

## Why Drag?

Observations and Notes on Drag & Drag Performance  
during a Time of Drag Popularity

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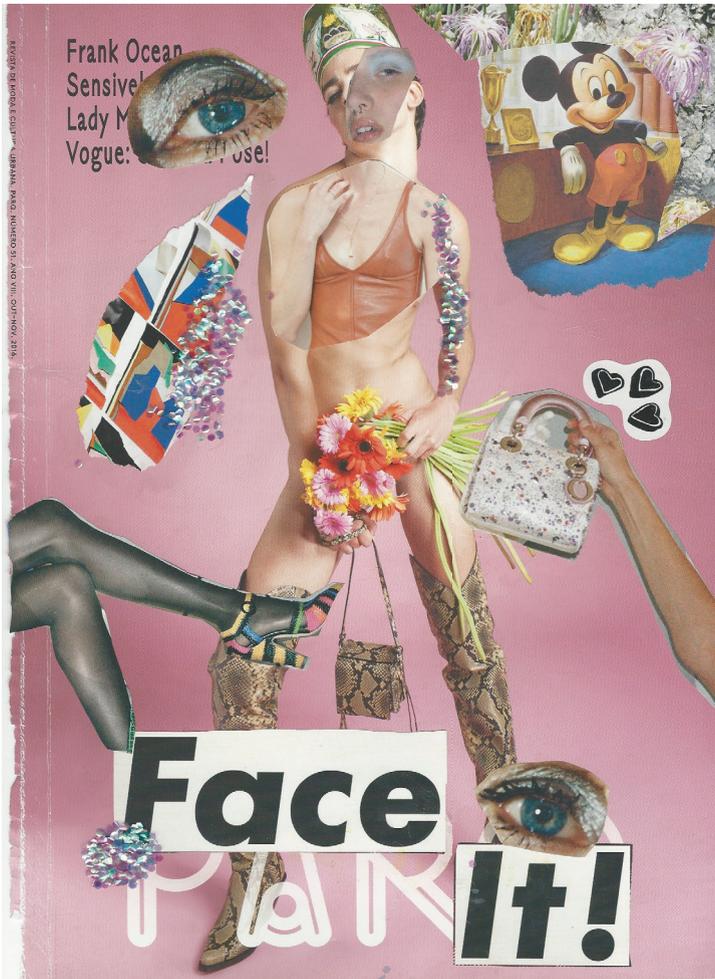


Fig. 1. *Face it*  
Collage by Simon Baetens

## 1. What is drag?

Drag can be used as an adjective or a noun. As a noun it means the clothing of one sex when worn by the other sex (a suit and tie worn by a woman also constitutes drag). The ability to "do drag" is widespread in the gay world, and many of the larger social events include or focus on drag ("drag balls," "costume parties," etc.)<sup>1</sup>

(Esther Newton - *Mother Camp: female impersonators in America*, 1972)

The tradition of drag performance is not a recent phenomenon. With records of cross-dressing in Elizabethan theatre, folk traditions and opera, it has a rich, yet rather sparsely documented, history. Recently, drag has made a remarkable mainstream resurgence. Social media such as Instagram, YouTube & Tumblr (to name but a few) as well as television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Dragula* give the art of drag a platform widespread visibility. Drag representation in popular culture is increasingly driven *by* drag performers, resulting in a more accurate and varied representation of drag in the media.

Before this, drag was mostly something straight cis male characters engaged in for amusement (with the execution of make-up and clothing often being intentionally trashy rather than polished) and when real drag performers were actually cast, it was mostly as a prop or extra. There is, however, also an impressive amount of underground cultural activity that has been far more successful at including drag in ways that do justice to the art form. Now that drag is more easily accessible and that more interesting forms of drag have gained visibility in mainstream media, a rapidly increasing number of people enjoy the entertainment drag provides. This has resulted in a vast business including drag merchandise and worldwide tours starring fans' favourites from *Drag Race*.

Drag is also a hot topic in both the beauty and fashion industries, with numerous endorsements and collaborations between famous drag queens and big brands currently being forged. Countless make-up artists, so-called 'gurus' when they have a large following, have delved into drag-inspired make-up looks and a number of drag performers have extended their platform through online content.

