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INSTRUMENTS OF EMBODIMENT

COSTUMING IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Eric C. Mullis

Instruments of Embodiment

Instruments of Embodiment draws on fashion theory and the philosophy of embodiment to investigate costuming in contemporary dance.

It weaves together philosophical theory and artistic practice by closely analyzing acclaimed works by contemporary choreographers, considering interviews with costume designers, and engaging in practice-as-research. Topics discussed include the historical evolution of contemporary dance costuming, Merce Cunningham's innovative collaborations with Robert Rauschenberg, and costumes used in Ohad Naharin's Virus (2001) and in a groundbreaking Butoh solo by Tatsumi Hijikata. The relationship between dance costuming and high fashion, wearable computing, and the role costume plays in dance reconstruction are also discussed and, along the way, an anarchist materialism is articulated which takes an egalitarian view of artistic collaboration and holds that experimental costume designs facilitate new forms of embodied experience and ways of seeing the body.

This book will be of great interest to students and scholars working in performance philosophy, philosophy of embodiment, dance and performance studies, and fashion theory.

Eric C. Mullis is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Queens University of Charlotte, USA. He has published essays on somaesthetics, dance technology, and dance ethics, as well as the book, *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance: Interdisciplinary Dance Research in the American South* (2019).

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Costuming in Contemporary Dance

Eric C. Mullis

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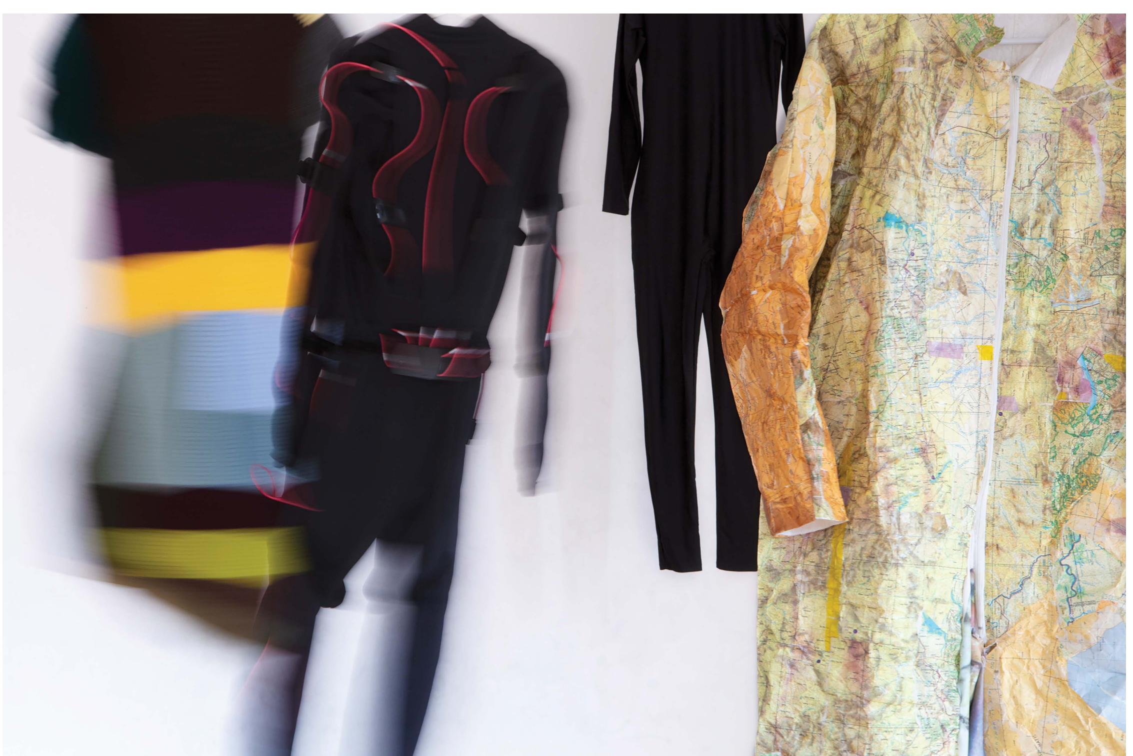

Figure 1 Suits

Source: Photo by Amy Herman.

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1 Introduction

This introductory chapter discusses a performance project by a philosopher of the body which capitalizes on the power of costume. Richard Shusterman shows that dress can position the wearer between two cultural fields and, in turn, stimulate creative thinking across disciplines. In this spirit, this chapter discusses the philosophical import of contemporary dance costuming and outlines the interdisciplinary methodology used in the book.

1.1 Conduits

Jérôme Bel's dancer portraits provide glimpses into the offstage lives of professional dancers. They are autobiographical micro-histories which, as stated on Bel's website, "establish a counterweight to accepted discourses from historians, critics, or choreographers." *Véronique Doisneau* (2004) is a solo for a Paris Opéra corps de ballet dancer of the same name in which she describes aspects of her career and dance sections from several acclaimed dances. *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2005) is a cross-cultural dialogue between Bel and a Thai Khon dancer. In *Lutz Förster* (2009), Förster discusses his career with Pina Bausch and, in *Cédric Andrieux* (2009), Andrieux shares stories from his time with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Most recently, *Isadora Duncan* (2019) examines the legacy of a deceased choreographer in collaboration with the long-time Duncan dancer and teacher Elizabeth Schwartz.

What stands out to me is the role costuming plays in these pieces—and in Bel's work more generally.[1] The early work *Shirtology* (1997) used multiple changes of mass-produced t-shirts to challenge a conventional understanding of performative subjectivity, and *Jérôme Bel* (1995) presents a mode of nakedness not usually associated with dancing. The dancer portraits capitalize on the symbolism of specialized dance costuming to critique practices of elite dance institutions. Both *Véronique Doisneau* and *Cédric Andrieux* begin with the dancers walking on stage in casual practice clothes: Doisneau in black athletic pants and a pink leotard and Andrieux in blue athletic pants and a gray hooded sweatshirt. Then, after verbally introducing a dance they will demonstrate, they change into more formal dance costumes: pointe shoes and a white tutu and, for Andrieux, a red halter-top unitard. Because those articles connote

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concert dance, changing into them helps indicate a shift to a more performative mode of embodiment. Doisneau and Andrieux go on to dance various dance phrases on stripped-down stages, with no theatrical lighting or décor, at times in silence. Whereas their practice clothes dramaturgically support the conceit of a professional dancer matter-of-factly sharing personal stories, their stylized costumes suggest the theatrical worlds of specific dance pieces (e.g., *Giselle* and Cunningham's *Suite for Five*) where their autobiographies have no import. The dance costumes are conduits into those worlds, but because there are no elaborate theatrical spectacles for the audience to be taken in by, the autobiographical details remain pertinent. Doisneau remains Doisneau and Andrieux remains Andrieux while they dance.

I have not discussed all the details of these thoughtful works, but it is clear that the costumes are instrumental for contrasting micro and macro dance histories. More specifically, Bel capitalizes on the fact that dress is always personal and social; that it is materially, functionally, and aesthetically integral for embodied experience and indicative of specific cultural practices and contexts (Entwistle, 2015, pp. 78–111). Inspired in part by Bel's approach, this book considers the philosophical import of costuming in contemporary concert dance. This chapter continues by discussing an intriguing costume experiment by a contemporary philosopher of embodiment and the way costuming factored into the anarchist aesthetics developed by John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Along the way, the question of why dress has not been sufficiently addressed by philosophers is examined, as is the tendency of dance studies to view costuming as having less artistic significance than choreography. The chapter concludes with an outline that charts a course for thinking philosophically about the manifold relationships between costume and the dancing body.

1.2 A Man in Gold

Richard Shusterman is a contemporary body philosopher who is keenly interested in the role embodiment plays in art practice, appreciation, and theory. In recent years, he embarked on a multi-year artistic collaboration with the Parisian photographer Yann Toma. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find a professional philosopher willing to pose for an experimental art photographer and, indeed, to do so while wearing a glittery, gold-colored unitard that covers all the surfaces of the body, except for the hands, neck, and the head. Admirably, Shusterman wears the revealing outfit for artistic purposes and, in interdisciplinary fashion, uses tools of philosophical analysis to think through his experiences (2012, pp. 239–261, 2016, 2019).

The project began when Toma asked Shusterman if he would be willing to model for his photographic series, *Radiant Flux*. In studio sessions for the series, Toma asks subjects to either pose naked or wear a sparkly golden bodysuit and then, in a manner reminiscent of Man Ray's light painting technique, he uses a long-exposure camera setting and moves handlamps near their bodies

(Naumann, 2003). The developed photographs show bands of light streaming and circulating around the subject that are subtly reflected on the surfaces of the skin or the costume. Because the bodysuit aestheticizes a naked silhouette, and because, at the time of Toma's proposal, Shusterman was 60 years old and had no experience working as an art model, he was originally reluctant to wear it. However, he eventually came to see that the collaboration afforded him a unique opportunity to take his work in the pragmatist philosophy of embodiment in a new direction (2012, pp. 255–256).

Briefly, pragmatist philosophy was originally advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among other things, it is characterized by the belief that theory should be informed by the details of practice. For example, political philosophy ought to be rooted in historical and contemporary social realities, and ethical theory based on concrete details of day-to-day moral situations (Pappas, 2008). Further, James and Dewey advocated for a meliorism which holds that if theory is rooted in practice, it is better able to solve problems such as how a government should address issues of distributive justice or how would-be parents should navigate the ever-increasing array of genetic screening options (Eldridge, 1998). Theory is most powerful when it is not done for its own sake, but when it is provoked by real-world problems which it then helps clarify and ameliorate. Also, I should say here that the pragmatists were influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, which upended philosophical and religious notions of fixed natural essences, and that, relatedly, they argued for a metaphysical pluralism which holds that natural, social, and personal realities continually evolve and may be intentionally modified so experience becomes more intelligible, diverse, and meaningful (Dewey, 1958, 1997).

Before developing *The Man in Gold* project, Shusterman had practiced and theoretically analyzed several body disciplines including the Feldenkrais Method and Zen meditation (2008, pp. 24–27, 2012, pp. 288–314). His work in the interdisciplinary field of "somaesthetics" (which he founded) is based on the pluralist beliefs that embodiment is not fixed and that new sensations and forms of knowledge can be cultivated by self-reflectively experimenting with embodiment (Shusterman, 1999). This has often taken Shusterman outside of his comfort zone and explains why he was ultimately amenable to Toma's proposal. In turn, after discovering that the costume significantly affected his embodied experience (and to some extent destabilized his sense of self), the collaboration developed in an unanticipated direction, with the duo spontaneously deciding to leave the privacy of the photo studio to photograph and film in public spaces. Hence, Shusterman found himself experimenting with not only photographic modeling but also site-adaptive theatrical performance.

He was likely aware that many of his fellow philosophers would dismiss *The Man in Gold* as something of a stunt that has little to do with philosophy proper. Such criticism is premised, among other things, on the belief that dress, fashion, and theatrical costuming are not worthy of serious attention. Of course, notable exceptions are Georg Simmel (1957) and Walter Benjamin's (1999,

pp. 62–80) arguments that contemporary fashion is part and parcel of modernity, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986, pp. 374–382) account of the role dress plays in marking social distinctions, and Gilles Deleuze's (1993, pp. 121–123) brief comments about Baroque dress, but the broader neglect of dress is consistent with philosophy's historical emphasis on body–mind dualism and the metaphysics of presence. In contrast, somaesthetics is indicative of a more recent trend in which scholars have focused on the details of embodied experience as well as the cultural practices that inform and contextualize it. As I have argued elsewhere, Shusterman does not consider his practice of performing in the costume in light of relevant theatre or dance traditions nor scholarship in performance studies but uses it to critique the way philosophy is commonly done (Mullis, 2020; also see Zamir, 2018). I continue by examining his critique and the implications it has for performance studies.

Shusterman's body-based experimentalism diverges from the conventional understanding that philosophy is a discursive practice. Historical precedents are Dewey's practice of the Alexander Technique (with the founder F.M. Alexander) to investigate possibilities of body–mind integration and William James's experiments with psychoactive drugs to research their psychological effects. Many of the philosophers' peers rejected those endeavors as wastes of time (Bloch, 2011; Richardson, 2007). Shusterman's project is unconventional because, in investigating what for him is a unique form of embodied experience, it breaks the norms of professional philosophy.

As Jacques Derrida argues, Western philosophy is logocentric, placing emphasis on the value of the written and spoken word (2016, pp. 80–96). This is apparent in professional philosophical writing as well as in the presentation formats that are commonly used at philosophy conferences where presenters read prepared remarks and follow norms of comportment and dress consistent with business professionalism. This is the reason why, when one is at a conference held in the ubiquitous hotel conference center, it is difficult to distinguish the philosophers from the business executives who are meeting elsewhere in the building. Like them, the philosophers wear mass-produced, ready-to-wear business clothing, downplay their physicality, and present their ideas to seated audiences. Shusterman's body-based experimentalism, however, led him to do philosophy by dressing in a flashy bodysuit and silently posing for an art photographer. The contrast highlights the degree to which somaesthetic sameness pervades professional philosophy and, by extension, academia.

One could reply that dress is ultimately unimportant for the development, articulation, and reception of philosophical thinking and that following the norms of business professionalism is simply a practical matter; somaesthetic sameness and standardized presentation formats ensure order and help maximize the use of time. Shusterman has a unique perspective on this because he is an Oxford-trained philosopher with decades of experience presenting his thinking in standardized conference formats. At the same time, his pragmatism has led him to places outside of the institutions of academia; he has worn a traditional *gi* while living in a Japanese Zen monastery and a dance costume

while working with Toma, and those experiences have made it evident that the performative norms of professional philosophy function in an epistemologically self-reinforcing manner. To illustrate with an analogy, how one habitually moves through physical space becomes apparent only upon studying yoga, dance, or the martial arts because the spatial logics inherent to those practices afford new ways of moving. In turn, they provide a new vantage point on the instrumental logic which characterizes everyday tasks such as driving a car, climbing stairs, or raking the lawn. Pragmatism emphasizes that one can see beyond existing epistemological horizons and become aware of how they frame experience only if practices which provide different forms of knowledge are engaged. This contrasts the view that the intellect has full access to reality and, concomitantly, that what is unfamiliar can be fully grasped even though it is not experienced first-hand. In this view, a philosopher of dance, for example, does not need to learn how to dance, choreograph, or otherwise meaningfully interact with dance artists because it is ultimately sufficient to observe and think about the practice. One never needs to step into a dance studio, dance, or try on a dance costume.

Even if the question regarding whether the performative standards of professional philosophy could admit of more variety remains unanswered, it is certain that alternatives to those standards can become apparent only if what seems unconventional is embraced. Silent and dressed in his unusual costume, Shusterman demonstrates that the philosopher must personally experiment with dress if they are to be certain about whether and to what extent it is relevant for philosophy. To anticipate a point to be developed in a moment, a pragmatist way of life entails continually exploring epistemological horizons. It is fueled by a sense of restlessness which arises when somaesthetic experience becomes too predictable and familiar. Arguably, that way of life should, at times, appear unusual and unconventional.[2]

The skeptic could question whether experimenting with dress in fact produces embodied knowledge in the way pursuing a novel somatic practice does. After all, different kinds of clothing may be worn while practicing Tai Chi or Irish step-dancing; anything that facilitates movement will do. Further, flesh and fabric are ontologically distinct, for flesh is sentient and animate while clothing is crafted from inanimate materials. Hence, since dress is distinct from the wearer's body, how Shusterman dresses has little to do with the embodied knowledge he cultivates while posing for Toma.

The border between fabric and flesh is unique. Early in their work, James and Dewey questioned the presumption that the body has a distinct border that distinguishes it from things in the environment (James, 1890; Dewey, 2011). Their view was informed by functional psychology, which holds that habits incorporate structural dynamics of things into the flesh and that, below the level of consciousness, they actively frame experience in terms of affordances for action. For example, through repetitious training, the spatial layout of the piano keyboard is patterned into the pianist's hands, and this renders the piano available to them to the extent that the distinction between their body and

instrument blurs while playing (Alperson, 2008). Similarly, because of habit, the distinction between feet and shoes dissolves in the act of running, and a gravel path appears in experience as able-to-be-run-on.

Further, articles of clothing have the power to elicit modes of bodily being that have become less familiar over time. The retired professional athlete who puts on the uniform they wore in their younger days may feel old habits mobilizing in their body. For example, the former baseball player may be overcome by a desire to swing a bat, or the ice skater senses an urge to speed over the ice once again. Stimulation of habits by clothing can elicit propositional knowledge about specific plays, games, venues, or teammates. Changing the example, a woman who takes out of the closet a power suit that she regularly wore to work in the 1980s may call to mind the psychophysical sense of empowerment it fostered in the context of a sexist work environment and, in turn, specific men who did not respect her (Entwistle, 2015, pp. 187–191). Because habits are characteristically intermedial, the border between animate flesh and inanimate material is not hard and fast.

This helps clarify how Shusterman's costume challenged his familiar modes of embodiment. To illustrate with an example, upon moving to a foreign country, one finds that existing habits no longer efficiently mediate experience and, consequently, that a great deal of attention must be dedicated to simple tasks such as shopping for food or getting to work. Upon being fatigued by the extra perceptual, mental, and physical expenditure, one appreciates how habits normally render the environment readily intelligible and actionable. Since Shusterman did not have the know-how of an experienced photographic model (e.g., he likely did not have the ability to accurately repeat unfamiliar postures or to clearly envision how his poses appeared from Toma's vantage point) and since the bodysuit materially, functionally, and aesthetically differed from his normal clothing, he had to attend carefully to the details of his postures and movements. The unfamiliar costume rendered his body unfamiliar and called for new ways of perceiving and acting.

