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'Punk's dead, Michael'. Artifice, Independence and Authenticity in Leigh Bowery's Self-Fashioned Post-Punk Performative.

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Abstract

The late London-based Australian nightclub sensation and fashion designer Leigh Bowery, deployed a daily ritual of exhibitionist self-fashioning and applied design which signified a tension between visual orders and performative cultures. In this article, Bowery's practices are read as the dissident tactics of a punk-era dandy, by his grotesque self-fashioning parody of the artifice and dehumanising influence of capitalist culture in the 1980s. From a post-punk perspective, this includes debates around authenticity and artifice that permeate much of our view of pop culture at that time, in which punk is often emblemized as an unstable signifier of authenticity. For Bowery and his fashionable coterie, punk music and fashion accompanied a 'look'–which he dismissed in a piece of archival film footage as being 'dead' to choreographer Michael Clark. However, Bowery's live art and self-fashioning refused categorisation, even in the archive, leading this study to conclude that Bowery enabled continuity between the experimental art movements of the early avant-garde and the infiltration of a punk aesthetic into high-fashion post-punk commercial codes. Having inspired subsequent generations of artists with a ferocity always compatible with the same ethos of punk independence, it is useful to consider whether, like the historical dandy, he animated only a fixed point in post-punk history or a process that is continually dialectical.

Leigh Bowery, the unofficial symbol of the alternative fashion and art worlds in London in the 1980s, appropriated punk and post-punk for his own creative purposes, which included resisting the commercialization of art and art practice. Although he never self-consciously proclaimed a manifesto, Bowery was committed to the same anarchic and provocative values of the early European artistic avant-garde, which sought to destabilize the middle-class enjoyment of fashion, art, performance and

music by unravelling the sign systems that held them together. For his contemporaries, inspired by the radical clout that resulted in the merging of the signs of punk subculture with art practice, like Damien Hirst, Alexander McQueen and Vivien Westwood, a flirtation with a punk aesthetic was to collapse into commercial success and middle-class legitimation. Bowery's example, for his particularly solo achievements, was both the antithesis of the collective nature of early punk subculture and yet the embodiment of a more defiant, extreme and fringe-dwelling variation.

Born in 1961, in the regional Australian town of Sunshine, Leigh Bowery's years of notoriety were to begin with his arrival in London in 1980 and ended, ostensibly, with his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1994, but this article asserts that his influence is still significant in the twenty-first century. The impact Bowery had on popular culture and established art circles was in the way he extended a performance artist's creative possibilities in existing *contra* to the relevant discourses at the time – he was characterized in the popular press as a misfit, misunderstood, adolescent and nihilistic in his vision of how fashion design could ever be compatible with radical artistic ideas, as the following troubled eulogy from *The Observer* indicates:

> Bowery was a fashion designer, an expert tailor, a nightclub sensation, an art object of sorts, a model for a great painter, an aspiring pop star, a man who made his body – his presence – a life's project. And when his friends met in Bond Street, still grieving and bewildered, it was unclear if they were marking the passing of some wonderfully unflinching artistic success, or were at the wake for a life that had gone slightly wrong, a life distracted and dogged by – or sacrificed to – the idea of making an exhibition of oneself, to adolescent habits of shock and disguise.
> Ian Parker *The Observer* (Tilley 1997: 292).

As such, a reading of Bowery needs to be both historically situated and take into account the varied and ongoing fascination with his capacity to bewilder and shock newer audiences. The commercially unsuccessful musical *Taboo,* staged in London and New York in 2002 and 2003, respectively, and written by Bowery's friend Boy George, attempted to stage Bowery as an historically situated phenomenon because it acknowledged his status as a cultural polymath and kingpin for London's nightclubbing, cross-dressing, self-fashioning subculture. 'Taboo' was the name of the London nightclub Bowery owned with Tony Gordon in 1985 to 1986. However, it was the subsequent Barbican exhibition 'Panic Attack: Art in the Punk Years' (5 June – 9 September 2007, The Corporation of London) that placed Bowery within the cultural context of the punk era as an altogether different and perhaps more compelling zeitgeist. His documented self-fashioning in this exhibition referenced both the nostalgic and exotic. The first exhibition image, in which he appears in Stephen Willats's photo-collage, *Are You Good Enough for the Cha Cha Cha?* (1982) is testimony to his New Romantic citizenship at London's Blitz nightclub, and the second in the film *Epiphany* (1984) by Cerith Wynn Evans, featured what Bowery provocatively called his 'Pakis from Outer Space' look, with Nijinksy-inspired blue face and exotic facial piercing (Atlas 2002).

When surveying the diversity of Bowery's work in multiple documents, audiences and readers are faced with a multitude of aesthetic realities that have been called 'virtually unclassifiable', an allegation made by art

curator, Robyn Healey in the Charles Atlas documentary *The Legend of Leigh Bowery* (2002). By refusing categorisation, even in the archive, Bowery impacted, enlivened and even destabilized the modes that represented him. This was still indicated in the title to a retrospective exhibition of his work at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, 'Take a Bowery: The Art and (Larger than) Life of Leigh Bowery' (19 December 2003 - 7 March 2004, Curated by Gary Carsley). The success of his work was his ability to appropriate the signs of other art works and to insinuate himself into a vast array of genres, some of which saw choices that seemed ill-fitting or excessive: reminiscent of Susan Sontag's definition of camp as 'failed seriousness' (1964: pp. 275-292).

