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Moriah Okun

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Interspace Suit

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BFA in Studio Art, Minor in Architecture

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ABSTRACT

My thesis work investigates the transformative possibility of mediating the space between ourselves and others, the tension between solitude and loneliness, and the disconnects between mind and body, personal and shared experience, and artist and viewer. The basis of my process is stitching and coiling — a practical and symbolic act of joining together material that serves as structure and surface. I am inspired by work that explores this middle space, like that of Archigram, Lucy Orta, Lygia Clark, and Ernesto Neto. These artists first showed me what it was possible to create when the viewer's body becomes the site of exploration and a point of activation, often challenging boundaries through the use of textiles. I also reference philosophical and psychoanalytical thinkers in order to translate abstract concepts such as loneliness and privacy into spatial constructs. Finally, I consider the evolving role of textile, and its customary associations of the domestic and the nomadic, within intimate environments.
People have a strange relationship with solitude. In some ways it is a priceless commodity — we pay premiums to live alone, to sit in secluded seats on airplanes, to have the time and space to work without interruption. But being alone is just as often seen as a negative, the ultimate state to avoid. We reach out and we swipe right and we stay up too late, all to delay the moment when we have to go home and confront nothing but our own solitary faces in the mirror.

Of course, solitude is not the same as loneliness, and that is what I explore in my thesis work. I am interested in the tension between being alone and feeling alone, between comfort and confinement, between solipsism and engaging with the world around us.

To that end, I’ve spent the last semester developing a piece called *Interspace Suit* (Fig. 1). It is a cocoon-like shelter for one, floating a foot off the ground and suspended from a pulley system. When you first confront the sculpture in a gallery setting, it is a little unsettling — it can be read as soft or sinister, invitingly cozy or terrifyingly isolating. There are no instructions, and you can only fully experience the piece with the help of someone else; a stranger, maybe, who you have no choice but to trust. And scary as this may seem, experiencing it is crucial. Without the participation of the viewer, *Interspace Suit* is just a pile of rope and some pulleys. After all, each person’s experience of loneliness (or solitude, depending on your perspective) is different, and mediated depending on their environment, their circumstances, and their company.
From across the gallery, the material of *Interspace Suit* is not immediately obvious. The white ridges could easily be read as an inflexible substance, like coiled ceramic. The piece is actually constructed of half-inch cotton piping cord on a sewing machine, a lowly material usually hidden away in the edging of sofa cushions. It is a textile associated with the interior and clothing, a domestic realm often considered inferior throughout most of design history and tainted by prejudices against the feminine and craft (Porter, 11; Schneiderman, 3).

However, as traditional dualities (such as mind/body, exterior/interior, nature/culture) continue to be reevaluated, there is a new appreciation for the “in-between”— for spaces and things that are fluid and flexible, and in materials that
mediate (Grosz, 91-95). In *Interspace Suit* (Fig. 2), the coiled and stitched cord becomes soft surface and taut structure — like skin, which occupies a liminal space by both protecting and remaining a part of the body. As boundaries are blurred, the merging of space, body and textiles redefines all three.

![Interspace Suit - surface detail](image)

Furthermore, we have a primordial connection to textiles — blankets are able to swaddle and also form surrogate bodies. According to the legendary psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, a “security blanket” is not always a textile, but refers to a transitional object that takes the place of the mother-child bond. Eventually, the child is able to distinguish between self and subject, keeping private and public apart and yet interrelated (Jefferies, 3). The psychoanalytic writer Adam Phillips connects these formative childhood separation experiences to solitude, with both containing an element of risk (Phillips, 27). He gives dimension to his conception of productive solitude when
he explains that, in Winnicott’s work, “mother is always there presiding over our solitude...For Freud, solitude could be described only as an absence, for Winnicott only as a presence. It is a significant measure of difference” (Phillips, 41).

The image of solitude as being full, together with notions of the body’s presence, suggests the opposite for loneliness — a feeling of emptiness and absence. I wanted to explore the idea of solitude as capable of taking up space, just like a body, while loneliness is often read as somehow weightless. Built to the scale of the body and suspended at eye level, the rounded form of *Interspace Suit* is meant to convey both presence and absence, movement and an essential stillness. But I sought to challenge the idea that loneliness and solitude are complete opposites, one adding while the other subtracts. I wanted to consider how they interact with one another, and with the body and mind, on an ever-changing continuum. Writer Wendell Berry compares this to spatial movement, in that we leave loneliness to enter solitude, during which one’s inner voice is heard (Berry, 11). Likewise, Phillips defines solitude as a movement inward, an escape toward a “replenishing privacy” (Phillips, 29).

