

Dress Code

By Dr. Martina Corgnati

In 1996, the art critic Germano Celant committed the resources of the city of Florence in a large Biennial, whose title was Time and Fashion, which aim was not only to compare but, for the first time, to involve art and fashion in the same projectuality, treating the two dimensions in exactly the same way as creative entities capable and responsible to constantly articulate a thinking and an innovative synthesis about the world and contemporary reality.

The choice, quite amazing at that time, violated a deeply rooted and consistent taboo of the idealist thought, “confirmed” by the famous and oft-cited joke of one of the best fashion designers ever, Coco Chanel: “Fashion is what you like immediately, but not tomorrow, art is what you do not like right away but you’ll like tomorrow. “In other words, quoting the same Chanel, “fashion passes, style remains”. Fashion and art had always been treated, so to say, as opposite entities: ephemeral, commercial and consumerist the first one, essential, universal and tend-to-be “eternal” the second one. In short, “true” values against “fake” ones.

Celant however, in full coherence with the brilliant situation that the “Made in Italy” was going through at that moment, spoke in favor of a different dimension, both for fashion and art: by making the first down from its traditional pedestal and immersing it in a virtual space for communication and exchange of forms and values far more lively and incisive than the old fashioned museum, and offering to the second unexpected and unusual opportunities of celebration and appreciation. In essence, “contaminating” museums with works by fashion designers, from Moschino to Calvin Klein, by inviting artists to produce art works-dresses (as did, for example, Rosemarie Trockel and Jan Fabre, who presented his disturbing clothes made of beetles) and, finally, engaging artists and designers to work together in pavilions designed by four hands.

This event, which has remained a one-off, made history: from that moment it was established a kind of osmosis between fashion and art, plans and prospects

for joint discussion and joint actions, which could have affected the very nature of the “person” at a time when distinguish between “natural and artificial, between mind and body, between physical and a-physical” was and has become very difficult if not impossible.

Today, with Dress-Code, the challenge that, in his time, was taken up by Celant, is taken again and adapted to very different time and situation: This project, conceived by Amel Makkawi as an open invitation, to artists and professionals active in the Arab world and vicinity, to create an artwork in form of dress, raises once again the strategic alliance between art and fashion culture, setting it in an area of the world especially critical and sensitive to the communicative poignancy of these two signifiers together. Dress, in fact, in the Arab world or, more generally, in the Islamic world, rather than fashion, choice, freedom of expression, contamination of languages, is a word that shows ties with the tradition, with the concealment, the repression of the body - especially the female body. But “dress” in the East, far more than in the West, is a word that contains also sophisticated and complex symbolic connotations and religious affiliation, reported by styles, shapes, colors and fabrics. The East, in fact, is precisely the realm of tissue, the place - the combination of places and spaces and traditions - where tissue culture has been more and more deeply varied: among “ikat” and “suzani”, among embroidery, damask work, brocade and lace works, among precious silks and satins and cottons, and endless variations of working, textures, colors, braids and knots. The East, in short, is the realm of textile and consequently of dresses: it is also with this huge legacy that the artists who have joined this project had to confront. The realization of which has needed about a year of very careful work and accurate selection of proposals. But we must not imagine that “art work in form of dress” has resulted in the production of wearable objects that reflect the pattern of “Dress Code”. This pattern, for the participants, was simply a memory, an empty container, an elastic theme. Their works, indeed, cover all the

techniques and forms of expression: from collage to multimedia, from video to photography to installation ... to “dresses”, but not conceived to be wearable.

