In the tradition of queer performance art. Steven Cohen in drag
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The following article concentrates on contextualizing Steven Cohen’s performances in the history of drag. The content of these Wiki articles tries to sketch briefly movements and perspectives that can help extend the understanding of Steven Cohen’s approach and his tradition regarding art history. With the definition of the drag terminus from Western historical and international perspectives, the first chapter gives the background for the social contextualization from which the artistic examples are chosen. Those practical approaches are the subject of the second chapter that concentrates on Steven Cohen’s performances and tries to broaden the way of reading them by enriching the drag definition with eccentric varieties from history. In an excursus called "Illusion and exposure", Mary and Gordy and, on the other side, Divine, stand for two certain "poles" among drag performance that are elucidated in the writings. The third chapter shifts the perspective to a more art historian one and further concentrates on drag regarding the body itself. Examples and definitions from the history of performance art in the twentieth century and another excursus to the legacy of Leigh Bowery are now the objects to illustrate Cohen's work. A direct comparison or valuation in respect of other artists is not intended. The goal of the contributions is revealing artistic and cultural possibilities, theories and practical implementations with a hermeneutic approach. Although most of the time writing "around" Steven Cohen, rather than "about" him, the short analyses of some of his specific works try to profit from the contextual extensions made and to show more effectively and vividly how the artist interprets drag, enacts his body and how his œuvre relates to different phenomena in history.

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Cultural and historical contexts of drag

"drag - [mass noun] clothing more conventionally worn by the opposite sex, especially women's clothes worn by a man: a fashion show, complete with men in drag."
If we look at the dictionary definition of the word *drag*, it tells us that it is a matter of adapting a contradiction. The sheer existence of such a term testifies an obvious deviation from the standard. Furthermore, there is a distinct concentration on the male gender wearing female clothes: *Drag* is predominantly associated with *drag queens*.¹ To be *in drag* describes a state that differs from the individual’s everyday life. It can be seen as a hobby or moment of self-expression, but does not imply a distinct social or legal identification. In contrary to a fundamental inner wish for an overall existence as a woman, a *drag queen* usually understands her appearance as a form of disguise with the inherence of some sort of extroversion, presented in a show context. Furthermore, there is no necessary connection with homosexuality, although gender transgression and same-sex desires often play an important role in the individuals’ lives.² However, there are also *drag queens* that actually identify as women (not as *female impersonators*) and adapt their stage outfit as normality. Although *drag* and transsexuality are to be differentiated carefully in principle, they occasionally go hand in hand in the reality of personal lives.³ The definitions also vary in broad society. Different terms are often used randomly and inflationary for every kind of man with the phenotype of a woman.

The social phenomenon of *drag queens* has emerged from magic figures to a secret pleasure, to a rebellious factor, to a cause of mass media interest. In ancient cultures, cross-dressing figures were often linked to certain magical and ritualistic powers. In Western culture, the theatre has long borne the reputation of being a “haven for homosexuality”.⁴ Roots date back to Elizabethan times, when women were not allowed on stage and adolescent boy players had to play female roles.⁵ Although, evidence for (especially gay) men dressing up as women are retraceable throughout modern history, many social and legal stigmata that reach far into the 20th century seem to have prevented an official documented history writing for the phenomena of *drag*.⁶ It is reported by the notes of Francois Carlier that by the 1860’s gay couples used the opportunity of masquerade balls to legally appear as “man and woman”. Although that occasion officially had to be an ironized play, it was one of the few moments where the mere illusion of a free life with the oppressed preferences could be imagined.⁷ The 1920’s, with their short-termed liberalism, brought along sexually diverse figures like Josephine Baker or Marlene Dietrich. It was mostly women that played with role models in a coquetty way. In the U.S.A., there were underground bars and variety theaters, like the *Black Cat Bar* in San Francisco, that existed on a razor’s edge to illegality.⁸ The “open” history of *drag queens* begins with the gay rights movement and its initial spark at New York City. At the *Stonewall Inn*, a bar in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, three days of riots took place and were the breakthrough for a confident gay movement. With slogans like “We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls. We have no underwear. We show our pubic hair” the principles for cross-dressing identities in context of a provocative concept with the name *gender-fuck* were born.⁹ With broader acceptance of gay rights and gender issues, *drag queens* like *Mary and Gordy* or *Lilo Wanders* in Germany, *RuPaul*, *Jeffree Star* or *Divine* in the U.S.A., and recently *Conchita Wurst* as winner of the European Song Contest, have found their way into mass media attention.

Non-normative Identities Beyond the West

It seems that the term *drag queen* is strongly connected to the Western history of the phenomenon and its historical figures as demonstrated before. Because of Steven Cohen’s international approach and cultural diversity, it is useful to open up the perspective towards related phenomena around the globe in order to maybe accomplish a perception of *drag* that is just as widespread.

**Hijras**

For example, as Serena Nanda states, the *hijras* in India “pose a challenge to Western ideas of sex and gender”.¹⁰ They are defined by a picture of an alternative sex and gender role - a biologically intersexed person, based on the model of the hermaphrodite.¹¹ Under the aspect of spiritual Hindu role models, *hijra*s are also defined by their impotence. Most of them are male eunuchs which eliminates their ability to penetrate.¹² Although their own identification is formulated as “neither man nor woman”, they clearly apply practices of the female role in India.¹³ They prefer women’s clothing and women’s occupations, such as a desire for male sexual partners, certain “typical” tempers, and they like children. They define their gender identity as either woman or *hijra*.¹⁴ Different aspects set them apart from the image of a *drag queen*. Firstly, there is also a dimension of being a performer, although it is a spiritual role, for example at the birth of a male child. Additionally, there seems to be no conflict of genders or display of contradiction. Because the Indian definition of gender is not in the same way dipolar as the Western one, those questions are not raised equally. *Drag queens* also do not tend to be seen as castrated beings. Their representation of sexuality is very diverse - as can be tracked by the examples displayed later. An overall statement as to the differences is hard to make, but it seems as if *hijra* includes many aspects of *drag* that mix with aspects of transsexuality and transvestism - though it goes further and even more diverse. In Nanda’s text, a *hijra* named Sushila is portrayed. She dresses consistently as a woman, has long hair and a “husband”. In contrary to that, she breaks through traditions with (in the specific notion) “manly” attributes like drinking alcohol, smoking and rejecting castration at all.¹⁵

**Warias**

This is a cultural phenomenon from Indonesia. Definitions of its nature vary: In some articles, Warias are portrayed as transsexuals, but most often without the ambition of a sex change operation.¹⁶ Other reports underline the diverse manifestations of waria culture, including what in Western societies would be called cross-dressers, transsexuals, drag queens, or just effeminate gay men.¹⁷
‘The waria community is very diverse,’ Shuniyya declares. ‘It includes individuals who continue to identify as male but who imitate certain feminine mannerisms, and perhaps occasionally wear makeup and women’s clothing. Others identify so closely as female that they are able to pass as female in their daily interactions in society. As waria, these individuals become almost invisible.’

If you follow Wikipedia’s link to the Indonesian language version of drag queen, you are guided to the term waria. It is also stated that - because a lot of people in Indonesia are not familiar with the term gay or lesbian - it often functions as a synonym for the Western equivalent of the LGBT community.

The lifeworld of the warias is often displayed as on the edge to illegality, because of the prevalent Islamic culture in the country. A lot of these individuals live in poor social circumstances. They often make their living by prostitution or begging, the HIV rate among them is very high and they constantly face discrimination. But there are also voices that call this image a stereotype and point to a lot of warias with middle class background. Because of the poorer individuals dancing and singing in the streets, people often connect the phenomenon with the performative aspect of drag queens. Like the hijras, it goes further and has a more complex and traditional, pre-Islamic history in society. However, there is a difference in acceptance and a distinct perception of warias being anti-normative.

African perspectives

Concerning this subject area, it is more useful to point to the other articles of this wiki-project that extensively dealt with identities around the African continent.

Especially the third chapter "Queer practices in tradition, history, culture and society" from "About the concept of queerness in the African context" and the movies out of "Representations of queerness in documentary films and art" give numerous examples for identities maybe considered drag in a Western context.

Conclusion

Although practices of drag can be traced around the world, their definition and social dimensions seem to differ considerably. The Western term seems to be predominantly connected to the performative aspect with precise delimitations to transsexuality. In other parts of the world, those boundaries are not as strict. Because of traditionally different conceptions of gender models, oppressive legal situations or the level of education among the population, the perception of the phenomenon varies. However, despite of drag being broadly understood as anti-normative, there is a theoretical discussion, whether it is a matter of resistance or ingratiation to a heteronormative society:

Some scholars view drag queens as primarily reinforcing dominant assumptions about the dichotomous nature of gender presentation and sexual desire because they appropriate gender displays associated with traditional femininity and institutionalized heterosexuality or because, despite their performance of femininity, they embody masculine privilege (Dolan, 1985; Frye, 1983; Gagne and Tewksbury, 1996; Schacht, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Tewksbury, 1993, 1994). Others, influenced by the writings of queer theory, argue that drag queen performances are transgressive actions that destabilize gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and sexualities (Butler, 1990, 1993; Garber, 1992; Lorber, 1994, 1999; Munoz, 1999; Rupp and Taylor, 2003). The concept of gender performativity in queer theory (Butler, 1990, 1993; Garber, 1992; Munoz, 1999) implies that the theatrical performance of gender is a form of resistance that undermines the assumed connections among gender, sex, and (hetero)sexuality (Moloney and Fenstermaker, 2002). For Butler, traditional gender loses some its claim to naturalness and authenticity through drag, which uses parody to reveal the fundamentally performative nature of gender.

Regardless of an assessment, these questions shall also be the subject of the observations concerning Steven Cohen. With the cultural background elaborated and contestations arisen, the cultural phenomenon drag can be set in context to its reutilization in art.

1 Of course there is as well the counter part of drag kings. Because of Steven Cohen being the subject of this article and him being of male gender, the remarks are therefore shortened.


3 Ibid.
Steven Cohen in drag

The following chapter sets the now elaborated terminus drag in context to vividly comprehensible examples from modern art history. It concentrates on Steven Cohen's character, his self-identification and his diverse practices of art. It further collates the findings from the analyses of certain performances of Cohen by finding evidently legitimate excursuses to other performers in the history of the 20th century. Again, those results shall help to refine the view on Cohen's work.

Self-identification

"I am an artist and I am a dog. I am a faggot and I am a Jew. I am white and I am an ugly girl. I have a cock and I am South African. I explore my life through art and I am proud of myself. I don't celebrate my queer identity on one specific day only. I use every day of my life to express pride in my deviance."  — Steven Cohen

11 Ibid. p. 380.
12 There is also a small minority of biologically female hijras that don't undergo any form of castration.
13 Nanda, Serena. p. 381.
14 Ibid.
15 All information also taken out of: Nanda, Serena. p. 373-417.
19 As experienced on 23.03.2015: English Wikipedia <-> Indonesian Wikipedia
20 Kortschak, Irfan.
In 1997, Steven Cohen's show Camp concentration included a picture of the artist at age six. Displayed is the young boy wearing a bikini, make-up and with his hair tied to a ponytail. Around his neck there is a sash, spelling "Miss Margerete". This insight to Cohen's private life gives a hint to a desire for cross-dressing, even present in the early years of his life. But looking at the quote from above, we can reenact a thinking that goes beyond the gender dualisms of man and woman, homo and hetero. Cohen describes himself with the labels society has allocated to him. He replaces his perhaps most obvious attribute - being a biological man - with the derogatory term for a male homosexual, "faggot". However, he is also an "ugly girl", although he "has a cock". Apart from the categories regarding his sexuality, he also claims to be a Jew, a dog, an artist, white and South African. All those terms point to markers of identity that could be - and also practically have been - understood anti-normative and may be a subject of discrimination. Nevertheless, to just indicate his formulation as a political statement, referencing to a reactionary society, would be presumptuous. Emerging from the last parts of the statement is his inner need to express his identity as multifaceted as possible. Looking at Cohen's everyday life, he has been living in France for more than ten years and says of himself that he lives a very "normal" life without travesty or excess:

Dans la vie, je suis quelqu’un d’extrêmement normal, presque de façon terrifiante. Je n’ai rien de la grande folie excentrique ni du travesti déguisé à l’excès. - Steven Cohen about his private life

Hence, acting in drag is a performative state for the artist. Relating to the childhood memories, it does not seem to be a disguise in the sense of an entirely alien or non-inherent sensation. But there is no indication for a desire to live as a woman in a transsexual lifestyle. Again, as claimed in his own words, Steven Cohen explores and presents diversity through the device of drag - to which extent is what the following explanations try to analyze.

Performances

"Living art" and "Ugly girl" (Part 1)

In the late 1990's, Steven Cohen began to concentrate on performance art. Around 1998, he did several performances in the South African public, which were recorded and later compiled to a video work titled Living art. The video is divided into several clips that are themed by a respective character: Dog, Ugly girl, Jew.

