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Costume Dramaturgies – the dramaturgy of things in performance (April 2025 – April 2026)

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Dramaturgies of a Connecting Costume

Dr. Charlotte Østergaard

Contextualization of the Connecting Costume

For the *Costume Dramaturgies* (CD) workshop, I brought a costume that I have designed to connect two people, referred to as *connecting costume*. This connecting costume is part of the participatory project *Community Walk*: a series of site-specific, community-forming walks placed in different public spaces in which up to 24 guests, 12 connected pairs, can participate. For this purpose, I have created twelve unique connecting costumes: all one-size, sewn or knotted in a wide colour palette of stretchy materials (Østergaard 2025b).

Community Walk are never placed “traditional” theatre contexts, and the connecting costumes are not designed to serve a specific text or choreographic score. The intention is that the participants are not limited to trained performers (Østergaard 2025b, 30), nor are they expected to enact predetermined characters or choreographies. The particular connecting costume present in the CD workshop is crafted so that it can be worn in multiple ways.

In each *Community Walk* I participate as an active host, not by directing but by

‘listening and sensing ... try[ing] to adapt to the rhythms and dynamics of the specific group, the atmospheres of the place and unanticipated encounters that happen in the process. Listening is a way of becoming – together with the group – and of letting material, place and community shape each other. Each walk teaches me new ways of carrying, moving and connecting myself with the costume and the group’ (Østergaard 2025a).

The hosting and the actively participate is an ambition of softening hierarchies or boundaries between host and guest, designer (crafting costume) and participant (wearing costume), as well as between

walking (improvising collectively with the costume) and observing (observing and being inspired by how others improvise with the costume).

Community Walk have taken place at festivals like at Performing Landscapes (2025), the 15th Prague Quadrennial for Performance Space and Design (2023) and SWOP Festival (2023) as well as in educational contexts. Only on one occasion has three of the connecting costumes been on stage as part a performance: *Gertrud-Material* (2023) directed by Professor [Aune Kallinen](#) and performed by MA acting students from the Swedish Acting Program at UniArts Helsinki, Finland. In this context, we worked within 'classical' roles like director, designer, actor and audience. During the rehearsal process, the actors (in pairs and as a group) had to familiarise themselves with the connecting costumes while simultaneously learning a text. This proved challenging, as the text often conflicted with the movements and gestures the costumes invited or imposed on the actors' bodies. On stage, in performance, the text and the costumes seemed to speak different languages, generating a compelling and dynamic tension.

Research Perspective

My research is informed by new materialism (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Haraway 2016). This implies that in crafting processes – such as when creating a connecting costume – textiles are my nonhuman collaborators and creative companions.

Prior to the CD workshop, I considered the twelve costumes as prototypes and versions (Østergaard 2025b) within the *Community Walk* collection. Selecting which one to bring to the CD workshop became an opportunity to rediscover that the costumes constitute the constant factor in *Community Walk*: the events, the public environments, and the participants are always different. The connecting costumes are the nonhuman companions on which *Community Walk* depends; they are sites for shared exploration (Østergaard 2024b, 183), and it is they who invite human participants to wear, listen, explore, and collaborate with and through them. Being nonhuman companions, I must acknowledge that I cannot control or predict what a connecting costume will craft since every encounter is an arrival into a new situational constellation (Østergaard 2025b, 33). Thus, as researcher I must be open-minded and curious to learn, un-learn, and re-learn with every encounter (Ibid); I must learn through and with the costumes as creative companions.

By taking one of the costumes out of its context, it became apparent that it was less part of a collection and more part of a flock. As such, as a flock, the connecting costumes transformed into a textile company—not a company in the classical sense of a dance, theatre, or musical ensemble consisting of people, but a company composed of textile (costume) companions. As we, the costume and I, entered the CD workshop, we entered as representatives of the textile company.

As researcher, I search for co-creative spaces that are surprising and/or lead in unexpected directions (Østergaard 2024b, 181). So even though we arrived at the CD workshop as representatives of the textile company, the costume, as my creative companion, had to step out of the textile company (and the *Community Walk* contextualization) to become its own being, as we wanted to explore what kind of being(s) it would become. In the CD workshop, we somehow entered more unknown territories.

