

Projects 40 : Readymade identities : Armleder ... [et al.], the Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 3-May 18, 1993

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readymade identities

selections

armleder

balassanian

etkin

hamilton

pellegrin

wilson

The Museum of Modern Art
New York

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Clothes make the man (or the woman), they say. There is no question that coded messages are woven into the fabric of our apparel. What we wear not only protects the body, decorates it, and serves modesty, it also constitutes a rich lexicon of information. In recent years, with increasing frequency, artists have been appropriating, recontextualizing, and refashioning clothes in order to examine their ethnic, class, religious, and gender-defining attributes. For some, clothing has been a medium for private psychological reflection or diaristic confession. Carefully presented articles of wardrobes tailored to personal needs may thus function as relics or emblems of the owner's unique experience. *Readymade Identities* concerns itself with the more public dimensions of clothing's symbolism. It focuses not on the idiosyncrasies of our attire but on conventional trappings that suppress individuality, on body surrogates that evoke sexual stereotypes, on generic clothes that proclaim a collective affiliation—in sum, on ready-to-wear clothes that carry readymade messages.

Fred Wilson's squad of uniformed mannequins are lined up at the entrance to the exhibition. They sport slacks and blazers that identify them as guards at four major New York museums: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Jewish Museum. Headless, they preside rather than watch over the galleries, and the uncanny effect of their presence in proximity to other works and the actual museum guards prompts a shift of awareness from the mannequins to their context, from representation to reality and back. In short, we are reminded by the stiff surveillance of these simulacra that one of the conditions of scrutinizing art is ignoring the presence of its custodians. Looking habitually entails overlooking. And to whom does one customarily turn such a blind eye? It so happens that Wilson's phalanx of guards—like so many in

fact—is entirely composed of dark-skinned men. They are even more “invisible” in this aesthetic precinct than they are in society at large. Among Wilson's purposes in creating these surrogates is to reclaim for them their full visibility. It is a challenge Wilson understands firsthand: he is both an African-American and a former museum guard.

Wilson is convinced that “a critique of the system is possible within the institution.”¹ Legs spread apart and firmly planted, the guards stick to and are stuck at their posts. Symbols of a static institutional hierarchy, the mannequins of *Guarded View* nonetheless stand their ground in silent accusation.

Working costumes for another sort and class flank the dressing mirrors in John Armleder's *Untitled (Furniture Sculpture)*. The Swiss-born Armleder, well known for removing standardized objects and emblems from their commercial settings and relocating them in almost minimalist configurations, is a contemporary practitioner of long-standing Dada tactics. The two suits in this piece are readymades in both the sartorial and Duchampian senses of the term. They are manufactured goods redefined by their context as art, recalling Marcel Duchamp's waistcoats of the 1950s. Armleder's Brooks Brothers suits await an as yet anonymous customer who, in the mirrored alcove, shall be transformed into an archetypal man of affairs. The sleeves bear the tailor's marks, signaling the discrepancy between the standard male model and the customer's specific proportions.