## 2. Why drag?

The effects of drag's increasing popularity are not strictly commercial, however. By introducing the age-old tradition of drag to a new, younger audience, more

and more people have become interested in getting into drag themselves. What often starts as a Halloween costume, quickly evolves into a very expensive and time-consuming hobby. Drag has a way of taking over: first your house, then your life. What was once a *niche* activity and something to be ashamed of (and which, depending on the milieu, often still is), has almost become a high-brow, hipster activity, a lifestyle even. Rather, it presents itself as a lifestyle. Drag performers who are financially dependent on drag alone often spend more than they earn, thereby sometimes marginalizing themselves in the process. Even queens who are able to make a decent living from drag (notably the ones who have been on 'Drag Race'), invest large amounts of their income back into their drag activities in order to keep developing something new.

If not for financial gain, why would someone choose to do drag? Most people who dabble in drag describe how this hyper-real art form helps them discover and express parts of their identity that had previously remained uncharted territory. *Liberation* is a word that is often used to describe the feeling people experience when they are in drag. Incidentally, it is not just gay cis men who do drag. The trans community and drag community have been closely intertwined from the beginning and despite some people believing that doing drag as a trans person is 'cheating', numerous trans drag performers exist.

The art of drag is closely connected to gender identity: many people start to question the gender they were assigned once they start blurring conventions of wardrobe, hair and make-up. Cis women do drag too. They are sometimes called *hyperqueens* or *bioqueens*, though the latter is deemed insensitive because it assumes that gender is a biological, irrefutable fact. In general, drag celebrates *genderfuck* attitudes: pointing out that gender expression is constructed precisely by *deconstructing* it through subversion and exaggeration.



Fig. 2. *Becoming Electra, Nightshift*  
Vooruit Ghent, September 2019.  
Picture by Leontien Allemeersch



Fig. 3. Pre-show *Electra* with Susan from Grindr,  
*Urban Art Festival Bruges*, April 2019.  
Picture by Louis Kerckhof

