

I'm Not Perfect: the role of Grace Jones and David Bowie in aiding the dissemination of queer subjectivities

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By examining the performance work of David Bowie and Grace Jones and their role as popular queer icons, it is possible to gauge the degree to which they have aided in the dissemination of queer subjectivities. They have benefited gay liberation movements in a variety of ways, for example; by raising queerness to the attention of the media, subverting heteronormative images and, enriching popular queer culture. Liberation movements require figureheads to open up widespread discussion, and David Bowie and Grace Jones are queer icons and therefore figureheads through their image and music. Without experimental representations of queerness in popular media, queer individuals would have had less agency to implement their fight for liberation in the public consciousness, particularly when the AIDs epidemic in the 80s further marginalised gay liberation.

Paul Clinton defines queer as “not simply an indicator of identity but a refusal of being identified, fixed and assimilated.”¹ The word ‘queer’ was reclaimed by gay liberation movements in the 90s, bringing it out of its fraught beginnings with a history of exclusion and violence. The term predominantly refers to identities related to gender and sexuality, although it has been spun to include a range of intersectional identities involving race and ethnicity. “A critical genealogy needs to be supplemented by a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be”²; it is to be argued that through their performances, Bowie and Jones prescribe new realities for gender, sexuality and race, exposing “the reifications that tacitly serves as substantial gender cores or identities.”³ Queer “seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation,”⁴ making ‘experimental

¹ Clinton, Paul. “Queer Time and Place.” *Frieze* (May 2014)

² Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 365.

³ Butler. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution [...]”, 365.

⁴ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Queer and Now.” In *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.

representations of queerness' paradoxical. Bowie and Jones utilise this refusal to be fixed and assimilated into their performances, giving prominence to queer identities.

In July 1972, David Bowie performed "Starman" live on Top of the Pops for the first time, raising queerness to the attention of the media. Bowie, performing as the androgynous Ziggy Stardust, famously slung his arm around guitarist Mick Ronson (Fig.1), described as "simultaneously blokey but also a bit gay."⁵ In January 1972 – before becoming Ziggy – Bowie said that he was bisexual in an interview. "And on 1 July, about 700 people walked from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park in the first Gay Pride march. [...] While a pop star putting his arm round another man on television might not look very revolutionary now, it seems to have been a liberating moment for young people coming to terms with their sexualities."⁶ Gay liberation was in its infancy at the time of Bowie's early sexual ambiguities, and comments made about him would be seen as highly homophobic now – he became a conduit for discussion, however crude. Bowie says he believes that, "The media is either our salvation or our death. I'd like to think it's our salvation. My particular thing is discovering what can be done with media and how it can be used."⁷ His experiments with the media seem to have paid off, as Joe Moran writes that "It would almost be quicker to list the pop performers and writers of [Bowie's] generation who have not cited this broadcast as a watershed in their musical and sexual education."⁸ Bowie agitated everyone's senses, but not enough to have been silenced – gay rights activist Tom Robinson proposes that "had that message been stronger, and not broadcast on the radio, I'd never have heard it."⁹ Bowie was prepared to break down barriers, and his reach went beyond Britain.

Ushering in the 80s and influencing American teenagers, Bowie performed on *Saturday Night Live* in 1979. His backing singers were Klaus Nomi, a German singer known for his unearthly stage persona, and Joey Arias, a New York drag queen. The first song performed was "The Man Who Sold The World", featuring Bowie dressed up in an immobilising suit with large shoulders and bow tie, similar to those worn by Nomi. Their influence is still contemporary – drag queen Courtney Act reinterpreted this suit in 2014 on the US television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Fig.2). During "TVC-15", Bowie wears a purple skirt suit and

⁵ Dowd, Vincent. "David Bowie: Did he change attitudes to sexuality?" BBC News (23rd March 2013)

⁶ Moran, Joe. "David Bowie misremembered: when Ziggy played with our minds." The Guardian (6th July 2012)

⁷ Copetas, Craig. "Beat Godfather Meets Glitter Mainman." Rolling Stone (28th February 1974)

⁸ Moran. "David Bowie misremembered: when Ziggy played with our minds"

⁹ Lynskey, Dorian. "Ziggy Stardust – it was all worthwhile." The Guardian (27th March 2012)

takes command of the stage whilst Nomi and Arias fawn over a pink poodle with a television in its mouth (Fig.3). All three wear skirts, tights and make-up, which combined with the lyrics about gender roles in the next song, shocked America. “Boys Keep Swinging” was already controversial due to Bowie’s representation of drag queens in the video, however he pushed what he could get away with on television for SNL. With use of a green screen, Bowie had a puppet body for the performance. “In an absurd move the show’s producers blanked the line “Other boys check you out” but seemingly missed the puppet’s obvious excitement at the climax of the song.”¹⁰ Bowie mocked broadcasting codes of conduct, visibly smiling during the climax at what he is getting away with on television. This exhibition of drag and otherworldliness was an unabashed exercise in audacity, challenging anti-queer agents as the gay reference was censored but allowed to climax nonetheless.

In 1980, Grace Jones performs “Private Life” on Top of the Pops, her first and only live performance on the show, taking control of the stage with her unmatched and strong androgynous presence. Jones champions the self as a work of art, having come from a fashion background where they would “revel in the pleasure and pain of reinventing the ‘self’ through rapid modifications of external appearance.”¹¹ Jones’ ability to experiment with aesthetic is crucial as it can be argued that “one answer to the silence [...] produced on the issue of black female sexuality is for black women to see themselves, to mirror themselves. The appeal to the visual and the visible is deployed as an answer to the legacy of silence and repression.”¹² Jones actively produces a desiring voice and image throughout her oeuvre, for example in her song “I Need a Man”. Yet she also experiments with this politics of silence – in the music video for “Private Life”, she wears a mask of herself and removes it whilst singing, exposing the tacit relationship of black women to public silence. Evelyn Hammonds writes that “the gains made by queer activists will do nothing for black women if the stigma continues to be attached to their sexuality.”¹³ This contrasts with Bowie and other white male peers who “could take liberties with sexuality without risking very much. The

¹⁰ “How Bowie ushered in the 80s on SNL 35 years ago.” David Bowie (15th December 2014)

¹¹ Kershaw, Miriam. “Postcolonialism and Androgyny: The Performance Art of Grace Jones.” *Art Journal* (Volume 56, Issue 4, 19-27, 1997), 19-20.

¹² Hammonds, Evelyn. “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality.” in *differences: More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 141.

¹³ Hammonds. “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality”, 140

stakes were much different for Jones, a black woman whose femininity was in question.”¹⁴ This refusal to conform created visibility for Jones, her multi-layered command of performance embodying yet countering historic oppression.

Together with photographer Jean-Paul Goude, Grace Jones set out to destabilise racist and sexist clichés in her 1978 Halloween performance at the Roseland dance space. The performance opened with Jones dressed in boxing gear, boxing being a locus of African-American pride (Fig.4). This sequence further perpetuates Butler’s theories of gender as spectacle, as the drag queens’ appropriation of femininity in the audience ironically juxtaposed with the masculinity of the boxers, “then Jones topped it off with a transgender appropriation of masculine power.”¹⁵ Jones oscillates between these feminine and masculine states throughout her extended music video *One Man Show*. Jones’ post-colonial androgyny counteracted the black identity crisis which was threatening to return to pre-Diasporan stereotypes in a search for metaphors of empowerment. Marlon Riggs describes these distorted, yet supposedly seductive and affirming, stereotypes; “In pre-colonial Africa, men were truly men. And women – were women. Nobody was lesbian. Nobody was feminist. Nobody was gay.”¹⁶ Jones exposes the masquerade of black male empowerment through her strong androgynous image, counterpoising “this warrior model of masculinity with the emasculated Other”¹⁷, the latter being her status as a heterosexual woman. After subverting dominant discourses about black sexuality, a reconfiguration of agency occurs, reclaiming control over historically oppressive representations of black bodies. If we are also to claim “that ‘woman’, and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact,”¹⁸ then this concept can be extended to black oppression, because of its historical context. Jones becomes almost symbolic of a ‘third sex’, which aligns with her visual articulation of the interplay between modernism and primitivism since “a lack of differentiation between the sexes was considered characteristic of more primitive societies.”¹⁹ This attests to a less distorted view of history promoting equality. Lyrics such as “feeling like

¹⁴ Guzman, Maria J. “Grace Jones in *One Man Show*: Music and Culture.” MA diss. (College of Fine Arts of Ohio University, August 2007), 12.

¹⁵ Kershaw. “Postcolonialism and Androgyny: The Performance Art of Grace Jones.” 20.

¹⁶ Riggs, Marlon. “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen.” In *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (London: Cassell, 1995), 474.

¹⁷ Riggs. “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen.” 474.

¹⁸ Butler. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution [...]” 357.

¹⁹ Martin, Biddy. “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary.” In *differences: More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 104.

a woman / looking like a man”²⁰ resonate with this gender ambiguity. Altogether this promoted a subversion and redefinition of gender that is crucial to ending the oppressive silence and supporting the dissemination of black sexualities.

The hegemony of heteronormative culture makes contradicting it in popular culture exponentially important. There is a “systematic separation of children from queer adults,”²¹ leading to queer youth seeking out or interpreting any representation in high or popular culture. In 1975, the BBC produced the documentary *Cracked Actor*, a profile of David Bowie at the height of his cocaine addiction. Bowie is asked, “You saw, for the last couple of years, a lot of kids aping you, or looking very like you. They would dress up very similar to you. How did you feel about it?”²² To which he replies, “They’re finding out things that are nothing to do with me, but the idea of finding another character within themselves. If I’m responsible for people finding more characters in themselves, then I’m pleased. One isn’t totally what one has been conditioned to think one is.”²³ To use Judith Butler’s concept of the performance of gender, “acts are a shared experience and ‘collective action’”, so each performance that Bowie produces creates an act, a collective experience that “has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it; but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.”²⁴ Bowie enables people to find facets of themselves, potentially reifying queer ‘characters’ in the self. This investment in experimental self-representation enables queer individuals to validate themselves in wider discourse through identification.

Androgyny was favoured by the New Romantic movement of the late 70s to early 80s, heavily influenced by David Bowie. Blitz DJ Rusty Egan says “the song that became the anthem of the [Blitz] club was Heroes by Bowie. “Just for one day” you could dress up and be more than what Britain had to offer you.”²⁵ Egan didn’t exclusively play Bowie however, “if you looked at Grace Jones’s album *Warm Leatherette*, it’s filled with all the songs I was playing at the time – *Private Life* and *Love Is The Drug*.”²⁶ The Blitz club scene produced several bands of the 80s that played with gender fluidity, for example Culture Club and

²⁰ Jones, Grace. “One Man Show”

²¹ Sedgwick. “Queer and Now.” 2.

²² “Cracked Actor: A Film About David Bowie”

²³ “Cracked Actor: A Film About David Bowie”

²⁴ Butler. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution [...]” 362.

²⁵ Elan, Priya. “It’s Blitz: Birth of the New Romantics.” *The Guardian* (15th May 2010)

²⁶ Elan. “It’s Blitz: Birth of the New Romantics.”

Visage. Although Bowie had disposed of the Ziggy Stardust persona in 1973, and in 1983 would distance himself from his claims to be bisexual, Tom Robinson says "for gay musicians, Bowie was seismic. To hell with whether he disowned us later."²⁷ Steve Strange, the Blitz host and Visage frontman says, "David Bowie came to the club and hand-picked me to be in the Ashes to Ashes video. I was totally in awe. [...] Bowie's known as a very clever thief, that's why he turned to the Blitz, because he wanted to be part of London's most happening scene. Latterly, word spread and the press was trying to pin a name on to us."²⁸ There's a peculiar humour to the New Romantics, who were inspired by Bowie, would then accuse him of trying to appropriate the style. Although it can be argued that Bowie appropriated bisexuality. In spite of this, Bowie was a precursor for many non-binary performers – "To gay fans Bowie's early 70s identity was a lifeline, while to those who didn't identify as such it was a demonstration that sexuality isn't a simple binary but a sliding scale."²⁹ He opened discussion for what it is to be a feminine man in the public eye, regarded by conservatives to be an agent provocateur but by others as an inspiration to British youth.

Queer visual culture plays a significant role in the propagation of queer subjectivities. Keith Haring met Grace Jones "through Andy Warhol, who brought them together for a brief collaboration photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe."³⁰ There can still be an institutional silence on the subject of queerness; "you can attend a major museum exhibition on Andy Warhol and never learn that he was gay – never mind that homoerotic and explicitly sexual images animate the entire range of his artistic production."³¹ Haring developed a pictorial language, inspired by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, which allowed him "to insinuate his own agenda—whether it was about HIV, homosexuality, poverty, youth culture, or drug use, [...] it was a completely marginal, forbidden discourse, but he brought it into the mainstream."³² Working with Jones gave him further publicity, and both Haring and Warhol have cameo appearances in the video for "I'm Not Perfect" – in this video he paints a 60ft skirt for Jones with his iconic visual language (Fig.5). This language unifies with Jones'

²⁷ Gilmore, Mikal. "David Bowie: How Ziggy Stardust Fell to Earth." *Rolling Stone* (2nd February 2012)

²⁸ Elan. "It's Blitz: Birth of the New Romantics."

²⁹ Lynskey. "Ziggy Stardust – it was all worthwhile."

³⁰ Kershaw. "Postcolonialism and Androgyny: The Performance Art of Grace Jones." 23.

³¹ Doyle, Jennifer. "Queer Wallpaper." In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 392.

³² Andrew Blackley, Johanna Burton and Scott Treleaven. "Keith Haring: Languages." *BOMB Magazine* (29th July 2014)

aesthetic as “[Haring’s] pictures often take on a “primitive” aspect.”³³ Miriam Kershaw writes, “Jones’ performances gave dynamic expression to the aesthetic of the 1980s that Haring and Warhol helped to formulate. According to Haring, Jones was a signifier for everything he admired in the global crossroads of postmodern New York.”³⁴ Through collaborative work with Jones, Haring reached new audiences, pushing his activist language with zeal to the mainstream, even though he is often mistakenly perceived as just “part of the whole MTV crowd.”³⁵ Haring’s work has been threatened with being framed as ahistorical, “simply because the market wouldn’t be able digest the actual truth of the artist’s aims.”³⁶ However, Haring and Jones both strove to take dominant voices, recontextualise them and offer them back in a subversive manner. Their work is politically and socially motivated at its core, intending to address issues to those who might have resisted ‘stronger’ methods.

The influence of Grace Jones and Bowie can be followed through popular gay advocates. Jones claimed in the 90s, “what Madonna’s doing, I did 10 years ago.”³⁷ In 1990, Madonna’s video for “Justify My Love” caused a well-publicised controversy “in the most self-aggrandizing – but ultimately liberating – way. With its scenes of voyeurism, lesbianism, and cross-dressing, [...] to MTV, it was a visit from another planet bearing everything they find repugnant.”³⁸ The video merited a ban from MTV, whereby it was released on VHS – hitting number one in early 1991. Michael Musto wrote, “It seemed Madonna deliberately played into MTV’s homophobia, hoping the product would offend them enough to be blacklisted, so she could then serve it up, for a price, to a hungry public nursed on hype.”³⁹ This marks the beginning of an era where “nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV.”⁴⁰ Mario Mieli explains, “The protection of homosexuals, ‘permissive’ morality, tolerance and political emancipation all go together [...] all these aspects proving in substance functional to the programme of commercialisation and exploitation of homosexuality on the part of

³³ Verzotti, Giorgio. “Radiant Eros: Keith Haring and Sexuality.” Keith Haring Foundation.

³⁴ Kershaw. “Postcolonialism and Androgyny: The Performance Art of Grace Jones.” 23.

³⁵ Blackley, Burton and Treleaven. “Keith Haring: Languages.”

³⁶ Blackley, Burton and Treleaven. “Keith Haring: Languages.”

³⁷ Willman, Chris. “Queen of Pop Shock Struts Into the ‘90s : Before Madonna and Annie Lennox, Grace Jones paved the way. Now the multi-media artist sets her sights on ‘softer’.” Los Angeles Times (11th February 1990)

³⁸ Musto, Michael. “Immaculate Connection.” In *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (London: Cassell, 1995), 432.

³⁹ Musto. “Immaculate Connection.” 432.

⁴⁰ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 9.

capitalist enterprise.”⁴¹ Madonna’s use of queer signifiers is fuelled by capital gain, but ultimately inspired by a desire to unite people against homophobia. During the AIDs crisis Madonna fought fiercely, “always keeping the subject in the public eye despite the government’s attempts to render it invisible,”⁴² becoming one of the first icons to put safer-sex information in her records. In the 80s climate of open homophobia it is argued that Madonna’s exploitative-yet-positive representation of queer subjectivities was much preferred to the crude homophobia of other musicians. Jones’ earlier quote continues, “But it’s cool. At least [Madonna] got it. I don’t mind. At least enough people took that ball and ran with it, you know what I mean? So we’re making some touchdowns, which is cool.”⁴³ This acknowledges both Jones’ and Madonna’s accomplishments in the maintenance of a large queer advocacy today.

In the 20th century, David Bowie and Grace Jones helped queer individuals to implement their fight for liberation, becoming icons of a radical split from heteronormativity. Advocating emancipation from oppression, they were catalysts for an era of change and experimentation. Their influence continues into the 21st century, inspiring queer people with their aesthetic and they are still cherished icons today. A long overdue BBC documentary called *Grace Jones: The Musical of My Life* is due out in 2016.⁴⁴ Directed by Sophie Fiennes, the film is posited as “an observational portrait of a bold woman who changed so much.”⁴⁵ This rhetoric of change is evident throughout their careers, and they’re often cited as pioneers in their field. David Bowie still experiments with androgyny and theories of gender as performance, as seen in the 2013 video for “The Stars (Are Out Tonight)”. The video features the famously androgynous Tilda Swinton and trans model Andreja Pejić (Fig.6), giving further visibility to contemporary queer icons. Bowie and Jones have aided the dissemination of queer subjectivities through a refusal to be fixed, innovative performances

⁴¹ Mieli, Mario. “Repressive Desublimation and Reformism.” In *Homosexuality and Liberation, Elements of a Gay Critique* (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1980), 106.

⁴² Musto. “Immaculate Connection.” 436.

⁴³ Willman. “Queen of Pop Shock Struts Into the '90s [...]”

⁴⁴ The author attempted to contact the BBC, Sophie Fiennes and Blinder Films for information on the upcoming documentary. Information is currently limited and the BBC just gave the author public press releases to read. The author enquired about topics relevant to this essay but was informed by Blinder Films that research had not begun as the film is still in the financing stage. The author was recommended to contact Sophie Fiennes directly, but is still waiting to receive a reply at the time of writing.

⁴⁵ Gorton, Thomas. “Grace Jones lands her first ever documentary with the BBC.” *Dazed & Confused Magazine* (26th March 2015)

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and exponential influence over queer youth and popular visual culture which does not appear to be dissipating.

Image List:



Fig. 1: David Bowie slinging his arm around guitarist Mick Ronson. “David Bowie - Starman (Top Of The Pops, 1972)”, YouTube video, 3:31. Posted by “The Doors”, 23rd February 2010. Author’s screenshot.