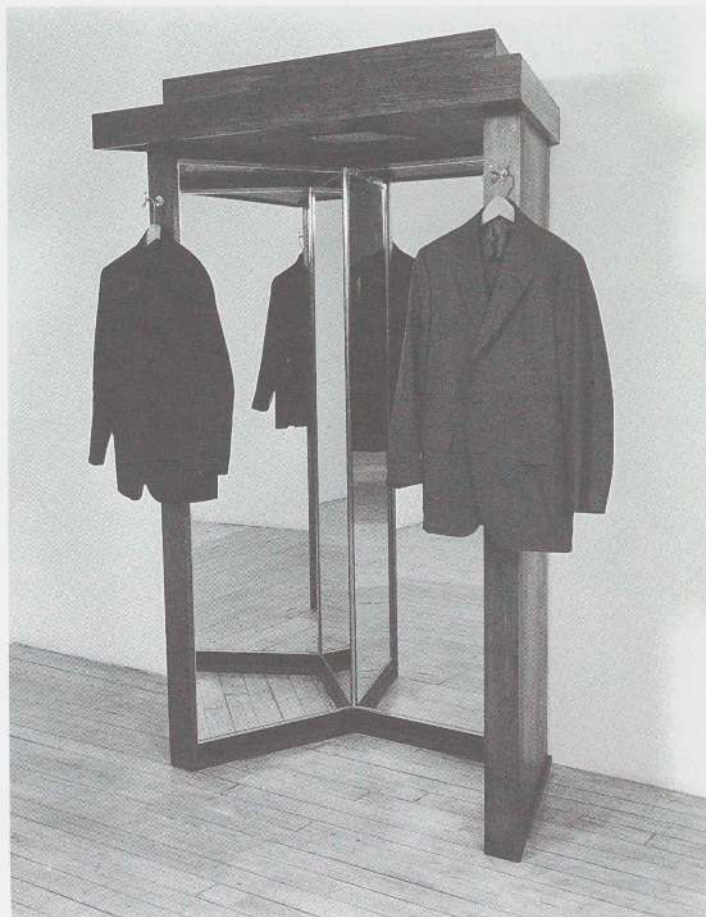
It is their lack of differentiation that is the main selling point of these off-the-rack clothes. So distinctive for a “look” that obscures differences, the Brooks Brothers suit scarcely needs advertising. The store has been hailed as “an institution that has stoically upheld the status quo for well over 150 years.”² The embodiment of conservative resistance to the capricious fluctuations of fashion, its products set the style for professional men of means and high institutional ambition. That is to say they are the uniform of a class, and those who wear it are every bit as identifiable as members or would-be members of that class as are those who wear the uniforms in Wilson's piece.

Ironically, the historical narrative embroidered into Armleder's elegantly nondescript suits is also one of class conflict. Their relative austerity is the contemporary expression of a sartorial about-face brought on by the French Revolution. Termed “The Great Masculine Renunciation” by psychologist J.C. Flügel, this turn away from the opulence of the old aristocracy was intended to announce a new fraternity among men of different social backgrounds and upheld work rather than leisure as the new manly ideal.³ From the psychological point of view the change replaced male vanity and exhibitionist desires with a democratic and anti-narcissistic modesty. Yet despite the leveling principle of the “Great Masculine Renunciation,” the dark suit has come to separate the middle and higher social strata from the working class.

Standing in front of Armleder's mirror the casual passer-by becomes a potential client and is in effect invited to try on this costume and so imagine joining the ranks of the ruling elite in what is seen as its socially significant but self-effacing masquerade. In turn, first a narcissist indulging in skin-deep scrutiny, then a consumer, and finally a questioning “I” flash and reflect in the mirror.

Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991. Four mannequins and clothing on platform, 6' 3" x 14' x 48". Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York





John Armleder. *Untitled (Furniture Sculpture)*. 1988. Wood cabinet with mirrors, light fixtures, and two Brooks Brothers suits, 7' 2½" x 34" x 28". Courtesy John Gibson, New York

As anyone who has been to a haberdasher will tell you, the well-dressed man makes his most personal statement through his selection of a tie. An accessory to the conventional modern suit, the straight tie is the only remaining article in which masculine display is generally permitted. Venetian artist Maurizio Pellegrin's *Colors of a Crowd* seizes this opportunity and, by presenting an array of the available possibilities, mocks this show of individuality. His ties are huddled in boxes. A row of muted black elements on top contrasts with the crowded display below. Some ties are neatly folded; a few, obeying the gesture of ritual, curl into a knot and blend with the rest. Only one cluster breaks loose. These fugitive ties, asserting a phallic will of their own, overflow their minimalist constraints, perhaps symbolizing an escape from the restraints of male conventions. The ties are decorated with a riot of color and geometric motifs. Bright, patterned, and at once repetitive and varied, they recall the design strategies of Andy Warhol's soup cans and reiterated media icons. Conjuring up the idea of the crowd, Pellegrin plays like Warhol did with flashy individual elements within a homogenized whole. With their supergraphic flags neatly tucked under their chins, businessmen march along *en masse*, each one of them vivid for a moment and just as quickly lost in a sea of their own kind.

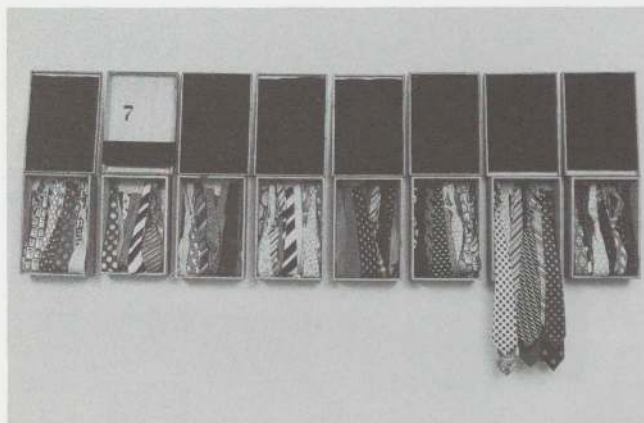
A similar bittersweetness attaches itself to the ethereal dresses of Suzan Etkin's *Dryclean V*. Obedient to the rotational force of the motorized dry cleaner's conveyor belt, the diaphanous

garments revolve in a circuitous system controlled by an automatic timer. Cut from satins and organzas in seven basic patterns, Etkin's dresses run round their track in an awkwardly alluring parade, like forlorn puppets. The dresses are programmed to flaunt a feminine sensuality, yet they create a spectacle where eroticism finds no accomplice in desire. *Dryclean V* remains Duchampian in its overall equation of the erotic and the mechanical.

A tutu among these garments introduces the idea of dance. The regimented motion, choreographed by the machine, is however a travesty of a seductive dance, a quality that injects both pathos and humor into the piece. Compared with other treatments of the theme of the dance, notably those of Matisse, Etkin's wraith-like silhouettes lack momentum and, above all, freedom of will. Explicitly artificial rather than "natural" archetypes, these images exist at a primitive level of commodified femininity, uninhabitable by the bodies and spirits of real women.

Whereas Suzan Etkin's *Dryclean V* swirls to the rattling beat of a revolving rack, Ann Hamilton's *Still Life* is enveloped by a lonely hush. And while Etkin's evening wear has been sent out for cleaning, Hamilton's shirts have been patiently cleaned at home. The piece consists of some 800 shirts, ironed, folded, and stacked on a table in a swelling wave. The shirts belong to men; the work to women. Ordinary at first glance, on closer inspection one realizes that they have been singed and, in places, gilded. This evidence of negligence and mending or embellishment expresses two antithetical impulses—malicious carelessness and loving care—whose actual coincidence is anything but abnormal in the ambivalently lived routines of dutiful marriage and domestic love. A tedious and Sisyphean task traditionally performed in solitude by women for men who go out into the world, ironing is also a ritual. Bringing all of these conflicting aspects together with a theatrical but magical simplicity, Hamilton's piece lends a narrative to the minimalist notion of modular accumulation. Based upon that narrative the artist draws from the act of repetition and from incidental damage and sacramental repair a sense of pervasive melancholy.

Maurizio Pellegrin. *Colori di una folla (Colors of a Crowd)*. 1991. Cloth, wood, and 131 ties, 55" x 8' 8" x 8". The Margulies Family Collection, Coconut Grove, Florida





Suzan Etkin. *Dryclean V*. 1993. Conveyor belt, fabric, and wire hangers, 6' 3" x 9' x 5' 4". Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

Still Life, conceived in 1988 for the exhibition *Home Show: 10 Artists' Installations in 10 Santa Barbara Homes*, originally involved the physical—but inactive and inaudible—presence of the artist herself. With Hamilton sitting immobile at the table, the work in that context conflated the genres of self-portrait and still life. Having stated in the exhibition catalogue that the piece is about her own "notions of domestic labor and relationships,"⁴ Hamilton received an unanticipated response from the owner of the house in which the work was first exhibited. For some time after the death of her husband, the woman told Hamilton, she continued to wash and iron his shirts.⁵ This anecdote poignantly underscores the ambiguities essential to Hamilton's meaning. The inequity of the roles that define and circumscribe masculine and feminine activity are absurd, but the absurdity of this woman's pursuit went beyond purposeless habit; her caress of those empty garments physically enacted an attachment to the absent body of her mate. Hamilton's piece fully recognizes and poetically honors that emotional duality.