Because pragmatists hold the non-essentialist view that the self is a collection of mental, emotional, and physical habits, they believe that somatic experimentation can effect lasting changes to it (Shusterman, 2000a, pp. 236–261). Shusterman develops this point in scholarly work that centers on the postmodern notion of "creative self-fashioning." Nietzsche and Foucault argued that the self is plastic and that the more conventional belief that it is fixed has been used to justify the marginalization and oppression of various peoples (2000b). Whereas Nietzsche (2002) focused on Christianity's notion of an unchanging eternal soul (which is implicated in an eschatological narrative regarding the struggle between forces of good and evil), Foucault observed that the key for heteronormativity is clearly defining homosexual deviance and meeting it with surveillance and punishment (Nietzsche, 2002; Foucault, 1984, pp. 291–330).

Work in cultural anthropology, sociology, feminist philosophy, and other disciplines has shown that the self is constructed in specific social contexts and that individuals may, to some extent, pursue strategies of self-reconstruction (Elliot,

2019). This was anticipated by Nietzsche who advocated for light, ebullient dancing that resisted Christianity's restrictive and prudish view of embodiment and by Foucault who personally experimented with sadomasochistic homosexuality in an effort to resist the heteronormative status quo (LaMothe, 2006; Kingston, 2009). Shusterman takes a more aesthetic approach to technologies of self-fashioning by analyzing, critically evaluating, and practicing popular techniques of self-styling and self-care: meditation, exercise regimens, and somatic disciplines such as postural yoga, the Alexander Technique, and the Feldenkrais Method. These and other body practices procure diverse somaesthetic experiences and foster personal transformation.

To take this argument further it can be noted that, in antiquity, Socrates, the Cynics, Epicureans, Stoics, Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists articulated metaphysical, epistemological, aesthetic, ethical, and sociopolitical beliefs that informed distinctive ways of life (Hadot & Davidson, 1995; Hall & Ames, 1998). With regard to dress, Diogenes the Cynic used a rigorous asceticism (e.g., living in a state of homelessness and wearing tattered clothes) and confrontational public behavior to critique Athenian values regarding wealth, consumption, and social prestige (Babich, 2011). Confucius held that clothing and bodily comportment should performatively demarcate the social roles of a role-based virtue ethic and the Daoist tradition that philosopher-sages will ignore the dress standards of a culture that has lost touch with the natural world. In all these cases, clothing is instrumental for a philosophical way of life because it publicly expresses and subjectively reinforces commitment to specific philosophical beliefs.

For many contemporary scholars, a key aspect of a philosophical way of life is the ethics of social responsibility. Some have expressed concern that construing philosophy as a purely intellectual affair renders it complicit with the unjust status quo. The utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer (2011) has argued that, not unlike the citizen who believes in social or environmental justice, those working in ethics, environmental philosophy, or sociopolitical philosophy are obligated to make informed decisions about their consumption practices. This includes considering the origin of one's clothing and, more specifically, whether clothing manufacturers engage in ethical and environmentally sustainable practices. Also, it entails critically evaluating social values that professional clothing styles manifest, for example, that women's fashion generally reveals more of the body than men's fashion and that, regardless of gender, business professionalism is historically intertwined with the norm of whiteness (McDonald & Toglia, 2010).

With the nature of habit and the relationship between dress and a philosophical way of life in mind, it is clear that Toma and Shusterman's project performatively critiques conventions of professional philosophy and supports the position that dress is important for the philosophy of embodiment. It is important, however, not to lose sight of the fact that Toma repurposed a dance costume for *Radiant Flux*, a design variation of the leotard (a knit form-fitting bodysuit without legs or sleeves) which was developed in the late 18th century

for use in circus routines and was then adopted for use in ballet rehearsal and performance (Arrighi, 2012; Chazin-Bennahum, 2002). Though Shusterman focuses on implications his costume has for philosophy as a discipline, it also situates him between philosophy and contemporary movement performance.

