

Leigh Bowery!: In Conversation

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Introduction

Co-Editor in Chief Isaac Nugent

We are delighted to present a collection of short essays by academics and museum curators in response to the Tate Modern exhibition *Leigh Bowery!* (27th February – 31st August 2025). A legendary figure in London's club scene, Leigh Bowery (1961-1994) was at once a performance artist, muse, club promoter, costume designer, post-punk musician and TV personality. In many ways, his creative practice resisted categorisation. The Tate Modern's wide-ranging retrospective exhibition situates Bowery at the centre of a vibrant artistic community, conjuring up the exciting cultural moment of 1980s and early 1990s London.

In commissioning this dialogue, we wanted to consider how our art institutions curate exhibitions about figures who remain outside the canon. At a time when debates around inclusion remain important, how can museums and galleries bring unconventional figures like Bowery out of the margins? What can be achieved through staging creative practices that resist fixed labels in institutional settings?

Fergus Greer, *Leigh Bowery Session*
1 Look 2, 1988. © Fergus Greer.
Courtesy Michael Hoppen Gallery.



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Our contributors consider these issues from several different perspectives. **Dr Sofia Vranou**, author of *Leigh Bowery: Performative Costuming and Live Art* (Intellect Books, 2025), uses single photograph from the exhibition to consider how Bowery responded to the sexual politics of his time. **Dr Bethan Bide**, a fashion historian and Lecturer at the University of York, steps back to consider what this Tate Modern retrospective reveals about the challenges facing creative practitioners in London today. And, **Fiontán Moran**, Curator of International Art at the Tate Modern and co-curator of *Leigh Bowery!*, reflects upon the curatorial decisions involved in staging this exhibition about such a boundary pushing artist, whose practice resists categorisation. The responses of our contributors demonstrate the stimulating conversations that can emerge when art institutions foreground unconventional creative practices, inviting audiences to reconsider what exhibition-making can be.

Hello Boys

Dr. Sofia Vranou

Among a myriad of eye-catching outfits, strange accessories, colourful projections and various ephemera on display in TATE Modern's recent *Leigh Bowery!* exhibition, a black-and-white image hangs almost unnoticed. It is a print from a 1994 photoshoot published in the satirical fashion magazine *BLOW*, depicting Bowery parodying what was then the most scandalous advertising campaign of the time (fig. 1, 1994). This was none other than the iconic Wonderbra billboard advertisement, which featured a not-yet-famous Eva Herzigova in lace lingerie promoting a supposedly miraculous push-up bra. In the original, the supermodel gazes enthusiastically down at her enhanced cleavage beside the product's logo and the bold capitalised slogan 'Hello Boys.' Contrary to the feminist outrage often provoked since the 1960s by imagery of semi-naked women for their sexual objectification, the award-winning campaign—viewed through a postfeminist lens—was seen as celebrating the modern, financially independent woman who is body-confident and in control of her sexuality.¹

Figure 1. "Hello Boys", *Blow*, September 1994. Photograph by Fiona Freund. Courtesy of James Pretlove.



Echoing the playful appropriations of the so-called 'Pictures Generation,' Bowery posed as Herzigova for photographer Fiona Freund, mirroring the layout and text of the original campaign. Wearing only a black lingerie set and a shoddy wig, he looks downwards at his man breasts astounded. With sloppy make-up, skin blemishes and a flabby body, it becomes apparent that Bowery has no interest in the slightest in resembling the model's 'ideal' body or reproducing the same erotic effect. Rather, his cheeky camp appropriation expresses his disenchantment with the once-desired fashion industry and its regularising impact on culture and society by looking splendidly terrible.

