

FLUID

A research of and a reflection on gender fluidity and representation
on stage and in costume design



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Master's in Design, Costume and Fashion
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I want to begin by acknowledging that I am writing from a western Scandinavian,
white, cis-presenting, gender fluid, curious perspective.

All pronouns used in this paper are either checked with the individual
themselves or thoroughly researched before presented.

INTRODUCTION

NOW YOU SEE ME; NOW YOU DON'T. A workshop

Frankie Boi

Intention

ON GENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY

When we dress up

THE COSTUMED BODY

Moving freely

DRAG AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING PERFORMANCES

Self expression

CONCLUSION



The first object I made at KHiO **MANIFESTO** A description of my intention



~~WHAT YOU SEE ISN'T ALWAYS WHAT YOU GET~~



INTRODUCTION

This is a written reflection on the work I have done and will continue to do on my MA degree in which I review how gender is performed on stage and in costumes.

I began my MA with the knowledge that I wanted to explore all that is identity and the self, with a focus on gender. I am a genderfluid woman, which means that I move freely in and out of gender expressions, sometimes identifying with one gender other times with another, or several at the same time. My partner is nonbinary and therefore, does not identify with any gender. My partners sister is a cisgender* woman, and her partner is a trans man. Therefore you might understand, I have a lot of personal experience and knowledge of what gender is and can be. I have realised that the way we reproduce gender in the performing arts is still very attached to the binary gender system. I have therefore chosen to research how non-binary gender representation can be a part of the stage and how it can expand from the stage and out. It is part of my everyday practice and has been the central theme in my work during my MA.

I'll begin by explaining what gender is to me and how it

has been scholarly defined and debated, by turning to Judith Butler and their work on the performativity theory and Alok Vaid Menon's book *Beyond the Gender Binary*. I will reflect on what Ida Holmegaard writes in their book *Look*, that examines the reading of clothes, which leads me onto the costumed body where I touch upon the "rules" of society in how we can and cannot dress in public. I will turn to Drag and gender-nonconforming performances to present insight into how gender performativity can play a different role within performance art. With help from the book *Queering Drag* by Meredith Heller, I'll go into the importance of the language used to talk about Drag and gender-bending performances in regards to talking about the performances in ways that expand them.

Throughout this I will continuously use the work from a workshop I recently did, using all I have learnt the last 1,5 years, and reflect on the theory that I am working within to dive deeper into my work. This workshop is the beginning of one of the two collaborations I have for the spring semester and my final MA work.

*cis-gender: people whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth

Frankie Boi



NOW YOU SEE ME; NOW YOU DON'T. A WORKSHOP



I have created a workshop for my first collaboration for the spring semester and my final MA project, with Mariko Miyata-Jancey from MA choreography at KHiO.

This workshop is building on the work I have done with creating my own Drag persona; Frankie Boi, exploring gender and the inner self, and on the work that Mariko is doing with the dancers for her MA exploring the authentic self.

I introduced the participants to my understanding of Butler's theory on gender and performativity and how this is a part of the workshop.

I presented them to the idea of looking to Drag to try and play with different kinds of performativity and to find their inner Drag of any kind. Not limited to dressing up in gender-bending garments but exploring the garment as something you are dressing up in to let out a side or a self that is not "out" all the time.



Frankie Boi

Through my work with Frankie Boi, I have found very distinct freedom in changing my face and body shape to get to a place where I understand my persona to be moving out of the binary performativity space. To me, it gives a feeling of being free of gender boxes and expectations. It's like there's a kind of line that one needs to cross, maybe once or maybe several times, but once that line is crossed, you are freer to express yourself.

Stepping into a pair of high heels and wearing a great suit with an oversized blazer jacket to accentuate my shoulders, maybe put on a binder and fishnet stockings. That is where I feel very

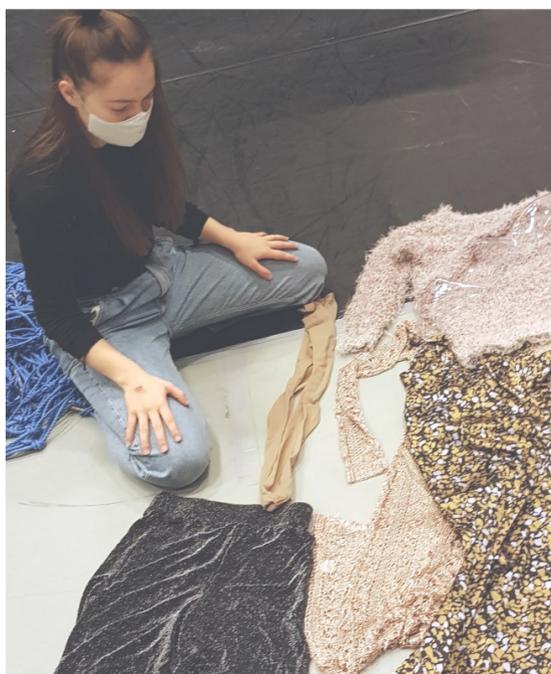
powerful in an outfit that is a blend of all things masculine and feminine and "over the top". The heels for me can feel very masculine; they add to my height and change my posture. The jacket gives my body a square shape, and the binder frees me from an overly sexualised part of my body that I sometimes embrace and other times wish I were free of. The fishnet tights bring in a kind of body awareness that finalises the look—the look, which is the gender. Taken in, chewed up and let out again.

That is what I want to explore with the dancers, and later use these explorations for my further work.



