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Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design

Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives

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The Felicitating Factor. Cinzia Ruggeri's Clothing Project

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Abstract. This paper sets out to shed light on the process that guided Cinzia Ruggeri in the elaboration of a unique clothing project that was eccentric to the 1980s Italian and international fashion scene, a process that allowed this *stilista* to activate collaborations with exponents of the world of art, design, literature, and music without disavowing the specificities of the fashion design practice. Cinzia Ruggeri was an atypical player inside the fashion system, presenting her creations at the Milanese prêt-à-porter fashion shows of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, stating her autonomy from seasonal trends and her sincere interest for change. Far from considering fashion a reflection of social and cultural changes, Ruggeri understood the power of fashion in affecting and bringing about these changes. Fashion, so inextricably linked to the desire for novelty, and clothing design so intimately connected to the body, allowed her to address the gestures, behaviours and therefore the experience of reality in transformation. Over the years she experimented with shapes and materials, creating objects that could be intellectually and physically enjoyed, pervaded by a signature trait – the "felicitating factor" – stemming from her direct and shared experience in creating her fashion project.

Keywords: Fashion design · Cinzia Ruggeri · 1980s · performativity · felicitating factor

1 Introduction

The work of Cinzia Ruggeri (Milan, 1942–2019), although well-known among scholars, has enjoyed little critical acclaim. This artist-*stilista*-designer, often mentioned in literature dedicated to Italian fashion and design, as well as several of her works displayed in international exhibitions, have only recently enjoyed a new wave of attention coming especially from art critics, an attention matching the interpretation endorsed by those galleries with which Ruggeri began collaborating regularly in the 1990s.

A confirmation of this is the recent touring exhibition *Cinzia Ruggeri. Cinzia Says…* Curated by Luca Lo Pinto, artistic director of MACRO Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome (MACRO, 14 April – 28 August 2022; Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London, 5 November 2022 – 12 February 2023). The exhibition and the monograph accompanying it [1] – the first dedicated to Cinzia Ruggeri – provides an overview of

the multifaceted production and collaborations that Ruggeri, from the 1970s until her death in 2019, established with some of the most significant Italian and international design, art, literature, and music experiences and personalities.

Art, fashion and design were the fields Cinzia Ruggeri uninterruptedly explored in her research. She made her debut at only eighteen with a solo painting exhibition at the Prisma Gallery in Milan (16–31 December 1960); the exhibition was reviewed by the author Dino Buzzati with a fable-presentation with somewhat of a surreal note since it anticipates the fashion design career the young artist would later undertake with an internship at the Carven atelier in Paris and then in her father Guido Ruggeri's dressmaking business. Ruggeri made a name for herself as a *stilista*, designing the Bloom and Cinzia Ruggeri lines in the late 1970s and throughout the following decade, the 1980s, when Made in Italy production reached the peak of the its international success. At the very beginning of the 1990s, she abandoned the fashion system and transferred the experimental practice she had been carrying out on clothing to stronger collaboration with forniture and interior design companies on a broader environtamental scale, while increasing her exhibition activity interacting with art galleries, including Bianca Pilat (Milan), Luisa delle Piane (Milan), Federico Vavassori (Milan), Campoli Presti (Paris) and Francesca Pia (Zurich) [2].

It was in the 1980s, when her work as a *stilista* had reached its highest level of visibility, that a first critical review of Ruggeri's projects was produced. This was the decade of the epiphany of the Italian fashion system in the world, of the triumph of the *stilisti*, the years when talking about fashion became fashionable. The analysis of this phenomenon came from different academic and non-academic ambits, stemming from the need to attribute a respectability to fashion by tracing its interactions with architecture, art, and industrial design. An approach that according to Giannino Malossi perpetuated that "modern annoyance for fashion" [3] which paid the price of its "ornamental crime," its offence to the principles of parsimony and function, an approach grafting onto cultural aspects preventing a true understanding of fashion's unique nature, its close bond with the body, erotic drive, fantasies, and – as art historian Richard Martin underlined in 1996 when curator of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art [4] – its manifest commercial component.

