

Re-thinking Drag: From Night Clubs to White Cubes

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Abstract—A new generation of drag queens and drag performers has recently enjoyed unprecedented success. The aim of this paper is to show the connection between the concept of drag as a gender-blending art form and the contemporary art scene. This connection is highlighted by pointing out how the essential features of drag, such as body manipulation, the performative element, irony, and political engagement, recur as much in drag as in the stylistic choices shared by many artists.

An initial reflection on terminology and on aesthetic is followed by a short survey of art history from the early twentieth century to the contemporary, to explore how many artists have been taking inspiration from the world of drag queens to create works that deconstruct and reshape gender and sexuality.

Finally, it comes the present where we are witnesses of a shy opening of institutional spaces to drag queens, a more decisive and tangible example of the aesthetic and cultural implications of an avant-garde still in progress and yet to be defined.

Index Terms—Contemporary art, drag artist, gender studies, performance

I. INTRODUCTION

The boundaries of drag, as a form of entertainment, are blurring into a genuine avant-garde art forms. This paper attempts to make explicit the connection between drag culture and the art scene from the turn of the last century to contemporary times. An initial reflection on terminology in our post-modern context enriched with the new socio-sexual theories known as queer theories, is followed by the analysis of drag in the international collective imagination. The essence of contemporary drag, as well as its aesthetics derives from both the world of theatre, particularly Elizabethan theatre, and, moreover, it is strongly influenced by the recent influence of pop culture and underground nightlife. Despite a multitude of factors that must be taken into consideration it is possible to define drag's characteristic components: the theatrical structure, the question of identity, the use of body, gender, and its rendering through performance. These characteristics are then researched within artistic movements and the work of artists who have shaped art history to demonstrate the connection between the two worlds. From the early experiments of Marcel Duchamp and Claude Cahun, through the legacy of Andy Warhol's Factory, to body artists such as Vito Acconci, Jürgen Klauke and Urs Lüthi, to the *tableaux vivants* of Cindy Sherman and post-human philosophy, it is shown how many artists have chosen the manipulation of their own image to investigate an expanded concept of the self. Therein lies the heart of the research

methodology: although the literature on drag is scarce and often not "high", these characteristics could be identified by considering both academic studies and first-person testimonies. All the shades of doing drag were declined into those of doing art. Artistic transvestism, as well as drag, always emerges in a context where the notion of subjectivity is investigated, where identity is perceived as malleable, capable of construction and change, and where the coexistence of opposites seems to be our destiny.

Finally, the paper deals more decisively with the points of contact between drag and the art world which nowadays increasingly welcomes drag queens of all genres into its institutions. From inspiring muses to real artistic personalities today we are dealing with the so-called drag artists. They are professional drag queens who practice a form of drag that is integrated with poetics and artistic practices such as multimedia or, conversely, artists who choose to do drag as the medium of their art.

This expanded notion of drag identifies a significant direction in which contemporary drag is moving.

II. WHAT IS DRAG?

Far from being the simple act of wearing the clothing typical of the opposite sex, drag embodies many meanings. An initial consideration of its terminology immediately reveals that it would be almost impossible to provide an unequivocal definition of drag, especially in the post-modern context of the new socio-sexual theories known as queer theories. While some scholars insist on defining drag as a fundamentally theatrical category of work, others, on the contrary, encourage a view of it inescapably linked to the LGBTQ+ community. Indeed, the term drag seems to derive from the world of theater, where elements of cross-dressing were widespread cultural phenomena from Thespis in Athens onward. Over time, it has become a well-established legend that the origin of the word drag lies in Elizabethan theater. It is said that it was Shakespeare himself the first one to use the term: he would have written the acronym "DRAG" next to the names of young male actors who played female roles, meaning "dressed as a girl." A more suggestive etymological hypothesis also refers to the world of theater: in the late nineteenth century, male actors playing female roles had to wear flashy petticoats. When acting on stage, these petticoats were dragged dramatically across the floor: hence, probably, the use of the term in reference to dressing as a woman [1].

