

THE IMAGE OF YOUR IMAGINATION

REDISCOVERING DRAG, RECONSTRUCTING GENDER

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In this thesis, I examine prevalent definitions of drag. I analyze the notion of drag as gender performance and consider key questions regarding drag as an artistic practice and medium: drag as a form of cross-dressing; drag's subject matter; the similarities and differences between drag and fe/male impersonation; and drag's relation to gender, particularly nonbinary genders and cis-heteronormative gender ontology. I examine how the purported reality of binary gender and sexual dimorphism is apparent in and shapes understandings of drag. My key sources include Esther Newton's anthropological study of American drag queens in the late 1960s, Jack Halberstam's writing on drag king culture, and Judith Butler's theorization of gender and drag.

Following these arguments, I examine two instances of contemporary art and fashion—Finnish artist Artor Jesus Inkerö's (b. 1989) holistic bodily project and Palomo Spain's gender nonnormative fashion—and how interpretations of them pertain to similar questions of gender and sex as definitions of drag. I propose the term 'areal' to reflect how the existence of nonbinary genders is subordinate to the reality of the supposedly original and authentic binary genders. Finally, I argue that contemporary drag, Palomo Spain, and the work of Artor Jesus Inkerö challenge and erase cis-heteronormative notions of gender and, in doing so, attest post-postmodern aesthetics.

I conclude that definitions of drag reflect perceptions of gender and the human and, ultimately, conceptions of reality. As an invitation for future research, I suggest that outdated notions of drag need critical revision and redefinition.

Keywords: areality, Artor Jesus Inkerö, cis-heteronormativity, drag, gender, nonbinary, Palomo Spain, performativity, queer culture, transformation

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INTRODUCTION

REDISCOVERING DRAG

Sometimes when something gets a lot of attention and college kids start to write papers about it (no offense) this can be a bad thing. Often something marginal becomes popular only when it reaches middle-class people.
—Silas Flipper¹

Twenty years later, at least part of Silas Flipper’s presage in the 1990s has come true: I, a white, middle-class university student, wrote a thesis on drag. Unfortunately, it is not drag kings or butch lesbians who have enjoyed more mainstream cultural recognition worldwide as Flipper hoped and feared. Drag and drag queens in particular have never been as prominent in Western visual culture as they are now. Besides gay bars and LGBTQ+ venues, drag can now be seen on television, read about in magazines and books, drag artists are featured on advertisements and fashion editorials, and, perhaps most notably, drag is found all over the internet and social media. Drag has become such a cultural phenomenon over the past decade that 2010s could well be dubbed the renaissance of drag.

In September 2018, a single drag queen sold out two shows at Finlandia Hall in Helsinki, which has 1,700 seats—something that would have never happened ten years ago. Selling thousands of tickets in Finland is no small feat even today and not just any drag artist or performer could have done so. It is no coincidence that that drag queen was Bianca Del Rio, winner of the sixth season of American reality competition television show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009–). By April 2019, the show has had eleven main seasons, four seasons of spin-off show *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars* (2012–), and three seasons of spin-off show *RuPaul’s Drag U* (2010–2012). As Elizabeth Schewe notes in an article published in 2009, the year *RuPaul’s Drag Race* began airing, “RuPaul, born RuPaul Andre Charles, is arguably the most famous drag queen to cross over from gay subculture to mainstream media outlets such as MTV and VH1” (2009, 672). There is no doubt that the recent uprise in drag’s cultural status follows the show’s enormous success worldwide, even though

¹ Quoted in Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 139.

credit for this development cannot be given to the show alone. Many of the examples I discuss are from or related to *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its microcosm. The majority of the well over a hundred drag artists featured on the show are part of drag's contemporary canon, and thus the bulk of interviews, stories, images, videos, and information in general of these artists and their work is abundant and readily available compared to canonized artists outside the *Drag Race* "Ru-niverse."

All types of drag artists have gotten more opportunities and recognition over the past decade, but looking from the outside, drag still seems to be a private club run by cis gay male drag queens. Laurel Lynn Leake argues in her article "Defining Drag: A Vymifesto," first published in the first issue of *Velour* (originally entitled *VYM*) in June 2015:

even queer spaces aren't safe from the tyranny of heterosexism, the demand for clear boundaries between masculine and feminine, the authority of the male voice for defining identity. And that's why the dominance of the cis male gay voice in pop culture is happily welcomed by straight audiences, all too readily gobbling up a single definition of drag and declaring it the whole. (2018, 53)

All three issues of *Velour: The Drag Magazine* were collected and published in book form in November 2018. Edited by Johnny Velour,² "the magazine has been dedicated to showcasing the work of drag queens and drag kings, queer, trans, AFAB [assigned female at birth], and non-binary drag artists from all backgrounds"³ and is a much-needed and welcome addition to both visual and literary drag culture. Drag may not be for everyone, but it is for anyone, and it is this single and exclusionary definition of drag—the cis gay male drag queen—that *Velour* challenges and I wish to subvert.

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study influenced by and indebted to art-historical studies of queer and feminist visual culture with critical and theoretical focus on gender. My personal interest in theories of gender aside, it is "organic" for a study on drag to focus heavily on gender: discourse on drag is at the same time discourse on gender because drag (supposedly) is gender performance. Drag as an artistic practice is commonly studied and discussed in a show or theatrical context, but introducing drag into the field of contemporary art enables a new set of questions to be posed. It is more interesting to open out

² Velour's partner and the magazine's creative director and designer, Sasha Velour, is also the winner of the ninth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

³ "Velour: The Drag Magazine [Collector's Edition]." *House of Velour: Europe* online store, n.d. 2018.

the phenomenon than to confine or fix it in place, and art history as a conceptual framework makes novel interpretation and concretization possible. After all, art is a flexible concept to begin with, and drag is simultaneously open to alternative ways of understanding yet resistant to definitive or restrictive demarcation. Still, the concept cannot be broadened endlessly without becoming descriptive and obsolete. By introducing drag into art history and the context of contemporary art, I wish to demonstrate that drag as an artistic practice and medium is a protean subject of study that cannot be confined or reduced to only one context or type of artist.

Despite there being no established drag studies tradition or discipline, many scholars have seen drag as an attractive subject for research. Still, studies that deal with drag often focus not on drag itself but, for example, questions of race, nationality, language, class, or social issues of gender and sexual minorities (see, e.g., Schacht and Underwood 2004; Daems 2014). Jack Halberstam has written about drag kings in several of their books, most notably in *Female Masculinity* (1998) and *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), and a book on drag king culture together with Del LaGrace Volcano (1999), combining academic text, interviews, and photography. Roger Baker (1994) has studied the history of drag queens and female impersonators in Western and East Asian performing arts. In Finland, Tiia Aarnipuu (2008; 2010) is one of the few scholars to have studied Finnish drag culture and has written for a larger audience. Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* ([1972] 1979), an anthropological study of female impersonators and drag queens in late 1960s America, is perhaps the most notable academic work to focus solely on drag and could be called a drag studies classic.

Much has changed since Newton conducted her study in the late 1960s and even since the turn of the millennium. Hence, the language used in *Mother Camp* and many other works is not up-to-date with contemporary terminology. The questions asked, however, have not changed dramatically over the past decades. Many of the issues and themes present in *Mother Camp* indicate that, in the end, fairly little has changed in the way drag is understood and theorized. It is important to note that I do not consider (most of) the texts I examine to be personal opinions per se. Still, I believe that what is said and how it is said always discloses the writer's perception of reality. I have not set limits on what types of works and texts I can or cannot study. Many of these works are academic studies,

written mostly by anglophone scholars, although almost equally many are articles or stories in online publications or discussions in social media. After all, examining only one type of text or context would not adequately demonstrate how drag is a protean artistic practice and subject of study.

Most research on drag has been conducted by queer scholars who are often also members of drag communities and participate in drag culture as keen spectators or even as performers. The lack of “outsider” perspectives on drag is no doubt at least partly due to drag being commonly labelled a marginal and subcultural practice. This, on the other hand, is likely the reason why self-reflection has become integral to drag culture. Drag’s theoretical framework is not separate from the phenomenon: debates on what drag is or can be, who can do drag, what is good drag and what is not—that is, aesthetic debates—are held within drag culture and communities. Indeed, much of my so-called tacit knowledge—the impressions and (pre)suppositions “behind” my arguments—is based on countless discussions and debates, not only of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* but drag culture in general, that I have observed and participated in during the past roughly five years, particularly in social media.

Many historical studies regard drag as both an age-old theatrical cross-dressing practice and a twentieth and twenty-first-century queer subcultural practice, generally represented by hyperfeminine cis gay male drag queens (e.g., Baker 1994). I do not wish to deny drag’s historical connection to what is regarded as cross-dressing, but my objective is not to date when drag as the kind of artistic practice I understand it to be begins. In order to disrupt the exclusionary and biased tradition of defining drag as a cis gay male cross-dressing practice, it is sensible to study drag artists whose work challenges cis-heteronormative notions of gender and the human. As is evident from my analyses, prevalent definitions of what drag is or who does drag do not accurately describe drag’s contemporary condition, calling for rediscovery. Hence, I examine subjects and themes that I believe are in most urgent need of revision.

In the first chapter, I examine the notion of drag as a form of cross-dressing and consider the limitations of understanding drag as a homosexual cross-dressing practice. Among other texts, I analyze a controversial interview published in *The Guardian* in March 2018

in which RuPaul states that he would likely not allow transgender drag artists who have transitioned to compete on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I then consider how understandings of gender and sex are apparent in and shape perceptions of drag. American philosopher Judith Butler's discussions of drag as illustrative of her gender performativity theory, particularly in *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006), *Bodies That Matter* ([1993] 2011), and *Undoing Gender* (2004), constitute an important theorization of drag that, as I argue, demonstrates cis-heteronormative gender ontology's hold on gender's purported reality. The overarching theme for the second chapter is drag as gender performance. What is performed in drag and how is it performed? What is drag's subject matter? What are the differences in the form and content of drag queen and drag king performances? I argue that the categories drag queen and drag king are insufficient to describe all drag artists and propose a new term to help interpret what I term nonbinary drag. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the similarities and differences between drag and fe/male impersonation based on observations I made during a drag show at nightclub DTM in Helsinki in February 2018.

Following these arguments, I examine two instances of contemporary art and fashion that revolve around similar questions of gender and sex as definitions of drag. First, I consider three works by Finnish artist Artor Jesus Inkerö, *Justin* (2016), *Kim* (2017), and *Caitlyn* (2017), and how their holistic bodily project could be understood as drag. I argue that reading Inkerö's project as drag enables new ways to interpret their work and its relation to gender and, furthermore, raises questions about the nature of drag. While I do not analyze Palomo Spain's garments per se, I examine articles and stories, mostly published online, that report on the fashion house's runway shows and designate Palomo Spain as gender nonnormative or "genderless" fashion. Finally, I consider what these two instances can give to understanding nonbinary genders and embodiment.

GENDERS AFTER GENDER

A common model of gender—with its "biological counterpart," sex—goes as follows:

male	female
man	woman
masculinity	femininity

This model is called cis-heteronormativity: the truth, law, and reality that there are only men and women, who are biologically male or female, and due to—and in accordance with—their maleness or femaleness are either masculine or feminine. Natural correlation between gender (identity) and sex (anatomy) is presumed, yet a deviant person might psychologically identify as the opposite gender. Besides gender, cis-heteronormativity is fundamentally linked to sexuality: men and women are presumed to be attracted to each other, although a queer person might be attracted to the same sex or both sexes. Indeed, sexual orientation (also an identity) is presumed to be based on the gender (i.e., sex) of the object of sexual desire instead of any other quality. Cis-heteronormativity grants both human and nonhuman animals the possibility of two complementary genders/sexes and four sexual orientations: the opposite, the same, both, or neither—the lack of sexuality, if anything, being utterly perverse. The logic of cis-heteronormativity is so omnipresent that to a varying extent it is applied to anything that can be understood in binary terms, such as plants and power cords.

Instead of affirming this model of gender, I propose the following model:

~gender~

As this simple model demonstrates, *gender is gender*: all genders are equally real, natural, original, material, and authentic. No gender is dependent on or subordinate to another, and no gender holds the copyright to a characteristic, style, or trait. Nonbinary genders are not mixtures of “male” or “female” qualities: gender is not a spectrum with men and women as its opposite ends, the “other” genders—as mere deviant variation—falling somewhere between them. The notion of sexual orientation based on a binary understanding of sex also loses its relevance when there are more than two genders. Acknowledging the existence of genders besides man and woman is not to say that there are no men or women, and neither does it mean that gender does not or should no longer exist.

Transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary are all inadequate terms for the genders besides man and woman because each term carries the semantic onus of the two “original” genders; they only have names subordinate to the absolute reality of binary gender and sex. To quote Judith Butler, “The genders I have in mind have been in existence for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms that govern

reality” (2004, 31). These genders do not have names of their own and therefore exist only as quixotic “gender utopia.” Only a few countries have added a “gender-neutral” option—which, yet again, only attests the ontological nonexistence of nonbinary genders, clumping them together and marking them as outside gender altogether—to official and legal documents. Finland, among many other countries, does not constitutionally recognize nonbinary genders, which therefore do not exist socially or culturally as “proper” ways of living and being human. As Butler argues, “To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human” (ibid., 218).

Some argue that it would be better not to try to come up with more names and “labels,” to stop talking about gender altogether. I, however, am one of those who think names are vital as to be called a name is to be given a possibility for social existence (Butler 1997, 2). Regrettably, I am compelled to use the term nonbinary to describe genders besides man and woman since they lack names of their own. Although often spelled ‘non-binary’, I omit the hyphen to underscore nonbinary genders as legitimate genders and not merely “not binary.” Many genders are still looking for the possibility to become and be real in their own right and not mere negations of reality, and I look forward to the collective efforts of future gender theorists, scholars, and activists who will participate in coining names for these yet-to-be-named yet not yet-to-be-discovered genders. As Butler argues, “The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (2004, 219).

My objective as a nonbinary scholar is to attest the reality of nonbinary genders. “Reality is a matter of representation [...] and representation is [...] a matter of discourse. [...] What the world ‘is’ for us depends on how it is described” (Tickner 1998, 357). As a nonbinary person, growing up can be a harrowing experience when you realize you are not real and do not exist as yourself to the world around you. Many who belong to gender or sexual minorities share the experience of not having known there were others like them when growing up or that being themselves was a possibility in the first place. By writing these words, I hope to create possibilities to be in this world. After all, if it is never represented—talked about, written about, portrayed, depicted—if there are no words or

images for it, it does not exist as a possibility.

CHAPTER ONE

CRISS-CROSSING THE REAL

In *Mother Camp*, a trailblazing study of American drag queens and female impersonators in the late 1960s, Esther Newton defines drag as a noun as “the clothing of one sex when worn by the other sex” (1979, 3). Merriam-Webster’s definition of drag is almost word for word the same as Newton’s: “clothing typical of one sex worn by a person of the opposite sex—often used in the phrase *in drag*[;] men dressed *in drag*.”⁴ However, according to Newton (1979, 108), drag’s principal meaning is role play: Newton states that “gay people” often use the word drag to mean role play in various social situations and everyday life, such as in school or at the workplace, as “all of life is role and theatre—appearance” (ibid.). Roger Baker (1994, 18) concurs with Newton, stating that besides clothes and sex, drag is about role play, gender, and sexuality.

Drag artists are commonly characterized as “individuals who publicly perform gender [...] as well as blur the lines between masculine and feminine” (González and Cavazos 2016, 659). The two canonical categories of drag artists and performers are drag queens and drag kings: according to Nicholas M. Teich (2012, 125), drag queens are (gay) men who dress and perform as women, whereas drag kings are (lesbian) women who dress and perform as men. Besides gay men and lesbian women wearing the “opposite sex’s” clothing for a performance, drag is understood to have several meanings in the LGBTQ+ community,⁵ such as social and/or political commentary on gender roles and presentation (Kohlsdorf 2014, 70). Drag has its roots in ballroom, club, and bar cultures and has been performed for queer and straight audiences (ibid.). According to Aarnipuu (2010, 13), drag can celebrate, degrade, simplify, criticize, and analyze notions of maleness or femaleness, maintain a strict division between two mutually exclusive genders or narrow the gap between them, and create a space for new ways to exist somewhere between stereotypical woman and manhood.

⁴ “Drag.” *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary, n.d.

⁵ The initialism stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer; the plus denotes other gender and sexual minorities. The LGBTQ+ community is commonly referred to as the queer community.

Aarnipuu argues that if drag means performing in the opposite sex's clothing, then either gender or gendered clothing are understood differently in drag than in quotidian life (2010, 11), although gender-bending clubwear can be drag or at least very close to drag (ibid., 216). Newton notes that the word drag can be used to refer to "any clothing that signifies a social role" (1979, 3n7) because "[t]he concept of drag is embodied in a complex homosexual attitude towards social roles" (ibid.). Accordingly, Newton remarks that the film *Star Wars* is full of drag: "powers-of-darkness" drag, "terrestrial alien" drag, and so on (ibid., xii). On a similar note, Aarnipuu suggests that, for example, the uniform of a (male) minister and his "performance" of holding a service could, in a way, also be considered drag (2010, 30), as both ministers and drag artists dress (up) in clothing that bear particular cultural and social meanings and perform a specific and reiterative role.⁶ However, inflating drag's meaning to any clothing that signifies a social role, à la Newton, is the same as arguing that any image or object can be called art.

If drag means wearing the "opposite sex's" clothing, then a woman wearing a suit and tie or a man wearing a dress and high heels would be 'in drag'. If they were to perform while cross-dressing, they might be 'doing drag'. I want to stress *might* as not all "cross-dressing"—even if in front of an audience—is drag, as I demonstrate below. There is a semantic difference between being 'in drag' and 'doing drag'. What counts as being in or doing drag depends, first, on how drag itself is understood, and second, on how being "in" or "doing" are defined; for example, is "doing drag" always a certain kind of act or performance, does being "in drag" require the artist or performer to wear makeup, and so on. Moreover, it is debatable whether a person can do drag without being in drag, and whether being in drag necessarily means that the person is doing drag. For my purposes here, I do not debate this matter but regard them as mutually constitutive: unless stated otherwise, when a person is in drag, they are also doing drag and vice versa.

Teich notes that "[m]ost drag queens sing, lip-synch, dance, or do skits of some kind. Many drag queens impersonate female pop stars and vice versa for drag kings" (2012, 125). Indeed, the common form(ula) of drag is a combination of a distinctive look and a

⁶ This is not the best analogy as being a minister evidently requires more than simply dressing up as one. Both parties are oversimplified in Aarnipuu's example as it is also debatable whether or not drag artists perform any specific (social) role.

performance. Lip syncing is arguably the most common and even stereotypical type of drag performance, but drag artists and performers are often creative and talented in different ways: they might be singers, dancers, athletes, musicians, rappers, makeup artists, hairstylists, actors, comedians, designers, models, directors, or/and so on. To some queer artists, drag is a gateway to bring their art to life; they might not have gotten opportunities to perform for one reason or another, but doing drag has introduced them to new audiences. Even though drag is commonly understood as performance, the word perform can be understood ambiguously in this context as all drag artists do not perform in the sense that they would dance or sing in front of an audience.⁷

Even though there is no unanimous definition of drag, most renditions revolve around gender, men/women, gay/lesbian, masculinity/femininity, cross-dressing, performance, and parody. Common to these renditions is that whether the cross-dressing is drag or not is generally defined by who does drag. Moreover, this “who” is taken to determine what type of drag is done. In this chapter, I first consider the notion of drag as cross-dressing, its relation to transgender issues, and how both *being* and *doing* are crucial to these questions. I then examine Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory and drag’s relation to gender; more specifically, cis-heteronormative gender ontology and the purported reality of binary gender.

