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Citation: Hann, Rachel (2021) Sportswear Performs. In: Sports Plays. Routledge, London, pp. 169-173. ISBN 9780367409425, 9780367409395, 9780367810016

Published by: Routledge

URL: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367810016> <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367810016>>

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Sportswear Performs

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Hann, Rachel (2021) 'Sportswear Performs', in Laine, Eero and Chow, Broderick eds. *Sport Plays*, New York and London: Routledge: pp. 169-173

ISBN 9780367409425

[--page 169--] The contributors to this section on Sports Equipment engage with the gendered, political, and material dimensions of sport—with a particular focus on sportswear (extending to the places and practices of preparing bodies for sport). This introduction has been written as a selected guide to critical lenses that might aid a reading of the chapters. The term 'equipment' is taken to be inclusive of a range of technologies that perform alongside and with human bodies, not least clothing. Performers have long known that costume practices exceed a purely aesthetic dimension (of what it looks like), or as actor trainer Stella Adler put it, '[w]hat you put on affects you inside'¹. Whether the fit of a hat or the flow of a dress, these costumed relations can alter an individual's performance. Athletes know this same relationship. To perform in a certain way again and again, requires a bodily preparation that is inclusive of the clothes worn.

The Grammy Award winning music video for *Here It Goes Again* (2005) by OK GO affords an adapt example to begin a discussion on the intersection of sports equipment and performance.² The quartet of Damian Kulash, Tim Nordwind, Dan Konopka and Andy Ross lip synced along to their US Billboard Top 40 selling track while performing set choreography using eight treadmills. The designed scene, or scenography, consisted of the

¹ Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2000), 198

² OK GO, "Here It Goes Again (Official Music Video)," *YouTube*, February 26, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTAAAsCNK7RA>.

treadmills pushed up against each other in two rows of four and filmed using a single fixed position camera. Completed by an un-ironed store-brought silver backcloth, the setup invited the band to jump between the alternating directions of the treadmills. The choreography, performed all in one take, was generated by the interface of human and technology. While possibly an all too literal example of performing sports equipment, OK GO's staging for their video serves to highlight an underlying premise featured in this section of *Sport Plays*; that sports equipment enables human bodies to act and feel differently.

[--page 170--] Bodily techniques, such as stretches or rehearsals, are augmented and furthered by technological techniques. Indeed, actors and athletes each share a focus on technique, or training, to prepare their bodies to act in certain ways for certain periods. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that techniques are culturally produced, communicated and practiced. Thomas Macho describes the German concept of *Kulturtechniken*, or cultural techniques, "such as writing, reading, painting, counting, making music – are always older than the concepts that are generated from them."³ For Macho and others interested in materialist media theory, techniques precede meaning. In particular, cultural techniques afford a way of describing how insight, new knowledges, or concepts emerge from the techniques practiced by an individual or society. Equipment techniques, as distinct from the equipment itself, facilitate the modes of thinking and knowledge that come to define the technology in question. In this manner, a focus on sport equipment techniques shifts the discussion beyond human-equipment *uses* to an understanding of how human perspectives are *wrought* through techniques as diverse as actor training to preparing a motor vehicle for a race. Techniques become the object of study.

³ Thomas Macho, "Zeit und Zahl: Kalender- und Zeitrechnung als Kulturtechniken," in *Bild-Schrift-Zahl*, eds. Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), 179.

The materialities of human-equipment techniques can be understood from a multitude of perspectives. For instance, assemblage theory presents humans as constituted through assemblages of assemblages. Manuel DeLanda argues that there are always larger and smaller assemblages, which are permanently in motion.⁴ Whether as mundane as a pencil slowing going blunt or as grand as the transition from plant life to fossil, assemblages are motions of various things, temperatures, pressures and flows that combine to perform in certain ways for a certain time period. Donna Haraway's approach to cyborg feminism further argues this point to cite the porousness of human and nonhuman processes.⁵ Haraway suggests that humans are never alone, we are always with nonhuman species. What is described as "the human condition" is produced through a symbiosis with nonhuman entities.⁶ A neat intersection of this provocation is that human thriving is only possible due to this symbiotic role of non-human bacteria in the digestion system. Human performance is arguably generated through, or as a consequence of, these assemblages of assemblages that exceed a strict focus on 'human' as an absolute category. Whether cyborg feminism or assemblage theory, these perspectives frame sports equipment as operating to further augment human bodily processes to perform through an entanglement of things, materials, and motions.

