

# **Spasms over balance: Posthuman perspectives, antinormative *becomings*, and the *sticky* runway of vogue femme**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores vogue femme as a performative way of creating ruptures with normative understandings of balance. As normative balance, I define a set of binary and heteronormative stereotypes and conventions that are enforced on a sociopolitical level, contributing to the survival of the capitalist patriarchal system. The focus lies on two specific elements of vogue femme: the spins and dips, and the floor performance. Both elements open up, I suggest, possibilities for ‘posthuman becomings’, as they are improvisational, coincidental and ephemeral, based on the here and now of the dancing bodies. The article is based on fieldwork conducted between January and March 2020. I employed participatory observation and ethnographic interviews with voguers in vogue femme sessions and ballrooms in Berlin and Malmö in order to explore and analyse potential posthuman aspects and the aesthetics of the dance, the possibilities it offers for deconstructing normative identities and becoming-other through erratic spins, dips, and drops. In this process, spasm and sweat are considered to be central generators of affect. The characteristics of the voguing space, as well as the atmosphere that is constructed every time the bodies meet and collide with each other are also explored.

## **Introduction**

*‘The category is... vogue femme. Anybody walking?’*

The commentator announces the category, the DJ starts the beat, and *Jaja* presents herself on the improvised runway somewhere in Charlottenburg. She catwalks with confidence in an exaggerated fashion, while working a very elaborate hand performance that frames her face and emphasises her chest and hips. Suddenly, the beat gives a crash, which motivates her to do a wild spin and drop abruptly on the floor, as if the ground is calling to her like a magnet. As she drops, the audience

goes crazy, clapping, snapping, and cheering. I know that this is the first time *Jaja* walks in drag and I share the audience's excitement. *Jaja* twerks on the floor, splits, arches her spine and lifts her legs; she makes it seem effortless, though beads of sweat concentrate on her forehead and drip on the floor. Her arched chest spasms with every breath, as she gasps for air, as she gets back up on her legs, spins again, and drops in ecstatic and erratic loops. The following day we will meet for an interview and *Jaja* will tell me 'my heart was beating so fast, my body was shaking, my head was up in the air, it was so exciting! I think I'm finally who I always wanted to be, I dance the way I want to dance. Now I don't care anymore, I'm just so happy!' (Notes from fieldwork, January 2020).

The above excerpt from my fieldnotes paints a picture of the atmosphere on a kiki ball night. For a few hours, the place that hosts the ball becomes a feast, a space to explore and experiment with oneself, an intimate community, a heterotopia hidden in the middle of the dystopian metropolis. In this space, voguing presents a way to dismantle norms, to become-other while dancing in community with others.

This article seeks to explore voguing as a performative way of creating ruptures with the normative balance, which I define as the neoliberal heteropatriarchal binary norms that we are called to perform in (and impose on) our everyday lives. I specifically explore 'vogue femme', which is based on the construction and performance of plethoric hyperfeminine dancing personas. Vogue femme consists of five elements: hand performance, catwalk, duckwalk, spins and dips, and floor performance. The article focuses on the latter two, tracing potential posthuman perspectives, possibilities for deconstructing normative identities, and *becoming-other* processes through erratic spins, dips, and drops. The concept of *becoming*, borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is approached as a political and aesthetic/

performative tool that clashes with pre-inscribed normative identities. I propose that vogue femme seeks to dismantle the heteronormative and capitalist balance by creating a space for imbalanced bodies to perform themselves in unconventional, ironic, and exaggerated manners.

Between January and March 2020, I conducted participatory observation at balls, voguing sessions, and vogue femme workshops, as well as interviews with voguers in Malmö and Berlin. I also explored my personal embodied relationship to vogue femme by dancing in(to) the field together with my sources, attempting to replicate their movements, learning how to walk and pose, and reflecting on my body as a research tool and as a performative force. The article includes excerpts from the fieldwork and quotes from my (anonymised) sources as empirical material which is analysed through the lens of posthuman theory, affect theory, and poststructuralism.

