

FUSIONABLE CHEONGSAM AND THE MÊLÉE OF FASHION

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The world *mêlée* came into the English language via the Old French *meslee*, itself based on Medieval Latin *misculare*, 'to mix'. In Middle English it denoted 'hand-to-hand combat', but also 'cloth made from variegated wool'. It is this double connotation, the colourful mix of fashion on the one hand, and the struggle over the meaning of particular dresses, that Wessieling's work on the cheongsam brings to the fore. In the cheongsam, tradition fights with modernity, costume with fashion, culture with economy. The male intermingles with the female, the West opposes the East.

The '*mêlée*' involves a constant movement. Like fashion itself, the cheongsam is never standing still, but constantly incorporating new differences and drawing new distinctions. It is these mixings that Wessieling enables us to see. And like fashion, this mixing never ends – stagnation and homogeneity are the death of fashion. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, therefore, stresses the difference between *mêlée*, and other forms of more static mixtures, like the *mélange*: 'The *mélange*, therefore, is not. It happens; it takes place. There is *mêlée*, crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing, and it is never a single thing, nor is it ever the same'¹. And so is the cheongsam – 'crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing, and it is never a single thing, nor is it ever the same'. I will follow Wessieling on her retracing of the ever-changing cheongsam, extricating some of the threads woven into its history. Roland Barthes famously declared that a *text is a tissue* – a tissue of *signs*, of *words*, of *citations*² – and that a theory of the text would have to be a 'hyphology (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web)³. A theory of the tissue, then, has to unravel the spider's web of signs and citations in which fashion is caught.

1. Nancy 2000: 150

2. Barthes 1977: 142-8

3. Barthes 1990: 64

Mapping Motifs

Wessieling started her investigation of the cheongsam in *Mapping Motifs: An Exploratory Journey through Fashion, Cities and Identities*, an exhibition first shown at the AVA Gallery of the University of East London in 2006. Fashion and the city have always been closely related. Cities offer the shopping arcades, the creative environment, and the production complexes without which no fashionable garment could be designed, produced, or purchased. At the same time, cities provide the stage on which the individual negotiates its identity between performance and recognition. The

Opposite page: Mapping Motifs: An Exploratory Journey through Fashion, Cities and Identities 2006





Mapping Motifs: An
Exploratory Journey
through Fashion, Cities
and Identities 2006

archetypical modern, the dandy-flaneur, walks the urban catwalk, window-shopper and spectacle at once, negotiating what his colourful fashions mean, getting into the *mêlée*.

In Wessieling's installation the relation between city and dress is inverted. No longer is the dress carried through the streets of the city; instead, the streets of the city run across the dress. The installation consists of six dresses. Otherwise identical, each dress has the fashionable streets of a different fashion metropolis printed on the textile: Paris, London, New York, Milan, Shanghai, Hong Kong. The topography of each of the cities is customized according to the fashionable mind: in London, for example, Savile Row leads straight to Notting Hill, and in Hong Kong Nathan Road leads into Pedder Street. The bespoke tailored dresses are presented hanging from two ready made, albeit modified, clotheshorses. The show room itself is covered in wallpaper which amalgamates the six maps displayed on the dresses.

Traditional exhibitions of costume history often tucked away their precious dresses in glass containers, presenting what was once part of a living person's life like Snow White in her glass coffin. Wessieling kisses awake the exhibited dresses by encouraging the visitor to interact with the pieces, reflecting fashion's status as an embodied practice that can only be exhibited as shrouds in the museum's dusty archives. Clothes come alive only when they are worn, and the artist manages to revive some of this interaction between human individuals and material artefacts: The clotheshorses, bought at a supermarket, remind the visitor of the mundanity of fashion, of the dresses' life outside the shop-windows and catwalks. By using ready-made objects, Wessieling manages to connect her bespoke tailored art pieces with the everyday reality of the visitor. Furthermore, two reading-glasses, one with a red, and the other with a blue lens supplement the dresses. Only when the visitor uses these lenses, s/he can decipher the different layers of writing on the dress, doubling street names and fashion designers; the observer is called upon to actively engage in making sense of the exhibited items. Finally, an accompanying leaflet asks the visitor: "Which is your favourite dress?" Again, it is hard to imagine a similar question in a classical museum; there, the evaluation is left to the curator, the visitor does the

admiring. Instead, Ling invokes an active response from her visitor, making use of fashion's nature to provoke judgemental responses: we like or dislike dresses in a much more emotional way than we might like or dislike works of art. Clothing is part of our everyday life, close to our bodies, they compel us to respond, whether we like it or not.

