

tives) that try to do justice to relations. In one example, she explains the relation between a livestock guardian dog, his human, his breeder, and her peers in “dogland” and how they are all participants in this relation. She describes it as follows: “dog-wolf-rancher-herbivore-environmentalist-hunter nature cultures of the contemporary U.S. northern Rocky Mountain region.”¹⁵ Her descriptions make me think of the many overtly long and complex fashion descriptions. Take, for example, the caption “[t]he ultimate in laid-back luxury, Reserved’s supersized leather trousers sum up the season’s easy allure.”¹⁶ In contrast to Haraway’s description, besides “leather” and “trousers,” the words and relations in this fashion caption are ambiguous, hyperbolic, and vague. The understanding of relations will of course always be fragmentary, and amputations will always be made, but the question is, which ones do we make and why? If I take other relations into consideration and pay more respect to the beings involved, I might make the following fashion caption for this pair of leather trousers: *cow-herbivore-carnivore-human-skinner-skin-wearers’ luxury cultures of the contemporary fashion industry*. Because our use of language affects behavior, naming is one place to start acknowledging relations.

In the *Dictionary Dressings* book, the French-German brand BLESS shared a selection of their products with names that combine functions from daily use in surprising constellations. These at first might seem random, but bring forth not uncommon daily experiences with garments; “*Towel Bag*; towel, upgraded with zippers at the corners combined with a handle that allows usage as a bag before turning into a beach towel at its destination” or “*Flipflopbag*: upgraded flip flops contain a small storage part to carry purses, keys and other small objects” and “*Towel Scarf*; prolonged towel that therefore can be worn around the neck.”¹⁷ With these names, and products that activate and embody these relations, BLESS gestures to a kind of fashion that celebrates the reality of use.

It is in the desert of the real that we encounter valuable existing relations and create a multiplicity of new ones that go far beyond the hyperreality of the industry. By actively engaging with, and acknowledging relations in the shape of garments, names, behaviors (of use and consumption), we can change how we value (fashion) relations and the stories that we tell. The desert of the real is not one of poor soil.

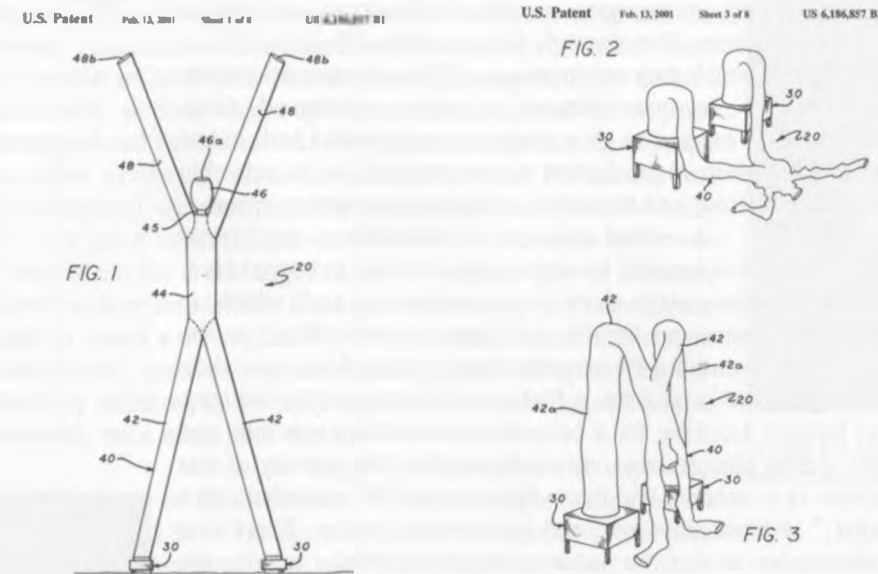


15 Haraway, D. (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p.39.

16 *Vogue*, (UK) September 2018, Conde Nast. p.241.

