

# Unfolding patterns of revolt

*Rosi Braidotti & Anneke Smelik*

**Abstract:** This article deals with art, fashion design, and cultural practice as both critique and creativity. It analyses artworks by William Kentridge, Sue Austin, and Lina Iris Viktor, as well as the fashion of Viktor & Rolf, reading these different works as modes of resistance and revolt against current forms and relations of power and knowledge. The authors place emphasis on new materialism and posthuman theory as theoretical frameworks that expand the range of cultural critique. They add a thematic focus on the actual bodies, the materials of cultural action, and the role of non-human elements in the making of artworks. With reference to feminist, decolonial and indigenous theories, the article analyses the workings of counter-cultural memories in contemporary art and fashion design practices.

**Keywords:** counter-memory, cultural memory, new materialism, posthuman bodies, cultural revolt, fold, fashion

## Memories on a wall

In 2016 the renowned South-African artist William Kentridge created a highly original mural along the Tiber river in Rome, called *Triumphs and Laments*. The huge mural, five hundred by ten metres, is made with a very special technique: Kentridge created the images by cleaning parts of the old dirty wall that lines the banks of the river, leaving the sedimented dirt as an imprint telling the history of the city of Rome. In other words, he created an artwork made out of urban dirt. It renders a fragile and yet timeless artwork, subjected to future transformations when new dirt will sediment on the old, or when the tide rises and washes the images away altogether. Meanings are unfolding successively across the spectrum of recorded time, but also exploding in a non-linear fashion as a result of unexpected disruptions.

Surveyed while walking the path along the river, the artwork looks like an animated film, created out of shadows and flickering images. It has a stone-like kinetic energy. Like so much of Kentridge's work, the images tell – as the title



Detail of *Triumphs and Laments* by William Kentridge (2016); on the right the black block with the text “that which I do not remember”. Photo by Anneke Smelik, Rome, 2016.

betrays – not only of the triumphs of the ‘eternal city’, but also of the laments of the Roman people who were beaten, tortured, or hanged. The artist inserted a large image of just a black block, in which the phrase “(quello che non ricordo)” is written between brackets: that which I do not remember.

Kentridge can be counted as an artist who performs a critique of culture that, as Rosemarie Buikema (2021) writes, is “geared towards the decolonisation of the postcolonial public space, as well as the production and mediation of both knowledge and memory” (116). Art in the public space functions as a reminder of the omissions of official history; it is counter-memory in the making. Indeed, what Kentridge does here, is what Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik call the act of performing memory (2013). In this deliberate ‘doing’ of memory, Kentridge performs the past in the present, recalling and recollecting the history of Rome in an affective assemblage. *Triumphs and Laments* implies a return, revision, re-enactment, and re-presentation, making experiences from the past present again in the form of these fleeting images along the Roman river Tiber (Plate and Smelik, 2013, 6). Letting counter-memories emerge is an act of creation that also mobilizes a form of subversion of the dominant historical narratives. It creates beauty by speaking truth to power. In the words of Buikema (2021) on a different artwork by Kentridge: “Kentridge’s performances articulate the violent and oppressive aspects of modern narratives of progression, address concomitant cultural amnesia and thematise acts of memory and working through as an inescapable contemporary responsibility” (131). All this produces the aesthetically pleasing, highly enjoyable and yet disturbing effect of performance, which any spectator walking along the Tiber can bear witness to. If you can spot it, and if you can read it, you will be transported to a different time-space zone.

