile, handsome models, Nes populates his photographic scene with more commonplace masculine figures, substituting ordinary men for the predictable paragons that populate fashion magazines. Implicitly critiquing the fashion industry's customary reliance on the seductive glamour of surface beauty, Nes locates the attractiveness of these men in the mythic reputation of the outlaw hero. As Jean Genet reminds us, in the context of the hypermasculine space of a prison, that



Still from *Un Chant d'Amour*, a film by Jean Genet, 1950

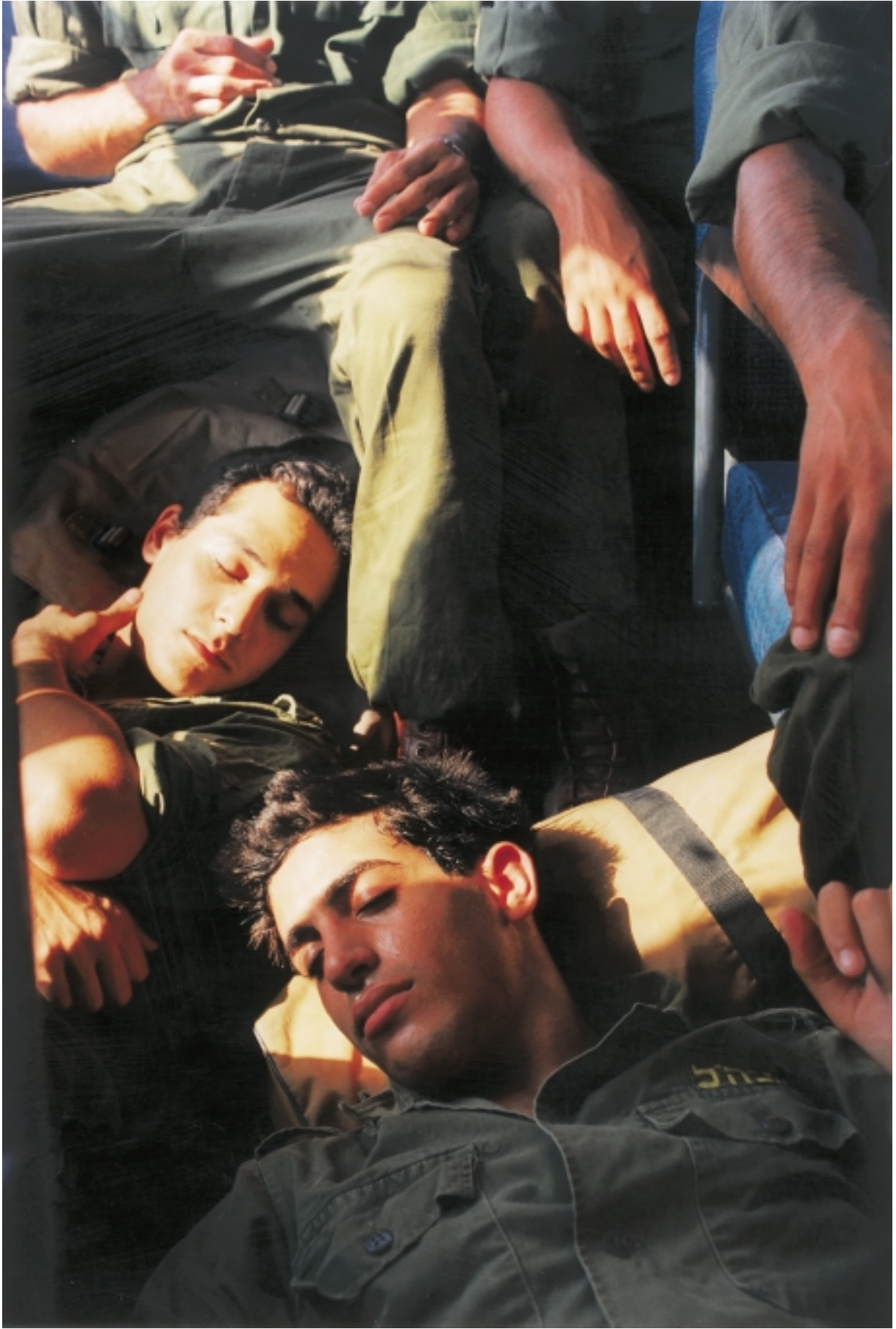
appeal resonates with the erotics of same sex desire. Ironically, it is only recently in more liberal societies that a visible gay identity would not land one in prison – while in more conservative societies it still does. Genet is an especially apt reference in this context because his lifelong theme was the link between homoeroticism and radical politics, which eventually resulted in his support of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.<sup>11</sup> Genet's conflation of his sexual fantasies and criminal behavior was a way to express how relationships forged within prison often complicate the clear identifications practiced by those outside the prison system.