17 Bless (2016). in *Dictionary Dressings* (F.de Vries, ed.). Eindhoven: Onomatopée.

All those stuffed shirts



Il vento soffiava le mie vesti
Di veramente stabile
erano le mie scarpe
alle cavaliere ortopediche

—Alice¹

In very recent times, the notion of “peak screen” has been coined.² The stage of screen saturation was reached sometime before 2020, and the subsequent screen fatigue has since become evident, as demonstrated by the plateauing of profits from TVs and smartphones, leading tech companies to increasingly investment in audio services and forms of entertainment. The reflection on the peak screen moment, and the consequent fatigue of digital visuality, has prompted some artists to reconsider their practices and poetics with regards to moving image-production and display. However, the measures of social distancing, altered working conditions, and forced mediatized socialization caused by the COVID pandemic of 2020-1, have only amplified and prolonged our stay in front of remove our screens. The pandemic captivity coincided, in my

1 The wind blew my clothes / Really stable / they were my shoes / to orthopedic anklets.

2 Cfr. F. Manjoo, “We Have Reached Peak Screen. Now Revolution Is in the Air,” *The New York Times*, 27th June 2018

3 Cfr. P. Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

case, with a period of doctoral research aimed at probing “cinematicity” in places where cinema does not manifest itself through its classic device—namely, screen and projector—but can be traced thanks to “other means.”³

I understand cinema as a medium that produces an appearance of life thanks to one of its simplest but fundamental elements: movement. My attention as an artist and researcher has never been captivated by narrative nor by psychological insight into characters, as much as by things manifesting themselves through their animation from the homogeneous panorama in which they are immersed. Through cinematography, the world comes to life, becomes animated or, better, re-animated. Additionally, I have focused on cinema as a machine, an apparatus both industrial and emotional: industrial production and its movements, its assembly line sequences, automation, and the vortex of mass consumerism spaces.

A central character in this study is the “dressman” iron machine, an automatic ironing system used by industrial laundries that violently inflates air in shirts to eliminate pleats and, which, in doing so, produces a semi-predictable and episodic “life effect” in the garment, constantly re-enacted by manufacturing cycles. Here, animation becomes a by-product of capitalism, a flicker of life activated by industry, aimlessly, to infinity. Looking for a comparison between a machine and contemporary media phenomena, one could consider the activity of this ironing machine as a material and three-dimensional GIF animation, as a “TikTok ballet,” abstract, minimal, and immensely alluring. There’s an existential dimension to this animation similar to that of a breath, the body’s own technology of survival. *The Stuffed Shirt* in the title allude to an Anglo-Saxon idiom which indicates someone very pompous, pretentious, conservative, and reactionary. The expression emphasizes the dress in order to denigrate the wearer, who in turn becomes a mere filling material. It refers to the grotesque spark of life produced by the dressman machine. The dressman fills the shirt with life, pushing it to its limit, into a sort of cardiac arrest that nearly makes the garment collapse. The iron mannequin swells up suddenly, looming over onlookers to become a monster that, escaping human control, could potentially cause catastrophe. Trapped between the categories of the uncanny and the eerie,⁴ the dressman recalls non-human creatures of gothic and fantasy literature. But it is above all cinema that has celebrated the golem-machine, from Frankenstein and Robocop to the affable Stay Puft Marshmallow Man, who, in *Ghostbusters* (1984) terrifies the population with his immense and frothy white body as he descends upon New York City with a permanent, unnerving smile. In the case of the dressman, air is the constitutive element of wonder, amazement, and fear, replacing photographic reproduction and montage as an animation device.