As Buikema (2021) incisively writes on Kentridge: “Time and again, that which has been lost is made present, relived, reshaped and re-signified, establishing new

relations between present, past and future whilst never ceasing to mourn that loss” (132). The affective quality of this artwork is what strikes as one of its most lasting features: *Triumphs and Laments* reinscribes the city space of Rome, transposing it to a different dimension. The unfolding of this space of becoming is a heterogeneous mix: it mediates the experience of the jogger who runs along, casting an absent-minded glance upon the murals, with the cyclist who flies by at great speed, missing it altogether. It takes in the tourist who strolls slowly and meditatively, making sure to take the images in. The contingency of all these encounters and missed hits is an integral part of the experience. The images are vulnerable to the workings of the weather – transient dirt grafted on the very materiality of the ancient urban wall. Memory – as discourse and representation – is here entangled with materiality, where the artwork functions as an act of remembrance (Munteán, Plate and Smelik, 2017). The wall becomes vibrant with the memories and counter-memories of its citizens, telling their stories. *Triumphs and Laments* unfolds history, and yet “these folds of history are never smoothed over”, as Buikema (2021, 132) cogently writes. What remains is an unfolding pattern of revolt.

### **From the folds of Kentridge to the folds of fashion**

From the fold of history in Kentridge's art, we move to the practice of the fold in the field of fashion, here understood as an artistic design practice. It is a contemporary cultural practice based on a concerted use of the selected and often especially designed materials: from early traditional fabrics to 3D printing, fashion begins by making its own materials. In this respect, it is an intrinsically transgressive practice that does not follow genealogically from the past, but unfolds in a disruptive manner from its material foundations. Smelik (2014) argues that nowhere is the constantly vibrating dynamic and creative force of the fold more visible and palpable than in the pleats, creases, draperies, furrows, bows, and ribbons of contemporary fashion. She adapts creatively Deleuze's insight (1993) that the fold expresses an infinite process of moving in between an exteriority and an interiority. She understands it as a continuous movement of folding, unfolding, defolding, enfolding, and refolding of material and form, content and design. Such an understanding of the fold in garments as a continuous, and hence unfinished, material and discursive process also implies a different concept and practice of the living body. That idea is of crucial importance for feminism, anti-racism, postcolonial critique, environmentalism and other forms of 'revolt' as Buikema (2021) calls it.

The fold as material and discursive practice allows for an opening up of the body in new ways. It points to a continuous process of becoming for the subject who is wearing certain fashion designs, or at least, it points to the possibility of such a

becoming. Take for example Viktor & Rolf's collection *Atomic Bomb* (Autumn/Winter 1998), which photographers Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin helped cast and style. Viktor & Rolf stuffed the garments with large balloons or padding, resembling the mushroom cloud shape of a nuclear bomb. They showed the colourful clothes twice, once with the balloons or paddings, and once without them, the 'anticlimax' as they dubbed the designs, now hanging loosely in large folds around the body and festively enhanced with garlands. The designs thus integrate the elements of festivity and war, indicating the confusion whether people would either be partying or become victims of weapons of mass destruction in the approaching millennium. The collection is an exploration of the potential function of clothes to deterritorialise the familiar form of the body, and especially of the idealised body shape circulating in contemporary consumer culture. Deforming the body through padding is a recurrent element in Viktor & Rolf designs, which is important in understanding how the process of becoming has the power to deterritorialise bodies from dominant modes of representation. This kind of fashion pushes the limits of what a living body can do and what it can become through the force and affect of folds.

For Deleuze (1993), the fold, or the process of folding, is a practice of becoming. Insofar as matter can fold, change, sediment, and transform, it is capable of becoming, because it involves a process of opening out to the world, or conversely of folding the world into the self. Even dust and dirt are capable of becoming art and meaning practices. In fashion, even 'ugly' utilitarian materials can produce beauty. Take for example Viktor & Rolf's *Flowerbomb* collection (Spring/Summer 2005). In the extravagant catwalk show, the models are first donned with black motor helmets and dressed in black clothes. After the spectacular launch of Viktor & Rolf's first perfume, called Flowerbomb, the models return with their faces made up in pink and dressed in the same designs but now in exuberant colours. The dresses are constructed out of giant bows and ribbons, which have since become a trademark of Viktor & Rolf. Bows, knots, ribbons, frills, ruffles and all such trimmings are variations on the fold. Watching the models walk down the catwalk, one can see the bows and ribbons bob up and down, flowing and billowing around the body.

