

BWA

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Into the Looking Glass

Agnieszka Sejud

An Exhibition on the Polish
Ballroom Community

curator:
Amy N. Muhoro

Artist:

Agnieszka Sejud

Guest artists**appearances:**

Lila Dziedzic

Karolina Jeż

Njoroge Muthoni

Guest designers**appearances:**

Tomek Dutka

(Luka Hot Couture)

Lila Dziedzic

Kamila Revlon Design

Mikołaj Thiel

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Amy N. Muhoro

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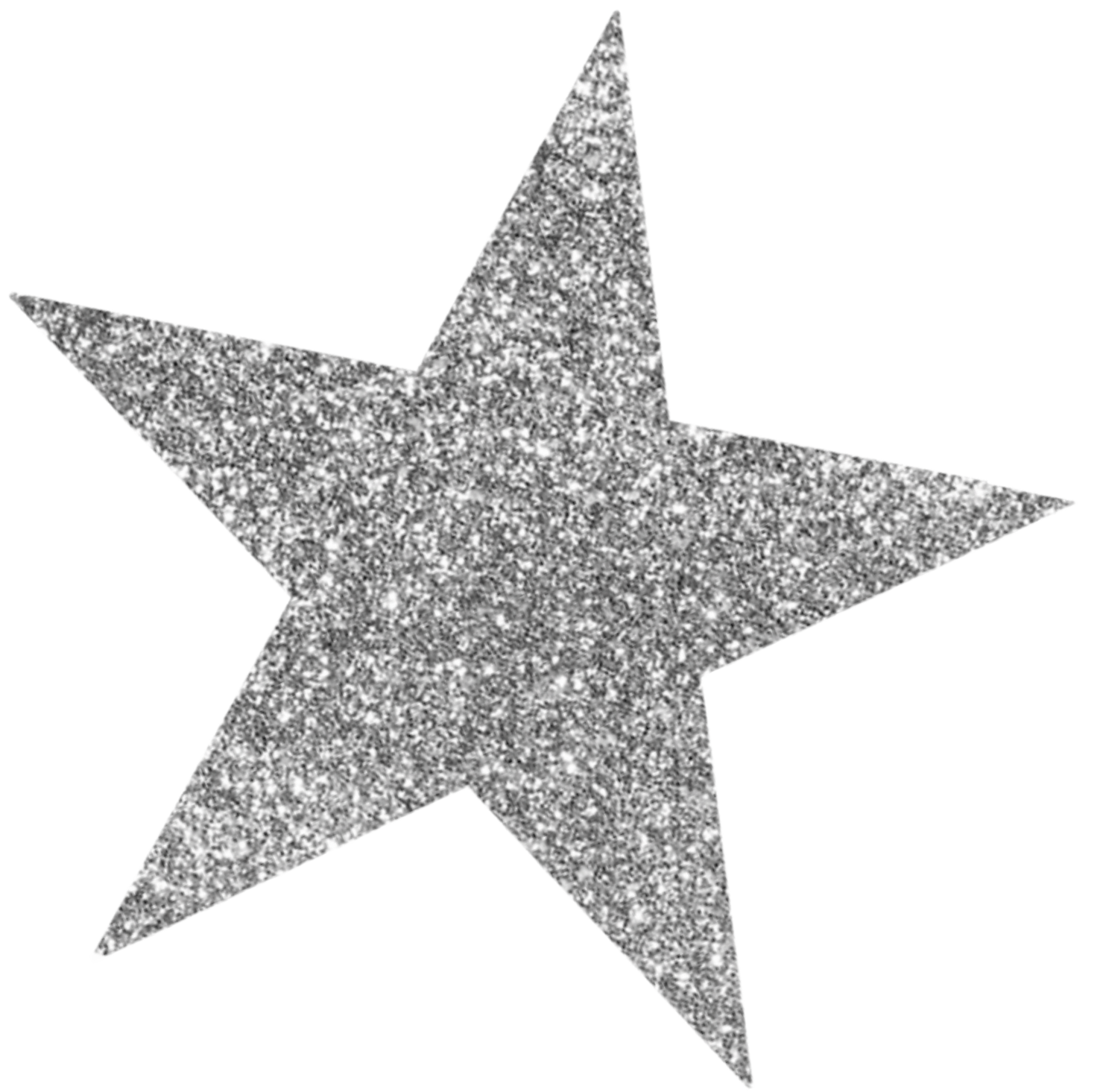
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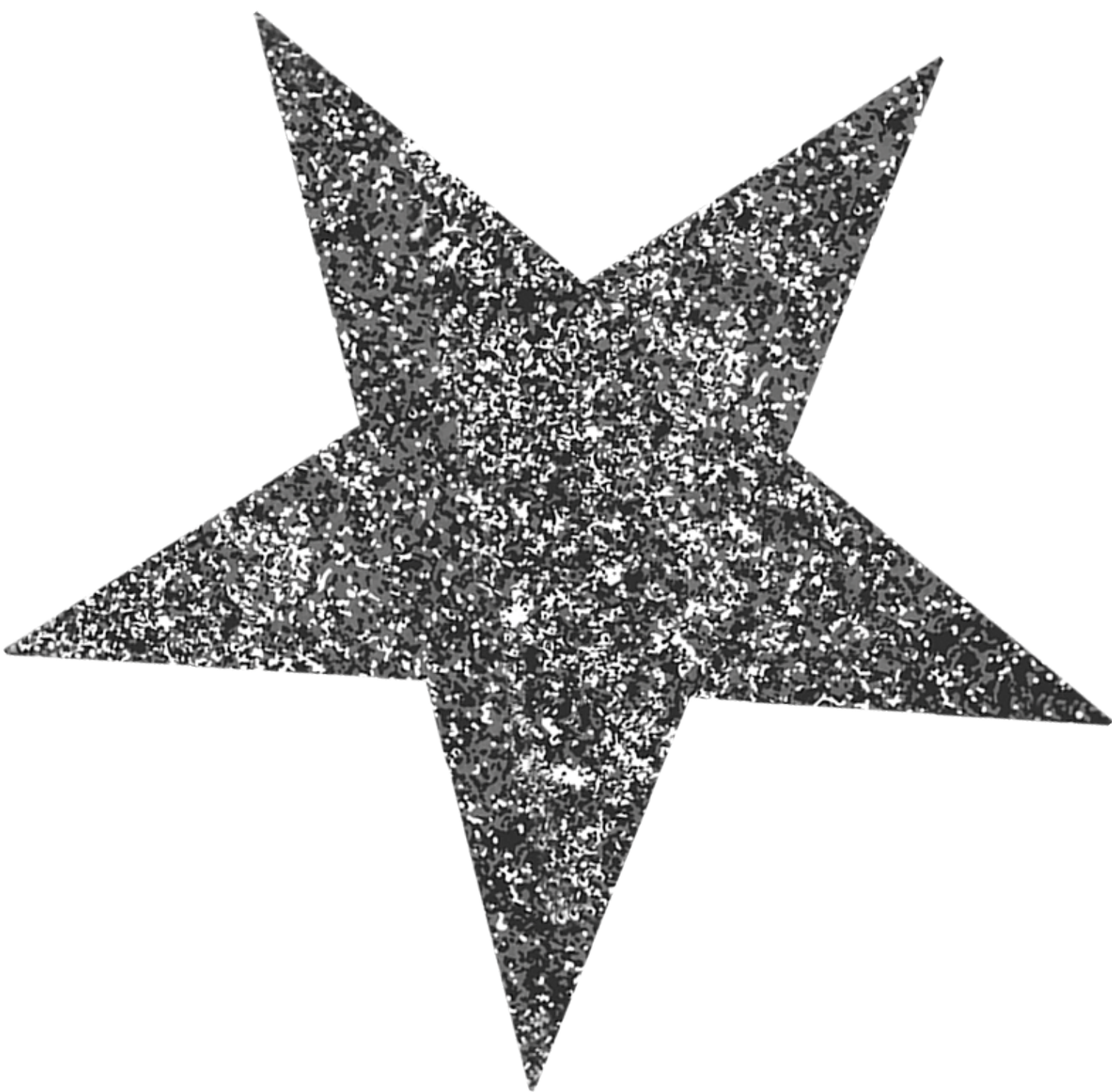
Sztuki Współczesnej





