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Fashion Meets Art

Cabaret and performance are back in style, from the radical-chic ensemble Citizens Band to Mother Inc.'s übersexy and subversive disco rapping. *Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome!* By Sarah Bailey

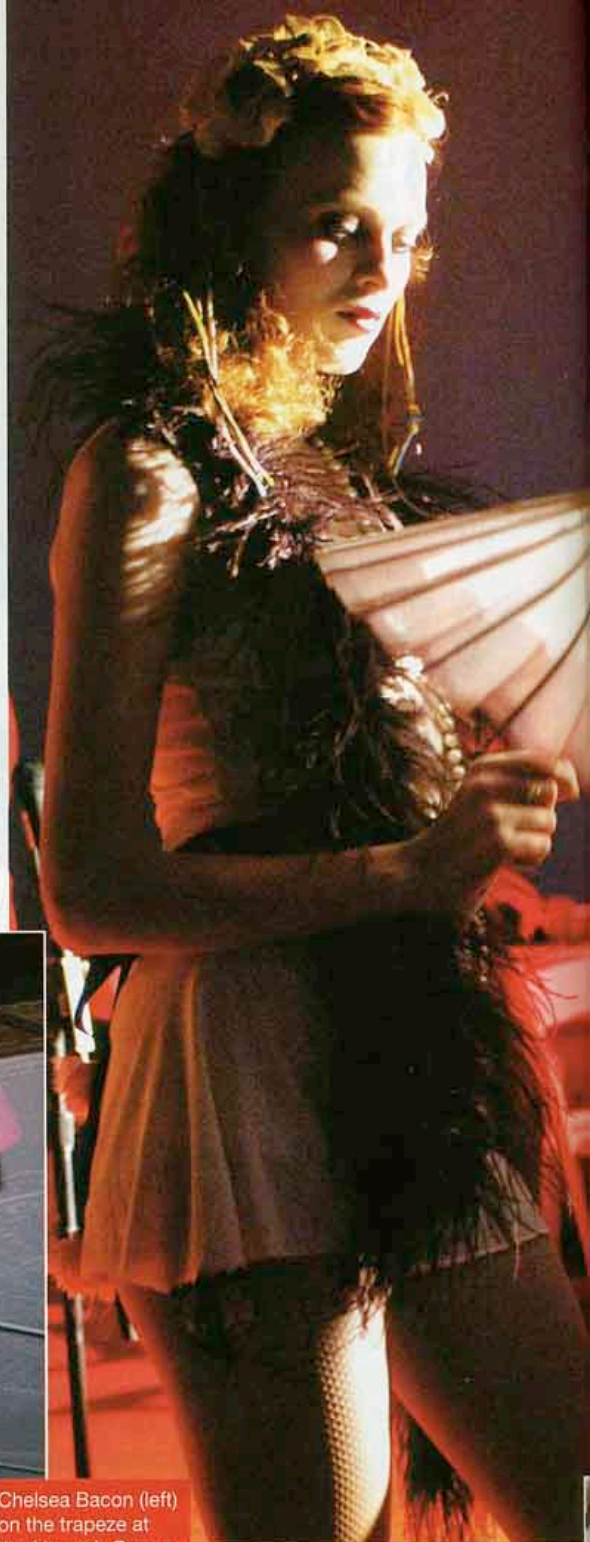
News that Karen Elson had married her sweetie, Jack White of the White Stripes, in the Amazon basin, just four days before Elson and her cohorts in the Citizens Band were booked to serenade Alber Elbaz at a surprise party for the designer, prompted various reactions in the *Bazaar* offices. On a practical note, would the new Mrs. Jack White make it back from deepest Brazil for rehearsals? (She did.) And taking a fashion historian's long view: The union of the flame-haired British model and the mysterious, alabaster-skinned rocker chimed like a particularly perfect symbol of the thrilling marriage of fashion, art and performance that is currently crackling like electricity through the cultural zeitgeist.

