

Ying Gao

The Artistry of Technologized Fashion

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Ying Gao, (No) Where, (Now) Here.
Photos: Dominique Lafond.



There are few fashion designers who have ventured in earnest into the field of technologized garments and achieved success or elegance. Of note is the pioneering work of Hussein Chalayan, who integrates robotics with LED-encrusted garments to create performative grand finale/fantasy pieces for runway presentations. Ying Gao, an emerging Montreal techno-fashion designer, is another who has embraced the potential of technology in fashion. However, Gao stands at the other extreme of Chalayan's showmanship, instead exploring the personal and intimate relations constructed between techno-fashion, the body and the public. By creating playful and irreverent designs, surprising in their poetry and ability to display non-utilitarian aspects of techno-fashion, Gao could be said to question the very core of the positivistic drive of an increasingly technologized society.

Trained as a fashion designer, and working as a researcher and professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Gao uses technology as a means for artistic expression—and as a physical conduit—to choreograph a fashion object that references the machine, body, environment, as well as social and material transformation. Her garments can be understood as relational objects that invite the public to react to and act with them, and thus experience subtle and unexpected moments of kinship with these “living” objects.

For example, Gao's sartorial works of art have explored instances in which the garment is modulated by the viewer's movements, breath, or their capacity to explore it in the dark with a flashlight, all with the aim to enchant, as well as posit a better understanding of what technologized fashion might add to the larger conversation of fashion discourse and experience. Works such as “Walking City 1 + 2” (2007) contain motion sensors, which trigger pneumatic systems in a dress, making the garment's origami layers “breathe” and move when someone is present. “Living Pod 1 + 2” (2008) is activated by a pocket lamp that shines deep into its organza and leather folds, launching a series of small motors that modulate the garment's form. Finally, “Playtime 1 + 2” (2010), inspired by the Jacques Tati film of the same name, is triggered by the flash of a camera so that one dress becomes uncapturable due to its rapid motions while the other dress echoes back to the “paparazzi” with a flash of its own, making the dresses appear blurry in photographs. In both cases, the garment's immediate reaction causes a misdocumentation of the object, as well as instills an awareness of the act of looking and the attempt to capture the object's image.

Beyond the technological finesse of Gao's designs is the meticulous crafting of fashion garments, which stand on their own stylistic merits, irrespective of technological add-ons. Combining leather and organza with sensors, robotics and kinetics, Gao creates fashionable



second skins that breathe, move and shape-change before our very eyes, and in reaction to our bodies, environments and actions. This is also what we ask of fashion: to transform us in the very moment, and in the very act, of becoming part of our bodies as we navigate unknown social and architectural terrains. After all, fashion, like technology, is our accomplice in living!

Micro-Interview:

1. Who is your greatest design influence? Fashion or otherwise...

YG: Photography and cinema, from Raymond Depardon to Jeff Wall, from Albert Lamorisse to Bruno Dumont.

2. What do you think technology adds to fashion?

YG: I'm not sure that technology adds anything to fashion design.

3. For whom are your clothes designed?

YG: For those who still believe in utopia, in intangible things, in a certain form of melancholy.

4. How did Jacques Tati influence your thinking about fashion design?

YG: Jacques Tati did not influence my thinking about fashion design, but his work reminds me of the importance of having a personal "worldview" in things I do and make.

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Valérie Lamontagne