Perhaps the most notable of these projects were the ones linked to post-punk music. Bowery was costume designer (and occasional performer) for the Scottish-born, Royal Ballet-trained choreographer and dancer Michael Clark, whose own company was launched in London in 1984. His costume designs for Clark were bold, colourful, playful and occasionally reminiscent of furniture or architecture. They were spontaneously produced and the aim was for them to be irreproducible. This was in the context of Clark's evident love affair with a punk aesthetic, in terms of his personal styling and choices of a post-punk musical soundscape. His relationship to the punk movement was discussed in the Charles Atlas documentary *Hail the New Puritan* (1987), with an evident respect by Clark for the challenges that the errant musical qualities of the chosen songs posed for classically-trained dancers. His company's distinctive fusion of classical and contemporary ballet with post-punk soundtrack was

a trademark for a number of productions: *Do You Me? I Did* (1984), which featured music by Bruce Gilbert, formerly of The Wire; and works that re-appropriated song titles such as The Fall's *New Puritans* (1984) and *I am Curious, Orange* (1988). While Bowery would taunt Clark in an archival video from the 1980s that 'punk's dead' (Atlas, 2002) it was clear that the subculture had its uses for Bowery in a 1980s pop culture that was saturated in artifice and lacking radical impact.

Skirting punk: queering the fringes of a movement

The elision between queer visibility and the visual signs of the punk movement is one that appears relatively unchallenged in extant scholarship, given accounts of the link during the punk movement's beginnings in 1970s Britain. What is more contentious is the lived sexual practice and preferences of punk's adherents, wherein Tavia Nyong'o insists upon 'subterranean linkages between punk and queer [that] are as frequently disavowed as they are recognized' (2008: 107), due partly to a North American association of the word and culture of 'punk' with male homosexuality. The context still had resonances in the United Kingdom, especially when Nyong'o observes:

> that 1970s punk represents the moment at which those specifically male homosexual associations lose their exclusivity and punk becomes a role and an affect accessible to people within a range of gendered embodiments who deploy punk for a variety of erotic, aesthetic, and political purposes (2008: 110).

That these two subcultural forces should merge in fashionable artistic circles in London at the time, was evidenced in the sexualization of fashion that borders on the violent iconography of punk self-fashioning. Producer Malcolm McLaren was particularly adept at exploiting this connection:

[Peter] Christopherson […] was contracted in the summer of 1975 by McLaren to photograph the Sex Pistols. This was at a time when McLaren and his partner, Vivienne Westwood, ran a shop called SEX on Kings Road in London that featured men's and women's street fashions inspired by S-M, gay porn, and various fetishes, like bondage trousers, that were both intentionally shocking and knowingly Warholian. But wearing the iconography or style of the homosexual — such as the gay cowboy T-shirts the Pistols would sometimes sport in concert — was apparently not the same thing as subjecting oneself to the stigma of being perceived as homosexual (Nyong'o, 2008: 111).

This fraught relationship, between disavowing a queer-punk nexus, while recognizing that participants, promoters and fans are from diverse (including queer) backgrounds is part of a post-punk legacy. The question of authenticity is raised, not just about sexual politics but socio-economic ones, when Nyong'o observes in the 1970s the lived experience of the Sex Pistols included 'the absence of a formalized politics among the callow, gangly lads that the pop Svengali Malcolm McLaren had cannily spun into cultural terroris[m]' (2008: 109). Such an appropriation naturalizes recognition of queer politics and visibility alongside punk, with the elevation of the misfit in a particular vein of art-school provocation, rather than organized political resistance.

While the figure of the dandy in a discourse on punk may seem an unlikely, rarefied, solitary nineteenth century figure, its destabilising potential in relation to socio-economic identity during the late twentieth century, creates a space for discussing how a dissident, subcultural entity like Bowery might operate as a 'punk-era dandy'. In Christopher Lane's work 'The Drama of the Impostor: Dandyism and its Double' (1994) the persona of the dandy possesses 'an interstitial status by referring to an object that has been conceptually misplaced and a person that is historically displaced because it is 'out of harmony with time' (Lane

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1994: 36). Signs of 'misplaced' objects are the most common iterations of 1970s punk self-fashioning and Bowery was attracted to the materiality of these signifiers. If Bowery was the historically displaced loner, he was also the poser and pretender, revelling in the distance he created from his target of imitation, because he did not live the experience of punk subculture. However in referencing a subculture like punk, Bowery was on fertile ground, for punk's visible capacity to act as the *bricolage* of what Dick Hebdige in *Subcultures* (1979) read as 'distorted reflections of all the major post-war subcultures' (2002: 26). For Bowery, the stakes of identity were not vested in the lived experience of any particular look; instead his drive was for cultural commentary through art practice in which his body was the living work of art. The dandy's goal was often to draw out and vulgarize the signifiers that had seduced middle-class culture. In Bowery's case this was done through the creative and impersonal mask of disguise and taunting spectators by scrambling the assemblage of any unity in an immediately identifiable 'look'.

Significantly to Bowery's formative process, was his time studying fashion at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, which exposed him to art history and the avant-garde – namely Futurist, Bauhaus, Surrealist and Dadaist art practices. Like many performance artists, Bowery developed a taste for performance modalities that were predicated on the disavowal of the self as a stable entity in place of an imitation of available visual orders. This included the sexualization of a look, cross-gender performance and sexual ambiguity.

Lane's work on the dandy highlights the sexual stakes at play for the 'hermaphrodite of history':

> I want to elaborate on dandyism's 'double and mutable character' by examining its intimate relation to modern –and even postmodern – issues of consumption and sexual identification [...] How, for instance, should we receive D'Aurevilly's descriptions of the dandy as simultaneously 'a woman on certain sides', 'a monster' and 'the hermaphrodite of history' (Lane 1994: 30).

Over a century after the description by Jules D'Aurevilly's (1861) that caught Lane's eye, Bowery blatantly exhibited the double-sexed, monstrous embodiment of both high fashion and popular culture in a way that moved beyond transvestism and potentially modelled a post-gender postmodernity. His regular display of a feminized crotch, in which a pubic wig or 'mirkin' was glued over his genitals was visible and sometimes foregrounded in the designs of his opulent nightclub costumes. In this way, his posturing related to both sexes, the asexual and the intersexed as well as signs that were emblematic of everyday objects.

In a 1980s cultural context in which 'dressing up', even as a private, domestic ritual became a hallmark of the subculture of New Romanticism, Bowery also had a notable following, although he did not really conform to their signature 'look' either. In the wake of the punk movement, the New Romantics had a more self-conscious engagement with their potential spectators. Simon Frith describes the distinction between the movements: 'the posers at the Blitz weren't just dressing up, they were dressing up and *pretending to be famous* – their 'individuality' only made sense when it had a public effect' (1987: 145).

Archival footage created by Charles Atlas of Bowery and his friends Rachel Auburn, Michael Clark and Trojan, documents a ritual of 'creating oneself as an artwork,' in the words of novelist Michael Bracewell (Atlas: 2002). For participants in this footage, the New Romantics' ritual of 'getting ready' for a nightclub appearance was so self-consciously theatricalized that it could be the culmination of the evening's entertainment and may end in the participants staying at home (Atlas, 2002). With a look of haphazard opulence, New Romanticism represented a collective model of dandyism, that shifted away from any claim to radical politics, but was still a means of cultural self-expression for its adherents. It was a gesture of nostalgia for fashion of previous historical eras and was appropriated by groups of art students, specifically from London's St Martin's College, before it entered the mainstream pop-music industry. The radically costumed artist could becomes in Christopher Lane's words 'the exemplary consumer and social dissident' (1994: 37) if the context was right. This kind of paradox was evident when the fashion look known as 'Hard Times' became glamorized. The historically embarrassing appearance of poverty was now middle class, with torn jeans and faded T-shirts becoming new status symbols.

However, Bowery was not content with the conservative collapse of a punk aesthetic, or any other, into a commodified look. As the artist Cerith Wyn Evans recalls in Atlas's documentary, Bowery's was a performative mode of dressing:

It wasn't just dressing up and showing off and shocking people. It actually had to have some radical element of change within. There had to be something that was contra [*sic*], against (Atlas: 2002).

Bowery's costumes were performative in that they *did* something. They altered the spectator's perspective on the object or source he was imitating and always destabilized the genre it inhabited. Some costumes could be read as a grotesque parody of fashion victim, transformed into a high art 'bodily sacrifice' to the codes of fashion (Marsh: 2002). His assemblages of corsetry, hats and footwear were so hyperbolized and extreme in their dimensions that the wearing of them caused discomfort and sometimes injury. When Bowery modelled his costume designs, his actions were monstrously perfected within the aim of clothing a 'puppet-like' or object-like presence of a high-art mannequin who, according to Anne Marsh 'insisted on the perfect walk' (2002). When this 'perfected walk' of the dandy is explained in masochistic terms of self-gratification through supreme sacrifice, the aesthetic reality was Bowery's black latex suit, covering his head and face, with a flared leg, incorporating platform shoes which meant the stifling of his posture and suffocation of the flesh, suggesting a suffering but impersonal automaton. The perfected walk strained against the embarrassment of being caught out as enslaving oneself to fashion. The hyperbole of his wigs and make-up, that completed a fashion look beyond simple costume, also repeated views of the impersonal mannequin in experimental art movements, such as the Bauhaus and Dada. His looks could be clown-like, beautiful and haunting.

There is also a connection to Georges Bataille's explanation of the erotic (1987) in many of Bowery's images. The interdependent relationship

between sexual desire and transgression, violence or death enables this paradox. At the level of visibility and performance, the erotic is inhabited by a self, submerged, mask-like or 'impersonal'. This is apparent in Bowery's frequent choice to mask heavily, either through heavy face paint or sequinned or furry wrestling masks, while isolating parts of his body into objects of erotic spectacle, such as prosthetic lips and breasts in a way that suggested a sacrifice of the performer's bodily integrity as the price for cultivating the erotic spectacle (Bataille: 63-70). Furthermore Bowery's enjoyment of simulated vomiting, blood, excreta (simulated or real) and exploding enemas also resonated with Bataille's appraisal of the violent explosions and convulsive bodily functions of the erotic event (Bataille: 91-93).

