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by

Bich N. Vu

2013

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T

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T

by

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Abstract

T

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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T is a thesis installation that explores the semiotics of public dress through the fundamentals of sculpture: mass and form, material and process, site and context. This exhibition consists of four T-shirt shaped objects made out of steel, aluminum, talcum, and sugar¹.

A T-shirt is arguably a universally recognizable article of clothing, but its familiarity when juxtaposed with everyday material challenges the social identity of dress.

As a theatrical designer experimenting with sculpture, Bich Vu investigates the ways clothing and space facilitates a narrative. The different arrangements of the objects within the installation are performances created in collaboration with guest directors and choreographers from the Department of Theatre & Dance.

¹ Nasher Sculpture Center, *Guide to Outdoor Sculpture*

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INTRODUCTION: WHY I BEGAN THIS PROJECT.

“The creative universe begins with its essentiality”—Giorgio Armani (qtd. Harris 13).

The T-shirt is arguably a universally recognizable article of clothing with malleable form and identity. It is prevalent and personal. Freely adaptable to the wearer’s taste, yet restrained by cultural guidelines, the T-shirt is an ideal representative of public dress.

Inspired by Ai WeiWei’s *With Milk, Find Something Everybody Can Use*², *T* is a material—and performance—based installation that explores the cultural identity of a basic article of clothing. The installation consists of four T-shirt shaped objects³ made out of steel, aluminum, talcum, and sugar. This transformation of the T-shirt by common materials invites new interpretations of performance and public dress.

T is a site-specific installation in the walkway of the F. Loren Winship Drama Building at The University of Texas. Situated next to the dance rehearsal rooms, the passing of

² *With Milk* is an installation at the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in which the substitution of common materials (coffee and milk in place of water) transformed a familiar fountain.

³ “T-shirt shaped object” or “objects” in the context of this thesis refers to the items placed in this installation. “T-shirt” refers to the T-shaped knit jersey garment.

dancers is a reminder of the close relationship between clothing and the body. The dual occupation of this space by moving bodies and still standing T-shirt objects calls attention to the inanimate existence of clothing without their wearers.

As a theatre designer experimenting with sculpture, Bich Vu investigates the ways clothing and space facilitates a narrative. To decode the semiotics of design in a theatrical performance, careful steps are taken to pull back layers of interpretations. A T-shirt worn by an actor on stage is a costume. When the actor walks out of the theatre in his costume⁴, this T-shirt becomes a single garment out of innumerable choices that make up public dress, the “attire to help craft a social narrative” (MFAH). Taken one step further, the T-shirt without the wearer is an inanimate object. This T-shirt is identifiable as an article of clothing through the collective memory of its wearers.

At this level of semiotic deconstruction, the T-shirt becomes the subject⁵ of this investigation and the material chosen are the agents⁶. Steel, aluminum, talcum, and sugar are common materials that activate the signifiers of a T-shirt. This intersection of material and form separates and reassembles the meanings of a T-shirt as an inanimate object, a garment, and a costume.

⁴ Which he or she would never do.

⁵ “To be a subject, therefore, is to be something other than free or autonomous, something other than self-created or independent of others. But subject also implies, in grammar or liberal political theory, a doer, capable of independent action and self direction” (Fortier 83).

⁶ “Agent, that which has power to act or effect something” (Fortier 83).

The T-shirt was chosen as a representative of public dress because of its mass distribution. “Its practical material and adaptable shape fulfilled the requirements for working gear. It was washable, durable and cheap...providing easy sizing, efficient mail order, and forgiving shapes on work-hardened bodies” (Harris 41). Its history is democratic, starting out as undergarment for naval lieutenants and making its way into the wardrobe of blue-collar workers. As fashion progresses, the T-shirt found new venues in cultural niches from high-end labels to anti-fashion cults. A T-shirt, therefore, represents a greater cross section of society than any other article of clothing.

