

Un/Ordinary Clothes: Destroying and Repairing Experience in Contemporary Clothes-Art

Roupas comuns/incomuns: destruindo e reparando a experiência nas roupas-arte contemporânea

Maria Antonietta Trasforini¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4068-3662>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26563/dobras.v19i46.2013>

[abstract] The paper analyses the use of clothing in contemporary art, from twentieth-century textile art to clothing as a contemporary art form. The difference is that textile art retains clothing's functional and distinctive values, whereas contemporary Clothes-art erases any use values to produce meanings related to identity, culture, and memory. Clothes-art occupies a polysemic space that seems to unfold between two synthetic paradigms: the destruction or emptying of clothing, as exemplified by Christian Boltanski's gigantic 2010 installation *Personnes*, where empty clothing evokes the absence of the body; and the production and repair of the subject, as exemplified by Louise Bourgeois's 1990s work, which used clothing and tissue sculptures to reconstruct a new corporeal self and repair her autobiography. This work anticipates Repairing Art, a contemporary practice with philosophical, political, and cultural implications that addresses collective memories of trauma, such as that caused by colonialism and war, as well as the theme of human survival on a dramatically damaged planet. Against this theoretical backdrop, Clothes-art emerges as a significant contemporary practice of meaning production, questioning the relationship between art, experience, culture and individual and collective memory.

[Keywords] **Clothes-art. repairing art. experience. gender. habitus.**

¹ Professor of Sociology of Culture and Art at the University of Ferrara (Italy). Email: mariaantonietta.trasforini@unife.it.

[**resumo**] O artigo analisa o uso da roupa na arte contemporânea, desde a arte têxtil do século XX até a roupa como forma de arte contemporânea. A diferença é que a arte têxtil mantém os valores funcionais e distintivos da roupa, enquanto a arte contemporânea da roupa apaga quaisquer valores de uso para produzir significados relacionados à identidade, cultura e memória. As roupas-arte ocupam um espaço polissêmico que parece se desdobrar entre dois paradigmas sintéticos: a destruição ou esvaziamento da roupa, como exemplificado pela gigantesca instalação *Personnes*, de Christian Boltanski, de 2010, onde roupas vazias evocam a ausência do *corpo*; e a produção e reparação do sujeito, como exemplificado pela obra de Louise Bourgeois da década de 1990, que usou esculturas de roupas e tecidos para reconstruir um novo eu corpóreo e reparar sua autobiografia. Esse trabalho antecipa a Arte da Reparação, uma prática contemporânea com implicações filosóficas, políticas e culturais que aborda memórias coletivas de traumas, como os causados pelo colonialismo e pela guerra, bem como o tema da sobrevivência humana em um planeta dramaticamente danificado. Nesse contexto teórico, as roupas-arte surgem como uma prática contemporânea significativa de produção de significado, questionando a relação entre arte, experiência, cultura e memória individual e coletiva.

[**palavras-chave**] **Clothes-art. arte de reparar. experiência. gênero. habitus.**

Recebido em: 19-9-2025

Aprovado em: 24-11-2025

Introduction

In the transformation of textile art into Clothes-art in the twentieth century, there was a shift from garments that were both functional and distinctive to garments whose meaning transcends any textile design. Clothing thus functions as a pretext, becoming part of the vast production of meaning in which contemporary art plays a leading role. Clothes-art constructs new cultural objects, narratives and experiences².

From the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the status of textile art had already undergone multiple redefinitions. Influenced by nineteenth-century hierarchies of value and gender, it was categorised as either traditional or experimental ‘work products’, created by women who were either artisans or proto-designers. Such works were usually produced in domestic or proto-industrial settings and were frequently contrasted with ‘professional’ art, the authors of which were more often men (Parker and Pollock, 1981, p. 68–70; Trasforini, 2007, p. 35–36; Pansera, 2002). Examples range from the traditional American women’s patchwork (Becker, 1982) to the production of artistic objects and fabrics by the English Arts and Crafts

² This article is an updated version of two of my previous works, published in 2010 and 2012, that examined the relationship between art, clothing and Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’, as well as experience (Trasforini, 2010; 2012). In light of the contemporary artistic practice of Repairing Art (Attia, 2019, 2020), I thought it would be interesting to revisit these studies.

movement, led by William Morris, and the textile art of the Bauhaus, in which female artists were the undisputed protagonists – sometimes despite themselves. During the 20th century, art clothing became intertwined with avant-garde research and experimentation³, exploring not only textile materials, but also new ways of attributing codes and establishing metonymic relationships with the body. ‘Art clothing’ tells stories, evokes emotions and transforms garments into something else. It is now detached from references to identity, as well as distinctive or connotative functions. This transition was characterised by the prevalence of female artists and marked a shift from textile art to what I term ‘Clothes-art’, abandoning the practical value of clothing in order to navigate the open sea of possible meanings and messages.⁴

Metonymic art: the garment is the body

During the 20th century, as textile art transitioned into *clothes-art*, artistic clothing took the form of metonymy⁵, with pieces that blur the line between garment and body’. This means that the garment ‘replaces’ the body, starting from a connection marked by strong connotations (such as gender or class), and resulting in new meanings. Alternatively, the garment is presented as an expression of a socially imposed identity.

