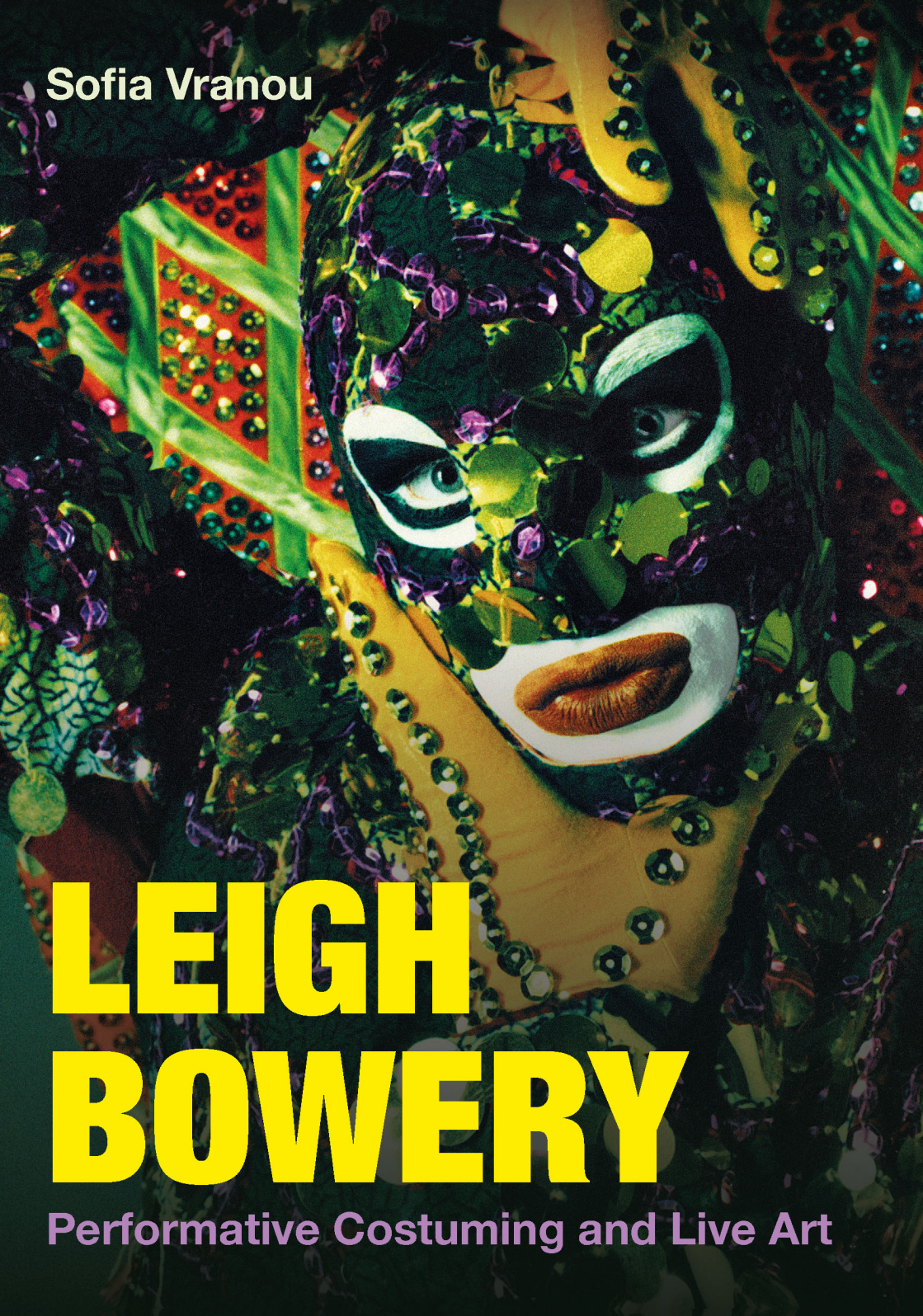
Sofia Vranou
LEIGH BOWERY
Performative Costuming and Live Art

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intellect
Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

Foreword

Boy George

I know Leigh Bowery would love the idea of exhibitions and books and the continued celebration of his colourful legacy. Those who knew him just wish he was still here and wonder how he would operate in this new politically correct universe. What would Leigh's pronouns be and would he be cancelled for spraying the contents of his bowels over the dance floor? Most importantly, I wonder what he would be wearing and where he would have taken it visually. It is clear, when you look at *RuPaul's Drag Race* and fashion, how much Leigh has influenced everything weird and wondrous, but no one does it quite like Leigh. He was the freakiest freak on the freaking planet.

Leigh was an agitator, provocateur and a sight for sore eyes. His favourite snack was pesto on toast and he was ahead of the game with sun-dried tomatoes. He was sarcastic with a twisted sense of humour and hated to explain himself. I always loved seeing him arrive at a club or fashion show because just when you thought he could take it no further he would appear in some genius creation that defied gravity and logic. Leigh Bowery always tried to defy gravity and logic and he did it with undeniable panache.

We must never underestimate the influence of Leigh's widow Nicola Bateman Bowery Binnie Rainbird who was absolutely instrumental in helping Leigh create his groundbreaking looks. Skilfully sewing a million sequins onto voluminous skirts for days or weeks on end. Her own looks were equally astounding and she is as interesting now as she ever was. So much so, I have dedicated a new song to her and her sister Christine, called simply 'The Bateman Sisters'.

Introduction: Larger than Life

In the finale of an early episode of *The Clothes Show*, a popular British television programme about fashion, a self-proclaimed avant-garde designer by the name of Leigh Bowery welcomes the camera into the dressing room of his flamboyant flat for a quick showcase of some of his latest outfits. Covered with clownish make-up, wearing a pair of painted glasses featuring two big dots for eyes, and adorned with a strange spiky headpiece that resembles a sea urchin, the emerging designer peeks playfully behind his colourful door and invites the viewers in. For the next few minutes he is shown modelling a series of outlandish costumes and bizarre accessories that he describes in what would commonly be perceived as an exaggerated posh British accent: 'I think things should be larger than life', he says and resumes posing and acting in a well-calculated theatrical manner. His presence is buzzing camp as he gestures and spins gracefully, wrapped up in layered frills inside his gloriously garish dimly lit flat. Most of the costumes Bowery wears have been designed for the stage, but he does not hesitate to wear them in public, especially in nightclubs, which, as he states immersed in a red tulle ball ensemble, play 'a very important part' in his life.[1]

