Super Pumper

From Utility to Identity

Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė

> *"...reality is not a constellation of things at all, but one of processes. The fundamental 'stuff' of the world is not material substance, but volatile flux…" (Rescher 2000)*

My artistic research explores the interplay between the human body, functional objects, and movement through the development of a morphing-based method. My background in dance and fashion has led me to explore how movement and material co-shape one another. Rather than designing objects to be worn, I have become increasingly interested in how the act of wearing itself becomes a process of becoming, not just aesthetically, but also affectively. This inquiry grows from a need to make visible the hidden labour, gestures, and micro-transformations that shape identity through material interaction. Originally derived from architectural practice (Terzidis, 2003), the method of morphing (a process during which an object gradually changes its shape) is here adapted to fashion design to investigate how wearable, kinetic forms emerge from the interaction between subject and object.

This process centres on continuous transformation – a concept I term "morphivity." Combining "morph" (to gradually transform) and "creativity," the neologism defines a state where the object is never final, but always becoming. Morphivity emerged not as a theoretical invention, but as a practical necessity—a name I gave to the strange in-between states that arose during object experimentation. It is less a model and more a response to the friction between form and function, fiction and labour, body and tool. This perspective aligns with process philosophy (Rescher, 2000; Seibt, 2012), where form, identity, and materiality are understood as inherently in flux.

Rather than presenting a resolved outcome, this research poses an open question: How can a utilitarian object become a speculative tool for rethinking identity, power, and embodiment through iterative transformation? This inquiry invites both material and conceptual uncertainty, positioning ambiguity as a methodological strength.

Methodology

This research is guided by material experimentation, movement improvisation, and performance. It unfolds through iterative case studies centred on the air pump—a utilitarian, often overlooked object that becomes a speculative tool for performative transformation. Through bodily engagement (pumping, wearing, dancing), the pump evolves from tool to character, gaining narrative agency and aesthetic presence (Tonkinwise 2014).

Often, the experiment itself becomes a performance, an improvised interaction between body and object with my direct participation. These ephemeral encounters are documented through film, photography, and diary-like writing, which help to capture both the act and its conceptual depth. This documentation is crucial for shaping both the artistic object and the project's concept. In everyday terms, not a single idea is "thrown in the trash can." Each concept, born from hands-on experimentation, carries value as an essence worth preserving for future exploration.

Inspired by the theory of intra-action (Barad 2007), this methodology frames bodies and objects as co-constituting agents. At the centre of this exploration is the character Super Pumper, introduced not as a fixed entity but as one that emerges through the process itself—an entanglement of identity, utility, and fiction.

Drawing on the idea of fictioning (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019), fiction here operates not as an escape but as a critical and generative method for reimagining reality. The character becomes an interface between labour and play, utility and fantasy, sweat and spectacle. The performer enters a feedback loop of transformation, a becoming-object (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), where identity is fluid, situated, and relational.

This transdisciplinary project weaves fashion, dance, scenography, and film. It draws on embodied knowledge (Polanyi 1958), material agency (Bennett 2010), and posthumanist thought, while remaining grounded in hands-on, iterative making. Documentation—both visual and reflective—is treated as a real-time archive of transformation, inviting viewers to linger between the functional and the fictional.

IEVA ŠLAIČIŪNAITĖ

1

The act of filling with air intrigues me—it is an indeterminate, moving force. We can only perceive its quantity by capturing this invisible matter within a sealed, flexible form. As the foot presses the pump, it compresses under the body's weight, releasing air, while the valve holds it in place, preventing backflow. This repetitive, mechanical motion is a strong example of how human movement directly influences an object's transformation. Inflated form becomes a threshold where the invisible takes shape, a speculative border between absence and structure. What holds the air is not a wall, but a skin, a flexible edge that marks both containment and openness. This moment of spatial suspension evokes the concept of "Ma," an idea from Japanese aesthetics that emphasises the interval between forms rather than the forms themselves (Isozaki, 2006). The air pump becomes more than a tool—it invites us to see inflation as the choreography of the invisible, mirroring the inflationary urges of our ecological and economic systems.





