WEAVING WORDS: MINA LOY’S FICTION OF FASHION, SEWING, AND DESIGN

by

AMBER NICOLE SHAW

(Under the Direction of Susan Rosenbaum)

ABSTRACT

Mina Loy’s novel *Insel* weaves together the roles of poet and seamstress, and language and fashion. These juxtapositions bridge the divide between popular and high culture, and they also challenge traditional associations of the feminine and feminine or domestic arts with popular, less-valued culture. I argue that Loy’s interest in the traditionally ‘feminine’ domestic arts directly relates to her treatment of gender and the status of women in her writing. *Insel*, Loy depicts the avant-garde community in which she lived and worked, and in doing so she challenges traditionally-accepted definitions of gender and artistic creation. Through sewing, writing, and painting, the narrator and *Insel* explore who can be the artist and who must remain a muse or vessel. Thus, by fusing the ‘feminine’ domestic art of sewing and fashion with the high art of avant-garde literature, Loy negotiates a new space for the modernist woman and the under-valued arts with which she is associated.

INDEX WORDS: Art, Clothing, Decorative Arts, Fashion, *Insel*, Mina Loy, Sewing, Surrealism
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AMBER NICOLE SHAW

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dewey and Virginia Shaw, who have supported me in all that I’ve done.
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“Clothed in memorial scraps
skimpy even for a skeleton”

“Chiffon Velours”

“She wrote, she painted, she made things.”

Roger Conover, Foreword to *Insel*

“Her eliminate flesh of fashion
inseparable from the genealogical tree”

“Lady Laura in Bohemia”
1. Introduction

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s avant-garde culture encouraged experimentation with various artistic media. As artists dabbled in such experimental forms as site-specific exhibitions and readymades, definitions of “art”—especially “fine art”—became increasingly inclusive. Paris—where the origins of Surrealism, the rise of *haute-couture*, and the vibrant expatriate community intersected and influenced one another freely—particularly fostered such artistic experimentation. Working as a poet, painter, and designer of lampshades and clothing, Mina Loy epitomizes the particular cultural moment of Paris in the 1930s; her fascination with “the artistic (as well as economic) potential of *haute-couture* within the burgeoning avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century” captures the innovative spirit of the period (Dunn “Mina Loy” 444). Susan Dunn suggests that Loy’s marginal position within the modernist avant-garde community “may have allowed for her innovations” because “as creators of commercial and (relatively) utilitarian objects, fashion designers were (and are) rarely recognized as artists” (“Mina Loy” 445).

Two particular artistic collaborations reflect Loy’s interests in the art and fashion worlds. Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dalí entered a symbiotic and collaborative partnership throughout the late 1930s. Innovative surrealist dresses and accessories by Schiaparelli were clearly influenced by Dalí’s paintings and sculptures; in turn, Dalí often incorporated Schiaparelli designs into his creations, and he frequently designed window

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1 In *All Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913-1930* Andrea Barnet emphasizes the cultural cache that avant-garde communities attained: “In the flamboyant and irreverent years of the 1910s and 1920s, bohemian New York, like Paris and Berlin, acquired ‘mythic status.’ It was the apotheosis of the new, a flashpoint of artistic and intellectual energy. There was an improvident, risk-taking spirit in the air, a celebration of spontaneity, experiment, creativity, and spectacle” (1).
displays for her store. The hall of mannequins at the 1938 Galerie Beaux-Arts Surrealist exhibition directly addressed Surrealism’s interest in the female body and its relationship to clothing, presenting sixteen mannequins that were meant to evoke and exploit the idea of women on display for male viewers. While Schiaparelli experimented with the idea of clothing dominating the human form, the mannequin exhibition forced viewers to confront the primacy of fashion-as-art and the subordination (and fetishization) of the female body.

Loy’s poetry and fiction similarly weave together the roles of poet and seamstress, and language and fashion, just as she balanced her own interests in design and poetry. These juxtapositions not only bridge the divide between popular and high culture, but they also challenge traditional associations of the feminine or domestic arts with popular, less-valued culture. I argue that Loy’s interest in the traditionally ‘feminine’ domestic arts directly relates to her treatment of gender and the status of women in her writing. In Insel, Loy’s only (and posthumously) published novel, Loy depicts the very avant-garde community in which she lived and worked; in doing so, she confronts traditionally-accepted definitions of gender and artistic creation. By reading Insel as a possible alternate self for the narrator, Insel’s clothing description parallel the “fabrication” of character and identity. Just as the two characters create art though writing, painting, and sewing, Loy suggests the physical construction of alter egos in the narrator and Insel through their bodily identification with particular clothing items; in doing so, Loy plays with gender conventions, illustrating identity and gender as embodied costumes that can be assumed at will.
2. Mina Loy and the Cultural Moment: Fashion, Art, and Avant-Garde Paris in the 1930s

Loy’s interests in fashion and interior design and their influence upon writing created a unique place for her within the avant-garde community, but she was not alone in her multimedia interests. The cultural moment of avant-garde Paris in which Loy lived and worked fostered such artistic experimentation, and Insel, which is set in the same 1930s Paris milieu, can be read as emblematic of Loy’s multimedia interests.2 Surrealism’s increasing participation in the fashion world parallels Insel’s equitable treatment of the ‘domestic’ and ‘fine’ arts. As Richard Martin asserts, “fashion and its instruments were at the heart of the Surrealist metaphor, touching on the imagery of woman and the correlation between the world of real objects and the life of objects in the mind” (11).3 While the rise of Surrealism contributed to the increasing conflation and experimentation among art forms, I argue that two particular cultural icons—the rising fame of fashion designer and artist Elsa Schiaparelli and the iconic hall of mannequins at the 1938 Surrealism exhibition—embody the propensity of addressing and challenging gender roles through the conflation of fashion and art.

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2 Besides her continuing work as a poet and designer, Loy was active in the Paris arts community: In 1931 she became the Paris representative for Julien Levy (her son-in-law) and in 1933 she met Richard Oelze, a German Surrealist painter who served as the inspiration for Insel’s title character (Arnold 194). These connections suggest that Loy was well aware of the latest developments within the art world.

3 Surrealism, however, is not known for its gender equality. In Surrealist Women Penelope Rosemont addresses the common divide between traditionally-defined “masculine” and “feminine” arts, particularly within Surrealism: “Certain critics and curators have attempted to isolate women surrealists from the Surrealist Movement as a whole, not only by reducing their work to the traditional aesthetic frameworks that surrealists have always resisted but worse yet by relegating them to a subbasement of the art world known as ‘Women’s Art’” (xxx).
Just as Insel explores (and exploits) artistic multimedia creation to capture the avant-garde community of 1930s Paris, Schiaparelli’s fashions “should be understood as another reflection of the zeitgeist of 1930s Paris, a time when a number of Surrealist artists were working in and interacting with the world of fashion and many couturiers were keenly aware of developments in the arts” (Blum 121). Indeed, after launching her Paris fashion house in 1927, Elsa Schiaparelli became known as an artist who designed clothes with “the essence of modern architecture, modern thought, and modern movement” (Blum 33). Martin reads Schiaparelli’s trompe l’oeil sweaters, which were part of her first collections in 1927 and 1928, as early examples of Schiaparelli’s interest in the art world. While she “was not yet part of the circle of artists and writers in Paris, she was aware of the powerful forces of vanguard art at the time” (Martin 200). The sweater “succeeded as a perfect gesture of art, artifice, and apparel,” and became a work of art, “as much a novelty as Duchamp’s bottlerack, a readymade lesson in art, a specific moment in history” (Martin 200). Thus, what was a sportswear revolution for chic women simultaneously functioned as an artistic statement in the Dada world, calling attention to its own artifice.

Just as modernist painting and sculpture reflected and embraced current social and political issues, Schiaparelli often drew inspiration from current events, both political and artistic: “fashion is born by small facts, trends, or even politics, never by trying to make little pleats and furbelows” (qtd. in Blum 72). One of Schiaparelli’s most sensational collections was created out of fabric printed to appear like newsprint, evocative of modernist collages which use found text as part of the artwork. Dilys Blum cites Schiaparelli’s 1935 collection as particularly emblematic. With “the failure of the Stresa Front, the threat of the Italian-Ethiopian War, and Mussolini’s loan exhibition of Italian masterpieces at the Petit
Palais in Paris,” Schiaparelli’s collection included “Fra Angelico” veils and “Royalist and Republican clothes so that women could ‘meet the uncertain temper of the times’ in attire appropriate for either throne or democracies” (Blum 72-73). By the late 1930s, however, Schiaparelli drew much of her inspiration from the contemporary art world and fully embraced Surrealism, creating garments that “became Surrealist objects themselves,” equal to a Dalí or Duchamp painting (Blum 121). Blum argues that Schiaparelli’s designs epitomize the sentiments expressed in André Breton’s Surrealist manifesto, and the women who wear the garments become “surrealist apparitions, bringing to life one of the principles of the first surrealist manifesto” (121): “The marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvelous is beautiful” (qtd. in Blum 121). Indeed, Schiaparelli’s increasing interest and involvement in the art world parallel the rise of Surrealism; her use of Surrealist imagery and her vision of these designs in relation to gender and the human body mark a point of intersection between these previously isolated fields.

In Paris during the 1930s, the continuing popularity of Surrealism gradually prompted collaboration between visual artists and fashion designers, most famously between Salvador Dalí and Elsa Schiaparelli. Moving within similar social and artistic circles as Loy, Schiaparelli used her self-made fashion house as a springboard for artistic innovation and occasional gender or sexual politicking. Like Loy, Schiaparelli vacillated among artistic media—or at least among the ideas of the various art forms. Martin defines Schiaparelli as an artist rather than a fashion designer:

She was distinctively an artist in the world of couture. She believed in

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4 The two women also used their various artistic pursuits to become economically self-sufficient after divorce.
inspiration and in the merger and magic of the arts together as a source of artistic germination […] She was an artist in the mystical tradition of creative inspiration and its consequences in art. A visionary, she touched clothing with the capacity to be art. Neither dressmaker nor designer, Schiaparelli gave clothing the romantic and inventive emancipation to become art even more than apparel. (207)

Fashion design provided Schiaparelli with a “vision and act of creating,” but the finished garment was “difficult and unsatisfying” because she viewed the dress as inextricable from the wearer’s body. She believed “a dress cannot just hang like a painting on the wall, or like a book remain intact and live a long and sheltered life” because a garment “has no life on its own unless it is worn, and as soon as this happens another personality takes over from you and animates it” (qtd. in Blum 125). Like Loy, Schiaparelli continually addressed the roles of gender and the human form within artistic creations. The dress—the artwork—cannot exist without a female body, for it is the body which “fabricates” or enlivens the creation, the basis of its intended personality. Like Readymades and other Dada and Surrealist sculptures, the dress and body are treated by Schiaparelli as types of “found” objects, usually associated with a different context and seen in new ones through the lens of Art.

