

Inhuman drag: Getting under the sk(e)ins of the posthuman in conversation with Charity Kase

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Abstract

This article is the culmination of a collaborative process with drag artist Charity Kase. Providing both transcriptions of our conversation and sections of theoretical commentary, I come to test and transform what constitutes the (post)human. Aspects of Charity's drag – its mediality and virtuality, its hybrid monstrosity and beauty and its anthropomorphic abjections of bodies and environments – embrace the disordered and damaged dimensions of human life on earth. This article introduces an inhuman turn, emphasizing how bodily borders are broken down when the inside is re-turned through staged fantasy and shared imaginaries, as a strategy for challenging phallo- and anthropocentric stereotypes, and the opening of a potential within for becoming without. Tracing some differences in my and Charity's senses of what drag can do, this article offers up a figure for post/in/human possibilities.

Keywords: difference, fabulation, fabrication, fantasy, mediality, monstrous

This article is the culmination of a year-long collaboration with drag artist Charity Kase. My initial approach was cautious, conscious of tensions between drag and critical revaluations of the human. I did not want to dress up Charity's body of work as a posthuman figure, becoming the prop for my own pre-held propositions. These concerns were addressed through conversation, as we adapted to thinking adventurously together across our differences.

Bernadette Wegenstein's *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory* establishes the 'body as constitutive mediation' (2006: 3, original emphasis). She argues for the 'blurring of the differences between the environment and its content, materialities and their use, process and product' as 'an augmented awareness and production of mediation' (2006: vxiii). Following Wegenstein, I understand Charity's work as getting under the skin, turning inhuman and reimagining the body through 'new extended spaces and metaphors for new spaces' (2006: 150). This article traces extensions that are generated in the tensions of being human and through which a posthuman becoming might be mediated. Rosi Braidotti assesses how 'a life that is not ours' will 'for us, members of this species, always be anthropomorphic, that is to say, embedded and embodied' (2017: 34–35). New materialist descriptions of the posthuman are emphasized throughout this writing, exploring how what matters and counts in critical figurations of the human are de/centre-staged in Charity's drag. My interpretations further follow Stacey Alaimo's suggestion that 'from an embodied perspective may flourish [...] a newly transfigured posthumanism' (2014: 17). Across several discourses interested in sex and species, this research carries a dialogue of material-affective and feminist perspectives between environmental and psychoanalytic studies. These perspectives are allied in the disruption of phallo- and anthropocentrism, particularly by 'opening up to possible actualizations of virtual forces' where 'we may yet overcome anthropocentrism by becoming anthropomorphic bodies [...] still finding out what they are capable of becoming' (Alaimo 2014: 35).

Our conversation commences with open explorations of space and time – questioning the limits of both in diffusions of linearity and an embrace of the liminal.

Thinking across spacetimes, I attune with Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) sense that the past can be returned in transformation of the present, along with Donna Haraway's forms of 'science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation' (or 'SF') (2016: 10). Potential activations of the retro and SF arise in fabulous queer arts. From Charity's first reference to the virtual in our conversation, I felt that both myself and possible figurations of the posthuman were in safe and suitably slippery hands ... or talons. Or claws.

This article follows Braidotti's refocusing of 'difference as the principle of not-one [...] [and as] constitutive of the posthuman subject' (2017: 38). Seeking some specificity through this different difference, situating Charity's drag in mediality, I sense something inhuman is stirred. Within the human, in body and fantasy, ways of relating with that which exceeds and exists without the human might be extended. Processual mediations played out via drag work through differences. This is based on Braidotti's 'awareness of difference as positivity [that] entails flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity, and desire' (2017: 38). Charity's drag enmeshes the inside and outside, confusing distinctions of active-passive, self-other and figure-ground. The human is not foreclosed and is instead opened in rippling tensions, where threads are knotted in the transgressive interstices of post/in/human possibilities.

In conversation with Charity, this article approaches the posthuman as not only, in terms of expanding possibilities for its articulation specifically around an inhuman turn. My method incorporates conversation as a site of non-oppositional exchange, where bodies (of knowledge) can be brought into a co-productive encounter, 'opening up the possibility of not only' (de la Cadena 2017: 4, original emphasis). I take the site of conversation seriously, following Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser where 'difference is done together' so that none of the 'participants become the other, yet they do not remain only what they were either' (2018: 11). Collecting the knowledges of 'heterogenous participants', conversation can construct 'a shared site where worlds diverged as they emerged in/with their constitutive difference' (de la Cadena 2017: 2). A doing of differences in and by conversation can recast self and other, as well as the limits of sexes

and species, in co-constitutive heterogeneity. I interpret this methodology as a kind of drag, dragging and displacing thought through converse bodies and spacetimes. My theoretical reflections continue the conversation in form as well as content, as sections of interview interweave with and inform my own writing. I reiterate the work of weaving and stitching in my attempts to string-figure critical discourses in association, in Haraway's sense of 'relaying connections that matter' (2016: 10). This extends possibilities for entangling and enmeshing different sk(e)ins (of difference). Ways of writing are also important; from the title and throughout, words brought together by dashes, slashes and parentheses embrace mixed messages, hybridity and exchange. These formal dimensions additionally address drag as turning inhuman, in and out of the body, across its boundaries and as constitutive mediation.

