

ELEMENTS OF VOGUE A CASE STUDY IN RADICAL PERFORMANCE



Bodies are both agents and products of history. Bodies are history made flesh, as much as they are primary tools for interpreting the past, present and future. History is a choreographic sequence of gestures that make us legible to others. Each gesture is a link in a chain that binds us to gender, race and social class. Gestures solidify into identities. They speak to identities that are naturalised through the systematic repetition of identical gestures. And yet a pose is more than that. Posing implies an acute awareness of how a body makes history. To strike a pose is to pose a threat, as Dick Hebdige wrote in relation to the meaning of style in youth subcultures. That is why we need to trace the history of dissident gestures, and to reconstruct the genealogy of those poses that are bold enough to confront the norm. This modality of performance can be described as radical, as it opens up space to imagine other possible bodies and futures. Radical performance invokes subjectivities for which there is still no name and social choreographies that are yet to come.

This notion of radical performance is what defines voguing, a popular culture that unfolds around transgender pageants and spectacular dance battles between queens of Black and Latino descent. Vogue is a defiantly queer dance form whose roots go deep into the history of the Black LGTB community. It takes its inspiration from fashion magazine poses, appropriating the elitist imaginary of haute couture, as well as adopting the vocabulary of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Asian martial arts, and Afrofuturism. This transgender, multicultural hallucination turns the aesthetics of voguing into an emblem for an alternative, fiercely underground scene. We are referring to the so-called ballroom scene. A community that flourished in 1980s New York as a response to the AIDS crisis, although its history can be traced back to a century of fragile coalitions between minority subjects which dominant culture has again and again consigned to the margins, incarcerated, pathologised and punished throughout the modern period. In the stylised poses of voguing, the dancer's hands do much

more than simply draw figures in the air. These poses transcribe in the flesh a history of resilience and cultural struggles that go all the way back to the 1920s and the first massive drag balls held during the Harlem Renaissance. Today ballroom culture, with its elaborate rules, aesthetics and forms of social organisation, still provides a platform to articulate queer energies and dissident bodies in what constitutes a case study of radical performance.

This exhibition explores ways in which minorities use their bodies to produce dissenting forms of beauty, subjectivity and desire. These minoritarian poetics and politics are perceived as a threat to the normative world, yet at the same time coveted by mainstream culture (one only needs to think of the exploitation of voguing by artists like Madonna). Naturally, it would be impossible to offer a fixed, static portrait of such a complex and changing world as the ballroom scene. Instead, this exhibition delves into a political history of the body in order to map out the debates, conflicts and culture wars that intersect in the birth of voguing, while looking for its echoes and resonances in the history of performance and popular culture in the African diaspora. Under this lens, voguing reveals itself as a case study to understand the emergence of radical performance and its potential to articulate new social imaginaries.

The exhibition begins on the second floor with a group of works, documents and actions in the public space that respond to a historical need to exorcise physical and social death by inventing new forms of collective mourning and militancy. Death is omnipresent in ballroom culture. Suffice it to recall the disproportionate impact of the AIDS epidemics on Black communities and racialised population. But also institutional racism, segregation and mass imprisonment constitute historical forms of social death. In a video taken from Twitter, voguers are shown dancing in the streets of Soho in London during a vigil for the victims of the massacre in Orlando. In another image, candy and chalk silhouettes on the pavement in Washington D.C. recall the killing of the African-American teenager Trayvon Martin. We are witnessing the creation of new rituals to keep alive the legacy of those who have left us too soon.

History is embodied in these practices. Here the body is revealed to be the site of trauma, but also a site of empowerment. The works of Emory Douglas and Ernest C. Withers are testament to the fact that Black culture has responded to brutality with new forms of solidarity and political affiliation, which are capable of weaving together the worlds of the living and dead. Dating back to the early 20th Century, James Van Der Zee's funeral photographs are proof of the centrality of death in the aesthetic history of Harlem. Closing this section,

an immersive video by Arthur Jafa —featuring a soundtrack by Kanye West— explores different forms of dance, movement, and social mobilisation, which do not only express the convulsions of an individual or collective body, but also serve as a medium to invoke ancestors and to embody the legacy of their struggles for emancipation.

The next room is dedicated to the emergence of radical subjectivities that burst into history. This genealogy begins with the first massive drag balls held during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s, and looks for echoes in the legendary House of LaBeija founded in the 1970s, but without forgetting the transgender activism of street queens like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson —the main instigators of the Stonewall riots, although erased from history in the neoliberal rewriting of the gay movement—. Finally, this leads us to the actions of drag performer Joan Jett Blakk, African-African candidate for the presidency of the USA, whose campaign as spokesperson for the Queer Nation party has been recreated in a museum for the first time.