More than three decades later, Bowery is commonly remembered as an eccentric costume maker of the 1980s who came to inspire some of the most ingenious contemporary fashion designers; a nightclub persona and free-spirited performance artist; an unlikely muse for painter Lucian Freud; but above all, a visual provocateur with a highly distinctive and unprecedented practice of creative self-fashioning (Figure I.1). Bowery started making extravagant costumes that he mainly showed off in London's nightclubs as an ambitious and aspiring fashion designer, soon turning into a subcultural icon who constantly blurred the boundaries between fashion, art and life. Being at odds

Figure I.1: Tim Bauer, *Leigh Bowery*, 1986. © Tim Bauer.

with mainstream trends and normative ideals of beauty, he soon abandoned his initial plans for a career in the fashion industry and focused on constructing unusual and often monstrous looks that became over time an inseparable part of his subjectivity, signalling a deep investment in the intersection of self-costuming and performance. Tall with a corpulent physique, Bowery manipulated his appearance drastically with sculptural garments, strange headpieces, layers of make-up and huge platform shoes that made him a towering figure more than seven feet high. Apart from his costumes and the wide range of creative projects he was involved in during his deciduous but multifarious artistic journey, Bowery left behind a peculiar body of work in live art that has for a long time remained puzzling.

The mastery of the fine balance between fashion and art that Bowery attained is rare – if not unique – among artists of his generation. He has been variously described as 'outrageous', 'beautiful', 'genius', 'terrifying' and 'sick', but it is the words of fellow club freak and collaborator Boy George, for whom Bowery designed some of his early career outfits, that seem to most vividly capture his unsettling presence when the latter famously described him as 'modern art on legs'. As compelling and accurate as this might sound in underlining the fact that Bowery's perpetual costuming is foremost a form of performative art that extends beyond the confines of the gallery, it also hints at a possible explanation as to why he has remained a marginal and slippery figure when it comes to the absorption of his work into dominant art narratives.

The ephemerality, complexity and mobility of Bowery's practice, which embraced pop sensibilities and was for the most part exercised in subcultural or unconventional settings like nightclubs, constitute the main factors of its difficulty in being accepted and treated as an important art form. This is the case with many so-called 'underground' artists – from Genesis P-Orridge and Kembra Pfahler to Johanna Went and David Hoyle – whose distinctive practices developed outside institutional art spaces and the disciplinary grid, encompassing a wide range of cultural influences and expressions that for the most part remained inaccessible to the restrained sphere of 'high' art. Bowery's costumes, nevertheless, many of which have been extensively documented by photographer Fergus Greer, were swiftly appreciated in fashion discourse for their strong impact,

bold shapes, innovative vision and craftsmanship, despite the fact that they were never conceived as fashion – at least in the typical sense – but as strictly personal performative devices. Bowery is perhaps the only performance artist who is widely labelled as such, but he is particularly celebrated as a designer and relatively very little has been critically explored about his performances. It almost feels like his costumes, the surviving relics of his idiosyncratic practice, have turned into autonomous artefacts whose powerful brilliance has overshadowed their performative purpose.

It was an image of Bowery in one of his arresting costumes that first caught my attention as I was browsing through *The Artist's Body* (2000), an illustrated art book. As usual, he was mentioned briefly and in relation to his series of performances at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, his only solo show in a commercial gallery and the one that is most often referenced in art publications. My enthusiasm to find out more about this 'icon in underground culture' who turned into walking art 'to examine prevailing judgements of what is perverse and what is normal' was cut short as very limited and scattered information was available or accessible to me at the time.[2] A biography written shortly after his death by his close friend Sue Tilley had been out of print for years, becoming a rare and treasured cult find. When I managed to lay my hands on it and lose myself in Bowery's fascinating life through amusing anecdotes and glimpses of his complex body of work, I felt that his fairly unexplored practice would make for a promising research project, given its significance to live art studies and visual culture as well as its potential to penetrate various discourses beyond art.

Bowery's short life was saturated with excessive experimentation with self-display and the ceaseless pursuit of creative possibilities driven by his fame-hungry ambition. Born in 1961 in Sunshine, a small working-class suburb in Melbourne, he shared a happy childhood with his younger sister in a conventional family that valued good manners and discipline, with both parents actively involved in the Salvation Army. He was an introverted child who excelled at school and the piano and had shown an interest in crochet and lace tatting from an early age. By the time he enrolled at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology to study fashion his creativity and flamboyant side had started to show, but he soon grew dissatisfied with the curriculum and abandoned the course, which he found conservative and boring. Approximately a year later, in late

1980, Bowery was on his way to London with few savings and his portable sewing machine, hoping to pursue a career in fashion and mix with the trendy club crowd he had only seen in magazines. Even though his path to subcultural notoriety was thorny and involved financial hardship and many shifts at Burger King to support himself at the beginning, he steadily built a strong network of like-minded creative friends, most of whom he met at clubs like Cha Cha, Club for Heroes and Asylum.

When Bowery started to get noticed as an emerging fashion designer by making clothes for his scenester friends and having achieved significant connections and exposure with shows in the United Kingdom and internationally, he realized that he disliked the idea of having his designs available on the market. What Bowery craved instead was all spotlights on himself as he paraded his unique and extravagant looks in London's most fashionable nightclubs. His big breakthrough came in 1985 when he became the public face of legendary club night Taboo: 'the apotheosis of a flamboyant life plan which [...] aimed to formulate an alternative to the philistine ruthlessness of neoliberalism, whose visual metaphor could be found in the rigid hairstyle of Margaret Thatcher', Thomas Mießgang characteristically writes.[3]

Taboo expanded Bowery's reputation as an eccentric club persona and motivated his increasingly excessive outfits, which subsequently started to turn into highly crafted avant-garde looks with the valuable help of his assistants Nicola Bateman and Lee Benjamin. From that point on, Bowery embarked on a mission to constantly push the boundaries with his often-provocative performative costuming and engaged in a variety of creative projects and collaborations. Never abandoning the honorary title of nightclub freak, he developed such an ambiguous identity and diverse body of work that essentially rendered him unclassifiable. During a near-decade of intense productivity, approximately from 1985 until his death in 1994 from an AIDS-related illness, Bowery had been known as a fashion and costume designer, club promoter, television persona, painter's model, performance artist, theatre actor and aspiring pop star.

A Peculiar Body of Work

Bowery's creative adventure started shortly after his relocation to London by designing clothes on commission for friends,

showcasing his work in nightclubs and setting up a stall at Kensington Market where he sold his early New Romantic-inspired garments. Influenced at the time by Vivienne Westwood's collection *Buffalo Girls/Nostalgia of Mud* (Autumn/Winter 1982), he made baggy clothes, such as long woolly skirts and cotton dresses, playing with different materials, patterns and patchwork techniques.