Paradigmatic examples include the work of several key 20th-century artists: Sonia Delaunay’s *Simultaneous Dresses*, Elsa Schiaparelli’s surrealist Body-Dresses, Atsuko Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* representing the homo faber of industrial modernity, and Magdalena Abakanowicz’s monumental *Abakans*.

Created between 1914 and 1930, Sonia Delaunay’s *Simultaneous Dresses*, literally give body to painting, offering a dynamic and aesthetic response to an era of great social and cultural transformation: “The geometries and colours produce variations in form through the movement of the body wearing them” (Panella, 2005, p. 30). Regarding the first *Simultaneous Dress* in 1914, Blaise Cendrars said, ‘*Sur la robe, elle a un corps*’ (‘On the dress, she has a body’) to describe the vitalistic exchange between body and dress (Campitelli, 2005, p. 8). Her experimental robe-poème (poetry dresses) reflected an era of geographical and cultural shifts that also affected the artistic avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s. If clothes is the only possession of nomads, then Sonia Delaunay’s designs, with their references to movement and intercultural influences, testify to and provoke world where shared identities were no longer certain (Felshin, 1995a, p. 29; Buckberrough, 1995; Panella, 2005).

³ During the 1930s Italian Futurist movement, fashion, fabric design and new clothing were artistic expressions of ‘rebuilding the world’ (Bentivoglio and Zoccoli, 1997). Balla, Marinetti, Thyacht and the Deperos (Fortunato and Rosetta) were designers of clothes that challenged traditions and institutions of the past (Braun, 1995, p. 34; Zoccoli, 1997, p. 140).

⁴ I have not found such a clear distinction in the existing literature as that used in this text. Instead, I have adopted the term ‘clothes-art’ from Steinberg (2005), who used it in the catalogue for the Paris exhibition entitled ‘Art-Robe’.

⁵ Metonymy is a rhetorical device involving the substitution of one term for another with which it has a contiguous relationship. For example, the name of the container is used to indicate the contents, or the name of the cause takes the place of the effect. While a metaphor is based on similarity, a metonym is based on contiguity. In metonymy, the figurative expression coincides with the literal expression it replaces in terms of a material connection of a spatial, temporal, causal or other nature (Barthes, 1964; Henry, 1975; Muraro, 1981). I also refer to Trasforini (2010).

Another example of explicit metonymy is the work of the Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli⁶, who was influenced by the Surrealist concept of ‘taking desires for reality’ (Baudot, 2004, p. 3). In an attempt to translate Surrealist ideas into clothing design, she collaborated with Dalí to create two explicitly metonymic dresses. The *Tear Illusion Dress* (1938) featured images of tears drawn on the fabric (Crane, 2000, p. 107), offering an approach that was arguably naive but certainly unusual in the context of poverty and social inequality at that time. The *Skeleton Dress* (1938) was made of elegant black silk and featured an extravagant reference to death in the form of the relief of an apparent underlying skeleton’s ribs and spine⁷.

Abandoning all traditional textile language, the *Electric Dress* (1956) by Japanese artist Atsuko Tanaka was modelled by the artist herself at the opening of the 2nd Gutai Exhibition in Tokyo. Consisting of an astonishing tangle of intermittently lit coloured light bulbs and neon lights, its structure evokes the armour of an ancient samurai. Prefiguring the post-human forms of the 1990s, the *Electric Dress* represents a body that is devoid of any identity or relational connotation; it is now functional only within a triumphant industrial and artificial modernity.

In the 1960s, Magdalena Abakanowicz’s monumental dresses also signified ‘something else’ entirely. Her ‘*Abakans*’ are gigantic, imposing figures made of compact, solid fabrics that resemble container dresses and challenge ‘any notion of dress as a discrete category’. With forms that explicitly recall female sexuality, they are evocative receptacles of metaphorical, historical, autobiographical and psychological content (Felshin, 1995a, p. 28; Brenson, 1995). These works seem to definitively complete the metamorphosis from textile art to *Clothes-art*.

A brief digression on habitus as cultural body

Metonymic characteristics can also be seen in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. Derived etymologically from the Latin *habeo*, it refers to something possessed and, by extension, indicates one’s disposition, behaviour or attitude. Bourdieu uses the term in several passages of his work (Bourdieu, 1979; 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 84–105) to describe the principle by which social actors act, namely the socially constructed system of structured and structuring dispositions acquired through practice and oriented towards practical functions. In other words, it is the social embodied. Furthermore, Bourdieu defines it as a kind of spring that is ready to act, durable, yet not immutable. This allows us to explain the constancy of dispositions, tastes and preferences. As an embodied form of sociality, habitus is the cultural body of individuals, their cultural clothing, their mobile culture and the light or heavy imagery that they carry with them, shaping their body and,

⁶ In 2022–23, a major exhibition entitled ‘*Shocking! The Surreal World of Elsa Schiaparelli*’ was organized at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

⁷ A contemporary reference to the *Skeleton Dress* is a mannequin with a glass head wearing the black dress; this mannequin was the protagonist of Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret’s work *Flow My Tears*, exhibited at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

phenomenologically, their ‘social and cultural being in the world’. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus seems to preserve the polysemy of clothing as both an action of inhabiting and of being inhabited by ‘something’, in a manner that could be defined as structuralist⁸. Similarly, the verb ‘to inhabit’ has multiple meanings: such as being constantly ‘inside’ — inside oneself, a house, a territory, a country or a nation — as well as being inhabited and contained by the outside.

