JOURNAL OF LOCAL CULTURE STUDY
Vol. 04, No. 01, June 2026, pp. 15–27
e-ISSN 3026-4561 | https://locusjournal.org/index.php/locuss

Face Painting as Gender Performativity in Didik Nini Thowok's Lathi Challenge on Indonesian Social Media

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Article history: Received: 10 January 2026 | Revised: 10 April | Accepted: 7 May 2026 | Published: 1 June 2026
Article type: Research Article
DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.33292/locus.v4i01.32

ABSTRACT

Cross-gender performance in Indonesia has been examined largely as stage practice, and face painting largely as a technical adjunct to costume and choreography; neither body of work accounts for what happens when the painted face becomes the principal carrier of meaning in a piece made for circulation on a social media platform. This article examines the visual form, the symbolic meaning, and the self-expression articulated through face painting in the Lathi Challenge uploaded to the YouTube channel of Didik Nini Thowok, the dancer recorded by the Indonesian World Record Museum as the first cross-gender dance artist in the country. The study is qualitative and situated within cultural studies, drawing together the aesthetic theory of The Liang Gie, sign categories as applied to performance by Sahid, Butler's account of performativity, and McNeal's theory of drag performance. The corpus comprises the four painted faces that structure the video, analysed alongside non-participant observation of the artist's digital activity between October 2024 and October 2025 and semi-structured interviews with makeup artists, dancers, and practitioners of Javanese character makeup; the material was triangulated by source and by technique and analysed through the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The analysis finds that the four faces move from a complete Javanese feminine face towards a bilaterally symmetrical death's head; that the decisive face is the second, on which the two registers are held at once and divided horizontally across the middle; and that red migrates from the cheek and the lip to the gum line, turning cosmetic colour into exposed tissue. Face painting thus operates as a medium through which gendered identity is negotiated for a scrolling audience.

KEYWORDS

cross-gender
digital performance
drag
Javanese character makeup
visual semiotics

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How to cite: Sutrisno, L. B., Budiarta, I G. M., & Sudiarta, I W. (2026). Face painting as gender performativity in Didik Nini Thowok's Lathi Challenge on Indonesian social media. *Journal of Local Culture Study*, 4(1), 15–27. https://doi.org/ 10.33292/locus.v4i01.32

INTRODUCTION

In May 2020 a short makeup video set to the song *Lathi* by the Indonesian electronic group Weird Genius, featuring the vocalist Sara Fajira (Weird Genius, 2020), established a format that thousands of Indonesian users would reproduce within weeks. The uploader, the teenage beauty influencer Jharna Bhagwani, presented two successive faces: an abstract, mysterious contemporary look and a second look in Javanese idiom, the cut between them synchronised with the shift in the track from English verse to Javanese refrain. The hashtag #LathiChallenge spread from Instagram to TikTok and then to YouTube, and with it a template in which a performer transforms on camera from beauty into something considerably darker (Tamba, 2020; Setiyaningsih et al., 2020; Nasution et al., 2022).

Among the many who took up the format was Didik Nini Thowok, a dancer whose position in Indonesian performance is not that of a platform user at all. Record number 10976 of the Indonesian World Record Museum registers him as the first cross-gender dance artist in the country, and his repertoire, built over five decades in Yogyakarta, moves between classical Javanese forms, mask dance, and comic creations of his own devising. His version of the Lathi Challenge, posted on his YouTube channel, consists of four painted faces presented in sequence against a plain ground, each held long enough to be read before the next replaces it. The video is brief, unglamorous in its staging, and made with the compositional habits of a stage artist rather than those of a vlogger; it is precisely this collision of a lifetime of theatrical makeup with the conventions of a platform challenge that makes it worth analysing.

