

Clothes Art and the Absent Body's Communicative Potential

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Abstract This paper investigates the conceptual and aesthetic dialogue between 'Clothes Art' and 'Wearable Art', two intertwined practices that use garments as expressive media. While Wearable Art depends on the body's presence to animate the artwork, Clothes Art operates through absence, transforming the empty garment into a reflective space. Drawing on Trasforini, Barthes, Frers, and artists such as Kounellis, Boltanski, and Pistoletto, the article explores how clothing, once detached from fashion, transcends utility to become an existential medium. The absent body, evoked through garments, turns void and absence into meaning, revealing absence as a generative space of presence, memory, and the human condition.

Keywords Clothes Art. Metonymy. Body. Absence. Relative void.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, the intersection between art and fashion has emerged as a fertile ground for theoretical and aesthetic investigation. As garments increasingly enter the space of contemporary art, either as sculptural forms, performative devices, or conceptual signifiers, the boundaries between artistic and sartorial practices have become progressively blurred. Within this hybrid territory, two key notions have gained prominence: 'Clothes Art' and 'Wearable Art'. Although often used interchangeably, these terms refer to distinct

yet overlapping modes of artistic expression that employ clothing as a medium. Their difference lies primarily in the role of the body, its presence, absence, or transformation into a symbolic trace, which in turn defines the ontological status of the garment as an artwork.

This study aims to clarify the conceptual and aesthetic distinctions between Clothes Art and Wearable Art, situating them within a broader discourse that includes philosophy, semiotics, and contemporary art theory. Drawing upon authors such as Maria Antonietta Trasforini, Roland Barthes, and Lars Frers, as well as artists like Jannis Kounellis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Christian Boltanski, the discussion explores how the garment can operate both as a medium of artistic production and as a signifying structure capable of expressing presence through absence.

By examining the garment's shift from utilitarian object to artistic device, the paper interrogates the ways in which clothing transcends its functional and fashion-related contexts to become a vessel of memory, identity, and emotion. In Clothes Art, the absence of the body transforms the empty garment into a metonymy of loss, an object through which the void itself becomes expressive. In Wearable Art, by contrast, the living body re-enters the artistic field as both participant and medium, animating the work and grounding it in the immediacy of the *hic et nunc*.

Ultimately, this analysis proposes that the dialogue between these two practices reveals not only new possibilities for interpreting clothing in artistic terms, but also deeper reflections on embodiment, temporality, and the semiotics of absence. Through the study of garments that oscillate between the visible and the invisible, between the material and the symbolic, this paper seeks to understand how art can articulate meaning precisely through what is missing.

2 Clothes Art and Wearable Art: What Are They?

First of all, in order to talk about Clothes Art, it is necessary to understand what it actually is. This term, together with Wearable Art, is very often used, or overused, to refer to a wide range of different things, both within the art world and the fashion world. For this reason, starting from an investigation into how clothes can engage with the art world as a medium of expression, among the many confusing ways of defining these interactions, I will try to bring some clarity to the definitions of Wearable Art and Clothes Art. As I mentioned, when it comes to the artistic use of garments, definitions are usually chaotic and overlapping. These clarifications regarding terminology are, of course, not meant to establish a rigid or impermeable boundary between the two concepts, but rather to

highlight their differences while keeping their borders intentionally blurred, precisely in order to allow for possible hybridizations.¹

It is crucial to understand how a garment can be defined, from an artistic point of view, once it is decontextualized from the fashion system, when it no longer signifies as a meaningful product stemming from a designer's poetics, but rather as a medium that becomes meaningful within an artist's practice. The use of garments in this context can indeed be broadly categorized under 'Artwear', yet different modes of employing clothing within the art world can be identified. Two of these will be referred to here as Clothes Art and Wearable Art.

First and foremost, the key difference between Clothes Art and Wearable Art lies in the presence, or absence, of the body, which itself becomes one of the main signifiers, the element that can entirely shift the narrative. In the world of fashion, the body is an essential and inescapable component, typically required to complete the meaning of a garment. In the art world, however, that is not necessarily the case: the body may be present or absent, and while this doesn't add to or subtract from the artwork's meaning, it does fundamentally alter it.