At an aesthetic level, this eroticism was met with a more radical signification of the agony of bodily sacrifice in Bowery's puncturing and taping of his flesh with the punk-era favourites of safety pins, gaffer-tape and glue. The use of mirkins necessitated the taping up of his genitals, meaning that he was unable to urinate for an entire evening of nightclub appearances. Furthermore, he created the appearance of breasts by lifting his stomach and affixing it to his chest with heavy-duty tape. So, when the dandy is spoken of as 'impaled upon the idea of dignity' by D'Aurevilly (1861: 56) the aesthetic reality is met by Bowery, with pierced cheeks bearing glowing light bulbs, evidenced in an early retrospective volume of his work edited by Robert Violette (1998: 67). This look transformed the artist into a living, human lamp. The bulbs were kept alight by Bowery

hiding a battery under his tongue and connecting cables to the bulbs in his cheeks.

Detournement as post-punk performative

A level of offensiveness was also an important element in Bowery's performative powers. As revealed in the Hilton Als memoir, 'Bowery was the English dandy who soiled Wilde's velvets with vomit' (1998: 18). If we consider the dandy as more than the literary hero but sharing his power of cultural commentary, then Bowery's double-sexed, subversive, vulgarising, statuesque and object-like form had something more to say about popular cultural consumption in the late twentieth century. The significance of the punk era in Bowery's dandyism also refers to the matrix of explosive aesthetics which links the violent and vulgar at the corporeal site of dissident youth. According to Ryan Moore, the punk movement in Britain, in its less nihilistic gestures, was adept at parodying the empty structures of capitalist culture. In creating looks that were a bricolage of industrial and consumer items, clothing of plastic and rubber and hair either bleached or shaved off completely, punks embodied an aesthetic that witnessed the sacrifice of the body to the work of art. The looks were read by political conservatives, ironically, as self-destructive, when they were highly self-reflexive. Moore elaborates, 'these punks have recycled cultural images and fragments for purposes of parody and shocking juxtaposition, thereby deconstructing the dominant meanings and simulations which saturate social space' (2004: 307). This was continuous with the post-WWII philosophy of the Situationists who saw visual orders

as being both the goal and the outcome of capitalism. Guy Debord's landmark work *The Society of the Spectacle* refers to the effecting of social relations due to the collapse of overbearing visual orders into a social unreality: 'In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life' (Debord: 1994; 1967, 46). Situationists and the popularized forms of the British punk movement shared a concrete poetics in responding to the excesses of this, the latter especially in relation to late 1970s, and then 1980s post-punk, capitalism. According to Sadie Plant, the concept of *détournement* as a poetic which 'lies somewhere between 'diversion' and 'subversion' … [and is] plagiaristic, because its materials are those which already appear within the spectacle' (Plant: 1992, 86). Plagiaristic strategies that revived the visual form of Dadaist cut-and-paste collage by the British punk movement is also an accepted part of punk's legacy and legend:

> Two of punk's leading protagonists, Jamie Reid, a graphic artist, and Malcolm McLaren, manager of the Sex Pistols, were well-versed in situationist ideas [...] Much of punk continued the tradition in which the situationists had worked [...] Its graphics, for which Reid was largely responsible, cut up newspapers, safety-pinned clothes, rewrote comics, and parodied official notices (Plant: 1992, 144).

In the continual tension between artifice and authenticity in 1980s popular culture, it is arguable that subversion was effected through undermining entire genres. Bowery tested the limits of taste and offensiveness in his parody of the visual codes of high-fashion's artifice, with a series of 'looks' captured by fashion photographer Fergus Greer, between 1988 and 1994, documented in the volume *Leigh Bowery Looks*. The series

functioned as an imitation of the commercial fashion photo shoot – where, perhaps in a coup of *détournement,* none of the fashion was for sale. The spectator is drawn into a flawless photographic composition where the visual codes are surreal, but also reference disturbing political images, such as the 'blackface' tradition and the wearing of a swastika armband. The multiple layers of offensive in that one particular image was an unusual variation on the punk strategy of fashion-as-political-palimpsest, with a referencing of both nineteenth century racist performance traditions based upon the slave trade legacy, the iconography of which the United States exported to the world (as minstrelsy), combined with the visual symbol of the early twentieth century Nazi German flag of the swastika. The creative effort there was one that was cognizant of the unacceptability of such content to audiences within progressive, politically-aware democracies. The pinnacle of Bowery's transgressive efforts in this respect came about when he modelled for the portrait artist, Lucien Freud. The late painter was indeed grandson of the founder of psychoanalysis (and philosopher of the 'taboo'), Sigmund Freud, and owed his life to his family fleeing Nazi-held Berlin to London in 1933. During the process of sitting for the portraits, Bowery collected the oil rags which Freud used to clean his brushes and subsequently deploying his dressmaking skills, stitched the stained cloths together into a large shawl so that the random shading, reassembled, comprised a large, pixelated image of the face of Adolf Hitler. He presented this to his portrait painter as a gift to commemorate their sessions together. Lucien Freud's daughter, Bella, recounts this story as one of typical provocation from Bowery, although

