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# Killing Conchita: celebrity persona (de/re)construction as artistic transformation

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## ABSTRACT

Conchita Wurst rose to fame as the bearded drag queen who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2014. Through Conchita, the artist Thomas Neuwirth found greater success in his career than he had achieved performing under his own name and non-drag image. Despite this, the specific image and persona of Conchita quickly became limiting for his own artistic expression and growth, leading Neuwirth to introduce a second persona, WURST. This article explores the construction and function of these personas for Neuwirth, arguing that the introduction of WURST has allowed Neuwirth to reconstruct ‘Conchita Wurst’ as a more versatile performance identity and artistic brand than achievable via the Conchita or WURST personas. It demonstrates how persona can be used strategically to disrupt and transform artistic careers, and how the celebrity of a persona can be leveraged into a form of brand recognition even after that persona is discarded.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In 2019, Thomas Neuwirth, the Austrian performer better known as Conchita Wurst, winner of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest, announced the arrival of a new persona. In contrast to the ‘polite and feminine media icon Conchita’, WURST represented a new facet of Neuwirth’s ‘stage character’, a ‘masculine, uncompromising Electro-newcomer’ (team 2019). Not only did WURST and his album *Truth Over Magnitude* signal a musical departure from Conchita’s signature baroque pop, but the album also promised to ‘[reveal] more about Neuwirth and his life than it was ever possible for the unapproachable character of Conchita’ (team 2019). This article examines Neuwirth’s two intersecting performance personas – Conchita and WURST – alongside Thomas Neuwirth himself to understand the function of these personas for both his personal and professional identities. It argues that Neuwirth’s use of Conchita and WURST illustrates both the function of persona for artists and a strategy for moving beyond a seemingly monolithic public identity. Conchita was nurtured specifically and successfully as a strategy for Neuwirth achieve stardom, but her

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particular image as a bearded drag queen and the political significance she accrued from her Eurovision victory obscured Neuwirth as an individual and was ultimately limiting for him as a performer. By disrupting this image, WURST functioned to transition 'Conchita Wurst' from a distinct persona to a performance moniker and an artistic brand. In so doing, this has created a new artistic space for Neuwirth that is no longer limited to that of the bearded drag queen. Neuwirth's professional process demonstrates how persona can be used strategically to disrupt and transform artistic careers, and how the celebrity of a persona can be leveraged into a form of brand recognition even after that persona is discarded.

### Celebrity and persona as strategic identities

The article uses a textual approach focused on content analysis of Neuwirth's music, videos, performances,<sup>1</sup> social media content, and memoir, *Being Conchita: We Are Unstoppable* (Wurst 2015), alongside interviews and media coverage. The memoir credits Conchita Wurst as the author,<sup>2</sup> but the narratorial voice is from Thomas Neuwirth's perspective. He speaks about himself as Tom in the first person and usually writes of Conchita in the third person as someone that he, Tom, both is yet can interact with dialogically. Neuwirth uses this to explore the complexity of his relationship with the persona of Conchita as simultaneously his companion, his mask, and an aspect of his own self. Most importantly, Conchita also emerges in the memoir as a particular manifestation of Neuwirth's dedication to values of tolerance and acceptance, and as someone with more confidence to fight for these values than 'Tom, the boy from the sticks' (Wurst 2015, x). Further autobiographical insight is gleaned from Neuwirth's third studio album, *Truth Over Magnitude* (2019), which he released as WURST. Neuwirth has expressed dissatisfaction with Conchita's debut album, *Conchita* (2015), describing himself as 'not the biggest fan' of *Conchita* and criticising its lack of authenticity for him as a performer (Savage 2018). Rey (2018, p. 26) observes that *Conchita* is remarkably ungendered and 'characterised by lyric indeterminacy', focused more on Conchita's symbolism and the diva archetype than on revealing personal insight about the performer. By contrast, for *Truth Over Magnitude* Neuwirth collaborated closely with the songwriter, Austrian singer-songwriter Eva Klampfer, and producer, Albin Janoska, and was creative director and stylist for its music videos (Aderemi 2019). The result is an album Neuwirth describes as 'authentic as authentic can be' (Savage 2018).

Although the method of textual analysis for studying celebrity risks having a 'slightly regressive dimension' (Turner 2010, p. 15), it is nevertheless a useful and easily deployed method for studying famous public personas where the phenomenological approach advocated by Marshall et al. (2015, 2020, p. 113) is not practical or possible. Nevertheless, Marshall et al. (2015) interpretive phenomenological approach highlights a method that can and should be deployed within the textual analysis of celebrity and persona: contextualising the analysis within an understanding of pre-existing cultural formations, such as the celebrity, the star, or the drag queen. Such an approach acknowledges that 'the construction of a public self is always working within the material identity of previous discursive formations of identity' (Marshall et al. 2015, p. 292).

Both celebrity and persona respond to circumstances Rojek (2001, p. 9) describes as the 'increasing importance of the public face in everyday life [that] is a consequence of the

rise of public society'. This has resulted in what Marshall (2016, p. 1) characterises as 'a pandemic obsession with constructing personas' that results in part from the celebrity system, but also from technological and cultural change that personalised consumer culture, celebrates individuality, and renders the divide between the public and private spheres more permeable (Marshall 2016, p. 2). In short, persona is a 'strategic form of public identity' (Marshall 2016, p. 1).

Celebrity is also a strategic form of public identity, but it is a particular type of public figure that is not just operating within public society but who has – to draw upon Rojek's (2001) typology of celebrity – achieved, inherited, or been ascribed some sort of fame and significance. For Rojek (2001, p. 10), these are individuals whose glamour (or notoriety) has an 'impact on public consciousness'. Scholars agree that media plays a large role in creating, sustaining, and destroying celebrity, as do their audiences. As Turner (2016, p. 13) summarises, 'celebrity [is] a media process that is coordinated by an industry, and as a commodity or text which is productively consumed by audiences and fans'. As both a result of this and of its origins in cultural studies, studies of celebrity frequently emphasise the collective agency of the audience (Marshall *et al.* 2015, p. 290). By contrast, studies of persona concentrate on the agency of the individual (Marshall *et al.* 2015, p. 290). Persona may thus be a tool that some celebrities might use to reclaim personal agency within public society, which I suggest is the case here with Neuwirth's introduction of WURST.

The strategic use of persona by celebrities is not uncommon as personas can be useful for signifying new artistic directions. For example, authors may use a nom-de-plume to write outside of the genre they are known for, such as Stephen King and Richard Bachmann. For some, the use of a stage name might be the first step in creating a distinction between their performance persona and their veridical self to serve a particular purpose (Deflem 2019, p. 33). Beyoncé's Sasha Fierce is an interesting variation on this tactic, as the album *I Am ... Sasha Fierce* (2008) was ostensibly the public revelation of a persona that she privately used to distinguish between her own shy personality and her bold stage performances (MacInnes 2008, Crosley 2010); however, Chatzipapatheodoridis (2017, p. 410) suggests that Sasha Fierce was 'another stunt, a creative project that provided Beyoncé with additional space to exercise role-playing'. Sasha Fierce illustrates how persona is both functional, for the individuals deploying them and their audiences, and disposable; that is, an individual may cease to use a particular persona once the context or audience they were addressing is no longer relevant. Given the brevity of his existence, WURST might similarly be viewed as a 'stunt', but he was effective in his purpose. Once a persona is established, they can be difficult to dislodge or kill, particularly if that persona was the initial point of contact between the artist and their public. The introduction of WURST illustrates both Auslander's (2016, 188) suggestion that performers cultivate multiple personas and Deflem's (2019, p. 42) argument that 'it is conceptually sounder to adopt the notion of a persona (in the singular) that is multi-dimensional and versatile'. I argue that the effect of Neuwirth's introduction of a second persona functions to re-construct 'Conchita Wurst' as multi-dimensional, versatile, and, importantly, no longer bound specifically to the image of the bearded drag queen.

The relationship between a performer and their drag persona is inherently complex. Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave (2010, pp. 179–181) draw upon performance studies to suggest that drag is a liminal state of 'not me-not not me' (Schechner 1985) that may

allow these queer performers to negotiate between the contradictory social worlds of a marginalised identity (as a gay male) and a drag celebrity status. The participants in Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave's (2010, p. 180) study of drag performers make a clearer distinction between their drag identities and their personal identities than those in Taylor and Rupp's (2004) earlier study. Although drag has always been a form of performance labour, Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave's frame of 'identity work' and 'body labour' is more explicit in recognising this. Combined with their finding that their participants distinguish quite clearly between stage persona and personal identity, this encourages an understanding of drag personas specifically as professional identities. Nevertheless, the idea of the liminal 'not me-not not me' state suggests that even if there is a distinction that performers make for personal or professional reasons, the character still emerges from that performer's experience and interpretation of their gendered social world (Hobson 2013).

### Dramatis personae: a note on names and pronouns

This article discusses two intersecting stage personas that are performed by one artist, the identity of the performing artist, and the eventual reconstruction of the original persona as a versatile artistic brand. Although intersecting, each of these three entities inhabit slightly different zones in the (non-linear) genderqueer spectrum. While they do have individual names that will be used throughout – specifically Tom (or Neuwirth), Conchita, and WURST – pronouns remain a useful linguistic signifier. While the 'naming of pronouns [can work] against moves towards a recognition of gender fluidity' (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2018, p. 250), they can also be personally and politically important for queer individuals and communities. Pronouns are thus an important social factor in signifying and representing gender identities and roles (Greaf 2016) and are particularly useful in discussing drag characters as distinct from artist identities (Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave 2010). The discussion below establishes the names and pronouns for these personas and provides a narrative of Neuwirth's career trajectory.