Nevertheless, contemporary drag derives not only from

Manuscript received May 29, 2023; revised June 12, 2023; accepted July 5, 2023.

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doi: 10.18178/ijssh.2023.13.6.1180

theater's stages, but part of its essence lies in the drag ball tradition of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These were fashionable parties modeled on the tradition of masquerade balls, and an increasingly obvious expression of a nascent gay community. As a true collective ritual, these events often involved beauty pageant and costume contests from which drag drew its traditional competitive component. It is precisely during these collective "rituals" that drag's closeness with the LGBTQ+ community is forged [2]. Moreover, this link reinforces a third etymological hypothesis: according to some authors, the origin of the term drag should be traced back to Polari, an English slang resulting from the union of Yiddish, Italian, Spanish and Occitan. It was a secret language used by homosexual people in the difficult years between the trial of Oscar Wilde and the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, years of criminalization of homosexuality in England. In this context, the term would have been used as a code word to avoid other more explicit references to one's sexuality. Although drag's closeness to the LGBTQ+ community is strong as some scholars highlight the role of gender transgression and homosexual sexual desire in the way many people approach drag [3], this practice does not necessarily presuppose homosexuality, nor does it constitute its exemplary paradigm for conceptualization.

In addition, to better define drag in the contemporary context, it is more than necessary to consider Judith Butler's powerful work on gender performativity. Firstly, Butler addresses the problem of the constitution of gender identities by questioning their *de facto* existence and defining them as a social and cultural construct. This leads to the elaboration of the concept of performativity. In other words, gender is not an innate essence that is part of the biological body, but a series of acts, a performance indeed, that designates a social construction imposed on us by normative heterosexuality. It is the iteration of these acts that defines the genre, and it is in these sequences that its performativity lies. In this effect, Butler suggests that drag plays a fundamental role in the deconstruction of gender, unmasking its imitative structure to which we are forced to conform, confronting bigotry and oppression [4].

In terms of contemporary drag aesthetics, the recent influence of pop culture and underground nightlife has been crucial in determining its characteristics. Drag is now a mainstream and unique phenomenon in which a wide range of aesthetic and performing aspects can be inscribed. In this regard, the talent show RuPaul's Drag Race provides us with an interesting, but controversial, pop overview of drag culture. The power of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in any discussion of drag is undeniable. Thanks to RuPaul Charles and his TV series the popularity of drag has grown rapidly [5]; season after season, drag queens are competing for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar, thus indelibly fixing their style in the international collective imagination. In the first place we find *fish queens*, certainly the most beloved drag performers among the heterosexual audience. They take care of every detail of their drag to perfection, wearing fashionable outfits and convincing makeup to deliver ultra-feminine bodies back to the public. Fish queens are followed by other glamorous drag with a unique and different styles: pageant, fishy, camp, comedy, etc. In fact, the marriage of drag queens and glamour has long years of history: from the Victorian age

with the first superstar in drag Julia Eltinge, to the 1950s, filled with a Hollywood inspired aesthetic, to recent years, with the explosion in popularity of supermodels and the catwalk world. Although glamour is a key feature not all drag queens choose to follow the dictates of fashion. Particularly, between the eighties and nineties, queer artists such as Michael Alig, James St James, Leigh Bowery, took drag to a new level, away from the usual presentation of imitable or ideal femaleness. A monstrous and grotesque aesthetic was sought, with aliens and chimeras that populate the new drag world. Leigh Bowery, in this sense, was one of the most controversial and avant-garde figures in the fashion and queer nightclub society of those years, capable of pushing drag beyond traditional boundaries. His performances and his unique creations, in open battle with conservatism and the rigid division between male and female, were of great inspiration to many subsequent big names. As a result, drag is nowadays embracing change and expanding into new practices to challenge all forms of classification. Some current trends in cutting-edge drag such as the pioneering Tranimal style, a more artistic form of drag with a dadaist and punk-rock style, attempt to undermine gender positions even more radically. Tranimalism can be considered an actual artistic movement founded in 2008 by photographer Austin Young, along with friends and colleagues Squeaky Blonde and Fade-Dra Phey, two figures in the Los Angeles gay, art, and music scene. Tranimal queens strongly reject the expectations of mainstream drag and shift their focus away from any sort of conventions. As Austing Young states:

It's how we feel in the moment. It's always a risk. We are open to the cosmic possibilities, to unknown chaos and beauty. What makes the project is a desire to create. We are artists and we live to make art, and Tranimal is chaotic freedom of expression. Tranimal an adjective that describes an energy of the people who are there and the way we come together [6].

In the immediacy and the use of simple materials, Tranimal's aesthetic can force a reconsideration of drag performance as gender subversion; such rapidity in fact indicates an implicated critique of the way and ease in which society judge subjects.

Hence another characteristic ingredient underlying the essence of contemporary drag which is a powerful political component. Drag's real-life impact on people's thinking conveys political messages about the boundaries of gender and sexuality. It all began toward the end of the tumultuous sixties, with the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City where a group of drag queens mourning icon Judy Garland formed the avant-guard of the uprising that began the gay liberation movement. After Stonewall, the aesthetics of the drag queen would also undergo enormous changes: wearing clothes of the opposite sex became a revolutionary act and drag queens became warriors, a quasi-militant figure with a somewhat hostile appearance. Thus, effeminate mannerisms with seductive dresses and precious jewelry were abandoned to embrace a new political meaning, which, somehow, masculinized this subculture to make it a weapon against homophobia. [7] Apparently this motif returns with the late eighties and the accelerating spread of AIDS. The epidemic had a major impact on the LGBTQ+ community and the drag

world in Western countries due to the lack of medical and social attention to this disease, along with the fear and prejudice that resulted. The result is several currently active “radical” drag groups such as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, the San Francisco Croquettes, and the Radical Faeries, which have always maintained a high profile in terms of political engagement [8].

III. DRAG AND ART HISTORY

Despite a multitude of constantly evolving styles, the direct consequence of each drag queen's personal interpretation of drag, it is possible to identify some characteristic components of drag. All drag has at the core of its structure a theatrical style; this characteristic also refers to the re-invention of one's identity through the choice of an art name. A third aspect concerns gender and its embodiment through performance. Indeed, through the exaggeration of femininity or masculinity, an implicit deconstruction of the rigid social archetypes of gender and sexuality takes place. Thus, the performative element is combined with a strong ironic and political force, which fight against all claims of heteronormativity. Since the early twentieth century, the essential characteristics of drag can be surveyed in the work of artists as well as art movements that have made art history. Although they might not be considered as drag in their fullest sense, many artists have historically chosen elements of cross-dressing, artistic disguise, and performance practices to investigate an expanded concept of self.

In 1919, Marcel Duchamp made the famous dadaist gesture of manipulating a postcard of Leonardo's Mona Lisa by drawing a beard and mustache. The five initials of the irreverent title *In L.H.O.O.Q.* give rise to the phrase “*Elle a chau(d) au cu(l)*,” ironically playing on the androgyny of the female effigy and the mystery of her identity, in whose face could perhaps be concealed a portrait of Leonardo himself. A year after this event, the artist debuted with a true drag alter ego, the famous and mysterious Rose Sélavy [Fig. 1]. In the photographic portraits of Rose the subversion of genders is game, an interpretive back-and-forth, an uninterrupted circuit of identifications that also applies to the parodic gender inversion of the bearded Mona Lisa.