In Clothes Art, there is a shift

da un uso di materiali, (quali stoffe, tessuti) che pur sempre restavano nel circuito semantico dell'abito e del suo 'valore d'uso' sia funzionale sia distintivo (arte tessile appunto), a una creazione o uso di abiti i cui significati fuoriescono da qualsiasi tracciato tessile, in cui l'abito funziona come un pretesto ed entra a far parte di quella vasta produzione di significato di cui l'arte contemporanea è ormai protagonista (la Clothes Art).² (Trasforini 2012, 171)

This alteration allows Clothes Art to align with a Kantian conception of art, which emphasizes the necessity of focusing aesthetic inquiry

1 For example, the Viktor & Rolf Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2015 fashion show, aptly titled *Wearable Art*, is a clear example of a possible hybridization between the two fields. While Wearable Art usually requires a purely artistic perspective, referring to a work of art where the medium of clothing is worn, in this case, however, the perspective is that of fashion, and the clothes, which are literally works of art (complete with canvas and frame), are first worn (Wearable Art) and then hung on the wall (Clothes Art), creating an effective and very interesting short circuit between the two terms.

2 Transl.: "from the use of materials (such as fabrics and textiles) that still belonged to the semantic realm of clothing and its 'use value', both functional and distinctive (as in textile art), to the creation or use of garments whose meanings go beyond any textile framework. In this case, the garment functions as a pretext and becomes part of that vast production of meaning of which contemporary art has now become the main protagonist (Clothes Art)". Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

solely on those forms that serve no purpose beyond themselves. For a work to be defined as art, it was, by necessity, required to transcend reality rather than immerse itself in it or participate in it. Without the presence of a body, it becomes easier to elevate the discourse to a more transcendent level, a discourse that may still speak about reality, but from a distanced, more reflective vantage point.

On the other side there's Wearable Art. What immediately draws attention is, of course, the body: it is the body that, by wearing the dress, allows the artwork to fully realise its meaning and reach its expressive potential.

It's clear that, in this case, the use of garments is not aligned with the Kantian conception of art I mentioned before. By being worn, the artwork is drawn down from the artistic empyrean directly into reality, immersed in the *Zeitgeist*. It becomes, quite literally, a living artwork: one that interacts with space, moves through it, and belongs fully to that specific *hic et nunc*.

The discourse around Wearable Art, however, is somewhat complex. The term has already been used to describe a trend that emerged in the 1970s (Schwartz, Laky 2008, 275-6)³ when certain designers sought to elevate their creations to the status of art. The point is, that this approach looks at clothing from the perspective of fashion, not of art, and the two are not the same.

Both art and fashion belong to the broader cultural sphere; both represent distinct 'artistic worlds'.⁴ But they are not interchangeable. Just as a hat and a belt can both be accessories, yet be very different objects, the same applies to art and fashion. As Pedroni and Volonté state in their book, "nella realtà possono esistere

3 "The Wearable Art movement of the 1970s sparked an ongoing dialogue between the art world and the fashion industry that brings together the body, sculpture and social issues in the context of fashion. The San Francisco Bay Area served as the epicenter of the wearable art revolution during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as it teemed with young artists bent on expressing their individuality via clothing. The term wearable art is commonly interchanged with art-to-wear, artwear, and art couture. Melissa Leventon, author and curator of the exhibit Art to Wear: Fashion and Anti Fashion, defines wearable art as 'an art of materials and processes whose creators are passionate about making art with textiles... artwear can be said to exist at the intersection between art, craft, and fashion. It is all three, but is owned wholly by none of them'. Wearable art found a home in museums, in galleries, and on runways" (Schwartz, Laky in Hethorn, Ulasewicz 2008, 275).

4 This term is used by Becker (Pedroni, Volonté 2012, 14) to indicate how fashion should not be equated with art but considered as belonging to one of the "worlds of art". Always an art form, but different worlds. Similarly, Ulisse (2018, 32), again to indicate the multiplicity of artistic practices that cannot be categorized under a single term, uses: "world of the arts".

contemporaneamente mondi artistici distinti e persino in conflitto tra loro”⁵ (Pedroni, Volonté 2012, 156).