Beyond the subversion of normative aesthetics, Bowery's parodic representation challenges a problematic aspect of the lingerie advertisement, which can be traced in the

way heteronormativity is legitimised as a reciprocal discourse through the public dissemination of imagery and slogans that position men at the epicentre of female sexual pleasure. Writing in the mid-2000s, Dee Amy-Chinn critiqued the postfeminist appeal leveraged by certain adverts, such as the one in question, arguing that the UK's Advertising Standards Authority promoted images that framed women primarily as sexual objects for heterosexual male consumers.² By contrast, adverts depicting women as active sexual subjects—especially those whose desires deviated from heteronormativity—were more likely to provoke public complaints and be withdrawn. This regulatory bias, Amy-Chinn maintained, reflected the enduring influence of heteronormative and patriarchal norms, even within a culture that, on the surface, appeared increasingly sexually liberal.

Although no man is pictured with Herzigova, the bold 'Hello Boys' beside her sexualised image leaves little doubt that the campaign targets male attention or—more accurately—seeks to appeal to women who wish to attract male attention through imagery calibrated to satisfy heterosexual male fantasies, thereby reinforcing a normative ideal that may also provoke anxiety in those who feel excluded or intimidated by her slender body. Another reading might suggest that the model is addressing her breasts, anthropomorphising and objectifying them as they pop up from the phenomenal bra. The diminutive 'boys' in the slogan creates a strangely maternal effect on the model's part in an otherwise highly sexualised content, communicating a repronormative feeling.

Bowery's humorous queer appropriation wrecks the campaign's heteronormative framework and aesthetic for he brazenly claims the position of the female subject who invites the male gaze. His camp embodiment challenges the ways heteronormativity and imposed normative ideals dominate commercial popular culture, marginalising a wide spectrum of sexual expressions, gendered subjectivities, and body types. At the same time, it suggests alternative possibilities for desires and identifications that resist or exist outside dominant narratives. Even the slogan 'Hello Boys' turns into an ironic mockery next to his 'disturbing' femininity, sealing the queer overtones of the image whether he's calling out to men or addressing his breasts in an anti-repronormative gesture.

Bowery effectively puts to the test Richard Dyer's thesis on camp, which he views as a product of gay oppression capable of "demystify[ing] the images and world-view of art and the media."³ Camp, thus, becomes a reminder of the manufactured narrow view on lifestyle and modes of being that the media in their majority foster but, most importantly, a reminder of the countless true possibilities one can take hold of. Accordingly, Bowery's less-than-perfect image touches on the fabricated stereotype of sleek beauty and heteronormativity that broadcast media portray as ideals of an ultimate and unattainable reality and promotes queer social visibility unapologetically. Far less flashy than his usual spectacles, Bowery's Wonderbra appropriation deconstructs the seductive facade of commodified femininity, while re-imagining queerer, messier, and more expansive ways of seeing, desiring, and being.

Leigh Bowery

Dr. Bethan Bide

The introductory wall text for Leigh Bowery! Introduces the titular subject through a list of his new year's resolutions for 1981:

1. Get weight down to 12 stone
2. Learn as much as possible
3. Become established in the world of art, fashion or literature
4. Wear make-up everyday

In terms of framing an exhibition about a man whose creative energy spanned careers as an artist, fashion designer, performer and club promoter, so far so good. Yet during my visit I began to wonder if another object presented in that first room might provide a better introduction to the works on display – a painting of Bowery by his friend, roommate and collaborator, the artist Trojan.

This painting depicts Bowery slouched in a bubble bath, one leg hanging over the side, drinking glass in hand. Bowery is naked – a stark contrast to the proliferation of images of him in make-up and elaborate outfits elsewhere. He gazes ahead, contemplative and relaxed. While there was certainly nothing particularly fancy about the East London flat Bowery and Trojan shared, the whole scene seems somehow luxurious. Here we see a man with the space and time to imagine, part of a wider ecosystem of creative practice and collaboration. From the perspective of the 2020s – an era of housing crises, student debt and dwindling independent venues – such things seem almost fantastical.

Collaboration is a thread that runs through the entire exhibition. While Bowery might have his name on the door, the interpretation highlights the significance of numerous other individuals, including Trojan, choreographer and dancer Michael Clark, and Nicola Rainbird, the embroiderer and designer responsible for crafting many of Bowery's more elaborate garments. Beyond named individuals, we see a whirl of diverse faces in the background as Bowery's work is positioned in the London scene of the 1980s and early 1990s. We are taken to nightclubs, street markets, art schools and East London tower blocks. In each location we are invited to contemplate how Bowery's creativity was fuelled by the people around him and to consider how such collaboration enabled a culture of creativity. Yet one key collaborator seems missing from the story: the city itself.

Perhaps the closest nod to the significant role played by the political, economic and physical infrastructure of London in Bowery's work is in the presentation of *Ruined Clothes* (fig. 2, 1990). In this 1990 photo work, Bowery and Rainbird took clothes ruined on previous nights out and threw them off the balcony of Farrell House, where Bowery lived in Shadwell. The garments are viewed from above in the photographs, but in the display they are presented frozen in the motion of falling, against the backdrop of an image of Farrell House. Staging this work to simulate the sensation of having stumbled upon the scene of creation made me wonder, what would it have been like for Bowery and his collaborators to live and work in this London?

1980s London was certainly no utopia. The exhibition situates Bowery's work during periods of economic recession and nods to the racism, violence and discrimination suffered by ethnic minority and LBGTQ+ groups in the city. The devastating impact of the AIDS crisis is ever-present. But London also provided places and spaces for Bowery and his

contemporaries to develop their creative practice. As a migrant, Bowery was able to obtain a visa to live and work. He lived stably in rented accommodation while developing his first fashion collection using funds saved from his unemployment benefit. He could affordably rent a stall in Kensington Market, where he found inspiration and built networks. He contributed to a vibrant club culture which fed his creative identity, predicated on a booming music and arts scene that was enabled by the ability of other people to similarly pursue their creative practice without vast financial resources.

If this exhibition feels shocking in places, it is not so much due to the nudity and bodily fluids (about which there are plentiful content warnings), but rather understanding the impossibility of these things in London in 2025. Bowery's work may be mainstream enough to merit a major Tate retrospective, but it remains subversive in the vision it presents of how we define productivity in and ownership of city spaces. Through this, it raises questions about the apolitical framing of collaboration and the curatorial imperative to discuss not just the collaborative act itself, but the circumstances and conditions that enable it.

Figure 2. Leigh Bowery, *Ruined Clothes*, 1990, installation view. © Tate Photography (Larina Annora Fernandes).



Leigh Bowery Reflection

Fiontàn Moran

The *Leigh Bowery!* exhibition emerged out of a series of conversations with Catherine Wood, Director of Curatorial & Chief Curator at Tate Modern, on the importance of the 1980s as a time when artists were working collaboratively, between mediums, and challenging convention at a time of social, economic and political change, in ways that relate to our current moment. Thinking through these ideas in relation to a London context, where Tate Modern is based, Leigh Bowery repeatedly came up as a figure who held a significant presence on the scene, influenced many artists internationally, but had never received a museum retrospective in the UK.

Leigh Bowery!, installation view.
© Tate Photography (Larina Annora Fernandes)



There had been other exhibitions on Bowery which informed the initial research on the project. In 1995 Johnnie Shand Kydd organised a memorial show at the Fine Arts Society in London, followed by a presentation in New York. In 2004 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney presented *Take A Bowery*, curated by Gary Carsley and Russell Storer, which was followed by exhibitions in Hannover, Germany in 2008, and Vienna, Austria in 2013. In 2022 *Leigh Bowery: Tell Them I've Gone to Papua New Guinea*, curated by Hannah Watson, presented seven of Bowery's costumes alongside a short video within Fitzrovia Chapel in London, which had originally been part of Middlesex Hospital where Bowery died. These all provided a useful context through which to think about the staging of a show on an artist who refused classification. Other exhibitions about this period that provided important reference points included *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990* (2012), *Club to Catwalk: London Fashion in the 1980s* (2013–14), both at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Michael Clark: Cosmic Dancer* (2020–1) at the Barbican, as well as Kevin Hegge's *Tramps* (2022) documentary that focused on the New Romantic scene. Tate's exhibition happened to coincide with *Outlaws: Fashion Renegades of 80s London* at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London, which focused on the work of lesser-known or appreciated designers from the

scene around Bowery and demonstrated the appeal of this period.

