

'Fragile,' 'Souper' and POP! The Atopos Paper Fashion Collection

By Stamos Fafalios and Vassilis Zidianakis

“Paper Dresses Soon” announced the headline of a *New York Times* report from Paris in 1907.¹ It was not until 60 years later, however, that printed paper garments became a mass-produced reality. “Paper fashion” took the United States market by storm between 1966 and 1968. Canadian and European markets soon followed. Thousands of dresses were produced; they could be purchased at drugstores, supermarkets, department stores and by mail order in exchange for clipped coupons and box tops. Though initially an advertising gimmick, the form was quickly appropriated by fashion designers, painters and graphic designers. Pop artists like Andy Warhol were enlisted to create and promote them and in turn saw their work appropriated and imitated on the dresses’ surfaces. It was all over in two years; the fad faded and consumers moved on, but its merger of paper, visual art, wearable form and consumer delight summarizes a culturally dynamic moment, and remains an inspiration to contemporary artists and designers working at the thresholds of their disciplines.

Since 2004, Atopos Contemporary Visual Culture has been collecting paper garments.² Founded in Athens in 2003 by the authors (recently joined by Angelos Tsourapas), Atopos cvc is an interdisciplinary platform that accommodates their backgrounds in art, architecture, anthropology and mathematics. Atopos cvc is particularly interested in the human figure and costume. The name comes from the ancient Greek *ἀτοπος*, meaning the strange, the unwonted, the eccentric and the unclassifiable. Paper fashion is *ἀτοπος*.

Paper has been used in the manufacture of garments and accessories since its invention in China about 2000 years ago. Paper and clothing have a long-standing recycling relationship: old rags have been used to make paper since the 12th century, when the knowledge of producing paper was first imported into Europe. The opposite practice—using paper to make clothing—came much later in Europe, arising about 150 years ago, but in Japan the tradition of paper



The Big Ones for '68 (1968), promotional paper dress for Universal Studios, with “pop” portraits of the Studio’s popular stars. Photo: Panos Davios. ©Atopos cvc collection, Athens.

clothing extends back a thousand years. According to legend, in 988 a Buddhist monk first made himself a provisional choir shirt from the pages of old sutras, initiating *kamiko*—clothing made from strong sheets of paper that have been

softened and starched with vegetable juice to produce a durable material. Paper weaving, or *shifu*, was developed in 16th-century Japan; in this technique, strips of paper are twisted into threads and woven together. Samurai used the *shifu* tech-

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Knitted paper vest from late Edo period (18-19th century) Japan. Photo: Panos Davios. ©Atopos cvc collection, Athens.

nique to make ceremonial clothing. An 18th–19th century vest in their collection is knitted from paper yarns.

Though the 1907 *Times* article described a new French paper thread that was “stout, unshrinkable, impervious to damp, non-inflammable and costs two-thirds less than cotton,” it was the American Scott Paper Company that first brought paper dresses to the market in March 1966 as a promotional ploy for the company’s new line of toilet paper, paper napkins and towels. Within a few months the company had received more than 500,000 orders. Scott’s idea was quickly imitated by others; some manufacturers began to specialize in paper clothing.³

The term “paper” was a bit of a misnomer: these materials were non-woven and gave the impression of paper, but their components included cotton, rayon, polyester and new-technology synthetic fibers in addition to cellulose.

Destined to be worn once and thrown away, these were the first expressly disposable garments in the history of Western fashion, and were addressed to a younger consumer public accustomed to disposable commodities such as cups, plates, tablecloths and diapers. Paper fashion reflected the desire of a postwar generation for affordable, fashionable and futuristic design; at the same time its inexpensive production made it a good moneymaking venture. Like throw-away paper hats, paper dresses were used to promote commercial products. The wearer was transformed into a walking billboard for motion pictures, kitchenware, food and drink: Butterfinger and Baby Ruth candies, Seagram’s whisky and Campbell’s Soup were among the



The Souper Dress (after Warhol) (1968), launched by Campbell’s Soup Company for the promotion of its “Vegetable Soup,” cellulose-cotton mixture dress. Photo: Panos Davios. ©Atopos cvc collection, Athens.

products blazoned on dresses. (Campbell’s *Souper Dress* (1968), which could be acquired for \$1 and two Campbell’s vegetable soup labels, was a witty play on Warhol’s multiplied appropriation of its soup-can label.)

The companies that produced the dresses and the designers who styled them often borrowed from the visual language of Pop Art (which of course revamped the visual language of advertising). The *Souper Dress* was not the only one to play on Warhol’s fame; Universal Studios released a dress featuring portraits of movie stars with the high-contrast, stenciled-color

look of the artist’s screenprints. Dynamic Op Art motifs; psychedelic, neo-Art Nouveau designs; trademark logos and the faces of politicians also adorned the dresses. The then-popular idea of a future life in space was represented in “foil” paper dresses, made of a nonwoven material with a metallic surface.

