

The Tailor Retailoring

Neither in tailoring nor in legislating does man proceed by mere Accident... In all his Modes and... endeavours an Architectural Idea will be found lurking; his Body and the Cloth are the site and materials whereon and whereby his beautiful edifice, of a Person, is to be built.

Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* [The Tailor Retailored] (1833)

Annet Couwenberg's recent sculpture, *Act Normal* (2002), a group of stacked, ruffled forms resembling Dutch collars, exemplifies an aesthetic impulse that has been central to her work for the past twenty years. Recognizable to art lovers from likenesses in so many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, the collars are constructed of starched white cotton held taught by reed armatures. Couwenberg is known for the kind of meticulous, labor-intensive, handwork that produces the striking visual effect of this sculpture. However, it is not merely the materials and processes that lend Couwenberg's work their enormous force. The size of these objects moves them beyond clothing and approximates the scale of furniture. The notion of clothing as a structure to contain the human body, like furniture or architecture, lies at the core of Couwenberg's aesthetic drive.

Clothing, Structure, Architecture

Couwenberg's interest in the relationship of clothing to architecture began early in her career when she was asked to design fabrics incorporating complicated systems of pleats for New York fashion designer Ronald Kolodzie in the early 1980s. This work afforded her the opportunity to explore textiles as structures, an issue she had begun to consider in a series of relief sculptures incorporating pleated, hand-dyed fabric exhibited a year earlier. It is typical of Couwenberg's penetrating ability to see underlying forms that she would draw a connection between pleats and architecture: they both consist of three-dimensional space created with two-dimensional materials.

Soon after Couwenberg established the relationship between dressmaking and architecture, she began to breathe life into it by introducing the body. This triangulation can be seen in works such as *Seeing is Forgetting the Thing One Sees* (1987) or *B.U.G. (Body Under Garment)* (1989). Both works are composed of wooden armatures that allude to the human torso over which has been stretched copper screen. They also incorporate found architectural or furniture elements. Couwenberg has explained that this series of works was inspired by the highly angular dress patterns of the Anglo-American fashion designer Charles James active between the 1930s and 50s. The influence of his designs, which were the first to exploit the bias of the fabric for architectonic effect, can be seen in these works in the clear delineation of interlocking or fitted shapes that compose their skeletons. The incorporation of what could be a portion of a balustrade in *Seeing is Forgetting. . .* and chair legs in *B.U.G.* emphasizes clothing's connection to larger structures of the built world as containers for the body.

Couwenberg's work manifests the equation articulated by artist-cum-architect Vito Acconci: "furniture is midway between clothing and architecture."¹ According to Acconci, "the way the skin covers the bones, clothing contains the body: a chair then, contains the body-contained-by-

clothing - a room then contains the body-contained-by-clothing-contained-by-chair." While clothing is mobile and conforming, and architecture stabile and rigid, furniture lies between the two, somewhat mobile, though fairly rigid. The powerful ambiguity in works like *B.U.G.* and *Seeing is Forgetting* is precisely the ambiguity between body, clothing, furniture and architecture. Their structural autonomy and verticality relate them to furniture and architecture, but the fact that they consist around an armature relates them to clothing and the body. Couwenberg shares with Acconci an interest in the way bodies relate to the forms that contain them. His "Adjustable Wall Bra" is an article of clothing, which is normally used for bodily support, enlarged and transformed so that it becomes at once a piece of furniture to give the body rest and an architectural space to enclose the body. The major difference between Acconci's furniture series and this series of works by Couwenberg is that Acconci's work functions literally as furniture and architecture for actual human bodies, while Couwenberg invokes furniture, architecture and bodies metaphorically.

Couwenberg's use of the body metaphor is a powerful aspect of her work. In pieces such as *Slip Over Pinch* (1996) and *Biased Point*, (1996) the association with the human body is especially strong. The "skeletal" structure, thin copper screen and silk that forms the "skin" of these works serve as metaphors for the human skeleton and skin. The redness of the copper gives it a particularly anatomic appearance. But, as Acconci points out, all clothing is a kind of skin. Therefore, Couwenberg's work reminds us that all clothing is a metaphor for the body. Seeing truly is forgetting the thing one sees because when we look at her sculpture we see a body and we forget we could just as well see it as clothing. The haunting quality of her work derives from the way she binds the relationship between clothing and body so tightly we can't distinguish between the clothing and the body on which it rests.

Couwenberg finds deep meaning in the simple fact that clothing on display requires some kind of support. Whereas in fashion shows, actual human bodies provide such support, in department stores, mannequins or hangars support clothing by simulating the human body. Couwenberg's sculptures support their clothing/skin with an armature that similarly acts as a surrogate for the body. This structure is not subservient to the skin as a hanger is clearly subservient to the dress that hangs upon it. Importantly, the skin is also not subservient to the structure, as clothing can be said to decorate the body. This parity between body and ornament can itself be seen as a metaphor for the leveling of the hierarchy between fine and decorative art that her work enacts. Her works are as much figurative sculptures as they are textiles supported in imaginative forms.

