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Performing Powderbubble

by

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Introduction:

In the planning of this thesis, I decided to take the opportunity to explore an area that is of particular interest to me. I have had personal involvement with the development of the club phenomenon 'Powderbubble', so it seemed only natural that I use this as the focus of my investigation into performance. The aim of this project is to research and write about an event that I have had intimate experience with, in the hope that it will make this thesis a personal investigation.

This thesis examines the role of performance in the night club space. It specifically focuses on the dynamics at play when one assumes a persona for the duration of a night. It touches on the complex ways in which identity works in the context of a night-club. I have chosen to look at this specific club event, 'Powderbubble', because of its significance both culturally and socially with regard to clubbing in Dublin.

There are two different types of performance that take place at Powderbubble; the performance of identity (as in the performance of gender, sex, and sexuality) and the performance of the created persona, (the audience at Powderbubble are encouraged to dress-up for the occasion and it is precisely this creation and performance of such characters, by the audience, that is defined here by the term *created persona*.)

Powderbubble is an interesting space because it courts both types of performance. What is also interesting about Powderbubble is that it has managed to push the boundaries of clubbing in Dublin. For example traditionally the structure of entertainment in clubs consisted of a 'stage' and

an 'audience', what was unique about Powderbubble was that it blurred the boundary between stage and audience. The performers would mix with the audience who were in turn encouraged to become performers themselves.

I begin by describing Powderbubble as a club event, how it started and how it functioned. I then go on to place Powderbubble within various different contexts to describe the genre in which it existed. In this study I shall be exploring identity and performance and how it is said that identity is constantly acted out in a ritualistic manner. I will also be looking at the problematics of 'performativity' and how the performing of identity can lead to its own derailment. In particular this thesis touches on the problems of implicit self definition, and how defining oneself can lead to one's own subversion and derailment.

I then go on to examine the dynamics of identity in the club space in relation to two case studies that I have carried out. I ask how different is the artiste to the created persona? I examine identity in terms of a post-structuralists purview, which I hope will help explain the dynamics of identity as a form of enforced cultural performance.

I begin by describing Powderbubble as an event and how it came about. I continue to place Powderbubble in a context of events that will illustrate the genre in which it existed.

Powderbubble.

Powderbubble was a club that ran once a month for one year, from December 1996 to December 1997. It began as a concept and developed into Dublin's most successful clubbing experience of this decade. Its simple

philosophy of fun, fluff, and frivolity proved to appeal to many people who attended each event. For the collective who created Powderbubble, it was the embodiment of a whole variety of experiences that they had accumulated and wanted to share and explore. It was also the logical conclusion of other events that the collective had organised in the past.

Powderbubble was a night-club event that came about as a result of a number of different reasons. The collective who formed Powderbubble had worked in various different areas such as graphic design, multi-media, promotions, and the press. Some of the key members of the collective had travelled extensively and were exposed to a more global sense of popular culture. Key instigators were Niall Sweeney, Rory O'Neill, and Trish Brennan. Sweeney at the time had his own graphic design consultancy and was responsible for the entire styling of the club, from designing the promotional flyers to dressing the venue. O'Neill had lived and worked in Japan for four years and had just returned to Dublin. Brennan was living in London until 1993 when she also returned to Dublin.

The atmosphere created in the club was one of 'all inclusiveness' which was perhaps a reaction against the exclusivity and elitism that a lot of new clubs in Dublin tended to implement. (It is almost an irony that the POD/Red Box venue was used as it had the worst reputation for this type of 'nouveau' elitism in Dublin.) Powderbubble was a club in which one was welcomed to dress, adopt a persona, or explore a fantasy through performance. Nevertheless, the focus on free expression and extroversion pre-selected a certain kind of audience, (notwithstanding the voyeurs in woolly

jumpers.) It was this 'all-inclusiveness' however that partly created the atmosphere and made Powderbubble unique.

Performance featured very strongly in Powderbubble. It may be regarded as the power that 'drove' the club; performance was its focus. (This was unlike other clubs in Dublin where the main focus of social interaction was the dance-floor and the main sense of connection between people came from the music, DJ and the club itself. Powderbubble on the other hand had the added dimension of dressing up and performance that functioned as an extra platform for social interaction.) Structurally the stage was situated in the centre of the main auditorium. A mezzanine floor, a catwalk, and a go-go stand provided a variety of locations for performance to take place. The crowd, it was hoped would seize any available space to perform and participate in the activities.

The 'massage parlour' and the 'nail and lash bar' offered relaxing massage and beauty therapy with the application of false nails and eyelashes. It also functioned as a space in which the audience could interact with the performers and in turn enter into the spirit of Powderbubble relaxed and fully equipped with nails and lashes. A candyfloss stand ensured that every one, on entering the club had sufficient floss.

Powderbubble in a club context.

Powderbubble was responding to a lot of cultural changes that were taking place in Ireland, for example changes in attitudes towards sexuality meant that Powderbubble could openly attract a mixed heterosexual and homosexual crowd. Powderbubble was spearheading change in an Irish

Powderbubble in a club context.

context and pushing boundaries with its alternative ideas on gender and identity, raising people's expectations about clubbing in Dublin. Powderbubble was responding to change in an Irish club context, but also more broadly in a European context.

With regard to clubbing on a broader scale Powderbubble was responding to changes first noted in Britain in the early nineties. 'Vague' was a club in Leeds where an ambivalent attitude to sexuality was actively encouraged. More radically perhaps would be the London-based club, 'The Torture Garden', a themed fetish club-night that ran once-monthly and acted largely as a showcase for fetishists. Costume was essential to gain entry. Once inside one could browse through various different performances involving heavy sado-masochistic activity. 'The Smut Festival' in Camden Underworld in London was an annual cabaret-based event where the acts were often confrontational attacks on middle-class morality. The Torture Garden and The Smut Festival are examples of clubs that have serious political and subversive agendas attracting a crowd that are an equally serious, sometimes po-faced participating audience. The atmosphere at these London clubs tended to be heavy, with a sombre approach to dressing-up and partying.

Larger London-based clubs such as Miss Moneypenny's and The Ministry of Sound went on to produce their own CDs which would feature music compiled by DJs that specifically played at these clubs. These clubs also went on tour taking their DJs and club promoters to venues around Britain and also to further destinations such as the island of Ibiza. Miss Moneypenny's, Cream, and Renaissance are a few examples of the English clubs that have come to Dublin further homogenising the club scene across geographical boundaries.
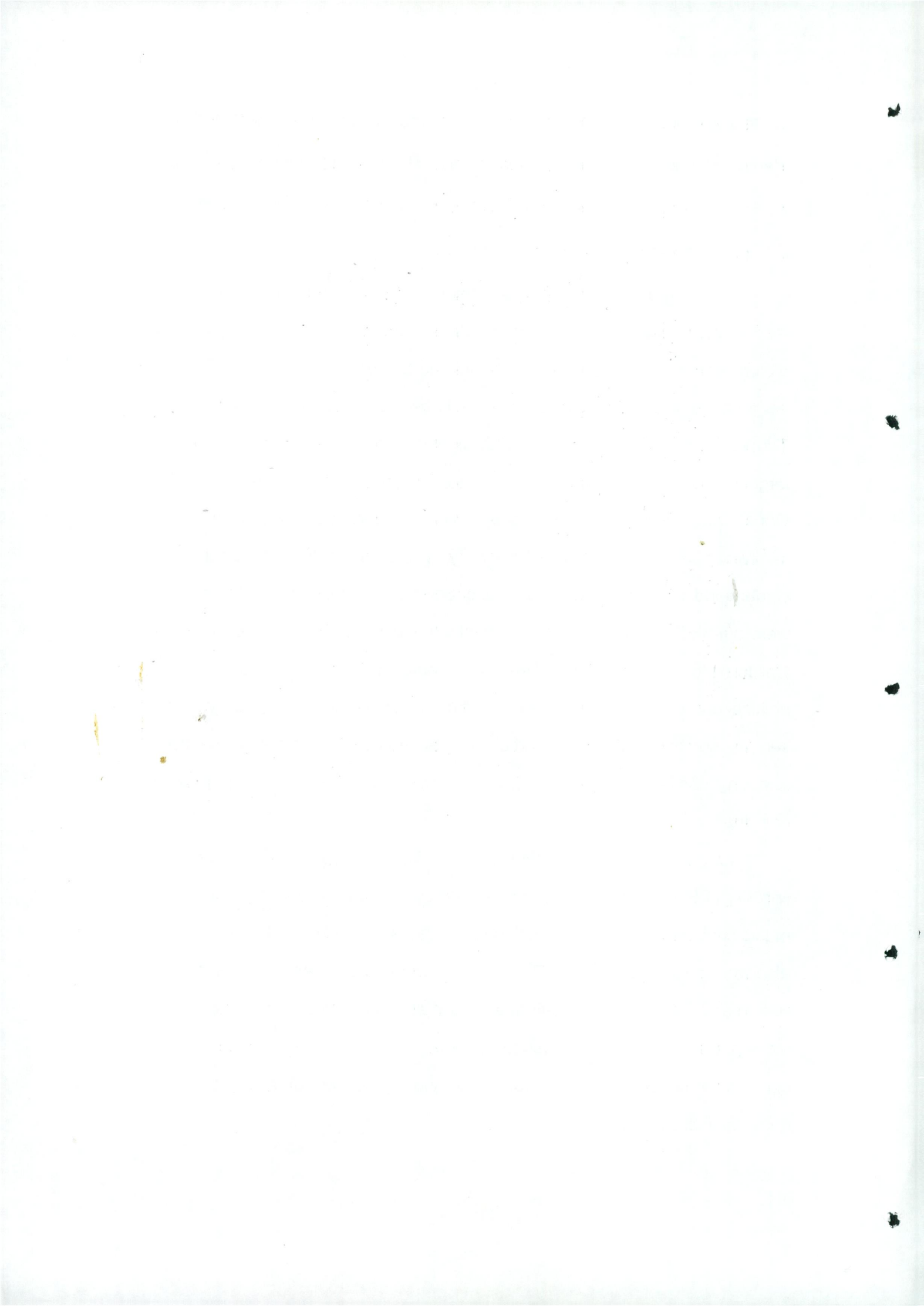
The obvious gender and sexuality messages conveyed by these clubs implied heterosexuality and often with the depiction of a semi-clad woman as object, implied a heterosexual male audience and spectatorship.

Plate 1, In 1998 Melinda Messenger, a *Page Three* model, appeared on the cover of Miss Moneypenny's album Too Glamorous implying a heterosexual male spectatorship.

Other clubs in Dublin at this time, for example The Kitchen, were centred around the allure of the DJ and clubs would often pay a well-known DJ to play at their club. Each DJ would have a following that would more or less guarantee the club a certain clientele for the evening. The focus of the night would be on the 'magical' DJ and there would be no emphasis on the crowd participation through costume. Larger Dublin clubs like the 'POD' would often fly over a well known English DJ such as Paul Okenfold of 'Cream' or Ian Oassia of 'Renaissance' to play at the club. This, one could argue, was

effectively further homogenising club culture, and transcending the boundaries of culture-specific entertainment.

Each Powderbubble event was themed and the venue was dressed afresh according to the theme. Powderbubble transformed or made strange the base venue on each occasion as part of the club's new multi-dimentional approach, hence challenging the traditional dance-floor orientated club model.

Gay clubs and bars in Dublin, although they did not actively exclude a heterosexual clientele, created an environment that was hostile towards what would be termed the 'straight' crowd. This was partly because gay clubs tended to be more centred around an insular approach to socialising from which it drew its security. The gay community in declaring its independence was beginning to isolate itself and through absolute implicit self-definition, and was occupying a very unstable social position.

> I think that crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening it is in some way. (Butler in Osborne, 1996, p.115)

In contrast to this 'Gag', the Dublin based fetish club that preceded Powderbubble and run by the collective in question may be read as a response to these large London fetish clubs and also a response to Dublin gay clubs. The atmosphere at 'Gag' was similar to that of a party. A strict 'dress-code' door policy eliminated anyone who was not suitably dressed however 'Gag' welcomed a mixed crowd of various degrees of sex and sexuality. Essentially 'Gag' was a gay club that welcomed a mixed crowd which was probably only possible in a city the size of Dublin because of the small club scene. That is why Gag and Powderbubble can be described as culturally indigenous clubs with their own culture-specific identity. The Dublin

club scene is comparatively small and that often events like these attract a broad section of 'types' which does not occur as readily in say, London where there are clubs for each 'type'.

Powderbubble was responding to popular culture both in Ireland and globally. Perhaps it realised that one possible way of addressing issues of gender, sex , and sexuality, was by integration through 'play' and hence illustrating the 'normalness' of subculture as opposed to reiterating itself as the political, radical, and demanding 'other'.

CHAPTER ONE.

This chapter examines identity and performance. I will examine the notion that identity is performed at Powderbubble. I will be looking at 'The Burning Man' festival in Nevada and comparing it to Powderbubble.