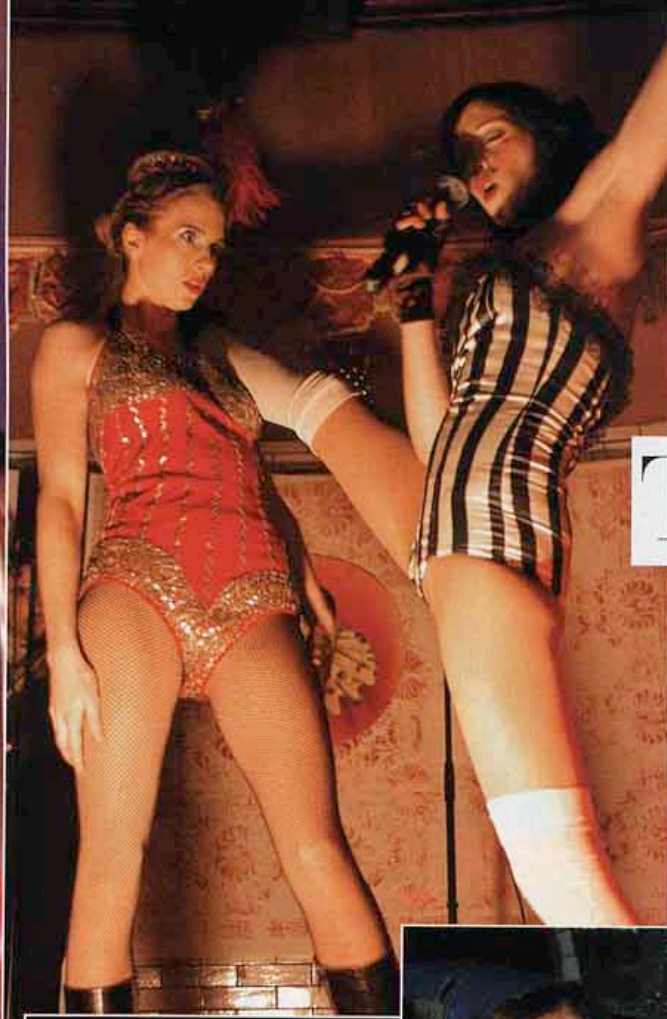
Cabaret and performance were a constant refrain in the Fall 2005 collections. At Luella, the Raveonettes' live power



Chelsea Bacon (left) on the trapeze at the *Harper's Bazaar* cabaret for Alber Elbaz; Karen Elson (right) performing at Deitch Projects

guitars accompanied the models' proper-lady strutting. Dita Von Teese, burlesque superstar, poster girl to corsetiere Mr. Pearl and the future Mrs. Marilyn Manson, created a frisson in many a front row, even walking the runway for Giambattista Valli. Far more revolutionary, however, was the arch postfeminist rap of Mother Inc. (a.k.a. art provocateur Yvonne Force Villareal and her partner-in-rhyme, photographer Sandra Hamburg), which accompanied *Imitation of Christ's* presentation in New York. Sample wicked lyric: "Never too rich, never too skinny/It's our obsession to be mini." Meanwhile, in Downtown Manhattan, the Citizens Band, a radical, carnivalesque





cabaret troupe of artists, filmmakers and contortionists—and the aforementioned copper-topped supermodel—played elaborate gigs at the Maritime Hotel and the SoHo gallery Deitch Projects.

“You have periods of fertile cross influence between art and fashion,” says gallerist Jeffrey Deitch, who represents the Citizens Band. “The 1920s, the 1960s, the early ’80s—and right now we are in one, too. Art and fashion have found each other again.”

The Citizens Band

I’ve wanted to do something like this for years,” says Sarah Sophie Flicker—filmmaker, dancer, actor (she recently added trapeze skills to her résumé)—of the formation of the Citizens Band. Galvanized by Bush’s reelection, the Citizens Band, like avant-garde and Weimar cabaret troupes of yore, believes that in politically questionable times, it is important for artists to “say something about something.”