This is precisely why, I believe, when we talk about fashion infused with artistic elements, the term Wearable Art may not be entirely appropriate. It implies an artistic point of view, which doesn't do justice to garments that originate from a designer rather than an artist. To understand them properly, we need to acknowledge their different frameworks, they may intersect, but they should not be treated as the same thing.

Wearable Art seems to merge Clothes Art with theatre, placing the clothing, now the central artwork, onto a body that must move, interact with the surrounding space, and establish a relationship with it in order to fully express its potential.

3 Clothes Art as Metonymy

As just explained, Clothes Art encompasses all those artworks that use clothing as a creative medium in the absence of the body that wears it. However, there exists a whole subcategory within Clothes Art in which the absence of the body within the garments becomes a representation of those very missing bodies. Here, the absent body, through wrinkled, empty fabrics, becomes a spotlight on the absence itself, turning into its spokesperson and metonymy.⁶ As Maria Antonietta Trasforini explains:

Nel corso del Novecento, nel suo passaggio da arte tessile a Clothes Art, l'abito d'arte prende le strade della metonimia con opere in cui 'l'abito è il corpo', ovvero l'abito-opera che contiene il corpo si sostituisce a esso, a partire da un nesso caratterizzato da forti connotazioni (di genere, per esempio, o di classe) e conseguenti nuovi significati.⁷ (Trasforini 2012, 172)

5 Transl.: “In the real world, multiple artistic realms may coexist simultaneously, at times even in tension or conflict with one another”.

6 It's important to note that not every example of Clothes Art functions as a metonymy for the body. The *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags) made by Michelangelo Pistoletto in 1967, for instance, uses clothing to express a critique against the consumerist society and the environmental issues it causes, an aspect of his poetic which is still very present in his works.

7 Transl.: “During the twentieth century, in its transition from textile art to clothes art, the art garment took the path of metonymy, with works in which ‘the garment is the body’ – that is, the garment-as-artwork containing the body comes to replace it, starting from a connection characterized by strong connotations (of gender, for example, or of class) and by the emergence of new meanings”.

For example, when discussing this aspect of Clothes Art, we can consider Kounellis's *Tragedia Civile* (Civil Tragedy) an artwork created in 1975 for an exhibition at the Lucio Amelio Gallery in Naples. In this installation, a black coat and a grey hat were hung on a coat rack positioned in front of a gilded wall. There was no sign of a body. As Nina Felshin observed, the "removal of the body calls attention to the artifice of clothes" (1993, 13), clothes that, as Maria Antonietta Trasforini argued, have lost their vestimentary function in order to become a medium, much like a canvas or a block of marble. The absence of the body becomes a metonymy for the body itself, turning that void into a more explicit and striking presence than presence itself could ever have achieved. That emptiness becomes charged with meaning.

And this is exactly what is seen in Kounellis's work. His coat, hanging alone against the wall, does not speak about itself, it speaks about the person who left it there and never returned to retrieve it. As Massimo Recalcati notes, "l'uomo - ecco forse la tragedia - ha deposto i propri abiti, di lui non resta nulla: solo la sua mancanza, la sua assenza"⁸ (*Jannis Kounellis. I cappotti* | *The Coats* 2019, 9).

This metonymy can be seen also in the artwork that Kounellis presented at the former Oratorio San Lupo in Bergamo in 2009, where identical coats and shoes were laid out on the floor in parallel lines and dominated by an iron cross. The Oratorio has once been used as a cemetery, and Kounellis recalled that history: with each empty coat and each empty pair of shoes he recreated the same sacred and lonely atmosphere of a place full of presences that were not really there anymore, bodies that left their clothes behind. And those clothes are all the same, because in the face of death, we are all the same (Fondazione Alberto Peruzzo 2020).