I seek this state of mindfulness in my practice. I want to reconnect my mind and body to help them work as one rather than in opposition. The simplistic concept of the mind as a possession, distinct from soul and body, dates back to Plato. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, the “thing that thinks,” to use Descartes’ phrase, came to seem more important, and more separate, from the vessel that carried it around. There is freedom in this division, but also disconnection. We can feel isolated from, and within, our own bodies when thinking is privileged over sensing (Pajaczkowska, cix).
The process by which I made *Interspace* is one I’ve honed over the past few years of art-making. In some ways, it is like a moving meditation, the rhythmic and repetitive act of feeding rope and thread into my whirring, perpetual machine. The coiled form of my pieces (Fig. 3) is an echo of that process, spiraling outward from the center. There is movement in this shape, even if the pieces themselves are still. The action is all-encompassing, though some may see it as “mindless”. I make my pieces when I’m alone, repeating the motions over and over again like a mantra.

As I grew interested in creating a physical manifestation of that sort of meditative headspace, I discovered the Beyond Architecture work of Archigram, the 1960s experimental architecture collective, as well as the Body Architecture work by contemporary artist-activist Lucy Orta. The concept of the body as home, and vice versa, appeals to me both literally and figuratively.

Archigram imagined an environment in which architecture was shaped to fit the body as expandable, inflatable, pod-like envelopes. The ultimate experiment in nomadic living, the *Suitaloon* (“suit balloon”) was a project that had no definition of interior and exterior space, and no divide between home and clothing (Webb). The *Suitaloon* (Fig. 4) was Archigram’s first nomadic unit to explicitly consider human interaction, with the
occupant choosing when to have guests (Spencer, 42). Viewers became participants and, for a brief moment, became the masters of their domain and their interactions. Controlling one’s social interaction is an essential aspect of privacy regulation, according to social psychologist Irwin Altman. His groundbreaking privacy theory explains social interaction in terms of a dynamic continuum of openness and closeness.

As a result, the ideal level of privacy, and isolation, is continually changing in response to different circumstances over time (Altman). Loneliness has nothing to do with physical proximity — desolation can take place in a crowd, whether virtual or physical.

While Archigram’s nomadic bubble architecture, like all their projects, was made up of a collection of possibilities, Lucy Orta stages interactive public interventions as social critiques, drawing upon her background in fashion and textile research to craft personal wearable architectures. As body architecture, her garment shelters guard the individual body and make publically visible its intimate links with others.
Orta’s wearable shelters are strikingly simple and functional — made of contemporary technical fabrics that attempt to mimic certain characteristics of the skin, improving on its durability. For example, in her *Refuge Wear* series (Fig. 5), a poncho folds out to become a tent, allowing the individual to literally wear his house on his back which not only increases visibility but also creates a space for reflection and meditation. In *Nexus Architecture* (Fig. 6), participants from different countries connect together to create a communal matrix, highlighting nomadism and isolation in contemporary society. As body architecture, her garment shelters are simultaneously individual and collective, autonomous and dependent (Johung, 98).
The themes of isolation and connection, shelter and exposure, and tension and release, are also central to my work. Orta’s structures mimic and comment upon the way humans interact, both physically and mentally. I echoed this idea in my Connexus piece (Fig. 7), a precursor to Interspace Suit, by creating a pair of separate yet inextricably linked suits. The piece is meant to explore how it’s possible to be alone even with someone else, and that connection is often possible without sight or speech.
My wearable pieces also draw largely from the work of artist Lygia Clark (1920-1988). Her work is unconventional, varied, and deceptively simple, with its sensory blurring of interior and exterior, mind and body, viewer and artwork. Throughout her career, Clark experimented with sensorial objects that would create a new awareness of the body and the self for the wearer. For example, her *Sensorial Hoods* incorporated eyepieces, ear coverings and small nose bags of aromatic seeds to enhance and constrain the various senses. Similarly, in *Abyss Mask* (Fig. 8), the face of the participant is covered by a large air bag, weighed down with a stone, where the sound of breathing within the hood can reproduce the movement of air within the body, thereby articulating inner and outer space (Macel, 254-255; Pérez-Oramas, 46-48).