The dresses have been made in traditional form and method by a Chinese *qipao* (the original Mandarin word for cheongsam) tailor from ink-printed fabric, itself a mixture of cotton and satin specially designed to facilitate the modern printing technique. Both the use of a non-British cut, and the fact that (as I assume) the general visitor is oblivious to the exact origin of the dress, is telling. It shows how Western fashion is at the same time dependent on innovations from outside its shores, and negligent to this debt. From Flemish lace in the sixteenth century, French fashions of the Restoration, the Indian Calicoes of the eighteenth, and the Chinoiserie of the nineteenth century, to today's Italian suits, fashion has always found its inspiration abroad. The desire for the exotic other is transferred onto purchasable commodities. But as much as the shopping consumer is interested in the exotic, there is little interest in the indigenous semantics of such pieces. Rather, they are invested with a stereotypical image of the region they come to represent.

By her extensive use of the colour red in this exhibition, the artist reflects such stereotyping. Although Chinese people would not normally wear red clothes, unless for festive purposes, 'red' symbolises China in the Western imagination, exchanging the diversity of a two thousand year history for a fifty year old political symbol. Similarly, the cheongsam, although originally from the Manchu region, comes to represent the heterogeneous population of a one billion super-state. This is not to say that such homogenizing, stereotyping constructions are the work of the Western gaze only. Self-stereotyping, as well as national egalitarianism, as Wessieling shows in previous essays, is performed by many Chinese designers themselves, in China as well as abroad. Orientalism, surely, is no one way street, but an inescapable *mêlée*.