"I am making the most personal statements i can and interjecting them into those public spaces ... I am looking at aspects of myself which society has told to be ashamed of." Steven Cohen on Living art

Already at first glance, the gender topic are distinctly present. When we look at Ugly girl, we can see the artist in a form of exaggerated female attire. He is wearing an orange wig with a headdress of feathers, a collar, ear rings, burlesque gloves, a corset, suspenders, nylons in leopard look and extraordinarily high, red platform shoes. It seems as if every cliche of female eroticism, as expected through the eyes of a desiring man, has gathered in his character. The result is a rather disconcerting sight. Not only seems the collocation of decorations to be out of phase and overdone - it is also Cohen's body that breaks with the normative imagination of an "attractive woman". His tall, muscular appearance, edged facial features and overall proportions leave no doubt as to obvious travesty.

Excursus: Illusion and exposure

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
“Classic” forms of drag (especially before the establishment of LGBT rights, or as pictured in more conservative mass media) tend to be a matter of illusion. In other words: The intention of disguising as the opposite sex is optimally fulfilled when a differentiation between ‘role’ and ‘reality’ is closest to impossible. But not only physical modifications, like wearing wigs and shaving one’s legs, come with this aspiration. There is also a conception that could be described as ‘ideal of female behavior’, that correlates with a diva attitude and an imagination of traditional female elegance.

Mary and Gordy
Mary and Gordy or Mary Morgan & Gordy Blanche were a German drag queen duo embodied by Georg Preußé (Mary) and Reiner Kohler (Gordy). Founded in 1978, they were Germany’s first distinctive travesty act to have extended television airtime (including five feature length shows) and gain acceptance in broad public.3 If we look at one of the TV shows from 1983, we can see the two characters in a cabaret-style revue. They constantly change outfits, sing songs, play short sketches and do stand-up-like comedy. Although the impersonations never stay the same for more than about ten minutes, there is always a certain ‘golden thread’: Everything is played with ‘ladylike elegance’ and an imagery of traditional ‘showbiz-glamour’. Grande dames like Marlene Dietrich or disco queens like Amanda Lear are being satirized - though, always in a way that is grotesque, but never tasteless or obscene. From the beginning, it is clear that the female attire of Mary and Gordy is just a disguise. The title of the show translates to “Loving the transformation” (Spaß an der Verwandlung) and in the opening act, Mary jokes about her fake breasts. However, for the rest of the hour, the illusions are played to perfection. It is only at the end of the show that the unmasking is celebrated to a German version of “My way” (as popularized by Frank Sinatra). Questions about identity are thus never raised. For the audience, both figures clearly identify themselves as (gay) men that dress up as stereotypical pictures of women for artistic purposes. Because their portrayals are always stylized or ironized in respect to a discernible model, there is no room for speculation whether the identities of role and actor do possibly coincide. The artistic illusion is formulated as “being able to play a woman perfectly, although being a “real” man”.

As mentioned before, those practices of illusion were questioned with the emancipation of gay rights in 1960's America and its subculture:

Divine
Divine, alias Harris Glenn Milstead, is strongly connected to the movies of gay underground filmmaker John Waters. The two classmates started filmmaking in the late 1960’s in their hometown Baltimore, Maryland. Waters invented the recurring topics of trash and filth that can be described as exposing the maximum of bad taste, subversion and abjection.4 After his feature film debut Mondo Trasho in 1969, his following work Pink Flamingos (1972) should emerge to a cult hit among the so-called midnight movies.5 In the movie, Milstead plays the role of “Babs Johnson”, described as an alter ego or pseudonym of his (although created by John Waters and Van Smith) character Divine.6 Johnson’s business consists of being “the filthiest person alive” - a title that is being rivaled by a couple of equally criminal individuals running a black market baby ring. Besides the absurd plot, the surroundings and appearance of the main character give an impression of how queerness is presented here. The protagonist’s obese mother lives in a playyard, she is addicted to raw eggs and in love with the egg man. Divine’s children practice erotic zoophilia and incest. At a notorious birthday scene, the social environment of the family comes together. Presents consist of a pig’s head, a pizza box containing vomit and different show acts, like a man playing tricks with his wide-opened anus.7 If we further look at “Babs Johnson” in her iconic outfit8 we see an oversized, surreal looking figure. Glenn Milstead’s bulky body is covered with a one-piece red evening gown that finishes with a sweeping ending of tulle. His face is arranged with extremely exaggerated eyebrows that nearly touch the hairline of his orange, teased wig. In most of these images, Divine is also portrayed holding a gun and pointing it towards the viewer’s direction.