The same ideas were also followed by Charles Boltanski, who realized *Personnes* in 2010 at the Grand Palais, where again the empty clothes became metonymy of absent bodies, but in this case the metaphor was intended as a memorial to the victims of the Shoah (and today it can resonate in every history of war, death or genocide). Boltanski, quoting Barthes, said that those objects were showing the absence of the subject (Trasforini 2012, 179). And even if the clothes are not the same, the spectators don't notice that. They're not seeing a yellow cotton t-shirt, or a brown linen skirt. They're just seeing clothes, and the people that are not wearing them anymore.

⁸ Transl.: "the tragedy lies in this: a man has shed his garments, and nothing of him remains, only his lack, his absence".

4 The Presence of Absence

When examining these artworks, it becomes evident that the true protagonist, in this case, is the void, absence itself. The garments, lying on the ground, thrown across the floor, or hanging from a coat rack, do not function as objects generating meaning per se; rather, they serve as conduits directing attention toward what is unseen, yet here, what is unseen, is the primary signifier.

Absence, by its very nature, implies a distancing from the designated place. This is already embedded in the Latin origin of the term *absens*, the past participle of *abesse*, meaning to be away.⁹ What characterizes absence in these contexts is its relativity: it is not the presence of an absolute void, but the awareness of a 'has been' that is no longer. In these works, it is the presupposition of presence that renders absence perceptible.

The bodies that were meant to inhabit those garments are no longer within them, where the viewer expects them to be. It is precisely for this reason that they are perceived as missing, allowing the viewer to experience their absence. As Anna Farennikova suggest:

Experiences of absence are conscious perceptions that represent a particular object or a group of objects as missing from the perceived scene. (Farennikova 2013, 431)

Moreover, one could add that the experiential perception of the missing element is made possible because the absent object leaves behind what might be defined as a trace, a necessary but unfulfilled residue of its prior presence. As Lars Frers insightfully observes:

The traces of presence of those absent are worked in such a way as to show, synchronously, the absence of presence and the presence of absence. [...] It's not the thing that is experienced as absent that is present, but the absence itself, the presence of absence, [...] [a void that] I fill with my own emotions and imaginations. (Frers 2007, 434)

This 'trace' that Frers describes offers an intriguing conceptual tool, allowing us to reflect on how the potentiality of a body's presence (or lack thereof) is crucial in shaping the perceptual differences between empty garments in various contexts. When one stands before a rack of clothes on hangers, or before the mass of discarded garments

⁹ Even referring to Ancient Greek, although there is no assonance, the principle is always the same. Absence can be translated with ἀπουσία, which indicates, precisely, the absence from a place.

composing *Venere degli stracci*, there is no perception of a missing body; the 'trace' of absence is itself absent. In these cases, the garments are characterized by the intentionality of their solitude, they are yet to be purchased or have been deliberately discarded (producing waste). They do not presuppose a body, either past or future, and therefore it becomes impossible to experience its lack.

In contrast, with Boltanski, whose work often features indistinct heaps of clothing, the perception is entirely different. Before such a display, one encounters piles of folded garments resting on the ground, as if waiting to be gathered and worn by their owners, who will never return. These are clothes awaiting to be filled, visually narrating the absence of their missing bodies. The pile here does not evoke voluntary abandonment; it signifies forced absence.

Similarly, in *Tragedia Civile*, Kounellis's coat hanging from a coat rack carries a meaning distinct from the garments in Pistoletto's *Guardaroba* (Wardrobe) (1968-2023). In the latter, the clothes have not yet acquired their referent bodies, they have not yet been worn, and therefore speak of pause, not absence. Conversely, Kounellis's coat is orphaned; it once had a body and has lost it. Like in Boltanski, it awaits an improbable return, while serving as a vessel of memory for the flesh it once covered.

A revealing comparison may be drawn between the meanings of empty garments and those of casts, as presented by Uros Cvorc (2002, 57):

The cast¹⁰ of an object traps it in time; it is a surviving reminder of a memorial form. [...] It is the supplement to the original, the coming of the mark of absence after the original has been removed (erased). [...] [It is] literally the mark left by empty space.