The existing research and literature on ballroom culture and voguing is multifaceted. It includes historical, postcolonial, and gender studies' perspectives, as voguing and ballroom culture have been intertwined with the histories of Black and Latinx queer movements. Even though my contribution to the field stems from a posthumanist and visual cultural approach, I am particularly inspired by the work of scholar and performer Marlon M Bailey (2011 et al). Bailey navigates voguing and ballroom culture with an emphasis on gender performativity and with various methodological references to (auto)ethnography. As for its history, in its early days, the ballroom was a community-based social event, a place of belonging for Black and Latinx queers that were excluded from the white gay spaces, and a space for competition amongst the different Houses (families). Voguing in particular was born in Riker Islands' prison in the 1970s and was brought as a competition category into the ballrooms of Harlem by Paris Dupree (Lawrence 5). Initially, voguing was based on the creative replication of models' poses in Vogue magazine—hence its name—and gradually evolved into a complicated dance and an integral part of the ballroom as 'a mix of competitive instinct, athletic ability and, above all, a desire to be seen (rather than a desire to become part of the crowd,

which motivated most club and party dancers)’ (Lawrence 6). In today’s ballrooms, there are three voguing categories: the old way, the new way, and vogue femme.

A voguing performance is not choreography-based, but rather improvisational, building on some existing elements (moves). It requires precision, accuracy, and creativity in terms of performatively interpreting the existing elements. Spontaneity is also important, as the performer responds to the competitor’s moves, the music, the general energy of the room. The goal is to be memorable, so the voguing performance is aesthetically over-the-top. In vogue femme, this exaggeration is translated into an over-the-top celebration of femininity, soft moves, dramatic poses, a mixture of hypersexual energy and naivety, irony, whimsy, and often grotesque aesthetics. As my sources have frequently expressed, there is a radical empowerment rooted in this exaggeration. Vogue femme is thus often seen as a ‘chance to own my sexuality; I put it in your face rather than sugarcoating it’ (*Flora*, January 2020), or a way to ‘explore my feminine and masculine sides, and I’m now comfortable with both’ (*Bruce*, February 2020), or even to ‘dance like a beautiful cyborg’ (*Moa*, February 2020). This empowering exaggeration transgresses moderation and normativity, opening up a space for movements beyond balance.

### **Moving beyond balance. Heterotopic spaces and *sticky* atmospheres**

Balance is here defined as the movement of the heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist system towards sustaining itself, and not as a movement of constant change. Balance is approached as a fixed position, as a rather conservative state and not a progressive process. In that sense, I refer to balance as it is represented in heteronormative and neoliberal rhetorics: it is neither neutral nor entropic; it is based on hegemony and majoritarian power structures. With ‘majoritarian’, I do not imply that the balance expresses the group that is bigger in numbers. Rather, it supports and is supported by the group that ‘assumes a state of power and domination’, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state

(*A Thousand Plateaus* 105), by making this domination seem natural and inevitable. Deleuze and Guattari approach the dominant subject, the white cis male, as majority/majoritarian, and all others—women, animals, insects, minerals, machines, etc.—are minority/minoritarian. The majoritarian subject is the subject that decides what and who constitutes the normative balance. Respectively, minoritarian subjects seek to move/dance beyond balance by *becoming-other*. The very act of *becoming* can be approached as a decolonisation and a queering; *becoming* is counter-hegemonic, anti-authoritarian, anti-speciesist, and non-binary.

The balance is intertwined with the neoliberal oppressive system and can be traced in various places, forms, and shapes. The normative balance is close to what Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos defines as the Lawscape, i.e. ‘the epistemological and ontological tautology of law and the city’ (*‘Atmospheres of law’* 36). For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, the lawscape is omnipresent as long as humans, non-humans, buildings, animals, machines meet (*ibid*). It is inescapable, which means that ‘wherever one is in the city [...] one swims with and against the various normative flows that constitute the materiality of the lawscape’ (*‘Atmospheres of law’* 37). The normative balance may be inescapable, but not indestructible. The voguing bodies inside the ballroom swim—or rather, dance—with and against the normative flows, attempting to bend or break them, creating their own antinormative here and now.

This is expressed on a performative level, as vogue femme includes beyond-balance moves like slipping, sliding, or dropping. Especially during the floor performance, the voguing body trembles, shivers, spasms, twerks. Vogue femme celebrates the literal loss of balance and incorporates it in the performance as a staged move to make the performance even more dramatic. My source, *Ena*, explains it better: ‘when you feel you’re about to fall, make it look like you meant to fall. Own it, give it character, make them go like *damn girl how you drop*’ (March 2020).