Bowery started to create a name for himself in fashion after 1983 when he met club and fashion impresario Susanne Bartsch who included his work in *New London in New York* (1983 and 1984), two massive runway shows of twenty emerging designers from the United Kingdom that she produced at The Roxy and The Limelight. It was around that time when Bowery discovered he was not interested in a career as a mainstream fashion designer and started exploring more experimental ideas of dressing. His collection *Mincing Queens* (1984) was presented at *Performing Clothes* (1984), a two-week fashion and dance event at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, with the show being repeated at The Haçienda club in Manchester and The Caley Picture House in Edinburgh.

Evidently more daring than his previous work, the collection featured frilly knickers and shoes, garments with unusual cuttings and uneven parts in baby pink, brown and white, big floppy hats and painted faces. Bowery, who also modelled his outfits on the catwalk leaving his ass bare, did not rehearse his show but instead enticed the models with alcohol and other psychotropic substances, encouraging an improvised spectacle of disaster that involved bumping into each other and tumbling. Later that year, Bartsch took Bowery's collection and other UK-based designers to Tokyo for *London Goes to Tokyo*, a collective fashion show that was sponsored by the Hanae Mori Foundation (Figure I.2). Information and material regarding these shows and Bowery's early steps in fashion are limited, but Bartsch, whose later successful career as a New York-based club organizer was very much inspired by Bowery's party ethic, undoubtedly gave him the opportunity to expand his creative network and subcultural stardom outside London.

Another success story from Bowery's brief but impactful fashion career was his contribution to a Levi's jacket project that *BLITZ* magazine initiated in 1986. The iconic style magazine commissioned 22 of the most forward-thinking designers,

Figure I.2: Page from the Japanese catalogue of *London Goes to Tokyo* featuring Trojan and Leigh Bowery, 1984. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Michael Costiff.

including John Galliano, Vivienne Westwood, Stevie Stewart and David Holah of BodyMap, Rifat Ozbek, duo Bernstock Speirs, and Judy Blame, to customize Levi's classic denim jacket. Bowery's piece – now acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London – was completely covered with blond shiny hair grips and was lined on the inside with applied silver plastic discs. The works were presented in a heavily publicized fundraising gala for The Prince's Trust at the Albery Theatre in London's West End where a number of celebrities took the stage with professional models in individual choreographed routines, showcasing the jackets. Not only was Bowery the only designer who modelled his own jacket, but he did so in clownish make-up, performing a spoof fall before leaving the stage.

A milestone in Bowery's artistic development is undeniably his long-term collaboration with the choreographer Michael Clark and his dance company. The two met at a nightclub in the early 1980s and Clark was immediately drawn to Bowery's

charisma and extravagant style; he likely identified its potential in dynamically complementing his unconventional post-punk ballet choreographies and productions, most of which toured nationally and abroad. Bowery was initially only making costumes for Clark – for which he and fashion label BodyMap won a Bessie award in 1986 – but eventually became a prominent performer in many of the company's shows, including *Because We Must* (1987), *Pure Pre-Scenes* (1987) and *Mmm …* (1992). Sustained by a strong friendship and a shared appetite for provocation, their lasting collaboration proved a fruitful exchange that benefitted Clark's longing for visual edge and modernization of ballet (often attributed by critics to Bowery's 'bad' influence) and opened new horizons for Bowery in meeting and working with various creatives and becoming more comfortable – and more ambitious probably – with performance beyond the nightclub.

Bowery's most unexpected collaboration, nevertheless, is with painter Lucian Freud when the latter famously immortalized his unadorned body in numerous paintings and etchings. Their unlikely association and friendship started after 1988 when they first met through the artist Cerith Wyn Evans. Bowery posed in the nude regularly for the painter until his death, with Freud producing during this time some of his greatest late works. They have been variously exhibited in many renowned museums worldwide, planting Bowery's imposing figure in the very centre of the art elite and prompting Freud's unsympathetic critics to denounce the works as, in Martin Gayford's words, 'a sort of freak show in oil paint'.[4]

Film director and video artist Charles Atlas, a pioneer in developing screen dance with an impressive list of collaborations, filmed Bowery for numerous projects. They first worked together in *Hail the New Puritan* (1986), a fictionalized poetic documentary about Clark that constitutes an important document of Bowery's early costumes in dance: tall hats, bodysuits that exposed the buttocks, uncomfortably high platform shoes, frilly aprons with bare backs, wigs, childish ensembles with big polka dots and oversized cardigans with huge shoulders decorate the dancers' bodies as they flow spasmodically to post-punk music by The Fall. Bowery also appears briefly in the film, most notably in a scene shot in his actual living room, plastered with tacky Star Trek wallpaper, where he experiments with various looks in front of the

mirror before a night out with friends Trojan, Rachel Auburn and Clark. In *Because We Must* (1989), a poetic film based on Clark's original stage production, a provocative mix of choreography and fantasy in classical and post-punk music features a variety of Bowery's impressive costumes worn by the dancers as well as himself. Dressed as an androgynous creature, a teapot, a shiny star or with lightbulbs on the sides of his head, Bowery is a prominent member of the cast shown playing the piano, delivering lines and dancing. He is also featured in two subsequent video portraits by Atlas discussed later: *Teach* (1992), which shows Bowery trying to lip-sync with plastic lips attached through the piercings on his facial cheeks, and *Mrs. Peanut Visits New York* (1992), a video that involves Bowery parading the streets of downtown New York in one of his most recognized costumes.

Bowery's arresting looks worked like a magnet for experimental video artists who wanted to include in their works even a few shots of him, such as Wyn Evans and John Maybury.[5] Photographers were equally drawn to Bowery, who frequently posed for many over the years, most notably Greer, whose comprehensive collection of Bowery's most iconic looks serves as an important archive. Not only did photography function as a strong aesthetic platform for documenting and preserving Bowery's looks, but, as Katharina Sykora observes, it 'induced and made possible this very particular adventure of the ego' that typifies his practice.[6] Craving the spotlight, Bowery appeared in various television programmes and talk shows many times, at first to showcase his collections and later as a captivating designer, artist and subcultural star utilizing strange costuming. His talents shone through a variety of roles he undertook throughout the years, sustaining his dedication to bringing performance, fashion and music together: as a chat show host in *Take the Blame* for European MTV; an iconic figure in commercials (for Pepe Jeans) and music videos (for The Fall, Jesus Loves You and Lana Pellay); or a background dancing freak on the stage of *Top of the Pops* for 'Don't You Want Me' (1992) by Felix.