Callum: *I thought we could start by thinking about your drag in space. Where do you see your drag happening in spaces?*

Charity: *Hm ... I see my drag happening in virtual spaces. Online, in imaginations, dreams and the nightmares in people's heads. I like to think that my creations spark people to play not only with my characters, but their own characters in virtual worlds. The characters are also here in the real world in many spaces. The spaces that I take up; my studio is very much the heart of my drag, my closet, with my costumes and ... all the disgusting pieces of fabric. My studio space in its entirety; my makeup station, my wig stands. There are so many tools that need space. A steamer, for example. There's so many little things. The heels ... I have more stuff for Charity than I do for Harry. All of these things need somewhere to stay, and they all live at my studio, so that's kind of Charity's home. The characters also take up space in the venues that book me, in theatres and clubs. And in my head ... they all take up a lot of space in my head!*

Callum: *There's something interesting in your reference to the virtual. The way you talk about what's in your closet – the pieces of fabric – that feels like a potentially virtual space, too ... possibilities for new drag develop from discarded bits of material in storage at your studio.*

Charity: *Yeah, my wardrobe and my drag studio is basically full of clothes that are not ready to be worn but are also not rubbish enough to be thrown away. Rails of costumes ... I must have a hundred, and there's two or three that are wearable and the rest of them are ready for me to make into something else. But I'm just not quite sure what yet. I'm waiting for the opportunity to arise or the inspiration. Then I will collect these dirty or bloody or crystallized pieces of fabric and make a character.*

Callum: *How do you see your drag working in and through time? How does it reference different times?*

Charity: *I reference different times in my drag costumes and characters. It has a lot of historical stuff in it. Period references inspired by periodic fashion. Though I think Charity exists outside of the realm of the real world. And I think that's a form of escapism for me from this human time we live in. It takes me to a place of fantasy and imagination and freedom. Digging deeper. It's probably to do with my feelings of a loss of self-expression when I was younger. From feeling like I had to hide who I was ... I was pushed into being this freakish today. I think Charity is also my escape from the way that people judge me in the world. And it's my way of creating the thing that I know is going to be judged in a certain way. I think all of this has to do with the reality that's around me and the reality that I want to create. I try to distance myself as far as possible from what's around me with my characters and creatures. That makes me feel most happy. Like I said, it's a form of escapism in a lot of ways and I think time is a part of that.*

Callum: *This is interesting, especially your ideas about escapism and, as you say, coming up against the feeling that you weren't able to express yourself in the past. You seem to work within pre-existing expectations, but to make them something other than them. You become completely different within these frameworks, flipping them, I guess?*

Charity: *I think it's a kind of coping mechanism. Feeling unsure how people are going to judge me, so I tattoo 'queer' on my cheek. I know how people are going to judge that. I know that can't be taken in any other way. So, I create some outlandish monstrous lizard lady librarian. It's just so mad and weird. What's the worst thing that people are going to say? If it's already something disgusting, what else can people say about it? And I created it to be like that ... it wasn't like I was trying to be anything else. And I feel like for so long in my life, I was trying to be something that I wasn't, or I was wishing that I wasn't what I was. To create something, where*

I know what it is and everyone else recognizes what it is ... that is empowering for me.

Callum: *It seems that you're making, in lots of ways, a positive from a negative. It's like you are working from the negative, but making these positive, active affirmations of things that are normally conceived of as lacking, being inexpressible and other than.*

Charity: *Yeah, I like to change and twist things as a kind of political questioning. It's like, what is disgusting and can disgusting be brilliant and well executed, skilful and beautiful?*

Callum: *Your tattoos seem to express a tension on the surface of things and with people's expectations. There seems to be a similar working within reactions and judgement as with your drag looks.*

Charity: *Yeah, I have 'queer' and 'queen' tattooed [on] either side of my face, in a pair of high heels. That was more of a recent tattoo. I've always been attracted to getting lots of tattoos. I like art, and from my perspective as a drawer and painter, having other people's artwork on my body is great. I don't think I'll ever stop getting tattoos, and I'll layer them up when I'm older and there's no room, because I like having new work on my body. It alters the way that I look, permanently, which I really enjoy. I love change and seeing something new in the mirror. I think that's prevalent in my fashion and drag; every one of my looks is a new character, a new creature, a new monster.*

Speaking of the spaces at the 'heart' of their drag, Charity gestures to a sense of virtual potentiality in descriptions of the assorted 'disgusting pieces of fabric' that come to construct 'a character'. This mode of character creation emphasizes processual co-emergence from the ground up, recycling past iterations into present looks. The genesis is not miraculous; the agential causes of creation are not disembodied. Each piece of fabric is partial, marked and traced by previous looks. They bear material witness to imprints of liveliness, in the form of stains and other signs of surface contact. This composite space of costuming can be read in line with Haraway's idea of composting, 'chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, mak[ing] a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, futures' (2016: 57). The disparate parts of compos(t)ed garments show

signs of previous wear and tear. A felt inscription of disgust further infiltrates the affective field, formed in Charity's descriptions of 'dirty or bloody or crystallized pieces of fabric'. These traces co-construct the creatures in Charity's body (of work), functioning as collaborative actants, enfolded in embodied fabrication. The virtual potentialities of drag transformation expand through these modes of costuming as fabulations for a dishevelled disordering of the human. Obscuring objects, Charity's descriptions suggest being swamped by so many costumes and tools. Working through manifold messy spaces, I understand this in and as an enactment of Eva Hayward's 'critical enmeshment' with the 'material, the literal matter, of being, surfaces and resurfaces as a constitutive force' (2008: 82). I take up critical enmeshment as one of the strategies I practise, along with conversation, through the grammar and structure of this article.

Drag also performs a temporal function: self and other, the feminine and human, slip along and across interstitial timestreams. This description is informed by Freeman's (2010) interest in the binding forces of time on the human body and its undoing through queer temporalizations and asynchrony. Drag organizes around lag, as past moments reference and return – re/turning looks – to the retro. Charity's costume choices gesture to archaic and preternatural forms in the face of SF tropes: sparkling strange, in one costumed creation they imitate the videogame character of the late 1990s, Spyro the Dragon – playing a new, older and weirder retro. Moments reverberate: stretching, looping and reordering sequential time. In Charity's own words, drag is 'a form of escapism [...] from this human time we live in'. They work a 'distance' from this world, or worlds, multiplying possible positions, perspectives and participants that might share in co-productive spacetimes, stretched (like fabric) so that more might fit. Charity's asynchronous staging of simultaneously historical and futurist looks emphasizes such distancing. As it lags, drag always already enacts through the skeins of several spanning environments, knotting human bodies in relation. Charity's creations then delimit both what constitutes a body in drag and the exceptionalism of anthropocentric subjectivity. Alterities of the self, feminine and human are recompos(t)ed. At a proximal distance, before and beyond the axioms that bind them, these hitherto fixed figures free-fall.

The effects produced by drag might operate in the prefixal ripples of 'trans' and 're' invoked by Hayward, across bodies and spacetimes, where 'the prefix re- must take up the body in order that trans- might become' (2008: 81). Hayward describes 'trans-species becoming' as return and repetition evolve a transformative potential through bodies (2008: 65). Enactors – for Hayward, a portmanteau of 'enfolded actors' – also seem to be activated in drag and its re-presenting of the past (2008: 77). Charity's creations further reflect Alaimo's interpretation of trans-speciation, becoming 'a self who is, who knows, through an encounter with another species' (2014: 17). At the crossroads where differences might meet and mutate, Alaimo's sense of trans-corporeality also resonates. Attuned to the actual and figural aspects of drag, the trans-corporeal suggests an encounter and effect where the 'figure/ground relation between the human and the environment dissolves as the outline of the human is traversed by substantial material interchanges' (Alaimo 2018: 435). In Charity's work, space and time do not remain passive backdrops and are instead incorporated into the constitution of creatures; across alternate times and distant worlds, the human body is re-trans-figured.

Charity: My drag isn't human most of the time; it's creatures and characters inspired by fantasy and sci-fi. That already distances me from the reality of the world we live our human lives in. I think of myself changing and challenging the way we think and the language we use. We, society, have gone so far down this path of things meaning a certain thing ... one specific thing only having one specific meaning. It is a very human thing to be putting ourselves in boxes and judging each other. And out of that, I think I explore beauty and the perception of it with a posthuman attitude.

Callum: You have referenced beauty a few times. What does beauty mean for you? In and out of what you're talking about, these boxes, human bodies, words and the singular meaning of things. How is that being changed in your way of dragging beauty?

Charity: I think it's a very human thing to have this perception of beauty that we have been taught by our televisions, our books and in magazines; by the success of people who look a certain way and those who buy alterations to change the look of their bodies.

I think that these things are shaping narratives that beauty is one specific thing. That womanhood and manhood are specific things. And that humanness is one specific thing. I know I'm not the first person who has said this ... but I've grown up with three sisters and female friends who feel the effects of society's pressures, and it's terrible. We live in a society that is misogynistic; it holds women up to standards that are ridiculous and then beats them down. When you look through history, it's been pressured on us ... centuries in the making. And I don't know if coming out of this can be a human thing. The human and our identity as a species is so correlated with these problems. If we were to truly change this, I'm not sure we would be human anymore.

Callum: I'm interested how these political ideas come through in your revision of beauty. Could you say a little bit more about what constitutes a 'beauty look' in drag terms?

Charity: I think beauty to me ... well, it's up to every single person to make up their own opinion of beauty, and it is whatever they find pleasing themselves. People say 'that's beautiful' about a piece of artwork that they like and to the next person it may not be so beautiful. So, why is it different when we are talking about ourselves? Generally, what makes something beautiful to me rests on a particular colour palette, silhouette, shape, line, composition ... these elements of art. And not just that; meanings, interest, intrigue and expressions of thought, I also find these beautiful. I could see a painting of a rotting apple, and it could be very beautiful.

Callum: It feels like we are in-between ways of thinking and seeing. You're thinking seriously about art having repercussions on how we understand what counts as the human and how this affects our lived experience in the environment. You're attending to these politically charged and embodied stakes in people's identities, bodies and existences through the art of drag, where beauty means many things. We could zoom in a little more here. Could you describe looks and performances that bounce off these ideas of beauty? And how this appears in all your weird, science-fiction and fantastical ways?

Charity: I use prosthetics and special-effects makeup to hide my features. Hiding my nose is one of my favourite things to do; the nose is a very human feature. No animals in the world have noses like us. If you look across species, what makes a nose for them is very different. It's something that seems so human that I like to get rid of. The first step in creating a creature look is changing the nose for me. I also alter my eyes and mouth. I always wear a coloured contact lens. If I'm a creature, I often change

my skin colour to a yellow or pink or green. I've got a passion for green skin. I think partly because it was used in the Wizard of Oz for the Wicked Witch of the West. Since I was a child, her character has always stuck with me as inspiration. That green, dead, corpse-like skin tone is a go-to for my palette.

Callum: I think green is especially interesting because, in your creatures, it references both witchy, supernatural and sci-fi, futurist elements. It also speaks to natural, organic things that go through processes of rot and change.

Charity: I do play a lot with natural elements in my looks. I like to use plants and foliage and flowers. One of my looks is a literal rose brought to life, with thorns all over my arms. I've done a Venus fly trap look in the past. And my forest witch has all these plants growing out of her. I do a lot of swampy-type creatures. I like playing with plants and naturalness in my creatures. I think it brings them into a ... location. They're not just this imaginary thing that exists out of the blue; they are actually somewhere.

Callum: Somewhere green ... the swamp is a natural place, but it is also fantastical. Swamps speak of possible growth, of weird creatures inside and coming out. It feels like much of what goes beyond, before and across the human in your drag is grounded in these green swampy sites.

Charity: Yes ... I take away from the human in ways, making it unreal. Representing the beautiful in its own way; distorting the body with weirdly shaped padding under skin suits, with lumps and bumps, stains and splatters on my body. I also try to make my looks cartoonish. Bringing them from two dimensions into a three-dimensional state. I like playing with paper and cardboard in my looks. There's almost this quality of drawing brought to life.

Callum: The way you play with [the] cartoonish ... it's usual to think the other way, of cartoons signalling a three-dimensional world represented on a two-dimensional surface. Instead, you combine two-dimensional materials – paper, cardboard cuttings – into prosthetics and appendages that change the way your body forms in three dimensions.

Just as the studio was described by Charity in terms of materials 'need[ing] somewhere to stay', references to naturalness in looks, invoking landscapes and botanical forms, give

characters a feeling of 'location'. An at once grounded and fantastical embodiment is necessary for Charity's creations, which are not conjured 'out of the blue' but are conceived as 'actually [coming from] somewhere'. This alludes to a mutual transformation between the figure and the ground, as well as in-between the aesthetic and ontological. Sprouting thorns, foliage and fabulous fronds, Charity utilizes paints, paper and cardboard to create exaggerated three dimensions. The previously outlined conception of costuming similarly seems to fabricate layers that spread like leaves across Charity's body. Tropes of green ecology and composting processes are materially imprinted in the stained fabrication of creatures, which merge with mediatized environments, as from a virtual swamp.

From fragments of the self and fractured humanist ideals, fantasies seep out and span potential spacetimes. Swamps provoke twistings of past/present and living/dying: per Jacquetta Hawkes's speculative archaeological prose, 'the swamp lives under a tremendous accumulation of its own past, tree-trunks, leaves [...] and scattered among them the broken bodies of animals – bones, empty shells, the wings of dragonflies' (1951: 64). Charity embodies the return of this scene through lumpy skin suits and protruding prosthetics, resurfacing the capacious signs of the swamp that 'sink as the particles of sediment begin to fall, burying all the dead stuff [...] in layers of forgetfulness' (Hawkes 1951: 64). The human body might be re-trans-figured – or swamped, as it were – becoming sub-merged in transformative encounters with plural and partial environments evoked through drag.

I turn to some theorizations of the inhuman, which not only direct a gaze beneath the surfaces of humanity and at once beyond its limits, but also invests this ambivalent scene with an ethical sense. Here, I bring Bracha Ettinger's, Karen Barad's and Kathryn Yusoff's writings into brief conversation (see also Bradley and Perkins forthcoming 2023 for a continuation of this conversation and an extended exploration of an inhuman sense that is shared between Ettinger and Barad). For Ettinger, '[w]e are here, hence we have been carried' (2018: 106). Following a revision of psychoanalysis from the feminine, a model for differentiation which is co-productive and non-antagonistic is theorized by

Ettinger as being imprinted in the human before birth, through the experience of gestation/pregnancy. This site is imagined as intrauterine, extending intergenerationally and becoming cosmic. Nonessential conceptions of difference arise via 'erotic antenna' that direct 'an impulse toward the other', which 'does not receive a human sense' though 'does not remain inhuman' either (Ettinger 2016: 160). This indeterminacy of an in/human desire is paralleled by Barad's work of 'confronting our inhumanity' and 'lack of compassion' by turning to the inhuman as a way 'to feel, to care, to respond' (2012: 216). Interrogating the inhuman(e), Barad's attentions mediate a '[s]tepping into the void, opening to possibilities, straying, going out of bounds, off the beaten path [...] not as consecutive moves but as experiments in in/determinacy' through which we might become more accountable for, and before, ourselves and others (2012: 208). Barad refuses the void as vacuous, redirecting critical attention to the kinds of erasure and covering-over that limit possibilities of being and relating between, which in turn displace and disembody matter. Adding to this, Yusoff regards 'the inhuman [as] a call across categories, material and symbolic, corporeal and incorporeal' that might make a difference to 'intimacies cut across life and nonlife in the [supposed] indifferent register of matter' (2018: n.pag.). We can regard Charity's drag as reintegrating supposedly inert material into the liveliness of entangled intimacies. Together, inhuman figurations seem to share in the reformulation of 'subjectivity [so that it] becomes both diffracted and assembled, both dispersed and partial' and thus possibly 'part of an alliance' (Ettinger 2016: 157).

This article emphasizes inscriptions of an-other always/already inhuman. Working critically in(side out of) anthropomorphism, through Charity's drag performances, the borders of bodies are crossed. The inside is returned through staged fantasy and shared imaginaries as a strategic site of deterritorialization, in the opening of a potential within for becoming without. We can work through our staging as anthropos, via critical rearticulations of our own inhuman(e)-ness and at the same time attend to Claire Colebrook's (2017) suggestion that 'We have always been post-Anthropocene'. I underscore an inhuman interpretation of Charity's drag: that the discounted persist without and might possibly be re-presented within. This potentializes Haraway's sense of

‘complex, dynamic and responsive’ processual relating, becoming with ‘the thing that is not oneself but with which one must go on’ in the human (2016: 58).

Troubling the possible composition of the posthuman and inhuman, gendered and anthropomorphic representations remain central in Charity’s drag. Here, what constitutes sex and species comes into conflict with contesting aspects of the other. Charity’s creatures hybridize both nonhuman and humanoid forms, further confusing the sexing of species and vice versa; a lizard lady is identified in the composite of green and scaly skin along with feminized facial features and the contour of breasts. Recollecting Braidotti’s critical thinking on the impossibility of being other-than-anthropomorphic, I ask: does drag always remain in some ways, but not only, a humanism? As asynchronous times unbound the body, is the renewal of outdated humanist ideals risked in drag’s lag? Resonating with these questions, Charity describes the need for a new language, however much this seems in tension with the gendering of the language and gaze that drag, as it proliferates in popular media, seems to standardize. I sense that Charity’s idea of a new language is by no means limited to the linguistic, instead transgressing the discursive limits of sex and species in terms that are affective, embodied, haptic and that which words fail. This interpretation resonates with Braidotti, as ‘beyond the confines of bound identities, art becomes necessarily inhuman’ and at the same time, it is also ‘posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of our embodied selves’ (2013: 107). Braidotti continues, ‘in so far as art stretches the boundaries of representation to the utmost, it reaches the limits of life itself and thus confronts the horizon of death’ (2013: 107).

Callum: You present these weird and sci-fi elements. There are also archaic, preternatural figures. It seems this expanse of space and time, between life and death, is often mediated by references to retro popular culture. Futurist and prehistorical things are expressed through, for example, a twisted version of Marge Simpson. This relates back to cartoonish drag ... where perhaps your most extravagant looks also come to feel eerily familiar?

Charity: I do a lot of character references from well-known television shows, films or games, and that’s a way of connecting people to my work. Being online and having a digital

profile, it's important to keep engagement high. I'm always on Instagram, doing stunts and the most to build an audience. It really works to do references to characters and media that people recognize. It helps when I'm trying to shock and gag. Doing characters and references is something I enjoy, but it's also about reading my audience. And I always make sure to mess these cartoon characters up a bit, like ... showing them at the end of a five-day bender.

Callum: A lot of the work you describe feels like recycling. You recognize these figures are valued by people, and you bring them to life – differently. You repeat things in weirder and camp ways. Maybe you could say more about this, how your looks also strive to be camp and funny.

Charity: I use irony a lot in my characters and performances. For example, I perform as a monster lady where I have these very long fingers. And all I'm trying to do is make a sandwich ... and I can't because of my bloody stupidly long fingers. I try and fail to open a jar and have to get someone in the audience to help. I smash another on the floor. I stick my fingers in the mess and I'm wiping it all over the bread, accidentally ripping it. Then I'm just crying over this ... and all whilst wearing a sixties-inspired housewife outfit. It feels very much ironic, relatable and silly. This monster, which you'd usually be terrified of and would eat you in a horror film, is failing at doing something we do often and easily. That brings vulnerability to my characters where you don't expect it. I also like shock humour. Giving a bath to a little baby pig on stage, dressed as a mummy pig, is shocking. And then making it into bacon afterwards is even more shocking! Again, it is funny because it's just so silly: I'm calm, I've got giant long eyelashes on and glittery eyelids, big heels and a little pig tail. It's ridiculous in a surreal way. I think it's showcasing humanity to themselves, to the audience. Through the lens of a creature, an essence of the human and its everyday experience, making a sandwich or bathing, is twisted.

Callum: I think that leads us nicely to think about some more ideas that seem prevalent in your work. How does the monstrous and grotesque show up in your drag?

Charity: Monstrous is a word that, I think, we all feel about ourselves as humans at times. There are times that I do feel like I'm a monster and an awful person. And then that correlation of awful[ness] and monstrosity is something that I try to break down in my drag. I try to bring backgrounds and humanity to my creatures, showing their vulnerability in day-to-day life. I also do this with my captions on Instagram ... There's an image of a monster and the caption describes how they're having a sad

day, having just sent their daughter off to college or something similarly mundane and relatable. Varied human emotions in my characters break this idea of monstrosity being one thing.

Callum: If the monster is normally conceived as something which we are not, and outside of us, it feels like you're very much bringing that in. And confusing what counts, inside-out.

Charity: Lots of my performances involve mess of some kind. I think mess is fun and works to bring out shock. Be it vomit, fake poo or any bodily fluid I can think of! Bringing these disgusting and grotesque things on stage and turning that ... getting a cheer from audiences for something they would not usually want to see. It feels powerful.

Callum: You've talked about shock value, which relates to your drag making people gag ... thinking of vomiting or these other messes that are staged across the borders of your body as a stunt or trick is interesting.

Charity: It depends on the venue of course, and the audience, but most of the time people love it. It's why I fake shit in my knickers and rub it all over myself dressed as a Playboy Bunny. It brings these disgusting and grotesque things out, and into a place of entertainment and fun. And this fits into subverting and challenging our notions.

Callum: Thinking about the inside – the shock of revealing what's inside, making things visible in new ways of seeing – I wonder whether and how your experiences of living with HIV resonate.

Charity: My drag comes out of my HIV. After I got diagnosed, I went through a rough patch, and I turned to drag as an outlet. Recently, I realized that I was creating these characters and writing these captions, bringing these vulnerabilities to the monstrous and subverting what society deems as scary ... and this reflects how I felt about my HIV and how society had taught me to feel about my HIV. It was me painting myself as a monster because I felt like a monster, and I didn't feel I could tell people that. Creating these characters and creatures that represented my feelings, and putting this into an image, felt therapeutic for me.

Callum: I didn't realize this was so concurrent, the evolution of your drag and your diagnosis.

Charity: My drag was spurred by my HIV diagnosis. Charity wouldn't be a thing if I wasn't HIV positive. I did a year of drag – my daily drag challenge for 365 days – and that was just after my diagnosis. If you go through and look at the captions, you can see my mindset and how it changes over the year, including more comedic captions for example. There were all sorts of things that I learned about myself and accepted through doing drag ... being me and having HIV was one of them.