Into
the Looking
Glass

Agnieszka Sejud



“I went to a ball, I got a trophy, and now everybody wants to know me [...] It’s like crossing into the looking glass in Wonderland. You go in there and you feel... you feel a hundred percent right [...] That’s not what it’s like in the world. You know, it should be like that in the world.”

— Voices of the Ballroom Community,
as preserved in Jennie Livingston’s
Paris Is Burning (1990)

Immersion into the extravagant is not mere escapism but a method for re-seeing reality. An insistence, as José Esteban Muñoz suggests, that utopia appears in the performative, the excessive, and the not-yet-here. Fantasy and opulence become tools for rehearsing worlds before they exist. Imitation gold, velvet, and counterfeit tiaras signal not falsity but alternative possibilities. Societies have long used spectacle, ritual, and adornment to imagine otherwise—a radical potential too often forgotten. Within collectives, opulence becomes shared life-making. Longing turns into action. Cultural symbols are reworked through the body, shaping the self toward believable futures.

At the core of Lewis Carroll's 1871 novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, Alice falls through a silvered reflection and into a chessboard world where identity is not fixed but performed through carefully calculated acts. In this mirror-world of shifting rules, she navigates a subversive Bildungsroman journey, using fantasy as the catalyst for self-discovery. From pawn to queen, she traverses a landscape across which meaning is constantly rewritten. This aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity: identity as stability produced through repeated, regulated actions. In the Wood where things have no names, Alice briefly experiences pure equality, laying bare the restrictive mentality of social labels. As the fragility of logic becomes visible, authority is exposed as constructed. Alice gains agency and begins to reshape the game, using fantasy to rework reality.

In 1967, at the Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant, a drag contest held in Harlem, Crystal LaBeija reached her limit, openly challenging racism in the white-dominated drag scene before walking off the stage—a moment captured in the documentary *The Queen*. This protest became a turning point. In 1968, she and Lottie LaBeija founded the Royal House of LaBeija, a chosen family for LGBTQIA+ youth excluded from dominant spaces. In 1972, they held the first House of LaBeija Ball, with competition reimaged through categories that celebrated performance, identity, and style, laying the groundwork for ballroom culture.

In Poland, ballroom was introduced circa 2012 and continues to grow as a queer counter-infrastructure. First emerging in Wrocław, it expanded to Warsaw and Kraków—cities shaped by palimpsestic histories of disruption, from partition to communist rule through post-1989 political transitions. Today, the Polish ballroom scene uses fashion, sound, and movement across categories for self-definition, recognition, and belonging. Here, fantasy functions as infrastructure rather than decoration. Performance becomes a critique of dominant gender and social norms, a blueprint for alternative futures.

The title *Into the Looking Glass* refers back to Lewis Carroll's mirror-world imagination. The exhibition presents video works, photographs, and objects forming a linked narrative of ballroom as a practice emanating from Harlem, reimagined in Polish contexts. It traces material and collective life, costumes, houses, and shared memory—showing ballroom as both refuge and resistance, sustained through oral traditions, reciprocity, and community-making.



Agnieszka Sejud

1. *Ball #I*, 2026
4. *The Power of Cunt I*, 2026
5. *The Power of Cunt II*, 2026
6. *The Power of Cunt III*, 2026
7. *Community Voices*, 2026

In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), Audre Lorde argues that true emancipation is impossible in isolation. In the essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” she speaks of a non-linear, ancient wisdom that exists within the erotic and that which is hidden—a deep well of feeling that predates modern categorization and is felt in the body long before it can be articulated in language.

