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The uninhabited drapery

Arranging folds in the digital age: from monument to document

By Silvia Giuseppone (Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti di Genova)

Abstract: The debate on technological Humanism and, more specifically on digital Humanism, refers to a stratified tradition of critical (Greenberg 1949; O'Doherty 1986) and sociological studies (Groys 2016; Steyerl 2017). Through visual culture, that legacy has screened variations in the ethical and political relationships between artists and technology itself. This paper therefore proposes a survey of drapery techniques as an index of continuity with the humanistic tradition and as a reflection of ongoing transformations in the digital age. Following the example of Barilli (2011), I will briefly sample the evolution of drapery as a counterpart to a historical, political and social mutation supported by technological development. The classical tradition of drapery will be compared with the direct and indirect persistence of that figurative motif in the contemporary visual culture. Hence it will be shown how the study of drapery represents an analytical tool for present day social and technological changes as envisaged by McLuhan (1964) and, more recently, Bourriaud (2009). Finally, a possible interpretation of the drapery will be outlined as a plastic solution and a valid visual reference for the political, economic and sociological positions that artists assume with respect to the technologies of digital contemporaneity.

"After we have been completely dressed and enclosed in a uniform visual space for centuries, the electric age introduces us to a world in which we live, breathe, and listen with the entire epidermis."

M. McLuhan [1]

1. "The drapery should be adapted in such a way that it does not appear uninhabited." On the classical heritage of drapery.

Drapery, or "the way of arranging the masses and folds of clothing in figurative works of art" [2], has represented an important subject of analysis for art historians of all periods in reconstructing the technical processes, technological advancements, and forms of thought characteristic of a given culture. Different civilizations have alternated phases of more or less intense interest in drapery as an authentic representational system, depending on the geographical area in which they were located and the different socio-political structures they were organized in. While in Egyptian sculpture clothing geometrically completes the plastic form of the human figure, and in Minoan art we find the first naturalistic hints, it is only from the Greek art of the 6th century B.C. that the study of drapery emerges as an autonomous path.

Along with the gradual refinement of anatomical representation in Hellenistic art, the invention of wet drapery makes visible the transition from the Archaic to the Classical period, reaching one of its most desired goals in Hellenistic sculpture: replacing the controlled sense of measure and proportion with a delicate aerial dynamism [3]. With the invention of perspective in painting, the visual investigation of the "nature of things" [4] continues its path of technical perfection.

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In the context of a humanistic recovery of classical heritage, drapery would come to document the attempt to instill in sculpture characteristics of pictorial evanescence and to introduce elements of sculptural plasticity into painting. It is indeed the relationship between painting and sculpture that Leonardo da Vinci would dedicate several pages to, comparing the effectiveness of the two arts in conveying and interpreting the main interests of Italian artists between the 15th and 16th centuries. Both in painting and sculpture, the almost exclusive prerogatives of humanistic study were familiarity with classical art and, above all, mastery of the technical-scientific tools aimed at direct observation of nature.

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The sculptor cannot diversify in the various natures of the colors of things; painting, on the other hand, lacks no part. The perspectives of sculptors do not seem real, while those of the painter appear hundreds of miles away from the work. Aerial perspective is far from the work. Transparent bodies cannot be depicted, nor luminous ones, nor reflected lines, nor shiny bodies like mirrors and similar gleaming things, nor fog, nor dark times, and countless other things that are not mentioned to avoid boring you. [5]

According to Leonardo, sculpture thus proves to be an insufficient representational medium in a world where art seeks to become a "mirror of the visible world." [6]

Painting is of greater mental discourse and greater artifice and wonder than sculpture, for necessity forces the mind of the painter to transform into the mind of nature itself, and to become the interpreter between nature and art, commenting with it on the causes of its demonstrations constrained by its law. [7]

In the end, painting triumphs, and more precisely, the entire process of optical transposition onto a two-dimensional surface, a process made possible by the perspective machine and exhibited as an indispensable technical conquest. Barilli affirms that "Albertian perspective works... as a Procrustean bed, but one that the West is ready to accept, given the advantages gained from it if one intends to create an accurate map of the territory." [8]

In the wake of an ever-present interest in the effects of depth and thickness mediated by drawing, Leonardo dedicates a chapter to the "cloths that dress the figures, and their folds" [9], specifically recommending that "the cloth should be adapted in such a way that it does not appear uninhabited" [10]. The technique of the Florentine masters, illustrated by Vasari in his Introduction to the Three Arts of Drawing, is well known for achieving such a result: using three-dimensional models for the representation of drapery, specifically mannequins, "small models or figures of wax or clay," covered in cloths soaked in plaster and left to dry to fix their pose [11]. Thus, it

becomes possible for the Renaissance eye to begin accepting the idea of representing drapery in isolation, seeing it entirely detached from a complete human figure. In Leonardo da Vinci's drawings, the support for the drapery is no longer the underlying body but the linen canvas, less absorbent and opaque than paper, capable of giving ink brightness and dynamism. Thanks to the intrinsic material qualities of the fabric, the canvas itself plays a decisive role in the liberation of the drapery.

