

# GALLERIAPIU

ALSO KNOWN AS OLTREDIMORE

**IULIA GABRIELA TOMA & CLAUDIU COBILANSCHI**  
**ДОБРОЕ УТРО, ВАРВАРА СТЕПАНОВА // BUONGIORNO, VARVARA STEPANOVA**

Text by Nicole Archer

In one of the many aphorisms on fashion that appear in *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin proposes that the modern fashion system's fast-cycling obsession with 'the new' is nothing but "camouflage" for the ruling class' absolute distaste for change—a formulation he develops in response to Bertolt Brecht's assertion that:

Rulers have a great aversion to violent changes. They want everything to stay the same—if possible, for a thousand years. If possible, the moon should stand still and the sun move no farther in its course. Then no one would get hungry any more and want dinner. And when the rulers have fired their shot, the adversary should no longer be permitted to fire; their own shot should be their last.<sup>1</sup>

In this concise, critical gesture, Benjamin locates fashion amidst a field of conflicting time signatures, desires, and political possibilities. With each passing fashion season or trend, the masses are swept-up in the work of trying to attain 'the next, new look' (and what changes it might offer), while the upper classes are rendered less suspicious by being made to appear as if they are concerned with 'change,' or 'creativity,' through their ceaseless work to be *au courant*—thus helping to avoid class war on at least two fronts, and why '*la mode*' has become such an important tool in the formation and maintenance of the modern social order.

A 'permanent strategy' masquerading as perpetual change, fashion's 'disruptive patterning' is literally formed, or woven, through the powerful intersections of multiple social temporalities and terrains. It is here that 'the end of history' literally meets 'the future,' and as Brecht makes clear, the stakes could not be less trivial—for while the rulers are averse to "violent change," they certainly are not averse to violence, itself.

Understood accordingly, fashion might be best acknowledged as a kind of 'time machine'—a mechanism for making (a smooth sense of) time out of our varied desires,<sup>2</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedman. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1990. 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> Bearing this in mind, it should come as no surprise that Benjamin also ponders, in another aphorism within *The Arcades Project*: "Does fashion die (as in Russia, for example) because it can no longer keep up the tempo—at least in certain fields? (71).

history of fashion might be best acknowledged, in turn, as *an archive of past possible futures*—all generated and forestalled by the whims of modern regimes of power.

This becomes patently obvious if one considers those ‘fashion phenomena’ that most explicitly trade in the promise of the new, like the ‘supermodern’ clothes of 1960s ‘youthquake’ designers like André Courrèges, Rudi Gernreich, Paco Rabanne, and Mary Quant.<sup>3</sup> And it is more apparent, still, in those canons of ‘anti-fashion’ imagined in complete contradiction to the capitalist fashion system. 20th Century, avant-garde artists and fashion and textile designers, such as the production-constructivists, worked hard to design clothes and fabrics that could make good on fashion’s feigned promise of ‘the future.’ At the same time, these artists and designers’ commitments to much more eternal and egalitarian ideals, bodies, and relationships reveal a keen understanding of dress’ capacity to stabilize or locate bodies that are, otherwise, prone to wanting evermore change. These boldly patterned and styled clothes wildly depart from the fashions of the capitalist West—indeed providing a real change or difference, yet they inevitably produce this shift in ways that are intended to last the permanent revolution. *The future, forever!*

It is in this spirit that Iulia Gabriela Toma and Claudiu Cobilanschi collaboratively excavate the archive of art, writing, and textile and clothing designs left behind by the Lithuanian-born, Constructivist artist, and committed revolutionary, Varvara Stepanova. Interested not in the extent to which her designs did, or did not, upend the logics of fashion — Toma and Cobilanschi mine Stepanova’s works for the futures hidden in their folds. They go back and ask *not* ‘what did this work do,’ *but* ‘what does this work want?’ What desires, what possibilities are preserved in Stepanova’s answer to “the problem of dress,” or “the problems of *prozodezhda*”?<sup>4</sup> How can an exploration of the past possible futures woven into Stepanova’s textiles help to reveal the ways that we are all, presently, located within the weave of ideology?

