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Thought without Concept: Carol Christian Poell's Paradoxical Aesthetics

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*O folle Aragne, sì vedea io te
già mezza ragna, trista in su li stracci
de l'opera che mal per te si fé.
Dante, *Divina Commedia* (Purgatorio, Canto XII)*

From Carol Christian Poell to C.C.P

Carol Christian Poell is an Austrian designer who holes up in a studio in Milan's Naviglio district where he unperturbedly designs collections that he displays to the public only when he feels like it.

Carol Christian Poell was born in Linz in 1966. After having been trained as a men's and a ladies' tailor in Vienna (Michelbeurn), he studied fashion design at the Domus Academy in Milan. It was there that he founded the production and distribution company C.C.P. srl together with his partner Sergio Simone. After the first presentation of his men's collection in 1995, he showed his work uniquely through performances that thus setting himself apart from the fashion world. As a result he became closely associated with the contemporary art scene, notably through his numerous references to Wiener Aktionismus, the issues and actions of which he queries and which, among others, are a central reference in his work. Since 2004, his work has not been presented to the public other than through diverse temporary spaces (abandoned warehouses, industrial factories, slaughterhouses, etc.). The

distribution network for his garments and accessories, which are extravagant in terms of production technology, include less than 40 retailers worldwide.

Carol Christian Poell has retired from the fashion scene and now shuns the public eye – a single fifteen year old stolen picture is the last known image of him. This restrictive policy equally applies to the diffusion of the images of his collections, which are held under a strict embargo. Nevertheless, his influence and fame are inversely related to his media visibility. Secret but influent, underground yet cult, Carol Christian Poell is the designer other designers know and praise. His peers admire his work that is both demanding and puzzling, both experimental and disturbing.

Carol Christian Poell is, above all, an extraordinary creator of fabrics. He develops, from the very first step of their production, 90% of the fabrics he uses, in close collaboration with Italian or Japanese weavers, according to extremely compelling demands. He has invented some astonishing materials, such as transparent leathers, or a rubber-like substance into which he ‘dips’ his shoes, boots, or sneakers’ upper surface, creating stalactites under their soles. He also ‘object-dyes’ his leathers, using all the original imperfections of the skins (kangaroo, calf, horse, bison, deer, donkey...). He even makes coats out of human hair or fibreglass. His innovations are also formal, and Carol Christian Poell revisits menswear classics by altering the sartorial cuts, in order to create both an extremely lanky and slightly awkward silhouette, which paradoxically emphasizes both masculine and feminine characteristics at the same time. Finally, his work can be seen as conceptual as it is not simply a matter of clothes, it is also a research into the essence and definition of clothing itself. All the garments he makes reveal the process of their construction. In this regard, his work is a work of virtuosity, which mostly revolves around technical thinking. Contrary to other designers, Carol Christian Poell’s primary concern is not about dressing the human body: his clothes are, above all, objects and bodies per se. Half-garments, half-objects (creatures)

Poell's creations redefine the shape of the body in a simultaneous attempt to cancel and recreate its anatomy.

Catastrophe

Carol Christian Poell's work is a conceptual interrogation of the nature of the garment, it is also an examination of the source of its identity, notably by the attention lavished upon singular structural points, what René Thom calls "catastrophic points", points where a sudden change appears on a surface (*kata-strophê* meaning etymologically "change of form"):

On a un milieu qui est le siège d'un processus de quelque nature que ce soit, et l'on distingue deux types de points, les points réguliers et les points catastrophiques. Les points réguliers sont les points où l'analyse phénoménologique locale ne décèle aucun accident particulier ; il peut y avoir des variations observables, mais ces variations sont continues. Au contraire, il y a des points où l'analyse phénoménologique révèle des accidents brutaux et discontinus, en particulier des discontinuités observables et c'est ce que j'ai appelé les points catastrophiques. (Thom, 1988, p. 32)

« There is a milieu which is the place of a any kind of process, et one distinguishes two kind of points, regular points and catastrophic points. Regular points are these where the local phenomenological analysis doesn't decipher any singular accident; some visible variations can happen, but these variations are continuous. On the contrary, there are some points where the phenomenological analysis reveals brutal and discontinuous accidents, in particular some visible discontinuities, et this is what I have named catastrophic points. »

By analogy with the human body – and Carol Christian Poell's work shows that the garment is not only what covers the body, but a body in itself –, stitches are like tendons, who's function it is to hold the anatomical segments together. "Segment", the word has to be understood according to its etymology ("what is separated") and to its biological definition ("the segment is a part of an organ distinct from the whole, though maintaining a continuous relation with it"). It is, however, an autonomous unity, what Aristotle calls a "flexion" (*kampsis*, *Metaphysics*, Δ, 6, 1016 a, 9-19): a part separated from the whole, yet remaining a continuation of the whole. Hence the segment can be seen as having a double relation: between *whole* and *part*, between *continuity* and *discontinuity*.

Seams

Minimal definition of a garment could be: different pieces of fabric sewn together to cover the human body. The specificity of Carol Christian Poell's work is that each and every constituting element of a garment – fabrics; stitches; shapes; relation to the human body – is interrogated in its structure, in its function, in its meaning. The work with these different elements cannot be distinguished from a reflection on them. Among these elements, the treatment of the seam displays a great conceptual inventiveness. In a garment, stitches play a major role, since they are part of its structural unity (making the heterogeneous a continuous unity) and its dynamical function, since they are an essential component of the garments' articulations, allowing it to follow the human body's movements. Last but not least, stitches play an important role in preserving the garment's integrity: they are on one hand what ensures its solidity, but on the other hand they sometimes have to break, especially when an unexpected and unusual tension may cause the tearing of the fabric. Stitches are a paradoxical element: they are at the same time strong and weak parts. Strong enough to make it last as long as possible, weak enough to be able to break in case of urgency. Carol Christian Poell enhances both functions that intrinsically define the stitch: solidity, frailty.

