

Performance Research

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**'AGE TRANSVESTISM' IN
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE
AND LIVE ART WITH CHILDREN**

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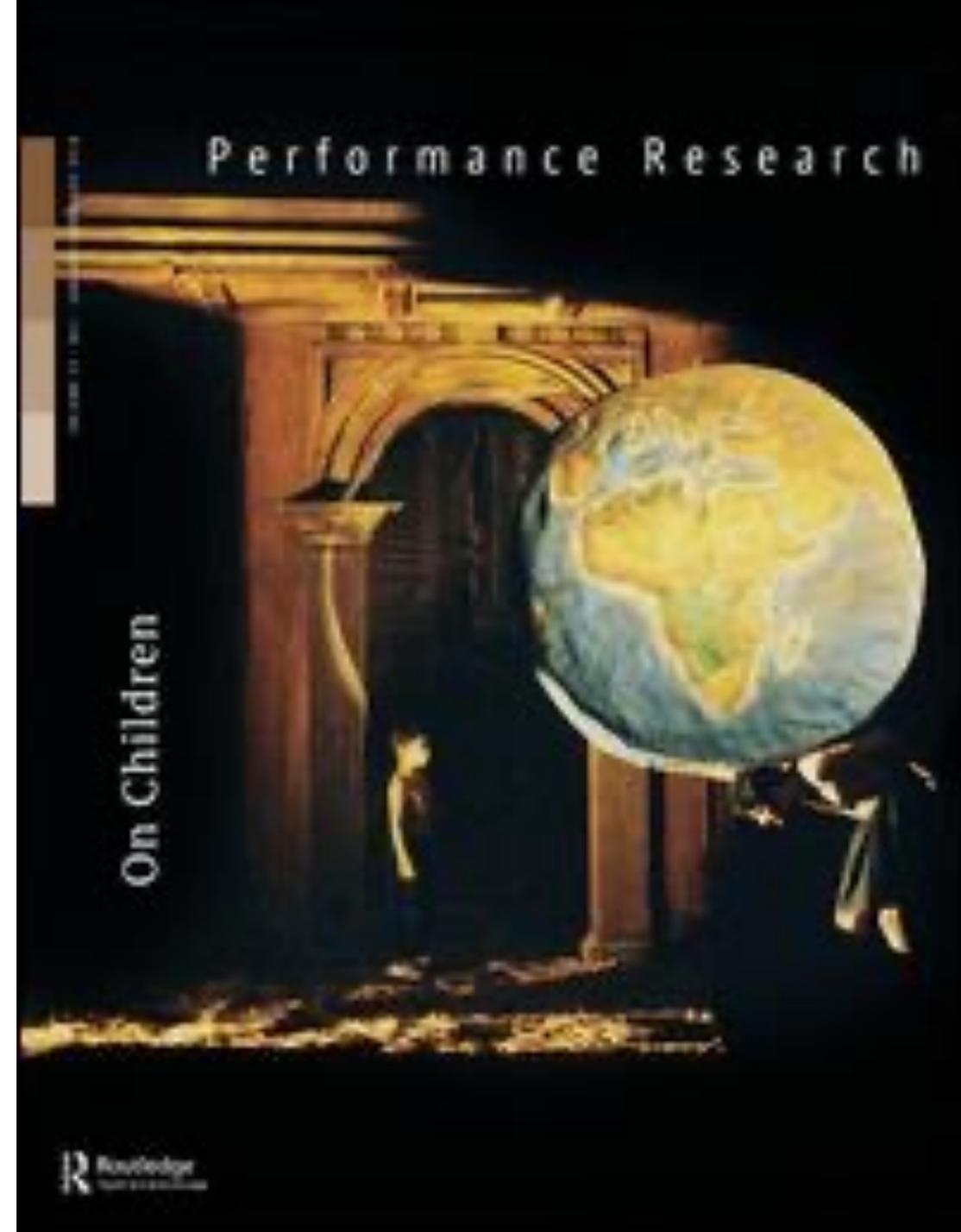
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ABSTRACT

In her 2012 paper, Marah Gubar coins the term 'age transvestism' to discuss the phenomenon of children impersonating adults on the Victorian stage. Gubar employs the term to argue that children dressing and acting as adults signals a 'category crisis' and, in doing so, she articulates a position that deviates from the well-established assumption that nineteenth century audiences liked to watch the child performer because their incompetence highlighted the difference between adults and children (Varty [2008](#): 15). Age transvestism, a term which she inherits from Marjorie Garber's notion of 'gender transvestism', thus becomes 'a space of possibility' (Garber [1992](#): 11) rather than a reinscription of binarised identities between children and adults. Contemporary performance and live art with children has renewed this fascination with children impersonating or being read in relation to adults. As such, contemporary performance practice both intentionally and unintentionally enacts a crisis of the discursive categories of both children and adults. This article examines age transvestism in contemporary performance as a strategy for destabilizing dominant conceptualisations of the child that persist within contemporary discourses of childhood. Focusing on *Film with Hope*(2016), a collaboration between UK-based artist Grace Surman and her young daughter, the analysis considers how age transvestism challenges historic perceptions of the innocent child, the child in need of protection, and the child as a subject in formation (Kehily [2004](#)). The article proposes that age transvestism – where it is read as a continuum of age-crossing – has the potential to foreground the body of the child in performance as a body that does not necessarily have to be defined by the nostalgic, erotic or judgemental adult gaze. Instead, it proposes that children's bodies are afforded the poststructural, feminist and queer approaches to reading their bodies that are ordinarily given to adult bodies onstage.

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