Less-known ventures in Bowery's rich experience include his work for the Italian brand Calugi e Giannelli, his tutoring in a creative foundation course at the Architectural Association in London, and his collaboration with Marina Abramović in her performance *Delusional* (1994). Furthermore, having achieved significant recognition in New York's party scene, Bowery was

one of the MCs at Love Ball I and II (1989 and 1991), two significant AIDS fundraising events organized by Bartsch that celebrated ballroom culture and raised millions of US dollars.

Whether showcasing his collections, sharing the stage with Clark's dancers, posing for Freud and photographers or appearing in music clips and experimental videos, Bowery's endeavours – if not his theatrical self-fashioning alone – emit a strong sense of performance. In 1986, he experimented for the first time with acting when he starred in *Hey! Luciani: The Life and Codex of John Paul I*, an intricate play bristling with absurd conspiracy theories written by Mark E. Smith, frontman of The Fall. It was staged only for a couple of weeks at the Riverside Studios in London, and the main cast comprised Smith, Bowery, Trevor Stewart, and Lucy Burge, with The Fall providing music interventions, and Clark and Pellay also appearing briefly. Smith's ambitious attempt at playwriting and his atypical crew were received with tepid bewilderment by critics. Bowery's final acting experience came in 1993 when he embodied Madame Garbo in *The Homosexual: or, the Difficulty of Sexpressing Oneself*, which toured nationally. In an essay discussing the work, Peta Tait was not surprised to see Bowery in one of the leading roles, considering the play's unconventional narrative that is determined by '"unnatural" physical bodies and their bodily functions'.[7]

Having been adequately familiar with the precepts of dance and theatrical performance in dignified institutional spaces, Bowery identified as an artist whose main outlet remained the nightclub for its anarchic and spontaneous mix of bodies, music and fashion, and its relatively greater freedom in expression. In parallel with his busy and diverse work schedule and especially after the success of Taboo, he continued performing throughout the years in the most remarkable nightclubs of the period in Europe and New York: Heaven, Camden Palace, Empire Ballroom, The Limelight, RoXY, Café de Paris and Jackie 60 are just a few. Bowery was also a contestant twice in Andrew Logan's recurring event Alternative Miss World, which fused queerness, art and fashion. In 1985 he entered as 'Miss Leigh Bowerie' and in 1986 he competed alongside a friend as 'Miss Fuck It', leaving a memorable mark in the history of the competition (Figure I.3).

Figure I.3: Fat Gill and Leigh Bowery performing as 'Miss Fuck It' at Andrew Logan's Alternative Miss World event at the Brixton Academy, London, 1986. Photograph by Robert Rosen. © Robert Rosen.

Bowery's outrageous presence was usually enough to turn any situation into an event, but his first advertised performance took place as early as 1984 at The Crypt near Warren Street in London. The event was organized by the Neo Naturists, an avant-garde live art group initiated in 1981 by Christine and Jennifer Binnie, and Wilma Johnson. Bowery performed with his close friend Trojan in one of their most distinctive looks that became known – problematically – as 'Pakis from Outer Space'. Tilley briefly describes their performance, which involved both of them stripping naked, with Bowery's freshly pierced nipple bleeding after it was accidentally snagged.[8] He next put on a white lab coat and pretended to push syringes into Trojan's body who proceeded to spill some lighter fuel on the floor and light it. To finish, Bowery urinated into a glass; Trojan managed to drink half of it before putting out the flames with the rest.

Many club performances followed, most of them unfortunately remaining difficult to recover, inadequately documented or forgotten. Perhaps his most notorious club performance was for an AIDS benefit at The Fridge in 1990 that ended with Bowery spraying the audience with an enema. This and his few major performances that are described below succinctly are unpacked in detail in the chapters of the book.

Bowery's most meticulously organized performance, after which he gravitated more consciously towards the genre, was arguably his series at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in 1988 for which he installed himself in one of the gallery rooms as an art object. Later that year he repeated the performance, slightly modified, in the shop window of Parco department store in Tokyo. An exhibition titled *Ruined Clothes*, which involved a collection of photographs depicting some of Bowery's garments strategically scattered on the ground outside the council estate he was living in, ran simultaneously in a gallery upstairs. The following year he performed a dress-up transformation at the opening of *Success Is a Job in New York: The Early Art and Business of Andy Warhol* (1989) at the Serpentine Gallery. Assisted by Mr. Pearl and Bateman, Bowery slipped into a tight shape-shifting bodysuit, elevating the act into a shared ritual of queer becoming. Yet, his most celebrated queer performance is a birth re-enactment that was carried out numerous times in clubs and festivals, most famously at Wigstock in 1993, a popular outdoor drag festival in downtown New York. Bowery's final performance idea was presented at *The Laugh of No. 12* (1994), a multimedia exhibition at Fort Asperen in the Netherlands for which he came up with a piece with the same title, inspired by tarot mysticism and BDSM aesthetics.

Particularly excited by the prospect of a career in pop music – albeit with a distorted twist of performance that could hardly lead to commercial success – Bowery formed in 1992 the short-lived group Quality Street Wrappers with Sheila Tequila and Stella Stein, devising short club performances that involved singing out of tune, outrageous costumes and nudity. They soon changed their name to Raw Sewage and continued doing shows in various clubs in the United Kingdom and abroad, which by then had evolved more into intoxicated abject improvisations. A sense of their avant-garde drag is captured in a deliberately tacky music

video they produced at Star Trax, a karaoke booth located at the London Trocadero shopping centre that was accessible for a few pounds to (typically) teenagers wanting to have some fun by making their own pop video. Sporting ridiculous costumes and – probably questionable – painted-black faces, in the video they follow a sloppy dance routine during which they end up naked with tucked genitals, delivering a terrible singing performance of 'Walk This Way' (1986) by Run-DMC featuring Aerosmith while various visual effects of urban landscapes run in the background via lo-fi greenscreen technology. When their collaboration ended in drama due to their differing levels of engagement, Bowery, along with Richard Torry, went on to form the alternative art band Minty in 1993, with Bateman and Matthew Glamorre joining as core members soon after. This was a much more concentrated effort to break into the music business and reach a wider indie audience that, apart from their highly theatrical performances in clubs, included plans for an album release and promotional activities. Their energetic performances involved elaborate costumes, explicit lyrics and abject acts, such as simulated drinking of urine, vomiting and Bowery 'giving birth' to Bateman on stage, which became their trademark act.

