

outfit consisting of a beaten-up varsity jacket spray-painted on the back with the letters "NY," paired with red skinny jeans, a floral crown, and an accompanying purple Hookah, certainly feels meaningful, loaded with narrative—yet no cohesive image or story is offered, and the meaning remains fractured, inaccessible, private, lost. Caroline Busta writes of Genzken's actors; "we might instead take this figure as refusing to communicate.... Considering information as a currency and that post-Fordist capitalism demands that everyone communicate as fluidly as possible, maybe this is what a radical body is supposed to look like."²¹ As Joselit argues, *not communicating* as a stable, identifiable image can be understood as an act of resistance to the expected communicability of information of bodies under advanced capitalism.

Assemblage, then—including and especially dressing—reflects more than anything the assembleur's own curiosity about, and attraction to, objects and their roles (semantic and functional) in life. In her writing on Genzken, Letizia Ragaglia writes that her sculptures possess "a sort of umbilical cord linking them to reality, a physical relationship that in its essence comes very close to the ready-made, and is removed from the concept of artistic 'invention' in general: her art is not about coming up with new forms but 'listening to' and channeling the complexity of the real world."²² This process of *listening* or *decoding*, deeply subjective and reliant on a variety of conditions and viewing positions, involves an active and self-conscious process of analysing one's own conscious and subconscious response to clothes. The "narrative mania" attached to clothes encompasses the desire to grasp a piece of clothing's life from production and exchange to use, loss and rediscovery; the lives it was imbricated with; and yes, even its repurposing as sculptural material. Outfitting stages the garment as a kind of *objet petit a*; it is forever unknowable and immensely fascinating.²³

In a 1964 essay, Barthes wrote that "costume is a kind of writing and has the *ambiguity* of writing;" "the good costume must be material enough to signify and transparent enough not to turn its signs into parasites."²⁴ If outfitting is adopted by artists as a form of artistic production, it is the duty of viewers and critics to develop a vocabulary, grammar, and syntax for decoding them.²⁵ Below and beyond the obvious signification of clothes lies a deeper and vaster field that marks acts of choice, desire, (self-)identification, and the very ritual of dress, and these lenses must be incorporated into a more intimate study of clothing as a sculptural material. However, the eternally ambiguous and *irrational* nature of dress must always be accounted for in a study of clothes: it reminds us that the play with fixed meanings, the rejection of permanent representation, is the ultimate act of freedom.

21 Caroline Busta, "Body Doubles" in Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, Nikolas Hirsch, eds. *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

22 Letizia Ragaglia, "To the Rhythm of Reality: Isa Genzken's Faithful Record of the World" in Isa Genzken and Letizia Ragaglia eds. *Isa Genzken*. (Milano; Köln: Mousse Publishing, 2010), p. 19

23 See Rosalind Krauss, "Objet (Petit) A" in Helen Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture*. (Columbus, Ohio: University Park, PA; Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University; Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 84-91

24 Roland Barthes, "The Diseases of Costume" in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 42

25 On this topic, see: Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*. (New York: Random House, 1981)

Issy Wood

ON CLOTHES

Whether you consider yourself fashion-literate or a fashion Luddite, clothes are important. They are the very definition of frivolity but also the most fundamental—really it's the only thing setting us apart from Adam and Eve. This brings me to shame, in which I'm well-versed. Sudden Biblical awareness of nudity, I'm afraid, is no match for modern body dysmorphia. Perhaps the former sets the scene for the latter, but contemporary clothing's ability to flaunt or hide a physique depending on the wearer's mood, sense of self, bloatedness, food intake, body temperate, occasion, and motive means there are a million ways to wear what we wear. I remember being told after my first stint in an eating disorder hospital that it was a good idea to burn all the clothes that once fit my skeletal frame but that now wouldn't agree with my new force-fed body. The idea was clear, a kind of ceremony to set fire to a bygone era of illness, and to make sure these tiny trousers weren't there taunting me, begging me to starve myself back into them. This is sometimes what happens—we allow clothes to dictate our body shape rather than the other way round. Think of Miranda from SATC's "skinny jeans," the holy grail of lost baby weight, of seemingly instant male desire. Miranda's body changes over numerous episodes and life events but the jeans remain a blameless size 6. Because if something doesn't fit, what are you gonna do, blame Opening Ceremony? "It's really less a case of me not fitting your body," the garment seems to say, "than of your body not fitting me." While not true for everybody, you can see how smoothly a shirt goes from cotton blend to torture chamber.

When I realised I could paint on the clothes I can't or won't wear, suddenly those compulsive insomniac purchases and years of physicians watching my weight climb, fall, climb, fall and having to have a wardrobe for every subtle expansion and contraction, it all mattered less. I can spin all the misery into gold. Often when wearing clothes wears you out, the best clothes are ones you don't have to wear at all.



Dal Chodha

THIS “DRESS” IS NOT A DRESS

Crew-neck t-shirts, long sleeve dresses, cotton and linen; I have been thinking about clothes that are non-descript yet omnipresent. The stuff that is rarely “reviewed.”

I thought about “one of the oldest garments from Egypt on display in the world.” It sits at the top of a tall wooden cabinet at the end of a poorly lit aisle of the UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London. Its caption—white 15-point text printed on red—reads:

THE TARKHAN DRESS

UC2861

This dress is now one of the most famous objects in the Petrie Museum but it did not always look like this. It was excavated at Tarkhan, one of the most important cemeteries from the time Egypt was unified around 3000 BC. Petrie’s teams excavated a pile of linen from a Dynasty 1 (c. 2800 BC) tomb in 1913. It was only in 1977, when this linen pile was cleaned by the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Textile Conservation Workshop, that the dress was discovered. It was then carefully stitched into Crepeline (a fine silk material used in textile conservation) and mounted. It is one of the oldest garments from Egypt on display in the world.

Early Dynastic Period, Dynasty 1, 2800 BC