The problematics of identity in subculture.

I will begin with the notion that identity is performed. Specifically I will start by looking at the performance of sexuality in the night club space. In an interview I conducted with Niall Sweeney and Leah Hilliard (two of the instigators of Powderbubble) an interesting point was raised. Whilst discussing the origins of Powderbubble, Sweeney mentioned 'Gag' (their previous club event). He talked about the 'Gag audience' and how they carried their preconceptions about clubbing with them to the Powderbubble event.

Gag was one of the first commercial fetish clubs[1] to come to the 'surface' on the Dublin club scene. There are a lot of similarities between Powderbubble and Gag, and it is apparent that the former is a progression of thought from the latter in terms of a few simple ideas. In particular performances; each event was themed around a specific show that took place during the night. The flyers would hint at what was to be expected, and the performances would feature strong fetishistic activities. Despite this hardcore appearance the club was not exclusive and similar to Powderbubble it actively sought a mixed (gay/straight, male/female) crowd.

> When Powderbubble was starting off there were a lot of preconceived notions about what the club was going to be about. Powderbubble, it was automatically assumed that it

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[1] Fetish club in this sense is used to describe kind of atmosphere created at Gag. This atmosphere was created by the type of clothing that people wore to the club, which ranged from uniform to full evening wear. The atmosphere was also created by the performances that were put on, for example, for the birthday Gag Panti was smeared with the ingredients of a cake by Mr Sphincter who continued to insert a lit candle into her anus while she sang 'Je ne regrette rien' by Edith Piaff.

was going to have a lot more elements of Gag. (Hilliard in
Inglis, 1998, p.4)

Powderbubble was a very new concept in clubbing in Dublin, it was the
mixing of different cultures on this fun and frivolous common ground. And in a
sense it was lifting the lid on the gay/ straight fetish scene, removing the
mystery and exclusiveness that preoccupied it for so long. Powderbubble
welcomed a broad audience base which also included the previous crowd that
attended Gag. Sweeny refers to this audience as the *Gag audience* when he
made the comment that this crowd had false preconceptions about
Powderbubble.

> The 'Gag' audience and the gay audience can be the most
> narrow minded and bigoted of the lot and it was harder to
> loosen up their ideas and thoughts than it was in fact to loosen
> up to what would be termed the 'straight' audience, they were
> far more free and accessible and free thinking and egalitarian
> than in fact a lot of the gay crowd. (Sweeny in Inglis, 1998, p4.)

So in a way the identity that was crucial to the gay audience, and
especially the 'Gag' audience, was appropriated by any number of people
from various different standpoints in a space (Powderbubble) that was
constructed for this purpose. This was a revolutionary concept and it forged
new expectations about clubbing in Dublin. It is the notion that identity is no
longer exclusively owned by a group. And in a way if a group is so exclusively
defined that their fixed position of identity intensely embodies who and what
they represent, when this is removed through free appropriation, it can result
in severe disillusionment and questioning of the fundamental subcultural
group. Perhaps in this space of fluid identity, preconceptions need to be
reconsidered.

I would like to introduce Judith Butler and the notion of 'performativity'.
Butler has proved both influential and controversial in her analysis of gender,

sex and sexuality. Butler's book *Gender Trouble* was essentially a critique of compulsory heterosexuality within feminism. However there was a popular misreading of this text: that there is no sex only gender and that gender is some sort of enforced cultural performance.

> people then go on to think that if gender is performative it must
> be radically free. (Butler in Osborne, 1996, p.110)

What was opened up here was the debate which critiqued the established notion that gender is some sort of compulsory performance and one was to some extent free to construct or deconstruct identity. Butler tries to clarify what she means by 'performativity' by explaining that what she is trying to do is to:

> Think about performatvity as that aspect of discourse that has
> the capacity to produce what it names. (Butler in Osborne,
> 1996, p.112)

The production of identity may be interpreted as an 'act' that has the power to reinforce or reiterate the norms of identity. However what is implied here is the notion that the production of subcultural identity exists in the heterosexual matrix or hegemony, and that when a group must be so specifically defined, their implicit self definition can be problematic in leading to their own subversion or derailment.

I think that this analysis applies to the problem of expectation and the Gag audience, as pointed out by Sweeny on the previous page. This group, in carving out their identity, have also consequently created a set of expectations and preconceptions about social interaction that was challenged by Powderbubble. Discourse had created the subject and its expectations.

> I agree with Derrida here in his analysis of structure in,
> 'Structure, Sign and Play' in *Writing and Difference*. A

structure only becomes a structure by repeating its structurality. Iterability is the way in which a structure gets solidified, but it also implies the possibility of that structure's derailment. (Butler in Osborne, 1996, p.118)

Further to this argument I think that the Gag audience have had to define their identity in order to exist in what Butler describes as the 'heterosexual hegemony' and that this is precisely one of the paradoxes or problems of identity in subculture.

The dynamics of identity at Powderbubble.

At Powderbubble the layout of the club was crucial to the 'scenes' that took place. The various viewpoints and stages created the framework from which pleasure in spectating and performing could take place. Similarly the initial philosophy of the event's organisers created the framework for the fluidity of identity which took place at Powderbubble.

Sweeney attributes a lot of the club's success to its simple philosophy, which was to hold an event that wasn't concerned with making money, that wasn't concerned with making huge political change and wasn't concerned with the exclusion of any cultural group.

This sense of family created an atmosphere that was welcoming and was saying here is a space where we welcome everything from the established to the untested. It was a space where money did not effect taste or standards and perhaps the only currency was creativity. The feeling was that everyone possessed creativity in some form and could express it in whatever way they wished in this club.

No matter who or what you are dress for your future flesh fantastic. (Powderbubble Flyer, June 1997.)

Plate 2, A member of the audience demonstrating the alternative uses of tinsel.

Plate 3, Panti back stage at Powderbubble exemplifies the visual transformations that are carried out as the his previous identity is dissolved.

If clothing can be considered a collection of objects specially chosen to convey a specific identity then equally costume can be described as a collection with which one describes a specific created identity. It this created

identity that is courted in Powderbubble. The participant is encouraged to join

in the pleasure of appropriating an alternative identity. And it is these

transformations that are enticingly carried out by the regular members of the

Powderbubble family: Panti, Mr. Sphincter, Trish Dalish, Fluff Ui Toole,

Jellyslut, Ebola Cherries and most notably, Pink Mekon.

At Powderbubble identity is something that can be created for the

duration of the event and the palette of expression is much less influenced by

'correct' social discourse. The choice of identities is much wider than that of

the outside and all possibilities and combinations are feasible, from subversion

of dominant cultural ideals to direct referencing and pastiche. Powderbubble is

a constructed space, one that encourages creativity and uninhibited

expression through dress and behaviour.

This phase of transformation is interesting; when one crosses over from

the expression of identity (as the 'self') into the expression of identity (as the

'constructed self'). The notion that identity is performed is equally present in

both states. The performance of identity outside Powderbubble, what Butler

describes as 'performativity', is a more subconscious performance, and one

that does not necessarily assume a subject. However the performance of a

character at Powderbubble is different, actively or passively one assumes a

subject. It is this fluidity of identity that is permissible at Powderbubble.

> It is important to distinguish performance from performativity:
> the former presumes a subject, but the latter detests the very
> notion of the subject. (Butler in Osborne, 1996, p112)

Butler opens up the notion that gender is performative. This is a useful

model to use on the phenomenon of identity at Powderbubble. Now assuming

that what is being examined here is an unusual space, which is a temporary gathering of various different people for a few hours once a month and not excluding the possibility that some are being stimulated by drugs or alcohol, Powderbubble is a literal semi-idealistic illustration of this notion of 'performativity'. Perhaps not in the same way as Butler intended, it still is performance with an assumed subject or audience and it is this transition, the change of identity outside of the Powderbubble space to identity within the space, so to speak, that is specifically of interest here.

Identity 'external' is also a constructed identity that is performed using props such as clothing and performative speech acts. This performance is so profoundly naturalised that the notion of a subject is negated here. In the real world assuming 'correct' social discourse is largely dictated by what is regarded as 'normal' behaviour, therefore any sort of dress or speech act that crosses the line of normal social behaviour is considered irregular or unusual. If one goes to buy a piece of clothing (or prop) for college or work, one's choice tends to be influenced by a number of factors. Advertising and price are obvious factors. However, more interestingly, choice is influenced by what desired messages (or identity) one wishes to convey about oneself using the item of clothing. In a sense it is looking at the piece of clothing and comparing it to a costume in which one performs one's identity or describes one's identity in a ritualistic manner. To take it a step further is to say that the reason we perform our identity is to solidify our identity in an environment of compulsory self-definition.

This fluidity of identity is what post-structuralists like Butler describe as a reaction to changes in environmental stimuli (such as the moment when one

enters the Powderbubble space), and that there is no 'true inner-self' which is revealed, identity is all surface activity and an individual may change the language of their identity at Powderbubble and in an constructed environment that provokes this type of reaction. Alternatively it may be said that at Powderbubble there is a different kind of activity, perhaps less influenced by what is politically correct.

Powderbubble and Burning Man.

At Powderbubble the range of clothing combinations is much less influenced by what would be termed 'correct' social behaviour. Factors that effect the choice of clothing as 'prop' or 'costume' for Powderbubble are more expansive and less restrictive than those factors influencing the choice of dress in a social context. Interestingly however because of the transient nature of the space, and the illusionary effect of drugs and alcohol, the social and political effects of this type of performance are minimal and virtually non-existent. And the dominant social norms are not simply deconstructed and remodelled into some new more expansive ideal, the desire for which is indicated by the popularity of this kind of event.

The 'Burning Man' festival in Nevada illustrates this point, and is a useful comparison to Powderbubble in a more global context. Every year in early September an estimated crowd of 10,000 people gathers on a 400 square-mile dried up salt lake for a four-day pagan-like anti-capitalist festival called 'Burning Man'. The event is centred around the ceremonial burning of a forty-foot wooden structure in the form of a human figure (Plate 4). Each year the festival is given a theme, and in 1996 the event was based on a reinterpretation of *Dante's Inferno.* The bankrupt Hades has been bought out

by a multinational corporation named 'Helco' and has been reconstructed in

the form of a shopping strip and theme park.

> It's all about the commodification of experience, it's not Dante's
> Hell, it's the essence of hell in the late Twentieth Century,
> where we are no longer defined by what we do or who we are
> but by what we consume. We've become perambulating
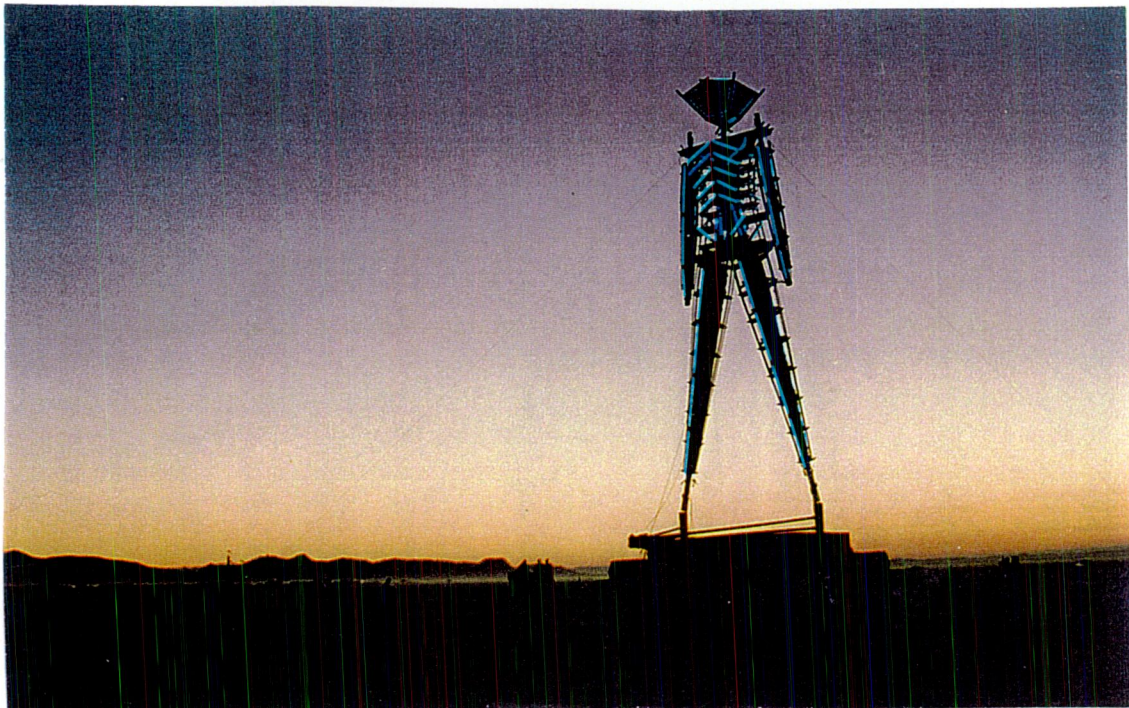> appetites. (Harvey in Chonin, 1996, p.44)

Plate 4, The four-day festival in the desert reaches a climax when this wooden structure set on fire.

The organisers of Burning Man would like people to believe that the

event is a radical communal experiment, that it is a primal technological

nightmare, and that it is destructive and anarchic, as well as spiritual and

libertarian. One of the organisers in particular, Ozan, sees Burning Man as the

"spearhead of an artistic renaissance."

Plate 5, This image clearly shows that there are performers and then there are also voyeurs recording, in the background, at the Burning Man festival, not as idealistic as their 'no spectators' philosophy would suggest.

Powderbubble is similar to Burning Man in the sense that both events take issue with and respond to contemporary popular culture. (Burning Man particularly targets consumerism and law enforcement. Powderbubble's motivations on the other hand are less political.) However, because these events are created in such a vacuum they can only ever be a memory in people's minds or a photo-documentary, compiled by those who do not actively take part in the festivities, (Plate 5, above). Therefore these events

should only be celebrated for what enjoyment one can receive and not for their philosophical aspirations.

Writer Stephen Black, who has participated in the event on a number of occasions, expresses concern with the increasing popularity of Burning Man, and fears the change from small gathering of an enlightened few to the large scale of a sensational event. Black believes that, "there's a certain point where the scale of a sensational event will exceed what the community and infrastructure can bear" (Black in Chonin, 1996, p.47) Black continues by making the observation that, " at the climactic moment when the man went up in flames, it became a mob scene and imagining the same kind of event times two makes the heat quiver." (Black in Chonin, 1996, p.47.) Harvey, the event organiser, acknowledges the potential problems but argues that,

> The site's isolation and harsh environment provides a natural
> buffer against anti-social behaviour, people are too busy to
> survive and of course having a good time- to pick fights,"
> (Harvey in Chonin, 1996, p.47)

This is rather a weak argument bearing in mind that most people have arrived by car with excessive amounts of food, water, bedding, recreational vehicles, sofas, tents, drugs, televisions, dogs, children, music, and alcohol. In the middle of this enormous desert with no law or law enforcement you simply cannot predict how a crowd of ten thousand people will react to each other.

There is a lot of crossover between the two events, Powderbubble and Burning Man, and the similarities between them are quite significant. Burning Man is a large gathering of people similar to the volume of people that one would expect at concert yet there is no centre stage or no performer or group of performers that are the singular focus of the gathering.

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Similarly at Powderbubble there is the same kind of decentering taking place whereby there are many platforms on which one may perform or observe, for example the catwalk, the go-go stands and the balcony. Here the focus has shifted from the DJ to the audience themselves and the photobooth at Powderbubble exemplifies that. It courts exhibitionism in the sense that the audience become performers in front of the camera (Plate 8, p.28). Who is the performer and who are the audience?

> Burning Man is all about catharsis burning away the inner demons, clearing the psyche. Some experience that catharsis from participating in the events, letting go of their inhibitions to build and burn and participate in mass destruction, (Brown, 1997, p.141)

> (Powderbubble) is really just one performance, put it that way, and each element, and they can be seen separately, is really part of the whole thing and I think that's why the false distinction between audience and stage has happened or worked so well, because the crowd is so much of the whole event that you need to push up the podiums to show that something is extra special. (Sweeny in Inglis 1998, p.2)

> That's what's actually wonderful about that, it's the cathartic effect of a performance in a club, it's the long standing well known effect in that it frees the audience or it can free the audience from any inhibition on whatever level, it may be whether it's having a good time or dressing up or behaving in a certain way or whatever that is. (Sweeney in Ingis, 1998, p2.)

The Powderbubble and Burning Man philosophies are similar in that both have a 'po po mo' approach in saying that yes the battle of gender is over and there were no winners, lets just reference it in a non-meaningful manner, and just have fun.
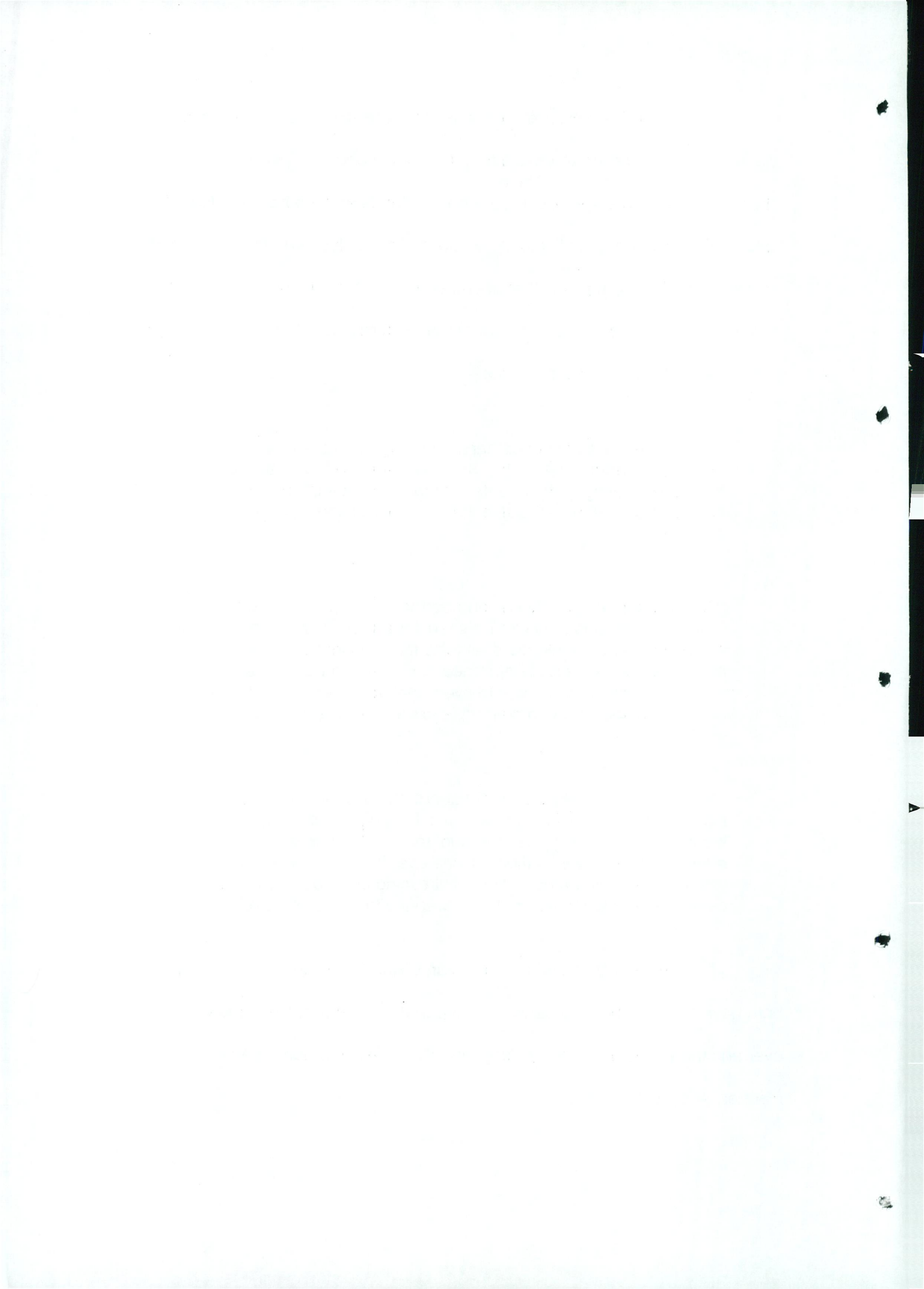
We live in a post-modern world. Every thing that ever
happened is happening now, yet nothing is terribly compelling.
On the one hand you have immense freedom, on the other
hand you have intense anomie. (Harvey in Kelly, 1997, p142.)

This is a rather broad and sweeping view of the world and I find this

linking of events like Powderbubble and Burning Man to the world en masse

quite problematic. However it does help to put some sort of context or

meaning into this sense of 'anomie'. That somehow reality can be

disappointing and that's why events like these are all the more exciting

because it is pure 'phantashee'.

This decentering or blurring of the boundaries between stage and

performer is personified or exemplified by the Powderbubble character, The

Pink Mekon, as created by Karim Renmani White. In the next chapter I will

begin to examine how the stage is blurred by such characters and how the

dynamics of interaction between performer and audience at Powderbubble.

Plate 6a.