Let us now examine the different types of stitches that Carol Christian Poell has developed throughout the years and which have their own characteristics: *taped-seam*, *scar-stitch*, *overlock-seam*, *invisible-seam*, *chain-seam*, sorted by their order of appearance in his work.

The *taped-seam* is a regular seam that is reinforced with a transparent tape (technically: "thermosolder taped"). Traditionally, this kind of tape helps to render the garment waterproof; visually, it highlights – exhibits – the seam, which is usually a hidden part of the garment, concealed by the lining. There is another seam, or better said, an evolution of the *taped-seam*,

that appeared later: the *meltlock-seam*, where the seam is overmelted with a transparent tape, thicker though than the *taped-seam*. Now Carol Christian Poell has removed the lining from most of his jackets since 2003, which makes the tape on the inside, and the seam that it covers, twice visible: because the lining no longer hides it, because the tape underlines it, making it visually more significant. The tape is used like a joint in architecture – a part of the structure, which simultaneously unites and separates. Let us note, while we are dwelling on the subject, that the Poellian garment is like a work still showing the traces of its own construction, defining itself as the palimpsestic memory of its own history.



Image 1. *Taped-seam*

Let us notice that the highlighting function of the seam has also been carried by the bright yellow seam (technically called “contrast overlock-seam”) that Carol Christian Poell used for example in SS 2006 (“U-turn” collection) on the inside of the garments.

Scar-stitch and *overlock-seam* (“Visible Overlock Seam”) share common features: both are overcast seams that give the seam the visual aspect of a scar – as is obvious by its name *scar-stitch*. They are sewn on the inside of the garment but also visible on the outside, on its visible part. *Overlock* differs though from the *scar-stitch* by the gauge of the thread, heavier for the overlock, and the stance between the dots, broader. The *metlock-seam* is used to reinforce the inside of the *overlock*.

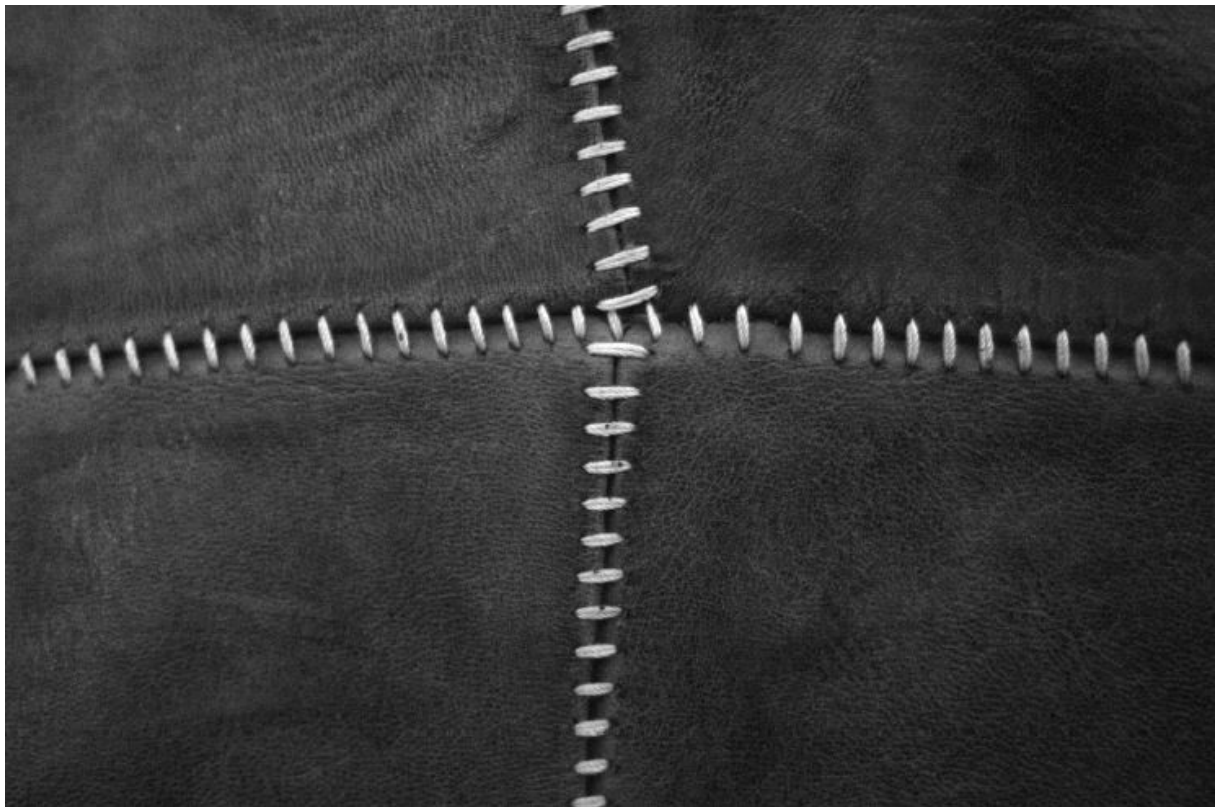


Image 2. *Overlock-seam* (“Visible Overlock Seam”)

The *invisible-seam* and the *chain-seam* differ from the previous stitches, where the pieces of fabric are assembled edge to edge. On the contrary both these seams leave a gap between the fabrics that are no longer jointed, forming an open split. Their difference lies in their make-up

and their visual effect. While the *chain-seam* is a regular cotton thread, the *invisible-seam* consists of a nylon thread, which is translucent – almost *invisible* – and flexible. When the pieces of fabric sewed by the *invisible-seam* are not under tension, their edges join together, the seam is closed, the split invisible. When the body induces some tension, the edges can work loose, without the seam breaking, revealing the flesh beneath that was formerly hidden by the garment – hence its technical name: “open seam with glued on seam-allowances”. In contrast to this, the *chain-seam* is made out of a rigid thread – *chain* – that leaves the seam constantly open, though the visual effect is at his maximum when the seams are under tension.