Identity and photography are closer than ever in the works of Claude Cahun: Lucy Schwob (1894-1954), aka Claude Cahun, driven by her own specific sexual identity rather than parodic temperament, choose cross-dressing to implement a visual experimentation that characterizes her artistic expression. Cahun makes large photographic *tableaux* with complete expressive freedom, where she is deeply committed to exploring issues of identity: she often appears in male clothing and with short hair. The artist uses the photographic medium not only as a site of the realization of her rebellious identity, but also to reflect and explore within herself [9].

Later, in the wake of the innovations created by the first avant-gardes, by the futurist theater, and dadaist evenings, the new artistic movement of Body Art revives the use of the body, of which Marcel Duchamp was a forerunner, to stimulate art to go in new directions. At the same time, drag becomes the interpreter and protagonist of the new cultural ferment by embracing new iconographic models, now far from the male and female ones promoted by the film industry

during the fifties. The artistic scene of the seventies offers us a vast body of work where Body Art converges in the representation of gender and its parody, according to the provocative will of breaking with dominant models and free self-expression. Thus, body artists become subjects of themselves, in search of an unrequited love; the primary love of which Lea Vergine speaks, a greed for love that similarly surrounds both the intended use of the body in drag, and the rhetoric of inclusion and acceptance of drag's culture. Marlon Riggs [10] suggests that drag queens personify the desire everyone has for love and recognition, seeing in these queens a very visceral desire to be loved, a desire that leads them to the creation of a doubled and transfigured self, the same desire that Lea Vergine acknowledges is at the root of Body Art's actions [11]. Just as body artists realize an expressiveness long denied, drag queens' joy of expression unlock productive forces of the unconscious hitherto withheld.

Body artists such as Jürgen Klauke and Urs Lüthi provide us with renowned example of ostentation of gender indeterminacy by provoking questions about visual pleasure. The works of Klauke and Lüthi problematize gender binarism with equal passion, wanting to seduce and draw the viewer into identifying (or desiring) the portrayed figures. With these two artists, the dichotomy between body and identity is emphasized; theirs is a truly liberating art, exploring polymorphous sexual identities in front of the camera.

Other contemporary artists have referred to the aesthetic heritage of cross-dressing by focusing their attention on the value of bodily manipulation and the masks. Indeed, the use of costuming represents one of the possible expressive variants of the contemporary artist through which offering interesting interpretations of otherwise inaccessible and incomprehensible aspects of reality. Referring to reflections on the performativity of life (from Pirandello to Judith Butler) and how each of us plays a part and wears a mask, it could be said that through masks reality elaborates its own language that leads to truth. Paradoxically, the mask does not conceal but presents the ambiguity of the self. [12] The mask motif is central to the production of artist Cindy Sherman, as well as that of Yamusama Morimura, who create incredible *tableaux vivants*. These artists transform themselves into an extraordinary cast of characters echoing the same experiments in identity as Marcel Duchamp, Claude Cahun and Urs Lüthi.

Bodily themes then return during the nineties. The profound socio-cultural, economic, political, and especially technological transformations of postmodern society have caused an irreversible crisis of the naturalistic approach underlying the rigid opposition between the sexes and gender identities and, as a result, a radical rethinking of the subject. The body is no longer a concrete form of an obsolete biological destiny but becomes the domain of transformations, alterations, and reconstructions. The result is a profound change in our consciousness and individuality. The foundations of the self are mined especially by computer technologies and by the constant reflection on alterity. This context gives rise to post-human philosophy, or rather, the post-human condition populated by hybrids and multiple identities. There are several aspects related to the drag world; especially regarding the avant-garde drag of recent years, far

from a hyperfeminine aesthetic and equally populated by monsters and chimeras, hybrids aesthetically very close to post-human ones. The post-human body, moreover, is investigated through various media, including video art, digital performance, and theater with a renewed arrangement of visual enjoyment that comes to embrace diverse experiences. Even contemporary drag performances often include multimedia aspects, such as elaborate audio and video compositions, in which the body dialogues with media, where biological and technological interface in a flow in which a strong queer essence remains. Since the nineties, South African artist Steven Cohen has been challenging the rules and spaces of art as well as the categories and stereotypes of our society. As a performer, choreographer, and visual artist, Cohen, through the staging of his own body, investigates his own identity as a gay, Jewish, white, and South African man while surveying the entire human race. The main characteristic of his artistic persona is indeed the disguise where sophisticated makeup and eccentric costumes trigger a metamorphosis that transforms Cohen into incredible, ethereal, and colorful creatures. His are true chimeras, hybrid beings whose identity is uncertain, multiple, and fluid.



Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp, *Rose Selavy*, 1921 [foto by Man Ray].

IV. DRAG MAKES GOOD ART

The connection points between drag and the art world seems to be multiple. From the early twentieth century to present days, many famous artists have drawn inspiration from the world of drag queens by choosing them as the subject of their works. Alongside fetishistic images of women conceived as sculptural objects with fake male attributes, Man Ray's works of the late 1920s include stunning portraits of the female impersonator Vander Clyde aka Barquette. Barquette became famous in Parisian theaters as a trapeze artist and acrobat with performances that challenged the traditional ideal of masculinity already tested by the aftermath of World

War I. Barquette's performances so impressed surrealist author Jean Cocteau that he commissioned Man Ray a series of portraits of her [Fig. 2]. Some of the earliest images of drag queens also include those Brassai shot in the nocturne and intriguing Paris of the 1930s. But the one who most surrendered to the glamour of the drag queen world was Andy Warhol. Not only the artists pose for several photographic portrait in drag but drag queens themselves are often protagonists of his works treated on a par with other photographic and film divas. Emblematic in this regard, alongside Warhol's drag movies such as *The Chealse Girls* (1966) and the Paul Morrissey-directed trilogy of *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970) and *Heat* (1972), is the 1974 series *Ladies and Gentleman*. The series was commissioned in 1974 by Italian art dealer Luciano Anselmino for whom the artist made a body of silkscreens on canvas based on photographic portraits chosen from over 500 Polaroids taken of 14 different drag queens and transvestites. The surface is fragmented by stripes and large, luminous portions of color that the artist paints on both the figure and the background, creating collage-like effects along with drawn strokes that recall a drawing style similar to Matisse's and that would be present in most of his prints from this time on. One canvas is reserved for Marsha P. Johnson [fig. 3], the protagonist of the Stonewall riots and undoubtedly the most famous subject in the series. At other moments in history, prominent artists have documented the practice of drag: alongside the aforementioned identity experiments of Andy Warhol, a place of honor over the years belongs to photographer Nan Goldin who immortalized drag queens in her hometown of Boston and the drag community in New York City. Nan Goldin's work as well as that of Brassai before her, is typically characterized by a component of voyeurism, in which drag queens and transsexuals are part of an attempt to document the unusual, the never-before-seen, presented to the viewer without shame. What distinguishes Goldin's photographs from previous images is his relationship with his subjects: these are deeply intimate images, the result of time spent with her subjects that are made public. Just as in a family album, her shots document her life together with that of his subjects in a shared quotidian.

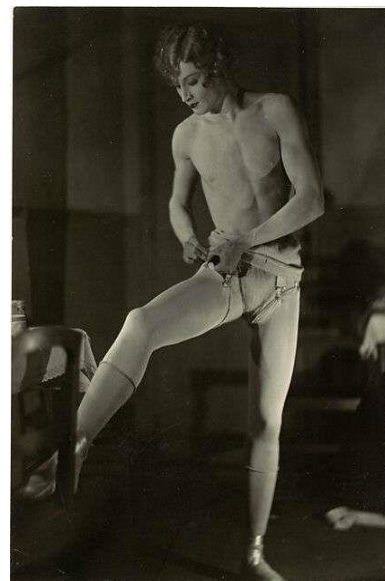


Fig. 2 Man Ray, *Barquette Dressing*, 1926 | <<https://www.metmuseum.org>>. [foto by Man Ray].

But it is not just a matter of muses; drag has also taken an active role and is now a protagonist in opening institutional spaces reserved to art. The aspects of this phenomenon are multiple and often experimental. Some aspects related to drag practice such as cross-dressing and disguise become the focus of some art exhibitions such the one organized by Jean-Christoph Ammann at the Kunstmuseum Lucerne in 1974, *Transformer: aspekte der travestie*, an early example of a review of artists who have touched the field of intersex body language and transvestitism. The curator groups together what he called “ambivalent images” wanting to present cross-dressing as a new form of creative art. The transvestite is thus the object and subject of this exhibition as well as the figure of the transvestite. When in art they lived experience coincides with the creative gesture, the behavior of the transvestite, linked to his bodily expressions, is thus to be counted as artistic in the [13] Years later, in 1995, the relationship between gender identity and photography is investigated by Jennifer Blessing in the exhibition *Rose is a Rose, gender performance in photography*. Committed to an intellectual mission, she wanted to introduce to a wide audience the power of photographs dealing with gender expression. The exhibition project was conceived in the context of the contemporary growth of popularity in the queer world, wanting on the one hand to trace its origins through a historical excursus of the early avant-garde up to the late nineties, and on the other hand, to pursue a reflection on gender as a social construction and performance [14].



Fig. 3. Andy Warhol, *Ladies and Gentlemen (Marsha P. Johnson)*, 1975 | © 2020 the andy warhol foundation for the visual arts.

A second aspect concerns so-called queer art, or rather the critical legacy of queer studies in the visual arts and contemporary art practice. Drag is in fact closely related to the history of the queer subculture, a strand that, in the artistic sphere, has indeed proved to be very incisive. The spread of the transgender body in contemporary visual culture, for example, can be seen as a symptom of the new contemporary identity condition. Transgender identity has become synonymous with postmodernism and has entered deeply into the mechanisms of the art world in close contact with its largest institutions. Alongside it, more and more images are also appearing that break down the established categories of

gender and race in an alternative and close-to-drag way: this is the case of the so-called freaks of Renate Lorenz's “Freaks Theory”, a figure capable of representing a wide variety of social and fictional bodies without producing a category or identity [15]. In any case, when we talk about queer art, we are referring to LGBTQ+ artists and their thematically themed works on which today, with a renewed attitude of interest, the spotlight is being aimed.

From nightclubs to white cubes, even the more traditional idea of drag is being embraced in galleries, museums and international fairs. In 2015 Lady Bunny is at MoMA PS1 in *Charles Atlas' Here She Is... v1*. The video, titled *Greater New York*, features the famous New York drag queen in an increasingly close-up during a lip sync that turns into a stream-of-consciousness monologue on a range of burning political issues. In 2017, also in New York, the New Art Dealers Alliance's (NADA) program similarly focused on more common ideas of drag with the *NADA x PAOM: Contemporary Drag pro-jet*. This is a series of talks, video screenings, and performances over several days curated by Sam Gordon and Jacob Robichaux of the Gordon Robichauxin Gallery, in line with NADA's goals to promote new voices in contemporary art. The collection features work by Lady Bunny, Linda Simpson, Patti Spliff, Sasha Velour and Taboo! among others, all personalities committed to drag as a radical form of art, theater, and politics. Among the works on display, New York photographer Lucas Michael's Polaroids, loosely inspired by Andy Warhol's *Ladies and Gentlemen* series of portraits, are portraits of drag artists and performers, among whom Lady Bunny again appears. The review could continue again with the 2017 Whitney Biennial, overseen by Christopher Y. Lew of the Whitney and curator Mia Locks, which challenges the unbridled individualism of our reality through a larger community like Drag Race, and the Venice Biennale of the same year, *Viva Arte Viva*, where Charles Atlas and Lady Bunny return with the massive multimedia installation *Tyranny of Consciousness*. In its 58th edition, the 2019 Venice Biennale featured Victoria Sin, a Canadian drag queen and artist, performing a lip-sync monologue, the heart of drag performance focused on the symbolic power of language. *May You Live in Interesting Times*, curated by Ralph Rugoff included a program of performances on the opening and closing days of the Exhibition to highlight the art that exists between conventionally accepted categories and genres. Central to this focus on performance was Victoria Sin's action piece, accompanied by a transverse flute, featured lip-sync drag performance of her own recorded voice. The monologue focused on the symbolic power of language and of naming as an act of domination over the other: an act that limits, creates boundaries, categories, binary systems and even nationalisms [Fig. 4]. In recent years, the artist's work has been leading in London's queer club culture where she performs, and at the same time, she has appeared in extremely interesting collective exhibitions in Taipei, London, Paris, and New York, in a performance at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as part of the Asian Art Circle Presents 2022 program, as well as during the mentioned Venice Biennale and at Art Basel in Hong Kong. Victoria Sin, now Sin Wai Kin, is also represented by Chi-Wen Gallery in Taipei and Soft Opening in London.

The intersections between art and drag are thus many, especially when it comes to radical forms of drag, an avant-garde that is yet to be defined. It is interesting to wonder what the evolutions of will be drag as a medium of artistic expression in this sense, once it is brought out of its traditional contexts and into art world contact as is happening these years. Constituting more decisive and tangible examples of the possible evolutions of drag are the so-called drag artists, each with a particular history within the drag world and within the art world.



Fig. 4. Victoria sin at the 58th venice biennale of Art, 2019.

V. DRAG ARTISTS

Today, the rules of drag have changed: a new generation of creative souls, driven by developments in technology and media, are rewriting the definition of this practice. Just as many of the artists we have considered have embodied the evolution of the contemporary self, drag artists, with the growth of individual freedom and expression, have also developed this concept. Between the eighties and nineties, early forms of "artistic" drag gave its impulses free rein by bringing their creativity to a broader cultural landscape. These were the years when the New York club The Gilded Grape became a meeting point for influential figures such as Warhol, fashion and music personalities, and famous drag queens; these were the years of BodyMap and John Galliano, of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, of Susanne Bartsch and trans artist Greer Lankton. These were the years of Leigh Bowery, a queer artist who have taken drag makeup and costumes to a new level with his unique creations so far removed from the classic meaning of glamour. In the wake of this creative revolution drag and art are more and more often coming together in the personalities of so-called drag artists. When talking about drag artists it is necessary to make a distinction: personalities like Sasha Velour, for example, now practice a form of drag that, although it draws its roots from the spaces of queer nightlife, expands its boundaries with multimedia practices and the integration of artistic poetics. When this happens it often involves professional drag queens with academic and/or artistic training behind them, fully aware of the expressive possibilities of drag. Sasha Velour was born in Berkeley, California. After studying college literature and queer theory, Velour moved to Russia to research LGBTQ+ political protest art and then, upon her return to the United States, undertook a Master of Fine Arts in Cartoon Studies. Always attracted to the art of cross-

dressing, once she began experimenting with drag, Velour pursued her own idea of art and politics. Velour's artistic training continues to inspire her iconic looks as well as her performances: through projection mapping, the artist blends live performances with pre-recorded videos appearing surrounded by many selves that become her dance troupe, her magician's assistant, or her own worst enemy in a dramatic aura of illusion and magic [16]. Sasha is like a living, breathing art installation, constantly pushing the boundaries of drag.

In parallel it happens that current trends, make drag "appealing" for contemporary artists interested in exploring atypical presentations of gender and sexuality, performance, and subcultural art forms.

We are in exciting times through the renaissance of drag. Drag must not lose sight of its queer roots; it must remain in flux. The point of this flux is that it is wholly queer, ephemeral, multiple, creative, and unbound [6].

And it is precisely this queer essence that many artists are exploring: many artists choose to do drag as the medium of their art because of its playful charge and unique multifaceted nature that allows continuous experimentation and gives free rein to individual freedom. These artists connect the unconventional presentations of gender and sexuality and body manipulations typical of drag with avant-garde art poetics that problematize the binary systems of gender and race and promote inquiry into the expanded concept of self. It is the case with Narcissister, a Brooklyn-based artist and performer whose work focuses on post-colonial and gender issues through the intersection of contemporary dance, visual art, and activism by sporting looks created from a homemade assemblage of everyday objects in what is a typical DIY drag feature, masks made from parts of commercial mannequins and vintage wigs often afros [17]. In live performance, through dressing up and its inverse, Narcissister has moved from character to character, taking on roles such as Marie Antoinette, Josephine Baker, Whitney Houston, in humor-laden actions that call attention to the mutability of identity. In her 2010 performance *The Russian Doll* her characteristic character with her typical mask and merkin on, emerges from a kind of sarcophagus-matrioska, moves in dance steps and at the climax of the scene lifts her skirt and "gives birth" to a smaller matryoshka. Like a real Russian doll, the artist conceals a smaller figurine inside, which is then reinserted into the vagina. The performance ends with the re-entry of Narcissister inside the mother matryoshka. This performance constitutes an important reference for Sahsa Velour's Matryoshka [Fig. 5]: made in 2021 for Murray & Peter's live Christmas show, Sasha's performance also contains an obvious personal component given the artist's Russian origins. Sasha wore a famous Russian doll costume, and through her characteristic practice of blending live performances with pre-recorded videos she removes the various layers of the costume to the notes of Release Me by Agnes. The performance is meant to symbolize the power of birth by celebrating femininity and interconnecting women of various generations to the point that the smallest matryoshka is pulled out of the costume from the genital area.

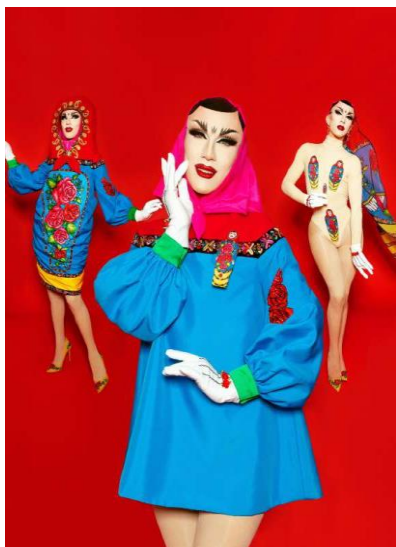


Fig. 5. Sasha Velour, *Matryoskha*, 2021.

VI. CONCLUSION

Inspired by the significant direction which contemporary drag is currently taking, this research aimed to address a rethinking of it by analyzing this creative form under the lens of art history. Thanks to the contributions of a new generation of drag artists, drag is today the protagonist of a true creative revolution. Brought out of its traditional contexts and into contact with the art world, and its establishments, contemporary drag works alongside related artistic poetics.

While many celebrated artists have drawn inspiration from the world of drag queens, choosing them as their inspirational muses, over time drag has been able to take an active role in becoming the protagonist of an opening of institutional spaces, both in its experimental and traditional forms. Furthermore, contemporary drag sees its influence grow as a medium of artistic expression and creativity; to the point that drag and art stop moving in parallel to coexist in the personalities of so-called drag artists. These artists link the unconventional presentations of gender and sexuality and body manipulations typical of drag with avant-garde artistic poetics that problematize the binary systems of gender and race and promote inquiry into the expanded concept of self. Although drag continues to have its roots in popular culture, when its queer essence turns to “high” culture, the result is an

extraordinary hybrid that is both entertaining and useful in defining diverse human identities in our multicultural and fluid reality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge and thank all those who played a role in the success of this research. Notably, I am deeply grateful to Dr. Cristina Baldacci (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) for her invaluable expertise and support.

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