First, Thomas Neuwirth, the performer of both Conchita and WURST, is a gay cismale artist. Neuwirth will be used to refer to the artist, although occasionally Tom will also be used as this is how Neuwirth refers to himself in his memoir and various interviews. He/him pronouns will be used for Neuwirth as this is again consistent with his own use, particularly when distinguishing himself from Conchita. Neuwirth grew up in regional Austria, reporting the experience of growing up gay in a small town as 'not that much fun' (Brooks 2014). He moved to Graz as a teenager to study fashion design, which has remained an integral part of his approach to performance and artistry. Neuwirth first found success as a singer in the 2006–7 season of *Starmania*, an Austrian television talent show. He placed second and was signed on to a *Starmania*-constructed boy band, *Jetz Anders!*, that charted in Austria but dissolved after one year. Notably, Neuwirth disclosed his HIV-positive status in late 2018 via Conchita's social media in response to a former boyfriend's alleged threats to publicly reveal this information.

Neuwirth's eventual success is closely entwined with the development of the Conchita persona, the bearded drag queen who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2014. While in persona, drag queens usually use female pronouns to refer to themselves and their characters (Greaf 2016). In line with this and Neuwirth's own practice for speaking

about Conchita, she will be referred to by she/her pronouns. Although Conchita Wurst is the full name of the Eurovision-winning artist, she is referred to here mononymously as Conchita to distinguish her from WURST and the later transformation of 'Conchita Wurst' into a performance moniker that is no longer defined by the drag persona. Neuwirth developed Conchita during his years performing in Vienna's burlesque scene after *Starmania* and Jetz Anders. Conchita has two backstories: that of Neuwirth's creation of the persona and that of the character herself. According to the character backstory developed by Neuwirth and his cabaret collaborators, Conchita was born in the Colombian mountains and migrated to with her parents to Germany as a child, growing up in Berlin (Adams 2012a). She is married to a boylesque performer, Jacques Patriaque, who she met in Paris (Adams 2012a, Wurst 2015). Although the IMDb (2023) reports a date of marriage to Patriaque with all appearance of seriousness, it is important to note that this is a marriage between the personas of Conchita and Jacques, not between Neuwirth and the artist, also named Thomas, who performs Patriaque. Neuwirth describes this relationship as 'a fairytale – he's actually a close friend of mine' (Bromwich 2014, see also Wurst 2015) – and in *Being Conchita*, he refers to Thomas's actual husband, Philipp, who performed in their shows as Urinella (Wurst 2015).

For Neuwirth, Conchita was an evolution of his long-standing interest in playing with gender through clothing. Neuwirth has stated, 'She was always there, but she had no name for a very long time' (Bromwich 2014). This progressed from playing dress-up in his attic as a child (as discussed in *Being Conchita* and later depicted in the music video for WURST's 'To the Beat'), to studying fashion design in Graz, to eventually exploring drag as a form of personal and artistic expression that also led to professional experience and success. Neuwirth was scouted at a party by Kitty Willenbruch, an icon of the contemporary Viennese burlesque scene known for her Salon Kitty Revue. Willenbruch invited Neuwirth to compere the show as Conchita. The name, Conchita Wurst, draws together Cuban slang that has been variously interpreted as meaning either a sexy woman (Pires 2015) or a vagina with the Austrian saying for 'not worth giving a damn' (*ist ja auch wurst*), playing also upon *wurst* as slang for penis; Conchita Wurst is thus 'vagina-penis'.

Conchita's first television appearance occurred in 2011 on Austrian broadcaster ORF's *Die große Chance* (2011), another television talent show; she placed sixth. She also appeared in other reality television shows, such as *The Worst Jobs in Austria* (2013) and *Wild Girls* (2013), which both helped to establish Conchita as a separate (and more successful) figure in Austrian entertainment than Neuwirth before her. Conchita then came second in the Austrian national final for Eurovision 2012 and was chosen via an internal selection process to represent Austria at Eurovision in 2014, which she won with the famous Bond-esque torch song, 'Rise Like a Phoenix'. She released her debut album, *Conchita*, in 2015 and her second album, *From Vienna With Love*, a collaboration with the Vienna Symphony, in 2018.

Conchita's Eurovision performance and victory was controversial in the context of pan-European queer politics. Prior to Eurovision 2014, petitions circulated in Belarus calling on their public broadcaster to edit out Conchita's performance because it made the contest 'into a hotbed of sodomy' (Tzanelli 2014). Following her victory, Turkish politicians expressed relief at their country's withdrawal from the song contest after 2013; one of the reasons for this withdrawal was the belief that the contest was no longer appropriate family viewing in Turkey due to divergent values (Granger 2014). Russian politician Vitaly

Milonov raged against Conchita as ‘blatant propaganda of homosexuality and spiritual decay’ (Luhn 2014), while the Russian Orthodox Church described her as an ‘abomination’ (Religion News Service 2014) and President Vladimir Putin criticised her for aggressively flaunting her sexuality with disregard of others’ morality (Edgar 2014). At the more vernacular level, a social media campaign called for Russian men to shave off their beards in protest (BBC 2014). Criticisms were not limited to the so-called ‘east’: former BBC commentator Terry Wogan accused Conchita of making that year’s Eurovision a ‘freak show’ (Selby 2014). By contrast, the Austrian president, Heinz Fischer, hailed Conchita’s win as ‘not just a victory for Austria, but above all for diversity and tolerance in Europe’ (Davies 2014), while BBC commentator Graham Norton observed that ‘it seems like Eurovision has done something that matters just a little bit’ (Osbourne 2014). In the wake of her victory, driven by these positive and negative responses, Conchita became the poster girl for LGBTQIA+ rights in Europe. In addition to headlining several pride events throughout Europe, she performed at an anti-discrimination event hosted by the European parliament and at the UN Vienna office for Ban Ki-Moon, who stated, ‘She confounds people’s preconceived ideas of gender and sexuality – and she appeals to them to accept her as she is. That is a powerful message’ (UN News 2014).

Neuwirth introduced WURST in early 2019 as the ‘masculine, uncompromising Electro-newcomer’ (team 2019), signifying both a gendered and musical departure from Conchita, who is associated with the kind of baroque pop exemplified by ‘Rise Like A Phoenix’ and her Vienna Symphony collaboration. Neuwirth released one album as WURST, *Truth Over Magnitude* (2019); subsequent music singles have been released as ‘Conchita Wurst’ without the signifiers of either persona. Importantly, the album’s title spells out ‘TOM’ and its lyrical content and music videos explore far more autobiographical themes, suggesting that WURST is a pathway to understanding Tom. Where Conchita was performed as a complete character with backstory, WURST is constructed less as a full-fledged *persona* and more as a specific *image* that seeks to disrupt the glamour of Conchita that has been applied to Tom, and through this create a new artistic space that includes room for personal truth. While Neuwirth is he/him and Conchita is she/her, WURST’s pronouns are ambiguous. The press release announcing the arrival of WURST uses masculine pronouns to refer to Neuwirth as an artist but avoids direct pronouns for WURST, who is instead referred to directly as WURST each time (team 2019). The ambiguity is, however, part of the purpose of WURST for Neuwirth. For example, responding to a question about both pronouns and personas from the host of *Late Night Berlin* in late 2019, Neuwirth stated, ‘Thank you for thinking you could do something wrong, but you cannot. Because in the end, it doesn’t matter. Everything is correct. I also turn around, if you just shout “hey!”’ (Bayer 2019). While this ambiguity or versatility is important to acknowledge, WURST will be referred to by he/him pronouns in part because he is distinctly positioned as a presentation of masculinity in Neuwirth’s artistic oeuvre. They/them will be used to refer to all three collectively and unless otherwise indicated, the full name of ‘Conchita Wurst’ and the pronoun he will be used to refer to Neuwirth’s artistic identity post-WURST.

### Constructing Conchita: ‘from talent show to world star’

Despite her humble origins in Viennese burlesque (or, as the backstory goes, the Colombian mountains), Neuwirth actively cultivated Conchita for the purpose of attaining

stardom and celebrity. Here, celebrity functions not just as a 'subset of persona' (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, 4) but as a strategy for success. Neuwirth credits Conchita's successful trajectory to his agent, Rene Berto, who, having ascertained Neuwirth's professional goals, developed a strategy document titled, 'From talent show to world star' (Wurst 2015, p. 56). By the time she was selected to represent Austria at Eurovision in 2014, Conchita had emerged from the underground burlesque scene to achieve a national public profile thanks to her appearances in several reality television shows, including her unsuccessful attempt at the national selection for Eurovision in 2012. Having had some success once via the reality talent show route as Tom, Neuwirth and Berto used the same approach to strategically develop Conchita's public profile in Austria – and to specifically develop Neuwirth's profile as Conchita rather than as Tom. Attitudes to the role that reality television plays in constructing fame and celebrity are complex and sometimes contradictory, showing at once the democratisation of fame and celebrity and the distaste for its mass production (Holmes 2004, para. 3). Fame accrued from reality programming that centres solely on attracting attention to personalities, such as *Big Brother* and arguably both *Worst Jobs* and *Wild Girls*, is generally more derided than reality pop programming showcasing talent, such as *Die große Chance* and *Starmania*. Conchita appears in an interesting combination of reality pop (*Die große Chance* and the Eurovision national selection) and celebrity reality programming (*Worst Jobs* and *Wild Girls*), with a marked trajectory from one to the other and back again that follows the plan mapped out by Berto and Neuwirth; that is, she establishes her talent first before building her celebrity as a means to more successfully leverage opportunities for her talent.