In 1994, Minty performed alongside Gavin Turk and Wyn Evans at The Fete Worse than Death, a memorable art gala with public interventions and stalls by young artists at once run-down Hoxton Square in London, organized by progressive curator Joshua Compston.[9] Their final performance with Bowery took place at the Freedom Café in London, shortly before his hospitalization and death.[10] What Bowery considered his most intimate performance had occurred just a few months earlier at the Bow Registry Office where he secretly married his trusted assistant Bateman, with Wyn Evans as the best man and Bateman's sister Christine as the bridesmaid. An openly gay man, Bowery never gave a frank explanation for this decision, which was possibly driven by his HIV-positive status and the fear of an inevitable death that could lead to legal complexities over the council flat he shared with Bateman or disputes over his archive and creative legacy.

Bowery's work has been hosted posthumously in numerous group exhibitions worldwide, exploring themes like unconventional fashion and design, masquerade, postmodernism, club culture,

post-punk, and queer identity politics. As his work started to increasingly attract institutional attention at the dawn of the new millennium, he still remained an enigmatic figure that troubled the curatorial tendency for categorization, destabilizing and upsetting the modes that represented him. Plenty of labels are used to describe him in exhibition catalogues in an attempt to communicate the complex nature of his work production. Yet, he enjoyed and desired this ambivalence: 'If you label me you negate me', Bowery famously stated, declaring his contempt and defiance for any kind of categorization.[11]

Considering the challenges posed by Bowery's diverse and anti-disciplinary work, this book seeks to critically engage with his performative costuming and non-theatrical performances through live art narratives and the broader context of visual culture. Emphasis is therefore placed both on the practice of constructing a dissonant subjectivity as an aesthetic and performative venture and on his known club, street and art performances that are either overlooked or obscured by their cult marginality. His choreographed performances in Clark's magnificent productions and a deep engagement with his brief experience with theatre and acting as well as his music-oriented projects are beyond the scope of the book, not least because some of them have been adequately accounted for by other scholars or writers and, as more conventional modes of performance, they fall outside my research interests and, possibly, expertise.

Performative Costuming and Live Art

Critic and independent curator Bob Nickas wrote in a brief article in *Artforum* in 2004: 'The Bowery moment we're going through now is testament to an unfolding fascination for an artist who continues to be rediscovered.'[12] Almost a decade after Bowery's death his life and work started to gain wider visibility first through an award-winning documentary, *The Legend of Leigh Bowery* (2002), directed by Atlas, followed by a stage musical about London's nightlife in the 1980s, titled *Taboo* (2002), and the massive retrospective *Take a Bowery: The Art and (Larger than) Life of Leigh Bowery* (2003) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Simply put, no scholarly writings were published on Bowery's practice during his lifetime. The only publications from prior to 1994 include brief articles, magazine editorials and

interviews in commercial-style magazines (most prominently *The Face* and *i-D*), mainly focusing on his outrageous presence in nightclubs and referring occasionally to his creative projects, and an insightful article by cultural commentator Michael Bracewell, first published in *Frieze* shortly before Bowery's death. Bracewell positions Bowery within the trajectory of transgression in fashion and pop culture that erupted during the 1970s with David Bowie, but he struggles to find a comparison to his performative costuming 'in fine art terms': 'the nearest [...] would be [Andy] Warhol's superstars, but Bowery has exchanged the traditions of simple drag for a personal surrealism', he writes.[13]

Scholarly writings on Bowery's practice started to appear timidly in the mid-2000s and increased significantly during the last few years. These are structured around a repertoire of themes and discourses, predictably focusing mostly on his profound experimentation with embodiment and attempting to make sense of it through fashion studies and its impact on visual culture, the liberating tenets of the carnival and the socially disruptive power of the grotesque or identity politics with a reasonable emphasis on his significance to queer studies and drag refashioning. They have certainly informed many of the core ideas explored in this book and provided useful (and often surprising) contexts for thinking about such a distinct body of work. However, although the concept of the body as an art object is prevalent and recurring in these discussions, a deep engagement with Bowery primarily as a performance artist – an identification he felt at ease with the most – through performance art narratives and art discourses is deafeningly absent.

This book is deeply motivated by this absence and seeks to counterbalance the disproportionate attention to fashion Bowery's legacy relished throughout the years by prioritizing the performative quality of his practice. Its objective is twofold: first, to theorize Bowery's outlandish costumes as fundamentally performative, emphasizing that they were not just well-designed corporeal objects but instrumental mediums for performance; and second, to critically reframe his costumed body within live art narratives as both significantly disruptive and capable of addressing pressing social issues, rather than serving merely as a superficial fashion spectacle. While Bowery abstained from referring to the outfits he created as costumes – possibly due to the association of 'costume' with

theatricality and fancy dress – the term is productive in conveying notions of performativity, intentionality and temporality. For this reason, it is widely adopted by scholars discussing his work and is also used here. Additionally, terms such as 'self-fashioning', 'costuming' and 'dressing' are used interchangeably in the text, despite their potential theoretical distinctions for fashion experts.

Pamela Karantonis previously described Bowery's costumes as 'performative' for '[t]hey altered the spectator's perspective on the object or source he was imitating and always destabilized the genre it inhabited'.[14] Furthermore, I maintain that just being in them in public was enough to transform the simplest act into a spectacular performance and they were also often designed and adapted to facilitate specific performance ideas. Bowery's costumes appear to be inextricably linked to him – his energetic dancing in nightclubs, his live art and his wild public behaviour – that when viewed on mannequins in recent exhibitions they look lifeless and deflated, creepy sad reminders of loss unable to convey the vivacity and threat of Bowery's live presence.

Framing Bowery's costuming as performative and approaching it critically is imperative in examining his status in contemporary art and culture; not least because costume, when employed as an 'interventional practice' that is distinct from conventional modes of dress and fashion, 'represents a potential strategy for subverting the ongoing repetitions of body politics', Rachel Hann writes.[15] Costuming can radically complicate and threaten normative ideas of appearance usually imposed by fashion, which operates as an ideological system traditionally upholding identity construction, and dress, which often functions as a repetitive standardizing practice that reinforces fashion conventions. It is perhaps this tension between the exciting prospects offered by performative costuming and the disciplined imagination of commercial fashion that gradually but permanently distanced Bowery from a career in the fashion industry. His extreme practice is exemplary of the type of costuming and subversive qualities that Hann articulates and demands a critical approach, for it does not only destabilize the politics of appearance, but, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, it shatters deeper understandings of identity tied to gender, sexuality and personhood.

