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High Decoration: Sonia Delaunay, Blaise Cendrars, and the Poem as Fashion Design

Carrie Noland

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1.

Among the many ghostly exchanges that take place between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno in the latter's *Aesthetic Theory*, a central one concerns the nature of fashion and its relation to aesthetic behavior. As Susan Buck-Morss makes clear in her presentation of the *Passagen-Werk* materials in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Benjamin's assessment of the fashion phenomenon specific to monopoly capitalism is primarily negative (see 97-101). Intended to introduce the new, fashion only generates "hellish repetition" (108), "[f]or fashion," writes Benjamin, "was never anything but the parody of the gaily decked-out corpse, the provocation of death through the woman" (quoted in Buck-Morss 101). Instead of seeing fashion as a reflection of historicized understandings of the organic body — as Adorno might have done — Benjamin views fashion as pure reification, transforming the organic body into a commodity whose value is extinguished every season.

Indirectly taking up Benjamin's appraisal of fashion, Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that the rhythms of fashion in fact play a visible and necessary role in the field of aesthetic production. For Adorno, as for his model in this context, Charles Baudelaire, fashion constitutes the "temporal nucleus of art" (192). Fashion is a heteronomous principle relating art's various apparitions back to the particular historical conditions in which they were wrought. In painting as well as poetry, fashion is the figure of the contingent, "la vie triviale" [the trivial in life],¹ "la

métamorphose journalière des choses extérieures” [the daily metamorphosis of the external world] (Baudelaire 1155). Without this contingent element, the artistic monument lacks its alluring detail, its sensual image, and thus fails to address the individual in the hollow universalism of its transcendent claims.

Adorno’s treatment of fashion would at first seem to be in direct conflict with Benjamin’s, but this conflict is at bottom a semantic rather than ideological one. Whereas Adorno adopts the word “fashion” as a synonym for “heteronomy,” indicating thereby the art work’s implication in the conditions of production peculiar to its historical period, Benjamin uses the word to designate commercial determination, evoking the more pejorative sense that the word “fashion” had acquired during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Because it is temporally specific, the connotative ambiguity of the word as it is used by both Adorno and Benjamin can be seen as symptomatic of a larger modernist dilemma concerning the nature of art’s relation to history. I want to study this dilemma with particular reference to the twentieth-century poet Blaise Cendrars, whose work implicitly questions whether art can have a “temporal nucleus” without yielding to the dictates of fashion. Cendrars’ entire oeuvre is generated from the paradoxes produced when the capitalist fashion system infiltrates the field of high culture. Cendrars asks whether literature in the twentieth century can confess to its association with fashion, avow its submission to heteronomy, without abdicating entirely its claim to cultural distinction.

Fashion is not an abstract concept in Cendrars’ work. From early on in his career, Cendrars exhibits a fascination with the phenomenon of fashion, especially as it pertains to dress. His first poetic volume, *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* [Nineteen Elastic Poems], was inspired in part by the “simultaneous” dress designs of the painter and decorative artist, Sonia Delaunay, whose efforts to ally fashion with art raised for Cendrars the question of art’s cultural status in a modern world increasingly governed by the laws of the passing fad. When Cendrars drew an analogy between poetry and Delaunay’s “robe simultanée” in “Sur la robe elle a un corps” [“On Her Dress She Has A Body”] of 1913 (collected in *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques*), he in effect presented himself as the Baudelaire of his own day. He presented himself, that is, as a poet dedicated to locating in the visual appearance of a generation the “élément éternel, invariable [et] poétique” [eternal, invariable, and poetic element] that ultimately presides over an aesthetic universe (Baudelaire 1154). But the effect of Cendrars’ hymn to Delaunay was not the same as that produced by Baudelaire’s meditations on Constantin Guy. By emphasizing the parallels between poetry and “la mode,” fashion, Cendrars came close to endangering the values by which poetry has traditionally been distinguished from more popular or commercial forms. For Cendrars did not live in Baudelaire’s universe; the lingering aristocratic values that in Baudelaire’s day might have ensured an abiding belief in such a thing as an “élément éternel” — religious values, or simply widely recognized standards of virtue and taste — were for the most part eroded by the time Cendrars arrived on the scene. Cultural production in early twentieth-century France was no longer divided as it had been during the nineteenth century between artisanal and industrial modes of production.² By the end of the Third Repub-

lic, industrial manufacture was rapidly replacing small workshop, craft-based production modes in a number of domains, from the decorative arts to the domain of film production.³ Cendrars' world, in other words, was becoming that of "monopoly" or industrial capitalism, one in which "la mode" would come to reflect less the complexion of a particular historical moment — its "morale" or "passion" in Baudelairean terms — than the directives of increasingly powerful entertainment and industrial monopolies. The realm of haute couture may have been somewhat protected from standardizing processes that were inexorably modifying the appearance of the everyday; however, by the early teens, even this elite field of cultural production was succumbing to the demands of large-scale industrial manufacture. The general democratization of access to elite culture, the increasingly dependent relation between film stars and fashion trends, and the emergence of a middle-class "knock-off" market (a market that accelerated the alternation of models in response to a larger and more diversified clientele) were all factors that contributed to the standardization of haute couture fashion design.

Thus, the analogy Cendrars established between fashion and poetry in 1913 functioned somewhat differently from the association evoked by Baudelaire in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne" of 1859–60. Even though Cendrars was careful to compare poetry to a dress made by a high modernist *painter*, he could not avoid evoking certain parallels between lyric composition and industrial manufacture. The analogy he presented in "Sur la robe elle a un corps" drew poetry inevitably into relation *not* with the "temporal nucleus" of art but rather with the infernal repetition that, according to Benjamin, fashion had become. Apollinaire's 1913 depiction of fashion as "le masque de la mort," the mask of death (7), clearly indicates that by the early twentieth century, the word "la mode" resonated quite differently than it had in Baudelaire's day. To be the Baudelaire of the early twentieth century meant, then, not only to avow the heteronomous, fashionable element immanent to poetry and the other high arts but also to place at risk the very distinctions between craft and standardization, authorship and imitation, upon which the high arts had, since the Romantic period, been founded.

2.

Cendrars belonged to a group of European artists who were attempting at the dawn of the century to import the techniques, iconographies, and discourses of popular culture into the domain of high art. What differentiates Cendrars from his contemporaries, however, and what makes his contribution to modernism so extraordinary, is that he experimented with the boundaries of high art not within the domain of painting or sculpture but rather within one of the most conservative and convention-bound spheres of cultural production, that of French lyric poetry. Whereas recent critics have familiarized us with the existence of pre-postmodern forms in avant-garde art, such as the readymade and the pastiche, very little attention has been paid to Cendrars' *poetic* readymades and pastiche compositions, his own peculiar experimentation with the limits of

concepts such as authorship, work, and style. Cendrars' willingness to associate and even at times to equate poetry with decorative and commercial forms threatened the epistemological claims of poetic "connaissance" in a way that even the Dadaists — who continued to associate poetry with "primitive" chant and mimetic ritual — had not yet dared to attempt. Cendrars was already asking in 1913 whether poetry might not, after all, be nothing more than "sheer decoration,"⁴ a play of linguistic surfaces eliciting pleasure but no deeper or more metaphysical response. If, as Cendrars would declare in 1926, "Il n'y a pas d'absolu," [there is no absolute], then poetry could boast of providing no greater access to an eternal absolute, a higher epistemological order, than could, say, the haute couture dress (*Aujourd'hui* 26). But Cendrars went further in "Sur la robe elle a un corps," where he declared that the poem was comparable not just to any dress but more specifically to a dress constructed along the lines of a patchwork quilt or pastiche. Cendrars implied in this way that poetry, like Delaunay's "robe simultanée," could be reconceived as a play of surfaces, a texture of citations, that the author only "signed" in the guise of an ingenious *assembleur*.

