

Computer Couture? : Or, Queer Eye for the Cy

Title	Computer Couture?
Subtitle	Or, Queer Eye for the Cy
Lead-in / Abstract	The paper represents research analysis of emerging varieties of wearable technologies as cultural expression; and, as such, compares and contrasts wearable technology and fashion.
Participants and speakers	Ryan, Susan (US)
Short biography of participants	Associate Professor of Art History specializing in contemporary art including new media and theory and art. Member of the Steering Committee for L-CAT(Lab for Creative Arts and Technologies), an initiative for multidisciplinary research in innovative arts and technologies and part of CCT (Center for Creative Technologies) at at LSU. I am currently developing an arts and computation interdisciplinary working group at LSU. I have published books on contemporaray art with MIT and Yale University presses but the current paper reflects a new research direction and a larger project I have pursued for about a year.
Full text	<p>Wearable technology is an umbrella term that, on the one hand, has some specific connotations, like futurism, functionality, and logic. On the other hand, it covers a broad range of emerging phenomena, from fetishistic cyborgian costuming incorporating sensing and virtual reality devices, to sartorial wireless systems that seek to merge (or so it would seem) with the body's epidermis. This paper argues that whatever form wearable technology takes--and whatever tasks it seeks to accomplish--it is already doing something that its developers may or may not always intend or grasp. It already comprises a language or languages (à la Barthes's "garment system"). With many voices it generates meanings that are never psychologically neutral nor always easily controlled. But what kinds of things are the new technological body coverings, prostheses, and mergers--that still constitute attire--saying?</p> <p>Applying semiotic analysis to categories of wearable systems (or, more properly, representative selections from these categories) turns up some messages that are worth considering. For example, fetishistic "modes" engage with a rich history of erotic attire that has been addressed by some cultural analysts. Other approaches morph technology with our skin or attire. Still others appear like uniforms suggesting messages of militaristic withdrawal (Lucy Orta's refuge wear) or defense, (eHolster's personal electronic concealment system looks like a weapon, and Whiton and Nugent's No-Contact Jacket is one), and other regimentations of the body that evoke bunker garb for a culture under attack. Other examples seem built on attire and culture of outdoor sports (cycling, skate boarding), and yet other creations focus on technological essentials, like wearable computer models that display naked hardware, a "plain clothes" practicality that nevertheless suggests an "open source" politics and emits utopian messages concerning imaginatively enhanced lifestyles.</p>

All these bear cultural, literary, and psychological meanings that we can ascertain. But are these technological wearables capable of generating sophisticated nuances of discourse (like pairing seduction with fragility --"life and death") that clothing by designers like Lagerfeld, Ford, or Galliano have developed in the couture idiom of traditional clothes? Humans tend to expand and complicate meaning in the process of communication. With this in mind, will the new wearable discourse, can it, reject the sophisticated poetry of garments that couture aspires to within its own elitist realm (from which, however, selected messages disseminate via ready-to-wear)? Is this level of discourse necessarily a bad thing? Can it happen only when the techno-wearables are contextualized within a wider market matrix, a situation with negative political connotations that many cyber-designers are trying to avoid?

Then we might ask, does much wearable technology currently tend toward the solipsistic? As it merges the body with networked communication does it elide "body language"? Much wearable technology seems to involve systems shrouding the self. As traditional fashion reflects the transitory, the fleetingness of life, do wearable technologies emit (false) messages of durability within their "wired off" realms? Do wearable forms of wireless internet access and sound systems distance wearers from phenomenological reality like some Baudrillardian bubble-wear, whereby wearable technology shuts down subtle levels of physical dependency and social contact? As we focus on our own zones of comfort and cybernetics, do we become a society that abjures expression based on visceral display, historical associations of style and culture, and phenomenological risk and response? This paper, which might also be a contribution to a panel, admittedly contains many questions that the final paper will seek to refine and illuminate.