

GABRIELLA BIRARDI MAZZONE, GIOELE PERESSINI

VOGUING: EXAMPLES OF PERFORMANCE THROUGH ART, GENDER AND IDENTITY

RAPHAËL BRANCHESI (TRANSLATED BY)

This paper is the result of a thirty hour seminar on Performance Studies, taught by Dr. Carmela Cutugno at the University of Bologna, as part of a Master course in Theories and Cultures of Representation held by Professor Marco De Marinis. The idea for the chosen topic, as well as part of the readings were suggested during the seminar by Dr. Cutugno, who assisted us for the entire process of thinking and writing about this issues. The seminar was conceived and realized as a performance studies analysis workshop and the final paper was presented, performed and danced as the result of the course.

This essay is a synopsis of that work, focused on Voguing, firstly as artistic and cultural performance, and then upon the differences between the U.S.A. context and the Italian context, which were both supported by the dichotomy between artistic performance and “gender performativity”. The first part of this essay starts from this point to analyze the process of transformation, and differentiation of the voguing culture, paying particular attention to the Italian performative scene. In the second part a further analysis is carried out, taking into account all the topics connected to the ideas of identity and gender.

«Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body,
and tell stories»⁸³

R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*

There was no better way to begin this paper, than to use this quote as an introduction to the analysis presented in the following pages, concerning the phenomenon of voguing and its penetration and reception in Italy. If it is true that voguing played a great role in the assertion process minorities in American metropolis underwent during the Sixties, it is also important to underline that it then changed and spread losing its original traits and becoming – in a chiastic way – more of an artistic expression, than a cultural one.

Voguing is a dance that takes into account the subjectivity of the individual as well as the culture of the minority it represents. As a matter of fact, it originated at the end of the Sixties in a period whose beginning had been marked by the well-known events of the Stonewall riots⁸⁴, which involved the LGBT⁸⁵ community, always struggling and fighting for its rights. In particular, voguing was a way of expression

⁸³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2002, 22.

⁸⁴ The Stonewall Riots are a series of violent clashes between homosexual people and police that took place in the early morning of the 28th of June in 1969 at Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in the Greenwich Village, New York City. That day has been considered the founding moment of the Gay Rights Movement.

⁸⁵ LGBT is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

used by the Afro-American and Latin-American homosexual communities of New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Washington, Miami, Detroit and Chicago.

These «minorities within minorities within minorities»⁸⁶ had to face a potential and complete exclusion from society, hence the strain to emerge and escape from the threat of oblivion, which they did by mimicking and overturning the *Uptown* standards of beauty, primarily those promoted by the popular magazine «Vogue» – whose title inspired the name of the movement – that became in those years the «Bible of fashion»⁸⁷. Intended as the manifesto of the high society of New York, as of December 1972 «Vogue» became a monthly, and was praised by every fashion victim in America. At the same time, it also became more accessible to a wider public, giving the lower classes a hope for emancipation both on a political and cultural level.

It was the posture, the gaze, the position of the arms and that of the hips of front-cover models from the magazines that first set the rules of voguing. With the use of feathers and sequins, voguers came from the outskirts of big cities with the will to express their personality, which they did by openly displaying their sexual identity. They used to meet in gay venues, clubs and discos, all places that would soon become the main center of that newborn philosophy, which was actually turning more into a lifestyle.

The movie *Paris is Burning*⁸⁸ is an important record of life as it was inside ballrooms at the time, as well as the first real try at a visual record of the voguing culture. It allows the viewer to actually witness one of the so-called “balls” – contests focusing on style, appearance and the typical dance moves of voguing.

Balls were a parody and an overturn of the *Haute Couture* world with its catwalks, and the runway represented a stage where people had the chance to show themselves in all their effeminacy, vanity and narcissism – often bordering on prima donna behaviour⁸⁹ – telling the audience their story and fighting for their rights at the same time.

⁸⁶ «Ballroom includes society's most marginalized: minorities within minorities within minorities, for whom voguing and ballroom culture is an important resource. In a world where they have been rejected, ballroom not only accepts these people for who they are, it *celebrates* them, in a variety of unique and different categories. [...] Voguing is not just a dance, and ballroom is not just a genre. It's a way of life that brings pride, peer recognition and self-respect.». Cfr. Niall Connolly, *Welcome to the Ballroom, where voguing is always in style*, available on-line at: <http://boingboing.net/2013/03/06/ballroom.html> (November 2013).

⁸⁷ Norberto Angeletti, Alberto Oliva, *In Vogue*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2008, 2-8.

⁸⁸ *Paris is Burning*, a documentary by Jennie Livingston. With Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, Willi Ninja, Octavia St. Laurent, Angie Xtravaganza, Venus Xtravaganza, Sol Pendavis, Freddie Pendavis, Kim Pendavis, USA, 1991.

⁸⁹ Voguing has been inspired by the immortal beauty of Hollywood stars: Greta Garbo, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe. The life of a voguer can be understood only as a continuous process of imitation of celebrities.

Voguers would not have been able to go through with their project, without the support of the Mothers – progenitors of the Houses – which were actual families based on the criterion of belonging to the same social and cultural status. The so-called “children” were either orphans of both mother and father, people who had been abandoned because of their homosexuality, or simply outcasts, proud to give up their birth surname to accept that of the House they belonged to as their own. It could be stated that, from a performative point of view, the Houses represented an idea of kinship in the sense of «ability to build a scheme of alliances based on the need for exchange and mutual support among individuals»⁹⁰, an actual «practical kinship»⁹¹, then, that brought the Houses – organisms led by transsexuals, drag queens⁹² or homosexuals – to embrace the “children” in a real domestic environment⁹³ based on the idea of sharing culture, art and philosophy of life. In this regard, the life of a woman of the time can be seen as a prime example.

Her name was Ellen Stewart, she was an African-American woman who owned a café in New York where she hosted all the young promising actors of stage drama of the neighborhood. Her behavior could be defined according to what Richard Schechner called «restored behaviour»⁹⁴, that is acting as a mother – with all the peculiarities of the role – in a theatrical context. The emotional and personal nature of this bond can also be inferred by the nickname Stewart went by, La Mama, that defined both the woman herself and the theatrical scene she had created. At the end of the Eighties, voguing started being commercialized, and this process was helped by globalization – still in its early stages – and especially by the development of pop music and music videos. Credit for the opening of the voguing phenomenon to the general public goes to Italian-American pop star Madonna, for the release of one of her videos: *Vogue*.

The first part of this essay will start from this point to analyze the process of transformation, blending and differentiation of the voguing culture, paying particular attention to the Italian performative scene. In the second part, a further analysis will

⁹⁰ Giulia Palladini, *Com-memorare Ellen Stewart, La Mama: narrazione e custodia di una parentela*, in Enrico Pitozzi (curated by), «Culture Teatrali», 21, 2012, 240.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁹² A drag queen is a man who dresses, sings and acts as if he was the caricature of a woman, with an ironic and entertaining purpose. The drag shows have increased in America during the 70s, with the birth of the Gay Liberation Movement. In such a cultural context, where the drag phenomenon overlooks the scene echoing strong socio-political signs, it is extremely simplistic to consider the drag as a simple phenomenon of cross-dressing.

⁹³ The episode of the adoption of Venus Xtravaganza in *Paris is Burning* is explanatory: Venus, a young transsexual works as a prostitute to raise money for an operation of sex reassignment. When she is just thirteen years old, she is introduced in the House of Xtravaganza, where she is rescued from life in the street.

⁹⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 28.

be carried out, taking into account all the topics connected to the ideas of identity and gender.

In conclusion, it is important to underline once again the focal point this study is based upon: the comparison between the U.S.A. context and the Italian context, which were both supported and corroborated by the dichotomy between artistic performance and “gender performativity”⁹⁵. As a proof and an explanation of the presence of these two elements, Schechner wrote about the ideas of «twice behaved behavior» (concerning the artistic performance), and «behaved behavior» (in regards to gender performativity), stating that every action carried out by an individual is actually the result of a combination of attitudes and reactions had in the past. Thus, what is the difference – in terms of value – between a voguer’s pose and the cover of a fashion magazine, or between a black and white music video and a dance performance in heels? In the following pages, an attempt to answer these questions will be made.

The effects of voguing: artistic performances in today’s Italy

Any study on voguing that pretends to be accurate has to focus on the singer Madonna and one of her most famous songs: *Vogue*.

The single, released in 1990, has sold over six million copies worldwide, and was presented at the MTV Video Awards later that year with an iconic performance in Marie-Antoinette’s style. With the help of her dancers, Madonna put on a show that was more of a hymn to escaping reality through imagination and dancing. In the song, the artist paid tribute to some of the great divas of the past, as it can be inferred by the lyrics and the music video itself. The great role the Italian-American singer played with her song for the promotion of gay and African-American culture is beyond doubt. *Vogue* is one of the pop hits that have contributed the most to the development of a reflection on gender and sexual identity, and it still has a huge influence today, whether acknowledged or not⁹⁶.

For the purpose of this study⁹⁷, the music video of the song *Vogue* plays a prime role. Through black and white sequences shot by David Fincher and accompanied by voguing dancers, Madonna paid a tribute to Hollywood’s golden age

⁹⁵ Gender performativity is a term introduced by post-structuralist philosopher and theorist Judith Butler, firstly used in her book *Gender Trouble*. A central concept in Judith Butler's theory is that gender is constructed through the repetitive performance of gender. Gender performativity is a stylized repetition of acts, an imitation of the dominant conventions of gender, for example in *drag* performance. See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

⁹⁶ Madonna, hated and praised by feminists at the same time, is the subject of many post-modern studies for the use she made of her influence on the mass, to bring an underground movement to the general public.

⁹⁷ I am grateful to Marco Argentina, young scholar and voguer, for the technical and choreographic advice and for the fundamental contextual analysis as well.

divas. Fully aware of her accomplishment, it is beyond doubt that Madonna knew the impact – on a commercial level – that her choice was bound to have, and it indeed had such an influence, that the *Vogue* period also marks a turning point in the voguing culture itself, now accessible to the general public. The social and cultural process Madonna started was very clever, because through the use of a way of expression that was historically tied to the gay, the Latin and the African-American cultures, and of lyrics such as «it doesn't matter if you're black or white, if you're a boy or a girl», she dissolved the borders between subculture and mainstream culture. It was now no longer necessary to be gay to vogue, and everybody could claim the right to be themselves, to paraphrase the title of another popular song by Madonna, *Express Yourself*.

How did this process of opening to the general public work? The strength of the whole operation seems to lie in the way Madonna paid tribute to the underground culture: not a mere “copy and paste” or just a random summing up of its style, but by working on two different levels. The first was that of the choreography, put into the hands of professional voguers and the brightest exponents of the Houses and the ball-culture. The second level was the one concerning Madonna's gestures, with the popular pose – both hands held in front of her face as to frame it – to the words «strike a pose», inspired by the movements of the divas mentioned in the rapped second part of the song. Aware of the fact that the voguing way of expression was not her own, she paid great respect to it by not trying to copy it and just hinting to its characteristic movements. In doing so – using the general sense of the voguing moves and not strictly following their choreographic coding – she also simplified them and made them more accessible – almost as a commercial product.

For the sake of accuracy, there is another musical piece dated 2012 by Madonna it is important to mention: *Girl gone wild*. The song – chosen as a single from her latest album – was full of references to her early works, one of which was, of course, *Vogue*. Both songs share similar music videos, in terms of white and black photography, set design, references to the gay world and the worship of the male body, all things that reflect the singer's tastes. The dance moves in the 2012 music video represented both the newest component in the album, and the most direct reference to all the choices mentioned above. Every pose, every hint of a voguing dance move, every triangle-shaped movement executed by muscular bodies on heels seems to remind of voguing. Everything is very inexact and extremely accurate at the same time. The choreography to *Girl gone wild* is the peak of the above-mentioned process of making the voguing movement accessible to the general public started twenty-two years earlier by Madonna. One could object that making a phenomenon accessible to everybody means letting it become mainstream, end up in pop-culture,

and lose most of its original content, but that loss is the price to pay for the sake of a process of blending, renewal and mixing with other contents and ideas. If we did not accept that, then we could only talk of a mere “voguish expression” – which does not have much in common with tradition, other than the gestures.

The fact that Madonna asked the Kazaky – a young Ukrainian boy band – to take part in her music video is a clear sign that she knows that there is a difference between what she does and the movement she draws inspiration from. The Kazaky are known for their performances, which include a mix of dance moves, singing, a display of muscles, fashion and homoerotic choreographies executed most of the time in heels, with leather and studded clothes. According to sociologist Camille Paglia, there are two different types of male homosexuality⁹⁸, depending on the way a gay man feels towards his mother. When gay men identify with their mother lifting her up to a peak of femininity and fertility, they become what Paglia calls «transvestite priests of Cybele», honoring and celebrating her in the orgiastic rituals of dance-music, where drag queens and transvestites are the highest form of expression of religiousness.

The second type of male homosexuality is represented by those gays who refuse and revolt against their mother’s power, and it is expressed through the form of perfect manliness, with a reference to Ancient Greece and its standards of the male body, which was always depicted as perfect and statuesque. In this dichotomy, the Kazaky – exponents of promiscuity – could be seen as standing in the middle.

The clash between femininity and manliness helps to interpret every factor that draws inspiration from the voguing movement. The idea at the base of every performance by the Kazaky – the desire to express themselves – is similar to the one the manifesto of voguing is founded on, (the former act on the East European scene, and the latter was developed in the United States during the Seventies), and the only substantial difference lies in the planning and the way things are organized. As a matter of fact, the Kazaky became famous thanks to the internet – through Youtube – and have a very specific target, which does not only include homosexuals. The fact that they took part in a music video just as dancers – and as singers – despite being a band, makes their marketing strategy clear. In fact, the song is not considered a featuring, and the Kazaky only appear in the music video as dancers. They were chosen for their style – that people are now beginning to call «Kazaky style» – which is more of a mere copy of voguing, than a real tribute to it, and all there is of the voguing culture is the pleasure of cross-dressing (both in terms of attitude and clothing choice), leaving behind the battle over rights and focusing only on the

⁹⁸ Camille Paglia, *Homosexuality At the Fin de Siècle*, in *Sex, Art and American Culture: Essays*, Vintage Books, New York, 23-24.

display of the individual⁹⁹. Further analysis reveal that the Kazaky's approach to the original voguing culture is spreading, and it is starting to be used in gay clubs and discos – not just by drag queens, but also by boys dancing on heels¹⁰⁰.

Following an unbiased analysis, free from personal judgments, all these expressions seem to be just a way for individuals to display their sexuality for the sake of a personal process of self-gratification in one's own environment. There is no political inference there, just the rules of show business. Everything is focused on attitude and posturing, and there is no reference to the ambiguity and the otherness of the divas of the past, and pop-stars – well aware of using an artifice – focus on imitation in all its *unheimlichkeit*, often bordering on grotesque. In this regard, it is important to introduce the idea of “camp”¹⁰¹, that according to Susan Sontag is an aesthetic sensitivity springing from a love for artifice, exaggeration and the unnatural¹⁰². Looking at the world from a camp point of view, means seeing it in terms of style – an ironic, flamboyant, flashy, theatrical style. And that is what camp is based on: theatricality (both in the sense of factitious, and as a more complicated idea of a metaphor of life as a stage). This «Being-as-Playing-a-Role»¹⁰³ attitude gives awareness of the fact that all the opposites – or binarisms, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹⁰⁴ would call them – upon which life is based – like gender roles – are interchangeable. Camp, a frivolous approach not exclusively used by gays, feeds on the exchange and the opposition between the two genders, aiming precisely at overturning the widespread cultural standards of taste, attitude and language.

That's why people who represent camp have an androgynous look, like Greta Garbo, mentioned in the song *Vogue*. According to Sontag, the thing that makes feminine women beautiful is their masculine part, and vice-versa. This signals the importance of sexuality: the exaggeration of one's sexual characteristics and «personality mannerisms» goes hand in hand with the androgynous and the camp. This is the reign of effeminacy, of the interchangeability between man and woman¹⁰⁵. Richard Dyer, an expert of Film Studies, goes even further stating that camp, by definition, isn't butch or manly¹⁰⁶.

⁹⁹ Even nowadays self-ostentation is one of the fundamental characteristics of the voguing culture.

¹⁰⁰ Names are not mentioned here because examples of that kind are extremely common and get exhausted in a very short time.

¹⁰¹ For a detailed discussion on *camp* see: Fabio Cleto (curated by), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics And the Performing Subject*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1999.

¹⁰² Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, in Fabio Cleto (curated by), *Camp*, 53.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, in Fabio Cleto (curated by), *Camp*, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Dyer, *It's Being so Camp as Keep Us Going*, in Fabio CLETO (curated by), *Camp*, 110.

Going back to the artistic examples mentioned above, it is important to reiterate that they weren't based on attitude in relation to voguing moves, but on a display of sexuality in a super-structured form, or better a «performative» sexuality, as Bruce LaBruce calls it, which can be decoded thanks to Lady Gaga, Rihanna and Britney Spears' «drag queen» way of exaggeration, which is promoted as *avant-garde* under false pretenses, but it actually hides a «crudely obvious, unnuanced female sexuality, and even a vaguely pornographic sensibility which, unhappily, is post-feminist to the point of misogyny»¹⁰⁷.

Once it is accepted that wearing heels is all it is needed to vogue, to prove that it is false to state that the voguing culture was not absorbed in Italy, if not just under the form of “voguish expression”, it suffices to quote the example of a well-known Italian talent show. In the beginning, there are two wannabe professional dancers who have to win a competition on heels in order to become part of the show¹⁰⁸. The two contestants said more than once that the style they were using was called girling or girly style, a type of dance on heels that combined voguing dance moves and femininity. It is important to underline how Andrea Attila Felice, the dancer who won, calls his style street-jazz, and not girling, and states:

To better explain my style, you just have to divide its name into two words: the first one – *street* – includes different hip-hop techniques, such as poppin, house, waacking and others like new style, voguing, L.A. style, girly, dance-hall. The second one – *jazz* – includes movements – like leaps and twists – that are typical of modern dance. So we can say that street-jazz is one of the most commercial dance styles, which combines a mix of hip-hop techniques, but is also influenced by basics of the modern dance style¹⁰⁹.

Although it would be impossible to carry on a thorough study on the reception of voguing in Italy, it appears that the dance culture in Italy is greatly influenced by trends that depend on the variables of demand and offer¹¹⁰. What is considered *in* at the moment? What does the audience want to see? What is there that can be re-invented? In a context of refusal of academic training, the idea of «crop and paste» is

¹⁰⁷ Bruce Labruce, *Notes on Camp/ Anti-Camp*, the essay was first presented at the *Camp/Anti-Camp Conference* in Berlin in march 2012, curated by Susanne Sachsse and Marc Siegel, available on-line at: <http://natbrut.com/notes-on-camp-labruce> (November 2013).

¹⁰⁸ Available on-line at: <http://www.video.mediaset.it/video/amici/danza/367147/antonino-vs-andrea.html> (November 2013).

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Andrea Attila Felice, available on-line at: <http://www.forumnews.it/?p=6445> (November 2013).

¹¹⁰ Surely the discussion may be expanded to food, cinema, music, etc...

gaining more importance every day, and that could explain the nuances between the different terminologies of each style, which are an example of a choreographic apparatus that is increasingly becoming hybrid and indefinable. Thus, there is a question that arises naturally, which we include here for the sake of accuracy and not with a provocative aim: do styles exist anymore? And, above all, is research only based on aesthetics and form, or – speaking of content – is there also a hint of that spirit of social and political activism that is at the base of the voguing culture?

It is not true that voguing has not in the least been absorbed in Italy. Real examples of it, which we will mention further on, are rare – so rare that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand – but there are some.

Finally, to conclude this general overview of non-voguing examples, it is important to talk about voguing classes and courses in Italy. Well away from the Houses and the Ballroom scene, the voguing culture is now passed down in gymnasiums and dance schools. An overview through a research on a search engine is not accurate, but it gives the idea of the situation¹¹¹. In schools where such classes are available, wrong notions are often given out. Descriptions of voguing on the web either say that it is a dance style originated in prisons, that it was invented by Madonna, or that it is a form of fitness dancing. During the 2012 edition of the Rimini Wellness fair, an important event dedicated to well-being, Javier Ninja – one of the best voguers on today's scene – held some classes of Vogue&Fit, an activity useful for tightening the glutes and improve the circulatory system¹¹².

Among the «real examples» of voguing, as they have been called above, it is important to mention at least two: Barbara Pedrazzi, known as La B. Fujiko, and the voguing classes at the NABA - Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti di Milano.

La B. Fujiko is a dancer, a choreographer and a teacher as well as the main exponent of voguing and waacking¹¹³ in Italy. She has not trained just imitating the steps taught in some tutorial on the Internet, as is often the case with “club entertainers”. La B. Fujiko learnt on the field, traveling through America and North Europe, attending classes and becoming the apprentice of the best voguers around. Of course, she is not the only one to have gone in that direction, putting time, passion and money in her training, but she surely is a prime example. She has accomplished a lot, in terms of awards and satisfaction, and the quality of her work is recognized by

¹¹¹ When someone looks for «voguing Italia» on Google the results are made of a list of sites, articles and references to the magazine «Vogue». Only after several pages, it is possible to see the first result that concerns the search, that is the definition written in Wikipedia.

¹¹² Irma D'ARIA, *Fitness, si Cambia!*, available on-line at:

http://d.repubblica.it/argomenti/2012/05/10/news/fitness_tendenze-1006927/ (November 2013).

¹¹³ *Waacking* is very similar to voguing with the only difference that this dance was born on the West Coast of the U.S., in the county of Los Angeles.

the legendary *House of Ninja*, which invited her to become part of its “family”. La B. Fujiko also created her own group, called B-Fuji, which she follows in several contests – both on a national level and worldwide – in which the ball-culture spirit is still alive.

The classes at the NABA - Nuova Accademia delle Belle Arti di Milano, on the other hand, are part of an academic institution, included in the study plan of a three-year course in Fashion Design. The perspective from which the phenomenon of voguing is taught there is yet of another kind, focusing more on the creative process of reconstructing the original context and tradition that were essential for the creation of the phenomenon. In line with the purpose of the course, the main focus in these classes is on the creation of stage costumes (with the use of recycled materials), but it is interesting to analyze the initial process and how everything is planned. At the beginning of the term, students are asked to divide themselves into “families”, taking the “Houses” as model. Once groups have been formed, a surname for each “family” is chosen, and finally roles are assigned – the leader of the group, the Mother, and then all the others. Then, students start designing costumes – which have to reflect the family they represent – that will be displayed at the end of the course with an actual fashion show.

This example is interesting because of the questions it arises. First of all, can a culture be taught? And why exactly voguing? Is it an expedient to expose students to a different reality, or better still, to help them develop a complete new working process? It would also be appropriate to question if despite the change of time and geographic coordinates, voguing still has part of the spirit of social and political claim that characterized its origins, or rather if now people just focus on its aesthetics.

In conclusion, there is yet another doubt that arises: if a real culture of voguing was to be absorbed in Italy, would it be useful for the redefinition of the ideas of gender, identity, equal opportunity and rights for the minorities?

The reception of voguing and reactions in Italy: a connection with the gay identity

In what way do the codes of transformation analyzed so far contribute to organize or disorganize our society? And what are the effects the fictitious approach of building one’s image has on society and the individual? It is quite difficult to analyze the various processes that lead the public to perceive the phenomenon of voguing – considered in its performative sphere – in a certain way. As has been said, this artistic expression in Italy has completely lost its original traits typical of the so-called “LGBT world”, and has only spread in the dance field. Yet, the ignorance shown towards this type of performance says a lot.

This research poses a fundamental question: is it possible, in Italy, to “restore” voguing to its original form, in all its effectiveness in the process of assertion of a minority – that formed by homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals – still long overdue in our country. To carry out a thorough analysis on the phenomenon from the point of view of culture, politics and aesthetics, it is essential to take into account the prime role played by gay identity and style, which do not usually express their peculiarity through an erotic act, but through a combination of customs, both physical and mental, that in the confrontation with the main values of the cultural establishment, lead to a social conflict, more than to a confrontation. Italy there is still no law defining discrimination based on sexual orientation as an aggravating circumstance, in addition to article 3 of the Italian Constitution¹¹⁴, despite the large number of homophobic attacks of a very violent nature, and the high rates suicide among bullied gay teenagers has reached. The media have often drawn attention to this matter creating intense debates, but not leading to any significant solution.