With her work Cinzia Ruggeri fuelled this debate. The critical literature dedicated to her fashion project has highlighted the significant interconnections between the frayed asymmetrical clothes of her Bloom line and the post-modern architecture by Venturi, Hollein, Wewerka and SITE, [5] and the reactivation of the experiences developed by the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes through her experimental take on textile design [6] and the communication potential of the objects of Cinzia Ruggeri's brand. [7] Critical studies have also underlined the peculiarity of Ruggeri's research that never refrained from crossing disciplinary boundaries, detecting an affinity with the radical experiences of Archizoom, Nanni Strada's projects [8] and the activity of Alchimia. [9] [10] Critical literature about Ruggeri has also covered her graphic production as an expression of specific cultural models, those of 1920s- and 1930s-Austrian and French culture, [11] according to a line of interpretation of fashion drawings started in the 1980s by Gloria Bianchino in the framework of the research conducted by CSAC – Centro Studi e

Archivio della Comunicazione of the University of Parma. Lastly, key factors in understanding the peculiarity of Ruggeri's production via the comparison with the composite mosaic of Italian and international fashion, have been the exhibition *Excess. Fashion and underground in the 80s* (Florence, Stazione Leopolda, 8 January – 8 February 2004) and its catalogue, both curated by Maria Luisa Frisa and Stefano Tonchi [12].

Although considering the above-mentioned critical interpretations, this paper sets out to analyse the process that guided Cinzia Ruggeri in the development of a precise and peculiar fashion project against the backdrop of the 1980s. Ruggeri's was a project permeated by a concept she herself called the "fattore felicitante" (felicitating factor), that component of pleasure originating from the desire to experiment with shapes and materials through the designing of clothes; a factor necessarily requiring the performative action of wearing clothes in order to enjoy the beauty contained in these felicitating objects.

The consultation and analysis of the objects and of the documentation preserved in the Cinzia Ruggeri archive in Milan carried out by the author on the occasion of the exhibition held at MACRO last spring, were decisive in undertaking this study, which is a continuation and extension of an ongoing path of research [13].

2   The Felicitating Factor

2.1   For an Organic Way of Dressing

Per un vestire organico (For an organic way of dressing) is the title of a video conceptualised by Cinzia Ruggeri and directed by Metamorphosi, that was at the photographic workshop entitled *Nuove tendenze italiane nella creazione di immagini. Arte percezione, realtà, visione* (Venice, Centro di documentazione Palazzo Fortuny, 12–17 December 1983). [14].

Although this video was intended for a photographic workshop, it is useful to understand the design attitude that over the 1980s guided the designer in her definition of the concept of fashion, confirming her inclination to work using different languages, and the importance that her activity as a *stilista* has had in the definition of post-modern aesthetics, as Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt have clarified in the exhibition *Postmodernism. Style and Subversion, 1970–1990* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (24 September 2011 –15 January 2012) [15].

The protagonist of the video is the dancer Valeria Magli, who provides the voice and the body of this "*poesia ballerina*" (dancing poem).[16] The space in which the video is set is the workshop-showroom in Via Crocefisso in Milan, made aethereal by the pink walls and by the presence of an angel that looks like the one standing next to the Virgin Mary in Piero della Francesca's Brera Altarpiece, and that in the video we see looking down from a mock pulpit, a copy of the balcony of Palazzo Farnese in Rome. The costume worn by the protagonist is a light-blue skin-tight bodysuit with strings and suckers, which turns the dancer into a sea creature – an octopus – that crawls, clings to and remains stuck to the objects it discovers around her.

Clothes, which in this case is a stage costume, activate a connection with the environment and show a breathing, vibrating, wanting body. A body that amplifies its communicational capacities thanks to a second skin that makes it "wired".