JUXTAPOSING FOR THE AUDIENCE

Drag is commonly perceived as a form of cross-dressing—wearing the opposite sex’s clothing—alongside ‘transvestism’. The difference between drag and transvestism seems to be a matter of sexual orientation: according to Leinonen and Leinonen (2007, 77), most transvestites are heterosexual or bisexual men; whereas, according to Newton (1979, 3), ‘drag queen’ is the homosexual term for transvestite. Baker also defines transvestite as “the man who finds relief and personal satisfaction by dressing as a woman [...]. He is happy in his maleness and is generally heterosexual” (1994, 16). As the terms transvestite and transvestism are nowadays considered derogatory, I will henceforward use the words

⁷ For instance, Jussi, one of the drag kings Aarnipuu (2010, 216) interviewed for her book, says they mostly do drag at parties or in bars because they do not like to perform.

cross-dresser and cross-dressing instead. Teich (2012, 125) argues that the difference between cross-dressers and drag queens and kings is that drag is always for a performance. In accordance with Teich, Newton states that “*the* distinguishing characteristic of drag, as opposed to heterosexual transvestism, is its group character; *all* drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, has a theatrical structure and style” (1979, 37, emphasis in original).

Based only on these accounts, one could conclude that drag is the collective practice of gay men or lesbian women cross-dressing (only) for a performance (i.e., to entertain an audience, not for psychological reasons or for individual pleasure); heterosexual men cross-dress (only) for individual, psychological reasons; whereas heterosexual women apparently do not cross-dress at all. In other words, drag, or “homosexual cross-dressing,” requires a spectator or an audience as it is done for a performance, whereas heterosexual cross-dressing is intimate and done in private. But surely not all heterosexual men—say, actors, as an obvious example—cross-dress only for psychological or sexual pleasure but often exclusively for a performance, whereas some gay men cross-dress in private and never perform for an audience? If drag is the homosexual term for cross-dressing for a performance, then what is a heterosexual man cross-dressing for a performance or a homosexual man cross-dressing for personal pleasure and not for a performance? If cross-dressing is a) heterosexual, b) private, c) pleasure, and drag is a) homosexual, b) public, c) entertainment, then are they not simply too dissimilar to be thought of as two forms of the same phenomenon?

The distinction between cross-dressing and drag seems to be based on *who* does the cross-dressing; for example, according to Newton (1979, 11n19), any cross-dressing homosexual man is a drag queen. Even though drag queens are understood to be cisgender homosexual men by default, Aarnipuu (2008, 85) notes that not all drag artists (i.e., drag queens in her account) are gay men: a drag queen can be a male cross-dresser or a transgender woman, and many professional actors do drag regardless of sexual orientation. However, cross-dressing has to be (politically) “aware” or “gay sensitive” to be drag, otherwise it is simply “masquerading” and “uncivilized antics”—for example, a heterosexual man dressing up as a woman at a bachelor party is not a drag show (Aarnipuu 2010, 216). For example, it is arguable whether Dustin Hoffman’s performance in the film

Tootsie (United States, 1982) is drag or not. Hoffman's cross-dressing performance is often used as a prime example of cisgender heterosexual men doing drag, but *Tootsie* can hardly be described as gay or trans sensitive. Michael Dorsey, Hoffman's character, assumes the character of Tootsie to land a role in a popular television show and uses the opportunity to beguile his co-star Julie, played by Jessica Lange. His heterosexuality, masculinity, and cisgendered manhood are persistently reaffirmed throughout the film. Every time another man attempts to enamor Tootsie, the desire is marked as homosexual—as Tootsie is only a character and Dorsey is really a heterosexual man—and thus repulsive and nonconsensual.

According to Teich (2012, xvii), drag queen (yet apparently not drag king) is sometimes perceived as a gender identity, falling under the umbrella term 'transgender' along with cross-dressers and genderqueer people.⁸ In like manner, Del LaGrace Volcano argues that "Drag Kings are part of the transgendered spectrum but not everyone who does drag is transgendered or wants to be" (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 27). Doing drag is an act that identifies the doer as transgender—that is, as gender nonnormative or not decisively cisgender. This transgender "stamp" has little to do with the performer's gender but is imposed on them: it is the (spectators') transphobic "fear that the costume may never come off, that the performance will become a reality" (Halberstam 1998, 120). Halberstam notes that the mainstream public is disinterested in and discomfited by drag kings because of this fear; for example, whenever major mainstream magazines write stories on drag kings, they are keen to assure that "there is no cause for concern, that underneath the costumes, Drag Kings are really beautiful women" (ibid.). Likewise, some cis male drag queens make sure to assert that they really are men underneath the costume in order to dispel any suspicion of being transgender or a cross-dresser.⁹ Newton addresses this predicament poignantly: "For if drag [...] is work, it is not home, it is not where a man 'lives' in the deepest sense; if it is work, a man could always quit" (1979, 18).

⁸ The word transgender is sometimes used as a descriptive term for so-called nonnormative genders (Halberstam 2005, 55); that is, genders besides cisgender men and women.

⁹ Aarnipuu (2010, 229) notes that many presume drag artists (i.e., cis male drag queens in her account, yet again) to receive sexual pleasure from wearing women's clothing or feel they are women in some way. See also, e.g., ibid., 230; Kursi, Olli-Pekka, "Drag queen -tähdet eivät ole suvaitsevaisuuden asialla." *Yle Kioski*, June 22, 2015.

Even though drag scenes have always been home to people of both gender and sexual minorities, the relationship between gay and trans communities has been complicated in and outside drag communities. The discordance between trans women and cis men in American drag queen scenes is evident in the interviews Newton conducted for *Mother Camp* in the late 1960s. Newton notes that to professional performers, “the transvestite is one who dresses as a woman for some ‘perverted’ sexual purpose outside the context of performance” (1979, 51). This “transy drag”—any feminine item or apparel either worn in everyday life or not related to performance—is a violation of drag’s aesthetic “glamour standard” and indicates unprofessionalism; impersonation has the right context (performance, work) and the wrong context (offstage, private life) (ibid.). Despite the research participants’ antipathy towards the “compulsion to *be* rather than to *imitate* a woman” (ibid., emphasis in original), Newton notes that “[a] very significant proportion of the impersonators [...] have used or are using hormone shots or plastic inserts to create artificial breasts and change the shape of their bodies” (ibid., 102). Consequently, these implicitly transgender drag queens are “placing themselves out of the homosexual subculture” (ibid.); since they are not men, “no gay man would want to sleep with these ‘hormone queens’” (ibid.).

Trans inclusivity in drag culture became a burning question once again when *The Guardian* published Decca Aitkenhead’s interview with RuPaul in March 2018. Halfway through the interview, Aitkenhead asks RuPaul how can trans women be “men dressing up as women” (i.e., drag queens) if they “must be identified as female.”¹⁰ RuPaul states that drag is not ‘dressing up as women’—he points out that none of the women present at the hotel lobby where the interview is being held dress like drag queens do—it is “wearing clothes [...] that represent our culture’s synthetic idea of femininity.”¹¹ Aitkenhead asks if he would allow assigned female at birth contestants to compete on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, to which RuPaul responds:

“Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity.”¹²

¹⁰ Aitkenhead, Decca, “RuPaul: ‘Drag is a Big F-You to Male-Dominated Culture’.” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2018.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

The conversation turns to Peppermint—the first openly transgender contestant on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, who competed on the show's ninth season in 2017—when Aitkenhead inquires for the second time how a trans woman can be a drag queen. RuPaul notes that Peppermint did not get breast implants until after the show had been filmed, and therefore “hadn't really transitioned.”¹³ When asked if he would allow a contestant who had “really” transitioned¹⁴ to compete on the show, RuPaul replies “Probably not. You can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we're doing.”¹⁵

The show's fans, former contestants, and people from drag communities all over the world took to social media to show their exasperation and disappointment in RuPaul's comments after the interview was published.¹⁶ Besides being hailed as an icon in the LGBTQ+ community, RuPaul is taken as an authority on drag and gender nonconformance in general (Kohlsdorf 2014, 69), and many were appalled that he would act as a gatekeeper to what drag is and deny both trans and cis women the possibility to compete on the show.¹⁷ RuPaul responded to the backlash on Twitter two days after the interview was published. In his tweet, RuPaul compares trans women drag queens to athletes who take performance enhancing drugs and argues that an athlete can take drugs but not get to compete in the Olympics—just like trans women can “really” transition and therefore not get to compete on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. These further comments caused even more aggravation and RuPaul eventually apologized for the hurt he had caused.¹⁸

The Guardian interview was not the first time RuPaul's name has been involved in controversy over trans inclusivity and representation. *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ All trans people do not go through the same medical treatments and surgical procedures to transition “fully.” Many do not take hormones or have not had or will not have surgeries. There is no definite point when a person has “really” transitioned as transitioning is a personal process and different for everyone. This is why changing your body is not and should never be a requirement for transitioning.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nichols, James Michael, “RuPaul Comes Under Fire for Comments About Openly Trans Contestants on ‘Drag Race’.” *Huffington Post*, March 5, 2018; Levin, Sam, “Who Can Be a Drag Queen? RuPaul's Trans Comments Fuel Calls for Inclusion.” *The Guardian*, March 8, 2018.

¹⁷ Nichols, James Michael, “RuPaul Comes Under Fire for Comments About Openly Trans Contestants on ‘Drag Race’.” *Huffington Post*, March 5, 2018.

¹⁸ Ibid.

notorious for handling trans issues with insensitivity (see, e.g., Kohlsdorf 2014; Marcel 2014; Norris 2014) even though several of the show's contestants have been trans women.¹⁹ Writing on the show's gender politics, Kai Kohlsdorf argues:

There is room in the bar or the ballroom for queens who identify as transgender, who identify with transgender women regardless of personal identification, and who understand their worlds as more gender complicated than simply men who impersonate women (the show's understood definition). (2014, 70)

Furthermore, contestants whose drag style is more nonbinary or genderqueer than hyperfeminine often fail to impress the judges and are sent home early in the season (González & Cavazos 2016, 663). Given its phenomenal popularity and more mainstream success worldwide, the show is highly influential and culturally significant and has the power to represent and narrate, include or exclude, and shape ideas of what drag is and who does drag. During its decade-long run, the show has merely reinforced the stereotypical notion that drag is done by cis gay male drag queens who perform hyperfemininity. Notably, only drag queens and contestants who were assigned male at birth have been featured on the show, and all episodes highlight this by showing the queens' transformation "from boy to girl."

Trans and nonbinary people have had a tremendous influence on drag culture, but drag in the broad sense is still persistently attributed to cis gay male drag queens.²⁰ Most accounts acknowledge trans women drag queens and trans men drag kings, but they are rarely included in definitions of drag. However, trans men drag queens and trans women drag kings seem to remain impossibilities that are always overlooked in these accounts. It is not that being cisgender is a requirement for doing drag, but being cisgender (and homosexual in drag's case) is the norm not just in drag but in life in general. Trans men and women are *trans* men and women, while "men" and "women" are cis men and women by default. The assumption that all men who do drag are cisgender and drag queens—and, likewise, that all women who do drag are cisgender and drag kings—maintains the notion that drag is a form of cross-dressing. Aarnipuu, for example, repeatedly uses the

¹⁹ However, all but Peppermint have come out as transgender either during or after the filming of the show.

²⁰ For instance, even though Jennie Livingston's documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (United States, 1990), a classic in drag culture, is commonly understood to be "about black gay men, drag queens, and drag balls" (hooks 1992, 149), most of the people observed and interviewed in the film are trans women of color, not only black gay men.

expression “men who do drag” (e.g., 2010, 215) to refer to drag queens and “women who do drag” (e.g., *ibid.*, 230–31) for drag kings. Trans women drag queens and trans men drag kings, however, cannot be thought of as cross-dressing because they would be “women dressing up as women” and “men dressing up as men.”²¹ Thus, given that trans women drag queens and trans men drag kings are generally acknowledged even in accounts in which drag is understood as cross-dressing, it is arguable that cross-dressing in itself comprises more than merely wearing gender atypical clothing.

RuPaul’s argument, that “[d]rag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, [...]” that when men do drag “it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity,”²² implies that, ultimately, drag is not about aesthetics, it is about crossing a line—the line of heteronormativity. Indeed, what seems to be behind the idea that drag is a form of cross-dressing is not the dressing part, but the *crossing*. Thus, drag is most potent when a person who could and should aspire to become the cis-heteronormative ideal human—white, middle-class, able, masculine, heterosexual, cisgender, male—refuses and renounces that position. This is why RuPaul thinks drag is subversive, “punk rock,” only when cisgender men do it: it is a cis man’s world and therefore only a cis man can bring it down.²³ Despite his criticism of normative masculinity and good intentions for gay empowerment, RuPaul’s argument, in the end, demonstrates and affirms the sociocultural valuation of cis male masculinity over any other quality instead of subverting it.

In accordance with RuPaul’s statement in Aitkenhead’s interview, although preceding it, Giuseppe Balirano argues:

When a man wears drag, some sort of heteronormative line is crossed. However, this crossing is always a fuzzy and ephemeral one, since cross-dressing is suc-

²¹ Furthermore, the cis-heteronormative notion of cross-dressing is inapplicable to nonbinary life: if cross-dressing means wearing clothing not designed or socially coded for your gender, then it is impossible for nonbinary people not to cross-dress. There are no nonbinarywear aisles next to menswear or womenswear, so no matter what nonbinary people wear, it was designed to be worn by men, women, or both men and women.

²² Aitkenhead, Decca, “RuPaul: ‘Drag is a Big F-You to Male-Dominated Culture’.” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2018.

²³ Not everyone perceives drag as subversive of gender roles. Newton notes that by appearing as a woman, and thus behaving inappropriately, a man “places himself as a woman in relation to other men” (1979, 103). Likewise, bell hooks argues that “[t]o choose to appear as ‘female’ when one is ‘male’ is always constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy only of ridicule” (1992, 146), as moving from a position of power to a position of powerlessness.

cessfully subversive, paradoxically, when a juxtaposition of ‘real’ life gender and ‘performed’ gender representation takes place. (2017, 155)

Newton also argues that “[u]ltimately, all drag symbolism opposes the ‘inner’ or ‘real’ self (subjective self) to the ‘outer’ self (social self)” (1979, 100). In other words, “when impersonators are performing, the oppositional play is between ‘appearance,’ which is female, and ‘reality,’ or ‘essence,’ which is male” (ibid., 101). Drag is precisely this juxtaposition of reality and fantasy, identity and performance, essence and appearance, being and doing. Thus, the fantasy of drag (performance, appearance) is most successful and at its best when it is as far from reality (identity, essence) as possible—when a masculine man puts on a big wig, heavy makeup, a dress, and high heels, and transforms into a feminine woman. This juxtaposition is what RuPaul and the producers of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* are looking for, which is why they have not cast cis women, trans women who are transitioning or have transitioned, or others whose essence is not (sufficiently) masculine: the contrast between their being and doing is not sharp enough.²⁴

The notion that drag’s successfulness is determined by and evaluated in relation to “who the artist is,” is why the type of drag done is so often defined by the artist’s gender and sexual orientation. This “who” is preceded by cis-heteronormative gender ontology and the reality of biology and sexual dimorphism: the idea that femininity and masculinity correlate with and are based on “biological sex,” that “males” are inherently masculine (their bodies are masculine compared to their opposite even if they are not socially masculine) and “females” are feminine. This is why the drag done by trans and cis women drag queens is perceived to be less successful and subversive than that of cis male drag queens: femininity comes naturally to women, particularly cisgender women, and therefore they have no trouble performing femininity; for men, however, it takes real skill and talent to perform femininity since it is not in their nature.

As I have demonstrated, common to prevalent definitions of drag are its close connection to gender: drag is gender performance, drag is defined by the artist’s gender, drag is the

²⁴ Two trans women have competed on the show since RuPaul’s *The Guardian* interview controversy: season two contestant Sonique, who came out as transgender during her season’s reunion episode, appeared on the holiday episode *RuPaul’s Drag Race Holi-Slay Spectacular* on December 7, 2018; and season six contestant Gia Gunn, who came out as transgender in 2017, competed in the fourth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars* in late 2018 and early 2019. Their appearances on the show can be seen as damage control as both happened soon after the controversy.

juxtaposition of the performed gender and the artist's gender, and so on. Thus, it is imperative to further consider how conceptions of gender shape perceptions of drag.

AREAL ME

One highly influential theory of gender, particularly in anglophone academic discourse, is gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. First introduced in *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006), Butler has since returned to her theory and developed it further, most notably in *Bodies That Matter* ([1993] 2011) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), and has further developed her notion of performativity in contexts besides gender, for example, in *Excitable Speech* (1997). *Gender Trouble* and Butler's theory have been some of the most discussed, quoted, and referred to subjects in feminist and gender-related writing for nearly three decades. Besides gender studies departments, Butler's theory is well-known in, for example, the arts and LGBTQ+ activism.

Butler gives a conspicuous summary of her theory in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*: "The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (2006, xv). In (overly) simple terms: a wo/man does not act a certain way because s/he 'is' a wo/man—s/he 'is' a wo/man because s/he acts a certain way. In other words, there is no gender behind acts (or expressions as Butler calls them) of gender: the gender "behind" the acts is not the origin but the result of those acts (ibid., 34). Butler adapted her notion of performativity partly from the speech act theory of J. L. Austin, a philosopher of language. An important point in Austin's speech act theory is that acts need the right "circumstances," as Austin (1975, 8) calls them, in order to be felicitous, that is, successful. Acts cannot perform on their own—others have to recognize and accept them as such in order for the acts to be successful and able to perform. The same goes for gender: to be a wo/man, others have to recognize and acknowledge the person as a wo/man based on their gendered acts.

Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* at a time when social construction and the distinction between social gender and biological/anatomical sex had become increasingly common in anglophone feminist theory. Characteristic to the sex/gender distinction are the beliefs

that a) there is either causality or discordance between “natural” biological sex and “nurtured” social gender, and b) as sex is biological, it is an immutable fact, whereas gender is socially constructed and therefore contingent. Butler’s main thesis, however, is a total repudiation of these beliefs: a) there is no “natural” causality between sex and gender, and b) like gender, sex is socially constructed and therefore just as contingent. Butler discusses drag in *Gender Trouble* to illustrate her thesis: drag reveals this contingency and gender’s “imitative structure.” It is worth quoting Butler extensively to get a sense of her argument and how she perceives drag:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.* Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (2006, 187, emphasis in original)

As is evident from this excerpt, Butler equates drag to cis male drag queens. In accordance with Balirano’s and Newton’s accounts, Butler also understands drag as the juxtaposition of the performer’s anatomical sex and the (opposite) gender being performed: “What is ‘performed’ in drag is, of course, the sign of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but that cannot be read without it” (2011, 181). If “natural” causality between sex and masculinity or femininity, the “signs of gender,” is presumed, the fun in drag (namely, men performing as women) is in seeing how a man can transform into a woman—since biological males are “naturally” (truly) masculine, it is giddy such a person can convincingly perform “unnatural” (artificial) femininity.²⁵

²⁵ In like manner, Newton argues that as “gender theater” drag poignantly underscores and demonstrates that “the possession of one type of genital equipment by no means guarantees the ‘naturally appropriate’ behavior” (1979, 103).

Although Butler understands “heterosexual coherence”—the idea that a person born with a penis becomes a masculine man and a person born with a vagina becomes a feminine woman—as naturalized fiction, her perception of drag echoes this fiction by asserting that drag is about gender; in her account, to the point of revealing gender’s imitative structure. The cis-heteronormative enterprise of binary gender is a prerequisite for a person to be recognized as human by others, and what drag reveals is that that binary is not natural (i.e., does not precede human social life) but socially constructed. In other words, the “fact” that people are born *either* male *or* female and inevitably become men or women is not dictated by nature but by people themselves. Drag underscores this notion as a person born male can “become” (i.e., in drag’s case, look and behave like) a woman and thus subvert the supposedly natural and necessary causality between sex and gender. Still, Butler does not imply that simply putting on makeup and a dress is “enough” for a person to be or to become a woman. Drag does not reveal how people become men or women or what it is to be a man or a woman; it reveals how becoming and being a man, a woman, or a person of any gender is not imposed by nature or biology but is always socially constructed.

Gayle Salamon (2010, 59) notes that the “mechanism” of social construction is often perceived as capable of producing normatively gendered subjects only, while nonnormative subjects somehow remain outside the reach of social construction. However, I would argue that nonbinary genders are perceived *only* as socially constructed. To be socially constructed is supposedly to lack ground in “natural facts” and, therefore, to be less real or not real at all. Nonbinary genders lack the “factual”—that is, material—foundation of sex that cisgender men and women have in sexual dimorphism since sex can only be male-or-female. Theorists and philosophers such as Butler have maintained that these “facts” are themselves socially constructed—they are facts because they are iterated and reiterated as such. Salamon argues that “[t]o claim that the body is socially constructed is not to claim that it is not real, that it is not made of flesh, or that its materiality is insignificant” (2010, 60). Likewise, Butler states in *Bodies That Matter* that “language and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified” (2011, 38). Yet language is commonly not perceived as material because materiality is understood to be outside language and thus outside the human mind. Such

views are part of the nature versus culture dichotomy in which materiality stands for nature/natural and language for culture/cultural. The nature/culture dichotomy is also part of cis-heteronormative gender ontology: sexual dimorphism (materiality) as an immutable natural or biological fact—the “truth” of gender—that correlates with binary social gender.

Butler (2006, 45) states in *Gender Trouble* that her objective is not to propose an ontology of gender but a genealogy of gender ontology: her theory is not about what gender is, it is about how the reality of gender is made. Butler discusses drag as “an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be” (2006, xxv). As drag “disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (Butler 2011, 85), the point of drag is “to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” (Butler 2004, xxiv). According to Butler, both drag and transgender can bring into question notions of reality by showing how they “can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted” (ibid., 217), while “[t]he point about drag is [...] to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested” (ibid., 218). In other words, Butler discusses drag to dispute cis-heteronormative gender ontology—the ‘heterosexual matrix’ as Butler terms it—and point out the purported reality of binary gender and natural causality between sex and gender as fallacious. Thus, drag seems to be located somewhere between—or perhaps beyond—being and doing in Butler’s theorization.

Drag is a somewhat confusing illustration for Butler’s theory as it is easy to misunderstand her point given that drag is commonly understood as theatrical performance. Gender performativity theory has sometimes been misinterpreted as declaring gender as intentionally chosen self-presentation—as if a person could change their gender like they change their clothes (e.g., Marcel 2014, 27–28)—even though Butler explicitly states in *Bodies That Matter* that “[p]erformativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance” (2011, 59).²⁶ J. L. Austin (1975, 6–7) states in *How to Do Things with Words* that he derived the word performative from

²⁶ It must be noted that performance as in “an artistic/theatrical show” versus performance as in “the verb perform in action” are easy to confuse in general and in Butler’s writing. To be fair, her use of the word performance is not always entirely clear in this respect. Perhaps it is not even possible to separate these two meanings entirely, at least in Butler’s writing.

‘perform’, as in perform an action. However, perform has a second meaning in English: to give a performance. Performative has in some contexts—perhaps most notably in the visual arts—come to mean ‘performance-like’, the adjective of performance, because of this double meaning of perform. Leena-Maija Rossi (2015, 30), for instance, notes that artists sometimes use the word performative when they, in fact, mean to say that their work is performance-like, that they perform in front of an audience or before a camera.²⁷

Performativity theory demonstrates how reality is made and established—while “others” are excluded from reality—by discursive iteration and reiteration. Ergo, a performative is an act that establishes (performs) reality. Drag is a problematic illustration for performativity theory because whether drag is readable as performative or not depends on how drag itself is understood. If drag is not understood as gender performance (or as homosexual cross-dressing), then drag does not appear as any more or less performative than painting, sculpture, or any other artistic medium or practice.²⁸ If, on the other hand, drag is understood as gender performance, then it can be interpreted as performative: doing drag (artistically/theatrically performing gender) produces a certain kind of truth effect of gender. That is, if a drag king is understood to perform masculinity or “as a man,” then that performance produces and (re)iterates a particular image of the reality of masculinity or being a man, although that reality is not necessarily cis-heteronormative.

Butler’s theory was, and still is, radical for arguing that nothing is essentially natural if natural is understood as that which is *a priori* objectively and unquestionably true and real. In cis-heteronormative gender ontology, naturalness is part of the pattern “sex is biological, that which is biological is natural, natural is true, and true is real.” Thus, if nothing is natural, then nothing is essentially real—reality is dependent on the thoughts and acts of those who attest that reality; it is contingent and discursive. But who gets to decide what is real and what is not? There is no one or definitive answer, but it is crucial to pose the question because the binary reality of gender and sex can seem unfaltering given its long and remarkable history. Its contingency can be difficult to comprehend for

²⁷ For further discussion of the double use of performative, see Rossi 2015.

²⁸ Diana Taylor (2016, 120), who has studied performance art, argues that performative is not the adjective of performance, and proposes the word ‘performativ’ instead. Still, performativ is not much more suitable a term to describe drag because drag is not a uniform artistic practice or medium. Not all drag is performance-like; drag is not limited to an artist performing onstage in front of an audience even if such performances are a common way of doing drag.

those whose existence has never been disputed as unnatural or unintelligible. “One ‘exists’ not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being recognizable” (Butler 1997, 5), and when you yourself are not recognized as human or admitted into the real, it is not difficult to fathom that cis-heteronormative gender ontology is one monumental hoax.

Butler argues that drag “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (2006, 186). Although Butler’s argument is intended to critique and subvert cis-heteronormative gender ontology and the essentialism inherent to it, I would argue that to regard drag as parody of the notion of real and authentic gender (see also, e.g., Aarnipuu 2010, 218) is to fail to recognize nonbinary genders and embodiment as real, authentic, and original. Nonbinary life and embodiment are impossibilities to those to whom essence and existence are phenomenologically, epistemologically, and ontologically cis-heteronormative concepts. After all, the reason cisgender men and women are understood to be ontologically more real than any other gender is because both their biological sex and social gender are recognized as true and real, whereas a person can “identify” as nonbinary *regardless* of their sex.

Being assigned male or female at birth (i.e., sex as sexual dimorphism) is supposedly the material truth and reality of gender, and thus man and woman are the natural, therefore true, therefore real genders. If biological sex can only mean sexual dimorphism, then nonbinary genders can never be real in the same way man and woman are. There are no biological nonbinary sexes because human bodies are only understood in relation to the monolith of sexual dimorphism: the naked truth of sex is always male *or* female. Even the sexes that *are* nonbinary in biological terms are regarded as “ambiguous” variation or combinations of male and female sex characteristics, and not as proper and legitimate sexes that simply are not male or female. Intersex people, born (i.e., “naturally”) neither male nor female, are in most cases forced to conform to cis-heteronormative criteria of gender, sex, and the human through various forms of violence. Their sexes are treated as medical conditions; they are not regarded as proper sexes but as disorders that need fixing. It is peculiar that when it comes to sexes that are biologically (as in scientifically studied) nonbinary, it is nature that is assumed to be erroneous and mistaken and not the people

who study and interpret it.

Peculiarly, the belief in the absolute reality of cis-heteronormative gender ontology is so unwavering that having a vagina or a penis can *only* mean being fe/male and thus a wo/man, binary sex and gender always being the only intelligible form of life. Even though man and woman are understood to be the two truly real genders, nonbinary genders are not surreal or unreal—they can be imagined, and many acknowledge their social existence—but they are *areal* because they are not intelligible as true and real in the same way as man and woman. There are different degrees and levels of intelligibility and acknowledging non-cis genders as “gender identities” is just one of them. To reflect this conceptual difference, I propose the term ‘areal’ for that which can be thought of but is not thought of as real—material, embodied, original, and authentic—in the same way as that which is real. On a closer look, Butler’s analysis of drag, in fact, demonstrates the areality of nonbinary genders:

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the “reality” of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks “reality,” and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. (2006, xxiii)

It is not so much drag itself as such perceptions of drag that reveal the impossibility to think of gender outside cis-heteronormative gender ontology—the “profound desire to keep the order of binary gender natural or necessary, to make of it a structure [...] that no human can oppose, and still remain human” (Butler 2004, 35).

As I demonstrate below, drag is sometimes thought to have the power to create new and transform existing perceptions of gender. Though I do not deny this potential, I do not wish to hail drag as the liberator of nonbinary genders or impose such a messianic role on drag only. After all, all art has the same performative potential because all human endeavors are and always have been about gender, race, dis/ability, age, sexuality, and class, even if their subject matter does not specifically concern these issues. Unlike other mediums, however, drag is generally perceived to be gender performance, and thus *explicitly about gender*. In the next chapter, I consider drag’s subject matter and its apparent nature as gender performance.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROYAL FAMILY

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, drag is generally understood to be a form of cross-dressing—wearing the opposite sex’s clothing or performing as the opposite gender. This notion is based on a binary understanding of gender and sex, and it also implies that the artist’s gender defines what type of drag they do: men who do drag perform as women and women who do drag perform as men. In *Mother Camp*, Newton argues that drag is one of “the most representative and widely used symbols of homosexuality in the English speaking world” (1979, 100) and goes so far as to state that being a drag queen is an “open declaration” of homosexuality (ibid., 64). However, it should be noted that what Newton calls “gayness” (ibid.) or the “homosexual subculture” (ibid., 20) would now be called queer or LGBTQ+, and thus encompasses more than cisgender gay men. Indeed, drag’s home is in the LGBTQ+ community, particularly queer communities of color, and is generally attributed to gay men and lesbian women, although some argue that heterosexual men and women (can) also do drag.

Fairly little seems to have changed since Newton wrote *Mother Camp* in the early 1970s—even today the prevailing image of drag is the cis gay male drag queen. In fact, many accounts imply that gay men who do drag are drag queens because they are gay men, not because they perform certain type of drag. Transgender artists have been, and often still are, excluded from definitions of drag even though trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people have always been important actors in the history of drag.²⁹ As I discussed in the previous chapter, an individual artist’s or a particular performance’s artistic merit is sometimes assessed based on the juxtaposition of the performed gender and the artist’s gender, and thus drag is supposedly at its best when done by cisgender men who perform hyperfemininity; that is, when natural masculinity is transformed into artificial femininity. Consequently, trans and cis women drag queens supposedly have an “unfair upper hand” because embodying femininity does not come naturally to men like

²⁹ Newton, for instance, discusses trans drag queens and their position in the drag community, although not in a positive light: in her rather somber interpretation, being a trans woman (*and* a drag queen) is a fate even worse than being a cis gay male drag queen.

it does to women. This gender bias is harmful because not only does it discredit and devalue numerous artists and their work, it also creates uncalled-for hierarchies within already marginalized drag communities and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. As feminist art historians have striven to assert, it is harmful to assess artistic merit based on the artist's gender and not the art itself—especially of artists whose art is culturally and socially significant to gender, sexual, and racial minorities.

In this chapter, I discuss different types of drag artists and examine their distinctive characteristics. First, I tackle the question of subject matter. What is performed in drag? Is it always gender, or is there more to drag than dressing up and performing as the “opposite sex”? I then examine the differences and similarities between drag and fe/male impersonation. Often considered synonymous, both are artistic practices closely associated with the queer community in general and cisgender gay men in particular. Is a distinction between the two necessary, or is fe/male impersonation simply another word for drag and vice versa?

BUTCH BOTCHERS AND FAUX FEMMES

The two most common and best-known types of drag artists are drag queens and drag kings. Newton defines drag queen as “a homosexual male who often, or habitually, dresses in female attire” (1979, 100) and drag king as a lesbian who dresses in male attire, although she uses the term “drag butch” (ibid.). Newton's account is exemplary of definitions in which drag queens are understood to be “men who do drag” and drag kings “women who do drag” (see also, e.g., Balirano 2017, 175n1; Aarnipuu 2010, 113, 215): drag queens are cisgender (homosexual) men who wear women's clothing or perform as women by default, drag kings being their “counterpart” (e.g., Gelder 2007, 57). However, Olli-Pekka Kursi notes that a drag queen can be a person of any gender or sexual orientation; common to all drag queens is that they do their makeup, dress up as women, and perform, sing live, or lip sync.³⁰ Likewise, Halberstam states that a drag king can be any “performer who makes masculinity into his or her act [...]” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 36); or, as Volcano argues, ““Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes

³⁰ Kursi, Olli-Pekka, “Drag queen -tähdet eivät ole suvaitsevaisuuden asialla.” *Yle Kioski*, June 22, 2015.

a performance out of masculinity” (ibid., 16). Thus, taking transgender and nonbinary artists into account, it is reasonable to argue that it is the style or type of drag that determines whether the artist or performer is a drag queen or a drag king, not their gender or sexual orientation.

Stereotypical visual characteristics of drag queens are heavy makeup, big wigs, high heels, and over-the-top costumes, and their performances of (hyper)femininity are often described with words such as exaggeration, theatricality, glamour, drama, and camp (e.g., Aarnipuu 2010, 218). These larger-than-life attributes are part of the so-called artificiality of femininity that drag queens employ in their performances. Although many argue that drag queens perform hyperfemininity, some identify “women” as the subject matter of drag queen performances. Besides the notion that drag is a form of cross-dressing, this seems to result from conflating drag queens with female impersonators, which I discuss in the next subchapter. Even though the same conflation applies to drag kings and male impersonators, drag king performances are less often interpreted as being about actual men than masculinity as a social construct. Indeed, it is not the artificiality of masculinity that drag kings make into their act, but the alleged naturality and normality of masculinity as Halberstam argues:

If the drag queen takes what is artificial about femininity (or what has been culturally constructed as artificial) and plays it to the hilt, the Drag King takes what is so-called natural about masculinity and reveals its mechanisms—the tricks and poses, the speech patterns and attitudes that have been seamlessly assimilated into a performance of realness. (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 62)

According to Aarnipuu (2010, 229), many drag king performances play on men’s cultural freedom and power and the sexism and chauvinism that ensues from this hegemony. Halberstam argues that the drag king “revels in what is already perverse in the normal,” and in this way “gives us insight into the vagaries of normal masculinity, its own set of peculiarities, its own way of making those peculiarities seem mundane” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 152). Unlike drag queen performances that reflect the artificiality and extravaganza of femininity, “kinging”—performing or doing drag as a drag king—reflects the hegemonic notion of masculinity as unperformable (Uimonen 2007, 105). Halberstam attributes the comparative “lack of a lesbian drag tradition” to this notion, “to mainstream definitions of male masculinity as nonperformative” (1998, 234). This

apparent “nonperformativity” of masculinity is not limited to Halberstam’s analyses of drag king culture; for example, Ken Gelder argues that “[t]he drag king’s performance of masculinity [...] is almost oxymoronic: the performance of something non-performative. Drag queens exaggerate their femininity, but drag kings therefore downplay their masculinity” (2007, 58). The demarcation between drag kings and queens is sharper than the conspicuous difference in subject matter: besides implying that masculinity as a subject of performance is markedly different from femininity—“masculinity ‘just is,’ whereas femininity reeks of the artificial” (Halberstam 1998, 234)—these arguments suggest a decisive disparity in the way these qualities are performed.

Aarnipuu (2008, 84) notes that (cisgender) women can also be drag queens, but the appropriate term for these performers is ‘bio queen’ (as in biological) or ‘femme queen’, although the latter is rarely used.³¹ However, the variants ‘faux queen’ and ‘hyper queen’ are also commonly used in social media. These terms are used to make a distinction between assigned female at birth and assigned male at birth drag queens and were likely coined in response to cisgender men’s dominion over prevailing notions of drag, most notably the term drag queen that is persistently identified exclusively with “men who do drag.” Faux/bio/hyper queens are remarkably active in contemporary drag scenes, at least in Finland; in fact, I have seen more assigned female at birth drag queens than cis male or assigned male at birth drag queens among young Finnish performers. Despite faux/bio/hyper queens’ prominence in contemporary drag scenes, there seem to be no faux kings (assigned male at birth drag kings), only the theoretical possibility of them. Searching for faux kings online, I came across only one article featuring photographs of several faux kings, including the winner of the seventh season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Violet Chachki.³² Tellingly, the *Urban Dictionary* definition of faux queen by user rainbowrolemodel states: “As of the time of this writing, there are no known faux kings.”³³

Drag is often considered synonymous with cis male drag queens or “male cross-dressing.” In fact, this type of drag seems to be the archetype from which all other types of drag

³¹ According to Aarnipuu (2010, 201), pop star Madonna could be considered a bio queen because her stage shows sometimes resemble drag shows and the exaggerated femininity is performed by a female artist.

³² England, Blake, “The Other Show: Faux Kings.” *Wussy*, April 6, 2015.

³³ rainbowrolemodel, “Faux Queen.” *Urban Dictionary* definition, June 26, 2005.

have supposedly evolved. Baker, for instance, notes that the term drag being used to refer exclusively to drag queens suggests that “a woman dressed as a man cannot correctly be described as being in drag [...]” (1994, 17), but is still used because no better term to describe the practice is available. However, when it comes to hyper/faux/bio queens and kings, the dilemma seems to have been overcome by simply omitting *drag*. Be they bio, femme, hyper, or faux, these performers are apparently not in drag because they are not understood as cross-dressing. This is an intriguing omission because the ‘queen’ in drag queen originally stands for gay, not for woman: “‘Queen’ is a generic noun for any homosexual man” (Newton 1979, 3).³⁴ Etymologically, this makes bio queens “biological gays” and faux queens “fake fags.” In *Mother Camp*, Newton refers to drag kings with the term “drag butch” (ibid., 5n13), which also attests queen’s origin as a specific type of homosexual man, just like butch is a type of homosexual woman. A significant shift in meaning seems to have happened at some point in the late twentieth century: queen came to refer no longer to men, but women, and drag butch was most likely replaced by drag king to mirror this shift in meaning. Before this transition, drag was the deed (cross-dressing) and queen or butch identified the doer (their gender and sexuality); in contemporary use, however, queen and king indicate the deed (sign of gender being performed) and drag or hyper/faux/bio identifies the doer (their gender or sex) in relation to the deed.

