

Dress For Stress: Wearable Technology and the Social Body^[1]

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This essay considers the work of artists, designers, and activists who, since the 1990s, have worked with body covering as survival mechanism and social tool. Individually or within collectives, they call their work art, design, or activism; or all three. The result is a "body of records" of technological, biological, and performable wearables that have not received the attention they deserve, either as art or design, or as vehicles for ideas about threats to species survival and collective experience.

For example, we can consider wearable artworks in the form of survival attire embedded in localized performative events concerned with social connection under adverse circumstances. Lucy Orta is prominent among such practitioners, who formulate clothing the body as critical, social, and ethical practice within an ambient "culture of fear."



Lucy Orta
Nexus Architecture X 50:
Intervention Köln, 2001

I call such work "critical garment discourse" (abbreviated as CGD), a term I propose to mean work in the form of fashion or clothing that concerns not just the

body, but notions of dress--and dress, not just as historically viewed or normatively considered, but as experienced, situated and located, and empowered as a medium capable of significant commentary.

Is there a new way to think about aesthetic practice here? Typically, fashion and dress have been trivialized as objects of scholarship. However, increasing numbers of researchers are studying garment history and theory, and some argue, as philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky does, that, far from being materialistic incentives for the growth of market economies, notions about what we put on our bodies are involved in the very infrastructure of democratic societies. He writes:

We have reached the era of *consummate fashion*, the extension of the fashion process to broader and broader spheres of collective life. Fashion is not so much a particular peripheral sector, now, as a general form at work in society as a whole. Everyone is more or less immersed in fashion, more or less everywhere . . . [2]

For Lipovetsky this is not a bad thing: fashion--or, more broadly, dress--is not a commercial but a quintessential element in the life of individuals functioning in societies. If the discourse of dress is as important as that to our social existence, one might ask, how does it mediate conditions of stress? In the future, what may pass for clothes, or extend beyond them, may be driven not just by fear of death (fashion's primal force, according to Walter Benjamin, writing of the rise of modern fashion in the 19th century), but now of political eradication, or even species annihilation.[3] This essay represents the beginning of my own research; it is exploratory rather than conclusive, so I will touch on a number of different phenomena. I will not consider gender differences in this presentation; rather, I will discuss aspects of dress that apply across genders.

Extreme environmental conditions constitute one form of stress that has long influenced the discourse of dress, and not just in the military-industrial complex where we have been electrically heating up and cooling down clothing for a hundred years. Stylish heated coats appeared on runways in the 1930s, and today new garments proposed for extreme environments, like the moon or Mars, are becoming a lot more fashionable. Further, designers like Mike Webb in the 1960s, or artists like Orta, later, have produced inven-

tively armored or wired up attire that protects against inclement circumstances, and architectural clothing that forms nomadic lodging. Current trends project visions of mobile populations that can move out and hunker down, and fears of unpredictable environmental and political challenges that keep populations on the run. This clothing discourse is a function of fluid subjectivities.

Numerous authors have portrayed the notion of post-modern selfhood under adverse circumstances as an interactive, ongoing process, much along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of Nomadology, the deterritorializing and reterritorializing cycle of the body-without-organs engaged in multiple social entanglements and lines of flight.[4] Relevant also is Bruno Latour's definition of society, "not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling." [5] Recently, renewed interest in behavioral, corporeal, and subjective processes has helped generate wearables that multiply and perform embodied powers and protect nomadic, homeless bodies in action.

CGD differs from commercial trends such as eco-fashion. I refer to the conspicuous planet-consciousness of the fashion industry in the past few years. Linda Loudermilk's "eco-luxury" line, for example, uses renewable resources--bamboo and soda bottles--and crafts them into high-end, luxury fabrics. Such work is marketed via slick trademarks, ignoring the inherent contradiction between luxury and global awareness. And it is a common confusion.

British handbag designer Anya Hindmarch attempted to project an environmentally conscious image by producing a cheap "designer" canvas grocery bag to call attention to those petroleum based plastic versions clogging up landfills. However, fashionistas waited in long lines to purchase the designer's bags and celebrities were photographed using them as purses. They quickly sold out in Europe and the US and product launches in Asia were cancelled, as the company says, out of "concerns for customers' safety." [6]



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By contrast, Lucy Orta was also trained in fashion, and, in response to the First Gulf War, she began to work outside the studio, to investigate how, in the words of relationalist aesthetician Nicolas Bourriaud, "art was about working well within social reality, not just about finding a means of representing reality." [7] She began piecing outfits together at the Salvation Army which were shown in the streets on the outskirts of Paris during Fashion Week, positioned in direct counterpoint to that dominant institution associated with beauty, wealth, and privilege. Then, Orta created *Refuge Wear*. Though her collectivist garb has hung bodyless, as art works in museums and galleries, more often it has been worn, and to greater effect, on bodies in motion, in social interventions around the globe.