Within the traditional art sphere, Bowery is probably best known as a model for Lucian Freud, and within a fashion and nightlife context for his daring and experimental designs. *Leigh Bowery!* aimed to position him as an artist who used his body to explore questions of aesthetics, identity, and sexuality in ways that continue to hold relevance. The exclamation that formed part of the title was meant to evoke the range of emotions his actions elicited, good and bad, as well as connecting to the performative and declarative nature of Bowery's work. In recent years there has been increased attention given to performance, craft, and identity politics in the art world internationally, and so I hoped that through Bowery such questions could find a different orientation through his work as a fashion designer, club performer, and continually shifting presence.

A key part of this process was to situate his work within the context of London and the expanded network of artists and designers he worked with, as well as in New York. And so a great deal of my research involved speaking with these people including his biographer Sue Tilley, choreographer Michael Clark, and the artist Cerith Wyn Evans. Central to this process was Nicola Rainbird (née Bateman), the Owner and Director of the Leigh Bowery Estate, who married Bowery before his death, worked on his costumes, and was involved with many of his performances in the 1990s. Rainbird provided full access to his archive, collection of costumes, and insight into Bowery's life and work. Working with Jess Baxter, Assistant Curator at Tate Modern, and in conversation with Margery King, Artistic Advisor to Rainbird, we aimed to create an exhibition that highlighted key ideas within Bowery's practice.

Born in Australia, Bowery decided to move to London in 1980 after discovering punk and the burgeoning club and style movements that followed, such as the New Romantics. Realising that dressing up could be used to communicate ideas and challenge societal conventions, he set about becoming a central figure on the scene, which he achieved within a few years after his arrival. Such ambition reflected the aspirational nature of 1980s Britain, while at the same time pushing against the increased focus on financial success and conformity as the decade moved on.

Charles Atlas, Still from
Because We Must, 1989. © Charles
Atlas. Courtesy of the artist and
Luhring Augustine, New York.



Two artworks formed the starting point for the development of the exhibition, both shown in the opening room of the display, which centred around the importance of the home to the creation of Bowery's world. One is a scene set in his flat from Charles Atlas's film *Hail the New Puritan 1985–6*, a fictionalised documentary on Michael Clark, which depicts Bowery and Clark alongside the artist Trojan (Gary Barnes), and the fashion designer Rachel Auburn as they get ready for a night out on the town. Continually changing their looks and exchanging bitchy remarks to each other, the scene encapsulated many of the themes I wanted to explore in the exhibition, namely the use of clothing and makeup as a medium to transform the body, the importance of the network around Bowery, and the performative nature of his life. It also hinted at the subtext of the AIDS epidemic which was a dark cloud hanging over the period. Toward the end of the scene, Bowery wears his 'spots' Look, which many interpreted at the time as referencing Kaposi sarcoma that affected many people who were HIV positive. Clark leans in for a kiss, hesitates and asks, 'Will I catch something?', to which Bowery replies 'Yeah, don't', followed by Trojan shouting in the background 'Aids'. Bowery was not diagnosed HIV positive at the time this scene was filmed, but it points to the pressing reality of the time and Bowery's interest in forms of 'bad taste', which was influenced by the work of John Waters, especially his film *Female Trouble* (1974).