Such an approach can provide a potent metaphysical foundation bridging the gap between our current reality and the potential for a liberated future. For Lorde, a resilient society is not a homogenous one, but one in which differences become a creative resource. Without community as an anchor, any sense of individual freedom is merely a brittle armistice, a temporary truce with the world. The quest for collective liberty first materialized in Sejud’s earlier work, *Mimesis*, where the desire for bodily liberation and the exploration of gender appeared as biblically accurate angels—celestial figures offering a way to imagine a self that exists beyond the reach of the state and the gaze of society.

In *Ball #1*, a series of collages from her travels around Poland between 2023 and 2025, such fantasies come to life. Although these moments last only for a few hours at a time, the ritualized repetition of ballroom conveys an enduring sense of permanence. In the center of the inflatable, spherical structure sit *femme queens* and women of trans experience, particularly those of color who pioneered the culture and whose leadership remains at the heart of the movement.

The Power of Cunt expands this community archive by charting the evolution of Polish ballroom culture. *Community Voices* presents interviews with members of the Polish ballroom community. Kamila, Bożna, Deri, Marczita, Timmy, Zolietta, Lila, and Sinoa discuss culture, their personal experiences, and queer life in Poland. Sejud maps this sociopolitical landscape, documenting the intersectional assembly of people with trans experiences and those navigating the various shades of non-binary existence, BIPOC individuals, those with experiences of migration, non-heterosexual individuals, and women. The costumes and the categories serve as ontological anchors. Recording the mechanics of this scene reveals a world in which “fantasy” becomes the only reality.

Njoroge Muthoni

2. *How to Live*, 2024

Ethno-historically, queer kinship has functioned as an interconnected technology of care sustaining life outside of traditional state frameworks. The scars of occupation in Poland parallel structural marginalization in the Global South, while also mirroring the survival strategies of Harlem, where navigating a precarious politics of visibility could be both an empowering force and a target for conservatism.

How to Live acknowledges that cross-continental pulse, borrowing stylistically from the meditative filmsophy of Soviet era filmmakers such as Tarkovsky and the gritty social realism of Iranian cinema. The dialogue has been furthered by modern cultural shifts (e.g. Beyoncé's *Renaissance* album), which have sparked a global reclamation of queer ballroom discourse, including as a catalyst in East Africa, propelling this underground energy into a more organized and visible movement. Njoroge frames the work as a "visual, meditative affirmation [...] a call to action toward the partaking of pride, and existence, despite, despite, despite..."

Tracking a four-year journey through Nairobi's queer underground, the work centers joy as an answer to despair. It shows the labor of collectives and ballroom communities—anchored by pioneers Ashton Laurence, Majic Dyke, and Andeti, whose inaugural Safari Ball opened up and bridged Nairobi with the International House of Ninja—all while guided by the filmmaker's deepening questions: "What does joy mean to you?" and "Who are you?" and, eventually, "What do you want?"

The film invites a turn toward community, offering shared vulnerability as a foundation for a reimagined collective future.

Karolina Jeź

3. *The essence of Polish Ballroom, 2026*

Community formations appear as early as the 1920s, during the Great Migration of queer African Americans who repurposed urban landmarks as drag ball performance venues, cultivating a racially integrated reality in stark contrast to the conservative and segregated outside world. This movement transformed spaces like the Savoy Ballroom and the Apollo Theater in New York into sites where photographers, writers, and poets alike automatically became archivists. Their work captured the essence of trailblazing figures such as Gladys Black, lesbian drag performer known for her powerful, gender-bending stage presence. This cultural blueprint would, four decades later, become the structural foundation for ballroom. Today, these written accounts and images serve as counter-archives, imprinting fleeting dance nights into enduring historical records, celebrating queer people as fluid and autonomous.

For Ronald Murray, aka Father Ron “Drama,” the founding father of the House of Xclusive Lanvin, studying queer social architectures unveils ballroom for him as less of a competition and more of an “environment for you to learn how to be the person that you’re going to be for the rest of your life.”

