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**HDK - ACADEMY OF DESIGN
AND CRAFT**

EMOTIONAL AUTOMATA

On how body armour can be used for
artistic purposes

Augusto Boer Bront

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Tutor:	Tobias Birgersson
Examiner:	Heiner Zimmerman
Opponent:	Per Bornstein

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Abstract

This project has been an exploration of the possibilities of using objects inspired from historical European armour as a vehicle for artistic use and expression. During the 10 weeks of the exam period I have been experiencing various situations in which armour was used to answer artistic questions.

This led to a different result than what I had expected from the beginning. It was a very interesting journey that I would gladly deepen and develop.

Both independent and collaborative work happened during this 10 week period and the results of such activities are hereby reported.

Background

My main field of interest is historical armour, its construction, fashion and use through time. I'm focusing right now at the end of the XIVth century, the beginning of the use of a full set of plate armour in Europe. I'm passionate about military history in general, the development of weapons, tactics and logistics of European armies through history.

Major technical and scientific discoveries were made during times of war, and then carried on in civilian environment to make that civilization's life better. I can see a trend where humans under the stress of violence and war become very ingenious and creative, and I'm fascinated by that.

Another aspect is my interest in understanding how things work, through subjects like physics, neuropsychology or biology. I just think the world is beautiful and fascinating as it is. The beauty of the cellular structure of a leaf or the composition of a galactic cluster for me are just elements of this wonderful universe, where science and rationality are the keys to unlock its secrets and behold its properties.

Human creative activities such as art or music are very interesting for me to follow, but there is no comparison in my opinion in being able to see the mechanics of our reality and being able to grasp the simple complication that our universe is made of. This translates into my insistence of figuring out processes, especially of crafts. If this is taken into account in my studies in the reproduction of medieval armour, this means that for me figuring out the exact same technique that our ancestors used 700 years ago to produce arms and armour just brings us closer to understanding our past. Knowing how a knife was made or what kind of steel or heat treatment was used for making war equipment for me just "unlocks" one of the countless tiles that human knowledge is composed of and enables us to put it in the bigger picture of our history and culture. The thought of being able to contribute to this process is very dear to me and makes me strive for future achievements in this field.

That is why in the last 12 months I started developing tools and techniques as close as possible to the ones used in the middle of the XIVth century for producing armour. Using original tools and methods brings me closer to understanding processes and how a medieval craftsman was thinking, how they were solving problems and what kind of design and creative process they had. This allows us then to "bring back to life" such objects, but surely not without problems. The "bringing back to life" part is difficult. Nowadays there is no need for traditional metal armour in warfare, but there are three other major routes that can solve this problem: reenactment battles, sport fights and jousting.

Many times I've been asked why and how my working methods, using old and forgotten techniques for an old and forgotten craft, relate to the contemporary art world. I'm not 100% sure of the answer, since I'm just at the very beginning of my practice, but I would say that I'm making a statement. A statement that says that through certain processes, meaning and value can be given to simple objects, like art does. At least in my mind, one of the purposes of art is to give meaning other than the ones embodied by the product itself, being it an object or a performance. And this is what I would like to do, give value to objects using a certain method when the same end product could be achieved through more efficient ones.

Part of the program here at Iron&Steel is to work with public space in some form or another.



Complete armour in the style of the late XIVth century (photo courtesy of Ian LaSpina)

Therefore I've been wondering what public space is and what defines it, and how my work can be placed within it. It would come naturally to mind that perhaps my work could be exhibited in a museum, especially an history museum. Regarding open public space, it's obvious that my pieces would pose some problems since they would need a lot of maintenance and the size alone would be hard to relate to a bigger space. A way to remedy this is to wear such armour, using the wearer as carrier and as "living display case". Of course the wearer could be part of the piece itself, in either some kind of performative act or something similar.

A source for inspiration for using armour as an artistic tool is the Afghan artist Kubra Khademi, as in 2015 she made a performance where she walked for eight minutes in the streets of Kabul wearing body armour covering and enhancing her breasts, crotch and behind as a sign of protest towards men groping women in public space (Graham-Harrison, 2015). This struck me as very interesting, as for the first time I saw the possibility of using metal body armour as a tool for artistic expression.



Artist Kubra Khademi wearing her armour in the streets of Kabul (photo: Twitter)

Aim

With this project I intended to explore how metal body armour can be used today and what effects it might have on everyday life. I wanted to see where people perceive the limits on what is socially acceptable and what people are allowed to wear and how.. It is also of interest to me to know how would people feel when wearing armour pieces in an everyday-life context, rather than reenactment or other historically-related situations.

