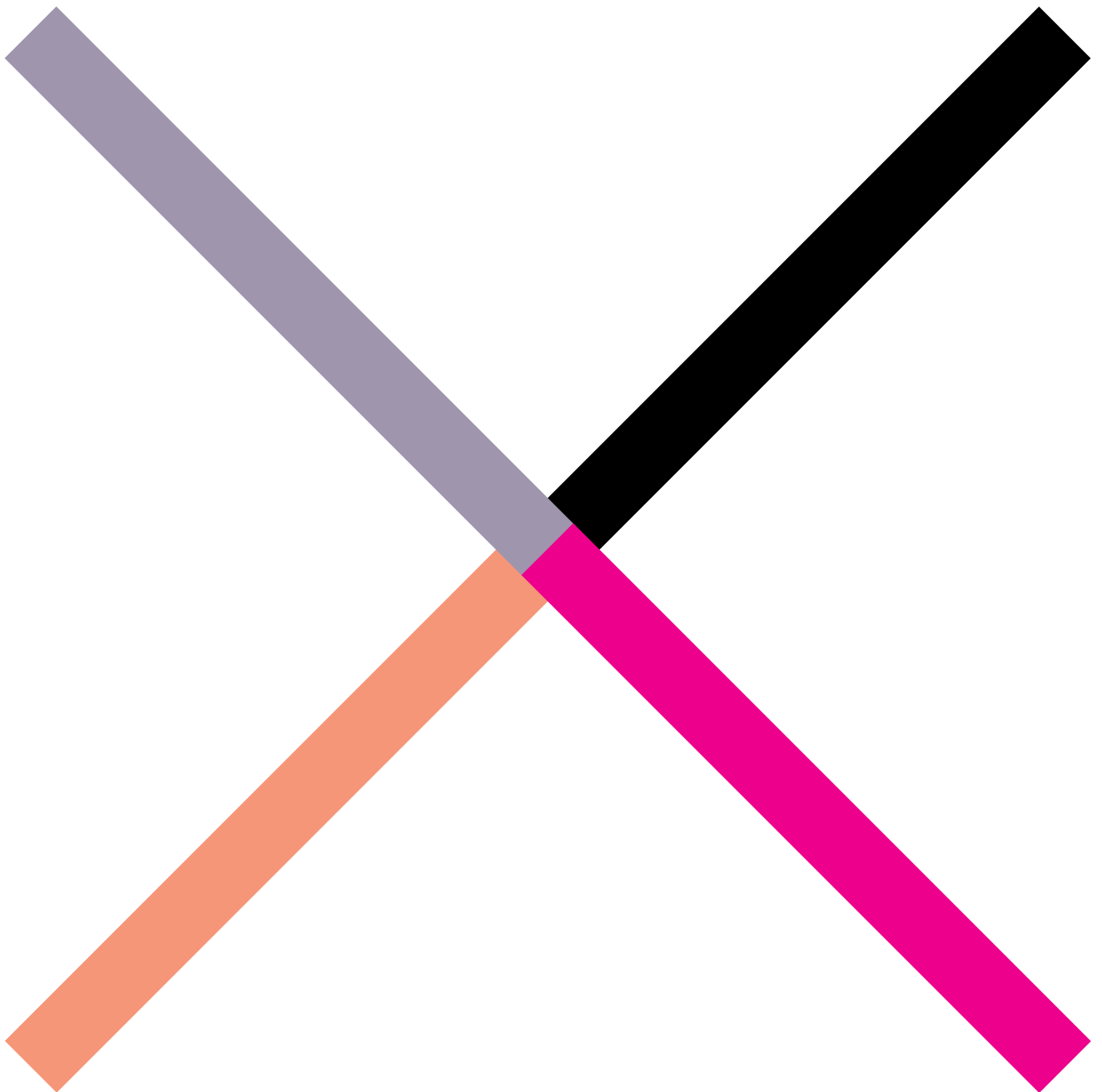


The Polyphonic Object

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Aynouk Tan

Wearer of *Ensemble*

Aynouk Tan (she/they) is a writer, curator, moderator, advisor, and public speaker on gender, decolonization, (queer) identity, and appearance. In the cultural sector, she works as an exhibition curator and public program organizer. She is also a policy advisor on rainbow issues and works as a senior trainer in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). She is a board member at RITA (Report it Always) — the reporting platform for (LGBTQ+) discrimination — and a committee member at Fonds 21 and the Amsterdam City Archives.

Eliza Steinbock

Transgender Studies, Art, and Cultural Activism

Professor Eliza Steinbock (they/them) holds the Chair in Transgender Studies, Art and Cultural Activism and directs the research-focused Centre for Gender and Diversity at Maastricht University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. See their recent edited volume *The Critical Visitor: Changing Heritage Practices* (open access in English and Dutch, 2023).

Roberto Luis Martins

Curator Fashion and Popular Culture

Roberto Luis Martins is Curator Fashion and Popular Culture at the Amsterdam Museum. Roberto focuses on researching, collecting and exhibiting fashion and its affiliated popular culture through a sociopolitical perspective. Examples are the exhibitions 'Continue This Thread' on the power of handicrafts, and 'Grand March' on the artistic voices of the Dutch ballroom house, House of Vineyard. In the past, Roberto has worked as a curator in cultural institutions such as Het Noordbrabants Museum, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, and fashion heritage platform Modemuze.

Ensemble

In 'The Polyphonic Object', three analyses by experts from different perspectives and (academic) fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their practical and theoretical analyses, they uncover the different stories behind *Ensemble*, an outfit curated and worn by Aynouk Tan. Tan is a (fashion) journalist, curator, lecturer, and advisor, specialized in the relationships between appearance, gender, and identity. In the context of this Amsterdam Museum Journal edition about women and cities, *Ensemble* addresses questions about what the concept of a woman might mean.



Aynouk Tan (they/them) (1982)

Ensemble, 2021

Amsterdam Museum, purchased from the artist, 2024

This outfit was assembled and worn by fashion journalist, curator, speaker, and advisor Aynouk Tan (1982). Through their outfits, Tan seeks to extend the notion of who a person can be, exploring a new identity every day. Playing with fashion can help you invent a new version of yourself. According to Tan, many identities are waiting to be discovered, especially when letting go of how a man or woman “should” dress. They view gender as a spectrum. In 2025, *Ensemble* was exhibited in *Women of Amsterdam – an ode* in a space where different visualizations and symbolizations of the city as a woman were featured. Amsterdam is often described as a female, but what does that mean? Could this outfit perhaps reflect the city maiden’s new identity?

Aynouk Tan

(Wearer of *Ensemble*)



On the high roof of the psychiatric institution Metrum on the Bilderdijkstraat, there stands a figure on a ladder. His feet balance on the last steps, his arms reach out to the heavens. The name of the artwork is, *How to Meet an Angel*. A title that nuances the association with the darkness and despair of suicide, as well as emphasising the potential for salvation, surrender and freedom.

The statue, just like all the other many 'crazies' that Amsterdam has and still sees, was important during the creation of my *Ensemble*. The arms of my figure also extend upwards. Yet now shrouded in a euphoric flower bouquet – with a tiara as a torch she carries this frenzy with pride, like a pamphlet that screams it out.

I don't think I would have learnt anywhere else that this could be: defying reality with the absurdity. That could only happen in the Magical Centre of Amsterdam. The title was thought of by provo Robbert Jasper Grootveld, who in the 1960s single-handedly transformed himself into an

anti-smoking magician and, acting as a guru, complete with a sooty face and a cigarette cloud, performed so-called 'happenings' around the statue of the Lieverdje. A statue that was once gifted to the city by a tabaco factory. This was his way of ritualising his own and large societal addictions, like those to consumerism, and calling attention to the power of advertisements and media within this.

The list is long in terms of interventions, interactions and performances that spot, confuse and disrupt the public social order – as a form of political action. The greater lesson they taught me was that the public space, the daily existence being lived happens according to self-evident norms and values, seen as a spectacle. Artists and collectives like provo challenged and provoked this self-evident neutrality with their own imagination.

Mathilde Willink followed in the 1970s: the Netherlands' most famous muse, living art and fashion-icon. She was famous for her flamboyant outfits made by designer Fong Leng – just like me, with Chinese roots, where decoration anchors a piece more in the culture than in that of the Dutch. "If people cannot notice you, you might as well not exist," Willink once said. She did not hide the fact that her parents had given her up early and that that had wounded her. That yearning for affirmation and love is something that I recognise. The arms of the figure carrying *Ensemble* reach up, like a toddler looking longingly at their mom, looking and longing to be picked up.

Sometimes pomp and circumstance are façades. A way to guard yourself, to not have to be vulnerable. Or to escape reality, away from insecurity the pain. *Ensemble* is, apart from a political work, also a queer work: a *drag Ensemble*, and that way rooted in fear and rejection. No one understands the role play that has to be played in the theatre that is daily life as good as us queers. In the town

where we grew up, we learnt to wear the mask of normality, to discipline ourselves. In Amsterdam it was finally safe enough for us to take off the mask – so that we could create space for all the sides of us that had not been allowed to exist for so long.

In that sense *Ensemble* is a necessity: an emotional matter that screams it out. Look at me, love me, accept me, pick me up mom. But also: fuck you all and your oppressive (beauty) ideals, this (drama) queen will do it autonomously and only on a high queenly tower, there where I (supposedly) don't need anyone.

I found solace in the words of the great thinkers. Foucault, Butler, Preciado (2008), Sontag (1966) and many others. I read about man as a political subject, as something that is produced through the political fictions of a specific era and culture. In that sense, we can only see in broad lines the result of a specific narrative; a discourse. Or, as Simone de Beauvoir said: "You aren't born a woman, but you are made a woman" (1997, 295). Later, Butler added: 'The pressure exerted on a body to conform to the historical idea of 'gender', is not only a condition for intelligibility, but also a mechanism of power – a violent production. Foucault extended by understanding of identity to society: "Disciplinary power exercises itself by manufacturing individuals; it tames them and makes them normal" (1977, 194-5).

These ideas not only gave me something to hold on to, but predominantly space. As, if your identity exists by the grace of a fictional social norm created through violence and power, what would stop me from completely ignoring that?

Ensemble is a subversion of what is right and especially the toxicity for those that cannot or will not comply. It is also an ode to Patsy and Eddy, and Amsterdam's Fabiola, to Priscilla Queen of the Desert, and to the self-mockery and the madness. But perhaps even more so it is the expression of my anger

and sadness of a fundamentally unfair system where a bank director will always be valued higher than a psychiatric patient, and a tribute to those who feel the same way and cannot tolerate it. "In a mad world, only the mad are sane," a character

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Translated by Rosanne van Ballegooijen

Eliza Steinbock (Transgender Studies)



How can we hold all the contradictory, complex parts of ourselves at the same time? Is the self a fragile union or more like an exploding fragmentation of these pieces? Why is this drama queen shouting or calling to me? I'm arrested by the call out, I can't take my eyes off the screaming colors, the airy textures that seem to float towards me. I can't get to the bottom of the layers of the funky, patterned textiles, no they are flowers, wait everything is plastic, hold on, feathers too? Hard colors clash, the light bouncing off the glittery surfaces hurt my pupils. And yet, I'm entranced and challenged to take in all of THIS. All the parts together, all at once, it is too much. Trying to do so makes me smile and open my eyes all the wider. The displayed outfit on the shimmery gold mannequin pulls together the too muchness of a high hard femme; a show-off suit created of layered armor cascading over her tender softness that comes from loving beauty. To pull off an ensemble like this is hard-won labor. It evidences fem/me labor (Duggan & McHugh 2008). Their bursting

bouquets remind me that the righteous should receive their flowers in recognition of standing up for the LGBTIA+ community while their heart still beats. The piles of crowns gracing their bald head are indicative of their regal status, a "Queen" amongst us.

