

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

HOWARDENA PINDELL

FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER

CHRISTINA RAMBERG

A WOMAN OF INORDINATE STRENGTH



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CRISIS AND CHILL

Tobias Madison on “The Overworked Body”

THIS PAST FALL THE EXHIBITION “The Overworked Body: An Anthology of 2000s Dress” conceived by curator and writer Matthew Linde and organized with Saim Demircan and David Lieske, took place at two New York Chinatown spaces: Ludlow 38, where Demircan is a curatorial resident, and Mathew Gallery, which Lieske owns. Evoking “Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton,” a germinal 1971 exhibition curated by the photographer and designer for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Linde’s show privileged connoisseurship over precise cataloguing as he tracked a decade characterized by the galactic ascent of the megabrand, fast-fashion proliferation, and high-street collaborations with formerly exclusive designers. Digital distribution of images and wares alike dovetailed with new technologies of the body, embodied most prominently by the era’s It Girls—from Paris Hilton to Alexa Chung—and trickling down to everybody else via analogous shifts in labor conditions such as the rise of the gig economy. In the decade since, to be present has meant to be accessible, with any attempt at absence negated by a compulsory online existence or its less glamorous twin, the surveillance video. As overpresent, overphotographed, and overworked bodies gear up for their public appearances, garments need to be designed to meet the upcoming decade’s needs—for versatility, adaptability, plurality, and, if so possible, anonymity or invisibility.

What the exhibition proposed was a reconsideration of the fashion of the aughts—a period bookended on one end by 9/11 and on the other by the 2008 financial meltdown—as a form of crisis management, addressing a human figure subject to constant alteration and compromise. To cite just a few examples, the detachable skirt of a cotton shirt by Lutz Huelle from autumn/winter 2002 had twice as many hooks as eyeholes, making it hang awkwardly no matter how one wore it. A dull trench coat (Huelle again; from Spring/Summer 2001) that one might wear to the office featured shoulders that could be zipped down, allowing the garment to collapse into an after-work cocktail dress. The horny slits and straps on Helmut Lang garments promoted the idea of the body as a living currency in the new electronic wasteland.

A transparent nylon jacket from 2000 by the Japanese label Final Home—founded by Kosuke Tsumura to make flexible survival clothing for scenarios including a nuclear fallout—could be stuffed with garbage or other materials to provide warmth and/or enhance appearances. The owner could even pencil in his or her information on a tag sewn on the outside: The garment doubles as a body bag. Early-aughts fashion liked its tags and labels, to say nothing of its ideology, sewn and



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shown inside out. Perhaps the most striking form an external tag took was the silver cocktail dress attached as a necklace to a black overcoat from Wendy&Jim’s autumn/winter 2001 collection, which channeled the low-key glamour of the exhibition as a whole.

Among a selection of videos documenting fashion shows and presentations was one featuring Carol Christian Poell’s spring/summer 2004 men’s collection “Mainstream—Downstream,” in which male models floated like corpses down the Naviglio Grande canal in Milan in 2003. *Best Before 16/10/00* is a short sequence of CCTV-quality footage from Poell’s 2000 collection presentation, consisting only of models in clothes resembling body bags laid out on gurneys, their made-up feet protruding. By turns questioning longevity in fashion and the distribution methods of the industry, the video and its grainy interlaced lines, typical of the amateur video medium the footage was shot in, seem to scan the inert bodies as if for hidden truths. Even the Raf Simons pieces from the designer’s autumn/winter 2001 collection, patched up with subcultural lingo, popped up in this show like an aerial view of a graveyard of beliefs and esoteric convictions. The private becomes public, and in cyclical trends the dead are forced back to life. Or is it the other way around?

When gay porn star François Sagat ends up with a bouquet of flowers stuffed in his anus, or his penis stuck in the exhaust pipe of a Renault Twingo—as he does in images that appear in the calendar produced for Bernhard Willhelm’s spring/summer 2008 collection—he perfectly embodies the confusing comedy of errors characteristic of pleasure-seeking in the new millennium. Linde’s rich playlist for an era channeled the now-vintage subjectivity of what it meant to be a delirious body in the 2000s, hallucinating the present and oneself. A MiniDV tape jammed into an orifice could also be an accessory.

The exhibition’s metaphysics of adaptation, change, and death are perhaps best summed up in a video documenting Hussein Chalayan’s spring/summer 2007 runway show: A spinning, numberless infinity clock transported the audience straight into the afterlife. Models wore intricate constructions of boning and bubbles, moving down the catwalk like ghosts to the sounds of warfare and ritualistic clapping. At one point they stopped, and robotic mechanisms hidden within the clothes lifted skirts and opened blouses. Models, like the rest of us, no longer pull off looks. They are worn by clothing, used by a superstructure that has dressed them, and worked over by the images that mediate this structure. If the body is always equally a digitized specter and an organic object, how does one *object* with it? □

TOBIAS MADISON IS AN ARTIST LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY.