



suit for subversion
ralph borland



'suited for subversion' is a project to create a civil disobedience suit for street protestors to wear. the final prototype pictured here is made of vinyl stuffed with polyurethane foam. it is designed to protect the wearer from police batons. in the centre of the chest of the suit is a small but powerful speaker. this appeared to project the heart-beat of the wearer, as well as other messages. not included in this prototype is a wireless video camera, which is to be mounted above the face of the wearer, in the head of the suit.

This is what they did to the march on Washington. They joined it... became part of it, took it over. And as they took it over, it lost its militancy. It ceased to be angry, it ceased to be hot, it ceased to be uncompromising. Why, it even ceased to be a march. It became a picnic, a circus. Nothing but a circus, with clowns and all...

- *Malcolm X, Detroit 1963*

in my civil-disobedience suit, i am that clown. in my strange, overpadded outfit i exaggerate the clownishness of protesting within the boundaries set out by the state. but i also equip myself to cross those boundaries.

malcolm x was referring to the states co-option of the civil rights march on washington in the summer of 1963. black leaders had threatened real action with civil disobedience, like lying down on the airport runways to prevent planes from landing. the government met with these leaders and persuaded them to work with the state and have a controlled 'protest', preempting confrontation.

the modern state and corporate culture has a vast capacity for taking transgression and dissent and assimilating into the mainstream, defanging it. nike 'culture-jammed' it's own bill-boards in an australian ad campaign - "they appropriate[d] and trivialise[d] the idea of offense" . the state allows placard-waving protestors to mass within their boundaries.

ngugi wa thiongo wrote of the threat the state feels from any performance by it's citizens which takes place outside of the zones demarcated for it. when we are corralled and 'managed' by the state, we are forced into performing our protest in the space set out for us by authority. this offers security not just for the state but for some of the players too; i spoke to a friend about the World Economic Forum protests in new york in february and he said 'wasn't saturday's action great?'. when i said 'yeah, but it was frustrating to get shepherded around like that', he was like 'oh, but at least that meant things didn't get out of hand like in genoa', while i was thinking that i wanted things to get a little out of hand. the kind of 'performances' i want inherently require transgression, involve leaving space set out for it by the state. performing within recognised boundaries defangs the subversion of a protest. it gives the feeling that we all just roll out, fill our role as protestors while the cops fill theirs, everybody's happy and we go home feeling we've done our duty... but what have we really done?

direct action was formulated to break that mold, that stifling performance role.

frederico mariani, president of the ya basta association, says of the state "classic demonstrations no longer bother them. on the other hand, now we are disobeying as citizens, and they suppress, but we are defending ourselves. that attracts society's attention, which echoes our protest." (source)

the yabasta, like their comrades in the WOMBLES or the tutte bianche use protective wear to shield protestors at anticorporate actions from the police, breach police lines, and create a spectacle. they are broadly described as using 'white overall' tactics. i'm drawing on their work and tactics in 'suited for subversion'.

Of the three photographs on the next page, the left and right photographs are of protestors who identify themselves with white overall tactics. The centre photograph is of similarly padded and shield-carrying anticapitalist protestors (from the infernal noise brigade), but whose clothing identifies their allegiance with black bloc anarchist tactics.



protestors at anticorporate mass actions usually identify themselves with a color signifying their tactics; this identification happens at an organisational level too. the 'white' tactics as mentioned are to wear protective gear and shields to protect other protestors from the police and to be able to hold territory. red signifies a willingness to risk arrest (so for civil disobedience). choose green if you want to be part of a group with low risk tactics. the black, or black bloc, use direct action, civil disobedience, and in some cases, property destruction as weapons. the pink draw out the carnival nature of street protest, breaching barriers and then partying in the reclaimed space. they use costumes, music and spectacle.

there are more colors and tactics: but what i'm interested in doing with 'suited for subversion' is fusing the pink, the black and the white. so for my 'civil disobedience suit', i created a brightly colored, heavily padded and intriguingly-shaped costume, with a chest-mounted speaker and a head-mounted wireless video camera. the suit allows for white and black tactics, and is definitely pink too. the suit is red because that's my favourite color. i made this suit as much for myself as for a larger group; i am proposing this as an idea anyone can use, and customize for themselves.