That Conchita was selected internally to represent Austria at Eurovision in 2014 is indicative of the success of her campaign in terms of its impact on the Austrian television and music industry. Austria had failed to qualify for the Eurovision grand final for two successive years – including 2012, when the public selected Trackshittaz to represent Austria ahead of Conchita, despite fan polls suggesting external audiences might be more supportive of her (Adams 2012b). Furthermore, Conchita emerged in a particular cultural and economic moment when drag performance began to enjoy mainstream success through reality television programmes, such as *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (2009 - current); Conchita later went on to be a judge on the German drag programme, *Queen of Drag* (2019). Although such programming frequently privileges particular drag aesthetics that Conchita does not necessarily adhere to and establishes particular standards of professional success in the drag performance industry (Parslow 2020), they also indicate the mainstream marketability of drag performers to particular audiences.

It is important to emphasise that Conchita is not purely a career gimmick capitalising on a zeitgeist. Neuwirth's dialogical engagement with Conchita and his characterisation of her persona, particularly throughout the memoir, illustrates the complexity of identity work between a performer and their drag persona. In the memoir, Neuwirth evokes Jungian psychology to explain, 'we can't suppress what is inherent within us ... In my case, it was Conchita and what Conchita stood for: tolerance and love, or everything that can make our world a better place' (Wurst 2015, pp. 47–48). Although Conchita as such did not manifest until 2011, Neuwirth believes she 'had existed inside [him] for a long time' (Wurst 2015, p. 47). Taylor and Rupp's (2004, p. 119) study found that childhood gender transgression is a common experience for many drag queens, as illustrated by Neuwirth's own childhood recollections. He recounts various experiences of playing dress



up with his mother's and grandmother's clothing as a child and feeling jealous of his best friend's confirmation gown in comparison to the four suits he and the other boys had to wear (Wurst 2015, pp. 8–9). When Neuwirth first began exploring drag as an adult, he 'felt as if the concept had been created specially [sic] for [him]' (Wurst 2015, p. 44), identifying drag as an important part of his journey to self-knowledge and self-acceptance as a cisgender queer man. In a letter from Tom to 'Conchy', as he affectionately calls her, written around 2012 and included in the memoir, Neuwirth apologises for keeping her inside himself for so long with 'no proper appearance and no name' (Wurst 2015, p. 49). Importantly, Neuwirth identifies Conchita as the means through which Tom can finally 'empower[ed] ... to lead a life in which he can be what he wants to be and be who he really is' (Wurst 2015, p. 49).

The maintenance and negotiation of the divide between self and drag persona is an important form of 'identity work' that also involves the 'embodied labour' of transforming into the drag character and back again (Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave 2010, p. 179). These complexities are illustrated in the prologue of the memoir, in which Neuwirth describes getting ready for bed the night before the 2014 Eurovision grand final. The prospect of an imminent victory sparks a small crisis of identity as he tries to reconcile his self (Tom) with who everyone sees on the stage (Conchita). He refers to his reflection in the mirror as both a 'shape-shifter' and a 'hybrid', questioning whether it is Conchita who smiles back at him or Tom. The process of readying himself for bed involves removing the physical trappings of Conchita – the wig, dress, and make-up – to reveal Tom:

I reach for another piece of cotton wool and carried on removing my makeup. Conchita retreated with every dab, making way for Tom ... It's him I see in the mirror as Conchita disappears along with her makeup: it's the rebirth of Tom, the boy from the sticks. By this point my wig has been long put aside; my dress hangs from the clothes rail. A few more dabs and Conchita will be gone. (Wurst 2015, x)

Conchita is constructed from the parts of costuming – a wig, a dress, makeup – that are at once *her* yet also the possessions of Tom ('*my wig*', '*my dress*'). She is at once someone or something that is within him, yet manifests through specific external and embodied signifiers, such as clothing and makeup. The specificity of this costuming is important as Neuwirth deploys different styles of makeup and dress to signify Conchita and WURST.