The sense that drag as art makes possible a confrontation with death comes through most apparently in Charity's enactments of monstrous, ghostly and damaged forms of life. The standard vision of beauty, as a metaphorical outline of life, is morphed into a decomposed and abject embodiment of death. Art is activated on the horizon of death, working around its limits; Charity can 'see a painting of a rotting apple, and it could be very beautiful'. A sense of speculative fabulousness is expressed, queering the constitution of bodies in time and space. Freeman reminds us to be critical of 'forms of time [that] fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible' (2010: 11). The material effects of text on the mediational body are emphasized, as nonsequential time, in art, poetry and drag, reorganizing subjects into modes of expression 'as a way to manage excess' (Freeman 2010: 16). A possible unbinding through drag provokes the 'release of energy that surpasses the original stimulus' of binding (2010: 16), transforming both senses of time and body in a reformulation of beauty and what counts as in/visible. Through Charity's creature creations, beauteous bodies are un/bound in the bony corsetry that contains them, refashioning an aestheticized and gendered construction around the body's excesses.

As much as Charity emphasizes modes of visibility, this does not privilege the disembodied gaze nor what it would count as visible. Whilst the inhuman emphasizes the presence of an inside-out, this does not seem symptomatic of a phallic scopophilia seeking to render the inside of bodies visible. Responding to feelings of lack, and specifically lost senses of self and environment, Charity works within the currents of the scopophilic impulse to appropriate a sense of an originary inside, towards getting under human perspectives and positioning. Emptying out the inside might critically bypass the screen set-up by the masculine gaze in its desires to represent without what originates within (the

maternal body). This scopic drive is subverted as forms of loss and lack return to haunt the subject from beneath the screen, skein and skin. Similarly, perhaps the ghosts of homophobia are sublimated in tattoos, tensely rippling on Charity's skin, confronting the heteronormative gaze with embodied senses of touching a queer sur-face.

Working inside-out, Charity's drag seems to converge subject and object around the abject. Becoming vulnerable in our scopophilia, as audience members we are confronted by a felt sense of our own abjection beyond the gaze and its subjective parameters. Julia Kristeva's writings on the abject 'confront us [...] within our personal archaeology, even before existing outside of [the mother]' (1982: 13). For Kristeva, visual cues of the abject, which materially mark transgressions of bodily and psychic limits, include 'wounds with blood or pus' and the 'spasms and vomiting that protect me' (1982: 3). Barbara Creed's formulation of the monstrous feminine further follows the abject positioning of 'menstrual and excremental objects' from 'the body [that] looks as if it may tear apart' (1993: 14, 55). Additionally – as a laughing performer is not unironically seen as 'corpsing' – Charity's camp costuming and comical performances can be interpreted with Kristeva also: '[L]aughing [is] a way of placing and displacing abjection' (1982: 8).

Abject forms gesture to archaic phantasies, evoking originary enactments of gestation and birthing, which I argue, when re-turned with a difference, can generate capacities to carry and care. Echoing Creed (1993), these phantasies, when expressed in phallic logics of lack and negative valence, are projected in paranoia onto a fragile and permeable female body that becomes a threatening proxy of masculine-framed subjectivity. Beauty and monstrosity appear in paranoid parameters through Charity's drag, which must perhaps maintain associations with a humanism, in enactments of femininity, so as to abject it. Performances are staged against negative ontologies of the exceptional and isolated subject through the opening-up, sharing and working-through of our abjections with audiences. Charity's stuffing of skin suits to produce protruding bumps suggest something inside is gestating. Prosthetics and appendages go beyond the limits of the material body, enmeshed with the fabrications that exceed it. For Kristeva, the abject represents a 'harebrained staging of an abortion, of self-giving birth ever miscarried' (1982:

54). Can senses of caring and carrying be sustained through this, via loss and lack, in an aborted inside-out of the monstrously feminine and abject? Charity's descriptions of living with HIV seem to speak to this, resonating a project of revaluing the positive and negative status of things that threaten the borders of the subject and embracing an ontology of presence and persistence for the other on the inside. Wegenstein is also particularly critical of the aestheticized 'symbol of the spiked globe' that came to represent the HIV virus, seen as not only 'a metaphor for the danger of AIDS itself, but also for the tendency of the infected and affected' to be abstracted 'as inhabit[ing] such a separate universe' (2006: 5). Charity seems to imagine such inhabitation differently, stuffing skinsuits and emphasizing the protrusion of spikes, as an extended mediality that not only englobes bodies but also transforms the affects and valences contained within them.

