

Andrea Kollnitz and Marco Pecorari.  
*Fashion, Performance and Performativity:*  
*The Complex Spaces of Fashion.* Bloomsbury, 2021

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The book *Fashion, Performance and Performativity. The Complex Spaces of Fashion* opens with an initial sentence that reevokes the 2012 terrorist attack and mass-shooting by the Norwegian far-right extremist Anders Behring Breivik, in which seventy-seven people were pronounced dead. This opening paragraph aims to communicate the urge for compiling of such a book; the sartorial choices that the attacker — who chose to dress up as a police officer — made were performative in blurring the fine line of the recognition of law, order and safety from the victims of that day. The example perfectly reflects the main aim of the book; to show how fashion can inform both performance and performativity and be the key to their constant dialogue, exchange and relation.

Published in 2021, the book was co-edited by Andrea Kollnitz and Marco Pecorari, whose joint interest on the cultural meaning of fashion in the field of museums, visual culture and archival research, led them to select eleven contributors for a complete, but non-exhaustive, overview of the role and meaning of fashion in performance theory and practice. The multidisciplinary and multicultural case studies not only have roots and are built from the field of fashion studies but also “art history, media studies, postcolonial studies, cultural and gender studies, as well as artists and practitioners.”<sup>1</sup> This shows, I would argue, an attempt from the authors to use the voice of academia by looking beyond academia itself and considering practices of performers and artists, in an attempt to expand the reach a field that oftentimes tends to appear quite self-referential.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and putting it in dialogue with other seminal works of the field of performance studies, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker’s *Performativity and Performance* (1995), the contributors of the book touch upon questions of a body

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1. Andrea Kollnitz and Marco Pecorari, *Fashion, Performance and Performativity. The Complex Spaces of Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 3.

that can either be: colonial, naked, hidden, overexposed, disciplined, idealised, vocal, utopian,<sup>2</sup> mostly female, but always performative in forming (individual and collective) identities and social implications. The book is divided into three main macro-sections. The first one is titled ‘Transformations and Translations’, and its three chapters focus on the role of the individual in performative contexts. Building up on her research on the grotesque body, Francesca Granata’s chapter ‘Leigh Bowery and Judith Butler: Between Performance and Performativity’ explains and compares Butler’s theories through the analysis of certain performances by queer artist and club personality Leigh Bowery and the construction and later staging of his gender(lessness) and self-expression.

As a second chapter, artist Karima Al Shomely stages a form of *meta-performativity*, by speaking about the latter through the means of the performance itself. The practice-based research focuses on the sartorial power that the clothed body holds in her study of the Emirati burqa through the means of the embodied performance. Closing the section is Paul Jobling’s digression on the power of orally transmitted knowledge through testimonies, exploring the power of written fashion narration in performing and mimicking the self. The chapter, built from in-depth archival research from the digitized National Lives Sound Archives at the British Library, unpacks the case of British cult-boutiques owner Tommy Roberts.

The following case studies are then grouped by the editors in the section titled ‘Stages and Places’, aiming to elucidate the inextricable relation between fashion and the geographical and cultural context where the ‘performance of the body’ happens.

Performance artist Tsuneko Taniuchi is the focus of Emmanuel Cohen’s re-interpretation of Butler’s idea of ‘restored behaviors’ and Austin’s theory of ‘unhappy performances’, using clothes and gestures to perform reality and, at the same time, counter-reality.

Jacki Willson then develops the concept of the ‘bare *flâneuse*’, building on the narration of the figure of the *flâneur* through a feminist perspective. In the chapter, she analyses a series of auto-portraits by photographer and artist Erica Simone, in which she stages her naked body in public spaces, questioning issues of spectatorship and consumption through her (un)fashioned body.

The sixth chapter of the book is written by Victoria L. Rovine who, in analyzing written excerpts from French colonial travel books in the interwar period, shows the performative effects that clothing has in creating systems of power (in the Foucauldian sense) between the colonizers and the colonized.

Closing the section is Jonathan Michael Square and his reflections on the phenomenon of digital influencers Lil Miquela and Shudu, and their performative presence on social media that he defines as ‘digital slavery’, as these fictional characters hide behind the trope of black feminism, while enriching their non-black male creators and taking jobs from black models in the business.

The book then closes with a final section focusing on ‘Models and Poses’.

These last four chapters open with an analysis by Karen De Perthuis on the performative potential of white background studio photography in decontextualizing clothes and models themselves from time and place, and opening to potential, utopian and non-identifiable bodies and gestures.

With a digression on the figure of the *indossatrice* (Italian for ‘the wearer’), Gabriele Monti presents an historical overview of Italian fashion models and their identification with the ‘typical Italian’, while also introducing some non-canonical Italian models and the consequential blurring of these stereotypical imaginaries.

Performativity, however, does not only happen in still images but also in moving ones. Louise Wallenberg considers twenty-first century fashion films and their tendency to incorporate violent and pornographic acts often referring to an idealized, but potentially subversive, lesbian imaginary, thus raising “issues regarding performativity of gender, (queer) sexuality, identity, violence, performativity and aesthetics.”<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, the book closes with a chapter by Royce Mahawatte titled ‘Male Gender Performance and Regency Fashion’, analyzing the representation of mainly white male figures in fashion editorials over the nineteenth century, mediated by the *dandy novel* which performed a constructed type of masculine

2. Kollnitz and Pecorari, *Fashion, Performance and Performativity*, 9.

3. Kollnitz and Pecorari, *Fashion, Performance and Performativity*, 20.

identity.

In *Fashion, Performance and Performativity* Kollnitz and Pecorari managed, I would argue, to curate a selection of articles that showed how dress, clothing and the fashioned (and unfashioned) body can be evidence for new forms of individual and collective identities and, to conclude, be the focus of new, innovative and non-canonical perspectives in the field of performance and performativity studies.

## Bibliography

Kollnitz, Andrea and Marco Pecorari. *Fashion, Performance and Performativity. The Complex Spaces of Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.