The meaning of the video is clarified in the words with which Ruggeri accompanies this project, words that sound like a declaration of intent: "Getting dressed is the first thing we do every morning: shabby, polished, 'normal.' Whether we want it or not, clothes are an (always intentional) display of ourselves." [17].

A fashion project therefore becomes a tool to explore the everyday gesture of getting dressed and implies an act of self-staging, and a relationship with space and time.

In an interview at the presentation of the works developed during the photographic workshop, the fashion designer defined the "felicitating factor" as the coefficient of pleasure that guides us in doing what we really believe in: if this is the attitude pervading the creative process, then the result is a product that contains "beauty" and thus makes its user happy too. [18].

A systematic analysis of the documentation preserved in the Cinzia Ruggeri Archive allowed us to ascertain how this expression was intentionally used to indicate the outcome of a design process stemming from her fashion project. The designer was already using it in 1978 when describing to the international press the debut of the first complete collection distributed with the Bloom label and sold in the Cynthia Ruggeri boutique that had been opened in Washington at the Watergate Hotel the previous year. [19] The "felicitating factor" also appears in the handwritten notes that accompanied the drawings of her clothes and objects she made after her participation in the Venetian event such as the *Fontana dell'amore* project designed for the Municipality of Lamezia Terme in 2001 (ACR).

2.2   Shirts as a Manifesto

Shirts were the original core of Bloom, the womenswear company established in 1972 of which Cinzia Ruggeri was sole director. Shirts were the item that accompanied Ruggeri's research until the 1980s when she decided to retire from the Milanese prêt-à-porter fashion shows. Shirts were a manifesto representative of a fashion object requiring the constant complicity of its user, of the mind and the body of the wearer.

From the outset she endowed this item of clothing, generally used to complement an outfit, with character, transforming it into an autonomous object with a strong narrative energy.

She worked on its lines, alternating and overlapping sinuous profiles and sharp edges. She played with the sartorial conventions of menswear, shifting the dickey or rotating the collar and the bowtie to the shoulder. She worked with materials, with a predilection for linen and silk, painting them or fraying them as if they were canvases.

Ruggeri's clothing project contemplated the extraordinary in the ordinary and this can be inferred by observing her drawings and even more when touching her clothes. At times she insisted on a flow, on an embroidery turning into a sophisticated erosion, or on compulsions, like that of women always playing with their necklaces. Emblematic in this respect is the series of shirts with mobile elements, designed to give meaning to a meaningless gesture. Instead of jewels she sewed on those elements offering a pretext to tell short personal stories: a chicken's egg rolling along a line becoming, as indicated on the label, a "Chereghin," a fried egg that in Lombardy is traditionally cooked in butter, a Scottish Terrier (Ruggeri's pet dog called Scherzi) coming out of his basket to pee, or

an embroidered heart at the throat in a model called "Magone," an Italian expression for "a lump in your throat" (F/W 1981–82, ACR).

Sewn inside all her clothes are hidden labels with handwritten messages containing the name of the item and of the fabrics, which were especially made for every collection, and sometimes even quotes from a book, as in the small *Giorni felici* collection (S/S 1986, ACR), named after Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*. In the press release of the collection accompanying the presentation to buyers and journalists, the presented models are described as follows: "Sentimental clothing. Clothing for people who like this project. Its motivation does not lie in its practical efficiency, its 'beauty' consists in the love and magic with which it is presented, in the soul it contains." [20] These words are a reworking of an excerpt from the *Manifesto di Alchimia*, which sounds like a tribute to the research conducted in particular by Alessandro Guerriero and Alessandro Mendini, also testified by the collaboration that resulted in the design of six covers for the monthly magazine *Domus* in 1982, but in this case applied to fashion design. In fact, this is the field in which Ruggeri, the *stilista*-entrepreneur, publicly declared her fashion shows operated, safeguarding her design autonomy.