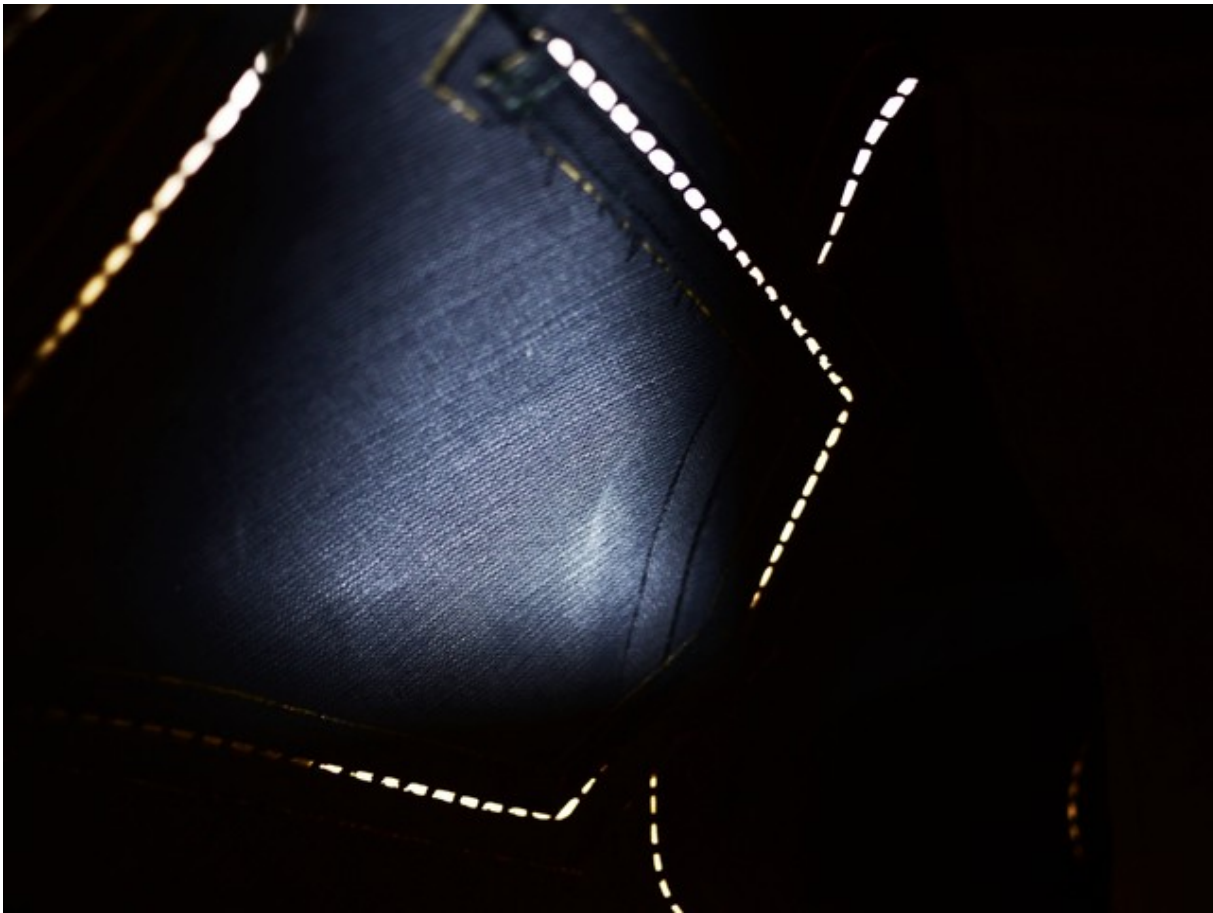


Image 3. Chain-seam

Articulations

These different forms define a constellation that can be identified by a limited collection of oppositions: interior *vs* exterior; concealed *vs* revealed; flexible *vs* rigid; continuous *vs* discontinuous.

Seen historically, the succession of the five seams presents a dialectical progression, but not in the Hegelian meaning. Seams are usually hidden, concealed, invisible, since they are an element of structure, a means and not an end. Firstly, Carol Christian Poell makes the seam visible by underlining it (*taped-seam*), even though it stays partly concealed, since it appears only on the inside of the garment. At this stage, its visibility is in an evasive mode. Then, the seam becomes clearly visible on the outside of the garment (*scar-stitch; overlock*), as if it had been turned inside out. And even more visible with the *overlock*. The third stage is the inversion of the previous stage, its antithesis: the seam becomes invisible, while the seam puckers open. Fourth, and last step, is the synthesis between visual significance and invisibility: the thread of the *invisible-seam* becomes once again a cotton thread, hence more visible than the *invisible-seam* but less so than the first ones, due to the loose zigzag type of the *invisible-* and *chain-seam* sewing. Carol Christian Poell explores the whole range of possibilities: at both ends, the *taped-seam*, which is half visible, and the *chain-seam*, half invisible; in between: the *overlock* which is completely visible while the *invisible-seam* is almost invisible. This tension between hiding and revealing, visibility and invisibility, is a major characteristic of Carol Christian Poell's work: turning the garment inside out, designing reversible garments, not only because it is a technical challenge, but since it brings the unseen/unknown to light, the inside to the outside, the structure to the surface. As is the constant effort to draw the wearer's (and the viewer's) attention to the structure of the garment, and its architectonic lines, by disturbing his *a priori* conception of what it should look like.