outside the context of the Bowery-Freud rapport, the gesture was the type of transgressive act containing material that could have been subject to public censure for its cultural insensitivity (Atlas 2002). Or perhaps not. Given the context of punk-era fashion's capacity for explicit and offensive content, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's "Cambridge Rapist" T-shirt design from 1977 (based on the infamy of a masked, serial rapist who committed several offences in Cambridge, UK), sold for a few years in their boutique, soon after the convicted rapist was incarcerated. The screen-printed T-shirt image created a fetish of the iconography of the attacker's appearance, thereby threatening to minimize and also glamorize sexual violence against women. Rather than being suppressed as a work of misogynist history, a sample remains in the collection of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, among other collections, and a pair of the T-Shirts was sold by the prestigious London auction house, Christie's (Westwood and McLaren, 1977; 2007). Such is the capacity for punk-era art and fashion to take its place in the protected realm of the high art establishment in the twenty-first century, regardless of concerning politics. Such an example contrasts the parallel, gendered art worlds of male-dominated, punk-era performance with the more liberatory and contemporary feminist politics of body-centred art in the 1970s, as typified by the work of Carolee Schneemann. Bowery's work could therefore be critiqued as exhibiting misogynist overtones. The most pertinent example was in a look in which he was submerged and faceless in an oversized piece of head-to-toe white lycra daubed with the black painted label 'a cunt' (Greer 2002: 138-141). It is arguable that Bowery's

look was not mimetic in its visual assemblage and he was instead trading on the offensive implications of using the word in place of an ability to exhibit female genitalia, perhaps denying women a voice. However, he problematized male genitalia too, using dildos in combination with mirkins in a vocabulary that seemed highly sexualized, with the aim of foregrounding the lower bodily stratum as strangely asexual and merely instrumental in transgressive art practice: more consistent with Bataille's surreality than representational gender politics. An object-like detachment was also evident when he wore a black plastic skirt with a clear plastic corset around his torso, a black plastic toilet seat around his neck, his bald head emerging through the lid caked with brown, scaly paint which also covered his face. Despite the literal depiction of the 'shithead', he expertly repeated the bland hand-on-hip pose of a female model in a high-fashion editorial shoot. This suggested an assault on the banality of commercial fashion, rather than a transvestism that in any way supplanted the agency of the female body.

Living on a constant continuum of autofacture, where commercial fashion is one style or mode alongside what appears to be his daily subcultural practice, Bowery claimed to blur the distinction between theatricalized and social space that made his life's project performative. In his self-ironizing words, he revealed in *South of Watford*: 'I can't really tell the difference between the stage and the street'; a subtle jibe to the image-consciousness of emerging pop groups and pop culture at the time (Carlaw 1986). Ever-transformative, Bowery resisted the consistency of a brand-like persona:

performativity was in confounding spectators with a chameleon-like nature. In the documentary *The Legend of Leigh Bowery,* his friends account for the variation in his daytime appearance, with individual theories as to the techniques and the reasons behind them. The friends interviewed represented a coterie of artists and writers, immersed in London's subcultural scenes and included Rachel Auburn, Bella Freud, Lorcan O'Neill, Sue Tilley, Michael Bracewell and Cerith Wyn Evans. According to friend Rachel Auburn 'in the daytime, Leigh was keen to be wholesome-looking but in a perverted way', suggesting an imitative subversion of a stereotype (Atlas 2002). According to Bella Freud, whose father Lucien painted portraits of Bowery, the daytime appearance was 'a calculated look' of a 'serial killer' or 'child molester' (Atlas 2002). The writer Lorcan O'Neill detected one subtle strategy that invited closer scrutiny: 'His eyes had a slightly different shape and then you'd realized he'd cellotaped the side of his head up' (Atlas 2002). Biographer and friend Sue Tilley mentioned the 'ladies wigs which he thought looked natural' as integral to Bowery's daytime performativity (Atlas 2002). Her written account suggests a bewildering array of targets for parody:

> Leigh's daytime attire was in its own way even more shocking than what he wore at night. In the mid-eighties he used to wear one of the jackets he had made himself, with shorts to show off his very shapely legs. Later on he gave up trying to be stylish and adopted, according to Boy George, 'A Benny Hill child molester look' (Leigh's similarity to Benny Hill was a phenomenon, and when he was abroad people would shout 'Benny Hill' at him all the time) (Tilley, 139).

Bowery did not only calculate the looks he created in this way, but he enjoyed the trope of social imposture, in many media, manipulating passport photo images for instance, in ways that suggested a monstrous

kind of interchangeability, changing the shape of the eyes just as he had done on his own body, with cellotape. These are documented in his private collection of photos edited by Robert Violette (Als: 30-31).

First the look, then the music

One of the assumptions of popular music history, noted by Simon Frith and Howard Horne, is that a number of the musicians in the punk era were educated vocationally as visual artists (Frith 1987). According to Frith, the musical career usually happened after the artist had found 'their look' (Frith 1987: 27-70). Bowery and his friends were no exception, participating in a number of musical outfits with playful names such as The Quality Street Wrappers, Raw Sewage and Minty. The irony was that Bowery was a highly competent classically-trained pianist who never shared that talent with the public because in his concept/rock bands he was the vocalist and 'front man', so to speak. The bands were really only ever adjuncts to his wider aims to perform generally, and typically in genres where he was untrained and likely to create the maximum amount of personal embarrassment, such as performance art events and nightclub stunts. Tavia Nyong'o observations on early punk suggest an anti-bourgeois approach to audiences in terms of auditory offensiveness that Bowery evidently picked up on:

> If punk rock dissented in part by rejecting musical virtuosity for pure attitude and ecstatic amateurism, how precisely could it sustain that stance? The more committed to punk one was, the quicker one acquired precisely the expressive fluency the genre ostensibly disdains. Either that, or one transforms into a cynical parody of […] Billy Idol, the bottle blond who transformed Vicious's wild snarl into the knowing smirk of eighties megastardom (2008: 110).