I argued in the previous chapter that doing drag is a transgendered act: drag artists do not suddenly become transgender when they do drag but doing drag socially marks them as gender nonnormative or non-cisgender *because* they do drag. This, however, only applies to cis male drag queens and cis female drag kings; that is, drag as cross-dressing, when the gender being performed is the “opposite sex.” This could be one reason why the hyperfemininity performed by cis male drag queens is so eagerly underscored with words such as theatrical, exaggeration, and imitation.³⁵ Since doing drag can mark them as gender nonnormative, some cis male drag queens are keen to (re)assure that they really are men underneath the makeup and costumes.³⁶ This assertion is understandable given

³⁴ In other words, drag queen originated as pejorative slang for homosexual men who cross-dress.

³⁵ Paradoxically, cis gay male drag queens are commonly perceived as feminine men “by nature,” yet the femininity they perform is underscored as superficial and external.

³⁶ For example, Kursi, Olli-Pekka, “Drag queen -tähdet eivät ole suvaitsevaisuuden asialla.” *Yle Kioski*, June 22, 2015; Aarnipuu 2010, 230.

that most cis male drag queens are homosexual, and therefore already part of a minority group unfavored by the cis-heteronormative majority. Thus, drag's artificiality and theatricality must be emphasized in order to dispel any suspicion of nonnormative gender identification. Perhaps because of this imposed shame or stigma, both discernibility and indiscernibility have been central to drag queen performances by cisgender men: part of the fun is in knowing that the performer is not female even if they look and act like a woman (e.g., Newton 1979, 57; Butler 2006, 187); on the other hand, the fun might be in the performer failing to look and act like a "real" woman despite their wearing women's clothing and makeup.

Making this homosexual, transgender, or gender nonconforming "shame" a key element of drag queen performances is a quintessentially queer tactic in which the imposed shame is disarmed and the characteristic reclaimed as a source of pride.³⁷ This, however, is not to say that being shamed by the cis-heteronormative majority for gender nonconformity or nonnormative gender is any less oppressive or hurtful.³⁸ Although understood mainly as lighthearted entertainment, drag performances by cis male drag queens can be thought of as political acts (Aarnipuu 2010, 13). The political nature of drag queen performances by cisgender men seems to always concern hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative gender roles. Gelder (2007, 56), for instance, argues that drag queens undo normative maleness and cross gender boundaries, whereas Balirano notes that "[d]rag performers characterize their shows in a highly satirical way in order to bait prescribed gender roles as produced by heterosexual men" (2017, 155). I would argue that if drag is political, then all drag is political, yet somehow only cis male drag queens are considered a threat to cis-heteronormativity: they supposedly double-cross the male sex—their birthright—and gender altogether. They mock both nature and culture, and, thus, the order of things: if a man can look and act like a woman, then what is there to being a man or a woman?

In addition to unfavorable elements like artificiality, drama, and exaggeration being associated with drag queen performances of (hyper)femininity, the interpretation of drag queen performances by cisgender men as disputing the category 'woman' is likely one of

³⁷ The word queer itself originated as pejorative slang but has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community since the late 1980s.

³⁸ Homosexuality, after all, is most of all *gender* nonconformity: a homosexual person does not abide by cis-heteronormativity and their assigned gender's rules and roles.

the reasons why drag queen performances have been interpreted as misogynistic parodies of womanhood (e.g., Aarnipuu 2008, 135).³⁹ Butler is one of the few twentieth-century feminist writers and theorists to defend drag (see, e.g., Rossi 2015, 38) and notes in *Gender Trouble* that drag and cross-dressing have been perceived as degrading to women within much feminist theory (2006, 187). Elizabeth Schewe suggests that “[b]ecause femininity, in contrast with unmarked and naturalized masculinity, is already seen as artificial, it is more open to parody and tends not to ‘efface’ the man who appropriates it [...]” (2009, 672) and notes that “male drag”—that is, cis male drag queens—has been compared to white performers in blackface (ibid.). As is evident in Schewe’s account, drag queen performances, presumably performed by cisgender homosexual men who cross-dress, tend to be interpreted as parodying and appropriating femininity—and thus, in a binary view, women. This interpretation may be based on the way cis male drag queens perform femininity (over-the-top, flamboyant, exaggerated), or because in a second-wave feminist context women (namely, cisgender women) are understood as being oppressed by cisgender men; even homosexual men, who in turn are subordinate to heterosexual men.

The relation between drag kings (cisgender homosexual women, presumably) and masculinity is rather different: in drag king culture, masculinity is understood in the plural, as masculinities, and drag king performances are often described as analyzing, criticizing, celebrating, or commending masculinities. Halberstam (1998, 235) notes that drag kings perform different masculinities in different ways: white and heteronormative masculinities are contested and thus subject to parody and ridicule, whereas black or queer masculinities tend to be regarded with good humor and respect. According to Aarnipuu (2010, 13), kinging is often theoretical by default as it challenges gender systems, scrutinizes old-fashioned notions of masculinity, and creates new ways to perform masculinity and be masculine. Halberstam argues that drag king culture constitutes “a counterpublic space where [...] minority masculinities can be produced, validated, fleshed out, and celebrated” (2005, 128), and describes drag king scenes as “testing grounds” and safe spaces

³⁹ Furthermore, drag performer Mystery Meat associates this type of drag with transphobia: “While many cis men who are drag performers don’t intend to make women or trans people into a joke, audience members and performers who laugh at the idea of ‘a man in a dress’ perpetuate a transphobic ideology” (Gardner, Luke, “Not Just for Cis-Men: Mystery Meat Redefines Drag in the South.” *Wussy*, January 3, 2019).

for various gender identifications (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 131). Aarnipuu (2010, 215) also notes that there is room for variation and experimentation within the subculture because crossing borders with trans and gender nonconforming identities is not as difficult in the drag king scene as it seems to be for “men who do drag.” Overall, drag king scenes seem to be more open to change and new styles of drag, perhaps because there are not many drag kings even today (ibid.).

A common question regarding drag king performances is whether the performed masculinity is innate, and thus “organic,” or simply an act of imitation or impersonation. In Halberstam’s writing, kinging is profoundly connected to lesbian and butch identities and female masculinity in general. Resolving the (cor)relation between masculinity and drag is imperative to their theorization of female masculinity: both male and female bodies have participated in constituting what is culturally and socially recognized as masculinity (Halberstam 1998, 2), yet female masculinity has been repeatedly rejected so that “male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (ibid., 1). Halberstam notes that “if masculinity adheres ‘naturally’ and inevitably to men, then masculinity cannot be impersonated” (ibid., 235). Thus, it is of importance whether assuming masculinity is a theatrical transformation, as it supposedly is for the “femme” or “androgynous” drag king, or whether the performed masculinity is an extension of the king’s own masculinity, as it seems to be for the “butch” drag king (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 36, 131).

For many drag artists, doing drag is a safe way to express nonnormative gender creatively in a queer-friendly environment. To paraphrase Halberstam, many cis male drag queens do drag to express their “alternative forms of femininity” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 35); being a drag queen is supposedly the only acceptable “mode” of being a feminine cis gay man because femininity can only be a negative quality outside the context of drag. Alexander argues that “[t]he act of gay men dressed in drag performing for other gay men is less about women and more about the situated desire of the performative aesthetic” (2006, 120). Although Alexander only considers cis gay male drag queens in his account, I would argue that all drag is more about artistic self-expression, the “situated desire” of aesthetics, than any actual gender. This, however, is not to say that drag has nothing to do with gender, especially the artist’s own gender and gendered experience. The impetus for doing drag is always personal; it is not always an extension of the artist’s gender, but

many trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people discover their gender by doing drag because they get to safely explore and experiment with nonnormative gender expression in drag, which is often not possible in everyday life, at least not in the same way.⁴⁰

Understood as cross-dressing, drag can be perceived as the play between appearance and essence, reality and fantasy, or the artist's ability to authentically fake or imitate the "opposite sex's" embodiment.⁴¹ This understanding seems to result in the assumption that the artist plays a character or has a separate persona in drag. For example, in the first episode of each season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, each contestant is asked to describe their drag persona in the third person instead of describing themselves in the first person. The insistence on drag artists playing a character or having an onstage persona implies that the artist *has* to be a different person in drag even though being in drag is not a sudden change of gender or personality for many, if not for most, drag artists and performers.⁴² This expectation seems to follow the presumption that drag is cross-dressing: the cross-gender element of drag is overemphasized and misinterpreted because gender itself is understood in cis-heteronormative terms as pertaining to an *either-or* material truth. That is, the insistence on an artist playing a character in drag is motivated by a transphobic need to be reassured that what the audience sees onstage is strictly fantasy and play, that the drag queen in particular is, in fact, merely a "man in a dress."

Since many drag artists are transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer, it does not come as a surprise that not all drag is about the "opposite sex."⁴³ Some nonbinary drag artists and performers do drag as queens and/or kings, but many others do what I term nonbinary drag, although nonbinary artists are not the only ones who perform this type of drag.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Volcano, for instance, notes that for some drag kings their drag personas are more than a stage act (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 27).

⁴¹ For example, Newton notes: "Thus when impersonators are performing, the oppositional play is between 'appearance,' which is female, and 'reality,' or 'essence,' which is male" (1979, 101).

⁴² For instance, drag performer Dani Weber writes: "When I'm contouring my face and applying exaggerated make-up, I'm not a 'faux queen', I'm Dani. When I'm gluing hair clippings on my face to create a beard, I'm not a 'drag king', I'm Dani" (Weber, Dani, "Drag and Gender: Performing as a Non-Binary Human." *Archer*, July 13, 2017).

⁴³ Weber argues that "[t]o suggest there's only two binary ways of doing drag is to suggest that western beauty standards, and cultural ways of acting like a man or woman, are the only forms of gender expression" (ibid.).

⁴⁴ For instance, American drag artist Milk, a contestant on the sixth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the third season of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, is well known for his "genderfuck" drag inspired by the Club Kid culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Milk is one of the few contestants to have appeared on the show whose drag is more gender "ambiguous" than hyperfeminine.

Sometimes called “gender bender” or “genderfuck” drag, nonbinary drag can be a mixture or fusion of masculine and/or feminine characteristics, or it can be a complete rejection of binary notions of gender. At present, nonbinary drag styles do not have proper names, and thus artists and performers who do nonbinary drag are persistently labeled drag queens or kings. This issue is also addressed in a *Wussy* magazine interview with Atlanta-based drag performer Mystery Meat:

As a trans man, Lewis [Bello] said that navigating the drag scene, along with life in general, is harder for him than most. While many people categorize Meat (Lewis) as a drag king, he refers to himself as a drag thing. It’s important to remember that drag is not just cross-dressing, as this enables the idea of gender as a strict binary. Rather, drag is an art form that molds to the shape of the artist, and, as such, can ignore, reject, or redefine gender altogether.⁴⁵

In this regard, nonbinary drag’s status is very similar to nonbinary genders. In an interview with Aarnipuu (2010, 296), Finnish drag performer Lola Vanilla, founder of the drag collective House of Vanilla, says they wish drag performers would not be so strictly divided into queens or kings, that everyone could just do drag. One way to solve this problem would be to acknowledge and accept drag queen and drag king as insufficient to describe all drag and begin to coin proper names for the different styles and types of nonbinary drag. Balirano (2017, 175) argues that doing nonbinary drag is a performative act that can reconfigure old-fashioned (i.e., normative) gender categories. Thus, having more than two terms for drag artists could help create new ways to articulate and understand nonbinary genders. I have coined the simple portmanteau ‘drag quing’ to underscore that not all who do drag are queens or kings. Sadly, quing, as a combination of queen and king, is as precarious as nonbinary. Having drag quing as an option is a start, but coining terms that have no semantic relation to the binary genders should be a priority in future research. In the meantime, drag quing may be of service to other writers who struggle with this issue or to drag artists who do nonbinary drag.

One contemporary drag artist whose art I would like to consider as nonbinary drag is Berlin-based Hungry, best known for their surreal, perhaps alien, makeup and style. In an interview with *Indie* magazine, Hungry describes their current style, which they have

⁴⁵ Gardner, Luke, “Not Just for Cis-Men: Mystery Meat Redefines Drag in the South.” *Wussy*, January 3, 2019.

dubbed ‘distorted drag’, as visually “ranging from very insect-like drag to [their] own interpretations of gods.”⁴⁶ They received mainstream recognition and acclaim for creating Icelandic singer-musician Björk’s distinctive makeup for the artwork of her studio album *Utopia* (2017). Hungry has made quite a reputation for themselves since 2017 despite their having done drag for only a few years and being relatively new to the world of drag.

Even though their drag style is conspicuously more-than-human, unhuman even, Hungry is labeled a drag queen in the *Indie* story and in an interview with *PAPER* magazine.⁴⁷ But if drag queens perform femininity, as my sources maintain, then what are the characteristics that make Hungry a drag queen? Is it because they were assigned male at birth and do drag, or because their drag has ambiguously feminine characteristics? One reason why Hungry’s drag could be considered nonbinary is precisely this “ambiguity,” although nonbinary genders are ambiguously “masculine” or “feminine” only if gender is understood as binary. Hungry could be labeled a drag queen for the lack of a better word, but ‘distorted drag artist’ does their art more justice. As a matter of fact, distorted is a fantastic word to describe their drag: it is not only the makeup that distorts human facial features, but the complete look from head to toe that amalgamates human characteristics with unhuman features and distorts the image of the human. One could argue that Hungry’s distorted drag is genderless because of this dubious nonhumanity and overall ambiguity, but, in my understanding, gender is something no living creature can escape or be outside of if/when understood in human terms, although that gender is not necessarily binary.

Given the persistent emphasis on gender in definitions of drag, it is imperative to pose the question of who (or what) determines drag’s subject matter in general and in particular. Numerous accounts designate the subject matter of *all* drag as gender—or cross-gender transformation, more specifically—as if individual artists and works had no intention of their own. After all, transformation is drag’s form, not (necessarily) its content.⁴⁸ Arguing that all paintings, sculptures, or photographs have the same content because they share a

⁴⁶ Hennessy, Caity, “@isshehungry’s Guide to Surreal Drag Makeup.” *Indie*, August 22, 2017.

⁴⁷ Moran, Justin, “Berlin-Based Hungry’s Distorted Drag.” *PAPER*, January 16, 2018.

⁴⁸ This is not to argue that form and content are separable, sovereign components of a work, but in art history emphasis is often placed on either one. Marshall McLuhan ([1964] 1968), for example, proposes in *Understanding Media* that “the medium is the message,” that the focus should be on the medium rather than the content.

medium is by no means a plausible argument, yet in the case of drag the medium is neutered and pronounced singular, albeit in binary terms. Is it impossible to interpret, describe, and consider drag without reducing its content and form to cis-heteronormative notions of gender, or is this conception preimposed on all readings of drag? Since drag is still understood to be cross-dressing, it may be that the renunciation of assigned gender and cis-heteronormative subjectification is in itself so atrocious and radical even today that drag can only concern gender.

Furthermore, drag is a peculiar art form because, gender being its apparent (i.e., imposed) subject matter, it is sometimes given the prodigious power to denaturalize and reconstruct notions of gender (e.g., Lorenz 2012, 60). This rather hyperbolic reading ignores other qualities that are always also present in any human, and thus in drag. Whenever gender is performed, sexuality, race, dis/ability, class, size, and age are also performed. These qualities are all interwoven; femininity and masculinity, the signs of gender, are always particular and specific, although much usage of these terms does not reflect this, at least in the context of drag.⁴⁹ Lola Vanilla suggests that drag is a fictive gender into which one can pick and mix the best and strongest qualities from “both” genders (Aarnipuu 2010, 248–50). But if drag is fictive (i.e., fantasy) gender, then it is also fictive race, class, age, and sexuality because gender can never be isolated from these factors and neither can they be conceived of without gender.

According to Alexander, “Drag is based in the assumptions about the normal and its opposite” (2006, 101); it is “both that act of subverting what is seen and presumed to [be] natural, and that strategic manner that presupposes a knowledge of the real, displaced by the surreal” (ibid., 100). Instead of surreal, I prefer the word fantasy to describe drag and, more specifically, its relation to the real. At first, fantasy seems inadequate for my purposes here because it is commonly understood as that which is not real—the opposite of reality. However, “Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality [...]” (Butler 2004, 29). This foreclosure is blurred in drag: the obvious answer would be that fantasy is dragged into the material realm of the real and presented as reality, but it is, in fact, the purported reality that is

⁴⁹ Silas Flipper, for instance, argues that “class differences are really crucial to drag performances because there are so many different forms of masculinity” (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 134).

presented as fantasy and disarmed of its truth claim on the human.

“Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise [...]” (Butler 2004, 29) and, understood this way, is the perfect word to describe drag. By becoming the “image of [their] own imagination,”⁵⁰ to quote RuPaul himself, drag artists do not merely imitate or reiterate ready notions of gender or the human but challenge the bases of these notions and trouble the distinction between fantasy and reality.⁵¹ Drag is a fantasy embodiment, a manifestation of a situated image—a construction, if you will—of the real; it “isn’t interested in the world as it is—it’s interested in the world as it *could be* [...]” (Velour and Velour 2018, 95, emphasis in original). As Gardner writes, “drag is an art form that molds to the shape of the artist [...]”;⁵² what is performed in drag is therefore not only the sign of gender, but images of the human in all shapes, sizes, and forms, with varying degrees of emphasis on different qualities and characteristics. Still, it is debatable whether drag, the *art préféré* of gender and sexual minorities, has the power to make truth claims about the real or reconstruct notions of gender or the human. Be that as it may, drag always has something to say about reality, and those utterances can have unexpected repercussions.

EVERY JOHN IS NOT THE SAME

One category of performing arts closely related to drag is female and male impersonation. The terms drag queen and female impersonator or drag king and male impersonator are sometimes used interchangeably;⁵³ drag queens can be understood as impersonating the social character of women and “female embodiment” and thus as female impersonators, and the same is true of drag kings and male impersonation. Whether and what sort of a distinction between these artistic practices can be made is, of course, contingent on how they are defined. For instance, Newton argues that female impersonators and drag queens

⁵⁰ RuPaul’s Drag Race (@RuPaulsDragRace), “‘When you become the image of your own imagination, it’s the most powerful thing you could ever do.’ - @RuPaul.” *Twitter*, July 7, 2013, 11:49 a.m.

⁵¹ My argument is indebted to Diana Taylor’s discussion of performance art, particularly her argument: “Performance moves between the AS IF and the IS, between pretend and new constructions of the ‘real’” (2016, 6).

⁵² Gardner, Luke, “Not Just for Cis-Men: Mystery Meat Redefines Drag in the South.” *Wussy*, January 3, 2019.

⁵³ See, e.g., Volcano and Halberstam 1999.

can be distinguished “to make invidious comparisons” (1979, 11n19): only professionals are referred to as female impersonators, whereas any gay man in drag (i.e., wearing women’s clothing) can be called a drag queen.⁵⁴ Baker, on the other hand, states that female impersonator is “an all-embracing term describing any male who entertains by dressing as a woman” (1994, 17) and stresses that he would use the term drag queen only for full-time drag artists. Baker also notes that some artists have rejected the term drag queen because they perceive drag to be “tacky and downmarket and degrading [to] their ‘higher art’ of female impersonation” (ibid., 18). In other words, the disparity seems to lie in artistic quality: Newton understands drag queen as the comprehensive term for gay men who cross-dress and female impersonation as the professional and “higher art,” whereas they are the opposite for Baker even though his subsequent observation coincides with Newton’s account.⁵⁵

Whether one or the other is the higher or lower art is irrelevant to my discussion here. What is of relevance is whether or not there are substantial artistic differences between these artistic practices that support their differentiation. Distinguishing them is in many ways a futile crusade because, quantitatively speaking, their similarities outnumber their differences: as Teich (2012, 125) notes, a performance by one can look tantamount to the other since both drag performers and fe/male impersonators often lip sync, dance, sing, or do comedy acts. Hence, I argue for this distinction based on their qualitative—that is, artistic—differences without forgetting their similarities. Drag and fe/male impersonation do not exclude one another but are not mutually constitutive either; they often go hand in hand, especially in what Aarnipuu (2010, 211) describes as “traditional drag.”