What remains consistent between Conchita and WURST – and thus also Neuwirth when he is out of these personas – is their beard; it is also what distinguishes them from the clean-shaven young Tom of *Jetz Anders*. While the memoir is philosophical about the beard's meaning as a form of gender play (Wurst 2015, p. 45), elsewhere Neuwirth speaks of it in quite pragmatic terms as an 'optical statement' to gain attention (Adams 2012a), or as a feature he maintained because he did not want to shave for his weekly cabaret performances (Frostick 2020). Bearded drag is not entirely new; bear or skag drag performers maintain some of their masculine appearance, such as facial and body hair, while in drag. Yet where bear/skag performers also do not obscure their burly, masculine frames, Conchita is slender and does groom or obscure her body hair, but also does not adhere to other conventions of drag, such as padding the bosom and hips. As Rey (2018, p. 17) observes, Neuwirth's performance as Conchita is a 'cleverly constructed display of indeterminacy [that] provoke[s] the gaze, and subvert[s] not only the illusion of female, but also the expectation of drag'. While conservative commentators were just as likely to

be perturbed by a conventional, unbearded drag queen, Conchita's further subversion of any supposed gender binary through the maintenance of her beard proved particularly disruptive. Various outlets labelled Conchita as a 'transvestite' (Beard 2014), 'cross-dresser' (Roxborough 2014), or 'transgender' (Gander 2014) rather than a drag queen. Although in her earlier appearances, Conchita lays claim to an identity as a woman (Adams 2012a), as she attracted more attention, Neuwirth became firmer about the implications of misgendering, stating, 'I'm strict about the difference. What I do is performance, it's staged, it's glamour – it's not real life. But for trans people, being born in the wrong body – there's nothing glamorous or easy about that' (Pires 2015).

Neuwirth's shift from pragmatism to symbolism and back to pragmatism in explaining his beard is indicative of his changing attitude to Conchita from her early career to her Eurovision success and its aftermath. Early Conchita seeks fame and attention without any clear political agenda, while later Conchita leverages her fame to advocate for acceptance and tolerance. Early Conchita presents herself as a complete persona, often denying the existence of Tom, while later Conchita exhibits greater fluidity between the persona and the veridical self. In a 2012 interview with Eurovision fan site *Wiwibloggs*, Conchita deflects a question about 'the character "Conchita Wurst"', stating, 'First of all, I wouldn't call me a character, because I'm a real person' (Adams 2012a). In response to the next question that asks about Tom Neuwirth's experience on *Starmania*, Conchita replies,

The thing is that I really don't know who this Tom is. I heard he is a singer too, but unfortunately I never met him yet. I have to say, it's a bit impolite of Mister Neuwirth that he never called me after all this confusion about us both. If the media would have said that I looked like her, I would have called her' (Adams 2012a).

By the time she was selected for the 2014 contest, however, Neuwirth is more transparent about the existence and functions of the persona, and it is Tom as much as Conchita who responds to interview questions. In direct contrast to the 2012 *Wiwibloggs* interview, in 2013 Conchita refers to herself as a 'stage persona', linking her existence to the biographical experiences of Tom: 'I struggled with discrimination as far as I can remember. And I decided to create this bearded lady as a statement to just be yourself. And you can look whatever you want and you can dress however you like' (Muldoon 2013).

Neuwirth once claimed that his success 'probably would have happened regardless of whether I'd done them as Thomas Neuwirth or Conchita Wurst, because I have the same heart' (Pires 2015). Although a victory as Thomas Neuwirth would have been significant in its own right – he remains the only gay man to have won the contest<sup>3</sup> – it is unlikely that this would have been as disruptive without the beard and dress. As Tzanelli (2014) asserts, 'the singer's aesthetic presence in a global event can only be read as a political intervention of sorts'. Similarly, Rey (2018, p. 21) argues that 'Neuwirth's multiple defections from orthodoxy belie a very conscious choice to provoke', identifying Conchita as 'sociopolitical action'. In her critical chronology of Eurovision's instrumentalisation for queer international relations, Baker (2017) identifies Conchita's victory as marking the beginning of the song contest's geopolitical phase. This signifies a time of heightened international attention to LGBTQIA+ politics in Europe, prompted in part by the impact Russia's anti-homopropaganda laws had on several mega events, such as the Sochi Winter Olympics. During this time, queer politics emerges as a particular geopolitical fault line between western and eastern Europe (Carniel 2015, Zhonga 2022), particularly Russia and its socially conservative allies. Conchita became representative of this fault line, transformed

into 'a symbolic opponent of Putin's Russia' and a 'queer, human rights icon' (Zhonga 2022). Conchita's Eurovision victory captured global attention and gave Neuwirth access to more opportunities and more political agency that he likely would not have achieved as Tom, but it also risked fixing him in a particular image and persona.