Although critics have exerted much effort in attempting to clarify Cendrars' debt to Apollinaire and, conversely, Apollinaire's debt to Cendrars, the influence of Robert and Sonia Delaunay's simultaneous contrast technique upon Cendrars' work has never been properly explored. It is clear, however, that the remarkable stylistic modifications that Cendrars' poetry underwent during the year 1913 can be attributed primarily to his frequent visits to the Delaunay home. Robert Delaunay's theory of simultaneous contrast was responsible for the pastiche compositional technique of Sonia Delaunay's "robe simultanée" and, I will argue, for the pastiche quality of the poems of *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques*. Introduced by Robert Delaunay and elaborated on by his wife, the technique was based on Michel-Eugène Chevreul's theory that the perception of color values is determined by the contrast of juxtaposed tones. The Delaunays transformed Chevreul's theory into a technique of "simultanéité" roughly defined by Cendrars in 1914 as the process by which one entity gains its identity through contrast with another (*Aujourd'hui* 71-2). Anticipating the post-modern fascination with surface juxtapositions, the Delaunays reinterpreted pictorial depth or "profondeur" as an illusion produced by surface planes of color rather than by vanishing-point perspective. It was this reconception of depth as a function of surface design that stimulated Cendrars' interest in citational pastiche.

While the simultaneous contrast theory that Robert Delaunay devised in the realm of high art clearly had a significant impact on the young Cendrars, the decorative objects Sonia Delaunay created during the same era were perhaps an even more decisive influence on the development of Cendrars' literary practice. For it was specifically Sonia Delaunay's experiments with assemblage technique in the realm of the *decorative* arts that compelled Cendrars to revise his approach to verbal construction. Encouraged (or compelled) by her domestic situation during the war, Delaunay began to transfer the modernist iconography associated with her husband's canvasses onto a variety of decorative objects: curtains, upholstery, lamp-shades, book bindings, scarves, and dresses.⁵ In this way, "simultanéité" evolved from a theory of color contrast into a

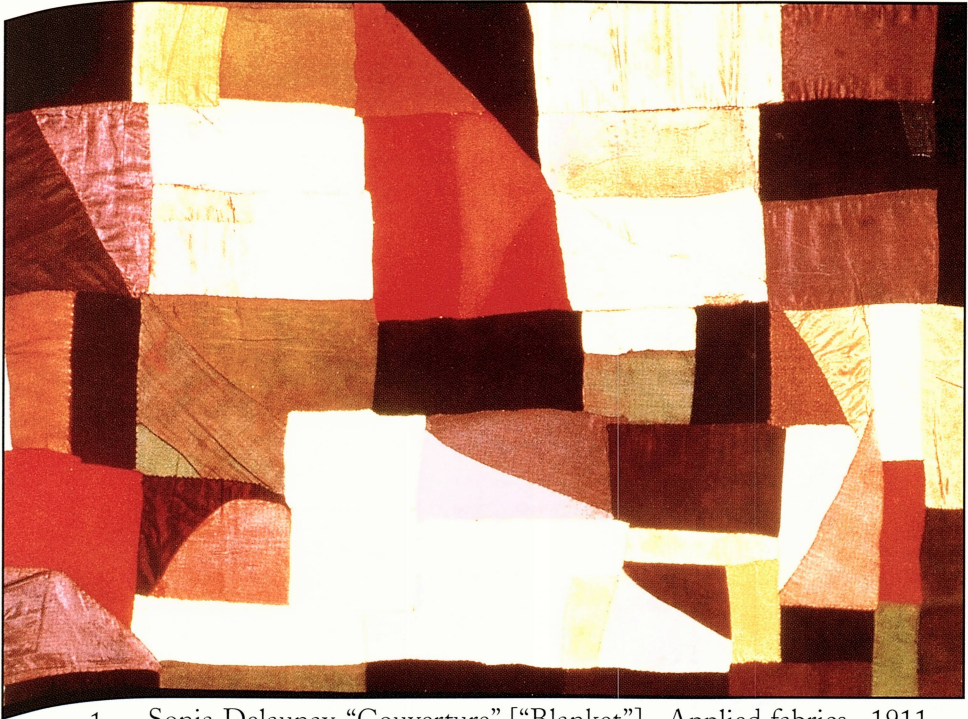


Figure 1. Sonia Delaunay, "Couverture" ["Blanket"]. Applied fabrics. 1911.
© L & M Services BV Amsterdam 980402.

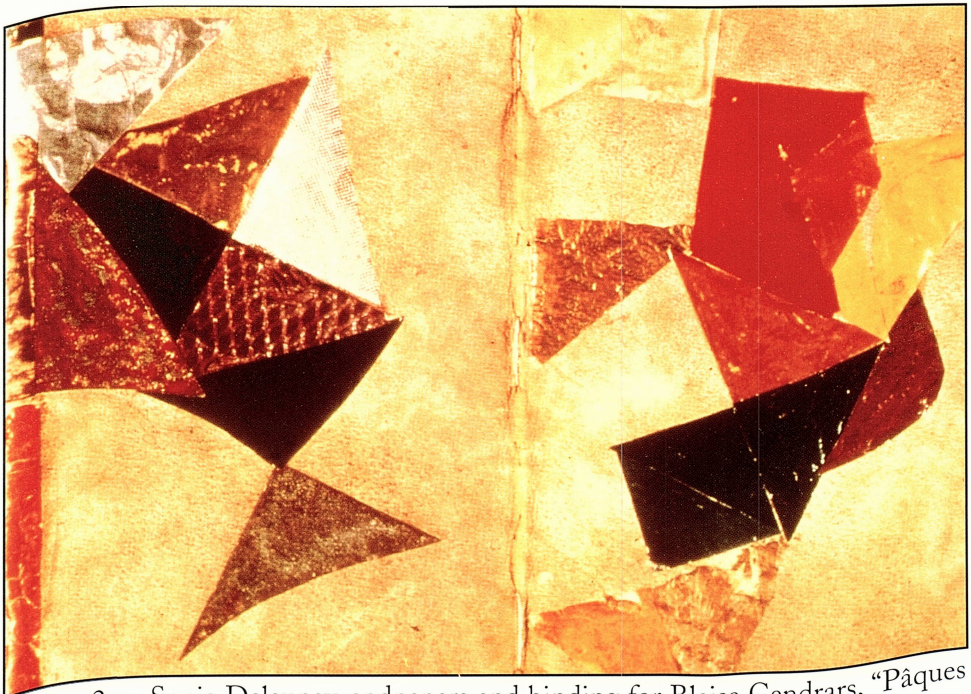


Figure 2. Sonia Delaunay, endpapers and binding for Blaise Cendrars, "Pâques
à New York" ["Easter in New York"]. c. 1912.
© L & M Services BV Amsterdam 980402.



Figure 3. Sonia Delaunay, "Bal Bullier" ["The Bullier Ball"]. 1913.
© L & M Services BV Amsterdam 980402.

practice of cultural production. The goal of her visual experiments was no longer to discover how one tone affected the perception of another; Delaunay was now interested in bestowing upon every available surface what had become an eminently reproducible “simultanéiste” iconography that, in fact, sold quite well. The implication of her specific version of “simultanéité” was that a visual identity between objects situated in different institutional contexts could potentially erase the traditional cultural distinctions between them. Impressed by Delaunay’s approach to everyday objects, Cendrars began to apply the assemblage or “patchwork” technique to the composition of poems, novels, screenplays, and radioplays; only in his case, the boundary between elite and commercial realms was crossed by integrating discourses drawn from paraliterary and commercial sources. The assemblage practices of Sonia Delaunay were thus directly responsible for what Jean-Carlo Flückiger has aptly named the “patchwork” technique of *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* and other works (176).⁶ Cendrars’ verbal “patchworks” were a poetic response to Delaunay’s “objets simultanés.”

Delaunay’s first attempt to elide the decorative arts with simultaneous contrast technique produced “Couverture” [“Blanket”], a patchwork quilt or assemblage of various fabrics and furs that she stitched together for her infant son in 1911 (see figure 1). Drawing from the folk tradition of her native Russia, Delaunay joined fur scraps with patches of “found” fabrics in order to recreate the effect she and her husband had achieved elsewhere with variegated planes of pigment. The patchwork quilt already combined three elements of the aesthetic Delaunay would develop more fully in her fashion designs and book bindings: the quilt suggested visually the genre of pastiche; it juxtaposed diverse elements without creating a hierarchy of value among them; and it created an impression of depth through the contiguity of contrasting surfaces. Cendrars would draw attention to these three elements in his own poem on Delaunay’s “robe simultanée,” “Sur la robe elle a un corps,” only in his version, the implications of Delaunay’s tripartite aesthetics for the future of poetry would be more fully explored.

Soon after designing the quilt, Delaunay made a series of appliqué collage bookbindings, most notably for Cendrars’ *Pâques à New York* (see figure 2). Similar in this respect to the quilt, the bookbindings play with the effects of juxtaposed surfaces. Appearing frequently are the Russian folk art motifs, the rainbow and the arc, as well as the triangles and trapezoids of patchwork construction that Delaunay was using in her paintings during the same period (“Bal Bullier,” 1913, is one example; see figure 3). These motifs serve as building blocks that can be detached and reassembled in each subsequent design. Delaunay’s procedure accentuates the autonomy of the unit or building block; each shape remains distinct even while participating in a larger composition. The detachable quality of the building blocks reminds the viewer of the initial gesture of the simultaneous craft, that of assembling rather than inventing, selecting rather than originating.

Delaunay was working with the principle of simultaneous contrast on a variety of levels when she designed the “robe simultanée” in the summer of 1913. An habituée of the Bal Bullier, a popular modernist hot spot on the

Avenue de l'Observatoire, Delaunay arrived one evening wearing a dress that would effectively launch her new career as a fashion designer (see figure 4).⁷ In her "robe simultanée" Delaunay reiterated the motifs employed in her paintings, book-bindings, lampshades and upholstery of the same period, such as the rainbow arc and the solar disc. The dress was formed on the principle of the quilt, sewn, in Delaunay's own words, "with small pieces of fabric that formed patches of color" ("The Poem" 198).

Apparently, Cendrars was at the Bal Bullier on the night during the summer of 1913 when Delaunay stepped out in the first model of her patchwork "robe simultanée." Although not a costume (Delaunay's costume designs for the Ballets Russes were far more outrageous), the dress was designed to draw attention away from the spectacle on the stage to the spectacle performed by the audience itself. In a *compte rendu* of the evening at the dance hall Guillaume Apollinaire noted that Delaunay most intentionally did not dance (see Goldenstein 54). Her goal, according to Apollinaire, was to draw attention to the "corps sur la robe," the limbs dancing on the dress — as the title of Cendrars' poem indicates — and not to the woman's body beneath. In his poem, "Sur la robe elle a un corps," Cendrars also confuses the distinction between surface and depth, decoration and anatomy, extending a critique of ontology that the poet finds implicit in Delaunay's practice. The first element of Delaunay's aesthetic that Cendrars chooses to thematize in his poem, then, is her tendency to destabilize

the hierarchical relation between truth and appearance, eternal form and ephemeral ornamentation. Appropriately, Cendrars opens his poem with an attack on phrenology, the nineteenth-century positivist science that insists, unlike the dress, on a one-to-one referential correspondence between surface and depth. Instead of positing an absolute correspondence between the shape of the cranium and the individual personality, Cendrars, following Delaunay, recasts the identity (here, of the woman) as an imaginative reconstruction dependent upon the printed surfaces traditionally considered diversionary.



Figure 4. Sonia Delaunay, "Robe simultanée" ["The Simultaneous Dress"]. 1913. © L & M Services BV Amsterdam 980402.

SUR LA ROBE ELLE A UN CORPS

Le corps de la femme est aussi bosselé que mon crane
Glorieuse
Si tu t'incarnes avec esprit
Les couturiers font un sot métier
Autant que la phrénologie 5
Mes yeux sont des kilos qui pèsent la sensualité des femmes
Tout ce qui fuit, saille avance dans la profondeur
Les étoiles creusent le ciel
Les couleurs déshabillent
"Sur la robe elle a un corps" 10
Sous les bras des bruyères mains lunules et pistils quand
les eaux se déversent dans le dos avec les omoplates
glauques
Le ventre un disque qui bouge
La double coque des seins passe sous le pont des arcs-
en-ciel
Ventre
Disque 15
Soleil
Les cris perpendiculaires des couleurs tombent sur les
cuisses

EPEE DE SAINT-MICHEL

Il y a des mains qui se tendent
Il y a dans la traine la bête tous les yeux toutes les
fanfares tous les habitués du bal Bullier 20
Et sur la hanche
La signature du poète
(Blaise Cendrars, *Du monde entier* 83-4; © by Editions Denoël)

[ON HER DRESS SHE HAS A BODY

A woman's body is as modelled as my skull
Glorious
If you are incarnated with spirit
Couturiers have an idiotic job
As idiotic as phrenology
My eyes are kilos that weigh the sensuality of women
All that flees, stands out moves forward into depth
Stars hollow out the sky
Colors undress
"On her dress she has a body"
Under the arms heathers hands lunules pistills when
waters flow over the back with its blue-green shoulder
blades

Belly
 Disk
 Sun
 The perpendicular cries of the colors fall on thighs

SWORD OF SAINT MICHAEL

There are hands that reach
 There are in the train the beast all the eyes all the fanfares
 all the regulars of the Bal Bullier
 And on the hip
 The poet's signature]

Significantly, Cendrars begins “Sur la robe elle a un corps” by mocking positivist science and its tendency to locate truth — psychic or spiritual — in the order of the organic. The pun between “sot” (“idiotic”) and “sew” in line 4 — “Les couturiers font un sot métier” — does little to dampen the blow of the accusation against traditional “couturiers” who, like the phrenologists, treat the body as a privileged signified, the truth that the contours of the dress must reflect.⁸ In contrast, Delaunay dissociates the dress from the body it covers. The dress recreates the body not only through its abstract patterns but also through the images these patterns evoke. That is why “la femme” of line 1 is only “Glorieuse” insofar as she “incarnates” herself in a dress, or “avec esprit” (line 3). Nude and unconstructed, “la femme” is as “bosselé(e)” as the “crâne,” a word in French often associated with death, as is “skull” in English. The skull and the body of the woman are humped or modelled, differentiated surfaces, but they signify nothing — bear neither a spiritual nor an aesthetic truth — without incarnation in fabric or text.

If we follow Cendrars' logic, it would seem that the modern *couturière* must be freed of the obligation to follow physical contours, since these contours are not, in themselves, the source of woman's “sensuality.”⁹ In “Sur la robe elle a un corps,” Cendrars reconceives “sensuality” as a product of the impressions or images that the woman's *reinvented* (textile) body evokes. The eyes that scan the dress are, accordingly, “des kilos qui pèsent la sensualité des femmes” (and here the verb “peser,” “to weigh,” parodies the scientific discourse of the phrenologists). The organic body has been displaced as a source of sexual excitement; it is now the *colors* that seduce the viewer: “Les couleurs déshabillent” [The colors undress] (line 9). Desire is stimulated by the contrast of artificial and organic shapes, rather than by the organic feminine curves alone. These curves are rivaled as a three-dimensional construct by the depth and volume created by the colors *on* the dress. Line 7, “Tout ce qui fuit, saille avance dans la profondeur” [All that recedes, stands out comes forward into depth], refers to the colors, the contrasts of which produce the illusion of movement forward and away from the surface plane. The traditional surface-depth relation is undermined by the principle of composition by simultaneous color contrast: Delaunay's technique of juxtaposed surfaces creates the illusion — and rivals the physical reality — of three-dimensional depth.