Posthuman perspectives on materiality, such as those put forward by Haraway and DeLanda, do not preclude cultural difference. Sports equipment techniques are practiced differently dependant on a range of social normativities, rituals, or expectations. Gender, race, and sexual orientations frame how material experiences are performed. Legacy Russell's proposal for "glitch feminism" presents a case for political self-determinism in the

⁴ Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 104.

⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 97.

wake of white feminism's assumptions on the essentialising criteria of woman, Black, and lesbian.⁷ Glitching is a political act that refuses and refutes binary structures "at that trippy and trip-wired crossroad of gender, race, and sexuality one finds the power of the glitch."⁸ Sports [--page 171--] equipment glitches can be as straightforward as resisting gendered branding or stereotypes that are assigned upon sportswear, sporting events, or techniques. It can also be as complex as practicing hybridizing, non-binary, anti-category technologies of appearance through assemblages that continually reform and renegotiate who and what you are. This glitching site of political self-determinism is also a site of material indeterminism; where the rules, frameworks, and ideologies of self are inconsistent, error-laden, and incessantly caught between failure and success. How sports equipment performs is also bound to the way in which sport equipment is worn, held, used, and remediated.

The feel of sportswear is often integral to a desired performance, and yet this feel is produced through a combination of the symbolic as well as the physical. Psychologists Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky's proposal for "enclothed cognition" offers a framework that addresses this tension.⁹ In a laboratory experiment, when different groups were asked to complete a simple task, but with one in general wear and the other in a white lab coat, the group in the coat performed better.¹⁰ In a second experimental phase, the same white lab coat was presented to one group as a "doctor's coat" and the other a "painter's coat." The group in the doctor's coats performed marginally better.¹¹ The equipment of the lab coat could change its performance, or at least its influence upon human performance, purely through its symbolic associations. While by no means the only factor at play in these studies, the idea

⁷ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 8.

⁸ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 7.

⁹ Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky, "Enclothed Cognition," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (July 2012): 918.

¹⁰ Adam and Galinsky, "Enclothed Cognition," 919.

¹¹ Adam and Galinsky, "Enclothed Cognition," 922.

that sportswear prepares bodies to perform is also, at least in part, managed by the way in which these same items are symbolically worn. To wear an item of clothing that is already embroiled with meaning, changes the feel for the wearer—even when the item itself is materially the same.

To perform is the *raison d'être* of sport. To exceed, excel, and redefine the potential of human performance is a cultural driving force that often transgresses competitive structures or rules. In this manner, sport is arguably a cultural framework for understanding the limits of human performance. Jon McKenzie echoes this line of thought in his framing of “organisational performance,” as the management of efficiency, and “technological performance,” to stress how products/computers/things perform in certain ways.¹² McKenzie also notes that “cultural performances” are acts of efficacy that produce emotions, meanings and feelings.¹³ Sport performances sit across these three forms. Technological effectiveness (suitability of equipment) and organisational efficiency (economical use) are direct frames of reference when discussing sport performances, whether running times or motorsport wins. Yet, cultural efficacy (symbolic meaning) is also produced by these events. Football or soccer matches form communities that result in cultural practices such as rehearsed actions (songs, gestures) and modes of appearance (team shirts). The act of preparing your body to go on a Sunday run, from the stretches you do to warm up and the brand of shoe you wear, is culturally codified. To investigate sport equipment and performance is to study how these three forms intersect to produce events, acts or scenes through technological, cultural, and organisational lenses.

¹² Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 5-10.

¹³ McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 7.