The structural support in Couwenberg's work not only relates it to the body but also to the tradition of sculpture. The work of Beverly Semmes provides a fruitful contrast. Semmes is known for her oversized dresses and robes, where richly colored fabrics cascade down walls and create pools of color on the floor. Semmes exploits fabric insofar as it approximates a liquid, associating her work most closely with painting. Couwenberg, on the other hand, uses fabric for its capacity to act as a membrane to define volumes of space. Her work, therefore, belongs more essentially to a tradition of sculpture. Given the uncanny nature of her forms, combined with the tactility of her materials, Couwenberg's work bears a strong resemblance to Surrealist sculpture wherein the function of materials is to provoke a physical response through its association with touch.

Tailoring the Body

The essential connection between body and dress in Couwenberg's work is the foundation of its social content as seen in her works of the early to mid-1990s dominated by girdle and corset-like forms that squeeze, shape, or sheath the body. In these works, distortions in the clothing design are indistinguishable from deformations of the body. The body is not a given upon which the ornament of clothing is added. These forms of clothing were made to tailor the body, not the other way around. The artist's installation of these works in 1995 was suitably titled, "Public Apparel / Private Structures" for the way in which women's undergarments function as a weigh station of sorts between the private body and one's public appearance fashioned in accordance with patriarchal norms of beauty.

The installation is composed of five, free-standing, body girdles based upon the Victorian bustle. Each girdle's shell is composed of pleated white silk that serves as a container for various interior treatments of folds and wood ribbing or materials such as wire and feathers. On the wall opposite the girdles is a group of stitched abstractions, palimpsests really, composed of layers of dressmaking patterns, rubbings, and machine stitching. Couwenberg connects the three dimensional girdles with the two dimensional abstractions through a series of cables that terminate in the middle of the central stitched abstraction.

"Public Apparel / Private Structures" plays upon the relationship between fine art and fashion, with the wall abstractions suggestive of the former and the girdles of the latter. The cable that connects one component to the other and mutually supports them can be read as a metaphor for the more general affinity between these forms. The installation as whole seems to offer a gloomy vision of Victorian propriety and taste. It suggests that the norms that governs women's fashion belong inescapably to the same world in which fine art works are displayed. Tying fine art with fashion, the cable ties eternal forms to fleeting trends, aesthetic judgment to fanciful taste, cultivation to social control, and expertise to social status. The two nineteenth-century inventions the museum and the department store seem equally fetishistic and depraved. Yet they also share a certain exquisiteness, created through the fineness of Couwenberg's handwork.

Apart from serving as metaphors for fine art, Couwenberg's stitched abstractions have an important place in her later work. With their geometric shapes, earth tones, and dark outlines, they bear a resemblance to analytic cubism, while their grid-like regularity gives them a topographical feel. Like all of Couwenberg's forms, they incite curiosity, perhaps even awe. Her working process for these pieces is very different from her three-dimensional works. Unlike her dress works, which demand that she perfectly execute a previously conceived pattern, she approaches these patterns, as she puts it "as a point of departure, something to reinterpret." As opposed to the architecture-like process of making the dresses, these pieces allow for improvisation and accident.

The stitched abstractions share an affinity with the work of Dada artist Hannah Höch, who incorporated dressmaking patterns into her collages beginning in the 1920s. In works such as *Design for the Memorial to an Important Lace Shirt*, (1922) or *Tailor's Flower*, (1920), Höch used bits of dressmaking and embroidery patterns as an abstract vocabulary of form. Like Couwenberg, she sought to invert aesthetic hierarchies subordinating design and textiles to high art practices and genres through the use of non-traditional media and techniques such as sewing. Couwenberg also shares with

Höch a conceptualization of the dressmaking pattern as a form of abstraction germane to women's experience and specific to their own contexts as artists with backgrounds in design, fiber and craft.²

Individual Identity and Group Affiliation

Couwenberg's transition from the dress works to the series of wall works that followed is marked by *Untitled #4*, a piece from 1996 consisting of a bodice mounted to a wooden support that resembles the anchor of a wall sconce. Instead of supporting candles, the bodice holds protruding, breast-like, feathered mounds. Here the architectural connection is present, a sconce being an architectural fixture, but tangential. No longer autonomously supported, with the bodice abstracted from the body, this piece becomes a trophy. Bearing a resemblance to an animal's head mounted on a plaque, this work appears to be a biting commentary, intentional or not, on the objectification of women's bodies.

The trophy-like quality of the wall mounted bodice work prefigures Couwenberg's major series, 'Family Air,' completed two years later. The unique wooden frames conceived for these works resemble heraldic shields. Within these frames, Couwenberg juxtaposes under small, glass domes small passages of crochet or bobbin lace and downy brown feathers against a stitched abstract ground. The convex glass hermetically sealing these materials is in turn encased by the curiously shaped, broad, shield-like frames. In the case of at least one of the works in the series, *Family Air, AC* (1998), the shape of the frame is derived from the form produced by the corset upon the female body.