Thus, the body became a type of living sculpture onto which Schiaparelli grafted her designs. Schiaparelli, not surprisingly, was drawn to sculpture because “the feeling of molding between one’s fingers a shape mirrored in one’s mind is one of intense magnetism and divine sensuality” (Blum 125). She channeled this intense feeling into her fashion designs, “inventing” dresses by “draping [fabric] on a live model and manipulating it into the desired effect” (125). This fluid process was described by another designer as “almost a
living thing, moving, almost breathing… the fabric […] often originates the idea,”
emphasizing the dueling lifelike nature and fabrication of the design/artwork (125).
Schiaparelli’s designs certainly mirror, and in many cases mold, the human body. Indeed,
one of her “commandments” for women declares, “Never fit a dress to the body, but train
the body to fit the dress” (Blum 33). Thus, instead of having the fabric and artistic vision of
the designer accent a woman’s body, they dictate her appearance. Blum likens the
Schiaparelli model or dress-buyer to a sculpture adorned by the designer: “A Schiaparelli
customer did not have to worry as to whether she was beautiful or not—she was a type. She
was noticed wherever she went, protected by an armour of amusing conversation-making
smartness” (151). Like the blank walls of a modernist museum, the woman’s body merely
transports and supports the artwork/dress. For Schiaparelli, the female body functioned only
as a vehicle to display and enliven her art: its generic form only further facilitated the
clothing’s renown, and emphasized the fabrication of the creation.

Schiaparelli was already a renowned Parisian designer when she began collaborating
with Salvador Dali, but their joint work is often cited as Schiaparelli’s most well-known.
Schiaparelli’s August 1936 collection included her first collaboration with Salvador Dali;
including an array of “‘Surrealist’ suits and coats with pockets that looked like miniature
drawers, complete with dangling handles,” the collection was of great interest to the art and
fashion circles (Blum 123). The most famous collaboration, however, came from
Schiaparelli’s summer 1937 collection, which included an homage to Dalí’s Lobster
Telephone (1936): a printed lobster design translated onto the skirt of a silk evening gown.

5 It is interesting to note that many scholars, Martin and Blum included, view Schiaparelli in contrast to Coco
Chanel. While both women were rising stars in the Paris fashion industry during the 1920s and 1930s,
Schiaparelli is most often associated with the avant-garde arts community and labeled as an ‘artist’ whereas
Chanel remains pegged as a designer of couture. Perhaps their approach to the function of clothing and the
relationship between clothing and the body account for the differing views of their careers and creations.
The design proved popular among Schiaparelli’s clients: Daisy Fellows and Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor were both photographed in the gown. In Schiaparelli’s winter 1937 collection, she and Dalí designed a “shocking pink” hat shaped like a high-heeled shoe, which was worn with a suit embroidered with pink lips. Conversely, Dalí used the embroidery as inspiration for a lip-shaped “shocking pink” sofa. Frequently photographed and discussed, these collaborations highlighted the convergence of the art and fashion worlds for the public eye.

The landmark 1938 Galerie Beaux-Arts exhibition in Paris united Surrealist writers and artists and showcased their growing interest in consumer culture, multimedia art, and the female form. In particular, the hall of mannequins, which was the only point of entry for the main exhibition rooms, forced visitors to experience “an unexpected, more corporeal interaction” than they usually encountered with pictures on a wall (Kachur 37). Designed and dressed by renowned artists and writers, all but one of whom were male, the mannequins embodied many principles and aesthetics of the Surrealist movement. As Kachur argues, “the choice of mannequins for this purpose was consonant with the rise of Surrealist sculpture and the use of readymade objects in the 1930s” (38).

More importantly, however, was that the mannequins exemplified the “long-standing Surrealist fetishization of the female body” (Kachur 38). By dressing and adorning the female form, often in a violent or demeaning manner, the mannequin artists were transformed into what Hugnet termed “couturiers of eroticism” (41). The mannequins may not have been a new aspect of Surrealist art, but they emphasize the close connections between art and fashion, and the imaginary and the real. Martin concurs: “The proposition of Surrealist art as a simulacrum of either sculpture or dressmaking allowed the art a
particularly perverse twist on the associations between the artificial and the real” (50).

Indeed, the human likeness of the mannequins was of utmost importance. The mannequin artists selected the particular set of mannequins that were used because of their realistic appearance, after rejecting the first mannequin type as “too maladroit and unlifelike” (Kachur 41). Thus, the mannequin bodies became works of art in and of themselves, prompting a variety of reactions from viewers such as “svelte stars,” “adorable puppets” (42). Moreover, the myriad of mannequins exemplify the variety of personalities and possibilities for character development inherent in the mannequins, emphasizing the artifice of their “identities.” Readymade mannequin bodies, signifying actual female bodies, were of equal artistic importance or value as what the artists did to them to create “art.”

Moreover, Surrealist associations with the mannequin originate in Breton’s 1924 manifesto, when he “cites ‘the modern mannequin’ as an example of the key concept of ‘the marvelous,’” which also evokes an affinity to Schiaparelli’s aesthetic (Kachur 38).

The mannequins and the relationship between mannequin and viewer highlighted the exhibit’s “overlapping histories in the commercial and fine art realms,” particularly associated with the department store and fashion (Kachur 7). As Man Ray observed, the mannequins appeared “kidnapped from the windows of the Grands Magasins” and brought the association with them to the exhibition, reinforcing the prevalent collaboration between the art and fashion worlds (Kachur 41). Indeed, walking though the mannequin street purposely mimicked window-shopping along the Rue de Honore but also suggested the ability to purchase or “own” the female bodies/garments on display or choose a favorite identity or appearance. Thus, “the public and private spheres were fairly mingled on this

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6 It is interesting to note that Man Ray’s own photographs, including of Schiaparelli’s designs and store window displays, drew upon the increasing collaboration between the Surrealist art community and avant-garde fashion designers.
'rue Surréalistes,” uniting the traditionally masculine world of fine art with the traditionally feminine world of shopping and fashion (Kachur 65).

Three particular mannequins, each designed and dressed by a famous male artist, signify the various relationships between the art and fashion worlds. While they are not the most innovative nor the most famous, Dalí’s, Man Ray’s, and Marcel Duchamp’s mannequins each challenge the idea that the traditionally masculine world of “fine” art was ignorant of—or resistant to—traditionally feminine arts like fashion and sewing. Of the sixteen mannequins included in the exhibition, Dalí’s mannequin was the only one to include a piece of couture, Schiaparelli’s “shocking pink knitted helmet” (Kachur 57). Just as Schiaparelli drew inspiration for her fashions in the late 1930s from Dalí’s art, his mannequin clearly referenced Surrealism’s debt to the fashion world. Mounted behind the mannequin “were pages from several issues of his American Weekly articles featuring the Schiaparelli-inspired surreal fashions he had seen in New York” (Blum 124). Moreover, the world of couture capitalized on the overt fashion references on Dalí’s mannequin. A group of fashion designers “paid Dalí the ultimate flattery by commissioning a variant of his mannequin, somewhat overly spooned, in an actual shop window during the course of the exhibition” (Kachur 58). The pastiched mannequin, however, included the additions of “an oversized Mossé flower and Duchampian men’s shoes,” which were not included in the Dalí design, but further capitalized on other aspects of the exhibition. The additions, as Kachur argues, reinforces how “fashion keep[s] a watchful eye on developments in the ‘fine’ art avant-garde, and quickly appropriate[s] its more spectacular aspects” (58).

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7 Kachur further notes that Dalí’s other artwork in the exhibition, like his lobster-telephone, referenced the influence of Surrealism upon the decorative arts (41).
8 Dalí continued creating mannequins with fashion references, many of which were exhibited at the Julien Levy gallery, owned by Mina Loy’s son-in-law.
Man Ray’s mannequin, in contrast, “wears nothing else but a ribbon around her waist, inscribed with the enigmatic phrase ‘adieu foulard,’” visually evoking “the kind of ribbon found on new mannequins” (Kachur 61). Unlike mannequins such as Dalí’s that actively engage the fashion world, Man Ray’s mannequin appears to express “a farewell to scarves, clothes” in exchange for, as Kachur suggests, “a hello to nakedness” (61). The scant ribbon further emphasizes the Surrealists’ interest in the female form and the human body—they did choose their particular mannequins for their likeness—and equates nakedness to other forms of dress. Just as one can choose to wear Schiaparelli’s shocking pink hat as a form of adornment, one can choose to wear nothing at all for an equally shocking statement, each conveying a particular personality and persona through clothing, or lack thereof.

Marcell Duchamp’s mannequin both challenged and conformed to the Surrealists treatment of the female body. Distinctive among the mannequins, Duchamp’s suggests the possibility of cross-dressing and highlights the subversive possibilities of clothing and fabrication of identity. Not only evoking Duchamp’s own forays as M. Rose Sélavy in the 1920s, which in itself subverted traditional gender roles, the mannequin also recalls the dueling personalities of Insel and the narrator in Loy’s novel, positing a self or identity that has the potential to be both male and female. While Man Ray’s recollection of the mannequin clearly associates the artist with his creation—“Duchamp simply took off his coat and hat, putting it on the figure as if it were a coat rack. It was the least conspicuous of the mannequins”—Kachur also emphasizes the mannequin’s associations with Duchamp’s cross-dressing interests (qtd. in Kachur 47). The mannequin does suggest Duchamp’s likeness, but its distinctly masculine apparel on the torso emphasizes the mannequin’s lack
of trousers, thus highlighting the mannequin’s pubic area. Moreover, on the mannequin’s lower abdomen Duchamp “provocatively signed [Rose Sélavy’s] name […] with two Rs, thereby clouding the authorial function as well” (Kachur 47). The signature further emphasizes the mannequin’s genitals (or the suggestion thereof) and leaves viewers to decide whether the Rs refer to “Sélavy the (alter-ego) ‘maker,’” as Duchamp often signed his works throughout the 1920s, or the identity of the mannequin (Kachur 47). Thus, the mannequin challenges the traditional gender boundaries between artist and subject reinforced by other mannequins in the exhibit, but it equally emphasizes and exploits the fetishization of the female body.

Mina Loy moved from Paris to New York in 1936, but she was well aware of the latest developments occurring within the Paris avant-garde art and fashion community. While Insel’s autobiographical aspects attest Loy’s familiarity with the Surrealist movement, her frequent artistic pursuits suggest the level of her investment in the avant-garde aesthetics.9 The Paris agent for Julien Levy’s Gallery, Loy knew Dalí and likely met and interacted with Schiaparelli, as they all were associated with the Levy Gallery in New York during the late 1930s and early 1940s.10 Loy certainly moved within circles central to Surrealism, but Penelope Rosemont makes an important distinction regarding Loy’s ultimate identification with the Surrealist Movement. While manifesting “real affinities with surrealism,” Rosemont argues that Loy, among many other women artists, did not “identify [herself] with surrealism as a collective effort, and did not take part in surrealism as an organized activity” (xxxvii). Despite Loy’s lack of active participation within the Surrealist

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9 Elizabeth Arnold provides a comprehensive overview of Loy’s Surrealist connections in her Afterword to Insel.
10 Loy helped organize the first Surrealist exhibition in the United States, which took place at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1932 (Conover 13).
movement, her work illustrates a clear propensity toward Surrealist ideals and aims, particularly her broad definition of what is and is not “Art.” Indeed, as Rosemont notes, “Surrealism inspired men and women to break the chains of traditional notions of gender—to question and supersede the claptrap of ‘manliness’ and ‘femininity,” and, in the words of Breton, blur the distinctions between “life and death, the real and the imaginary, the high and the low,” which eventually “cease to be perceived as contradictions” (qtd. in Rosemont xlviii).