By turning the spectator into a participant, Wessieling's installation engages



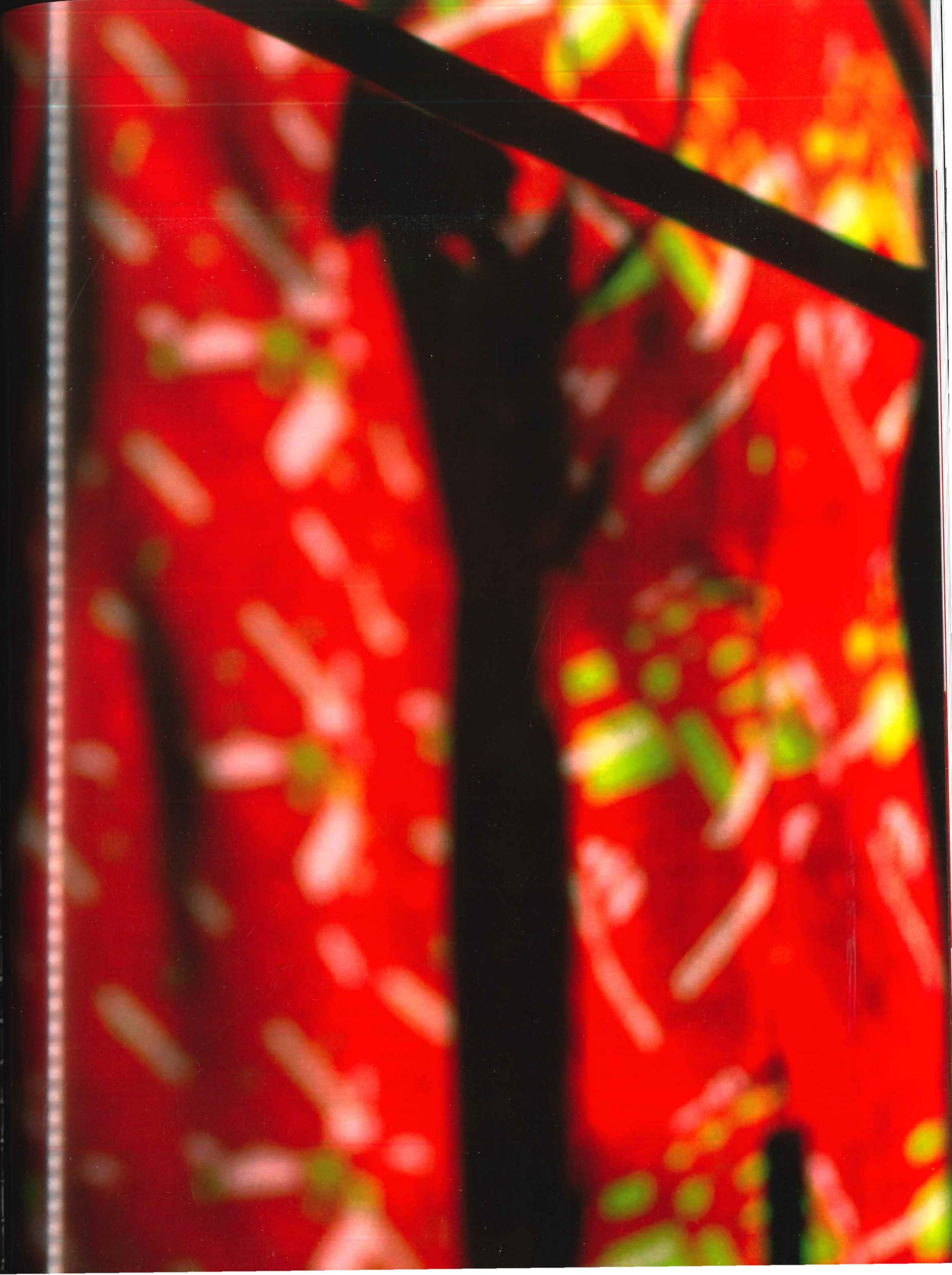




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the visitor in a manifold dialogue. Questions about fashion, exoticism, capitalism, West and East, unfold under the eyes and hands of the observer. At best, the visitor has acquired new tools to decipher the daily theatre on our global metropolitan streets, but also understand that s/he is constructed in the eye of the other in the same moment as s/he constructs the other. In the theatre of the street, there is no darkened hall, no lightened stage, we are audience and actor at the same time, observer and observed – there is no escape from the *mêlée* of fashion.





Fusionable Cheongsam

In *Fusionable Cheongsam*, Ling takes up many of these themes and explores them further. Most importantly, she takes her reflections back to China – engaging the East itself in the negotiations of Orientalism. The exhibition explores different *mêlées*, different combats and different mixtures. Four different cheongsams, each presents the image of the cheongsam as a contested ground: What does the cheongsam mean? And for whom?

National Dress

One piece shows a Chinese flag cut into the form of a Cheongsam. The resulting cheongsam-Chinese-flag reflects on the status of the cheongsam as well as the image of China in the eyes of the West. What does ‘the West’ think about China? On the one hand, China is an exotic, feminized other of the colonial mind – represented by the cheongsam. On the other hand, China is seen to be a dangerous, anti-Western, communist opponent – represented by the Maoist flag. By merging these two images, the artist shows how these conflicting images manage to exist side-by-side, often without influencing each other, but sometimes fighting or even excluding each other. By conjuring up such opposing associations as femininity and Maoism, subservience and opposition, exoticism and anti-Westernism, the artist also reveals the feebleness of such stereotypical constructions.

Red Guard Dress

A cheongsam which the artist made from a Red Guard uniform evokes similarly conflicting images, this time of militarism and femininity, uniforms and fashion, obedience and freedom. However, this piece exposes more than just the *mêlée* of conflicting images. Here, we can see that purity is the *result*, not the *starting point* of mixing – that the threads that make up a tissue become threads only as part of this web. There is nothing ‘male’ inherent to a uniform; instead, the ‘maleness’ of such uniform comes to the fore when it is mixed with a ‘sign’ for femininity, i.e. the cheongsam. But of course the cheongsam has no inherent ‘femininity’ itself – its identity is emerging only when coming into contact with another emerging identity.





Red Guard Dress 2007







This and opposite page:
Authentic Dress 2007

Authentic Dress

Traditional stereotypes are conjured up and pushed to the limit again with a cheongsam rising from a wok. In the West, the cheongsam is almost invariably connected to the catering business. Like Chinese lanterns, chopsticks and traditional music, the cheongsam is employed to guarantee the authenticity of the food served. However, many of the dishes consumed under the image of authenticity, like the famous 'chop suey', for example, only become Chinese when eaten in the West. The 'authenticity' of Chinese dress (and food, for that matter), it seems, is produced only in contact with the 'otherness' of the West. Like gender identities, cultural identities seem to emerge only in contact with others – who themselves become other in this contact. Gregory Bateson describes the emergence of culture as the emergence of a *distinction* between two 'cultures'.⁴ This distinction has two dimensions: Firstly, it is generating one social entity which encompasses the two 'cultures' it brings into contact – neither the East nor the West 'exist' without the other. Consequently, the identity is always already based on a two-ness and as such defined by the difference it enables. The fact that 'culture' has to be written with inverted commas points to the second dimension. Prior to the contact, there are no cultures, i.e. there is no acknowledgement of a 'culture' as culture, there is no (fixed) sense of self. Bateson's term for the fact that such self-recognition as a culture is born out of the experience of otherness is *schismogenesis*. It is the very contact that forces one 'culture' to find its 'identity' in contrast to another 'culture'. Accordingly, any notion of a cultural self carries the mark of otherness, corrupting any recourse to authenticity – at least on an epistemological level: 'The self is infected by the other [...]. It is "schizophrenic" in the truest sense of the word, since any reflection will carry it *not only* to itself (the product of self-determination) *but also* to the other (the cause of the self-determination) and that leaves it not knowing how to solve this either-and-or-situation'⁵. In other words: while authenticity might be ruled out and even discredited in a strict difference-theoretical sense, the semantics of authenticity accompany the discourse on culture from its beginning, and have proliferated in a postcolonial setting.⁶ Difference and the plea for authenticity are in a constant *mêlée*, forever entwined and entangled.

