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"A Delightful Horror, A Terrible Joy: An Essay Mainly About E.V. Day's Exploded
Dresses and Dissected Wetsuits" by Jan Avgikos
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**A Delightful Horror,
A Terrible Joy:
An Essay Mainly About
E. v. Day's Exploded
Dresses and Dissected
Wetsuits**

Jan Avgikos

Much can be said about the relationship between bodies and clothes in E. v. Day's art, but it all comes down to this: clothes are not only surrogates for bodies, they suggest entire world views. Imagine them in their original state, which is to say, imagine them before they graduate from high-end consumer goods to art: a beautiful décolleté evening dress and a high-tech neoprene wetsuit. One displays and reveals the body, the other covers it up and protects it. One is barely there: it is flimsy, flirty, floaty, see-throughy. The other, with its thick rubber skin, is built to be impenetrable. One is openly seductive; the other, defensive. One epitomizes sensual pleasure, romance, even ecstasy—the perfect evening, the magic moment, the bloom of youth. The other is highly functional, ergonomically correct, and designed for survival against harsh aquatic environments. One is classic, the other is constantly being redesigned, upgraded, and improved. The dress is made for dancing, the wetsuit for diving. They make for an odd pair, and yet there is symmetry in their opposition.

Both construct the body in relation to activities—dancing and diving—which have great metaphoric resonance in modern and contemporary art. The lyrical dancers of Degas and Matisse and so many others who compose the face of modern art rustle softly in the wings of *Black Bombshell*. There's something of Jasper Johns's somber divers, too, that surfaces in the isolation and coldness of Day's "Dissected Wetsuits." Together, her altered dresses and wetsuits describe extremes and oppositions that divide along a watershed of what's expressive and extroverted versus what's deeply, inwardly inclined. Of course, the sorts of experiences we associate with a strapless, sequined evening dress and a sleek, zippered, neoprene wetsuit are, in and of themselves, somewhat extreme. These garments are synonymous with extraordinary kinds of moments—moments when we defy gravity, when we ride a wave, when we sail to the moon on champagne, when we transcend the usual boundaries that define everyday existence.

In addition to divers and dancers and art-historical precedents, a wide band of popular cultural sources registers as equally important collateral. From Marilyn Monroe to surfers, from lifestyles of the rich and famous to special-effects cinema, Day's work functions as a repository for so many (usually contradictory) associations from such (potentially) disparate cultural niches that a kind of streaming or cascading effect occurs: everything comes from somewhere else and is indexed to something else, and then, in turn, to something else again.

To imagine the couture clothes or the wetsuits in their "original" state, as if they were brand-new and "un-deconstructed," is to engage, actively, in the work of reconstructing them. We recognize them instantly for what they once were—the perfect dress, the ready-to-go wetsuit—just as we contemplate what they've become in their altered state. To see them as symbolic of stereotypes of style, identity, or other categories of experience is to see through what's on display and to apprehend their extension as "virtual garments" and "virtual bodies," which tend to be as significant as the actual material fragments.

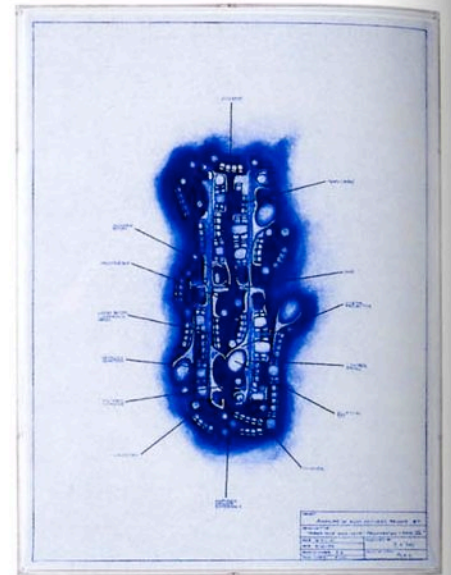
Day gives us the ruins of what once was, delivered in an active tense. The dress exists in a first-person, present state of being blown to bits, and it's presented as though it were happening before our very eyes, albeit in slow, slow motion. (Think of the final, dazzling gun battle/fashionata scene in the film *The Matrix*.) The big picture in Day's incendiary scenario is that the force of the explosion is sufficient not only to disintegrate the dress but to blow *us* away, too! The primary event we witness in the exploding-couture works is an image that describes our own demise. The second that dawns upon us, metaphorically speaking, it's all over. The dress' destruction mirrors our own, which has to be some kind of "out-of-body" experience equivalent to the "virtual bodies" that haunt Day's installations.