2. "The difference between muscles and fabrics." On drapery in the electric age

Greenberg argues that from the Renaissance onwards, "painting could monopolize subject matter, imagination, and talent in the visual arts, where almost everything that happened between Michelangelo and Rodin happened on the canvas" [12]. It thus takes the electric age and modern sensibility to achieve a new sculpture free from mass and solidity, and to definitively establish the "exclusion of all reality external to the medium of the relative art: the exclusion, that is, of the subject" [13] .

In the saturated atmosphere of experimentation of the historical avant-gardes, at the dawn of the electric age, the representation of drapery brings to the surface some of the key elements of the technological and social transformations underway. An emblematic case is Marcel Duchamp's Sculpture de voyage (1918), where these elements are summarized: the use of industrial materials is combined with a kind of spatialized two-dimensionality that answers the needs of transportability and replicability. Duchamp's own work will last only a few years before breaking and disappearing [14]: only photographic documentation will remain.

Among the more elaborated attempts at theoretical systematization, not only the hypothesis but also the hope of an "integral art" [15] should be counted, as expressed by the young students of the Altamira Academy. In the 1946 White Manifesto, there is an emphasis on the autonomy of artistic processes in relation to figuration, drawing on the example of the relationship between body and drapery.

The viewer imagined one object behind another, the difference between the muscles and the fabrics represented. Today, experimental knowledge has replaced imaginative knowledge. We are aware of a world that exists and explains itself... We need an art that is valid in and of itself [16].

The same goals that, as seen earlier, Barilli attributed to Hellenistic sculpture—achieving "airy" effects in stone and bronze [17] —are thus recontextualized in the electric age: technological advancements allow research to move towards "an aerial art" [18], literally transmissible via the ether. The ultimate goal of Spatialism [19], therefore, stems from well-grounded premises that still have roots in the classical and humanistic tradition of drawing on canvas. The first step, therefore, is precisely to pierce the surface, to penetrate the canvas, in order to extend its sensitive skin into the four-dimensional infinity, since "the forces that have annihilated four hundred years of illusion and idealism, expelling them from the painting, have transformed spatial depth into surface tension" [20].

These are also the years in which we witness the invention of the transistor and the integrated circuit, the protagonists of the beginning of the electronic age. It is within this technical and theoretical landscape that Piero Manzoni, a close friend of Lucio Fontana, created his Achromes, the famous

crumpled canvases soaked in plaster or kaolin, almost sealing a research path initiated in the 16th century by Vasari's accounts. What in the Renaissance was study, preamble, and workshop model, now becomes the ratification of an achieved autonomy: drapery is no longer simply detached from the body, it is an independent subject of study.

The Achromes [21] in turn open the way for Yves Klein to conceive Le Vide (1958). Manzoni, in fact, challenged the concept of optical representation using the same technical apparatus employed by Renaissance artists, but allowing the material to act according to self-sufficient processes (drying) in order to free himself definitively not only from the human figure but also from form and color. Klein would go further, directly eliminating the support—at least as it was understood in the middle of the last century—thus expanding his reflection to the entire space, which was meticulously painted white before the inauguration. Among the photographs documenting the exhibition, only the white curtains of the Iris Clert Gallery remain visible as testimony to the void.

At the end of the 1960s, with the development of the concept of Anti Form by Robert Morris [22], object-type art programmatically adopts the characteristics of self-sufficiency. Morris emphasizes objects that "stand as a self-sufficient whole shape rather than as a relational element" [23], works, in other words, that "simply separate, more or less, from what is physical by making relationships themselves another order of facts" [24]. The path begun with Sculpture de Voyage can be considered complete: drapery, now definitively detached from the assumption of dressing the figure, becomes a system unto itself. Once freed from any reference to the underlying body, drapery allows artists to focus on the creation of self-sufficient forms, seeking a form for the sake of form. However, Morris still primarily focuses on the constructive properties of materials capable of satisfying the "imperative for the well-built thing" [25], thus leaving out "all nonrigid materials," including fabric, which interests him only when stretched over a rectangular frame ("stretching a piece of canvas") [26] . Yet artists have always loved drapery in itself—drapery for drapery's sake—especially for its intrinsic properties. When drapery is painted or sculpted, what is painted or sculpted are non-representational forms, bordering on figuration, those types of forms that are unconstrained, and to which, as Huxley points out, even artists from the most naturalistic traditions love to surrender themselves [27].