Bowery's music and musical stage persona seemed calculated to fail at any commercial appeal. He sought exposure by moving into genres of music

beyond his expertise thereby embracing punk's 'anti-virtuoso' stance, which included awkwardly rendered rap, with his expletive-ridden song track 'Useless Man', which biographer Sue Tilley claims he aimed at a lesbian audience (Atlas 2002). His music changed as often as his looks.

It was the band Minty (formed in 1993) that enabled his theatricalized performances. Some referenced celebrity impersonation and drag festival spectacle, including a strange cabaret version of couvade. Couvade, an esoteric term which refers to ethnographic rituals of male 'sympathetic' pregnancy, is, in its limited use here, a performative practice of staged male birth. This type of performance, of the symbolic practice of male 'mock pregnancy' is regarded as continuous with queer performativity and drag, according to Laurence Senelick (2000: 63). Bowery's claim of impersonation, in 1993, of a childbirth scene acted by film star Divine, from his favourite John Waters's film *Female Trouble* (1974)*,* references a tradition of vaudeville-style visceral shock tactics within an homage to Waters, arguably still an emblem of queer resistance by the 1990s, albeit not creating a critical space for its relation to women's bodies. Instead, Waters' influence here borders on what Anna Breckon (2013) identifies as the 'anti-social' in queer politics due to the notoriety of *Pink Flamingos* (1972). Biographer Sue Tilley explains a dual reference to choreographer Michael Clark and actor Divine:

> Leigh had been inspired by the portrayal of Michael Clark's mother giving birth to him on stage and wanted to do something similar. He was also madly in love with Divine, so he decided to combine his two enthusiasms and recreate the scene in *Female Trouble* where Dawn Davenport gives birth to her daughter Taffy (Tilley 1997: 203).

The staged-birth-as-performance was to become a Bowery favourite, repeated in a number of venues in London and The Netherlands from 1993 to 1994 and suggests a cultural context in which male queer performativity onstage was to be connected to a corporeality that was in constant crisis during this period.

The pop video genre was also a musical gesture in which Bowery attempted to record his brand of performative dressing (and un-dressing). By the early 1990s, commercial Top 40 pop videos were saturated with highly artificial images of megastar soloists singing power ballads (Meatloaf, Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Whitney Houston and Bryan Adams among others). In 1993, Bowery recorded an anti-pop video at London's Trocadero, in a video booth open to the public (Atlas, 2002). With his band Raw Sewage (formed in 1992, originally as The Quality Street Wrappers), he attempted the shock effect of reviving old, racist signifiers in a look of nostalgic black-and-white minstrelsy with the stylized and shocking choreography of a striptease. The resulting pop video was Raw Sewage's version of Aerosmith's 'Walk this Way.' The costumes were an incorporation of yet another iteration of 'blackface' along with Bowery's preference for fashion accessories of extreme proportions, as Als explains: '[they] comprised, in part, of a blackened face, oversized white lips, an Afro wig and a bustle' (1998: 21). The look was completed with tartan dresses and excessively tall platform boots, with tight leather belts and mirkins, all revealed in the final striptease. In it, Bowery attempted to scramble the racial offensiveness of the face make-up with his own monstrous variations on notorious music-hall minstrel iconography by repeating it as fetishistic; however he depended upon its

provocative capacity and offensiveness. Legend has it that the Trocadero's engineers who operated the booth were so shocked by the performers' appearance that they 'forgot to press "record" ', so the extant copy is actually a re-take (Atlas 2002).

What makes Bowery's work difficult to theorize is that he anticipated classification and subverted it, so that performances sought to undermine themselves, relying in the main on the unreproducible strategies of performance art while reverting to a parodic stance of 'anti-art' as his friends described. *The Laugh of No. 12* at Fort Asperen in The Netherlands in 1994, was an experimental performance art event and featured Bowery suspended upside-down, with face painted completely black, chanting and exclaiming into a microphone (accompanied by Richard Torry, thrashing incessantly on guitar) flying through a sheet of sugar glass. The glass was expected to shatter before Bowery swept through it, but his cuts and injuries suggested there was a staging malfunction, which he enjoyed as part of the performance. Diagrams, a written plan and photographic documents appear in the catalogue of the Bowery's retrospective exhibition *Take a Bowery*, (2003: 120-128). Rather, than building a single persona through the authoring of these types of events, Bowery became associated with spontaneous, outrageous behaviour that created a sensation.

The poetics of embarrassment and the unravelling of performance

There is something productive in Bowery's pursuit of *embarrassment* in any context that has been read within a Butlerian notion of social shaming

in relation to aspects of queer performativity (1993). Gender theorist Peta Tait reads his behaviour as an enactment of 'defiant shamelessness' (Tait: 2002). Rather than being a political act in which Bowery shamed those in power, as we would expect in subcultural forms of resistance, it was a strategy to empower himself, even at the risk of deploying reactionary and offensive material, as discussed previously.