Eluding accepted histories and conventions of artistic production and reception, Bowery's ambiguously anti-disciplinary

performative costuming troubles the way canons are traditionally constructed for art and performance and requires a new or revised practice of historiography. It is for this reason that I find 'live art' a more useful critical term than 'performance art' in describing and framing his peculiar body of work. Although it is frequently used interchangeably with the latter since both terms appeared in art discourse in the late 1970s broadly designating the same thing – that is the experience of liveness in art-making – live art has increasingly grown into an independent cultural sector in the United Kingdom (which, however, remains sidelined) that appears to be at odds with the formalities of international performance art. Live art operates as a more inclusive territory, embracing a variety of artists adopting not only traditional aspects of performance art but also more experimental practices that favour miscellaneous disciplines and deviate from or refuse the legacies pertaining to international performance art. Remaining equally resistant to specific definition, live art is described by Lois Keidan, co-founder and former director of the Live Art Development Agency in London, as 'a framing device for a catalogue of approaches to the possibilities of liveness by artists who choose to work across, in between, and at the edges of more traditional artistic forms'.[16] Bowery's unorthodox practice, which stands awkwardly on the periphery of art discourse and became largely outshined by his impressive costumes, seems to fit well within the fluid boundaries of what is now understood as live art.

Noise and Absence

This first monographic study of Bowery's live art and performative costuming strongly engages with a broad spectrum of visual culture and an array of cultural practices and histories of performance. It contributes to a relatively recent scholarly context in the historiography of marginal or heterogeneous art practices in which scholars in art history and performance studies have sought to recover artists whose complexity and often anti-institutional demeanour have hindered the acknowledgement of their cultural significance in dominant narratives after 1960.

In a bid to reckon with Bowery's gravity in contemporary visual culture and performance studies, I move beyond the limitations of traditional forms of criticism and undertake a critical visual

analysis, often informed by intertextuality, favouring a distinctive interdisciplinary methodology that spans from performance studies and art history to subcultural theory, with a strong emphasis on disability discourse, gender, and trans studies. Feminism, fashion and the critique of orientalism are also key to the development of my arguments at various points in the chapters. This diverse approach is partly informed by Jennifer Doyle's analysis in *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013), an exploration of politically confrontational (and often overlooked) works whose controversial status, in subject matter or form, poses a challenge to institutional politeness and exposes the limits of traditional art criticism that tends to dismiss anti-disciplinary or overly political works for disengaging from aesthetic criteria.

Citing the relationship of noise and music as a productive analogy, Doyle describes such multifaceted works as 'noisy' for their ability to interfere with and disrupt the supposedly harmonious order of art discourse with their problematic attachment to specific genres and disciplines: 'They appear to be at odds with Art, or they contain within them elements that seem to come from the "outside"', she writes.[17] Grounded in her first-hand viewing experiences of and emotional responses to her case studies, Doyle's close readings draw on a variety of fields, such as cultural studies, film criticism and feminist and queer critical theory. Delving into other disciplines for insight appears to be an essential strategy in opening up to the social turn of such 'noisy' works and practices that otherwise cause awkwardness to those art critics who avoid popular culture and the methodologies pertaining to its analysis. What Doyle suggests and this book attempts to put to the test is 'a different kind of conversation'.[18] That said, my analysis tends to be rather removed from Doyle's deeply personal emotive readings. While she experienced many of the performances she discusses first hand, which facilitates her affect-driven analysis, my approach to reading Bowery's live art is inevitably limited to studying documentation and oral histories, allowing (but not necessarily following from) a comprehensive evaluation resulting from historical and physical distance. This, indeed, appears at odds with the ontology of performance that Peggy Phelan so assertively defends for its presentist and nonreproductive quality, but it, nevertheless, constitutes a productive strategy in accessing and examining work.[19]

In this respect, my methodology mirrors that of Amelia Jones who in critically unveiling histories of performance art – most notably the body art practices that defined the 1970s – resorts to photographic, textual, film and oral documentation often. She argues that knowledge developed through documentation is of equal significance to that generated by witnessing a performance live or getting to know the artist's intentions for 'there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product' and 'the documentary exchange [...] is equally intersubjective' to that of the live experience.[20] Referring to Carolee Schneemann's famous performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), Jones characteristically writes: 'Having direct physical contact with an artist who pulls a scroll from her vaginal canal does not ensure "knowledge" of her subjectivity or intentionality any more than does looking at a film or picture of this activity.'[21] Furthermore, historical distance in evaluating performance art (through its documentation) is almost essential for coming to grips with the contexts and narratives that surrounded the work at the time. Certain works become indeed more meaningful when re-visited later as 'it is hard to identify the patterns of history while one is embedded in them', Jones also observes.[22] This resonates profoundly with the work of artists like Bowery who in hindsight are often loosely celebrated as 'ahead of their times', but they have, for various reasons, managed to escape critical attention in their time. Although documentation can be emotionally detaching, it has served as the main source for analysis in this study. The historical distance from Bowery's work, however, has proven to be a privilege as it revealed his ongoing relevance by allowing his work to converse and resonate with a variety of contemporary concerns revolving around performativity and identity politics.

Researching such a disparate and almost uncharted territory, as is the case with Bowery's less renowned performances – if not his work at large – inevitably comes with certain difficult challenges, the most common being sparse documentation and scattered or insufficient information and material. In addition, Bowery's personal archives that I consulted in person – just like his practice – remain chaotic and uncatalogued in storage boxes in a private residence, while his marginalized status until recently translated to limited scholarly attention. I also often identified and sought to correct inaccuracies and inconsistencies in chronologies and events, on one memorable

occasion coming from Bowery himself. It is widely known among his friends how he enjoyed constantly confusing people by spreading outrageous lies or twisting the facts. Tilley must have fallen into this trap when she believed and later reproduced in his biography that Anthony d'Offay personally invited Bowery to perform at his gallery after being mesmerized by a series of seasonal cards featuring Bowery displayed on a shop window; Bowery did make these images and cards with photographer Johnny Rozsa and he appears in some of them disguised as a cake, or a Christmas tree (Figure I.4). However, gallerist Lorcan O'Neill's account of the events (who was working closely with d'Offay at the time) presents elsewhere a less sensational – and rather more plausible – story.[23] It was Clark who was at first approached for a performance at the gallery but, due to his busy schedule, Bowery took on the offer. As intricate as it might have been, researching Bowery at times turned unexpectedly entertaining.

Figure I.4: Johnny Rozsa, *Leigh Bowery as a Christmas Tree*, 1986. © Johnny Rozsa.

He left behind a colourful body of work that sustained my enthusiasm and dedication throughout the research process and drafting of this book despite the awkwardness caused sometimes by his politically provocative costumes or my concerns about his ambivalent politics in a number of instances. I consider the creative weaknesses that I detect in Bowery's work an interesting and important part of his artistic identity and my subsequent frustration a fascinating aspect of what constitutes an exciting and challenging research project.