2

I began searching for a way to attach the air pump to the body, not just for function, but also to alter the way a person moves. The accordion-like pump, attached to the sole, resembles a high heel. I construct a footwear prototype using the method of deconstruction—removing the heels from old dance shoes. This technical intervention became a conceptual trigger, rekindling my connection to dance. This decision fuses foot and function, suggesting a prosthetic merger of flesh and utility, where gesture becomes both design and defiance. Morphivity draws from embodied archives—what past gestures remain folded into present form?

3

Movement tests begin. Such stages of the process are truly exciting—as soon as any wearable prototype is made, you try it on without hesitation. And to my surprise, the shoes were actually comfortable! However, I must admit that wearing the prototype changed my balance and the precision of my footwork. The tool's resistance activates a new vocabulary of movement, urging improvised

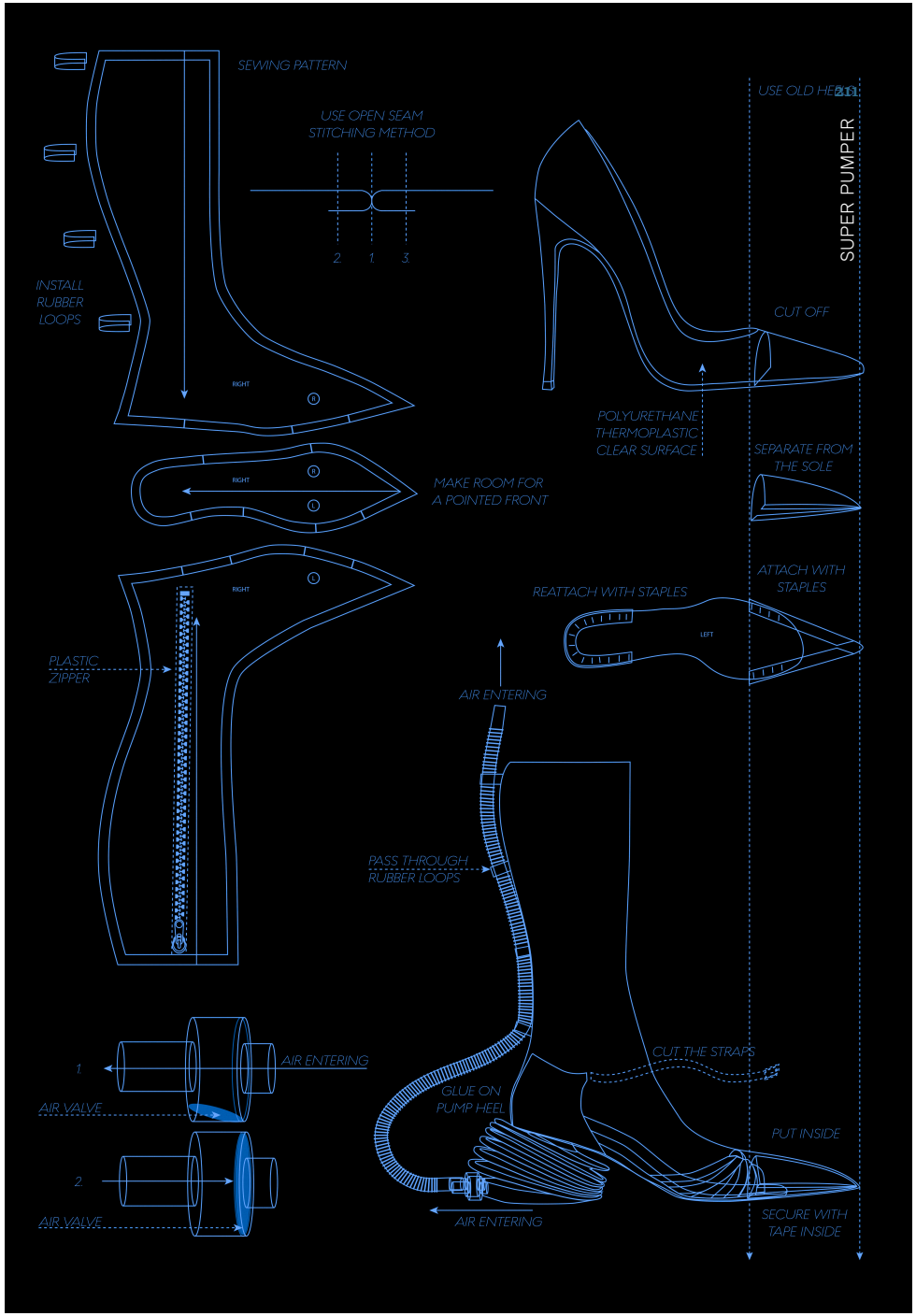


solutions. This is not merely ergonomic testing, but a somatic inquiry into morphivity—how tools re-script bodily awareness. With two pump-shoes, bilateral interaction emerges. One leads, the other resists. Their rhythm generates a new kinaesthetic language. Although the pumped air still flowed freely from the shoes into the room, the sharp sound of the plastic pump being compressed began to create a sense of tension. I couldn't help but wonder if inflation could be read not only as a choreography of the invisible, but also as a metaphor for our desire to fill voids, to assert presence in uncertain spaces? What other readings might emerge if we relinquish control over the narrative?

IEVA ŠLAIČIŪNAITĖ

4