Such choices and artistic interests could be the result of gender politics within the arts community at the time. As Rosemont notes, during the 1930s in France “no radical women’s movement existed at the time; the small suffrage groups were decidedly upper-class and the Left, afflicted with ‘workerism’—the sectarian notion that only labor issues are matters of concern—was utterly indifferent to women’s special needs” (44). Surrealism, however, “filled the breach in this particular configuration of circumstances,” and “the Surrealist Group provided an oasis for some rebellious, free-spirited women” (Rosemont 44). Consequently, the resulting art of women surrealists in the 1930s is “rich and many-faceted” (Rosemont 47). Rosemont specifically argues that “women were especially adept at such quintessentially surrealist activities as making collages and surrealist objects,” thus “opening inexhaustible possibilities of genuine discovery to all, even to those without formal artistic training, these practices radically challenged the very foundations of the bourgeois, androcentric art establishment” (Rosemont 47). Moreover, women surrealists excelled in applying their surrealist aesthetic to the decorative arts, like book binding, jewelry, and furniture (Rosemont 47). Rosemont firmly maintains the gap between surrealist women’s work in the decorative and visual arts and their work in poetry and writing. I, however,
want to examine the implications of the convergence between these two often disparate
categories and how Loy’s writing begins to explore that realm, especially using “decorative”
arts like fashion to challenge and define a role for the female artist within a male-dominated
movement; reading the narrator and Insel as two equally possible selves only strengthens
this convergence of artistic media. As Conover suggests, “[Loy] was a living reproach to
the idea of the canonical, refusing to meet the art world on its terms, and brushing off the
institutions and individuals who could ‘make’ her” (11).

While it is difficult to date Insel’s composition, especially since it was published
posthumously, the novel can be read as Loy’s personal reflective commentary on the period,
whether it was written while she was still in Paris or as a retrospective. If viewed as a
commentary on the period and milieu, then Insel certainly critiques the gender roles often
prevalent in the arts communities. Elizabeth Arnold concurs: “There was no place for a
serious woman artist in the elitist fraternities that these [avant-garde] groups often became”
(185).11 Subverting traditional gender boundaries of a male artist creating, capturing, or
portraying a submissive female subject, Loy uses fashion and sewing imagery to fabricate
the identification of her female narrator and male artist Insel as two possibilities of selves
throughout Insel. Both the narrator and Insel explore multimedia artistic creations, but it is
the narrator’s verbal power—her absolute authority over Insel’s written narrative—that
suggests she remains in control of their power dynamic. As Arnold claims, “It is no
surprise, then, that the narrator’s final victory over Insel—the definitive moment of the
book—coincides with her success as a writer” (181). Thus, understanding the cultural

11 Arnold further notes that Surrealists tended “to view women as passive muses incapable of the work of the
serious artist, which aligns with my reading of Insel’s subversiveness.
moment in which Loy lived and worked, and in which *Insel* is set, informs our reading of the
gender dynamics and artistic pursuits throughout the novel.

Loy’s personal interests in clothing, lamp designs, and painting (in addition to her
literary career) are well documented. Clearly intertwined, these pursuits infuse Loy’s
writing. Susan Dunn notes, however, that Loy’s design interests distinguish her from the
avant-garde community as a whole: “Throughout the teens Loy created fashion designs and
made lampshades, an activity that was not supplementary to, but rather integrated with, her
participation in avant-garde movements. Indeed, one of her most famous paintings is
entitled *Making Lampshades* (1917)” (“Mina Loy” 444). While she moved between careers,
“Loy’s interest in fashion as a medium was both concomitant with her participation in the
modernist avant-garde, and outlasted any one movement in particular” (445). Moreover,
Roger Conover notes that Loy’s business cards in the 1930s “simply listed the types of
lamps, lampshades and illuminating devices she confected,” emphasizing her interests in the
visual arts and subverting her literary pursuits (10). While “verbal and visual creation
were at the center of her life, […] the exigencies of raising a family and making a living
made writing and painting, by definition, something she did on the side” (Conover 10).

Her association with the avant-garde fostered such experimentation, but contemporaneous

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12 In the Foreword to *Insel* Conover emphasizes Loy’s resistance to definition: “Mina Loy would be the last to
call herself a novelist, or to answer, for that matter, to any of the names which refer to producers of the things
she made—plays, poems, hats, manifestoes, paintings, collages, essays, sculptures, inventions, crafts, fashions,
lampshades, drapes, designs, dresses” (9-10).

13 Barnet presents a slightly different argument. She examines the varied lives and interests of women in
bohemian Greenwich Village, but she implies that Mina’s multimedia pursuits are the sole result of economic
necessity: “Others were poor […] Mina Loy designed lampshades and made her own clothes” (6). She further
argues that upon moving to New York in 1916, Mina planned to support herself by “creating hat designs and
fashion covers she would sell to *Vogue*, drawing up blueprints for a line of couture clothing […] to attract
backers” (Barnet 17). While her interest in fashion and lampshade designs were often prompted by economics,
as Conover and Burke assert, Barnet neglects to address the artistic merit of Loy’s artistic dabbling or its
influence upon her writing, which Barnet privileges throughout her treatment of Loy.
“conditions scarcely favored an artist who gave proof of her talent in every direction but declined to take herself seriously in any of them” (Conover 10).

Loy’s own life was consciously “fabricated.” Like many women “of the Paris community who explored more than one artistic world—women who were publishers as well as poets; journalists who were critics as well as novelists,” Loy viewed her own life as an artistic creation, ever-evolving and self-consciously produced. (Benstock 387). Living in such a way directly related to Loy’s multimedia pursuits. Since fashion emphasizes the body’s “construction and its disguise” (Dunn 445), Loy’s style mirrors how her other creations adhere to “a modernist aesthetic that traverses high and low culture, exploring revolutions of the mind (abstraction, formalism, perception) and the body (gender, sex, labor)” (445). Carolyn Burke’s description of Loy’s artistic interests directly engages their fluidity:

Whenever one medium no longer felt satisfactory, Mina tried the other. It was one of her enduring complaints that she never knew whether to develop an idea with a pen or with a paintbrush. She showed one painting at the 1923 Salon d’Automne […] Two years later she turned to la decoration (interior decoration), the newest branch of the applied arts as practiced in Paris, where a decorateur could market imaginative designs with commercial appeal. (338)

Constructing her own identity and how she desired to portray and define herself for the world, Loy chose a “created life,” as her contemporary Margaret Anderson defined it, embracing “all that was artful” (qtd. in Barnet 69). Believing “that there was a new way to live as a woman in the world; not because she’d seen it done but because she could no
longer imagine enduring the confinements of the old way, a life such as her mother had lived, engulfed by an unappeasable rage, hobbled by the shackles of the familial and domestic,” Mina resolves that “in order for her life to change, she must script her own story,” moving to areas of avant-garde activity (Barnet 15). Her “impeccably modern” life equates to a “polyglot identity,” echoing “the ‘self-constructing strategies’ of a new kind of woman, the experimental shapes of a life invented as it went along” (Barnet 19).

A *New York Sun* article, published in 1916 shortly after Mina arrived in New York, celebrates her “modernist credentials” such as writing free verse, designing lampshades, making her own clothes, acting, illustrating magazines, and drawing stage designs (qtd. in Barnet 30). Just as Loy fuses her multimedia interests in *Insel* to negotiate a new role and position for the woman artist, the *Sun* article concludes that Mina’s talents indicate “this woman is half-way through the door to tomorrow” (qtd. in Barnet 30). When asked how one lived as a “Modern,” Mina replied that the “modern way meant not caring if you transgressed familiar categories” (qtd. in Barnet 30), foreshadowing the eventual artistic convergence of feminine and masculine arts, domestic and public spheres, and “high” and “low” art within *Insel*.14

The innovation in Loy’s fashion aesthetic and artistic pursuits similarly infuses her work in writing and her design. While these references are often made in passing, their very presence woven within her writing illustrating the important role of clothing and individual appearance to Loy, recalling her interest in the fractured female body, and suggesting the possibilities inherent in consciously creating—fabricating—one’s identity through

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14 Barnet acknowledges how “like her poetry, Mina’s life would be filled with ironic swerves and ceaseless change, sexual dissonance, and sly evasions,” and she notes that, however difficult it was to maintain, Mina “would find an alternative to the smothering confinement of marriage and domesticity, just as she intended” (19-20). She does not, however, acknowledge the integration of domesticity within Loy’s poetry (or prose).
appearance. While scholars have begun to explore the relationship between Loy’s interest in fashion and design and her writing, her novel *Insel*’s vivid Surrealist imagery remains unexplored.\(^{15}\) In light of the cultural moment in which *Insel* is set, the pervasive sewing and clothing imagery a useful lens through which to read the novel. Just as Loy moved fluidly among her artistic projects, *Insel*’s title character and narrator reflect her multifaceted interests as they embody different potential selves, producing art through writing, painting, and even sewing. Furthermore, the characters’ clothing becomes a central metaphor for the novel as dress becomes both a work of art and a representative of the human body underneath that can be defined or controlled at will. In doing so, Loy consciously arranges and fabricates identities and selves, thus weaving together appearance and personality.

Loy constructs two potential selves in the narrator and Insel, which are further emphasized through their clothing and appearance. In doing so, Loy challenges the conventions of genre, especially a largely autobiographical memoir or novel, and what it means to write an autobiographical novel about another individual. On the surface, Loy’s character appears to be the unnamed narrator, an unconventional choice for a novel based upon one’s own life, and the title character is one who is eventually banished from the text. When these two characters are read as dual selves, however, *Insel* explores the possibilities inherent in embracing two potential identities of different temperaments and genders.