Nes slyly reveals this homoerotics in his photograph of twins sitting together on a cell bunk (cat. 15). Representing emblems of same-sex desire, these twins operate as a visual trope, a sign of the role that notions of the other play in identity. Each is a signifier

of the other and yet signifies himself. The handcuffs, which bind the twins together, function as a further sign, reinforcing this notion of the double implicit in the structuring of identity. Similarly, the dramatic chiaroscuro highlights the sameness of their poses, hand placement, facial structures, and the open “v” of their shirts, which exposes the vulnerable flesh in the hollows of their necks. At the same time, subtle differences in these details distinguish the men and establish their separate identities. As the twins confront the spectator with their direct gaze, their beauty and erotic appeal is represented in terms that collapse difference into sameness, exposing the possibilities of a desire for the other that resembles the self.

Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent celebration of same-sex desire, the photograph also contains an implicit critique of macho gay clone culture and its vision of hypermasculinity, an intensifying of masculine sexual expression and the internalized oppression of stereotypical political ideologies. The prison setting reinforces this role of denial in regulating the body and its outward expressions: as a setting, the cell effectively erases any hint of effeminacy, the cultural opposite of male identity, and at the same time loudly announces a sexual availability that is stereotypically considered unmanly. It is a reminder that prisons operate as spaces of traditional yet non-conforming masculinity. Nes shows himself to be a shrewd chronicler of the ways that viewers rely on the contingency of ancillary codes to define masculinity, even as he dismantles the secure associations of those codes. Prisoners, gay men, and political dissidents operate as rhetorical equivalents, sharing a common status as oppressed outsiders that the mastering look of fashion photography reveals. The photograph illustrates the ingenuity of Nes's imagery as he takes a familiar *mise-en-scene* and disrupts the symbolic knowledge it typically supports.

Nes pushes the complex irony of the masculine poses, on which prison, gay clone culture, and fashion all rely, into parody with his tightly cropped photograph of a man in handcuffs, black leather jacket, and tight fitting blue jeans (cat. 20). Seen from behind, the man's torso is cropped to emphasize his obviously firm, well-shaped butt. His handcuffed pose forces him to assume an arched position that renders the man's posture as erect but his role as passive. The handcuffs formally divide the image, drawing attention to the symmetry of the belt loop and the stitching that outlines the division of the man's buttocks, signaling the site that serves both as a sign of sexual vulnerability and gay desire. Again, Nes plays the image both ways, deploying the language of fashion to subvert its visual register and point up the interdependent



Untitled, 1999





*Untitled, 1995*



operation of culturally coded signs in the definitions of mastery and desire. This masquerade of straight, macho masculinity is mannered and stylized, operating not as an expression of some presumed authentic inner identity but as a signifier of “manly presentational strategies.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige has pointed out that subcultures develop their own fashion sensibilities as a political action: often specific articles of clothing, accessories, and gestures are adopted as a strategy to disrupt the mastering codes of visual communication on which dominant cultures rely for their control.<sup>13</sup> Such style offends the mainstream precisely because it challenges the notion of what is deviant, revealing the arbitrary nature of any system calculated to exclude it. Both gay and prison subcultures share an outsider status, not only positioned as deviant in respect to conventional cultural norms but also as the defining other that must be mastered. The crossing of these two realms is manifestly fitting because prison life provides so many of the sexual fetishes that serve gay desire, especially those associated with masculine power relations: uniforms, bodily display, voyeurism, physical restraint, sadomasochism, and an all-male community. In addition, prison presents the scenario of an implied order of forced intimacy within the context of heightened masculinity that subverts traditional heterosexual gender assignments.

These inflections inform Nes’s photograph of a face-off between a mature police officer and an adolescent boy, presumably a criminal suspect, although any overt indication of what underlies the tension between them is eliminated from the scene (cat. 12). Reminiscent of Nes’s cinematic vocabulary, the image suggests an ongoing narrative of which this is a decisive moment, a synecdoche for the confrontational drama they enact and the desires that drive it. Also borrowed from cinema, the characteristic chiaroscuro lighting effects, emanating from behind the officer, bring the youth’s profile into sharp relief while illuminating his face with an intensity that suggests not only interrogation but also intelligence and resolve. Yet it is impossible to determine the register of the look embodied in the exchange between the two protagonists in this scene, especially given their unusually close proximity.