The architecture of the ballroom also plays a significant role, creating a space and an atmosphere that facilitates *becomings*, antinormative movements. I define space as the tactile side of the ballroom, the three-dimensional locality where the performance takes place. This can be anywhere, as the space is also the ephemeral spatiality that is created when the participating bodies move towards each other on the runway. It is moveable, it can exist in various places, but it is not easily extendable, it has specific limits or borders, which are further underlined by the participants' immersion, the intimacy and sense of safety that is produced. The space is explored haptically. It is experienced through skin-on-skin contact, by touching the walls, sliding on the runway, dropping and feeling the cold dirty floor against one's backbones.

This space is a heterotopia, defined by Michel Foucault as 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault 3). The ballroom space is literal and symbolic, existing with its own rules while subverting the norms of society with irony. This can be observed in the hyperfeminine, sexual, and, at times, grotesque vogue femme aesthetics. For my sources, vogue femme embraces and celebrates characteristics which are stereotypically considered 'shameful' for a non-cis-male body, like sensuality, softness, audacity. These are subverted and approached with self-reflexivity and irony within the physical ballroom space.

On the other hand, the atmosphere is a phenomenological concept. I define it as a co-produced affect, as *methexis* experienced by the participating bodies. For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, the atmosphere is 'an enclosure of affects that spread through affective imitation between bodies' (*Spatial Justice* 5). This atmosphere is fluid, temporary and incidental; it will withdraw as soon as the contact between these bodies stops. I locate the atmosphere in the sensual level; it is the stuffy, yet intoxicating air that circulates amongst the participating bodies, the beads of sweat that drip on the floor and

evaporate, the sense of presence and togetherness that is produced by the feeling that the participating bodies sweat, spasm, and breathe in and out together. The ballroom atmosphere is intimate and sticky.

The intimacy of the ballroom atmosphere was a recurring pattern during the interviews that I conducted. Sources have described it as a *bubble* (Moa, February 2020), a *safe space* (Dre, February 2020), a *common vibe* (Liam, January 2020). The ballroom space strives to facilitate methexis, a collective here and now, where the bodies that are present are moved by a sense of shared desire. I am not implying that each body inside this space will immerse in the voguing performance and experience the ballroom atmosphere in the same way. However, the space and the performance give the participants the possibility to become part of the atmosphere, to circulate methexis amongst them, if they want to. The space and the atmosphere are thus characterised by *stickiness*.

*Stickiness* is defined by Sara Ahmed as a generator of affect ('Happy Objects' 29), while affect is 'what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects' (*ibid*). As the dancing bodies move with, around, and against each other, they constantly leave sticky impressions, staining, transforming, and emotionally affecting each other with their energies and fluids. Ahmed argues that 'emotions are about movement, but also about attachments' and, respectively, attachments take place 'through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others' (*cultural politics* 11). There is a mutual movement at play. The bodies that occupy the ballroom transform and support each other with various somatic and verbal actions and reactions. In these processes of mutual movement, sweat is a crucial factor. The *sticky*, sweaty impressions that the voguers leave on each other every time their bodies meet, collide, brush against each other, are markers of intimacy, methexis, and presence. Sweat is a fluidity with various connotations. On a visual level, it offers proof of intense somatic labour and transformative processes of immersion. Additionally, it is a fluidity that speaks against proper bodies and rejects the domination of the clean and the spotless, the normatively proper.

Sweat as a *sticky* factor also marks the boundaries of the heterotopia and indicates that it can only be occupied by specific (*sticky, becoming-other*) bodies. Thus, these heterotopic bubbles belong to these bodies and can be decoded by them. As Michel Serres points out, ‘to make something its own, the body knows how to leave some personal stain [...] appropriation takes place through dirt’ (3). Similarly, the becoming bodies appropriate the space through sweat. Intimacy and stickiness are often generated as a body comes across something that has been stained by someone else’s bodily fluids. Sweat thus may facilitate what Ahmed defines as ‘the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near’ (*‘Happy Objects’* 30).