In both the wetsuits and the exploded-couture series, narratives of movement and speed are equipped with themes of explosiveness and violence. If it's our own imminent death and destruction that's mirrored in *Black Bombshell*, the dissected wetsuits represent rigor mortis as a permanent state of being. Day is very clever about taking things apart and putting them back together again, but the key to the believability of her work—which in turn fosters our engagement with its metaphoric dimensions—is her skill in representing movement. It is from this movement that so much of the work's narrativity stems, shimmering, dizzying, spectacular movement, or movement under arrest, stilled and permanently frozen in place. It's not just a progressive idea of motion that's on display, but one that is equally negatively inflected.

Cut along original seam lines and suspended by stainless-steel surgical wires in cagelike vitrines,

opposite

Black Bombshell, 1999
dismembered dress and
monofilament



the dissected wetsuits are more than tightly stretched: they are rigged into bizarre physical positions suggestive of a cornucopia of readings, including arrest, captivity, and bondage, as well as such ordinary sports metaphors as the instant replay and freeze-frame action. The wetsuits sustain subtle (and not so subtle) references to the body as anything other than itself—it is technologically compromised, utterly unnatural, and yet possessed of human “urges.” Whether the neoprene bodies that result from Day’s surgery are seen to resemble insects or machines or radically altered human forms, it’s readily apparent that whatever they are, they are customized in compliance with physical positions—bent over, opened up, tied down—that are close to coital. It’s not just the suits that are stretched to their limits; the bodies for which they function as surrogate hosts exhibit extreme alienation. A counterpoint to narrative vignettes of arrest, captivity, and alienation, the ergonomically correct wetsuits themselves are evocative of speed, efficiency, and performance. Their advanced design suggests a body liberated from physical constraints: it is enhanced, evolved, streamlined, elegant, fast, free.

Day’s dissected wetsuits and exploded-couture installations express exotic simultaneities and breath-taking reconfigurations, with ample wiggle room for a string of associations that cluster into narrative formation. Such is the case with “Anatomy of Hugh Hefner’s Private Jet,” a series of blueprint drawings based on floorplans of Hefner’s private jet, which Day alters to resemble diagrams of living organisms. In the Hefner drawings Day describes an eerie ongoing and productive synthesis of organism and machine. The physical, sexual, pleasure-seeking body morphs, becoming the actual Playboy jet, a “sex plane” if ever there was one. Just as the “dissected wetsuits” represent the body as thoroughly colonized, reengineered, and reinvented by technology, the newly hybridized “living jet” presents another picture evocative of ecstasy, symbiosis, and destruction. Whether in the wetsuits, the exploded couture, or the Hefner drawings, the repertoire of special effects—and beyond that, the suggestion of unholy union and offspring—fuels a clutch of narratives descriptive of the “act of becoming something else” as largely, and compellingly, sensationalistic.

In the drawings and the wetsuits, the body is hardly recognizable as such. Despite the wetsuits’ decidedly alien proportions and obvious artificiality, it echoes the sensuality, physical dexterity, and

appetites of the natural body. Hugh Hefner's private jet—an image of extravagance and extreme and ultimate pleasure, probably once suggestive of the world's fastest and most extended orgasm—is already phallic and customized for pleasure. And yet, the fantasy of endless pleasure and privilege is tethered to the fear of an artificial techno-body that's better at being us than we are ourselves.

Ricocheting between the natural body and its extension into an altered, technologized, artificial version of itself—all the while gnawing at distinctions between what qualifies as natural and what is artificial—Day's art exists in counterpoint to the unveiling of the natural body in seventies art, with all its naked, muddy, juicy, Ur-impulses to discover its roots and origins. The bodies in her art also foreclose on the socialized and thoroughly politicized bodies of the eighties, which bristled with distinct gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as well as weighty cultural agendas.

In the scenario Day creates, the wetsuits, initially designed to extend the range of the human body, instead overtake and usurp it. Trussed up and displayed like prize anatomical specimens, they seem to enact the disenfranchisement of the natural body by an artificial intelligence that is more efficient, more malleable, more subservient, more perfect, and presumably, more advanced than our own. Following their surgical makeovers, they appear less human than machine- or insectlike, which makes them all the more horrific. They share affinity with humans—the physical design of the suits is modeled after our own bodies—but visually they are more closely related to the variety of fantasy bodies that populate computer games and special-effects cinema. In this sense, the *Dissected Wetsuits* are superbly, thoroughly, sublime. Associated with the science-fiction versions of a future menaced by aliens and nightmarish visions of what we may become, Day's wetsuits and Hefner drawings seem compatible with narratives of invasion (of the cinematic, alien variety) but also with fears grounded in more immediate “future-shock” realities such as laboratory clones, our newly acquired abilities to alter the evolution of our species, and our success at teaching computers subjectivity.

Anticipating the limits of the body—its confrontations with technology; its estrangement from a mechanized, hybridized world; its subservience to machines that think faster than we do—we recognize that body (our own) as becoming more and more alien. That's sublime. We survey the body cut apart, flayed, splayed, and readied for display. We encounter it as a monstrosity, as an instrument of forces that control it. All this touches on instinctive fears that we possess and know intimately.

Counterbalanced with the sublime wetsuits are the exploded-couture installations. In *Black Bombshell*, Day captures the dress at its expressive height, with its skirt twirled out to the full extent of its deep ruffles and its fluidity so beautifully manifest. The dress epitomizes a moment of pure delight, perhaps even a kind of delirium associated with the sight, much less the feel, of a rapturous “liftoff” as soft and loose as can be. It's the most extravagant, the fullest, and the lightest moment of dance which lifts skirts and hearts and whatever else so lyrically. That's what Day captures or, rather, creates in those fluid waves of silk seemingly caught up in an enchanting rhythm and splendor of mood, splashed on the currents of air which caress a phantom dancer. By presenting a “bombshell” with the power to “knock 'em dead,” she symbolizes both celebration and destruction.

The stop-action image is held in suspended animation by a quite dense field of hundreds of translucent monofilaments and turnbuckles that convey a subtle sense of danger. The riggings that create the illusion that the dresses are afloat are installed on the floor and ceiling in geometric configurations that are identical, as Day points out, to gun sights. What's more, due to the fear of actual entrapment, the silvery forest of filaments inhibits the viewer's close-up examination of the blizzard of torn taffetas and tulles. If her impulse is to give the work exact location, to literally mark the spot, it also makes the piece even more “loaded” than it already is.

Guns, bombs, explosions, party dresses—the picture turns suddenly bleak. But then, in the sense that Day strives to achieve dimensions in her work which suggest a perpetual state of becoming, the “big bang” that sets the exploded couture in motion is another surefire route to the sublime, a sublime predicated on extraordinary ambivalence, ambiguities, and paradox. In spite of all that, it's the flashy, tricky, seductive, sexy eye candy, the bait, the slow-it-all-down-to-see-how-good-it-looks-through-the-lens-of-technology illusionistic stuff—a function of the provocation and sensationalism that inform her work—which is the real throbbing consciousness in Day's art.

opposite

Three-Mile-High-Club Proliferation, Stage III, from the series *Anatomy of Hugh Hefner's Private Jet*, 1999
Series of five blueprints; #4

Three-Mile-High-Club Proliferation, Stage III, from the series *Anatomy of Hugh Hefner's Private Jet*, 1999
Series of five blueprints; #3

photos: Peter Muscado