2.3   The Daily Ritual of Getting Dressed

The figurative potential that Cinzia Ruggeri recognized in clothes, and that she integrated in her sartorial production, translated into her way of showing and presenting her fashion proposals, in other words her communication style. The advertising campaigns and the collateral initiatives that accompanied the presentation of her clothing and accessory collections orchestrated by Ruggeri herself in the role of art director confirm this aspect.

An emblematic Bloom advertising campaign was the one created for the S/S 1978 collection, shot by Guido Cegani, and published on the pages of *Vogue Italia* in March 1978 with the model Pia Soreson in the role of the personification of nature or of the seasons. Apart from the clothes, the only element on the set is a black throne that, like a Proppian magical element, speaks of transformation.

Equally emblematic is the campaign shot by Occhiomagico launching the F/W 1981–82 collection of the new line called Cinzia Ruggeri – a line that from 1981 was produced alongside the Bloom line. Even in this case Ruggeri used a throne. This time the models ironically interpreting the collections are the owners of the boutiques that used to buy and sell Ruggeri's collections around the world. With their imperfect bodies these models confirm the wearability of the clothes and that "felicitating" factor that is activated when they are worn (Fig. 1, 2).

2.4   Clothes as a Scenic Object

For Cinzia Ruggeri the act of choosing our clothes is always an intentional gesture we perform in order to play our role. The performative component, sometimes brushed off by the fashion journalists of the time as a sign of extravagance, pervades all the projects of this *stilista* that go beyond the distinction between real clothes and costumes. The tactile quality of her clothes made them perfect as stage costumes, endowed with an expressive potential that was activated when they were worn. It is in fact the bodies that

Fig. 1. Cinzia Ruggeri, S/S 1982, advertising campaign. Najla Tabiat, boutique Bint El Ishrin, Kuwait.Photo credit: Occhiomagico

inhabited them that provided the real engine of this process leading to the creation of images and of their meanings.

Like other *stilisti*, Ruggeri designed theatre costumes. In an earlier joint study based on the analysis of a group of drawings preserved at the CSAC archives of the University of Parma, the author has investigated the collaboration that occurred at the Teatro di Porta Romana in Milan between Cinzia Ruggeri and Valeria Magli, the artist who paired different techniques and forms of expression such as dance, visual arts, and vocals. [21].

To accompany Magli's moves, Ruggeri designed costumes matching the atmosphere and the themes of the shows, conceiving them as stage props providing the trained body of the dancer new elements to shape her performance, becoming an active element of the creative project.

The steps, i.e. the element of the six-ply tunic designed to be assembled in front of the audience in a cerebral reverse-striptease performed by Magli in *Banana morbide*

Fig. 2. Cinzia Ruggeri, F/W 1982-83, advertising campaign. Annamaria Venzi Timpano, boutique St Tropez - Rome.Photo credit: Occhiomagico

(1980), and the kinetic decorations that in *Banana lumière* (1981) are activated by Piero Fogliati's "fantastic lights" transforming the dancer's body into a mobile, reappear in the lines and materials used by Ruggeri in the collections presented in the prêt-à-porter fashion shows and then produced.

The steps in particular, together with the cone, and the inclined plane are formal elements that recur in the designer's projects and with which she explored the deviation from the rule, which determined – as Ruggeri herself declared on multiple occasions – the "loss of balance."

They are archaic and at the same time recent forms, also explored in the sphere of new Italian design, indicating an unresolved coexistence of ancient and modern, the awareness of which matured in the aesthetics of the 1980s. These motifs tend towards infinity and combine with the idea of motion, inspiring a two-directional reading; these

shapes lend themselves to the transformation of the bodies wearing them and, moving in space, modify them in turn.

Already in the early Bloom collections, the designer interpreted these motifs on the two-dimensional surface of fabrics, inserting inlays and applications, and in the structure of the clothes and blouses, for example cutting the two sleeves differently with wave or geometric add-ons. She then transferred them to the three dimensions by playing with scales: from an earring, to a clutch bag, to the actual architectures for the body. Paradigmatic interpretations of the staircase motif are *Omaggio a Lévi-Strauss* (Homage to Lévi-Strauss, F/W 1983–84) – now preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London – and the *Ziggurat* dress (F/W 1984–85, ACR), which express a proudly exhibited concept of femininity: the steps provide support and, in the game of courtship, offer an invitation to climb or descend them.