An interpretation of this character in context of the term drag must raise the question to what extent the illusion of a woman is implemented here. Firstly, at the physical level, Milstead seems to convert himself to a female semblance. Besides his clothes, he wears fake breasts and has a completely shaved face and epilated arms, which support his already pronounced “women’s curves” - also, his moves appear markedly feminine. Then, on the other side, there is his rough, undeniable male voice and his sheer body dimensions. However, Divine’s most subversive approach appears in regard of the conception, previously paraphrased as “ideal of female behavior”. Concepts of “elegance” or “being ladylike” seem to be mostly perverted. The figure is an embodiment of the anti-normative - not only gender-wise, but also with its affection for everything that is obscene and criminal. It is not a man living out his feminine desires in search for the gentle classiness of cabaret, but a monstrous, antisocial creature. Divine’s transvestism merely appears to be a logical addition to the whole package of provocation. Though, it is to be pointed out that the character never questions its existence as a woman. A naturalness that, again, only adds to controversy.
At the end of *Pink Flamingos*, after the actual movie, the director presents us an outtake from the shooting. It is *Divine* that is introduced with being "not only the filthiest person in the world, but also the filthiest actress in the world". Following that, there is an uncut scene of a dog defecating on the pavement and the 'actress' eating the product. By this point, along with the fact of the character being played by a man, it is also denied that there is acting involved at all. The monster of *Divine* is claimed as reality - a real threat to children, public policy, morals and even nature. A women so ugly and dangerous that it could only be an man?

"Living art" and "Ugly girl" (Part 2)

If we look again at Steven Cohen as *Ugly girl*, we recognize the obvious ‘imperfection’ of the disguise, not only with regard to his looks. The 'female ideal' is also disturbed by an exhibition of nastiness. In the way *Divine* demonstrates her rude attitude through manners that are typically associated with masculinity - like tackiness, belching and flatulating - the *Ugly girl* gives the image of a hyper-stereotyped woman out of control. Not only is 'blood' coming out of Cohen's anus, it is also gushing out of his mouth. As if the image of uncontrolled menstruation through the rectum is not enough and has to seek a way through all body exits. Finally, the artist paints a picture with his bloodstained anus inside an empty frame.

"Living art" and "Dog"

The other characters in *Living art* seem to share the same outfit although accompanied by other attributes. As *Faggot*, Cohen can be seen with a pyrotechnic article in his anus. As *Jew* he is wearing a gas mask. As *Dog*, Cohen varies his appearance: He is now clothed with a sort of ballet dress and a white tutu. The artist's head is covered by a white mask and a sweeping yellowish headdress. His mouth is stuffed by a ball gag, there are kneepads around his legs and black sneakers on his feet. Additionally to that, there is an inflatable dildo in his anus and his penis is trussed but exposed. The piece was performed at a public dog show, with the artist stating that he wanted to show what a "talented and disciplined mongrel" he was. In the context of *drag*, now we have to face a creature whose sexual characteristics are visible and seem to be definitive, though are mixed up by the clothing. Cohen himself has summed up this concept as *conceptual drag*. Contrary to the previous examples, a trans-sexual dimension is not only matter of speculation in regards of an anti-normative semblance. The blatancy of a hybrid creature supports the concept of a "mongrel" which Cohen finds in context of animal competitions. However, except for this criticism on racial purity and conventional concepts of gender there is also a possible hint to the freak show character of *drag queens* and other cross-dressing people. In the performance, Cohen musically barks, somersaults and pirouettes. Although the definition of a *drag queen* is closely connected to a performative aspect, public perception often ignores the individual motives and high diversity behind the phenomenon. And even though tolerance in Western society is being suggested in the delimited space of media and art, it is questionable to what extent those kinds of lifestyle find the same acceptance offstage.

"Girlfriend"

In his 1999 series, *Girlfriend*, we can see Cohen again questioning role models. His appearance resembles elements from his former projects. Traceable are, for example, the nylons from *Ugly girl* or the white tutu from *Dog*. This time, the artist's face is arranged even more heavily. His entire head is grounded in a covering pale shade interrupted by colorful ornaments. Exuberant blue lipstick, jewelry on his nose and exaggerated drawing around the eyes picture the image. In different portrait photographs, the character poses for the camera. His look points to the recipient with an attitude of what could be called "lack of femininity" or "girlish shyness" in *Selfish portrait*. The hand gesture signalizes an intimate whispering or the blowing of a kiss - but below the masquerade the viewer can see Cohen's thick chest hair. A similar picture emerges with another image from 1999, titled *Crawling* on the artist's website. Here, we can see him lying in the image plane, again coquettish with a "limp wrist". It seems as if heteronormative beliefs are being directly confronted. While, for example, *Mary and Gordy* also play with being flirty, they constantly reassure the audience by being ironic and classy as well. Cohen's extremely exaggerated style mixes with the assumption of self-evidently acting like an attractive woman. What can be seen in the photograph does not make clear the intention of the character - instead, it offensively tries to confuse the recipient.

**Crawling at miniland**

That a *drag queen*, whose intentions are not clear, is often seen as something frightening, is what the artist demonstrates boldly in the same year. *Girlfriend* is crawling around a street corner, the look aggressively headed towards a building. Because the enactment takes places in a miniature city, the scales seem to be surreally offset. Godzilla-like, the monstrous creature seems to threaten the existence of the ‘normal’ world. Cohen again underlines the anti-normative position of cross-dressing people by overdrawing it - a persiflage towards fears and stereotypes.

1 pp.14-17  
Steven Cohen's body in drag

The following writings try to set Steven Cohen's works in context with examples and conceptions of performance art and drag. Preceding is a demarcation of Body Art that understands the difference to performance art in a more physical and egocentric way. As Amelia Jones states, "performance art has typically been defined as motivated by a 'redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life, as a vehicle for social change and as a radical merging of life and art'. It was already this political and socio-cultural, anti-normative perspective on drag that the previous chapters were focusing on and which is very prominent in the art of Cohen. Nevertheless, his use of physical attributes, apart from make-up and dresses, is another aspect that catches the eye immediately when looking at him performing. It is not the intention to look at his work in context of a de-politicized Body Art (a concept that is questioned anyway by the example of Urs Lüthi), but to look at it in context of the modifications and questionings of the body itself not its 'decoration'.

Gender issues in performance art

Apart from drag queens, performance art has brought its own, maybe even more radical way of questioning gender issues. If you regard Jackson Pollock as the first modern performance artist - a narcissistic figure that overcomes the easel painting - one is confronted with the strong heteronormativity and masculinity of his character. The initial emancipation from the canvas and further from an everlasting product must be considered with the American role model of a 'strong man': A lone wolf, a drinking, chauvinistic macho worker-artist. Therefore, it is no surprise that in the following decades this sexist picture should be even more radically turned upside down. The question of gender is mostly also a question concerning the body it contains. Consequently, questioning the body often means questioning gender identity.

Body Art

In the early 1960's, artists like Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Caroline Schneemann or Yoko Ono insisted on the body as the main locus of ideas about art. It was also this time frame when the terms Body Art or Body Works came up in theoretical discourse. The underlying thing was a wish to differentiate it from conception of performance art that was at once broader (in that it reached back to dada and encompassed any kind of theatricalized production on the part of a visual artist) and narrower (in that it implied that a performance must actually take place in front of an audience, most often in an explicitly theatrical, proscenium-based setting). However, the approaches to the body were as diversely as the multinationality of the phenomenon. For example, in Austria, artists like Hermann Nitsch and Gunter Brus regarded the body as a depersonalized tool of flesh that had to be used to stage orgiastic feasts. Concerning gender, some artists saw Body Art as a possibility to express physical transformation. In 1974, the show Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie took place in Luzern, Switzerland. The exhibition consisted of photographs, alongside contributions of contemporary music ("Transformer" is also the title of an album by Lou Reed that was published in the same year).
Urs Luthi's work *I'll be your mirror* (1972) was part of "Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie". The title of the photography is also the title of a Velvet Underground song with the chorus line being "I'll be your mirror, reflect what you are." In Luthi's picture, we see a portrait of the artist himself wearing a glistening pullover and long hair. Although the image immediately mediates an impression of travesty, the recipient is being compelled to ask himself why. The deliberate assimilations to the female gender are marginal, there is no exaggeration or performative aspect, no noticeable make-up or 'campy' wig involved.