The shape of a T-shirt—knitted into a tube by machines—gives little indication of fitting a human form.⁷ Only when it is worn does it take on a unique shape. This intersection of an architectural shape with a soft organic material is the basis for the exploration of T-shirts made out of different materials. Its simple shape, with minimal seam-lines, allows it to straddle between an inanimate object and a garment. It is the wearer that activates the transformation from one to the other. This relationship between the wearer and the garment lead to a parallel comparison of the T-shirt and performance art, as both are transformed by audience participation.

⁷ "In a tube form, the lengths of fabric are laid one on top of the other like colossal layers of puff pastry.... At this stage, the computer then works out the precise positioning of the different parts of the T-shirt, no matter what size.... The T-shirts are assembled with a series of very precise operations on the assembly line.... A final check involves the finished shirt being drawn like a stocking over a metal form” (Brunel 37, 40).

The T-shirts size system restricts our ability to express the vocabulary of dress. This article of clothing is designed to fit a mass of people in wide categories of sizes labeled “Small, Medium, and Large.” “Manufacturing maximize market by targeting all socioeconomic levels at once, and soon designs increasingly favored loose-fitting clothes sized to accommodate the ‘average’ figure” (Harris 43). This organization system is both reductive and subjective. It limits the range of wearers into general groups according to the manufacturer’s discretion. In order to translate the human form into the flat patterns of a garment, multiple measurements are taken from different cross sections of the body, whereas the size description of a T-shirt can be reduced to a simple abbreviated letter of the alphabet. This system is more informative of the T-shirt as object rather than a garment. Though developed by manufacturers, it is self-imposed by consumers. Most people can identify which bracket of size they fit into. This further inspires the making of the T-shirt shaped art objects because *T* explores the T-shirt as an inanimate object whose identity as clothing is dependent upon the experience of the viewer.

STEEL



Figure 1: *Heavy Metal T-shirt* front view.



Figure 2: *Heavy Metal T-shirt* three-quarter view.

Heavy Metal T-shirt is the first project in which clothing was transformed into art object through the substitution of material. *HMT* is a T-shirt shape replicated in 16-gauge plated steel. This process explores ways in which a T-shirt is both a protective armor and a clone of the wearer's skin.

Based on the measurements of the artist's own T-shirt, *HMT* was made using the systematic process of costume construction. A pattern was drafted and adjusted, and a mock-up was made out of paper to simulate the rigidity of the plated steel. Even with careful planning, the steel's natural do not align with standard T-shirt dressmaking process. *HMT* appears as a struggle between the nature of the material and the intent of the artist.

Two small tubes of plated steel were welded to a larger center ovular tube that ruptures at their points of connection, giving the object both an industrial presence and organic form. The shoulders slope down at an angle that seems natural, but the volume of the body transitions into a shape that is neither gender specific or human. The steel shirt has a cavernous body that encapsulates a volume that is about the size of a small adult chest, but does not have any pectoral indication that it is was ever worn by a person.

HMT has raised creases that run along the side seams from the neck, through the shoulders, and down the two sides. It also has an indented crease down the center front, and a concave crease down the center back. These lines make the image of *HMT* reflective left and right on the sagittal plane and complimentary front and back on the coronal plane. This organization of form is reminiscence of the human body, but in conjunction with the steel, is also signifies a wearable object, specifically the breastplate of a suit of armor.

ALUMINUM



Figure 3: *Al-T* front view.



Figure 4: *Al-T* back view.

Al-T (Aluminum-T) continues the exploration of public dress through the process of metallurgy. Cast in aluminum, it is a relief of a T-shirt shaped object complete with a banded collar and stitched shoulder seams. Evolving from *HMT*, *Al-T* is an organic shape in motion.

Al-T moves closer to signifying a human form but further mystifies the wearer. From the front, the folds of the object replicate the appearance of fabric clinging to the skin. The folds form shapes that resemble arms and a chest, but they also twist and cross on the center plane in a way that is irregular to how jersey material falls from a wearer's shoulder across the chest. These shapes both signify and defy classical Greek forms and were achieved through unconventional rigging against gravity.