### **Killing Conchita: from persona to performance moniker**

For Neuwirth, giving a name to his drag persona signified the 'decision to turn professional' (Wurst 2015, p. 45) as he was no longer engaged in gender play as solely a form of personal expression but now as a professional identity. Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave (2010, p. 163) describe drag pseudonyms as 'a critical stage prop that drag queens adopt to act their role and maintain a barrier between the character exposed to the audience and what the men consider to be their other, nondrag personality'. Being Conchita, Neuwirth admits, offers greater privacy than he had at the height of Tom's *Starmania* fame because of how the persona functions as this barrier between self and audience (Muldoon 2013). Yet a professional drag name is more than a prop. As Slørdahl (2022, p. 1) observes, when professional drag queens make a living from their performance, 'drag names [are] not just names of a drag character, but the names of a business'. This has been a crucial tension in Neuwirth's career as 'Conchita Wurst' was the artistic brand used to establish a cohesive online identity and profile through social media and the official website. As the brand became quite entrenched, it was unlikely Neuwirth would ever be successful in 'killing' Conchita entirely without a complete rebrand; instead, he needed to dislodge the brand from an exclusive association with his drag persona.

The possibility that Conchita could be superseded was foreshadowed as early as 2017 when Neuwirth (Duffy 2019) stated, 'I am looking for myself, and Tom rebels. I don't need her [Conchita] anymore . . . I have to kill her'. However, it seems that the catalyst for finally 'killing' Conchita in 2019 was Neuwirth's forced revelation of his HIV-positive status in April 2018. A post on the official Conchita Wurst Instagram account stated, 'I have been HIV-positive for several years. That is actually irrelevant to the public, but an ex-boyfriend is threatening to go public with this private information and I will not give anyone the right to frighten me or affect my life' (Snapes 2018). Serostatus disclosure, Hargraves (2011, p. 29) argues, outs drag queens as 'a man in a dress with a sexual history'. For Neuwirth, Conchita had acted as an effective shield against public attention on his private life, not in the least because he had cultivated her character as 'unapproachable' (conchitawurst.com 2023); now her fame was precisely what made her (and Neuwirth) vulnerable. However, celebrity disclosure of a disease can be an effective way to promote public awareness (Casey *et al.* 2003, p. 250); most media reportage of the disclosure included information about retroviral treatments (for example, Snapes 2018, McNamara 2018). Furthermore, Neuwirth frames the disclosure as a step taken to help destigmatise HIV, and in many ways the revelation underscored Conchita's advocacy for HIV awareness and gave retrospective poignancy to her contributions to the Vienna Life Ball, an HIV/AIDS charity event. Less than a year after his serostatus disclosure, Neuwirth revealed the second persona, WURST, for the album *Truth Over Magnitude*. The album's second single, 'Hit Me', is widely interpreted as a response to his ex-partner's threats.

*Truth Over Magnitude* deals with Neuwirth's transition away from Conchita and towards Tom, as spelt out in the album's title. In an interview given while the album was being

written, Conchita promised an offering that is 'authentic as authentic can be', explaining, 'I'm talking about my love life and I'm talking about what fame does to somebody – or at least to me' (Savage 2018). The lyrics of the first single, 'Trash All the Glam' (Klampfer and Janoska 2019) suggest the demise of Conchita as an illusion that can no longer be sustained, while the press release asserts that WURST's costuming in the music video – a vinyl bodysuit that obscures him completely – 'should be understood as a precursor for his artistic rebirth' (team 2019). In the song's opening verse, the first-person speaker describes their very being as 'cut in half', suggesting a split in identity, and feeling 'under glass', such as the kind of exposure and scrutiny Neuwirth experienced as Conchita. The second verse describes a woman leading a way towards peace, but in the third verse she is breaking under the strain of her 'polish'. As a result, 'she is dropping pretence' to reveal something 'way more complex'. Here, the song shifts deliberately back to the first person. In this half of the song, the speaker expresses their fear at being themselves as an artist, as well as their determination to do so. As the first-person speaker, WURST 'trashes the glam' of Conchita to reveal Tom. In the second single, 'Hit Me', Neuwirth is reborn and WURST is revealed. With short, platinum blond hair and beard, and blue contact lenses, WURST is a physical contrast to the dark-eyed, long-haired, brunette Conchita. In the music video, scenes of WURST walking with a hyperfeminine strut are juxtaposed with him in a hoodie aggressively interrogating a bearded and tattooed man. Eventually the strutting WURST takes on a menacing swagger. Together, the videos depict a deliberate and embodied transition from the feminine Conchita to the masculine WURST.