4. Bateson 1972: 62-72

5. Baecker 2001: 17;
translation is author's own.

6. Cf. Huck and Schinko
2006

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One-Dollar Dress 2007



One-Dollar Dress

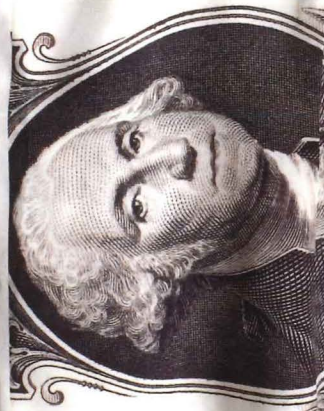
Another reminder of the movement involved in creating 'identities' sees 'One-Dollar Dress' - a cheongsam imprinted with the image of a Dollar note emerging from a suitcase. The cheongsam cannot be understood simply in terms of an inner-Chinese development. It has been, since its beginnings in Shanghai in the 1920s, part of a global economy. And China itself was never a homogeneous, steady, pure society before it encountered the 'West', but its very existence was born out of the fight over diversity and variety, incorporating and producing differences along the way. The role of textiles, the trade along the silk route, in the production of unity and difference through internal and external encounters, is a story that, unfortunately, can only be hinted at here.





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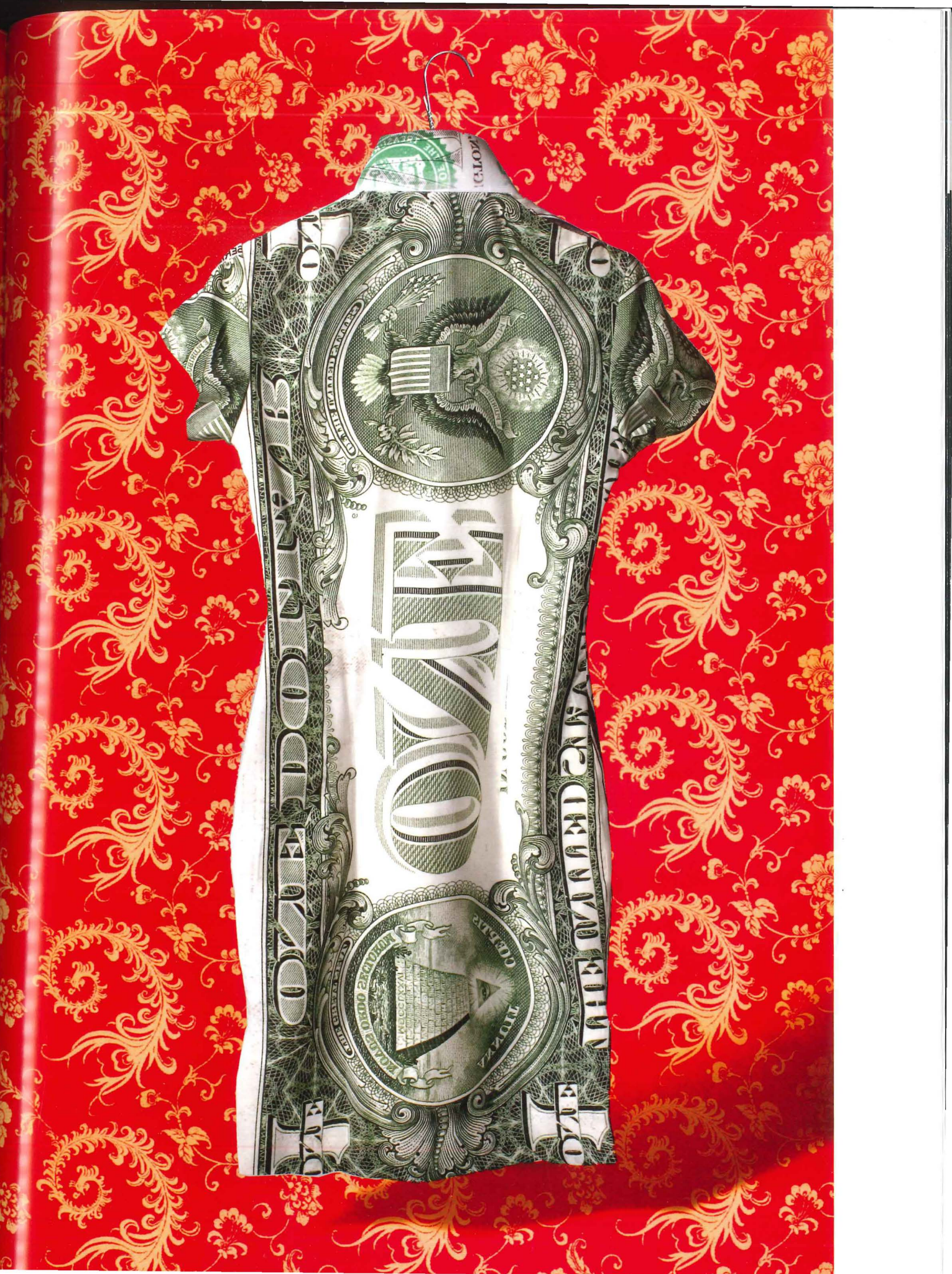
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ONE DOLLAR