Such work requires Toma and Cobilanschi to read and to get into touch with Stepanova’s archive in somewhat inappropriate, or even fetishistic ways. It requires a form of engagement that works Stepanova’s varied projects out in perpetuity—constantly challenging and changing her oeuvre’s own form. The resulting projects included in *ДОБРОЕ УТРО, ВАРВАРА СТЕПАНОВА* // *BUONGIORNO, VARVARA STEPANOVA* are a series of literal time warps, which offer gallery

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<sup>3</sup> For more on these designers and other more contemporary designers, see: Bolton, Andrew. *The Supermodern Wardrobe*. London: V&A Publications, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> The art historian Natalia Adaskina provides a useful definition for readers unfamiliar with the idea of ‘prozodezhda,’ or the differences between it and ‘spetsodezhda,’ for instance. She writes: “The concept of *prozodezhda* which appeared in the early 1920s was not confined to that of *spetsodezhda* (clothing for specific jobs requiring a specific dress). It was understood more broadly as clothing for the working man of a specific category for specific occupations, whether labor, relaxation, or sport” (Footnote 2, page 146). Adaskina, Natalia. “Constructivist Fabrics and Dress Design.” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*. Vol. 5, Russian/Soviet Theme Issue (Summer, 1987). 144-159.

viewers the opportunity to shuttle back and forth between a moment possessed by the bright promises of early socialism and the dark days that currently possess us.

In *Grey Flags* (2016)—the exhibition's centerpiece, Toma and Cobilanschi present a commercially produced fabric, which is perhaps not so unlike some of the materials once made at the First State Textile Print Factory (where Stepanova worked with other revolutionary artist-producers, such as Liubov Popova), draped in a series of ever ascending configurations that explicitly echo the overall shape of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920), a monument for the future — if ever there was one. Suspended over a large, Persian-styled carpet intended by the artists to evoke a generic image of Muslim presence and material culture, the peaks and valley's of the lustrous blue-grey fabric condense the time, space, and hopes of Stepanova and her contemporaries with those of countless refugees currently fleeing war and drought and attempting to cross the rough Mediterranean Sea *en route* to Italy, Greece, and other European ports.

This dynamic, materially informed and politically inspired work is then continued throughout the exhibit. In *Rhythmical Logic* (2016), the fourteen fabric collages, considered individually and at the level of the fabric and the stitch, might transport viewers to the very intimate and individual times and spaces of patch-working, or attempting to extend a much loved (or needed) garment's longevity. It might also evoke the practice of quilting and piecing-together a blanket for a loved one, so that they might find continued comfort through your labor. Regarded in terms of their shared colors and forms, the bold geometric shapes and stark red, white, and black palettes work to guide viewers towards more historical, temporal registers: to the history of painting and modernism and to the hopes deposited in so many formal innovations. Considered together, as one monumental statement, these fourteen, smaller artworks start to occupy the spectacular dimensions and scales of Soviet, social realist murals—murals that have literally started to fade since the fall of the iron curtain and remain as tarnished images of a future long lost.

The photographic triptych, *Emotional armors* (2015) seems to revisit Stepanova's research on 'the right dress for the right occasion, or occupation,' in a way that affords humor and laughter. Here, a pair of athletic pants creep up the body and find a place to finally rest, on the head—no longer working, relentlessly for the legs. Through this playful gesture, *Emotional armors* rather seriously demands that viewers think about the subjectivity and not simply the objectivity of dress. This demand is further underscored by the way Toma's personal history informs this piece — how the images' occasion is the opportunity for a daughter to refashion her mother's own sports clothes. Refolded and tied around the daughter's body, the years of the mother's training,

which are literally sweated and soaked into the clothing's fabric, saturate the scene and imply how essential it is for us to consider the intergenerational dynamics of labor, of discipline, of politics.

Like any viable strategy of resistance, Toma and Cobilanschi's shared project is a critical, material-semiotic practice. It insists that we learn to collectively grab hold of the textile (and the clothes and relationships fashioned through this cultural medium) in ways that we aren't used to or are supposed to — particularly should we hope to find new ways to grasp onto one another, ways that the 'powers that be' might not be able to yet anticipate, or line-up in their crosshairs.

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