The context of prison suggests that the officer and youth are engaging in a mutual standoff of determined bravura whereas the context of gay subculture inflects the image with the more passionate register of sexual anticipation, or possibly even the fervency of the desire to be dominated. This ambiguity creates a

rhetorical slippage, encouraging viewers to question what crimes against the established order are on display in these photographs: have the subjects in them committed political crimes against the state or social crimes against heterosexuality? Or are we merely witnessing the banal crimes against fashion that result when men who are not models wear designer clothes? Ultimately, the spectator is led to consider how the assumptions supporting these apparently separate spheres are mutually implicated in establishing identity.

More than most, the gay subculture reminds us that fashion is one of the primary avenues in the formation and expression of identity, and as such, it offers a powerful intervention into the social order as personal conduct is transformed into political action. However, the importance of consumerism as a fundamental trait of the gay community is based in its own set of myths and stereotypes, which Nes also subverts. In the final two-page spread, he links gay and prison subcultures to the world of fashion in a pair of photographs that are remarkably at odds with any visual rhetoric meant to promote consumerism. On one page, a young man is being subdued and handcuffed against a metal grid by two men in white shirts (cat. 17). Strong purple lighting emphasizes the metal grid and creates extreme visual contrasts that accentuate the beautiful bone structure and features of the model. The designer “check wool trousers” indicated in the caption are barely distinguishable, disappearing into the deep shadows of the image. The vocabulary of fashion photography, with its focus on the way that clothing establishes relationships among body, gesture, identity, and consumption, is transformed by Nes into the visual language of surveillance and its articulation of restraint, control, and mastery.

The final image, the most subversive of the spread, consists of a snarling, wild-eyed Doberman, who is wearing a studded leather collar (cat. 18). This single fashion accessory gleams diamond-like against the black ground of the guard dog and the dark night. A tangle of barbed wire, lit with the same strong purple lighting as the image on the facing page, provides the only clue to the photograph’s visual setting. The signifying work in the photograph is accomplished through the fetishistic associations of the studded collar, which make explicit the affinities among fashion, sadomasochism, and sexuality. But, if the collar is a fetish, what does it stand for? Identified with the Doberman, it serves as both a literal and symbolic displacement of the prison and its control over the body. It is a powerful trope for the regime of mastery and the mechanisms by which we become complicit in our own bondage to the norms and regulations of dominant culture.

Drawn from the subculture of sadomasochism, it connects power and fashion through the language of deviant sexuality.

The kind of person who has experienced prison life, whether as a political dissident or a sexual fetishist, is usually not anyone who would be perusing the pages of *Vogue Hommes* for fashion advice. No matter how radical chic the social identities available for consumption in its pages, the magazine's success depends on its ability to reinforce the proscribed boundaries of established power that Nes's photographs deconstruct. He fissures the image of the fashionable male model, alluding to political and sexual positions that are at odds with the cultural ideology on which that image depends. The guard dog fittingly concludes the spread because it summarizes the control and mastery of bodies and identities that are implicit in fashion photography and the regimes of power it supports. Nes's images remind us that in fashion, as in social identities and political agendas, the powerful demands of others operate as a prison, seeking to constrain any who dare to envision a world outside their compulsory expectations. His photographs depict the irreconcilable gaze of the Other looking back at the incomplete, vulnerable, fragmented, and alienated self of the fashionable spectator.

## Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, [1978] (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 48.
2. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2000), 20.
3. Tim Edwards, *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity and Consumer Society* (London: Cassell, 1997), 100.
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 217.
5. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1977), 5.
6. Liz Kotz, "Aesthetics of Intimacy," in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 208.
7. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 59.
8. Daliah Karpel, "Man's Work," *Ha'aretz Magazine* (April 6, 2001), 22.
9. Conversation with Adi Nes, Toronto, Canada, September 19, 2003.
10. Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 114.
11. Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 549-60.
12. Shaun Cole, "Macho Man: Clones and the Development of a Masculine Stereotype," *Fashion Theory*, 4 (June 2000): 128.
13. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 18.

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