[--page 172--] Investigations of sportswear performances offer a distinct vantagepoint from which to understand and conceptualise the techniques of human performance. The provocation that sportswear performs, possibly independently or on its own terms, invites the argument that human performances exceed a strict focus on “the body.” Jean Luc-Nancy asked a similar question when reflecting on Western cultural norms: “Does anyone else in the world know anything like ‘the body’? It’s our old culture’s latest, most worked over, sifted, refined, dismantled, and reconstructed product.”¹⁴ *The body* is a flattening essentialism that arguably evades or erases the complex labors of nonhuman things, species, and processes entangled within performances of “the human.” For instance, sportswear is a known separation from muscle fibers or skin texture, akin to how a costume is a known separation from an actor. Yet, within critical discussions on sport or acting performance, the idea that these bodies—of the human (athlete or actor) and the nonhuman (sportswear or costume)—are performing independently are flattened to sustain the premise of *the body* as a singular unit. The labors of clothes (other species, ecological relations, etc.) are all too often collapsed into this essentialist catch all unit that covers a varied range of biological, cultural and technological processes. It is time to move on from *the body* and talk about *bodies*.

In the OK GO video, the band members performed through an interplay of bodies inclusive of clothes acting *with* fleshy muscular systems and firm skeletons. The collective motions of these bodies moved each other, where their clothes—as an entanglement of fibres/layers/textures—sustain their movements and vice versa. Certain clothes perform in certain ways. If these processes are collapsed into the actions of *the body*, this potentially erases the labors of these nonhuman things in preparing humans to perform differently. Even if only in cultural terms, such as a change of clothes marking a transition from one

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 7.

behavioural state to another, these nonhuman devices evidently impact how humans feel prepared, able and ready to perform. As Russell states, “bodies are journeys.”¹⁵ If assessments of human performance extend to embrace the affordances of multiple bodies, it also invites a renewed critical framework for debating the porousness of human-world politics more broadly.

The augmentation of human performance through sports equipment techniques can result in performances that are not always intentional or planned. Failures of sports equipment “act out” dramatically. For instance, Cuban Pole Vaulters Lázaro Eduardo Borges began running for his first attempt at 5.35m at the London 2012 Olympic Games with his fibreglass pole in hand as he had done many times before. Having been the Silver medallist at the 2011 World Championships, Borges was an experienced vaulter and this was his second Olympic Games. With the pole successfully planted in the “box” (the area designed to provide a base for the pole), Borges lent back and completed the take off and swing back positions before the pole broke into three pieces. Borges luckily had enough forward motion and landed on the crash mat unharmed. The failure of Borges fibreglass pole to perform as expected highlights the interdependence of human and nonhuman technologies in the act of vaulting. The pole acted out. While on one level, a failure to perform, the action of the pole breaking [---page 173---] can also be viewed as realising a different “potential performance.” As with the human component, the pole always had the potential to perform in a number of different ways. Borges’s skill is in his ability to craft the interface of human-pole to perform in certain ways again and again. The rehearsal of this human-pole assemblage is the purpose of the years of training that Borges has partaken in to reach the games. Importantly, as with all forms of performance, rehearsal does not preclude the potential for an assemblage to perform differently. Moreover, in the terms of Richard Schechner, the point at which the pole

¹⁵ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 146.

broke transformed its performance from one of “efficiency” to that of “spectacular.”¹⁶ The pole’s spectacular performance as it scattered into three pieces exceeded its designed, or rehearsed, efficiency. Whether a glitch or a drama in-and-of-itself, the pole’s spectacular performance serves as an adapt reminder of how nonhumans perform in their own surprising ways.

In summary and byway of an introduction to this section, sports equipment techniques can be studied from a variety of different contexts, orientations, and materialities. The intersection of performance and sport equipment invites a close discussion on what, how and why the performance of sportswear can afford critical insights into human-world relations more broadly. Whether challenging *the body* or embracing glitch feminism, encloded cognition or cultural techniques, these positions are offered as critical lens from which to read the chapters featured that offer renewed routes for investigating the gendered, political and material relations that frame sports equipment.

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¹⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 243.

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