

Relax your hips

Margret Wibmer and irritations between bodies, things and spaces

In Monika Wagner's book, *Das Material der Kunst* (the fabric of art)<sup>1</sup>, which entails comprehensive research into the utilization and significance of materials in twentieth century art, the reader already encounters an unusual piece of clothing on the book cover. A model covers on the floor wearing the *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, which the Canadian artist Jana Sterbak sewed together from pieces of oxen flesh in 1987.

Unusual materials have been used more and more frequently in art over the past decades. Wagner's research includes wide-ranging aspects such as colour as a material, the use of everyday finds, relic cults, solid or ephemeral materials, stone, metal, synthetic materials, fat, felt, blood, fire, air and light. Wagner also dedicates an extensive chapter to clothing, however the approach by the artists is less innovative here. Clothes are often presented as memorabilia or relics, independent of a body that wears them. It is much more frequent that artists use found pieces of clothing rather than producing new ones and experimenting with materials as Sterbak does for example. It is the fashion designers who take on this task and meanwhile develop creations that one would expect in a conceptual exhibition rather than on the catwalk, some of which even incorporate organic processes. Thus the Belgian fashion designer Martin Margiela designed clothes that were eaten away by microbes. And the approach to new materials and technologies is becoming more and more inventive. The Chinese-Canadian designer Ying Gao causes the surface of her clothes to move using pneumatic pistons and pumps, so that the silhouette of the clothing frees itself autonomously from the contours of the body. It is given a life of its own, in a similar but more elegant way to the grotesque growths and deformations of the outfits by Leigh Bowery, who, up until his early death in 1994 had undermined almost everything that was considered good taste in the fashion world.

Clothing can be a membrane-like second skin but also an object that becomes independent of the body, one that develops almost architectural qualities. This also applies to some creations by Hussein Chalayan, whose fashion shows resemble

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<sup>1</sup> Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst. Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne*, Munich 2001.

artistic performances and have a narrative that makes reference to contemporary political events. In *Afterwords* (2000) the models interact with tables and chairs whose seat covers are spontaneously converted into clothing.

Moved by the current events of the war in Kosovo, the Cypriot artist sought to evoke the situation of people who are forced to flee, taking their possessions with them and trying to hide them.

“My work is about ideas”, he said in 2009 when asked about his design philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Chalayan not only designs clothes that can be worn, he also generates awareness.

The same applies to Margret Wibmer, who approaches the grey area between art and fashion from another perspective. In her photographs, objects, installations and performances, clothing designed by the artist herself plays a central role. However the clothing is never simply “worn” but is an instrument for reflecting the relationship that develops between the human body, the object and the space. Margret Wibmer experiments with materials and technologies in the manner of an innovative fashion designer, not least in order to find out what effect media has on us. In 2009 she said, when describing her interactive installation *reconstruction*: “I am interested in questioning the use of technology in order to create an awareness for the medium itself. This is only possible through generating irritation, by not including what we take for granted.”

In his renowned book *Understanding Media*, which aimed to provide a perspective on the electronic era that was just beginning, Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964 that most people were not even aware of the “effects of technology” and therefore “The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perceptions steadily and without any resistance“, not only in the case of the serious artist who “is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.”<sup>3</sup>

McLuhan’s media theory, which includes a large number of strong visual metaphors, is also art theory. Art means dealing consciously with technology, media and its effects, when it brings to light what is caused by “media as translators”, as one of the chapters in *Understanding Media* is called. Here McLuhan states that people have

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<sup>2</sup> <http://designmuseum.org/design/hussein-chalayan>

<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, ed. Routledge Classics, London/New York. p 19

always tried to transfer nature to art and in doing so have generated “applied knowledge”: ‘applied’ means to transfer or transform one kind of material into another.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect what artists are doing in the digital age is not something fundamentally new. In viewing the artist as an expert in generating awareness for otherwise unnoticeable perception processes, McLuhan seamlessly follows on from the manifest-like statements made at the beginning of the twentieth century about the artistic avant-garde of that time. Thus the Russian author and literary theorist Viktor Sklovskij wrote the following in a programmatic text in 1915 that is translated either as “art as process” or “art as technique”:

“In order to restore the perception of life for us, to make things palpable or the stone stony, there is the thing which we call art. The purpose of art is to allow us to experience the object, an experience that is vision and not only recognition. Art makes use of two strategies in this context: the estrangement of objects and the complication of form in order to impede perception and prolong it. For in respect to art, the perceptual process is an aim in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a means to experience the becoming of an object, that which has already become is irrelevant to art.”<sup>5</sup>

The disorientations that permeate Margret Wibmer’s work can be perceived as a conscious extension of the process of perception through which the familiar body-space experience is invalidated. The artist initially took her own body as the starting point. *Performance for no audience* (1998) can be seen as a “prototype” of the works, in which Margret Wibmer uses her body as a “material”, a photographic series in which she wears a yellow rubber suit. The body becomes a sculpture and the suit becomes a second skin, a medial surface, an interface. According to Reinhard Braun’s analysis in 2000, Margret Wibmer’s interest revolved around “Schnittstellen” (interfaces), “around interfaces between bodies, their surfaces and their interaction with the space, through glances and sound, and not least through cultural systems of symbols.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Sklovskij, *Theorie der Prosa*, ed. by Gisela Drohla, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhard Braun, Zum Verhältnis von Blick, Bild-Schirmen und Kunst, *Die Desorientierung des Blickes*, Breda 2000, p. 15

The German word “Schnittstelle” (meaning interface or the point where a cut is made) contains, in contrast to the word “interface” in English, associations with the word “Schnitt” meaning a cut with scissors, something which occurs in Margret Wibmer’s work, not only in an etymological sense. The decisive “Schnittstelle” between the human body and its environment is clothing. The cut of the clothing, the tailoring and the collaging appear in Wibmer’s work as “analogue” – in the double sense of the word – processes that run parallel to one another.

Wibmer’s interest in people is focused on their “Schnittstellen” or interfaces with the environment, on clothing and fashion, on movement and situational behaviour. It does not apply to the portrait. Faces rarely appear in her work, her own included. Artists used to bring themselves into play by painting self-portraits or immortalizing their own likeness on the edge of a religious or historical painting. They did not use their own bodies to such an extent until the 1960s with the beginning of action and performance art. Bruce Nauman described his approach retrospectively: “I was using my body as a piece of material and manipulating it.”<sup>7</sup> Margret Wibmer also takes this approach and like Nauman himself she never performs in front of the public herself. She “portraits” herself using digital scanning and mapping processes.

In the age of the digital data processing, the portrait has become anachronistic. No-one is identified merely according to their appearance. And the physical presence is only one form of “presence”.

While the artist herself is only present “virtually”, the viewers are brought into play actively. For the preparation of *off the wall* (1998-2000), the artist stood in a rubber suit on a rotating plate. Using a video camera affixed to a pole she initially filmed vertically from above until a complete rotation of 360 degrees was achieved. The camera then moved approximately ten degrees lower, and continued to repeat the same procedure. During this completely controlled mechanical process the artist had to stand still the whole time until she had been scanned completely. Following this the scans were processed to create a Quicktime object which enables the visitor to interact with the installation, which Margret Wibmer describes as follows: “The public plays the side parts but also can take the function of the director, the stage designer, the conductor and the choreographer.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London 1998, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Hawn, *Interacting through art*, Sony Style Magazine, Spring 2000.

Wibmer describes *off the wall* as a “virtual-reality opera” that was created in collaboration with the composer Günther Zechberger. The latter developed a soundscape, which could influence the visitors to the installation in the museum De Beyerd in Breda just as much as the movements of the larger-than-life Quicktime-object of the figure in the rubber suit.

Several people can exert influence on the installation simultaneously and as a result there is a doubly disorienting effect: on the one hand the participants are not certain to what extent they are triggering the particular changes or if these are in fact occurring as a result of the system itself or other visitors; on the other hand the familiar spatial perspective is disturbed because the horizontal and vertical axes of orientation have been disabled.

Without the existence of a conscious reference, one could describe Wibmer’s approach as a further digital development of settings that generate awareness, as designed by Dan Graham or Bruce Nauman around 1970. Graham divided up rooms using glass that is reflective on one side, in order to put the visitors in situations in which they were disorientated and could no longer distinguish between seeing or being seen. In doing so he used artistic means very early on to point to the increasing problem of surveillance in public spaces.<sup>9</sup>

Nauman used real-time video recordings in order to confront the visitors with their own image, which appeared after a slight delay and not necessarily where one would expect it – in black and white on one of the monitors mounted throughout the space. Thus the viewer sees him or herself from behind rather than from the front, which is reminiscent of Magritte’s famous picture *La Reproduction interdite* from 1937. The disorientation created by a “false” mirror is multiplied equally in spatial and temporal shifts, which in the case of Graham and Nauman is based on classic video technology, and in the case of Margret Wibmer on “disturbances” in the interaction with digital objects. Subtle manipulations of the time axis have an effect on the sense of space.

In Wibmer’s works the interaction never takes place verbally or through eye contact or facial expressions but through a shift or the removal of usual means of

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Graham’s own texts on the subject of surveillance, for example in *Video in Beziehung zur Architektur*, in: *Dan Graham, Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. by Ulrich Wilmes, Stuttgart 1994, p. 57-89; *Rainer Metzger, Kunst in der Postmoderne - Dan Graham*, Cologne 1996, in particular p. 148 ff.

communication. This applies above all to *the holding* (2006), a performative installation in which the artist requests up to eight visitors to wear pieces of clothing designed by her and to walk around the installation in these outfits, masked and uniformed. Ingeborg Erhart described her experience in the Kunstpavillon Innsbruck in 2006 as follows:

“Barefoot, I step through a kind of gate lock into the back part of the Kunstpavillon. I slip into a dark belted coat, its hem touching the ground, and fasten it around my waist. Although I have never worn a Kimono before, this belt reminds me of an obi. Or an ammunition clip or a holster, the paramilitary evoked by its banded rollers. I tuck up the sleeves with the help of a ribbon that is held in place with Velcro cuffs, almost as if my blood pressure were being taken, I think. Next, I put on the adjustable headgear and I decide to tie it at the back like a headscarf. My outfit is rounded off with a pair of sunglasses. **I am anonymous.**”<sup>10</sup>

Viewed from the outside, it could be a fashion show or an esoteric ritual, an eerie collection of Ku-Klux-Klan supporters or an unusual carnival costume. The fabric, which is light and flexible although it appears heavy due to its dark colour, is a “smart material” that can be shaped as if thin metal threads have been woven through it. In this way it can flexibly adapt to fit the body but can also create very autonomous shapes.

The head covering is reminiscent of a headscarf but also a monk’s habit. And could the people wearing the clothes perhaps even be avatars from a virtual space who had been transferred to the “real” world and now form a physical unity with the people whose digital representatives they are otherwise? A female voice can be heard through loudspeakers saying sentences like “relax your hips and “observe your employees” or “protect your body in the blazing sun”. It could be therapeutic advice, messages for consumers in a department store, doctor’s orders or instructions given by state authorities, however the context is not clear enough for the statements to be categorized. The situation as a whole creates a diffuse atmosphere of control and surveillance. One does not know exactly what is happening, there is no plot according to which one can behave wisely and purposefully. It is a situation with impeded communication or no communication at all. The outfit too prevents people from entering into contact with one another. The artist inflicts the same experience on them as she did on herself in the rubber suit: They become quasi sculptures, objects.

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<sup>10</sup> Ingeborg Erhart, *the holding, entering a strange field*, Innsbruck 2006, p 4.

Finally, in the photo series “the girl and her object” a purely “sculptural” approach is taken to the human body and the things worn on it – one which completely forgoes verbal and gestural communication. These can be household appliances such as a vacuum cleaner or a coffee pot, but also mysterious technoid objects without any perceptible form of identification. The body, of which only fragments are ever visible, is modelled three-dimensionally by the light.

The almost classic poses are counteracted by the seemingly absurd and mysterious way in which the objects are held. It makes one think of the presentation of products on advertising photos, however the objects appear to be dysfunctional and useless, occasionally like prostheses that seem to have grown onto the body. Together, the body and object form a silhouette, which is only created by this exact camera perspective.

The absurd “wearing” of objects implies a comparison with the adaptives (Paßstücke) that Franz West began to present in his performances in the 1970s. These are white objects made of paper maché, plaster, polyester and material for dressings, wrapped around wire frames. On numerous photos one can see the “wearers” of such adaptives in different postures, standing calmly, slightly bent or striding forward. The adaptives can be found at stomach-height, on the shoulder, the ear or on the head. Their shape sometimes has similarities to particular objects such as household appliances or musical instruments. Or it looks almost as if the form is moving. It is reminiscent of a swan or another animal that is held by the person concerned.

A variation of the adaptive idea was developed by Erwin Wurm, also an Austrian. Since 1997 he has requested different people to perform “one-minute-sculptures” on the basis of drawings that serve as instruction manuals, which Wurm records on video. The protagonists balance five long sticks between the tips of their fingers and the wall, stand with an asparagus in each nostril or juggle, their legs stretched upwards, a teacup on each foot. The art critic Jörg Heiser comments on these works as follows: “The idea of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the great 18<sup>th</sup> century art historian, that even fragments of sculptures contain the dream of eternity, is transformed into a frozen snapshot slapstick.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jörg Heiser, *Plötzlich diese Übersicht. Was gute zeitgenössische Kunst ausmacht*, Berlin 2007, p. 74.

The slapstick element is not as obvious in Wibmer's work as it is in the works by West and Wurm, however the unusual body-object combinations feed on similar sources. On the one hand, they can be read as a playful modification of the presentation of clothing, of fashion, yet on the other hand as a reminiscence of the absurd combinatorics of Surrealism.

The encounter between Surrealism and fashion historically manifests primarily in the original clothing creations of Elsa Schiaparelli, who had close connections to the Surrealists in Paris. Cocteau and Salvador Dali created fabrics and designs for the fashion designer. Dali's painting "Anthropomorphic Cabinet" (1936, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf) inspired Schiaparelli to create her "dress with drawers". In the upper section of the close-fitting dress were a large number of pockets with rings that looked like drawers. However Schiaparelli did not go so far as to have them protrude from the silhouette itself, thus creating an effect like that of the clothing in *the holding*.

In the Surrealist object art of the same time we find – vice versa as it were – the combination of everyday objects and natural materials that have been used for clothing, such as "Breakfast in Fur", the famous fur cup by Meret Oppenheim. The Surrealist metamorphoses of the world of things also stand for the move away from the human body as a model in sculptural art. The "reification" of the body, as is the case in Dali's anthropomorphic cupboard, stands in opposition to the psychologization of the world of objects and commodities.

In her objects and sculptures, Margret Wibmer follows on from Surrealist combinations of materials. *I.e.a.* reminds one directly of Oppenheim's fur cup, although here the fur covers a slide projector. *5 p.m.* is a bracket affixed to the wall, a strangely cumbersome extendable presentation device for pictures. In this way, objects such as the "girl" become the carriers, although the meaning and the objective of the device are left undefined.

Last but not least, Surrealism reflects a society in which not only crafted and industrial products, but also human bodies become commodities. The fact that bodies appear like things and things appear like bodies is a frequent occurrence in the world of Surrealist metamorphosis and is a central characteristic trait of Margret Wibmer's art.

Is the clothing that one wears not also an object? And is the body not also transformed into an object through the clothing, such as the tailor's dummy or mannequin, on which one fits clothes in order to try them out or present them? Tailor's dummies and mannequins were part of the standard repertoire of the Surrealist iconography. Scissors, needle and thread appear in many of Max Ernst's pictures for example. The previously mentioned analogy between the tailoring and sewing of clothes and the combining of cut-out motifs to form a visual collage is a further "inheritance" of Surrealism, which Margret Wibmer develops further, also in her work *reconstruction*.

