“Constriction, Expansion, and Space: Sculpture and the Formal Properties of Clothing”

Meredith Buck
Independent Study and Honors in Studio Art
Department of Art & Art History
Franklin and Marshall College
Submitted April 25, 2011
Graduated May 14, 2011
Table of Contents

I. Abstract
II. Main Body
   A. Concept and Inspiration
   B. Process, Forms, and Choices
   C. Artistic Context
   D. Reflections on Meaning and Success
III. Footnotes
IV. Illustrations
V. Appendix
VI. Bibliography
Humans have endowed clothing with the ability to dictate physical and social realms of space. This is perhaps especially true of women’s clothing, which sets boundaries and creates public and private spaces in different societies, both historically and contemporarily. Initially inspired by the forms and social and physical boundaries of hoop skirts, corsets, and Muslim modest dress, I have created four sculptures in response to the formal capabilities of clothing to constrict, expand, flow, stretch, and freeze.

As I progressed with my research and studio work, I discovered that omitting the figure from my sculptures would allow me to explore the formal tendencies that interested me (constriction, expansion, etc.), without being restricted to the everyday realities of the garments. The sculptures I created showcase constriction, expansion, internal movement, tension, and concealment while creating a spatial environment with boundaries that may be breached.

I worked in large expanses of spandex cloth to make four independent-yet-interacting sculptures that evoked curtains and the internal dynamism of fabric. The spandex was stretched, bolted, sewn, lacquered, knotted, and inflated. The final works that this project resulted in are the products of a rigorous academic, creative, technical, and personal journey.
Concept and Inspiration

Humans have endowed clothing with the ability to dictate physical and social realms of space. This is perhaps especially true of women’s clothing, with which, being a woman, I consider myself familiar. Clothing sets boundaries and creates public and private spaces in different societies, both historically and contemporarily. Initially, the forms and social and physical boundaries of hoop skirts, corsets, and Muslim modest dress inspired me. As I progressed with my research and studio work, I discovered that omitting the figure from my sculptures would allow me to explore the formal tendencies that interested me (specifically, constriction, expansion, and tension), without being restricted to the political, social, and historical contexts of the garments that inspired the work. The sculptures I created, inspired by tight waists and voluminous skirts, showcase constriction, expansion, internal movement, tension, and concealment while creating a spatial environment with boundaries that may be breached.

In the Western tradition of women’s dress, the silhouette has focused on a corseted, stabilized torso and a voluminous, full skirt. Indeed, this silhouette, one that focuses on a dynamic between tightly controlled and dramatically expanded volumes, is so enduring it seems hard to pin down temporally and culturally. Though the nipped waists and full-hipped skirts worn by, for example, Queen Maria Luisa of Spain in the late 18th century (Plate 1) may have little to do with the greater historical and cultural climates that surrounded the birth of Christian Dior’s “New Look” and the fuller skirted
silhouettes that Dior produced through to the 1950s (Plate 2), these garments have similar spatial properties. In addition to the drama of the constricted bodice and the expanded skirt, these garments seem to necessarily dictate boundaries of personal and public space. After all, how close can one possibly get to a woman who is wearing pannier? \(^1\) And how might such an augmented hip area affect her physical travel through space? Or how other people negotiate personal space in reaction to her dress?

In this context, I feel that I must also consider the various forms of modest dress for women in Islam (Figure 1). Specifically, I thought of the language used to describe garments versus the ideological concept of the social separation hijab precipitates. “Hijab” may refer to the dress code of covering all but the hands, feet, and face; it may also be used in reference to a headscarf alone. Yet, “hijab” also refers to the separation of non-mahram\(^2\) men and women. While “khimar” might be used to describe a garment itself, \(^3\) “hijab” endows the garment with a stronger social and religious significance—one of regulating and constructing space. Artist Shirin Neshat compares the concept of hijab’s separation with a modern Western conception of privacy in her video artwork Tooba. In the video, a woman stands, meditative, concealed within a tree. Surrounding the tree is a low wall. When a crowd of men dressed in black begin to climb over the wall, the woman vanishes. \(^4\) Neshat recognizes the dual nature of hijab as a garment and as a sort of mystical curtain that regulates public behavior. The tree protects, conceals, and separates the woman in a powerful manner, even in the face of invasion.