Intention

It is not my intention to turn this performance into a drag performance or dictate making the dancers explore new gender identities. Still, I do believe that what we are exploring goes in the direction of some kind of bend act. I here look to Meredith Heller (Heller) and her intention for Drag discourse, which is about looking at what is presented on stage. How and what kind of bending is deployed, rather than who is doing it. We don't focus on who the performers are but what they do; the fact that they are bending the normative.



The dancers were exploring performativity and how this connects them to others and themselves or affects them in how they behave and how they feel.

At first, they chose from a big bunch of garments without looking, only feeling for what they wanted to wear. It was about intuition and materials. My thought was that they chose whatever they thought would be best for them, with the materials they like the best; thick or thin materials, scratchy or soft. It's a way for me to stay on the sideline and observe what materials they (/their egos) are drawn to.

I had them go through this twice, and then we went on to them choosing garments to create a character of their inner self. They went into the assignment headfirst and got to select the garment they wanted. The only rule: they had to dress up in all of the chosen garments.



ON GENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY

I do not want to erase gender in costumes; I do not want to erase gender at all. We live in a gendered world, and I want to expand this world of gender.

To me, gender is something to play with. It is also something that can cause a lot of self-doubt and internalised hate. The latter comes from the way the western society has established laws around it, from the judicial laws that make it close to impossible to legally identify outside the male/female binary to the social rules that dictate who can go into what toilet.

Non-binary people have been a part of this world for centuries; some countries like India have a legally assigned third gender (BBC, 2014). It is nothing new, but it is still not a regular part of what's presented on stage or in the field of costume design, which is often very dominated by heteronormativity and the hegemonic gender binary.

I want to create a space where non-binary gender is represented or is a possibility, as much as binary genders, and take this with me into the mainstream world of costume design. At the moment I only see 'gender play' on small stages in queer communities or as random tokenised characters on bigger stages or tv, and I hope to catch the attention of other creatives in the field and make them reflect on the predominant gender representations on stage.

Furthermore, I am generally very interested in the way we express ourselves through garments, in fashion and costume, and I have been intrigued, like many others before me, by the theory of gender performativity presented by Judith Butler (Butler). I find it very thought-provoking when living in a community where I do not believe it is possible to determine a person's gender through specific heteronormative gender performativity. Additionally, it is worth noting the gender performativity of clothes in general, and the gender performativity of the materials.

Butler explains their theory on performativity in an interview with Big Think and says;

"Gender is performative - we act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman." (Big Think, 2016, 0:35)

Which is their way of explaining how the heteronormative cultural understanding of gender is such a big part of how we live and learn. It is the first way we learn to categorise each other: are you a boy or a girl, then you like playing wild or sitting still and listening - we are taught how to be either or and it becomes a part of everything else we live with.



One could argue that this is expressed in the workshop, where one of the participants (dancer#1) ended up with five pieces of large garments, after picking blindly from the pile of clothing. She chose a pair of nylon stockings, glitter pants, shiny floor-length mesh knit dress with long-sleeves, a thick fluffy knit with a plastic attachment and a long satin strap dress. The garments all had a very intriguing feel; the touch was soft and materials and garments, would be heteronormatively categorised as womens clothes. The dancer noted that she felt for things she found nice to touch and materials that seemed to be light and soft on the body.

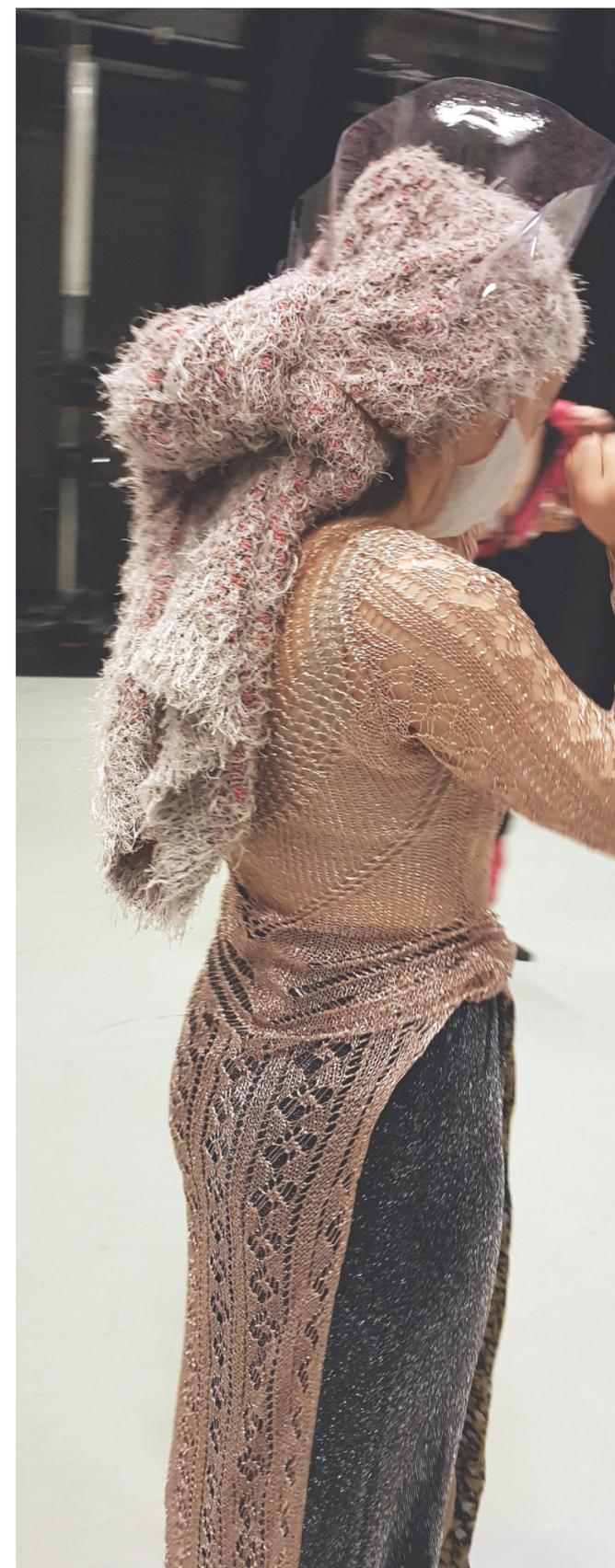
She then put on alle the garments, dresses on top of eachother and the rest thrown over the shoulder as a kind of boa and she immediately began showing off and playing with the performativity that the garments enhanced in her.