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\(^{15}\) Susan E. Dunn has written two articles concerning Loy’s fashion aesthetic: “Fashion Victims: Mina Loy’s Travesties” and “Mina Loy, Fashion, and the Avant Garde.” Alex Goody’s article “Ladies of Fashion/Modern(ist) Women: Mina Loy and Djuna Barnes” also addresses Loy’s interests in clothing and interior design. Neither scholar, however, extends her reading to *Insel.*
3. Artistic Convergence in Insel

Using language frequently suggestive of needlework, Insel’s narrator skillfully weaves the many narrative threads together, thus suggesting a complex, multi-dimensional artistic project centered upon a carefully-constructed domestic and artistic space. A thinly-veiled autobiography, Insel is primarily set in the narrator’s apartment, which also serves as Insel’s art studio.\footnote{In her book Queer Poetics, Mary Galvin describes the biographical references in Insel and relates the novel to Loy’s poetry: “Insel is a novel that fictionalized the surrealist personality of a German painter, Richard Oelze, whom Loy apparently befriended and possibly saved from a drug addiction. While radically different in subject and genre from her poetic works, the novel is not unlike her poetry in that Loy attempts to enact the surreal consciousness through her form as she explores her subject, much as the poetic forms she devised often reflected the change in consciousness which was her theme” (78). Carolyn Burke similarly traces the connections between Loy’s life and Insel: “The story of friendship that ensued between the introverted Oelze and the equally reclusive Loy is retold in her novella a clef Insel—whose title is also her name for the artist. Oelze was, she thought, a “congenital surrealist.” […] Soon Oelze was dining regularly in her rue St.-Romain apartment, then living there during her absence. She looked upon him as a potential Loy-alist and soul mate” (73).} The apartment’s use as a living space, sewing room, and artist’s studio, not only alludes to the web of relationships among these elements and mirrors the interwoven projects occurring throughout the novel but also privileges the domestic space as the center of creation and central to the construction of personal identity. The space seems to have a magical artistic aura. When vacating the apartment so Insel can use it as a studio, the narrator reluctantly leaves because “[t]he psychic effort of retracting oneself from the creative dimension where one can remain indefinitely […] was devastating,” suggesting she personally identifies with the space (Loy 39). She reacts as powerfully upon entering the apartment after the brief sojourn: “When I returned, the place was different—in the smoothed out air there was a suspicion of a collapse in time. As if by a magnet, I was drawn into the studio and up to the dark oak table” (Loy 44). Thus, the apartment is clearly a space of artistic activity—painting, writing, and sewing.
Carolyn Burke depicts Loy’s Paris apartment as a vibrant center of the avant-garde community, arguing that it truly embodied Mina’s aesthetic: “A poetic mélange of flea market finds, decorative schemes devised to hide flaws, and idiosyncratic art gallery composed of Mina’s paintings, Fabi’s drawings, and photographs of Cravan, it also featured Mina’s collection of antique bottles, Fabi’s bird cages as room dividers, and silver paper in floral patterns pasted over cracks in the plaster” (“Loy-alisim” 100). Just as Loy’s varied interests were reflected in her living space, near the novel’s conclusion, Insel’s narrator describes a space that seems to resemble Loy’s own artistic production:

The still life that intrigued him was a pattern of a ‘detail’ to be strewn about the surface of clear lamp shades. Though equidistant holes punched in a crystalline square, I had carefully urged in extension, a still celluloid coil of the color that Schiaparelli has since called shocking pink. Made to be worn round pigeon’s ankles for identification, I had picked it up in the Bon Marché. (167)

Seemingly a reference to Loy’s lamp shades, the description captures the eclectic nature of Loy’s apartment and highlights Schiaparelli’s ubiquitousness. Sylvia Beach’s description of Loy’s actual apartment and artistic lifestyle further emphasizes the pervasiveness of Loy’s interests: “When you went to Mina’s apartment you threaded your way past lamp shades that were everywhere [...] She made all her own clothes, also [...] Her hats were very like her lamp shades; or perhaps it was the lampshades that were like her hats” (Beach 113).

17 Tyrus Miller reads this passage as evidence of Loy’s and the avant-garde’s ambivalence toward commerce and the department store: “In this comical scene of competing interpretations, two images of art battle for life. The one clings to the clichés of depth and expression, to the phantoms of the spirit, while the other embraces the ‘degradation’ of the avant-garde impulse to decoration and commerce. The ‘economical nudity’ (Loy’s term) of the bohemian would-be visionary faces off against the disillusioned avant-gardist’s reconciliation with the Bon Marché” (215). I, however, read this scene as evidence of Loy’s—and Insel’s—commitment to multimedia expression and the conflation of decorative and fine art.
Moving fluidly among interior design, lamp designs, and fashion designs, Beach’s memories of Loy’s apartment convey the interconnectedness of the creations.

Insel similarly creates miniature museum-like domestic collections of his personal effects while in the narrator’s apartment, often using his clothing as a source of inspiration or a receptacle for display. Returning to her apartment, the narrator notices “[a] scatter of objects on the table […] Among some weary sous and tiny strangulated worms—broken shoe laces—lay evidently the bone of some prehistoric fish. A white comb shrill with the accumulated phosphorus of the ages” (Loy 110). Eventually realizing “Insel had emptied out his pockets,” the narrator’s fascination with the display and her precise descriptive language suggests the arrangement should be viewed as an artistic creation rather than a mere discarded heap (Loy 110). More importantly, this scene illustrates how the narrator identifies Insel through personal objects. Insel creates another domestic collection in his shoe, which the narrator labels his ‘wardrobe’: “In one was stored a white comb. The other was stuffed with a huge white handkerchief. They were his wardrobe. A warm appreciation stole around my heart for that adorable domesticity of the tramp, which first attracted me, when in my childhood, a clown, taking off his tattered overcoat displayed a wash-hand stand built into the lining” (Loy 121). Again blurring the distinctions between clothing, domesticity, and art, the narrator clearly views Insel’s collection of belongings as a valuable aesthetic arrangement and as a visible manifestation of his identity and personality. Indeed, after Insel leaves the narrator’s apartment, the narrator describes the space’s transformation with increasingly artistic language: “Each item of his furnishing, he having touched it, had undergone the precious transformation of the packet he had folded in my home. His hand, in passing over them, must have caused their simple structure to obtrude upon the sight in
advance of their banal identity. [...] The room, with its two tiny matchboard tables, its curtains of washed-out cotton across an alcove, full of its supplementary radiance, had an air of illogical grandeur beyond commercial price” (Loy 142). Thus, the mundane or “commercial” appearance of the apartment morphs into a museum of sorts—one of constructed personal identity.

Throughout Insel, Loy relates clothing to the artistic space and artistic body, but clothing and art are also linked through Insel’s economic stability. As the narrator asserts, to be “economically nude” is most undesirable (Loy 23). Commercial culture infuses Insel’s artistic production: he spends earnings from his art on clothing. The first description of Insel—the novel’s opening image—is of Insel using his painting revenue to improve his appearance. Indeed, the narrator first learns of Insel because he is “hoping to sell a picture to buy a set of false teeth,” thus altering the appearance of his body as if it were a fluid work of art (Loy 19). After he sells Die Irma, he and the narrator determine what clothing items he most needs to purchase with the revenue: “We spent an incredibly concentrated and somehow heart rendering arithmetic, reckoning whether Insel, out of the three thousand francs loaned on his picture, could possibly afford a new pair of boots. We had already decided he must have a warm overcoat when, although it was not particularly chilly, little muscles in the side of Insel’s nose, self-animated, leapt up and shivered” (163). So, Insel’s artistic production directly relates to his ability to cultivate and maintain the aesthetics of his appearance. Insel’s artwork funds his fashion aesthetic, which parallels Loy own conflicted relationship with art, writing, and fashion. Thus, Loy’s multifaceted interest in art and design facilitated her role “in the ‘fashionable’ realm as designer, commentator,

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18 Note the “we” voice of the passage. Despite Insel’s own desires to improve his appearance, the narrator controls his actions and purchases.
and trend-setter, adopting a role, not just as “mediator” or “liminal figure” standing as/for the ‘feminine object of exchange’ between the avant-garde and bourgeois culture” but as an active artist and contributor to the art world (269).

Like Insel, Loy used artistic production to fuel economic solvency and to support her writing. In her biography of Loy, Burke further describes Mina’s eclectic aesthetic and its relation to her economic stability. In a quest for a larger apartment, Loy “crossed traditional still life with Cubist collage” by “cutting leaf and petal shapes from colored papers, layer[ing] them to form old-fashioned bouquets, and arrang[ing] these pressed flowers in decoupe bowls and vases painted with meticulous attention to surface texture” (*Becoming Modern* 338-39). A few years later, Mina began selling her lamp shades, which were based upon various artistic influences including “Delaunay’s Cubist-inspired *simultanés*” and “Lalique’s large-scale decorative designs in glass” and their “*bibelots lumineux*” (*Becoming Modern* 340). Transforming “antique bottles from the flea market into lamps,” Loy was able to create artistic and cutting-edge lamp designs that “could serve as a poor man’s version of a more costly fashion” (*Becoming Modern* 340-41). Burke directly associates Loy’s lamp shade designs and her poetry: “Indeed, to those who knew her poetry, Mina’s lamps transferred its images to an earthly plane. The starry skies and cosmic reaches of her poems, their slow transit through states of being, their concern with the liberation of form could all be rendered through design” (*Becoming Modern* 343). Tyrus Miller similarly suggests that Loy’s lampshades took “the traditional metaphor of the imagination and literalized it: the image thrown by the mind’s candle became a kind of projection machine” (213). These designs, in Miller’s opinion, were like “metaphors in the poet Loy’s futurist-influenced proclamations,” but were “realized cheaply [...] and mechanically” (213). Miller
concludes that Loy’s forays into design and art were inferior and distracting to her writing career: “If the ‘invention’—that is, the design—of these artworks showed Loy’s ‘usual genius,’ their production announced the presence of a different, more abstract and powerful genius: the genius of capital, harnessing the energies of multitudes in processes of collective labor and political movements” (215). Of course, like Insel’s painting, these pursuits were economically driven. As Loy’s lampshade business illustrates, creating in one medium directly influenced or inspired her creation in another.

From the opening pages of Insel, the narrator does not discriminate among different artistic pursuits. She urges Insel, traditionally a painter, to write his biography:

“Write your biography.”

“I am a painter,” he objected. “It would take too long building a style.”

“You’d only have to write the way you paint. Minutely, meticulously—like an ant! Can you remember every moment, every least incident of your life?”

“All,” he replied decisively.

“Then start at once.” (31)

The narrator clearly advocates artistic multiplicity and believes various media are not only equal to one another but are equally pursuable. The similarities between writing and painting parallel the apparent interchangeability of artists; as two potential identities, they parallel the different media recurring throughout the text. When Insel balks at writing his story, he willingly relinquishes the task:

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19 It is interesting to note that Insel uses “high art”—painting—to remain fiscally solvent whereas Loy repeatedly relied upon “decorative arts” like her lampshade business (and her scheme to design clothes) to fund her poetry writing.
“Oh,” said Insel disinhibiting, “very well. It’s not the material that is wanting,” he sighed wearily, “the stacks of manuscript notes I have accumulated!”

Then, “No,” he reversed, “it’s not my medium.”

“Insel,” I asked breathlessly, “would you let me write it?”

“That would be feasible,” he answered interested. (Loy 31-32)

These initial exchanges between the narrator and Insel suggest artists are defined by their chosen medium, and emphasize a potential correlation between different selves and different artistic media. By the end of the novel, however, Insel reconsiders his writing abilities: “If the painting no longer “goes,”” Insel surprisingly was ruminating, ‘I shall do as you do. Write. What a profession. One carries one’s studio about with one. A sheet of paper—” (Loy 176). Insel’s confidence illustrates his acceptance of multimedia pursuits. He has no doubt he can and will write if he tires of painting, as the narrator has demonstrated—moving among painting to writing to sewing—throughout the novel, but he also reinforces the concept of the body as an artistic self ready for fabrication and arrangement.