Eventually, it is the human body itself and its gender-specific belonging that is being questioned. But Luthi does not only lay this claim to his own person. With his look addressing the viewer and the title speaking directly to the person standing before it, everybody's sexual identity is requested to be reflected.9,10

**Feminism**

Although, as mentioned before, female artists like Carolee Schneemann or Yoko Ono already enacted their body confidently in the early 1960's, feminism as a theoretical and practical movement in art is dated to the early 1970's. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard explain the differentiation like this:

> "Women artists of the feminist generation differed from the women artists of the fifties and sixties most of all in the deliberate grounding of their art in their socialized experience as women and - the corollary of that position - in their acceptance of women's experience as different from men's but equally valid." 11

Another subject of the "uniquely American" agenda was to redefine the nature of female identity itself by questioning "the social construction of gender".12,13 If we look at an example of this time, it becomes clearer what is meant by these brief sketches of the movement:

**Carolee Schneemann's "Interior scroll"**

Schneemann's *Interior scroll* was performed in 1975, in East Hampton, NY and at the Telluri de Film Festival, Colorado.14 The piece basically consisted of her standing on a table, while "slowly drawing a narrow scroll of paper from her vagina, reading aloud from it".15 When we look at photographs of the event we can see Schneemann's bodily presence holding the paper in her hand as if it was an umbilical cord attached to her inside. The artist herself stated that she wanted to associate the numerous cultural images and conceptions of femininity and the vagina.16 By highlighting the (from a male, heteronormative point of view) unavoidable eroticism of her female body, but at the same time acting controversially, Schneemann questioned role models ascribed to her naked physical existence.

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2 Ibid. pp. 77-79.
3 Ibid. p. 81.
7 Ibid.
8 Early form of Music Video to The Velvet Underground - I'll be your Mirror on YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKzMEG6MUo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKzMEG6MUo)
12 Ibid. p. 22.
Cohen and the body. Performances

The following selection of performances by Steven Cohen was made with a focus on physicalness. It should be the matter of analysis to what extent he displays the shape, modifications, movements and presence of his body. The artist's orientation towards this subject intensified in 1996, when he suffered from glandular fever. By feeling intense pain and observing the processes of his ill body, he became aware of the capabilities of his substantial existence:

"I'd seen my skin go yellow and my piss go black, and I felt the needles in the back of my hands all night. I knew my body was a powerful medium - I couldn't wait to get well and work with it." Steven Cohen

"Chandelier"

For Chandelier (2001-2002), Steven Cohen converted an iron chandelier into a wearable piece. On pictures, we can see him having the object around his body at the height of his pelvis like a tutu. Except of the vest, made to carry the item, the artist is close to naked. Thin, white lace tights cover his legs close to transparently, his bald head is made up expressively and his genitals are coated with some skin-colored fabric. Cohen chose a squatter camp under a highway near his studio in Johannesburg as location for his performance. The unpaved ground in the informal settlements was filled with potholes and mud. Despite, or maybe because of that, the artist wore outstandingly high platform shoes with spikes. Already difficult to walk with in "perfect" surroundings, like catwalks or dance floors, the affair in unsurfaced terrain is almost impossible. Cohen puts his body to the test, stumbling across the area. In constant danger of falling over, twisting his ankles and destroying his costume, he looks physically disabled.

Additionally, the exposing of himself to the public, without any distance, is severed through the fact of being defenseless. One could see a paradox in this scenery: The artist's agenda of provocation comes with images of vulnerability. As if it was the price that he has to pay for his actions, suffering seems to be the consequence out of the social deficits he has to point to. But could it be called 'martyr drag' then? Are Cohen's performances always also a hint to the power that art demands and to the dangers that being in drag brings with it? The historic perspective on the performances of Leigh Bowery shall also give another perspective on these questions.

Excursus: Leigh Bowery

Leigh Bowery's era is set in the mid 1980's until his death in 1994 and located mostly in London, where he had moved to in 1980. Originally from Australia, he studied fashion design in Melbourne - an influence that is unambiguous in his work. The following writings concentrate on two examples of his œuvre, that are chosen because of their obvious correlation with the topics body and drag. The first one is a photography from his last session with Fergus Greer in June 1994. It is called Look 38 which leads us to Bowery's concept of creating disguises and making them be photographed in a fashion context. The elements in the picture are nothing but the artist's body and the clothes he wears. This is emphasized by an undefined, blank background. Bowery can be seen in an all-over black glossy leather or latex outfit that does not only cover his full torso, but also his head, hands and legs to a certain extent. Apart from a few visible transitions, like the shoe on his right leg or the belt around his waist, he appears to be a monochrome surface. However, it is the spotlights in the studio that highlight his three-dimensional forms by reflecting the slick material. Because of its impression of elasticity, the costume seems to fit skin-tightly, consequently marking the person's body shape. But what kind of creature is the recipient being presented here? One aspect is the asymmetry of the legs. While the right one seems to be of 'normal' human nature, with feet and shoes, the left one is dysmorphic. Secondly, the gender of the human being under the fabric is unclear. The long hair, the enormous breasts, the prominent pelvis and the posing in female elegance point to a woman. Nevertheless, its face and genitals are coated and the huge appearance (1.90 m without high-heels) is untypical. What Bowery does with his approach to drag is extending it to a question of not only the appearance or decoration of the body, but to one questioning its original design with an illusion of what could be called a "fundamental and trans- anthropomorphic androgyny". William Lieberman, former curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, gave the following statement:

"What was astoundig was that his performance was never drag - it was never a costume. He did not attempt to imitate or to embody someone else. He simply created a new being."
But that drag is not only a matter of disguise and not only a matter of imitation or impersonation, that it rather goes far beyond in the numerous variations from cultural and art history, has already been shown before. Perhaps Cohen's and Bowery's approaches to the phenomenon in the limelight of their physical work could be labelled physical, anthropomorphic or posthuman drag. Because it not only questions the human body in terms of its gender, but adds a dimension of going beyond the normative human shape itself to an extent where it may seem even extraterrestrial or animal-like - the human body is degraded to a sheer quotation of its phenotypical form.

The second work to be discussed here is a video of a performance from 1992, Mrs. Peanut visits New York, directed by Charles Atlas. We can see Bowery again in an overall costume covering every part of his body. His face is noseless and distorted grimace-like, to the semblance of a rubber doll. Again, he pictures the image of a physically contorted female creature, now confirmed by the title Mrs. Peanut. In contrary to the Looks, the setting is now shifted away from the core of the studio to the unprotected outdoors of the metropolitan city. People stand still, point their fingers at him or move out of his way in confusion. Like Steven Cohen, Bowery is vulnerable in his exotic costume. Because of the disparate and broadly coated legs, it seems hard for him to walk at all having to move his hip joint excessively. Elisabeth Bronfen sees Bowery’s body in context with the ‘diva’ who “incarnates not only glamour but also a certain pain, for her real body with its vulnerability is always involved in her seductive game”. Regarding the artist’s extreme costumes and the putting of his body to the test, Bronfen writes:

“His own corporeal excess was intended to stimulate the affects of his viewers in order to encourage them as well to explore their own limits of uninhibitedness”.

Those two quotes also seem to be very appropriate for the performances of Steven Cohen. Lastly, another performance of him shall be analyzed in respect of the conclusions that emerged from the investigations of the art of Leigh Bowery.

"Voting"

In 1999, Steven Cohen decided to do a performance in the context of the general election in South Africa. In terms of his costume, it may be one of his most extreme ones. Apart from the outfit, that is (with his feather wig, bodice and made-up head) similar to the previously discussed ones, Cohen's shoes tend to be the matter of attention. Onto black “fetish shoes”, the “artist grafted meter-long gemsbok horns”, that made them impossible to walk with. Consequently, he literally had to crawl on the floor, only protected by knee pads. Maybe even more than in Chandelier, Steven Cohen exposes his body to the possible arbitrariness of his fellows. Not being able to walk at all provokes a position of obsequiousness by having to be down on the foot level of other people and one of helplessness by needing aid for the most basic tasks (such as voting). Generally, the action of the performance consists of nothing but queuing in line in order to make use of a civil right. But it is also the implicitness of the occasion that deduces controversies: One could ask why this person has to impair his abilities in so far as he cannot handle everyday tasks anymore. Is he mentally disordered? Is it calculated provocation or his inner need to do this? If it is his inner need and it paraphrases as ‘homosexuality’ or ‘transsexuality’, is it a disease or even dangerous? Lastly, Cohen shows that he is a legal part of society regardless of these discussions. His permission to vote leaves no doubt about his status as a mature citizen. In the same way Bronfen opines about Leigh Bowery that he “explores the own limits of uninhibitedness” of his viewers, Cohen confronts the people at the election office. And in the same way, Bronfen describes the diva’s diversity of glamour and pain, he fascinates and provokes questions about the price he has to pay for his performance and consequently why he pays this price. For it is not the simple conception of the performance that animates us to reflect, but the act of doing it in such a devoted way.


5 Ibid. p. 76.

6 Information about Steven Cohen http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/cohen/index2010.htm