The other work, which connected to this conception of the home and Bowery's use of styling to communicate different ideas, was the installation *Leigh Bowery: What is He Trying To Get At? Where Does He Want to Go?* (1984) by the British conceptual artist Stephen Willats. Consisting of two panels featuring photos of Bowery pre-and post-getting ready, objects from the flat, and handwritten statements explaining Bowery's view of the flat as a 'spaceship', and his Look as 'advocating tolerance', the subtitle of the piece also provided a question that I wanted visitors to ask themselves:

What is he trying to get at? Where does he want to go?

I had thought originally this query came from Willats, but later discovered it was Bowery who wanted people to ask these questions when they saw his Looks, demonstrating the way he was already framing his work in relation to a public. It also provided a vehicle for questioning some of the more contentious elements of Bowery's work, including his cultural appropriation and, in the case of the blue-faced Krishna Look, the use of racist language.

Thinking about Bowery's work in relation to the architectural context of the home provided a framework for the rest of the exhibition, with subsequent rooms based around specific sites such as the club, the stage, the street, and the gallery. While the body was the most consistent focus and medium used by Bowery, by thinking through the spaces in which his costumes and performances were seen, we were able to place them in a specific context and move away from a reading solely based around design or questions of identity.

To suggest this, we designed each gallery differently through contrasting wall colours and décor and displayed archival materials in a variety of ways. Having studied art history with a focus on performance, I was conscious of the debates around the documentation of live art forms and the challenges of display within the static confines of the museum. This was partly remedied by many of the photographers allowing us to print exhibition copies of their work so that we could show them in a more informal fashion and at different scales, and by placing the videos in relation to these other media and allowing the sound to bleed between spaces; in a way that partially reflected the frenetic pace of Bowery's life. This is most evident in the 'club' room, where photographs were stuck to the walls to evoke the mood board for a magazine or fashion collection, but also something akin to a teenage bedroom where images are ripped from magazines and plastered across the wall. The emergence of street style magazines like *i-D* and *The Face* during this period, was a central part of how Bowery came to be known, and informed many aspects of the show. This extended to the interpretation texts for the exhibition, which aimed to strike a more journalistic and personal tone to match Bowery's own sarcastic sense of humour.

Leigh Bowery!, installation view.
© Tate Photography (Larina
Annora Fernandes)



Given the collaborative nature of Bowery's work and the reliance on the various artists who 'captured' him, *Leigh Bowery!* is in many respects a group exhibition, albeit framed through the lens of Bowery's life. In doing so I wanted to challenge the concept of the solo artistic genius that often dominates retrospective exhibitions. In their own way, several of the artists channelled a similar spirit to Bowery, emerging out of punk, and working to challenge their respective mediums, often presenting their work in non-art spaces. This included: Michael Clark, whose choreography and own stage persona invigorated classical and contemporary dance through the mixing of dance modes and the inclusion of humour and sexual content; many of the people in the videos and photographs such as Princess Julia, David Holah and Andrew Logan; while the video work of Cerith Wyn Evans, John Maybury, Charles Atlas, Jeffrey Hinton and Baillie Walsh showed the use of experimental approaches to moving image through rapid cuts, digital technologies and playing with music video conventions.

The exhibition also provided a way to foreground the work of a diverse array of photographers: from the club images of Derek Ridgers and Dave Swindells through to the more formal portraits taken by Nick Knight, Fergus Greer and Fiona Freund. These latter works provided a way to question the tradition of the artist-model relationship in favour of a position that highlighted the active role Bowery played in the creation of these images. This also extended to our presentation of works by Lucian Freud, which could be considered as another form of performance and exploration of the human body, albeit through a very different medium. Bowery's own construction of the body could be viewed up close through a selection of costumes that highlighted the development of his aesthetic and move towards a more distorted and surreal version of the human form. Many of these works were made with Nicola Rainbird, Mr Pearl, and Lee Benjamin, and provided another means to consider the collaborative nature of his practice.