Face painting, in the narrow sense, is painting that takes the face as its support (Syamsiar, 2018). The practice is not an import. Marks applied to the face and the body are documented across the archipelago and are particularly well attested in Papua, where painted skin carries clan, ritual, and status information rather than decoration alone (Wenda & Sinaga, 2025). Nor is the traffic between regional idioms a recent development: the *Dayakan* folk dance of Magelang, a newly choreographed form that treats Islamic themes, borrows its face painting and much of its dress from the arts of the Dayak of Kalimantan, so that a visual vocabulary circulates well ahead of the meanings originally attached to it (Yanti, 2019). Face painting in Indonesia is therefore already a mobile practice before any platform is involved.

The scholarship on this material divides into three positions. The first treats face painting as a component of stage makeup and describes it technically. Bellayuana and Puspitorini (2020) document the construction of Jaranan makeup at the Turonggo Satrio Mudo studio in Blitar, establishing which motifs are applied, in what order, and with what materials. Putri and Ismurdiyahwati (2021) catalogue the types of face painting found in the makeup of Remo dancers in Surabaya and assign each a meaning within the character system of the genre. Syamsiar (2018) approaches the practice from the side of creation, using face and body painting to extend the artistic range of a batik fashion presentation. Taken together this line of work establishes that Indonesian face painting is rule-governed and that its motifs are semantically loaded. It stops, however, at the edge of the studio: the audience is assumed to be co-present, the work is assumed to be seen whole and at length, and the question of who is wearing the face does not arise.

The second position concerns cross-gender performance and the body that performs. Mrázek (2005) remains the fullest account of Didik Nini Thowok's art, reading the masks and the selves they produce as a negotiation conducted in and through Javanese dance conventions. McNeal (1999) analyses drag as a practice structured by ambivalence, in which the performer is held in a double bind between the identity displayed and the identity lived. Butler (1993, 1999) supplies the theoretical ground on which both rest, treating gendered appearance as the sedimented effect of repeated acts rather than the expression of a prior substance. Sutrisno et al. (2025) extend this to dress, showing how batik functions for a cross-gender instructor at the

Kinanthi Sekar Dance Centre in Yogyakarta as a material means of holding a feminine role in place. This literature has established how cross-gender identity is produced through costume, movement, and the mask as an object. The face beneath the mask, painted rather than covered, has not been its analytic unit, and the digital setting is absent from it altogether.

The third position takes the Lathi phenomenon itself as its object, but approaches it as media rather than as art. Setiyaningsih et al. (2020) examine how the mystical register of the music video shapes audience perception; Nasution et al. (2022) read the work as a representation of language and culture and connect it to the erosion of *unggah-ungguh*, the Javanese code of deference in speech and conduct, among younger users; Laksono and Wulandari (2022) supply the epidemiological context for the violence against women that the song addresses. Zhao and Abidin (2023), working on a comparable challenge on TikTok, show that platform affordances do not merely distribute a gesture but reshape what the gesture can mean. What this work establishes is that the Lathi format carried social meaning for its audience. What it does not do is treat any single instance as an authored aesthetic object with its own compositional logic; the videos appear in it as content, counted and sampled, not as works.

The gap that emerges is therefore not an absence of publications on face painting, on cross-gender performance, or on the Lathi Challenge, but a deficiency in knowledge at the point where the three meet. No study has treated the painted face as the unit in which a cross-gender artist constructs identity for a platform audience — that is, as a surface on which a traditional repertoire of character makeup is compressed into a sign that must be read at the speed of a scroll, and in which the performer's own position between genders is simultaneously declared and withheld. This article is the first to analyse the painted face of a cross-gender artist as an authored sign system operating under platform conditions, taking Didik Nini Thowok's Lathi Challenge as its case.

The study accordingly asks three questions. What visual form does face painting take across the four faces of the performance, and by what means is that form constructed? What do those painted surfaces mean in relation to the song, to Javanese character makeup, and to the social issues the work invokes? And how does the artist's self-expression as a cross-gender performer operate through the painted face in a medium that is public, reproducible, and indifferent to the conventions of the stage?