She tells us that she does not usually use dresses and does not usually move around in very "typical feminine" ways, but getting these heteronormatively defined feminine garments on, she felt a kind of need to move around in flowy movements and show off what she had created on her body. The question here is whether the garments and the materials inherently possess this performativity or whether this performativity is assigned in the heteronormative matrix. It is interesting to see whether we can move beyond that in any way.



Dancer #1
Andrea Sorlie Barret

This binary way of understanding each other and each other's genders quickly becomes the 'truth' and the 'natural' way of understanding. Which, as Butler later points out, is a very absurd and limiting way to understand each other and our gender expressions. (Big Think, 2016, 1:27) The thought that we could determine a person's gender, or at least guess on it, based on how they dress and move around in the world is absurd. It might be possible to point out a non-binary person based on their performativity within the queer community, where the first few steps outside the gender binary have been taken and where a new kind of non-gendered performativity is developing. Though, despite this developing performativity, the whole point for gender non-conforming(GNC) people is that you cannot determine a person's gender solely by looking at them. Unfortunately, gender is still perceived as one of the most relevant things to know about a person, even if you don't know them personally, even if you only see them on the street. You (try to) determine people's gender, as a way to understand how to relate to them. This kind of gendering, however, will only ever be a reflection of your gender definitions and not the person's actual gender identity.

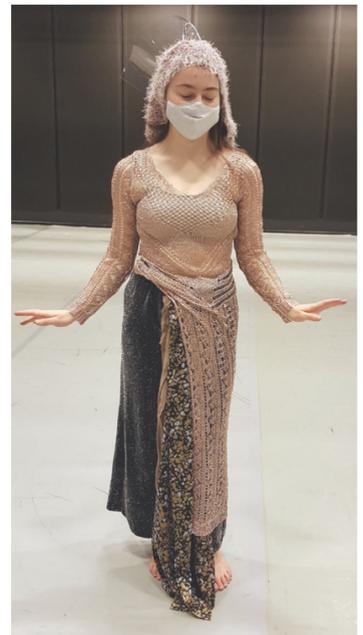


In the workshop, I chose to give dancer#1 and the rest of the team a "second act" in the same garments, where they had to change the way they wear it. Because, as initially thought, the dancers did, in fact, use the garments mostly as the dominant/normative way to wear them.

In the second act, dancer#1 draped one of the dresses and the nylon tights from her waist and wore the pants. She put the fluffy knit on top of her head as a kind of wig, and the plastic attachment looked like a crown on her head. At this point, she let go of the semiotics of the garments, to some extent and began playing with them. Pretending the fluffy blouse was long hair and a crown and bunching the leftover garments together in one place on her body to create a kind of tow of fabric.

She came into character - or the character might have come out of the "hair and crown" on her head. It definitely let her discover something, specific for that combination of costume/dress and that the same garments can make a completely different character, who then also might have other gender expressions.

I got a pretty useful look into how she reacts with different garments, and how much they can "control" her performativity. I am collecting the information in a "character gallery" for myself to work with when further developing the costumes for the dancers and this performance piece.





Alok Vaid Menon (Alok) writes in their book *Beyond the Gender Binary*; “Some gender non-conforming people are nonbinary, and some are men and women. It depends on each person’s experience. Two people can look similar and be completely different genders. Gender is not what people look like to other people; it is what we know ourselves to be. No one else should be able to tell you who you are; that’s for you to decide.” (Alok, 2020, s.44)

What they are clearly stating is that gender performativity and gender identity don’t necessarily align. As Butler describes, the heteronormative way of perceiving each other is very limiting and at the same time, erases queerness by insisting on the binary. Even though one does not conform to the binary, they are read within the binary gender expectations of garments, hairstyle, body type and so on. But, gender is such an individual thing that no matter how you look or act, your gender can be something different from what the general perception would be, based on the binary gender performativity.

“Gender is a phenomenon that is being produced and reproduced. Nobody really is a gender from the start, we create the gender” (Big Think, 2016, 1:36)

Therefore there could be many other genders. If we create gender, we should be able to create infinite genders, and float between them as best suits us. Butler’s theory on performativity also notes that if we don’t conform to the performativity of our gender assigned at birth, we can disrupt the binary and at some point, erase gender completely. I don’t believe that this is the case yet, and I am not sure it ever will be; in Butler’s understanding gender could be anything at any time thus undermining it as a descriptor. However, I believe that even if gender no longer exists as a binary descriptor, it will still be an essential way for people to understand themselves. I think in general we need categorisations to place ourselves within, for better self-understanding.

“Gender performance is a part of what we do to communicate, navigate space, validate selfhood, and represent who we are to others” (Heller, 2020, s.31).