They offer a crown to you too – will you accept the benediction, join the court and house of drama? Do you agree to live under the contradictory motto of Fuck Love your Oppressive Beauty Standards? How can we both love and hate that which oppresses us? What can this Drama Queen figure teach us about living out contradictions, too-muchness, labor, and holding tight and reworking that which hurts us? Generically named Ensemble by the Amsterdam Museum fashion curator, Roberto Luis Martins, Aynouk Tan's creation is, I wish to explicate, an object lesson. It holds space for a lesson on what first Judith Butler (1993, 219) and then José Esteban Muñoz (1999) have termed "disidentification," that is, the active working on, along, and pushing against the hegemonic cultural categories available for self-identification.¹ Love or hate those standards: you and I are caught up in them as the structuring forces in our lives. For those not aligned with majority cultures, who experience them as exclusionary ideologies, disidentificatory performances are a means to transform the terms of a lopsided relation. Disidentifying requires one to get intimate and bite back by using the very forms, symbols, and materials of oppression to spark if not fuel the engine of activism. Further, Muñoz has shown how trans and queer of color artists and cultural producers create disidentificatory performances that have the power to propagate new queer/trans worlds. Drama Queen hails me to join their more vivid, livid, and loving world. The silver rhinestone-encrusted crown on the ground to their left is there for the taking, should I dare cross the line and stand up on the Queen's

podium. Be warned, with their lip stuck mouth open, the Queen of Drama is ready to kiss or nip you when you get closer.

The single term for this outfit, I deem a work of art, is “Ensemble,” which has multiple resonances, depending on how it is used in a context. Etymologically the French word *ensemble* has expanded meanings over time, while retaining the general meaning of a multiplicity of parts considered at once (www.etymonline.com, *ensemble*). Since the mid-15th century *ensemble* has meant “together, at the same time,” which could refer to people, instruments, or fashion. Since 1844 it has had a musical sense in English: “union of all parts of a performance.” Similarly in fashion, but only since 1927 has it referred to the put togetherness of a woman’s dress and accessories. Shifting between scales from performers and instruments in musical *ensemble*, to the elements that come together to form and perform a fashionable *ensemble*, the word refers to the practice of curating an aesthetic look and feel as well as the aesthetic experience of perceiving and feeling the togetherness of a thing, however momentarily it hangs together.

Gender expression too refers to how one curates your *ensemble*, or the “all togetherness” of disparate parts. Terminology like man and woman, or boy and girl, falls woefully short in capturing the nuances of the aesthetic look and feel of one’s gender expression. Gender attribution by others, being the aesthetic experience of perceiving and categorizing someone else’s gender identity, usually falls back on the same basic terms that lack the subtle differentiations between genders. Like artistic aesthetics, so much about gender aesthetics is ineffable. But we can lean hard on other vocabularies to develop modes to communicate our manifold and multiplying meanings and perceptions. Tan’s *ensemble* draws on the vocabularies of queer performances of drag,

of fashion and feminism, but also of the trans and queer articulations of fierce queendom and femdom. Tan crafts this *ensemble* from the trash bins and strewn debris of cisheteropatriarchy manifested in colonial and capitalist orders. My eyes and itchy fingers keep returning to the loose threads of the pink tulle, signs of fraying edges and a dress very much “in the fray” of highly political debates on gender, sexuality, precarity and survival (Bryan-Wilson 2017). The muck stains along the petticoat edges attest to how this *ensemble* has been worn on streets, mobilized in public where the Drama Queen has met her people. This *Ensemble* is embodied and grounded in lived experience that the shimmery mannequin does little to match. Nonetheless, their breathing, shouty contagious spirit reverberates from the podium to take on all onlookers.

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Endnotes

- 1 Muñoz discusses this key term throughout this book and in returns to it in later publication. One useful definition I can point to is: “Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (1999, 31).

