THE WARDROBE PROJECT

by

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The Wardrobe Project is an attempt to blur the lines between work and daily life, between the ritual of getting dressed each day and the rituals performed in the artist's studio, between the body and its coverings. Beginning as a means of questioning the (lack of) value placed on domestic handwork in fine arts (specifically, the value of my work in knitwear design in the context of my studio work in printmaking), the project has grown to encompass daily life and studio practice, forcing the routines of one to overtake those of the other: daily life becomes the work, and the work is a uniform that defines the artist.

In late August 2007 I began a cycle of daily dresses: first printing woodblocks on fabric, cutting and sewing dresses from this fabric, wearing the dresses, then printing successive layers of imagery over the dresses between each wearing. Each dress is photographed at each printing, and I photograph myself wearing the dress each day. At any given time there are eight dresses in the cycle, one for each day of the week and one for wash day; I periodically remove a dress from the project and preserve it in the state in which it was last worn, adding a new dress to replace it. To date (at the end of March 2008, when the dresses were folded away into drawers for exhibition, marking the end of the project) there are twenty dresses altogether.

I have organized this paper into six sections: body, clothing, place/mapping, work, ritual and chance, and the museum.

Body

Printmaking is intimately connected to the body. To begin, there is a physicality involved in the making of prints. Beyond this, printmaking encompasses any sort of impression made with or on the body: a hand print on a window, a thin spot worn into the centre of a bedsheet from restless sleep or in the knee of a trouser leg from active play, an indented sweater pattern left on a face when one falls asleep with one's head resting on an arm, the creases and lines that streak across a belly where the trousers waistband rests.

In her *Tarpaulin* series (1974 to 1978) artist Betty Goodwin collected used canvas truck tarpaulins, carefully folding and re-folding the fabric, rubbing gesso and graphite into the surface in thin layers and working these materials into the fibres of the fabric until the marks made by her hand and body were almost indistinguishable from the stained and faded marks left behind from the fabric's former life. This canvas, once used to cover goods hauled across the continent on the backs of trucks, becomes as familiar as a bed or a favourite shirt, the hands and body leaving their impression on the fabric in the same way they would leave their impression on domestic fabrics through daily use. In *The Wardrobe Project,* each layer of ink stiffens the fabric of the dresses and is subsequently softened by wearing and by washing; the dresses are run through the press just as they came off the body so that the creases left behind by wear dictate which part of the fabric touches the inked woodblock and which part does not, so that the impression the body leaves on the dress through wearing becomes explicit in the ink patterns on the fabric.

In *The Wardrobe Project* the body, at once both the vehicle for the work and the object of the work's eventual destruction through wear, is explicitly referenced through the printing of images of the artist's body on the dresses; the body is clothed with images of the unclothed body, a reproduction of itself. A frontal figure is simultaneously printed on the front of a dress and on its back so that when the artist/wearer's back is turned from a viewer, the artist/wearer does not become a passive recipient of the viewer's gaze; instead, the gaze is subverted and thrown back at the viewer by the facing figure. In subsequent printings this image is gradually covered and obscured, so that the image of the body undergoes the same destructive wear as the dress undergoes by being alternately worn and then crushed in a printing press, over and over.

Figure 1: dress #4, state 8, front (left) and back (right)

Clothing

During my first year of graduate studies I took on (as an outside, paid project) several commissions for knitwear designs. Countless hours that year were spent planning, charting lace, cable and colourwork designs, knitting samples, pattern drafting and grading for multiple sizes and finally knitting full sweaters for photographic models, hours that could perhaps have been better spent in the print studio. For me this work is as important as my studio work, and I have struggled to justify, to myself and others, why this is the case. I want it all: I want the work of my hands to be meaningful and to be beautiful, but I also want it to be practical. The best way to achieve this was to create a body of work that could not be separated from my daily existence as an artist, so that the things I make in the studio, the things I make for public exhibition and the things I make for my own personal use became integrated and formed a new more expansive dialogue.

Artist Andrea Zittel, whose work responds to daily routines and personal needs, created a series of uniforms (1991 to present) which she wears every day for a set length of time (at first wearing a single uniform for six months, later changing to a new uniform for each season). Many of these uniforms, in particular the *Personal Panels* (1995 to 1998), are reminiscent of the simple, block-like contours of the mass-produced garments designed by Russian Constructivists Liubov' Popova and Varvara Stepanova. Like Popova's and Stepanova's designs, Zittel's *Personal Panels* are designed with frugality in mind, constructed from rectangular panels in order to make efficient use of fabric. The dresses in

The Wardrobe Project exist in a space between factory production and hand production in that they are cut from the same pattern, the same shapes over and over, then assembled one at a time, by one person, on a domestic sewing machine. As a final nod to the tradition of hand work, each dress's hem is stitched by hand. In design, the dresses reflect the realities of the factory floor with their apron-like coverage of the front of the body, their large utilitarian pockets and their wide, non-constrictive skirts, while in production they remain individually handcrafted objects, each with the subtle differences that arise from being made by hand.

Figure 2: dress #7, state 2, front

Place/mapping

In the summer of 2005 I left my home in Canada in order to pursue graduate studies in Athens, Georgia, leaving behind my spouse, his children, and my two aging cats in our newly purchased home. Living a thousand kilometres away from everything and everyone I cared about caused me to spend a lot of time that first year meditating on that space in between the place I am and the place I came from. I began to draw map-like marks in my sketchbooks and on my prints, embedding the map into my self portraits in an attempt to take ownership of that vast space by filling it with my own marks. Beginning by obsessively drawing radiating ink lines, reminiscent of topographical map lines, across and around sections of my body in prints (essentially turning the body into land forms), I eventually became so familiar with these marks and my hand so accustomed to drawing them that they became routine, background chatter, repeated across a page as patterns in textiles. In The Wardrobe Project, maps of the neighbourhood in which I live and of industrial areas near my home become repeated textile patterns, layered on and through the images of the body until the two become one in the densely inked surface of the dresses' fabrics.

At the same time that the dresses are printed, large sheets of Japanese kozo paper is passed through the press to collect any offset ink that occurs in the printing; these sheets are folded, refolded and printed multiple times until they carry a densely layered collection of dents and marks pressed into the wood blocks from the thickness of the dress pockets and seams as they pass through the dress, ghostly residue of those same images that have been

printed on the dresses, and blurry outlines of the dresses themselves. These prints serve as maps to the working process of creating the dresses, maps that depict time rather than place, detailing the gradual muddying of surface in the dresses as printing builds up and the damage caused to the woodblocks as dresses are printed. Just as the obsessively repeated drawing of map lines was a way in which to simultaneously fill and define for myself the gap between two places, these maps serve to fill and define the gap between the daily ritual and reality of making and wearing the dresses and the residue that is left behind when the dresses are removed from daily life and placed on view in the museum.

Work

I grew up in an industrial park. Formerly a Royal Canadian Air Force training station, by the time I was born Huron Park, Ontario had become a government-owned experiment: a tiny town surrounded by farmland and boasting a military-sized airport, many large industrial warehouse buildings and 350 low-rent homes, it attracted both businesses and workers. Growing up, the factories were where our parents worked and where we played, and the routines of factory life dictated our routines as well: each day at noon the sound of the old RCAF air raid siren would pierce the air across our town, signalling the beginning of our lunch break during the school year, interrupting our play on summer days. Windsor Ontario, the city I've chosen in adulthood as my home, is also a place defined by labour and manufacturing; I've merely traded in the chainsaw, boat, drainage tile and pop bottling factories of my youth for Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. In his book

Landscapes of the Interior, Don Gayton puts forth a theory of primal landscape, positing that the landscape in which one spends one's formative years imprints in such a way that one can never be truly comfortable, feel at home, in any landscape vastly different from that first one. While Gayton is speaking specifically here about natural landscapes (for him, the prairies and canyons along the western Canada/US border), I believe that my primal landscape is the factory town with its routines, its predictable traffic patterns tied to shift changes, its metallic and burning chemical smells.

Living in a city dominated by the automobile manufacturing industry inspires an approach to the act of making that thrives on rules, schedules, daily rituals and documentation. Manual labour, implicit in the repetitive acts of cutting, sewing, and printing of the dresses, is made explicit in the cut of the dresses themselves, their simple lines, bib fronts and large pockets calling to mind the classic work apron. I chose this uniform-like style in order to make explicit the link between my work and my daily life, to carry my work with me through everything I do not only in the images printed on the dresses but in the nature of the dress itself. The fabrics are simple and utilitarian: lightweight muslins and fabrics taken from secondhand bedsheets, evoking the simplicity of work shirts and the security of the home. I wear the dresses at home, at work, while teaching, to parties and gallery openings, while shopping for groceries. I wear the dresses while printing in the studio and do not cover them with an apron; the dresses are my apron. Scuff marks build up where I wipe my hands on my skirt, holes form in pockets where I stow small hand tools. I live my life fully inside the artwork, and the day-to-day living becomes the artwork itself, as the