i was inspired by the group *las agencias* (the agents) from barcelona, who i did some work with during the protests around the World Economic Forum in february, in this idea of fusing pink and black. they want to draw out the theatricality that the black bloc presents and exaggerate it, and give it a sense of humour. their 'pret a revolter' line of clothing is a colorful remake of the 'white overall' style, while their project **new kids on the black bloc** fused the 80s boyband NKOB and the black bloc, creating a fun-loving group of kids who like to smash things up on their world tour.



two outfits from las agencia's pret a revolter clothing line.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLACK BLOCK

ANOTHER WORLD TOUR (IS POSSIBLE)

#1 IN THE BLACK LIST

November 1999	Seattle (USA)
April 2000	Washington (USA)
January 2000	Davos (Switzerland)
September 2000	Prague (Czech Rep.)
December 2000	Nice (France)
April 2001	Quebec (Canada)
June 2001	Gottemborg (Sweden)
June 2001	Barcelone CANCELLED
July 2001	Genoa (Italy)
September 2001	Washington (USA)
December 2001	Brussels (Belgium)
NEXT SHOW:	
March 2002	Barcelone

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the new kids on the black block

A bandage covers and treats the wound while at the same time exposing its presence. Its presence signifies both the experience of pain and the hope of recovery. Is it possible to further develop such a bandage as equipment that will communicate, interrogate, and articulate the circumstances and the experiences of the injury? Could such a transformed bandage address the ills of the outside world as perceived by the wounded? To see the world as seen by the wound! In the complexity of the contemporary urban context, the equipment becomes a device for communication and mediation-design as tactical media-its purpose to treat not only the singular human being experiencing suffering, but the external society which produced it. As it facilitates treatment and provides "first aid" to immediate wounds, it will also alert, interrogate, and provoke to prevent the recurrence of injury. Implicit in this design's temporary character is a demand and hope that its function will become obsolete.

- the Interrogative Design Group, MIT, from their *Statement of Purpose*

i like the IDG's idea of design as 'bandage' - my suit is as much about drawing attention to the fact that one needs to protect oneself from the police in order to protest effectively as it is a real tool for protest. 'suited for subversion' is partly pragmatic, partly conceptual statement.

the suit's wireless headmounted video camera is an effective tool for witnessing, recording evidence, and reconnaissance. at every large protest, police and protestors are armed with digital video cameras, and whenever there is a conflict, both sides rush in to record their take. i saw a news report on israel's invasion of palestine, particularly the siege of the church of the nativity in bethlehem. israeli snipers had video cameras mounted alongside their rifles, so that when they shot someone, they would have evidence of the need to do so. a wireless video camera means no tape on the suit-wearer to be taken or destroyed. a base station could receive the signal, record it, project it for others in the protest, and use the information for planning.

the speaker in the chest of the suit has a practical use in being a portable soundsystem which can be used to play music and chant slogans and tell jokes; but it also has a more fanciful function. a pulse reader attached to the wearer's ear triggers a prerecorded sample of a single heartbeat repeatedly, to give the effect of being able to hear the wearer's heart and pulserate outside their body.

why have this function for my suit? one reason for the idea was just sensational: i liked the image_idea of a group of people with an audible heartbeat. as tension or excitement mounts in a crowd, you'd hear their heartrate increasing, a natural percussive soundtrack rousing people around them. but i also saw it is a gesture that is simultaneously powerful, strong - amplifying the surge of blood through your body, projecting your bodily sounds out into the environment - and also vulnerable, revealing, transparent.

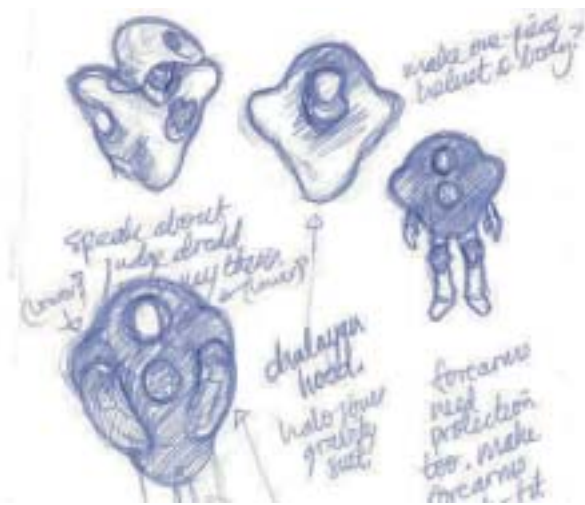
i'm interested in vulnerability as a tool. your body as a weapon. when protestors use lock-boxes to attach themselves to fixed objects so that they cannot be moved, they are using the frailness of their body (and the shaming of their opponent) as a weapon - the lockbox cannot be removed without injuring them. their giving up of their bodies is opposed to the hyper-protection of the body which the military aims for. the military aims to crush the flesh of others and through their technology form a carapace around their own bodies. we use our bodies as weapons. civil disobedience sits, lie and lockdowns oppose munitions with their own bodies.