The back of *Al-T* is evocative of the body, but of internal organs rather than the exterior physique. The porous texture, created by the buildup of wax during the preparation of the T-shirt, resembles the surface of a lung or a liver. The network of sprues cast in aluminum is both organic and industrial. Its structure resembles the circulatory system with branching capillaries; whereas the sheen of the metal pulls attention towards a mechanical surface.

The economic history of metals parallels that of the T-shirt. Metals as a permanent material are “infinitely recyclable.”⁸ The T-shirt as a fashion icon has infinitely resurfaced in the history of public dress. At the same time, the manufacture and trade of the T-shirt passes through multiple levels of economic depletion. The production and

⁸ “Metals are forever... Aluminum (Al) and steel (Fe) are permanently available resources” (empac.edu).

“Metals are infinitely recyclable while preserving their virgin metal qualities – they have infinite recycling possibilities and have the ability to constantly deliver new applications in a permanent material loop without depleting the earth's resources” (Soper).

cost of a T-shirt is dependent of the distant it travels in the global economy (Rivoli).

While the majority of worldwide T-shirt manufacturing is located in China, much of the cotton raw material originates in Texas where the price of cotton is subsidized. The T-shirt then passes through multiple cycles of trade from retailers, to second hand buyers, to individual sellers of “Salaula”—“bend down boutique”⁹—in Zambia (Hansen). Unlike its infinite life in fashion trends, the T-shirt as an economic commodity is only recyclable on a finite scale. Each time the T-shirt changes hand, the value and quality of the material degrades according to the seller and market.

⁹ “The term *Salaula* means, in the Bemba language, ‘to select form a pile in the manner of rummaging,’ or for short, ‘to pick.’ Commonly used since the mid-1980s, the term describes, graphically, the selection process that takes place once a bale of imported secondhand clothing has been opened in the market and consumers select garments to satisfy both their clothing needs and their clothing wants” (Hansen 1).

TALCUM



Figure 5: *T is for Talcum* side view in gallery.



Figure 6: *T is for Talcum* detail.

T is for Talcum exposes connotations of intimacy and hygiene. A stack of uniformly folded white T-shirts is flocked with a dusty coat of talcum powder. Its delicate surface—that beckons and repels touch—calls attention to the fragility of intimacy.

“The T-shirt is the last layer of privacy, offering tantalizing glimpses of naked flesh, but it is also a kind of natural packaging. Cotton jersey is a thin and supple fabric that clings to the tiniest undulations of the body and leaves very little to the imagination, while still allowing for a decorum dictating that parts of the anatomy should be covered” (Brunel, 82) Talcum is a product that lies next to the skin like a pair of underwear. The function of talcum powder is similar to that of a T-shirt in that it is a cushion against the exterior and wicks moisture from the body. It is a product that is intimate and applied in privacy. It has no shape of its own but adheres to the skin taking the shape of the body as it forms a protective layer. When the T-shirts are flocked and exhibited them in a gallery, the notion of privacy is exposed to the public.

The talcum T-shirt is inspired by the evolution of the T-shirt from underwear to outerwear. Its early history is integrated with social standards of hygiene. The plain white T also questions our association of cleanliness to the color white. “The T-shirt owes its existence above all else to a period when the hosiery boom, coupled with notions of hygiene and comfort, turn the world of men’s underwear upside down, not to mention inside out. In Europe, physical and mental health were one of the obsessions of the ‘philanthropic’ middle classes of the 19th century” (Brunel, 22). The T-shirts used in this piece were purchased from the Goodwill Outlet in Austin. They are the leftovers of donations that have fallen below selection standards for Goodwill retail stores. At \$1.39 USD a pound, they are one step above clothing that will be sold as rags to China or packed into bales headed to Africa (Rivoli).

Talcum powder was chosen as the material for this piece because its visual resemblance to “snowflakes” references an economic phenomenon in the charity clothing industry. From the point when a used T-shirt is donated to a charity to the time it hits the Salaula market in Zambia, it would have passed a rigorous selection process. “Snowflake” is an economic term use by Rivoli in *The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy* to describe each used T-shirts as a unique item when it enters the goodwill industry. The consumer demand set by the ever-changing taste of vintage buyers defines which characteristic of these snowflakes makes one more valuable than the other. The T-shirts used in *T is for Talcum* are selected by their proximity to the plain white T. Prints and stains make certain snowflakes in the stack less valuable, and a colored T-shirt has no value at all. This arbitrary selection process makes *Talcum* a unique economic system.