The protagonist of “Dress Code” are twelve: all together they cover a vast area of cultures and countries, extended from Algeria to Pakistan and from Turkey to Egypt to the Emirates, via Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. This is already in itself a meaningful result, and a sign that the project has aroused interest and that a variety of extraordinary pieces have been produced, which reflect, of course, first of all the individual creativity (they are indeed “art-works” in the full sense), but also the experience of each person, the difficulty of the daily existence, the experience of conflict, violence, but also the inspiration of beauty and, last but not least, the sexism, male-female relationship, an especially delicate topic which does not surprise to find regarded and treated with particular focus and dedication from the artists, especially the women-artists. Women -artists: as it often happens, it hits here too the happy exuberance and creativity of women artists of the Arab world, who are capable of comprehensive responses and incisive, relevant, timely, and lucid interventions. Their works focuses on sensuality and sexuality, but it also proves to be a powerful tool for introspection, for narrative and even for a declared, stinging irony.

This is the case of Naiza Khan, who presented two objects, a corset and a belt full of not too hidden references to the object which was known as “chastity-belt”. Objects “between love and war,” as she puts it: objects made of hard metal and strong, masculine fiber leather, equipped with aggressive protrusions and attractive zippers, but in any case “dresses” that evoke an armored, defended, seemingly inaccessible body, but also a body who is provocative, ambiguous and terribly sexy. Marya Kazoun has enriched her Baroque and fleshy dress of a number of existential elements that accompany, not without anguish, a woman’s life: sex, childbirth, the sprawling and almost suffocating wrapping that can characterize the relationship between mother and daughter; and finally, death and decomposition. Her dress is impregnated with moods and reminiscent of some anti-form experience, for example by Eva Hesse. Fatma Bucak has used for her dress a heavy synthetic rubber characterized by a shiny surface that reflects the

world and protects the body, placed inside as if in a kind of cocoon. The shape of this dress is typical of the one worn by the archaic Greek “Kore” (maids), covered, yes, but always provided of an individual and unique face. On the contrary, this synthetic and heavy dress denies the face – also the placement “backwards” of the dress avoids the define any connotations and even the sexual references. The dress makes us whatever, that is all, that is nobody. Nermin Hammam has used the strong emotions of the Egyptian revolution of last January, to produce a work in which references cross and multiply each other: on one hand the Iranian miniatures, a quintessential traditional artistic practice, on the other the ideal warrior, a revolutionary centaur. Camouflage overalls, schoolgirl collar, tiny feet rooted to the ground, toy soldiers suspended over a base decorated with traditional Arab patterns, in other words, an efflorescence of contradictions and at the center of it all, inevitably, a self-portrait (because it is only by ourselves, from our limited and partial point of view that we get experiences and emotions). Rachida Azdaou has woven a dress, simple in appearance, with strips of white tape, synthetic and almost transparent, marked by irregular patterns of metal wire. A dress which is thin, fragile, delicate but artificial. A sensitive suit that, supposedly, heal deep wounds. A dress unpretentious, designed as therapy for a world too hard and pressing. Samt Benyahia is presenting on this occasion two dresses made of plastic material, very “feminine” and inlaid with all the precious appearance of traditions of the desert. Her work, in general, is based on the relationship between transparency and decoration, between inlay and light. The dress, transparent, has been made solid and plastic thanks to ancient decorative shapes used all over the Arab world. Blue color on emptiness, gold on blue: the decorative forms evoke ancient traditions, rituals and timeless symbols. The dress becomes a kind of virtuosity, an exercise of lights and shadows, solid and void, inlay and transparency: totally traditional and totally original. Sumayyah Suwaidi uses the pattern chosen for Dress Code as an ideal screen for projecting a problematic relationship, yet smiling, between a double idea of the self: an intimate inner-self and a decorated, even plumed with peacock feathers outer-self. Because, the dress is also this: a diaphragm, the threshold of a