Still, we have to be able to move around within this gender performance. I have noticed in myself and my surroundings, the need to categorise ourselves in some kind of way, to be able to have a place from which to evolve and to be able to relate to other people, since gender is still one of the main things we think we know about each other. The way we do this is generally through the way we dress and express ourselves, which brings us to the gendering of garments and the general practice of using garments to express ourselves.



The second dancer (dancer#2) had a greater awareness of his gender and gender performativity. He often dresses in what he calls “boy glam”, a gender-nonconforming mix of clothes normatively identified as men’s clothes mixed with normative women’s clothes, and heels for occasions. Unlike the two others, he has experience playing with gender identity and expression. He jumped quickly into a character and played around in any garments. When picking with closed eyes, he got two boiler suits. They both had a kind of masculine vibe to them, even though

they were in the store categorised as women garments. One of them a very colourful ski suit and the other a black low cut thin wool suit. He first chose to dress, in the way the garments are meant to be worn with the black suit underneath and the ski suit over, but only as a jacket with the legs hanging down the back. It gave associations to a penguin tuxedo, and he embodied a character standing in a typically masculine position, with hands in the pockets and shoulders square and forward. It seemed like he was genuinely feeling this characterisation of himself.



Dancer #2
Morten Stenersen

Moving on to another outfit he got into a skirt, high heels and a short-sleeved shirt, again emphasising on his body type; flat chest, broad shoulders, but wearing a long flowy skirt and high heels giving him a very feminine way of moving around the room.

He was able to move freely around his ideas of performativity, and this is what I have found true to many people that have an awareness of their own performativity, and been interested in exploring it.



Since our gender is such a big part of who we are in the world, it can end up being a very vulnerable thing for those who do not conform to the binary genders. When our gender identity is not accepted or continually mistaken, because of the terms of the world we live in, that is where the self-doubt and internalised hate comes in.

I want to try and find a way to express all of these complexities within performance and within costumes for performances, expressing this with and through one of the many gendered things in this world, the garment. With this, I hope to create an open space in which to explore gender expression.

When we dress up

The garment has an immense amount of power over us and can sometimes make or break your day, your interview, your performance. It is all about how we perform ourselves in the world, and how much control we have over how our own performativity is interpreted. It is a way to try to express our most authentic self. Or hide it? Because even if two people look exactly alike to one person, they might look very different to another person - it is all about perception. In many ways, performativity only exists in the moment it is being read, since performativity is all about cultural signs and what the individual takes these signs to mean. So, depending on your culture, your community, you will understand a person's performativity differently. But what if they are dressing up in such a way that you do not immediately understand their specific performativity, or you understand them to be dressed up, wearing some kind of costume? Gender non-conforming people often get mistaken for dressing up for a theme party. Halloween can for many GNC people be the safest time of the year to walk the streets at any time of day. (Van Ness, 2020)

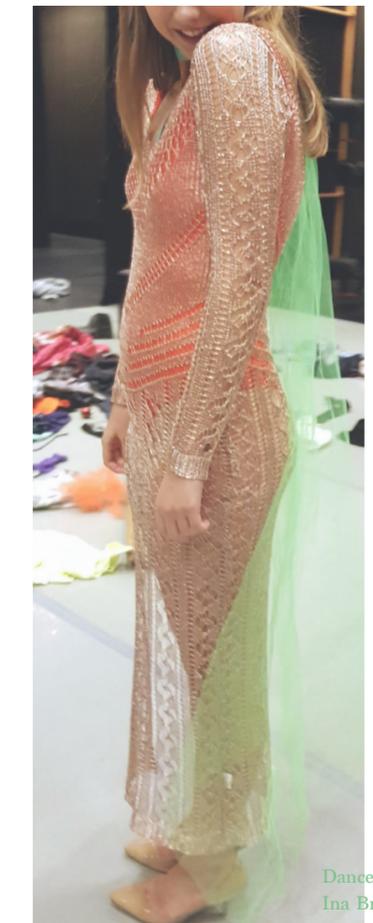
I am always in the process of understanding clothes and costumes as the same thing and still see it as being very separate. Ida Holmegaard writes about this feeling of one's clothes being a costume and how dressing up in an actual costume can feel like a very serious thing; They write about how they felt about dressing up in costumes as a child, truly being the person, they were dressing up as, channelling that person. It was serious, and not a game, not play. They write about the possibilities the costume contains for real change.

“When the costume stops being a costume and becomes clothing, then everything can change. I can dress up as a police officer for a theme party, but if I put on a real police uniform and walk the streets, it would be a crime. Or: I can dress up as a police officer at a theme party and then realise that the police are also dressed up in costume. Maybe being an adult is about building a defined (way, way too defined) relationship with what costume is and what so-called regular clothing is, appropriate clothing”
[Translated from Danish] (Holmegaard, 2020, s.47)

Appropriate clothing, not costume. Even in big fashion design competitions, they talk about the clothes being too costumey, this is an emphasis on the distinction we make as grownups about costume and clothing, costume is the thing that is too much, or that makes you become something else. Clothing is who you are, and if you dress up in too much, you are hiding or trying to be something else.

Which brings me to the third dancer(dancer#3). She jumped into this with a kind of playfulness that I can only compare to kids dressing up without fear. She was actually saying at the start of the workshop that she usually does not want to stand out, and she rarely dares to wear the things that she actually wants to wear. She gave an excellent example of being very tied to what is “normal” and “appropriate” to wear. With this dancer, what I noticed the most was her excitement in trying out the garments and at one point she brought out a pair of sweatpants with a big hole in between the legs, these pants are her own, worn and torn, and she has saved them

because she really loves them and wanted to wear them as a top, but this would not be categorised as “appropriate” to her, rather a little weird. When moving on to everyone dressing as they would dress a character of their inner selves, a “costumed” character, she chooses to wear a Baywatch bathing suit with a beautiful shining rosa see-through dress on top and a long green tulle cutoff as a kind of tow. This creation makes her move around in the room playfully and - as we later talk about - in a way she would never have if she were “in the real world” in that outfit. There is a limit to how she and the garment perform together. That is the limit of the stage.