It is the gap between body and folds that allows for opening up a freedom of movement (Smelik, 2016). The multilayered garments become pure movement, from which the body can free itself. The very movement of Viktor & Rolf's billowing designs shows how the body is involved in a continuous process of folding, unfolding, and refolding. The motion of the clothes gives an idea of the body as incorporeal, a body of passions, affect, and intensity. If the fold is a concept to think of subjectivity as a process of becoming, and functions as an interface between the inside and the outside, depth and surface, being and appearing, then we can understand Viktor & Rolf's experimental designs as an invitation to engage the wearer in the creative

process of becoming, by transforming the body, and perhaps reinventing the self. In creating fold after fold, crease after wrinkle, bow after ribbon, Viktor & Rolf's designs open up to an understanding of the body as an infinite play of becoming, as a cultural practice.

As so much designer fashion today probes the limits of what a body can do or what it can become, the critical notion of the fold helps to see how such experimental clothes set the body in motion. The fold is just light, colour, depth, surface, shape, fluttering and flickering, and opening a line of flight. The folds and pleats of Viktor & Rolf's bows and ribbons opens the subject up to a spiralling process of creative becoming. By transforming normative images of human bodies, perhaps they even liberate it from the market, which is so pervasive in the consumeristic world of fashion. What remains is an unfolding pattern of what bodies can do.

### **Bodies, encore**

Let us now take another example of what a body can do in a process of becoming, from Rosi Braidotti's work on the posthuman (2022). The last volume of the posthuman trilogy refers to art as both a research practice and a praxis of resistance. Braidotti analyses extensively a stunning live-art and video work called *Creating the Spectacle!*, by British disabled artist Sue Austin. This amazing performance features the world's first underwater wheelchair art event. She appears almost to float in mid-water, displaying physical abilities she had left unexplored or virtual until then. The effect on the spectators is uplifting, in a display of joy and freedom of movement that is liberating not only for a disabled person, but also for those who admire her artworks. Produced through her company "Freewheeling" as part of the London 2012 Festival during the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the artwork has been viewed by over 150 million people since.

One may think that a disabled artist dancing underwater in a wheelchair pushes the boundaries of what bodies can do. Braidotti argues that it clearly moves advocacy for the disabled to an altogether new dimension. In this respect it becomes emblematic of what she has called 'posthuman bodies' (2013, 2019, 2022) in several interlinked ways. Firstly, by interacting in a creative manner with a technological artifact – the wheelchair. Secondly, by embracing the materiality of the natural environment, the water world. Thirdly, through the impact this living artwork has on the viewers, by challenging expectations and set patterns of perception of what disabled bodies can do, through the juxtaposition of a wheelchair with the fluid underwater environment. And throughout the performance, Austin shows the virtual possibilities of what all and any bodies can do. In other words, she speaks truth to the power of bodily normativity, advocating the right to and the dignity of

bodily diversity, so that ‘other’ bodies need not be repaired or fixed, but be accepted in the singularity of their specific forms of embodiment.

All feminist politics is body politics as cultural rebellion. But in posthuman times we are aware that a body is not only, or not even, human or anthropomorphic. In fact, as Deleuze teaches us, a body can be anything: animal, vegetable, a body of sounds, a linguistic corpus, a mind or an idea; it can be a social body, a line of code, a DNA sequence, or a collectivity. For Braidotti, a philosopher of new materialism, these are all modulations on the same vital matter. Bodies are not only signs of individual identity, but can also be understood as a materially embedded heterogeneous assembly of human and non-human components. They are not only a socially constructed entity, but an embodied, embedded, relational and affective portal to the world. Posthuman feminism understands feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial subjects and bodies as sites of multiple experiments with alternative modes of becoming. This task is matched by the quest for adequate representations and alternative figurations of the weird subjects we are in the process of becoming. Braidotti calls this a process of ‘becoming posthuman’, which is neither linear nor one-dimensional. It enlists the resources of material bodies but requires also a loss of innocence about the ‘naturalness’ of bodies. At heart, like all transformative and subversive practices, art and fashion included, the process involves a high degree of dis-identification from and subversion of set habits of thought.