technical stuff:

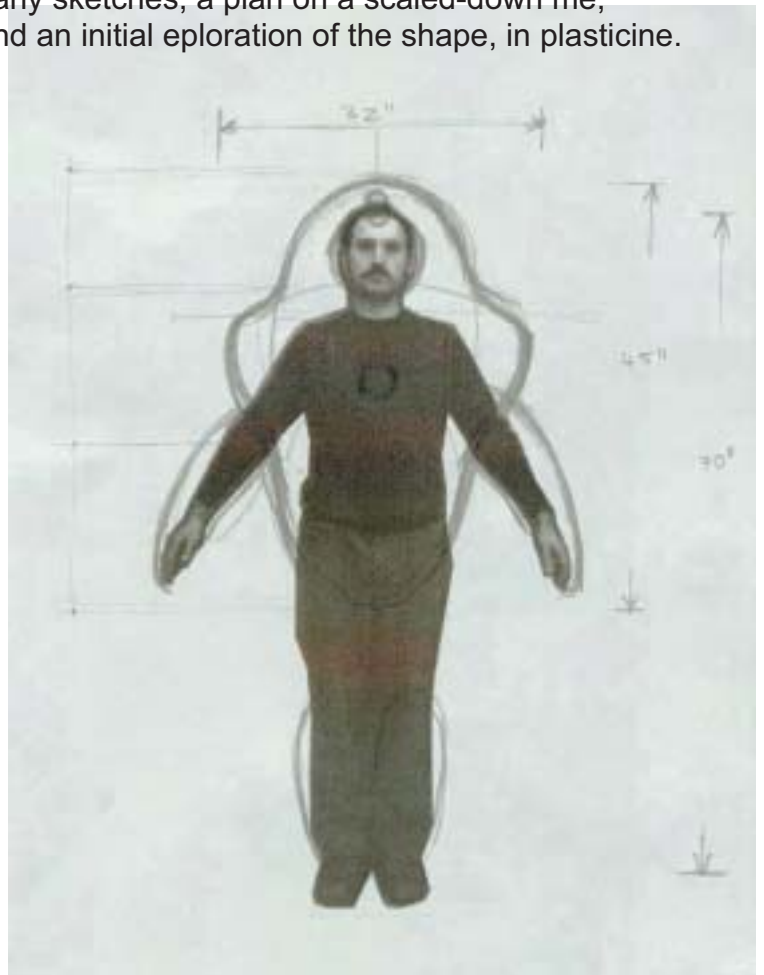
the suit:

my process in making the suit involved making an accurate 1:10 scale model of the suit in plasticine from my sketches. i decided on seams and traced patterns from this model. i scanned these teeny pattern pieces and then scaled them up in photoshop. i printed the 16 or so pattern pieces out, each tiled onto several pieces of 8 x 10 paper, cut them out, and traced them onto vinyl. i then cut out the vinyl pieces and pinned them together and sewed them, partly on a sewing machine and partly by hand. i then stuffed the suit with shredded polyurethane foam. i had originally intended the suit to be inflatable, and still would like it to be, but because of the difficulties in making it airtight this version is stuffed instead.

i must thank jessica findley and jill nussbaum for helping me with the process, and emre celik for tolerating a foam strewn apartment.