“It was October 14, 2004—I remember it well,” says Adam Dugas, singer, performer and boyfriend of electropop band Fischerspooner’s Casey Spooner. “I was having these salons in Williamsburg....”

“Karen Elson came and sang,” continues Flicker, laughing, “and we couldn’t get her off the stage.”

Since that first, somewhat ad hoc Citizens Band performance, the ever-changing lineup—including Maggie Gyllenhaal, Melissa Auf der Maur (of Smashing Pumpkins renown), Rain Phoenix and trapeze artist Chelsea Bacon—performed *WhatsHisName*, a show about war, at the Maritime Hotel in January. At Deitch Projects in April, the band unveiled *Je T’Aime, Scumbag*, a bawdy, ambitious ensemble romp about love and loss, all played out on a seedy bordello set by David LaChapelle. The overall effect: a little bit Brechtian agitprop, a touch Warholian Factory, with a sprinkling of Baz Luhrmann’s *La Bohème*

and a circus sideshow stirred in. Next up, the band plans to tackle medicine. Ah, yes, and world religion.

“What we’re doing is different from other cabaret, which always has this campy, ironic edge where emotions are kind of cut off and no one believes you’re serious even if you are,” says Dugas. Certainly a compelling part of watching a Citizens Band performance is the rawness and vulnerability of watching people you may recognize doing things you’ve never seen them do before.

“We’re putting ourselves on the line,” agrees Elson, who in *Je T’Aime, Scumbag* sings the Velvet Underground’s “Candy Says” in a seashell-pure voice as Flicker performs a delicate air ballet, hanging upside down from a trapeze.

“The fact that I’m a model—and a model doing anything always makes people’s eyes roll—I’ve always been a bit shy of actually loving something [singing],” Elson adds. “Meeting these guys changed all of that. There’s no one saying, ‘You can’t.’ The cabaret really is the most inspiring thing I’ve ever done. It has taken my imagination into a whole other realm.” >



Clockwise from top: The Citizens limber up in song; Maggie Gyllenhaal with Sarah Sophie Flicker; the band gone wild at New York’s Maritime Hotel in January; Adam Dugas crooning at the Deitch Projects show in SoHo



EM CRAIG/ELI KEITH WIDYOLAR; SAGHA BEZZUBOV; KETH WIDYOLAR

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KETH WIDYOLAR; MARGARET MCELROY

Mother Inc.

They performed at artist Jeff Koons' 50th birthday earlier this year and had their lyrics literally woven into Tuleh's spring collection. Their superluxe stage wardrobe of Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci gowns and Fendi furs is stratospheres beyond the blingiest threads of hip-hop royalty. And yet Mother Inc.'s lyrics would make your typical rapper wince: breast pumps, diet culture, plastic surgery and—gasp!—fashion crises (the latter served up with lashings of satirical party girl self-loathing): "Will I be reduced to a joke on Page Six?/Or maintain my status and always be IT?"

Long before she became a New York art-world boldface—famous inter alia for producing the legendary Vanessa Beecroft girls-in-Gucci-bikinis artwork at the Guggenheim Museum and enabling artist Rudolf Stingel to swathe Grand Central Terminal's Vanderbilt Hall in gloriously floral carpet—Yvonne Force Villareal met Sandra Hamburg at the Rhode Island School of Design. "Every other night, [we] partied à la Gatsby," quotes Villareal from a Mother Inc. lyric.

Today, in her TriBeCa loft, surrounded by Lisa Yuskavage paintings and a flashing neon dollar sign by British artists Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Villareal (in a black fleece catsuit and Dior fur clogs) and Hamburg (eight and a half months pregnant with her second child and wearing white '50s overalls) are allowing a Mother Inc. rehearsal to be interrupted by Villareal's two-year-old son, Leopold Villareal IV ("Cuatro").