Both the boundaries of hoop skirts and those of Muslim modest dress disappear when the wearer is removed from the garment’s context. If one were to see a voluminous skirt hanging in a closet, its spatial regulation would be irrelevant. One would be aware
of the garment’s potential spatial power if on a wearer, but one might be enticed to touch and examine the skirt—and its previously concealed insides—in its new context. When a hijab scarf is absent of its wearer, it loses both its shape and its significance as a border of separation. At the end of Shirin Neshat’s video, Tooba, the woman concealed within the tree disappears. After she is gone, the tree and the wall as borders are no longer obstacles, and the men abandon their invasion of the space. Removing the sculptures from any figural context allowed me to focus on the formal aspects of tension and movement, while retaining a sort of permeable membrane of space in relation to the works, as I will explain.

**Process, Forms, and Choices**

Since curtains, constrictions, and expansions influenced my concept, I quickly decided that experimenting with spandex fabric would be an appropriate choice of process. Spandex has the ability to dramatically expand and contract, and in large swaths it hangs and drapes gracefully. In choosing spandex, I also saw connections to what may be the modern incarnation of the corset, shape-wear, and to spandex hijab under caps, used to keep hair more securely concealed and in place beneath a scarf (Figure 2). Interacting with and learning the capabilities of the spandex was an experience of learning to express form and meaning through fabric. I ordered large yardages of spandex in various solid colors and finishes: black and shiny, and true red, blue and green in a matte finish. I chose the colors and finishes based on their strength and reflection of
light. I was also conscious of the relationship of the colors red, green and blue in the RGB color theory.\footnote{6}

The black, shiny finish spandex was chosen after completing my sketch of what was to become Cover. As I began working on that piece, designed to be a sort of self-sustaining curtain, stretching and expanding from within, I reflected on the behavior of the fabric and my process of working. There was a great deal of pure physical tension in Cover, as I stretched smaller cuts of spandex over wire forms that I attached to a plywood backboard. Cover had bones of its own: corset-esque bones, but nothing close to human bones. I liked its autonomy as an object, as if it were clothing that acted as its own wearer.

The other three pieces, Knot, Suspend Curtain, and Behind me is the same as myself, have a similar internal tension and dynamic character. Knot creates tension in the distance and implied action between its two parts: the hanging fabric ends in a fist-like knot, while the cushion on the ground is dramatically dented at its center. Suspend Curtain centers on a graceful twist at its center that implies balance and frozen motion. Meanwhile, Behind me seems to step from the wall, balancing the tension and pull at each of its sides against its stiff upper portion. Its bottom edge is attached to the floor and wrapped with loose fabric that swirls on the floor beneath the piece’s outer skin. The bottom element of the shape steps into the viewer’s space, suggesting either a force behind it or its own inner strength and ability to step forward.

The individual pieces of the exhibit handle space differently while dialoging with each other. Cover, built for its specific location in the gallery, cooperates with its space. It explores its area while asserting itself as a boundary. Yet, the boundary itself is more
compelling than the wall that it restricts. During the exhibition reception, viewers climbed beneath the piece to see how it was supported and attached to the wall (Figure 3). The boundary existed, but felt impersonal enough for multiple viewers to squat down and crawl behind the work. Cover is at once ominous, curious, and inviting. The logistics of its construction of boundary and form, rather than its concealment of a secondary object, were what drew people to peek behind its first layer.

Knot creates a tense space between its hanging knot and imploded cushion. It also interacts with the viewer as it establishes an uncertain boundary between the viewer’s walking area and the location on the floor of the cushion. The viewer may physically view the piece from any angle at its perimeter, but its internal space is controlled via emptiness. There is a palpable tension in the negative space between the two parts of the work. In the installation, Knot is strong and dramatic in gesture and true red color. It is attractive to viewers in its boldness. While it maintains a very internal sense of spatial drama, the exterior of Knot is accessible to viewers at all angles.

In Suspend Curtain, viewers are both restricted and invited by the space between the object, the wall, and the attaching wire cable. It creates an intimate pocket of space in the gallery corner. Nearby, Behind me is the same as myself breaks out of its lacquered, folded top into a tight stretch. If one peeks behind Behind me from close to the wall, the hollowness of the fabric and the loose fabric on the floor are revealed. The work references the conceal and reveal boundary of a curtain; it makes all views available, except for a full view of its interior. However, its interior may be sufficiently comprehended from the side.
These works combine the presence and appearance of sculpture with installation. I believe that each piece’s strength and independence in identity are characteristic of them as sculptures. Meanwhile, the pieces together in interaction create an installation environment. To provide an example, Yayoi Kusama’s *Violet Obsession* has spatial interest, but stands alone as a sculptural object (Plate 3). Her installations that feature similar forms to those that comprise *Violet Obsession* focus on the created environment rather than the power of individual forms, although a viewer might choose to narrow his or her focus to appreciate individual pieces of the installation as well.

I attempted to make the four pieces for this show part sculpture and part installation so that they might equally assert themselves as independent objects while creating a spatial environment and experience for the viewer. Hence, the pieces dialogue within themselves, with the space, and with each other in turn. *Cover* is very grounded within its own space and feels the most isolated. *Knot, Suspend Curtain* and *Behind me is the same as myself* interact with each other in space and in color and shadow. The latter two, especially, have a distinct relationship with each other, as their forms echo each other and their lines parallel when viewed from the center of the gallery space.

**Artistic Context**

Clearly, the formal characteristics of my works have deviated from the appearance of the clothing by which they were originally inspired. Some literal references, such as the use of fabric, wire hoops, grommets, and the structure of curtains, are more obviously derived from the garments I considered. However, my work is also
strongly informed by other fine artists, conceptually, technically, and in form. Yet, my work is not merely a conglomerate of influences; my sculptures may also be located within the art world and tradition.

In the earliest days of my visual research, I looked at the work of Arlene Love, a sculptor with a diverse oeuvre, from her leather-wrapped figures to Franklin and Marshall’s own Ben and John sculptures. The former reference corsetry heavily: eyelets and lacing encase the resin figures in their sewn leather casings (Plate 4). I quickly decided to work against Love’s ideas. While I did appreciate her sculptures, I wanted the garments not to interact with bodies that I constructed, but to become bodies themselves, bodies that interacted with each other and invited those of my viewers.

In this regard, I found aid in Richard Serra and Mary Dritschel’s artworks. Serra provided for me both a manifestation of my desired combination of sculpture and installation, and a body of work that confronted viewers’ own bodies. In works like Intersection II and Wake, Serra creates a spatial environment for his viewers. Both works have the weight and feel of a single object, while filling and manipulating the space they occupy and the ability of their viewers to travel in space. Serra’s works strongly embody the ideas of constriction and space regulation: viewers are forced to follow a narrow path between Serra’s steel plates. While inspired by Serra’s strict regulation of space, I decided that this level of control of space related heavily to the politicization and control of the body.

In contrast, Mary Dritschel’s work, Boxed Parts, helped me to visualize part of my conceptual focus, constriction versus expansion, as expressed within a single form. In the work, Dritschel has contained a bursting foam material in a rectangular wooden box
(Plate 5). The brown foam twists at its center and expands across the box’s boundaries on each side. The bulging, twisting foam mass at the center evokes a central, internal force, constricted by the size and shape of the box. Thinking about and viewing a photo of this work helped me to understand constriction and expansion not as separate properties to be rendered in separate artworks, but as a sense of tension and force within forms.

Dritschel’s form and title evoke the female body; the meaning of her work seems far from my own desired distance from the body. Yet, her use of material (an expanding foam) and the internal force of the structure helped me locate my sculptural interests.

The experiments in material of Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois informed my work process, as well. In my third sculpture for my Junior Year Art Award, I began to explore Hesse and Bourgeois’ influence on my work by using latex as a material. In this project, I think I embraced a more sophisticated connection to both artists by learning to experiment with the physical capabilities of a new material. I stretched, starched, knotted, inflated, and bolted down the fabric, learning how it reacted to several methods of manipulation. I felt a connection to these artists’ processes that I believe places my work in relation to theirs meaningfully.

Of course, I experienced setbacks as I worked. For example, the first version of the cushion for Knot failed to take the right shape when I switched to a new brand of expanding foam. I also discovered that matte spandex lets foam through its surface while shiny surfaced spandex contains the foam without any spills or stains. While fabric has a rich legacy in the world of fine art, \(^5\) spandex is as of yet a rare material in fine art, much as latex was in Hesse and Bourgeois’ time. I feel that the experimental nature of my work with material aligns my concerns with those of these two artists.
Ernesto Neto and Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artworks helped further my sense of fabric’s potential. Neto’s stretched, ethereal environments make fabric look like cave stalactites or mounds of chewed bubble gum. His soft, gentle shapes and large-scale creations showcase fabric as something that envelops the viewer into a created world (Plate 6). Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s wrappings and running fabric fences installed over buildings and across landscapes demonstrate an overwhelming, beautiful power and interact with the concept of environment as well. The simple yet powerful shapes both artists create with fabric reminded me to keep my spandex experiments fluid, organic, and graceful.

