



Hussein Chalayan, *LED DRESS*, 2007 made with CRYSTAL-LIZED™ – Swarovski Elements, LED lights, chiffon/silk overlay

pants to wear during the exhibition opening. Each piece of clothing bears texts consisting of inscriptions and advertising slogans circulating in the public realm – e.g., “Fragile” or “Freedom is the new luxury.” Marketou’s project thus provides an update of how the human body is reclaiming the public space through fashion similar in intent to Acconci. Marketou’s interventionist projects play with advertising and graffiti in an effort to create better access to urban areas for individuals and thus wrest them from the dominance of cheap investor-architecture.

ture.

At first, I was shocked by *PIET2WEAR* (2009) by Mirjana Djordjevic-Thaler, aka DJ MIRA\* (Serbian, residing in Vienna), because the Mondrian icon has truly become one of the most overused commercially, in everything from posters to fabric patterns. However, DJ MIRA\* appropriates this icon of modernity in a surprisingly new way. In the video Djordjevic-Thaler poses as a static model in a terry cloth bathrobe whose design adapts Piet Mondrian’s modular. A precursor to this homage is Yves Saint Laurent’s wool jersey Mondrian tunic dress (1965-1966), a piece that first introduced the fashion world to the Mondrian look. The concept of treating a dress as a canvas is one which DJ MIRA\* “foils” by hinting at Mondrian’s ascetic neoplasticism and its inherent dogma of achieving a purely plastic form. Here, fashion confronts a social reality, whose reflection in turn demands a reflection upon the artist’s own work. Through use of a mirroring effect to create the image and the soundtrack of *The Beauty Regime*, DJ MIRA\* becomes an interactive part of the scene.

In an off-site intervention, Terence Gower (Canada, residing in New York) dares to enter the lion’s den with his installation *Display Modern II (Hepworth)*, 2009 - in this case Barneys luxury fashion department store on Madison

Avenue. There, his installation of papier-mâché copies of original sculptures by Barbara Hepworth will play on the modus operandi of an art gallery amidst the commercial-world backdrop. I still remember going into the former Helmut Lang boutique in Soho and not knowing whether I just entered an art installation, a museum’s white cube or a fashion store. Gower emphasizes the artificiality and factitiousness of banal, salable goods, whose value is boosted by adept merchandising techniques.

With his work *Hou/Jun* (1997, translates as enriched, healthy and happy) Takehiko Sanada (Japan) proposes a radical rethinking of the feverish fashion industry. For a fieldwork project he invited around 500 members of Tokyo’s Setagaya Ward district, to cultivate their own cotton. The cottonseeds are harvested and hand spun into threads to produce “Ifuko” (clothing). Sanada creates with these homegrown cotton very fragile sculptures in the shape of human bodies. Through this contemplative process, the artist/designer attains the state of an “enriched heart and mind” where he turns a fragmented, hectic world into an infinitely layered and interconnected life encapsulated in the “eternal time” as the philosopher Yukihiro Nobuhara states in reference to *Hou/Jun*.

Edwina Hörl (Austria, residing in Tokyo) also refuses to follow popular fashion trends to create her collections. Instead, she continually seeks out new, socially relevant challenges. Her multimedia installation *Dead Fashion Reborn - Exchange Flea Market* (2009), produced together with so+ba,

Acconci Studio (Vito Acconci, Dario Nunez, Sarina Basta, Eduardo Marques, Garrett Ricciardi), *Umbruffa*, 2005, 2-way-mirrored Mylar



Jenny Marketou, *Parkour (wear)*, 2009, Art project in the form of “wearable situations”

optionally exchanging a piece of their clothing. In another break with consumerism, Hörl distributes her specially designed toilet paper in public restrooms throughout Manhattan. Visitors have an opportunity to wrap themselves in the paper and its printed designs, to co-create ephemeral clothing pieces.

Carla Fernández (Mexico) takes up powerful ethical and sociopolitical themes, while challenging the role of fashion and design in creating cultural identity. Mexico is of course strongly influenced by the USA and the fashion industry’s mega brands, which often makes one city look like the next. Fernández works with original motifs and techniques, and embraces the indigenous population of the Yucatan and other areas of Mexico in her work. Inspired by traditional patterns, designs, colors and cuts, she also uses her *mobile fashion workshop* throughout Mexico to carry out design projects with indigenous communities, and to draw attention to their socio-economic situation. Together with Pedro Reyes, Fernández devises the installation *Square Clothes for Round-Minded People* (2009), in which seven pieces of clothing featuring a strictly geometric design of squares and rectangles hang from a bent steel rack. Reyes’ sculpture is a paraphrase on Sol LeWitt’s *Incomplete Open Cube*. Films showing how the individual clothing items can be worn on the body in a multifunctional manner run parallel to the installation.