Recently, however, there has been an event that must have been subject to a certain degree of obscurantism: in Nardò, a town in the province of Lecce, in the South of Italy, a man put up a sign on the door of the bar he owned stating that homosexuals could not enter the place¹¹⁵. An unbelievable act somewhere in the middle between unreason and the terror engendered by a totalitarian regime. It makes clear that the models promoted by our society must be negative. It is as if every gay teen had the whole world against him or her. Episodes of physical and verbal abuse are made possible by the tolerant atmosphere that prevails in schools – and society in general – which minimizes the gravity of such conducts, almost justifying them by judging homosexuality as negative. On the other hand, European countries are promoting the creation of television commercials speaking out against homophobia and bullying to raise awareness amongst the people. There is one in particular, shot in Portugal, that is worth mentioning. It shows two old ladies knitting on a bench in a park. Then two gay boys holding hands pass by, and they start whispering in shock. Next one would expect to hear a derogatory comment, but the two grannies were just complaining about the fact that the boys were wearing t-shirts in «such a cold

¹¹⁴ Article 3 of the Italian Constitution: «All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country».

A controversial bill has been passed in the Chamber of Deputies over the past few months. It goes against the homo- and trans-phobia, but it only affects acted offenses and not any incitement or discriminative propaganda.

¹¹⁵ □ Available on-line at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWsc-tDwYPI> (November 2013).

weather»¹¹⁶. In Italy there has never been a campaign of such an impact. On the contrary, Rai – the Italian public television company – blocked a commercial by the Ministry of equal opportunities which stated «Sì alle differenze. No all'omofobia.» (say yes to differences, and no to homophobia). The reason is very simple: it contained the words «gay» and «lesbian», which were judged discriminatory¹¹⁷, almost like a dog is chasing its own tail. After all, it is important to remember that in 2011 Ikea created a campaign that provoked a huge scandal. The ad showed two men holding hands with the motto «we are open to every family». Undersecretary Carlo Giovanardi stated it was offensive towards the Italian Constitution, and the gay community started a protest. A «free kissing» performance was organized. It consisted in a minute-long display of affection in front of the Ikea store in the North of Rome¹¹⁸. The two men in the ad were not in a provoking pose promoting lingerie, but they were visibly fully clothed and just holding hands. This event was followed by a much steamier campaign against homophobia promoted by the independent province of Trento and organized by two LGBT Italian organizations called Arcigay and Arcilesbica. The banner displayed two men and two women dressed as Schützen¹¹⁹ in the act of kissing. After long discussions, institutions approved the campaign¹²⁰. What was so shocking that could upset the public? What there something that could be judged «out of the norm» or subject to exploitations? The next question to arise would be why the huge billboards hanging everywhere, showing girls in lingerie or half-naked men in explicit attitudes are not subject to discussions concerning their appropriateness. Our hypothesis is that no artistic form – movies¹²¹, art pieces or dance expressions – dealing with homosexuality can break the deep-rooted stereotype of the «different», unless combined with a deep knowledge of the mechanisms at the base of the creation of a stereotype, which is nothing other than a response to the need – necessary to the individual – to categorize reality as is perceived through experience. Studies on gender teach us that the mechanism of validation of a stereotypical notion is strictly applied also, and especially, to sexual identity. In the confrontation with another person, the brain starts

¹¹⁶ Available on-line at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgfZDi-ps68> (May 2013). TV commercial against homophobia, *Per il diritto all'indifferenza*, 2008.

¹¹⁷ Available on-line at: <http://tv.fanpage.it/stop-a-spot-contro-omofobia-in-rai-contiene-le-parole-gay-e-lesbica/> (November 2013)

¹¹⁸ Available on-line at: http://www.queerblog.it/post/11048/carlo-giovanardi-contro-la-pubblicita-di-due-uomini-gay-mano-nella-mano-per-ikea-e-una-violenza-e-un-attacco-alla-nostra-costituzione_ (November 2013).

¹¹⁹ Also known as Tyrolean shooters, Schützen has formed for about three centuries (from the XVI to the IXX century. D. C.) a voluntary military corp used to defend the territory of the province of Tyrol. Today their clothes are simply folkloristic.

¹²⁰ Available on-line at: <http://www.spotanatomy.it/2013/34180/> (November 2013).

¹²¹ The filmography of Ferzan Ozpetek is focused on this topic and on the issue of homophobia in Italy.

a process of automatic classification of the sex of that person, labeling her according to two categories: male or female¹²². As Flavia Monceri wrote in her essay called *Pensare multiplo. Oltre le dicotomie di sesso e di genere*:

None of us usually asks others if they are male or female, postponing the answer for a later time, after the observation of the combination of attitudes and behavior. [...] The decision to label an individual according to the M/F dichotomy is in fact caused by a combination of elements that, not having been negotiated, must be considered as mere prejudices whose validity depends on the fact that they are normally not questioned, because they actually work – at least apparently. These elements are firstly physical appearance (one's anatomical configuration, so to speak), a combination of physical attitudes, the tone of voice, etc¹²³.