Suit Covers

Moving away from cultural images of the cheongsam, further work hints toward another *mêlée*: the negotiations between the maker and the wearer of a cheongsam. Do we wear our clothes, or do our clothes wear us, as Virginia Woolf suggested? Who has the power to determine the meaning of our clothes? In the production of a cheongsam, the negotiations between tailor and wearer are an important aspect of the creation. Traditionally, the wearer would bring cloth of her own choosing, the tailor would measure up the prospective wearer and every consumer would finally purchase an individual, bespoke cheongsam. However, the cheongsam the consumer has in mind and the cheongsam the tailor thinks fit for the wearer do not always match completely – the final cheongsam has to be negotiated. Here we find two very different results of the negotiation process between the twin-producers of the cheongsam – the tailor and the customer. The two exhibits show the artist wearing the results of this negotiation; these images are printed on two suit-covers, reflecting how the cheongsam can be covered by different meanings.

Both cheongsams have been tailored by Hong Kong-based Shanghai tailors, using textiles the artist brought to China from London. The cloth is imprinted with the pattern of traditional Chinese writing paper. The tailors were asked to make a cheongsam from this and write something of their liking onto the cheongsam using the imprinted pattern. However, the results could hardly be more different. The first tailor showed a strong conviction of what a 'proper' cheongsam should look like. In his eyes, the cheongsam should be sexy, emphasising, or even constructing the Chinese female body in a well-shaped S-curve. His cheongsam can only be worn with high-heels, again emphasising 'female' attributes. That the wearer could wish for something else seemed more than strange to him. However, he refused to write on the dress – seeing this as a misuse of what he perceived of as a practical, everyday commodity, not a work of art. In the end, he asked an acquainted, retired tailor, now the general secretary of the Hong Kong Wearing Apparel Industry Employees General Union and the Chairman of the Hong Kong Calligraphy Association, to write on the dress. The writing is an excerpt of the renowned *Legend of Ah Q* by the Confucian writer Lu Xin. It tells the story of *Ah Q* meeting a traveller between cultures, who, in the end, is at home neither here nor there. As it seems, this appears to be what