Cendrars' hermeneutics of the dress shifts the location of meaning from the physical body to the surfaces that adorn it, from anatomy to the body's spectacular performance or masquerade. The remainder of the poem plays with the tension between organic and textile bodies. However, as lines 14-16 indicate, there are really three bodies evoked by the dress, each one belonging to a separate order: the organic, the textile, or the poetic. For instance, "Ventre" [Belly] of line 14 represents metonymically the order of the organic nude body (although it does not necessarily signify this body; the "ventre" could also be the dress's body, an ambiguity upon which the poem depends). "Disque" [Disk] of line 15 represents metonymically the de-anthropomorphized or geometric order of the designs on the fabric. And "Soleil" [Sun] of line 16 is a synecdoche for the order of the *imagined* body, that which the poet makes, poetically, of what he sees. These three orders are emphatically intermingled in lines 11-13. "[B]ras" [arms], "mains" [hands], "dos" [back], "omoplates" [shoulder blades], "ventre" and "seins" [breasts] all belong to the order of the organic body; "disque" and "arcs-en-ciel" [rainbow] refer us back to the abstract motifs printed on the dress (the primary motifs of Delaunay's paintings), while "bruyères" [heathers], "lunules," "pistils," "les eaux" [waters], "La double coque" [The double-bottomed hull] and "le pont" [the bridge] all belong to the order of the poetic or imaginative discourse inspired by the abstract motifs. Meanwhile, line 11 reveals a high degree of phonetic rather than visual motivation; the /o/ of "les eaux" motivates the /o/ sounds of "dos" and "omoplates glauques" [blue-green shoulder blades]. To attenuate even further the relation between the phenomenological truth of the body and the incarnated "spirit" in the dress, Cendrars allows the poetry of the line, the sound values of the words, to govern the longest descriptive sequence of the poem. Although it is the *eyes*, the poet tells us, that "weigh" the dress, in this case his *tongue* seems to be generating the descriptive discourse of the imaginative order. The synesthesia implied by the overlap between seeing and speaking, the visual and the poetic, is fully realized in line 17: "Les cris *perpendiculaires* des couleurs tombent sur les cuisses" [The *perpendicular cries* of the colors fall on her thighs]. This move from the eyes to the mouth as the primary organ realizing the (woman's) "glory" or "sensualité" is highly suggestive. The semiotic activity that defines poetic writing seems to work *not* in the service of unveiling the human mannequin but rather in the service of veiling her yet again. And here, the familiar etymological association of text and textile receives a new twist. Poetry's own artifice, the operations of paranomasia, assonance and internal rhyme, come to resemble fashion as a method of covering the body with another body. And this imaginative poetic body, like the textile one, no longer accessorizes the organic but rather "incarnates" it. Incarnation, then, is not a matter of respecting the contours of the ontic original; rather, incarnation involves pursuing the directives of the medium concerned, ceding the "initiative" to words or, in the case of the dress, to surfaces of contrasting color.

Fashion critic Diana Vreeland has commented that Delaunay's "robes simultanées," or "chromatic cocoons," were "wrapped around the body like a second skin or a mad tattoo" (10). Vreeland's allusion to the tattoo is evocative in this context, for it suggests that for Delaunay dressing is akin to a kind of

writing on the body. The simultaneous dress reinvents anatomy as inscription, and the job of the *couturière* becomes one of covering the skin with a text. Delaunay in fact attempted to realize her conception of the dress as tattoo when she began in 1921 to compose designs for what she called the “robe-poème.” This “robe poème” was conceived as a garment stencilled with poetic verses as well as various lines and planes of color (see figure 5). Although none of Delaunay’s designs for the “robe-poème” was ever produced, the project itself indicates a desire on her part to reconceive fashion as a means of incarnating female “glory” as language. A direct link can be drawn between Delaunay’s approach to fashion as inscription and the avant-garde conviction that the artist must alter the organic body in order to perform an aesthetic (or aesthetico-political) project. When Rimbaud writes in 1871 of planting warts on his face, or when he imagines a “nouveau corps amoureux” [new amorous body] in “Being Beauteous” (181), he exhibits an impulse similar to that realized in Delaunay’s designs. His portrait of “un homme s’implantant et se cultivant des verrues sur le visage” [a man implanting and cultivating warts on his face] offers the possibility that one might make manifest or visible (“se faire voyant”) a hidden or simply abstract state of consciousness (270). To tattoo the body is, in this context, to force “profondeur” to the surface, to make the deeper self visible, readable, and, in consequence, a subject of exhibition and performance. This visually exhibited or linguistically exteriorized self may remain a function of the self’s truth; it is more likely, however, that the exteriorized self, as it enters into the pure play of surfaces, will subordinate its truth to the dynamic interaction between, in one case, the colors of the dress, and in the other, the phonetic and graphemic textures of words.

3.

To return to Cendrars’ poem, it is now clear why Delaunay’s “robe simultanée” comes to serve Cendrars as a model for an aesthetic that no longer privileges organic “profondeur” over articulated surface. Delaunay’s designs play with the lines of the body, treating them nonhierarchically as just another surface entering into play with the surfaces of applied and thus artificial elements. True, Delaunay — at least according to Cendrars — retains the order of the organic body, as opposed to the Futurists, who demanded in 1909 “the total suppression of the nude” (Boccioni et al. 31). However, the demotion of this nude body to pure surface design threatens to eclipse its ontological priority and even its significance. As Cendrars’ ambiguous allusions to “ventre,” “dos,” and so on indicate, there is no way to preserve the distinction either in language or in visual spectacle between a surface that refers to an anatomical feature and one that merely serves a function in an illusionist design. Immanent in Delaunay’s and Cendrars’ approach, then, is the possibility that all surfaces, all texts, behave in the manner of citations: the “ventre,” for instance, refers simultaneously to the body *under* the “robe simultanée” and to the visual text *on* the “robe simultanée.” There is no way to tell, the poem implies, which “ventre” is which.



Figure 5. Sonia Delaunay with Tristan Tzara, “Robe-poème” [“Poem-dress”].
1923. © L & M Services BV Amsterdam 980402.

Delaunay and Cendrars could have found no better way to signal this problem than to have visually associated the “robe simultanée” with the traditional practice of quilt-making. The patchwork technique Delaunay applies in the “robe simultanée” suggests that each element put into play — the “dos,” the “disque,” the “soleil” — exists as a kind of citation, a fragment drawn from a larger fabric or discourse. While the elements may appear to form a whole — a dress, a poem, a body — they are nevertheless scraps of preexisting discourses, fabrics or anatomies stitched together into an assemblage. In “Sur la robe elle a un corps,” Cendrars explicitly draws attention to the fact that the incarnation of the woman’s glory requires the *cutting* of fabrics, their separation as well as their union. The repetition of the title in line 10 — “Sur la robe elle a un corps” — provides a kind of *mise en abyme* suggesting the immediate citational, and thus detachable or fragmented, quality of all lyric utterances. The lines of a poem or a dress may claim at one point to “incarnate” the glory of the ideal, but they, too, are merely surfaces that can be cut out and inserted into the next arrangement. Cendrars’ habit of recycling citations from his own works as well as from works by others also adds to the impression that lyric discourse, just like the discourses of newsprint, popular fiction and advertising, can serve as building blocks for assemblage. In an assemblage no single discourse, no single element, refers in a univocal fashion; rather, each element is continually reimmersed in a flow of attributes exchanged — phonic and graphemic in the case of poetry, chromatic and textural in the case of the dress.

The concluding lines of the poem — “Et sur la hanche / La signature du poète” [And on her hip / The poet’s signature] — finalize the analogy between poet and fashion designer, “poème élastique” and “robe simultanée.” In the original manuscript version of the poem Cendrars follows these lines with his own signature, rendering even more explicit the parallel between the fashion designer who “signs” at the hip, and the poet who imaginatively reconstructs and recovers the woman’s body (Goldenstein 52). But if the poem is composed merely of a set of clippings rearranged and reassembled, then in what ways can it be said to deserve a signature? Like the designer, Cendrars suggests, the poet can also sign because the recreated body, the incarnated ideal, depends upon the eye or the ear of a good assembleur. The word “assembleur” is itself derived from textile manufacture, referring to the person who sews together the various parts of a garment.