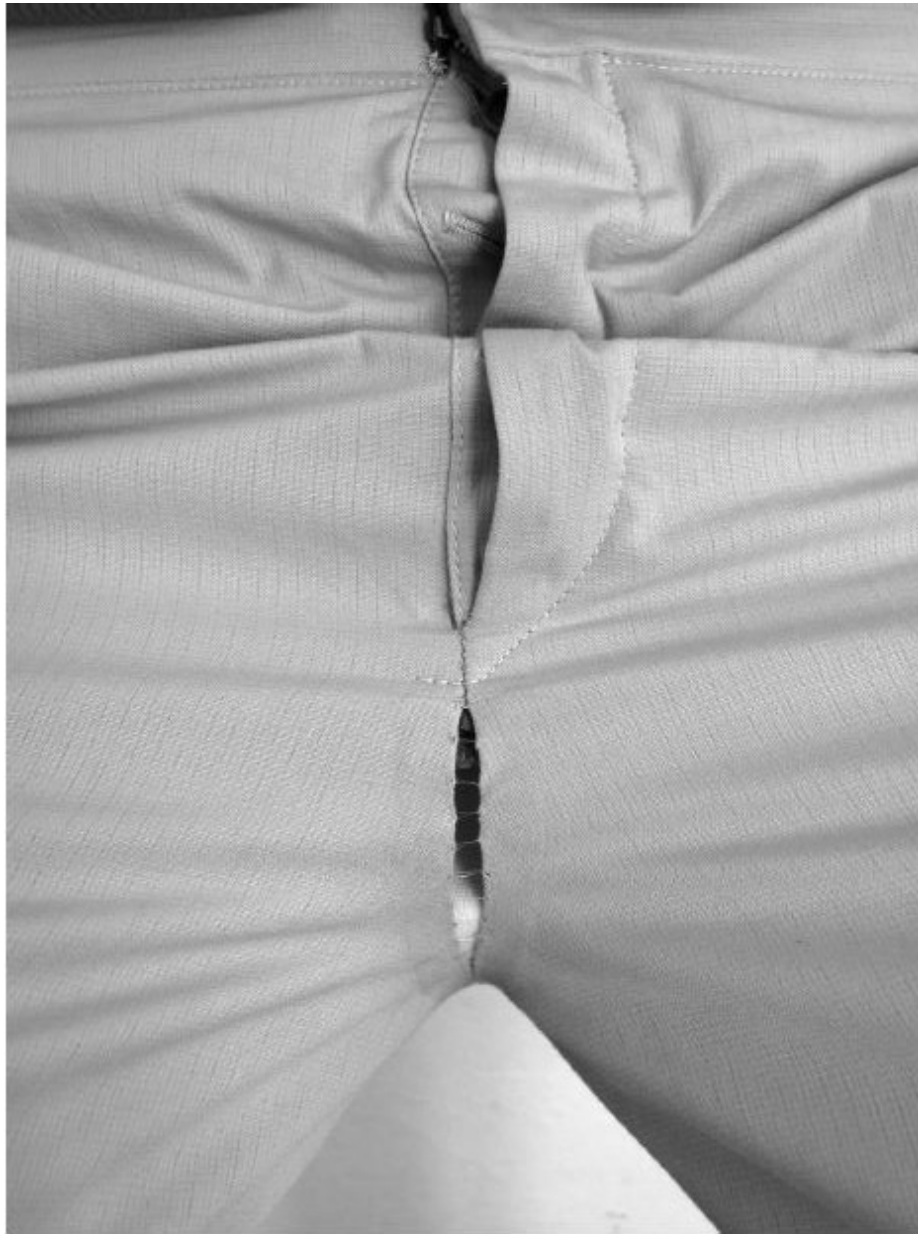


Image 4. *Invisible-seam*

There is yet another possible interpretation, that no longer insists on the continuous evolution, but rather on the paradigmatic change introduced by the *invisible-seam* and the *chain-seam*. Here the major step is topologic. While the *taped-seam* is on the inside of the garment and the *scar-stitch/overlock* on the outside, the *invisible* and *chain-seams* are neither on the inside, nor the outside: they are literally *in-between*. This time, the third form is not only a synthesis but it also surpasses – sublates – the previous seams, now in the Hegelian way of meaning: they

create a new topological space, which extends still further the opposition between under and upper, inside and outside, recto and verso.

Aufheben hat in der Sprache den gedoppelten Sinn, daß es soviel als aufbewahren, erhalten bedeutet und zugleich soviel als aufhören lassen, ein Ende machen. Das Aufbewahren selbst schließt schon das Negative in sich, daß etwas seiner Unmittelbarkeit und damit einem den äußeren Einwirkungen offenen Dasein entnommen wird, um es zu erhalten. (Hegel, 1812, p. 80)

“ ‘To sublimate’ has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to. Even ‘to preserve’ includes a negative element, namely, that something is removed from its immediacy and so from an existence which is open to external influences, in order to preserve it.”

Is Carol Christian Poell’s work thoughtful? We have already noticed that Poell’s work focuses on the catastrophic – i.e. significative – parts of the garment. Opposed to any ornamental, decorative or folkloric play with the garment, Poell proposes a reflection on its structure, not to say its infrastructure – a possible legacy of his former training in traditional tailoring. Contrary to designers who favour superstructure over infrastructure, by analogy with the famous Marx quote (*Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, 1859), and who could be called formalist or baroque, Poell gives priority to infrastructure over superstructure, since the material and its fabrication take precedence over its form.

„Die Gesamtheit dieser Produktionsverhältnisse bildet die ökonomische Struktur der Gesellschaft, die reale Basis, worauf sich ein juristischer und politischer Überbau erhebt, und welcher bestimmte gesellschaftliche Bewußtseinsformen entsprechen.“ (Marx, 1859, p. 9).

« The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. »

Fabric is not only first, it is the ground, the “foundation” on which arises an aesthetical superstructure that determines (“conditions”) different possibilities, but within a limited range.