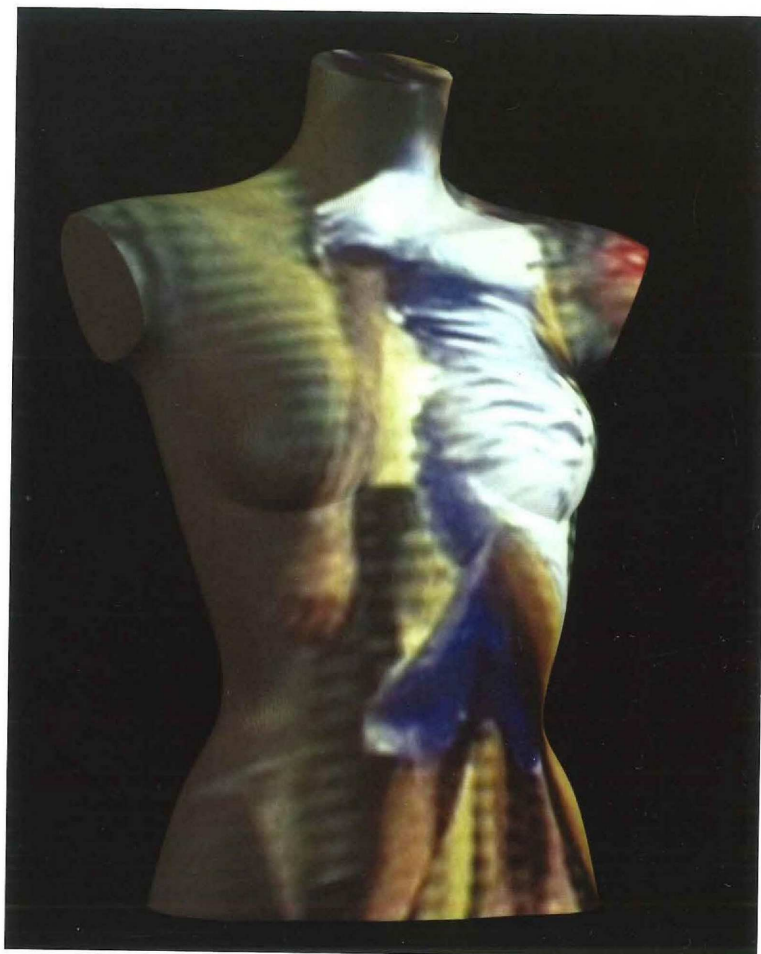
the calligrapher thinks of Wessieling: A Hong Kong-Chinese woman, who emigrated to Europe, who still wants a cheongsam, but rather as a work of art, than a mundane dress. Like writing, and textiles, our live-stories seem to be woven from various threads, endlessly changing and developing.

The second tailor, however, tried to comply with the modernity of the textile his customer brought him. He produced an easy-to-wear, almost leisurely dress, which appears almost modern and minimal, bereft of many of its exotic connotations, and bereft also of a specific, stereotypical femininity. All he wrote on the textile was his personal as well as his company's name – signing and branding the piece at the same time. The image of the artist as a sexy woman that resulted from the first dress seems strangely at odds with the image of her wearing the latter one. Who is she? Does she wear her clothes, or do her clothes wear her?

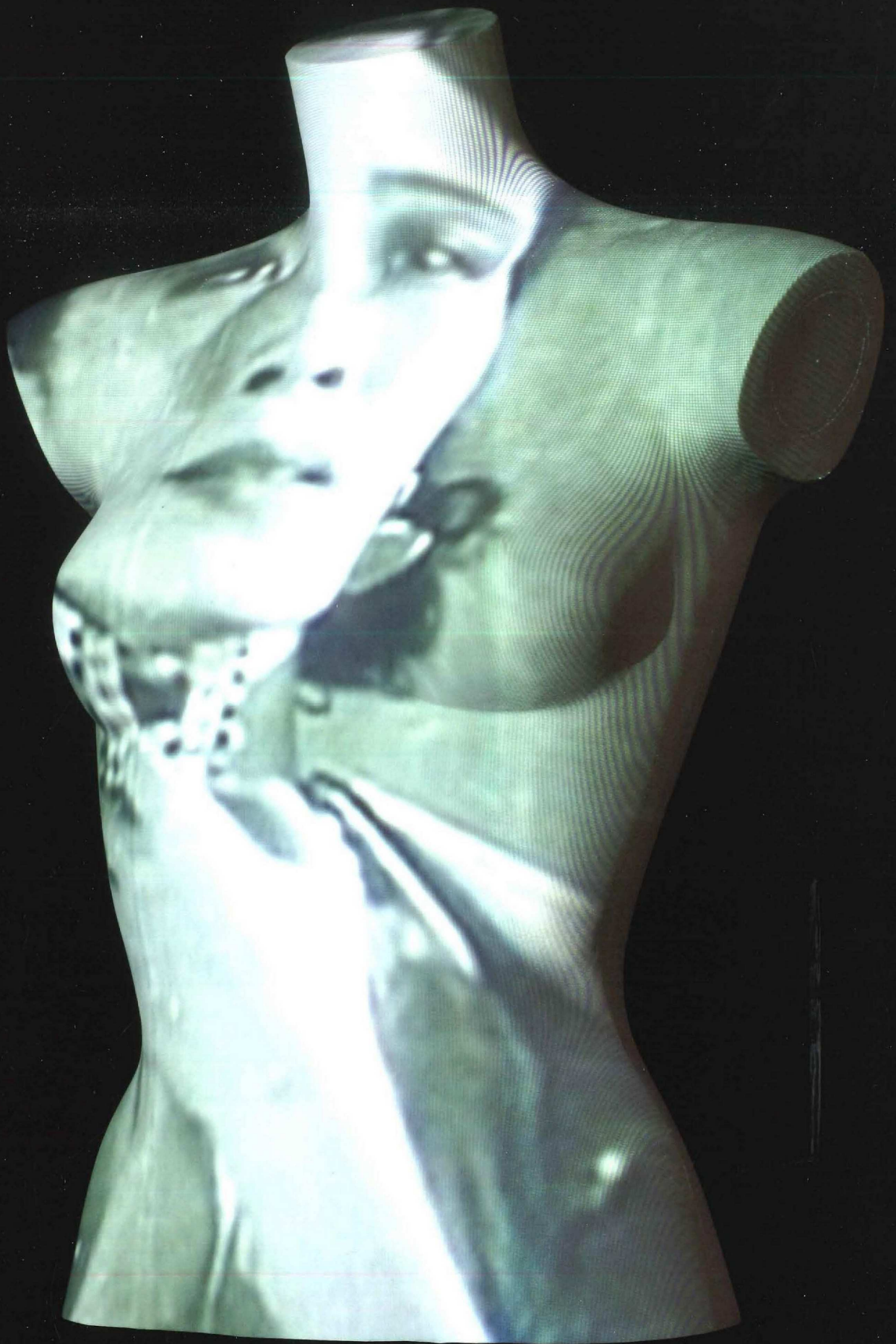
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Suit Covers 2007