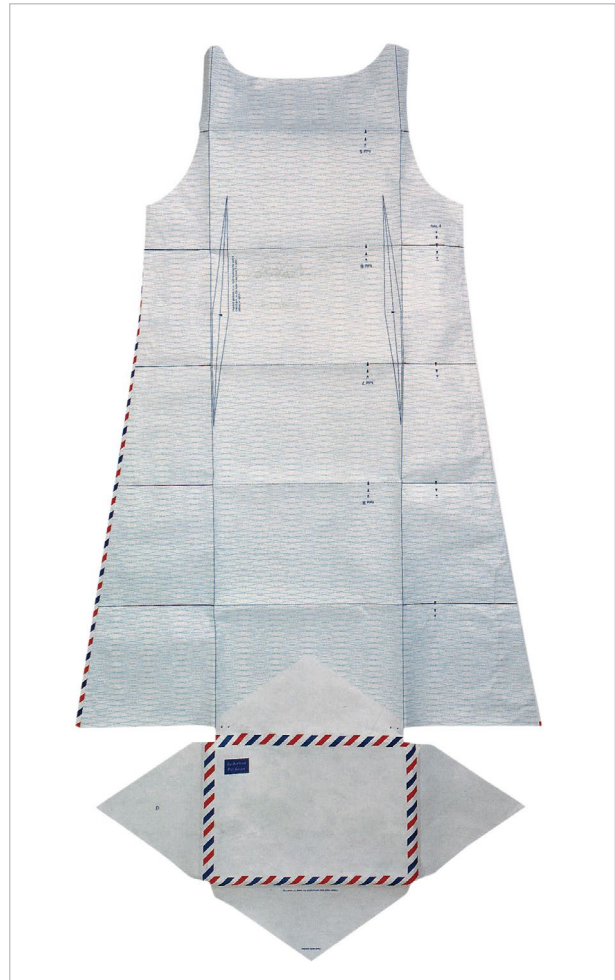
While some dresses bore repeating floral or paisley patterns that might just as easily have appeared on traditional fabrics, the most distinctive ones treated the surface of the dress as a unified field for a single large composition. The multicolored designs and pop-cultural or

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Left: Richard Nixon's electoral campaign paper dress with logo (1968). Manufactured by Mars Manufacturing Company, Waste Basket Boutique line. Photo: Panos Davios. ©Atopos cvc collection, Athens. **Right:** Hussein Chalayan, *Airmail Dress* (1999). Photo: Panos Davios. ©Atopos cvc collection, Athens.



topical imagery printed on them was core to their popularity. Paper dresses advertised newspapers⁴ and the commercial phone book Yellow Pages.⁵ They featured collages of press cuttings or headlines of notable events such as the launch of Apollo 10. During the 1968 American presidential race, paper dresses were produced in support of Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, George Romney, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. The Canadian liberal candidate Pierre Trudeau issued a paper dress bearing his portrait as part of his successful election campaign.

In 1967, at the height of paper fashion, the airlines BOAC and TWA introduced paper uniforms for their stewardesses. The latter were styled by the designer Elisa Daggs, who also created a promotional paper sari for Air India.

In contrast to the audacious colors, bold geometries and adventurous imagery

applied to the dresses, the actual garment structures were strikingly simple. Almost all were A-line, short and sleeveless—a convenient canvas for artists or for the women who would wear them. One of the defining features of paper fashion was the creative freedom it offered consumers. The packaging often urged buyers to cut the dresses according to their body shape and taste, or to add decoration.

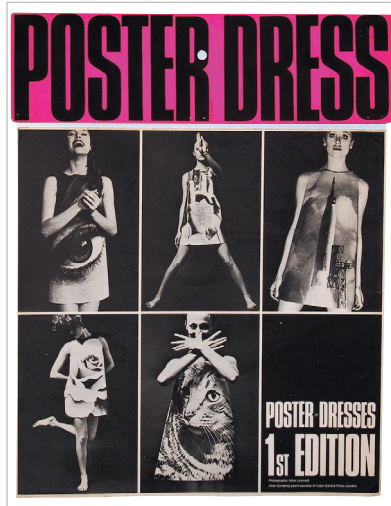
In 1966, Mars Manufacturing Company⁶ produced its "Paint-your-own-dress": a white dress, sold with a box of watercolors and a paintbrush. Warhol was enlisted to promote the product by painting a dress for Velvet Underground collaborator Nico: he screenprinted the word "FRAGILE" on it and signed the work "Dali." In 1967, the American graphic designer Harry Gordon put a large black-and-white photograph of Bob Dylan on a dress. Like a dorm room poster, Gordon's design did not promote

a product; it celebrated an allegiance. As paper has done since its earliest origins, it was used as a bearer of messages. Gordon created five more *Poster Dresses* in 1968, each bearing a different black-and-white photographic motif: a rocket, a cat, an eye, a rose and a hand held in the gesture of Buddhist peace overprinted with Allen Ginsberg's poem *Uptown N.Y.*

Soon after this, paper fashion went into decline, perhaps because of overexposure or because its much touted disposability did not sit well with new public concerns about the environment. Of the many nonwoven material experiments of the 1960s, only Tyvek is still widely used. In addition to its primary use as house wrap, it can be found in medical packaging, envelopes, car covers and—the less fun descendent of paper dresses—workers' uniforms and lab coats. Though Tyvek looks very much like paper it can be washed and is more durable; lightweight

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Packaging for Harry Gordon's *Poster Dresses* (1968). Photo: Panos Davios. ©Atopos cvc collection, Athens.

and inexpensive, it has been used since the late 1980s for jackets promoting commercial products.