Dancer #3
Ina Bråstein

How can I take this notion of performativity where clothing can also be costume, and bring it into my costume design when it is actually all about who is viewing it, how they perceive it? And how can I use it to create garments that will illustrate who the person wearing the costume is without it having to be about their gender or being something that is only understood as a costume? Is that even possible? Can we create a way to express one's authentic self, going beyond gender and moving into just personal expressions, producing without reproducing? Or is the answer actually to note down all the different kinds of ways something can be understood depending on how it is viewed, where it is viewed and who is viewing it; working with heteronormative gendering. Maybe going into the semiotics of garments and understanding those to the extent where they could be played with, like words in a pun, to accentuate the absurdity of those specific signs?

I will work with this for my spring semester when I start creating the garments/costumes for the performances I am working on.

THE COSTUMED BODY

The body is costumed - on stage *and* in everyday life.

“Clothes are always meaningful, readable, in conversation with something that comes before it” [Translated from Danish] (Holmegaard, 2020, s.48)

We dress for work, sport, school, staying home, going to the store. This dressing up might be unconscious. But within the unconsciousness of dressing lies learnt behaviour, a reason for doing what we do, choosing what we choose, always dressing in something knowing that others will see it, dressing to walk into a specific act. The store, the school, the couch, the desk at work is your stage. When we dress for all this, are we still dressing as ourselves? Or are we dressing as what we think is ourselves?

Are we “allowed” to dress as the self we want? Or is that dangerous, and therefore we dress in what is expected of us - what can feel like a costume - just to be safe?

How can you highlight the act of being your authentic self when dressing, and also embody that you are continually changing and evolving, that your core self is a fluid entity? Is choosing to change your facial shape with makeup what makes you *you*? If choosing not to do it because of reasons that are out of your hands, does that make it *not* you? Or is the fact that you can choose whatever makes it you, enough to make it you? When you move that you onto the stage, acting, dancing, performing something special; Would you need to separate the acting/performing you from the other you, or are they one and the same? These questions - when is a person their “true” self and when are they not - could ignite a kind of reflection for my future collaborations to understand how we move from clothes to costume and back again and how identity is wound up in both.

Image 2. Joshua Allen and Alok Vaid-Menon, SOFT: A Gender Non-conforming Photo Series by Zara Julius, 2017



Moving freely

Currently, I am working on costumes for a stage performance that aims to illustrate the authenticity of the dancers on stage, without the garments relying on fixed semiotics that only work for this specific performance and space. Instead the costumes should serve as a comment on how we are (not) allowed to change and play with our self-image within the larger society. It is an attempt at building up a utopic way of being, expressing and moving, and letting this be a comment or a spark for reflection on how we are “allowed” to be outside of that performance context. How/who we are in “the real world” and on whose authority?

We are only free to be who we are if we are not “too much” - if we stay within the lines, conform, and don’t call too much attention to who we are, making sure not to stray from the normative where “too much” can be as little as a sundress.

This is different on the stage. In the podcast *Getting Curious* with Jonathan Van Ness, Alok talks about being gender nonconforming and shares;

“People are okay with gender non-conforming people when it’s on a billboard, in a magazine, on the stage. But if they’re sitting next to you on the train, then it’s uncomfortable.” (Van Ness, 2020)

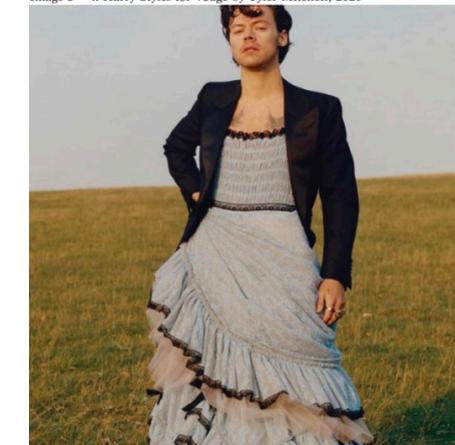
The non-conformity then becomes too real and “too much” to handle and can create fear and violence. When Alok talks about gender non-conforming people like this, they are talking about the GNC people who are living their lives true to who they are and not hiding their gender non-conformity. Dressing GNC out and proud is often very visible because it is a very different way of dressing compared to “regular” gender-conforming dressing. There’s a natural emphasis on gender non-conformity because it is just that—non-conforming, outside of the norm.

We had a conversation about what it means to dancer #2 to do boy glam, and what kind of garments that makes it glam. The glam, to him, comes with the feminine additions, the make-up, a skirt, a ruffled top, but also just in the mix of all those. Where on its own it would not categorised as glam. We then dressed me in his boy glam outfit. Dressing in men’s clothing mixed with womens clothing, which I do, often, is definitely a part of my non-conformity but it is rarely noticed in the same way that his is. It wasn’t as “extreme” of a change on me, because the feminine clothes are “made for my body” and me putting on a men’s jacket or pants is normal and not different looking, while the other way around it would be.