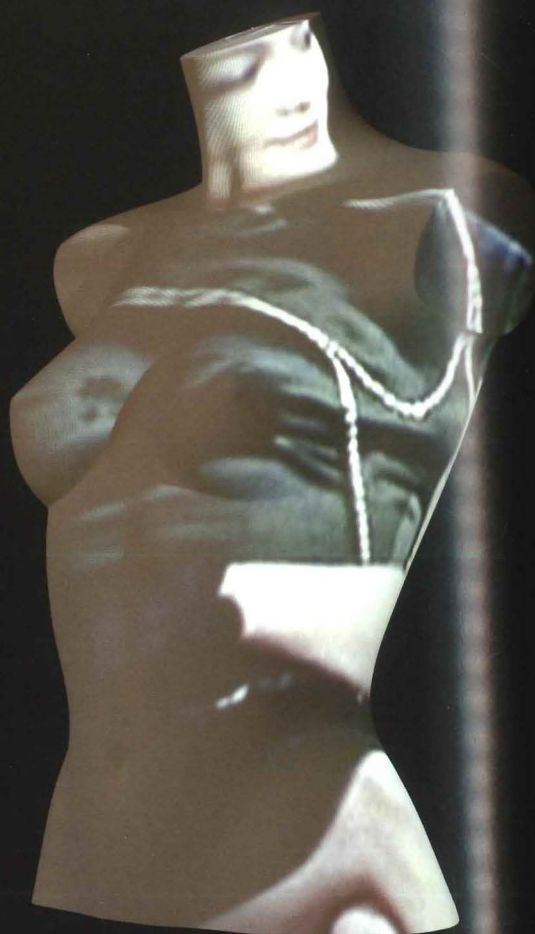
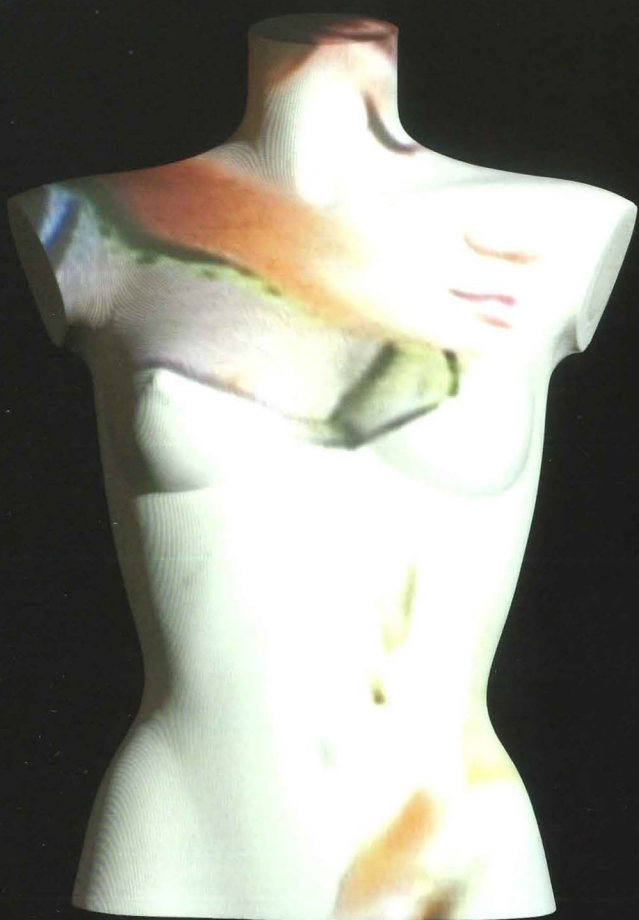
Nam Kok Staircase

