

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

From the Selected Works of Mireille Hildebrandt

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Between the covers

Mireille Hildebrandt



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mireille_hildebrandt/67/

While meandering through San Francisco's *de Young* Museum of modern art, I encountered a large cast-glass statue of a woman. The statue shows the form and inclination of her body by the folds and draping of her dress. Upon inspection, the woman herself has evaporated into thin air; there is only the dress that traces the imprint of her delicate and lush bodily appearance, thus highlighting her disappearance. The dress is an empty mould that stands around the empty space of the woman, drawing the contours of her physical absence, thus preserving the memory of her evanescent being in the flesh. Like any work of art, Karin LaMonte's *Dress 3* invites onlookers to muse about the meaning of the work.¹ Its opacity and robustness disrupt the association of glass with transparency and fragility, confronting the spectator with the materiality of absence and the tangibility of memory. Some have suggested that the statue reminds us of the decay of the flesh and the loss of youth and beauty;² the dress has thickened into a relic of what the absent woman once looked like, highlighting the merciless process of aging and death.

For me *Dress 3* evokes the materiality of the immaterial, the contours of what cannot be defined, the casting of a person of flesh and blood in the costume that covers her role. It relates to privacy, to the hiding of the body, but also to the freedom to display and accentuate the curves of a woman who dresses up to show her self. It relates to role-playing, to the projection of an image, to staging a persona, while still masking the living body that breathes life into the mould. Like legal personhood, the dress enables a person to act her role while also protecting her from overexposure. In evoking elegance and the luscious enjoyment of being alive the statue – a contrario – reminds me of the rigidity of conventional robots, caught up in the limited degrees of freedom (DOF) that restrict their motoric skills to mechanical iterations. It raises the question of whether compliant robots will soon persuade us into taking an intentional stance, guessing there is something like a living entity on the inside, expressing itself in the embraceable softness of its approach.

The link with privacy, identity and persona became even more evident when I discovered LaMonte's *kinstugi* sculptures of Japanese kimonos.³ They confirm the idea that privacy can be designed into an environment up to the point where one's clothes form the environment that helps to protect against the gaze of the other; against being read by significant others whose proximity makes impossible to *not-read* whatever one's body gives away. Different kimonos are used for different situations, during the course of a lifetime, depending on one's status, rank or community. A kimono therefor carries a message, projects a role, situates the person it envelops; it hides curves and movement, it suppresses enjoyment and spontaneity, requiring training to drape the garment and to move with dignity while keeping the folds in place. The affordances of the kimono differ from those of the lush dress typified by *Dress 3*. They are part of another tradition where politeness, rank and groupism keep people in check while requiring them to respect each other's privacy without necessarily translating this into a right to privacy.

If the technological landscape changes course, we cannot assume that the protection it affords remains unchanged. A dress is a technology; a tool used for a specific function, incorporating and generating a web of meaning. To preserve privacy, non-discrimination, due process and the presumption of innocence, we may have to 'dress up' differently, reconsidering the affordances of the covers we need to present *and* to shelter ourselves in view of the intrusions of hot and cold weather – and impertinent surveillance.

Mireille Hildebrandt

¹ See <<http://www.karenlamonte.com/>>.

² Arthur Danto, *Karen LaMonte: Absence Adorned*, Tacoma, WA, Museum of Glass International Center for Contemporary Art, 2005.

³ Laura Addison en Karen LaMonte, *Karen LaMonte Floating World*, Los Angeles, Art Works Publishing, 2013. Kinstugi is the Japanese technique of repairing broken ceramics while using gold. It entails that fractures are repaired by emphasizing rather than hiding their faultlines. See e.g. Chana Bloch. "The Joins" *Southern Review* 50.1 (2014): 1-1, available at http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/southern_review/v050/50.1.bloch.pdf.