Jeż's series of photographs echoes this philosophy, acting as a ledger for how this history endures in contemporary Polish ballroom culture. Various moments transpire as intense physical performances alongside quiet moments of behind the scenes preparation, the pride of holding a trophy, the stunning details of costumes, bright colors, bold poses. Above all, the presence of House parents in their children's lives.

Lila Dziedzic

8. *ESTRO DIVA*, 2026

Niambi E. Stanley, a key contributor in advancing LGBTQIA+ justice and culture, reimagines transition as something far more than a mere medical odyssey. To Stanley, it is a deeply pedagogical act—a masterclass of self-creation in which trans individuals reclaim the imaginative depths of their internal worlds.

In *ESTRO DIVA*, Lila Dziedzic examines the nuances of intimacy and boundaries through her body, from which she once felt dissociated. As both observer and architect, she presents the surgical process as a metaphysical homecoming, attained through physical endurance.

This is a significant departure from the messianic narratives that reduce trans existence to performance or spectacle. Dziedzic documents her period of convalescence, compelling the viewer to engage with her hauntingly vulnerable inquiries: “Am I sexy like that? Is it ‘woman’ enough? Do you like that, too?” While the broader exhibition celebrates the kinetic brilliance of ballroom culture—a community Dziedzic honors as the essential sanctuary within which her pursuit of selfhood was nurtured and made possible—this work introduces a necessary, introspective duality.

9. *Runway, 2026*

Runway showcases costumes made by designers Kamila, Lila, Tomek, and Mikołaj for balls in Poland. The runway emerges directly from the wardrobe, a symbolic portal in queer life. A cabinet of concealment and transgression, opening onto the world of fantasy.

- a. Tomasz Dutka (Luka Hot Couture)**
pink ball gown designed for Ali Urwał for *Chamber of Secrets Ball*, organized by Legendary Angélique Mimi Prodigy, Berlin 2019
- b. Tomasz Dutka (Luka Hot Couture)**
white evening gown designed for *Future Ball III*, organized by Trailblazer Madlen Revlon and Trailblazer Kamilla Revlon, Warsaw 2025
- c. Lila Dziedzic (House of Slay)**
Babushka costume for *Mismatched Madness Kiki Ball*, organized by Timmy and Capriolaola, Wrocław 2024
- d. Lila Dziedzic (House of Slay)**
Love Is the Message ensemble designed for *Y2K Practice Ball*, organized by Father Jake Femina and Mother Fatale Femina, Warsaw 2023
- e. Kamilla Revlon Design**
gold skeleton costume designed for *The Halloween Party Ball III*, organized by Legendary Father Vini Revlon (House of Revlon) and Icon Mother Jack Mizrahi (House of Gorgeous Gucci), Paris 2024