It is most often noticed that someone is dressing GNC when they dress in feminine clothing and have clear body attributes that point in a masculine direction. It is rarely noticed when it is the other way around. This has everything to do with the time and society we live in, how fashion has shaped what we wear, and the simple notion that women can wear pants and suits but men are not “allowed” by the norm to wear dresses or skirts. Since we are in 2020 soon to be 2021, this is not entirely true, the fashion and the norms are changing, slowly but steadily. However, while it might seem that we’re finally moving in a direction that allows freedom of expression by de-gendering garments, this is only true for people who are doing it in a way that is palatable to the normative.

An example of this is Harry Styles (Styles) (English singer, songwriter and actor) being the first non-woman to be featured alone on the front cover of *US Vogue* in a dress, in a beautiful and tasteful way. However, it is still not moving in the direction of full acceptance of anyone choosing to express, be and dress who they are. (Alok, 2020) Styles is still a white, cis presenting, privileged man with an idealistic normative body, for whom being in a dress is not life-threatening.

The fact is, that feminine ways of dressing is still the most stigmatised, especially if it’s done by a person publicly showing their gender non-conformity with femininity as a big part of their expression. It can be boiled down to the fact that femininity has always been less valued in western society compared to masculinity, so people who choose to dress in men’s/masculine clothing are understood and praised because they are perceived as “dressing for success”. But dressing in feminine clothing is a step-down, it’s soft and devalued. For this reason, people dressing in traditionally feminine clothing are more noticeable than the people who are dressing up in masculine clothing when still easily understood as “female”. (Selin Davis, 2020, 2:37) I will not discuss this further here, but it is a point I am going to explore within my work in the spring in my two collaborative projects, one of which includes creating a capsule collection for a Drag performer’s Drag persona.

Image 3 + 4. Harry Styles for *Vouge* by Tyler Mitchell, 2020

DRAG AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING PERFORMANCES

Drag is an art form, created most often from the drag performer's own vision; from costume to music to what happens on stage to light and props. Drag explores the whole spectrum of gender, being most known and most often talked about in the binary setting as a man dressed up as a woman and the other way around. Even when reading scholarly texts, explaining Drag is often reduced to a binary gendering, focusing on what gender the performer "actually" is underneath the performed gender. Meredith Heller points this out when discussing the discourse of gender-bending performances in her book *Queering Drag*. Early on she explains how Drag is usually understood by quoting from *The Drag Queen Anthology*, by Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood who define Drag Queens as;

"Individuals who publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are 'men' regardless of how compellingly female - 'real' - they might appear otherwise" (Schacht and Underwood, 2004, s.4)

Heller explains "Here, a drag queen is defined as a drag queen because she looks "compellingly female" onstage and also because she is really a man offstage. In other words, drag queening is a theatrical representation of a gendered persona that is not real but a parody of reality" (Heller, 2020, s.3) So, it says that Drag Queens are Drag Queens, not because of the performance that bends their queer identity, but because of the performers assumed cisgender identity.

Drag has expanded beyond the extreme gender binaries and is done by people of all genders expressing all genders and no genders at all, moving from polished Queen to abject GNC Drag to any kind of creature Drag. It can be done in any way, any form, by anyone. It's an art form to express oneself, done any place whether it's the stage at a bar or in front of the bathroom mirror. The main thing is expressing yourself; however you need to do it.

Heller's discourse of gender-bending performances makes it possible to understand Drag in a new way outside the gender binary, and not only as the gender-bending that dictates a Drag performer to be the opposite gender out of Drag, as what they are performing as in Drag. We can choose to look at drag performances from a place of understanding the performance for what it is and not for who is doing it.

"I aim to deploy a drag discourse that focuses on what the performers do rather than who they are, thus crediting them with the impacts of their carefully constructed and deployed bending." - (Heller 2020, s18)

As such Heller creates space for Drag to move beyond the performer's perceived gender and instead, moving it into a space where bending of any kind is what we focus on, within the Drag definition established by Heller.