This series commemorates the women of Couwenberg's immediate family, hence its iconography carries specific references to their lives. The doilies, a collection that belonged to her grandmother, reference both her Dutch heritage and the weekly sewing circle held by Couwenberg's grandmother, mother, and aunts. Couwenberg's use of crochet and lace in these objects to represent women's traditional artistic practices and everyday domestic work, places them squarely within the larger feminist project involving the recovery of women's artistic heritage and the critique of the hierarchy of art and craft.

Couwenberg's 'Family Air' series manifests new heights of ambiguity and strangeness. A shield-like frame suggest both a trophy and a sign of family lineage. Though their likenesses can be found throughout the United States, Couwenberg seems draw upon their roots in the hoary families of Europe. In her hands, they combine nobility, evidenced by the heraldic form, with an atavistic ritualism, suggested by the tufts of fur-like feathers. They seem to belong to the Europe of the Saxons and the Huns, not the Germans and the French, of Norse mythology, not *Romeo and Juliet*. The simple, unembellished frames suggests a medieval coarseness and the central element, combining lace with feathers on an earthy ground, suggests a time when domestic life had not yet isolated itself from the realm of war and survival. It calls to mind a Europe when gallantry could not be distinguished from tribalism. It is an emblem of the continued existences of a clan, marking not greatness but steadfastness.

Two series of works initiated in 2000, the four wall-mounted collars and the 'Embroidery Frolics', lead up to Couwenberg's most recent series of digitized embroidery. The forms of the wall-mounted collars are derived from distinctive periods in costume history which the artist has reduced to essential, nearly abstract shapes and then blown-up to the gargantuan size of

seven feet in width. Oversize, steel T-pins "hold down" the collars like that of the splayed body undergoing autopsy or dissection.

The 'Embroidery Frolics' share a certain resemblance to the 'Family Air' series through the use of flocked, wooden frames that encase collage elements. In this series, several transparent layers of printed and machine embroidered fabrics are secured with dress-making pins in the manner of insect specimens mounted in shadowboxes. Two images dominate the 'Embroidery Frolics': the target and one of several basic dress forms repeated across the visual field. Although the target is the ground for the transparent layer of embroidered dress forms, the two images actually compete for the viewer's attention and they cannot be focused upon simultaneously. In the series, *Precious View* (2002), the private references to family keepsakes through the shape of the flocked frames is combined with references to the very public world of naval rank and insignia. This work foregrounds what is present among both series, the tension between one's desire for group identity, the conformity it requires, and the quest for personal distinction.

Underlying Couwenberg's shields, dress-works, collars, and framed embroideries is a profound humanism. In Thomas Carlyle's 1833 book, *Sartor Resartus* (The Tailor Retailored), we find a line that seems to serve as the enigmatic key to all of Couwenberg's mysterious forms: "all Emblematic things are properly Clothes."³ An emblem is a sign of belonging to a social body. To possess an emblem introduces, then, a paradox of belonging: that distinctions conferred on the individual cannot be solely individual but must also be properties of a group. This is the reason that all emblems are clothes. Though clothes are worn by individuals, they necessarily signify the group. Couwenberg's Victorian bustle is only an extreme case of what is always true and what comes to light in her shields, that clothing is a sign and like all signs it only functions within a greater system wherein that sign is given meaning. All clothes, like all emblems, are tribal.

In *Sartor Resartus*, we also find the line: "The beginning of all Wisdom is to look fixedly on Clothes... till they become transparent." Looking at any one of Couwenberg's works gives a sense of being in the proximity of wisdom. Viewers are asked to look at clothes in order to see sociability. All her works remind us that clothes, like houses, mark the boundary between private and public and so belong essentially to both realms. The inextricable connection in her work between body and dress only reminds us that bodies are always, in a sense, clothed. She reminds us that we never stand naked in the world because our bodies are continually defined and coded by society, even as we participate in the process. This is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari mean when they say "you will articulate your body."⁴ In Couwenberg's work, the essential affinity between body and clothes relates to her insistence that the sea is defined by the shore. Thereby clothes are a metaphor for meaning itself whereby our attempt to make meaning out of the world always depends on our willingness to tailor the forms of meaning (the patterns, if you will) that are already given to us.

¹ Vito Acconci, "Home-Bodies: An Introduction to my Work 1984-85," in *Vito Acconci: Writings, Works, Projects*, edited by Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2001), 378.

² Until their exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Höch's collages incorporating dressmaking patterns were unknown to Couwenberg. Annet Couwenberg holds M.F.A.s in textile and fiber arts from both Syracuse

University and Cranbrook Academy. From 1916 to 1926 Höch was employed by Berlin's Ullstein publishing house where she designed embroidery and other 'fiber-craft' projects for German women's magazines such as *Die Dame*. On the subject see Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: the Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chapter two.

³ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987[1833-4]), 56.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 159.

Elissa Auther, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory
Visual and Performing Arts
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

Adam Lerner, Ph.D
Master Teacher of Modern and Contemporary Art
Denver Art museum