Medium-weight black neoprene becomes the structural material for the footwear. I sew the shoe frame on a straight-stitch machine, inserting a dance shoe inside. The pump is glued at the heel, a hose threads through rubber loops along the back of the boot. A zipper allows for easy wear. The heel's past life— as part of a discarded dance shoe— lingers quietly beneath the new form, like a fossilized gesture. Switching between roles became an act of morphing itself— navigating fluidly between designer, engineer, shoemaker, and seamstress. At this stage, the decision to represent the shoe through a blueprint-style technical drawing evokes the visual language of historic invention, often used to frame ambitious architecture or speculative machinery. This ironic nod places the pump shoe alongside the canon of “serious” inventions, questioning what counts as utility, labour, or design process.



5

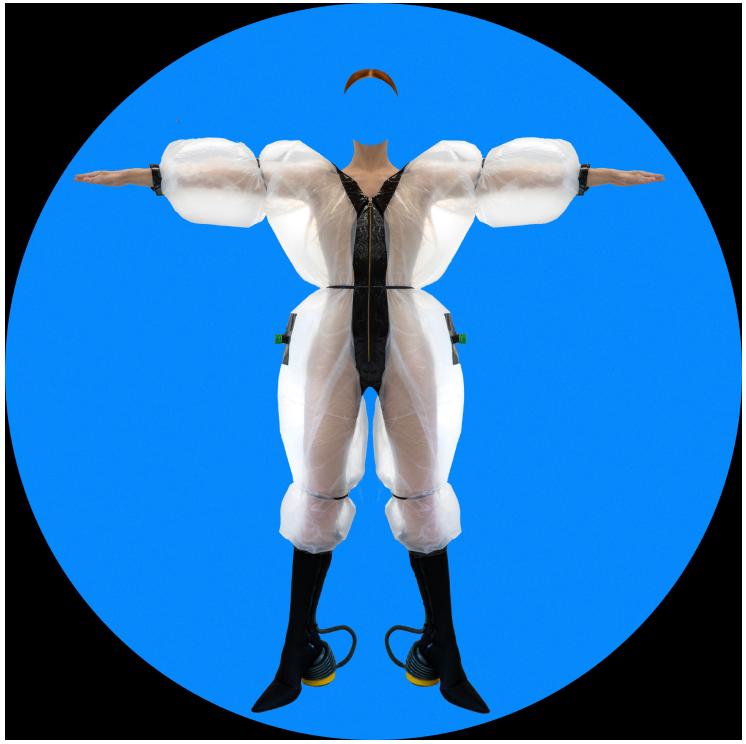
The final result no longer resembles a dance shoe—it evokes the aesthetics of a superhero. In fiction, characters with special powers often wear iconic, expressive shoes. Fashion design shapes these memorable figures, whom we tame through their visual language. The character Super Pumper is a commentary on how material design constructs identity myths. A hero is a blend of concept, visuality, and a noble mission. The character is not so much super as symptomatic of our need to believe in power, spanning from ancient epics like Gilgamesh to today's culture. Super Pumper emerges not as a character with pre-written traits, but as a ficto-critical mechanism (Frichot 2018), a speculative figure that reveals contemporary contradictions of identity, labour, and desire. Rather than a saviour, the character becomes a figure of self-inflation, reflecting society's compulsive image-making and desire for performative power. Perhaps the balloon is not just a prop, but a parable of self-made enclosures, inflated identities, and the cultural machinery that urges us to swell until we pop.



