»Villains no Men Dare to Mess With«
Drag, Women, and Femininity

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Abstract
This article by Kristin Lerch provides a historical review of the many ways in which women (trans and cis) have been part of drag, and highlights current debates about the inclusion of women in (more mainstream) drag spaces, representations of femininity in drag, and the problem of misogyny and transmisogyny within this culture.

Title
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»Are you like... a woman?», a confused looking man asks me in the tiny, dirty backstage of a club filled with young gays and their straight best friends. It’s not a situation for a serious discussion, so I just go with »I’m pretty much there, bitch, but you look like you might still need some help!« Shade aside, the question of women in drag remains.

The idea of women participating in the artform of drag isn’t shocking to me. As a ballroom girl, I know that in the early days of this culture, ›drag queen‹ and ›transsexual‹ were distinctions that were sometimes important, but weren’t always a clear cut matter in people’s lives. When the state criminalizes you for ›crossdressing‹ and survival matters more than identity, you will call yourself whatever serves and protects you in the moment. Whatever a trick needs to hear, whatever is funny when you gossip with your friends, whatever helps you get closer to desired medical interventions, whatever, whatever... And while such distinctions between ›identities‹ are more separate than ever before, trans women and drag queens have a shared history, because, well – the world often doesn’t care to understand these differences.

Cis women have also been a part of drag cultures in various ways, tapping into its alternative images of womanhood. As my friend Susie Flowers from the Haus of Rausch puts it: »I feel powerful dressing and acting this way, find joy embodying fema-
le villains who men do not dare to mess with. Basing my art on figures like Divine, I find the freedom to invent the person I want to become, combining and playing with masculine and feminine archetypes.« Cis women have also been the driving force behind the art of drag kings, reconfiguring and multiplying representations of masculinity – be it by embodying the man they want to see in this world, or by parodying the men who bother them.

Quelle: Women in Drag event at Lazy Life, 10.06.2022, from left to right: Denise Palmieri, Kristin Dive, Sheezus H. Christin, Susie Flowers

While more underground scenes have always been populated with women, the RuPaul-fueled 2010s mainstream moment of drag has had a hard time making sense of us. Some queens like Victoria Scone (UK season 3) and Kylie Sonique Love (Winner of US Allstars 6) are making waves, but this is more of a promise of change rather than a strong tradition of inclusion. Earlier contestants such as Jiggly Caliente or Peppermint were made to ›hold back‹ regarding their out-of-drag look and medical interventions. RuPaul himself stirred up controversy after sharing some whacky opinions on how women doing drag aren’t really what drag is about (The Guardian, 2018, March 3), for which he got heavily criticized by the producers of the franchise itself. After all these developments, Victoria’s and Kylie’s success is far from the norm in the history of mainstream drag. While I know many inclusive producers and clubs, many people still have the nerve to tell women that they’re not really doing drag, or hold them to higher, campier standards. The ›idea‹ of a drag queen (bold to assume a queen even holds such an idea) is often seen as the transgression of men dressing as women, and the shocking
transformation and ›trickery‹ this involves. Sounds like an old transphobic stereotype? Oh, oh no. That complicates things...

Dealing with stereotypes, beauty ideals, and notions of disgust is pretty much what drag is about. It’s a great way to stop dry, academic analyses of gender and sex for once and instead just start living it in real life. I love the fire in someone’s eyes when I drag them up and then can’t get them away from the mirror, as they are just so stunned that their subconscious perceives their reflection as something they have never thought of themselves as. Drag is about exploring and playing with gender, not dressing up as a misogynistic or transphobic stereotype, right? Well, it can be, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t seen my fair share of men in drag mock, denigrate, and misrepresent cis and trans women’s experiences on stage many times. From slut-shaming and toxic beauty standards to disgust towards vaginas and the exploitation of Black women’s art in pop-culture – it’s all there. Drag queens often inhabit the same space in people’s heads as their stereotypes of trans women – and cis men in drag too often make light of lives that they do not live. ›What you see isn’t always the truth.‹ (UK Allstars 2, Ep. 1) – and the truth is, Miss Tati, that framing transfeminine bodies as ›lies‹ to horny straight men is putting girls in danger who live this life every day and not just on stage.

So here’s the solution: Let’s just have a beautiful show full of all shades of gender exploration with no mockery, no shade, only self-reflection and growth. Doesn’t sound boring at all, right? Ooops. Well, perhaps mockery is actually not evil per se. Or maybe evil is fun, as Susie Flowers suggested earlier. I have seen many a comedy queen do a funny skit – damn, I have even done shows lipsyncing to alt-right men afraid that butt-sex will bring down civilisations. But I’d suggest to anyone to punch up and not down, reflect on what kind of assumptions an audience will need to bring along in order to find something funny, and get well educated on the various voices of the women who inspire drag. I promise that listening to some trans liberation podcast won’t make you want to cancel yourself, reading Audre Lorde won’t turn you into a stuffy professor, and even if you speak up against police violence against sex workers you will probably not lose your ability to make jokes.

Women – trans and cis – have always been part of drag cultures, and I don’t think we need to be all too concerned with defending ourselves against anyone who doesn’t ›get it. Gia Gunn, Juno Birch, Creme Fatale, Denise Palmieri – all stunning yet complicated artists. We look breathtaking, we serve amazing performances, our art is relevant to the world of drag and I trust that we will be recognized for that.