



Title

Leigh Bowery!

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Leigh Bowery!

by Dominic Johnson • 30.04.2025

Leigh Bowery (1961–94) is best known as a performance artist, club creature, costume designer and subcultural celebrity; he was also a provocateur, chameleon, attention-seeker and self-made monster. He was at the beating heart of club culture in London in the 1980s and early 1990s, but, for at least the last five years of his life, was also comfortable in the commercial art world and broadly recognisable as an eccentric public personality. Throughout his short life, Bowery resisted easy definition.

Leigh Bowery! at Tate Modern, London, is and is not an exhibition about Leigh Bowery, and this is one of its curious, seemingly contradictory, exclamatory strengths. In his first retrospective at a British institution, and the largest anywhere to date, Bowery appears by way of his mediation through the work of other artists. The most compelling and profound of these include conceptual paintings by Stephen Willats (b.1943), which analyse Bowery's subcultural role in materialist terms; monumental, lucid studio portraits by Fergus Greer (b.1961) [FIG.1](#); quasi-fictional video documentaries about the choreographer Michael Clark by Charles Atlas (b.1949) [FIG.2](#), in which Bowery's presence catalyses the appearances of everyone around him; and the glitchy video portrait of Bowery's ecstatic dancing by John Maybury (b.1958), in which he is dressed in a velvet jacket, greasy merkin and tasselled facekini [FIG.3](#). Bowery's role in these works is partly as subject or muse – certainly his function in paintings by Lucian Freud (1922–2011) [FIG.4](#), also shown here, is typically described in such terms. But he also figures as a kind of virus, infiltrating, reprogramming and replicating within and across other artists' works.



Fig. 1 *Leigh Bowery Session 7, Look 37*, by Fergus Greer. 1994. Photograph. (© Fergus Greer; courtesy Michael Hoppen Gallery, London; exh. Tate Modern, London).

What did Bowery do, exactly? What did he make? He produced little in the way of objects, beyond the costume elements that functioned as prostheses and props in performances, and which therefore seem wanting in his absence. He typically delegated the labour of construction to costumiers and specialist fabricators, including Nicola Rainbird, Mr Pearl and Lee Benjamin. His costumes **FIG.5**, which were so gregariously embodied when worn in clubs, performances and public appearances, always look attenuated without his bulk to flesh them out and his maximalist charisma to enliven them. The exhibition shows them sympathetically. Rather than relying on mannequins alone **FIG.6**, which can have a deadening effect, his costumes are also placed in vitrines, hung jauntily on wires or strewn on the floor **FIG.7**, as though he has just discarded them after a night of hell-raising.

Yet his most distinctive achievement as an artist was his creation

of 'looks': categories of artistic production that are hard to describe in formal terms, but which function as mosaics of costume, makeup, performance and personality. The 'looks' lend themselves to obsessive capture by others: in paintings, photographs [FIG.8](#), videos and less categorisable forms. More than that, Bowery – to refashion a colloquialism – 'made a scene': that is, he knew better than most how to turn a look and shake up a room. In this, he calls to mind another larger-than-life personality: James Lee Byars (1932–97), who, when asked what he did as an artist, replied enigmatically 'I create atmospheres'.¹ But Bowery also 'made a scene' in the sense of creating a peripheral social and subcultural milieu that came into being in visual terms through his generative act of autopoiesis, and which morphed into subsequent relational and aesthetic shapes after he disappeared.

Much like Genesis P-Orridge (1950–2020), another eccentric auto-fabulating creature of the underworld, Bowery might be considered a 'cultural engineer': both created new ways of being and doing, which were then seeded into the culture at large, such that the singular origins of their antagonistic cultural innovations remain themselves somewhat camouflaged, at least to those who are not 'in the know'. Like Byars and P-Orridge, Bowery is an enduring enigma who manages to be both impossible to ignore yet difficult to pin down. The alluring force of his idiosyncratic persona demands our attention, but he resists capture and obscures full fathoming. It is often easier to overlook – or worse, to ridicule – such distinctive artists than it is to parse their novelty and to process their distinction.

The exhibition, which is distinctively conceived and lovingly curated by Fiontán Moran, wrestles with the problem of how to represent performance through artefacts, partly through a sense of aesthetic maximalism and overload [FIG.9](#). Here, no single artefact is expected to do the labour of indexing a performance; instead, actions are suggested through complex overlays of images, videos, costumes and props. Its pleasurable cacophonies of sound and image try to summon the impossible, embracing the generative incompleteness of any attempt to exhibit Bowery's performances. As such, it complements and extends a series of excellent performance-orientated exhibitions at Tate Modern in the last few years, including surveys of Mike Kelley (which Moran co-curated with Catherine Wood), Joan Jonas, Zanele Muholi and Yoko Ono. Bowery is, in many ways, more extreme an object of curatorial attention than these formidable forebears. Moreover, whereas they have been widely exhibited, Bowery has received few solo shows internationally, neither he nor his estate has had commercial gallery representation, he has no market presence and his work has largely resisted serious academic and critical interpretation.

Indeed, Bowery has apparently been anathema to art history. Even

within performance studies, where he would surely be best suited, it is only recently that he has begun to be substantially considered.² In some ways, this longstanding resistance to his assimilation into art-historical narratives conditions the exhibition. Except for a short, intelligent essay by Wood in the catalogue, the exhibition and its supplementary material generally avoid any attempt to claim Bowery first and foremost as an artist, as opposed to a club creature or muse. He floats free from validation, categorisation and explanation. This is in many ways a positive, although the accounts given for who he was and what he did tend to accumulate in anecdote, especially in the catalogue, where a familiar roster of Bowery acolytes – Rainbird, Clark, Les Child, Sue Tilley, Richard Torry, Jeffrey Hinton, Princess Julia, Cerith Wyn Evans – are summoned to recount mainly biographical information about Bowery, flooding his reception in nostalgic memories and lovelorn reverie.



Fig. 2 Still from *Read Only Memory*, by John Maybury. 1989. Video, duration 90 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Tate Modern, London).

Bowery's reception has arguably suffered from a surfeit of gossip and a relative absence of published critical thinking. As a result, received ideas about his inconsequentiality include: the perception that his shock tactics papered over a lack of serious thought, often evidenced by his much-recounted ejection of the contents of an enema into the audience at an AIDS benefit in 1994, also shown here in photographs and writings; the suspicion that his indecency reinforced negative stereotypes of gay people in a time of conservative backlashes against homosexuality as a perceived social threat or scourge; that his work lacked political efficacy or acuity; and that his fame depended on his iconic status and the tireless mythologising labour of his friends, rather than serious

artistic merit. The exhibition flirts with some of these tendencies. Despite his ubiquity, Bowery seems oddly hard to locate here as a self-determining artist, as opposed to a subject in the work of others; and shock as an avant-garde tactic, together with the seemingly self-ratifying power of creativity or imagination, remain key themes for Tate's construction of Bowery as an artist of note.

The question of the politics of Bowery's work is left open in this exhibition. It is well known that Bowery sought to be an arbiter of poor taste and revelled in the disruptive power of insult and outrage. His political transgressions include his appropriative uses of South Asian cultural signs (named with a racial slur), swastikas and Nazi aesthetics, and non-parodic blackface. Tate has negotiated this by removing much of the evidence of these indiscretions – some remain, including his *P*kis From Outer Space* 'look' in works by Willats and Atlas – and by inserting written disclaimers.³ These, and related descriptions in the catalogue, describe 'obnoxious' documents that exist, but which are now considered indefensible, and therefore are not shown, including of his 'controversial performance' as 'a dominatrix Nazi nurse, dressed in black latex' (p.21) at a sadomasochistic nightclub, and a video with his short-lived band Raw Sewage in which the three performers dressed as black-and-white minstrels in horror drag.⁴

Bowery described his appropriations as fuelled in part by his excitement at the 'clash of cultures' (p.13) he encountered in East London, where he lived. Perhaps he reified this excitement naively or too bluntly. Yet an effect is that the depiction of Bowery is sanitised, stripped in many ways of a fuller sense of him as a negative standard-bearer for 'bad taste, body horror and the subversion of images', as Tate's content guidance states. Without evidence, it can be difficult to judge the shape and extent of his transgressions. Nevertheless, this is a resoundingly successful and compelling exhibition, which prompts lots of feeling and thought, foremost about Bowery and his lasting influence, but also about the perceived limits of the category of art – which Bowery largely explodes – and the politics of transgression in changing contexts of artistic production and encounter.



Fig. 3 Still from *Because We Must*, by Charles Atlas. 1989. Video, duration 52 minutes 30 seconds. (© Charles Atlas; courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; exh. Tate Modern, London).



Fig. 4 *Nude with Leg Up (Leigh Bowery)*, by Lucian Freud. 1992. Oil on linen, 198.3 by 228.5 cm. (© Lucian Freud Archive; exh. Tate Modern, London).

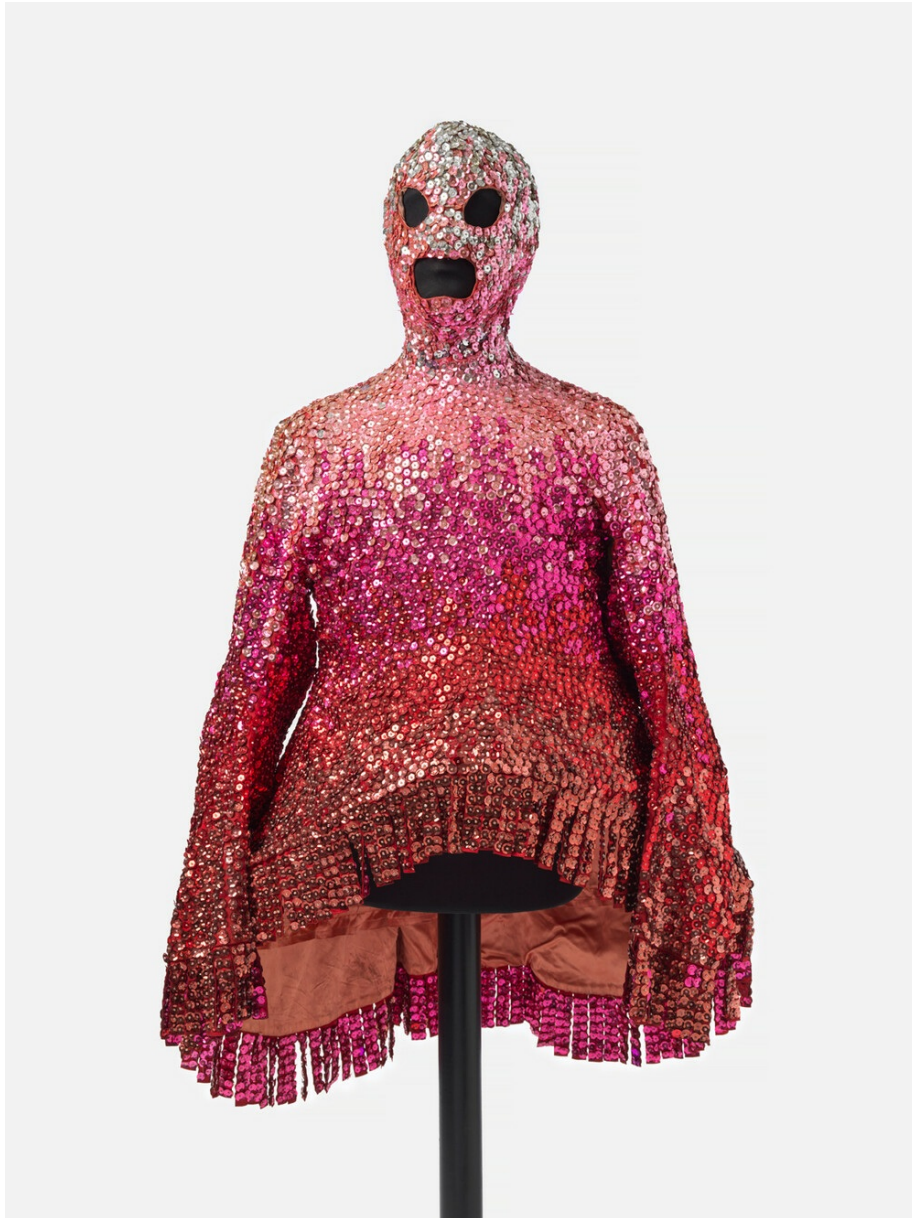


Fig. 5 *Look: Masked A-Line Dress (silver, pink and red sequins in ombre pattern)*. 1988. Plastic sequins on fabric with ridgeline support, 133 by 134 cm. (© Tate Photography; courtesy Leigh Bowery Estate; exh. Tate Modern, London).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Leigh Bowery!* at Tate Modern, London, 2025. (© Tate Photography; photograph Larina Annora Fernandes).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Leigh Bowery!* at Tate Modern, London, 2025. (© Tate Photography; photograph Larina Annora Fernandes).



Fig. 8 *Limelight: Leigh Bowery*, by Dave Swindells. 1987. Photograph. (© Dave Swindells; exh. Tate Modern, London).



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Leigh Bowery!* at Tate Modern, London, 2025. (© Tate Photography; photograph Larina Annora Fernandes).

Exhibition details

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27th February–31st August 2025

About this book



Leigh Bowery

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Footnotes

- 1** James Lee Byars, quoted in, for example, T. McEvilley: 'James Lee Byars: a study of posterity', *Art in America* 96 (November 2008), pp.142–209, at p.148.
- 2** The first monograph on his performance work is forthcoming, see S. Vranou: *Leigh Bowery: Performative Costuming and Live Art*, Bristol 2025.
- 3** The stylisation of the work title here follows the catalogue.
- 4** Catalogue: *Leigh Bowery!*. Edited by Fiontán Moran. 240 pp. incl. numerous col. ills (Tate Publishing, London, 2025), £45. ISBN 978-1-84976-958-7.

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