6

The air-filling experiment is performed using an inflatable lounger, and the process is documented on video. I pump the form by jumping, stomping and bouncing from foot to foot, sweat dripping. The movement must constantly shift, because after just a few compressions, my calves begin to burn. In these moments, the aesthetic ideal quietly dissolves—what began as a dance-like performance morphs into a noisy and exhausting ordeal. Behind the scenes, the magic fades—the audience only sees the polished facade, while every strained effort is devoted to maintaining it. This performance becomes a paradoxical ritual of self-inflation, a physical and psychological balancing act where desire for presence meets the absurdity of exertion. This dynamic interplay of body, volume, and performance moves beyond mere mechanics, resembling an almost alchemical fusion of human effort, time, intention, and material, coming together to create a lived space. The session stretches to ten minutes, then I collapse into the jaws of the lounger to catch my breath.





7

After deconstructing the air lounger, I discover a thin, transparent film inside—a tunnel-like form. Using black adhesive tape, I shape it into a jumpsuit that envelops the entire body. Pumped rapidly, the suit fills with air in about two minutes, enclosing the figure. Yet this containment is not complete—air escapes, seams ripple, the form resists perfection. Air becomes both structure and trap, which acts as an exposition of the body's boundaries. The act of sealing oneself inside evokes a strange intimacy with the material—a form of exposure that complicates the heroic tone of earlier phases. This act reconfigures the body's limits—expanded, inflated, burdened, compressed—exposed without cover. The pneumatic suit functions as ambiguous armour, both amplifying presence and imposing constraint. It destabilises fixed concepts of bodily presence, positioning protection, display, and vulnerability as interdependent.

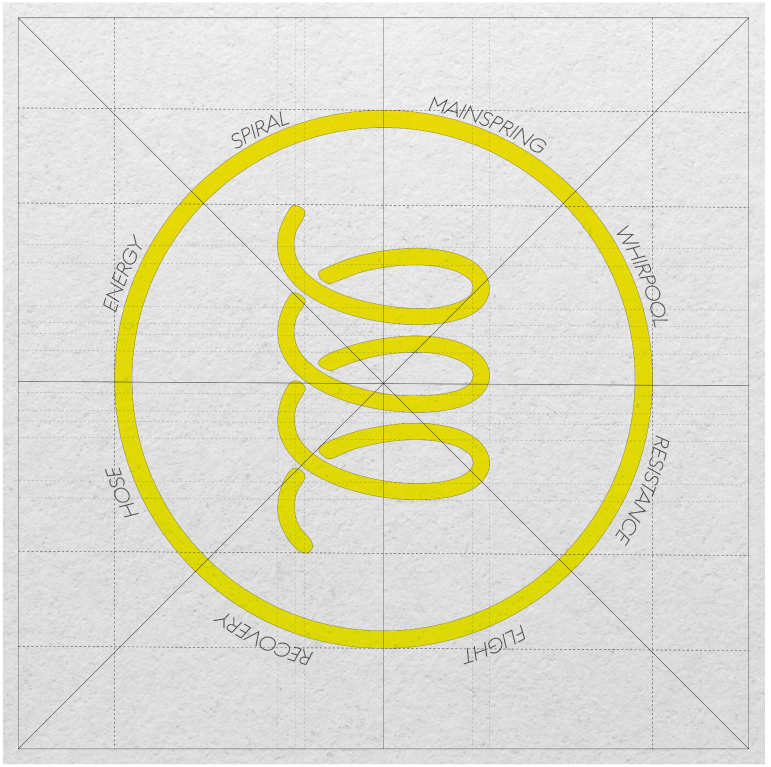


8

The choreography becomes a ritual of inflation. The performance combines two movements: displacement, from the pump and aesthetic, shaped by the costume (Belik 1988). The aim is to immerse oneself in the process, stretching time and lingering in presence. I improvise movement, particularly jumping, as if trying to fly. This suspended motion stages the fantasy of lightness while confronting the body's weight, heat, and gravity. Though it weighs little, the suit insulates me, and my body overheats. Once inflated, the object gave rise to a character larger than myself, both in volume and in presence. I felt weighty, imposing, almost untouchable, though the actual material was light and hollow. This dissonance—between how I looked and how I felt—was captivating. I couldn't stop watching myself in the studio mirror. The costume produced not just a silhouette, but a performance of selfhood—confident, monumental, fully embodied.

