

PHOTOSHOP OF HORRORS

Women Protest Ralph Lauren's Ridiculous Photoshop

Yesterday, around 30 protesters held a rally outside Ralph Lauren's NYC flagship to demand that the company stop using images of models who've been Photoshopped into unreality for its advertisements. Protest organizers said they even envision a legislative solution.

Manhattan was covered in a fresh layer of snow yesterday, and the protesters chanted and marched in a circle on East 72nd Street and Madison Avenue, a corner where the foot traffic was otherwise comprised of holiday shoppers and parents towing kids through the drifts on sleds. Sonia Ossorio, of the National Organization for Women's New York chapter, which organized the protest, said that the date was chosen with the holiday shopping season in mind. And although Ralph Lauren was targeted **because of its recent spate of disgustingly over-Photoshopped advertisements**, not to mention **the revelation that the company terminated model Filippa Hamilton's multi-year contract because, at 5'9" and 120 lbs, she had become "too fat" for its tastes**, the message is really for all fashion companies. "We'd like retailers to realize that their customer base is women," Ossorio told me. "It's like, who do they think they are? Making women feel less sexy and less beautiful than we are. Why do they think

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they have the right to do that? And it's so unfortunate. Look at how it impacts the entire world, and how we feel about ourselves." Then Ossorio jumped over a snowbank to talk to two policemen who'd pulled up in a cruiser. "I'm the organizer if you have any questions!" she shouted. The cops stayed parked on the corner for the rest of the hour-long protest, and flipped through Sunday's *Post*.

The protesters chanted slogans like "Ralph Lauren, make no mistake/Your advertisements are a fake," and the somewhat less rhythmic "Healthy women and girls instead/Of sticks who can't support



their heads." Popular signs included Filippa Hamilton's much-maligned and terribly Photoshopped ad:

As well as this disturbing image of Magdalena Frackowiak and a model whom we think is Charlotte di Calypso Valentina Zelyaeva, from spring of this year:



One protester, an older woman in a pair of pretty awesome black leather motorcycle boots, waggled her placard at a woman in a fur coat carrying a silver Givenchy bag as she was exiting the Ralph Lauren store. When Anna Holmes, who took this picture of the protest, started to take out a cigarette, the woman in the boots came charging over. "That's worse than being anorexic!" she said. (There is no moral authority like that of the former smoker; Anna put the pack back in her purse.) Turns out that Hilda, who didn't give her last name, has been active in protesting various causes — against the Vietnam war; for the civil rights movement; against the invasion of Iraq — since the '60s. "I have seen girls suffering from anorexia," said Hilda. "It is not a pleasant thing to see." Her gold earrings swung a little as she shook her head.

Carol Bloom, who works at the [Women's Therapy Centre Institute](#), said she has counseled women with eating disorders. Bloom said she is particularly dismayed at the ways in which even as women have made great advances in claiming our rights over the last 40 years, the wider culture has pushed us to scrutinize — and find fault with — our bodies to an unprecedented degree. (Every month, it seems like *Vogue* has some new body part — the armpit, the neck, the lower abdomen — to obsess over, and a range of costly new cosmetic products and procedures to

"fix" the offending bit of anatomy.) "More and more, you hear these horrible statistics about little girls dieting at earlier and earlier ages," said Bloom. "If you ask a young girl, 'What's the single most important thing in life?' a lot of them say 'Being attractive.'" Dieting to size down to a female ideal (not to mention an ideal which has been manipulated extensively with programs like Photoshop) requires women to "interfere with the most basic, natural form of good health, which is feeding yourself...And body dissatisfaction is the single most relevant cause, or predictor, for an eating disorder. And for a shitty life, frankly."

Filmmaker Darryl Roberts had been slated to speak at the protest, but his plane was delayed because of the winter storm. Roberts, [you may remember, made the documentary *America The Beautiful*, which touched on the story of the model Gerren Taylor](#). Taylor was just 13 when she walked for Marc by Marc Jacobs, Tommy Hilfiger, and Catherine Malandrino, among more than a dozen other top designers. She was also the first black model to be in a Marc by Marc Jacobs campaign. Nonetheless, by the time she was 15 — and had grown to her full 6' height — she was called "obese" by her Paris agency because she had a hip size of 38".

The only man protesting, NOW New York's Arthur Lundquist, said he was there because he's sick of seeing the women in his life affected by the barrage of media imagery of "perfect" (and artificially perfected) bodies. "Real women have curves," he said.

I had noticed a woman who'd been standing around outside the Ralph Lauren store, watching the protest since it started. When I asked her what she thought of the whole production, as a bystander, she backed away from me and went down the street, which I thought was kinda weird. Turns out she worked for the Ralph Lauren store: she came back waving a Blackberry and telling me to call Ralph Lauren's corporate communications number. Then she went back down the block to watch the protest from a doorway.

A man walked by with two very young daughters, carrying a sled and coming from the direction of Central Park. "They're right, see," he said to his kids, who were pointing at the protesters. "The pictures of the women make them look too thin. And that's not pretty."

Ossorio said that NOW New York is trying to spearhead efforts to get legislation passed in the United States that would require all images that have been manipulated in post-production to carry disclaimers, which she likened to the disclaimers on tobacco that point out that the advertised product is harmful. Such laws are reportedly [under consideration in France, and have been discussed in the U.K.](#) "When I saw that, I thought, 'That's what we've gotta try here,'" said Ossorio. "And I don't see why it can't be done."

The only problem, of course, is that literally every picture on every page of every magazine has been altered in post-production — sometimes extensively, sometimes only a little, to correct lighting errors or even out shading. Products, people, landscapes: they all get changed. To give you an idea of how pervasive retouching is, take this example, furnished by one of Ralph Lauren's photographers. [Brian Dilg has both the raw and the final, retouched images of a Polo Ralph Lauren children's ad posted on his personal site](#). The number of alterations to the little

girl's body — and she looks like she must be, what, 8? — and the background is astonishing. Not only did Dilg clone and extend the French doors in the background of the shot, but he visibly slimmed the child model's waist and hips, and made her long-sleeved shirt short-sleeved by grafting on a re-sized shot of an adult woman's arms. "I was very proud of how I made the lean, muscular adult's arms plump to match the girl's body type," writes Dilg, "but Polo asked to have them made skinny, just as anorexic as adult models."

If every page of every magazine had to carry a disclaimer, would women pay these images any less heed, or would the standard-issue reminder of the photograph's unreality become like so much white noise? The manipulation of photographs is as old as photography — what used to be achieved with darkroom techniques, airbrushing, dodging and burning, or negative-splicing, is now achieved, in much less time, with Photoshop tools. The prevalence of these images, and the attendant rise in our media consumption, might be wreaking havoc on our mental and physical health. (Studies show that womens' self-esteem drops after reading women's magazines.) But what can we do about it? Protesting is one answer. (And so is calling out the companies behind the worst kinds of images.) Is changing the law another?