METHOD

Research Design and Approach

The study was designed as a qualitative, interpretive enquiry within cultural studies, a field whose transdisciplinary habit of borrowing from aesthetics, anthropology, and gender theory suits an object that belongs fully to none of them (Carlson, 1998; Kaplan & Manners, 2002). Qualitative design was chosen because the research questions concern meaning rather than incidence: what a painted face signifies cannot be established by measuring how often it appears. Qualitative enquiry of the inductive, naturalistic kind proceeds from data towards interpretation rather than from hypothesis towards test (Sugiyono, 2016), and is oriented to the observation of phenomena in their natural setting (Abdussamad, 2021); research itself, on Sahid's (2017) formulation, is an effort to find a solution to a stated problem. Qualitative work of this kind requires the researcher to hold in view the biases and the positions — of gender, history, culture, and social location — that shape both the material and its reading (Creswell & Poth, 2016), and to observe the phenomenon in the setting where it occurs rather than in abstraction from it (Tracy, 2013).

Three theoretical instruments were brought to bear, each at a defined point in the analysis. The aesthetic distinction between objective and subjective theories of beauty set out by The Liang Gie (2004) was applied first, in the description of visual form, to keep separate the qualities

carried by the painted surface itself from the responses those qualities provoke. Sign categories as developed for the analysis of theatre, dance, and *wayang* by Sahid (2019; see also Nöth, 1991; Sahid et al., 2017) were applied second, in the reading of meaning, on the principle that a performance signifies simultaneously through language, gesture, sound, colour, and appearance, and that these channels are interdependent rather than separable (Sathotho, 2022). Butler's (1993, 1999) account of performativity, together with McNeal's (1999) theory of drag performance and Althusser's (2014) account of ideology as lived practice, was applied third, in the analysis of self-expression. McNeal's category has been widened here to include the range of practices that Indonesian usage gathers under the term cross-gender: performance by feminine men, by men who cross-dress partially, and by transgender performers.

Site, Period, and Corpus

The field site of this study is a digital one. The primary corpus consists of the Lathi Challenge video published on the YouTube channel didikninithowok (Didik Nini Thowok, 2020), from which four painted faces were extracted as the units of analysis; these are reproduced as Figures 1 to 4. Inclusion was determined by two criteria: the face had to be held on screen long enough to be read as a composed image rather than as a transitional frame, and it had to differ from the preceding face in at least one of palette, motif, or hair arrangement. Frames showing partial application or camera movement were excluded. A secondary corpus of the artist's other uploads on the same channel, together with the Jharna Bhagwani video that established the format, was consulted for comparison but is not analysed here.

Observation of the channel and of the wider circulation of the format ran from October 2024 to October 2025. The video documents and screen captures on which the analysis rests were downloaded on 7 October 2025, and all figure captions record that date because platform content is revisable and a retrieval date is the only stable reference point. Informants were selected by role rather than by reputation, on the criterion of demonstrable working knowledge of the techniques at issue: makeup artists with experience of theatrical character makeup, dancers who perform in genres that use painted faces, and practitioners familiar with the Javanese conventions governing eyebrow, eye, and cheek treatment. Informants are identified in the text by role and not by name.

Data Collection

Observation was non-participant and was conducted in both declared and undeclared modes. In the declared mode, informants who follow the artist's activity knew that their comments formed part of a study; in the undeclared mode, the researcher followed the public circulation of the video — uploads, responses, comment threads — without announcing that presence, on the ground that the material was already public and that no individual commenter is identified in this article.

Interviews were conducted in both structured and semi-structured form. Structured interviews followed a guide covering four areas: the materials and sequence of application in theatrical character makeup; the conventions governing feminine and demonic faces in Javanese performance; the technical differences between makeup designed for the stage and makeup designed for the camera; and the informant's reading of each of the four faces. Semi-structured interviews followed the direction the informant took, and were used in particular with practitioners who had themselves produced faces in the Lathi format. Interviews conducted by the authors are cited in the text as personal communications and are not listed in the references.

Documentation combined photography and screen capture. Screen capture was used to fix the painted faces as still images at the moment of fullest legibility; the video itself was downloaded to preserve a record of the sequence, since the relation between the four faces is temporal and

is destroyed by extraction alone. This division of the record into moving and still components reproduces the distinction Miles and Huberman (2014) draw between the event as perceived by its actors and the setting in which it occurs, and corresponds to the three qualitative strategies — observation, interview, and audiovisual material — identified by Creswell and Poth (2016).

Data Validation and Analysis

Credibility was established by triangulation of two kinds. Source triangulation set the readings of makeup artists against those of dancers and against the published descriptions of Javanese character makeup, so that no single professional idiom determined the interpretation. Technique triangulation set the visual evidence of the screen captures against the informants' accounts and against the sequence as it unfolds in the video. Where these diverged — most sharply over whether the third face should be read as demonic or as abstract — the divergence is reported in the analysis rather than resolved by fiat. Prolonged engagement with the channel over a year provided a check against reading a single upload as representative of the artist's practice.

Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014) and proceeded in four steps. First, reduction: each screen capture was described in a standard set of fields — base colour, applied colour, eyebrow treatment, eye treatment, nose and cheek treatment, mouth and dental treatment, symmetry, hair arrangement, ornament — and material not bearing on these fields was set aside. Second, categorisation: descriptions were grouped by the opposition they exhibited, which produced three working categories, namely traditional-feminine, traditional-with-contemporary, and contemporary-dominant. Third, interpretation: each category was read through the theoretical instruments named above, in the order specified there, and each reading was checked against the informants' accounts. Fourth, conclusion drawing: the categories were assembled into the argument presented below, with conclusions treated as provisional and revised as later viewings altered earlier readings.

Research Ethics and Positionality

No institutional review board with jurisdiction over arts research operates at the authors' institution, and consent was therefore secured directly. Informants gave oral informed consent before each interview, were told the purpose of the study and how their words would be used, and consented to the use of role descriptors in place of their names. The images reproduced as Figures 1 to 4 are stills from a publicly published video and are used for criticism and scholarly analysis, with attribution to the channel and the retrieval date; permission for reproduction has been sought from the artist. No restricted or sacred material is discussed. The first author is a researcher of cross-gender performance and dress with prior published work on a cross-gender instructor in Yogyakarta, and is acquainted with the professional milieu in which the artist works; this proximity gives access to technical knowledge that a distant observer would lack, and carries a corresponding risk of sympathetic reading, which the triangulation described above is designed to offset.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Four Faces and the Order in Which They Appear

The Lathi Challenge as Didik Nini Thowok performs it is built from four painted faces presented in a fixed order, and the order is not incidental. Read as a sequence, the four faces trace a movement from a complete Javanese feminine idiom to a bilaterally symmetrical death's head, and the decisive event occurs not at the end but at the second position, where the skull is applied to the lower third of the face only and the feminine construction above it

is left untouched. For the duration of that face the performer wears two incompatible registers simultaneously, divided horizontally across the middle of the face.

The first face is constructed entirely within the conventions of Javanese theatrical makeup for female characters (Figure 1). The eyebrows are drawn as a long, thin, upward-tending arc; the eyes are extended at the outer corner; the nose is narrowed by shading along its sides; the cheekbones carry blush placed high. The hair is dressed in a *sanggul*, the Javanese chignon, and ornamented with flowers. Nothing here departs from what a makeup artist working on a *wayang wong* or classical dance production would produce, and the informants consulted identified the treatment without hesitation. What is notable is the completeness of the citation: the face does not gesture at tradition, it reproduces it.



Figure 1. The first face: Javanese character makeup for a female role, with a *sanggul* dressed in coloured segments and floral ornament.

Still from the Lathi Challenge, YouTube channel didikninithowok, retrieved 7 October 2025. Reproduced for criticism and review.

The second face retains that apparatus and contradicts it (Figure 2). Everything above the upper lip is unchanged — the same arched brow, the same extended eye, the same high blush, the same *sanggul* and flowers — while the lower third of the face is overpainted white and a full set of teeth is drawn across the closed mouth and the jaw in black, so that the performer appears to be smiling with a skull's dentition. The division is horizontal and abrupt, and it is not disguised: the edge where the white ground meets the living skin of the cheek is left visible. Two things follow. First, the feminine construction is not removed to make room for the frightening one; it is retained as the frightening one's support, so that the effect is produced by juxtaposition rather than by substitution. Second, the skull is not drawn from the Javanese character lexicon at all. It belongs to a globally circulating iconography of the death's head, and its arrival on a face otherwise built to the specifications of *wayang wong* is precisely the contemporary term that the artist sets against the traditional one.