Strangely, once the suit was removed, I was left with a heightened awareness of my own physical body. I felt strong, upright, healthy—as if having carried the illusion had somehow activated the real. The experience lingered as a somatic imprint—theatrical inflation giving way to a grounded, tangible vitality. What

does it mean to inhabit your own construction—and at what point does it begin to inhabit you? What kind of agency arises in acts of excess? Could this be read as a bodily reverberation of accelerationist desire—to inflate, to amplify, without knowing when or how to stop?



9

The assembled whole—footwear, costume, choreography, and documentation—leads to the development of a character, Super Pumper, the one who controls air. This is not a hero in the traditional sense, but a fictional function, someone who moves with and through air. Identity is not performed but generated (Haraway 1991). Yet no hero emerges without a sign. Super Pumper is branded—not silently, but symbolically, visually. The spiral embedded in the pump mechanism doubles as a logo, a mark of presence, of constructed identity, reflecting the logics of marketing and myth-making. Visibility becomes currency—to be seen is to be legitimated. But the spiral is more than just a brand—it also functions as a yantra: a diagram of flow, tension, and release. Like a ritual tool, it choreographs not only air, but cycles of becoming–power, collapse, regeneration. The design flirts with irony, inflating both the body and the brand.

10

A question remains: Who is this superhero? As soon as you create a symbol, an enemy appears. A character born from an air pump ends up wearing the creator's own shoes. Fiction gives power, but also reveals vulnerability. The poster's aesthetic borrows from comics but simultaneously transforms it, blending irony and sincerity. Fiction doesn't replace reality—it reframes it. Here it functions not as escape but as a lens—a way to reveal the elasticity of self and symbol. Super Pumper is neither hero nor clown, but a vessel inflated by cultural pressure. Ultimately, this character does not resolve into a fixed identity, but gestures toward a shifting subjectivity shaped by tension and contradiction. It embodies our simultaneous yearning for transformation and discomfort with instability. Rather than closing the story, these frictions invite the viewer to linger, not to decode the character, but to inhabit its ambiguity. The narrative remains open.



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Cracking and Mending Contexts

Disorientation and Decontextualisation as Part of the Queer Diasporic Experience

Ditiya Ferdous, Noah Emanuel Morrison and Xingpei Shen

In the fall of 2021, I [Ditiya Ferdous] joined my college friend Noah Emanuel Morrison and his newlywed husband Xingpei Shen in signing a one-year lease on a tidy, refurbished two-bedroom flat in a quiet Soviet-era apartment block in Tallinn, Estonia. The three of us, along with their chihuahua, Pepper, were leaving our hectic lives in post-pandemic New York City to begin our Master's in Fine Art at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Leaving the US for a country with affordable higher education, accessible public healthcare, and a thriving underground music scene felt like unlocking a well-kept secret. But as we entered the academy, we realised we were more than just art students; as individuals visibly marked by race, we found ourselves positioned on the front line of Estonia's uneasy negotiation with globalisation and diversity.

With a background in fine arts and anthropology, I was employing autoethnography and animation as methods of artistic research to explore themes of diaspora, coming of age, and belonging in public space. Noah had been immersed for many years in an analogue photographic practice examining memory, race, intergenerational trauma and spirituality. His partner, Xingpei, already an accomplished independent animator, was expanding a growing body of hand-drawn animated films centred on queer Chinese identity and aesthetics.

As queer artists of colour examining race and representation through our own personal and cultural histories, our practices were particularly susceptible to misinterpretation, orientalist projection, and, at times, outright dismissal; the academy frequently reproduced many of the anxieties that pervaded the wider Estonian cultural climate.[1]

1 In February of 2021, Tallinn's Kumu Art Museum opened the exhibition Rendering Race, publicly addressing for the first time Estonia's relationship to race and colonialism through the renaming and historical reframing of racist artworks. The exhibition sparked an immediate outcry from the right-wing EKRE party as well as from the general public. Please see "Rendering Race Through a Paranoid Postsocialist Lens" by Redi Koobak and Margaret Tali (2023).