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# Costume Design for Public Space: A View from Complejo Conejo, Chilean Performance Collective<sup>1</sup>

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## About the collective and their work

Complejo Conejo is a design and performance collective in public spaces created in 2011 in Santiago, Chile. Through high visual work the collective intersects concepts such as absurdity and masking, creating projects that explore the city's public space.

Under the direction of Pedro Gramegna Ardiles, the collective is integrated by two performance designers and three actors, who actively participate in the research, creation, and development of each project, prioritising the visual composition and its imagery, developing during its twelve years of work, a highly visual proposal.

Their work generally consists of five or more bodies through the city, either walking or using public transportation, wearing costumes that embody a simple and absurd concept that can be read with multiple interpretations by passers-by, their target audience. The collective, through simple elements, generates a performance with the aim of being '*an experience that can carry out a transformation in those who experience it*' (FISCHER-LICHTE 2011: 347).

Using this motor, the collective redefines spaces and daily traffic actions, providing an ephemeral spectacle to passers-by. The performances are always devoid of meaning, narrative, and words; they are walking ideas that can change depending on the events or conditions of the public space. This is how each show, even if it is done in the same place, is different every time.

The last two performances created by the collective are titled *Peces Caminando!* [Walking Fish!] (2019) and *What Do Astronauts Do?* (2023), both were premiered during the Prague Quadrennial in the Formations (2019) and PQ Performance (2023) categories.

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1 For more information, visit: [www.complejoconejo.com](http://www.complejoconejo.com).

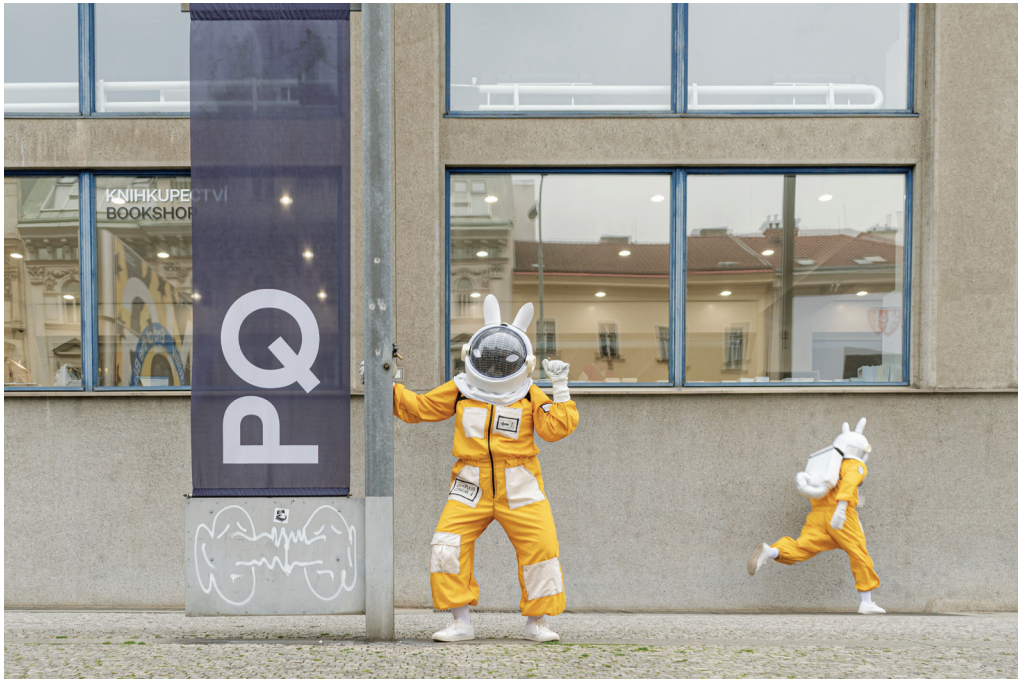
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**Fig. 1:** *Peces Caminando!* [Walking Fish!] by Complejo Conejo. PQ 2019.  
Photo: Daniela Leiva.

*Walking Fish!* consisted of five performers, ‘the fish’, who walked through the city collecting and imitating the movements, gestures, and actions of passers-by, while they walked following a previously designed route (Fig. 1). This show had three presentations during PQ 2019, varying between 1 and 2 hours each time and was presented in different places, the most significant for this article being its presentation in the historic centre of the city of Prague, facing a large number of tourists and locals at the same time. The ‘fish’ followed a series of rules self-imposed by the group, such as not speaking or communicating physically or non-verbally, restricting themselves only to imitation and moving forward as the only possibility.

In detail, the costume for each fish consisted of an oversized fish head, with a net through which to breathe, see, and hear the environment. The clothes of each fish varied in shape highlighting the diversity in physical complexions of each performer, taking fashion shows as a reference, particularly those proposed by the renowned fashion brand Gucci in its 2019 spring/summer and fall/winter seasons, with a colour palette limited to bright yellows and blues, thus matching the masks and conceiving characters that were different from each other but that recalled the same family, full of humour and creating an absurd fantasy that broke into the city.



**Fig. 2:** *What Do Astronauts Do?* by Complejo Conejo. PQ 2023.  
Photo: Andrés Valenzuela.

*What Do Astronauts Do?* (2023) is the latest performance created by the collective and consists of five characters, 'the astronauts' (Fig. 2), who walk through the city exploring the multiple 'human creations' that are easily accessible in the public space, such as a small fruit market, the restaurants, the streets, and their commemorative plaques, etc. These astronauts follow a route as they carry out small actions such as collecting objects (generally garbage) that catch their attention due to their human origin, as well as making paper copies of commemorative plaques or municipal drain covers as a sign of human life. Physically, astronauts have a series of 5 movements/gestures that they use to communicate with each other and with passers-by/spectators. These gestures correspond to simple movements coming from the pop culture around astronauts, such as waving from a distance, celebrating a discovery, approving or disapproving of an action, and so on. The astronauts constantly have a basic movement that refers to the breathing of an RPG video game character, which, together with the emission of a sound design track referring to the cinematographic imaginary of space travel, ends up printing a total decontextualisation of the characters with the space inhabited during the show.

The costumes are uniforms that seek to subtract identity and create a crew. A white helmet with antennas in the shape of rabbit ears and a black front that prevented the performers' faces from being seen. On their bodies the performers wore yellow

overalls with multiple pockets that gave them the possibility of storing materials, as well as accessories such as backpacks on their backs which carried different props in addition to reproducing the sound design of the performance, which ended up creating an atmosphere of science fiction, giving the group a cartoonish look in the middle of the streets.

Both performances have in common that the skin of each performer is completely covered, making it impossible to reveal their human identity until the end of the show, when they remove their fish head or astronaut helmet respectively, to receive the applause of the passing public.

Proposed by the collective, this approach to costume design and performance comes from their participation in the *Tribes* walking exhibition held at the Prague Quadrennial 2015 where they participated with their performance *Selk'nam Project* (2015). The curator of the exhibition was *interested in the sheer presence of costume in public space – on the one hand creating a presence of ‘costume’ in order to avoid the carnivalesque effect or the impression of acting* (PANTOUVAKI and LOTKER 2017: 8). It fit with the experimentation that the collective had been carrying out since 2011 in public spaces, allowing it to explore *the performativity of the costume itself* (PANTOUVAKI and LOTKER 2017: 9).

## About the costume design process

The Complejo Conejo collective, since their creation in 2011, has developed a specific methodology of costume design for their street performance shows.

Their last two projects can be analysed as a simple formula: five bodies using a specific costume that covers all their skin, travel a specific route while performing specific actions, all in public space, particularly city centres highly frequented by tourists and locals.

The creation and costume design process begins with an idea or concept that the collective wants to solve; this is discussed in a group until opinions, criteria, and perspectives are combined. In the case of *Walking Fish!*, its origin comes from the phrase ‘there’s plenty of fish in the sea’ referring to the number of people available to have a relationship in the world. In the case of astronauts, the first idea was The Other, referring to the one who is not like me, a post-colonialist vision that the group was interested in. During this process, the main idea changes depending on the point of view from the group, becoming more serious or naive depending on the case.

When this first investigation begins to be defined, it is transformed into images that are provided first by each collective member’s own imagination and then a search from the design team, looking for them in different media such as cinema, television, visual arts, and popular culture, without prejudices of origin.

Having created a solid conceptualisation where the images are a fundamental piece, the design team translates that into a series of five costumes that represent that idea, always seeking the absurd contrast with an urban space. This first design process focuses on building a clear, figurative image such as a fish or an astronaut, that is

absurd enough and has the potential to perform any type of movement when used as a costume in public space.

During this design process there is only one obstruction in terms of design: the costume must cover the performer's body completely. This decision by the collective is a way to extreme the masking in public spaces, which naturally captures the attention of passers-by near the show. On the other hand, it provides an enigmatic quality to the performers by their anonymity, resulting in increasing the interest of the spectators, prompting them to stop for a period of time seeking to mentally resolve the identity of the performers.

The lack of human facial features and exposed skin ends up generating a dehumanising phenomenon in the bodies, rejecting their nature as people and relegating them to the category of characters, although at the same time because the collective does not use the word or the narrative as a common thread of events; these 'characters' lack personality and are relegated again to a representation of a transcendental concept or idea coming from the performance seen.

In the case of the Fish, they are commonly interpreted as a reflection and metaphor of passers-by who walk with a fixed direction through the city. In the case of Astronauts, a representation of the foreigner, one who does not belong to a specific place as is the case of a tourist or an explorer.

Returning to the creative process, once the performance has been conceptualised in a single costume (an Astronaut, a Fish), it is time to define the aesthetic quality of the costumes, and for this it is necessary to collectively resolve the actions that these figures will perform in the public space. Usually via workshops and group meetings, the team develops a creation methodology through experimentation and rehearsal guided by Director Pedro Gramegna, who, thanks to his experience as a Performance Designer, manages to combine the acting dimension with the visual composition, defining the technical needs that should cover each costume. Through experience it is known in the group that the first concern is breathing through the costumes, so the attention in the first rehearsals is taken by the head and its possibilities with masks or helmets, in addition to discussing the group's materials to be used that generally must be light and transportable.

After solving the breathing, the use of props becomes the second main concern: the group discuss the need for accessories, backpacks, or simply pockets in the garments to be created, taking into consideration their visibility and their ease of use during performance. In this process, the members of the group define comfortable footwear, always thinking that the performance will take place during the walk of a route. They also discuss the use of gloves and the materials to use for them, because the hands are essential if it is necessary to use props.

Finally, having responded to the acting needs of the performers, a fundamental dimension is defined that also entails a final obstruction: the costumes must be eye-catching and capture the attention of passers-by instantly. It is in this process where colour and silhouettes become the most relevant, forcing the design team to create costumes with a height above average, choose bright colours, in addition to imagining

clothes that are comfortable to move in but at the same time unconventional for street dressing, looking for the contrast between the public space of the city and the performance's costumes.

After these considerations, the collective's design team conceives a series of sketches accompanied by visual references and construction techniques, which are shared and discussed with the entire group who incorporate this design in their essays, becoming aware of the restriction and possibilities that the garments and accessories will provide to their bodies.

## Conclusions about costume and public space

As for the Complejo Conejo collective and its costume design methodology, I can conclude that it has been built slowly, without a clear definition from the beginning but rather responding to the experience gained with each project.

It is interesting the way in which the public space is used as a context, and there is so much awareness of this when it comes to inhabiting it with a specific costume, with the main audience being a passer-by who will see the performance for only a few seconds and then continue their routine. The idea that in that limited amount of time the visual impact is such that it breaks into a person's daily life seems relevant to me. Costumes in other media such as theatre or cinema are constructed in a rational and representative way, hoping to provide truthfulness even in fantasy or science fiction genres, but in this particular medium proposed by the collective, it seems that truthfulness is not even a concern and is replaced by impact as a motor for performance.

These decontextualised costumes in the middle of the city do not respond to a fiction or a narrative but are representations of a very simple idea put into five different bodies that move creating a spectacle. The proposal of absurdity is valuable as a shared sensation among spectators, who must confront these images when they least expect it, being forced to go from passers-by to spectators, at least for a few seconds, and then continue with their daily routine, now contaminated with the images of this group and their costumes.

Finally, it is important to contextualise that the exhibition of these costumes is in a public space, where there are multiple bodies and costumes in constant display under no general rule other than the moral and cultural norms of each city, so the diversity of shapes, colours, and materials is impossible to size or even predict. It is in this context where the collective proposes that the design of its costumes takes on the main relevance of its performances, thus contributing to the diversity exhibited but also communicating with it in an absurd relationship, drawing the attention of those who walk and would never have expected to encounter these figures, ambiguous in their actions, who could not be named characters or people, but rather absurd.

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