While the album press release suggested that WURST was a definitive shift for Neuwirth, he appears to have lasted for the duration of the album's initial promotion only. The landing page of the official Conchita Wurst website features an image of Neuwirth accompanied by the text, 'Austrian singer and artist Tom Neuwirth won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2014 and continues to follow his mission to spread happiness in the world' (conchitawurst.com 2023). This reattributes Conchita's win and advocacy to the artist himself rather than the persona he utilised at the time. The biography provided on the website confirms, 'The artist Tom Neuwirth emphasises the contrasts of both musical worlds even further, by no longer presenting Conchita and WURST as a dual role but unadulteratingly [sic] living out the two facets of his stage character' (conchitawurst.com 2023). Neuwirth's music after *Truth Over Magnitude* is released as 'Conchita Wurst', but his presentational style is far more fluid; while he might still appear in glamorous dresses and makeup, his presentational style makes it clear that he is no longer Conchita the diva. For example, in an appearance at the 2023 Sydney Mardi Gras in Australia, Conchita Wurst appeared in a loose dress that fell low on his chest with a backward-facing baseball cap over his unstyled shoulder-length hair, and dark eye eyeliner (Conchita Wurst on Instagram 2023).

Branding studies argue that for artists to be successful, they must have a strong brand narrative (Preece and Kerrigan 2015). As Conchita, Neuwirth's brand narrative was the importance of being yourself. Through WURST and *Truth Over Magnitude*, Neuwirth was able to maintain consistency in this artistic brand, even as the image shifted, as the purpose of the stylistic shift was for Neuwirth to be more authentic in his artistic outputs. By using WURST to disrupt Conchita's glamour (in both senses of the word), Neuwirth now has access to a far more malleable artistic space that, while still using the moniker and the fame that has

accrued, can also be a space of personal authenticity. This space is undoubtedly far more oriented within a queer male presentation of Neuwirth, but this new space of a united 'Conchita Wurst' exhibits a greater playfulness and fluidity than either persona was able to offer.

## Conclusion

Neuwirth's deployment of both the Conchita and WURST personas demonstrates an understanding of both the benefits and disadvantages to persona work as a performer. While a persona can fulfil a particular purpose for a performer, they risk being subsumed into that persona, which can limit their artistic direction. This can be particularly challenging when the persona accrues a degree of celebrity as their cultural significance can become fixed to a particular image or idea. In the case of Conchita, the geopolitical context of her Eurovision win imbued her with symbolic meaning and awarded her global attention. Although Neuwirth and his agent likely did not imagine Conchita attaining this kind of magnitude, this signified a successful campaign for the persona and provided Neuwirth with further career opportunities. However, it fixed Neuwirth into the image of the bearded drag queen and limited his capacity to use his music as an articulation of the veridical self outside of the persona. Conchita projected strength, grace, and magnanimity; the persona was a mismatch with the vulnerability and anger expressed in the lyrics of *Truth Over Magnitude*. Having once used persona to generate success, Neuwirth again deployed the tactic strategically to achieve a new professional goal: the dismantling of his celebrity persona to reveal a more authentic and versatile artistic space.

Beginning as an articulation of Neuwirth's queer identity, Conchita evolved into a hypermediated public icon who functioned to provide Neuwirth with the confidence and agency to speak against the kind of discrimination he experienced growing up queer in rural Austria. Yet Neuwirth ultimately outgrew her, and the persona parameters of the bearded drag queen became artistically confining: 'Back in the days, when I was performing as Conchita, that was the version of me that I was feeling . . . but if you limit yourself, you can only go that far' (Santos 2019). Although short-lived, the second persona, WURST existed long enough to fulfil his own purpose: disrupting the glamorous, feminine image of Conchita. Through this process, Neuwirth successfully killed Conchita without killing 'Conchita Wurst'; instead, this has been successfully leveraged into a performance moniker and artistic brand that is no longer reliant on the specific image of the bearded drag queen who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2014. To coin a phrase, the rumours of Conchita's death have been greatly exaggerated. In one interview, Neuwirth pronounced her missing, saying, 'I have no idea where she is. There are some shoes missing' (Santos 2019).

## Notes

1. This includes the researcher's experience of seeing Conchita Wurst perform live shortly after the debut of WURST. The author thanks the Queensland Performing Arts Centre for providing a complimentary ticket to the show. The experience was pivotal in understanding post-WURST Conchita Wurst.

2. The memoir acknowledges the ghost writer, Daniel Oliver Bachmann, but the right to authorship belongs to Conchita Wurst according to its copyright. Accordingly, it will be cited as Wurst (2015) throughout.
3. There have been numerous out, queer performers at Eurovision, and several queer winners who came out after their victory. Only Dana International (1998), Conchita (2014), Duncan Laurence (2019), and Victoria de Angelis of Måneskin (2021) were out at the time of their win.

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## Notes on contributor

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