Stephanie Cumming of Liquid Loft, a dance company from Austria, uses slapstick-like poses to undermine media-hyped beauty ideals and body styling obsessions, as well as narcissism and star mania. As the “Anti-Lara



Edwina Hörl & so+ba, *Dead Fashion Reborn-Exchange Flea Market*, 2009, Installation

Croft,” Cumming shows how the media spectacle degrades our heroines from cult into mere products of the masses. The layers of clothing that she pulls over her body in the form of a second skin not only serve as a synonym for overlapping identities, but also offer a variety of outfit choices.

Hussein Chalayan (Cyprus, residing in London) can be considered as one of today’s most conceptually interesting fashion designers, alongside Carol Christian Poell, Martin Margiela and Walter Van Beirendonck. His chador piece is precisely on the mark; the way Rudi Gernreich’s unisex performance was in Osaka. His *LED Dress* (2007), in the installation, thematizes energy and the interexchange that takes place with the environment – in terms of environmental change. Chalayan’s film *The Absent Presence* (2005) was first shown as an art project at the Venice Biennale. In it, a frightful vision of the future plays out, where “fashion scans” are used to access private data and track consumer behavior; and where DNA data is used to keep tabs on everyone at border crossings and airports.

Despite this apocalyptic ending note, the exhibition *A Way Beyond Fashion* presents a selected group of artists and designers who blur the lines between the two domains and revise some key technological, ecological and socio-economic issues of our day, so that Gernreich’s vision – “Fashion will go out of fashion” – should not become reality soon.

Robert Punkenhofer ©2009



# A Way Beyond Fashion

Curated by  
Robert Punkenhofer



apexart



Rudi Gernreich, *Black and White Geometric Print Silk Scarf, 1960s*, Silk, 60 x 60 cm

I am also witness to his daily fashion-inspired ritual of identity building, which means getting out of bed in the morning as just another young boy and transforming himself into a “super-styled” fashion freak in knee-high jeans by the time he’s ready to go out in the evening. It doesn’t even take the “Fuck is Cool” on his t-shirt to make it clear to me what role fashion plays as a medium for communicating youthful rebellion!

*A Way Beyond Fashion* analyzes the shifting boundaries between art and fashion design. The selected 11 artists and designers blur the lines between the two disciplines when exploring phenomena related to the global fashion industry in their performances, public art actions, films, animations and installations- all as a means of juxtaposing the prevailing discourse on identity and media-related consumption patterns with entirely new concepts and forms of articulation. Indeed, an examination of fashion codes, languages and strategies serves as the source material for the presented projects that, charged with aesthetic, economic and technological implications, are contributing to the design of “real life worlds.”

Naturally, my own passion for fashion resonates with a project like *A Way Beyond Fashion*. I like to wear Helmut Lang – a vintage suit that I couldn’t have afforded if it had been new – and a Viktor & Rolf tie, as well as a “horny headpiece” from jewelry designer AND\_i. At the same time, I’m fascinated by the fact that art “peers at” fashion, and that the art world has developed an envy complex of sorts due to the glamour, commercial success and

mass appeal of fashion. Conversely, I’m impressed that designers keep peering back at the artists. Take Raf Simons, for example, who has flagship stores styled by artists, and who regularly visits art shows to view content with artistic depth and gather inspiration for his fashions. Indeed, this fascination isn’t something new, nor is it mine alone, since one can trace back the interplay between art and fashion to the beginning of modernity. It started with fashion designers using works of art as models for their creations and, reciprocally, with the Futurist Giacomo Balla designing clothes in 1913.

A related idea that interests me is the luxury aspect. Art is de facto a luxury idiom. On the one hand, we saw this in the art boom that raged prior to the collapse of the market amidst the most recent recession. On the other, we notice the increasing glamour and hype that surrounds grand openings and cocktail parties at art exhibitions, to a point nearly matching the pomp found in the world of fashion shows. Additionally, we no longer speak only of star designers, but also of star artists. Of course, the question of commodification also applies to art these days. Take, for example, the works of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst. The latter’s *For the Love of God* is a diamond-studded skull that, in my view, is no more than an inflated piece of jewelry. With respect to high fashion, the topic of luxury is intertwined with haute couture, which is ultimately a handcraft and thus leads us back to the dressmaker who sits in the atelier and creates pieces by hand – as do most artists. Even fashion history offers plenty of excellent crossover examples, like Viennese men’s tailor Knize, who not only mastered his craft, but also collaborated with the architect Adolf Loos – and subsequently opened the world’s first “flagship megastore” in 1913.