The famous feminist slogan ‘our bodies, ourselves’ acquires an ironic twist in this process of posthuman transition. The embodied feminist self, far from being the unitary point of epistemological verification of lived experiences, turns into a crowd of human and non-human housemates. By implication, this means that the bodily markers for the organization and distribution of sexual or racial differences also shift. We have come a long way from the crude system that used to mark differences on the basis of visually verifiable anatomical and physiological variations between the sexes, the races and the species. Nowadays, differences are multidimensional processes scattered across a multilayered field of distributed power relations. Seizing their complexity and drawing adequate cartographies of bodies, power, and knowledge and of their interrelation is a core task of any cultural critique that cares for social justice.

Take for example the multilayered self-portrait *Eleventh* (2018) by Liberian-British artist Lina Iris Viktor in which she combines influences from classical mythology, West-African textiles, and Aboriginal painting. To paraphrase Rosemarie Buikema (2021), we can see here how this complex painting works through the past, thus not only contributing to a better understanding of the present, but also making possible structural changes for the future (149). Viktor recycles “the matter of a contested past, giving it new form and new meaning” (ibid.). Borrowing from a



*Eleventh* by Lina Iris Viktor (2018). Photo by Anneke Smelik, exhibition *In the Black Fantastic*, Kunsthal Rotterdam, 2023.

variety of cultural traditions, the artist unfolds multiple layers of memory, artistic composition, race, and feminist body politics.

Afrofuturist and feminist artists point out something we find quite significant, namely that body politics is a minority issue. It is indeed left to the social minorities to provide an accountable location for subjects within our societies in posthuman times. Minorities are the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised 'others' who do not conform to expected standards or canons. Women, LGBTQI+ people, racialised and indigenous bodies, and other alternative minority forces, with their historically 'leaky bodies', are ideally placed to reassert the powers, prerogatives, and pleasures of the posthuman flesh. Cultural and theoretical critiques follow suit. Feminism, anti-racism, and postcolonial critique foreground the desire for social justice and

freedom, a deep, visceral longing for overcoming conditions that are not bearable, unfair, not sustainable. Consequently art cannot be satisfied with just accounting for the indignities and injustices of the present, although such an account is necessary as a critical cartography, but it also need to point to affirmative alternatives. In the tradition of Afrofuturist transformative aesthetics, Viktor's painting *Eleventh* records not only a painful past, but also a future of becoming otherwise. In this short piece we have shown how scholars, artists, and fashion designers show that we are all capable of becoming – becoming other.

Deeply rooted in feminism, anti-racism, and other forms of 'revolt', critical scholars, like artists or designers, are freedom fighters who have to trust their dreams so as to imagine a different future. Rosemarie Buikema, Anneke Smelik, and Rosi Braidotti, together with Maaïke Meijer and Berteke Waaldijk and others, augmented the beginning of women's and gender studies at Utrecht University, rooted in a feminist tradition as an ongoing event, opening possibilities and creating fractures (Buikema and Smelik, 1995). Feminism, like anti-racism and postcolonial critique, is not a historical precedent that can or should be replicated, but a virtual past of half-accomplishments and semi-successes that call for renewed collective instantiation. The energy of these critical positions is an affirmative force infused with visionary powers, which need to be actualised and expressed by each new generation in its own way. All of us feminists across multiple generations acknowledge our formidable intellectual foremothers, who paved the way of our cultural, political, and scholarly practice. We share a sense of intergenerational responsibility and the conviction that the true 'dutiful daughters' are those who engage in cultural revolt, creating counter-memory resonating across time. Traces on the walls of history, or in the folds of time, however transient, will be never be deleted. We will continue to unfold in multiple becomings.

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### About the authors

**Rosi Braidotti:** Distinguished University Professor Emerita, Utrecht University.

**Anneke Smelik:** Professor Emerita of Visual Culture, Radboud University Nijmegen.