In a shift of meanings, the habitus — the cultural embodiment of the individual — appears to replace the physical self (Airyung, 2005: 6), as Virginia Woolf evocatively suggests in a passage from her *Orlando*: “There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; ... they mold our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking”⁹.

Clothing and bodies as symbolic battlefields

The declassification of languages in the 1970s art world produced a great deal of freedom of expression, in terms of both materials and languages. Many artistic practices revealed the connections and symmetries/dissymmetries of meaning between clothing, identity and the body (Steinberg, 2005). During this period, clothing in art became a vehicle for cultural rhetoric narrating identities, stereotypes, traumas and wounds, both personal and collective (Campitelli, 2005), and amplifying psychological, sexual and cultural messages. As a means of expressing identity (gender, group or ethnicity), clothing highlights the transient and negotiated nature of its social construction, as well as its role as a symbolic battlefield.

Examples of this can be seen in the body-dresses that many feminist artists used to denounce gender stereotypes, violence, and social control over women’s bodies in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰

One notable example is Jana Sterbak’s 1987 installation-performance *Vanitas*, which featured a hyperbolic flesh dress. In her *Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, the artist performed wearing an outfit made from real flesh. By literally doubling the flesh of the body (Valeriani, 2004, p. 208), the work appears to reject the cultural body in order to reconnect with its ‘natural’, raw and unromantic interior, composed of tissue, nerves, blood and fat. Through an apparently naturalistic action, Sterbak dramatically stages and denounces Western femininity as a gender habitus and a naturalised system of differences inscribed in a body saturated with culture¹¹.

⁸ In Lacan’s definition, it is akin to being defined by language, or, in Lévi-Strauss’s analysis, by one’s position in the chain of kinship.

⁹ Quoted by Felshin (1995a, p. 20)

¹⁰ Here, I will only examine a few of them. For a more comprehensive illustration of the work of the first and second generations of feminist artists (the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s), see Felshin (1995b). The artists are: Sarah Charlesworth, Maureen Connor, Lesley Dill, Leslie Fry, Kathy Grove, Harmony Hammond, Miriam Schapiro, Mira Schor, Judith Shea, Elise Siegel, Mimi Smith, and Yong Soon Min.

¹¹ Jana Sterbak is also renowned for her giant, remote-controlled, mechanical crinoline (*Remote Control*, 1989), into which she lowered herself to symbolise the transformation of women’s bodies into submissive objects in the modern era.

Within the realm of stereotypes and gender imagery, the bride and her dresses are recurring themes in contemporary art history, beginning with Marcel Duchamp's *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (1915–23). Together with the 1914 readymade *Bottle Rack*, this ambiguous and esoteric work by Duchamp forms the reference point for Maureen Connor's 1989 piece *The Bride Re-dressed*, in which a bottle rack/body is covered with a white, impalpable bridal veil. Regarding the relationship between clothing and identity, Maureen Connor stated:

I suspect, though, that the relationship between clothing and identity has been a bit misunderstood. While identities are not innate, neither are they selected at will. Frequently they are imposed on us by virtue of necessity or circumstance, usually with each one carrying with it sartorial requirements that strictly limit one's choice of clothing as well. At this point in time, however, we do have an increased awareness of clothing, especially regarding its ability to represent the range of available identities (Felshin, 1995b, p. 78).

During prolonged period of alarm surrounding AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, many gay and feminist artists created clothing for absent bodies. These works/clothes were literal documents of loss or veritable memento mori. They were also public gestures rejecting culturally imposed images, or forms of resistance to being transformed into objects by those who wield the symbolic power to construct cultural gazes (Felshin, 1995a, p. 20).

One of the best-known examples is American artist Robert Gober's *Wedding Gown* (1989), an empty wedding dress standing alone, resembling a sumptuous, unfinished larva. Serving as a symbol of both individual and collective roles, desires and plans, the empty wedding dress also features in *Forgotten Dream* (2000) by Afro-American artist David Hammons. Here, Hammons denounces the disappointments and failures of social inclusion and integration in 1990s American society, which was still seen as a promised land. In this piece, the white wedding dress emerges from a grey manhole cover and hangs from the ceiling.

In the 1990s, 'cultural clothing' signalled irreversibly hybridised identities and denounced absences. These were the stories and geographies affected by wars, migrations and the involuntary displacement of women and men. This took the form of actual cultural habitus (Trasforini, 2010). Examples of this can be seen in the performances and video works of Bosnian artist Maja Bajevic and Bulgarian artist Daniela Kostova, who cut, sew or wear clothes bearing images that symbolise their origins. These include the map of the former Yugoslavia in Bajevic's *Dressed Up* (1999) and the monuments of Sofia in Kostova's *Made in* (2004–05) (De Cecco, 2006).