Moreover, the Surrealist imagery throughout the novel coincides with depictions of interchangeable artistic media, which parallels Richard Martin’s description of the fluid Surrealist world view: “It is the same device that Surrealist disorientation of fashion provided: a license to redesign all existing fashion objects and objects external to the figure. The floating, somnambulant world of Surrealist figures allowed for the misalliance of familiar objects and the reevaluation of all objects, especially those which obtained on the body as fashion” (108). In contrast, Mary Galvin distinguishes between Loy’s inspiration and those from her various avant-garde circles. She claims, “Loy’s creativity was often
spurred on by contact with significant movement men such as the decadents, the Dadaists, and the futurists, [but] most often she wrote in dialectical opposition to their beliefs, moving from a temporary acceptance of their theses into her own challenging antitheses, ending with a unique and idiosyncratic form of synthesis” (53). Galvin’s reading is particularly persuasive when reading Insel and the narrator as alter egos or two different and equally possible selves. The surrealist descriptions of Insel’s body and his own surrealist paintings like *Die Irma*—not including the similarities between Insel and Loy’s friend Surrealist Richard Oelze—recall Loy’s close ties to the Surrealist movement. Furthermore, Insel’s departure at the end of the text signifies Loy’s ultimate lack of membership in the inner Surrealist circle. As Rosemont argues, as discussed above, Loy was associated with the Surrealist movement, but she was never identified as a Surrealist. Galvin further notes Loy’s innovation and the synthetic nature of her writing, but she does not account for Loy’s interests in different artistic media—something crucial to her innovation. She does suggest, however, that Loy’s knowledge of the visual arts facilitated “a concrete notion of the word as medium, as a plastic entity that could be isolated and elevated for its own sake, manipulated not by the ancient baggage of meaning it may carry but by its placement in a new context” (56). This description is particularly apt, capturing how Loy employs surrealist imagery to convey Insel’s changing artistic projects.

The narrator’s own sewing works in dialog with the novel’s depiction of sewing and writing. Certainly, among all of the artistic media described in *Insel*, sewing recurs most frequently as an artistic pursuit and domestic activity. While the narrator suggests that she and Insel are primarily writers and painters, sewing connects their individual interests and talents and fuels their (particularly the narrator’s) interest and productivity in other areas.
When Insel moves into the narrator’s apartment, the narrator ensures he will not be disturbed except when she “should come every few days for a dressmaker’s fitting at the further end of the flat where it would not disturb him” (44), thus conflating the domestic space, artist’s studio, and sewing room and emphasizing that clothing—specifically the creation of clothes—is what facilitates both the narrator and Insel working in the apartment at the same time.

Early in the novel, in a moment of inspiration, the narrator sews:

After more than a week of this paralyzing resistance, I came across a long painting overall. Its amplitude made something click in my brain. I at once became animated with that operative frenzy which succeeds to such periods of unproductive strain. Sewing up its neck and sleeves on the Singer, I obtained a corpse-like sack, and stuffing it full of superfluous room, locked the door on it with a sigh of relief. I was once more myself. (40)

Interestingly, the narrator sews a fabric body in reaction to seeing a painting, paralleling Schiaparelli’s fashion designs that were inspired by Dali’s paintings and sculptures. The act of sewing enables the narrator to relieve stress, be productive, and unleash her creativity in a way that other artistic media do not. Actions surrounding the scene, however, are particularly important. The scene occurs immediately after the narrator sits “looking at [her] apartment obsessed with the necessity of disencumbering it of personalia,” particularly contemplating “a bureau whose drawers must be emptied—the idea of some sort of classification of manuscript notes and miscellaneous papers—[…] easily selectable by the remembrance of their subconscious ‘arrangement,’” which further emphasizes the narrator’s personal identification with her domestic space and her belief in “arranging” personal effects
into a desired collection (39). Moreover, immediately following the description of the cloth body the narrator remarks that “meanwhile Insel had come [to the apartment]” (40). By juxtaposing the sewn body with Insel, the narrator suggests an affinity between the two; it is the first important scene of creation, particularly regarding the fabrication of appearance, and it introduces the possibilities inherent in creating or “fabricating” identity or self, which develops throughout the text. In sewing the cloth body, the narrator opens the door to creating other bodies, selves, or identities. Creating the body through sewing enables the narrator to release tension from “arranging” her apartment, and it flows seamlessly into her meeting Insel. Indeed, as the narrator and Insel become closer, she begins to treat Insel’s body and his suit as a single entity: a cloth dummy over which she has complete control.

Loy’s inclusive interests are part of a longer tradition of sewing imagery. Alluding to the perceived contradiction between the domestic arts and the other high modernist interests Loy pursued, Susan Dunn notes, “[i]ronically, to support herself in the teens and twenties, Loy drew on skills she had learned as a typical middle-class girl: sewing and millinery” (448). Carol Shiner Wilson, however, places needle-working references in literature into a discourse “fraught with tensions, ambiguities, and multiple readings that are particularly compelling to contemporary feminist critics who have engaged in similar readings of women’s textile arts: rejection, rediscovery, celebration” (169). While Wilson writes about sewing and poetry in the Romantic tradition, I find her argument compelling in relation to the recurrent sewing imagery in Insel. If, as Wilson argues, “for over two centuries, the sewing needle—intersection of class, gender, and race—has been the site of intense debates about women’s roles and the potential for artistic and political expression,” then the narrator’s sewing impulses can be read as part of something larger than a hobby or
pastime (169). By sewing a cloth body, for example, the narrator enters into an artistic space suggestive of creating identity through needlework; the act is especially suggestive of reading Insel as another possible personality for the narrator. As the narrator’s creation of the cloth body illustrates, the act of sewing becomes a particularly fruitful outlet for expression, enabling her to create art while feeling unable to do so in other media. Indeed, Martin’s exploration of the possible Surrealist significance of the sewing machine parallels Shiner Wilson’s inclusive analysis of sewing:

[T]he sewing machine could represent the female worker who in the early years of this century worked in the clothing industry, but it could also represent woman’s industriousness in the home in the task of providing dress. Becoming an easy aphorism for Surrealist chance and juxtaposition, the encounter proposed by Lautréamont establishes the sewing machine as an essential surrogate for the woman. (12)

Martin emphasizes how the Surrealists capitalized on the traditional feminine connotations of sewing and the sewing machine, but he does not examine the artistic potential of sewing seen in the creations of Insel’s narrator and Schiaparelli.

Loy often employs sewing or fabric imagery, and Insel’s narrator essentially weaves the story together through her narrative expertise, thus linking sewing and writing as connected media, which are both used to fabricate identity in the text. Throughout the novel she subtly highlights the precise language, particularly emphasizing sewing and fabric words. When Insel expresses how frustrating “the subtlest shades of meaning” can be, the narrator “decide[s] to get a first-class dictionary,” so “nothing was to be lost!” (77),

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20 Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, defined the beautiful as “the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table” in his poem *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868-70) (qtd. in Martin 11).
reinforcing the specificity of Loy’s word choices. Similarly, the narrator often references
Insel’s monetary schemes with language evocative of sewing and needlework: “Weaving in
and out of our conversation was a shuttle of money-making devices for Insel’s relief” (Loy
76). Near the end of Insel, the narrator equates her story and memories with sewing:
“Every now and then the sharp of his flickering sadism, a needle occasionally picking up the
dropped thread of memory, would prick through his frayed conversation, woven of
disjointed themes like an inconsistent lack eked out with stocking darnings” (143). These
passages vividly link the novel’s narrative and the sewing imagery, which occur throughout
the text. Moreover, they affirm the narrator’s dual interests in sewing and writing, and
further typify the interconnectedness of the two arts. Just as the narrator sews the cloth body
in response to the painting, she writes images evocative of woven cloth as she pens Insel’s
life story, recalling Shiner Wilson’s reading of sewing as an “intersection” of gender roles
and artistic expression.

Insel, too, is often described using textile terminology. Like the narrative itself and
the cloth body that she sews, the narrator speaks of Insel’s fragile body as if it were a cloth
with visible threads and seams. She notices “the gutter of [Insel’s] upper lip was interrupted
by a seam, a fine thread of flesh running from the base of the nose to his mouth” (Loy 132).
Insel’s body and soul are also described as woven together: “It was remarkable he should
succeed in speaking—his body no longer showed much sign of life. He might be using this
body—with its interwoven identity of the living remains of a dead man and the dead remains
of a man once alive—as a medium, from a distance to which his fluctuant spirit had been
temporarily released” (Loy 99). Near the end of the novel the narrator describes him
“[s]pinning himself into a shimmering cocoon of his magnetic rays, introvert, incomparably
aloof” (144), suggesting that, like the novel itself, he is a woven piece of fabric, constructed to the desires of the narrator. The narrator writes Insel into being though the existence of her narrative, much as she verbally weaves him together throughout the text, and—most importantly—these linguistic depictions closely mirror the narrator’s own sewing projects. Just as Shiner-Wilson argues that sewing is a subversive intersection of gender, class, and race, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar read sewing in women’s writing as “mend[ing] or heal[ing] fragmentation in a positive way […] artful stitching connects those fragments with a single self-developed and self-developing yarn” (638-39).21 These yarns “resolve […] quarrelsomely fragmented public selves […] into a single woman,” a reading that parallels the dueling selves of the narrator and Insel throughout the novel (639). In addition to the sewn body the narrator creates, the “metaphorical sewing of art—a single all absorbing process—which contrived all the superficially different costumes in which those selves clad themselves” recurs throughout the text as the narrator’s and Insel’s body and clothing are repeatedly arranged and “fabricated” as they assert their own identities (639). Through using sewing metaphors and language and clothing imagery, Loy renders the narrator’s attempt to reconcile these disparate selves into a unified whole. While the narrator ultimately fails at merging these two identities and Insel is banished from the text at the novel’s conclusion, the sewing and weaving imagery throughout the novel highlights the ideal of blending these two disparate selves.

21 Gilbert and Gubar are discussing Emily Dickinson’s poetry, but their reading of the art of sewing as constructing identity is particularly relevant to my reading of the fabricated dueling personalities in Insel.
4. Gender, Clothing, and the Body in Insel

Living in Paris, the center of haute couture, Loy’s own fashion designs were as much driven by a changing feminine fashion aesthetic as her interests in the human body. As Dunn submits, Loy followed the “dress reform movement” that rejected “the constraining styles of corsets, bustles, and petticoats that imprisoned women in whalebone and exaggerated the reproductive aspects (bust and hips) of their bodies,” and she “marked these social and sartorial changes in her works” (“Mina Loy” 446). Exploring her own aesthetic and the ever-increasing freedom of the woman’s body, Loy’s “designs ranged from bathing suits to evening gowns” and “most combined art-nouveau and geometric patterned material with nonconfining formfitting styles to suggest natural (uncorseted) feminine sexuality and abstract forms” (Miller 113). In one of her most famous drawings, which was published in Rogue in the 1910s, Loy depicts a reclining woman in a corset. The image is entitled, “Consider Your Grandmother’s Stays,” and is accompanied by articles concerning women’s undergarments. Like her drawing in Rogue, Loy’s designs were not intended for the “factory worker or career woman” (113); instead, they highlighted “Loy’s interest […] in the posed female figure,” reminding readers of Loy’s artistic aims and her interest in the artfully arranged human body (113).