SUGAR



Figure 7: *Sweet T* detail.

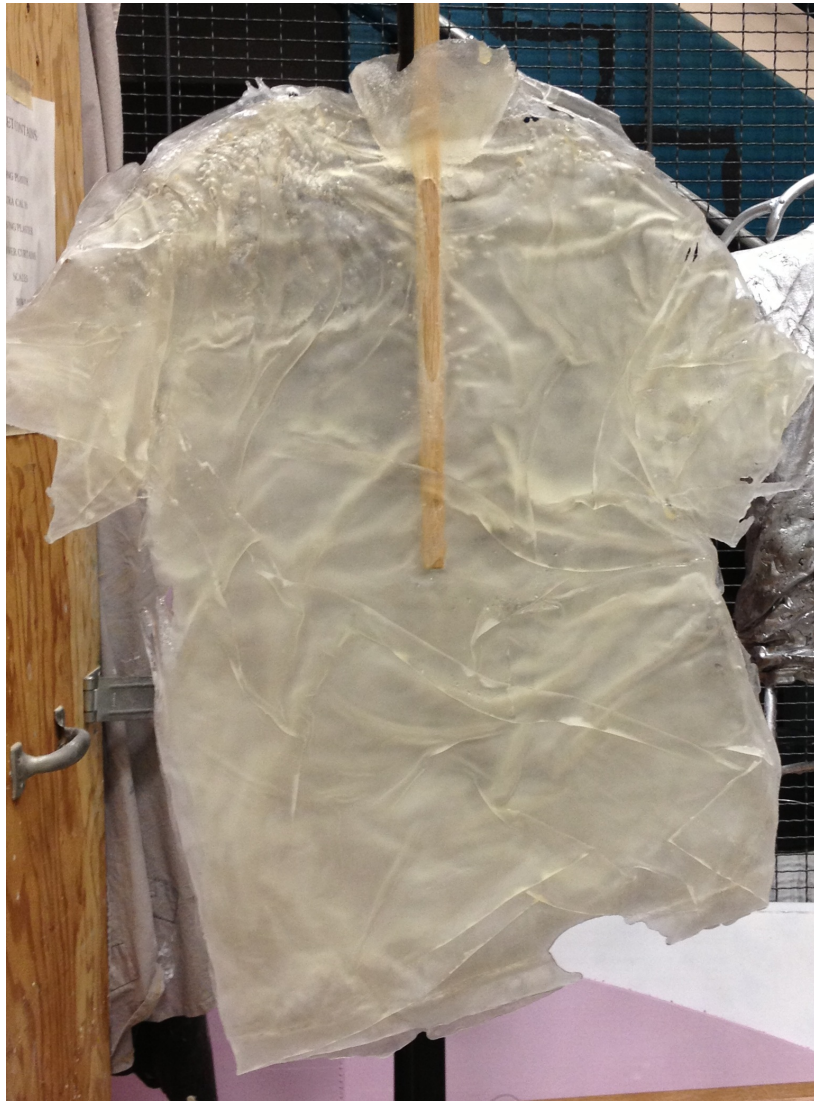


Figure 8: *Sweet T* in studio space.

The T-shirt is a fashion icon and is recognizable by its silhouette. Retailers generally market their latest season of clothing by showing images of those items on a fashion model. This allows potential customers to see the dimension of the garment. Marketing of the T-shirt, however, often rely on a customer's prior knowledge of fit. Major retailers such as J. Crew and Cafe Press¹⁰ have published images of T-shirts as flat objects without the fashion model, because their customers are familiar with how a T-shirt works in conjunction with the body. *Sweet T* replicates this imagery in three-dimensional form; it has physical depth but is cast from a real T-shirt laid flat on a table. When mounted on a stand, *Sweet T* appears to defy gravity, and recalls the catalog images of T-shirts suspended in cyber space. This three-dimensional object inspired by two-dimensional advertisements questions viewers' reading of contemporary retail media.