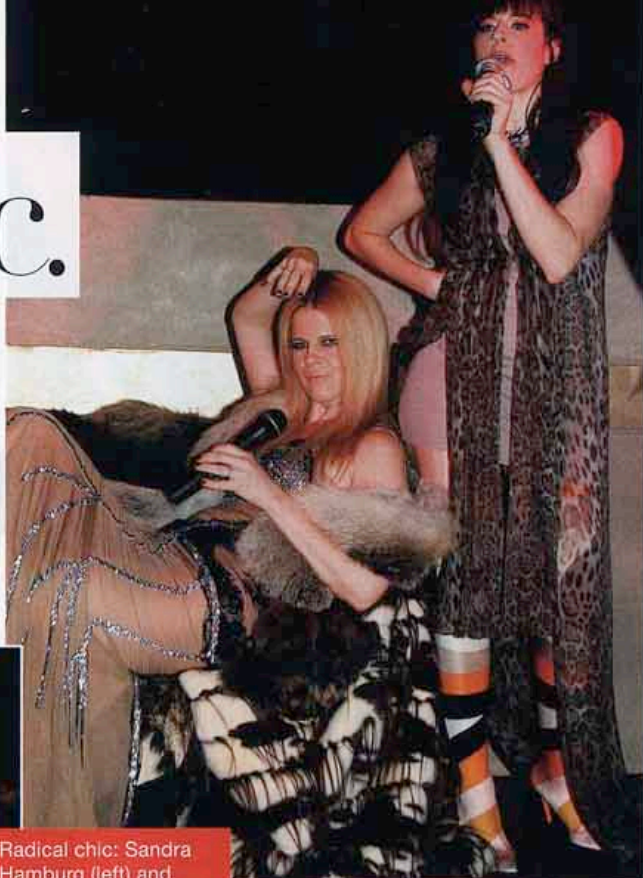
I always thought it would be a great thing to have a band called Mother," explains Hamburg. "And somehow the incorporation of motherhood was much more contemporary, much bigger."

"We also love the idea of *mother* being such a tough word," adds Villareal, smiling, "with so many different connotations."

The duo's first song, a scatological ditty entitled "Megacolon," was originally composed one RISD morning after. "We kept the song alive for a long time, singing it a cappella to our friends," says Hamburg. Then, in 2001, while producing a "three-night extravaganza" for Fischerspooner in L.A., Villareal gave a rendition of her college gross-out composition. Fischerspooner were so enamored, they offered to record the track and invited Villareal



Radical chic: Sandra Hamburg (left) and Yvonne Force Villareal at fashion patron Fendi's launch of their CD (left); the duo flaunt their archly sophisticated style



"We love the idea of *mother* being such a tough word, with so many connotations"

and Hamburg to perform it onstage with them at Irving Plaza. Hamburg, just three weeks away from giving birth to her first child, chose a Paco Rabanne disc dress for the occasion, adapting it by removing the pieces that covered her pregnant bump. "A guy came up to me afterward and asked me if I was wearing a fake belly," she says, rolling her eyes.

This in-your-face attitude toward fertility, body shape and provocative dressing is the DNA of Mother Inc.'s eponymous first album, launched in February with true fashion brouhaha and a full set by the ladies, at a party

hosted by the band's patron, Fendi.

Stylistically, Mother Inc. couldn't look or sound more different from the Citizens Band: All 1980s synthetic slickness, the mothers rap—or rather speak—their lyrics with a bored, sexy roboticism. What they share with the raggy-trousered contortionists of the Citizens Band, though, is a radical approach to performance. In an art gallery? A fashion show? Why not? "Both bands expand the idea of what an artist can be," says Deitch. "Both have a sense of fun, a sense of humor. With both bands, the work is experiential. It's an event, like an art performance."

"It comes totally from the heart," says Villareal. "We're doing it as we're maturing and having our own careers and family lives. It's a blast, a personal journey and a radically fun thing to do." And is there a goal, an ultimate Mother Inc. ambition? "Oprah. She's definitely a Mother Inc. She is a mother to hundreds and thousands of children in South Africa. She is an amazing woman, and if we could perform on her show, that would be ..." Villareal looks down at her Dior fur clog. "That would be divine." ■