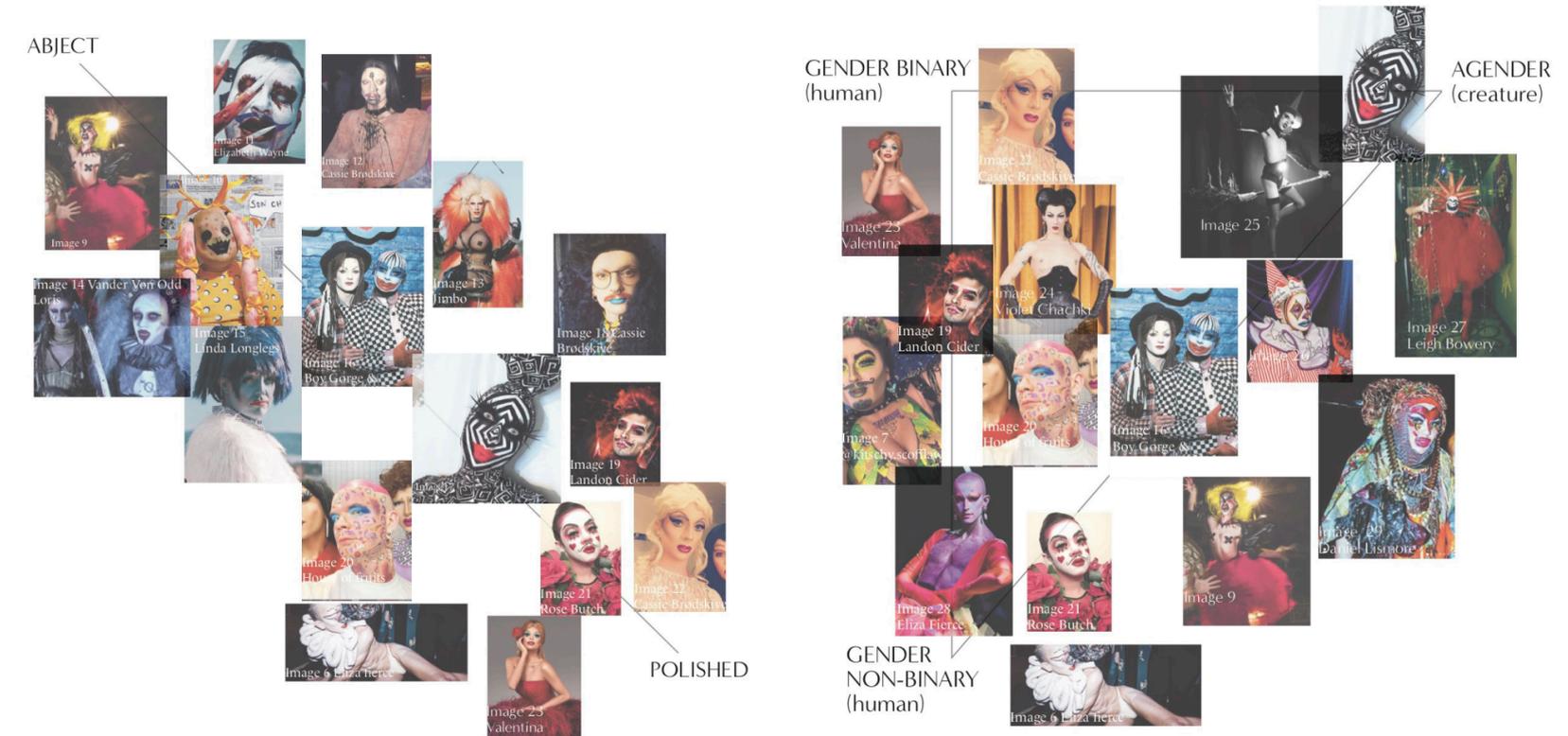


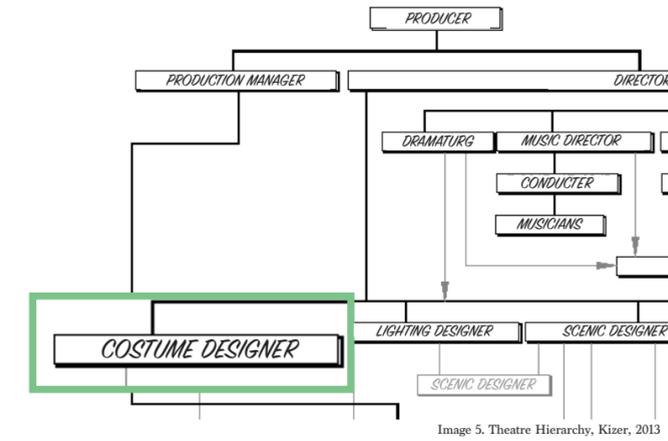
Image 6. A visualisation of drag performers ranging between Polished and Abject and Gender binary, Agender (Creature drag) and Gender Non-binary created by me for an earlier project at KHIO

WASTE NOT. A PROJECT



At the end of last semester, I worked on a project with Drag performer, Eliza Fierce. Eliza is a drag performer in Oslo who enhances her flat boy chest and does not tuck* anything away when dressing up in Drag. It's a way for Eliza to be not only gender non-conforming but also non-conforming to the mainstream portrayal of Drag. Mostly, it's a way for her to express herself in Drag. Working with Eliza, I got an insight into how GNC drag can be done. I made an outfit for her that was created with methods, all a little out of the norm; finding materials on the street and making a bodysuit to show off the un-tucked and the bare chest. The way I worked with Eliza was to find out who she is in Drag and what kind of shapes and ways of dressing she most often turned to, and then I created from that. For me, it's all about getting to know the Drag character. With Eliza, I ended up making something that had many feminine qualities to both contrast and display her masculine qualities.

Eliza Fierce
aka Peter David Ramthun



I see that Drag has agency in the way the performer themselves creates it. Comparing it to other kinds of performance art; in theatre, for example, there is often a hierarchy where the costume designer has to answer to the director and producer, and often more. In Drag, the costume is one of the main parts of the act, and the Drag artist is both the director, producer and often the costume designer.

“Theatrical gender-bending has the potential to be a source of individual or group strength for deeply marginalized people as well as a source of large-scale political resistance and cultural change” (Heller, 2020, s.5)

That is exactly why I believe that turning to Drag is beneficial to my work. It is a way for me to dive into another kind of costuming where the act of being or not being a gender is not the central part of costuming. Where the costume and garments speak a million things together with the performer, moving in and out of specific associations or ways of being. It is a way not to be tied down to the specific binary semiotics of materials and garments, but moving in and out of what it could mean. Wearing a bathing suit or walking determined in a business suit made of latex, that is falling apart and revealing military underwear and fishnet stockings underneath.

* Tucking: a way to hide the penis and testes (Dornheim, 2018)



In my continued work with the dancers, I intend to work with exaggerations of what we found early on, moving it into something so hyperbolic that it becomes “too much” or moves into an area of performing oneself in an extreme kind of way. Here, I am drawing inspiration from Drag and hope that I will be able to bring in what Drag can do; creating a space for reflection on gender performance and self-reflective performance.