Sweet T uses an edible material as a comment on the consumption of art through contemporary media. Websites such as Pinterest and This Is Colossal makes new art readily available and easy to through social media, but it also cuts down on the time dedicated to analyzing these works of art. The ranking of the work on these websites is dependent on how many people take momentary pleasure in voting that they "like" the work. Like eating candy, social media makes the consumption of art brief and pleasurable, with minimal substance.

¹⁰ Refer to Figure 9 in Appendix.

CONCLUSION

I came into the Design program at The University of Texas as a costume designer. However, my first year in the M.F.A. program included design projects in multiple disciplines: costume, scenery, and lights. These studio projects, along with site-specific projects in the UT Theatre Summer Abroad in Florence, expanded the way I look at design for performance.

I became interested in creating theatre as a collective experience. In my second year of study, I began taking sculpture and installation courses through the Department of Studio Art. I combined my interest in live theatre—as an interactive event—with new practices of making objects. *Sculpture for the Blind*¹¹, a set of Jenga blocks made of natural branches, and *Three People without Their Shoes On*¹², a three-person hammock, were both projects that are activated by audience participation. Like a performance, these objects change the spatial orientation of a familiar place and the pace by which people go about their daily lives.

¹¹ Refer to Figure 10 in the Appendix.

¹² Refer to Figure 12 & Figure 13 in the Appendix.

T continues this exploration of performative objects. Theatre and art have transformative qualities in that they can direct you towards a new way of seeing. It is the familiarity of the T-shirt that gives it unexpected potential. I started with “something that everybody can use” and transformed it into a performance.

APPENDIX

cafe press T-shirts

SHOP BY PRODUCT

CafePress > T-shirts > School T-shirts > **College T-Shirts**

College T-shirts

You searched for "College"

All Departments

Sort by: **Relevance** | Newest Results per page: 28 | [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) ... [100](#) Next »

NARROW BY FEATURES
(Show all)
Customizable

FILTER "TSHIRTS"
(Show all)

Men (show all)
Short Sleeve
Long Sleeve
Mens All Over Print T-Shirt
Sleeveless
American Apparel
Organic
Polos
Performance Dry Tee
All Over Tee

Women (show all)
Short Sleeve
Long Sleeve
3/4 Sleeve Shirt
Womens All Over Print T-Shirt
Fitted T-Shirt
Cap Sleeve
Tank
Maternity
Plus Size
American Apparel
Organic
Polos
Performance Dry T-Shirt

<p>COLLEGE Tee \$35 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>	<p>Black T-Shirt \$29.50 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>	<p>Cute College Infant T-Shirt \$18 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>	<p>Animal House College Vintage Distressed T-Shirt \$29.50 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>
<p>Animal House - College Organic Women's Fitted Dark \$35 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>	<p>CAPTAIN OBVIOUS SHIRT TSHIRT Black T-Shirt \$29.50 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>	<p>Animal House Tee \$29.50 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>	<p>College Student Women's Tank Top \$24 <input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/> See this design on other items »</p>

Figure 9: Cafe Press online catalog.

Have-to-have tees—



TEES Cotton.Import.

- 1 LINEN V-NECK POCKET \$39.50 71290H 2 LINEN DOLMAN \$42 22271H 3 VINTAGE COTTON V-NECK \$29.50 24500H
 4 VINTAGE COTTON TANK \$24.50 37265H 5 VINTAGE COTTON CAP SLEEVE \$29.50 84179H 6 VINTAGE COTTON BOATNECK \$32.50 36181H
 7 VINTAGE COTTON CREWNECK \$29.50 36183H 8 PERFECT-FIT BALLET BUTTON \$32.50 72716H 9 PERFECT-FIT V-NECK \$24.50 97784H
 10 PERFECT-FIT LONG SLEEVE \$26.50 18098H 11 PERFECT-FIT TANK \$22.50 92098H 12 PERFECT-FIT CREWNECK \$24.50 23340H 13 ENGINEERED-STRIPE
 BOATNECK \$45 25167H 14 VINTAGE COTTON V-NECK IN STRIPE \$32.50 59436H 15 VINTAGE COTTON LONG SLEEVE \$34.50 58157H
 16 ENGINEERED-STRIPE INDIGO BOATNECK \$45 76974H

064 | JCREW.COM | 800 562 0258

Figure 10: J.Crew: Style Guide. May 2013.