Further, the poet implies in “Sur la robe elle a un corps” that assemblage — whether in fashion or poetry — necessarily entails violence. Cendrars refers to the violent gesture involved in assemblage in line 18, the detached and typographically emphasized “ÉPÉE DE SAINT MICHEL.” This line alludes most directly to the annunciation and the imminent incarnation of the spirit in the “glorious” flesh of Christ. But Cendrars reminds us here that in traditional iconography, when Saint Michael descends to announce the incarnation he is often depicted as bearing the glinting sword with which he vanquished the dragon. To incarnate, the allusion to Saint Michael’s sword suggests, one must also exert violence. In the case of Delaunay’s “robe simultanée,” violence is manifested in the cutting and reassembling of swatches of fabric; on another level, however, this violence is exerted specifically on the woman’s body, a body which is recut and reimagined according to the superimposed contours of arti-

fice. Liberating the spirit, or the “profondeur sensuelle” of the woman from the chains of her anatomy is, in Cendrars’ own terms, a violent as well as an imaginative gesture. The simultaneity of violence and creation is consistently foregrounded throughout the poem. We hear the victims of this violence crying in line 17: “Les cris perpendiculaires des couleurs tombent sur les cuisses”; and we see the hands objectified in the act of cutting in line 19: “Il y a des mains qui se tendent” [There are hands that reach out]. If we consider that “mains” is a term employed by the fashion industry to refer to the second-rank seamstresses responsible for *cutting* the dress form, then the line gains significance. Cendrars seems to be implying that Delaunay, as a fashion designer, applies (violent) hands, cutting up not only fabrics but also the natural lines of the female body in order to incarnate the glory of this body in a “robe simultanée.” But if “tous les yeux” figuratively extend their hands, then all present — “tous les habitués du bal Bullier” [All the regulars at the Bal Bullier] — are imaginatively resurrecting (re-cutting) the body of the woman. Cendrars depicts the violence implicated in the reconstructive gesture in the apocalyptic terms of the annunciation. And yet here it is not God who is incarnated in the flesh, but the “glory” of the woman’s sensuality that is incarnated in a dress. Once again, the order of the spiritual is vacated to make way for the play of sensual surfaces. These surfaces must provide an experience of depth formally ensured by allusions to a more profound (religious) order of experience.

In the manuscript of a 1945 preface composed for a volume of Baudelaire’s collected poems, Cendrars indicates to what a great extent the poet’s relation to the spiritual has been altered since Baudelaire’s time. “Comme le monde moderne a perdu la foi, mais n’a pas pu se dépouiller de la sentimentalité chrétienne,” begins Cendrars, “de même j’ai n’ai [sic] plus l’amour des beaux vers et des rimes riches, mais reste tout pétri de la sensibilité baudelairienne” [Just as the modern world has lost faith, but hasn’t been able to strip itself of Christian sentiment, [so] I no longer care for pretty verses and full rhymes but remain awed by Baudelaire’s sensibility] (“Baudelaire”).¹⁰ Here Cendrars suggests that “faith” in divinity (“la foi”) can be replaced by “feeling” (“sentimentalité chrétienne”), while poetic conventions (“les beaux vers et les rimes riches”) can be replaced by a generalized poetic “sensibilité” — *without* a consequent loss of aesthetic force or value. Cendrars’ wager is that a feeling for the transcendent can in fact subsist even when unsupported by any formalized or institutionalized vision of a higher order. By extension, Cendrars’ post-Baudelairean poetics implies that surface decoration and its sensual appeal may take the place of a system of beliefs. This feeling without faith (“sentimentalité” sans “foi”) is like a Hegelian aesthetics without Spirit, an art without aura, or, more accurately, an art that redefines aura (“glory”) as a democratized experience available without initiation to “tous les yeux . . . tous les habitués du bal Bullier.”

In a sense, Cendrars’ privileged figure of the poem as dress merely renders literal Baudelaire’s more metaphorical association of “la mode” with art’s ephemeral, “modern,” and contingent aspect. For Baudelaire, fashion is poetry’s “élément relatif, circonstanciel” [relative, circumstantial element], the “enveloppe amusante, titillante, apéritive, du divin gâteau” [amusing, titillating, appetizing element of the divine confection] without which “le premier élément

serait indigestible, inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine” [the first element would be indigestible, inappreciable, unadaptable and inappropriate to human nature] (1154). But what in Baudelaire appears to be a simple “enveloppe” rendering more palatable the suprahuman truth becomes in Cendrars’ hands the very source of this truth. If for Baudelaire appearance (the “enveloppe” of the contingent) is present only to introduce that which is not present (the divine), for Cendrars the divine turns out to be the very function of its appearances (the “enveloppes”). The poet’s task, according to Cendrars, is not to “dégager de la mode ce qu’elle peut contenir de poétique” [detach from the fashionable whatever poetry is in it]; neither is it to “tirer l’éternel du transitoire” [extract the eternal from the transitory] (Baudelaire 1163). “Dégager” and “tirer” are verbs that suggest an act of separation, a gesture of discernment that would cast aside the shell to reveal the kernel (“l’élément éternel”) inside. But for Cendrars, shells, envelopes, and appearances are precisely the locus of an experience of cosmic proportions.

The concept of depth implied in Baudelaire’s poetics is far more consistent with a traditional epistemology of poetic “connaissance,” one that Jean-Pierre Richard, for instance, associates with an experience of an immeasurable, inhuman depth. “L’aventure poétique,” states the author of *Poésie et profondeur*, consists in “une certaine expérience de l’abîme” [a certain experience of the abyss], an experience of precisely that which is “inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine” (10). It is not accidental that Richard associates the end of a certain understanding of “profondeur” with the work of Rimbaud, a poet who wishes to “nier la profondeur,” *negate* depth; “il tente d’édifier un monde sans en-dessous, un univers délivré de l’origine et de la nostalgie” [he attempts to construct a world without foundations, a universe freed from any origin or sense of nostalgia] (11). In continuity with Rimbaud, Cendrars recasts “profondeur” as a “profondeur sensuelle,” a depth located in the way the eye or ear functions, a sensual experience of the surface as origin and limit of meaning. However, as in Rimbaud’s work, it is not the physiology of perception that underwrites aesthetic truth but rather perception’s “dérèglement.” The eyes in “Sur la robe” are like “des kilos qui pèsent la sensualité des femmes” because they respond viscerally, deliriously, to a wealth of surface designs and inscriptions (to a mélange of “Ventre,” “Disque,” and “Soleil”). In response to these three distinct orders of phenomenal reality, the eyes “edify,” to borrow Richard’s verb, a world without depth (“sans en-dessous”), a world created entirely from a superfluity of non-hierarchicized visual impressions. In “Sur la robe elle a un corps,” the “ventre” becomes “un disque *qui bouge*,” a *moving* disk on a two-dimensional surface. The woman’s “glory” is not, then, a materialization of her spiritual truth or even an unveiling of her physical contours. Instead, her “esprit” is fully incarnated in a designer dress.

By drawing poetry into a closer relation with apparel, Cendrars not only realizes a potential inherent in Baudelaire’s aesthetics of the modern; he also completes a gesture sketched out implicitly by Rimbaud. Rimbaud, even more dramatically than Baudelaire, suppresses the concept of origin and detaches appearance from necessity. “Oh! nos os sont *revêtus* d’un nouveau corps amoureux” [Oh! our bones are *clothed again* in a new amorous body], writes

Rimbaud ecstatically in “Being Beauteous” (181), thereby intimating that the new world he envisions will involve, above all, a change of costume. And Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* is, in fact, full of references to costume: in “Les Ponts” the speaker glimpses “une veste rouge, peut-être d’autres costumes” [a red jacket, perhaps other costumes] (187), while in “Parade” he is the witness of a performance in which a series of “Maîtres jongleurs . . . transforment le lieu et les personnes” in “des costumes improvisés” [Master jugglers . . . transform places and people in improvised costumes] (180). The volume seems to suggest at times that the realization of Spirit, the satisfaction of the “promesse surhumaine faite à notre corps et à notre âme créés” [the superhuman promise made to our created body and soul], can occur entirely on the level of visual spectacle (184). “Quant au monde,” Rimbaud reflects, “que sera-t-il devenu? En tout cas, rien des *apparences* actuelles” [As for the world, what will it have become? In any case, nothing like it *appears* now] (208).