In the same space, the exhibition presents a series of landmarks in African-American performance, featuring seminal works by artists such as Lorraine O'Grady, Pope.L and Adrian Piper. These are pioneering works that address issues of racial and gender identity, not as the spontaneous expression of a given interiority, but rather as a contested ground—that is to say, as the staging of a political conflict. This room also presents for the very first time a significant sample of the photographic archives of Bruce W. Talamon and Dawoud Bey, whose pictures make it possible to reconstruct the performativity that permeates the earliest works produced by the slippery artist David Hammons, including his ephemeral installations made with Black hair.

At the end of the second floor, we find two radical responses to the challenges posed by the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. In *Tongues Untied*, a film originally produced for US public television —where it was censored— Marlon T. Riggs makes the most of video, the emerging remix culture and audiovisual montage to dismantle the fiction of an essential Black identity, through unfolding a poetic, choral and fragmentary narrative that became a landmark in the representation of diasporic masculinities. Riggs argued that loving and fighting were reciprocal processes. The film includes many pioneering figures no longer with us like the poet Essex Hemphill or the legendary Willi Ninja, who is shown dancing on the piers in what counts as one of the very first documents of voguing.

In dialogue with this film, the exhibition presents the *Ektachrome Archives* by Lyle Ashton Harris, an ambitious installation of his personal archive of slides that spans over two decades of activism and political intimacy during the AIDS crisis. Punctuated by an eerie remix of disco star Grace Jones, this multi-screen installation proves that the realm of the intimate always exceeds the private, inasmuch as a history shared with other bodies. It thus embraces the possibility of imagining new political coalitions that take place in various realms such as sex, affect, subculture, dance and style.

In the elevators to the first floor, a mix by Terre Thaemlitz invokes the queer energies that gave rise to house and electronic music at large. The lower floor introduces another

group of works that could be read as notes for a politics of style. These works are mostly produced by a younger generation, with the inclusion of artists born in the seventies and eighties. The first part presents photographs by Gerard H. Gaskin, who has documented ballroom culture from within, taking part in hundreds of balls in different cities over a period of more than twenty years. Also on view are works by Ellen Gallagher, Willie Cole and Rashaad Newsome, artists who inhabit a grammar of excess, exuberance, camp and glamour. Their objects of fascination inevitably lend themselves to twisted, deviant, and anti-normative —in short, subcultural— readings. In other words, these works appropriate the ornamentation of dominant culture in order to resignify it in unpredictable ways.

In addition, this floor also brings together artists who strive to overcome the burden of what James Baldwin called the “obligation of representation”. The works by Kalup Linzy, Paul Maheke, Charles Atlas and Wu Tsang explore the intersections of gender, race and social class, but also bring into play different techniques of appropriation, ventriloquism and artifice. The relations between these works establish a labyrinthine journey through a myriad of copies and plagiarisms, versions and variations, footnotes and exercises in profanation. A journey that is not linear, but instead draws an eccentric —or queer, in the original sense of the word— path that weaves together distant spaces and times. Finally, the atrium of the museum features a monumental installation conceived specifically for this space by Rashaad Newsome. This installation serves as the stage for an events programme that includes live performances, DJ sets and two voguing balls.

Sabel Gavaldón / Manuel Segade

Image: Gerard H. Gaskin,
*Legendary Stewart, State Ball
Harlem, N.Y., 1998*
Courtesy of the artist

Curators Sabel Gavaldón and
Manuel Segade

Exhibition tours: Wednesdays and
Saturdays: 18:30
Sundays thematic visits with
Javier Vaquero 18:30

Alongside the exhibition, there
will be an events programme that
includes voguing performances,
workshops, oral history and
educational activities

Two books will be published: a
theory reader featuring a selection
of texts on the Black political body
in the United States throughout
the 20th Century and another
publication around the exhibition

With the collaboration:



CA2M 

**Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo
Comunidad de Madrid**

Av. Constitución 23
28931 Móstoles, Madrid
Tel. 912 760 221
www.ca2m.org
ca2m@madrid.org

Tuesday to Sunday
11:00 — 21:00

Admission free to the centre and
to all activities

Local Train: C5 Mostoles
(23 min from Embajadores)
Metro: L12 Pradillo

Wi-Fi available in art centre

Legal deposit M-22963-2017