Playful Improvisation(s)

In *Community Walk*, I never push or force participants to do anything they do not want to, nor is the walk framed as improvisation. However

surprisingly quickly, ... pairs [that share a costume] begin to interact [and] often, two or more pairs get tangled up in improvised choreographies ... turn[ing costumes] into hammocks, trampolines, balancing points or places of rest. Each group evokes its own choreographies and relational dynamics. ... [I]n *Community Walk*, play and improvisation are not just methods but ethical design approaches that open spaces for commoning relations between body, material and place. ... This open attentiveness is the condition for the unforeseen – what we do not yet know – to take place in our (creative) explorations of costume and walk. (Østergaard 2025a)

As such, *Community Walk* is improvisational, yet the improvisations are never performed *for* an external gaze. Participants are not interpreting the role of “performer,” nor are they enacting something for passers-by. Instead, the improvisations emerge from within the relational situation created by the shared costumes and the collective movement. The creativity, curiosity, and playfulness that arise are relational rather than representational.

Participation unfolds through interpreting, interrupting, co-inventing, listening, laughing, and negotiating – acts through which participants co-compose with the costume, their bodies, and the surrounding place(s). Each walk and encounter produces new, momentary compositions that reveal relational, material, and creative possibilities with the costumes. In this way, the frame of *Community Walk* may offer a temporary suspension of everyday life, or even evoke a kind of *third space*, in which people can explore expanded abilities through mutual responsiveness and learning-with each other's perspectives in playful and improvisatorial ways.

Costume Jamming

In the CD workshop, the structure of the Costume Jam Sessions was no less playful or creative than described above, yet the roles were organised differently. In each session the group of twelve people was either jamming with a costume or observing/witnessing the unfolding of the jamming. Additionally, the CD workshop had a sequential structure in which one action by one person was followed by an action from the next, creating a chain of responses.

I do not recall whether we (the core group present; Christina Lindgren, Liv Kristin Holmberg, and I), in the days leading up to the CD workshop, explicitly decided that the designer who brought a costume would withhold its context before starting a costume jam session. During the workshop some people expressed that they missed having contextual information and we discussed whether it would be constructive to share the costume context before or after a session. In relation to my research approach, however, I intentionally did not provide any contextualization, as I wanted to avoid influencing how people engaged with the connecting costume as well as (as mentioned above) I wanted the costume to be(come) its own creative being.

It is worth noting that on the first day of the CD workshop, we had a jam session with a white sheet that was followed by the session with the connecting costume – this session the first of the six sessions where we jammed with costumes. Several people (Christina Lindgren, Liv Kristin Holmberg, Susan Marshall, and Natálie Rajnisová) had previously taken part in *Community Walk*, and in the session they all acted as witnesses and so did I. None of the seven people who jammed with the costume knew its context and did not have any knowledge of the reflections discussed above.

Witnessing the Jamming with the Connecting Costume

In *Community Walk*, I have experienced a richness of interactions with and responses to the connecting costumes from many different participants: colleagues from theatre, performance, design, music, research, and other fields; performers and non-performers; people whose backgrounds I do not know; as well as students in the educational versions of *Community Walk*.

The Costume Jam Session allowed me to experience the connecting costume outside of its familiar context. Here, the familiar—what Sara Ahmed describes as the world we implicitly know, “a world organized in a specific way” (Ahmed 2006, 124) – often takes shape by being unnoticed, quietly guiding our attention and expectations (Ahmed 2006, 37).

Drawing on Ahmed’s notion of familiarity as an orientation, in the Costume Jam Session I had to reorient myself, making space for the unnoticed – what had not yet come into view. The unfamiliar thus became a site of relational possibility rather than a lack, as I observed how others acted and reacted to the connecting costume and noticed whether new or other, more unfamiliar possibilities emerged.

In the CD workshop, seven people jammed with the connecting costume: some I had met before, others for the first time, and none of them I had collaborated with previously. While they were jamming with the costume, they had to become familiar with the connecting costume, and I had to become familiar with their ways of approaching and improvising with it. Therefore, as I was observing the seven colleagues jamming with the connecting costume, I was trying to become familiar with them and, through their interactions (and perspectives), I had to re-familiarise my view (and perspective) on the costume.