What is more, his investigation is simultaneously systematic, organized and exhaustive. With reference to this, should we focus now on the remaining couples of opposites (continuous vs discontinuous; flexible vs rigid), the five seams can be seen to be deployed in the four categories, showing that all the logical possibilities implied are fully explored.

- continuous and rigid: taped-seam
- discontinuous and rigid: chain-seam
- discontinuous and flexible: invisible-seam
- continuous and flexible: invisible-seam

One can note two specificities. Firstly that *scar-stitch* and *overlock* are missing since they are not easily featured amongst these categories. They could belong to the continuous and the rigid, but they are not as rigid as the *taped-seam*. Neither are they as flexible as the *invisible-* or *chain-seam*. Nevertheless, the *scarstich* is more rigid than the *overlock*, due to the short stance between dots. This leads to the conclusion that the two seams, that have so far been considered as an homogenous category, actually belong to different ones:

- continuous and rigid: taped-seam; **scar-stitch**
- discontinuous and rigid: chain-seam; **overlock**
- discontinuous and flexible: invisible-seam
- continuous and flexible: invisible-seam

The use of the *meltlock-seam* to reinforce the *overlock-seam* on the inside undoes nevertheless the previous distinction, making the *overlock* as stiff as the *scar-stitch*. One should hence distinguish two types of *overlock*: the soft version (without *meltlock-seam*), the stiff version (reinforced on the inside with the *meltlock-seam*, technically called “Visible Meltlock Seam”).

The second point is that the *invisible-seam*, which is the most complex seam amongst the four, belongs to two different categories: discontinuous and flexible; continuous and

flexible. It shows that Carol Christian Poell's thoughts are not only thorough, but also inventive, since the *invisible-seam* features structural characteristics that could have been displayed in two different seams. His thoughts are not only systematic, but also economical – ockhamist: “*Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate*” [*Plurality is never to be posited without necessity*] (*Quaestiones et decisiones in quattuor libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, 1495, i, dist. 27, qu. 2, K).

It also helps to define the way Carol Christian Poell draws attention to the garment's singularities: through the invention of paradoxical features, like the *invisible-seam*, which is a seam without seam, and a seam that looks like a tear. Revealing the flesh underneath, the *invisible-seam*, like the *chain-seam*, also contributes to the feminization, or demasculinization of the garment, since they allow the skin, or the underwear, to show through the opening in the seams.

Wound, scar, life and death

Systematic, thorough and inventive, Carol Christian Poell's thoughts are also meaningful, as can be seen in the tension between continuity and discontinuity, which defines the garment as a frail surface, constantly on the verge of tearing, breaking, dismembering. While the sewing, as a rule, aims to erase the discontinuity between assembled sections, the *overlock* and the *scar-stitch*, whose name evokes fabric and skin, preserve, and even expose, the discontinuity of which they are the vestigial trace. The same goes for the *taped-seam*, even though the tape reconstitutes the continuity. On the other hand, the other types of sewing accentuate discontinuity to the prejudice of continuity, and define the garment as a frail surface, constantly on the verge of tearing, breaking, dismembering. *Invisible-* and *chain-seams* can pucker open due to the tensions induced by body movement. However, the *chain-seam* being stiffer than the *invisible-seam* will, in the end, inevitably wear out and break.

Seam, as scar, is a complex form. A scar is, of course, the trace of a wound, but whose edges have been rejoined. Although the seam is a discontinuity, it is of a kind that establishes a *second species* continuity, and is the expression of a vital force. Seam like scar is the sign and the proof that healing has prevailed over decay, reunification over disjunction, continuity over discontinuity. Stitching, as any other form of weaving, thus struggles against death, which is the fundamental discontinuity, as told in the story of Isis sewing Osiris's body back together or, on the opposite side, as shown in Arachne's reaction to Athena destroying her tapestry. And so Carol Christian Poell proposes, through his art, a formal and material transposition of this struggle opposing vital forces and deadly forces, between life and death, which constitutes the main theme of his work, and which is revealed through the tension between continuity and discontinuity. This tension echoes the different types of materials that he uses. On the one hand, he object-dyes pieces of leather that do not hide the fact that they are the skin of a dead animal that often bears the traces of the violence they have suffered; on the other hand, he develops new fabrics (over 90% are exclusive productions) in a close relationship with the mills. Vegetable opposes the animal, just as weaving (which is a creation of a new fabric) opposes tanning (which is eternization of a dead hide).

In this respect, it may be appropriate to make a distinction between two sorts of seams: those where continuity prevails over discontinuity (*taped-seam*) and those where discontinuity prevails over continuity (*invisible-seam*, *chain seam*, etc.). But the forms invented by Carol Christian Poell do not easily lend themselves to unambiguous reductions: the *invisible-seam*, one of the forms which appear to be on the point of breaking, is also a flexible seam, in opposition to the rigidity of the parts it articulates – allowing looseness, liberty of motion, and thus, *in fine*, related to life. This tension between continuity and discontinuity, unity and fragmentation, life and death finds its most emblematic embodiment in the “one piece”

garments from the “Dead End” collection (2010), where this tension is illustrated as a constitutive of sewing.

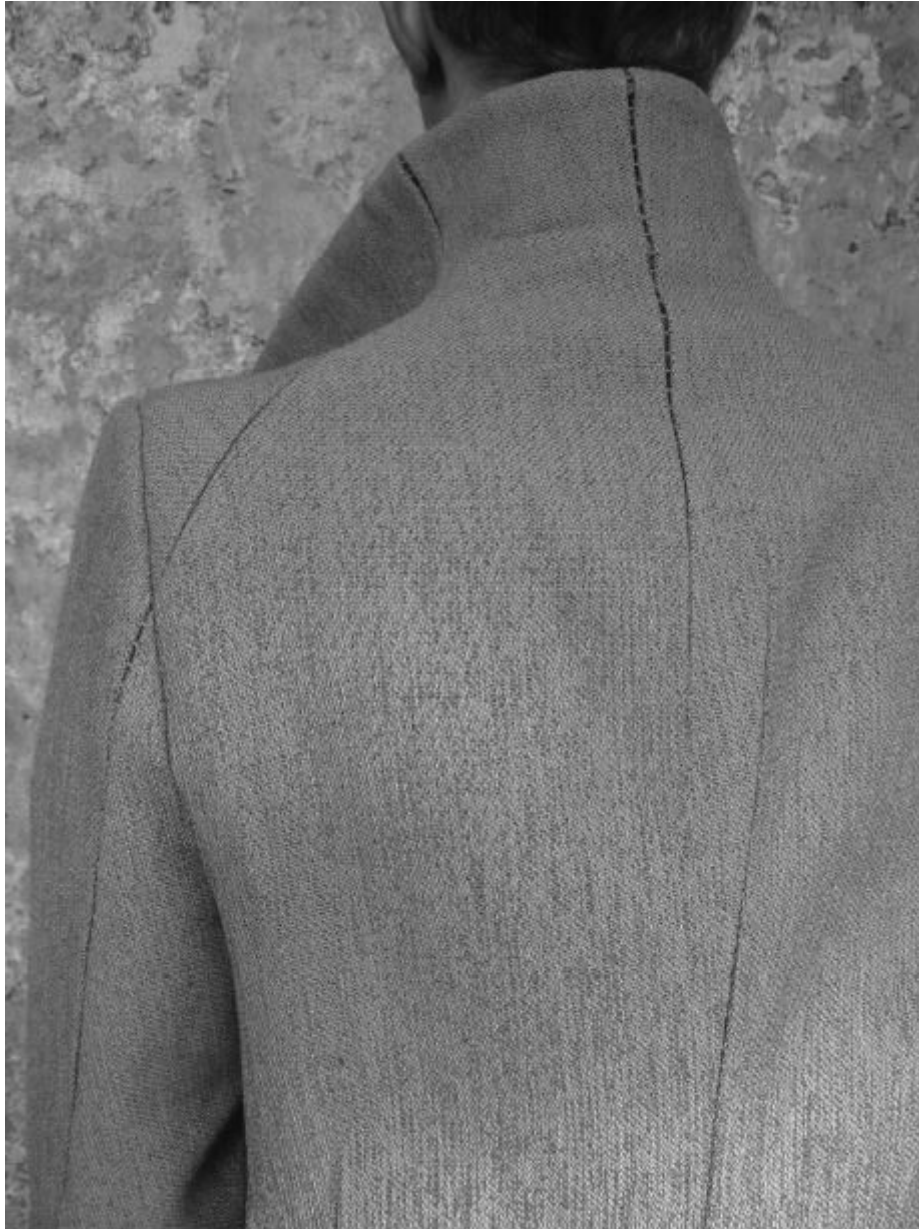


Image 5. *Dead-end scar*

The asymmetrical double scar's pattern is indeed used to signify, in an apparently paradoxical way, the fundamentally continuous nature of the piece of cloth used. If the two scars converged together – if they re-established a continuity between themselves – then the garment would be discontinuous. It is because of the preserved discontinuity between the two

scars that the garment is continuous. And so, the discontinuity of the double scar reveals the continuity of the garment. The same tension can also be observed in the beautiful shoulder of the 2009 high-collar coat (another example, in the following collection: OM/2340, “Dead End” collection, 2010), previously seen on the FW 2007-08 fishtail coat (GM/2319, “Disjointed” collection), in which the front part of the shoulder is built as a traditional tailored shoulder – discontinuous – and the rear part as a raglan sleeve – continuous.

To steer clear of the temptation to interpret Poell’s work as macabre, it would be more appropriate to define it as the scene of a tension, irresolute and heraclitean, between the mortiferous and the vital forces which coexist at least as much as they confront each other,

and where the former engenders the latter : “*ταύτό τ’ ἐνι ζῶν καὶ τεθνηκὸς καὶ [τὸ] ἐγρηγορὸς*

καὶ τὸ καθεῦδον καὶ νέον καὶ γηραιόν· τάδε γὰρ μετὰπεσόντα ἐκεῖνά ἐστι κάκεῖνα πάλιν

μεταπεσόντα ταῦτα” [« And it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep,

young and old; the former are shifted and become the latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former. »] (Herakleitos of Ephesos, 88).

This is what defines the Poell garment as essentially paradoxical. And thus one is able to propose an explanation to the contradictory feelings and emotions experienced by wearers of Carol Christian Poell creations: an impression of confidence and omnipotence, as the garment is a shell, but, at the same time, induces a feeling of fragility and anxiety, for it is constantly menaced by loss.

Nazism/Aktionism/Poellism

Poell claimed in an interview that he would like to work with human skin in the same way he does with those of animals (« *Menschenhaut zu Leder verarbeiten* », ART Magazin, 18/11/2008). But he adds, not without humour, that he has yet to receive the necessary authorizations. This claim is both strange and shocking. It transgresses a double taboo, ontological and historical. Ontological because man is not an animal, at least according to the dominant humanist philosophical conceptions still prevailing at the beginning of the XXI century. Historical because the use of human skin as material evokes the darkest hour of European history. If we attempt to go beyond the provocative aspect we can, nevertheless, make sense of this desire. A garment is, according to Poell, like a second skin. It is therefore not surprising that proximity can be inversed, if only phantasmatically, to become identity, personifying the metaphoric.