dialectic of existence. Zena Assi and Issam Barhouche have worked together: their intervention consists of two dresses, very different from each other, the first dedicated to the city of Beirut (My city my puppet) and the second to an original raw material made by the shining, “golden” face of hundreds of bullet - a stunning reinterpretation of the “metal” clothes designed in the eighties by Italian designer Gianni Versace. Beirut: an extraordinarily fascinating and contradictory city, as the situation of Lebanese women. Free, in fact, according to law but not in fact, free apparently but not substantially. The “City” dress is a patchwork of contradictory and spurious images, of partial images and graffiti, which seem to contradict each other, attached to the shoulders of the hypothetical model not as expected, with strips of cloth, but with chains. On the other hand, the second cloth, Bullet Points, is an elegant evening dress, for a dress all in gold. The sophisticated style and brilliant appearance speak in favor of an evening gala, a circumstance of great impact and splendor. The raw material, however, are large caliber bullets, dangerous, even deadly offensive elements, woven together by an elegant copper wire. “The Arab woman is in fact treated as an object” confirm the two authors. Their idea was to “create a dress made of shiny golden dots, conveying a glittery luxurious vision of an icon from afar, that takes a completely opposite dimension when one gets a closer look and realizes that the golden dots are in fact the heads of bullets”.

Male-artists too have expressed strong narratives through works of great expressive power, and often poignant relevance. Beginning with Ahmed Al Bahrani, whose suit of steel, riddled by hits of anonymous bullet, without reasons or mandators, contains a clear reference to the tragic situation of Christian minorities in Iraq: to the essential equality of all men, the artist comments, it is superimposed a dress, a surface immediately mystified as “identity.” And it is the dress that one shoots, it is the dress that one tries to kill but it is the person who dies under the dress. Fadi Yazigi emphasizes the protective function of the cloth, which protects a fragile body from insults and attacks of reality and society. His work, though softened by the beautiful painted panels that descend like a sumptuous cloak along the foot of the bust and of the large skirt, is more reminiscent of a

cage that a dress: even from the collar comes out a kind of suffocating hood. An unlivable dress. Mahmoud Al Obaidi puts his person at the center of a review of the precariousness of any identity connotation conveyed by clothing. In his video, constituted through a sequence of images of himself, half-length, images very similar to those used by police to file or detainees suspected of any crime, he wears a set of clothes / costumes that tackle his identity. To be someone else, just strip and change dress. Ghassan Ali Ghaib made two dresses, significantly titled Home Industry. In both cases, they are made of recycled, recovered material, reintegrated with difficulty in the movement of commodities and of meanings of the world. In the first case, where “production” is completed, we are dealing with a suit of chain, supported by straps of old wood that evokes the unfortunate palm trees of the Iraqi desert. In the second case, the production is still in progress: from an old sewing machine is emerging the dress on which it is printed a map of Iraq, all furrowed with tears and zippers. It is not certain yet whether the stitching will proceed to the end and pleats along the edges of this devastated country, or if the parties shall stand and the skirt will be split permanently from the bodice. The work is still in progress.

Almost a conclusion: it is more clear than ever that today’s social arrangements, both those from the Eastern as those from the Western world, are breaking up under the influence of ethnic, religious, industrial, cultural and economic factors. Day by day, we increasingly seem to find ourselves at the terminus of a great dream - the end of a developmental model. In this twilight, or perhaps dawn, still plays a dramatic role the great conflict between humanism and technology: a lot of humanity is left behind, on the road, losing, over and over again, its values. It is urgent, more urgent than ever, that culture and art participate in redesigning the clothes for the new humanity. The one that, in this morning not free from anxiety, is awakening.



Ahmed Al Bahrani, Dress from Baghdad, 2010 - Copyright of artist, Courtesy of Art Sawa



Ghassan Gaib, Cover, 2011, mixed media 18x133x65cm - Copyright of artist, Courtesy of Art Sawa



FADI YAZIGI, Untitled, 2011, Mixed media, 160cm height - Copyright of artist, Courtesy of Art Sawa



Marya Kazoun, The Mother fabric, beads, thread, 2011 - Copyright of artist, Courtesy of Art Sawa



Fatma Bucak, Anonymous Heaviness made of Synthetic Rubber, 2011 - Copyright of artist, Courtesy of Art Sawa



Naiza Khan, Bullet Proof Vest, 2010, Galvanised steel & suede leather, 115x38x8cm- Copyright of artist, Courtesy of Art Sawa