f. Kamilla Revlon Design

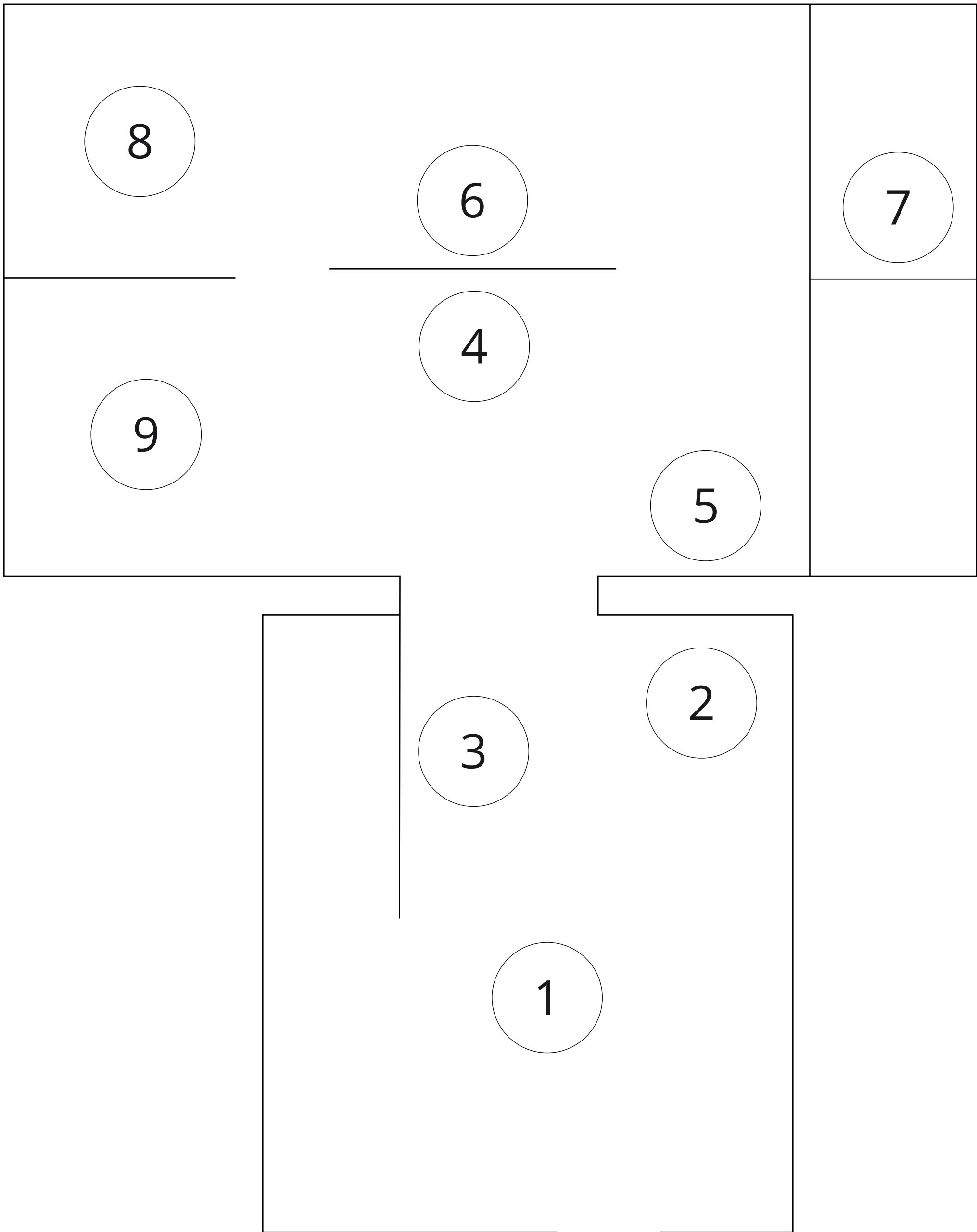
checked costume designed for *The Mean Girls Kiki Ball III*, organized by Polish Princess Checky Versace and Princess Jala Louboutin, Katowice 2025

g. Mikołaj Thiel (Anthurium)

anthurium costume designed for *Future Ball II*, organized by Trailblazer Madlen Revlon and Trailblazer Kamilla Revlon, Warsaw 2024

h. Mikołaj Thiel (Anthurium)

Panthera Schiaparelliesque costume designed for *Mismatched Madness Kiki Ball*, organized by Timmy and Capriolaola, Wrocław 2024



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<i>Ball #1, 2026</i> | 6 | Agnieszka Sejud
<i>The Power of Cunt III, 2026</i> |
| 2 | Njoroge Muthoni
<i>How to Live, 2024</i> | 7 | Agnieszka Sejud
<i>Community Voices, 2026</i> |
| 3 | Karolina Jeż
<i>The essence of Polish
Ballroom, 2026</i> | 8 | Lila Dzedzic
<i>ESTRO DIVA, 2024</i> |
| 4 | Agnieszka Sejud
<i>The Power of Cunt I, 2026</i> | 9 | <i>Runway, 2026</i> |
| 5 | Agnieszka Sejud
<i>The Power of Cunt II, 2026</i> | | |