[A] why this privileged condition, I do not know. Perhaps because the forms of pleated drapery are so strange and dramatic that they conquer the eye, and in doing so, force attention to the miraculous fact of pure existence? [28]

Huxley seems to believe that even in the Renaissance and classical art, drapery constitutes a kind of experimental laboratory in which the preternatural dimension of form can be freely investigated. In focusing on the fascination with draped fabric, Huxley identifies in the material properties of drapery the manifestation of a "reality in its purest state" [29]. After all, these are the years in which he also investigates the processes and dynamics of vision on a purely sensory level, reaffirming what Brian O'Doherty will later write: "Just as the nineteenth century was obsessed with systems, the twentieth century is obsessed with perception, which mediates between object and idea and includes both"

[30].

3. "Only Folded Surfaces." On Drapery in the Digital Age

So far, the trajectory of drapery has been followed from classical sculpture to the canvas and from canvas to the four-dimensional space. The next step is to analyze a current process: the return of drapery to two dimensions, within the surface of the monitor. A series of hypotheses will be proposed regarding how contemporary artists conceive and spatialize works generated with digital tools or indirectly influenced by the pervasiveness of such a model.

In outlining the premises of what he calls rooted aesthetics, Nicholas Bourriaud argues that just as "Florentine painters used Siena's earth to depict Tuscan landscapes" [31], staying in close contact "with the 'model,' as... the Impressionists did," today engaging with the digital infosphere means "entering the 'model' itself and moving according to its rhythms" [32]. Indeed, it can be asserted that much of our daily visual experience occurs through contact, via the sensitive glass of the touch-screen [33], and that the consumption of the latest artistic outcomes is experienced through online viewing long before it happens in person.

It is precisely this haptic-visual perception that Lucy Hardcastle dedicates her visual experiments to, providing a possible index of the most current expressive techniques, where 3D modeling, digital printing, and glass blowing contribute to the development of a varied research in continuous osmosis "between the virtual and the physical world" [34]. Her works, which often include references to textile elements and folded surfaces, aim to give digital images tactile sensations and to imbue her glass sculptures (her Phygital Objects) with ethereal and abstract properties.

For new artists immersed in the digital landscape, there seems to be a pressing need to investigate methods for returning to three-dimensional space an image extrapolated from the two-dimensional surface of the screen. Hito Steyerl defines this process as objectification [35], while Boris Groys highlights the peculiar nature of the digital image: a file that cannot express visible content without the support of software capable of interpreting it [36]. The very fact that a digital image cannot simply be "shown or copied (as an analogous 'mechanically reproducible' image can), but only staged and performed" [37] betrays the inseparability of the digital image from an ephemeral practice.

Numerous contemporary artists have therefore engaged in folding, crumpling, piling, stretching, or hanging their ideas (or files) in physical reality by resorting to the model of the draped veil. After the 2000s, this procedure seems to have almost become a conventional code, the most suitable for evoking the two-dimensional surface (with all the baggage of the pictorial and conceptual tradition of figurative illusionism) and, at the same time, spatial plasticity (the object occupying physical space). Following the Warburgian example, an online archive has thus been collected on the Instagram profile @lonelydrapery to account for the variety and pervasiveness of this phenomenon in the imagination of the digital age.

Following an inverse process, the digital acquisition of morphological data (for example, through aerial photogrammetry or 3D scanning) once again invokes the idea of the folded surface as a point of reference,

almost functioning as an experimentum crucis to demonstrate the assertion that the medium is indeed the message [38]. The medium of computational photography and the use of digital media for image processing – which can express different messages and pursue different goals – nevertheless produce the same results and reach the same outcomes in terms of visual response. Steyerl argues that "the data scanned in three dimensions do not produce solid bodies or objects, but only folded surfaces" [39].

These surfaces can fold in on themselves to create full volumes, but in the fractional space, they are mostly sheets folded into a third dimension: surfaces that can be manipulated and topologically modified to include any possible type of shape. Depth is achieved by folding this surface. [...] The surface is no longer a stage or a backdrop upon which subjects and objects are placed. Instead, it folds into objects and vectors of motion, affectivity, and action, thus removing the artificial epistemological separation between them.