Loy’s fashion aesthetic relates to larger cultural shifts occurring during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Barnet argues that the cultural revolution of the 1910s and 1920s can be visibly traced through women’s fashion and bodily presence: “The stout, full-figured Victorian matron was out, replaced by her emancipated sister, the angular, scantily clad

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22 Loy’s poetry (as seen in the epigraphs), with its recurring interest in the female body, closely mirrors this aesthetic.
flapper with her bobbed hair and slash of red lipstick, her brazen sexuality and outspoken views” (4). If these changes can be made and clothing can be used as the primary vehicle to construct a new, alternate identity, then the correlation between the narrator and Insel as two possible selves—crossing gender boundaries—seems a next logical step. The visual shift in a woman’s appearance further correlates to the woman artist’s creative aims, and Barnet holds Loy up as a prime example. As Barnet describes, “Mina Loy was self-consciously, willfully modern; determined to live and speak in the emancipated voice of the ‘new woman’” (6). While Loy would appear “at poetry readings in a leopard skin coat,” her contemporary Marianne Moore, who shunned the bohemian avant-garde community, often donned “sober Victorian tailored suits and her trademark black tricorne hat,” both of whom cultivated personality and identity through their appearance and the artful arrangement of clothing (6). At the 1917 Blindman’s Ball, where guests were to dress as schools of modern art, Loy “came as a cross between a Pierrot and a lampshade,” visually exemplifying her continual integration of artistic interests and visually signifying the equality of the Pierrot and the lampshade (Barnet 38). Granted, most guests did conceive of their own artistic schools and movements. Loy’s costume choice, however, directly relates to her own artistic production, speaking to her own aesthetics and her belief that the body can function as a potential work of art.

Blurring distinctions between fabric and flesh, what is fabricated and natural, the surrealist imagery of Insel enacts artistic interests in the aesthetic possibilities inherent in fashion and the body. As Dunn argues, Loy explores how “the body is part of fashion’s constructions” throughout her canon (“Fashion Victims”). Dunn focuses her analysis of clothing and the body on their presence in Loy’s long poem Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,
but I find her insights compelling and believe the same points can be made regarding *Insel*:

“The body is clothed in such a way as to disguise itself. In addition, the flesh is so travestied that it becomes part of the trimmings. This illustrates another notion of travesty: a mixing and blending to such a point that the separate components become indistinguishable from one another” (“Fashion Victims”). Dunn similarly claims “Loy’s writings demonstrate how fashion can be used in two opposing but interdependent ways” (“Mina Loy” 444); Loy often highlights how “fashion can control the body through regulating social conventions (especially class and gender),” but she also explores how “subjects can transform styles and, at least locally, subvert cultural regimes” (444). Fashion imagery functions in both ways throughout *Insel*, emphasizing how the arrangement of clothing fabricates identities.

Indeed, Loy may have been inspired by her contemporary and friend, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, whom she befriended while in New York in the 1910s. Another woman who used her appearance—body and clothing—as a vehicle for artistic expression, the Baroness often appeared in public with “her head half shaved and lacquered a bright vermillion, her face smeared with yellow powder, her lips inky with black lipstick,” and she often wore equally experimental outfits such as “a bolero jacket, a Scottish kilt, and a moth-eaten fur coat, to which she affixed kewpie dolls, stuffed birds, canceled postage stamps, bottle caps—what lesser souls might have considered detritus” (Barnet 34). Other similar accessories, which the Baroness frequently created out of garbage, included “a lit birthday cake atop her head, […] a halo of dangling spoons, […] a birdcage necklace, complete with a live canary […] and a makeshift bra made of two tomato cans fastened with a green string” (Barnet 34). One of the founders of Dada, the Baroness and her playful fashion aesthetic parallels those of Surrealist artists with whom Loy would associate in Paris
during the 1920s and 1930s, and her self-conscious creation of wearable art—or the use of the female body as a canvas for individual expression and experimentation—foreshadows the work of Dalí and Duchamp, among others, in hall of mannequins at the 1938 Surrealist exhibition. She was a “protégée” of Duchamp and once went so far as to rub “a newspaper reproduction of Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* over every inch of her anatomy,” thus blending flesh, fabric, and text into a single work of art (Barnet 36). This incident not only parallels Schiaparelli’s newsprint fabric and modernist collages that incorporate text, paint, and other found objects, but it also recalls the narrator’s fabrication of Insel through text and fabric, constructing his identity by writing his character throughout *Insel* and controlling his appearance and clothing.

In *Insel* the narrator continually describes and discusses Insel’s body and appearance, often likening it to a hollow shell or mannequin. These descriptions are indicative of Insel’s function as a potential self for Loy and of his fabrication. The narrator’s first describes Insel as “an embryonic mind locked in a dilapidated structure” (19). He “always give[s] [the narrator] the impression that [he is] not there. Sometimes [he has] no inside; sometimes no outside, and never enough of anything to entirely materialize” (Loy 54). For the narrator, Insel’s body is fluid and adaptable to particular situations. At other times, however, the narrator characterizes Insel’s body as a work of art: “It was at that moment that, for me, Insel, from a seedy man, dissolved into a strange mirage, the only thing in the world at that time to stir my curiosity. On his arrival with the pictures he had appeared the phantom of himself as I had seen him last. He had so weakened, become so transparent” (Loy 45). Sometimes she even compares parts of his body to paintings by particular artists; while
eating, Insel develops “a Dali-like protuberance of elongated flesh with his flaccid facial tissue” (Loy 30).

The appearance of Insel’s clothing develops into a central focus of the novel. As his suit changes colors and frequently functions as the glue that holds his body together, Insel’s clothing is described in artistic and surreal terms, much like his body: “Had he really intended as much in his challenge—or did this Polar region of a mania—these maps of Himalayan anthills with their scabs of pure vegetation embossed upon the backdrop of his clothes, depend for their pictorial clarity on some accord between his cerebral vibrations and mine?” (111). The narrator is describing Insel’s clothing, but the description could easily be applied to a work of art. In *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander asserts “dressing is always picture making, with reference to actual pictures that indicate how the clothes are to be perceived” (311). She further argues how “[i]n clothing, then, visual need may indeed be stronger than practical need; but the visual elements in a style of dress, like those in an artistic school, naturally have iconographic or symbolic meanings as well as formal properties” (312). Clothing, Hollander claims, “stand[s] for knowledge and language, art and love, time and death—the creative, struggling state of man” (448). It at once conceals man’s “unapplied, unrealized body” and reveals “all of his and its possibilities” (448). Through surreal imagery, Insel’s clothing becomes something greater than bodily protection. Like a mosaic or patchwork quilt, and like the narrative itself, Insel’s body and clothing are pieced together to form a single, artistic whole. As Hollander argues, “clothes have that same related to the body that language has to truth or pure thought […] Moreover, the elements of dress, like those of language, are perpetually flexible, and just as apt to betray and mislead as they are to express and convey—with or without intent” (447). Thus, as Loy
repeatedly constructs Insel’s identity through his appearance and clothing and through the narrative itself, both of which give “that shapeless and meaningless nakedness its comprehensible form” and without which Insel would not exist (447).

As the novel progresses, Insel’s body and clothing become increasingly unified, merging into a single, fluid barrier separating Insel from the world around him. At times, Insel treats his body like clothing, changeable at will:

Shaken with an unearthly anxiety, this creature of so divine a degradation, set upon himself with his queer hands and began to pull off his face. For those whose flesh is their rags, it is not pitiable to undress. As Insel dropped the scabs of his peculiar astral carbonization upon the table, his cheeks torn down, in bits upon the marble—one rift ran the whole length of his imperfect insulation, and for a moment exposed the ‘man-of-light.’ (Loy 97)

More frequently, however, the narrator describes Insel’s clothing and body as merging together. When the narrator taps Insel on the arm, she feels her “hand pass through ‘something.’ The surface of his cloth sleeve, like a stiff sieve, was letting that something through,” suggesting his sleeve and skin is one permeable barrier (64-65). In another encounter, the narrator reaches to touch Insel and is left “holding in [her] hand a few inches of gray bone. It had come away with a bit of his sleeve, acutely decorated with the jagged edge of torn black cloth. At the same time, Insel laying his hand on [her] shoulder, the rag and the bone did a ‘fade-out’” (84). Through blending Insel’s body and his clothing, the narrator treats both as works of art that can be created to one’s wishes.

Throughout *Insel* the narrator conflates clothing and the body, controlling his appearance. Her manipulation of Insel evokes Schiaparelli’s fashion aesthetics and the hall
of mannequins’ treatment of the female body—fabricating identity—but it subverts these cultural counterparts through its reversal of gender roles. As the female artist designing (and attempting to control) the masculine form both linguistically and aesthetically, the narrator occupies a role of power that few women occupied within the avant-garde community. At the same time, however, the identification between the narrator and Insel suggests the battle for control—who can design or arrange whom—signifies an interior battle of disparate selves, each of which desires artistic control. The narrator spends a great deal of time shopping for Insel’s new clothing, particularly a “warm overcoat,” indicative of clothing’s ability to bind his body together, but Insel’s body image is poor without the concealment of clothing. Insel believes he is “so ugly naked” that he cannot “go to the public baths because [he] daren’t walk down to the water” (53). Furthermore, the narrator suggests he is “made of extremely diaphanous stuff” (64), connecting Insel’s body or skin with fragile cloth. Near the end of the novel Insel’s “features appear to be of crumpled velvet,” reminding the reader of the narrator’s repeated fabrication of Insel’s body through cloth and especially through text (Loy 168). These fabric references evoke the cloth dummy the narrator sews in an artistic frenzy, suggesting Insel becomes another sort of fabric body for artistic creativity.