Inflatables as screen-less animation could be traced back not only through art history or through the genealogy of industrial apparatuses but sits within a complex history of body decoration and fashion design, where it converts the practice of dressing into an in-

“TikTok ballet”



Anna Franceschini, *The Stuffed Shirt*, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

4 Cfr. M. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater Books, London 2017.

dustrial techno-fashion show-on-demand. In this mechanical showroom, each body is typified by the gestures of an industrial air device and garments to be “inflated.” Inflatable outfits contributes a kinematic effect to the scenographic body, combining the dramatic effects of the fabric, the sartorial cut, and the air. Inflatable clothes imply not only a spatial but a temporal dimension, and activates a “zero degree” cinematic experience without the aid of any projection surface. One of the most recent and striking examples of clothes spectacularized via air was artist and designer Fredrik Tjærandsen’s BA graduation collection at Central Saint Martins in London in 2019. For the occasion, the young designer created latex design which, skilfully blown up with air, formed an all-encompassing opalescent-colored bubble around the wearer’s body, leaving only the feet free to allow movement. Once the air was expelled, the tension that animated the material vanished, making the latex fall softly on the body to return it to a more comfortable, normal outfit. The same trick was used by Tjærandsen for a one-night showcase at the V&A in London, aptly entitled *Fashion in Motion*. Fredrik’s bubbles, by his own admission,⁵ sought to create a conceptual link between fashion and movement, and are transformed, more or less accidentally, into walking moving images, temporarily obliterating the body as air procures animation, only to rapidly disappear, once more, into thin air.

Air is the trigger for the cartoonish explosion of the inflatable pants of Harikrishnan, a young designer from Kerala who recently graduated from London College of Fashion. Harikrishnan, too, uses natural latex and engineers, with a valve of only seven millimeters and an external pump, a kind of impossible version of traditional tailored trousers. The designer claims to have found inspiration during walks with his pug dog Kai, wondering “how exaggerated objects must look from such a low angle,”⁶ and, consequently, deciding “to reimagine the people [...] through the game of distortion—detached from the stereotypical, pre-determined notions of the human perspective.”⁷ Harikrishnan appropriates storytelling strategies from visual animation and cartoons such as distorted perspective and impossible subjective POV, applying it to three-dimensional reality without giving up the fourth—time—marked by the movement of the body. The exceptional nature of this strategy resides in the persistence of a distortion of a normative perspective, in the coexistence and simultaneity of alternative planes of vision within the same visual space, like a cubist painting in motion. The playful aspect of the project is inscribed in the materials—colored strips of opaque latex and lacquered wooden beads usually used to make toys, made by artisan women from Channaptna, a rural area of India.

The ludic side of “inflatability” applied to fashion design is constitutive to the collection *Operation Europa*, created by Chinese-born designer Syna Chen in 2019. Syna creates dresses that can be inflated at will thanks to a clearly visible and hand-operated pump, styled to resemble a pretty and petite clutch bag. The possibility of inflating and deflating skirts, overcoats and jackets refers to a potential emo-



The Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters* (1984)

5 Cfr. T. Zhang, “Bubbling Up With Balloon Fashion Designer Fredrik Tjaerandsen” on ExBulletin, May 2021.

6 J. Hahn, “Harikrishnan’s inflatable latex trousers create ‘anatomically impossible’ proportions” on Dezeen, February 2021.

7 Ibid.

8 Much of the information regarding the inflatables’ biography was gleaned from the brilliant article: S. Dean, “Biography of an Inflatable Tube Guy. The checkered past and lonely future of air puppets,” on Medium.com

tionality of dress, an adaptability to the moods and sensations of the wearer. In joyful moments, a dress can be inflated on demand; or in moments of displeasure, re-normalized, emptied of its airy sympathy. Or, in moments of sudden panic, the wearer's hand, with an automatic reflex, tightens around the switch and activates a protective bulge—a mass aimed at creating a safe distance thanks to a sudden change in body volume, a tactic seen in plenty of animal species, from the puffer fish that quickly swallows large quantities of water to become too big to swallow, to the hedgehog who, if threatened, pricks up its quills to oversize fearfully. Syna Chen's emotional creations make it possible to activate a direct connection between desire and form thanks to a way of animating sartorial material. For humans, this has been almost exclusively the prerogative of cinema, of cartoons, of two-dimensional regimes of representation.