Left: Lucy Orta, *Refuge Wear*, early 1990s



Right: Dealing with the Virus, from *X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998)

Orta's pieces succeed not because their imagery is so new, but rather because they project multivalent references to known hazardous situations. The garment references for Orta's pieces are everywhere from space and environmental suits to hazmat and "clean room" attire. We are familiar with the type from mass media--cinema and television scifi--from the *Star Trek* EV suits of the 1960s to the quarantine suits crucial to the plots of the *X-Files*.

I wonder if Orta fulfills Foucault's notion of a "founder of discursivity"--someone who has begun a new domain of thought (and, in this case, art practice) enabling new language and further contributions.[8] The discourse here is characterized by its deployment of clothing as worn, as concept, process, and visual aesthetic. It encompasses not just the body, but its performability, and the way dress participates in networked collectivity--in Okwui Enwezor's sense: "[the networked art collective] tends to emphasize a flexible, nonpermanent course of affiliation, privileging collaboration on a project basis more than on a permanent alliance." [9] Progeny of Orta's work include projects like Moreno Ferrari/C.P. Company's *Parka/Air Mattress*, Kosuka Tsumura's *Final Home 44-Pocket Parka*, and Derek Ryden's *Blizzard Survival Bag*, and all in various ways extend the discourse.

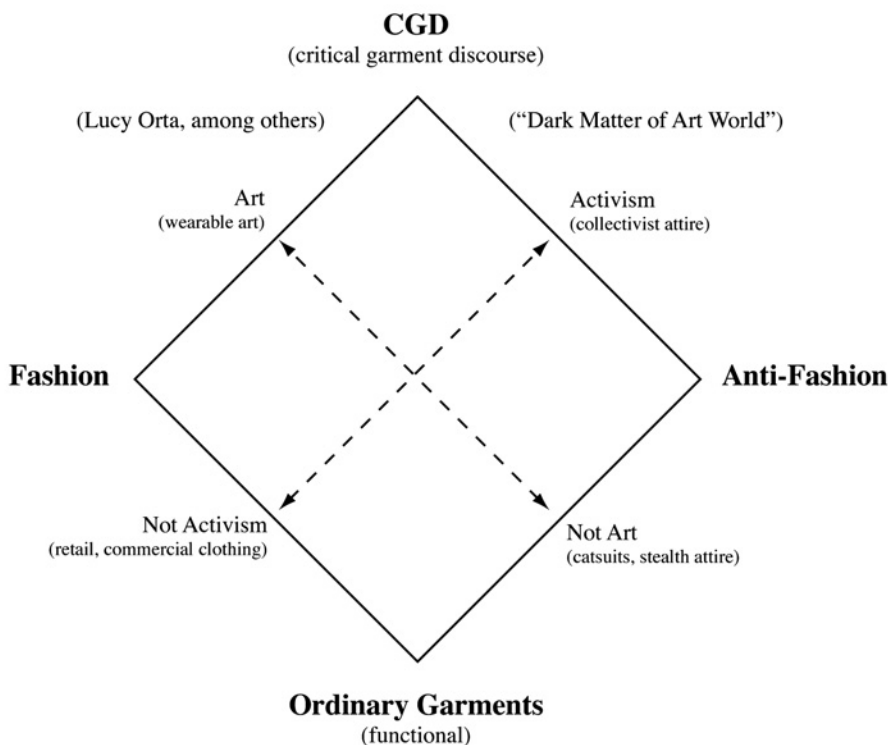
But in fact Orta's hooded coverall-as-intervention is not unique; it compares with projects created by many activist art collectives. Thinking about wearables routinely involves criss-crossing genres from couture to clothing as daily performance and more. CGD is per-

haps another "expanded field" (to use Rosalind Krauss's term) for the 1990s and 2000s--some of it is art, some activism, some both, some neither.[10] Orta's work would locate the extreme "art" parameter of this system. Much of the rest would be what Gregory Sholette has termed the "Dark Matter of the Art World"--work so embedded in reality that is off the art radar.[11]



Lucy Orta, *Refuge Wear-City Intervention*, 2001

Can ... (the) control of emotional, narrative content of sound enhance the understanding of abstract information?



The realm of CDG includes garment-based political activities occasioned by regional threats: terrorism, factional struggles, and military aggression, for example, projects by the Barcelona collective Las Agencias, or Italy's Yabasta and Tute Bianche (White Overalls or White Monkeys). "If, as Foucault wrote, the body is the object of the power's micro-physics, if all social and political control exercises its mastery of the body, if the market economy has converted

Author's Diagram of
Garment Art Activism System

the body into merchandise, the 'white monkeys' [Tute Bianche] have called for a 'rebellion of bodies' against world power," reflects Sergio Zulin, one of the organizers of that group.[12] Tute Bianche in action wear hazmat attire--white, as opposed to the police's black riot suits--and pad themselves to keep their bodies safe.



