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# Novelty through Performance Costume: From Material to Immaterial Dimensions

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## Abstract:

This paper presents select examples of contemporary performance costumes made of materials that transcend established boundaries, traditions and conventions. A variety of new materials is introduced in contemporary costume design, including smoke, liquids, ice, plants and seeds, as well as technology-based materials. Digital applications related to costume design concentrate primarily on projections used to 'paint' and create textures on the costumes used as projection surfaces. Mapping multiple images (still images or projected animations) extend the costumes in the space. By analysing select examples, this paper aims to present non-conventional material applications in costume design. It also initiates a discussion on questions of materiality and virtuality in the context of performance costume and on the potential to conceptualise, design and realize costumes for characters who can change, dissolve and reshape through the combination of analogue materials, digital technology and moving bodies.

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Costume for performance has for many centuries relied on well-known conventional materials, such as fabrics and leather, yet this longstanding tradition has radically changed in the past one hundred years. Since then, new materials not previously used for costumes - such as paper - were introduced for the realisation of performance costumes and artificial materials as well as new elements, such as found objects, started to be used in costume design. In the 21st century, costume has been liberated from established textiles given that new types of materials, techniques and technologies are engaged in the creation of costumes in all fields of practice.

The exploration of materiality in costume design has been at the core of recent international group exhibitions such as the *Extreme Costume* exhibition at the National Gallery in Prague during Prague Quadrennial 2011, and *New Costume Practices and Performances*, the exhibition of Critical Costume 2015 at Aalto University in Helsinki. The Czech costume designer and curator of *Extreme Costume* Simona Rybáková characteristically remarks in relation to preparing this exhibition:

*"We were [...] looking for material that would be intense, unusual, daring, unexpected, unique, cosmic, virtual, intangible, diffuse, luminous, acerbic, elevated, extravagant, off-putting, deforming, technical, environmental, sonorous, technologically innovative, decadent, bizarre, eclectic, buoyant... With these motifs in mind, the idea of "extreme costume" began to take shape in its entirety"* (Rybáková 2011, 281).

The *Extreme Costume* exhibition, therefore, hosted costumes made of extreme materials as well as costumes with "extreme use, extreme size, extreme relationship[s]" (Rybáková 2011, 281). The exhibits included costumes made of found objects of everyday use as well as items normally used for different purposes than to construct garments, such as balloons, bras, tampons and bullets. For example, one of the costumes included in the *Extreme Costume* exhibition was the wedding dress for Tamora, the Queen of Goths, who "*marries the Emperor Saturninus to arm herself against Titus and so avenge the murderer of her son Alarbus. Her marriage is an act of violence, hate, revenge and a perversion of love*" (Kazan 2011, n.p.).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Queen Tamora's bullet wedding dress was created for a project called *The Titus Procession* based on William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, presented at Theater de la Paz, San Luis Potosí, Mexico in 2007. The costume designer Eloise Kazan provides the background of this costume together with concept images of the design and

*“Accordingly,”* notes Eloise Kazan, the Croatian-Mexican costume designer and creator of this costume, *“I designed for her a wedding dress made of bullets, a cold, heavy shell, an arm and armour in one, a self-destructive fort. [...] The ammunition on the dress is real and it was courtesy of the Mexican Army. I used more than 2000 real bullet cases”* (Kazan 2011, n.p.).

This paper presents select examples of contemporary performance costumes made of materials that go beyond traditions and conventions, sometimes transcending established boundaries, such as when using porcelain to create dance costumes in the following case. A traditional approach to design for dance usually focuses on how the costumes should allow the dancers to move; the materials used for the costumes are in that case stretch or lightweight to enhance the movement. Contemporary projects, however, challenge this convention by inviting designers, dancers and choreographers alike to experiment with the contrasts that material choices offer to the creation of movement.

UK-based designer Dawn Summerlin, for example, explores the notion of abstraction, restriction and fragile figuration in her project *Perceptive Fragility* (2015) through the unconventional costumes that she created for dancers using porcelain.<sup>2</sup> By removing the dancers’ *“natural, fluid freedom and placing them within a cold, restrictive, claustrophobic and intimidating environment”* (Summerlin in Pantouvaki 2015, 64), Summerlin developed together with choreographer Michelle Man a live choreographed performance entitled *Porcelain Moves* in which the body and the costume became ‘a responsive extension of each other’ (Summerlin 2018, n.p.). As the designer notes, her approach *“placed the costumes at the forefront of the research, manifesting themselves as the written ‘text’ which would determine the choreography of the dance piece, rather than being the latter consideration”* (Summerlin 2018, n.p.) i.e. being a visual response to given movement. This allowed the development of an embodied dialogue on fragility through the materiality of body and costume. It is interesting to note that what remains of this costume are only (broken) fragments of this unconventional material; when this project was shown at the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition, a small amount of porcelain fragments were the only relics of the costume available to the visitors of the exhibition to observe and touch.

In another project also presented at the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition, entitled *Ni Una Mas - Exploring Clothing as Psychological Armour* (2012), Italian born and London based experimental costume designer Giulia Pecorari explored mental and physical fragility in relation to violence against women through costume. By creating a costume made of 75 pieces of shaped resin and 400 hidden magnets which hold the pieces together, Pecorari created an ‘imaginary armour’ ready to offer

*“protection from the external world, hard like metal but fragile like porcelain - prone to break at any moment if something violent hits”* (Pecorari 2018, n.p.). *As the show developed and the performer breathed and moved, this costume performed and deconstructed itself, gradually breaking apart leaving the female performer wearing it ‘exposed, showing her most fragile, intimate side”* (Pecorari 2018, n.p.).<sup>3</sup>

As Pecorari notes, these experimental costumes ‘become closer to a piece of art or a performance in itself, allowing the costume and performer to become an extension of each other’ (Pecorari 2018, n.p.).

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photographs from the final realisation on her page at the website [www.behance.net](http://www.behance.net) [Link address: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/1803472/TITUS-ANDRONICUS-extreme-costume-project>].

<sup>2</sup> A close-up image of the porcelain costume designed and created by Dawn Summerlin is included in the choreographer Michelle Man’s website in which the performance *Porcelain Moves* is presented. See: <http://www.michelle-man.com/porcelainmoves/>.

<sup>3</sup> The designer, Giulia Pecorari, provides several photographs from the performance *Ni Una Mas* (2012) by Nerina Cocchi\_inoutput, LaMama Umbria, Spoleto, Italy, on her website <https://giuliapecorari.com>. [Link address: <https://giuliapecorari.com/NI-UNA-MAS-performance>]. She also provides a video with close-ups that reveal how the costume works. [Link address: <https://giuliapecorari.com/filter/PROJECTS/NI-UNA-MAS-video>].

Latest technological materials developed in the field of fashion such as 3D printed textiles emerge in costume design, too. Recently, the Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen collaborated with the German choreographer Sasha Waltz on a new dance production entitled *Kreatur* (2017). Sasha Waltz is well known for her interdisciplinary approach and her collaboration with artists from other art forms invited to join her choreographic works in a creative dialogue. *Kreatur* examines different aspects and phenomena related to human existence and to social realities 'against the background of a disrupted society' (SWG Press 2018, n.p.). Through different scenes engaging movement, costume and light the dancers respond to key life dichotomies such as power and powerlessness, dominance and weakness, freedom and control, community and isolation (SWG Press 2018, n.p.).

Iris van Herpen's multidisciplinary approach to design fitted perfectly to these themes as her work offered the dancers a diversity of materials and forms through which they were able to create relationships with the space surrounding them as well as between themselves. Van Herpen's work for *Kreatur* included laser cut costumes with curved patterns that revealed the dancers' bodies in an interplay of light and shadow reminiscent of her recent collections (e.g. S/S 17 Haute Couture collection). Elsewhere the bodies were transformed, distorted and deformed through transparent surfaces, and sculptural costumes with long spikes interacted dangerously with the naked bodies. The work also included ultralight cloud-like and cocoon-like wearable sculptures worn as ethereal costumes that reflect van Herpen's interest in transparency. *Kreatur* has been described as 'a piece set at the boundaries between dance, image, fashion and social comment,' its costumes offering 'the chance to dancers to alter their personal spaces, [...] indeed to be interpreted as armours, cocoons, shells or wombs that protect them and help them surviving their struggles, but also as alien structures that alter and reconfigure their body movements' (Battista 2017, n.p.).<sup>4</sup>

The variety of new materials introduced in contemporary costume design also includes natural materials and biomaterials such as hair, liquids, ice and smoke, as well as plants and seeds. The Brazilian director-designer Leo Fressato, whose work was included in the *Extreme Costume* exhibition, used real ice bars to make footwear and a bra for the costume of the performance *The Girl and the Autumn* (2007), creating movement according to the pain of the feet by the direct contact with the ice. Staged in wintertime in Curitiba, the coldest among Brazil's state capitals, the costume caused the audience 'a feeling of inhospitality, of repulsion' (da Silva, 2010, 147).<sup>5</sup> Here the costume addressed the topic of the performance - sexual violence – through its materiality, precisely by the ice element, which, placed on the actor's body, contained a material metaphor of pain and penetrating.

Biomaterials and especially plants are also increasingly used in the creation of costumes. One indicative example is the work of Finnish fashion and costume designer Liisa Pesonen, who planted the costumes of an experimental performance entitled *Organorgan* (2013)<sup>6</sup> with cress seeds. In *Organorgan* the performance makers investigated interaction as a performative act; the experiment combined space, sound, lighting design and technology with common, recognisable objects, plantae and the performers' and audience's presence made active through biosensors connecting them to the lighting devices of the space. The costumes were designed to 'resemble functional work garments to characterise the performers as parts of a

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<sup>4</sup> The Sasha Waltz & Guests website includes several production photographs with Iris van Herpen's costumes. [Link address: <https://www.sashawaltz.de/en/creation-by-sasha-waltz-world-premiere-in-june-in-berlin/>]. Battista's article entitled "New Space Geographies for Moving Bodies: Iris van Herpen X Sasha Waltz & Guests' »Kreatur« @Tanz im August, Berlin" on the website *Irenebrination: Notes on Architecture, Art, Fashion, Fashion Law and Technology*, [https://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination\\_notes\\_on\\_a/](https://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination_notes_on_a/), includes some additional images of these costumes. [Link address: [http://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination\\_notes\\_on\\_a/2017/08/iris-van-herpen-sasha-waltz-kreatur.html](http://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination_notes_on_a/2017/08/iris-van-herpen-sasha-waltz-kreatur.html)]

<sup>5</sup> Select images of this costume are available in the online archive of the Prague Quadrennial, <https://www.pq.cz/archive/>, in the archival section of PQ 2007 under the entries of Brazil for the *Extreme Costume* exhibition. [Link address: <http://services.pq.cz/en/pq-07.html?itemID=189&type=costumes>]

<sup>6</sup> *Organorgan* was a collaborative project created by graduating performance design students from the Department of Film, Television and Scenography of Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland, and the Department of Lighting and Sound Design of the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. It was presented in April 2013 at the Theatre Academy, Helsinki.



larger system' (Pantouvaki 2015, 6). The cress seeds embedded in the costumes grew during the rehearsals and the two-week performance period, until they finally decomposed at the end of the performances (Pantouvaki 2015) (see Figure 1: 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e). This relatively simple idea provided multiple concepts for further enquiry: Is the life of a costume only as long as the performance-run? How does costume evolve *together with* and *through* the performer's body? Can costume be alive, is it a living organism?

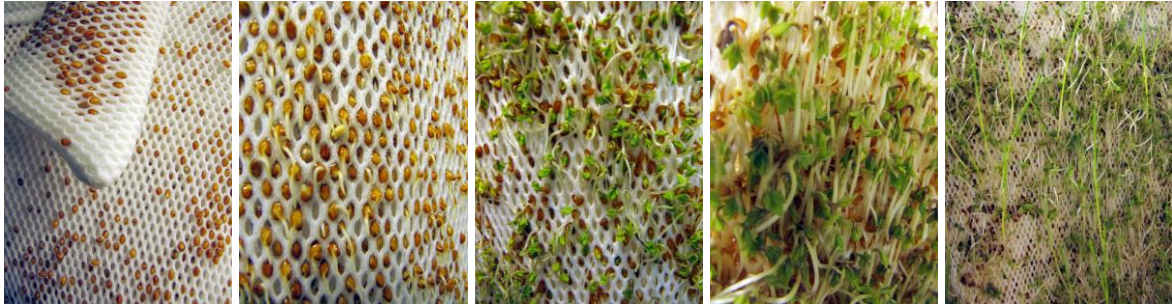


Figure 1 (1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e): *Organorgan* (2013), the progressive growing of the cress seeds embedded in the costumes. Costume Design: Liisa Pesonen, Theatre Academy Helsinki in collaboration with Aalto University. Photos: Liisa Pesonen. © Liisa Pesonen

Further to this project, Pesonen moved a step ahead by proposing real vegetables as the main material for her costume entitled *Grow* (2015). This became a wearable growing entity that transformed from one day to another. The costume was displayed at the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition, served with olive oil and vinegar. Its materials consisting of a variety of salads and herbs created an edible performance through interaction with the audience who were invited to taste it (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Grow* (2015) by Liisa Pesonen exhibited at the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition, Aalto University, Helsinki. Photo: Riina Nieminen. © Aalto University

Another substance that has attracted attention by costume designers in experimental performance projects is vapour and smoke, used as materials for 'dressing' the body. The Dutch costume designer Daphne Karstens created at London College of Fashion a costume-based performance entitled *Ping* (2014) based on the homonymous Samuel Beckett piece of

prose.<sup>7</sup> Karstens used near-death experiences as a theme to investigate the ephemerality of life in her work through the medium of smoke. Using a refined tube system as the main structure of her costume, she directed smoke from a smoke machine through the performer's body to produce a costume that represents the 'spiritual body'. In this, the costume became both 'restrictive and suggestive of a second body, the ephemeral body' (Karstens in Pantouvaki 2015, 52).

Another artistic research project entitled *Transformation 1 and 2* (2014) was developed at Amsterdam School of the Arts by the Belgian emerging designer Rosemarie Allaert inspired by Ophelia's fragility and vulnerability. In *Transformation*, Allaert was interested in exploring the relation between performer and costume, skin and ethereal material, focusing on how smoke as a constantly evolving material can contribute to the costume, to the performer and the performance as a whole. The project developed as a dance between the performer and the material around her (Figure 3).



Figure 3: *Transformation 1 and 2* by Rosemarie Allaert photographed at the exhibition Critical Costume 2015. Photo: Tuuli Ahonen. © Aalto University

The designer observes that the performer 'influences the material by her movement; at the same time, the material is unpredictable and lives its own life: a dance sometimes in harmony, sometimes not' (Allaert in Pantouvaki 2015, 55) as the smoke costume moves around the performer even when the performer stands still, telling 'a story of change' (Allaert 2014, 39). The aim of this project was to investigate how the role of costume can be changed into a role that is not illustrative but an active part of telling the story, indicating e.g. the mental state of a character through a performance of materiality and material transformation. These projects clearly demonstrate an attempt to investigate the performing costumed body on an unconventional material, almost immaterial dimension.

In the age where performance becomes increasingly multi-disciplinary and technological on an advanced digital and virtual dimension, the relevant developments through the medium of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ping* was presented at Sadler's Wells Theatre, Lilian Baylis Studio, London in December 2014. For more information and photographs from this project, see Daphne Karsten's website, <https://www.daphnekarstens.com/>. [Link address: <https://www.daphnekarstens.com/ping>]

costume are still nascent. Contemporary digital applications in the field of costume concentrate primarily on projections, used to 'paint' and create textures, mapping multiple images on costumes used as projection surfaces or deploying projected animation to extend the costume in the space. As an example, the costumes of the Hungarian designer Zsófia Geresdi do not exist without projection: she uses the forms of her costumes as a three-dimensional canvas that hosts layers of colour and texture to create characters (Figure 4).



Figure 4: *The Poetry of Nature* (2015), costumes for *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Zsófia Geresdi photographed at the exhibition Critical Costume 2015. Photo: Tuuli Ahonen. © Aalto University

In the past 10-15 years, increasingly many designers include projection in the materials that they use for the creation of costumes. In *DonaUllsDonaUlls* (2011), performance artist and costume designer Catalan-Venezuelan Mariaelena Roqué mapped multiple images of her own work upon her naked body in a 'costume in progress' that embodies herself, dressed-undressed, while the projections indicate 'inner-outer/outer-inner' approaches to herself. However, the Finnish choreographer Tero Saarinen has created one of the early examples of professional performance integrating projection into the design of costume in the production *Hunt* (2002) designed by the acclaimed Finnish costume designer Erika Turunen.

Commissioned by the Venice Biennale in 2002, *Hunt* was a contemporary reinterpretation of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The production developed as a collaboration with the multimedia artist Marita Liulia, who added a live virtual level to the performance. Saarinen wanted to focus 'on the conflicts within an individual: between masculinity and femininity, good and evil, the fading of beauty'; he observes, 'I wanted to dive into the mind and inner conflicts of a person being sacrificed and of the person who offers himself for sacrifice' (Saarinen 2007, 11). Therefore, he searched for an additional element of power, which was added to his performance by the integration of costume and multimedia: the costume consisted of white



nylon forms on which the moving images were projected.<sup>8</sup> Through this stream of images layered on his body - including images of himself - the dancer became 'both hunter and hunted' (Anderson 2006, 20).

In 2012, an innovative production of *The Magic Flute* was launched in Berlin and became famous worldwide for its fairy-tale universe containing distinctive references ranging from Buster Keaton, German cabaret and Nosferatu to British humour and Terry Gilliam. This production, directed by Suzanne Andrade (1927) & Barrie Kosky (Komische Opera), co-conceived with the British '1927' theatre company with full-scale animation created by Paul Barritt and design by Esther Bialas, deployed projected animation as part of the stage scenery and costumes.<sup>9</sup> Characteristically, the Queen of the Night appears high up the stage in a white surface costume onto which a spider-like animation is projected until the spider legs expand onto the entire stage. In moments of fury, the projection includes a skeleton, demonstrating the Queen of the Night's mental state. Although the singer is largely static, the costume is animated and changes colour and patterns; it therefore adds considerable dimension to the character in a way that is at times intriguing or humorous. To my opinion, this constitutes one of the most interesting examples of using digital projection in relation to costume to date.

Green screen digital technologies, on the other hand, have been known for several decades, but have been mainly used for the creation of scenography, by adding a digital background on cinematic and televisual applications. Costume designers working in projects involving green screen are customarily constrained to take into consideration the effect of the technology when designing costumes, to avoid the 'dissolving' of the performer's body in the background. What if the body partly disappears?



Figure 5: *Digital Character Design* (2015), workshop conceived and supervised by Sofia Pantouvaki. Experimentation with green screen digital technologies as costume material. Photos: Digital Character Design workshop. © Aalto University

<sup>8</sup> Saarinen toured with *Hunt*, his first solo choreography in ten years, until the end of 2013 – *The Rite of Spring* Centennial – in a total of 83 cities and 32 countries. For more information on this production, audiovisual material and images of the costume, see the Tero Saarinen Company website, <https://terosaarinen.com/en/>. [Link address: <https://terosaarinen.com/en/creation/hunt/>]

<sup>9</sup> This production of *The Magic Flute* premiered at the Komische Opera Berlin in November 2012 and has been restaged in new productions worldwide since then. See also the website of '1927', which includes a trailer of the production, <http://www.19-27.co.uk/>. [Link address: <http://www.19-27.co.uk/the-magic-flute/>]



At Aalto University, I organised an experimental workshop entitled *Digital Character Design* (2015), in which this challenge became a starting point to investigate the potential of dissolving bodies (Figure 5). The workshop addressed questions of materiality and virtuality in the context of costume design by discussions, lectures and hands-on work. The creative work undertaken involved experimentation with the combination of physical (fabrics and tangible objects) and virtual materials (digital software) to design multi-layered characters and costumes. The work focussed specifically on mixing analogue fabrics with green screen technologies to create dissolving and disappearing bodies through designing 'costumes' with the combination of these materials (Figure 6a, 6b).



Figure 6 (6a, 6b): *Digital Character Design* (2015), workshop conceived and supervised by Sofia Pantouvaki. Dissolving and disappearing bodies through costume and green screen digital technologies. Photos: Digital Character Design workshop. © Aalto University

The preliminary results from this workshop serve as pilot research for future artistic exploration in the context of performance-making and demonstrate that the central idea of layering the physical and virtual dimensions of the performer's body through costume offers potential for new visual meanings. It is important to test these further in the context of dramaturgy.

The emergence of new approaches and innovations in the field of costume seeks to inspire and enable creative work that integrates traditional visual languages of the stage with digital arts aesthetics, processes, techniques and technologies. By analysing these examples, my paper aimed to briefly explore material novelty in performance costume and to address preliminary questions on materiality and virtuality in the context of costume design. I am also interested in generating further discussion on the potential to conceptualise, design and realize costumes for characters who can change, dissolve and reshape through the combination of analogue materials, digital technology and moving bodies.

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