To delve into less harmless aspects of "swelling" in art and fashion, it is necessary to return for a moment to the industrial genesis of inflatables and recover the story of its progenitor. Latex balloons, zeppelins, and hot air balloons are all possible ancestors, but there is a moment in recent history when the possible category of inflatability was truly embodied. In 1996, during the celebrations of the Atlanta Olympic, the so-called "Tall Boy" was introduced, the first inflatable ever made.⁸ It was created by Peter Minshall, a Guyana-born Trinidadian carnival designer, in collaboration with Israeli artist and designer Doron Gazit. Minshall was active as costume designer for the carnival since a very early age, and for decades he created outstanding concepts for the parades of "Mas," as he called the performances, after the French "Masquerade." Beside the sophistication of his chosen themes—spanning Milton's *Paradise Lost* to folklore, and even controversial social issues like the AIDS crisis—his creations are remarkable for the combination of sculpture and movement. His costumes, often described as "dancing mobiles," are designed "with the motion of the performer in mind, so that the performer and the costume are one." His giant puppets were operated by humans, thanks to long sticks which transferred movement, amplifying the gesture of the operator while enhancing it gracefully. The Olympic commission gave Minshall the opportunity to complete this form of transmutation through costume: the performer and the costume become one, or better expressed, the costume becomes the performer. Erasing the human body, the animated textile is the only visible presence, whose animation is seemingly enabled by air.⁹

Minshall, who was commissioned by the Olympic organizers to design the entire ceremony, outsourced the technical making to Doron Gazit, who had previously gained expertise in domesticating air. Gazit started to deal with breeze and plastic in his native Israel, creating "AirTubes," as he called them, that he conceived and used as artistic media to "visualize the invisible."¹⁰ At first, the soft and thin pipes could only be operated by wind horizontally, but for the Olympics, he developed blowers powerful enough to project his Fly Guys more than 30 mt. up in the sky.¹¹ Furthermore, he engineered the apparatus in order

"protective bulge"



Image courtesy of Syna Chen and Lilli Waters.

9 Cfr. J. D. Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds. Towards a philosophy of Elemental Media*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2015.

10 S. Dean, "Biography of an Inflatable Tube Guy. The checkered past and lonely future of air puppets", cit.

11 Cfr. Ibid.

12 P. Chan, S. Thorne, F. Tenaglia, *Odysseus and the Bathers: Paul Chan*, moussemagazine.it, 2018

to achieve a graceful dancing appearance, inflating the textile with a flux of air, which induced patterns of different movements. Ganzit later patented it in the United States, apparently behind Minshall's back, making good profit but partially contributing to the decline and even banishment of the Tall Boy, via a metamorphic agony that led the inflated successors far away from its Olympic progenitor.

Artist Paul Chan's most recent body of work, *Breathers*, is an example of a possible new kind of screen-less animations which derives directly from flying guys. *Breathers* are, effectively, moving sculptures: figures made of fabric and moved by air generated by industrial blowers at their base. Chan, who is mostly known for his sophisticated works of CGI animation projection, stopped his normal production for several years because he "had to use screens for making moving-image works" and he "couldn't bear to look at them anymore."¹² As stated in the press release of his exhibition show at Greene Naftali in New York in 2017, significantly entitled "Rhi—Anima," Chan has long expressed the "'regressive' nature of image works," commenting on how computer and projector screens are in essence the same, in so far as both exist within the frame of the image. The artist affirms that in the early 2000, when he reached a peak in his career, screens were still "special," far from as ubiquitous as they are now. Today, however, we are "drowning in screens;" the *Breathers*, then, are a potential rescue from this drowning. The *breathers* are actually breathing, they are breathing artworks, they come alive with a breath.

The exhibition's title, *Rhi—Anima*, recalls the Aristotelian *De Anima*, thinking of the process of animation with/through air. He considers *The Breathers* close to spirits, highlighting the vital relationship between spirit, breath, and movement. He continues pointing out that he is designing "clothes for air in movement," describing the appearance of *The Breathers* as a pure abstraction of the body presence, the idea of a body yet, nevertheless, the expression of humanity. These restless figures animate the exhibition spaces until they are compassionately turned off by the museums staff; their life is limited to the temporality of display in the white cube, severed not only from natural forces (such as wind) but from the liveliness of street life.

Recent inflatables in fashion seem to detourn the inflatable into a thematic of emergency and danger, particularly evoked the s of life vests, and their linkage to crossing waters in order to reach a safe destination—far from war, devastation and hunger. As such, the clothes, which seem to be given a kind of respiratory function, impose an ambivalent reflection on the link between air and life and on death as a denial of breath. "The Life Vest" designed by Balenciaga creative director Demna Gvasalia can be considered the clearest example of a nod to the permanent state of emergency in which contemporary society finds itself, inevitably conjuring associations such as the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. The sleeveless jacket, priced at around €1,800, is made of waterproof fabric and can be inflated—according to



Paul Chan, *Breathers*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

the directives inscribed in the item description—to increase “dramatic volume”—but fails to indicate for what situation or emergency this would be appropriate. Almost certainly, this function serves as little more than a scenographic and purely formal effect, yet, if we reflect on the name of the garment, as a “life vests,” we cannot help but contextualize the jacket with respect to its primary function, the rescue at sea. In the case of the Balenciaga inflatable garment, the implicit narrative is perhaps that of a high-class marine tragedy, which follows the sinking of a luxury yacht and not of an inflatable overcrowded boat, adrift for days or weeks. Elsewhere in the luxury space, Craig Green’s 2018 collection for Moncler Genius (inspired by samurai fighters) recovers the values of protection and functionality that distinguish many inflatable objects, to build soft and light armor that is easily foldable. Green’s flexible shells resemble life-boats, lifesaving emergency devices that seem, potentially, to be an effective solution for temporary survival in dark, freezing waters.

Air-mediated animation of works of art and sartorial creations open up for reflection upon a new horizon of materialized cinematicity, on the realization of “cinema with other means” in a dimension of everyday sartorial life. These inflatable clothing apparatuses give body to images that were, until recently, considered strictly two-dimensional. They conjure up fantasies and nightmares thanks to various air animation mechanisms, and invite the wearer to participate as a model, wearer, witness. For better or for worse, this three-dimensionalization redeems the images from being “only” images, and present them as presences operating at the very boundary of reality, albeit expanded and inalienable.

In claiming an existence outside the cage of the frame, beyond the regime of representation, these restless sartorial image-objects raise new questions about subjectivity, freedom and marginality. The unquestionable kinematic nature of dress starts from the movement of fabric thanks to the movement of the body, articulating itself through drapery and folds of garments. Yet, the inflatability of these clothes seems to go beyond the need for a human subject as an activating agent, and thus gestures to a sort of ontological autonomy—garments that, just like Chan’s *Breathers*, claims the subjectification of those who risk losing the right to humanity. Inflatable fashion reinforces this perspective thanks to its air-powered, non-human appearance. Mechanical life tied to capitalist labor manifests itself in/as animation. Clothes advocate the same autonomy and subjectivity of cinematic images and animated machines, and help pinpoint a crucial aspect of anthropocentrism: the idea that the world is at the service of man. The world understood not only as the totality of resources to be exploited, but as a set of artifacts that, once created, remain at the service of man, in a condition of eternal slavery.



© Craig Green x Moncler

Outfitting as Assemblage



Isa Genzken, *Untitled* (Schauspieler), 2012. Photo: Delfinne Photography. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

“‘Getting dressed’ in the modern world is a matter of bricolage, of the coming together of garments and accessories that we have usually not made ourselves, combined to create a finished ‘appearance’. Every individual is a walking collage, an artwork of ‘found items’—or perhaps something closer to a contemporary installation, changing as it interacts with its audiences.”

—Elizabeth Wilson¹

¹ Elizabeth Wilson, “Changing Times/Altered States” in *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 249