According to Bourriaud, contemporary forms refer to the topological model that designates "reality as a conglomerate of surfaces and transient objects potentially displaceable" [40], and that, together with the concepts of translation and precariousness, helps define the characteristics of rooted art. The exhibition Surface Proxy (Paris, 2015) by American artist and programmer Clement Valla effectively documented the validity of these principles. In the gallery space, several volumes made of synthetic foam and covered with digital inkjet prints on fabric presented themselves as possible three-dimensional reconstructions of fragmented sculptures and medieval architectural details. The resulting configuration is disorienting, highlighting the ambiguous relationship between the object and its virtual image, almost simulating the pervasiveness of digital technology as a ubiquitous patina on every element of physical reality [41].

Once again, the tradition of the non-strictly-figurative role of drapery is recontextualized within the contemporary visual climate. The legacy and imagery associated with drapery seem to ignite a reflection on how the folded surface visually affirms the relationship that artists establish with technology. The persistence, both direct and indirect, of drapery remains an effective tool today for conducting a survey of the social and technological transformations mediated by the digital infosphere.

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Note:

[1] M. McLuhan, Gli strumenti del comunicare [1964], tr. .it. E. Capriolo, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1967, p.122.

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[3] R. Barilli, Arte e cultura materiale in occidente - Dall'arcaismo greco alle avanguardie storiche, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011, pp. 41-43.

[4] E.H. Gombrich, La storia dell'arte [1950], trad. it. M. L. Spaziani, Phaidon, Milano 2008, pp. 64-79.

[5] L. Da Vinci, Trattato della pittura, a cura di E. Camesasca, Milano 1999, p. 38.

[6] E.H. Gombrich, La storia dell'arte, cit., p. 178.

[7] L. Da Vinci, Trattato della pittura, cit. p. 41.

[8] R. Barilli, Arte e cultura materiale in Occidente, cit. p. 164.

[9] L. Da Vinci, Trattato della pittura, cit., p. 262.

[10] Ibid.

[11] G. Vasari, Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori [1568], a cura di C. Brunetti - B. Fanini, 2015, www.memofonte.accademiadellacrusca.org. [23 febbraio 2021].

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[13] Ibi, p. 91.

[14] P. Cabanne, Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp [1967], trad. ing. Ron Padgett, Thames & Hudson, Londra 1971, pp. 59-60.

[15] Lucio Fontana, Manifesti, scritti, interviste, a cura di A. Sanna, Abscondita, Milano 2015, p. 29.

[16] Ibi, p. 15.

[17] R. Barilli, Arte e cultura materiale in occidente, cit., pp. 41-43.

[18] L. Fontana, Manifesti, scritti, interviste, cit., p. 23.

[19] Si veda il Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione in L. Fontana, Manifesti, scritti, interviste, cit., p. 33.

[20] B. O'Doherty, Inside the White Cube. L'ideologia dello spazio espositivo [2000], trad. it. di I. Inserra e M. Mancini, Johan & Levi, Monza 2012, p. 35.

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[23] Ibi, p. 41.

[24] Ibi, p. 43.

[25] Ibi, p. 41.

[26] Ibidem.

[27] A. Huxley, Le porte della percezione – Paradiso e inferno [1954], trad. it. di L. Sautto, Mondadori, Milano, 2014, p. 26.

[28] Ibi, p. 49.

[29] Ibidem.

[30] B. O'Doherty, Inside the White Cube, cit., p. 51.

[31] N. Bourriaud, Il Radicante. Per un'estetica della globalizzazione [2009], trad. it. di M. E. Giacomelli, Postmedia Books, Milano 2014, p. 103.

[32] Ibidem.

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[34] F. Fontana, Come toccheresti un'immagine? Intervista con Lucy Hardcastle, 16 dicembre 2017, www.digicult.it [01/03/2021].

[35] H. Steyerl, Duty Free Art. L'arte nell'epoca della guerra civile planetaria [2017], trad. it. di N. Poo, Johan & Levi, Monza 2018, pp.181-182

[36] B. Groys, In The Flow. L'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità digitale [2016], trad. it. di G. Biaggi, Postmedia Books, Milano 2018, p. 127.

[37] Ibidem.

[38] M. McLuhan, Gli strumenti del comunicare, cit., pp. 29-41.

[39] H. Steyerl, Duty Free Art, cit., pp. 179-181.

[40] N. Bourriaud, Il Radicante, cit., p. 81.

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