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Fig. 2: Australian drag queen Courtney Act's reinterpretation of the Klaus Nomi suit. "RuPaul's Drag Race | The Best of Courtney Act", YouTube video, 1:44. Posted by "Logo TV", 28th October 2014. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 3: David Bowie performing in the skirt suit on Saturday Night Live, with Joey Arias and Klaus Nomi. Disclose.tv. "BOWIE - RARE LIVE VIDEO - MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD +2 - SAT NIGHT LIVE 1979," online video, 9:24. Posted by "Butlinca", 12th October 2012. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 4: Grace Jones dressed in boxing gear during her performance at the Roseland dance space. "Grace Jones. Live in concert 1978 Highlights", YouTube video, 3:38. Posted by "Lee Lee", 30th July 2011. Author's screenshot.

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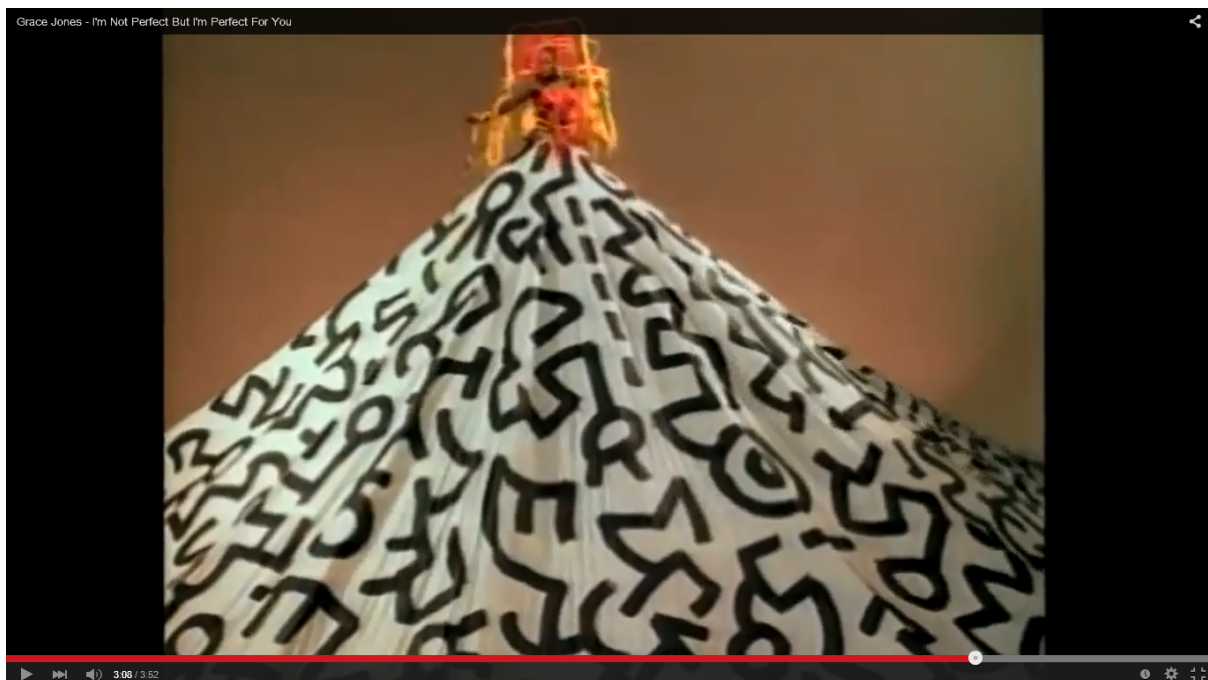


Fig. 5: The 60ft skirt painted by Keith Haring in Grace Jones' video for "I'm Not Perfect".

"Grace Jones - I'm Not Perfect But I'm Perfect For You", YouTube video, 3:52. Posted by "József Csáth", 24th September 2014. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 6: Tilda Swinton and Andreja Pejić in David Bowie's video for "The Stars (Are Out Tonight)".

"David Bowie - The Stars (Are Out Tonight)", YouTube video, 1:44. Posted by "DavidBowieVEVO", 25th February 2013. Author's screenshot.

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