Works by Harry Roseman and Dan Loewenstein helped me continually connect back to the more literal, physical aspects of my concept. Roseman’s plaster wall hanging curtain sculptures explore the physical and symbolic potential of curtains (Plate 7). They deal with the conflict between the sculptural and the “flat” spatial properties that interest me in the idea of a curtain. Although I happened upon Roseman’s work fairly late in completing my sculptures, I found the success of his artwork and its appeal to be encouraging. I feel that Roseman’s works, like my own, play on the dissonance between surface and three-dimensional form. However, I believe that his sculptures are also meant to remark on the two-dimensional tradition, or the contrasts between the flat surface of a painting, its decorative appeal, and its ability to be a gateway to a different realm of perception. His connection to my works is also about boundaries, fabric, and surface, in that he often contrasts fabric shapes with solid surfaces, or, conversely, screen-prints the textures of solid surfaces (like brick walls) on fluid fabric (Plate 8).
Loewenstein’s installation, *A Use for Old Socks*, consists of a faux cinderblock arch housing a figurative form made from a jumpsuit (see Plate 9). The jumpsuit is pulled out from various points by wires, and lit by plaster-dipped sock light fixtures. *A Use for Old Socks* deals with my initial conceptual interest: expansion and tension as part of a garment. Thin wires that attach to the house-shaped arch pull the jumpsuit. The total volume is controlled and dictated by the space of the house, yet the tension at the points of attachment is clear. The jumpsuit takes on a jagged outer shape and a sense of inflation. We may not see its physical interior, but the source of its expanded, manipulated form is apparent to the eye: its forces are easily understood.

**Reflections on Meaning and Success**

As I conducted my visual and physical research, my interpretation of my initial concepts evolved significantly. Indeed, the creation of and research for these artworks is a journey that has yet to end. I believe that my sculptures express constriction and expansion, interior and exterior spaces, and pregnable spatial boundaries. I consider some works more successful than others. *Cover* is enigmatic, inviting, and assertive in its expression of boundary and bold in its interior, expanded and stretched shapes. *Knot* is satisfyingly simple yet powerful in its impact. I believe that *Suspend Curtain* and *Behind me is the same as myself*, while thoroughly considered and developed pieces, lack the impact of the two aforementioned works.

*Suspend Curtain* was both technically and formally the most difficult piece with which to work, and I find some of its issues to still be unresolved. Although the bottom
half is stiffened with polyurethane, a viewer has difficulty seeing the difference in the fabric surface and the tension between the unaltered and the starched spandex. Although I am pleased with the way the work was installed, I feel that more tension and contrast can be built up in the interior forms and surfaces of the work. I plan to continue resolving these issues even after this project has reached its conclusion.

*Behind me is the same as myself* faces a similar dilemma. I believe it needs more strength in its gesture and more drama in its form. Although the work plays with the concealment and revelation of interior spaces, I think it could do so much more powerfully than it does now. I am, however, quite satisfied with the anthropomorphic quality of its “stepping” bottom edge.

Overall, I believe I have made great strides in developing and interpreting my own work and my own intentions. Reinterpreting my sculptural interest in clothing and understanding the subject in a fine art context has been both a challenge and a joy. Confronting the issues confronted in this project—meaning, form, space, and technical exploration—has truly allowed me to develop as an artist and come to understand the significance of my visual choices.
Footnotes

1 Pannier refers to the wide, rectangular skirt shape and understructure, such as that worn by Maria Luisa in Plate 1.

2 *Mahram* refers to members of the opposite gender who are permitted to see a woman not in full cover due to their relationship to her, including their:

   *Husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons or their sisters' sons, or their women or the servants whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex…*(Quran 24:31)

3 “Khimar” is related to the verb for “to cover,” while also referring to a longer headscarf that reaches the chest area. “Hijab” is related to the Arabic verb “to separate,” and thus implies an action other than that of a passive garment alone.


5 Many influential fine artists, including Claes Oldenburg, Christo, and Louis Bourgeois, have embraced fabric and fiber as mediums. The Fabric Workshop, an artist’s resource and museum located in Philadelphia, hosts various fine artists in residence and encourages them to work in fiber, while acting as a resource for artists on the technical aspects and capabilities of fabrics.

6 Red, green, and blue are the primary colors in the RGB additive color model, the model that informs photography and television, for example. Colored lights are added to each other to produce the spectrum; adding all three produces white light.

Illustrations

Plate 1: Francisco de Goya, *Queen Maria Luisa*, 1789

Plate 2: Christian Dior Evening Ensemble, 1953

Plate 3: Yayoi Kusama, *Violet Obsession*, 1994

Plate 5: Mary Dritschel, *Boxed Parts*. Liquid foam, wood.

Appendix

Figure 1: Various styles of Muslim modest dress for women

Figure 2: A spandex blend hijab under cap for sale at aladeendesign.com

Figure 3: The armature of Cover in progress
Bibliography