The aim was to get a certain expression from armour just by making it and making it wearable for people.

The main property that armour has that I'm interested in is protection. For me physical and psychological protection go hand by hand when talking about proper armour and this project is an attempt to see if taken out of its historical context armour can still hold up to my expectations.

Goal

I created various pieces of armour that people, including myself, would be able to wear. These pieces were of my own design, although inspired by real historical ones. I started with a breastplate with a bevor covering part of the face, and continued with creating a left arm harness and a right pauldron (protection for the shoulders). These two pieces were the result of a collaboration with other fellow students and they served the purpose to start my research leading into developing a new piece that would cover other parts of the body.

Question Formulation

How does armour change one's perception of the body?

Will people get used to a prolonged use of the armour? Both user and viewer.

Which properties does the armour need to have to achieve certain effects, in this particular case the feeling of protection and pride?

Approach

After a brief sketching period where I decided which kind of objects I wanted to realize, I proceeded to realize some prototypes directly in the material, steel. I started off with working on my



Sketching directly in the material, fundamental for the process

own body, and constructing a breastplate (torso protection) with an integrated bevor (throat and face protection). I was interested in both the shape and the functionality of the piece. I liked the fact that the lower portion of the face would be covered while also enhancing and modifying the shape of the upper torso.

I was undecided whether or not to continue and finish that piece or if to explore starting new object and body parts, when Nathalie, a peer student from the Furniture department here at Steneby, approached me. She would have liked to be part of my project, offering herself as a model and person to collaborate with.

Her idea was to have a

full sleeve of armour covered with tattoos via acid etching, since having actual ones on her real arm would have been too expensive. I accepted her suggestion thinking that it would be a great opportunity to make historical armour relevant by today's standards by combining it with modern tattoos. She then proceeded to design her own tattoos while I was working on which style and shape of arm harness would have been most suitable for the task. We then agreed on a full arm, going from the shoulder to the wrist, consisting of multiple components covering nearly the whole surface of the arm.

While working on Nathalie's arm, I was approached by a second person. Ema, another peer student from Textile, who would have liked to be part of the project too. So after a brief meeting in which I asked her which body part she would have liked to be covered and showing her different styles and designs we came up with the agreement that I would make a right pauldron (shoulder protection) and that she would wear that on top of her leather jacket.



Multiple fitting sessions permitted to achieve a perfect fit



A lot of work went into several tryouts of body fit

To both participants, we agreed that they would keep the piece, pay me nothing for it, but they would have to wear it in public to report and collect the experience on how it felt for them while wearing it and how the other people were reacting and looking at them. The first piece to be completed was the pauldron, while the arm harness required more time.

This gave me the opportunity to learn how these objects and their wearer would behave in an open environment.

After having finished the pauldron and while waiting for the feedback from the wearer, feedback from the wearer, I accepted a third collaboration. This time I was working again with a fellow student, Matilda, also from the textile department. We agreed that I would have been working on a right gauntlet (protection for the hand), thinking that I would be able to complete it before the last few weeks before the final presentation. Unfortunately I was

wrong, as I completed the arm harness too and then it was already time for the midterm presentation.

By then the gauntlet wasn't even halfway done and after the presentation I was left with the choice of either keep working on it or stop and take a different direction. As by then the feedback from the wearers of the pauldron and the arm already came to me, I decided to stop working on the gauntlet and instead focused on the realization of an all new piece that could somehow summarize my experience during the whole project.



Prototype testing on my own body
would choose to show.

I decided to make a physical representation of what I think armour should do, make you look confident, maybe a little bit menacing, and make you feel protected. Thus I designed something that would cover part of the face, very much like the first prototype I never finished at the beginning of the project but without the chest element. The collar would then also have a movable element that allows the wearer to reveal his/her face if willing to do so, enabling the wearer to choose how much of him/herself he/she

Result

The gathered experience and information has been very important and interesting to me. First of all, I was sure that if someone did approach me with a request for a piece of armour, that person would have been thrilled to wear it. And that was the case, especially with the tattooed arm. The owner was as excited or even more than I was during its construction, but once finished she seemed to be reluctant to put it on. The pauldron had a similar fate, where it was also not worn so often. That is because those pieces were attracting too much attention. The wearers described it as a spotlight shining over the body part that was encased in metal, and for them that was too much attention. They both thought that they would feel proud and "cool" by wearing such pieces, but the result was different. Perhaps not being experienced in wearing something so visible as armour was the cause of such withdrawal.