While in her installations and performances she explores the overlapping of physically tangible and virtual bodies or spaces, in her photographs she examines the potential of portraying spatial references as two-dimensional surfaces. The act of translating space and surface has been consistently continued in the project *reconstruction* that was developed during a period of stay in China in 2009. Wibmer herself writes the following about the idea behind *reconstruction*:

Although I have lived in New York for many years and am used to the big metropolis, I was impressed by the immensity and number of the high-risers growing out of the ground by the dozens in cities like Beijing and Shanghai. I could not help but wonder who would fill all that new space. At the same time, although feeling really small among these buildings, I felt too big and a bit clumsy as I was surrounded by people whose anatomy is much more fragile than mine. Back home when I started to work on the images I took, I realized that this visit to China has significantly influenced my way of looking at the world, my perception of the body and the urban environment. "The body is no longer presented in a spatial setting and in relation to tangible objects but have been completely woven into a surface pattern. It is also no longer located in a limited, closed environment, in the context of a "experimental arrangement" such as those used by Bruce Nauman, but in an urban setting of repetitive uniform architectural patterns. Here however, the protagonists are not set like "real" figures in the environment but the architecture is at the same time a two-dimensional screen, on which people who have been reduced to a silhouette appear like projections. Everything is merely surface, both the bodies and the buildings.

While the girl and the object present the reification of the relationship between the human being and his or her environment in an exemplary manner, *reconstruction* deals with the theme of the specific alienation of a society that is increasingly

characterised by digital communication. The disappearance of bodily presence seems to represent the impossibility of creating any kind of physical relationship at all.

*reconstruction* is presented as an interactive installation. It is possible to change the visual elements, sound etc. However the space still cannot be accessed but instead remains a two-dimensional screen, a dysfunctional, moving collage.<sup>12</sup>

It is astonishing that Margret Wibmer succeeds in expressing the “contradiction” between the human being and the digitalized living environment using the technique of collage. Because every image that has been edited or produced on a computer is a collage, only in contrast to the analogue procedure, the cuts are not visible here. The collaging process is just as “phantomatic” as the social reality.<sup>13</sup> The philosopher Günther Anders used the term “phantom” in the 1950s in order to describe the experience of the intrusion of radio and television into the living space, a phenomenon that was still new at that time.<sup>14</sup>

The traditional use of the term collage refers to the combination of disparate elements in a visual or spatial ensemble, while in the case of collaged temporal processes, above all in film, one speaks of “montage”. The filmic animation of digital collages in *reconstruction* however does not create a time flow but remains trapped within the parameters of the visual collage like a loop.

The surrounding space that appears like surfaces that have been pushed into an overlapping position resembles a second layer of clothing on the figures. While the clothing is transformed into spacious objects, the space itself appears like a

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<sup>12</sup>*Reconstruction* is a performative installation. The images will be projected onto a screen. The viewer will activate changes in the image and sound and will set the work in motion by moving through the actual space (the gallery space). Through the activity of the viewer, the images which are built up of layers will become re-organized, re-placed and may also form groups, restructure themselves or unfold and crease as if they were fabric. This system of regrouping equals the copy, paste and delete functions, which were used when constructing these images. In architectural practice programs like 'Zoom' are commonly used by architects to design buildings and whole urban environments. One of the most important functions in the design process is the zoom function.

Being able to zoom in and out allows us to enter and explore that digital space. It allows us to identify our own position in relation to the objects in space (3-D animation programs, computer games and google map's street view) Today's viewer is familiar with these kind of possibilities and that gives me enough ground and the wonderful opportunity **not** to use it.

The result of taking the zoom function away from the viewer is, that the viewer is captivated as figures and background are too close to identify a larger context“.

<sup>13</sup>See also: Ludwig Seyfarth, *Phantomcollage. Wenn man Schnitte nicht mehr sieht – zur Aktualität des Collagebegriffs*, in: Kunst & Kultur 2, 1995, p. 17–19.

<sup>14</sup>Günther Anders, *Die Welt als Phantom und Matrize. Philosophische Betrachtungen über Rundfunk und Fernsehen*, in: idem., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, volume 1: *Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (1956), Munich 1985, p. 99 ff.

membrane, a second skin. The clothing serves as a connecting link, as a “Schnittstelle”, in other words an interface or the place where the cut is made, as an exchange between the human being and their environment. It finally becomes a metaphor for the perceptive and cognitive exchange between humans and the world, which is the primary goal of Margret Wibmer’s art.

Ludwig Seyfarth