In order to proceed with my examination of these hypothesized differences, it is necessary to draw some crude outlines for fe/male impersonation. According to Aarnipuu, the crux of traditional drag is that a man dresses up as a woman and portrays a character that the audience recognizes—usually a female popstar or other celebrity—in an exaggerated and

⁵⁴ Newton also notes: “Glamour drag and serious drag are synonymous terms to female impersonators. No serious attempt is made to present any female image other than that of a ‘star’ or female nightclub performer (singer or dancer)” (1979, 49).

⁵⁵ No such hierarchization is present in accounts of drag kings and male impersonators. This could be because drag king culture is more fluid and open to variation, or because there are not very many drag kings or male impersonators overall in comparison to drag queens and female impersonators.

humorous manner (ibid.).⁵⁶ Pace Aarnipuu, I model my outlines for fe/male impersonation on her description of traditional drag: performers who impersonate a specific and recognizable person. Merely impersonating a celebrity or other well-known person is not enough for a performance to be described as fe/male impersonation—the words female and male imply the element of cross-dressing. However, all cross-dressing impersonations are not fe/male impersonation as Baker notes: “there have been literally hundreds of actors and comedians who have made an impact by playing as women [...] but who could hardly be categorised as female impersonators” (1994, 17). The same argument is present in Newton’s account: “Of course, known legitimate performers sometimes do drag in the movies and on TV but are not thought of as drag queens” (1979, 5n13).⁵⁷ Thus, even though the aspect of cross-dressing is the implicit common denominator, all performers who cross-dress are not considered drag artists or fe/male impersonators. This is why “any male who entertains by dressing as a woman” cannot be the definition of drag queen or female impersonator as both evidently require more than merely wearing a dress or makeup.⁵⁸

My argument for distinguishing drag and fe/male impersonation on the basis of their artistic differences is based on various performances, artists, and observations, but I examine one particular drag show here to demonstrate this distinction. Aja, American drag artist, rapper, and contestant on the ninth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the third season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race: All Stars*, headlined an hour-long drag show two nights

⁵⁶ Aarnipuu (2008, 60) also notes that in “contemporary drag shows” a fabulously dressed man imitates famous female artists’ singing and mannerisms and ends the show by dramatically taking his wig off. Taking a wig off is perhaps more common in female impersonation: its function is to underscore that the performance is in fact an impersonation, although the effect is hardly dramatic since female impersonators often change wigs multiple times during their acts. In *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, contestants removing their wigs during a lip sync performance is considered distasteful and the judges strongly discourage doing so. However, removing a wig can be a profitable wager if there is something special underneath it, such as another wig (i.e., a “wig reveal”). For example, during the ninth season’s finale “lip sync smackdown,” Sasha Velour removed their wavy auburn wig to uncover a flurry of red rose petals. Velour was ultimately crowned the winner and their floral reveal became one of the most iconic moments in the show’s history.

⁵⁷ Some argue that the difference between female impersonators and drag queens is a matter of sexual orientation. This distinction is similar to the definitions of drag as the homosexual term for or version of cross-dressing, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter. Gelder, for instance, argues that drag queens should be distinguished from female impersonators because the latter is a common practice “across a range of male social sectors and [...] is usually not associated with homosexuality” (2007, 55).

⁵⁸ Implicit in both Newton’s and Baker’s accounts is that in order for a cross-dressing performance to be drag or fe/male impersonation, either the performer has to be queer or the performance has to be part of queer culture or otherwise “gay sensitive,” as discussed in the previous chapter.

in a row at nightclub DTM in Helsinki in February 2018. Aja's supporting acts were Marko Vainio (Divet Show), Amanda and Ofimja, and Jayden Mars on both nights. I was there to see the show on the second night, on February 2.

Marko Vainio opened the show with a lip sync medley of world-famous female popstars, such as Cher, Céline Dion, Pink, and Lady Gaga, along with Finnish favorites like Katri Helena and Elli Haloo. Every time the track and "diva" changed, Vainio transformed into the person he was impersonating by quickly changing outfits, wigs, and mannerisms. Vainio's segment was followed by Amanda and Ofimja, who performed a voguing number. Aja performed to Lady Gaga's "John Wayne" in their signature dance style, wearing their black bodysuit adorned with rhinestones from the "Lip Sync for Your Legacy"⁵⁹ performance in the first episode of the third season of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, which had aired a week before. After their performance, Aja talked to the audience about the television show, their fellow contestants, and the latest episode, which had aired in the United States the night before. Their segment was followed by a performance by Jayden Mars, who, much like Vainio, changed wigs and mannerisms multiple times while performing a motley medley of spoken word and hit songs with an entourage of three. Aja returned to the stage for a second number, a South Korean pop song, now wearing their pastel three-in-one outfit from the aforementioned season premiere's "All Stars Variety Show" challenge.

Vainio, who is one of the few professional entertainers in Finland to make a living as a drag performer, impersonates various women and men during his performances and states in an interview with *Yle Kioski* that he is a 'drag impersonator'.⁶⁰ The gist of impersonation is that the audience recognizes the celebrity or public figure, but merely looking like or imitating the behavior and mannerisms of the person in question is not enough for an impersonation to be successful. An original take on the character is crucial because, in the end, anyone could do a "convincing" impersonation. This was also evident in Vainio's performance in which he added whimsical twists to his characterizations. At the DTM

⁵⁹ In *RuPaul's Drag Race* (the "main seasons"), two of the week's weakest ("bottom") contestants have to "Lip Sync for Your Life" in order to appeal to the judges and save themselves from elimination. On seasons two to four of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars*, two of the week's strongest ("top") contestants have had to "Lip Sync for Your Legacy" in order to win a cash prize of \$10,000 and eliminate one of the bottom queens from the competition.

⁶⁰ Kursi, Olli-Pekka, "Drag queen -tähdet eivät ole suvaitsevaisuuden asialla." *Yle Kioski*, June 22, 2015.

show, the audience applauded an original—often “improper,” out of character, or wildly exaggerated—portrayal: for example, Vainio played a recorder and made faces during the instrumental intro to Céline Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On” and lip synced to Sanni’s bawdy pop song as Katri Helena.⁶¹ Moreover, generational (sub)cultural differences were discernible in the audience’s reactions to particular popstars; for example, Vainio’s rendition of Cher did not receive much of a response from the audience, perhaps because most spectators were in their early twenties and do not consider Cher their queer icon.

This impropriety or inappropriateness is important to fe/male impersonation since the objective is not to be too convincing or “lifelike.” After all, the impersonation has failed if the audience does not recognize the performance as an impersonation. An improper portrayal enables the artist and the spectators to imagine the person otherwise, not as they are but as they *could be*. Fe/male impersonation shares this element with drag, albeit with one critical difference: the *could* is directed towards a particular and actual person in fe/male impersonation. The impersonated person is generally someone the audience is familiar with and thus recognizes, although an impersonation can be particularly impressive if the audience is not familiar with the character. Some drag artists and fe/male impersonators have introduced less well-known figures to new audiences by their own characterizations. For example, younger audiences have become acquainted with Edith “Little Edie” Bouvier Beale, known for her appearance in the American documentary film *Grey Gardens* (1975), after Jinkx Monsoon, winner of the fifth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, impersonated her in the “Snatch Game” episode of their season.⁶² Since their appearance on the show, Monsoon has occasionally impersonated Little Edie during their shows and even starred in a *Grey Gardens* inspired original stage show entitled *Return to Grey Gardens* with drag performer Peaches Christ.⁶³ Monsoon’s portrayal of Little Edie is exemplary of impersonation in drag culture as drag artists often do characters only during short segments, unless their show is a theatrical stage show that employs impersonations like *Return to Grey Gardens*.

⁶¹ I have previously seen Vainio perform at the QX Gay Gala in Helsinki in 2014. He received a similar response from the audience when his Katri Helena suddenly transformed into scantily clad Miley Cyrus.

⁶² Each season the contestants compete in a game show, the “Snatch Game,” in which they impersonate a celebrity, public figure, or other well-known person. Although they are expected to impersonate women, some contestants have impersonated men.

⁶³ Tharrett, Matthew, “Jinkx Monsoon Returns to the Stage as Little Edie, Dishes on Life One Year after Drag Race.” *Queerty*, April 4, 2014.

Although impersonations are common in drag performances, there is a notable difference between impersonating and referencing. An impersonation is bound to refer to someone particular and recognizable to convey meaning as intended, but a reference can allude to anyone or anything without the intention to imitate or resemble its subject. Drag is essentially referential in this latter sense. For example, a drag king might lip sync to an Elvis Presley song during a performance that deals with depression and substance abuse without looking like Presley or adopting his mannerisms. Drag can reference something specific—a person, movie, artwork, quality or characteristic, culture or cultural practice—or something more abstract or not present in everyday life. Moreover, a reference in itself can be anything—a pose, an utterance or catchphrase, movement of the body, an outfit, a facial expression, a hairstyle, and so on. Even though drag’s referentiality can extend to anything outside queer culture, it is decidedly self-referential and, in this sense, bears resemblance to the visual arts, whose intrinsic quality is that artworks reference other works and the history of art.

RuPaul’s Drag Race is illustrative of referentiality in drag culture. For example, the show is so saturated with references to the American documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (1990) that, seeing the film after having watched several seasons of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, it seemed like *Paris Is Burning* was referencing the show and not the other way around. Furthermore, the show is remarkably self-referential and tirelessly references memorable catchphrases and moments from past seasons and episodes, which are not reiterated only within the show and its microcosm but spread wider into drag and queer culture. One particularly memorable reference (with)in the show’s history is Vanessa Vanjie Mateo’s exit from the show. Mateo became the first eliminated season ten contestant and exclaimed “Miss Vanjie” three times when exiting the main stage walking backwards. The moment went viral online and was instantly made into countless memes that could not be avoided in queer social media.⁶⁴ “Miss Vanjie” was referenced in nearly all subsequent episodes of the season, and fellow contestant Miz Cracker even remarked in the reunion episode that the exclamation had become the gay aloha—hello, goodbye, and thank you.

⁶⁴ “Her fabulous exit sent the Internet into a tailspin, constantly referencing and joking about the moment until people who didn’t watch *Drag Race* started questioning what ‘Vanjie’ meant” (Daw, Stephen, “‘RuPaul’s Drag Race:’ The Very Best of the ‘Miss Vanjie’ Memes.” *Billboard*, April 2, 2018).

Both drag and fe/male impersonation comprise a visual transformation realized through numerous “props” and techniques, such as makeup, wigs, padding, binding, tucking, and costumes, which are generally temporary and external and can therefore be put on and taken off.⁶⁵ Semipermanent and permanent cosmetic procedures and body modifications—namely, injections and implants—are also common among drag artists. Furthermore, fe/male impersonators and drag artists often play with behavioral transformations, such as mannerisms, body language, or changing the pitch of their voice or the way they speak. Evident in Aarnipuu’s interviews with Finnish drag performers is that many base their definition of ‘drag’ or ‘not drag’ on these transformations. For example, some of the interviewed performers do not consider Cristal Snow, who won the Miss Drag Queen 2006 pageant, a drag performer because they do not wear a wig. According to Pola Ivanka, not wearing a wig is why Snow is a performance artist and not a drag queen. Kalkkuna, on the other hand, does not consider Ivanka a drag artist because they do not modify their voice. (Aarnipuu 2010, 215.)

Transformation is the medium of both drag and fe/male impersonation. It is always referential, although this is where the two practices diverge: fe/male impersonation is tied to everyday life and actual people, whereas drag is not constrained by reality. RuPaul dismissing “that his act is female impersonation, claiming he doesn’t look like a woman, he looks like a drag queen [...]” (Smith 1994, 258) suggests that female impersonation is restricted by what women look like or how they are perceived, while drag queens are freer to play with imagination and fantasy, the *idea* of femininity. Fe/male impersonation can comprise two transformations, out of which only the visual transformation into the impersonated person is necessary. The second transformation, an opportunity not every performer puts to use, is the reimagining: the popstar, celebrity, politician, or whoever is being impersonated, is queered and imag(in)ed otherwise. It is this reimagining or queer-

⁶⁵ Newton notes that female impersonators use “props” to create “the partial or complete visual appearance of a woman” (1979, 5). The word prop is commonly used in the context of theater, which is where Newton locates drag. Moreover, Storme Delaverié notes that while the female impersonator adds things to achieve a feminine appearance, the male impersonator takes things off (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 35). Delaverié may refer to how drag kings (assigned female at birth performers in this context) often bind their chest, whereas drag queens (assigned male at birth performers here) stuff bras or wear prosthetic breasts. However, the opposite is true of the crotch area: while the drag king might stuff their underpants to suggest a bulge, the drag queen is likely to tuck—that is, tape their penis between their buttocks—to flatten their crotch. Delaverié could also refer to how drag queens “put on” exaggerated femininity while drag kings perform masculinity in an understated way.

ing of the real that fe/male impersonation has in common with drag, despite their differing relations to reality. Moreover, not being contingent on everyday life and purported reality is perhaps one reason why some interpret drag as being capable of redefining and reconstructing notions of gender.

Though the visual transformation is realized through similar means and techniques, the objective in fe/male impersonation is to look and act like a person the audience recognizes, whereas the artist or performer is not “being someone else” in drag.⁶⁶ This was evident at DTM’s show: all performers lip synced and danced, wore makeup, wigs, and costumes, yet while Vainio and Mars impersonated several famous and recognizable popstars, Aja was the star herself. Even though Aja performed to a song by Lady Gaga, they were not impersonating her; “John Wayne” was as much part of Aja’s performance *as Aja* as their wig or costume, and thus whether the song was by Lady Gaga or not had no particular significance. Like fe/male impersonators, drag artists and performers often lip sync and perform (to) songs by famous singers or rappers, but the intention is not to look like or transform into the original performer—unless, of course, they are specifically doing an impersonation. In this sense, songs are also “props,” means to an end, for drag artists to realize their artistic intention and convey meaning. The song is a vital component of a drag performance or an impersonation, but its status as a signifier is less literal for drag artists.

In conclusion, drag and fe/male impersonation do not exclude one another; some drag performers do impersonations and some fe/male impersonators do drag. Arguing for their differentiation is in many ways futile because, broadly speaking, they have more in common than not. Moreover, both are practiced within the same subcultural context and favored by sexual and gender minorities. Thus, my argument is for specification rather than separation. This can be achieved by, first, dissociating these practices from cis-heteronormative notions of gender and cross-dressing and, second, paying closer attention

⁶⁶ This distinction is, in a way, present even in discussions in which drag and fe/male impersonation are considered synonymous. For example, Finnish drag performer Kalkkuna argues that drag can be assorted into American and French styles. Kalkkuna names RuPaul as an example of American drag in which the performer has to wear a big wig and they only do one character instead of changing looks during the show. (Aarnipuu 2010, 282.) In an interview with *Yle Kioski*, Vainio also remarks that European drag queens change characters several times during a performance (Kursi, Olli-Pekka, “Drag queen -tähdet eivät ole suvaitsevaisuuden asialla.” *Yle Kioski*, June 22, 2015).

to individual artists, works and performances, subject matter and medium, form and content. When examined and considered without simplification or unification, one can easily discern that both drag and fe/male impersonation are much more protean practices than cisgender men dressing up as women for laughs.

CHAPTER THREE

GEN(D)ERATION XY

Though most drag is still performed on small stages in LGBTQ+ venues, it has become increasingly visible in mainstream Western visual culture during the past decade. The ongoing “renaissance” of drag has given drag artists new opportunities to explore and experiment with different platforms and gain wider audiences. These shifts within drag culture make novel variation and diversity possible and at the same time create new ways to understand drag as an intricate artistic practice and medium that cannot be confined to small stages or conflated with cross-dressing. Moreover, drag has been introduced as a viable medium to artists working in other fields. One notable instance of drag extending into fields and spaces outside its conventional context is the exhibition *DRAG: Self-portraits and Body Politics* that took place in the Hayward Gallery’s HENI Project Space in London from August 22 to October 14, 2018. The exhibition featured works by numerous artists, such as Samuel Fosso, Cindy Sherman, Luciano Castelli, Ming Wong, VALIE EXPORT, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Pierre Molinier. The Hayward Gallery’s curators set the exhibition’s framework with a definition: “‘*Drag*’ is the generic term for a tradition of performances that involve dressing up and creating alter-egos in order to parody cultural, social or political systems and tropes.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, senior curator Vincent Honoré maintains in a curator tour video that “[d]rag is not about cross[-]dressing... drag is about a performance, it’s about at once hiding and revealing.”⁶⁸ Thus, besides reasoning their reframing of these artists and their works and the exhibition’s thematization, the curators participated in defining drag.

As expected, the exhibition was not received positively by all. Peter Conrad begins his review for *The Guardian* by declaring the exhibition a “celebration of cross-dressing”⁶⁹ despite Honoré’s assertion. Conrad continues his campaign with an obtuse critique of Butler’s gender performativity theory in which he blatantly equates gender to genitals.

⁶⁷ “Concepts of DRAG, behind the exhibition of Self-portraits and Body Politics.” *Southbank Centre* blog, July 30, 2018. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁸ “DRAG exhibition: mini curator tour video.” *Southbank Centre* blog, n.d. 2018.

⁶⁹ Conrad, Peter, “Drag: Self-Portraits and Body Politics review – a purely cosmetic exercise.” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2018.

All in all, his main criticism is that the exhibition and its works are not as subversive as they claim to be because the “enterprise” of drag “itself is not as edgy as these artists fancy.”⁷⁰ That Conrad does not comprehend the enterprise of drag or its apparent subversiveness and purposefully regards drag as cross-dressing—despite the inclusion of artists such as Sherman who clearly do not cross-dress—is no surprise because, frankly, *drag is not for him*. Conrad’s “educated” review is not worth any further consideration here because such displays of cisgender, heterosexual, male privilege are precisely what drag opposes and why it is very much needed even today. Subversive or not, *DRAG* demonstrated how the “performance of drag” can be translated to different contexts. This endeavor could have easily gone wrong had the curators conflated drag with cross-dressing, but the exhibition was a welcome opening for reconsideration, first and foremost, because it did not present drag as a uniform medium or practice.

In this chapter, I discuss a small selection of artists and works in the fields of contemporary art and fashion. First, I examine the work of Finnish artist Artor Jesus Inkerö, particularly their holistic bodily project in which they transform their body and behavior—their image—into that of contemporary masculinity. Many aspects of Inkerö’s project concur with reading their work as drag, although equally many are in disagreement with the way drag is commonly understood. Thus, not only can this reading help interpret Inkerö’s work, but it also raises questions about the nature of drag. Then, in the second part of the chapter, I analyze a handful of compelling accounts of Palomo Spain, a Spanish fashion house notorious in the fashion world for its “gender-bending” aesthetics. Palomo Spain does not pertain to drag as an artistic practice per se, but as gender nonconforming or nonnormative “menswear” it is conceptualized vis-à-vis the cis-heteronormative notion of cross-dressing. Finally, I demonstrate how these two instances pertain to similar questions of gender—more specifically, the areality of nonbinary genders—as prevalent definitions of drag.