Going back to this statement, that evokes so explicitly that mental image of reducing Man, once dead, to the state of an object, takes the form, in European imagination, of the figure of Ilse Koch and more largely the Nazi genocide. However, it can also be found in Kafka's short novel where the servant gets rid of Gregor's corpse by throwing it away in the garbage can. Another reference to the extermination of the Jews in Europe can be found incarnate in the human hair sleeveless coat (Fe-Male, FW 2000-01, "Trilogy of Monotypologies III") or the human hair tie (SS 2006, "U-turn"). Poell therefore poses, as

Adorno did before him but in his own way, the question of creation after Auschwitz. And his answer – like his clothing – is not comfortable.

Some of the forms characteristic of his collections unquestionably evoke the Nazi uniform. One can note the high and pinched waist of the formal jacket, also present in uniform jackets where the taper is further accentuated by the belt. The shape of the overlock leather jacket is reminiscent of the “pilot jacket”, the vest worn by aviators but its proximity with the vest worn by flying ace Erich Hartmann is striking: same collar and inelastic waist in both jackets, in contrast to the more classical pilot jackets.

These citations of Nazism can only be fully understood if we relate Poell’s thought process to the larger concept of the European avant-garde of the 60s and 70s, driven by the first post-war generation, notably the Viennese Actionists.

Various references to Actionism can be found in Poell’s work, paying homage through direct citation or re-writing. Direct citation: the red latex circle seen on the ground of the 2009 collection presentation recalls the red circle of the blood splattered participants of the *Orgien Mysterien Theater* performance, held in Napoli (Hermann Nitsch, 1974, 10th of April).

Homage: the razor, one of the Actionists favourite tools, notably used by Günter Brus during the *Selbsvertummelung*, but also by Rudolf Schwarzkogler, is presented as a pendant by Poell. Re-writing: a founding act of Actionism was a performance held on the first of June 1962 by Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch and Adolf Frohner, all three of them entombed in an atelier-cave (*Einmauerung*) where they created a series of works, notable among them the “7. Malaktion” composed by Hermann Nitsch with blood and red paint spread on a canvas using brushes and sponges. On the door, a manifesto asking, among other things, the public to liberate the imprisoned artist. Forty years later Poell presents the “Traditional escape” collection (SS 2002) during a performance which saw models escaping through the window of the Milanese studio. The two performances are like mirror images of one another,

“Traditional escape” answering *Einmauerung*: the Actionists imprison themselves, the models escape; Actionists are shut in a cave, models escape by a first floor window; Actionists violate then crucify a lamb before splitting open its head with an axe; models wear horse leather jackets.



A woman standing as she was looking at the portraits. The latest exhibition by controversial Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch, the Orgies Mysteries Theatre (Das Orgien Mysterien Theater), opened at Zisa Zona Arti Contemporanee Art (ZAC) in Palerm

More often than not the places chosen by Poell to present his collections are eminently Actionist: a refrigerated room (“Best before” presentation, 14th-16th of October, 2000), a disused abattoir (“Three Refrigerated Cells”, 28th of June, 2000), a dog pound (“Public Freedom”, 17th of January, 2001) or the disaffected bathroom of “00” (2008).

Generally speaking there are numerous similarities between Poell's aesthetics and those of the Viennese Actionists. They hold in common a sense of provocation; the primacy of the grotesque and the carnivalesque reversal of values; the use of the body and skin as artistic material; the staging of a tormented body; deconstruction of stereotypical representations of the body through expressionist distortions of proportions; sacrificial relationship to animals and use of their blood, etc.



Direct Art Festival. A Happening by Otto Muehl and Günther Brus (Porrhaus, Vienna. 1967)

Certain forms are also shared by both Poell and Actionism such as the scar (cf. Günther Brus, self-painting 1, 1964). In *Wiener Spaziergang* (5th of July, 1965), Günther Brus covers himself in white paint, his body vertically divided by a long black painted scar which echoes in ulterior, more radical performance where he actually cuts himself (series of

Selbstverstümmelung and *Zerreissprobe*: for example “Resistance challenge” (19th of June, 1970).

This reference gives us a clear picture of the nature of Poell’s stitching, that are as much scars as incisions. Indeed, if all stitches are strictly speaking scars, in the sense that they join together two different, discontinuous parts, certain stitches, notably the invisible seam and chain-seam, when open due to tension, present a dynamic emergence of incisions into the garment.

As to the Actionist fascination for disembowelment and the exhibition of entrails, it finds a more abstract and subtle transposition in Poell’s unlined jackets, pieces that reveal, even flout the interior of the jacket, normally hidden from our eyes. In this sense the Poellian aesthetic is, like that of the Actionists, obscene – a play on this word that can be found in the 2008 collection video; “Off scene”.

If Poell can be considered an inheritor or follower of Actionism transplanted to Italian soil, as was Herman Nitsch before him, it is important to point out that he belongs to another generation (he was born in 1966). Even though his thinking may be inspired by the preoccupations of the Actionists, he cannot be assimilated with them nor, a fortiori, be reduced to them. Poell is not Franko B., who repeats without creating. The Actionists intention was to literally provoke post-war Austrian society, that was still in denial of its responsibility in the Shoah (myth of the *Anschluss*), unlike their German neighbours. What is the purpose of Actionist interventions? They reveal the hidden side of Nazism that Austria so enthusiastically embraced before disavowing its passion. Decorum: prestigious uniforms, majestic parades, cult of strength and beauty. The other side of the coin; death camps, corpses ejecting their bodily fluids in the gas chambers, piles of disarticulated corpses that Actionists evoke in their performances. However Actionists only bring to the fore terror and disgust

whereas Poell tackles fascination as well. In this way his work, while politically incorrect, is psychologically sound and shows greater artistic complexity than his Actionist forebears.

Fascination is perceptible in those designs that show evidence of the plastic perfection and severe classical proportions prompted by Nazi aesthetics. On the other hand Poell reveals the hidden side of this fascination; repulsion and what this surface perfection hides: extermination, terror, agony, to which the leather (skin) garments bear witness: scarified bodies, desiccated skin, soiled colours. However, no matter what kind of treatment he inflicts on leather hides, he would never, unlike Yves Klein, go as far as burning them.