Sex is assigned to newborns just after their birth, and individuals are divided into two gender categories before the evidence of their naked body: male and female. On the other hand, nature seems to eschew from any dual definition, and offers the possibility of a *third gender* (still not considered as such)¹²⁴: intersexuality. The so-called “hermaphrodites” – the use of this commonly used term is incorrect – are people «who are in a state that is not completely masculine or feminine»¹²⁵. They are therefore in a liminal situation between the two genders, which – without any physical damage – could remain unchanged. Regrettably, as Catherine Harper wrote, «[...] even with the proof of intersexuality just before our eyes, medical science keeps perpetuating a system based on two genders, establishing that also children who cannot be classified as belonging to either one of them, have to be defined according to that system anyway»¹²⁶, subsequently to an essential surgical procedure. The matter is subject to another problem, is we where to talk about what could be called the *cross-dressing effect*, as in a psychological and social implicit effect that is not just local or historical. One of the cultural roles of cross-dressers is in particular that of marking the shift from class to gender, and from gender to race or religion. In cross-dressing the dualism between male and female – an apparent ground of

¹²² Cristina Gamberi (curated by), *Educare al genere*, Carrocci, Roma, 2010.

¹²³ Flavia Monceri, *Pensare Multiplo. Oltre le Dicotomie di Sesso e di Genere*, in C. Gamberi (curated by), *Educare al Genere*, 73.

¹²⁴ When this paper was written, Europe didn't have any official recognition of this gender. In November 2013, Germany enacted a law that provides for an optional declaration of sex on the birth certificate, admitting the possibility of a “third sex”. Without any doubt it was an isolated case, but an important step was done.

¹²⁵ Flavia Monceri, *Pensare Multiplo. Oltre le Dicotomie di Sesso e di Genere*, in C. Gamberi (curated by), *Educare al Genere*, 74.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

distinction between “this” and “that”, “him” and “me” – is questioned and exposed to the risk of obliteration, so the cross-dresser, will always act as a sign of overdetermination – that is a mechanism of disorientation from a vague limit to the other. Camouflage causes disorientation, leading perception to drift from common sentiment. *Norms* – the subject of a study by Michel Foucault – are overturned. The French philosopher noticed that mechanisms of power were involved in the elaboration of these norms – applied to the so-called “body discipline” – with the purpose of institutionalizing them in the frame of a highly-regulated code¹²⁷.

As a matter of fact, children grow in a social and cultural context ruled by a predominant idea – which defines the relationship between two people of different sexes as the only right form of love, calling it «normal» – and a minor one that approves of love between people of the same sex, but contextualizing it in different forms that are also changing and not institutionalized. Boys spend most of their teenage years – if not their whole lives – building their own sexual representation, a model of who they are, by working on a personal and creative level. But putting the development process undergone by homosexual on the same level of that undergone by heterosexuals is not that simple: besides the similar processes of psychic identification and social differentiation, the development undergone by heterosexuals falls into an accepted cultural establishment with well-defined reference models of behavior, connected to the biological and symbolic reproduction of society, while the development undergone by homosexuals, in lack of pre-defined models, forces the individual to invent or to research his or her own way of expressing, or better, his or hers multiple configurations. Thus, on one side we find society – whose power is based on and strengthened by stereotypes – and on the other LGBT people in their marginality, clashing against a compliant power that does not seem to include them. At this point, it would be important for our society to reconsider the construction of masculinity by the use of a new point of view, which should no longer be rigid, patriarchal, misogynous and homophobic, but wider and more open.

Beyond *performance*

The study carried out in these pages does not only focus on social changes and different trends, and it is not about the clash between America and Italy, the old generations and the new ones. On the contrary, its purpose is to understand how the change of focus that has occurred, has led to an overturn of the purpose of *performances* (not only considered from the artistic point of view, but also as «action,

¹²⁷ □ Michel Foucault, *Volontà di Sapere. Storia della Sessualità*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2001. In reference to the analysis of intersexuality, I refer also to Michel Foucault, *Gli Anormali*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2002.

interaction and relation»¹²⁸ amongst individuals). Performance – when «it isn't "in" anything, but "between"»¹²⁹ – finds its reason for being in connection. This position it has, *between*, is in the sense of threshold, line of border, a place of infinite potential and possibilities that we have tried to contextualize. Schechner's theories were of great help as a support to the process of definition of the macro areas where voguing, in its dual performative nature, finds its expression.

Setting deliberately aside the category of everyday life, root container of all the other categories, the cultural dualism of America in the Seventies and of contemporary Italy is based on the peculiarities of business, popular entertainment, sex, rituals and arts¹³⁰.

So, voguing has not disappeared, and it keeps manifesting itself in sever aspects of everyday life, but with completely different ranges, purposes and degrees. One can no longer talk of ritual or collective participation, which is every day less explicit in relation to the demand of leisure by society. What is left, then, of the original American claims? A brief but effective analysis can be found in Schechner's idea of the purpose of performances: «to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade, or convince, and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic»¹³¹. Where is voguing rooted? What were the places where it used to manifest itself in America? Where does it still appear today?

If at the time the main goal was that of constructing an identity through which one could recognize himself or herself and let others know him or her, the shift in the timeframe caused a change in the original purpose of the phenomenon, which has kept most of the time the same characteristics, but with a completely different aim.

This is why this research talks about cross-dressing, camouflage and strategies processes used to manifest one's own belonging to a gender, far from that primordial need of expressing one's identity¹³², or of creating and expanding a community, but rather just for a narcissistic¹³³ need of displaying one's self. The need for deliverance and self-expression through dance is not new, and as a matter of fact it endures still today, despite the changes in time and place. This original principle could be defined as a constant, since it remains unvaried despite the change on a geographic and temporal level. This constant, differences set aside, is filled with culturally shared

¹²⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 24.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³² To identify into a class is necessary what is different, ambiguous, alternative to the norm, anything that is considered as abnormal.