The reactions that the pieces created in the wearer (too much body awareness) and the "audience" (no direct interaction with the wearer) led me to physically create my own image of what armour should be and should do.

This resulted in the armoured collar. This is because I think that covering the face or part of the face is a very direct way to achieve what I think the most basic property of armour is: protection. Being able to see and not to be seen, to cover your expressions and



The two participants did like their pieces

emotion while observing the others' are all properties that are important to me when talking about armour. I thought that through the two first objects I made, the arm and the pauldron, that effect would have been achieved by their mere presence and by how they were worn.

But the lack of familiarity of the wearer with the armour pieces resulted in a different outcome instead. They felt more vulnerable with the pieces than without, which is ironic, considering the expected purpose of armor. This apparent contradiction is something that really intrigues me now.



The fact that the shoulder and the arm were seldom worn shows that the "cool factor" itself is vastly outweighed by the stressful feeling of being constantly under people's attention, or at least this was the case with the two collaborations I had.

It feels natural to draw the parallel with crutches or other physical handicap implements, where the user would feel in the first period of their use slightly stigmatized or

at least subject of unwanted attention. My intention was not that at all, but it serves to show that this theme still has potential that can be developed.

The whole project for me was a very big step into the possibilities of what armour can provide to the modern world, in this case in an artistic context. I started with being loaded with so

many preconceptions, data and facts about historical armour that I'm glad to have taken this opportunity to explore and delve into uses for armour that don't involve physical protection.

I am still very interested in the overall theme of protection. I'd like in future projects to be able to link physical protection with psychological and social protection, using armour as a starting point. I personally still link those two qualities together, physical with psychological, when I wear armour myself. But perhaps this comes from years of experience in the field of reenactment and using armour in a historical context, exactly where it is expected to be used. I hope in the future to recreate the same link and feelings in other contexts and situations.

Another aspect that I shall take into account for future projects it's the amount of involvement that I have when doing a collaboration or working with other people in general. Meaning that during the "commission" phase of this project I think that I should have taken more control over the design of the objects themselves, to create and enforce more a feeling or an expression of the piece. While in the beginning I thought that I would just cover the role of the craftsman doing pieces of armour and then "releasing" them to the outside world with the wearer having the task of experiencing and reporting the results. I found that this method and way of thinking doesn't work, unless the people that partake into the project are also very committed and will actually wear the pieces on several occasions without being told to.

Discussion

At the exam presentation one of the recurring questions was what kind of direction the next projects would have had in the future. It was a hard question to answer, since I myself realized that the project offered many possibilities and paths to follow. I figured that the two more likely directions could be either fashion-related or armour used oneself expression. During the exam period I was actually suggested by my internal tutor, Christian Habetzeder, that a possible way to and it up would have been to build up a "character". That would have meant to do concept sketching, mock-ups, collaborating perhaps with students from the textile department and so on. At the moment that was not possible for me due to time constraints, but the idea never left me. I'd really like to sketch my own ideas of armour and compose them into a whole suit or costume. What I don't want to do is to work in the movie industry, since there are way too many compromises and restrictions that one has to follow to be able to work with such entity.

Another question was if I would be open to use other materials than steel, say carbon fiber, resin or other non metallic materials. To that I answered that at the moment I would not be interested, since a very important part of my work is the craft process involved. This means using materials as iron or steel, shaped by hot forging using hammers on stakes. This might change as I find and develop other ways to use armour beyond its physicality and tactile qualities, but those for me are staples of my work at this moment.

What I couldn't answer was how my armour pieces could work on a psychological level. The fact that I'm focusing on the craft and the execution of the pieces means that for now I'm more interested in the physical their aspect. But if i had to develop that thought, I would say that for me the physical and the psychological protection go hand-by-hand, since in armour there cannot be psychological protection without the physical presence of armour on a body and vice versa. There might be some way to detach the two properties, but that would be the result of years into experimenting various ways of wearing armour and its overall significance.

Something that surprised me though was the lack of discussion regarding the fact that all my collaborators were females. Perhaps at the time it wasn't deemed as important but in an environment such as this one in Steneby, one very critical to gender issues, I would have expected at least one question raised from the audience, if not from the opponent himself. And I'm pleased with that in some way, as it shows that at least in this context the gender of the users is not something that should raise questions, or eyebrows. But this direction, armour related to gender issues, could also be one of the many possible routes that my projects might go towards.

Conclusion

I started this project with the idea that armour would automatically make the wearer feel comfortable and at ease. But this didn't happen.

In my mind it was very clear and obvious that armour would have a big "wow factor", but I clearly overestimated my own confidence in the aesthetic effects of armour. It was a good opportunity to get in touch with reality, or at least a reality that is not linked to the historical aspects of armour and its use.

One way in which the project could have been directed more or at least a direction that I had in mind was to create pieces very much like the *Mirror Brooch*, by the artist Kajsa Eriksson. For her PhD she wore a special brooch, a small circular mirror in fact, to initiate social interaction (Eriksson, 2009, 94). I would have liked very much to get the same kind of response she had during her project, with people commenting, pointing and overall reacting in a more active way.

During the building of the exam exhibition in Gothenburg from the 18th to the 20th of May me and the two other participants of my projects went for an "armoured walk" in the main streets of the city. We just went to buy a cup of coffee down the street where the exhibition venue was, Vasagatan 33. I could finally see with my eyes the effects of walking on a crowded street in a major Swedish city wearing pieces of armour. None. I was attentively looking for people's reactions while looking at use, but those were just limited to a quick glance or not any look at all. I was pretty disappointed and surprised of such nonchalance from everyday people. I was later informed from other coursemates of mine that the people were actually responding and reacting, but only when we would pass them they would then turn on their back and give a better and more surprised look at us.

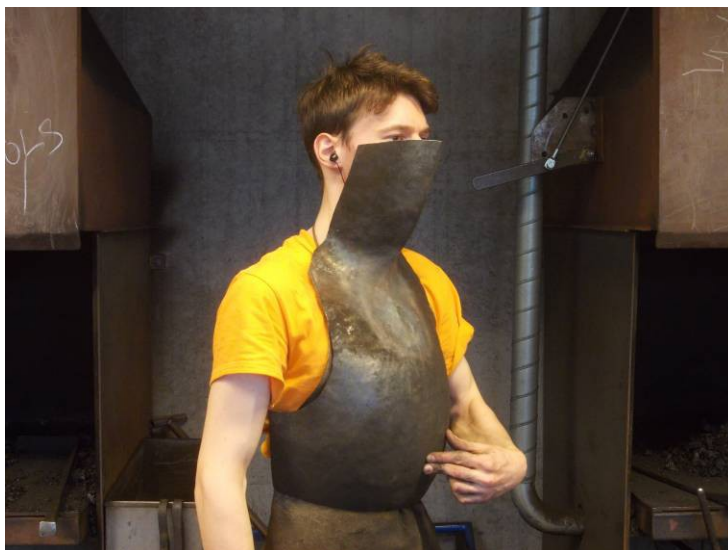
I don't know if this is due to cultural differences or just an innate "big city" people to ignore strange and weird events, but I'd like to explore more this. I would have to decide the framework I want to work with in the future, to better adjust my expectation of the reactions of the audience and to have a format that is better understandable and easier to deal with.

Another thing that happened during the exhibition time in Gothenburg was that the curator, Karl Hallberg, did take one of the pieces, the *Armoured Collar*, and gave it to a designer to match it with an outfit. What she came up with was pretty interesting. She dressed a female mannequin with a see-through black lingerie and a pink cropped top jacket. The result with the collar was pretty stunning and I have to admit that it was pretty powerful, but it did clash with the rest of the work and how it was being exhibited. So then we changed to a more simple tank top with stripes. What is still interesting for me though is the impact that that piece had. The strong sexual allusions that the lingerie had are something that I might work in the future, using pieces such as armour that are viewed generally with an exclusively male accessory with outfits that relate to a female dominated context such as sexy lingerie. Without being associated with the fetish scene such as BDSM or such, since that's not the focus and purpose of my work.

Bibliography

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- Graham-Harrison, Emma, Afghan Artist Dons Armour to Counter Men's Street Harrassment, The Guardian, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/afghan-artist-armour-street-harrassment-walk-kubra-khademi-kabul>

Index Images



Breastplate with bevor, first material prototype.



Tattooed arm harness, first collaboration.





Right Pauldron, in the Italian style





Armoured collar, the embodiment of my own ideals of armour



A locking mechanism with a spring catch allows for the buff to be lowered

