

COMMISSIONED TEXT BY LAURA VAN GRINSVEN

“Release me from this thing”

The young artist makes a suit, a costume to pass off as a professional, as successful. There is a gap between desire and reality. The finish is a bit choppy. The fabric is poor, the seams are untidy – it is made by an amateur after all. His aim, however, is perfectly clear.

I recall Lacan’s dictum that the individual has at least two parts, consisting of a real and an imaginary ego. The imaginary ego is a static mirror image, the view of oneself as another. This abstraction of the person’s actual experiences, confusions, are generally idealised, superior to the real ego. An aspiration, in a healthy state of being. You might see the imaginary ego as a suit that will never fit exactly because reality can never be reduced to a tailored, perfect static form, to the complete identification of the self with the image of self.

Alex Farrar’s first suit might be interpreted as a materialisation of wish fulfillment: first, of the wish to be a successful artist, and second, to be able to identify with this ‘self’ – the fusion of the image with reality. The ‘suit’ is the materialisation of a desire.

Even so, it seems to me that the ‘suit’ cannot be so easily reduced to a psychological symptom. Farrar’s ‘suit’ in particular refutes any interpretation in terms of sheer personal pursuit, biographical particulars, and psychological factors such as motive and meaning. The ‘suit’ is inconspicuous, made in such a way that no one would ever say to Farrar ‘great suit!’ or ‘that really looks good on you’. Grey or blue, like Obama’s, the emphasis is on his ideas, not his appearance.

The ‘suit’ expresses far more than the artist’s individuality. It also relates to him as a – male – Western entrepreneur, as a professional, as an autonomous actor: creative, idiosyncratic, original. The ‘imaginary artist’. That image weighs heavily on artists, and art itself.

What Farrar makes clear is that as an artist he is conscious of this, that he has to find a way of relating to this image. The ‘suit’ is the question of whether the ‘imaginary artist’ is the right goal to pursue. The ‘imaginary artist’ also makes itself felt in the work’s meaning. There is seepage into the work: seepage of what is demanded of the artist, what he must and can mean, and what his intentions are.

The ‘suit’ achieves a deliberate infiltration of the ‘imaginary artist’ into the work, as a concept, as material. Any item of clothing serves as an allusion to what is not, but what is the precondition for its own existence: the body. Adopting and reinterpreting Kant’s term, Derrida calls it a parergon, a subordinate element that serves as a carrier of meaning: the body, in the case of clothing, is a good example of this.

Clearly then, the ‘suit’ says far more about the wearer than about its own materiality.

The carrier is effectively the space between Alex himself, the ‘imaginary artist’, and the artist in the work. This dizzying schizophrenia hones the notion of the imaginary, ‘autonomous’ artist, all dressed, wrapped up, made to measure and pushes it to the limit.

After graduation there is a second suit, of better quality, with better workmanship. He has learned a great deal. Years go by and various suits wear out. What remains can be found

in the pockets or a chance photograph. The passage of time is reflected in unraveled seams, traces of wear and tear, and the accumulated knowledge. Also, perhaps, in the conversations of those who have noticed the unannounced interventions.

Alex told me that his last suits, and hence their performativity, attracted less and less consternation. The 'suit' was better made and was itself not such a strange apparition in the places it haunted. The 'imaginary artist' and the real artist appeared more and more frequently to coincide.

Alex did not mind, he tells me, if the performance went unnoticed. He never mentioned the 'suit' whilst he was wearing it. The 'suit' underscored his consciousness of himself as an object – an 'imaginary', static object, it seems to me. I also wonder if he has ever had a desire to become the man in the 'suit', in other words whether it is only performance. The 'suit' suspends motion – even though there have been several suits, each one in turn making slight additional modifications to the 'imaginary'. Even so, clothes make the man. Yet the man himself is not asked anything. He has to comply with the image. Static and stifling as it is.

The worn suits have been laid out and prepared at the conservation workshop of the Rijksmuseum. Residues of performances, of desires, laid on the table. The last suit has only just been finished and is virtually perfect. It is not worn, only displayed. The desire – obsolete, distorted or fulfilled – is weightless now, cast in concrete.

And now all that remains is the story about that last suit. It seems to be perfect: the craftsman's final test or 'masterpiece'. This suit will never be worn, however. The 'suit' is now separate from any reality, separate from the wearer. In the emptiness of its sleeves and trouser legs breathes the body of the 'imaginary artist', the parergon, wrung loose and now shown in its pure form.

In an attempt to capture the imaginary, Farrar made solid concrete casts of cotton toiles. Partial objects: lower legs, shoulder pieces, crotch and seat. A well made suit is a cast of the body. A cast of the 'suit' becomes a new body, fragmented. The concrete fills the emptiness in the abandoned suit. The concrete body parts do not make up a self-portrait. They represent the 'imaginary artist': frozen into immobility in the name of art; detached from their vibrant, multifaceted existence; isolated, detached from their natural relationships and existence for the benefit of the imaginary demands of art, and displayed in sterile spaces.

Just as the imaginary does not coincide with the real, with the actual, complex, direct experience of reality, no single image coincides with it either. Every attempt is made in hindsight. In the same way, the 'suit' is a frozen reference to the total reality of relationships.

I recall Alex's words: "My work always has an emotional starting point." Of course it does. Just as the non-psychological aspect of the 'suit' is part of the truth. The 'suit' has many truths, most of them unnamed. The 'suit' – like this text – is a cast of reality. Made static, cut off from its natural multifaceted connections, propelled to the extremes of its potential, complex and irritated.

Farrar is now carrying on without his suit. He inhabits and moves around the art world without the static image of the 'imaginary artist'. Alex has outgrown his suit. Yet he was only able to achieve this autonomy by emphasising the existence of the 'imaginary artist', dressing himself in that image, and eventually casting it off. His final request to me: "Release me from this thing".

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