Figure 11: Sculpture for the Blind.

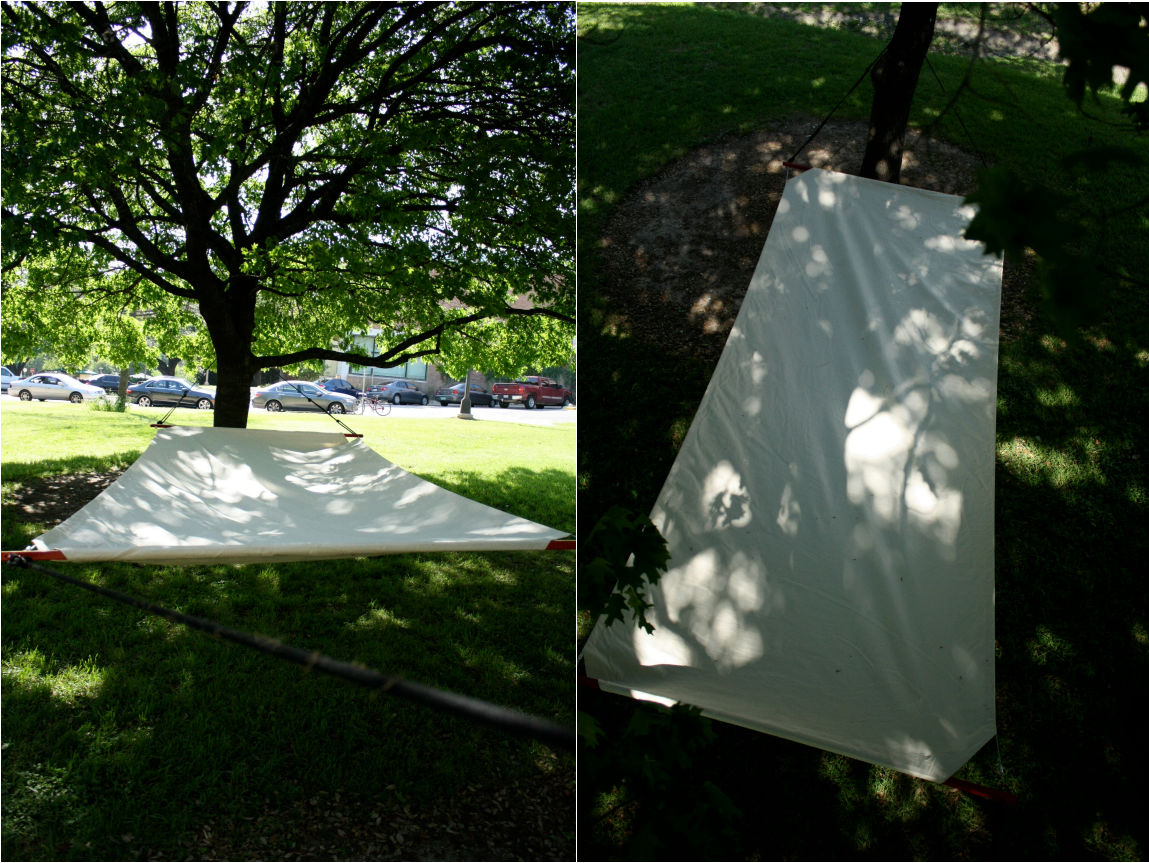


Figure 12: *Three People without Their Shoes On* front view.

Figure 13: *Three People without Their Shoes On* birds-eye view.

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