It felt new to witness the mime actors handling the costume as a kind of puppet, noticing how the puppet’s character came alive in their hands and how they responded to it. One of the mime actors reflected, more generally, that approaching a costume was an act of exploring what the costume was—almost as if the costume posed a question, inviting the person to invent a response, or functioned as a mask that the person had to decide how to wear and interact with. Witnessing the mimes’ interactions revealed not only their skilfulness but also the depth of their training—which

was profoundly inspirational. In this sense, it felt as if the costume and I were meeting on new grounds as well as meeting new creative partners.

After the session people described the connecting costume like inner tissue, giving a sensation of loosening or shedding one's skin. It evoked associations with sea creatures and snakes, suggesting an other-than-human presence. It also oscillated between sculpture, haute couture and crafted object. Some of the people jamming with the costume experienced that the colour activated something vibrant — they felt that the colour itself lead the jamming. For others the many holes and openings were perceived as invitations, allowing any body part to explore, enter, or emerge. Lastly, I noted that some people experienced varying degrees of resistance, gravity, and elasticity as well as that several remarked that the costume demanded attention — it insisted on being engaged with, seen, and listened to.

Susan Marshal (who like me witnessed the session) has kindly shared her notes. She writes that 'You think you understand it, but it holds secret potentialities. It is laughing with you. It is cheeky.' Susan have experienced *Community Walk* and it's interesting that even though she (like me) knew the costume she also experienced that the costume holds (and perhaps revealed) secret potentials. I had similar sensations; in the jam session it was as if the costume revealed other (relational) sides of itself that I was unaware of existed.

Exploring the Connecting Costume's dramaturgies

As I write in a chapter of a yet-to-be-published anthology, one participant in *Community Walk* described the dramaturgy of the connecting costumes (having worn two different costumes over a duration of about 1,5 hours) as an expansion of orientation that "happened in steps": moving from a focus on individual experience toward exploring collective possibilities.

However, what unfolded in the Costume Jam Session was of a different nature. During the session, participants revealed their in-the-moment relationships with the connecting costume. Their improvisations pointed toward dramaturgical potentials that I had not previously focused on. I observed how composition unfolded in real time: how others could invent, shape, and respond to the costume in ways I could not have anticipated, generating forms and gestures that might later

develop into a stage performance. This demonstrated the capacity of the connecting costume to act as a site for collective exploration, improvisation, and emergent dramaturgy.

I was deeply touched by the relationships that arose during the jamming; it felt like a gift to witness. Because the costume is my close creative companion, it mattered that the interactions were attentive, and yet playful. Laughter often accompanied these encounters, evoking an atmosphere of and playfulness and curiosity that is central to the practice of the textile company. In these moments, I felt the costume – and through it, I too – was touched, enriched, and transformed.

The session with the many actions and responses also illuminated aspects of my own practice. I recognized that my focus has always been on creating communities, which in itself is a form of dramaturgy – one that is relational, attentive, and participatory rather than scripted or predetermined. Crafting, in this context, is not only about shaping material, but also about caring for materials and carrying the weight of that care. Actions and interactions emphasized the relational and affective dimensions of working and collaborating with materials: the costume requires attentiveness, responsiveness, and care, just as I do in relation to it.

Humor and laughter were present throughout the jam session with the connecting costume. This was essential, as I believe that when we laughed together, our hearts opened and boundaries softened, enabling relationality and playfulness to emerge. In this way, the Costume Jam Session revealed that dramaturgy with a nonhuman companion is not only about gesture or narrative, but about co-composition, relationality, attentiveness, and the joyful unfolding of possibilities.

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What is the dramaturgy of (costume) things in performance?

Elaborating on the text *Dramaturgies of a Connecting Costume*

Dr. Charlotte Østergaard

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, the American political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett challenges Western human-centric perspectives that frame matter as passive. In Bennett's vitalism, things – such as litter, electricity, foods, and metals – possess vitality and vibrancy that influence human actions and political landscapes. She writes: “*If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated*” (Bennett 2010, 13). By emphasising that we – where “we” includes things like nonhuman matter – share materiality, Bennett challenges fantasies of that humans are unique beings capable of escaping their own materiality and mastering nature (Bennett 2010, ix).

As I write in my PhD thesis (2024), Bennett's vibrant matter is an ethical call to awaken and expand our (human) sensitivity and attention toward the materialities that surround us. If we are sensitively open, this applies equally to costume. Crafting costume requires sensitivity and care for textile materialities, and when we wear or explore costume, we must attend to its material vibrancies, because they will interact, interfere, and co-compose with our bodies in multiple ways. Bennett's call resonates in the sense that we – costume designers, researchers, and collaborators – cannot and must not enclose costume within one specific performance concept or fixed meaning. Costume potentially has multiple vibrating lives if we remain sensitive to its inherent qualities. Bennett's ecological approach suggests that costume has circular qualities and appearances: each time we wear or encounter a specific costume, its materialities will vibrate differently – from yesterday, from last year, from different events and with different collaborators – evoking new affects in our human material bodies.

In my thesis, I also draw on ecofeminist Donna Haraway's notion of *making kin* (2016). I write that “*Haraway's kin-making stretches kinship to include forming relationships with kinds that are not human, which is an invitation to include these other more-than-human kinds in our stories or worldings. In Haraway's wording, ‘ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are*

unfamiliar’ (Haraway 2016, 103). In Haraway, worlding kin-making is becoming familiar with what is unfamiliar, whether the strangers are human or more-than-human. ... Haraway argues that kinship is not a given but requires attention and endurance from humans to allow more-than-human bodies to become ‘persons’ on their own terms” (Østergaard 2024).

Building on these perspectives, I understand textile materials and costume as vital creative partners. This breaks hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman and elevates the impact of costume. “The dramaturgy of things”, understood through the connecting costume, is not something imposed from the outside but something that emerges through relations. The connecting costume(s) functions as a nonhuman compositional and dramaturgical companion that initiates, shapes, interrupts, and redirects action through its material properties, affordances, resistances, and invitations.

The connecting costume generates dramaturgy by orienting bodies toward each other (Ahmed 2006). Its elasticity, weight, openings, and colors provoke gestures, attentiveness, negotiation, humor, and care. The dramaturgy or dramaturgical potentials of the connecting costume(s) are unfolded material encounters – responses between bodies, textile, and place – rather than as linear narratives. In this context, the “dramaturgy of things” is situational and emergent. Each encounter constitutes a new constellation in which meaning, movement, and relational dynamics are co-composed in real time. The connecting costume does not represent something else; it *does* something. It insists on being engaged with and listened to, and through this insistence it produces dramaturgical tensions, rhythms, and transformations.

In participatory contexts such as *Community Walk*, this dramaturgy operates without an external gaze. Improvisation is not performed *for* an audience but arises from within the relational situation co-composed by the shared costume. Here, dramaturgy is an expansion of orientation – from individual sensation toward collective awareness – and unfolds gradually as participants learn-with the costume and with each other.

When the connecting costume enters a more conventional theatre context, as in *Gertrud-Material*, its dramaturgy does not disappear but becomes frictional. The costume and the text “speak different languages,” creating productive tensions. This reveals that connecting costume(s)

dramaturgy may conflict with textual and spoken dramaturgies precisely because it operates through material agency and embodied negotiation rather than representation.

The *Costume Jam Sessions* further demonstrate that the “dramaturgy of things” becomes especially visible when context is withheld. Encountered as its own being, the connecting costume acts as a question rather than an answer – inviting invention, play, and responsiveness. Here, dramaturgy is not centered on narrative coherence but on co-composition: gestures, affects, laughter, and care arise through shared attention to material presence. These are porous dramaturgies – ephemeral, non-reproducible, and grounded in the moment.

Ultimately, the dramaturgy of connecting costumes is a form of relational dramaturgy. It is about encounters, softening hierarchies, and creating conditions for collective listening(s) and becoming(s). The connecting costume, in this sense, is not only a participatory (designed performative) practice but also an ethical and dramaturgical one: a way of caring for material companions and for the communities that forms through and with them.

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