The parallel may appear somewhat daring, yet it is thought-provoking. A garment is not, of course, a cast, indeed, it is almost its opposite, since it takes form through the body that inhabits it. However, once deprived of that body, it assumes a function analogous to that of a cast, "the mark of absence after the original has been removed".

From this point, a further reflection emerges. Roland Barthes notes that:

10 On the casts, reference is also made to the film *The Cast* presented by Clemens von Wedemeyer at the MAXXI in 2013 where: "The reference is linked to the identity of the works: the cast and the body like the rib and the arch (the rib becomes useless, like the shape of the cast, once the keystone has been placed, but the construction of the figure of its void - materialized essence - becomes the primary element of what remains, is observed and persists)" (Ulisse 2018, 46).

Il vestito è il momento in cui il corpo diventa significativo; in altre parole il vestito è ciò attraverso cui il corpo diventa significante, e dunque portatore di segni, o anche dei suoi stessi segni.¹¹ (Barthes [1993] 2006, 139)

The garment's capacity to render the body significant reaches a new dimension in the works discussed here. Normally, when speaking of the signifying power of dress, reference is made to clothing¹² as an individual act of signification by the wearer. Here, however, garments bear the meanings of the body in its absence, they signify not through adornment, but through loss. One might argue that the garment's semiotic capacity transcends the body's presence, signifying instead its absence, making the remaining void the allusive subject of meaning. Thus, the void¹³ reveals itself to possess "una sua figura, seppur latente, ma di rimando ad una dimensione altra, parallela"¹⁴ (Ulisse 2018, 46).

5 Conclusion

At the heart of this exploration lies the notion of absence, the void as both subject and medium of artistic expression. Through the empty garment, Clothes Art makes visible what is no longer there: it transforms the lack of the body into a tangible, meaningful presence. The coat without its wearer, the heap of folded clothes waiting for bodies that will never return, these are not mere symbols of loss, but rather manifestations of a paradoxical fullness. The void ceases to be an absence of meaning; it becomes the very condition of meaning itself.

In the works of artists such as Kounellis and Boltanski, the garment acts as a metonymy of the body, not replacing it, but recalling it through its trace, through the memory inscribed in its folds and textures. What we encounter in front of these pieces is

11 Transl.: "The garment is the moment when the body becomes significant; in other words, clothing is that through which the body becomes signifying, and thus a bearer of signs, or even of its own signs".

12 Nicolaj Trubeckoj explored the concepts of *langue* and *parole*, as expounded by Ferdinand de Saussure. The former refers to a social institution external to the individual that defines and encompasses the customs of communication, while the latter involves the individual and subjective action of appropriating and using *langue*. Trubeckoj associates custom with *langue* as a set of conventions, and clothing with *parole*, as a field in which the individual can act. (Baldini 2005, 188)

13 I refer to Lucio Fontana and his holes as the first dimension of emptiness and freedom for artists and men to create art by any means.

14 Transl.: "its own figure, latent, yet pointing toward another, parallel dimension".

not the physical body, but its resonance: a 'presence of absence' to borrow Frers's formulation. The empty garment thus operates as a kind of threshold, a liminal space where visibility and invisibility, materiality and memory, converge.

This transformation of the void into presence challenges the traditional semiotics of dress. As Roland Barthes argued, the garment is the moment in which the body becomes significant; yet, in Clothes Art, this dynamic is reversed. Here, the garment signifies without the body, and precisely through its absence. It speaks of the body that once was, of its disappearance, of the impossibility of return. In doing so, it shifts from being a sign of identity or social belonging to becoming a vessel of mourning and remembrance, a site where the personal and the collective, the aesthetic and the existential, coincide.

The garment, deprived of function and body alike, turns into an echo, a silent testimony of existence through disappearance.

Ultimately, the study of these examples of Clothes Art reveals that emptiness is not an absence to be filled but a language to be read. The void is not the negation of presence; it is its extension, its shadow, its proof. These garments remind us that what has vanished can still speak, that the traces left behind by absence are often more eloquent than presence itself. In the end, the art of the empty garment teaches us that silence, too, can be a form of expression, and that in the folds of what remains we may still find the shape of what is gone.

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