physical artifacts (the dresses) are temporal, always changing. I stamp the date on each dress every time I wear it and photograph myself each day wherever I happen to be. These photographs and growing rows of dates are the record left behind of the work; while each layer of each subsequent day of wearing is contained within the artifact of the dress, it is hidden beneath so much noise and colour and pattern that it is impossible to unpack each layer and examine it on its own. This endless filling of space, piling up imagery on top of itself until everything beneath it is buried and destroyed, speaks in part to the endless manufacturing of more and more and more things, filling up our vision with noise and junk, obscuring the landscape: if you explore the city I live in you can find a seemingly infinite number of parking lots and fields filled with row upon row of brand new minivans, overflow waiting to be loaded on a truck and taken away.

Ritual and chance

While the rituals of factory life define the structure and the performative aspect of *The Wardrobe Project*, there is also a good deal of ritual in my working approach. Each day in the studio I carefully lay out my tools and materials in an unchanging pattern: inks, rags, gloves and palette knives to my left (always gloves above, rags below and palette knives laid next to a phone book in the middle), ink roller on the glass slab in front of me, wood blocks to my right. Newsprint sheets next to the press, a stack of printing paper and the dresses and fabrics I'll be printing on next to that, laid out in neat rows. I brew myself a cup of tea before beginning. There is an efficiency to my movements, rolling out ink,

spreading it on the wood, moving the wood to the press bed, laying out the dresses, running them through the press. The dress goes through the press once to print the back first, then the block is run back through with paper to print the ghost image the dress leaves behind; the woodblock is then re-inked and the dress laid face down with paper on top to pick up the ink offset from the already-printed back of the dress, and the wood goes through the press one last time with paper so that all possible marks that can be made by the dress while it's being printed are preserved. My art-making becomes a routine similar to every other daily routine of life, just like getting dressed.

While there is a well-defined structure to how I organize my printing day, the element of chance plays an important role in the work. Dresses are allowed to wrinkle as they are placed on the woodblock for printing; hems and side seams sometimes hang off of the block and are not printed, pocket edges fold down and skirt creases cause long unprinted lines to appear. I choose colours at whim, and sometimes the resulting prints look good on the dresses and sometimes they do not (either way, I wear the dress). Areas of the dresses that I'd hoped would continue to show get covered up and obscured. At the same time, I am not wearing an apron while I work and so occasionally ink from my printing gets on the dress I am wearing. Sometimes the residue that I pick up on the kozo paper afterwards shows a perfect outline of a dress, sometimes it is a solid layer of colour that obscures everything beneath it, and sometimes it's so transparent that it doesn't show at all. In this way the act of printing the dresses echoes the act of living day to day: small unexpected things happen that change the outcome, in big ways or in subtle ways.

The museum

The Wardrobe Project exists in three very different exhibition spaces: in the every day performance that is my daily life and the ritual of putting on clothes each morning in order to present a persona to the world; in the presentation of the daily photos and documentation via the internet, and finally in the art museum.

Each day I put on a new dress and go out and live my life inside the work, and the work is a costume that defines me as a person. The ritualistic manner in which I work in the studio spills over into the everyday, with each element laid out systematically: newly printed dresses, not yet worn, hang on the bedroom door handle; during the day I stamp the date onto the dress with ink; I take a photograph of myself wearing the dress; at the end of the day I undress, laying the worn dress on a table by the door where it waits to be carried back to the studio and be printed once more.

The daily photographic evidence of the performance is collected and presented on the internet in the form of a weblog, arranged into days and months, for a broader audience to consume. While the daily existence of the work is constantly destroyed and changed with repeated printing of the dresses, the web documentation stands as a permanent record of the project's changes over time, of those daily repeated acts. Each state of each dress is presented in the same way so that the work's internet presence itself becomes a ritual to be repeated: each day's first post contains photographs of the dress laid flat, always presented

the same way, first front, then back, then close-up details of layered inks; each day's second post is simply a photograph of the artist wearing the day's dress. These photos are taken wherever I happen to be that day: in the print studio, for the most part, but sometimes at home, in the classroom where I teach, or places travelled. Thus the weblog becomes a record not only of the dresses and their changes but also of the artist's life, a visual diary of snapshots.