This movement is motivated by rhythm, spasm, and desire. Voguing is based on improvisations and experimentations on pre-existing elements, so there is no choreography to follow in a linear chronological order. The body moves as it wishes to move, responding to the *stickiness* of the ballroom. The sweat here is not the result of a heavily labouring oppressed body, but the result of a desiring body, that is let loose to dance freely. The voguer is free to ‘let the spine do the work and just set that body on fire’ (*Cleo*, March 2020). Consequently, the sweaty voguing body is presented as the radical Other of the majoritarian balanced body. The balanced body must be clean, spotless, pure. Even extreme somatic labour often appears to have a minimum impact on the (mainstream) visual representations of the majoritarian balanced body. Two examples that I like to think of here are classical ballet and Olympic gymnastics, both of which are based on balance and praise the normative body. In both cases, the body is put under extreme pressure and goes through very intense somatic labour. The visual representations of these two examples, however, are—to a large extent—those of graceful, clean, and perfectly balanced bodies that perform without clashing with other bodies and seemingly without producing any bodily fluids.



On the contrary, the minoritarian imbalanced body oozes fluids. Thinking about the film *Paris is Burning* (1990) as an example of visual representations of voguing, what comes to mind is the thick beads of sweat trickling down Pepper LaBeija's face, Willi Ninja tossing his sweaty hair back during a duck walk, the fading make-up, the damp clothes as the voguers lock and pop against each other on the runway. The facade of systematic balance indicates a sterile environment, where the proper bodies glide avoiding any skin-on-skin contact. On the contrary, the ballroom heterotopia is crowded, narrow, *sticky*, full of colours, noises and smells. Despite the literal lack of space, the bodies still move and clash around the ballroom. As I observed in my fieldwork and as I discussed with my sources, the bodies on the runway yearn for somatic contact, desire to leave repeated impressions on each other's skin, to be seen, to be heard, to *become*. This desire is expressed in the movement itself and is underlined by the body's resort to spasm.

### **Spasms as ruptures in balance**

The spasm as a movement and as a somatic condition has interesting political and philosophical connotations. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi connects it to the hectic speed of semicapitalism (*Precarious Rhapsody* 149), the inexorable exhaustion that it causes, and the depression that it leads to. Berardi defines the spasm as 'a sudden, abnormal, involuntary muscular contraction, or a series of alternating muscular contractions and relaxations. A spasm is also a sudden, brief spell of energy and an abnormal, painful intensification of the bodily nervous vibration' (*Heroes* 113). For Berardi, the spasm is a 'panic response of the accelerated vibration of the organism' as well as the 'hyper-mobilisation of desire submitted to the forces of economy' (*Heroes* 115). It is the result of a collision between the body's desire to be and capitalism's desire to exploit, to profit from its labouring movements.

Drawing parallels between capitalism and heteronormativity, I see the spasm as the result of a collision between the body's desire to dance beyond balance and the normative balance's desire to limit

the body's expressive and transformative movements. In a similar context, Melissa Blanco Borelli explores the spasm both theoretically and performatively, looking at majoritarian spasming bodies, white cis men who 'benefit from an ideological system that grants them privilege' (59). I find her work fascinating, as it facilitates a dialogue with other types of non-majoritarian spasmogenic dance performances and can be contextualised within vogue femme. In this case, the spasm is a political and performative tool for empowerment, a somatic response to the angst that is caused by the heteronormative balance. In a capitalist urban centre, the precarious labouring body spasms due to its inability 'to live and breathe in harmony with other bodies' (58). In that sense, I understand Berardi's spasm as a somatic response of a body in an extremely precarious state, pushed to the limit, forced to perform in certain speeds and normative ways. It is simultaneously an involuntary contraction and a conscious act of defiance, which affects the participating/labouring bodies.

Dance allows alternative aesthetic and affective responses, as well as different experiences of space and rhythm. Here, the somatic labour is not exploitative, but expressive, and the body moves around not carrying pre-inscribed identities, but deconstructing them. In voguing, the spasming body is able to create its own radical space and rhythm, where the harmonious coexistence is interrupted by creative, chaotic collisions and withdrawals. The spasm is thus a series of rapid movements that attempt ruptures with the balance. It is crucial to remember that this balance is not an equilibrium, since it is based on exploitation and oppression. Rather, it is a conservative response that the system creates to perpetuate its existence. The bodies that spasm inside the ballroom atmosphere are bodies in state of *becoming*, which choose to spin and dip against, to subvert the normative balance through their performance.