The abject not only represents an unrepresentable in psychoanalytic terms but might also be significant to ecological discourses. Kristeva announces 'the abjection of self [to] be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundation of its own being' (1982: 5). Conceptions of what is lost can be reoriented around a shared ecofeminist politics, critically shifting constructions of the earth and women as lacking, as in the scholarship featured in *Anthropocene Feminism* (2017). Kristeva's sense of an inaugural loss can be extended to consider the irrevocable destruction wrought by humans on the environment. This article is less concerned with changing the terms of what is lost as it is with emphasizing how this construction of loss reiterates the human mind, body and its laws of representation as constituted in and by relations that are always at risk, troubled and staked in processes of living and dying. Figures of monsters and ghosts resonate differently through *Arts of Living on A Damaged Planet* (2017): as 'monsters are bodies tumbled into bodies; the art of telling monstrosity requires stories bundled into stories' (Tsing et al. 2017: M10). The inaugural environmental damages that define the Anthropocene must be reconceived in joint and plural terms, beyond singular phallic logics. Storying spans the many spacetimes that Charity's drag materially and affectively represents, amassing bodies in bodies, assembled collectively. The effects of this can be

fielded through Ingrid M. Parker's seeking to repair our 'limited ability to perceive' environmental loss (2017: M161). Changing what is accounted for and seen, we should 'learn how to transcend amnesia to remember ghosts, to transcend blindness to a new kind of sight' (Parker 2017: M165). This is necessary for us to grasp a posthuman figure delimited beyond the scope of our memory and imagination, towards re-membering, as described by Vinciane Despret: '[A] creative act involving fabulation, captioning and especially fabrication [...] re-member, as in recompose' (2017: 47, original emphasis).

Callum: *Thinking about the transformation of people, I want to close this conversation exploring how witnesses are welcomed inside your drag. How do viewers follow and mutate along with your drag, across boundaries and separations, possibly into a collective?*

Charity: *There's lots of different ways I interact with my audience ... in reality, on stage, through looks, emotions and gestures. I hope to take people out of their world. I used to work as a walk-about scare artist. In venues and clubs, I would creep around the room. In one corner I'd sit on someone's table and pour myself a glass of champagne or, I'd sit on the sink in the toilets painting my nails. I love to do interactive performances, where I'm more involved as a character playing in a space. It's about giving each character a place to be, in reality and fantasy. There's also that level of interaction online. I see my Instagram page as a personal art exhibition space and interacting with people is like I'm welcoming them into the museum.*

Callum: *Your mention of the museum seems to reflect all the past, forgotten and repressed things you return through your drag. It seems your audiences become participants, as you drag them along with you. Can collective resistance be engaged in these encounters? Do you think there is [a] possibility here to change what counts in terms of the human?*

Charity: *I think there is. There is the opportunity to change and alter people's perspectives on restrictive binaries, in a space where people not only feel comfortable and enjoy watching me, but they are surrounded by people who feel the same. This will hopefully push the narrative that it's okay to enjoy these things deemed disgusting and monstrous. People that follow me online are given a wider perspective on*

beauty and would hopefully find more fun and be comfortable in fancy dress costumes that are spooky and weird. Even silly, dressed like a fruit or something. That's got to be better than another sexy nurse outfit ... I think that these choices are the small changes that hopefully my work creates.

In many ways, it seems Charity's drag twists the negative into the positive, whilst detaching these valences from the embodied and affective forms they commonly connote. Disgust, the swamp, monstrosity and ghostliness produce unique relays which shock, gag and reinvigorate relations between performer and audience. Through this, the capacity to differently make sense of things in and by relating with others becomes possible. Potential resistance is collectivized and, additionally, merged with environments, as the body in drag comes to re-co-constitute the figure and the ground. Hauntings of the figure/ground make possible the return of relations with what was hitherto un/accounted for in loss and lack. Sites of co-production and potential resistance form between performer and audience, enlivened by shared affects and phantasies. Transformed via drag, things come to re-ac/count in and for each other differently. Charity's performance numbers reorder heterogenous participants outside the monologic economies of the singular human subject. Superseding any one drag present(ation), manifold personas are fragmented into and offer a constellation of entities to be moved in and by. Figurations of the self, feminine and human are partialized and potentialized, recollected in the other's excesses. Dredging the depths of earth, body and psyche, Charity returns repressions, in the club, on and off stage and crossing the screen.

I interpret inhuman drag, through the resurfacing of repression and history, in representation and embodiment, inside-out of bodies and spacetimes. The separating distinctions of self and other, sex and species are transgressed as they are transformed together. Charity might be a surrogate for a grotesque staging of rebirth, conjuring 'creatures of ambivalent entanglement' and 'landscape assemblages of multispecies living' (Tsing et al. 2017: M11). Through the capacity to carry each other, inside and outside of the human, a decentring of anthropos brings forth the ground up and in. Modes of working-through difference via collaborative (co-e)merging might take the place of

oppositional logics positioned against the monstrous. This (co-e)mergence traverses cuts in the association of living and dying, producing alternate past/presents and in/visibilities for unfolding and enfolding inhuman alliances. Overall, inhuman drag becomes an argument for our pre/positional response-ability in-un-towards others. As Charity Kase loosens and restitches human sk(e)ins, a case of and for inhuman drag directs towards the body, with a difference. The hope is that discourses that diagnose damage and lack, as closed 'cases of', can be returned through transformation in monstrous and mysterious bodies, as 'cases for' the opening of other stories, relays and relations.

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