Making the Man: ‘Suiting’ Masculinity in Performance Art

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Alicia Cornwell’s paper originated as a research assignment on performance art for ART 4550: Theories of Contemporary Art during the fall of 2004. In May of 2005, Cornwell graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art History and a double minor in History and French. At UNT, she was very involved in on-campus organizations, including the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (she was the historian and then copresident). During both 2003 and 2004, she was head producer of *The Vagina Monologues* at UNT; she raised $25,000 for charities dedicated to ending violence against women. Cornwell is pursuing a career as a museum curator of contemporary art. This fall, she will enter Tufts University, which awarded a fellowship to her for its Master of Arts program in Art History and Museum Studies.
Abstract:

This essay examines the significance of clothing, specifically, the “men’s suit,”¹ in select examples of contemporary American performance art. Drawing on sociology and art history, it considers the suit as a form of communication, and it suggests that performance artists Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, and Vanessa Beecroft have used the “men’s suit” to explore and communicate something about masculinity as a socially and culturally constructed hegemony.

¹ “Men’s suit” is the garment industry’s technical term for suits designed to be worn by men.
In this essay, I will identify and interpret examples of performance art in which artists have used the “men’s suit” to expose and critique the construction of masculine identity. My focus will be on examples of performance occurring in the American art world since the 1970s.

First, I need to explain what gender is, and what it means to state that a gender is socially and culturally constructed. Sociological literature tells us that rather than being a trait inherent in our biological sex, gender is made up, or constructed, of what Brod (1995) calls “social relations practiced in social interactions” (p. 16). Throughout our lives, we learn to exhibit gender, to practice it socially, in relationships formed and occurring with other people. We learn and adopt characteristics and mannerisms that our society interprets and accepts as singularly masculine or feminine.

I will apply this concept to certain examples of contemporary performance art. First, I need to point out that gender itself has been understood as performative because it requires the adoption of visible codes, such as clothing, as a means to construct or create, as well as communicate and signify identity. In fact, the term “gender role” implies that gender is an identity we perform by communicating a set of characteristics consisting of personality traits, material qualities, and behaviors that society interprets as masculine or feminine (Pleck, 1981).

Moreover, gender roles are permutable. Over time, our expectations about the behaviors associated with gender roles change.

I will focus on masculinity in particular, and an understanding of the permutability of gender and its performative aspects will help me outline a “crisis in masculinity” that results from demands that hegemonic masculinity makes on men in everyday life. The concept of “masculinity” that is familiar to us today actually developed in the early twentieth century amid the increasing technology in work and the entry of women into the workforce. Previously, men
had secured a masculine identity through association with their trade. However, the mechanization of work and the rise of the bureaucracy meant that a faceless organization man in addition to women workers was supplanting the laborer and entrepreneur. The changes jeopardized long-established ideas about what and who is “manly” at work. At the same time, as more women began to move into the workforce, occupying traditionally male jobs such as office clerks, the social position of men as breadwinners was also threatened. As a result of the changes, the ways that men established and maintained their masculinity was rendered vulnerable, and a crisis in masculinity followed that scholars suggest continues to this day (Brod, 1995).

The “crisis in masculinity” has helped generate a specific type of masculine identity that requires men to conform to limited, narrowly defined roles, even though they live under differing conditions of class, race, and sexuality (Kimmel, 1996). For example, we may expect men to exhibit emotional reserve yet also demonstrate strong, heroic qualities. Any variation is seen as a deviation from the “proper” gender role, and the deviant traits are devalued by society (Brod, 1995). Brod argues that during the twentieth century, male anxieties concerning masculinity have centered on the body. Anxiety results from the reduced importance of the male body as a “site of productivity” and its transformation to a “site of consumption” (p. 19); traditionally, consumption was considered an activity primarily for women. Since midcentury, capitalist tendencies to create new, expanding markets have led to an increasing emphasis on the male as consumer and on the male body as a site of consumption. Historians and sociologists recognize the situation; some have approached it in terms of fashions used to clothe the male body, analyzing what fashions reveal or repress about male anxieties.
Recent sociological literature also helps to explain fashion as a primary means of communicating gender identity. What we wear on our bodies visually expresses our sexuality and gender identification (Crane, 2000). Therefore, we can perceive fashion as contributing to the ways we perform our gender identities. Interestingly, fashion is a viable tool for contemporary performance artists, many of whom tend to treat the body as an object and so regard the body as the primary material of their work.

My specific interest in fashion is the “men’s suit.” The suit communicates very particular messages about masculine gender identity and its relationship to the male body. For example, the boxy shape regularizes the natural curves and contours of the male body, disguising its explicit form and the individuality of its wearer. In addition, Hollander argues that the suit functions to unify the male body’s “visibly separate parts” (1994, pp. 112–113), serving to communicate masculinity as a visually singular, cohesive entity. Furthermore, because the modern suit as we know it has evolved from suits of armor and, later, military uniforms, the ensemble continues to convey institutional power; today, it functions as a corporate uniform of male authority. Therefore, in its regularized form, the suit unifies the body as masculine authority and power while suppressing individuality. Performance artists Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, and Vanessa Beecroft all use the suit to expose how dominant ideas concerning masculinity determine how men are expected to live and behave.

In his 1971 performance piece called I Became a Secret Hippy, Burden removed his jeans and t-shirt and lay on the floor on his back. A friend of the artist hammered a star-shaped biker’s stud into his sternum. Burden then sat in a chair while his head was shaved. Afterwards, he proceeded to dress in an FBI uniform consisting of a black suit and tie. The suit as uniform
conveyed institutional power and authority. In addition, it hid an element of rebellion, the biker’s stud, which remained lodged in the artist’s body.

The performance reveals how the suit can aid in constructing and performing masculine power and identity while obscuring personality, individuality, and psychological realities. Furthermore, it demonstrates how different notions of masculinity—both a machismo sensibility and one of sanctioned power and authority—can coexist and be donned at will, although sometimes with serious consequences, including bodily pain. Burden seems to be presenting masculinity itself as variable and permutable, altered simply by changing, or layering, clothing (Jones, 1995). Additionally, I Became a Secret Hippy reveals the accumulation of masculine identities through psychological layering. In this way, one masculine identity is maintained outwardly while the other is repressed visually, at least for the audience. One might assume that for Burden, repressing the hippy self was painful because it involved stifling any outward expression of pain resulting from the stud being hammered into his sternum.

The two identities that Burden exhibits, the machismo rebel and the authoritative agent of the government, represent two examples of the hegemonic masculine gender identity to which men are required to conform by our society’s limited definitions of masculinity. The machismo sensibility represented by the star-shaped stud lodged in Burden’s body is a raw example of danger, toughness, and bravado. The silent and expressionless authority of the FBI agent, communicated by the suit treated as an institutional, government-sanctioned uniform, represents a masculinity that requires men to suppress their individuality and emotions. Both notions of masculinity issue as constructions devoid of personal expression yet suffused with power.

Similarly, according to Phillips (2000), the performance artist Paul McCarthy has consistently explored the tension between the “revealed and the hidden” (pp. 2–3). This is
evident in the artist’s frequent use of masks to exaggerate his skull while disguising his face (Burnham, 1985). In McCarthy’s work, clothing functions in the same way as masks, to exaggerate his characters’ attributes while disguising his own identity and self. For his 1978 performance *My Doctor*, McCarthy donned a “men’s suit” and mask while he “operated” on a mannequin, hammering maniacally and slathering both himself and his “patient” with ketchup, meant to evoke blood, and other substances. His loutish and awkward behavior undermined any composure and control underwriting the power associated with the “men’s suit.” Likewise, in the performance called *Death Ship* in 1981, McCarthy’s ungainly character, the “Sea Captain,” wears a naval uniform, which is related to the suit.

In her performances, Vanessa Beecroft has also explored contributions that the suit and the uniform make to constructing masculine identity. During 1999, Beecroft used a group of male U.S. Marines in her performance piece *VB39 U.S. Navy Seals*. In a San Diego gallery, the soldiers, wearing white uniforms, alternately stood at attention in formation and then at ease. Their homogenized and standardized presence was not unique to this piece; Beecroft has frequently achieved the same effect using nude or partially clothed women. However, the use of the naval uniform sets *VB39* apart from her other performances. St-Gelais (2003) argues that in *VB39*, Beecroft “displays the body of order, of rules, that a society or community makes normative in order to survive” (p. 64). The order and rules of both the Navy and the masculine identity that Beecroft examines in this piece coalesce in the uniforms the soldiers wear and the behavior they display while wearing them. According to Joseph (1986), uniforms “enforce organizational codes” (pp. 65–66) while also exerting control over their members. The soldiers’ uniforms communicate to the viewer not only the male-dominated institution of the Navy, which relies on the subservience and the suppression of identity of its members to a unified function,
but also an image of traditional masculinity, which requires the same suppression of self to exist within its narrowly defined boundaries.

Using the suit and similar examples of masculine uniforms that disguise the male body and individual self, Burden, McCarthy, and Beecroft explore how clothing communicates gender. Their performances examine the suit’s role in contributing to a homogenized masculine gender identity, and the narrowly defined parameters to which men are required to limit themselves, despite living under differing conditions of class, race, and sexuality. The performance artists explore the ability of the suit to construct and communicate gender. As Hollander (1994) said, “clothes make not the man, but the image of man” (p. 27).
References