The narrator linguistically weaves together Insel’s corporeal body and his spirit, much as she joins his clothing and body: “It was remarkable he should succeed in speaking—his body no longer showed much sign of life. He might be using this body—with its interwoven identity of the living remains of a dead man and the dead remains of a man once alive—as a medium, from a distance to which his fluctuant spirit had been temporarily released” (99). Such descriptions only further highlight Insel’s fabrication, his purposeful arrangement for a particular artistic self, a vessel emblematic of a desired
personality. At other times, Insel’s body also resembles a surrealist painting. Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator envisions “Insel’s diaphanous intestines entirely disappearing” (43). Again employing language evocative of fabric and sewing, the narrator fashions Insel’s body as malleable and able to be altered at her will, particularly through Insel’s clothing. The narrator similarly describes Insel’s body as a work of art from which his own creations emanate: “A conspicuous liver, so personal he might have served as his own fluoroscope, clear as a pale coral was painted as only the Masters painted. He had no need to portray. His pictures grew, out of him, seeding through the inter-atomic spaces in his digital substance to urge tenacious roots to a plane surface” (103). While Hollander claims “in real life […] rags obviously cannot be ‘seen through’ to something lovely underneath because they themselves express and also create a tattered condition of soul” (443), Insel’s fractured, surrealist imagery works with Insel’s rags, still concealing (or containing) his body underneath—even when it seems to be an empty vessel—much like Schiaparelli’s fashions molding the body instead of the body dictating the clothing’s shape. The clothes, as Hollander describes, literally “make the man, not because they make up or invent what the man is or dress him up for show but because they actually create his conscious self” (444). As in Insel, clothing can “be like costumes, ways of dressing selves in roles for show,” but, more importantly, “[i]t is the inner theater that is costumed by the choice in clothes” (451). It is this relationship between “inner theater”—selfhood—and outer appearance that Loy capitalizes upon throughout Insel.

While she rarely describes or references her body and instead focuses on shaping Insel’s appearance and holding him together, the narrator’s body—like Insel’s—is fragile and capable of unraveling at any moment. After the narrator and Insel dance “to an identical
rhythm,” suggesting their function as dual selves, the narrator loses bodily control (150). She describes the surreal experience of reassembling or reweaving her body, using similar sewing language to the passages describing Insel’s constructed appearance: “I unexpectedly disintegrated […] Looking down at myself I could see my sensation. The life-force blasting me apart instead of holding me together. It set up a harrowing excitement in my brain […] I lost contour” (150). Moreover, the narrator explicitly links her unraveled coat, as discussed below, and her body when she describes putting up “a pretty good fight against this incredible dematerialization—it took [her] hours to weave [herself] together—but at last, exhausted yet once more intact, [she] fell upon [her] bed and slept” (151). Through the scene the narrator acknowledges her connection to Insel; she “cognize[s] this situation as Insel’s […] a thing that, while being the agent of his—[her]—dematerialization alone could bring him together again” (151). This scene again recalls the narrator’s sewn cloth dummy, suggesting she has successfully created another body.

In contrast, Insel tries to separate the female body and clothing: “We sat around the Dome and Insel x-rayed. All the girls, as they giggled along the Boulevard, he disrobed—more precisely, he could not see that they were dressed […] I presumed he was claiming my interest by indulging in what Boulevardiers of the old days called ‘undressing the women’ in his own unbelievably tangible way. ‘I don’t need them to take off their clothes,’ he remarked” (161). While Loy uses surrealism in the scene, it delineates the contrast between the narrator’s own conflation of flesh and fabric and Insel’s desire to separate them, and illustrates Insel’s aestheticization of the female body much like the artists who created the exhibits in the hall of mannequins. On another outing with Insel, the narrator describes the interchangeability of the waitresses using clothing imagery: “one after another the same
Germanic wag would shuffle up to our table, each time wearing a different face” (Loy 78). Like the faceless women whom Insel visualized undressed, these women’s bodies have been reduced to blank faces that can be switched without consequence. Nonetheless, these scenes correspond with Goody’s reading of a series of photographs of Loy; Goody notes how “the identity of the woman is reduced to a voyeuristic fetish,” presenting “the abstracted female body as site of experimental artistic expression” (278).

While Loy associates clothing with holding bodies, particularly Insel’s, together, she similarly emphasizes fashion’s ephemeral nature and materiality. Insel changes the form of the narrator’s coat:

The cloth of my coat, a fantaisie, was sewn with lacquered red setae—wisps, scarcely attached, which caught the light, and all through the evening unusual manifestations of consciousness occurring outside the Lutetia were punctuated by Insel’s staccato spoliation of that hairy cloth [...] whenever I laughingly reprimanded him for ruining my coat, with an acrid cluck of refutation he would show me what he had instantly plucked from the cloth—it was always a white hair—he did not trouble to contradict me—the evidence was clinching—But in the end the side of my coat sitting next to him was bare of all is fancy setae. (57)

This is the only scene in which Insel attempts to manipulate or arrange the narrator’s body. Throughout the rest of the novel it is the narrator who repeatedly controls Insel’s appearance. For the most part, Insel does not fetishize the narrator’s body nor does he make it a site of artistic expression. He does, however, occasionally commodify women’s bodies while visually undressing women, as discussed above, and in his painting Die Irma. The
coat becomes a piece of performance art. Initially a mere article of clothing, albeit one
described in highly aesthetic terms, the coat transforms into a different shape and a work of
art through Insel’s touch and serves as a foil to the narrator’s own sewing. Unlike his
painting, which he talks about more than actually working on, the scene recalls the
narrator’s own artistic productivity, often occurring in sporadic bursts of energy. As Insel
picks at the fabric, his actions recall the “scabs of pure vegetation embossed upon the
backdrop of his clothes,” which “depend for their pictorial clarity on some accord between
his cerebral vibrations and [the narrator’s],” and further articulates the connection between
the potential dual selves in Insel and the narrator (111). Moreover, the scene evokes Alex
Goody’s definition of fashion as “linked to ideas of personal adornment and contemporary
manner and style, but [it] can also refer to an active moulding or shaping” (267). Insel’s
shaping—or unshaping—of the coat actively molds it into a new and distinctive form.
Conversely, it is the narrator who repeatedly uses Insel’s body as a “site of experimental
artistic expression.” His suit, which he always wears, becomes the primary source of
conflict regarding the control over Insel’s body and appearance, and it seems as if his
transformation of the narrator’s coat spurs her subsequent desire for aesthetic control.

In another moment of performance art through clothing, Insel incorporates
dressmaker’s pins into his ensemble. Insel’s suit becomes a repository for dressmaker’s
pins, signifying a blend between artistic innovation, bodily unity, and fashion sense:

“I knew when you had been here for where you trod there lay little fragments
of stuff. I could trace your movements by the pins you shed on the floor.
Think what it was like—to seek after a woman, a vanishing woman, and in
her stead, to find nothing but pins,” he implored. Then brightening, “I picked
them all up. Look,” said Insel, hurriedly reversing the lapel of his jacket. On
the underside stuck in rows as precise as in packages from the factory, were
my dressmaker’s fallen pins. (46-47)

By associating the dressmaker’s pins with the narrator, Insel not only conflates the narrator
and the creation of her clothes, but he also physically connects himself with the seamstress
and new clothes by placing the pins along his lapel, ostensibly creating an artistic
arrangement with his own body and clothes. Blending artistic identities and media, Insel
transforms the pins—part of the narrator’s identity—into part of his own identity, thus
joining—if only temporarily—their selves through sewing, constructing a joint identity.
Again, Insel’s power in this scene is unusual. Nonetheless, it does foreshadow his eventual
merging with Die Irma when he unveils it for the narrator: “‘Die Irma,’ he repeated
lovingly to introduce her to me, and the magnetic bond uniting her painted body to his
emaciated stature—as if she were of an ectoplasm proceeding from him—as so apparent one
felt as if one were surprising an insane liaison at almost too intimate a moment” (Loy 131).
More overt than his use of the dressmaker’s pins, the scene resembles the narrator’s many
descriptions of Insel’s ever-transforming body. Here, however, Insel becomes, in a sense,
his own work of art, constructing a body and a self that blends his identity with that of the
narrator.

Insel’s clothing similarly changes form and function. From the beginning of the
novel, when the narrator learns Insel dresses up in evening wear to paint, Insel’s trademark
suit becomes inextricable from his identity as an artist: “He has an evening suit, but never
an occasion to wear it, so he puts it on when he paints his pictures, first having meticulously
cleaned everything in his studio. Now, I don’t mean he’s a delicate soul because he paints in
evening dress—!” (Loy 21). As the novel progresses, the suit increases in importance, becoming emblematic of Insel’s fabrication and of the two characters’ multimedia experimentation. When his suit mysteriously changes colors, the narrator mistakenly attributes the experience to incorrect perceptions: “I should have continued my obsession of conserving something very precious with an Insel changing to an incubus, playing his silly psychic tricks on his clothes—raving of imprisonment and the gnawing of Knochen […]” One last struggle with the suit—and it turned black again. Insel must have forgotten about it” (113). Just as the narrator’s coat can be a work of art through physical acts like pulling threads, Insel’s suit seemingly changes colors based upon his concentration level. He can transform it at will. The effect is so striking that Miller argues, “it is as if Insel […] were compelled to play out on his own flesh the final passion of auratic art” (216). Moreover, Insel drapes himself with an “incredible” blanket that “one could only believe with difficulty it had not been dyed—a perfect job at that—no spot, no smirch, no variation in tone disturbed the unity of its spread surface” (144). Its flawless, artistic surface bewilders the narrator, and recalls the artfulness of Insel’s suit and his transformation of the narrator’s coat. In another moment of performance art, he attempts to control and fabricate his own appearance.

Throughout the novel, however, the narrator uses her narrative control to highlight her ability the construct selves and identities through appearance. Through Insel’s suit, particularly cleaning it (since he never takes it off), and buying new clothes for him, the narrator negotiates for control over Insel and his self. Since the suit is critical to his identity and closely identified with his artistic production, Insel consistently balks at the idea of his suit being cleaned, and when the narrator offers to clean it, he responds, “Your suggestion
for my suit is most kind—however, I am convinced that it is only on account of the dirt in it that it still holds together” (Loy 44). As the novel progresses, it seems as if it is the suit—dirt and all—that holds Insel together and generates his artistic productivity. He worries about the loss of his inspiration:

Insel was horrified. “I don’t want anybody to see the dirt in that suit—let alone you—I’ve worn it for five years.”

“All I shall see is the gasoline go dark—it would seem just as dark if I were cleaning something that had only been worn six months.”

But Insel was actually writhing in a bitter determination to protect his own.

“Are you afraid,” I asked, in a sudden concern for his “rays,” “that it would interfere with your Strahlen?—I’m not going to wash it. You can’t short circuit.” (Loy 108)

While, at first, the narrator resists cleaning Insel’s suit, the struggle over Insel’s appearance parallels her work to capture Insel’s story and write his biography and it parallels the two characters’ dueling personalities. As long as Insel remains autonomous and wears his filthy suit, the narrator cannot fully control Insel through his appearance or her narrative of him. Thus, the suit functions as another artistic medium, signifying the power struggle between the two artists and the continued coexistence of their dual identities.

When the narrator finally cleans the suit—a pivotal moment in the text—she gains control over the construction of Insel’s appearance, signifying a turning point in the narrator’s and Insel’s selves existing as two potential identities. As opposed to the narrator’s frenzied creation of cloth body near the beginning of the novel, the narrator cleanses Insel’s
suit in a volatile and flammable liquid, emblematic of the growing conflict between their selves; in the process she rids it of any trace of his body, since the two have practically merged in the five years he has worn it. Thus, the narrator destroys part of Insel’s self, which has been carefully arranged and created throughout the novel. If the narrator seemingly creates the possibility to have two potential selves when she sews the cloth body and almost simultaneously meets Insel, here she begins to exert her power to destroy, or at least retain absolute power over, the disparate selves. She describes the scene in detail, emphasizing its crucial role in the text:

I went about my cleaning. Ordering several *bidons* of gasoline, I poured them into an enamel tub, and suspending the suit by a wooden pincers, I dipped it in. […]

Before the open windows that which seemed most substantial about Insel, like a corpse let down from a gallows, fell to its knees in the volatile fluid.