His clothing always bears the trace, as we said earlier, of the animal's suffering but it is also the tomb of those men that Nazism attempted to relegate to the rank of animal. In this respect, the type of leathers used by Poell are not irrelevant; pig, horse, kangaroo, donkey. They are all animals that entertain a relation of proximity with men, be it by their nature (the pig's digestive tract is similar to our own, which explains the Jewish and Muslim taboo regarding its consumption) or the popular and cultural representations associated with them. As to bison leather, introduced in the 2010 collection, it might be an allusion to the Indian genocide, another mass murder.

In Kafka's novel the father does not want to know what happened to his son's body, discarded like garbage by the maid. Gregor will thus be robbed of a tomb and epitaph. Against the effacement of those who have disappeared Kafka writes *Die Verwandlung*. And Poell creates garments that clothe mourning.

Symbolism in the time of paranoia

Poell's work systematically associates opposing characteristics: the garment is both skin and armour, supple and rigid, stitching is continuous and discontinuous, shapes masculine and feminine, designs anatomical and anti-anatomical, his aesthetics are classical and baroque, his

garments provoke fascination and repulsion, etc. These opposing characteristics are not to be found on different clothing but coexist in the same garment. The Poellian aesthetic is not so much contradictory as paradoxical. His work is defined by this tension between antagonistic and incompatible positions that are however closely associated in the mode of conflict (paradox, ambiguity) or appeased tension (oxymora, irony). In this sense discomfort and worry, effects we have already mentioned, must be recognized as the very basis of his research rather than its mere consequences.

Once again the correspondence with Kafka is striking; the latter making generic and fictional indecision the center of his short story: Gregor is both human and insect; the story is both realistic and fantastic, etc. Both men share an ultimate conviction: the refusal of metaphor that even prompted the Prague writer to say he despaired for literature.

No citations, immediate historical references or, a fortiori, folkloric ones can be found in Poell's work. Symmetrically the choice of materials, exclusive and surprisingly original, focalize attention on the tangible dimension of clothing, the most literal, inducing the risk of blindness – or fetishism.

Parallel to that, Poell's work is founded on an attempt at demetaphorization or rather the concretisation of the metaphor. The garment, according to Poell, is not only a second skin, it is skin; stitching is not only like a scar or incision, it is scar and incision – and man, a potential corpse. One might point out that leather is skin. Yes and no. On the one hand it is a skin but a skin that has been transformed, that has lost many of its initial characteristics. On the other hand a leather garment is only wear/bear-able on the strict condition that its initial nature as a skin, bloody and animal, be forgotten or, at least, hidden. In this way the Poellian aesthetic succumbs to a literalistic impulse, taking the metaphor at face value. Once again like Kafka who responded to his father calling his friend Isaak Lowy a vermin (“Ungeziefer”) by creating a character literally transformed into a vermin. But his work is not, for this reason,

devoid of signification, absurd or unfathomable as literalism is not a negation of the symbolic. Abolishing the space between symbol and object is always secondary, that recognizes the power of the symbol but attempts to limit its proliferation.

Nevertheless the dream of a phantasmatic abolition of the distance between sign and flesh persists. In this way the underlying dynamic of his work, that takes the word at face-value is undoubtedly psychotic, as is also indicated by the collection's title: "Paranoid" (SS 2007). Did not Freud, another famous Austrian, declare that an artist is no more than a successful psychotic, because he finds a way to share his own private delirium with a large audience?

Work of art?

The question as to the artistic dimension of Carol Christian Poell's work is doubly unfounded. Firstly it implies an axiological perspective that adds little to the critical debate. Secondly it clashes with the very nature of the object, that belongs to the category of applied arts, hybrid by nature, between hand-crafted object and work of art. It can be noted, however, that there is a surprisingly enduring tropism in Poellian clothing, which can easily emancipate itself of its wearer to attain the status of an autonomous object.

This question finds a relative pertinence if one removes it from the point of view of nature to that of interpretation. Poell's work is rich with multiple forms, often contradictory, hence complex, that resist comprehension and interpretation. In addition to this they are polysemic, as illustrated by the stitching. Yet, beyond the variety and richness of the forms, which are the mark of creativity, Poell's work is remarkably coherent, in diachronicity as in synchronicity, forever proposing different answers to the same old questions, according to the logic of an organic body of work. In this sense his work challenges the fashion system, defined as perpetual renewal and fascination of the ephemeral. If stitches play, in Poell's

work, a major role and are an object of investigation, his thoughts deserve to be qualified as true thoughts, since his works bears the trace of an investigation that 1. explores all the logical possibilities of a form or a technique, 2. displays them logically and articulates them together 3. gives the form/technique both an aesthetical and ontological meaning, as it is shown in the tension of continuity and discontinuity. Let us note, while we are dwelling on the subject, that our definition is more Aristotelian than Husserlian or Fregeian, *i.e.* based on the existence of logical underlying principles rather than defined by the mere existence of a object of thought. His thoughts are not conceptual tough, they are not worded nor verbalized, but incarnated, embodied in the garment, and possibly revealed by the analysis, which is not a translation, though, as garments are not a proper language (contrary to what structuralists like Roland Barthes, in particular in *Système de la mode* (1967), may have suggested).

Finally his work bears the print of his ponderings on the very nature of his objective; clothing, of which the singularities are not only worked on but also questioned, even problematized. Aesthetic inventions are indissoluble from conceptual developments without actually being abstract; like any authentic artist or artisan Poell thinks materially.

More than a designer or a stylist, Carol Christian Poell is a tailor who gives birth to new forms by transforming matter. And the material he works on is not fabric or leather but the human body itself, whose representations are reinvented, taking new and unseen forms.

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