

The Dummies Guide to Cultural Studies

What Artists Wear, Charlie Porter (Penguin)

Well, what do you know? Apparently, you can tell a lot about a person by what they wear, work clothes are called that because they used to be clothes to work in, and casual wear is called that because it appears casual in opposition to formal wear. Formal wear is patriarchal and reeks of power, blacks and queers often wear different clothes as a sign of resistance to racism and homophobia. Oh, and sometimes artists wear the paint-splattered or dirty clothes they work in outside their studios. Some artists even slob around in clothes they are comfortable in.

Sadly, this is pretty much the contents of Charlie Porter's new book. He clearly loves fashion and art, and likes showing the reader pictures of artists dressed-up or dressed-down alongside his textual profundities, the likes of which I have summarised above. There is little critique here, so it is left to cynics like me to wonder why anyone would wear a self-imposed uniform (the same brands of clothing and sneakers every day), question spending vast sums of money on clothes that look like everybody else's, or engage with ideas of consumerism and commodification.

Surely, part of growing up is realising you can wear what you want when you want, and that what you wear sometimes has repercussions? Most people have found the kind of clothes they are comfortable in for everyday wear and choose whether or not to engage with the dress codes and expectations of funerals, weddings, exhibition openings, dances, clubs, the workplace etc. Most people also have to deal with budgetary restrictions, availability, their body shape, and all the other things most of us navigate daily.

But it's pretty obvious these are first world problems and there might be better things to do than prioritise fashion? Actually, most of us get up, pull some clothes on and get on with our lives. Deconstructing Andy Warhol's denims, Agnes Martin's quilted work clothes or Jean-Michel Basquiat's layered-up jumpers doesn't really get us anywhere. It especially doesn't tell us anything about the art they made, or tell us anything new about how or why we live. What do artists wear? Actually, pretty much what everyone else wears. Which I think we could have worked out for ourselves.

Rupert Loydell