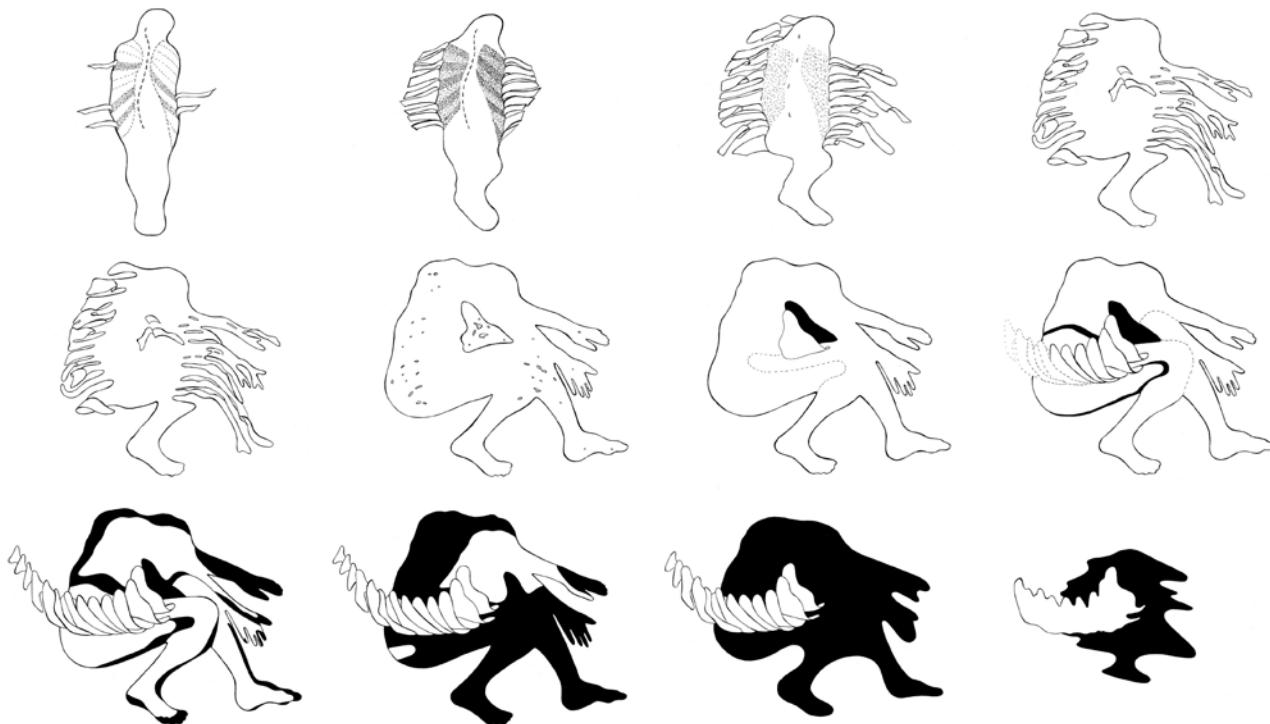


## THING AND LIFE

### Barbara Graf's Art Bodies

By Cathrin Pichler



**Contours**, 2005-2009, Ink on Paper, 21x29.7cm - Courtesy of the artist.

Formed, spread out, layered, smoothed, folded, tied, unfolded, separated, stretched, fastened, raised – Barbara Graf's art bodies present themselves in many ways. Astonishing manifestations and fragmentations of fantasized corporeality characterize the history of the so-called Anatomical Garments. Their anatomies are always allusions to the real anatomy of the human body, coverings fabricated from the forms and elements inside it, turning them outward, accentuating them in fragments, or peeling them off in layers. They are made of cardboard or textile materials. "Material" is an obvious association: the materiality of skin and tissue, of the flesh. Bones are also formed and everything comprising the human body to its innermost organs. This is conceptual art based on an investigation of the human

body, interjecting corporeality into the investigation while continually imagining new representations and forms. The body imagined as a whole is always present, even when it is dismembered and reassembled in very different ways. Clothing is initially covering, wrapping, protection – also defense, a suit of armor – but it is likewise presentation, display, a carrier of meaning. Barbara Graf's Anatomical Garments are the signifiers of an imagined universe of corporeality of the mind. How could this human covering look, how could it be assembled and depicted, and how could it "come to life" in a very different way? Graf tailors these garments in the true sense of the word. They are produced according to complex patterns, after sketches that one might assume are studies for sculptural work. These

are painstakingly transformed into cutting patterns, and the sections are, in fact, then sewn together. The individual elements are absolutely precise in their outlines and meticulously assembled. The same is true of the works formed and glued in paper, for example a life-sized torso that shows only the spinal column. It is a sort of annotation to the human figure, and yet in looking at it one does not think of a skeleton, but of a human body. Precision and craftsmanly perfection are distinguishing features of Barbara Graf's work. Her high degree of patiently applied knowledge characterizes an approach that one could call searchingly reflective, almost scientific. And yet, one should not be misled. In her drawing project *CONTOURS* (2005–2009), in which she takes the outlines of a human figure as the point of departure for “metamorphoses”, she leaves the creation of form up to the pen and the hand. As she says, the myriad transformations develop by themselves, almost unconsciously. When the pieces of one of her artistic anatomies are spread out on the floor, one can recognize the pattern according to which they have been cut, perfect in its outlines. All the same, the beholder can hardly imagine being able to put such a puzzle together. But the artist assembles the pieces into a three-dimensional installation, and, surprisingly, a new body emerges. At times, however, it is hardly a body, rather a fantastic shape that is only fragmentarily reminiscent of a body part. Some of the works are so-called explosion diagrams, derived from technical drawing, which depict the pieces of a system pulled apart so as to better visualize the way they combine to form a whole. This practice, commonly used in depicting machines, appears here as a strange reference and yet one immediately thinks of the body as a machine and of a tradition with a host of associations: the human body as the measure of all things, the mechanics of the body's limbs, the anthropomorphic machine.

Precision in design and in technical conception, precise implementation, and millimeter-exact execution are hallmarks of Barbara Graf's work. Her designs for new installations resemble complex technical construction drawings. And yet, when the art bodies capture a space, all technical considerations disappear behind a very special aesthetic. Suddenly the layers of the individual sections dissolve, becoming surfaces; body parts seem

to float, light and shadow give rise to something completely new, an artwork that has gone beyond the origin of corporeality. The art body seems to take on a life of its own, to fly, to leave its space and mass. These works can hardly be compared to those of many other artists dealing with the theme of body and corporeality. An impression similar to that of the art bodies is more likely to arise from artworks of a very different sort – for example, Bill Viola's video showing a body climbing upward in a waterfall. Here the body, although fully visible, seems freed of gravity. Even against the power of the cascading water, it rises. 1

In her newer work, Barbara Graf merges two of her approaches to exploring corporeality: graphic contours meet sculptural layers developed out of the artificial body coverings. In this synthesis they allow new and unknown art bodies to evolve, conjuring up artificial corporealities in space. The body theme has accompanied Barbara Graf since art school and her studies under Maria Lassnig. These years were marked by feminist awakenings, which contributed to a “body boom” in the art scene. It is not only the turn to sculpture and installation that separates Barbara Graf from the great painter Maria Lassnig, but also her artistic program and her working methods. Her theme is not body feeling and the experience of one's own body, instead, Graf explores corporeality as a phenomenon, and from a distance. Her own body merely serves as a model.

The work *Figures* (1991) provides early clues regarding strategies and practices. Here Barbara Graf is pursuing feminist ideas, but pointedly diverting them: it is not the perpetually thematized female body that is depicted, but a male body. It might be irony that shapes this male body made of cardboard, with oversized hands and feet, and an erect member. In a sort of performance, the artist is next to and with the figure, her female frame towering over it. She is dressed in a tight body suit, white like the cardboard of the male figure. On both the figure and the body suit the vertebrae of the spine are clearly visible on the surface.<sup>2</sup> Might it be that the artist is writing the creation fable of the first human couple anew – the woman creates the man?

The recurring booms of the body theme stretch from the middle of the last century to the present. They have been in part carried by intellectual discourses,



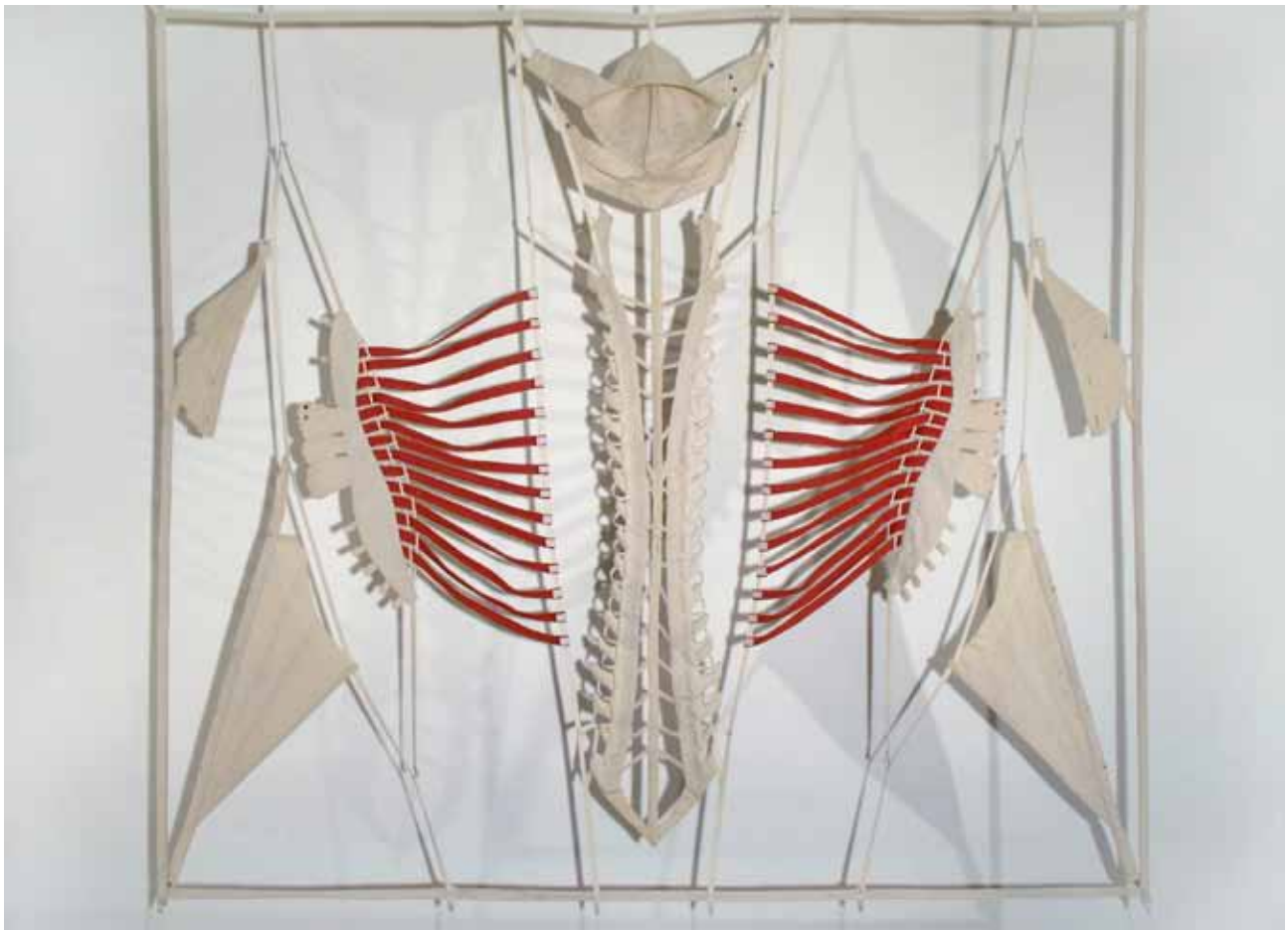
**Breast layers**, Anatomical garment XV, 2006, Cotton, 38 parts, 100cm height - Courtesy of the artist.

in part manifested in numerous artistic programs and positions. Initially there were Performance Art and, very literally, Body Art, forms which were carried by the utilization of the artist's own body and its presentation and interaction. Key aspects of 70s and 80s art were tied to Happening, Performance and Action Art, exemplified by artists like John Cage, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic, Valie Export, Nam June Paik, and last but not least, by Gilbert & George with their living sculpture. The last decades have seen the expansion and radicalization, of this scene, for example in the work of the Austrian artist Flatz and in the spectacular facial surgeries undergone by the French artist Orlan. Body-critical, social-critical and/or gender-specific works continue this tradition into the art of the present in a wide variety of transformations, playing with both the

utilization of the body and the multiplicity of current interpretations.

By contrast, the investigation of the body in its physical representability appears as a traditional discipline, but one that is mutable into an innovative field of aesthetic codes. Barbara Graf's work is anchored in this field. It may well be that the body, the part of ourselves that opens out to the world, is the pivot of all representations and imaginations. In the text *Utopian Body*, Michel Foucault reflects on the experience of the body and on the indispensability of its presence, even in any thinkable mental world: "No, really, there is no need for magic, for enchantment. There's no need for a soul, nor a death, for me to be both transparent and opaque, visible and invisible, life and thing. For me to be a utopia, it is enough that I be a body. All those utopias by which I evaded my body – well they had, quite simply, their model and their first application, they had their place of origin, in my body itself." <sup>3</sup>

Beyond actionist and performative approaches, artists who link thing and life, and find ways of depicting this link, are rare. Seldom reached, this aesthetic form can be achieved through references to scientific depictions or through a sort of mimesis of real corporeality in an imagined or fantasized materiality. Both are found in Barbara Graf's work. Her art bodies, most of all the "multipurpose" Anatomical Garments, recall the great tradition of medical depiction exemplified by the famous anatomies of Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty (1711–1785), particularly the girl with the opened back from 1746, who turns her head to the side, revealing a beautiful profile.<sup>4</sup> Like the famous wax anatomies, this "scientific" depiction achieves the status of art. Barbara Graf studies the body, and in doing so she ties in with scientific strategies. The appellation Anatomical Garments names this relationship directly, and a small work demonstrates it clearly: a model of the ear, again realized in fabric, adorned with a depiction of the ear's magnificent inner architecture, as appliqué. The inside is turned outward and embroidered on the ear model, anatomically correct and very exact. But then the model veers out of the space of scientific understanding into a completely different dimension: the object, a multiple with bag, also has a functional purpose. By means of



**Jumping out of one's skin**, Anatomical Garment III, 1996, Cotton Installation, 225x200cm, 10 parts - Courtesy of the artist, Collection of the city of vienna.

a small opening it can also be worn on the ear, and suddenly an art ear becomes an adornment for the ear as well. The strange dialectic of ear, art (ear) and ear adornment can be read as an ironic aperçu of body art. Within the framework of the CORPOrealities project, the artist has further developed elements of her work in reference to the project's themes. Here two conceptual approaches become apparent: firstly, the line, the drawing; secondly, the volume, the volumes of sculptural and installative realizations. Beginning with a basic figure, the artist has developed 330 variations (CONTOURS). Via diverse intermediary stages, the figure is transformed into new body forms – such as breasts or brains – via stages of interweaving, folding, crumpling, pointillistic dissolution to a point or a negative. These are metamorphoses of contemplations

and imagined transformations of corporeality. For the artist, the initial figure, covering with one leg pulled up and one arm lifted to the head, represents a form with openings, which, as she says, provides an ideal point of departure for transformations in both a bodily and a linear formal sense. It is interesting that the basic figure, selected out of formal considerations, has an archaic counterpart in the postures of South African Xhosa youth, waiting in isolation for their initiation. In this posture they experience their rites of passage, the transition, the transformation. 5

In the installation CONTOURS (2005), Barbara Graf has transformed her figure into the third dimension, cutting it out of a surface and spanning it over its own negative. From the figure grows a space, in which it “takes life.” Graf has also subjected this spatial variant



**Ear object with bag**, 2005, Cotton, 21x14,5x1.5cm - Courtesy of the artist.

to numerous transformations and transfigurations. The manner in which she succeeds in interrelating the graphic and the spatial is striking. It seems that these works address that “sense of possibility” allowed by the aesthetic realm, where the limits of reality can be transcended and our conceptions of our body can be left up to fantasy. We cannot escape the body, but we can imagine it in a completely different form than that in which reality binds it. “My body, in fact, is always elsewhere. It is tied to all the elsewheres in the world. And to tell the truth, it is elsewhere than in the world, because it is around it that things are arranged. It is in relation to it – and in relation to it as if in relation to a sovereign – that there is a below, an above, a right, a left, a forward and a backward, a near and a far. The body is the zero point of the world. There, where paths and

spaces come to meet, the body is nowhere. It is at the heart of the world, this small utopian kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine, I perceive things in their place, and I negate them also by the indefinite power of the utopias I imagine. . . . It has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate.”<sup>6</sup> It is a dream of humanity to fathom the mystery of the body, this zero point, which nevertheless is the basis of all experience, feeling and fantasizing. Likewise, it is an age-old dream to overcome the body. For now – and for a lifetime – we can only conjure up aesthetic fantasy and ‘utopian radiation’.

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Translation into English: Christopher Barber, Vienna



**Hand breast layers**, Anatomical Gatement XVI, 2008, Cotton, 90cm (Detailed) - Courtesy of the artist.

#### *About the writer*

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#### **Notes**

- 1- Bill Viola, video installation for *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Peter Sellers, Opera Bastille, Paris, October – December 2008.
- 2- Barbara Graf, *Figuren 1989–91*, project documentation, Vienna, 1991.
- 3- Michel Foucault, *Les hétérotopies – Le corps utopique*, two radio broadcasts, 1966. "Utopian Body", translated by Lucia Allais in consultation with Caroline A. Jones and Arnold Davidson, published in Caroline A. Jones (ed.), *Sensorium*, MIT Press, 2006, pp. 229–234, here p. 231.
- 4- Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, *Myologie complète en couleur et de grandeur naturelle, Muscle du dos Pl. 14*, Paris 1746, Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris.
- 5- James Nachtwey, *Photography – Xhosa young men in rite of passage*, 1992.
- 6- Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 233.