

## TANZRECHERCHE NRW #39

**STIPENDIATIN:**

Marje Hirvonen, Köln (Choreografin,  
Performerin)

**TITEL:**

In Vogue: a political body

**RECHERCHEORT:**

New York oder Paris

**RECHERCHEZEITRAUM:**

Juni/Juli 2021

Interview vor Beginn der Recherche (in  
englischer Sprache)

*Hello Marje, congratulations to your  
Dance Research NRW #39 scholar-  
ship. You are interested in the political  
body, tell us more about your project.*

The goal of this research is a physical  
and choreographic study of voguing,  
understood as a form of queer subcul-  
tural protest against established white  
patriarchy norms.

The political body has been a contin-  
ued interest in my choreographic re-  
search, and the long-term goal Dance  
Research NRW supports is a project of  
organizing and “choreographing” a  
voguing ball like performance in the  
field of contemporary dance and thea-  
tre, using the privileged knowledge  
from the field of contemporary dance  
to empower and give more voice to the  
voguing movement and its social mes-  
sage of fluid and tolerant identity. To  
deal sensitively with this subject, I  
need to immerse myself in the roots of  
voguing, physically and culturally. For  
this reason, this research cannot be  
completed in Germany, where voguing  
is often abstracted from its political  
content. “In Vogue: a political body”  
asks the relevant questions: How can

bodies enact agency through dance  
technique? How can a dancing body  
be a political expression and act of af-  
firmative resistance? What does the  
queer and trans situated dance form of  
voguing have to teach us about how  
to be a political dancing body? How  
can I, a contemporary choreographer,  
use the tools, knowledge and privilege  
of Northern European stage dance  
practice to sensitively, thoroughly and  
with integrity research the sub cultural  
field of voguing?

The governing idea of my research is  
that voguing represents a utopic, re-  
sisting, body that reaches beyond its  
(conventional) limits in terms of biol-  
ogy, social codes, sexuality, behavior,  
ethnicity, culture, etc. Its roots are in  
bodies that that are queer in the broad-  
est sense: peculiar, unconventional. A  
body that finds agency through dance  
though it is heavily imposed upon by  
the structures of normative power. I  
want to observe and interview the  
voguers in New York, in the birthplace  
of voguing, and understand the history  
and culture of voguing. I want to dive  
into the practice of learning voguing,  
its techniques, aesthetics and ideolo-  
gies. I hope to come to a closer under-  
standing about the philosophy of vogue-  
ing. With the help of this research, I  
am aiming to develop my idea about  
the body, in the context of perfor-  
mance, further by challenging the idea  
that dance techniques produce “docile  
bodies” and exploring the idea of the  
sub culturally shared voguing body  
and its performance as a resisting, po-  
litical force.

*How did you get interested in this  
topic?*

In the times of crisis in a society that is  
built by white patriarchal, heteronorma-  
tive, power structures, where some  
bodies, and especially certain kind of

bodies, are threatened more than other bodies, I started thinking about performing bodies and their political power. Especially after the appearance of voguers in the “Black lives matter” - protests in New York, I became curious about the history and philosophy of voguing. Created in the 70’s in Harlem, New York, to express cultural and sexual identity of minorities within the gay and queer community, voguing also served as a tool to reveal and protest heteronormative patriarchy and homophobia, white privilege and thereby the closely linked ideologies of racism and classism. The ballroom scene began in the 1970s as a competitive arena for drag queens, who are grouped in “chosen families” called houses, and later as a haven for black and Latino L.G.B.T.Q. people.

An alternatively shaped interpretation of gender and identity, blurred boundaries, a safe community and a body as a resisting force are the departures of my research. Furthermore, the aesthetics, the philosophy, the vocabulary, the costumes and the dressing up and the whole culture of voguing. As a creation of black and brown queer and trans folks, it has always been a way to physically play with notions of gender presentation. And it’s because of these origins that this particular dance form has always also been a type of resistance. I personally relate to this topic in a way that I always felt being rather fluid than something concrete. A gender is for me a role play, that I choose. In my language, in Finnish, we have gender-neutral pronouns, so I always felt comfortable not having to choose between he or she. Since I became aware of the non-binary gender identities, it felt “natural” for me to stop categorizing myself - or the others. In voguing I am fascinated about the

freedom of choosing your identity and gender, about the playfulness of it.

*What kind of questions do you ask yourself?*

How are politics currently performed on a body? How can body be a political expression through voguing? How is the voguing culture today? What is its importance and position in the current political situation in the USA? My ongoing interest is seeing body, especially my own body, as a material, that can be shaped and reshaped. A body that cannot be narrowed down by words. This is perhaps the reason why I once chose dance as my medium. My current interest is the idea of considering the body as a political, resisting force. Bodies are powerful symbols and sources of social power and privilege on one hand and subordination and oppression on the other. My current artistic interest is to search for forms of physical, political statement in a performative frame. I strongly feel that my artistic work should have a political angle in it, since I have the privilege to work in this field and i have possibilities to communicate with my work. A long-term goal is is a project of organizing and “choreographing” a voguing ball like performance in the field of contemporary dance and theatre.

*What is your plan B in case you cannot travel to New York because of the Covid-pandemic?*

In these unpredictable times of the global pandemic, I chose Paris as an alternative for New York. Nearly 30 years after “Paris Is Burning” put a spotlight on New York’s underground ball culture, Paris itself is alive with the spirit of resistance, survival and self-expression, in spaces carved out

largely by black and Latinx members of the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

*Tell us how you will proceed. What is your methodology?*

“In Vogue: a political body” consists of three research tracks which are running simultaneously and interwoven with another. The three tracks are the: 1. social political-theoretical discourses around the subjects of gender, queer, trans and postcolonial relevant to the voguing movement; 2. the qualitative study of the field of voguing through interviews, participant observation of voguing balls and the scene. 3. the physical practice of learning vocabulary, technique and performance modes of voguing. This is the commitment to place my body in the field I am researching.

The first part will be prepared in Cologne. The main questions of this part are as follows: How are politics currently performed on a body? How can body be a political expression? The second part is about interviewing and observing the local dancers and visiting the balls. Relevant beginning questions include: What does voguing mean to them? Why did they start voguing? Do they consider voguing as protest? If so, in which ways? Do the dancers consider themselves political? How do they view voguing culture today? What is its importance and position in the current political situation in the USA?

The third thread is the physical approach and consists of movement research and diving deeply into vocabulary of voguing and developing my own way of expressing with it. To accomplish this, I will take classes in voguing and experimenting with the material in a studio space. I will attend balls and

informal practices and seek out feedback and help from experienced and willing voguers and experiment in a studio with the movement material. This part is as well about finding ways to adapt my research into my artistic practice. An attempt to see a body as a field of artistic research, but also a tool for making political claims in today's world.