“A form only has meaning because of its close link with its inner space”

Lygia Clark, *Emptiness-Fullness*

For my own work, *Isolation Helmet* (Fig. 9), I began to look even more inward. The natural predecessor to *Interspace*, my helmets were meant to be a solitary place of reflection and meditation. The viewer wears one with the intention of shutting out the world and, more significantly, burrowing deeper into their own consciousness, making time and space to sit with their thoughts without distraction. And they are not meant to
be forever: whenever the viewer is ready, they remove the helmet and re-enter the
gallery space with an increased sense of connection to the undercurrents around them.
It is both a suit of armor and a place to gather strength, and it is also a tiny journey
undertaken entirely alone.

With *Interspace Suit*, I expanded the scale and began to experiment with the idea
of solitude and loneliness as shared states, in opposition to and changed by the
interaction of others. Here’s how the piece works: the coiled form, suspended at eye
level, descends slowly overhead until it encloses the body, stopping short of the gallery
floor. It requires operation by someone else, and it was significant to me, as the artist, to
remain outside the proceedings; I wanted to see how viewers would react when forced
to confront the piece on their own. Most of the time, they figured it out.
The soft, weighty sculpture is designed to contain a participant as long as desired. It demonstrates the line between comfort, in this soft, womb-like place, versus confinement, surrounded as one is by a strange material in a strange place with a possibly-strange person waiting for them to hurry up and be done. It is immersive, at times to the point of claustrophobia, and yet shelters the viewer from the onslaught of stimuli in the gallery (and world) outside. A part of you wants to stay in Interspace, even as the other part is begging you to go.

To that end, Lygia Clark’s work inspired me further, dealing as it does with navigating the spaces between public and private life, and with the mind and memory as near-physical spaces. The influence of Winnicott is evident in her landmark installation, The House is the Body (Fig. 10), which explores the separation of the infant from the body of the mother, in a fantasy of rebirth and fusion (Macel, 256-258). Like Clark, I wanted to merge the body’s interior and exterior spaces, as well as dissolve the borders between subject and object.

Figure 10 - Lygia Clark, The House is the Body - A casa é o corpo, 1968

My final inspiration comes from another artist, Ernesto Neto, whose playful immersive sculptures are meant to invite you in, to join together and inhabit his surreal
“Space Odyssey” landscapes. Influenced by Brazilian Neo-Concretism, he stresses emotional response over a rational approach, exclaiming, “Take refuge in art. I think that not thinking is good, it allows you to directly breathe in life” (Neto). This enormous hand-crocheted multicolored sculpture, *Life is a Body We are Part of—A vida é um corpo do qual fazemos parte* (Fig. 11), is suspended from the ceiling and symbolizes Neto’s conception of life, in which there is continuity between man and woman and no separation between people and nature. His work speaks to the desire to move through space, hover above the floor, and float in the air. According to Neto, a slight sense of vertigo encourages us to think about balance and to reconsider “the way we move, desire, and fear” (Neto).

Neto’s use of textiles to create environments informs my own, as does the idea that no matter how long you spend with one of his pieces, when you leave it you have been, in some small way, transformed by it and have also left a bit of your own energy behind to activate it.
Likewise, you must eventually emerge from *Interspace Suit* (Fig. 12). My hope is that when you do, after a few seconds or a few minutes, you find yourself a little different than when you first entered (or put it on, depending where you fall on the home-versus-clothing spectrum). Maybe you are quieter, after spending some time exploring the corners of your own mind, or maybe you are more desperate for human connection. We all react to solitude and loneliness in our own way, and seek it out or avoid it for our own reasons, and I as the artist can not presume to know what transpires between your body and your brain as you experience my work. What I do know is that once you have interacted with it, it is not just you that’s shifted — *Interspace Suit* has been irrevocably, if imperceptibly, changed as well.

I keep returning to this idea of the spaceman. Even back when I first began making prints (Fig. 13), unsure of who I was as an artist or where I wanted to go next, the single helmeted figure kept appearing in my work. It’s retro, in a way, this almost heartbreakingly simple idea of what the future would look like way back when, but to me the spaceman represents both more and less. I like to think of him (or her) as this figure who, going against what comforts them and what they know, has chosen solitude in the pursuit of something bigger. Their loneliness is acute and all-encompassing, but it has a purpose, even if it’s muddled even to them. To bring knowledge back to everyone else,
maybe, or to see for themselves what exists beyond their usual scope. It is just the spaceman and her helmet, this thin layer of material that has become her armor, her purpose, and her home.

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