The works of Etkin and Hamilton recast female personae found in Western culture. Sonia Balassanian's installation draws the viewer into a world inhabited by women of the Middle East—specifically Muslim women in Iran. The scene Balassanian presents to us is not that of Orientalist art and lore. Rather than being languorous odalisques chattering away one thousand and one nights, her figures stand erect. In the ominous ambience that surrounds them, they seem at once proudly defiant, stoically resigned, mournful of their martyrs, or maybe petrified with fear. One cannot tell for sure. Sealed into hermetic isolation by their garments, they remain invisible. They are wearing the chador, the head-to-toe veil in use in Iran. Much passionate controversy has focused on this piece of traditional clothing, whose length Balassanian has exaggerated for this occasion, so that it cascades over the face and drags a train on the ground.

In the West the veil is simply interpreted as emblematic of the ancient, patriarchal oppression of women. Its actu-

al origin and history, however, lend it far greater complexity of meaning. In pre-Islamic times the veil was an attribute of upper-class women. When it was prescribed late during Muhammad's lifetime to his wives, it was a status symbol. In a society where slaves and prostitutes went about unveiled, it also signaled the sexual virtue of its wearer.⁶ Veiling thus served to differentiate between "respectable" women and those who were publicly available. In modern times the widespread use of the veil among the urban poor has invested this garment with an opposite symbolism: it has become the uniform of underprivileged women. These class and religious associations have empowered the veil and transformed it into a political tool for asserting or denying Islamic identity. In Iran, Reza Shah banned the veil in the 1920s, and in the 1970s its return was among the earliest visible symptoms of the revolution. At this historical juncture, the veil became a symbol of a militant revival of Islamic mores. Those who did not or could not choose the veil—including Balassanian, who belongs to Iran's Christian Armenians—could either follow the road of exile or remain and dissimulate.

The husk of an Islamic identity envelopes the five mannequins in *The Other Side II*. These tenebrous shrouds mask individuality, hiding a woman's body from male eyes, indeed, and from all public gaze, and all sight, including her own. In shutting the viewer out from what lies behind the veil, Balassanian draws attention to internal psychological reality. Mirrors reveal the self to itself; looking into them is a primal act of narcissism and definition. To conceal the body not only from the eyes of others but from one's own eyes negates not only vanity but any real degree of self-awareness and ultimately self-love. Moreover, in Balassanian's installation the presence of intense floodlights suggests an interrogation or inquisition, in which context the denial of one's unique identity may be the only defense against punishment. Rather than illuminating her subjects, the mirrors and lights in Balassanian's installation obliterate them, while making spectators painfully conscious of the unwelcomeness of their gaze. Collective blindness, to

Ann Hamilton. *Still Life*. 1988. Table, chair, and 800 men's shirts, folded, starched, singed, and gilded, 5' 4" x 5' 9" x 42". Collection Arthur and Carol Goldberg, New York. Photo: D. James Dee





Sonia Balassanian. *The Other Side, II* (detail). 1993. Mannequins, fabric, mirrors, and floodlights. Installation space: 11' 4" x 15' x 23'. Collection the artist. Photo: Marty Heitner

which Balassanian alludes in this way, may be read as either the final revenge of those who stand frozen into an imposed role, or the curse of those who proudly espouse the radical Islamic cause.

Gathered in the rooms of this exhibition is a phantom crowd, each member of which assumes an ambiguous and layered identity. These stereotypical specters are deliberately incomplete fictions, whose significance is predicated on the viewer's willingness to read and decode the polyvalent symbols encoded in what they wear. A fashion show of readymade but uncomfortable identities, this exhibition has presented a few of the great many garment-based works being produced by contemporary artists who are acutely aware that the choices we make are determined by social and historical designs over which we may have little conscious control.

Fereshteh Daftari

1. Fred Wilson interviewed by Maurice Berger, *Art in America* 79 (September 1991), p. 131.
2. Stephanie Strom, "A Quiet Alteration at Brooks Bros.," *The New York Times* (November 9, 1992), Section D, p. 1.
3. See J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1971 (first published in 1930).
4. Ann Hamilton in the exhibition catalogue *Home Show: 10 Artists' Installations in 10 Santa Barbara Homes*. California: Santa Barbara Community Arts Forum, 1988, p. 18.
5. Quoted in Laura Cottingham, "Ann Hamilton: A Sense of Imposition," *Parkett* 30, 1991, p. 132.
6. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, and the references on p. 15 to Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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