In her photographic series, *Static Drift* (2001), Kenyan artist Ingrid Mwangi - born in Nairobi and now living in Germany - maps her national and ethnic genealogy onto her own body, transposing the borders of Germany and Africa onto herself. When detached from their usual contexts and inscribed on her body, these geographical borders demonstrate the significance of nationalism, skin colour and ethnic identity, namely the relationships between colonisers and the colonised, and oppressors and the oppressed.

Contemporary Clothes-art offers multiple and multicultural lines of interpretation that intersect with categories such as empty or filled clothes, clothes tattooed on the body¹², clothes that double the body, and clothes that are absent or intangible.

Examples include Andrea Zittel's *A-Z Fiber Form Uniform* (1998–2008); Yin Xiuzhen's small shoes containing photos (1998); Beverly Semmes' *Landscape* (1993); and Regina Franck's *Hermès' Mistress* (1994–99) and Majida Kattari's *V.I.P. (Voile Islamique Parisien)* (2004); *She Said* (2004) by American artist Donna Rosenthal; *Liebes Kind* (2004) by German artist Gudrun Kampl; and the full-body garments *Mistress* (1994–99) by German artist Regina Franck and *V.I.P. (Voile Islamique Parisien)* (2004) by Moroccan artist Majida Kattari.

As I have already mentioned, female artists seem to be more convincing interpreters than male artists. In the catalogue of the 2005 Paris exhibition organised by UNESCO titled *Art-Robe: Women Artists at the Nexus of Art and Fashion*¹³, one of the curators emphasised:

Clothing is a complex and eloquent symbol that personifies the wearer. As a metonym for the body and a symbol of socio-cultural identity, clothing has always interested artists, who often use it as a material, a medium and a symbol. Above all, however, they use it as a substitute for the subject 'body'. Female artists in particular have a special relationship with fabric, tailoring and fashion, demonstrating an extraordinary ability to explore this field. By playing on the different layers of the body, they express themselves on diverse themes such as identity, memory, culture, sexual difference and, finally, fashion (Airyung, 2000).

The relationship between art and clothing in contemporary art is now a polysemic field and a deployed theoretical space. Metaphorically speaking it is stretched between two opposing paradigms that call into question the relationship between the creation and experience of art and individual and collective history. I refer to these as the paradigms of emptying and deprivation, and filling and repair respectively.

Christian Boltanski: The Destruction and Survival of Experience

The concept of 'undressing' and 'emptying clothes' as a form of deprivation is exemplified by Christian Boltanski's large-scale installation, *Personnes*, which was exhibited at the Grand Palais in Paris in February 2010 (Lequeux, 2010). The title itself is a powerful oxymoron, combining 'nobody' and 'people'. Renowned for his radical reinterpretation of the memory of the Holocaust through the use of objects, clothing and photographs of those deported and exterminated in Nazi concentration camps, Boltanski collected thousands of used garments and arranged them in small, neat squares under the vast Art Nouveau vaults

¹² See also the series of photos of tattooed clothes entitled *Chameleon* (2003) by Mwangi herself.

¹³ This exhibition is not the only one on this theme during this period. I would like to mention two others: *DressCode: Das Kleid als künstlerisches Symbol*, held at the Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum in St Gallen, Switzerland, in 2006–07, and *Reflecting Fashion: Kunst und Mode seit der Moderne*, which was held at the Mumok in Wien in 2012.

of Grand Palais¹⁴. Next to this stands a high mountain of clothes, on which a gigantic, blind mechanical arm works, randomly selecting garments with a dull, obsessive noise and lifting and dropping them in a heap. By ‘emptying’ the clothes of their former owners, Boltanski creates a monumental, haunted work in which the absent bodies are like ghosts, recalling Roland Barthes’s definition of photography: here objects, just like photos, show the absence of the subject.

The used garment speaks of someone who was there, but is no longer there. The smell and the creases remain, but not the person [...] I always try to use clothes from our time, so that they are immediately recognisable as things from today [...].¹⁵

Personnes stages the experience of deprivation and nudity, stripping clothing of all its connotative functions. These ephemeral and transitory characteristics are typical of fashion in modernity, but not only. By removing clothing’s role of individualisation, the artist reverses fashion’s historicising action, whereby dress codes are used to categorise people according to their social class, time and space, thereby materialising social distinction.

A powerfully anti-Bourdesian work, *Personnes* resets the codes of distinction and status differentiation, by playing symbolically with the dimensions of flattening and verticality. With its flattened structures of small, regimented, squared-off fields of used clothes, it evokes the cancellation of identity signals and the downward fall. The verticality of the pile of clothes on which the mechanical arm operates, fishing at random, evokes the verticality of the modern visual field¹⁶, the negation of hierarchies, and the random levelling of death. The work also evokes the historical responsibilities underlying the 20th(th)-century extermination camps.

By radically depriving clothes of their *signifiants* (Barthes, 1964), thereby removing their ability to narrate history and stories, Boltanski seems to indirectly refer to Walter Benjamin’s (1980;orig.pub. 1933) definition of the *destruction of experience*. This represents the end of a narrative subject, a destruction which, however, remains incomplete as long as the story of what has been destroyed survives (Didi-Huberman, 2009).

Through this gap, and through his work, Boltanski creates an opportunity for an intensified physical experience: the sensation of cold and bewilderment, and the feeling of being in the presence of absence.

¹⁴Using empty and discarded clothes is not a new concept in contemporary art. It is part of a wider trend of reusing and repurposing discarded objects to give them new life through art (Vergine, 2006). This trend can be seen in some *Arte Povera* works from the late 1960s, particularly in Michelangelo Pistoletto’s best-known piece, *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags), created in 1967.

¹⁵Boltanski, quoted by Vergine (2006, p. 121).

¹⁶For more on the debate among art historians and critics concerning the contrast between the ‘verticality of the visual field of modernity’ and ‘*the formless*’, which challenges the primacy of vision by presenting what lies ‘on the ground’ in a horizontal manner, see Didi-Huberman (2002).

A piercing cold greets the viewer, offset by a neon light diffused throughout the space. A quiet desert of clothes lies on the ground before us, rows of piled-up clothes opening up like paths for our gaze and steps to follow. Once worn, they are now silently devoid of the body and mark each viewer's passage. *Personnes* is Boltanski's most radical and democratic installation, placing the artist and the viewer on an equal footing. It invites viewers to embark on an initiatory journey, forgetting the entrance in order to reach the end and the dematerialisation of the body, and to overcome the gravitational weight of clothing [...] (Bonito Oliva, 2010, p. 44–45).

Rather than being an object of contemplation, *Personnes* is a true *open work*: a space for crossing and immersion, in which the public both 'inhabits' and is 'inhabited' by the work. Indeed, the verb 'to inhabit' reveals its polysemy here, denoting both being 'inside' — inside oneself, a house, a territory, a country, a nation, or a work — and being contained and inhabited by the outside. In a structuralist sense, the verb 'to inhabit' evokes Bourdieu's (1979) definition of habitus – discussed above – as a 'worn' exterior that shapes and structures the interior simultaneously.

While the 'full' garment that covers bodies is political, shaped by modern technologies of sign systems and power that mould docile bodies in the modern era (Foucault, 1988), the empty garment appears to signify 'bare life', the absence of its political, social and communicative dimensions. This concept emerged from the dehumanisation of humanity after Auschwitz (Agamben, 1995). In *Personnes*, Boltanski exploits the paradox of destruction versus survival, emphasising the notion of survival through clothing as a sign. When the protagonists' lives seem irreparably compromised and the human form has disappeared, the rag remains (Didi-Huberman, 2002)¹⁷.

From Louise Bourgeois to *Repairing Art*: repairing one's own history and collective history

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Boltanski's depersonalised, empty clothing paradigm is Louise Bourgeois' work of subjectivation. In her textile pieces from the 1990s, she employed clothing and fabric sculptures to repeatedly reconstruct, repair and recount her autobiography. Her work seems to anticipate what is now broadly defined as *Repairing Art*, a practice with philosophical, political and cultural implications that addresses the memory of collective trauma, such as that caused by colonialism and wars, and the theme of human survival on a dramatically wounded planet.

¹⁷ The discarded clothes are reminiscent of Bauman's (2003) concept of 'wasted lives', representing the humanity of refugees who have fled war and poverty by leaving behind the clothes they were wearing when they arrived.

Louise Bourgeois

Her pioneering act of repair — mending fabric sculptures — can be defined as a process of ‘remembering’ (rammemorazione), in which the artist acts as her own narrator, tracing and retracing the path of her survival¹⁸.

She uses textiles and weaving and sewing tools in this process, such as her needle-shaped sculptures from the 1940s and 1950s. She revisited this theme in the 1990s with her Needle series. She also transformed her mother into a giant weaving spider (the *Spiders* of the 1990s). Through these works, Louise Bourgeois evokes her mother’s presence, depicting her as a solitary, threatening yet protective figure, much like the archetypal spider that weaves and produces webs of relationships and repairs them (Legrand, 2008).

Thus, art and life seem to be woven from the ‘thread of thought’ underlying the spider’s philosophy (Rigotti, 2002: 47–58). The needle is an instrument of care (Steinberg, 2005), and can be used to construct a personal mythology through incessantly re-narrating her own roman de famille, with its continuously revisited inner plot. “Je m’appelle Louise Joséphine Bourgeois. Je suis née le 25 décembre 1911 à Paris. Tout mon travail [...] tous mes sujets trouvent leur source dans mon enfance” (Boutouille, 2008, p. 14).

From the 1990s to the 2000s, Bourgeois sculpted bodies like fabrics, creating figures and clothing with a primal construction in which fabric and body are one: naked body clothes, dressed in fabric skin furrowed by seams like scars.