In a strikingly similar manner, Cendrars also views the ultimate incarnation of glory as a matter of wardrobe. Consistent with the aesthetics of “simultanéité,” Cendrars transforms “l’esprit,” the incarnated glory, and even the woman’s sensuality, into a function of the surfaces presented to the eye. Because these surfaces do not need to correspond to any specific anatomy (nor do they answer to any eternal ideal) they always run the risk of falling subject to the manipulations of a contingent third party. In the case of Delaunay’s “robe simultanée,” the surfaces of the dress are determined and their patterns administrated by a modern artist, not an industrial designer. Yet even an artist’s rendering of a fashion design is still constrained by exigencies usually considered foreign to lyric composition. The author of a garment, no matter how greatly informed by a high art aesthetic, still depends extensively on available technologies of fabric production, on contemporary modes of cutting and assembling, and on the types of accessorization and color schemes privileged during a certain period. Although Delaunay belongs to a generation of artists who believed that function and fashion are not necessarily anathema to craft and aesthetic force, she herself had to admit that in the end the decorative arts walk a thin line between “vital, unconscious, visual sensuality on the one hand,” and the “lowering [of] the costs of production . . . and the expansion of sales” on the other (“Survey” 208). The fashion designer or decorator has to accept material contingencies that a lyric poet would, by definition, resist.

But if Cendrars’ analogy holds, that is, if the poet authors a poem just as a designer authors a dress, then the implication is that poetry, too, “edifies” a world influenced by — perhaps even conditioned by — the contingent. “[D]élibéré de l’origine” [freed from any origin], the poet hallucinates a new landscape of the body, but this body is also, like the dress, a functional object, a product circulating in a market for which new bodies are always sought. Thus, because the poet relinquishes an ideal of permanence, he can only drop anchor in the shallow waters of a “profond aujourd’hui.” Profound today, gone tomorrow. Cendrars is aware of this fundamental instability, this “sans en-dessous,” when he describes his *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* as “poésies de circonstance,” “[n]és à l’occasion d’une rencontre, d’une amitié, d’un tableau, d’une polémique ou d’une lecture” [born of the occasion of a meeting, a friend-

ship, a painting, a polemic or a reading] (*Poésies* 106). Cendrars' "poésies de circonstance" still locate the center of insight in the speaking subject ("Mes yeux sont des kilos qui pèsent . . ."), but they simultaneously *displace* this center by admitting that the subject can be touched, redefined by "l'occasion." In "Sur la robe elle a un corps," Cendrars takes this poetics of the occasion to its logical extreme. The accidental occasion — "un tableau," "une lecture" — is replaced by contingencies of an entirely different order, such as the availability of materials, the influence of fashionable cuts, and the development of new compositional or reproductive techniques. These contingencies provide the "occasion" which touches, and therefore alters, both the subject and his or her imaginative "creations." In "Sur la robe," the "je" is thus no longer an autonomous creator but instead an *assembleur*; he belongs to that ambiguous class of artisans who must work with the given while conceding to the tastes of the contingent "other" that markets create. Rimbaud's infamous "Je est un autre" can be reread in this light as the motto of the modern poet as fashion designer. It is the confessional cry of a lyric subject who knows its creations — and even its self-creations — to be heteronomous products conceived through a dialogue with "la mode."

To the extent that Cendrars seeks a modern subject capable of recreating itself through a "nouveau corps amoureux," his works provide an early image of the postmodern subject as the product of masquerade.¹¹ And to the extent that Cendrars deflates Romantic conceptions of originality and authorship he engages us in a meditation on the nature of a lyric subject deprived of its autonomy. In sum, Cendrars raises the question whether a modernist aesthetics can indeed assert and maintain its value without relying upon an all-encompassing spiritual or institutional support (or an equally forceful ideology of the autonomous subject). Yet in his prescient manner, Cendrars goes even further. He also hints at the naiveté of a project that aims to stitch together a pastiche of identities without reference to an ethical body capable of suffering. He does this in "Sur la robe elle a un corps" by continually reminding his readers of the violence inflicted — not incidentally, upon a woman — by a poetics of pastiche.

4.

"Sur la robe elle a un corps" was published for the first time in 1916 in a catalogue prepared for an exhibition of paintings by Robert and Sonia Delaunay that took place in Stockholm. The publication was not authorized by Cendrars, and he had no occasion to revise the manuscript version he had entrusted to Robert Delaunay three years earlier. The poem appeared again in Cendrars' 1919 collection *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* with very few revisions. Given the poem's odd itinerary, it would be simple to dismiss "Sur la robe elle a un corps" as a flawed and trivial poetic effort, one lacking the rhetorical coherence and rhythmic balance of many of Cendrars' other, more carefully wrought poetic works. Indeed, critics of French poetry have neglected to provide any extended readings of the poem, consigning it in this way to an early oblivion. Departing from earlier critics, however, I will proclaim "Sur la robe elle a un corps" a

centerpiece of Cendrarsian poetics, a crucial “art poétique” of the prewar generation. For I believe that Cendrars’ own approach to the poem suggests that he accorded it far more importance than his critics have previously noted.¹² In fact, Cendrars demonstrated an almost excessive concern with the publication and preservation of “*Sur la robe elle a un corps*”; his correspondence of the wartime period provides valuable evidence to the effect that the poem constituted for him a viable response to what he considered an outmoded Parisian avant-garde. The significance of the poem for Cendrars resided in the fact that it posits a new, more dialectical relation between poetry and culture, one that his avant-garde contemporaries, as Cendrars himself stressed in 1916, had yet to envision.

During the war, Cendrars wrote repeatedly to Robert and Sonia Delaunay from the front to inquire what had become of his only existing copy of “*Sur la robe elle a un corps*.” “Chers amis,” Cendrars begins a typical missive,

Je n’ai pas de copie du poème de la robe — surveillez donc à ce que Canudo ne *perde* pas le brouillon que vous lui avez donné. Peut-être pourriez-vous me le faire envoyer, et je lui renverrais une copie *très lisible*. Je ne le sais pas par coeur et je ne saurais pas le refaire. Je tiens beaucoup à recevoir le manuscrit. (Letters)¹³

[I have no copy of the poem on the dress — so make sure that Canudo [the publisher of *Montjoie!*] doesn’t lose the draft you gave him. Perhaps you could get him to send it to me, and I would send him back a perfectly legible copy. I don’t know it by heart and I wouldn’t be able to write it again. I really want to receive the manuscript.]

Apparently the Delaunays did not reply, for in January 1916, while Cendrars was recovering from the amputation of his right arm, he sent word to Sonia Delaunay that he still longed to know where his manuscript of “*Sur la robe elle a un corps*” might have been misplaced. The fact that neither of the Delaunays ever responded to Cendrars’ repeated inquiries seems to have caused a rift in their relationship: “Je m’étais juré de ne pas vous écrire tant que je n’avais pas reçu *le poème sur la Robe*” [I swore I wouldn’t write to you until I got *the poem on the Dress*], Cendrars avows in another letter of 1916, “que je vous réclame depuis *1 an . . .*” [I’ve been asking you for it for over *1 year*]. (“1 an” is underlined three or four times.)

I cite this epistolary evidence of Cendrars’ continuing interest in the fate of “*Sur la robe elle a un corps*” in order to suggest the extent to which he valued it as a representative work of the prewar period. In general, scholars have tended to look upon Cendrars’ early poems as the somewhat careless jottings of an author who would only find his true voice in the major novels of the forties and fifties. But Cendrars himself seems to have considered the early poems to have been quite significant in their own right; they were so radically prescient, so beyond their own time, that, as he wrote Robert Delaunay in an undated letter from approximately 1916, all other efforts of the “soi-disant” avant-garde appeared to him “foutu[s] d’avance” [screwed in advance]. Of course, Cendrars

would probably have exhibited a similar degree of concern for any manuscript of his that had been mislaid or placed in neglectful hands. I believe, however, that “Sur la robe elle a un corps” had gained its author’s affection for a very specific reason. The poem contains many elements of what I consider to be a transitional poetics in the context of twentieth-century modernism, a poetics departing from the typical modernist sense of writing as the reorganization of fragments around a new center to approach a postmodern erasure of the notion of centrality itself. “Sur la robe elle a un corps” can be read as a kind of “art poétique” in the rough, an inchoate manifesto of a poetics on the cusp of postmodernism. Publishing the poem was the closest Cendrars ever came to circulating a poetic manifesto on the order of Apollinaire’s “Anti-tradition futuriste” (1913) or Marinetti’s “Parole in libertà” [“Words in Freedom”] (1913). And that is why Cendrars was so determined to locate the manuscript and to have a hand in its eventual publication.