Structure and Chapter Summaries

Leigh Bowery: Performative Costuming and Live Art attempts to read Bowery as a multifaceted performance artist whose costumed body – his main expressive medium – allows him to penetrate multiple theoretical discourses and contexts of visual culture. By carving out a space for Bowery in relation to dominant art narratives, the first chapter establishes a vital understanding of his performative costuming as art and provides the foundation for further interdisciplinary analysis. In subsequent chapters, I carry out a close and extended study of Bowery's key looks and performances through a number of research contexts and analysis of relevant visual culture material to argue that his influential performative costuming and live art, which often appear politically precarious, constitute critical postmodernist interventions that not only trouble conventional historiography but also effectively challenge notions of normative embodiment, defy stereotypical representations of illness and bolster queer visibility. After I theorize Bowery's extravagant performative costuming as art in the first chapter, my attention shifts to its critical manifestation of subcultural freakishness, Bowery's extreme practices and body modification, and eventually his phenomenal queer embodiments. Throughout this narrative I engage with Bowery's live art substantially, with every chapter – save for the first – being thematically structured around at least one major performance that is discussed in detail.

Starting from the premise that Bowery's highly artificial self-fashioning constitutes an enigmatic and contradicting welding of avant-garde experimentation and postmodernist aesthetics, Chapter 1 negotiates Bowery's place in art history through some of the most authoritative voices in art theory and performance

studies, namely Peter Bürger, Allan Kaprow and Fredric Jameson. I engage the narrative from modernism and the historical avant-garde to the emergence of postmodernism to argue that Bowery's performative costuming effectively merges art and life while often presenting questionable shock tactics to stir controversy. To critically situate Bowery's practice within the wider domain of postmodern art and to call attention to the marginalization of performative costuming in the broader context of art history, I look at his public intervention *Mrs. Peanut Visits New York* (1992), captured on film by Atlas, as well as the Dada embodiments of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, an artist whose unruly practice in the early twentieth century remains enchanting. Three of Bowery's most controversial and potentially offensive looks that are exemplary of his postmodernist ethos – known as 'A Cunt', 'Nazi Dominatrix' and the 'Pakis from Outer Space' – are also discussed in depth and in relation to their problematic attachment to political matters pertaining to feminism, appropriation and subcultural aesthetics, and orientalist representation, respectively.

Chapter 2 expands on the sociocultural dimensions of Bowery's performative costuming through a critical investigation of the figure of the freak and examines his series of performances at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery (1988) as a distinctive manifestation of what Robin Blyn calls 'freak-garde'. Deviating from the flamboyant ethos of the New Romantics, which motivated his early sartorial experimentations, I demonstrate how Bowery evolved into the epitome of subcultural freakishness in London's club scene via his club night Taboo and the various niche media that supported it, most importantly *The Face* and *i-D* magazines whose contribution I historicize throughout in line with Sarah Thornton's seminal work on club cultures and subcultural capital. Bowery's solo performances of notorious self-made freakishness at d'Offay's gallery – a series of *tableaux vivants* that turned his costumed body into an art installation – can be viewed, I argue, as a postmodernist interpretation of the historical institution of the freak show, in which 'human oddities' were exhibited for entertainment and profit. In contrast to Bowery's passive objectification, artists Mat Fraser in *Sealboy: Freak* (2001) and Mary Duffy in *Stories of a Body* (1990) deal much more explicitly with 'freak' as a stigmatizing marker of disability and seek to address through agency the intrusive stare their unusually formed bodies elicit. The different ways the interrogating

stare is negotiated in the performances under study enable me to propose an original dialogue around notions of normativity and otherness, narcissism and agency, and disability and queerness. Drawing on the writings of disability studies scholars, such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Petra Kuppers as well as Jones's work on narcissism and body art, I conclude that Bowery's narcissistic desire, flamboyant demeanour and dedication to transforming the body beyond accepted norms constitute an effective strategy of asserting difference and questioning the idea of the normative body.

Following the theorization of Bowery's freakishness as a performative mode, Chapter 3 elaborates on his fixation on bodily extremity, most evidently expressed through abject performances (namely, a performance at Industria in 1993, *The Laugh of No. 12* at Fort Asperen in 1994 and an enema performance at The Fridge in 1990), BDSM aesthetics (widely understood as the sexual practice of Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism) and the profound manipulation of the body as art material. I approach his restrictive shape-shifting costumes and experimentation with body modification – evident in various looks as well as in Atlas's film *Teach* (1992) – as painful means of a performance of endurance that aligns him with histories of extreme body-focused practices as they have been theorized by scholars like Kathy O'Dell and Dominic Johnson. Yet, I argue that pain in Bowery's practice arises as an inevitable consequence of the desire for the impeccable, exaggerated look and requires a new theory. His performance *The Laugh of No. 12*, which explicitly communicates this fascination with BDSM style and tactics, evokes the similarly intense body works of Bob Flanagan and Ron Athey, whose investment in extremity is openly informed by personal experiences of illness and disability and serves as a form of tacit activism. I specifically examine Flanagan's touring exhibition *Visiting Hours* (1992–95) and Athey's *Torture Trilogy* (1992–95), both dealing with illness and loss by employing ritualistic BDSM and body modification as empowering strategies. Even though I find Bowery's particular performance to be unconvincing in relation to a critical engagement with extremity, by shifting my focus to his enema performance at The Fridge for an AIDS benefit I argue that at times Bowery reveals a more politically promising aspect of his practice through perverted humour and the glorious staging of a sick queer body that refuses to crumble.

Bowery's unmissable queerness – the most frequently occurring motif in analyses of his practice – is meticulously addressed and developed in Chapter 4, which examines his important contribution to gender expression, sexuality and the representation of non-normative procreation. To effectively intervene and build on the existing relevant scholarship of his practice, I discuss several case studies from Bowery's diverse body of work and the expanded field of visual culture. His performance at the Serpentine Gallery (1989), a camp appropriation of an iconic billboard advertisement that became known as 'Hello Boys' (1994) and his 'Birth' performance at Wigstock drag festival (1993) are some examples I examine in detail. Bowery's camp and hybrid visual language, which, I argue, transcends conservative drag practices and effectively challenges the presumed gender binary, is re-worked towards a more robust framing of his work as an act of disidentification with heteronormative mass culture and as fundamentally reflective of – what writer Sandy Stone calls – a 'posttranssexual' ethos, which troubles not only understandings of gender but the limits of the human as well. Judith Butler's influential work on gender, José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification and Donna Haraway's feminist reframing of the cyborg are some of the theories I engage with throughout the chapter. Employing the work of photographer Del LaGrace Volcano to guide the analysis allows me to initiate a discussion about non-normative procreation and the ways it poetically crops up in Bowery's work, whether through his performative costuming or, more explicitly, the infamous 'Birth' performance that constitutes the climax of his creative journey.