On these fabric hybrids – clothes, mannequins and sculptures (Coignard, 2008, p. 27) – the sewing process takes the form of a continuous ‘I make-I undo-I remake’, in which the garment functions as a container-ego skin, as defined by Anzieu’s (1985). Through her exploration of materials ranging from fabric to iron and marble, Louise Bourgeois situates the clothed-naked couple within the anthropological framework of primal and binary oppositions. These works take the form of bodies and objects – such as sculptures comprising balls of wool, spools, threads and hanging clothes – and are presented as tools of a deconstructing both her art and her biography. The padded garments are in painful positions and are enclosed in display cases like memories. There are also clusters of hanging, worn clothes that were once worn by the artist herself. These clothes are now enclosed in a *cell* and are leaning on chairs or hanging from hangers and clothes pegs. In their new guise, they bear witness to an unfinished personal diary (Vettese, 1997, p. 36). In short, her clothes are her memories. As she herself said in a comment on Cell 1 from 1991: ‘I need my memories. They are my documents’ (Coen, 2004, p. 58).¹⁹

These documents function as tools of a daily and “low” technology of self and subjectification process (Foucault, 1988), but they also continually expose, break down and question the artistic creation process itself.

¹⁸ Again according to Didi-Huberman (2009), who takes up this theme from Benjamin, the imprint through which the narrator leaves his mark is epic memory, whose transformation gives rise to the processes of remembrance in modern novels.

¹⁹ Weaving was the business of the Bourgeois family, who owned a small company specializing in tapestry repair near Paris, where her mother was a weaver and where little Louise herself worked on tapestries.

Repairing Art

In the contemporary context of ‘Repairing Art’, a form of political and collective ‘sewing’, — two distinct approaches actually emerge²⁰: post-colonial criticism and resistance/resilience, and ecological denunciation for the survival of the planet and humanity itself. The main exponent of the former is the Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia, while a significant exponent of the latter is the English artist Lucy Orta.

Attia’s research into 20th-century European history begins with the discovery of shocking photographs of faces of wounded First World War soldiers who were surgically ‘repaired’ using experimental techniques, and continues with a reflection on post-colonial hybridisation (Attia, 2017; 2019; Jones, 2016)²¹. Just as the faces of the wounded and repaired are ‘new’ faces, so post-colonial history, precisely because it is hybridised and not necessarily reconciled, is a ‘new’ history.

Attia’s ‘recovery’ involves ‘post-colonial’ artefacts that have been restored and incorporated into a new type of archive/museum, creating a new memory and a new hybrid existence. According to Attia, hybridisation and cultural reuse are a form of repaired and non-victimised existence — a reappropriation, as Osvaldo de Andrade defined anthropophagy: the occupied, dominated, and colonised absorb — or eat and digest — the symbols of the dominant culture, producing something new in the process (Attia-Vanier, 2020).

Drawing inspiration from her training as a textile designer, English artist Lucy Orta²² — alongside with her partner Jorge — creates resilient bodily architectures using technical fabrics for ‘apocalyptic’ clothing. These collective constructions take the form of large-scale performances exploring themes such as social exclusion, forced migration, human rights and sustainable development (De Cecco-Romano, 2002, pp. 325–330; Belen, 2022). In these provocative performances, which are staged at various international political events, individuals are often connected to each other through their reconstructed clothing.

²⁰ The art of repairing broken objects finds its most refined expression in the Japanese philosophy of *Kintsugi*: do not hide the broken parts, but show them and highlight them to emphasise the beauty of imperfection and give objects the chance of a second life. Many contemporary artists make the repair of objects (and clothing in particular) a political act of ethical and sustainable consumption. See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/aug/22/back-for-good-the-fine-art-of-repairing-broken-things> (Visited in July 2025).

²¹ See also the interview with the artist on the occasion of the 2017 exhibition *Reflecting Memory* at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano: <https://www.galleriacontinua.com/artists/kader-attia-7/videos> (Visited in August 2025).

²² See the artists’ website: <https://www.studio-orta.com/en/artworks>.

Conclusions

The abstract emptying of bodies, where only the clothes remain, and –conversely – the filling of constructed bodies with subjectivity, seem to define the analytical poles of contemporary Clothes-art. While many works use different tools and achieve different results, they all seem to resort to a memory-based process²³.

While Boltanski used his ‘rags’ to draw on the collective memory of the 20th century as a vast archive from which to reflect on the present, and Louise Bourgeois transformed her personal and family past into an experiential ready-made (Bourriaud, 2002) through which to construct a new ‘dressed’ body, contemporary Repairing Art research reveals that mending and repairing bodies, objects and stories is a powerful semantic connector of the memory. The very act of ‘sewing’ and re-sewing — literally or metaphorically — sets in motion the thread of narration, weaving bonds and constructing networks of threads, knots and voids (Rigotti, 2002).

I will conclude with the work of the Korean artist Kim Sooja²⁴. She re-enacts her cultural memory using fabrics, treating her own body as a kind of immaterial fabric through which she can ‘sew’ and ‘weave’ relationships and connections (Nakaruma, 2000).

In her early works, she used *Bottari*: traditional Korean bedspreads imbued with the memories, stories and pain, but also the strength of women. Alongside other fabrics and clothes, these became substitutes for the body and witnesses to its absence. Subsequently, her research became increasingly immaterial and mental, transforming into an instrument for sewing connections. In a series of video performances entitled *The Needle Woman* (1999–2001 and 2005), set in major contemporary cities such as Tokyo, Shanghai, Mexico City, London, Delhi, New York, Cairo and Lagos, she stands motionless and filmed from behind, in intense Zen concentration, surrounded by a bustling crowd.