With the spin and dip, the voguer performs a freestyle pirouette and then either gradually slides to the ground or drops abruptly on the backside. As a final pose, the voguer arches the body, keeping one leg bent right next to the backside and the other leg lifted, with the coup-

de-pieu pointing towards the ceiling (see fig. 1). As a visual experience, it is spectacular and captivating; *Rae* even claims that ‘if voguing is the sentence, the dip is the exclamation point’ (March 2020). As a somatic experience, it is intoxicating, yet rather painful, twisting the body in unusual angles. It requires practice, repetition, and failure upon failure, and it seems hard to stop until it is perfected. ‘With practice, the pain won’t go away, but you’ll start caring less about ruining your knees. It’s kind of addictive’, comments *Jaja* (February 2020).

The spin and dip gives the voguer a chance to haptically converse with the runway-space and the other bodies that occupy it. This element includes actual contact, intense skin-on-skin brushes. The body spins around its axis and drops or slides to the floor, spreading and exploring it with its senses. After the dip comes the floor performance, a dramatic improvisational vogue femme element. The voguer is free to dance any way they wish, performatively renegotiating and reinventing aesthetic conventions. The body experiments, becomes ethereal, elemental, changes shapes. On the floor, as one source beautifully states, ‘I am free, I’m unreal, I’m a show, baby, I’m not from this world!’ (Dre, February 2020). Another source has shared a rather poetic experience: ‘I spread like ocean, I consume the floor with my body, then I become small, disappear for a second, before I resurface’ (*Cleo*, April 2020). The transformative *becomings* are limitless and there is no deciding factor that would indicate which direction they would take, other than the spasmogenic ephemeral here and now of the dancing body.

The floor performance movement is not linear and progressive, but circular and constantly disrupted. The voguer follows the body, and the body responds to the characteristics of the surrounding space. The voguer spasms, fuelled by the collective methexis that is produced by all participating bodies; these are the other voguers, the audience, the judges, the commentator, the DJ, everyone that contributes to the construction of intimate stickiness within the ballroom. Every spasm is a movement against and beyond balance and a performative motivation towards *becomings*.

In the works of Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of *becoming* is not an imaginary identification, an imitation, a resemblance, but rather an active, never-ending process of embodiment, an ‘extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance’ (*What is Philosophy* 173). *Becoming* is a transformative, embodied, climactic process that is never completely fulfilled; it is a movement towards a state or an action, without a teleological cause. For Rosi Braidotti, ‘*becoming* is the actualisation of the immanent encounter between subjects, entities, and forces, which are apt mutually to affect and exchange parts of each other in a creative and non-individual way’ (58). *Becoming* is ‘minoritarian’ (*A Thousand Plateaus* 106) and spasmodic, stemming from an excess of energy from within. The voguing *becomings* are anti-majoritarian performative acts of queering.

Consequently, the spins and dips and the floor performance, marked by sweat and embellished with spasms, become highly aestheticised political tools of a deviant body that seeks to create radical counter-narratives and counter-sites of expression. The spasms transform the body, the space it occupies, and the other bodies that collectively *become* with it. This liberating process entails a little paradox that is common with dance in general. This is a chaotic state of deconstructing and reconstructing oneself, while being in control and remaining aware of the body. This sense of losing oneself without ever losing control is an act of going beyond balance. Balance is about control in a very specific and narrow context, whereas *becoming* is about testing and dismantling the existing limits, without entirely erasing the body. The body cannot be erased as it is not only a dancing element, but also a political tool. The identities are deconstructed and renegotiated, but the materiality is still there, never abandoned.

Again, sweat is a very central fluidity, functioning as a proof and as a reminder of presence. Immersing into dance and *becoming-other*, the dancer might lose the conscious connections to the body and momentarily forget about its physical dimension. As *Moa* describes it, ‘it’s almost like a spiritual experience, because your body exists and you exist, but you’re not really there’ (February 2020). In these moments