Roberto Luis Martins (Fashion Curator)



In 2023, the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* launched a podcast episode called: “How the Bird of Paradise Disappears from the Streets of Amsterdam” (*Het Parool* 2023). The episode honored the passing of Henri Pronker, Amsterdam’s so-called *Stringskater*: a well-known figure in the city, who cycled through Amsterdam while wearing nothing but a thong (*string* in Dutch). In a figurative sense, a bird of paradise refers to someone who stands out because of their appearance, behavior, or style (ANW 1994). The episode reflected on several figures who once shaped Amsterdam’s eccentric visual culture—such as Mathilde Willink and Fabiola—and concluded that these birds of paradise are slowly disappearing. As a curator of fashion and popular culture, this statement resonates with me. My position gives me the opportunity to give important elements of the city of Amsterdam a (somewhat) permanent home. Hearing this, I wonder: *What does it mean to archive a life that was lived through dress, performance, and public appearance? How*

do we preserve the presence of people who shaped the city through style? *And how do we honour and archive a life while it is still being lived, rather than waiting until it ends?* In 2021, I met what may be Amsterdam’s perhaps most famous living bird of paradise: (fashion) journalist and activist Aynouk Tan. However, I must say that calling Aynouk Tan a bird of paradise also detracts from the meaning behind the stylish creations they wear. Aynouk Tan’s story is about so much more than just an eccentric clothing style. This became clear when I attended a lecture in which Tan explained how, for years, they have deliberately used clothing to challenge social norms related to gender, age, and class. Why shouldn’t someone buy groceries in a princess dress? Who is stopping you from celebrating your imperfections by wearing a tiara? Clothing enables self-expression and allows for the embodiment of multiple versions of oneself.

The work in question emerged from conversations Aynouk and I had while preparing the mini-exhibition *Unboxing: Fashion from the Archives*. I invited them to create an outfit not solely for this exhibition, but particularly one to archive in the collection of Amsterdam Museum.¹ This collection comprises around 10,000 fashion-related objects: historical garments, accessories, and designs by notable fashion houses and artists such as Fong Leng, Puck & Hans, Daily Paper, and Mohamed Benchellal. The Amsterdam Museum distinguishes itself in the Dutch museum landscape through its long-standing commitment to collecting pieces worn by “wearers”: individuals whose clothing visibly communicates identity, lifestyle, or personality. Among them are the aforementioned Mathilde Willink, Henri Pronker, but also punk poet Diana Ozon, living artwork Fabiola, and drag artist Miss Milly (Onno van Dijk).

These wearers caught attention not only because of what they wore, but

because of their style — clothing as a form of self-fashioning that made their lives visible in the public sphere (Tulloch 2004). Through clothing, they assemble meaning and express what cultural theorist Carol Tulloch calls a *narrative practice*: a way of shaping and communicating identity through choices that are at once personal and historically informed (Tulloch 2020). Their ensembles turn dress into a form of cultural agency — a means to negotiate belonging, defy expectations, or carve out space within the city. For a city museum like the Amsterdam Museum, collecting style means archiving these acts of agency, these lived narratives. It allows us to preserve how *Amsterdammers* use dress to shape identity, resist norms, build communities, and leave visual traces of their presence in the city's evolving cultural landscape.

The ensemble (read: outfit) Aynouk Tan created, builds on one that they had previously worn and expends it through added layers: plastic crowns, a stuffed toy suggesting genitals, layers of colorful polyester tulle, pink press-on nails, and a train consisting of pieces from fashion house Maison the Faux. With a sign saying 'Love Fuck your oppressing beauty standards', Tan clearly articulates the work's intent: to challenge the politics of expression through bodies. According to Tan, the ensemble brings together both material and immaterial layers—memories, inspirations, and references to birds of paradise such as Mathilde Willink, Fabiola, and Bas Kusters, figures who shaped Tan's own visual language. In this sense, the piece functions as a stylistic assemblage, an embodied narrative that illuminates the social, cultural, and affective forces informing Tan's practice.

By acquiring this work, we acknowledge style as a vital form of storytelling. The legacy of Amsterdam's birds of paradise shows that the city has long been shaped by individuals who dress beyond convention. Collecting

Tan's work continues this lineage and affirms that style is not only an aesthetic layer but an archive of identity and lived experiences: a record of how *Amsterdammers* imagine themselves, resist simplification, and create new possibilities of being.

Translated by Sigi Samwel

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Endnotes

- 1 One version of this ensemble had been seen in the exhibition *Maison Amsterdam* (2021-2022) presented in De Nieuwe Kerk.