Self-expression

I have been exploring all these different ways of understanding who we are in regards to what we wear and how we move, together with Mariko, as beginning research for the costumes I will be making in our collaboration. Mariko is exploring the notion of being one’s true self, being authentic to your core self if there is a core self and how this core self is a part of everything you do. She uses this quote from Richard Schechner’s book on performance studies, and the concept of the self:

“[...] restored behavior is “me behaving as if I were someone else”, or “as I am told to do”, or “as I have learned”. Even if I feel myself wholly to be myself, acting independently, only a little investigating reveal that the units of behavior that comprise “me” were not invented by “me”.” (p. 34, Schechner 2002)

If we then look at Butler’s Performativity theory, we could say that Schechner and Butler are talking about the same thing, where Butler just talks directly about the gendered part of identity, that is produced and reproduced. Mariko writes in her essay on the topic of her MA work that she’s been; *“haunted both by the complexity of the term performance and the elusiveness of the concept of the self”* and *“that how we perform ourselves, or not, is of great importance.”* (Miyata-Jancey, 2020) Within my work on creating costumes that are more than a gender, it is essential to explore the complexity of the self and how this self is performed, because the garments/costume is an intricate part of this performance. My work with the dancers is all about creating a space for them to dive into the production of the self, they should feel supported by the costume and use it to build on their performance & performativity. Instead of the costume being a reference, to illustrate one binary expression specifically, it helps them to move in all the directions they want to go. Hopefully letting them express outside of the bindings of the gender binary.

This idea of the self, or multiple selves, also became a part of the workshop, specifically when working with dancer#3. She had so many different kinds of characters or selves she wanted to bring out by trying on the garments. One very prominent part was when she realised that for every character, she chose a bathing suit. She got most excited about a string bathing suit, revealing the skin that she usually would not dare, became a big part of that self she was showing us in the workshop. To me, not knowing her prior to the workshop, I understand her as an extroverted person who is very willing to try everything out. But the others told me that she is known to be very shy. Was she still herself in the workshop, creating her characters based on herself? Or were the garments revealing their characters through her?



To me, creating a costume for a performance of any kind is always a challenge, especially if the costume comes in secondary to the performance. When that is the case, the performer has to perform *despite* the costume. The costume becomes a new uninformed element that the performer on stage has to take into account and then get to know, to be able to do their performance as well as they want to. It's a second body or a kind of second skin that the performer has to get to know. No matter how early in a performance setting, I as a costume designer enter, it is my experience that the costume is often a challenge. The only setting where this does not seem to happen is when the costume is a part of the initial creation of the performance. Here the costume is a part of shaping what the performance will be from the starting point and helps it on its way, thereby becoming a crucial part of the performance. It has agency. This is what I intend to do with my MA collaboration with Mariko at KHiO.

CONCLUSION —————

“Clothes are not only objects that we make, clothes are objects that make us. From this perspective, it’s not simply that clothing becomes gendered. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say in our modern era: fashion is gender.” (Alok, 2020)

Garments are gendered, but only to the extent that we let it be. Through the research I’ve done so far I see the possibilities to change this fact, but I also know that I need methods to be able to let go of the way I perceive the garments as gendered. It’s such a big part of the way we understand the world, and it’s hard to redirect the mind.

The workshop that I have referenced throughout this paper gives a great insight into how my future work can go even deeper in the research of performativity in costume design. It’s clear to me that I need to keep working within these workshops, as it’s an excellent resource for me to build on the elements of creating costumes outside of gender expectations. Through the workshop, I have found that the way we wear the different garments are very determined by the gender we perceive the garment to have or not have. By reflecting on the performativity theory in the workshops, I am beginning to deconstruct the hegemonic gender system that costume is generally based on. Through my workshops and through working with Drag performers, I’ll build on my own knowledge about everything GNC, and be able to apply this in my further work.

I have realised the importance of my collaboration with Mariko, both within the workshop but also for my understanding of identity and performance in general. Her MA project on self and identity creates a second dimension within my work that further underlines my ambition to develop a kind of costume design, that goes beyond gender construction.

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IMAGES

Image 1. Katoch, Karan(2017) Travis Alabanza, Katlego K Kolanyane-Kesupile, Alok Vaid-Menon and Eddie Ndopu. [Photograph] <https://www.alokvmenon.com/photo>

Image 2. Julius. Zara (2017) SOFT: A Gender Non-conforming Photo Series [Photograph] https://www.unlabelledmagazine.com/post/2017/04/18/soft-a-gender-non-conforming-photo-series-by-zara-julius?fbclid=IwAR2asTr13BbunqWZhr76rgmlih0eaUAA0d0xIQ-sNoDSocqslQfQV0M_-A

Image 3 +4. Mitchell. Tyler (2020) Playtime with Harry Styles [Photograph] <https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020>

Image 5. Kizer. Matt (2013) theatre hierarchy handout [Graphic] <https://broadwayeducators.com/theatre-hierarchy-handout/>

Image 5 contains:

Image 8, @artofcassie (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCDcBtRJ2WY/>

Image 11, @Elisabethwayne (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEgHC9QJv7D/>

Image 12, @artofcassie (2019) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2VHQi5IBSn/>

Image 13, @Jimbothedragclown (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/CC4KO5-pr3w/>

Image 14, @vadervonodd and @Loris, (2019) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/vadervonodd/>

Image 15, @linda_longlegz (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAzCzn9J8j7/>

Image 16 Wm Mars, *Boy Gorge & Euan Morton* [Photograph] http://www.euanmorton.com/photos/professionalphotographs/professionalphotographs1/images/nobbyclark6_jpg.jpg

Image 18, @artofcassie (2019) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9BicA0pH3T/>

Image 19, @Landoncider (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCrDUgDBdls/>

Image 20, @Housefruits (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9wZG1YhBDk/>

Image 21 @Rosebutch (2020) [Photograph] <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvLCd0RBbni/>

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