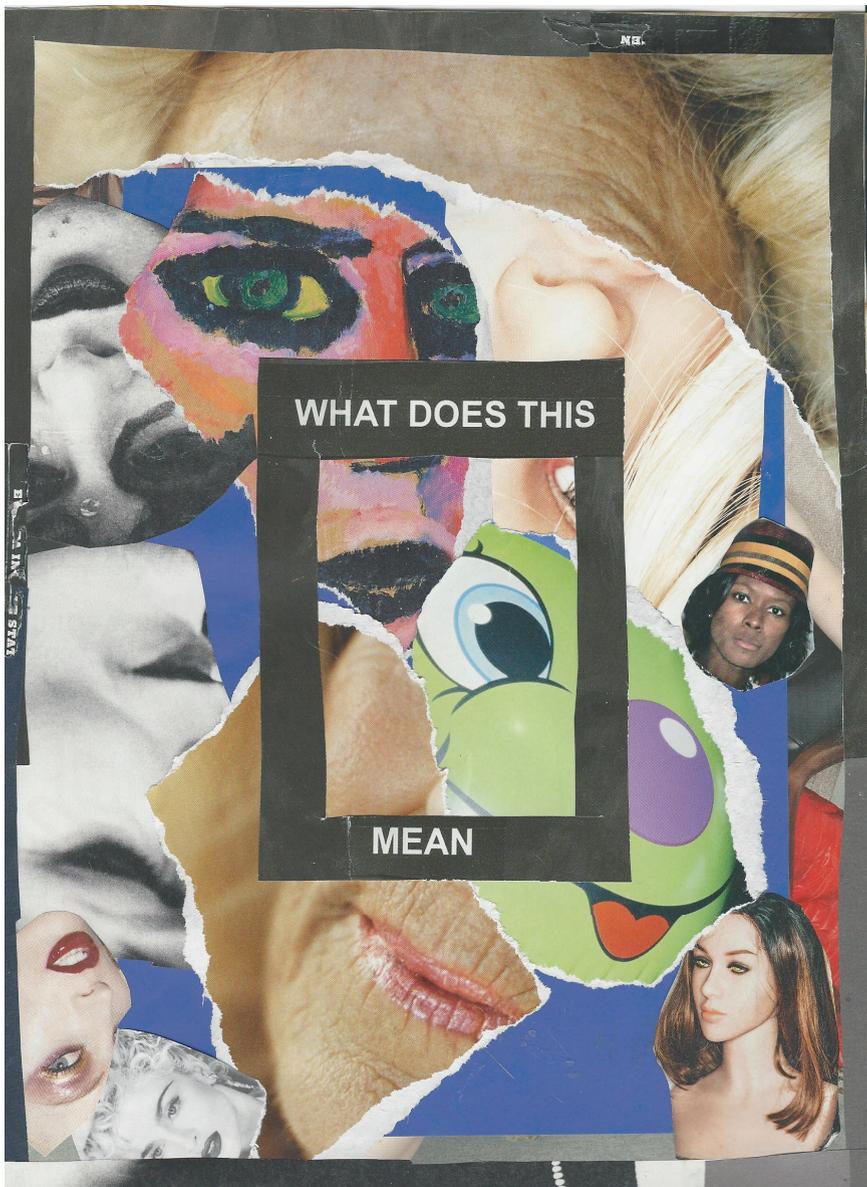


Fig. 4. *What does this mean*  
Collage by Simon Baetens

### 3. What does it mean for a body to be *in drag*?

Drag is an art form that uses the human body to question the conventions that are traditionally linked to it. Originally, it was a tool for exclusion, (e.g. in both the Greek and Elizabethan theatre, men would dress up as women to play female roles since women were not allowed on stage). The term 'drag' is believed to find its origin in Shakespeare's time: male actors had to get accustomed to *dragging* their long cross-dressing garb which led to the coining of the expression being 'in drag'. Drag has, in many ways, emancipated itself since then and today it aims to turn even the most marginalized body into a body with agency. Agency to disguise, to transform, entertain and to claim a (political) voice. Although it is agency that is self-proclaimed, it is nonetheless one with history and tradition.<sup>2</sup>

A body in drag is always a mediated body. There is no original, there is only construct. This construct cannot exist outside reference. Drag is always a citation, whether it is a conscious choice made by the drag performer or not. Drag is not outside convention, rather it exists *through* convention. By enlarging, questioning, celebrating, ridiculing, idolizing, embodying and *performing* convention, drag proves the impossibility of being outside of it. Without convention there would be no drag, no need for drag and, arguably, convention would not be what it is without drag either. It is in the dialogue between what is 'conventional' and what is 'being dragged' where the performance is located. Drag is therefore always *out of place*; subversion and drag go hand-in-hand.

Without subversion, drag is merely self-referential and therefore renders itself uninteresting as far as gender performativity goes. When there is nothing to *drag*, drag seems to lose its point. This is, of course, a very subjective notion, depending on factors such as the drag performer's personal stories, the political climate in which the *dragging* takes place, what kind of history the performer describes themselves as etc. There is a certain point where drag becomes flat: when only entertainment remains, when being 'passable' as someone of the opposite gender, rather than transcending any kind of gender binary altogether, becomes the goal. This is what I would call *travesty* rather than *drag*<sup>3</sup>

Essentially; travesty is drag without medium reflexivity from *within* the drag manifestation itself. Travesty does, however, represent a rich history of drag and often makes the existence of more experimental drag possible by providing a scene to perform in and a tradition to relate to or rebel against. In addition to this, travesty performers who have been active for years have often faced much

more reactionary political climates than the one young performers live in now. I want to emphasize that the distinction I make here between travesty and drag (with drag pointing to a more recent, fresh form of travesty) relates mainly to aesthetic and performative aspects of the genre and does not automatically render the one more valuable than the other. There are many interesting correlations as well as oppositions between the two. In Belgium, for example, it is noticeable that travesty generally reaches an older, cis/straight audience while drag manifests itself in a more underground setting, with a largely queer, younger audience as result. While the difference between travesty and drag is not the main focus of this article, as well as very much being a construct made by me, it is important to shed some light on it while aiming to describe a history of drag and the current state of drag performance. The introduction of this distinction is my own proposition therefore.

#### **4. Drag in and versus popular culture**

Pop culture is at the core of drag and drag is, especially in recent years (at least visibly so), at the core of pop culture. Drag is the height of iconoclasm, taking whatever is available and endlessly re-mixing it. The speed at which some drag artists respond to online trends or memes, for example, is astounding; in fact, drag could be the non-virtual art form most suited to keeping up with the status of the image in this post-internet era. Interestingly enough, at the same time drag *resists* digitalization. Even though social media and digital photo editing are highly lucrative for drag artists and certain aspects of drag thus become increasingly virtual, a YouTube video cannot quite replace nor replicate the atmosphere of a drag show performed on a stage the size of a milk crate in some insalubrious bar.

An almost shamanic ritual takes place when a drag queen or king, and everything beyond and in between, embodies a piece of music, exists in between the performer and their (live) audience, between inspiration and interpretation, between reality and fiction. The performer is simultaneously the medium and the source, the reference and the referent, creating the cited material anew in the moment of making it performative. It is no longer possible to differentiate the live performance from the body of references it cites; the two become intricately intertwined at a moment in time that is both singular and hyper-associative for it is undeniably *live* yet could not be live without its links to prior and contemporary events and artworks. Last but not least, this crossbreed-hybrid of

popular culture often becomes popular culture itself, making the entanglement even more complex and idiosyncratic.

Even if an image or object is able to be traced back to a source, the substance (substance in the sense of both its materiality and its importance) of the source object can no longer be regarded as inherently greater than any of its copies. When I take a moving image and represent it through an object (video rendered sculpturally in styrofoam for example), I am positing an alternative method of representation without ever supplying a way to view the source. A source video exists. The idea of a source video exists. But the way the object is instantiated denies both the necessity of an original and adherence to the representational norms that follow the creation of “video” as both technical device and terminology.<sup>4</sup>

Artie Vierkant - *The Image Object Post Internet* (2010)

### 5. Meta-drag

To illustrate my point about the complex citational character of modern-day drag, I would like to introduce the term *meta-drag*. Meta-drag occurs when one drag performer imitates or alludes to another. One of the most popular episodes of every season of Drag Race, for example, is the ‘Snatch Game’. Modelled after the ‘Match Game’<sup>5</sup>, the competing drag queens dress up as a celebrity and have to answer questions as the character they are portraying in a comedic way. Increasingly, the queens choose other queens that have or have not been on the show before them as their ‘Snatch Game’ character. The fact that an audience ‘gets’ such references, proves drag’s place in media today. One could argue that drag is now *being dragged*, but iteration is inevitable. It is in this iteration that the potential for exciting meta-drag lies. *Drag culture* is a growing subdivision of popular culture and the borders between the two are not always clear or even existing. Drag is everywhere nowadays, and the drag queen is rapidly becoming a trope or archetype in online, BuzzFeed-style content.



Fig. 5. All members of *House of Lux*,  
*Urban Art Festival Bruges*, April 2019.  
Picture by Louis Kerckhof



Fig. 6. *Electra* at *Nightshift*, Vooruit Ghent,  
September 2019.  
Picture by Leontien Allemeersch



Fig. 7. *Drag becomes her*  
Collage by Simon Baetens

Drag is thus becoming a body of reference in itself, available to a large group of people, altering its historically underground character. In many ways, drag has always been referenced in mainstream media (think of voguing, make-up techniques such as highlighting and contour, over-the-top red carpet looks etc.), but often not as consciously or openly as it is today. Furthermore, a large part of the art of drag and related subcultures such as the ballroom scene have originated from black and Latino culture. The growing popularity of drag tends to overlook this politically important part of its history while at the same time allowing for attention to cultural appropriation and its consequences. In response to those who say that drag is becoming too mainstream, one could say that drag has always been mainstream, or at least has always influenced the mainstream, but is only now getting recognition for it, even if it tends to lose significant nuance in the process. A more interesting question to focus on is what *kind* of drag is becoming mainstream and what this means for drag itself. Before we can elaborate on either of these questions, we must first try to define what 'mainstream' really means.

## 6. Is drag mainstream?

What does 'mainstream' mean anyway? When we say something is mainstream, does it mean that it is appreciated by many, or that it passes seemingly unnoticed? It is one thing to *enjoy* a drag performance and another to *get* it. Not that every drag performance either succeeds or fails through the communication of a clear message or idea; not all drag is conceptual. There are, however, layers to drag that will always remain hidden to anyone who's not part of the 'in-crowd'. Rather than being concerned about whether or not drag is becoming mainstream, for this is a notion that is both too difficult and uninteresting to grasp, I wonder if the 'in-crowd' is growing and if so, what this means. It is strange to witness how RuPaul's Drag Race has introduced a huge audience to drag (I myself would probably not be a drag performer nor writing this article were it not for RPDR) and in doing so, inevitably at the same time dictates what drag *is* or *should be*. This creates an audience with a shared knowledge about drag, with one-liners galore, with an admiration for the queens who have been on the show (Drag Race has only recently allowed trans women to compete, drag kings or cis females who do drag have never appeared on the show so far). This has resulted in a large number of people loving Drag Race but yet having no idea who the queens in their city are, if they are even aware of the local drag scene at all. Moreover, when they do go and see live drag performances, more often than not they draw on Drag Race references. This is the predicament drag finds itself in today: it is thriving and

viable thanks to a commercialized television show but that inevitably limits and defines it at the same time. So why would anyone still *do drag*? Is it still political in any way?