In this context, her work re-actualises Michel de Certeau’s (1980) definition of the ‘performative everyday’ that produces meaning²⁵: even sewing seems to function as a language.

Like many other forms of contemporary art, the Clothes-art from the 1990s and early 2000s and its postcolonial ‘evolution’, Repairing Art, produce new meanings and awareness. These are paths and practices that cross boundaries and produce contradictory and restless spaces of individual and collective identities. Above all, they are testimonies of irreversibly hybridised cultures.

²³ Artistic narration, as memory literally imprinted on clothing/the body, offers examples of an almost literal intensity. The memory of participating in the Vietnam War was transformed by American artist Kim Jones into military uniforms worn by the artist himself in the 1970s performance *Mud-man*: uniforms as bleached canvases on which to rewrite the trauma, retracing the maps of destroyed Vietnamese villages. Another literal superimposition of biography onto clothing is that of French artist Annette Messager in her *Histoire des robes* (1991), in which she exhibits some of her past clothes, lying in open structures like coffins, covered with photos taken from her personal album.

²⁴ See the artist’s website: <http://www.kimsooja.com/> (visited in September 2025).

²⁵ De Certeau (1980) includes walking, which creates spaces; reading, which creates texts; and narrating, which creates directions of meaning in stories, among the practices of everyday performance.

References

AGAMBEN, G. **Homo sacer**. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita. Torino: Einaudi, 1995.

AIRYUNG, K. Art-robe: habits des pensées. In: **Art-Robe**: Women artists at the nexus of art and fashion. Exhibition organised by Unesco, 2005. Catalogue on <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001388/138861M.pdf> (site visited in September 2025).

ANZIEU, D. **Le Moi-peau**. Paris : Bordas, 1985.

ATTIA, KADER. **Reflecting Memory**. (interview) in <https://www.galleriacontinua.com/artists/kader-attia-7/videos>, 2017. (Visited in September 2025).

ATTIA, KADER. **The Museum of Emotion**. Catalogue of Exhibition curated by Ralph Rugoff. Hayward Gallery, London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2019.

ATTIA, K.; VANIER, A. Symptômes du politique: les recyclages de la colonisation. **Figures de la Psychoanalyse** n. 40, 2. 2020. p. 159-169. on line <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-figures-de-la-psy-2020-2-page-159?lang=fr> (Visited in September 2025).

BARTHES, R. **Éléments de sémiologie**. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964.

BAUDOT, F., Elsa Schiapparelli toujours vivante. **Elle**, Paris: Musée de la Mode et du Textile, 2004.

BAUMAN, Z., **Wasted Lives**: Modernity and its Outcastas. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.

BAUMANBECKER, H.S. **Art Worlds**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

BELEN, V., Lucy Orta. Activismo Artístico en clave textile. **NEO2**, Mar/Avril 2022, n. 178 (PDF scaricabile dal sito dell'artista <https://www.studio-orta.com/en/bibliography>) (Visited in September 2025)

BENJAMIN W. Esperienza e Povertà. In: RELLA, F. (ed.), **Critica e storia**. Venezia: Cluva, 1980 (orig. ed. 1933).

BENJAMIN, W.; TIEDEMAN, R. (ed). **Das Passagen-Werk**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983.

BENTIVOGLIO, M.; ZOCCOLI, F. Women Artists of Italian Futurism. **Almost Lost History**. New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997.

BONITO OLIVA, A. Christian Boltanski. Monumenti di vestiti. A Parigi l'Expo del dolore universale. In: **La Repubblica**, 13 febbraio, 2010.

BOURRIAUD, N. Post Production. **La culture comme scénario**: comment l'art reprogramme le monde contemporain. Dijon : Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

BOUTOULLE, M., Roman de famille. *In* : Louise Bourgeois. Paris : Centre Pompidou, **Hors-series de Connaissance des Arts**, 2008, p. 14-23.

BOURDIEU, P. **La distinction**. Critique social du jugement . Paris : Minuit, 1979.

BOURDIEU, P. La domination masculine. **Sciences Sociales**, n. 84 , 1990, p.3-31.

BOURDIEU, P. ; WACQUANT, L.J.D. **Risposte**. Per un'antropologia riflessiva. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992.

BRAUN, E. Futurist Fashion: Three Manifestoes. **Art Journal**. Vol. 54, n.1, 1995, p. 34-41.

BRENSON, M. Magdalena Abakanowicz's "Abakans". **Art Journal**. Vol. 54, n.1, 1995, p. 56-61.

BUCKBERROUGH, S. Delaunay Design: Aesthetics, Immigration, and the New Woman. **Art Journal**. vol. 54, n.1,1995, p. 47-51.

CAMPITELLI, M. Corpo, moda, mente. *In*: CAMPITELLI M. (ed.) Corpo, moda, mente. **Natura naturans 10**, Exhibition Catalogue, Trieste: Juliet Editrice, 2005, p. 8-13.

COEN, V. Louise Bourgeois (o della giovinezza perenne). *In*: Andata e Ritorno. **Artiste contemporanee fra Europa e America**, Catalogue of Exhibition, Ferrara: XI Biennale Donna, 2004, p. 53-71.