After the immediacy of the daily performance and the complete archive of the web documentation, installation of the project in the museum is akin to exhibiting fragments of

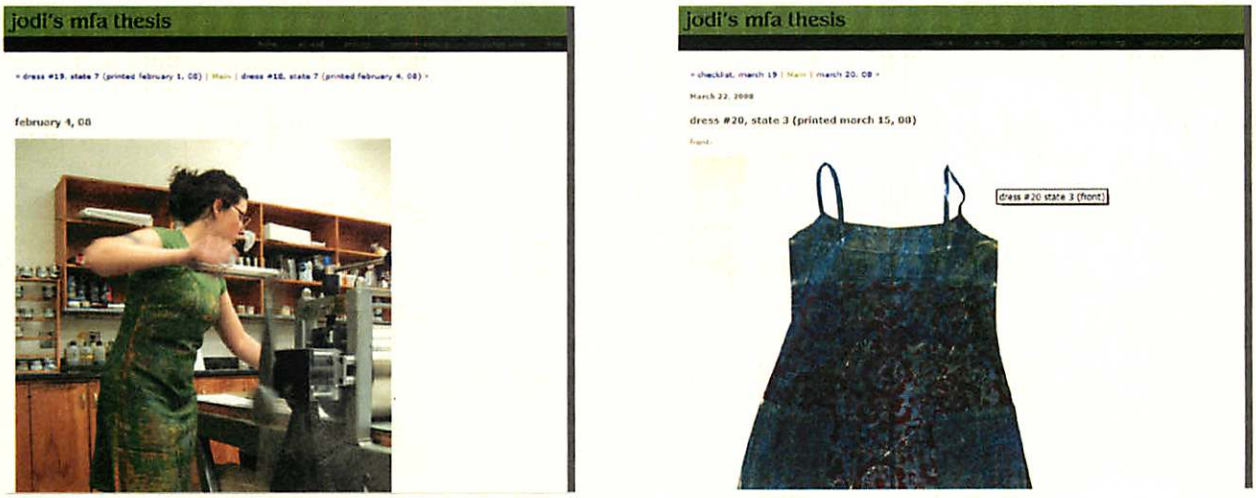

Figure 3: screen shots from the project website

cloth from which one isn't quite able to determine the original shape or purpose of the garment. The dresses are presented as artifacts, carefully folded and archived in drawers. Each dress is numbered and bears a tag containing the dates worn, the date the dress was withdrawn from the project, and the reason for withdrawal. A book accompanies each dress, and within the pages are successive images of each layer of printing, giving the

viewer clues to the project while not making clear the realities of the daily wearing. Flanking the drawers in which the dresses are housed are the two Japanese kozo "maps", at once hinting at the process and making clear that what the viewer sees in this space is merely the residue of something that has passed, something the viewer is not seeing.

Figure 4: The Wardrobe Project, installation view
Georgia Museum of Art, April 2008

Figure 5: view inside cabinet drawer (dress #4)

A work that influenced my decision to structure the museum installation in the form of an archive, Irene Whittome's series *The White Museum* (1975) places club-like pieces of wood, their ends swaddled in obsessively wrapped cotton string, into wall-mounted display cases. The objects are ambiguous, their presence in the museum not clear, their meaning or purpose lost to the viewer; the story they tell is not one of objects or of artifacts but rather of which objects and artifacts are privileged to be placed in a museum and which are not, of what is presented to a viewer as having meaning and what is not. *The Wardrobe Project* presents similar questions to the museum visitor, the fact that the dresses have been archived in this manner a clue to the fact that they have a purpose and a meaning, but providing no clues to the performance or web-based nature of the project other than a stack of small cards, one of which the viewer is invited to take, which will

direct him or her to the project website. The project cannot fully exist for the viewer in the museum space, just as the breadth of the project cannot exist for the casual viewer of the daily performance, for whom the artist is likely just a woman wearing an unusual-looking dress (which is at times oddly stiff and smells faintly of solvents and ink). An art exhibition is never experienced firsthand by as many viewers as will see the exhibition documentation, and so the incomplete story told by *The Wardrobe Project* in installation speaks to the difficulty of a viewer to engage with a work fully when given only part of the information. Fully integrating work and life means that no viewer will ever see the full extent of the work, but the work is strong and meaningful because it is lived every day. The project is, and continues to be, an exploration of art as ritual, art as daily life, art as costume; it is a map for a way of living and a way of making.

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