Just what did Cendrars’ “art poétique” consist of, and in what ways can it be said to constitute a point of transition between a modernist and a postmodernist aesthetic epistemology? As I have argued, “Sur la robe elle a un corps” draws poetic techniques into close association with the specifically *decorative* practices of Sonia Delaunay. While links between the domain of painting and the decorative industries were often forged by the early twentieth-century avant-garde, the potential continuity between lyric poetry and the decorative arts was less frequently asserted. And yet Cendrars’ attempt to eliminate the hierarchy and even attenuate the distinction between the lyric and the decorative arts is consistent with the practices of a specific group of lyric poets who, as early as the 1850s, were already exhibiting a fascination with the ornamental. Cendrars represents the culmination rather than the reversal of a trend developing within lyric modernism, one that begins with Théophile Gautier’s collaboration with *La Mode* (and his claim that fashion is an art), proceeds with Baudelaire’s “Éloge du maquillage” and his analysis of the “dandy,” and reappears in Mallarmé’s meditations on style and self-ornament in *La Dernière mode*. But while Mallarmé’s schizophrenia produces a split between poems of monumental impersonality and ephemeral journalism, the two are fully reconciled in Cendrars’ “Sur la robe elle a un corps.” By explicitly associating the poem with the dress, “Sur la robe elle a un corps” in effect “spiritualizes” — by means of a carefully selected vocabulary of Christian allusions — an instance of apparel.

However, while Cendrars’ goal may be to “spiritualiser” the decorative, to solicit and celebrate the “profondeur sensuelle” immanent to the transient, the end result is inevitably a demotion of the poetic to the order of the decorative. For poetry’s distinction no longer resides in a heightened diction (there are no more “beaux vers” or “rimes riches”); nor can such distinction be derived from a circumscribed set of themes or located in a compositional technique peculiar to poetic production (assemblage, for instance, is a procedure shared by poets and dressmakers alike). True, the demotion of the poetic to the status of the decorative is merely hinted at rather than confirmed in the poem. Cendrars seems to enjoy the risk he runs when he identifies the poet with the fashion designer, and yet he retreats before celebrating the full implications of his anal-

ogy. Cendrars in effect protects the poet from full contingency by choosing as his double a fashion designer who is also an accomplished modernist painter. As an artist, Sonia Delaunay hypothetically exercises greater autonomy over her creations than would a *couturière* employed by a large firm. Cendrars may be seen, then, as occupying the crossroads between a postmodern refusal of cultural distinctions and a Baudelairean poetics that retains the superiority of high art over industrial products and what Baudelaire terms “leur grimace de circonstance” (Baudelaire 1034). Nevertheless, Cendrars’ identification with the decorative arts, as well as his excessive attention to surfaces, eventually implicates the lyric in a set of conditions from which it cannot, without recourse to a higher order — Spirit, Deity, autonomous subjectivity, or even biology — escape.

Delaunay’s efforts to harmonize her “simultanéiste” project with the exigencies of mass production highlight the dilemmas encountered by artists or writers who sought in the twenties to establish a middle-ground between a meaningful participation in the social and a strict refusal of heteronomy. It should be recalled that the theory of simultaneous contrast was developed several years before the stock market crash of 1929, during a period of immense enthusiasm for democratizing industries. At that time the competitive capitalist market seemed to offer previously unimaginable opportunities for the democratic distribution of high quality commodities. The rapidity with which Delaunay found industrial backing for large-scale production of her “robes simultanées” might have persuaded her that industry could indeed provide the means for promulgating an avant-garde aesthetic iconography previously confined to the haute couture salon. During the teens and twenties Delaunay expended a great deal of energy attempting to develop a “pochoir” (stencil) technique that would allow her to mass reproduce her simultaneous designs without a consequent loss of tonal integrity (see Wallen). She also invented the “tissu-patron,” a dress pattern upon which she printed both the motifs of the “simultanéist” iconography and instructions for the cut and assembly of the finished garment. All her experiments in fashion production aimed to synthesize an “artistic conception” with “the standardization to which everything in modern life tends” (“The Influence” 206). Delaunay maintained that such a synthesis between pure art and industry could indeed be achieved. Denying, for instance, that her geometric patterns were proof of her compliance with contemporary fashion trends, Delaunay defended her designs in the following manner:

[Critics] have announced confidently at the beginning of each new season that geometric design will soon pass out of fashion and be replaced by novelties drawn from older patterns. A profound error: geometric designs will never become unfashionable because they have never been fashionable. Bad geometric design is the untalented interpretation of copyists and minor decorators.

If there are geometric forms, it is because these simple and manageable elements have appeared suitable for the distribution of colors whose relations constitute the real object of our search . . . (207)

In contrast to the “minor decorators,” responds Delaunay, the real artists of fashion, those who create the “good” versus the “bad” geometric designs, are involved in a type of scientific research. In pursuit of truth not profit, these “good” designers are destined to enjoy the laurels bestowed on every “lyric vision” (“Rugs” 201). A “lyric vision” in the domain of fashion is, for Delaunay, nothing less than a Baudelairean vision, one capable of discerning eternal laws in transient appearances. A talented decorator, like a pure scientist, can mobilize a fashionable geometric iconography for the purpose of discovering the *profound* relations established by colors operating in a geometric design. It is only by obeying these laws that the decorator resists the role of “copyist” and manages to offer an intuition of permanent (physiological) harmonies *and*, happily, a fashionable dress.

But if Delaunay in effect retains the Baudelairean lyric schema, if, that is, she sustains a belief in a higher order (in this instance, the essential truth of chromatology), then Cendrars announces the advent of an aesthetics that will place biology, physiology, anatomy and consequently all ahistorical orders of knowledge in serious jeopardy. Along with Baudelaire’s “*foi*,” in other words, will go the self-assured epistemology of the chromatic scientist. No “*élément éternel*,” no absolute science of relations, accords one geometry epistemological priority over another. In this sense, then, Cendrars’ tentative “*art poétique*” leaves Delaunay’s modernist preoccupations behind and advances toward the postmodern world of relativized knowledges and nonhierarchical cultural practices. By abandoning a poetics of depth, or rather, by reconceiving depth as an effect of surface, Cendrars anticipates a postmodern aesthetics in which “[t]out est artificiel et bien réel. . . . Les produits des cinq parties du monde figurent dans le même plat, sur la même robe” [all is artificial and totally real. . . . Products from the five ends of the world appear on the same plate, on the same dress] (*Aujourd’hui* 12).

Cendrars thus transforms Delaunay’s dress from a scientific experiment into a postmodern pastiche. No underlying order or chromatic law determines the sequence or pattern of the surfaces and any attempt to locate a center from which to observe and hierarchize the colors of the “robe,” or for that matter the “cinq parties du monde,” constitutes a baldly ideological gesture. Cendrars’ decentering, similar to Rimbaud’s “*dérèglement*,” denies priority to any ontological, metaphysical, biological, or even aesthetic order. “Je suis trop sensuel pour avoir ‘du goût’” [I’m too sensual to have “taste”], announces Cendrars; “J’ai tous les goûts” [I have a taste for everything] (*Aujourd’hui* 193). The subject is thus set adrift in a world of surfaces, each of which possesses an equal claim on its scattered attention.

To reiterate, Cendrars is celebrating this delirious subject and its aesthetics of decentering during a period of euphoria when Europe was only just beginning to appreciate the full consequences of capitalist expansion.¹⁴ As time went on, industry did eventually disappoint both Cendrars and his collaborator, Sonia Delaunay. Sherry Buckberrough recounts how, during the thirties, Delaunay abandoned all attempts to ally the decorative arts with her scientific experiments in painting. Repulsed by the aesthetic compromises industrial manufacture was increasingly imposing upon her after 1929, Delaunay retreat-

ed to the exclusive domain of the gallery exhibition (Buckberrough 105). As early as 1925 Cendrars also registered the failure of industry to accommodate the talents of artist-designers: "Je regrette surtout qu'on ne voit pas plus souvent de vos robes dans la rue" [Above all, I'm sorry we don't see your dresses in the street more often], he wrote to Delaunay (quoted in Goldenstein 55). Cendrars' mature work in particular focused increasingly on democracy's disappointed promises; in 1949, he even concluded laconically that "[o]n peut aujourd'hui . . . condamner le capitalisme" [today we can blame capitalism]; "c'est du fric qu'il s'agit, et de rien d'autre" [all that matters is dough, nothing else] (*Le Lotissement* 286, 285).

