The Modern Rag-Picker

Valérie Guillaume

The ambiguous nature of the relationship between art, and more so fashion and modernity was mentioned by the poet Charles Baudelaire in an 1859 essay entitled *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (The modern painter). Fashion reflects the appearance of a given moment, "its morals", its passions", an appearance in which the observer can grasp the invariable "eternal element", or, in other words, a poetic manner in which to manufacture the permanent from the ephemeral. Modernity goes hand in hand with the urbanisation and industrialisation that modify a number of space-time elements such as speed, mobility and communication. This paradigm shift was analysed by a number of European sociologists at the turn of the century. Emile Durkheim analysed the division of work in modern production process, Max Weber, the mechanism of disenchantment in a rationalised world, Ferdinand Tönnies, the mutation of the individual with, as a corollary, the rise in individualism.

Baudelaire wrote his essay before the birth of Haute Couture. The first "griffe" or signature came from Charles Frédéric Worth in 1871, sewn into a designed garment. The economic strength of the sector that grew during the period from the turn of the century to the twenties forced buyers into a demanding seasonal schedule. The creation of the Chambre syndicale de la couture parisienne, in December 1910, went hand in hand with unique debates in particular on the nature of fashion. The artist opposed the "*vêtement de création*" (designed garment) with the "reforming garment". Controversial from the start, the "*vêtement d'artiste*" was invented to stand against fashion whose industrialisation was then transforming economic structures. Thus the Italian futuristic artists and Robert and Sonia Delaunay actively participated in this reform[1]. The Delaunays were married in 1910 and the following year, according to Sonia, "I had the idea to make a blanket for my newborn son from pieces of fabric as I had seen among Russian peasants. When it was finished, the way the fragments of fabric were distributed seem quite cubist to me and so we began trying to apply the process to other objects and paintintgs"[2]. It was in 1913 that Sonia Delaunay created the famous simultaneous dress described by Blaise Cendrars as follows: "It was no longer merely a piece of fabric draped according to the current fashion but a composition seen as an object, like a living painting, a sculpture on a living form"[3]. So he wrote the poem "Sur la robe elle a un corps" that was published in 1916 in the catalogue of Robert and Sonia Delaunay's work in Stockholm, then in 1919 in the collection entitled "*Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques*". An article by the university lecturer Carrie Noland entitled "High Decoration: Sonia Delaunay, Blaise Cendrars, and the Poem as Fashion Design"[4] contains new analysis we can refer to on the subject. We note that the Delaunays reinterpreted depth as the illusion coming from a flat coloured surface rather than the result of a perspective point. The surface of this new universe, with nothing underneath, becomes primordial; where art meets fashion, it encourages exchange and contact that was to condition the cosmic experience. Later, Sonia Delaunay reminds us that "the fashion of the day was of no interest to us. I was not looking to innovate in terms of cut, but to brighten and animate the art of clothes by reusing new materials that brought new colour ranges"[5]. Taking existing things as a starting point, she selected, cut, applied, assembled, juxtaposed, sewed… Her method was a forerunner to what Walter Benjamin described in his famous text: "I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuable, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse –these I will not inventory but allow in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them"[6]. Just like the historian, the artist-

designer mutates into a modern "rag-picker" looking for scraps. The metaphor shows well-known processes such as collage and montage that were already common in contemporary painting, photography, cinema and literature, to invent the narrative of a radical contemporary story that tears fragments of images from their context and founds a modern sensibility on this destruction.

In our 1996 publication *Quand l'art habillait le vêtement* (*When art dressed clothes*) that was subsequently translated into German and enriched by the exhibition entitled *Kunstler ziehen an, Avantgardemode in Europa 1910 bis 1939* at the Museum am Ostwall in Dortmund, in 1998, we analysed how to "peripheral" clothing creations from all over Europe had spread the double-edged wish to free clothes from fashion, in other words from one geographical origin: Paris, on the one hand, and from a temporal cycle: the seasons, on the other. To do so, the organisation of creative activity can be split into two aspects. In Germany, Russia, or Switzerland, artists considered their craft or industrial work to be complementary to their teaching at the Bauhaus the Vkhoutemas or, for Sophie Taeuber, at the Ecole des Arts appliqués in Zurich. As a result, the production from workshops, from the Soviet manufactures or even the Italian "case d'arte", new experimental laboratories, went hand in hand with theoretical, technical (class programmes, patents, clothing typology in Eastern Europe) or poetic (manifestoes in Italy mainly) reflection.

This unusual perspective of Paris that had been, not without reason, consecrated the fashion capital since the 19th century led to the discovery of the textile and clothing design of avant-garde European artists. Some, immigrants in Paris, were obliged to earn a living rapidly. In Italy and Russia, these artists had contributed to the emergence of a national couture or clothing industry and their arrival in the capital, which revealed itself to be without a great consequence for the creation of Haute Couture, incite us to highlight the extraordinary welcome and friendship that Madeleine Vionnet, Gabrielle Chanel, Marie Cuttoli, Director of the Salon Myrbor gave to Thayaht, Iliazd, Gontcharova, or the level of solidarity between immigrant artists, Sonia Delaunay with Iliazd and Mansouroff, Iliazd with Mansouroff...

To put into perspective a split with utopian, or at least theoretical clothing conceptions developed in one's native country and an enforced adoption of the Paris fashion world, let us remember that continuity of an artistic activity within the strict framework of craft-based structures like workshops or dress-making facilities, enabled the pursuit of other activities (painting, writing…).

In Paris it is not surprising that the "émigré artist" was hired by the "great designer" who thus revealed their artistic sensibility. Certain famous designer/artist "couples" come to mind such as Paul Poiret and Raoul Dufy, Jeanne Lanvin and Armand Rateau, Madeleine Vionnet and Thayaht[7], Gabrielle Chanel and Russian artists or even Schiaparelli and Dali. Often begun for a ballet, a play, an exhibition or a party, their collaboration in fact presented very diverse aspects. It served the complex and often dark desire of the designer to endow fashion with an artistic value by filling it with the spirit of the contemporary aesthetic movement. The creative inventiveness of the historical European avant-gardes remains to be evoked through the few examples that follow. The clothing of the artists is passed on to us through numerous photographic portraits. Colouring the face seems to have been a practice from early on. Already in 1871, Rimbaud, in his famous letter known as "du *Voyant*" wrote: "Imagine a man planting and cultivating warts on is face. I say one has to be visible, to be seen". In 1910, colouring one's skin became a performance. At the same time the Russian artists Zdanévitch, Larionov and Gontcharova practiced body painting : "We will daub ourselves for a moment and any change in our feelings will change our daubing, like a painting absorbs another painting, like the way we can see other windows through a car window, all superimposed on one another". Their faces were transformed "in the emotion projector"[8]. The Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), founder of the futurist movement in 1909, exhorted people to try the "psychofolie"

experiment that involved applying colours to the body so as to modify the collective sensibility. He demanded that the singers dye their hair green, their arms purple, their décolletage sky blue and their chignon orange.

In a comparative vein, his compatriot Giacomo Balla (1871-1958) proposed a polychrome accessory he referred to as a "modifier". A fabric application made with cut pieces of fabric, the modifier could be placed "when you want where you want on any part of your clothing using pneumatic buttons. Each person can thus not only modify but invent a new garment at any moment that reflects his humour. The modifier can be imperious, in love, caressing, persuasive, diplomatic, multitonal, shocking, discordant, decisive, scented, etc.". (*Manifesto of the futuristic garment*, May 20th 1914). Thus, before World War One, artists taking over the domain of the senses, engaged their own bodies in a synesthetic experiment, following the example of an emotional short-circuit that, like coloured hearing, would bring together perceptions from different origins. After the war and in a context of the "return to order", photographic portraits showed artists in work clothes, that of manual workers. The Florentine artist Ernesto Thayaht, who had an American mother was the first to propose a sort of boiler suit, the "tuta" in 1919, this was not by chance. The design of the tuta was like American overalls. The term overall is a generic one that designates the different outfits worn by workers, dungarees, boiler suits, jackets with many pockets. Thayaht described the garment in an alliterative quatrain: "*en forme de T ; elle est Toute d'une pièce ; elle habille Toute la personne ; elle est pour Tous*" (In the shape of a T ; it is all in one piece, it dresses all of a person, it is for all). Around this time, the Viennese artist Adolf Loos was also predicting a universal destiny for the man in overalls. In the USSR, the constructivists Vladimir Tatline, Alexandre Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova between 1922 and 1924 invented a new wardrobe made up of an overcoat, a production suit and sailor's clothes. Varvara Stepanova exalted the vision of stitches made on the machine: "What gives the garment its shape are these essential stitches. I would say it is important to show the stitches, the staples... leave them exposed like in a machine. Finish with invisible hand stitches, replace them with the line of machine stitches" (Lef, "*Front gauche de l'art*", 2, n° 23). In 1926, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, then teaching at the Bauhaus was photographed "in the garments of the workers of modern industry". He wore the work clothes of a fisherman, elevated by the artist to the level of design worthy of Bauhaus, in line with the Russian movement.

The principle of the working garment is to show the truth of its cut by patch pockets, hems, patches and obvious stitches on bands of cut leather. The garment shows its functional and mechanical workings. Thus the "appearance" is there to "serve the truth"[9]. In the Sixties, the modernity of the designs of Paco Rabanne or André Courrèges also claim a link to the truth.

"Materials are what artists have at their disposal: what is presented to them in words, colours, and sounds, to associations of all kinds, as far as the different technological processes developped"[10]. Theodor Adorno thus gave rise to fertile reflection on the "concept of materials" that appeared at the start of the 20th century. Thus, in 1912, the futurists Gino Severini and Carlo Carra proposed the integration of the five senses in the perception of a work of art. The garment had a mission to free all of the possibilities, colour, light, noise, mobility and smell. Giacomo Balla wore triangular shaped ties facing up or down in fabric, cardboard or celluloid. One of them, that no longer exists was equipped with a little bulb that the artist would switch on in an electrifying part of the conversation!

After the First World War, futurism entered a second period that went on until the thirties. Artists continued to refer to the machine, notably to the car and above all the plane, a theme that had its own development in "aeropeinture". With the rise in fascism, the movement took on a political nature. Marinetti published *Futurismo e Fascismo* in 1924. The artists who favoured a militant nationalism in favour of Italian art participated in governmental actions encouraging the development of national

industrial and crafts based companies. The use of different "new" materials, like straw, aluminium and lanital was then encouraged.
As part of a national campaign for the straw hat, in 1928, the Florentine artist Thayaht designed a series of functional hats. Aluminium was the subject of a manifesto by the sculptor Renato de Bosso in 1932 in tandem with the poet Ignazio Scurto. The sculptor tells the story that after having visited an aluminium factory in Rovereto he had the idea to create a little plaque in the shape of a plane to wear as a tie. "The anti-tie we have designed can be: in white iron with horizontal curves, in opaque aluminium with anti-traditional decorative motifs; in shiny aluminium with modern incisions; in simple chromed metal; in aluminium with gradations of shininess and opacity; in precious metal; in brass; in copper. The metals used must be two to four millimetres thick and thus have a minimum corresponding weight and the knot must be totally abolished. The length is a few centimetres (...) The anti-tie, held by a light elastic collar, reflects all the sun and azure that we, Italians possess in great quantities and takes away the melancholic and pessimistic note in our men".[11] In Pistoia, Victor Aldo de Sanctis, made metal breastplates and filed patents for four hats, in straw, felt and celluloid and a pair of rubber and aluminium shoes (First national fashion exhibition in Turin, April 12th to 27th 1933). In Italy again, lanital was certainly the most unusual material of the time. It was an artificial fibre made from the casein from milk commercialised by Snia Viscosa, and was the subject of an apologia written by Marinetti, *Il poema del vestito di latte Parole in liberta futuriste/Lanital ommagio della Snia viscosa* (a poem for milk clothes, words in free futurist/Lanital homage to the Snia Viscosa) in 1937. The page layout was by Bruno Munari, and the iconography showed pastoral, industrial and finally military images.

In the German Bauhaus workshops however, the use of shiny viscose, then transparent cellophane (see-through cellulose) and the spread of the zipper in plastic or metal, opened promising perspectives. These materials and new technological procedures undeniably changes the perception of the object and the garment that then became "dynamised". Retractable furniture, moving paths, revolving doors, stairwells with elevators, auto-restaurants, clothes with removable pieces, etc. marked a new stage in the evolution of material culture. The object became functional, active, closely linked to man's practical life"[12], following new concepts of mobility and multiplicity.
The experimental creation of the historical avant-gardes, remained on the edges but wore the face of modernity that revealed (and woke up) bodily sensations. Taking the side of a critical dimension, it aimed to highlight as much as possible its own conditions of conception, thus valorising the creative process. The textile, garment and accessory creator thus attempted to explore the fashion medium in terms of its properties and its materials and through this process creates another temporality. The linear time was succeeded by "cycles and clusters of images". The English novelist D.H. Lawrence added that "the idea of time as a continuous straight line cruelly paralysed our consciousness" (*Apocalypse*, 1932). However peripheral it may have been, this polyphonic creation will have left a trace as the broadening of fashion's horizon, and that of the designer, to sensible forms of expression that may at first glance have seemed foreign.

Valérie Guillaume,
Design curator, Centre Pompidou

1. Giovanni Lista, « La mode futuriste », in *Europe, 1910-1939, Quand l'art habillait le vêtement*, Valérie Guillaume (dir.), Paris, Paris-Musées, 1997, p. 22-43.
2. Michel Hoog, *Robert et Sonia Delaunay. Musée national d'art moderne. Inventaire des collections publiques françaises*, Paris, Editions des Musées Nationaux, 1967, p. 122, quotes the review *XXe siècle*, 1956, p. 19.
3. G. Bernier et M. Schneider-Maunoury, *Robert et Sonia Delaunay,* Paris, J.-C Lattès, 1995, p. 138.
4. *Journal X*, vol. 2, n° 2, printemps 1998, available on the site www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/pubs/jx/2_2/noland.htm
5. *Nous irons jusqu'au soleil*, Robert Laffont, 1978, p. 36.
6. Walter Benjamin, *Le Livre des passages. Paris Capitale du XIXe siècle*, « Réflexions théoriques sur la connaissance », Paris, éditions du Cerf, 1993, p. 476.
7. See the exhibition: *Thayaht, un artista alle origini del Made in Italy*, Prato, Museo del tessuto, 15 December 2007-14 April 2008.

8. Michel Larionov, *Manifestes*, commentaires de Gabriella di Milia, Paris, Allia, 1995, « Pourquoi nous nous peinturlurons » (1913) p. 35-37.
9. Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), founding member of the Frankfurt school. *Théorie esthétique, Paralipomena*, Paris, Klinscksieck, 1995, p. 439 et 388.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, *ibid.*, p. 209.
11. *Manifesto futurista sulla cravatta italiana*, Verona, March 1933.
12. B. Arvatov, « Organizatsiia byta », *Almanach Proletkoulta,* Moscou, 1925, p. 81, cited by John E. Bowlt, in "Un ingénieur vaut mieux qu'un millier d'esthètes. Réflexion sur les origines du constructivisme soviétique". *Ligeia*, April-September, n° 5-6, p. 44.