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Body-Guard Design: Gender, Violence and Agency

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48–67

This essay focuses on one of the numerous aspects in design that illustrates the necessity of including gender. It discusses gender identities between subjection and agency within the broad realm of matters, textiles, and fashion. The article exemplarily wanders through various forms of social oppression and exploitation of women in history as well as today, but also offers perspectives of resilience and resistance. Although totally different from each other, they have one phenomenon in common: it is both the body and the material that matters. In the end, the possibility of transforming the social making of objectified and subjectified bodies into fluid identities is discussed.

#body

#material

#subjection

#gender fluidity

Whether we like it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, all the products, symbols and services that we either encounter involuntarily or that we voluntarily surround us with speak to us in a gendered language – sometimes confusing or blurred, more often than not in a stereotypical way of what socially is considered and constructed to be 'male' or 'female'.

Objects generally function as cultural signs and symbols, as markers of distinction, and communicative means.

Firstly, products generate and people **do gender** by voluntarily subjecting. Secondly, gender provides **a biographical** narration about the construction of gender "and thus also forms a direct connection to the dimension of experience or memory. Things (called object for a good reason) appear to be the most 'pure' form of objectivity. In other words, things can be, or tell, stories" (Bal 2006, 271). Thirdly, products also play an important role by serving as props or requisites for small dramas to **perform and stage** gender roles. Objects and arrangements always fulfil a twofold function: a private and a public one.

I will now demonstrate both the crucial role of design and the urgent necessity to embrace gender in design. I decided to exemplarily discuss gender identities between subjection and agency within the broad realm of matters, textiles, and fashion. To start with I will take a quick glance at two violent types of historic female subjection, although very different in their manifestation.

The Bourgeois Private Woman

When, in the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie eventually advanced to become the ruling class, the bourgeois woman's field of activity was limited to the role of being a good housewife and mother in the private home. It was only in this interior space that she was allowed to indulge in her allegedly natural urge to find self-fulfilment in decoration. This even went as far as integrating the woman into the furnishings as a decorative accessory: she was "the finest adornment in her decorated home" (Falke 1882, 356): the bourgeois woman had become invisible. Irene Nierhaus vividly highlights the ideological idea of the, as it were, naturally decorative and decorating private woman:

> *In the course of the nineteenth century, needlework, textile materials and interior design were linked to a genuinely female gender characteristic. Bio-psychological naturalisation and mythical historisation are the means for this, marking, in 19th century texts, the wealth of textiles and ornaments in the interior space as the true intrinsic culture of the woman.* (Nierhaus 1999, 88, transl. by U.B.)

If we wanted to develop any optimistic future vision from this, we could state that, in the course of the twentieth century, these abilities established themselves as independent professional design disciplines such as interior design, jewellery design and, indeed, textile design. So far, however, these disciplines have not been able to truly overcome their one-dimensional association with fields of practice considered typically female: female 'skilfulness', 'dexterity', the female 'sense of beauty' as well as the allegedly special way women handle textiles, flowing fabrics, soft materials and colourful patterns have been weaving their ideological ways from the past to the present.

The Exploited Female Factory Worker

With industrialisation, and accordingly with the mechanisation and technicalisation of work, the female proletarian did not, however, disappear in private life, but rather in an inhumane, standardised workplace: the factory. Here, as

is generally known, she was paid even more miserably than her male colleagues and was given even worse kinds of work for which no qualifications were needed – allegedly.

However, the textile industry would soon become the most important employer for women. With the use of hydropower and, soon after, of steam power, (textile) work had been transferred from the home to the factory. The interim step of collective work at home (cottage industry) through the putting-out system at least allowed women a certain degree of freedom in a community of solidarity with other women: a merchant would supply them with the raw material – yarn – which they would then spin or weave into a product that would be returned to the merchant who would pay them a – doubtless miserable – piece-rate wage. The factory, however, would finally and completely dispossess women of any self-determination: invented in rapid succession, the mechanical machines for the manufacture of textiles controlled both the head and the body by relentlessly dictating the pace of work and dividing up the work process: John Kay's 1733 'flying shuttle' was one of the first inventions in the long succession of technical innovations for mechanically improved weaving; in 1764, James Hargreaves invented the 'spinning jenny' and in 1769 Richard Arkwright came up with his much more complex 'throstle' or 'water frame', the first spinning machine powered by a water wheel and needing no human power. At least just as significant, the 'water frame' was able to continuously process the raw material so that the human work element was reduced to replacing a full spindle with an empty one and to reconnecting broken threads. This kind of work was considerably duller than the former manual work of spinning. Samuel Crompton's 'spinning mule' from 1779 eventually combined the qualities of its two predecessors into a much more sophisticated machine.

As the processing of materials such as yarn or straw had always been women's work, even in the pre-industrial age, it continued for women as socialised paid work – and, to the present day, it is identified and stigmatised as female. We could metaphorically state that, with mechanised factory work, women lost the thread, and they were deprived of controlling the goods. The product became merchandise by adding exchange value to utility value, and, from then onwards, the exchange value would simultaneously capitalise and subjectify the object while the people who produced the artefact were objectified.

Hence, the women in these two very different classes (proletariat and bourgeoisie) shared the same two phenomena: on the one hand invisibility, with the one disappearing in the anonymity of the factory and the other in the intimacy of the home. On the other hand, both were made responsible for all fabric-related materials, for textiles and for the related activities. Both forms, however, confirm the female 'deviation' from the societal, male-constructed norm.

Material and Form

When we consider this part of female history, the (textile) material appears as the substance, and this substance seems to be typically female. 'Material' is the matter we handle and with which we come into physical and almost always bodily contact. Material is the raw matter, that which is thing-like. The more general 'materiality', on the other hand, can be considered the concept, the form of 'thingness'. This once again mirrors the recurring interrelated juxtapositions of the Aristotelian concepts of *techne* and *episteme* or Descartes' *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Material amalgamates itself with *mater* and is hence the original, the source, the fundamental, but, as such, it is also the raw, the wild, the untamed – and that

must be subjugated and shaped: it must be put into form. Having established that, it is no coincidence that we arrive at the bipolarity of the sexes, which usually interpreted as a matter of fate, is indeed nothing but ideological: Didi-Huberman forcefully critiques this ideological meaning of 'material', using the example of wax (and referring to the truism of Aristotle's 'embryology'):

> *What does this preliminary look at the material of wax teach us? First, that its* plasticity *cannot be reduced to the canonical* passivity *of Madame Matter enduring the thrusting – and the pounding of seals – that Mister Form would forever subject her to.* (Didi-Huberman 2006, 207)

Just like other scholars, Judith Butler also traced the idea of the wild material of 'woman' that has to be tamed by the man from its origin in antiquity through to present gender constructions (see, among others, Butler 2011, especially the chapter "Matters of Femininity", 7-11).

Following this thought, the woman would be material, which is kneaded (soft as wax) and shaped in male hands, and hence is put into form by design. When we combine this logic with the etymological double meaning of the word 'text', we arrive at a historically oppositional (and by no means equivalent) pattern: text literally means "things woven", and stems from the Latin verb "*texere*": "to weave", "to join", "fit together", "braid", "interweave", "construct", "fabricate", "build" (Oxford English Dictionary 2010). The unfolding metaphors match the hierarchical idea: "thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns – but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver" (Bringhurst 2004, 25). The female weavers hold the concealed, the invisible concept of the thread in their hands, while the poet becomes the real hero who visibly interweaves these thoughts. He is the hero who forms language through writing so that it can be preserved and passed on, while the women only provide the raw material that can no longer be identified in the final product. Bringhurst eventually links the written word to the cloth, but he is not aware of the inequality: "After long practice, their [the scribes'], work took on such an even, flexible texture that they called the written page a *textus*, which means cloth" (ibid.) Although referring to a different context, Thomas is more aware of the precarious "affinity between the woven word and the woven cloth" (Thomas 2016, 1).

The fairy-tale version of expropriation

Hence we can safely say that the thread/yarn material fettered women in a very specific and gender-specific way: it tied them to the home, the factory, the man. The female bodily fluids – blood, sweat and tears – which, as already impressively described elsewhere, both physically and mentally merge with the processing of the material – spinning, weaving, sewing – once again reappear metaphorically in many fairy tales, in particular in those by the Brothers Grimm: as a young girl, Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on a spindle (blood!), Rumpelstiltskin spins the straw of the miller's daughter into gold and, fortunately, she solves the evil imp's riddle in the end. In *Mother Hulda*, when the hardworking servant (girl) is washing her blood (!) off the spindle, it falls into the well, but here too there is a happy end. *The Three Spinners* is much more ambivalent because the recalcitrant girl dodges the exploitative hunger of the male-influenced production process by unashamedly exploiting three other female workers who are already physically deformed by hard labour. In another fairy tale, *Spindle, Shuttle, and Needle* come 'alive' like robots and help the poor, yet cunningly clever girl, to get the prince. All these more or less obedient fairy tale girls are

spinners but do not end up as spinsters: in stark contrast to the reality of the nineteenth century, they are rewarded with a noble and rich man, who liberates them from their hard work, but at the same time, takes total control over them. In the fairy tale, the female proletarian and the princess blend into one single character, but here too those girls do not find freedom. As soon as they are sexually mature, they are subjected to a man. The blood resulting from pricking their fingers on the spindle anticipates, to some extent, the girls' deflowering that will later just be re-enacted by the son of a king.

The fact that the women are being dispossessed of both their products and their bodies remains unchanged: the invisible female provision and preparation of both the material and their bodies for the designer of a visible final product – the designed good 'textile' and the designed good 'woman'.

The objectified female fashion-body

From these historical associations, all of which are very intensely connected with design, though not in the direct sense of (fashion)design, we will now jump to the present. However, those who think that gender constructions in design have essentially changed are wrong.

The staging of, in particular, the female body in fashion objectifies the subjects in a modern way; they are empty object-shells onto which fashion is applied as the subject. Designers tend to refer to models as 'clothes hangers' and abuse them respectively.

Barbara Vinken describes the reasons why these exploitative structures clearly focus on female fashion on female bodies:

> *Ultimately, female fashion is about that which male fashion obscures for the sake of preserving the institutional body: about bodily metamorphoses, about the way of all flesh. Female fashion externalises the individual to its corporeality.* (Vinken 2013, 37, transl. by U.B.)

The male 'institutional body' cannot wear extreme or crazy clothes on a society-wide level because the both iconic and most successful modern male garment, the suit, sublates the body within a controlled and dominating figure of authority. This is also one of the reasons why queer, trans and neutral (fashion)bodies cannot, may not, due to mechanisms that stabilise domination, play a significant role in socially constructed normality.

Horror in the fashion body

> *The determining male gaze projects its phantasies onto the female figure.* [...] *women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to-be-looked-at-ness.* (Mulvey 1999, 62f.)

Using the case of a fashion shoot, I will now demonstrate a particularly perfidious, yet not at all unusual 'male gaze' in the contemporary fashion industry. Widely considered one of the international star designers, photographer Steven Meisel (who has designed each cover of *Vogue Italia* since 1988), who every now and again seems to love playing with images of tortured or murdered women, created a particularly repulsive and misogynist photo spread for the April 2014 issue of *Vogue Italia*. With the title "Horror Movie", he showed a long sequence of scenes testifying to extremely brutal domestic violence: young women (models in, of course, luxury garments by famous fashion designers), as one can see by their mouths, screaming in shock and horror or as silent corpses.

I will only describe two of the many more scenes published in this issue of *Vogue Italia*: a young

woman is lying head first at the bottom of a staircase in a house. Eyes half open, perhaps already dead due to a neck fracture inflicted by falling down the stairs, legs twisted, thighs apart, one arm stretched out with a bloody kitchen knife lying next to it. Her shiny dark red hair mixes with the blood that pours out of a head wound and that perfectly matches her red, slightly dishevelled dress. In the twilight a man in a bloodstained shirt sits opposite, yet removed from her in an armchair, looking at her calmly, bereft of emotion. Second scene: a black-haired woman, a girl rather, dressed all in innocent white ('like a virgin'), her arms raised in panic, her mouth wide open as if screaming, presses herself against the wall of a staircase. Along the wall, there are bloody traces as if fingers had slipped down the wall. On the top landing, a man in a white shirt features carefully arranged blood splashes. His face is outside the picture frame, the lower part of his body and his hands obscured by the shadowy darkness of the staircase.

Except for the first example, in which the red-haired model is staged as a corpse, all the other victims still seem to be somehow alive. However, we are left in the dark as to how the scene designed as a momentum of violence will eventually end. But still, we could imagine the outcome of these acts of violence because, in each photo, Meisel has 'reconstructed' a famous film scene in which a woman becomes the victim of violence, including, for example, scenes from *The Birds with the Crystal Plumage* (original title: *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo*), *Suspiria*, *The Shining* or *The Silence of the Lambs*. It's hard to determine which is worse: the photo series itself or the fact that the powerful chief editor of *Vogue Italia*, Franca Sozzani (who died in 2016) claimed that this action was intended to condemn violence against women and as a contribution to the struggle for women's empowerment and emancipation (see Fury 2014)! Such an impertinent statement once again demonstrates the tacky, yet powerful, construct by which in some parts of the fashion world, with its fashion shows, glamour magazines and advertising campaigns, a sexualised morbidity culture is being celebrated – a culture in which staged passion degenerates into power, romanticism into violence and closeness into sheer hatred.

> *[T]he beauty of these photographs transforms acts of violence and humiliation into erotic possibilities. […] Torture has not only become normalised, it has been integrated into one of the most glamorous forms of consumer culture – high fashion.* (Bourke 2006)

There's hope: fluid gender constructions

Finally, taking a more optimistic look at the historical gender-web starting with weaving, spinsters, housewives, exploited female workers and poor-girl-to-princess up to the abused models in today's fashion design and photography, we can see the beginnings of totally different forms, the best examples of which could serve as role models for gender sensitivity, gender openness and gender blur – concepts that, although deriving from fashion, reach far beyond it.

Here I wish to make specific reference of the 'Inter-Fashion for unmarked Bodies' collection conducted during 2014 in a course entitled 'Inter-, Trans- and InBetween-Fashion' at the Köln International School of Design (KISD), exemplified in the work of Juliana Lumban Tobing (Manyfold Diversity), Annika Mechelhoff (Archi-Dress), Zoe Philine Pingel and Kathrin Polo (#040585) and Katja Trinkwalder and Paul Claussen (Amorphé).

Fashion design spans the highly controversial spectrum from the asocial, sexist and non-ecological discount store and throwaway fashion to mainstream and business dress and to extreme gender stereotyping at the one end

and to experimental gender fluidity at the other. As one of the most advanced fields of design, fashion is, after all, also the perfect playground for experimenting with gender-fluid concepts. Here, gender identities can be explored and put to the test in very experimental ways because bodies can be veiled, exposed, changed, deformed, re-interpreted, and re-composed.

Emancipatory textiles and fashion are finely calibrated seismographs for new tendencies, not only in fashion itself: they also work as a societal blueprint for future societal democratisation efforts. Fashion can be an agent for increasingly unmarked bodies, with openness, fluidity, and many different options at its disposal and the possibility to drive forward self-empowerment for all genders.

It will be exciting to observe what the future will bring: regression to conventional-conservative patterns or a focus on gender inclusion and gender diversity, including the radical openness of 'the sky's the limit': fluid, elastic constructs that not only allow diverse but also constantly changing gender identities.

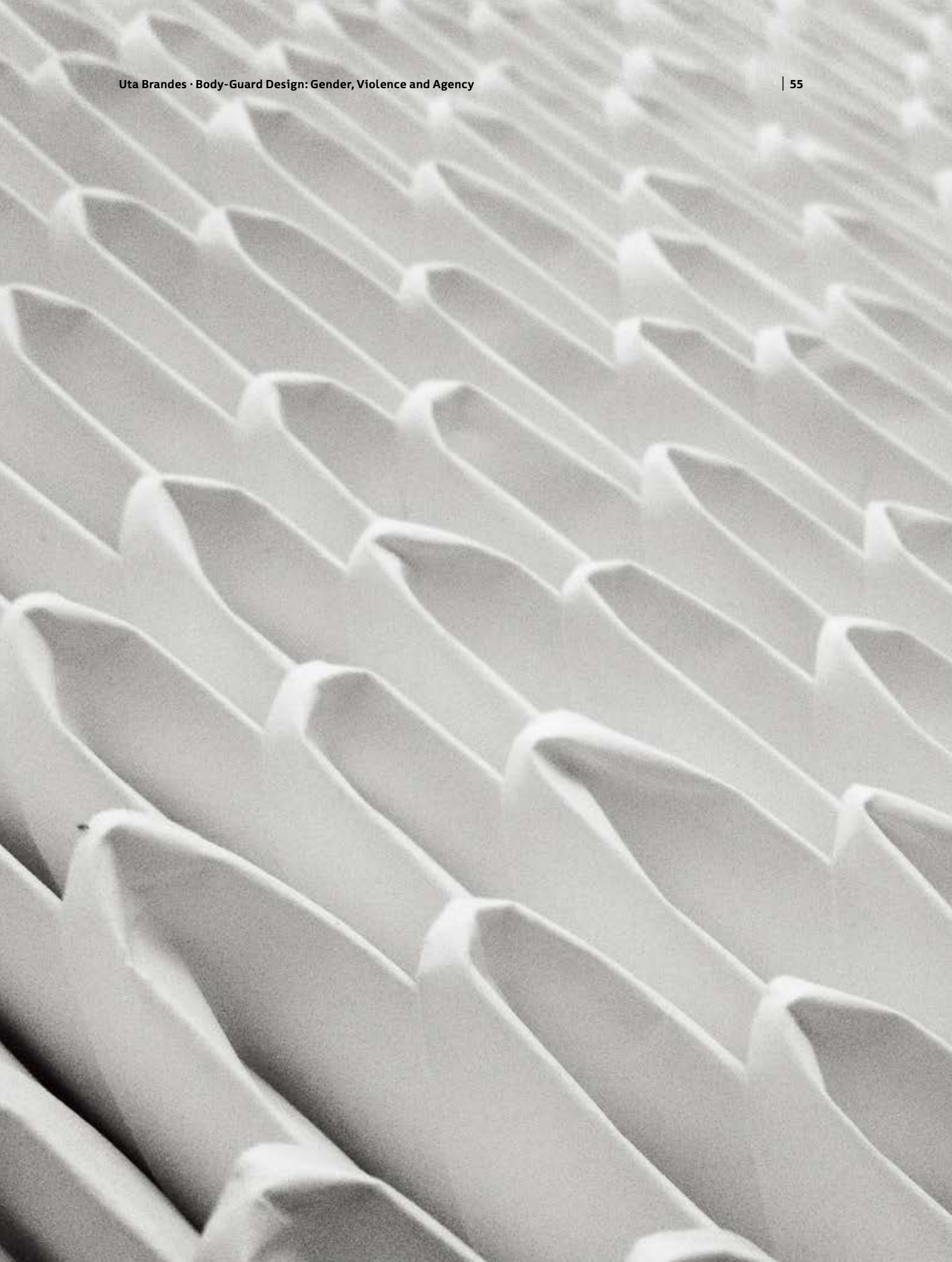
The following set of images represent 'Inter-Fashion for unmarked Bodies'. This project embodies an experimental approach by design students who had no expertise in fashion design. In this specific instance, the task was to think about body "shells", i.e. how to cover a gendered body in a way that both genders and body shapes are blurred and concealed. Twelve images show the various angles that design and gender take, manifesting in a number of fashion proposals.

Figure 1–3 (pages 55-57): Manyfold Diversity by Juliana Lumban Tobing. Many folded pieces of Origami can be assembled and attached in numerous ways to reshape and/or hide the body albeit expressively. Source: Juliana Lumban Tobing, 2018.

Figure 4–5 (pages 58-59): Archi-Dress by Annika Mechelhoff. Architecture can be an initiator when looking for new types of fashion. Here, the inspiration derives from the architecture of Frank Gehry, especially buildings such as the Vitra Design Museum (Weil, 1989), the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997), or Walt Disney Hall (Los Angeles, 2003). Source: Annika Mechelhoff: 2018.

Figure 6–9 (pages 60-63): #040585 by Zoe Philine Pingel and Kathrin Polo. The title '#040585' indicates the specific nuance of the colour blue according to the RGB colour system. This performative message opposes the preformed, conventional construction of gender by claiming the development of free personality. Source: Zoe Philine Pingel and Kathrin Polo: 2018.

Figure 10–12 (pages 64-66): Amorphé by Katja Trinkwalder and Paul Claussen. This is a very fluid, temporary fashion, each time changing the body shape of an individual in an unpredictable way: the model wears a box on their back that is constantly filled with dry ice and hot water, thus producing the effect of a mystical fog that envelops the person and blurs their body shape. Source: Katja Trinkwalder and Paul Claussen, 2018.

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Bio

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