DRAG 3000

Amsterdam-based Finnish artist Artor Jesus Inkerö (b. 1989) began their ‘holistic bodily

⁷⁰ Ibid.

project' in 2015. Inkerö, who is nonbinary, aims to “transform their image into the most generic version of contemporary masculinity.”⁷¹ The project comprises videos, photographs, and performances and is described in an interview published in *Helsingin Sanomat* as Inkerö transforming their behavior and physique to resemble that of a hockey player, realized through dieting, bodybuilding, clothing, and adopting new poses, facial expressions, and gestures—for example, sitting with their legs spread.⁷² In the previous chapters, I examined themes and discussions regarding the definition of drag, such as who can do drag, drag’s relation to gender, types of drag and drag artists, and drag’s subject matter. Following these arguments, I consider how Inkerö’s holistic bodily project could be read as drag and what this reading can give to interpreting and understanding contemporary drag. To demonstrate my arguments, I examine three works, *Justin* (2016), *Kim* (2017), and *Caitlyn* (2017), pictured at the exhibition *I am our common pronoun* at CHART Art Fair (Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, August 31 – September 3, 2017; **FIGURE 1**).

Inkerö discusses drag, drag culture, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in a video interview with *EDIT Taidemedia*. They describe their relationship with drag as problematic because they appreciate drag culture but do not like how drag has been appropriated by certain “human-pigeonholes” and how people who have been part of drag culture since the beginning are now excluded from it. According to Inkerö, drag in general is fun and meant to be positive, entertainment, subversive of norms, thought-provoking, and political commentary. They have watched *RuPaul’s Drag Race* with a research mindset to better understand what it means for a person to be in drag. Someone on the show had mentioned that they are treated like a different person in drag, as if drag was extrinsic to them—a character or separate persona—even though it is not. Inkerö sees drag as a manifestation of the artist; it is not something that just begins and ends but is part of the person. They find it interesting that a person can have various manifestations and move within or cross borders and lines. Inkerö sees the connection between their work and drag and notes that some have begun to treat them like they were in drag—that is, playing a character—since they began their project. Their appearance has changed during the project, but does that mean

⁷¹ Artor Jesus Inkerö’s website, n.d. Accessed January 23, 2019. <https://artorjesusinkero.com/>.

⁷² Frilander, Aino, “Muunsukupuolinen taiteilija haluaa ymmärtää miehiä ja on siksi bodannut itselleen 18 kiloa lisää lihasta – ja muuttunut ‘lätkäjätäkäksi.’” *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 19, 2017.

they are or should be a different person? Inkerö does not regard themselves as doing drag, but even if they were, they are still themselves; there is no need to alienate them in conversation.⁷³



FIGURE 1. Artor Jesus Inkerö’s *Kim* (2017), *Caitlyn* (2017), and *Justin* (2016) at CHART Art Fair in 2017. Photograph by David Stjernholm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

The aspect I want to consider first is cross-dressing because drag is commonly understood as the homosexual term for cross-dressing or, more specifically, as cisgender gay men cross-dressing for a performance. The concept of cross-dressing is based on a binary understanding of gender: men who wear women’s clothing or dress as women, women who wear men’s clothing or dress as men. Furthermore, the critical difference between “heterosexual” cross-dressing and drag lies in the spectator or audience: cross-dressing is private and practiced for psychological reasons or sexual pleasure, whereas drag is entertainment and always for a performance. I argued in the first chapter that the concept of

⁷³ “Työhuoneella: Artor Jesus Inkerö.” *EDIT Taidemedia*, January 9, 2018, 10:55–14:03.

cross-dressing is inapplicable to nonbinary life, but, to serve my purposes here, let us streamline cross-dressing to simply refer to the phenomenon of wearing clothing typical of another gender. As follows, Inkerö can be understood as cross-dressing because they are a nonbinary person dressing in men's clothing and, therefore, as being in or doing drag because they are cross-dressing for artistic reasons (for a performance, in a sense). They are described in the *Helsingin Sanomat* interview as having been a skinny, long-haired Academy of Fine Arts student before beginning their project and gaining 18 kilograms of muscle.⁷⁴ Newton (1979, 101) suggests that in drag the “oppositional play” is between appearance and essence, and this description of Inkerö's figure before the project, particularly the emphasis on their unmasculine qualities, translates as the essence that is opposed to appearance in drag. Moreover, Inkerö's project is compared to their “origin” in a way that reflects the notion that drag's successfulness is assessed in relation to who the artist “really” is; the juxtaposition of the performed gender and the artist's gender.

The artist's body, shaped by bodybuilding and dieting, is prominently featured in Inkerö's work. In *Justin* (**FIGURE 2**), Inkerö poses in nothing but Calvin Klein boxer briefs. *Justin* references Canadian pop singer Justin Bieber's Spring 2015 Calvin Klein Underwear advertisement campaign and one of its more memorable pictures in particular. Inkerö's photograph is black and white like the advertisement, their pose is the same as the singer's, and they are even wearing the same underwear as Bieber. The only notable discrepancy is in the subjects' facial expressions—Inkerö's look is considerably more somber than Bieber's complacent stare. *Justin* could be regarded as male impersonation based on how literally Inkerö references Bieber's Calvin Klein advertisement. As I noted in the previous chapter, the gist of all impersonation is that the spectator recognizes the person in question, and some impersonators strive for convincing or “lifelike” look-alikeness. Furthermore, it is common for fe/male impersonators to enliven their portrayal with an original interpretation, to reimagine the character. The motive for this reimagination varies, but it is commonly employed for comedic effect or political commentary. Besides the transformation and desired appearance being realized through similar means, fe/male impersonation resembles drag because of this reimagination—imagining and imaging the world as it could be. Even though its referencing Bieber's Calvin Klein

⁷⁴ Frilander, Aino, “Muunsukupuolinen taiteilija haluaa ymmärtää miehiä ja on siksi bodannut itselleen 18 kiloa lisää lihasta – ja muuttunut ‘lätkäjätkäksi’.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 19, 2017.

advertisement is instantly recognizable (if, of course, the spectator is familiar with the campaign), *Justin* comes closer to drag than male impersonation because Inkerö does not aim to reimagine Bieber. Their objective is more empathetic, an attempt to understand Bieber and his image.



FIGURE 2. Artor Jesus Inkerö, *Justin*, 2016. Digital print on PVC tarpaulin, 6 x 4 m.
Photograph by David Stjernholm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Kim (FIGURE 3) and *Caitlyn* (FIGURE 4) are similarly referential but do not mimic their exemplars as literally as *Justin*. Inkerö poses like Kim Kardashian West and Caitlyn Jenner in their respective *Paper Magazine* and *Vanity Fair* magazine covers but their outfits do not resemble what Kardashian West and Jenner wear in their photographs. *Justin* is the exception out of the three because Inkerö takes the reference one step further by removing all clothing except the same underwear as Bieber's; not only do they mimic his pose, but the exemplary image itself. Even though *Kim* and *Caitlyn* reference women, there is no attempt to feminize Inkerö or the physique they have attained during their project. After all, Inkerö is not impersonating Kardashian West or Jenner and thus there is no reason to "adjust" their masculinity or femininity. *Kim* and *Caitlyn* are referential in a way that resembles the referentiality that is characteristic of drag: Inkerö alludes to highly recognizable photographs and celebrities but their objective is not to state or reveal anything about the three celebrities, or themselves. *Justin*, *Kim*, and *Caitlyn* are and at the same time are not self-portraits—the artist is prominent in all three works, but they are not declarative or confessional. Inkerö looks back at the viewer in all three works but makes no effort to contest the spectator's gaze. Instead, they permit the spectator to look and assess their own standing, as if they were asking, "Is this how you want to see me?"

Halberstam argues that any performer (and artist?) who makes masculinity into their act can be a drag king (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 36), and, based (only) on this definition, Inkerö could be considered a drag king as they are "transform[ing] their image into the most generic version of contemporary masculinity."⁷⁵ Masculinity is sometimes understood as nonperformative, something that cannot be impersonated because it adheres "naturally" to cisgender men (e.g., Halberstam 1998, 234; Gelder 2007, 58), and drag king performances supposedly dissect and scrutinize this alleged naturalness and normality; for instance, according to Halberstam, "the Drag King takes what is so-called natural about masculinity and reveals its mechanisms—the tricks and poses, the speech patterns and attitudes that have been seamlessly assimilated into a performance of realness" (Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 62). Inkerö too has had to learn these "tricks" and poses during their project; for example, how to talk and sound more masculine. However, I do not believe Inkerö's work reveals cis male masculinity as no more normal, natural, or

⁷⁵ Artor Jesus Inkerö's website, n.d. Accessed January 23, 2019. <https://artorjesusinkero.com/>.

neutral than any other quality—although this is implicit as they have had to explicitly *learn* how to look and act more masculine—because revealing is not their objective. Their project is not an exposé of cis male privilege and bias. Their approach is empathetic, there is no element of ridicule or contempt in their works. In fact, Inkerö began their project to better understand men.⁷⁶



FIGURE 3. Artor Jesus Inkerö, *Kim*, 2017. Digital print on PVC tarpaulin, 6 x 4 m.
Photograph by David Stjernholm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

⁷⁶ Frilander, Aino, “Muunsukupuolinen taiteilija haluaa ymmärtää miehiä ja on siksi bodannut itselleen 18 kiloa lisää lihasta – ja muuttunut ‘lätkäjätäkäksi.’” *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 19, 2017.

The generic, contemporary masculinity that Inkerö is transforming their image into is most of all white. It is also cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, and able, and although this masculinity can be described as generic in a Western context, it is particularly Scandinavian and Finnish. Furthermore, it is characterized by sportiness, an active and athletic lifestyle, and a taste for sportswear. These attributes are conspicuous in all three works, but they are most prominent in *Caitlyn* in which Inkerö alludes to Jenner's white undergarment with underwear appropriate to the masculinity they depict: a navy Nike long sleeve undershirt and black Nike long boxer briefs. Though inherently active and athletic, Inkerö represents this masculinity as subdued and passive. However, this passivity is not intended as feminization or demasculinization—as “negative.” Inkerö's project is above all empathetic—*Justin*, *Kim*, and *Caitlyn* are all attempts to understand and relate to others. Everyone has to look at and to others to find their place in the world: to find your place is to realize your own standing but also to know where others stand in relation to yourself. Looking is different for nonbinary and queer people because it can be difficult, if not impossible, to find common ground with other people; looking is trying to understand how and why *you* are “different.” The passivity in Inkerö's works is an attempt to find common ground with this particular masculinity, to relate to that which is not “theirs.”

Certain aspects of Inkerö's project are in disagreement with prevalent understandings of drag. Perhaps most decisive are their project's temporality and the lack of cosmetic props. Drag is generally understood to be a transformation that lasts mere hours at a time, something you can put on and then take off. Drag artists work on their physique, body language, outfits, makeup skills, and performances for months and years, but getting in drag in itself takes only a couple of hours. Inkerö's bodily project began in 2015—their transformation, “getting in drag,” can only be achieved in months and years, not in a few hours; it is progressive and laborious and cannot be simply taken off at will. Many drag artists shape their bodies by dieting and exercising and some also undergo cosmetic procedures for semipermanent or permanent body alterations, but the visual transformation is realized mainly through props—makeup, wigs, costumes—that are essentially temporary and can be put on and taken off. Inkerö's sculpted, muscular figure could be considered a prop, means to an end, but not the type of prop that can be taped, glued, or painted on. In fact, the lack of makeup or nonpedestrian costumes is a compelling argument against Inkerö's project as drag because drag aesthetics are in many ways based on the artificiality and

instrumentality of props and cosmetics and the intensity they enable. Thus, reading Inkerö's work as drag raises questions about the nature of drag and the artist's body as an instrument or tool and a medium. Can drag be "minimal" to the point of wearing only underwear or nothing at all? Can the body in itself be (in) drag?



FIGURE 4. Artor Jesus Inkerö, *Caitlyn*, 2017. Digital print on PVC tarpaulin, 6 x 4 m.
Photograph by David Stjernholm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Despite this “minimalism,” Inkerö’s bodily project can be described as radical or extreme drag because of these temporal and instrumental aspects: it is a fantasy embodiment, an image materialized by transforming the artist’s body. This transformation is not private, although it is personal, as it inevitably affects how other people see them. Even though the transformation is physical and seemingly superficial, the extremeness or radicality of Inkerö’s project is psychological: they are deliberately transforming their image into an embodied sign of a gender that is not their own. Like all non-cisgender people, Inkerö has had to reject assigned gender, the “truth” of their being dictated by cis-heteronormative gender ontology. Rejecting this assignment is a constant battle for nonbinary people because nonbinary genders are areal, that is, they are not “admitted into the terms that govern reality” (Butler 2004, 31) but are denounced as impossible and outside the human. Discussing drag, Butler argues: “If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the ‘reality’ of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks ‘reality,’ and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance” (2006, xxiii). This is reversed in Inkerö’s case: reality is located in the body—that is, assigned sex—to which cis-heteronormative gender ontology grants only two options. Hence, the first term cannot be taken as the reality of their gender because it lacks material truth. The second term, however, is not taken to constitute an illusory appearance but, in fact, erases the first term.

In a discussion entitled “Nonbinary tries being a man in the name of art,” held after the *Helsingin Sanomat* interview was published, Finnish Reddit users debate Inkerö’s holistic bodily project.⁷⁷ Most comments, presumably written by cisgender heterosexual men based on the comments’ defensive and often mocking tone, criticize Inkerö’s perception of masculinity and the “insulting” way cis straight male masculinity and men are depicted in the story. Nonbinary genders are effectively erased from the reality of gender in the discussion;⁷⁸ for example, user *kompuroija* comments: “So Artor is a man? Surely ‘non-binary’ as in does not *feel* like a man but is a man anyway?”⁷⁹ Many users deem Inkerö’s

⁷⁷ “Muunsukupuolinen kokeilee miehenä oloa taiteen nimissä.” *Reddit* discussion started by user *Shuppiduu*, n.d. 2017. My translation.

⁷⁸ The word ‘sukupuoli’ is used for both gender and sex in Finnish. This distinction is usually made with compound nouns: biologinen sukupuoli (biological sex), sosiaalinen sukupuoli (social gender), sukupuoli-identiteetti (gender identity).

⁷⁹ *kompuroija*, “Siis Artor on mies? Toki ‘muunsukupuolinen’ eli ei *koe* olevansa mies, mutta kuitenkin mies? [...]” *Reddit* comment, n.d. 2017. My translation.

project absurd in light of their “real” gender and deride Inkerö for having received a grant for the project. User neonone replies to kompuroija’s comment: “Is Artor not a biological woman after all? Or what makes you think otherwise? What a funny art project if [they are] really a man.”⁸⁰ The way the users discuss Inkerö’s project and gender attests cis-heteronormative gender ontology—sexual dimorphism in particular—as the definitive truth of gender; their being nonbinary is pronounced gender psychosis or an identity crisis by some users. Unfortunately, such views on non-cis genders are not uncommon or unique but are part of the discursive violence nonbinary, transgender, and genderqueer people face every day.

Inkerö mentions in the *Helsingin Sanomat* interview that they have pondered if the project has made them feel different about their gender, but they have been happy to notice that it has not, that that part of a person does not change.⁸¹ This doubt is understandable given their drastic physical transformation and the fact that masculinity and femininity, the “signs of gender,” are still firmly associated with cisgender men’s and women’s bodies. However, differences are contingent and mobile: neither masculinity nor femininity can be traced to any one gender or physique because they are always particular and interwoven with gender, sexuality, dis/ability, class, race, size, and age. In the *EDIT Taide-media* interview, Inkerö remarks that what interests them in drag is that an artist can have different manifestations and move within or cross borders.⁸² The apparent “border” that is crossed in drag is, of course, gender. Manifestations can be taken “out of context” as Inkerö does in *Kim* and *Caitlyn*; thus, there is no contradiction in embodying masculinity while trying to understand two women. Moreover, manifestations trouble the distinction between reality and fantasy. Inkerö can radically transform their body and behavior and still be the same person—although their body is material reality and *their* body, it is at the same time a fantasy body, an embodied image.

Butler argues that “[w]hat is ‘performed’ in drag is, of course, the sign of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but that cannot be read without it” (2011,

⁸⁰ neonone, “Eikö Artor nyt kuitenkin ole biologinen nainen? Vai mistä päättelet toisin? Jos tosiaan on biologinen mies, niin aika veikeä taideprojekti.” *Reddit* comment, n.d. 2017. My translation.

⁸¹ Frilander, Aino, “Muunsukupuolinen taiteilija haluaa ymmärtää miehiä ja on siksi bodannut itselleen 18 kiloa lisää lihasta – ja muuttunut ‘lätkäjätkäksi’.” *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 19, 2017.

⁸² “Työhuoneella: Artor Jesus Inkerö.” *EDIT Taidemedia*, January 9, 2018, 12:42–13:03.

181). Indeed, drag artists are commonly understood to critique gender norms and roles and make entertainment out of rejecting and subverting assigned gender. Inkerö, however, superassigns masculinity, the sign-image of the “male gender,” to their body. Their transformation is not for one performance or an evening but for years, night and day, even though as a nonbinary person they have had to endure the violence of assigned sex and binary gender all their life. In *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, Jo Anna Isaak describes Nancy Spero’s work as targeting “what feminism has always targeted—things as they are, for things as they are are not for us” (1996, 27). The same can be argued for Inkerö’s work: it is testimony to the impossibility to have a body that is not governed by cis-hetero-normative gender ontology, *things as they are*. It is a situated image of the real—an image pervaded by collective, normative imagination, and an image of the areality of nonbinary genders. *For things as they are are not for us*.

Discussing drag culture, Inkerö states in the *EDIT Taidemedia* interview that their work is not drag,⁸³ and therefore I cannot declare it as such. The artist’s intention must be taken into account; if it is not intended as drag, then it is not drag. Nonetheless, Inkerö’s artistic work can be studied *as drag*. Their work is evidently not the type of drag I discussed in the previous chapters, but neither were most of the works featured in the Hayward Gallery’s *DRAG* exhibition, which could have also featured Inkerö since the exhibition’s curators thematized drag in a similar way to how I have examined their holistic bodily project. The definitions and limits—the “rules”—of drag have changed, are changing, and will change, and reading Inkerö’s bodily project as drag can help envision what drag’s future could look like. The type of drag that involves makeup, wigs, tucking, and/or binding cannot go on for more than hours at a time, but is it possible to be in drag for years, to live in drag? Can the artist’s body in itself be (in) drag? Can drag be stripped-down and minimal to the point of wearing nothing, not even makeup? In the end, these are not questions of whether drag can or will change in these directions, but whether it is possible to revise definitions and understandings of drag to accommodate these transformations.

⁸³ “Työhuoneella: Artor Jesus Inkerö.” *EDIT Taidemedia*, January 9, 2018, 13:30–13:43.