Textile research was a constant of Ruggeri's activity; it evolved in parallel with the need to charge her fashion proposals with emotional values and integrate technological elements. In the S/S 1982 collection the designer inserted LED lights connected to a battery and a switch on her clothes so that the wearer could turn them on to satisfy his or her wish to appear (*Abito di luci a 12 W*, ACR), while in the following collection she worked directly on the fabric. It was in fact in 1982 that she applied liquid crystals to the fabrics. Graduated on certain temperatures, these crystals changed colour depending on body heat. The result was mutant clothes that, once worn and moving in space, signalled the modifications of the body and the environment.

When she used traditional materials, such as silk and linen, she worked on the concept of emptiness with a sensitivity close to Japanese aesthetics; she endowed holes, openings and slits with meaning, sometimes embellishing them with the surprising presence of pearls or chains, to create interstices and favour an exchange between inside and outside, between body and space. Interviewed in 1984 by art critic Giorgio Verzotti, Ruggeri declared "I want my things to contain empty spaces, interstices, empty areas that are available to be loaded." [22].

Her creations were objects to be experienced with body and mind, that once worn turned into scenic devices with which the wearers could communicate or say something about themselves. They did not offer solutions, but opportunities.

3   Conclusions

Cinzia Ruggeri is presented in the pages of *Casa Vogue* as the creator of an "archi-moda" imbued with references to Postmodernism. [5] Alessandro Mendini, the theorist behind Alchimia, defined her as the creator of "neo-fashion" because of the proximity to the communicative demands of "neo-design", [23] while the dance critic Marinella Guatterini chose to use "art -stilista", as she considers Ruggeri's creations behavioural devices creating connections between the slow pace of thought and the immediate intelligence of the body. [24] These neologisms conceal the critics' efforts to define Ruggeri's approach to fashion, finding names related to the collaborations that she intertwined with exponents of the world of architecture, design and performing arts from the beginning of the 1980s. In a recent talk, the curator and contemporary art consultant Mariuccia Casadio used the adjective "irrestituibile" for Cinzia Ruggeri, [25] thus reaffirming the

inadequacy of any label to describe a multifaceted production and attitude transcending any disciplinary fields, while eroding their boundaries.

As a matter of fact, her practice was about adopting different languages without adhering to currents or movements, preferring to explore the specificities of the means of expression. She used clothing – a medium intimately close to the body and immersed in space – using the communicative power of fashion to first and foremost express her own story. Autobiographical elements can indeed be found in all of her projects, even those developed after her activity in fashion had come to an end. These traces are hidden in the puns with which she enjoyed naming her works, or in little word puzzles prompting a reaction from the observer. Her clothes required an active brain and heart.

A critical insider of the 1980s Italian fashion system, of which she publicly contested the progressive creative impoverishment and inflation of the *stilista*'s import, Cinzia Ruggeri presented her collections on the Milanese prêt-à-porter catwalks from the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, proudly claiming her autonomy from seasonal trends, paired with her sincere interest in the concept of change. Far from considering fashion a reflection of social and cultural changes, Ruggeri, if anything, acknowledged its power to affect and bring about these changes, anticipating a critical position that later developed in the field of fashion studies. [26] Fashion, so connected to the desire for novelty, and the design of clothing so intimately connected to the body, allowed her to address the gestures, behaviours and therefore the experience of reality in transformation.

Understanding, through the analysis of archive records, the process that guided Cinzia Ruggeri in the definition of her clothing project, can assist us in interpreting her entire production, which circularly explored art, fashion and design, pervaded by that "felicitating factor," that pleasure of sharing and manifesting emotions she made clear in 1983.

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