Figure 2. The second face: the feminine construction retained above the upper lip, the lower third of the face overpainted as a skull's dentition.

Still from the Lathi Challenge, YouTube channel didikninithowok, retrieved 7 October 2025. Reproduced for criticism and review.

The third face completes what the second began (Figure 3). The white ground now covers the whole face; the eye sockets are blacked out and enlarged; the nasal cavity is drawn as a dark inverted triangle; the dentition extends across the full width of the jaw, and red appears along the gum line behind the painted teeth. The feminine drawing has been absorbed entirely, and with it the small asymmetries that Javanese character makeup for female roles tolerates and often requires in order to soften the face: the composition is now bilaterally symmetrical to a degree the tradition does not use, and the symmetry produces rigidity rather than repose. Only the hair holds the face in place. The *sanggul* with its coloured segments and flowers is unchanged from the first face, and it is the sole remaining evidence that the skull belongs to the woman who preceded it. The register of this face is undecidable within the conventional system: it is neither a *raksasa* nor any other codified Javanese antagonist, and it is not an abstraction either, since the dentition is unmistakably referential. That undecidability is the point at which the face has left the lexicon.



Figure 3. The third face: the skull completed across the whole face, with red along the gum line and the *sanggul* unchanged.

Still from the Lathi Challenge, YouTube channel didikninithowok, retrieved 7 October 2025. Reproduced for criticism and review.

The fourth face holds the painted composition of the third and alters only what surrounds it (Figure 4). The segmented *sanggul* is replaced by a black arrangement dressed with pink blossom and with red pendants hanging at the temple in the manner of Japanese ornamental hairpins, and with that substitution the reference of the entire face moves. Because the painted

surface has not changed by a single stroke, the alteration isolates a variable with unusual precision: the same skull reads as Javanese under one coiffure and as broadly East Asian under another, which is to say that the work of cultural location is being done by the frame rather than by the face. The artist's long professional engagement with Japanese dance makes the citation deliberate rather than decorative, and its placement last in the sequence leaves the viewer with a face whose origin has become a question.



Figure 4. The fourth face: the painted composition unaltered, the *sanggul* replaced by an arrangement with blossom and hanging ornaments in Japanese manner.

Still from the Lathi Challenge, YouTube channel didikninithowok, retrieved 7 October 2025. Reproduced for criticism and review.

This finding bears directly on the descriptive literature. Bellayuana and Puspitorini (2020) and Putri and Ismurdiyahwati (2021) both establish that face painting in Indonesian performance genres operates as a fixed lexicon in which a given motif denotes a given character type. The present material confirms that the lexicon exists and that this artist commands it completely. It qualifies their account, however, on the question of how the lexicon is used. In the studio settings they describe, the painted face is applied once and holds for the duration of a performance; here four faces are placed in succession within a single short video, and meaning is generated by the differences between them as much as by the motifs within each. The unit of signification has shifted from the face to the series. This is not a difference of degree but of grammar, and it follows from the medium: a platform video is watched repeatedly and in full, which makes sequence available as a resource in a way that a proscenium performance does not.

White, Black, and the Red That Turns Beauty into Threat

Across all four faces the palette is restricted to three colours, and the restriction is consequential. White supplies the base and carries, in the informants' accounts and in the conventions they cite, rigidity and strength rather than the softness that Western stage makeup assigns to pallor. Black draws: it produces the eyebrow, the extended eye, the outline that makes the composition legible at small scale. Red appears only twice and only around the mouth, and it is red that does the semantic work of the whole sequence.