“GENDER! SO LAST SEASON!”⁸⁴

Spanish fashion house Palomo Spain’s Autumn/Winter 2017 collection, *Objeto Sexual*,⁸⁵ presented at New York Fashion Week in February 2017, garnered significant media attention. Though designed by Alejandro Gómez Palomo, a menswear designer, and worn by an “all-male” cast, the collection consisted of clothing typically categorized as female, such as babydoll dresses in flower brocade and a bridal look.⁸⁶ The clothes themselves were nothing too riveting or revolutionary—unsurprisingly, it was yet again the startling image of “male” bodies in “women’s” garments that caused a commotion.

Reporting from *Objeto Sexual*’s runway show, Nick Rensen observes: “At first glance, it might be easy to label Palomo’s clothes as couture-inspired costume—perhaps drag, or even post-drag, with a bit more design than dash.”⁸⁷ Palomo Spain’s putative connection to cross-dressing, and thus drag, is obvious given their gender nonnormative or non-conforming aesthetics. As I have argued above, conflating drag with cross-dressing discredits and devalues artists whose work does not pertain to the cis-heteronormative notion of cross-dressing; that is, non-cisgender drag artists or artists who do not perform as the “opposite sex.” Besides the palpable “cross-dressing,” Rensen seems to bring up drag—“or even post-drag”—because of the collection’s costume-like garments. Unfortunately, Rensen does not further elaborate on his concept of ‘post-drag’. We have heard of post-modernism, postfeminism, and posthumanism, but what could post-drag be? Before I further consider the term, I first examine a few thought-provoking accounts of Palomo Spain.

Aria Darcella argues that the fashion house’s Autumn/Winter 2018 collection, *The Hunting*, presented at Paris Fashion Week in January 2018, “completely rethinks our modern notion of masculinity [...]”⁸⁸ Darcella continues: “It is not exactly drag, as his garments are *not* women’s clothes being worn by men—they are deliberately men’s

⁸⁴ Rensen, Nick, “Palomo Spain: ‘The Most Amazing, Beautiful, Decadent, *Evil Thing*’ at the New York Men’s Shows.” *Vogue*, February 3, 2017.

⁸⁵ For Palomo Spain lookbooks, see “Collections.” *Palomo Spain* website, n.d. Accessed January 16, 2019. <https://www.palomospain.com/collections/>.

⁸⁶ Vänskä 2017, 55; Rensen, Nick, “Palomo Spain: ‘The Most Amazing, Beautiful, Decadent, *Evil Thing*’ at the New York Men’s Shows.” *Vogue*, February 3, 2017.

⁸⁷ Rensen, Nick, “Palomo Spain: ‘The Most Amazing, Beautiful, Decadent, *Evil Thing*’ at the New York Men’s Shows.” *Vogue*, February 3, 2017.

⁸⁸ Darcella, Aria, “Palomo Spain’s Gender Bending Fashion Borrowing.” *L’Officiel USA*, January 22, 2018.

clothes, from a menswear brand.”⁸⁹ I agree, Palomo Spain’s clothing or runway shows are not drag, although by drag Darcella evidently means cross-dressing. I also agree that the garments are not womenswear, and thus not cross-dressing either, but is Palomo Spain labelled a menswear brand simply because the collection is presented by and designed for “male-bodied” people? After all, clothing being designed for a specific body type does not in itself make it womenswear, menswear, or anywear. Most clothes, such as knitwear, shirts, and pants, “can” be worn by anyone, whereas only a few items, such as lingerie, high heels, dresses, skirts, and suits, “can” be worn by women or men only. Besides certain materials, colors, textures, lengths, and silhouettes, most gender-specific clothing is designed with a supposedly universal physique in mind, often ignoring physical variation between individuals of the presumed gender (i.e., sex)—womenswear being designed for “feminine” individuals with narrow shoulders, thin arms, ample chest, thin waist, wide hips, and flat crotch area in a certain size range; menswear being the “masculine” opposite of these physical traits in a larger size. Still, there is nothing in the clothes themselves that would prohibit any individual from wearing them, unless they are the wrong size or a poor fit.

Even though Palomo Spain’s garments are designed for a thin yet muscular physique of narrow hips, flat chest, and a bulging crotch—a supposedly masculine figure—it is important to consider the possibility that Palomo Spain may not be menswear at all, or rethink any notion of masculinity, for that matter. After all, the way men and women are supposed to look, act, and dress in order to be men or women is determined by what, when, and where counts as wo/man, nothing being inherently male or female, masculine or feminine. Thus, Darcella’s account raises the question of whether “male” embodiment can only challenge notions of masculinity. The compulsion to open up the category ‘man’ to different “masculinities” and ways of being “male-bodied,” instead of considering them as *not* man, male, or masculine, makes cis-heteronormative logic evident: “male” embodiment (penis—male—man—masculine) is reality, and therefore “nonnormative maleness” can only be subordinate to that reality. Since nonbinary embodiment and genders are areal, and thus not an option to begin with, clothing designed specifically for a “male” physique can only be menswear.

⁸⁹ Ibid., emphasis in original.

It is curious that Darcella interprets the collection as challenging masculinity instead of any other quality, yet she understands the “male” bodies of Palomo Spain’s runway models as showcased “in a way we are not used to seeing,” being “sexualized in a female way.”⁹⁰ Palomo Spain’s models do present fashion that “male” models are not commonly seen wearing, but it is not necessarily a “female way” even if it is unconventional or nonnormative. Ultimately, Darcella’s notion of female denotes femininity because in a binary understanding to not be masculine is to be feminine. Still, “male” femininity is not the same as “female” femininity as natural causality is presumed between being female and feminine or male and masculine. “Male” femininity is therefore always understood in relation to normative cis male masculinity: it is not natural, authentic, and original femininity like female femininity, but the absence of masculinity. Halberstam argues that female masculinity is not recognized as authentic and commendable like male masculinity; instead, “female masculinities are framed as rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (1998, 1).⁹¹ Halberstam’s argument speaks for “male” femininity, too, as it is also rejected and framed as queer and unnatural so that cis male masculinity may appear to be the “real thing.” This is true for all expressions of gender that are not cis male masculinity or cis female femininity—that is, the way gender is supposed to be.

As I demonstrated above, some interpret Palomo Spain as commenting and rethinking contemporary notions of masculinity and, thus, of gender, which it inevitably does more or less intentionally by showcasing its garments on “male” models. Palomo Spain has a unique aesthetic as the models and their neutral disposition—there is no drama or flamboyance, the type of femininity commonly associated with drag queens, in the way the models present the garments—are desirable as both masculine and feminine and at the same time as neither masculine nor feminine in the cis-heteronormative sense. But is Palomo Spain deliberately gender nonconforming or antinormative fashion, or is this reading imposed on it because of its queer aesthetics? Homosexual, asexual, transgender, and nonbinary agencies are consistently labelled counterhegemonic or antinormative—as “resistance” (McNay 2016, 44–46)—solely by virtue of their existence. Lois McNay

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Tellingly, there is a word for male femininity in English, effeminacy, but no comparable term for female masculinity.

argues: “Resistance and subversion are limited modes of action because their displacements remain within the parameters of the given, within the existing rules of the game rather than challenging the game itself” (ibid., 51). Yet these nonnormative agencies are never allowed to escape cis-heteronormativity because every effort to challenge “the game” can only be understood in relation to the game and its rules, which ensure that there is no possibility for any game besides itself. Thus, the existence of those who do not live by its rules can only be an existence of negation—of *not being*.

This negation is prominent in most discussions on Palomo Spain. Annamari Vänskä understands the binary gender system as an inexhaustible source of material for fashion designers to draw from in order to get visibility for nonnormative subjectivities. She also regards Palomo Spain’s *Objeto Sexual* runway show as a caricatural interpretation of Butler’s gender performativity theory that proclaims gender as an ever-changing and free-floating construction that does not exist as an untouched, “virginal” physical body. (Vänskä 2017, 55–56.) Peculiarly, even though Vänskä does not interpret Butler’s gender performativity theory as suggesting that gender is freely chosen or a costume that can be put on and taken off, performativity in the fashion world seems to be profoundly intentional—a fashionably queer attitude towards gender and social norms. Paradoxically, this anti-essentialist view attests cis-heteronormative gender ontology and the reality of sexual dimorphism despite its contrary intention: sex can only be male-or-female, and *if* there are genders besides men and women, then sex cannot exist at all. The problem with this view is that, yet again, nonbinary genders do not even appear in the text because they are areal, not real in the same way as the binary genders, and thus not worthy of consideration. When gender is something you can more or less intentionally *choose* to be or become instead of something you *are* and always have been, it is a very different kind of real. Though the notion of gender as ever-changing and free-floating regardless of materiality (material “truth”) is anti-essentialist at heart, it is anti-essentialist only because the concept of essence is pervaded by cis-heteronormative logic. Despite acknowledging the “triviality” of anatomy (not all “female” humans become women or “male” humans men), this notion asserts the reality of sexual dimorphism, the “fact” that nature has only two stencils at its disposal. Since sex can only be male-or-female, and as nonbinary genders are neither, sex cannot exist—if nonbinary genders are to exist, then gender itself can exist only as a social construct, not as essence.

Overall, Palomo Spain seems to be regarded as “genderless” fashion. According to Vänskä (2017, 56), the question of gender in contemporary fashion design has become a question of no gender. On a similar note, Darcella argues that “[i]f there was ever a time [. . .] for gender specific clothing to end, it will be soon—if not now already,”⁹² and Mollie Pyne remarks in a *Dazed* designer profile that for Alejandro Gómez Palomo “gender is ancient history.”⁹³ Since cis-heteronormative gender ontology is a question of being either a man or a woman, there is no need for gender to begin with if gender is not binary. Gender-specific clothing can only be menswear or womenswear, and thus anything “gender ambiguous” can only be genderless or no gender. To claim gender altogether as “so last season” is to do violence against the genders that are yet to be named; they must perish before they have had the chance to become real. Nonbinary genders remain areal and outside “proper” gender because they are “rendered unlivable by their lack of footing in the subject-producing matrix of sexual difference” (Salamon 2010, 112). Nonbinary genders can never be(come) real, authentic, and original genders if they are pronounced “no gender” and excluded from serious considerations of gender. Thus, I would like to pose the same question Butler asked in 1999: “Is the breakdown of gender binaries [. . .] so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?” (2006, viii–ix).

What about the ‘post-drag’ Remsen briefly mentions? Let us first consider Marcia A. Morgado’s account of post-postmodern fashion:

Challenges to and erasures of common cultural categories that Eshelman identifies with performative works are also evident in contemporary transgendered appearance forms that effectively erase the male/female opposition. These dramatic looks are not the androgynous blending of categories identified with postmodernism; rather, the new looks combine typical masculine visual markers such as facial hair with very feminine appearance signs such as makeup, skirts, and heels. (2014, 12)

Morgado’s description of the erasure of the male/female opposition in contemporary transgendered appearance is suggestive of Palomo Spain’s nonbinary fashion. In contemporary usage the term transgender is mostly used to refer to trans women and men and less often as an umbrella term for nonnormative or non-cis genders, although

⁹² Darcella, Aria, “Palomo Spain’s Gender Bending Fashion Borrowing.” *L’Officiel USA*, January 22, 2018.

⁹³ Pyne, Mollie, “Palomo Spain.” *Dazed*, n.d. 2017.

Morgado and Halberstam use the term in this latter sense. Writing on postmodernism and “transgenderism” (being non-cisgender), Halberstam notes that although the corporeal transgender body “has been theorized as an in-between body [...]” (2005, 97), it has been consistently pictured as a transsexual body. Halberstam argues that for Jean Baudrillard transgenderism is merely “a metaphor for the unlocatability of the body” (ibid., 99) because “no one actually inhabits transgender subjectivity [...]” (ibid.). In like manner, the transgender body has appeared as “the representation of unstable embodiment” (ibid., 105) in postmodern visual culture.

Transgender serves its purpose as an umbrella term in a postmodern context, but the distinction between transgender and nonbinary becomes necessary in post-postmodernism. The postmodern transgender body has been pictured as a “mutable” body that serves as testimony to anti-essentialism and the overall mutability of bodies and gender, and at the same time transgender bodies “in the flesh” have been marked as radically different and discernible from cisgender bodies. Nonbinary bodies that are indiscernible from cis male and female bodies—Palomo Spain’s models, for example—are not understood as transgender in the postmodern sense because of the impossibility to conceive of sex and materiality in nonbinary terms. Cis-heteronormative gender ontology is “countered” and “resisted” in postmodernism with anti-essentialist theorization and the visual differentiation between “mutable” transgender bodies and “natural” cisgender bodies, although these non-cis genders are understood through the gender binary and, moreover, on its terms—as the resistance that remains within the rules of the game, as McNay argues.

Morgado suggests that “[t]hese emerging transgendered appearances point to the idea that post-postmodern aesthetics undermines rigid notions of identity and commonly understood cultural categories” (2014, 20). I understand Remsen’s concept of post-drag as belonging to this post-postmodern condition in which drag is no longer merely a form of cross-dressing because the whole concept of cross-dressing, based on binary gender, is outmoded. However, it is an inadequate term in this regard because, although it echoes drag’s indisputable historical relation to cross-dressing, it bears no direct relation to drag as an artistic practice or medium. Palomo Spain is post-drag in this sense because it effectively erases the cis-heteronormative notion of cross-dressing like Morgado’s account of post-postmodern fashion suggests, but it is not *post* the drag I have discussed here. Post-

drag is also mentioned in an artist profile of drag artist Arson Nicki in *The Stranger*: “Although there’s no single term that can describe what Arson Nicki does, their friends have classified their performance as ‘post-drag’ or ‘alt-drag,’ for a lack of better terms.”⁹⁴ Post-drag, in this instance, does pertain to the artistic practice I understand as drag and, more specifically, to the drag that is still perceived as cross-dressing: cis gay male drag queens. Nicki’s drag has an uneasy relationship with this type of drag because, like Berlin-based Hungry, their drag is not hyperfeminine beauty queen drag but comes close to conceptual or performance art. Hungry, Arson Nicki, and Mystery Meat are only a few examples of the contemporary drag artists in Europe and the United States whose work attests Morgado’s notion of post-postmodern aesthetics by challenging and erasing cis-heteronormative conceptions of gender and the human.

Nonbinary drag, Palomo Spain, and the work of Artor Jesus Inkerö are all part of the post-postmodern condition because they are still understood in relation to postmodernism—categories such as male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, feminine and masculine; drag as cross-dressing; gender as a spectrum; and areal nonbinary genders without names. Despite the alleged erasure of the male/female opposition and the emergence and visibility of nonbinary genders in Western cultural consciousness and visual culture, post-postmodernism is not the “gender utopia” in which nonbinary genders are recognized and celebrated as original, authentic, *real* genders. Embodying nonbinary gender is not simple or easy because there are no guidelines. There is no right or wrong way to be nonbinary because being nonbinary is to not play by the rules. Yet having no rules is not freedom if it means not existing in the first place. Gayle Salamon wisely argues in *Assuming a Body* that “[h]ow we embody gender *is* how we theorize gender [...]” (2010, 57, emphasis in original). Nonbinary genders are not a thing of the future or mere theory but actual embodied lives right here and now. Theory needs to catch up on reality, and this calls for a radical rethinking of the concept of gender that can only be achieved by dissociating sexual difference from sexual dimorphism and rejecting cis-heteronormative notions of gender, sex, and the human altogether.

⁹⁴ Knauf, Ana Sofia, “Person of Interest: Arson Nicki.” *The Stranger*, February 1, 2017.

CONCLUSION

REDEFINING DRAG

*You may have noticed, as we've skipped along this path together,
that strictly defining drag raises more questions tha[n] it answers.
Good. Then you're getting it.*
—Laurel Lynn Leake⁹⁵

In this thesis, my objective has been to examine notable accounts and common definitions of drag and the ways in which they are interwoven with understandings of gender. Notions of drag are often pervaded by cis-heteronormative gender ontology since drag is generally understood as cross-dressing, yet, simultaneously, drag supposedly subverts the gender binary and heteronormative gender norms. Notably, gender theorist Judith Butler has discussed drag to illustrate her gender performativity theory and has demonstrated how drag is connected not only to gender but perceptions of reality and, ultimately, the human. Drag is generally understood to be a cross-dressing practice; namely, cisgender gay men cross-dressing for a performance. Indeed, cross-gender transformation—the juxtaposition of the performer's gender and the performed gender—is supposedly drag's subject matter, but I argued that transformation is its form, not (necessarily) its content: drag is a fantasy embodiment, a situated image of the human. In the third chapter, I examined two instances of contemporary art and fashion that either could be considered as drag or pertain to similar discussions of gender. While Finnish artist Artor Jesus Inkerö's holistic bodily project could be deemed drag, it is not because the artist does not intend it as such. Nonetheless, reading Inkerö's work as drag can help envision what drag's future could look like. Discourse on Palomo Spain's gender nonnormative fashion is not directly related to drag but the cis-heteronormative notion of cross-dressing and, consequently, the areality of nonbinary genders and embodiment. Following Marcia A. Morgado's notion of post-postmodern aesthetics, I argue that nonbinary drag, Inkerö's work, and Palomo Spain all pertain to the post-postmodern emergence of nonbinary genders and bodies in Western cultural consciousness and visual culture.

⁹⁵ Leake 2018, 54.

One notable subject I have not discussed, even though it is central to many of the accounts I analyze in this thesis, is ‘realness’. In their discussion of drag king culture and “butch realness,” Halberstam summarizes the basic concept of realness in one sentence: “This young Asian American drag king was utterly convincing in her masculinity, so much so that women were challenging whether she was ‘really a woman’” (1998, 248). In other words, realness is the ability to “realistically” embody a particular version of a characteristic or quality (e.g., gender, race, class)—most often something you yourself “are not”—or, as Halberstam puts it, “the appropriation of the attributes of the real [...]” (2005, 52). One reason for not discussing realness is that I believe a proper examination and rethinking of the concept needs much more space than I could afford within the limits of this master’s thesis. The other reason is that, in my understanding, realness does not necessarily play a key role in interpreting and studying contemporary drag. Looking at contemporary drag trends, realness is not among the words that come to mind—contemporary drag seems to be more about challenging the real than “appropriating its attributes.” It is possible that the concept of realness has changed and evolved alongside drag, which would explain why realness as I have learned to understand it does not feel relevant today. Be that as it may, the concept of realness needs critical reconsideration and is an excellent subject for future research.

Aarnipuu (2010, 17) remarks that drag is not always performance art, and some queens and kings cross-dress even in civil life. Though drag artists can certainly cross-dress, I argue that the term ‘drag’ should be dissociated from the cis-heteronormative notion of cross-dressing and used only for the medium or artistic practice: *if it is drag, then it is art*. After all, not all drag is cross-dressing and not all cross-dressing is drag, and crucial elements are overlooked when the medium is reduced to a perfunctory notion of its apparent form. Not only is drag entwined with the artist’s gender but the artist as a complex human being, and gender is always only one aspect of a person, even if it is a decisive one. Curiously, the perception of drag as a cis gay male subcultural and artistic practice still persists even though the fact that drag is practiced by people of all genders is evident in drag communities around the world. Conflating drag with cross-dressing reflects a particular image of the reality of gender, not the reality of drag. In drag, the artist becomes the image of their imagination, but *drag itself is the image of our imagination*—how we perceive drag reflects our perception of gender and, ultimately, our conception of reality.