Liquid Loft, *Heroïne, 2009*, Performance and video loop based on performance, 15 minutes on DVD

Though a tailor, Knize deliberately cooperated with the greatest intellectuals of his day, such as Loos and the designer Ernst Dryden.

For *A Way Beyond Fashion*, my primary intention was to find works on the periphery between art and fashion. Together, the explored issues – relating to communication, identity, technology and ecological sustainability – provide exciting fashion themes, which in turn are analyzed from the perspective of art. Fashion designer Rudi Gernreich, whose level of conceptual depth and radicalism I set out to find in the contemporary fashion world, provided the historical starting point for the exhibition. I was immediately fascinated by Gernreich’s unisex design concept, which he first presented at the 1970 World Expo in Osaka. There, he asked the male and female models to shave all of their body hair, including their pubic areas, and then sent them across the catwalk, which to me was a performance comparable in significance to a signature Yoko Ono action named *Cut Piece*. With his unisex and monokini designs, Rudi Gernreich thematized sexual identity as an important aspect of fashion. Gernreich also experimented with technology, toyed with unusual fabrics, including vinyl, plastic and paper, and created the space suit and military look.



Terence Gower, *Display Modern II (Hepworth), 2007*, Digital print and short text, paper, cardboard, glue

In projects by Lucy + Jorge Orta (UK and Argentina, residing in Paris), technological and social aspects converge. Their transformable rescue wear for homeless people in the Paris Metro can be worn as an overall, or used as a sleeping bag or tent. Orta + Orta don’t deal with clothing as fashion, but focus instead on the protective function of clothing and on survival strategies. In *Connector Mobile Village VI – Makrowear Ljubljana* (2002), the two artists developed autonomous, modular “body architectures” for environmental researchers, in which the latter can perform their scientific work in isolated areas while always remaining mobile with integrated laptops and cell phones. What is truly remark-

able about Orta + Orta is their unyielding ethical commitment to rebel against cynical positions in the art industry, against selling out as artists and designers. Taking this autonomy and protective function a step further leads us to the question: How do we go about reclaiming the public space in a manner which places the focus on human beings as opposed to commerce?

With their *Umbruffla* project (2005), the Acconci Studio creates a new concept of an umbrella whose foldable surface is made of reflective polyester film. When closed, the umbrella is no larger than a fist, but it transforms into an “umbruffla” when opened. Not only does the thin skin of the “umbruffla” prove to be a thick skin in the end, but it also provides a reflecting, camouflaged hideout in the urban environment as it can be fully wrapped around when unfolded serving as a mobile, “urban retreat” inside which lovers can hide out. Acconci Studio also presents another preliminary study entitled *Magnetic Field Clothing*. In both projects the Studio continues its relentless and visionary research concerning the human body and its performance in the private and public realm.



Takehiko Sanada, *HOUJUN, 1997*, Cotton and Wire, 180 x 60 x 60 cm

“Fashion stopped being clothes and became value, a tool, a way of life, politics, a kind of symbolism.” This statement by critic Marilyn Bender applies to the political imperative behind the performances – or “wearable situations” – devised by Jenny Marketou (Greece, residing in New York). Marketou has heavily explored scents and smells, primarily focusing on the olfactory sense as a means of accessing memories or identifying individuals – “I can smell you.” For ParKour (wear), 12 wearable situations (paper dresses) will be handed out at the entrance of apexart for partici-

Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Connector Mobile Village VI – Makrowear Ljubljana, 2002*, Aluminium coated polyester, reversible Solden Lycra, open cell polyurethane, portable solar panel, silkscreen print, zips, 276” x 136”



## A Way Beyond Fashion

curated by Robert Punkenhofer

September 16 to October 24, 2009

Opening reception: September 16, 6-8 pm  
Including performances by  
Liquid Loft and Jenny Marketou

Acconci Studio  
Hussein Chalayan  
DJ MIRA\*  
Carla Fernández  
Rudi Gernreich  
Terence Gower

Edwina Hörl & so+ba  
Liquid Loft  
Jenny Marketou  
Lucy + Jorge Orta  
Takehiko Sanada

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### apexart

291 church street new york, ny 10013  
t: 212.431.5270 f: 646.827.2487  
info@apexart.org www.apexart.org  
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