Applied thinly and high on the cheek in the first face, red is cosmetic; applied around the mouth in the second, it is blood. Nothing else in the second face has changed enough to account for the reversal. The distinction The Liang Gie (2004) draws between objective and subjective theories of beauty is useful precisely here. Considered objectively, the red is a property of the painted surface, and its placement, density, and edge can be described without reference to any viewer. Considered subjectively, the same pigment produces admiration in one position and revulsion in the other. The evidence of this sequence is that neither account is sufficient alone: the reversal is neither in the pigment nor in the eye but in the relation

between the pigment and the face that carries it, which is to say in the composition. That is an argument for treating aesthetic value in performance makeup as relational, and it is a point on which the descriptive literature, committed to a motif-and-meaning table, has little to say.

The restriction of the palette also has a platform explanation that should not be passed over. A face built from three high-contrast values survives compression, small screens, and the thumbnail; a subtler palette does not. Zhao and Abidin (2023) argue that platform affordances reshape the gestures that circulate through them rather than merely transmitting them, and the present case supports that claim from the side of production. What is at work is not the dilution of a traditional palette to suit a screen, however, but a coincidence: Javanese character makeup was already built on strong value contrast because it had to read from the back of a *pendhapa*, and the requirements of the platform and the requirements of the hall turn out to be, in this respect, the same requirement.

What the Painted Face Says: From Paribasan to Platform

The title of the song on which the challenge is built is a Javanese word for the tongue, and it is drawn from a *paribasan*, a traditional Javanese proverb holding that a person's worth resides in their speech. The proverb is old and circulates independently of the song; it belongs to the same body of instruction as *unggah-ungguh*, the graded code of deference that governs how a younger person addresses an elder. Its claim is that one cannot escape one's own words, and that dignity is therefore something spoken into being or spoken away. The track's English verses, by contrast, describe a relationship experienced as both blessing and curse, and a speaker hardened by a pain she did not seek. The song sets a contemporary account of a damaging relationship against a traditional maxim about speech, and it is this juxtaposition, rather than any single line, that the painted faces take up.

Nasution et al. (2022) read the work as an index of cultural loss, arguing that the millennial generation's abandonment of *unggah-ungguh* in both speech and dress is what the song diagnoses, and that social media accelerates the abandonment by removing the face-to-face conditions under which deference is learned. Setiyaningsih et al. (2020) locate the work's force in its mystical register, which they show shapes audience perception before any lyric is processed. Laksono and Wulandari (2022) establish the scale of violence against women in Indonesia that gives the song's subject matter its purchase. The four faces analysed here engage all three readings, but they subordinate them to a single proposition that none of the three states: that gentleness and violence are carried by the same face.

This is the finding that the sequence makes available and that a study of reception cannot reach. The second face does not replace the first; it is the first with blood added. Read through the sign categories Sahid (2019) develops for performance, the red functions indexically — it points to an injury that has occurred — while the retained feminine drawing functions symbolically, denoting a conventional femininity that the injury has not cancelled. The face thereby asserts that the woman who has been harmed and the woman who is admired are not two women. Where the song states the proverb and leaves the listener to apply it, the painted face performs the application, and it does so in a form that requires no Javanese to decode and no more than a few seconds to register.

The comparison with the video that established the format sharpens the point. Jharna Bhagwani presents two faces, contemporary and traditional, as alternatives: one gives way to the other, and the pleasure of the form lies in the completeness of the change. Didik Nini Thowok presents four, and the transformation is cumulative rather than substitutive, each face keeping most of what preceded it. The difference is a difference of training. A dancer who has spent a career building characters knows that a character is made by accretion and that an audience reads change against what persists. The challenge format, designed around the reveal, is being used here for something the format was not designed to do.

Performativity, Ideology, and the Strategic View

The third research question concerns self-expression, and it is here that the cross-gender position of the performer becomes analytically necessary rather than biographically incidental. Butler (1993) argues that the body is not a surface on which power inscribes itself after the fact but a materialisation produced through the reiteration of regulatory norms; gender, on this account, is an effect of repeated citation rather than the expression of an interior state. What the painted face offers is an unusually literal instance of that citation. The eyebrow drawn in the Javanese feminine arc is not an approximation of a woman's eyebrow; it is a citation of a convention for representing a woman's eyebrow, a convention that no actual eyebrow satisfies. Femininity is being produced here from the conventions of its representation, in front of the viewer, with a brush. Performativity understood in this way is also the work of regulated discourse, and is legible in Javanese ritual performance well beyond the theatre (Sathotho, 2023).