Drag is constantly and, at the moment, rapidly evolving and developing, and the difference between drag ten years ago and today is significant. This development is in many respects thanks to the immense popularity and fan following of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the more mainstream cultural recognition drag has enjoyed since the show began airing in 2009.⁹⁶ Overall, this new-found interest has created more opportunities for all types of drag artists to perform, develop, experiment, and make a living, and many of the over a hundred contestants of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its spin-off shows have become world-famous superstars. Today, drag can be found in contexts besides LGBTQ+ nightlife, such as high fashion, fine art, and social media, and not all drag is performance in the sense that the artist performs live in front of an audience. Aarnipuu (2010, 31, 151) remarks that all gender-bending theater is not part of drag's history, but it is impossible to draw clear-cut lines as new drag is often closely related to performance art and "infiltrates" into streets and marketplaces, into quotidian life. Perhaps the only element that cannot change is that "[t]here is no drag without an actor and his audience [...]" (Newton 1979, 37), although who or what counts as an actor or their audience is always susceptible to change.

As Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues, "no art practice has yet proved too intractable, subversive, or resistant to be assimilated sooner or later into the cultural mainstream" (1991, 55), and this progression and more mainstream status of drag has not come without creating problems. Perhaps the most notable issue that affects individual drag artists is the perfunctory canonization of *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestants. Although drag's canon includes artists and performers outside the show's microcosm, with each season a new group of performers becomes part of a legacy that, at the moment, reigns over drag culture. This canonization has two main problems. First, only certain types of performers are welcome to compete in the "Olympics of Drag" and represent the show's version of drag. All contestants featured on the show have been assigned male at birth drag queens, most of them cisgender gay men. Second, this canonization directly affects local performers and their opportunities to work, particularly in the United States. Local performers are paid

⁹⁶ For instance, luxury lifestyle magazine *Thailand Tatler* gave a makeover to three drag queens in a story published in January 2019. The recent rise in drag's cultural status is also implied in the story: "In the past, *Thailand Tatler* was a magazine focused exclusively on the whos and happenings in high society in Thailand. While we are still about that today, the social climate has changed drastically since 1991 when the magazine began, allowing us to be able to explore more topics and cross more boundaries now as we continue to discuss all things related to society and luxury lifestyle" (Apichatsakol, Mika, "Drag Queens Get A Thailand Tatler Makeover." *Thailand Tatler*, January 23, 2019).

significantly less, and the demand for “Ru Girls,” performers who have appeared on the show, is high. This, however, is a double-edged sword since, overall, drag artists and performers have more opportunities to perform thanks to new and wider glocal audiences interested in drag.

There is no one answer to why such a rapid development has occurred in drag culture during the past decade, but the time has been right, to say the least. I would argue that, overall, this evolution has been positive, but that is not to say that there is no need for revision. Drag’s new generation of artists and performers are already breaking rules and boundaries within drag culture and challenging prevailing ways of seeing and doing drag. Eventually, this revision will infuse into discourse, theory, and research, “For new art—art that is animated by new ideas and fresh perceptions—is what compels us to revise, alter, or reinvent our critical vocabularies, not reprocess ones from fifty years ago” (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 84). That new art is here, and now we need to challenge our vocabularies and critically revise outdated notions of drag. An open mind and attentive eyes can lead to rediscovery and, hopefully one day, to redefinition.

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KUVITETTUJA KUVITELMIA MIELIKUVIA DRAGISTA, KÄSITYKSIÄ SUKUPUOLESTA

Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tutkin dragin määritelmiä. Tarkastelen vallalla olevia käsityksiä dragista sukupuolen esittämisenä ja kysymyksiä dragista taiteellisena ilmaisumuotona ja mediumina. Näitä ovat drag ristiinpukeutumisen muotona; mitä dragissa esitetään ja miten; dragin ja impersonaation (eng. *female/male impersonation*) yhtäläisyydet ja eroavaisuudet; ja dragin suhde sukupuoleen, erityisesti ei-binäärisiin sukupuoliin ja cis-heteronormatiiviseen sukupuoliontologiaan. Väitän, että drag on hyvin muuntautumiskykyinen ja monimuotoinen ilmaisumuoto ja medium, eikä sitä voi naulita paikoilleen tai typistää vain yhdenlaiseen taiteilijatyyppiin tai kontekstiin. Tutkielmani on monitieteisesti taidehistoriaa ja sukupuolentutkimusta. Esitän, että dragin tuominen nykytaiteen ja taiteentutkimuksen kentälle mahdollistaa erilaisen kysymysten asettelun ja uudenlaiset konkretisaatiot. Dragia käsittelevän tutkielman on kuitenkin ”luonnollista” keskittyä pitkälti sukupuoleen: mielikuvat dragista ilmentävät käsityksiä sukupuolesta, sillä drag on (oletettavasti) sukupuolen esittämistä.

Drag määritellään yleisesti ”vastakkaisen sukupuolen” vaatteisiin pukeutumisiksi eli ristiinpukeutumisiksi. Dragia pidetään usein ”homoseksuaalisena” ristiinpukeutumisena ja ero sen ja ”heteroseksuaalisen” eli seksuaalista mielihyvää tuottavan ristiinpukeutumisen välillä on oletettavasti juuri tekijän seksuaalisessa suuntautumisessa. Usein (homoseksuaalisen) dragin ja (heteroseksuaalisen) ristiinpukeutumisen eron nähdään olevan siinä, että dragia tehdään vain esiintymistä varten. Kaksi yleisintä ja parhaiten tunnettua dragitaiteilijatyyppejä ovat drag queenit ja drag kingit. Drag queenien ajatellaan esittävän liioiteltua ja yliampuvaa hyperfeminiinisyttä, kun taas drag kingit ammentavat esityk-

sensä maskuliinisuuden oletetusta luonnollisuudesta ja normaaliudesta. Useissa määritelmässä drag queenit ymmärretään ”(cis-)homomiehinä, jotka tekevät dragia”, ja drag kingit taas ”(cis-)lesbonaisina, jotka tekevät dragia”. Yhä nykyäänkin vallitseva kuva dragista on yliampuvaa hyperfeminiinisyttä esittävä drag queen, joka on cissukupuolinen homomies.

Trans- ja muunsukupuoliset dragtaiteilijat ovat olleet tärkeitä tekijöitä dragin historiassa, mutta heidät jätetään määritelmässä usein huomioimatta. Ottaen huomioon sukupuolen moninaisuuden niin elämässä kuin dragtaiteilijoiden keskuudessa on perusteltua väittää, ettei tekijän sukupuoli tai seksuaalinen suuntautuminen määritä, onko hän drag queen vai king, vaan se minkä tyylistä tai tyyppistä dragia hän tekee. Drag ei ole aina ”vastakkaisen sukupuolen esittämistä”, vaan monet dragtaiteilijat tekevät ei-binääristä dragia. Heidä kuitenkin kutsutaan silti drag queeneiksi tai kingeiksi, sillä ainoastaan näillä kahdella dragtaiteilijatyypillä on vakiintuneet nimitykset. Kuten ei-binäärisille sukupuolille, myös erilaisille dragtyyleille ja -taiteilijoille tarvitaan uusia sanoja. Tämän vuoksi ehdotan tutkielmani toisessa luvussa yhdistelmätermiä ’drag quing’ kuvaamaan dragtaiteilijoita, jotka eivät joko ole drag queeneja tai kingejä tai jotka eivät tee binääristä dragia.

Vaikka drag mielletään ja määritellään yleisesti (teatraaliseksi) ristiinpukeutumiseksi, transnais- drag queenit ja transmies- drag kingit otetaan useimmissa tutkimuksissa huomioon. Voidaan siis todeta, että ristiinpukeutuminen itsessään on muutakin kuin vain ”vastakkaisen sukupuolen” vaatteisiin pukeutumista. Ajatus dragista ristiinpukeutumisena ei loppujen lopuksi näyttäisi perustuvan vain tietynlaisiin vaatteisiin pukeutumiselle, vaan heteronormatiivisuuden rajan ylittämiseksi. Monet mieltävät dragin olevan vaikuttavimmillaan, kun henkilö, joka voisi olla, josta voisi tulla, tai jonka ainakin tulisi tavoitella cis-heteronormatiivista ideaalia ihmisyyttä – valkoista, keskiluokkaista, kykenevää, maskuliinista, heteroseksuaalista ja cissukupuolista mieheyttä – kieltäytyy ja hylkää kyseisen position pukeutumalla tietoisesti ”väärin” vaatteisiin. Drag on siis todellisen ja fantasian, identiteetin ja esittämisen, olemisen ja tekemisen vastakkainasettelu. Tämän vuoksi drag on oletettavasti onnistuneimmillaan, kun fantasia on mahdollisimman kaukana todellisuudesta eli kun ”oikeasti” maskuliininen mies muuntautuu ”leikisti” feminiiniseksi naiseksi.

Drag mielletään nimenomaan sukupuolen esittämiseksi, ja täten sen ajatellaan käsittelevän eksplisiittisesti sukupuolta. Mutta jos drag on kuvitteellinen sukupuoli, on se myös kuvitteellinen rotu, seksuaalisuus, luokka ja ikä, sillä sukupuoli ei ole koskaan näistä tekijöistä erillinen, eikä niitä myöskään voida käsittää ilman sukupuolta. Drag-taiteilijat eivät vain imitoi tai toisinsa valmiita mielikuvia sukupuolesta ja ihmisestä, vaan haastavat näiden mielikuvien ja käsitysten perustan ja kyseenalaistavat jaottelun fantasian ja todellisen välillä. Drag on kuvitteellinen ruumiillistuma tai manifestaatio, jossa ei esitetä vain sukupuolen merkkiä (feminiinisyttä tai maskuliinisuutta), vaan (mieli)kuvia ihmisyydestä kaikissa sen muodoissa, eri ominaisuuksia ja piirteitä painottamalla.

Yhdysvaltalaisen filosofi Judith Butlerin sukupuolen performatiivisuuden teoria on paitsi hyvin vaikutusvaltainen teoria sukupuolesta, myös yksi harvoista dragin teoretisoinneista. Butler käsittelee dragia havainnollistamaan teoriaansa: drag paljastaa ”heteroseksuaalisen koherenssin” oletuksen valheelliseksi ja osoittaa sukupuolen imitatiivisen rakenteen. Butlerin teoriassa drag on esimerkki, jonka tarkoitus on näyttää, ettei ”todellisuus” ole niin määrätty tai muuttumaton kuin sen ajatellaan olevan. Vaikka Butler käsittelee dragia tarkoituksenaan purkaa cis-heteronormatiivista sukupuoliontologiaa ja sille ominaista essentialismia, väitän, että dragin käsitteellistäminen ”todellisen sukupuolen” ajatuksen parodiaksi on osoitus epäonnistumisesta käsittää ei-binääriset sukupuolet autenttisiksi ja todellisiksi sukupuoliksi samalla tavalla kuin binääriset mies ja nainen. Ei-binäärinen sukupuoli ja kehollisuus ovat mahdolluuksia niille, joille essentia ja eksistenssi ovat fenomenologisesti, epistemologisesti ja ontologisesti cis-heteronormatiivisia käsitteitä. Ei-binääriset sukupuolet eivät kuitenkaan ole epätodellisia (*unreal*) tai surreaalisia (*surreal*), sillä monet tiedostavat ja tunnustavat niiden sosiaalisen olemassaolon mahdollisuuden, mutta ne ovat vähemmän todellisia ja täten eivät samalla tavalla tai tasolla ymmärrettävissä todellisiksi kuin miehet ja naiset. Ehdotan termiä areaalinen (*areal*) kuva(st)amaan sitä, jonka voi kuvitella mutta jota ei voi kuvitella samalla tavalla todelliseksi – materiaalisesti, kehollisesti, autenttisesti ja alkuperäisesti – kuin todellisen.

Yksi esittävien taiteiden alalaji, jolla on läheinen suhde dragiin ja jota harjoitetaan samassa alakulttuurisessa kontekstissa, on nais- ja mies-impersonaatio (*female/male impersonation*). Englanniksi termejä drag queen ja female impersonator sekä drag king ja male impersonator käytetään usein toistensa synonyymeinä. Pyrkimyksenäni ei ole

erotella vaan eritellä: näiden kahden ilmaisumuodon jyrkkä erottelu on monella tapaa hyödytöntä ja jopa mahdotonta, sillä pohjimmiltaan niillä on enemmän yhteneväisyyksiä kuin eroavaisuuksia. Drag ja fe/male impersonation eivät siis sulje toisiaan pois, vaan monet dragtaiteilijat tekevät impersonaatioita ja toisin päin. Visuaalinen muodonmuutos toteutetaan molemmissa samoja ”rekvisiittoja” ja tekniikoita käyttäen, mutta impersonaatioissa tavoitteena on muistuttaa jotain tiettyä henkilöä, jonka yleisö tunnistaa. Dragtaiteilija sen sijaan ei varsinaisesti esitä ketään toista henkilöä dragissa, vaan on ”oma itsensä”. Esitän, että muodonmuutos on molempien medium, mutta niiden suhde viitattavaan on erilainen: fe/male impersonation on tiukemmin sidoksissa arkitodellisuuden ja varsinaisiin henkilöihin, kun taas drag ei ole arkitodellisuuden rajoittamaa.

Tutkielmani kolmannessa luvussa tarkastelen kahta esimerkkiä nykytaiteen ja muodin kentiltä, joihin liittyy samankaltaisia keskusteluja sukupuolesta kuin useimmissa dragin määritelmässä. Tarkastelen ensiksi suomalaisen nykytaiteilija Artor Jesus Inkerön (s. 1989) vuonna 2015 aloittamaa holistista kehollista projektia. Inkerön tavoitteena on muuntaa kuvansa nykymaskuliinisuuden kaikkein geneerisimmäksi versioksi, ”lätkäjätöksiksi”. Muodonmuutoksen Inkerö toteuttaa erilaisella ruokavaliolla, kehonmuokkauksella, uusilla vaatteilla ja erilaisella käyttäytymisellä, kuten eleillä ja ilmeillä. Projekti itsessään koostuu video-, valokuva- ja performanssiteoksista. Jos drag mielletään ristiinpukeutumiseksi, Inkerön voidaan ajatella tekevän dragia tai olevan dragissa, sillä hän on muunsukupuolinen, joka pukeutuu miesten vaatteisiin taiteellisista syistä eli tavallaan esitysmielessä. Joidenkin määritelmien mukaan kuka vain esiintyjä (ja siis myös taiteilija?), joka esittää maskuliinisuutta, voi olla drag king, ja myös tämän määritelmän perusteella Inkerön voisi ajatella tekevän dragia, ehkä jopa olevan drag king.

Inkerön projektin lukeminen dragina herättää kysymyksiä dragin luonteesta sekä taiteilijan kehosta välineenä ja mediumina. Voiko drag olla niin pitkälle ”minimalistista”, että taiteilijalla on yllään vain alusasu tai ei yhtään mitään? Voiko keho itsessään olla dragia tai dragissa? Vaikka Inkerön muodonmuutos on kehollinen ja näennäisen pintapuolinen, hänen kehollinen projektinsa on ennen kaikkea psykologisesti radikaali. Dragtaiteilijoiden ajatellaan kritisoivan sukupuolinormeja ja -rooleja tekemällä viihdettä syntymässä määritellyn sukupuolen hylkäämisestä ja kumoamisesta, mutta Inkerö, joka on muunsukupuolinen, muokkaa kehostaan tarkoituksellisesti miessukupuolen visuaal-

lista merkkiä. Inkerön projekti ja erityisesti siihen liittyvät keskustelut ovat todiste keholisuuden, joka ei ole cis-heteronormatiivisen sukupuoliontologian sanelema, mahdollisuudesta. Se on kollektiivisen, normatiivisen mielikuvituksen kyllästävä ja samalla ei-binääristen sukupuolten areaalisuuden (*areality*) kuva.

Kolmannen lukuni toisessa osassa analysoin muotimaailmassa sukupuolirajoja ja -normeja rikkovana tunnettuun espanjalaiseen muotitalo Palomo Spainiin liittyvää diskurssia. Vaikkei Palomo Spain suoranaisesti liity dragiin taiteellisena ilmaisumuotona, sukupuoli-normeja haastavana ”miestenvaatemerkinä” se rinnastetaan monissa analysoimissani lähteissä ristiinpukeutumiseen ja täten myös dragiin. Sen syys/talvi 2017 -mallistoa nimeltä *Objeto Sexual* kuvaillaan jopa ”post-dragina”. Vaikka Palomo Spainin vaatteet on suunniteltu tietynlaiselle vartalomallille ja -tyypille – oletettavasti ”miehiselle” keholle – on tärkeää ottaa huomioon, etteivät Palomo Spainin luomukset silti ole välttämättä *miesten* vaatteita. Pakonomainen tarve avata ’miehen’ kategoria erilaisille ”maskuliinisuuksille” ja tavoille olla kehollisesti ”mies” (*male-bodied*) paljastaa cis-heteronormatiivisen logiikan: koska ei-binäärinen kehollisuus ja sukupuoli ovat areaalisia eli vähemmän tai ei-aivan-todellisia, eivätkä siis vaihtoehto alun alkaenkaan, vaatteet, jotka on suunniteltu henkilöille, jotka on määritelty syntymässä mieheksi, voivat olla vain miesten vaatteita. Kokonaisuudessaan Palomo Spainia pidetään ”sukupuolettomana” muotimerkinä; ei-binääriset sukupuolet eivät ole käsittelemissäni teksteissä laisinkaan läsnä, sillä niitä ei käsitetä samalla tavalla tai tasolla todellisiksi kuin binäärisiä sukupuolia – eikä siis myöskään huomioimisen arvoisiksi.

Mainitsemani post-dragin käsite suhteutuu post-postmodernismiin, jossa koko binääriseen sukupuoleen perustuva ristiinpukeutumisen käsite koetaan vanhentuneeksi ja jossa dragia ei täten myöskään mielletä yhdeksi ristiinpukeutumisen muodoksi. Post-drag on siis tässä mielessä huono termi kuvaamaan Palomo Spainia, jolla ei ole varsinaista yhteyttä dragiin taiteellisena ilmaisumuotona tai mediumina. Ei-binäärinen drag, Palomo Spain ja Artor Jesus Inkerön taiteellinen tuotanto ovat kaikki osa post-postmodernia estetiikkaa. Ne ymmärretään ja käsitteellistetään yhä suhteessa postmodernismiin – dragiin ristiinpukeutumisena tai kategorioihin kuten mies ja nainen, homo- ja heteroseksuaali, feminiininen ja maskuliininen tai sukupuoleen ”jatkumona”.

Tässä tutkielmassa tavoitteenani on ollut tarkastella ja analysoida dragin yleisiä ja vallalla olevia määritelmiä ja niihin liittyviä käsityksiä sukupuolesta. Esitän, että dragin käsite tulisi erottaa cis-heteronormatiivisesta ristiinpukeutumisen käsitteestä ja että sitä tulisi käyttää vain dragista taiteellisena ilmaisumuotona ja mediumina. Dragin yksinkertaistaminen ja samastaminen ristiinpukeutumiseen ilmentää tietynlaista mielikuvaa sukupuolen todellisuudesta, ei dragin todellisuudesta. Dragissa taiteilija muuntautuu oman mielikuvituksensa kuvaksi, mutta esitän, että drag itsessään on mielikuvituksemme kuva. Se, miten miellämme dragin, kuvastaa käsitystämme sukupuolesta ja pohjimmiltaan siitä, miten käsitämme todellisuuden.