Meanwhile fashion designers and artists continue to be inspired by the possibilities of paper garments. Hussein Chalayan's 1999 *Airmail Dress* is designed to be folded, sent through the post and then worn. Apart from the mass-produced paper dresses of the 1960's, the Atopos collection includes recent paper fashion by Issey Miyake, Helmut Lang, Maison Martin Margiela, Walter Van Beirendonck, Hugo Boss and A.F. Vandevorst among others. And through the RIPPING Atopos project, contemporary artists and fashion designers are commissioned to create new works of art inspired by specific pieces or the whole of the collection.

Commissioned by Atopos cvc to paint a dress, Robert Wilson transformed a white paper dress made by Mars Manufacturing Company; his *Lisa* (2007) dress was named for his friend Lisa de Kooning, the daughter of the painter. The American fashion designer Michael Cepress was asked to create a new garment from an original duplicate Yellow Pages dress. He drew inspiration from 19th-century detachable collars and shirtfronts to create *Collars for the Modern Gentleman* (2007), which rebuilds

garment architecture with unlikely ornamentation and pattern. Yet another Yellow Pages dress was given to Howard Hodgkin: his *Gouache on Yellow Pages Dress* (2010) is the most recent addition to the Atopos Paper Fashion Collection. Janis Varelas, Irini Miga, Yannis Kyriakides, Zoe Keramea, Hormazd Narielwalla, Bas Kusters, Angelo Plessas and Maurizio Galante have also produced new pieces or transformed original items from the collection.

Fun, modern and liberating, the paper dresses of the 1960s are emblematic of their times, both in terms of their experimental use of industrial materials and in their integration of contemporary art, commerce and ephemera. Though styles have changed, the goal of bringing art and life closer together remains entirely contemporary. ■

Stamos Fafalios and Vassilis Zidianakis are the founders and directors of Athens-based Atopos Contemporary Visual Culture (Atopos cvc).

Notes:

1. *Special Cablegram*, "Paper Dresses Soon: Possibilities of the New Durable Thread," *New York Times*, 19 May 1907: 17.
2. *Providing a comprehensive representation of paper clothing in the history of dress and design and numbering today more than 500 items, the Atopos cvc collection forms the basis of the exhibition "RRRIPP!! Paper Fashion" first seen at the Benaki Museum, Athens, in 2007. Subsequent versions of the exhibition have taken place at the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg, 2008; Mode Museum—MoMu, Antwerp, 2009; Fast Fashion Festival, Bologna, 2009; Museum Bellerive, Zurich, 2010; Chadstone, Melbourne, 2011; and most recently, Galerie Stihl, Waiblingen, Germany, 2013. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue that is a work in progress, containing articles on paper and the use of it by specialists and historians. At the same time the catalogue places particular emphasis on the ephemeral, fragile, humble and poetic nature of paper garments, juxtaposing modern creations with paper garments from different cultures and civilizations. The RRRIPP!! Paper Fashion catalogue features essays by experts in the sartorial field: Vassilis Zidianakis (artistic director of Atopos cvc), Christina Leitner (lecturer at the Arts University Linz and the Salzburg University and artist), Marie-Claire Bataille-Benguigui (doctor of anthropology, Paris), Alexandra Palmer (curator of the Textiles and Costume Department of the Royal Ontario Museum), Christoph Grunenberg (director of Tate Liverpool), Myrsini Pichou (curator of*

the Atopos Paper Fashion Collection), Kyriaki Lentzi (conservator of antiquities and works of art, Athens) and Yorgos Facorellis (Department of Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art at Athens Technological Educational Institute), Lydia Kamitsis (fashion historian, sartorial archaeologist and lecturer at the Sorbonne University—Paris IV), Kaat Debo (director of the Mode Museum in Antwerp), Akiko Fukai (chief curator of the Kyoto Costume Institute).

3. *Campbell's Soup*, *Lincoln Mercury* (Ford Motors), *Mars Manufacturing*, *Paper Ware*, *Hallmark Cards*, *James Sterling Paper Fashions*, *Poster Dresses / Nodina Products*, *Promo Dress*, and *Kimberly Clark* were among the companies that produced paper dresses.
4. For example, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Atopos 2005.02.084) and the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Atopos 2006.02.260).
5. *Yellow Pages Dress* by Mars Manufacturing (c. 968) (Atopos 2005.02.018a).
6. A Cincinnati-based manufacturer of printing equipment, not to be confused with the candy company.

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