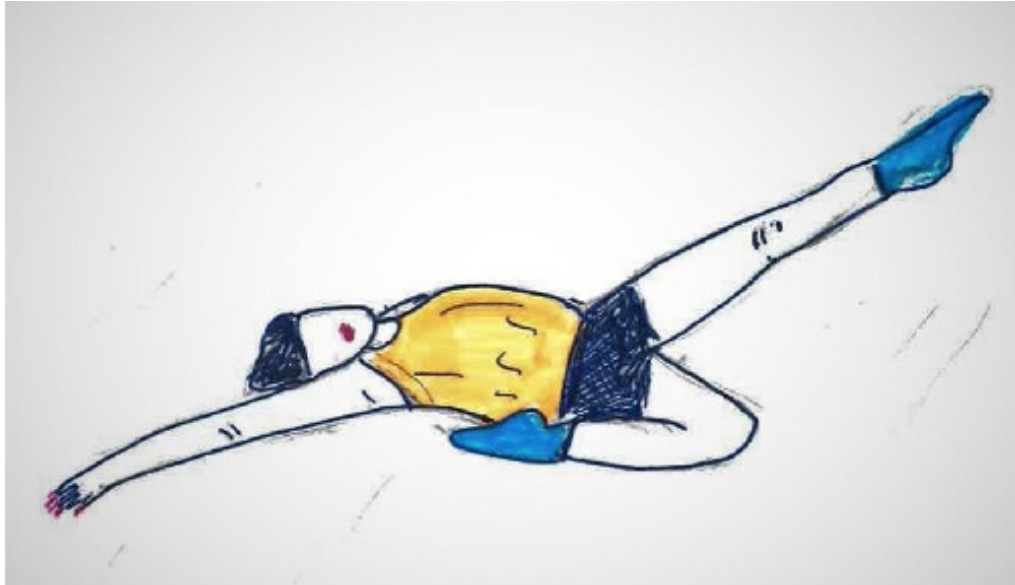


Fig. 1: A rough example of a spin and dip's final pose. Sketch created by the author, May 2020.

when we forget that we are really there and we get lost in the loops, touching and feeling our own sweaty skin works as a reminder that, despite our best attempts to dissolve into thin air, we are still present. Every spasm may be an act of withdrawing from the normative balance, but every contact with our sweaty skin, with the sweaty bodies around us is a reminder of the togetherness, the intimacy, the radical physicality of the ballroom. Returning to our sweaty bodies, we become aware of our conscious, political decision to move beyond what we know, beyond balance.

### **Concluding reflections**

When I vogue, I tell a story, my story. My hands will draw attention to my body. This is important to me, this is me, I've been forced to hide me, to avoid the looks, the tears, the pain. And the touch. But now I want you to look. When I spin, I am free. I drop on the floor, my body is mine, my story is *my* story. The floor, the duckwalk; I love every part of it, even the pain. This is a pain that I choose, it's a happy pain.  
(*pause*)

But I guess it's a happy pain because *you* guys are there.  
I have my audience, they hear my story, they see, they  
dance, they *know*. This is what makes it so special.  
(*Cleo*, April 2020 – the emphasis in italics is *Cleo's*).

The spasmogenic beyond balance *becoming* in vogue femme is not a lonely process. The voguing body needs the interaction with the other bodies to unfold its uniqueness while being fuelled, challenged or supported. As a political act, the becoming is based on togetherness and solidarity. In this sense, the floor performance underlines the sociopolitical dimension of voguing, because it indicates that the body needs the other bodies to walk, to dance, to battle, to merely exist, to transform, to *become*, and to subvert. Above all, voguing requires an assemblage, a multiplicity of bodies, and stems from a collective need for visibility, for protest, and for celebration.

Voguing is a lot more than a dance. It is a social movement in its most literal sense; a collective move-ment against the normative balance, towards a heterotopic counter-hegemonic state that is yet to be explored. As I have argued throughout this article, voguing is inextricably intertwined with the sociality and togetherness of the ballroom, the feeling of skin against skin, the sweat, the spasms that come from within. In a world ravaged by a global pandemic, it is hard to not yearn for this type of encounter, the tactile and affective relationship that develops on the floor, the accidental contacts and collisions. This affectivity is indeed a spasm against balance, based on the ethereal materiality and presence of bodies, willing to immerse, to sweat and to *become*, to bump against each other, to construct sticky, intimate atmospheres. And in this context, the voguing body—political, social, performative, aesthetic—is a *body-in-becoming*, never ceasing to experiment. As a political, social, and performative tool, the voguing body is multidimensional, multisensorial, creative; constantly exploring ways to hold on to the materiality and carry on moving, transforming, subverting, spasming and sweating, beyond norms, beyond gender, beyond species: beyond balance.

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