Then the ghastly thing began to turn pale. I set upon it in opposition and that white contorted outgrowth of a brain almost tangled in the whisk-brush—. (Loy 111)

Indeed, the passage begins a pivotal scene in the novel, addressing the growing tension and power struggle between Insel and the narrator. As the suit becomes a corpse, the narrator completely merges Insel’s identity with his shabby suit. In doing so, the narrator implies she is not only trying to “clean” the suit but also trying to destroy Insel. Moreover, its fantastic transformation in the gasoline highlights the connection between Insel’s creativity and his appearance. When Insel sees his cleaned suit, he exclaims, “I am a prisoner here!” (Loy

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23 This description is evocative of Richard Oelze’s surrealist paintings.
The narrator threatens that he “will never ‘get out’ while [his] suit is white,” reminding Insel of the suit’s transformation and her newfound power over him, retaining control over her self and his.

After this scene, the suit seemingly holds Insel’s limp body together: “He was cowering in some apprehension that constricted him, that even devitalized his hand. Become as the hand of a victim of infantile paralysis, it flopped over with the edge of the stuff. He had an air of shifting—just so far—the bandage of a wound” (Loy 113). Insel’s wounded body signifies a shift in the novel; after this scene—and her victory of sorts over Insel and his appearance—the narrator mentions her “cooling” interest in him. Rather than having two different selves, the narrator decides to erase one of them. Nonetheless, as an extension of his physical body, the suit does resolve many of Insel’s personal image problems, and continues to function as an extension of his fabricated identity. By continuing to want to wear the suit, Insel attempts to reclaim his self and autonomy. The narrator promises to bring his suit to all public events: “I am going to bring you your suit. You’re going to look so fine” (Loy 120). Still, the narrator is the one acting upon Insel. It is she who will bring the suit to him, controlling when he wears it (and that he can at all).

The narrator’s consuming desire to use Insel’s body and clothing as living examples of her artwork parallels Schiaparelli’s claims that a garment needs a human form in order to fully “animate” and that dresses are best “invented” on live bodies. Moreover, by the end of the novel, the narrator privileges descriptions of Insel’s clothing so that his body slowly, but completely, seems to disappear, just as Schiaparelli’s models were blank canvases onto which she could graft her creations. While she uses clothing to fabricate various selves, the

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24 As seen in this passage, Loy frequently uses the word “stuff” to denote fabric. Also used in the dressmaker’s pins scene, the word visually and linguistically links the scenes concerning Insel and his suit.
narrator also exercises control over the eradication or minimization of these alternate personalities. Indeed, by the end of the novel Insel appears to “have thrown himself away with his old black sweater above which his former face had risen like a worn, pocked moon” (166), and he even appears to be a mere pile of clothing, discarded at whim: “Terrible clothes have clotted on the floor—Never before have I seen what was lying on the bed” (165). Thus, by conflating identity, body, clothing, and art, *Insel* illustrates the possibilities inherent in fashion as a fluid art form: inextricably linked with individual identity, but equally fraught with questions of ownership and artistic control.
5. Conclusion: *Insel*, Clothing, and the Artist

Through the convergence of artistic innovation and blurred gender distinctions, *Insel* addresses what constitutes valuable artistic creation and who is privileged to create that art. A theme established during her sojourn in New York, and probably earlier in her career, Loy’s own adherence to the tenets of New Womanhood and avant-garde aesthetics continually blurred the line between artist and artistic production. Indeed, fashion, sexual liberation, and artistic equality converge within the avant-garde community as “the new modern woman not only drank, smoked, and talked like men; she insisted—whether white or black—on living with the same liberties and sexual license, rejecting the demands of motherhood and family,” foreshadowing a potential identification with Insel’s character (Barnet 5). Moreover, women formed the core of the Greenwich Village artistic community, living “impecuniously and informally, often cooperatively, eating together, criticizing one another’s work, gathering with their lovers and male cohorts in the tearooms and inexpensive restaurants that filled the neighborhood,” thus intertwining their social lives with their artistic ambitions (Barnet 5). Most importantly, the women who circulated within the Greenwich Village community exemplified the precarious negotiation of “the anomaly

25 While I argue that *Insel* captures and promotes an environment of multimedia experimentation, Tyrus Miller reads Loy’s thinly-veiled autobiography as less optimistic and successful:

Her narrator’s ill-fated adventures with an ineffectual German painter suggest the baneful short-circuiting of the once-energizing connection of modernist literatures and modern visual arts. Indeed, in its wider implications, Loy’s book registers a trembling of the whole artistic field, from writing to painting to photography and cinema, and the threat of these new plate tectonics of culture posed to the social ‘islands’ where modernist poet and painter had together found temporary refuge. The ending of Insel stands as an emblem of the end of an artistic epoch [...]. (6)

Miller rightly highlights Loy’s “attempt to represent her social context,” which he defines as “a narrow coterie of avant-garde artists, art collectors, and expatriate hangers-on,” but he concludes that the novel’s aim to define itself as an artist-novel ultimately fails (208). Miller, however, does concede *Insel’s* “historical testimony [...] has positive significance” (211).
of being women and artists” in a time when women were commonly confined to the domestic sphere (Barnet 6). Their individual struggles with “the bonds of monogamy, marriage, childbearing, and economic dependence” along with “how they expressed their feminism in their lives and their work” mark the avant-garde woman artists’ “collective insurgency,” but, moreover, it mirrors many of the women artists’ own artistic creations, blending aspects of a traditionally feminine domestic life with those of experimentation and a male-dominated arts community (Barnet 6). Loy fully embraced these attitudes, still adhering to them as she moved back to Paris and into the avant-garde community that Insel depicts.

By focusing upon the narrator’s artistic activity, Loy emphasizes the revolutionary aspects of the woman artist working concurrently—but not always in alignment—with the Surrealist movement. Arnold argues that “Loy uses Insel to set herself not just apart from but above the Surrealists while at the same time guarding against this quintessential Surrealist’s instability and misogyny,” and the dueling personalities of Insel and the narrator fully articulate this conflict (186). Thus, the narrator’s artistic rendering of Insel challenges traditional Surrealist dogma while affirming Loy’s own “life-long concern about her identity as a practicing artist” (Arnold 186). Throughout the novel, the narrator’s creative domination of Insel depicts the role—both actual and potential—of women artists within the avant-garde community. Her varied talents are highlighted at many points, and the entire novel ostensibly documents the narrator’s writing abilities (Loy 177). Insel praises the narrator’s paintings shortly after meeting her:

“Whose pictures are these?” asked Insel, immediately collected, and startingat

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26 The novel also subtly suggests that the narrator has artistically succeeded: She has written and published her novel, a work of art, while Insel has not and remains unproductive.
each [a photograph of a painting] in turn with entire attention. “Who could have done these?”

“They are mine.”

“You are an extraordinarily gifted woman,” he said, still staring at them. “oh how I wish I could read your book.”

“It’s not like those pictures,” I laughed and told him their brief history.

“‘Those’ are my ‘last exhibition’ cancelled the moment the dealer set eyes on them.” [...] 

“I felt, if I were to go back, begin a universe all over again, forget all form I am familiar with, evoking a chaos from which I could draw forth incipient form, that at last the female brain might achieve an act of creation.”

I did not know this as yet, but the man seated before me holding a photo in his somewhat invalid hand had done this very thing—visualized the mists of chaos curdling into shape. But with a male difference. (Loy 37)

Just as Loy and Schiaparelli struggled with choosing the appropriate art form through which they could best convey their ideas, the narrator addresses the distinctiveness of her different endeavors while Insel naively assumes all of her art would be of a similar vein. Moreover, their conversation raises the question of whether women and men visualize and create art differently, a recurring topic throughout the novel as the narrator and Insel struggle for artistic control over Insel’s body. Insel, however, continues to associate appearance with artistic quality. Upon seeing a painting of the Brontë sisters, Insel associates the artistic rendering and appearance of the sisters with the quality of their artistic production. The women in the portrait are “extraordinarily attractive,” so Insel feels as if he “should care for
what they have written’’ (Loy 33). While the connection between physical appearance and individual creativity recurs throughout the novel—as seen with Insel’s suit—Insel subjugates the Brontës’ writings to their artistic rendering. They become another version of the faceless women he visually undresses on the street, only thinking of their writing as an afterthought.

Cristanne Miller posits that “[f]or Loy, there is a chasm between spirit and skin” because “[h]er deceptive appearance of femininity is not reflected in the nongendered speaking voice and radical linguistic structures of her poems” (120). I argue, in contrast, that while Loy “was not following fashion” (Miller 120) and does create disparate works of art, her varied artistic interests—particularly her fashion interests—are clearly reflected in her writing, particularly through the identities of the narrator and Insel. Their sheer varied aesthetic interests enhance the novel’s surrealist aims, and, like the characters’ constructed selves, they exemplify the broad definitions of who and what is an artist and what constitutes artistic expression and production.

In their discussion of sewing, Gilbert and Gubar assert the “subtle subversiveness” of sewing “enact[s] and exploit[s] a traditional metaphor for the female artist” (641-42). Loy and her narrator, “like Ariadne, Penelope, and Philomena,” are “women [who] have used their looms, thread, and needles both to defend themselves and silent to speak of themselves” (Gilbert and Gubar 642). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in the perfect world the woman artist, instead of sewing clothing, would be a “naked and shining figure,” and perhaps Insel’s narrator, with her relative undescribed appearance, is a movement toward such an ideal form (642). Indeed, as Insel ends and the narrator and Insel part ways, the battle of wills and possible selves evident in the two characters resolves with the narrator
banishing Insel from his own text. Thus, in Gilbert and Gubar’s words, “[l]iteral or
figurative male impersonation”—here in the form of Insel as a possible self for Loy or the
narrator—“seems to bring with it a nervous compulsion toward ‘feminine protest,’ along
with a resurgence of the same fear of freakishness or monstrosity that necessitated male
mimicry in the first place” (66). The narrator may figuratively fabricate Insel through text
and cloth, but she ultimately reconciles Insel to a textual life, discarding her relationship
with him physically at the end of the novel, but allowing him to remain central to the text
and its eponymous title. Thus, the dueling personalities may be both possible and existent
throughout the novel, but Loy or the narrator ultimately choose a primary self—that of a
female artist—while allowing the alternative to remain an utter fabrication—a text.
Works Cited


Weaving Words. Exclusive-to-web audio and supporting material looking at the work and lives of some of Ulster's vernacular poets. For further enquiries, please contact Laura Spence -laura.spence@bbc.co.uk. Available now. Prog 05 - Hugh Porter of Moneyslane. Duration: 6:04. All available episodes (10 total).