The confrontational tactic of deliberately ill-conceived casting and staging, was evident in Bowery's prodigious return to Melbourne with the purpose of presenting a fashion show featuring Michael Clark's dance company. Unfortunately, arts industry regulations in Australia made it difficult for Clark's company to perform and a last-minute attempt to rescue the show seemed to misjudge the content as appropriate to spectatorship, including Bowery's religious and conservative mother. Some detail of the event is revealed in a letter written by Bowery to close friend Sue Tilley on 14 February 1987. This letter was reproduced in the Robert Violette edition of Bowery's work and personal documents:

> We did the fashion show at the town hall today at two o'clock. It was a free performance held in conjunction with the park entertainment group. There were families and children, and most importantly, my mother had told all the relatives and friends she has in the world, and they all turned up [. . .] Because after the wekk [*sic*] of problems I had lost interest, I gave Michael a free hand and told him to do whatever he felt like. Michael thought it would be wise to include all the sex sequences from his show. Let me just remind you that it was two o'clock in the afternoon on Valentine's Day. The audience saw Michael wearing an apron and the rubber dildo, then David licking and sucking it. There was nudity from nearly all the girls and Les-child [*sic*], Davis and me were as camp as christmas [*sic*]. What was planned by my mother to be the piece de resistence [*sic*], of a triumphant home-coming turned out to be the most mortifying experience of her life (Als 1998: 59).

This troubled relationship with audiences was to become Bowery legend and places him quite anachronistically in a punk zeitgeist, but by the early

1990s, he was the provocative misfit. This was repeated in the legendary story of Bowery's ill-fated enema performance at an AIDS benefit in 1991 that is suggested by Bowery's biographer Sue Tilley as an accident. It is thought that the tightness of his costume created pressure on his abdomen, which caused the 'accident' of defecating within reach of audience members. This incident, among many, suggested that Bowery was keen to exploit any sensationalism, while sustaining an ambiguity about his intentions:

> Jimmy Trindy was flabbergasted, 'It was the most shocking cabaret I have ever seen in my whole life.'[. . .] Leigh added fuel to the fire by writing to the gay press expressing horror at the foul act and signing the letters from horrified lesbians. He was delighted when they were published and thought that he was very Ortonesque (Tilley 1997: 199).

Bowery's imposture in the gay press perpetuated the shock value of his one-person-show. By impersonating outraged spectators, Bowery's overall practice tested pathological limits. Hilton Als compared Bowery's dedication to embarrassment, to an Artaudian drive to shock the world: 'Bowery's "bloody" ruthlessness in defining the way he wanted to present himself to the world – shock, is a reaction that can dispel with embarrassment – sometimes caused embarrassment and anger in others' (Als 1998: 21). It was, however, important to Bowery to participate in critical discourses surrounding his performances. In the subsequent cultural context of the 1990s and its celebration of 'transgression' as acts that were potentially obscene but performative, we saw the elevation of the outsider and misfit but in increasingly creative ways that invited wider audiences than those enjoying punk (such as the more violent example set by the late, highly controversial US punk artist GG Allin, who died one

year before Bowery and who employed body work that was explosive and ridden with the apprehension of taboo). By contrast, heading towards the late 1990s, elements of the carnivalesque gave rise to male performance artists whose body-centred practice invited not only controversy, but had softened to a less combative punk context, to invite humour and debate. Examples include the containable and curated 'blood work' of Franko-B and the androgynous, culturally self-reflexive transgressions of Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

Adolescence and Independence in 'the Cult of Pure Artifice and Pure Alienation'

'Fuck off, freak!'
'Fuck off, fossil!'
Mick Jagger and Leigh Bowery, respectively (Bowery 1998: 17).

In concluding this article, it useful to consider some final examples through Cerith Wyn Evans' argument that Bowery enabled a cult of pure artifice and alienation during a time when creative artists' 'authenticity' was an index to their commercial value, rather than their consistent beliefs, values or their commitment to a dissident youth culture (Atlas, 2002). Evans attests to Bowery's critique of art works or performances he had seen in the 1980s and early 1990s as falling short because they did not inspire any resistance: 'but where's the poison?' (Atlas, 2002).

Given these radical views, continuous with the early twentieth century avant-garde precept that the (bourgeois) spectator is automatically 'the enemy', Bowery could never have been a fashion designer, musician or performer in any conventional sense. Yet he engaged with the tropes of

authenticity in commercialized, high fashion by claiming to fear being copied, because he confessed to enjoying the practice of imitation himself. Commentators credit him with inspiring the great British designers in the twenty-first century, especially the late Alexander McQueen: 'He'd never admit to it, but the pink elephant in the room was Leigh Bowery' (Lewis, 2015). So it is noteworthy in the London Weekend Television documentary *South of Watford* (1986) that Bowery stated in an interview: 'Fashion is really a problem for me because you have to appeal to too many people. I like appealing to maybe one or two and then I like them to be interested in me but never *dare* copy me' (Carlaw 1986). The convergence of a punk aesthetic and popular fashion in this respect was a troubling paradox. Bowery's comments were in the wake of the collapse of a punk aesthetic into mainstream fashion and post-punk popular culture by the mid-1980s. The defence of the authentic and unique in dissident subculture, can be interpreted in the spirit of adolescent independence, wherein adherents seek intergenerational acknowledgement of their cultural expression but resist the selling off of a value system to which they feel a deep-seated psychological attachment.