As we have seen, the 'freedom' to have a subjective, personal relation with the cheongsam could be severely restricted. We are always already bombarded with preconceptions of what the cheongsam stands for through modern mass-media, we are always already part of the mêlée of fashion. A montage of excerpts taken from movies shot in China, Hong Kong and the USA between 1930 and today shows how the cheongsam has been used to eroticise women in modern mass media, and how the cheongsam itself has been made to stand in for sexiness. Can we escape from such a prison-house of images? Is there a perception of the cheongsam that is free from such preconceptions? Probably not.



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Excerpts from *Nam Kok Staircase*. In collaboration
with Thibaud de Barmon
2007



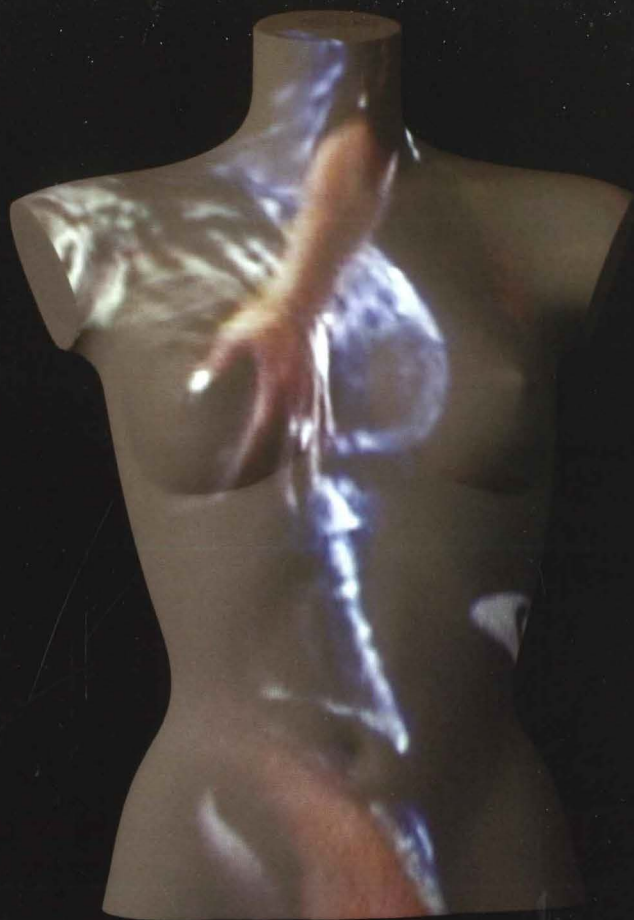


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Excerpts from *Nam Kok*
Staircase. In collaboration
with Thibaud de Barmon
2007





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Excerpts from *Nam Kok*
Staircase. In collaboration
with Thibaud de Barmon
2007





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Message Dress 2007

Message Dress

Taking the *mêlée* from the objects of the exhibition into the exhibition itself, Wessieling makes the audience, again, part of the negotiation process. Here two identical cheongsams, complete with a pattern of notebook lines, give the audience the chance to inscribe their own ideas about the cheongsam directly on the dress. Twenty different rubber stamps and a stamp pad are provided to give the audience the chance to turn from spectator to participant. The rubber stamps enable to print twenty different adjectives, ranging from 'sexy' to 'exotic' to 'bourgeois' to 'fashionable'. The audience is given the freedom to decide and express for themselves, what they think of the cheongsam, what connotations it has for them, personally – together, they create the meaning of the cheongsam, and a new artwork.



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UNIFORM

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ELEGANT
主人
INDIVIDUALISTIC
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OLD-FASHION

中國
CHINESE IDENTITY
MODEST
MODEST





女性
FEMININE

資產階級分子
BOURGEOIS

壓迫
OPPRESSION

衛星
SATELLITE



As Wessieling's work shows, the meaning of a cheongsam is always the result of a complicated process of negotiations, between stereotypical preconceptions and personal experience, between various cultures, between wearer, producer and spectator, between East and West, men and women. There is, as Wessieling shows, nothing outside of the *mêlée*, there is nothing that enters it unchanged, nothing that escapes it, just a permanent 'crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing' – and the result is 'never a single thing, nor is it ever the same'.

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