"Sur la robe elle a un corps" introduces the dilemma that Delaunay and many artists of her generation would eventually face: the dilemma of having to choose between the elitist pretensions of a higher order on the one hand and the dictates of an industry on the other. In a sense, the task Cendrars sets the modern artist in his "art poétique" is an impossible one: to de-stabilize hierarchies without homogenizing values; to retain aesthetic grandeur without the support of Kant, "objective Spirit," or conventional faith; and finally, to welcome contingency without capitulating entirely to capital. Like most of the early and most audacious members of the avant-garde, Cendrars wanted to maintain a high degree of craftsmanship (and thus preserve the categories of artist and poet) and simultaneously to collapse the distinction between art objects and everyday (mass-produced) items. But Cendrars neglects to address directly the question of how art is to prevent the vacant order of the transcendent from being inhabited by the interests of an industrial or military class. In contrast, Adorno chooses to devote himself entirely to this problem in his massive study of art under capitalism, *Aesthetic Theory*. In a long digression that he was never able to integrate into the final manuscript, Adorno presents fashion in art as the dangerous hinge between self-reflexivity and submission. "Fashion," asserts Adorno,

is art's permanent confession that it is not what it claims to be. . . . Against its detractors, fashion's most powerful response is that it participates in the individual impulse, which is saturated with history. . . . If art, as semblance, is the clothing of an invisible body, fashion is clothing as the absolute. (316, 317)

Adorno's art-as-clothing metaphor could not be more *à propos*. The important word here, however, is "absolute," a term Adorno uses to refer to the phenomenon in which one aspect of an entity (such as its contingency) gains dominance over every other aspect (such as its effort to reclaim its independence). Art becomes pure fashion when it abandons all attempts at resistance to fashion. Fashion, and even more pertinently, art's confession of its fashionable aspect (its desire to please) may indeed provide "strength" to art and prevent it from "atrophy" (317); but the "renunciation" or denial of fashion, Adorno stresses, is an equally integral part of art. For Adorno, then, fashion appears to penetrate art in two different ways, or really, to two differing degrees of depth. In a first instance, art fends off its subservience to fashion by insisting upon its own

counter-order, its own set of exigencies related to an intangible ideal. In a second instance, art is penetrated by heteronomous constraints to the point where it hypostatizes — fully embodies — what previously constituted only one of its conflicting aspects. In this second case, art comes to resemble “clothing,” a thin tissue or “enveloppe . . . apéritif” that now hangs upon a body whose vulnerability, whose material existence, has become irrelevant. Fashion in art is “legitimate” since it manifests the immanence of the historical, except when it is “manipulated by the culture industry” which tears it away from “objective spirit” (192).

Cendrars situates his poetics precariously between the two possibilities sketched out by Adorno. In this respect, Cendrars represents a turning point between a modernist celebration of the everyday and the postmodernist commercialization of the same. Cendrars does not have recourse to an abstraction such as “objective spirit” to defend his creations from manipulation; he can only hang his poem/dress on an unstable and utterly amorphous clotheshorse called “sensualité.” Stretching lyric form to its utmost limit, rendering lyric subjectivity as porous as it can possibly be, Cendrars seems to ask whether a lyric poetry can in fact relinquish the principle of autonomy — confess to its incapacity to “live up to” its own ideal — and yet still remain a counterforce to unmediated administration.

Finally, the only thing preventing “*Sur la robe elle a un corps*” from capitulating to radical heteronomy is the slender, nearly imperceptible barrier provided by the signature of the poet (“*Et sur la hanche / La signature du poète*”). In the poem, this signature must take on the huge responsibility of fighting off the repeated assaults of technological and commercial standardization. Yet this signature is by no means the fully authoritative paraph of the Romantic lyric poet, nor is it reduced to the status of a designer brand label. Instead, this particular type of signature seems to allude to an intermediary order of subjective mastery, a hybrid state between autonomy and commercialism, absolute transcendence and purely ephemeral value. This signature belongs to the space of hybridity, an increasingly significant third field of cultural production in which one would want to situate a wide variety of modernist and postmodernist pasticheurs. Cendrars and Delaunay are typical of many artists in France, Italy, and Russia who were attempting from early on to realize hybrid creations drawing from both the decorative and the contemplative arts. It remains to be seen, however, whether the space of hybridity that Cendrars helped to carve out as early as 1913 can prove capacious enough to accommodate all the cultural manifestations that stake a claim within it. As the fashion industry begins to play a greater role in funding museum exhibitions (and as publishing houses are forced by economic conditions to promote the study of visual culture over the study of poetry), the question of whether “confession” can be balanced with denial, the energy of fashion with the energy of resistance, grows ever more pressing.

Notes

1. All translations from the French are the author's.
2. On the persistence of artisanal modes in the France of the Second Empire, see Walton.
3. Silverman traces both the threat of machine mass-production on the decorative arts and the antagonistic response of aestheticians to this threat. See also Lipovetsky.
4. This is Jameson's description of the postmodern aesthetic (7).
5. Delaunay lost all of her Russian properties during World War I. Finding herself in a precarious economic situation, she extended her field of operations beyond the domestic sphere, opening a Casa Sonia in Madrid, an Atelier Simultané in Paris, and a Boutique Simultanée at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs.
6. Cendrars was working under the sign of the simultaneous contrast technique when he collaborated with Sonia Delaunay in 1913 to create "La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France," a two-meter long poem stenciled with Delaunay's designs and folded in the manner of an accordian.
7. Although Delaunay may not have admitted it at the time, her "robe simultanée" was very much a response to moves made on the competitive chessboard of avant-garde art. As several commentators have noted, the competition between the Futurists and Sonia and Robert Delaunay was quite intense before World War I. See Morano; and Braun.
8. It is highly likely that Cendrars intended this pun. The poet had just returned from six months in New York where he worked for the Butterick pattern company. For details, see Bochner's detailed account of Cendrars' life in New York.
9. "Sensuality" is Cendrars' modernist synonym for spirituality. A follower of Remy de Gourmont's theory of the aesthetic as the spiritual life of the senses, Cendrars substitutes "sensuality" for more traditional poetic values such as spirituality, divinity, beauty or truth. Cendrars' "profondeur" is a "profondeur sensuelle" (*Aujourd'hui* 193), an arousing visceral experience involving the five senses.
10. This manuscript passage does not appear in the published preface.
11. The now classic version of the theory of identity as masquerade is Judith Butler's. In response to Joan Rivière's "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Butler asks provocatively whether masquerade "serve[s] primarily to conceal or repress a pregiven femininity . . . [o]r is . . . the means by which femininity itself is *first* established" (48). I am suggesting here that once an organic femininity is eliminated as a possibility, any female identity one creates may be susceptible to other reifying forces such as commodification.
12. Leroy provides an exhaustive treatment of this period in Cendrars' career. He does not, however, recognize the significance of "Sur la robe elle a un corps," nor does he link the poetics it advocates to Cendrars' later works.
13. The letter is undated; June 1914 is an approximate date suggested by the archivist of the Fonds Delaunay, Bibliothèque Nationale, Department of Manuscripts. In another letter dated 28 June 1914, Cendrars again expresses anxiety concerning the fate of the poem.

14. In "Profond aujourd'hui" of 1917 Cendrars relates the ex-centric nature of the subject directly to an experience of high capitalism: "Tu te perds dans le labyrinthe des magasins où tu renonces à toi pour devenir tout le monde" [You lose yourself in the labyrinth of stores, where you renounce yourself to become everyone] (*Aujourd'hui* 12); "Tu vis. Excentrique" [You live. Eccentric] (14).

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