Plate, 6a and 6b. The eclectic composition of objects used as a costume at Burning Man is similar to that of a Powderbubble costume.
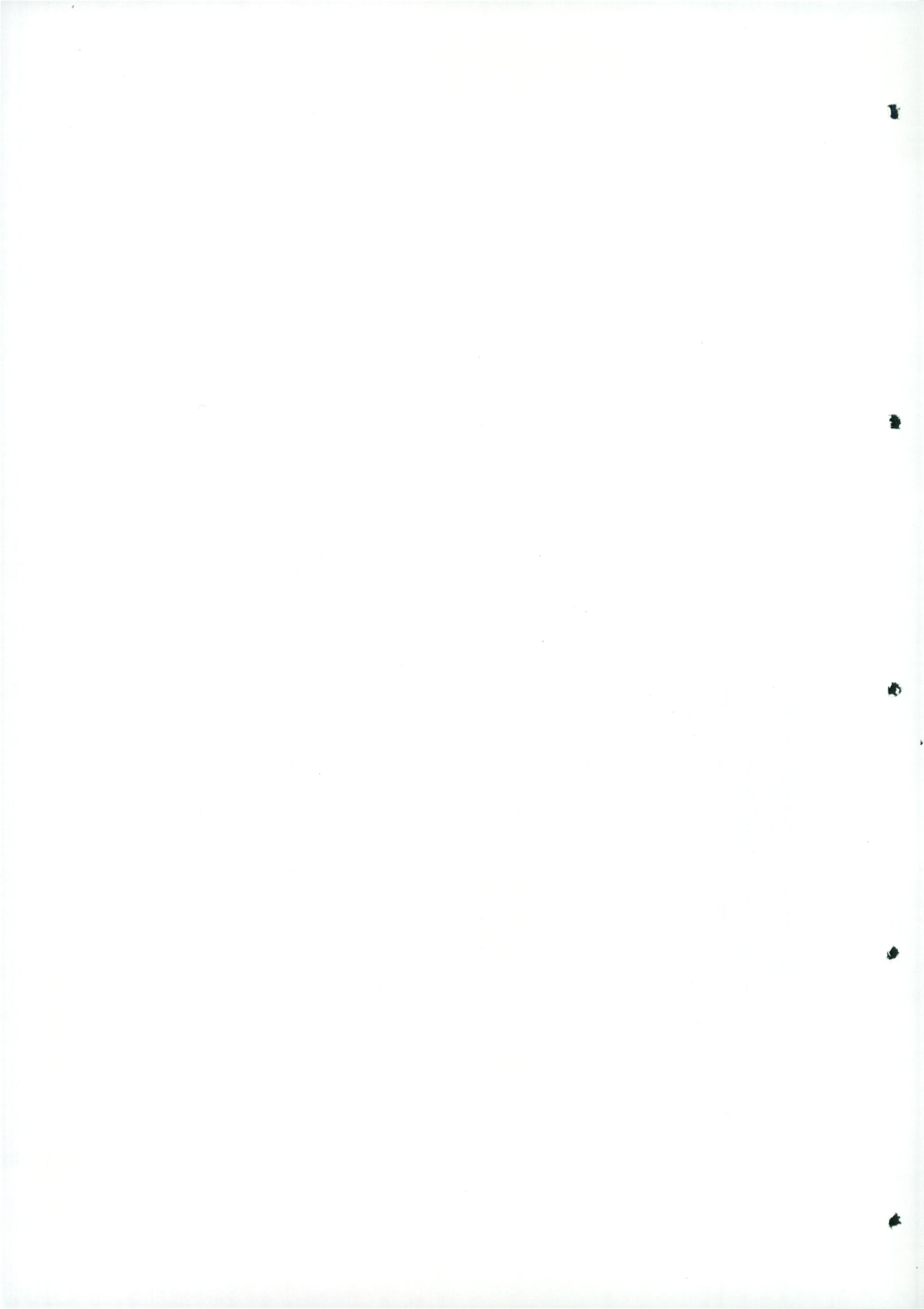
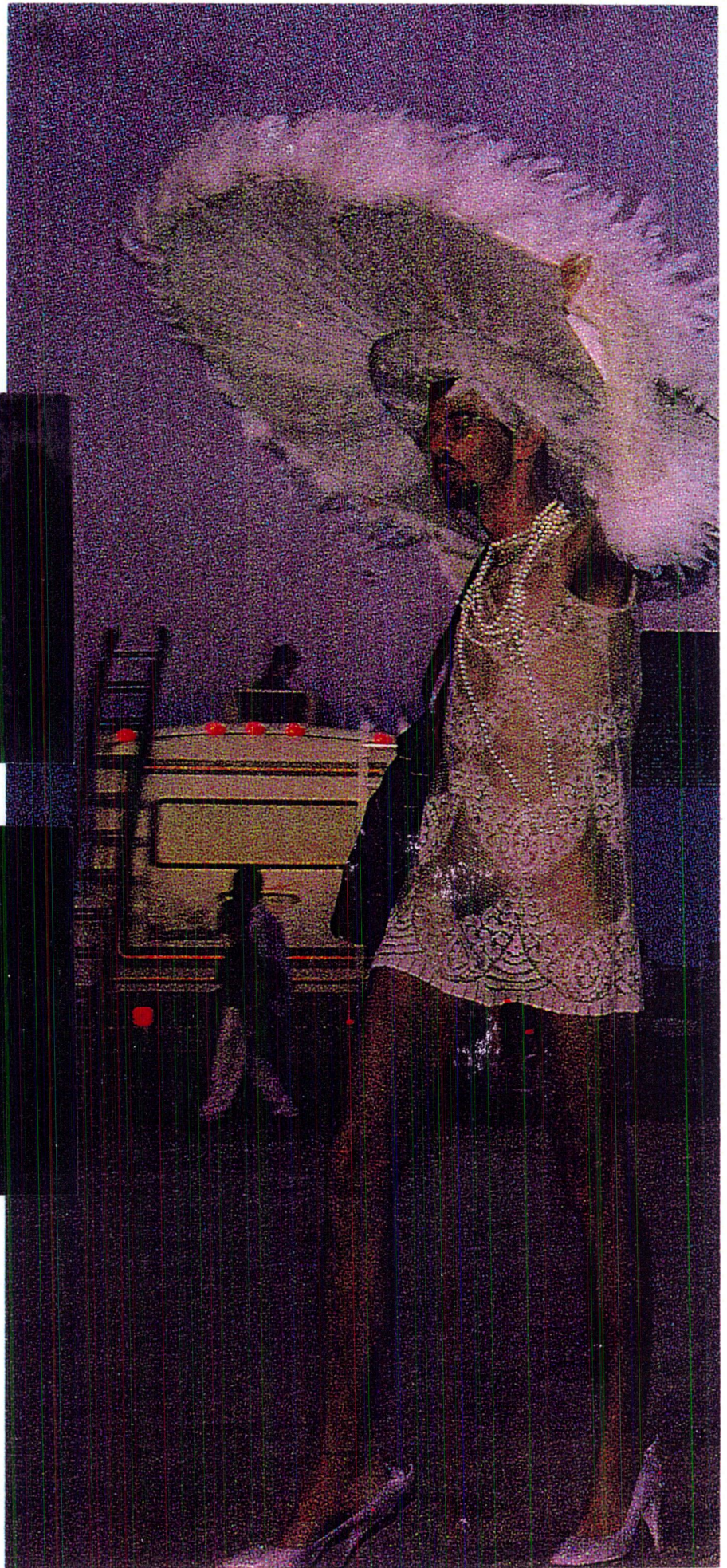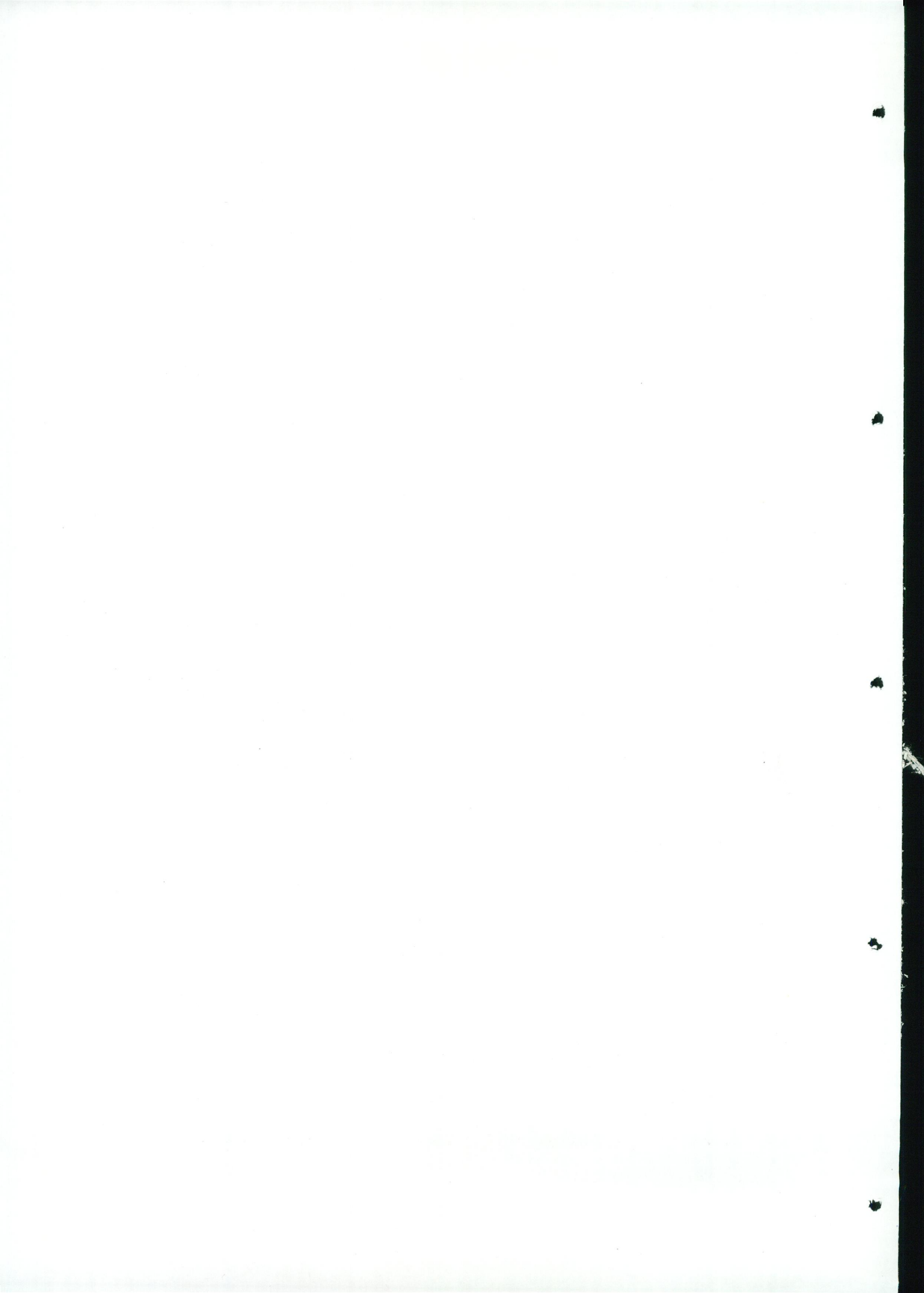Plate 7, The approach to Drag at Burning man is visually similar to Powderbubble.

Plate 8, These are examples of the kind of performance that is provoked by the photo-booth at Powderbubble, in 1997.

Case study one; The Pink Mekon.

The Pink Mekon is about six foot six tall. He bakes cakes and hands them free to his friends, he flew to earth in a flying cup cake, he is unable to articulate words despite his enormous brain. He likes music, it makes him want to dance. He is bright pink in colour, and he can be found at Powderbubble.

September Powderbubble saw the debut of the Pink Mekon and it was obvious that the alien was anxious about his first night at Powderbubble. What would people think of him, would he like the music, how was he going to negotiate the stairs and doorways of the club? Pink Mekon arrived at Powderbubble for the first time with a look of anxiety, almost dejected fright on his face.

But in all honesty fiction does not change the fact that Pink Mekon's look of anxiety was inherited from the occupant of the costume, Karim Renmani White. A week of worrying about how the costume was going to work, how the head was going to retain its shape had manifested itself on the face of the alien in the form of a frown. Luckily however no such disaster occurred and Pink Mekon enjoyed a tremendously successful first night with endless fascination from women, especially, and no shortage of 'alien-love-interest'.

Encouraged by such auspicious results White was confident enough to grace Pink Mekon with a gleaming smile for the October Powderbubble and also to construct for him a flying cupcake. It was another extremely exciting and successful night for the alien as he was hoisted up in his flying cupcake from which he showered astounded onlookers with free sweets and delicious

cakes. Having survived a kidnapping albeit minus one eye, and enduring a shocking assault by one particularly boisterous girl, Pink Mekon was well on his way to becoming one of the more robust members of the Powderbubble family. And at the following Powderbubble, Pink Mekon was back (with missing eye restored) and he proved himself the joyous participant with an unchanging "O" expression of surprise.

Being the man inside such a costume must be a strange occupation but perhaps there is something of value that can be said about the experience, something that pertains to the subject of how our personalities are performed or how our identity is produced by discourse.

Dressing up is a much promoted requirement of powderbubbling, and is vividly suggested by the words on the flyers. Each month sees an influx of imagination and creativity expressed through costume. Dressing up for the club is a device for drug-free disinhibition, a way of enhancing one's personality, setting some aspect of it free of re-inventing oneself. Many of those in costume have completely transformed themselves, dissolving one persona and reconstructing a new one. The regular transformations of the hosting team Rory O'Neill into Panti (Plate 3, p.17), Niall Sweeney into Ebola Cherries are examples of when the transformation may be seen as alter egos, particularly as these secondary personas, if you will, live a life in cabaret and then vanish for a month at a time: each time the powder bubble bursts. Whether or not these alternative personalities enter into the lives of the daytime personas is a question that perhaps would be too intrusive. Nevertheless each passing month sees a fresh emergence of these phantastical apparitions.

Pink Mekon is invested with a store of human qualities but his extra-terrestrial status ultimately removes him from having to behave in any governable manner. Perhaps inspiration for this character is borne out by exposure to the thoughts and images active in every dressed-up Powderbubbler. Some of the fetishistic costumes express a defiant stance whilst the primitive styled costume expresses a dissatisfaction with modern lifestyles (Plate 8, p. 28). Creating a costume might for some be nothing more than to have something to join in the party with. But for others true separate characters have been created, perhaps with a story surrounding them and with each passing Powderbubble a deepening history. Pink Mekon is one such character.

Important to this chapter is how the performed actions of the Pink Mekon effectively produce the identity of the character. These actions are partly conscious intentions, however there is the immeasurable side that is comprised of the effects of synergy, of interaction and subliminal response, which I predict, will remain a mystery. Nevertheless, from the area of unknown quantities and qualities surrounding the alien's performance, the effect of his facial expressions upon the guests and the effect of their subsequent responses upon him are aspects I feel I can hypothesise about usefully if not resolvedly.

The nature and features of the costume are an important part of how the character, Pink Mekon, is created. Something as simple as, for example, a blonde Monroe-style wig will bring about changes in the behaviour of the attentive wearer. Facial expressions, body language and verbal language may all be altered to create the character. In this case the wig is merely a prop, yet

it acts as a catalyst to transform the whole persona. A more ambitious costume such as that for the Pink Mekon begins life as more than a prop and is comparable to the make-up and attire of a drag queen in its transforming powers. It transgresses the boundary between the costume as prop and the costume as performer the moment it appears before an audience. The effort required by the performer to make this transgression in this case is nil. The fixed expression on the shining pink face is a store of meaning, a declaration of feeling and an invitation for the onlooker to respond and it is his presence felt amongst the crowd that is dynamic.

On the outside of the head the guests encounter an alien with two large spherical eyes unfettered by lids or lashes that survey the entire space before them. The sense of presence created by just these eyes is quite alarming. Despite displaying no sign of possessing hearing apparatus Pink Mekon is clearly a sentient creature for he dances and sways and claps to the music. Anyone seeking to converse with him will have to interpret mime to decipher any meaning. The physicality of the enormous head makes it necessary for the wearer to walk slowly and carefully which lends to Pink Mekon a sense of grace. We begin to see how the physical limitations of the costume are responsible for the Pink Mekon character assuming particular traits.

With the basic figure having been established, it is the facial expression that will decide the way all the other information is ultimately interpreted. Fixed for the evening in a state of permanent anxiety to all observers the facial expression brought about some interesting responses. Onlookers made noises of sympathy and sad eyes as one does to a dog. The expression that he wears never flags and it strikes every observer with the same intensity.

Clearly his silence and comedic appearance are viewed non-threatening so people respond to his actions and expressions in a sympathetic way.

It is precisely these actions that solidify the identity of the Pink Mekon, but to what extent is the performer's identity hidden or even accentuated by the production of such a character? I would argue that there is little difference between the alien and its producer. In my opinion I think that change is the exhilarating factor which provides the person with an alternative vista from which one can experience the interactions at Powderbubble.

It is the very production of identity that takes place at Powderbubble that can be compared to the production of identity in the world outside. The difference is that at Powderbubble one consciously produces the subject, however in the world outside the notion that there is subject is contested. To what extent can one compare the of production of identity at Powderbubble to the production of identity outside this space? Can one compare one's clothing to the costume of the Pink Mekon?

In the next case study I will be looking at how it might be said that the line between persona and performer is quite fancifully drawn.
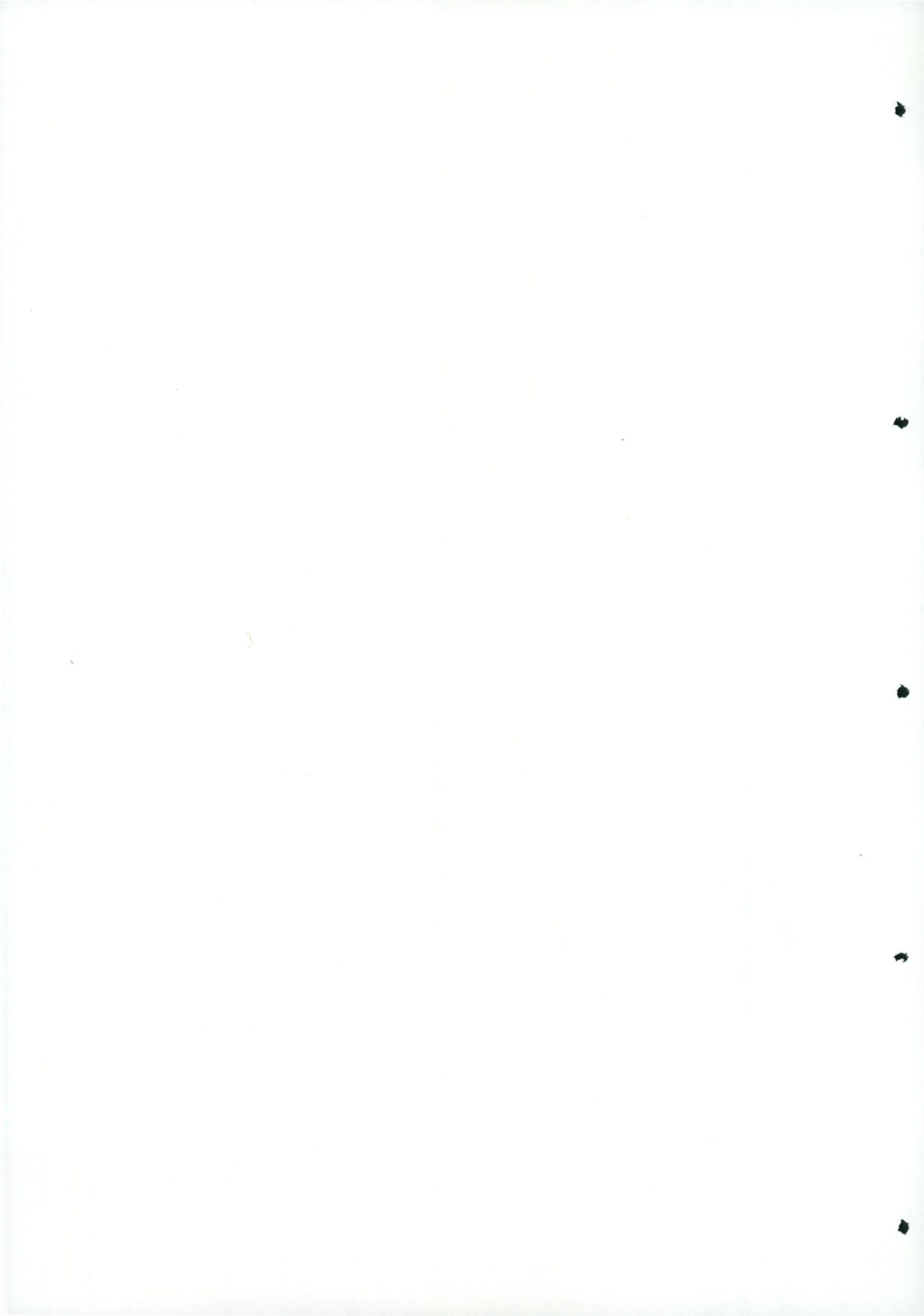
Plate 9, The Pink Mekon giving away cakes with a look of anxiety, 1997.

Plate 10, The Pink Mekon negotiating a doorway in at Powderbubble in *The Red Box, 1997.*

Case study two; Miss Red October.

Miss Red October was most probably borne out of many childhood experiences that had been hitherto repressed into deep psychological fetishes. One such experience was when the Pope came to visit Ireland. Already a conscientious and eager Christian at the tender age of five, I was all too keen to see the Pope address the masses at the Phoenix Park. However my mother, due to reasons beyond my control, had decided otherwise. Much to my frustration and annoyance she would not let me out of the back of the car to join my father and sister on their journey to see the Pope. My frustration and anger was building as I tried furiously to squeeze past my mother's leg, which she had placed firmly in front of me in an effort to thwart my escape. As hard as I tried I could not manage to force my way past my mother's booted leg. Boot. Long knee-high zip-up high-heeled leather boot. My attention was diverted. I marvelled at the object. The feel, the shape, and the smell was enough to completely redirect my attention.

My teenage years passed without any due psychoanalytical assessments on why I was so fascinated by the inanimate objects traditionally associated with womanhood or why I was always cast in female parts for school plays.

It wasn't until much later, when I eventually came to be involved in Powderbubble in 1996, that I soon rediscovered the exhilaration of performance and the changes brought about when one appropriates the attire of a significant 'other'.[2]

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[2] This is a common report of Powderbubblers who get dressed up for each event.

Miss Red October's debut appearance was on the set of 'The Alternative Miss Ireland' (a Powderbubble beauty pageant) in February 1997.
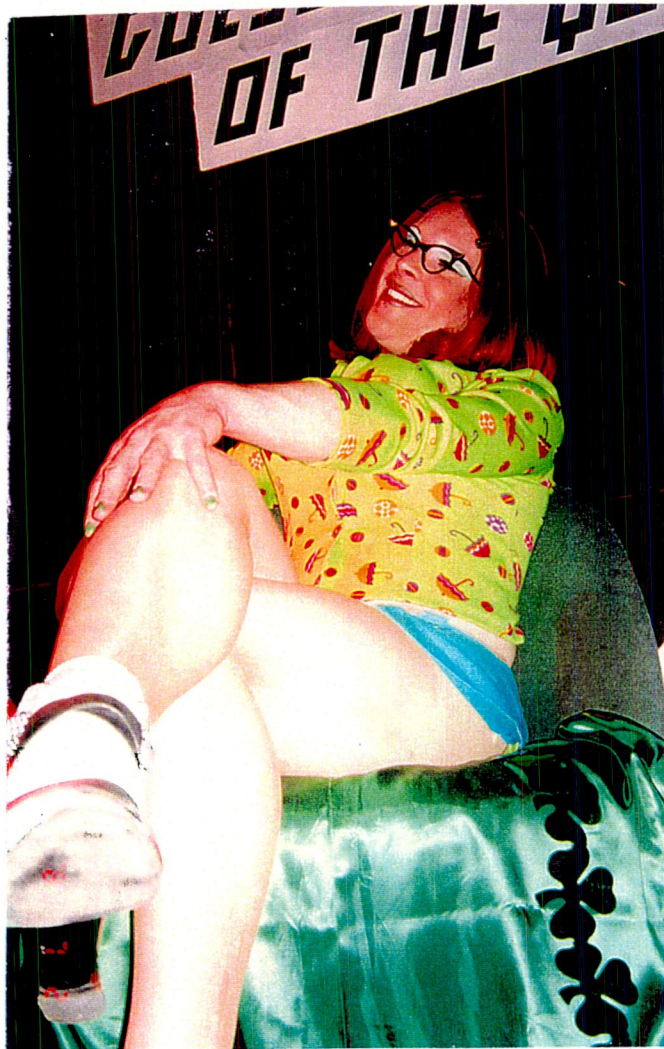

Plate 11, The debut appearance of Miss Red October, February 1997.

(With regard to putting together the visual language of Miss Red, I decided to go for a look that was revealing not in a sexy way, but in that sort of schoolgirl way.) Tights, wig and my sister's Debs shoes in place, all that remained to complete the look was a few coy glances and a couple of clichéd gestures. It was the first time that Red was about to appear in front of a big audience.

Confident in the look I had achieved, I was able to pass the evening with much ease and enjoyment.

This outward appearance of purity and virginity did court a certain type of reaction from the crowd. Girls would congratulate me on the length of my legs like it was some kind of achievement, and they would ask me for make-up tips, which I later learned was also a form of compliment.

And Miss Red October returned for the following June Powderbubble transformed. She had lost her innocence and forgone her virginity for worldliness. The Second Coming of Red was altogether a new experience.

On further thought and analysis I have tried to trace the visual origin of Miss Red October. In a sense I am trying to analyse where Miss Red came from in order to understand the ontological effect of the performance.

Drag has become more acceptable due to changes in attitudes brought about in the early nineties by the media for example. A broader understanding and wider reference base has been created by movies such as 'Percilla, Queen of the Desert' and musicians such as Kurt Cobain of Nirvana.

In Ireland the reference points for Drag developed much later in the decade. Perhaps one of the most notable emergences of Drag into mainstream Irish culture was the Christmas 1995 advertising campaign for the Dublin clothing store, 'Makullas'. This city centre retail department store featured a whole campaign headed by Miss Panti Bliss. In the run up to Christmas the shop had a thirty-foot cut-out of Miss Bliss attached to the side of the building. Inside, the shop was littered with images of Panti and every afternoon during Christmas week she would appear in the window on a swing taking requests for Christmas via an intercom.

Plate 12, Miss Panti Bliss as
featured in the *Panti-Claws*
Christmas promotion for *Makullas*
Clothing Store, Dublin, 1995.

Miss Red was partly born out of seeing the many appearances and

transformations of Miss Panti, though I realise that I was also responding to a

general trend in popular culture. The visual look of Red was a response to

other stimuli I had been exposed to in the past. Whilst at Gay Pride in San

Francisco in 1996, I photographed a man wearing a blue dress. The man's body changed only by the simple use of a blue dress presented the possibility of wearing women's clothing and still retaining one's masculinity. (I am not trying to suggest that I used this exact model for Miss Red because I used make-up and a wig to help create the look.) This image did, however, influence the transformation.

Plate 13, This image of a man in a blue dress was taken at Gay Pride in San Francisco in 1996.

I also feel that I was responding to the heterosexual male fantasy stereotyping of women (Plate 14, p. 45). Miss Red October was about the sexual appeal of the male body in female attire but she was also about the subversion and satire of heterosexual male fantasy. Japanese comic book

characters are graphic representations of this type of stereotyping, and they did, I feel, inspire the look and even the actions of Miss Red October. The images of women illustrated in these publications are arresting and sometimes disturbing. Their faces appear childlike and are often depicted with expressions of pain and terror. Despite their young faces their bodies are illustrated with over-sized sexual features (Plate, 15, p.46).

The look of Red was definitely influenced by these images and perhaps there was some social comment made by such a pastiche. Perhaps I sought to subvert, question and poke fun at heterosexual male fantasy, but I do not believe that was my prime motivation. Living in a society that so often assumes one spectatorship and neglects to acknowledge any other audience, one could construe that the subversion of this standpoint was part of my endeavour. But such political motivation would, I feel, take from the exhilaration of simply performing and the fun of making such temporary transformations.

I think that the gender norms of female identity were played with when I did drag but only in a visual way. I did not know how to react to people with words, only actions, and these actions were inspired by the images of women in these Japanese comics. So the image as norm was perhaps subverted but was it derailed?

> I don't think that Drag is a paradigm for the subversion of gender. I don't think that if we were all more dragged out that gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive. (Butler in Osborne, 1998, p.111)

I agree with Butler here, I think there are numerous limitations in doing Drag, I also believe that the line between character and performer is quite

fancifully drawn. I think that most of the characters created at Powderbubble are not that different to the personalities of the respective performers. This is certainly true of Miss Red October, I think that it was a visual transformation to some extent but I would not suggest that there is a cerebral transformation or transformation of personality. I don't think that such transformations are as easily achieved.

The problematic here was that I had created a visual character using various different objects, but what I had failed to do was consolidate the cerebral side to my character into some form whereby I could communicate my character using performative speech.

However what I had created, and what I was performing was an animated illustration of the 'other' (which my masculinity feared), or was it a further expression of my own identity? Well part of the character was expressing my interest in objects of drag, and the other part was interested in the fun of transforming one's physical appearance. Visually changing oneself offers a different standpoint from which one can observe any due reactions. And when people react accordingly it usually means that one has made a successful transformation. I think that my created persona was a further manifestation of my own identity and effectively what I had created was simply an image of myself in a dress. I feel that one cannot simply vacate the materiality of the body, and that we create these alter egos within tight constraints that are not easily abandoned. Identity can only reverse, mimic, parody or in some way allude to the identities culturally available to the subject. "This kind of citation will emerge as theatrical to the extent that it

mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses". (Butler, 1996, p.232.)

I think that often people, especially Drag Queens, make a visual transformation for Powderbubble quite successfully yet they fail to make a similar transformation of personality. I think that this is particularly true of Drag Queens. In reality they are just men in dresses and often it is hard to know what to say to them and similarly most Drag Queens have a restricted number of satirical retorts with which to contribute to any attempted conversation. This is a symptom of the limitations of Drag and highlights the change from gender euphoria to gender disphoria.

In a sense I think that the performance of Miss Red October can be analysed as taking an image of woman that exists in a heterosexual hegemony and performing it using the male body, thus subverting the image. And in effect, I suppose I am making a comment on the way that gender norms produced and installed within society, sometimes with heterosexual assumptions. Perhaps the more rigid the connections between gender identity and sexuality makes it possible to subvert and derail such solidified images of woman.

However, I don't think that I am destabilising gender categories: one does not simply deconstruct gender by simply putting on women's clothes. And I think that this is partly to do with the transient nature of the space Powderbubble where this kind of performance takes place. Even if one thinks about the audience and how one might say that the audience is pre-selected and just by the mere fact that they are there may mean that they have some sort of open mind with which to read such performances.

And I do not necessarily believe in the free fantastical transformations that take place at Powderbubble. In fact I think that people are still governed by restrictions of identity and codes of behaviour even in such a 'free' space as Powderbubble.

There is a great desire for "a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body", (Butler in Osborne, 1996, p.111), because of the desire for the destabilising of gender norms. This I think particularly applies to feminism and gay liberation as these gender norms are perceived by these groups as oppressive and restrictive. There are restrictions in every kind of identity position if it is implicitly occupied and there are restrictions in Drag, there are restrictions in gender identities and restrictions in identity period.

Plate 14, It was exactly this kind of representation of woman as object (selling sound equipment in this case) that I wanted to subvert and make a comment about in the analysis of Miss Red October.
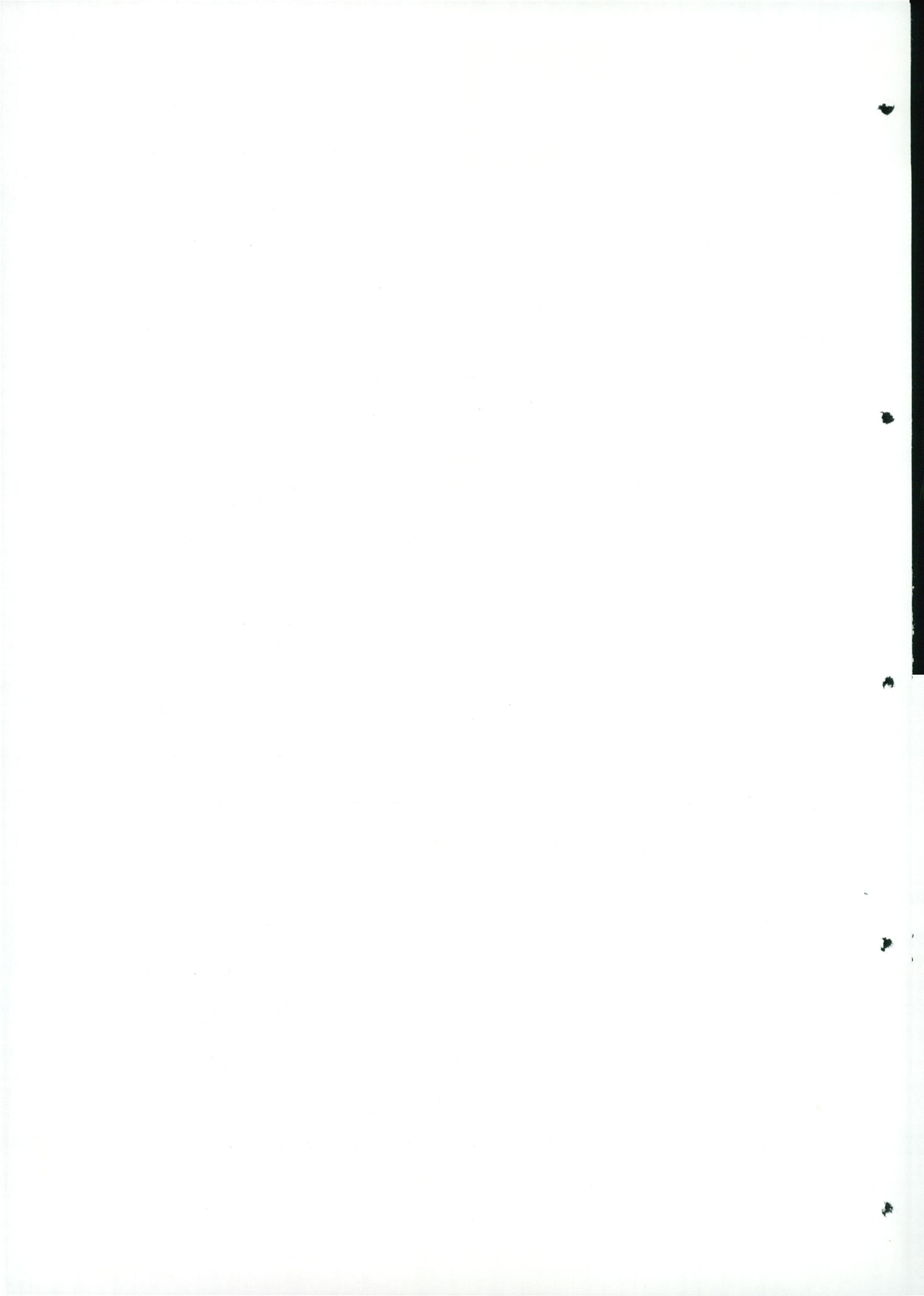
Plate 15, The image on the right is
taken from an adult Japanese comic
book. It shows the influence of this
kind of image on the performance of
Miss Red October.

Conclusion.

The main question raised in the first case study, the Pink Mekon, was to what extent can one compare the production of identity in Powderbubble to the production of identity outside? I think that clothing can be compared to costume when it is described as a catalyst in the process of producing identity. I believe that costume, as an object or collection of objects, embodies actions and meanings that help articulate identity. I think that this is true of clothing and its relationship to actions and even speech as vehicle for communicating identity in the world outside of these events. I also think that there are different kinds of behavioural constraints on the individual that effect the performance of identity. At Powderbubble these constraints are more expansive and less restrictive, yet they still exist.

Perhaps all this hypothesising distracts from the enjoyment of the experience of performance at the same time I think that it is useful to analyse these characters in order to understand the dynamics of performance in the night club space. Miss Red October was quite a self-indulgent performance, one where I had little regard for the pleasure of the respective audience. Interestingly nonetheless, there was a certain self-subversion in the image I created.

I think that we are living in a world that puts enormous emphasis on self definition for whatever reasons and that in defining ourselves we set up a whole range of standpoints which we have consequentially rendered impossible to occupy. I think that this is the danger of implicitly defining oneself, what is excluded can become threatening. This is my fear of gay liberation, I think that one must take into consideration the 'other' and

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somehow struggle to incorporate it into one's identity as it defines one's

identity as much as the position that one implicitly occupies. I agree with

Butler when she made point about radical lesbian feminists and how,

"lesbians make themselves into a more frail political community by insisting on

the radical irreducibility of their desire", (Butler in Osborne, 1996, p.115)

There is a huge desire to escape the demands of compulsory

definition, which I feel, is clearly illustrated by the success and popularity of

events like Powderbubble and Burning Man. People seem to get enormous

pleasure from re-inventing themselves even if it is only from a set of images

culturally available to them.

I think that this identity play that takes place at Powderbubble does not

end at the taxi door, I feel that it remains in people's minds and defines a

certain type of expectation. I have often heard Powderbubble used as an

adjective to describe a style of dress or type of music. I think it has filtered into

people's lives in some form, I certainly will continue to gain pleasure from

performance even if it is only ever a reverse, mimic or parody of what is

culturally available to me.

One way I have continued to enjoy performance in everyday life was by

taking ballroom dancing lessons with 'my lady friend'. Our approach to the

lessons was an entire performance from pretending to be the only couple that

were to be married in the class, to the mock rows and false displays of virtual

break-ups over one partner's lack of commitment. Even the clothes and the

shoes were so much part of the fun of participating in the lessons. It is

precisely this kind of performance that is the most enjoyable, where there is

no visible stage and only the actors know that they are actors. It's like the man

who wears women's lingerie under his suit to work, one performer, no stage

and no audience. He has successfully conquered dominant gender norms.

Appendix

Contents:

Interview held by Mark Inglis

On the 10th of September, 1998.

At Arthouse, Curved Street, Temple Bar, Dublin.

Interviewees:

Niall Sweeny and Leah Hilliard.

Interview conducted on the 10 of September 1998, at 'Arthouse' Multi-media centre, Temple Bar, Dublin.

Interviewer;   Mark Inglis

Interviewees;   Niall Sweeney, Artistic Director to Arthouse and instigator of 'Powderbubble'.

                      Leah Hilliard, Personal Assistant to the Director at Arthouse, Performance Artist and Sculptor. Co-producer of Powderbubble.

(Leah) Aspidistra is an art club within an night club its using an audience in a night club setting to expose the stuff that is in an art club, it's pulling people in. whereas Powderbubble in very much about an evening's entertainment, it is very much about a night club. Aspidistra is a means to an end in actually showing a lot of art based work whereas Powderbubble is where we would actually commission performers to work within the Powderbubble theme, Aspidistra just houses work it's a home for work and the doesn't actually have to slot into that whereas Powderbubble creates its own work its not quite the same because it already has its clear agenda. Even if you look at 'The Alternative Miss Ireland ' the problem is that people think that there is a set agenda to the pageant because they have just learned from the past and that there's certain criteria which aren't there at all, actually the stipulations for what people do are very open, like this year was just crazy with everyone doing performances for every section when they were actually only requested to do a performance for one section.

(Mark) So that just happened.

(Leah) Yes people had an expectation probably from Shirley winning the previous year, she was very strong in all sections.

(Mark) What are the main differences between performance and theatre?

(Leah) Well the main difference between performance in clubs and performances in theatre is the idea that performance in theatre is meant to be repeated and it's designed to be done, its got cues its got sets it's very much orientated around being repeated and repeated whereas performances in clubs tend to be once off, well certainly on any of the occasions that I've done, well I mean there are certain clubs in Dublin, they do something that's a motif to the evening that always happens, but certainly any thing that I've done they just work around the club, they're quite organic, they just have to work around what's going on and you cant be too picky about it.

(Mark) Can you say the same about Aspidistra, is that the way you want it to work, it seems to be a lot more organised?

(Niall) It's more organised than Powderbubble, it's a framework for artists to show their work.

(Mark) Tell me more about Aspidistra and where it came from?

(Niall) Aspidistra was designed to be an art based performance, night to be a forum for a certain type of performance that tends to get thrown into a theatre space and the role of Aspidistra is it allows, or it creates an automatic audience, and automatically by having it at night we have a definite audience. There's a definite difference in the idea behind the two clubs how ever there is a lot of crossover in terms of the social context for performance and that's the similarity; the social context, although the social context is quite different in that respect, especially say with Powderbubble having a dance floor is immediately a different context whereas with Aspidistra the performance is the dance floor in that sense or that is the involvement and also that there is no platform really at the moment, that it's welcoming, it's saying yes here is a space and a event that we welcome every thing from the experimental, the untested to the established to the silly, and try to bind them together in some meaningful form or deliberately non meaningful form and yet still with enough of the unknown so that it drives itself.

(Leah) Aspidistra doesn't have a stage, there is no set stage in the theatre sense and the audience isn't a traditional audience in that they're not seated and have paid for tickets to see the show, whereas in Powderbubble, just because of the pure physicality of the set-up things seem more as a show, the individual performances tend to be on stage for the simple matter that they're up above everyone else and things are seen as the show and the shows go on throughout the night, whereas Aspidistra the performances are more organic and entwined in the whole space.

(Niall) You almost expect it to be the other way around.

(Leah) Yes you would almost expect it to be the other way around, its not that in Powderbubble that there aren't performances that are off the stage, the thing about Powderbubble is that everyone in the audience takes on a character for Powderbubble and therefore the whole thing is about a theatrical sense of this great event whereas in Aspidistra there is the audience and then there is very much the artist which the audience come to see, whereas in Powderbubble people come to participate.

(Niall) I think that's interesting because that's probably why in Powderbubble we have kept that distinction. Because the audience is completely participating in the act of Powderbubble in the sense that it is an entire performance from start to finish in itself, it is really just one performance, put it that way, and each element, and they can be seen separately, is really part of that whole thing and I think that's why the false distinction between audience and stage has happened or worked so well there, because the crowd is so much of the whole event, that you need to push up the podiums, to show that something is extra special.

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(Leah)Plus the whole thing about going on stage tends to act as an explanation for why there are certain people looking so bizarre like Panti could be dressed up and in the audience, but eventually people know that she will get up and do a number.

(Niall) And make sense of what's going on,and that's what's actually wonderful about that, it's the cathartic effect of a performance in a club, its long standing well known effect in that it frees the audience, or can free the audience from any inhibition on whatever level it may be weather its having a good time or dressing up or behaving in a certain way or whatever that is, it can free them of an inhibition but also more than that. Here in Aspidistra we have to keep the distinction between audience and performer....

(Leah)To allow the artist the space to perform.

(Niall) And yet we've striped down the stage versus audience...
and the weird thing is that we still expect people to participate even the viewing layout is very much about the physicality of watching something, and there are always performers who, like even Suzanne Geherty's piece which was very much on top of people in the last Aspidistra, it's actually good that people are intimidated, it allows space for thing that they have to watch in a certain way.

(Mark)How important is the kind of audience to Aspidistra.

(Niall) It obviously very important, at the same time you don't want to be seen preaching to the converted, that's always one of the big problems with any of this stuff, in that there always has to be, maybe I'll just rephrase that, in certain circumstances there is no problem with that and that can be very enjoyable, it's a very sort of isoteric experience weather it's a club or weather its art-based or club-based or whatever it is. That there's nothing specifically wrong with it, but I think that certainly the Powderbubble experience and the deliberate way that was formulated and driven was about. I don't want to sound angelical or I don't want to be claiming great changes, however it is well known and I don't think it isn't any sort of Powderbubble self-promotion to say that yes it did change an awful lot of people and their opinions and their ideas on clubbing and their ideas on social behaviour and even their more ingrained notions on sexuality and it did have a very specific and quantifiable effect on people, which is more than we ever hoped for.

(Leah)But always with Powderbubble there was that intention to raise peoples' expectations of what they expected from a club. There was always this core idea that there would be this Powderbubble family but no-one thought it would go as far as it did. A lot of that stems from the idea that the performers being in the audience and then being on the stage, that all the performers were accessible to the audience, there was this club that people weren't just doing a show then disappearing off back stage and being you know prentetious about it, or whatever, that everyone was there for the same amount of enjoyment.

(Niall) And I do remember the very first discussions that myself and Trish, that we all had, it was just after 'Gag', and Trish was back from London and you were knocking around more then and all that kind of stuff. First thought was, we all wanted to have a party once a month but there was nowhere in Dublin that we wanted to go to, so that was the first main thought so it was very much about putting on a party for friends in that sense and that quickly evolved, basically that was still the core thought behind it however the way it evolved, even at the large scale it ended up being, it still was very much done in that manner and that's why I think basically it touched off

(Mark) Did it push boundaries do you think?
It certainly pushed boundaries in an Irish context for sure and also yes we'd all been involved we'd all been away we'd all had all those experiences and kind of wanted to bring some of those things back, but yes keeping it quite Irish, I mean its terribly Dublin, its terribly Irish.

(Mark) Why do you say that?

(Niall) Just the way the referencing and the fact that its quite intelligent really and the standard, even the stuff on the flyers and the performances and some of the visual clues and the textual clues and all of that was quite, and all of that but quite you know and which is what we wanted we didn't want it to be a Dublin translation of a London club, and with Aspidistra it has the same aspirations in the way that we had kind of, its just a different kind of community, a different kind of platform and a different kind of participation.

(Mark) Would you say logical progression from Powderbubble?

(Niall) No, no, no, no, its very different, I think Aspidistra in a lot of ways came out of, Apidistra did in some ways stem from Powderbubble but it's the things that Powderbubble couldn't cover, that became Aspidistra and Aspidistra has its own foundation aswell. The same reasons Powderbubble came about as a sort of need for an Aspidistra space, a need for somewhere will show case a lot of work in the same night and let people compare and contrast and have a definite audience.

(Mark) Being on a Thursday night must make a difference.

(Niall) It marks a difference in the crowd

(Mark) Are they a more passive audience?

(Niall) Yeah, they're a more passive audience put it that way for sure even though there would be an engagement in the discussion of the work on the night by the audience, its that kind of activity.

(Mark) And you predicted that to happen?

(Niall) Well it was hoped that would happen, so that that's why say the café space is more of a social space whereas say the basement space is more of

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a serious space and you watched the stuff and then you left and then you'd come back into it or whatever so the café kind of provided that extra social context for discussion and also because so much of the audience are artists themselves and potentially discussing further ideas, etc., etc. Its as much as an inspirational event as anything else as well as showcasing and exposing.

(Mark) That's the interesting the thing, that it does tend to inspire people to do different things.

(Niall) It will take, it certainly won't be until the Christmas one before its hit a stride and in the same way it took Powderbubble a while for the audience to be completely involved, to completely loose their, you know to completely be a participating audience.

(Leah) With Aspidistra it was very hard to describe to people what the event was going to look like and how it was actually going to work and people didn't have a full understanding of until they actually saw the first one and the same with Powderbubble I think people who knew of similar events, also there were a lot of preconceived notions about Powderbubbble aswell. I think as much as people didn't know they also had preconceived notions about what it was going to be about. Powderbubble it was automatically assumed that it was going to have a lot more elements of 'gag'.

(Niall) Because of the fact of the thing it was coming out of we definitely did that and included the 'gag' audience too, but it was to try and you know, that audience and the gay audience can be the most narrow minded and bigoted of the lot and it was harder to loosen up their ideas and thoughts that it was in fact to loosen up to what would be termed the 'straight' audience they were far more free and accessible and free thinking and egalitarian than in fact a lot of the gay crowd, and that was surprising, although it's not that we didn't know that, it was just quite surprising how true that was, so definitely that was part of the mission.

(Leah) In the same way Aspidistra everyone had preconceived notions that it was going to be very like 'Clubhouse' which was an event which was run here previously and the problem wasn't with the fresh new audience that came to the event at all, it was with the people who had performed, who had seen 'Clubhouse' before which had the same expectations and 'Clubhouse' was very much about a theatre event and people were on in consecutive order and you were seated for an evening and they were entertained whereas Aspidistra you are literally in the whole space of Arthouse in which you are moving throughout and things clash and its very much about a path of discovery, you know, you aren't really spoon fed entertainment in any way and its up to yourself to find the things you want to see and also at the same if you don't like stuff you're not expected to sit there and sit through it either you're quite open to move around and leave.

(Niall) Which is part of the discussion in a way that some people leave or they will move to a different space or upstairs or to whatever to something they either prefer or just not.

(Leah)And the funny thing that happened was at the last one the downstairs space was full of quite intense performance art and we found that there were a lot more people in the upstairs more sociable space in the café who were actually sitting and watching the stuff going on down stairs but felt more comfortable with being distanced from it. It wasn't that they didn't enjoy it at all, they did and they watched every moment of it and could tell exactly what happened it's just that they didn't want to be down in front of it.

Naill- With regard to Aspidistra the audience can choose what they take in, which can be analysed or interpreted as a form of interaction.
It is very interesting comparing the two because there are very strange differences in a way and yet, its like that whole thing about stage versus no stage it's the opposite to what you'd expect. But also it's the same about the interactivity in a way that there's more. the audience at Aspidistra interacts more with the space and the performances as objects whereas at Powderbubble there's a much more organic interaction put it that way and it's interaction in the social space, it's more literal interaction with the performers, literal as in they are walking through or whatever they're in the crowd but also the crowd with the crowd, that's for definite, and you can see that's part of the dance club phenomena too but when its escalated to a sort of a performance level, in the way the public perform on stage or areas that have been turned into stage or the catwalk, and its not just about people being exhibitionists there's a lot more to it than that I think, whereas in Aspidistra it's a different kind of interaction.

(Leah)The dialog about the performance piece tends to have happened before the actual artist gets off the stage, whereas in Powderbubble people would talk directly to the performers and its just the participation level in Powderbubble is straight across the board whereas people in Apsidistra would be much more you know, there would be less actual crowd participation, people wouldn't really be as involved. There's not an expectation on them yet really.

(Niall) No, not yet but maybe it will evolve a little bit that way but then in Aspidistra that kind of thing would seem like it was some sort if talent show contest, whereas in Powderbubble its not, ok well they can't get up and sing..

(Leah)They can get up and dance.

(Niall) They can certainly get up and dance and that is part of the performance.

(Leah)And you look at all the people who entered 'The Alternative Miss', they were people who went to Powderbubbble and decided hey I can do that, I can get up on stage. They want the stage and that's a dance club culture thing. It's the same when people go to gigs, the whole thing about 'I love the guy on stage', 'I want to snog the guy on stage' or what happens on the dance scene 'I'm dancing brilliantly I want everyone to see me dancing because I'm fab there's a stage I'm up on it' and the same thing happens in Powderbubble.

(Niall) You do get the egos and all that.

(Leah) It is an evening out with the egos.

(Niall) And some of its not and I do believe that some of its not, that its just getting carried away with the whole performance element because it is so much part of the whole experience. If you look at the last Powderbubble there was a performance every half an hour except for the one core dance hour between half one and half two. And just going back to a point that Leah made that notion where performances are connecting and making sense of and explaining other elements in the club weather it's the whole theme or the installations or some of the decorations, that the performances actually create a complete gelling of the experience and make people realise that they are there, you know what you always get about a normal night club experience is that it could be any night and your having a good time but at no point are you pulled out and that sort of dream world and pointed at and made think that yes I am here at this very specific point in time, in the year, in my life, in these peoples lives, do you know what I mean? In Powderbubble you get this great sense of existence at that moment in time.

(Leah) I agree, its like the whole thing where people are theme dressed in white and then you come out and you sing a Christmas song and everyone is delighted because they feel they are the backdrop.

(Niall) And that's completely true they're right to think that.

(Leah) And then the whole thing with the Spice Girls we'd be walking through and they be looking at these bizarrely dressed people for ages and not clicking why these people are dressed the way they are until you hear the music. And the one I think of is the nativity at Christmas and it went down brilliantly and it was so easy to do really Cristmassy things like have Panti in a red dress.

(Niall) And the whole song at the end and even the choice of song, it was Conor singing passenger and singing it acoustically and all that was specifically chosen, you had this giant 1200 capacity space with the best sound system in the country and yet its Connor with a little guitar and singing that particular song is completely relevant to the whole journey that is Powderbubble and the thoughts behind it so you know at no point was any thing done really for cheese. Even some of Panti's silliest moments I don't think were too, I mean some of them were of course.

(Leah) I mean the whole thing about Powderbubble is that people try to be flippant but even the guys with the big hats they worry about their batteries!

(Niall) Well it was one of the nicer moments the three guys wearing, they're all straight, the three of don't know each other, did you hear this story?

(Leah) One of them is a top psychologist in Ireland...

(Niall) They come with big wigs on and flashing fairy lights the three of them independently of each other. One of them is a Christmas tree with lights and they're having a chat at the bar like they're talking about motor bikes, talking about 'I've got the duracell whatever', and 'Jasus mine are going do ya have any spare' and whatever, and a very deadly serious conversation and yet they're there in the frocks and whatever and it's the first time they've done it and yet that is just insane

(Leah) Yes, I think Powderbubble has always been very tactile.

(Niall) Yes. And that's why even stuff like candy floss or whatever can seem silly or whatever at the same time it is a little bit of that, its actually that you know, its gifts, it was never about making money that was an impossibility because all of the money got spent and it was the fifty people it took to run the night including the staff and then all the crew and the performers, it was an impossibility. And then even just thinking back to Aspidistra that's certainly part of the same thing, it's really to plough as much into the performances and the space and the work so the focus is on the work and not the money making ability of the event although the event tries to fund the works obviously, but its priority is to show the work.

(Mark) You could almost say the audience is more passive yet they're not because they're thinking more about what you're seeing.

(Leah) The thing about the audience is number one they're paying to get in they make a decision to come here and they have an expectation of what they are going to see so you can't really say they are a passive audience because we wouldn't get a passive audience we only would get an audience who will really come to see this kind of event as much as Powderbubble will only get that sort of audience aswell. But I think it's a much more cerebral kind of audience they really want to be provoked and they will challenge any thing they get whereas Powderbubble is, even the name, its about fluff and about fun, Powderbubble can be very poignant but its not its whole aim whereas I think there's an expectation with Aspidistra that it should. I mean we will have pieces of fun and frivolous for purely entertaining or experimental but it will always have a certain sort of magnifying glass held over it because of literally the building its housed in. Whatever is done in here (Arthouse) because it is a cultural centre there's expectations on it automatically whereas Powderbubble in a night-club form and it's a hired space it doesn't have as many labels on it.

(Niall) So in some ways it has a more free palate of expression than Arthouse but then vice versa too it really just depends, interestingly enough I think as you're looking at the two now, is say something like Ann Kelly's piece actually appearing in both in a different context but succeeding equally and yet appearing in a very very different context and read differently and I really like that and bizarrely it was at Aspidistra that the balloon got highjack not at Powderbubble. The whole thing is weirdly inverted it really is actually amazing that things like that happen here, as oppose to Powderbubble which is where you would expect that. And people take Powderbubble very seriously.

(Leah)They do.

(Niall) Even Pualine Cummins who is on the board of directors for Arthouse can't live without kind of thing.
(Leah)But even if you think about it even the most frivolous of things in Powderbubble like getting your nails done in the make-up parlour and people are deadly serious about it, they have a very high expectation of what they are going to get. The best was the Powderbubble when we did the silver one, and you could not get silver face paint in the whole of Dublin, and you could go into any of the joke shops and they'd go, 'are ya goin' to the Powderbubble?', people at the door going, 'anyone for the last of the silver face paint?' but like it was just crazy!

(Niall) I mean we would have aspirations for Aspidistra to develop, obviously to develop in a different way, but to develop a similar need in people, I suppose just in sort of going to see performances, you know, on a Thursday night going to something which is very different to what they'd normally go to, still having a social evening out and yet its not theatre and its not cinema and it has elements of 'club' but not being 'club' you know.....

(Leah)I think what we need to strive for, for Aspidistra. In order to have the strong identity that Powderbubble had, that it can literally move into other forms and be easily identifiable just for it to grow, and it needs to have a very strong association with it. Powderbubble at this stage, it can support so many things because it has been so strong in its own right. I mean ideally Aspidistra should be able to move actually physically from this building and still survive.

(Niall) I mean they both should.

(Leah)Yeah they both should.

(Niall) The whole point is that they're a concept not a building.

(Mark)I think its on the verge of creating a lot of new things, a lot of new performances, a lot of new spectators, do you think that element of creation is there or are you producing the art, are you producing the audience?

(Niall)Yes I think we are creating the audiences and the artists I think that's fair to say although some might say to what extent, however we are certainly tapping into a general desire for something of these natures. Whether people are able to pinpoint that that's what they wanted, its just that this is what they wanted, just not what they're into expressing.

(Leah)If you think about Powderbubble, the both Powderbubble and Aspidistra are exploring new realms of possibilities and that would obviously create new audiences, but weather people would pick up on that in terms of Aspidistra people have seen certain works and gone 'ooo' and have maybe moved outside their own media to produce different types of work, or produced work that, Powderbubble has exposed people to a different social
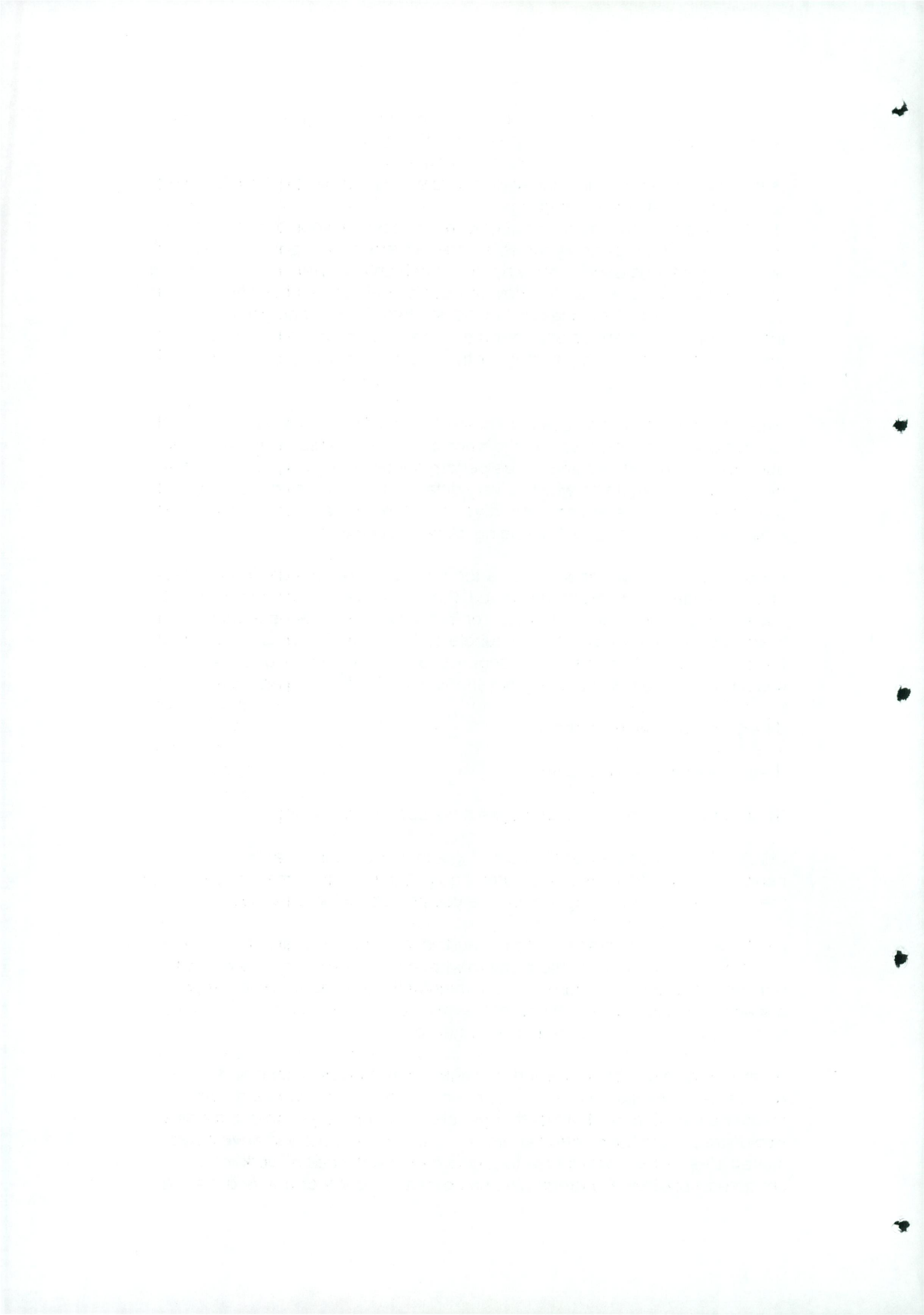
situation and a different realm of possibilities, and also higher expectation. Aspidistra has already caused quite a bit of controversy amongst similar, not similar events but what, like there has been a lot of performance events before but Aspidistra is literally the first of this kind, and it has brought about an expectation amongst other arts organisations to do similar types of events, and that's a good thing. If there's a higher expectation of what performance art should be it can only get better and better, if there is a higher expectation of what an arts organisation can do then it can only get better and better and the same with the club experience, you know if people are willing to invest more time and effort in proper social events for, I mean it can only improve things for everyone generally.

(Niall) I think so there's a lot to be said for placing performance in a social context I think work, certainly sort of a feeling in new media and clubspaces have operated, have had sort of a, have been new media for such a long time without realising it, they have operated in that way although their focus has been slightly different or what ever, but performance has always been central to clubs since night clubs started, since whatever.

(Leah) Even the first Dada performances were done in clubs.

(Niall) Because it's a receptive crowd and people in those contexts are happy to experience something aggressive something challenging something soft you know and they have to experience those things side by side and give them equal time and give them equal weighting.

(Leah) I mean it has been one of the key things about performance is that performance provokes a reaction in the same way that any Art should provoke a reaction so if you're talking about doing a performance. You've got theatre audience and a theatre audience would be considered a live audience but a club audience is a live and squirming and active audience and its, you know a theatre audience can be quite passive so I mean if you provoke a reaction within a live social event you will feel that reaction come back to you automatically whereas in a theatre event people already have.... more so what I was talking to you about earlier, that performance being different from theatre, the main thing is that people, the audience in theatre have already been preconditioned to react, if you like something you clap, you know there will be an interval. Performance doesn't have any preconceived rules for the audience and that's the biggest difference and causing a reaction is a key role, and simple things like performances have no time limit on them, they have no definite seating, they've no audience rules and that can be very disorientating for people aswell.

(Niall) And that's why they work best in these kind of contexts, because this gives a certain kind of a structure without saying there has to be a stage and rows of seating, it still allows for what ever variety of possibilities of presentation, all the same time people understand at least going into a space and having a drink and talking or watching, as oppose to people going into a gallery. People have this fear of galleries because they don't know how to behave in them, not that there is a way to behave, but they feel that they

should. It is like the way that people behave in any architectural space, or church, I mean it is a 'church' experience in that you expect to have to behave in a certain way and to respond in a certain way, it's a much more of an anarchic structure in that there is a hierarchy, there is different ways of presenting, there are different methods of behaving but those behaviours are really up to the crowd.

(Mark) Which can be hugely liberating for the audience.

(Niall) And for the artist and that's why the club analogy works very well, certainly for these kind of art forms, certainly for a means to get where it's going to go next, you know it may not always be the case, but think certainly at the moment it's the way that its going to get to its next space, it may not change but it will allow for change.
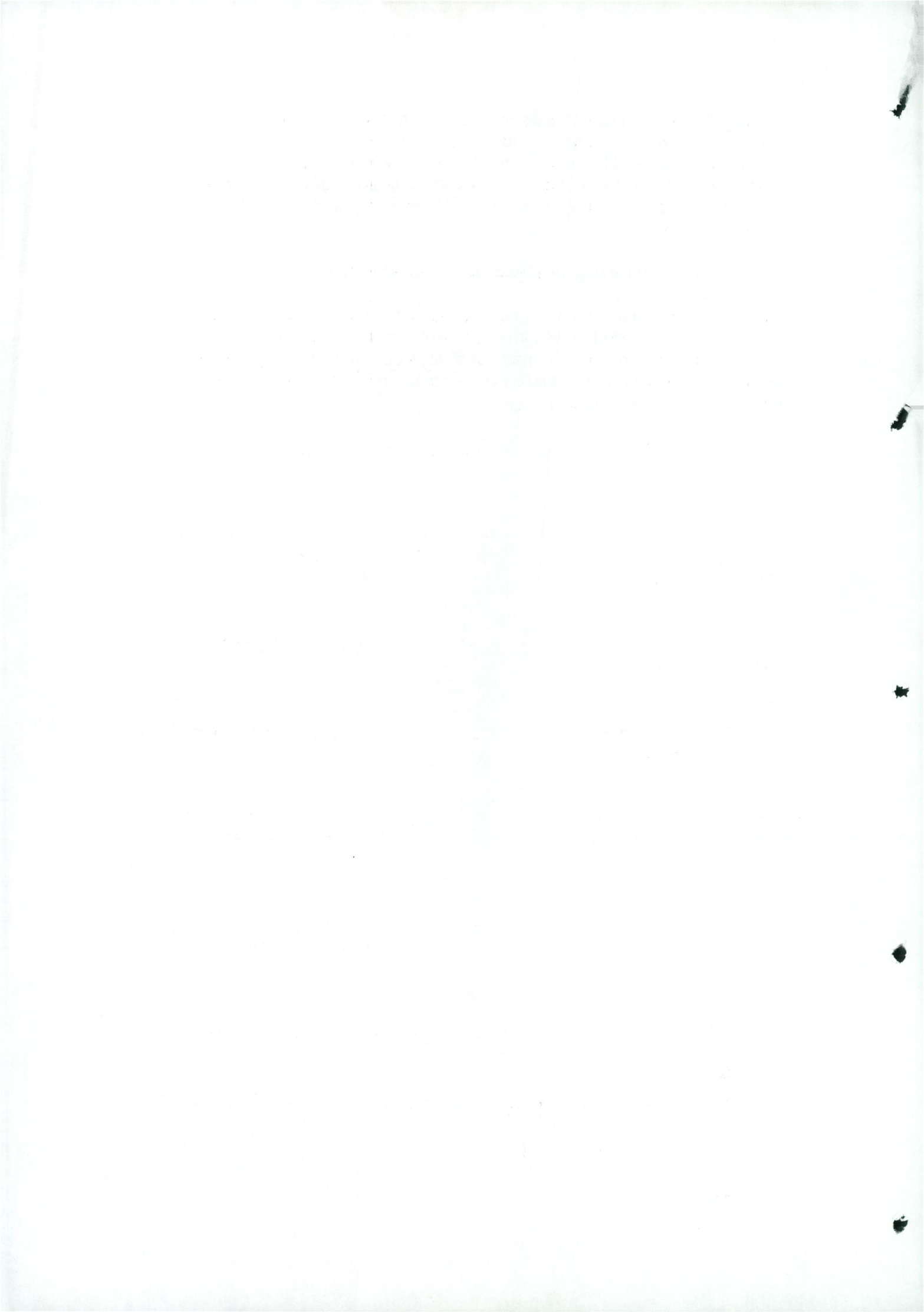
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