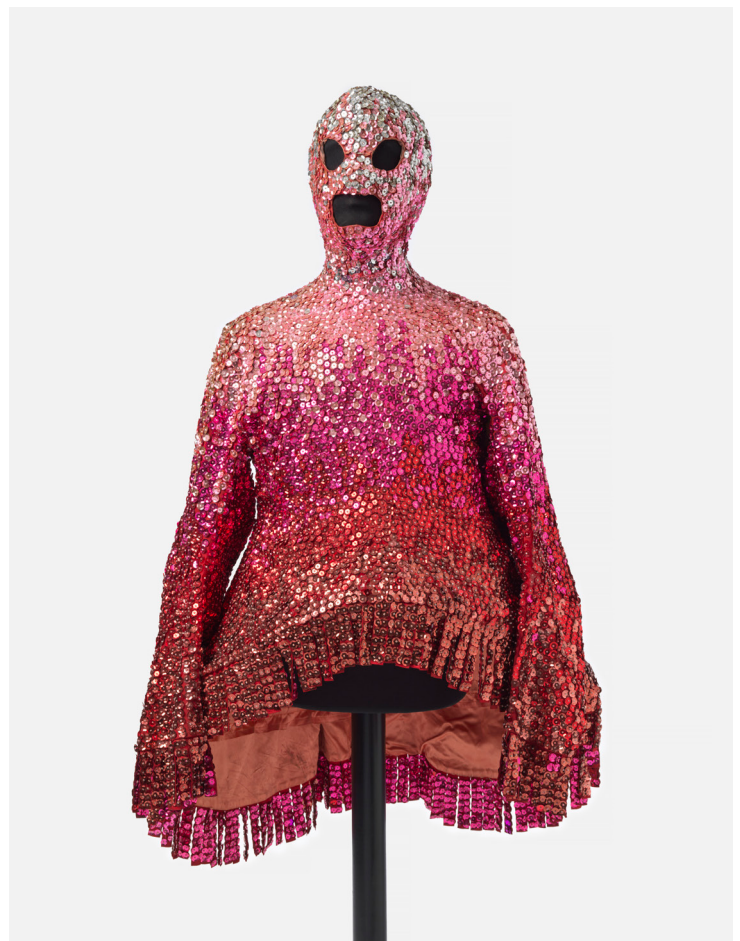
Bowery did not wish to be defined by his HIV diagnosis, which he discovered at the end of 1988, and so we sought to not tie any particular performance or Look to this fact (unless explicitly acknowledged by Bowery), but provide visitors with enough information to come to their own conclusions. This extended to the final room of the exhibition, which dealt with his death from Aids-related illnesses in 1994 but focused on the 'birth' performances. These involved strapping Nicola Rainbird to his chest, putting on an outfit, and then giving birth to her as she emerged through an opening in his crotch. This act took on many incarnations, with one of the most significant being the version used as part of the performance of his song 'Useless Man', which he performed with his band Minty. Written with designer-turned-musician Richard Torry in honour of the 'radical lesbians' who fisted gay men at a sex club, the song details an array of sexual acts and features the repeated chant of 'useless

man', culminating with the birth routine. In this performance, Bowery was embracing the very idea of uselessness, and how the term might have been applied to his work with fashion, queer nightlife and performance. As a gay man working at a time when the queer people were treated differently by society, his staging of such a scene, with all the messy and campy excess of live performance, suggested that you can birth your own world, form your own community.

Writing this now, as the exhibition is about to close, I am grateful that Tate was able to stage an exhibition that foregrounded the work of an experimental and unconventional artist, and hope that it will provide a way to think more expansively about the art history canon. The exhibition was a labour of love and an attempt to honour a range of artists and a period in the cultural life of London that I have long admired. At a time when it has become increasingly difficult to sustain a career as an artist or creative, I hope the project connected with a local audience, and provided a reminder of the importance of resisting convention in art, as well as life; and the potential to be found through collaboration, a punk attitude, and lots of makeup.



Leigh Bowery!, installation view. © Tate Photography (Larina Annora Fernandes)



Costume Photography 2024 © Tate Photography. Courtesy Leigh Bowery Estate.

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