



E.V. Day: G-Force
October 5–December 16, 2001

WHITNEY

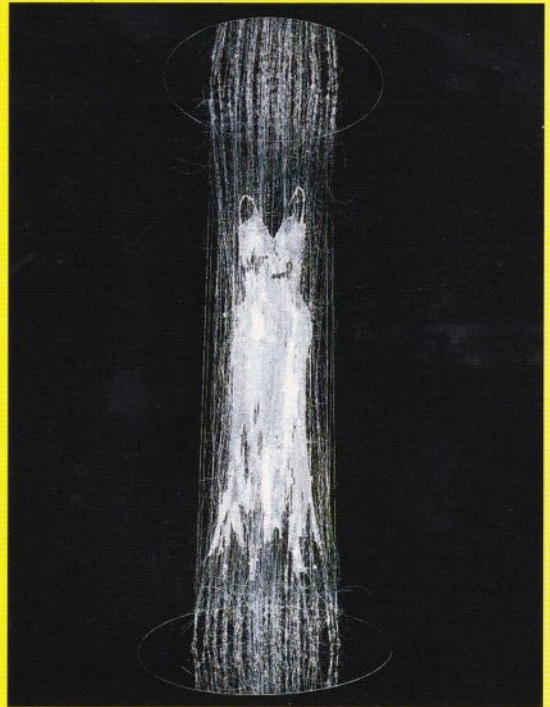
Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris



Speaking in Thongs

If ever an article of clothing symbolized the notions of desire and display that underlie women's fashion, it would be the thong. The thong is as ubiquitous in lingerie shops and department stores (where thongs account for ninety percent of overall panty sales) as it is in the popular imagination. As the subject of casual cocktail party conversation, countless magazine articles, and even popular rock songs, the thong is now literally talked about everywhere. Fashion-conscious women ignore its original intent—invisible underwear. Instead, thongs are flaunted, worn wrapped up high over hips with backsides exposed by low-riding pants and skirts—the brighter, the better. As with bras in the eighties, the idea of a woman's intimate apparel being an exclusively private aesthetic and erotic statement for the male gaze has been discarded. The thong has been reclaimed, and aggressively and publicly presented. Nowadays, the focus is less on who is looking than on who has decided to display.

E.V. Day's *G-Force*, a new installation in the Sculpture Court of the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, plays off this contemporary moment and the politics of desire and display—fantasy and fashion, femininity and fetishism—that have been of issue since women first got dressed. Drawing on elements of her earlier work exploring female icons, popular culture, and fashion, Day has created configurations of sleek flying objects from multicolored thongs and G-strings (black, silver, pink, and blue) that hang in groups from the ceiling. Approximately two hundred of these forms dive and swirl through the 40-foot-high space, transforming the cold, corporate architecture of the Sculpture Court into a kind of public aviary. The thongs, stretched and then hardened with polyurethane resin, create abstractions of flight and movement that animate the boundary between indoor and outdoor space. Caught in a moment of exploration and dynamic motion, they dart through the air with a purposive trajectory, imminently departing to parts unknown.



Day was inspired to use the thong in flight when she noticed increasing numbers of women wearing externally visible thongs. Seen from behind, the typical shape of a thong rising above a waistband closely resembles a child's schematic drawing of a bird in flight, a curved letter V with a thicker middle juncture approximating the bird's body and wings. Day envisioned a fantasy world in which thongs achieve sentience and spring off women's bodies into the air of their own accord. She humorously describes this as the "liberation of the thong."¹ In a witty twist on the idea of women's empowerment, the thong is itself empowered to soar. Thongs have shed their identity as mere bodily accessories and become beings in their own right, with focus and direction.

The arrested motion in *G-Force*—thongs frozen but definitively in transit—is characteristic of Day's earlier work, which often presents her subject in a moment of transformation or transition, both spatially and conceptually. The suspended sculpture *Bombshell*, from her *Exploding Couture* series, captures an iconic object of clothing—the white dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*—at the instant it explodes. The motion of the dress recalls the famous scene in which Marilyn's dress is blown up by air from a subway grate. In *Bombshell*, the force that lifted Marilyn's skirt has become aggressive and explosive. The dress shatters into pieces, caught in the air on monofilaments strung from floor to ceiling on turnbuckles. The violence implicit in the piece is transformative rather than destructive. Day has isolated "a moment of release" when a woman "explodes the conventions of femininity."² By referencing an iconic female figure such as Marilyn Monroe, Day universalizes the possibility of breaking seemingly indestructible social constraints for all women. It is an ongoing and unfinished process, punctuated by drastic moments.

ABOVE LEFT:
Bombshell, from the series ***Exploding Couture***, 1999. Dress, monofilament, and turnbuckles, 192 x 240 x 240 in. (487.7 x 609.6 x 609.6 cm). Collection of Charles Saatchi

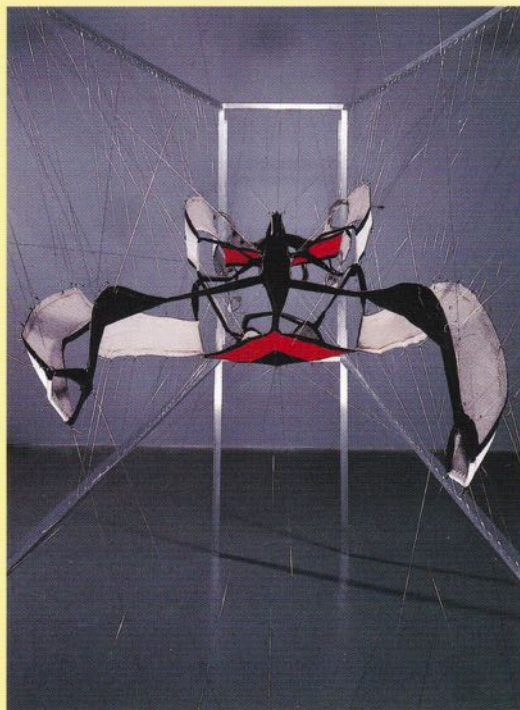
ABOVE RIGHT:
Transporter, from the series ***Exploding Couture***, 2000. Silver sequined dress (by Stephen Sprouse), monofilament, stainless steel disks, and turnbuckles, 48 x 48 x 115 in. (121.9 x 121.9 x 292.1 cm). Collection of Anthony Podesta

A similar logic applies to the most recent of Day's *Exploding Couture* works, *Transporter*, in which a deconstructed silver sequined dress is also caught in a moment within the process of translocation. *Transporter* might be the next step after *Bombshell*; once convention has been shattered, one is free to achieve true transcendence. *Transporter*'s silvery scraps of fabric create a vertical outline that retains the essential shape of the dress, implying a transitional moment in which the dress (as woman) is dematerializing from this world to another—a sublime state of motion rather than one of violent rupture. The reference to the transporter in *Star Trek* links the work to an imagined world yet to come, a place still undefined and replete with possibility. Looking at the trajectory of Day's previous work, the thongs in *G-Force* might be the inhabitants of this other world, returning en masse in perfect, unified formation to survey the world they left behind.

The installation of *Transporter* also included a collection of Day's *Celestial Pelvis* sculptures—surgical wire shaped to suggest female genitalia and pelvic bones. Dripping with glittering drops of clear resin, the sculptures hung from the ceiling on monofilament, gently bobbing and swaying around the dematerializing silver dress. Like the thongs in *G-Force*, the pelvises glorify the female genital region, and are glamorous, self-sustaining, and self-propelled. Hung in groups that suggest a sentience similar to that of the thongs, the pelvises propose a creature that is both familiar and alien, a hybrid state of being that suggests humanity but is clearly something else.

Like the *Celestial Pelvis* sculptures, much of Day's work explores the interface between the organic and technological that so captivates contemporary society. Day, however, rejects the moralizing nature/science dualism that commonly characterizes discussions of the issue. In her work, the pelvises, thongs, and dresses offer the possibility of beauty and transcendence. They are a potential evolutionary step forward rather than horrifying aberrations. For example, Day's wet-suit sculptures, dissected rather than exploded, are strung on surgical wire within metal, cagelike structures, that suggest the human form but as a new, artificial creature. Like peoples and societies on display at an anthropology museum, the wet suits are new beings to be observed. Yet the *Dissected Wetsuit* sculptures are not lifeless, sanitized, emotionless, and scientific—they are uncomfortably alive. The rubbery material and the suggestion of bondage or capture enhance the sexually suggestive position of the figures. Although fixed, the wet suits' various postures imply movement, bodies poised for action.

Unlike the glamorous, "feminine" materials of the *Exploding Couture* series, wet-suit fabric is technologically advanced, designed for performance enhancement rather than aesthetics. The dissected wet suits, like the



Dissected Wetsuit 4, 1995–2001. Neoprene wet suit with surgical steel wire and aluminum frame, 108 x 48 x 78 in. (274.3 x 121.9 x 198.1 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Henry Urbach Architecture, New York



dresses, suggest a moment of transformation, and offer the possibility of transcending bodily constraints through technology rather than fantasy. Day's work flirts with the questions, What is natural? What is artificial? It explores the body's limits and anticipates the inevitable desire to overcome them.

With *G-Force*, Day continues her investigation into the relationship between the organic and technological, and its inherent possibilities—both terrifying and thrilling—for transcendent synthesis. The thongs' sleek, elegant forms simultaneously suggest diving birds of prey and high-tech fighter jets. This relationship is reinforced by their configurations, which mimic the formations of fighter jets and migrating birds (on which jet patterns are based). Although the thongs' forms are streamlined, sharp, and potentially dangerous, they do not resemble the animated objects of horror and science fiction. The fleets of thongs convey purposiveness above all else, "flying with some kind of intent"³ as they enter through the enormous windows, trace an exploratory

reconnaissance around the space and then exit through the windows on the other side.

G-Force shares the fantastical aspects of Day's previous work that is anchored in popular culture by her choice of material. Like the dresses and wet suits, the thongs are re-envisioned, twisted and shaped into creatures whose basic material is not immediately recognizable. This is critical to the essential power of Day's work, which has been described as "respatializ[ing] cultural artifacts...expanding and re-editing their fixed cultural value...."⁴ Day goes further than revealing the dormant meanings embedded in these familiar objects—she transforms, and often explodes them.

Thus *G-Force* is comprised of thongs that might have been purchased and worn if not otherwise employed in the installation. Day had no interest in creating her own thongs, despite some initial difficulty in procuring the ones she wanted. To have designed her own thong would have been to create "a sculpture based on a thong,"⁵ thereby weakening the installation's associative meaning by eroding its connection to the thongs' contemporary function. Using manufactured thongs also links the work to the commodification of desire and feminine sexuality, the material exchange of intangibles that underlies nearly all contemporary media.

The historical objectification of the female form, and its deconstruction by contemporary critical and cultural theorists, informs all of Day's work. However, despite the serious nature of these issues, Day never loses her appreciation for the comedic surreal or for physical, sensual impact. The interpretation of clothing as metaphor for the female body enriches the multilayered meaning of her *Exploding Couture* series, while at the same time the work embraces the idea of pleasure even as it critiques it. Day's feminism is passionately feminine, as evidenced by the delirious motion of the *Exploding Couture* dresses or the evocative glitter of the *Celestial Pelvis*

sculptures. However, all the pieces have elements—the violence of the exploded dresses, the skeletal forms suggested by the dissected wet suits, and the lines of monofilament in the suspension pieces which recall gun sightlines—that carry a hint of danger and death. It is this consistent flux between sex, glamour, and violence that empowers her work. It is Day's acknowledgment of the humor inherent in that provocative and constantly changing equation that has earned her comparisons with the wry wit of Pop-era artists.

At the same time, Day's work can recall the ecstatic delirium of Baroque sculpture and painting, perhaps the first movement in which sensual pleasure in art was considered an end in itself. *Bombshell* "puts you in mind of things flying, female and climactic,"⁶ and it is not far-fetched to compare it to Bernini's famous sculpture of St. Teresa, in which religious ecstasy is literalized as physical pleasure. St. Teresa's transcendent state is emphasized by Bernini's masterfully animated flying drapery (a Baroque technique often called "living drapery"). *G-Force* is entirely composed of similarly "living" articles of clothing. Like many characteristically Italian Baroque ceiling frescoes of the Virgin's or Christ's ascension, *G-Force* depicts motion and drama that swirl out towards the boundaries of the composition and strain against a sense of stable centrality. The flying thongs, like the frescoes, suggest that transformation requires constant motion.

Unlike the *Exploding Couture* series, the thongs in *G-Force* do not merely substitute for the body in absence, but have been freed from the body altogether. Day reimagines the idea of a gendered object, giving the thongs a newly created sexuality. Each of the thongs is endowed with its own means to experience pleasure: during the process of stretching and coating the thongs with resin, Day inserted an iridescent pearl bead into what would have been the crotch of the panty. Though only occasionally visible to the viewer, this witty detail is characteristic of the artist's effortless tweaking of the line between humor and social critique. *G-Force* subtly unpacks one of the most prevalent contradictions of American society: the bottomless fascination with sexual display and exposure that coexists with strong undercurrents of Puritanism, and the fear of and desire to limit sexual power.

While the streamlined forms of the thongs evoke military strength and invulnerability rather than stereotypes of female passivity, Day's goal is not to project a clichéd notion of either gender. The thongs are "not there to drop bombs," nor as "feminist empowerment in the sense of women conquering, seeking, and destroying."⁷ Rather, *G-Force* embodies the possibility of change where there is purpose, intent, and of course, pleasure. Real empowerment lies in the freedom to make one's own decisions. In *G-Force*, Day has endowed these formerly fetishistic objects with an ability to transcend conventions of gender and fashion in favor of agency. "The thong," as Day describes it, "is making a choice to cruise."⁸

—Shamim M. Momin

Notes

1. Taped conversation with the artist, August 15, 2001.
2. From E.V. Day's notes.
3. Taped conversation with the artist, August 15, 2001.
4. Charles Beyer, introduction to "Day-Blow," interview by Stephen Sprouse, *Surface*, April 2000.
5. Taped conversation with the artist, August 15, 2001.
6. Deborah Solomon, "A Roll Call of Fresh Names and Faces," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2000.
7. Taped conversation with the artist, August 15, 2001.
8. *Ibid.*

E.V. Day

Born in New York City, 1967

Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts
(BA, 1991)

Yale Graduate School of Art, New Haven
(MFA, 1995)

Lives and works in New York City and
Los Angeles

Selected One-Artist Exhibition

2000

Transporter, Henry Urbach Architecture,
New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

1995

RAW Space, Real Art Ways, Hartford,
Connecticut

MFA Thesis Exhibition, Yale Graduate School
of Art, New Haven

1996

Material Matters, A.O.I. Gallery, Santa Fe
Weather Channels, Art Initiatives Gallery,
New York

25th Anniversary: 25 Younger Artists, John Weber
Gallery, New York

Instant Visions, New York Women's
Foundation, New York

A few bright seconds, Void, New York

1997

Perfect Day, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Twister, Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut
endorphin ladies, Sandra Gering Gallery
(Project Room), New York

1999

Luster, Henry Urbach Architecture, New York
At the Curve of the World, Track 16 Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

2000

Two Friends and so on, Andrew Kreps Gallery,
New York

Black Bombshell, Art Forum Berlin, with
Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf

Anywhere but Here, Artists Space, New York
Greater New York: New Art in New York Now, P.S.1
Contemporary Art Center/The Museum
of Modern Art, New York

2000 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York

2001

Armory Show, with Henry Urbach Architecture,
New York

Ghost, Claudia Gian Ferrari Arte
Contemporanea, Milan

The Axiomatic Arcade, Track 16 Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

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WHITNEY

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Monday–Saturday 7:30 am–9:30 pm
Sunday 11 am–7 pm

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition
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Momin, branch curator, Whitney Museum
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Cover, inside far left, and inside far right: *G-Force*, 2001 (installation view). Thongs, resin, pearl beads, and monofilament, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Henry Urbach Architecture

Photograph credits: All photographs by George Hirose except *Transporter* by Ron Amstutz; *Dissected Wetsuit 4* by Mathias Kessler; *Bombshell* by Bill Short.

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