The consequences of this struggle are explained by René Girard in his work on mimesis:

> Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash [. . .] Man [*sic*] cannot respond to the universal human injunction, 'Imitate me!' without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counterorder: 'Don't imitate me!' (which really means, 'Do not appropriate *my* object') (Girard 1997: 90).

While Girard uses these theories to discuss forms of mimesis in dramatic contexts, he also applies them to the possibility of masochistic desire in

contemporary culture. It gives rise to the suggestion that there might be both a pathology and imitative imperative behind dandyism, that Lane identifies as a 'hypercathexis' or strong psychic attachment to a range of objects that are transitorily fashionable (Lane 1994: 40). This situates itself historically in a capitalist culture in which consumers are enslaved to their transient desires for commodities. The desire to not have one's object appropriated is ego-driven and narcissistic because it represents the 'subject's precarious shift from imaginary to symbolic identification' (Lane 1994: 41). Despite the possibility that Bowery's performativity is not about his subjectivity as much as it is about the event of creating and parading oneself as a spectacle, his fascinating personality, in the biographical sense, was augmented by continual self-fashioning, so that the boundaries of his subjectivity and the social were read as intertwined by his spectators. What makes Bowery such a wonderful figure of dissidence is that he was the producer and consumer of the commodity, although his choice to guard originality so fiercely suggests a complex performative power that mimics the politics of either the radical artist on the street or the high fashion house. In this light, it is useful to read Bowery's insistence on concealing his face in many of his costumed creations as one which entertains a monstrous attachment to being the constant object-like spectacle, in other words, 'dandyism represented less a "character" than a recurrent and insoluble oscillation between the personal and the social in which neither category was stable or autonomous' (Lane 1994: 30). The resultant object-like performativity is linked to Bowery's attachment to an appropriated object and therefore an

identificatory bind with practices of signification that underscored his approach to performance.

In his nightclub appearances, Bowery's experimentation with looks was a contrived pseudo-anonymity that disguised a burgeoning notoriety; his face was hidden but his social circle knew that no other nightclubber could look so outrageous. From the mid-1980s onwards, he chose to resemble objects, often obscuring his face and identity. He would sculpt his body in fabric, stitching himself in like a boot, with bulging chest and a ball of tulle for a head (Bowery 1998: 73). Footage of one of his nightclub appearances reveals Bowery wearing an oversized headpiece and mask of the popular late 1980s television cartoon character Bart Simpson, though the rest of his costume was of mismatched corsetry and footwear. This fetishistic assemblage of icons was Bowery's own creation, designed to cause amusement or surprise in others and it certainly made him a visual focus in nightclub crowds. Jürgen Habermas attributes the dandy with an immediate power of cultural commentary through visual culture and child-like behaviour:

> The character of the present is also at the basis of the kinship of art with fashion, with the new, with the optics of the idler, the genius and the child [. . .] The dandy combines the indolent and the fashionable with the pleasure of causing surprise in others while never showing any himself [. . .] the aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory (1987: 10).

In viewing his efforts as a kind of poetic, Bowery, in an historical sense, is received by some commentators as a repository of the images of the fashion scene of 1980s London, despite the fact that he was such a figure

of resistance to mainstream fashion and that some of his images either still have currency today or seem 'timeless'.

Bowery provocatively characterized an art of standing in for objects, suggesting that he was teasingly commodifiable in a way that celebrities of his time tried to dissimulate because they crafted an 'authentic' persona. Johnny Rozsa's photographs of Bowery, taken in 1986, were used commercially for a series of Christmas cards (Bowery 1998: 100-101) where he appeared, face on show, with heavy make-up, as a series of costumed objects such as a Christmas tree or pudding. The signification represented a combination of drag, clown-like transvestism and theatricalized costume. The most famous documented example of Bowery-as-installation was his appearance at the Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London (11-15 October 1988) as the ever-changing costumed form featured in the shop-window installation, where a one-way mirror separated the exhibition from the spectators. The diversity of costume changes enacted Michael Kirby's description of a performativity that is 'clothed but not acting' (1972; 1995: 43) with a chameleon-like presence akin to a side-show spectacle.

Ultimately, Bowery's masking of subjectivity in tandem with a publicly-declared resistance to commercial or popular appropriation challenges wider theories of performativity in performance and cultural studies. It is compatible with how body-centred practices in late-twentieth century performance art negotiated the liminal status of performer as subsisting between subject and object. This has significance in twenty-first century

performance, where globalized, capitalist cultures are saturated with strategies of self-fashioning and body-image narratives. With new mimetic technologies, we must continually re-visit the tension between performative cultures and visual orders, so that in Habermas's terms, we might extract 'the poetry from the fashion' (1987: 10) and in this context, the lived experience of subcultures like punk from the mere 'look'. Ultimately Bowery used the practice of the masked and mediated form to showcase performative practices at the junction of fashion and art and our continual desire to understand him suggests that his legacy remains dialectical.

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