1.3 Outsider Performance

Toma and Shusterman brought expertise in photography and philosophy to their collaboration but were relatively unfamiliar with concert dance and relevant scholarship in performance studies. Shusterman's autobiographical writings about the project emphasize phenomenological experience during performative experiments in which he and Toma followed their impulses to try new things. This is reminiscent of work in experimental costuming in which a design is created or repurposed with the explicit intent of challenging perceptual and physical habits instead of, as is more commonly the case, using it to support choreography and/or dramatic content (Bugg, 2014).

Approached as a tool of creative self-fashioning meant downplaying the cultural significance of the unitard. Shusterman mentions that Toma received a pair of luminescent unitards from his parents who danced at the Paris Opéra Ballet in the 1970s and 1980s; however, he does not consider the significance of donning a costume previously worn by an elite dancer (2016, p. 21). Beyond the fact that it is linked to such a prestigious dance institution (indeed, it is home to one of the world's premiere ballet companies), it was at one point intimately associated with the body of its original owner. Dress functions metonymically, with its form suggesting the size and shape of the body and idiosyncratic patterns indicating how they moved in the world. Metonymy is especially evident in second skin costuming that directly contacts and physically interacts with the majority of the wearer's naked skin.[3]

Shusterman moreover does not consider the normative function the unitard design is intended to perform. Drawing on an aspect of Foucault's work, form-fitting dance costuming is often used in hierarchically organized dance institutions because it facilitates the observation of bodies training to have uniform musculature, comportment, and technique (Foucault, 2012; Green, 2003). In keeping with the notions of surveillance and biopower, the dancer's body must be seen by instructors and audiences in such a way that it may be assessed in terms of standards of virtuosity and beauty. Of course, Shusterman is not a professional dancer, and he does not have the training necessary to animate theatrically the spectacular costume. Instead, he performs pedestrian actions such as walking, running, or taking simple poses. Last, though it is designed specifically for the proscenium stage, Shusterman has on occasion ventured into public and semi-public spaces where the costume marks him as out of place. Hence, passersby encounter a middle-aged man in a costume normally worn by young dancers on stage who, instead of dancing, silently walks around, runs from location to location, and briefly poses for Toma.

These points show that the costume performs in ways that exceed the parameters of Shusterman's self-fashioning project. As a material object, it is intertwined with the history of an elite dance institution and the body of the original wearer and, in terms of functionality, it is conventionally associated with aestheticizing a particular somatic type and practically facilitating dance technique. Interestingly, Shusterman's repurposing of the costume is similar in spirit to Bel's micro histories, for both call attention to conventional uses of the unitard design in concert dance. Indeed, Shusterman's critique goes further because, whereas Bel's work is generally presented on stripped-down proscenium stages for theatre-going audiences, Shusterman breaks the circle of theatrical self-referentiality by bravely taking to the streets. More generally then, *The Man in Gold* highlights two ways dress fosters uniformity; it critiques the norm of somaesthetic sameness in professional philosophy and the normalizing functions of the traditional dance costume design. Taking a cue from Shusterman's intriguing project, this book investigates the intersection of philosophy and costumed performance.

1.4 No Fixed Points

The field of costume studies has grown substantially in recent decades, with scholars advancing historical and theoretical analyses of particular designs and design traditions. The work is intertwined with fashion theory, which utilizes scholarship in anthropology, sociology, art history, and philosophy to investigate the production, dissemination, consumption, and display of dress. However, with a few notable exceptions, scholars working in dance studies have had little to say about costuming.[4] It should be considered, however, because, as discussed earlier, costumes serve to destabilize the self, which is consistent with choreographic methods that aim not to reproduce codified technique but to generate novel embodied states and ways of moving. This calls to mind, for example, Tatsumi Hijikata's use of body paint and unconventional costumes to facilitate his *Ankoko Butoh*, which characteristically emphasized states of dramatic psychophysical transformation (Baird, 2012). Also, just as there are connections between concert dance and the social choreography that characterized everyday life, costuming and everyday dress are fundamentally intertwined. Consistent with a broad notion of "performance" which holds that the performative occurs in any social context, dance studies takes the position that all human activity entails choreographic ordering. That is, dance presented on the concert stage shares with sport, political protest, and other kinds of public gathering the systematic organization of bodies in space and, in formalizing or abstracting such orderings, it offers them for critical scrutiny. In similar fashion, dance costuming is wedded to everyday dress, for it imitates or shows alternatives to fashion trends or helps envision alternative social realities. As with movement, the medium of dress becomes explicit in the imaginary space of the theatre to the extent that audiences are encouraged to see it anew.