Fig. 8. *Human in flux*  
Collage by Simon Baetens

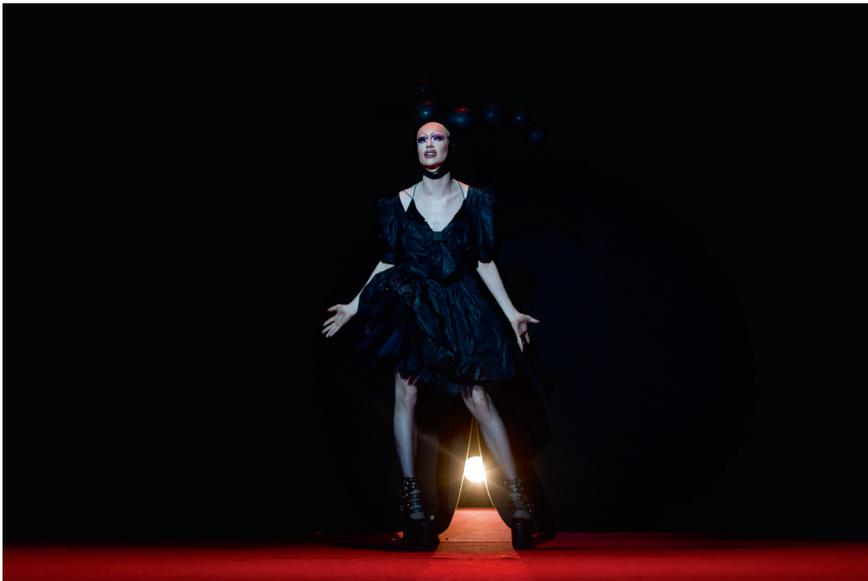


Fig. 9. “The only thing that is permanent is destruction.” *Electra channelling Sarah Kane through Naomi Velissariou. Queerly Beloved*, Theatre Scala Ghent, April 2019. Picture by Louis Kerckhof

## 7. Again: why drag?

Has the show set paradigms? Definitely. Should it try to break them? Or is this up to drag performers everywhere? Is it still truly drag if there is a paradigm at all? Drag has been demystified in many ways. Now that ‘everyone’ can do drag, we could ask ourselves the question if there is still a need for drag at all? RuPaul says “we are all born naked and the rest is drag”, alluding to businessmen in suits, police officers in uniforms etc. But beyond dressing up to fulfil specific tasks in society, more than anything drag is an *attitude*. Uniforms, for example, grant their wearer respect and power. These qualities, however, are synonymous with the profession, not its wardrobe. Drag is different in the way that it actively *claims* visibility and agency, making it extremely vulnerable and powerful at the same time.

This is why drag is still relevant and even necessary. At the height of its popularity, it has the unique opportunity to diversify itself and resist categorization. This is not the end of drag. It can become the newfound celebration of (local) drag culture, both existing and new. It can become the basis for a substantiated body of knowledge and research which sheds light on drag’s history thereby informing its present and future. It can be the start of dialogue about the importance of underground art, starting from that underground itself rather than from the institutions that claim to know it when they appropriate it. This is the age of drag and we cannot let it go by unnoticed. Let’s be *critical* of drag, let’s *celebrate* drag, let’s go see *live* drag, let’s *diversify* drag, let’s *do* drag.

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<sup>1</sup> Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: female impersonators in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> This history and tradition, however, are rarely written about. This is the reason I am writing this text in English (in addition to the fact that all of the sources I cite were written in English), in an attempt to contribute to the analysis and preservation of the art of drag.

<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with transvestism or cross-dressing, which are terms used to describe the more general phenomenon of people who like to dress in clothes that were designed for the opposite sex. The biggest difference between transvestism and drag is that transvestism is not usually meant for entertainment but rather express a (non-normative) gender identity through clothing in everyday life, whereas drag or travesty is more about creating a character that can be put on and taken off. I borrow the Dutch word 'travestie' and make it my own in English to make a distinction between two styles of drag.

<sup>4</sup> Vierkant, Artie. "The Image Object Post-Internet". Published on [http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The\\_Image\\_Object\\_Post-Internet\\_us.pdf](http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf), 2010.

<sup>5</sup> 'Match Game' is an American television show that has been running on and off since 1962 and in which contestants fill in blanks in sentences, often with comedic double entendres. If their answers matches the one given by a celebrity panelist, they score a point.