McNeal (1999) describes drag as structured by a double bind in which the performer is required to display an identity that the surrounding culture denies them the right to inhabit. Extended to the Indonesian material, and to cross-gender performance in the sense in which Indonesian usage employs the term, the double bind takes a particular form: the artist's femininity is legitimated precisely by being framed as art, and the frame that licenses the display is also the frame that contains it. Didik Nini Thowok's solution, visible across his career and condensed in this video, is what may be called a strategic view — a set of manoeuvres, operating at the level of both the art form and the artist, by which the cross-gender position is secured through the mastery of tradition. To paint a technically impeccable *wayang wong* female face is to make a claim that is difficult to refuse, because refusing it means disputing the tradition rather than the performer. Butler's language of fantasy as resistance describes the operation, but the Indonesian case adds a condition her account does not specify: the fantasy must be executed to professional standard for the resistance to hold.

Althusser (2014) locates ideology not in doctrine but in what subjects actually do — in practices, rituals, and commitments sustained over time. On this view the sustained performance of cross-gender roles across five decades is not the expression of an ideology held elsewhere but the ideology itself in its material existence. The four faces make the two levels visible simultaneously. Concretely, a male performer appears in a female character. Abstractly, the conditions under which such an appearance can be made are being tested and extended: the painted face declares what it is doing while the body beneath it declines to resolve into either term. The identity being expressed is not a female identity but a position held between categories, and the sequence of four faces is an argument that such a position can be occupied with technical authority.

This finding confirms, and then qualifies, the existing literature on the artist. Mrázek (2005) reads Didik Nini Thowok's masks as instruments of self-making and shows that the mask both conceals and constitutes. Sutrisno et al. (2025) make a parallel argument for batik, demonstrating that dress holds a cross-gender role in place for an instructor at a Yogyakarta dance centre. The painted face behaves differently from both, and the difference matters. A mask is put on and taken off, and its removal restores the wearer; batik is worn, and can be changed. Paint is applied to the skin, is bound to the musculature, and moves with expression; it neither conceals the performer nor leaves him as he was. Where the mask offers the cross-gender performer a boundary, the painted face offers none, and the identity it produces is correspondingly less separable from the person producing it. Theories of cross-gender performance built on the mask therefore require modification when applied to painted practice.

Face Painting under Platform Conditions

The final consideration is the setting. A performance uploaded to YouTube is public in a manner no *pendhapa* performance is: it is available without occasion, reproducible without permission, and open to responses its maker cannot see coming. The artist's use of the medium is nonetheless continuous with his use of any other. The staging is plain, the camera is static, the faces are held; there is no editing that a stage could not have supplied. Social media is web-based media through which users participate, share, and create content with little friction (Cahyono, 2016), and what it adds here is not technique but reach and repetition.

That repetition changes what the work can do. A face that can be rewatched can be studied, and a sequence that can be paused can be compared frame by frame in a way that a live transformation cannot. The compositional decision to build the second face by addition rather than by substitution is only fully legible to a viewer who can go back, and the artist, whether or not he formulated it in these terms, has made a work that rewards the behaviour the platform encourages. Zhao and Abidin (2023) show that a challenge format carries its politics in its affordances; the present case shows the converse, that a practitioner with sufficient command of a traditional idiom can turn those affordances to an argument the format did not anticipate.