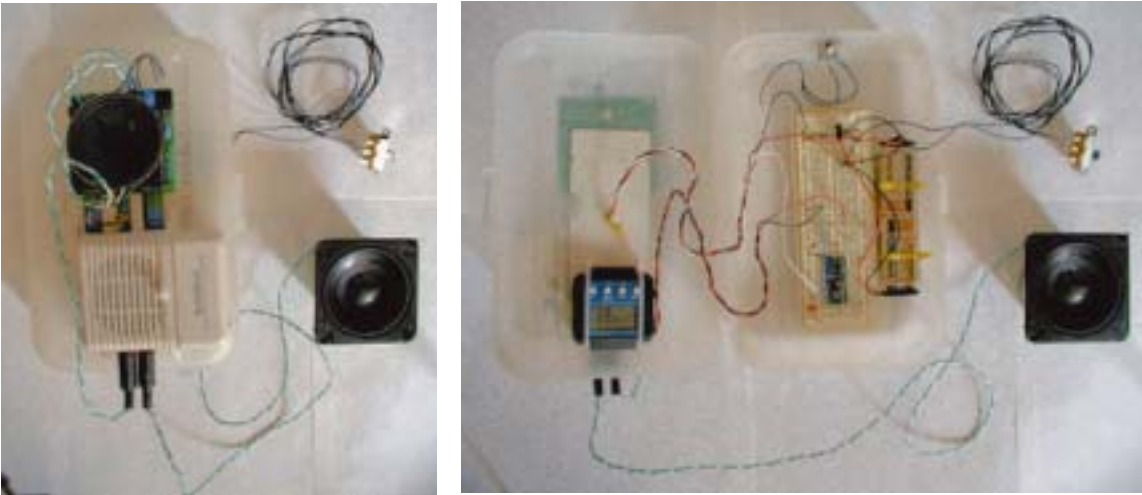
early sketches, a plan on a scaled-down me, and an initial exploration of the shape, in plasticine.



the heartbeat effect:

the technology was fairly simple to put together. i used a BasicStamp microcontroller to track the voltage change in a pulse-reader, and to play a sound sample of a single heartbeat on every pulse. i amplified this and projected it out a speaker. so it wasn't really the sound of your heart, unless you actually recorded your own heartbeat, but it was your heart-rate. i'd like to find a higher-fidelity alternative to the soundchip i used, which was rough-sounding at its 8khz sample rate. this setup worked, but was definitely lo-fi.

the system:



A: the SoundApp from parallax. it uses an ISD soundchip and some kind of basic-stamp-friendly chip as interface to make it easier to control the soundchip with a basic stamp. you can record into different points in the soundchip's memory, and access these points individually for playback, so you have multiple sounds. parallax provides some basic stamp code which makes it fairly simple to use the soundchip, programming-wise. but this module really didn't work at all robustly. playing back rapidly and repeatedly froze the chip after only several repetitions, which made it a bad choice for a continuous heartbeat made of a repeated single pulse. but it didn't even work very well for less taxing applications either. it just started to freeze all the time and have to be restarted. it sucks.

i diverted the output of the SoundApp from it's own speaker to an amplifier and more powerful speaker. they make it easy for you to disconnect their speaker.

B: a little audio-amplifier from radioshack, 9v battery-powered. it takes an input, amplifies it, puts it out. simple. it's taking the output from the SoundApp and making it louder. it sends the amplified signal to

D: a fairly nice speaker, from AA electronics, intended for a Bose soundsystem. cheap though, \$6. not a great speaker, but a lot more punch than the SoundApp speaker.

C: that's the on-off switch. not very exciting, but you might have wondered what it was. it got a lot of use restarting the frozen sucky chip. moving to the now open lunch-box:

E: a pulse-reader. i bought it off e-bay. on bill meyer's advice, i bought one which had a beeping-on-the-pulse function, so as to make sure there's some tangible electrical output i could tap into to track the pulse. i opened it and disconnected the piezo making the beep, and took the signal that was activating it into a pin on the BasicStamp microcontroller, through a very small capacitor to smooth the signal. with the basic stamp you also have to set up this RCtime circuit thing with a capacitor and a resistor, to convert the analog signal to a digital one.

F: the BasicStamp on a breadboard. it tracks the signal from the pulse-reader, and when it gets a pulse sends a serial communication to the SoundApp module, telling it to play the singleheartbeat sound sample. as the pulse increases, the sample is played more often, so the overall heartbeat sounds faster.



cutting out the vinyl pieces



the pieces laid out

sewing the pieces



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