In the Epilogue I assess Bowery's legacy in the present moment – 30-plus years after his death – by tracing his enduring impact on club culture histories and alternative drag practices. I specifically discuss Minty's video *Like a Dream* (2019) as an intimate posthumous gesture and an emotionally charged creative tribute by close friends to honour Bowery's memory. I also argue for his broader significance and relevance as a queer icon with a far-reaching influence on various scenes and movements, such as New York's so-called 'Club Kids' of the late 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of Tranimal drag in Los Angeles at the end of 2000s and Bowerytopia, an annual queer event in Brisbane that grew from a series of Bowery-inspired parties happening since 2016. Bowery's lasting legacy attests to a

powerful practice of performative costuming that is still urgent and present in various contemporary club cultures and queer drag scenes, disseminating a politically compelling queer ethos that reaches beyond fashion or art.

Notes

1. Leigh Bowery in *The Clothes Show*, BBC One, 17 November 1986. Author's transcription.
2. Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*, ed. by Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 187.
3. Thomas Mießgang, 'Die Kunst des Ausgehens: Wie Leigh Bowery im Rausch des Londoner Nachtlebens seinen Körper lesbar machte und als Regisseur eines Theaters der Künstlichkeit in Erscheinung trat', in *Leigh Bowery: Verwandlungskünstler*, ed. by Angela Stief (Vienna: Piet Meyer Verlag, 2015), pp. 53–71 (p. 57). Author's translation.
4. Martin Gayford, 'Ein riesiger unbekümmerter Narrenprinz: Lucian Freuds Bilder von Leigh Bowery', in *Leigh Bowery: Verwandlungskünstler*, ed. by Angela Stief (Vienna: Piet Meyer Verlag, 2015), pp. 261–81 (p. 261). A script in English was provided by the author.
5. Bowery appears in Wyn Evans's *Epiphany* (1984) and *Degrees of Blindness* (1988) as well as Maybury's *Read Only Memory* (1998) and *The Union Jacking Up* (1985). He is also featured in Dick Jewell's *Headcases* (1989), a three-part documentary showcasing London-based creatives discussing their views and physical attributes. A rare find is *Unstitched* (1990) by Baillie Walsh, which portrays Bowery having his cheeks pierced.
6. Katharina Sykora, 'Ego-Abenteuer zwischen Aktion und Bild', in *Leigh Bowery: Verwandlungskünstler*, ed. by Angela Stief (Vienna: Piet Meyer Verlag, 2015), pp. 209–32 (p. 210). Author's translation.
7. Peta Tait, 'Performing Shamelessness: Leigh Bowery, Copi and Queer Body Physicality', in *What a Man's Gotta Do?: Masculinities in Performance*, ed. by Adrian Kiernander, Jonathan Bollen and Bruce Parr (Armidale: CALLTS, 2006), pp. 208–21 (p. 213).
8. See Sue Tilley, *Leigh Bowery: The Life and Times of an Icon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).
9. Bowery was also involved in the previous year's fete where he painted the faces and privates of then-emerging artists Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst. During the street celebration, the duo, dressed as

clowns, created spin paintings for 50p and invited the curious to peek at Bowery's hidden artwork for the same price.

10. Minty only managed to record one single with Bowery, titled 'Useless Man' (1994), which became a chart success in the Netherlands and turned into a cult anthem with numerous re-mixed versions. After his death, three more singles were released: 'Plastic Bag' (1995), 'That's Nice' (1996) and 'Nothing' (1997); and an album titled *Open Wide* (1997).
11. 'What Is Your Idea of Perfect Happiness?' in *Leigh Bowery*, ed. by Robert Violette (London: Violette Editions, 1998), pp. 8–9 (p. 9).
12. Bob Nickas, 'Talk of the Gown: Bob Nickas on Leigh Bowery', *Artforum*, February 2004, p. 52.
13. Michael Bracewell, 'Leigh Bowery's Immaculate Conception', in *The Space Between: Selected Writings on Art*, ed. by Doro Globus (London: Ridinghouse, 2012), pp. 126–33 (p. 129).
14. Pamela Karantonis, '"Punk's Dead, Michael": Artifice, Independence and Authenticity in Leigh Bowery's Self-Fashioned Post-Punk Performative', *Punk and Post-Punk*, 4.2–3 (2015), 205–22 (p. 210).
15. Rachel Hann, 'Debating Critical Costume: Negotiating Ideologies of Appearance, Performance and Disciplinarity', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 39.1 (2019), 21–37 (p. 25).
16. Quoted in Dominic Johnson, 'Marginalia: Towards a Historiography of Live Art', in *Critical Live Art: Contemporary Histories of Performance in the UK*, ed. by Dominic Johnson (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), pp. 13–30 (p. 22).
17. Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 22.
18. Doyle, p. 21.
19. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Oxford: Routledge, 1993).
20. Amelia Jones, '"Presence in Absentia": Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal*, 56.4 (1997), 11–18 (p. 12).
21. Jones, '"Presence in Absentia"', p. 13.
22. Jones, '"Presence in Absentia"', p. 12.
23. See 'Lorcan O'Neil', in *Michael Clark*, ed. by Suzanne Cotter and Robert Violette (London: Violette Editions, 2011), pp. 115–16 (p. 115).

LEIGH BOWERY

Performative Costuming and Live Art

'Without dimming a trailblazing light, the book is bound to be a key source for studying the complexity and enduring influence of Leigh Bowery's practice across live art, visual culture and queer studies.'

– Stephen Farrier, professor of theatre and performance,
Rose Bruford College, UK

'This is an essential read for anyone interested in the critical relationship between culture, art and material-corporeal expressive practices, where costume and performance serve as instrumental interventions in pressing social matters. Emerging against the background of the HIV/AIDS crisis, this study articulates a diverse and anti-disciplinary legacy of acceptance and difference.'

– Donatella Barbieri, reader in critical costume practices and cultures,
London College of Fashion, UK

A critical exploration of the creative practice, socio-historical context and cultural impact of multifaceted artist Leigh Bowery. Engaging with Bowery's key looks and live art through a variety of disciplines and challenging research contexts, Sofia Vranou navigates costuming as a performative strategy that blurs the boundaries between art and life.

Thought-provoking and enlightening, the study investigates his aesthetics of freakishness and narcissistic desire as well as his fascination with extremity, hybrid embodiments and trans-queer visual language, establishing Bowery as a radical figure in contemporary performance and queer visual culture.

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