COIGNARD, J. Etre Sculpteur. *In* : Louise Bourgeois, Paris : Centre Pompidou, **Hors-series de Connaissance des Arts**, 2008, p. 24-31.

CRANE, D. L'abito fa la donna. Stiliste, stilisti e cambiamenti sociali. *In*: TRASFORINI M.A (Ed.), **Arte a parte**. Donne artiste fra margini e centro. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2000, p. 101-115.

DE CECCO,E.; ROMANO,G. **Contemporanee**. Percorsi e poetiche delle artiste dagli anni Ottanta ad oggi. Milano: Posmediabooks, 2002

DE CECCO, E. (Ed.), **Passaggi a Sud – Est. Sguardi di artiste fra storie, memorie, attraversamenti**. Catalogue of Exhibition, Ferrara: XII Biennale Donna, 2006.

DE CERTEAU, M. , **L'invention du quotidien**. Arts de faire, Paris: Gallimard, 1980.

DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. **Survivance des lucioles**. Paris: Minuit, 2009.

DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. **Ninfa Moderna**. Essai sur le drapé tombé. Paris: Gallimard, 2002.

FELSHIN, N. Clothing as Subject. **Art Journal**, vol. 54, n.1, 1995a, p. 20-29.

FELSHIN, N. Women's Work: A Lineage, 1966-94. **Art Journal**, vol. 54, n.1, 1995b, p.71-87.

FOUCAULT, M., **Tecnologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault**. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988 .

HENRY, A., **Metonimia e Metafora**. Torino: Einaudi, 1975 (orig.ed. 1971).
JONES, D.H, From Commonplace to Common Ground: Facial Injury in Kader Attia's Continuum of Repair, **Journal of War and Culture Studies**, 2016 (ORE-Open Research Exeter)

https://www.academia.edu/113231068/From_Commonplace_to_Common_Ground_Facial_Injury_in_Kader_AttiasContinuum_of_Repair (visited in September 2025).

LEGRAND, F., Naissance et renaissance de Louise Bourgeois. *In* : Louise Bourgeois. Paris : Centre Pompidou, **Hors-series de Connaissance des Arts**, 2008, p. 4-12.

LEQUEUX, E., Bienvenue dans le cercle de l'Enfer. *In* : **Christian Boltanski, Monumenta 10/ Grand Palais**. Paris : Beaux Arts ed., 2010, p. 7-9.

MACRI, T., **Il corpo postorganico**. Sconfinamenti della performance. Milano: Costa&Nolan, 1996.

MURARO, L., **Maglia o uncinetto**. Racconto linguistico-politico sulla inimicizia tra metafora e metonimia. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981.

NAKAMURA, K., **Kim Sooja's A Needle Woman**. *In*: <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/kim-sooja-s-a-needle-woman>, 2000 (Visited in September 2025).

PANELLA, L. Colore contrasto, movimento: gli abiti simultanei di Sonia Delaunay. *In*: CAMPITELLI M. (Ed.), **Corpo, moda, mente**. Natura naturans 10. Catalogue of Exhibition, Trieste : Juliet Editrice, 2005, p. 30-31.

PAGE, S. e PARENT, B. Entretien avec Louise Bourgeois. *In* : BOURGEOIS, Louise. **Sculptures, environnements, dessins 1938-1995**, Catalogue, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (giugno-ottobre 1995), p.15-19, 1995.

PANSERA, A. (Ed.), **Dal merletto alla motocicletta**. Artigiane/artiste e designer nell'Italia del Novecento. Catalogue of Exhibition, Ferrara: X Biennale Donna, 2002.

PARKER, R.; POLLOCK, G. **Old Mistresses**. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

RIGOTTI, F. **Il Filo del pensiero**. Tessere, scrivere, pensare. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002.

STEINBERG, C. Introduction. In: **Art-Robe: Women artists at the nexus of art and fashion**, Catalogue of Exhibition, 2005, p. 5. In: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001388/138861M.pdf>

TRASFORINI M.A. **Nel segno delle artiste**. Donne, professioni d'arte e modernità. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007.

TRASFORINI M.A., Tagli d'habitus. Corpi culturali, linguaggi tessili e arte metonimica. In: MORA E. (Ed.), **Geografie della moda**. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 37-47.

TRASFORINI M.A., Abiti smodati. Dall'arte tessile alla clothes-art. In: PEDRONI, M.; VOLONTE' P. (Eds) **Moda e Arte**. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2012, p. 171-186.

VALERIANI, L., **Dentro la trasfigurazione**. Il dispositivo dell'arte nella cibercultura. Roma: Meltemi, 2004.

VERGINE, L., **Quando i rifiuti diventano arte**. Trash, rubbish, mungo. Milano: Skira, 2006.

VETTESE, A., Fare lo scultore per distruggere il passato. **Il sole-24 ore**, 18 may 1997.

ZOCCOLI, F. The Applied Arts and Photography. In: BENTIVOGLIO M.; Zoccoli F., (Eds.) **Women Artists of Italian Futurism. Almost Lost History**. New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997, p. 139-162.