¹³³ This term is not used in a negative sense, but it just defines a natural mental scheme of the observer.

ideas on sex and gender. Feminist theorist Judith Butler reminds us that these ideas¹³⁴ are simply cultural structures engendered by the repetition of acts performed through time, with the aim of using strict categories to label terms with very uncertain boundaries¹³⁵. Hence, a «reassessment of the individual» seen «firstly as a body»¹³⁶ would be necessary, where «body» stands for what individuals build in the social and cultural framework they live in, which is of course subject to schemes and dynamics of power: sex is the first criterion used to define a body and its identity, which is subject to «identification processes»¹³⁷.

Canziani's words on the subject are very meaningful, because they boost a reflection on still unresolved matters, like those underlined by this very study.

Is it really clear what gender identity is? And whether cross-dressing is really connected to homosexuality? Or to bisexuality? Or if being a drag queen is actually a job, or a spiritual condition? [...] there is still a long way to go. Because changes undergone by vocabulary, more than those undergone by customs, make it labyrinthine to travel through this topic. And words that have been absorbed – such as queer, drag queen, cross-dresser, butch, transgender – do not help to make the situation clearer. On the contrary, they multiply the possibilities of distinction. Obscure acronyms (like MtF or FtM, which point out the direction of one's transition) do not help to throw light on the path. Sexual orientation and gender orientation do not always match. To conclude, the theatre of identities is a real mess¹³⁸.

Bibliografia

Norberto ANGELETTI, Alberto OLIVA, In Vogue, Rizzoli, Milano, 2008.

Stuart BAKER, *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92*, SJR Publishing, London, 2011.

Judith BUTLER, *Corpi che Contano. I Limiti Discorsivi del "Sesso"*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1996.

Judith BUTLER, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

¹³⁴ On the other hand, each concept is a social and cultural result.

¹³⁵ Judith Butler, *Corpi che Contano. I Limiti Discorsivi del "Sesso"*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1996, 3.

¹³⁶ Concepts such as "body", "subject", "gender" or "sex" are essential in the thought of Judith Butler.

¹³⁷ Judith Butler, *Corpi che Contano. I Limiti Discorsivi del "Sesso"*, 3.

¹³⁸ Roberto Canziani, *Teatro delle Identità, Identità del Teatro*, in «Hystrio», XXIV, 2, 2013, 42.

- Giuseppe BURGIO, *Mezzi Maschi: gli Adolescenti Gay dell'Italia Meridionale: una Ricerca Etnopedagogica*, Mimesis, Milano, 2008.
- Roberto CANZIANI, *Teatro delle Identità, Identità del Teatro*, in «Hystrio», XXVI, 2, 2013.
- Fabio CLETO (curated by), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999.
- Corey K. CREEKMUR, Alexander DOTY, *Out in Culture. Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, Duke University Press Books, Durham, 1995.
- Eve KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990.
- Michel FOUCAULT, *Volontà di Sapere. Storia della Sessualità*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2001.
- Michel FOUCAULT, *Gli Anormali*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2002.
- Cristina GAMBERI (curated by), *Educare al Genere*, Carrocci, Roma, 2010.
- Marjorie GARBER, *Interessi Truccati. Giochi di Travestimento e Angoscia Culturale*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 1992.
- Camille PAGLIA, *Sex, art and American Culture: Essays*, Vintage Books, New York, 1992.
- Sergio PERRI, *Drag Queens: Travestitismo, Ironia e Divismo "Camp" nelle Regine del Nuovo Millennio*, Castelvecchi Editore, Roma, 2000.
- Enrico PITOZZI (curated by), «Culture Teatrali», n. 21, 2012.
- Richard SCHECHNER, *Performance Studies: an Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2002.
- Sara VICARELLI, *Ostiense, Due Gay Pestati Fuori dall'Alpheus*, in «La Repubblica», 29 aprile 2013.
- William J. WILSON, *The Truly Disadvantaged. the Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.

Sitography and Videography

- Niall CONNOLLY, *Welcome to the Ballroom, where Voguing is Always in Style*:
<http://boingboing.net/2013/03/06/ballroom.html>
- Irma D'ARIA, *Fitness, si Cambia!*:
http://d.repubblica.it/argomenti/2012/05/10/news/fitness_tendenze-1006927/
- Intervista ad Andrea Attila FELICE:
<http://www.forumnews.it/?p=6445>
- Bruce LABRUCE, *Notes On Camp/Anti-Camp*:
<http://natbrut.com/notes-on-camp-labruce>
- Madonna, *Vogue*:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuJQSAiODqI>
- Madonna, *Girl Gone Wild*:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYkwziTrv5o>
- Tv commercial against homophobia, Portugal 2008:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgfZDi-ps68>
- TV commercial by the Ministry of equal opportunities, «Si alle differenze. No all'omofobia.», (2013):
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvjByANuAEc>