

Sofia Vranou

Q & A



Sofia Vranou holds a PhD from Queen Mary University of London. She has a background in art history and visual cultures, and a strong interest in live art, queer aesthetics, performative costuming, subcultural histories and marginal identities.

What first drew you to Leigh Bowery as a subject for a book?

‘Club icon and extravagant costume maker who influenced some of the most cutting-edge contemporary fashion designers’ – this was the kind of shorthand used to describe Bowery when I first encountered his work. It was his bizarre costumes that initially drew me in as well as the way he used them to construct a dissonant subjectivity and take over London’s nightclubs in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. But as I delved deeper, I discovered a complex, interdisciplinary body of work that moved fluidly between fashion, performance and art in radical ways. At the time, his work had received little scholarly attention and was often reduced to fashion, overlooking its significance to performance studies and its political dimensions.

What was the starting point for your research, and how did the book evolve from there?



Bowery’s practice and the ways it influenced the expanded field of performance studies and visual culture was the focus of my PhD research at Queen Mary University of London, under the supervision of Professor Dominic Johnson. After four years of examining and reflecting on his work, publishing a book felt like a natural next step, given the gap in scholarship and the continued resonance of his practice with urgent discussions around bodily autonomy, beauty ideals, and gender identity.

Did you discover anything unexpected or surprising during your research?

As compelling and important as Bowery's work is for queer politics and performance studies, I was surprised to realise how politically precarious and problematic it could sometimes be. Bowery was an artist who thrived on provocation, often deliberately engaging with offensive symbols and embodiments to stir controversy. At the same time, I hadn't anticipated in the early stages of my research that his work would indirectly intersect with disability discourse or touch on sensitive themes, such as non-normative procreation and AIDS sentimentality.

In what ways do you see Bowery's influence in contemporary art or fashion?

More than 30 years after his death, Bowery's influence remains potent across fashion, club cultures, and alternative drag scenes. Designers like Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, Gareth Pugh, Richard Quinn, and Rick Owens have all directly referenced his work in their collections. He also inspired the animalistic drag movement Tranimal, New York's Club Kids, numerous drag artists from RuPaul's Drag Race, and a wide range of queer club-cum-performance nights. His transgressive ethos in transforming the body echoes in the work of contemporary artists, such as Gena Marvin, the duo Fecal Matter, Jenkin van Zyl, and, of course, pop culture icon Lady Gaga.

How do you think Bowery's work challenges ideas of beauty, identity, and performance?

Bowery's attachment to the grotesque and the uncanny, evident in his transformative embodiments, subverts mainstream beauty ideals by embracing distortion, exaggeration, and excess. His trans-queer visual vocabulary, rich with contradictions and fluid signifiers, destabilises fixed notions of identity and foregrounds its performative and malleable nature. Finally, the diverse and interdisciplinary scope of his practice, developed mainly outside institutional spaces, resists conventional boundaries and shatters conservative understandings of art and performance.

How did you navigate the challenge of writing about someone who deliberately blurred fact and fiction?

It's a fact that Bowery enjoyed spreading fabricated stories and causing confusion. I found this more amusing than challenging, primarily because my book is grounded in academic research. My focus was on interpreting his practice through archival materials, documentation, and oral histories, rather than attempting to write a biography.

Was there a particular moment in Bowery's life or career that resonated with you personally?

I don't feel I have much in common with Bowery, but I do relate to his excitement about moving to London as a young adult and remaining restless and versatile.

Do you see any parallels between your work and Bowery's approach to creativity?

I believe there's little room for creativity in traditional research and academic writing, but scholarship could certainly benefit from some experimentation and an open-minded approach.

If you could ask Bowery one question, what would it be?

One of his latest performances, *The Laugh of No. 12* (1994) at Fort Asperen in the Netherlands, reveals a fascination with BDSM, mysticism, and self-actualisation – worlds apart from his earlier flamboyant extravagance. The elaborate, sequined costumes gave way to a more minimal aesthetic and greater exposure of the flesh. I can't help but feel that, had his life not been cut short by an AIDS-related illness, he would have continued to experiment with more stripped-down, body-focused performances that navigated vulnerability, power, and transformation in new ways. So, I would ask him: 'Does exposing the body feel more radical than concealing it in spectacle?'.

What's one misconception about Leigh Bowery that you hope your book clears up?

Bowery is usually celebrated for his exuberant looks and outrageous club presence, while his performances have remained marginal in performance art narratives. I hope the book helps to establish him as a radical performance artist who used costuming not just for spectacle, but as a performative tool to experiment with his body as art material in profoundly original ways.

What are you working on next?

I remain fascinated by the idea of costuming and spectacle as forms of queer resistance. Currently, I'm looking at Andrew Logan's *Alternative Miss World*, a queer art event that reimaged traditional beauty pageants through avant-garde performance and extravagant costuming across five decades.

What books, artists, or ideas are currently inspiring you?

I'm deeply inspired and moved by the resilience and determination of trans rights activists in their unwavering fight for recognition, equality, and justice in the UK and beyond. Solidarity.