Tute Bianche (*Disobedienti*), Prague, 2000

Alan Sekula distinguishes this new type of mass mobilization from the street theater of the 1970s in three ways: "1. Unified opposition to the global diffusion of a largely intangible corporate capitalism; 2. the . . . carnivalesque nature of much of this protest; and 3. [which I emphasize] a connection between actual bodies in space and the disembodied realm of cyber space." [13] Gregory Sholette adds a fourth characteristic, the elevated visibility of creative forms of expression. And dress elevates, and further articulates and aestheticizes, such visibility. An example is Las Agencias' *Prêt À Revolter* (a play on *prêt à porter*), a line of colorful coveralls with huge hidden pockets for protesters' gear.



Las Agencias, *Prêt À Revolter*, 2002, for the World Economic Forum Protests

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Though simpler and more widely worn, Vexed Generation's famous hooded jackets of the 1990s served as commentary on surveillance in the UK. Then the Center for Practical Magic recast the form as their *Ultimate Jacket*, 2003, in an art context.[14] The theme of the zip-up suit or jacket with hood or transformable neck cowl may be a prime form for art/dress discourse of the past two decades.



Vexed Generation Jacket, 1990s

Ralph Borland, *Suited for Subversion*, 2002, nylon reinforced PVC, padding, speaker, pulse reader, circuitry

Creatively deployed protective garments continue to function as social discourse, as exemplified by a series of projects done at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem in 2003--for example, Ralph Borland's *Suited for Subversion*, which foregrounds Sekula's notion of carnival, and the activist as clown within a media circus.[15] The image of the protectively garbed artist-clown is reiterated by The Yes Men in their *Halliburton SurvivaBall* (2006), which is like a satirical corporate version of Orta's *Refuge Wear*.

Biological threats like pandemics inspired tremendous creativity in the area of surgical and other types of protective masks.[16] Studio Samira Boon's "Get Well

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Lancman, and Maurizio Galante's *Safe Being: Bullet Resistant Shirt*--all reference the incursion of the violent into the everyday.

CGD also encompasses the symbolically wearable. The Tissue Culture + Art Project in the SymbioticA Art and Science Collaborative Research Lab at the University of Western Australia takes issue with fashionable use of animal skins and furs. There, little garments are lab-grown out of immortalized cell lines which are cultured and form a layer of live tissue supported by a biodegradable polymer matrix. While not actually wearable--yet--these "semi-living" mini-garments explore "notions

The Yes Men, *Halliburton SurivaBall*, 2006, shown at the Catastrophic Loss Conference at the Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island, Florida

Soon" masks offer protection but also counteract the isolating effects of disease. The masks create their own comic, playful space between caretaker and sick, as stated on the designer's website: "Products we make are not seen as final and fixed, but are adaptable according to circumstance. This flexibility creates an active relationship between user and object." [17] Other practitioners of critical wearables concentrate on responsive design in terms, not of carnival, but of terror and the need for body security within unstable ambiances. Whiton and Nugent's *No Contact Jacket*, which delivers an electric shock to an attacker; Gayla Rosenfeld's chain mail headscarf; or Ark Levy, Tal

relating to human conduct with other living systems, or to the Other," where the Other encompasses a fluid, mobile notion of ourselves. [18] Lipovetsky links the growth of ethical themes in society (like animal rights or fair labor practices) to the social discourse of democracy that has expanded in part via the ability of dress to articulate complex cultural circumstances and (hopefully) help negotiate differences. [19]

These days, I wonder where CGD is going. In the last few years, new incidents of wardrobed collectivity are decreasing, while--and this may or may not be linked--virtual connectivity within MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) or MUVES

Avatars for the Band Duran Duran, *Second Life* Screenshot from <http://mmorpg.qj.net/> retrieved September 24, 2007



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(Multi-User Virtual Environments), which involve expressive avatar appearance and attire, is soaring. Major examples like *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* (where dress is a major concern) experience tens of thousands of players at once, and count members in the millions. Dressing and interacting as avatars in virtual worlds reflect the interplay and negotiation we make as processual subjects involved in social interaction, but, at present, as recently noted by Kathy Cleland, notions of virtual dress are largely stereotypical, and follow the ideals of bodies and clothing circulating in the mass media.[20] And theorists of embodied subjectivity, like Joanne Entwistle, remind us that the dressed body is a situated subjective practice and we must consider not only how dress is represented, but how it is experienced on real moving bodies within high-risk (i.e. real, not virtual) social environments.[21]

So, under ultimate conditions, will we be dressing our own bodies, or imagined ones? Some argue that, in a widespread cataclysmic event, the Internet will be unsustainable. But, setting that possibility aside, if we encase ourselves in virtual cocoons that sacrifice phenomenological, body-based communication, will our "wearables" migrate to virtual "be-ables," self-styled avatars that are bodies-without-organs within what are, in the end, corporately-owned environments (which these games are)? Will body-based concepts of self and social interaction go the way of the dinosaur? I think not, and that Sekula and Cleland are right. Actual notions about bodies and dress in real space are needed to support meaning for avatar phenomena in cyberspace. But only time will tell.

References

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