It also follows that the circulation of face painting documented by the descriptive literature — the borrowing of Dayak visual idiom by a Javanese folk dance, in Yanti's (2019) example, or the long-standing painted practice of Papua described by Wenda and Sinaga (2025) — has acquired a new mechanism and a faster clock. Motifs have always travelled ahead of their meanings. What the Lathi Challenge demonstrates is that a platform can move a visual vocabulary across an archipelago in weeks, and that the question of what travels with it is now urgent in a way it was not when transmission depended on troupes and teachers. The four faces analysed here are an instance of a traditional repertoire being deployed knowingly under those conditions, by a practitioner who commands the repertoire completely and is therefore in a position to decide what of it to send.

CONCLUSION

Face painting in Didik Nini Thowok's Lathi Challenge is not an ornament applied to a performance but the performance itself. The four faces are constructed from a palette restricted to white, black, and red, and they proceed by accretion rather than by substitution: the second face is the first with blood added, the third dissolves the Javanese drawing into bilateral symmetry, and the fourth alters nothing on the skin but changes the face's cultural reference by changing the hair. Because meaning is generated by the differences between successive faces, the unit of signification in this work is the series and not the single painted surface. The proposition that the series advances is that gentleness and violence are carried by the same face, which is a claim about women, about speech and its consequences, and about the tradition of character makeup from which every element of these faces is drawn.

The study contributes to three fields. To the study of Indonesian face painting it offers an account in which the motif lexicon established by earlier descriptive work is shown to operate sequentially rather than singly once the medium permits repetition, which is a modification of how that lexicon should be read. To the study of cross-gender performance it argues that theories built on the mask do not transfer without alteration to painted practice, since paint binds to the musculature and offers the performer none of the boundary that a mask provides, and that the identity produced is correspondingly less detachable from the person producing it. To the study of digital performance it shows that a traditional practitioner may command platform affordances as compositional resources rather than submitting to them, and that the high-contrast palette which survives compression is the same palette that survived the distance to the back of a hall. For practitioners and for the institutions that teach character

makeup, the implication is that the conventions of the genre are portable to media for which they were not designed, and that their portability rests on technical command rather than on adaptation.

The limitations are those of a single case. One video by one artist cannot establish how cross-gender performers in general use painted faces online, and the analysis of a digital corpus, however carefully triangulated against practitioners' accounts, gives no access to the studio decisions that produced the faces or to the artist's own formulation of his intentions. Audience reception has been inferred from the public circulation of the format rather than investigated directly, and the readings offered here are the authors' and their informants', not the viewers'.

Three lines of further research follow directly. A comparative study of Lathi Challenge entries by trained performers and by beauty influencers would establish whether the accretive construction identified here is a mark of professional training or an individual signature. A reception study, working with viewers rather than with practitioners, would test whether the proposition the sequence advances is in fact received. And an extension of the analysis to painted practice in other Indonesian genres and other platforms would show whether the shift from the face to the series holds beyond this case, or whether it is particular to a format built on transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank Didik Nini Thowok for a body of work that has shaped the study of cross-gender performance in Indonesia, and the makeup artists, dancers, and practitioners of Javanese character makeup who gave their time and their expertise and who are identified in this article by role at their own request. Thanks are due to colleagues in the Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, for comments on an earlier draft, and to the anonymous reviewers of this journal, whose objections improved the analysis of the third and fourth faces in particular.

DECLARATIONS

Author contributions. L.B.S. — conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing (original draft). I G.M.B. — investigation, visualisation, validation, writing (review and editing). I W.S. — supervision, methodology, writing (review and editing). All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding. This research received no external funding.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest. The first author is acquainted with practitioners in the Yogyakarta dance milieu in which the artist discussed here works; this relationship is declared under positionality in the Method and had no bearing on the findings.

Ethical approval and informed consent. No institutional review board with jurisdiction over arts research operates at the authors' institution. Oral informed consent was obtained from all informants before interview, including consent to the use of role descriptors in place of names. Figures 1 to 4 are stills from a publicly published video, reproduced for criticism and review with attribution to the channel and the retrieval date.

Data availability. The screen captures, field notes, and interview transcripts underlying this article are held by the corresponding author and may be consulted on reasonable request. Interview recordings are not released, in order to protect the anonymity promised to informants. The video analysed is publicly available on the YouTube channel didikninithowok.

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