



DRAGGING THE DRAG

Dragging The Drag

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE READER

BECOMING VULVA T

DISCOVERING DRAG AND THE BIRTH OF VULVA T

TRANSFORMING INTO VULVA T: THE RITUAL

CHARACTER TRAITS THROUGH THE STUDIO PRACTICE

DENYING THE FAUXNESS

FAUX QUEENS AND UNINTERESTING CHARACTERS

WHY DON'T I WANT TO CALL MYSELF A FAUX QUEEN?

GENDER TROUBLE AND DRAG

VULVA T AS A TOOL: TRANSMITTING PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS THROUGH THE CHARACTER

PLAYFUL ATTEMPT TO CHANGE THE WORLD

VULVA T'S MANIFESTO

CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

15.11.2016

I wanted to become a drag queen, so I did. Now I'm asking, what happened and what happens now.

This project feels reversed: the character emerged earlier this year and at that time I didn't know why. I just really wanted to do it. It was "intuition". It felt urgent and important.

Now I'm trying to analyse. Where did the desire to try drag arise, when did the character emerge, why did I feel like I found something fundamental? Why am I dragging my own gender? Why does the character make me question gender? How did I make the decisions about the character's looks and personality?

And finally: what can Vulva T do?

What happens when a drag queen practice is decided to be taken into a dance institution by a biological female – and why could it be important in terms of gender and feminism?

In this essay I will talk about my journey of creating a gender bending drag queen character Vulva T in an institutional dance context and as a biological female, using internet as a source of knowledge. I'm attempting to articulate why my drag queen practice, that might challenge the traditional definition of drag, feels essential and important.

I will reflect on my discovery of drag, the emergence of the character and the character practice in the studio. I will try to elaborate ways I have made decisions about the character. I will attempt to specify the elements that I'm taking from drag queens and the elements I'm taking from my toolbox of moving and performing skills as a dancer.

I'm dedicating a chapter for the reasons why I don't want to call myself a *faux queen*, which is a term for biological females performing as drag queen characters. I will shortly look at my character through Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, where she argues that gender is a cultural construction and a performance. I want to ask myself: if there's no natural gender, what do I drag? I want to try to talk about Vulva T's space-taking ability and power, and figure out what to do with that space in a form of a performance. And finally I will try to conclude reasons of why I am doing a drag practice.

Most of all, this essay is a documentation of me JUST DOING IT: being a drag queen, borrowing the drag culture from men, ignoring all unnecessary rules about drag characters and performances, claiming space and power as a feministic act by using drag, and neverminding my biological sex or constructed gender. While my project is maybe asking serious questions about things like gender, drag culture and power, it's also a celebration of femininity, entertainment and drag. It's at the same time a serious and a playful attempt to change the world into a more gender-equal place to live in.

FOR THE READER:

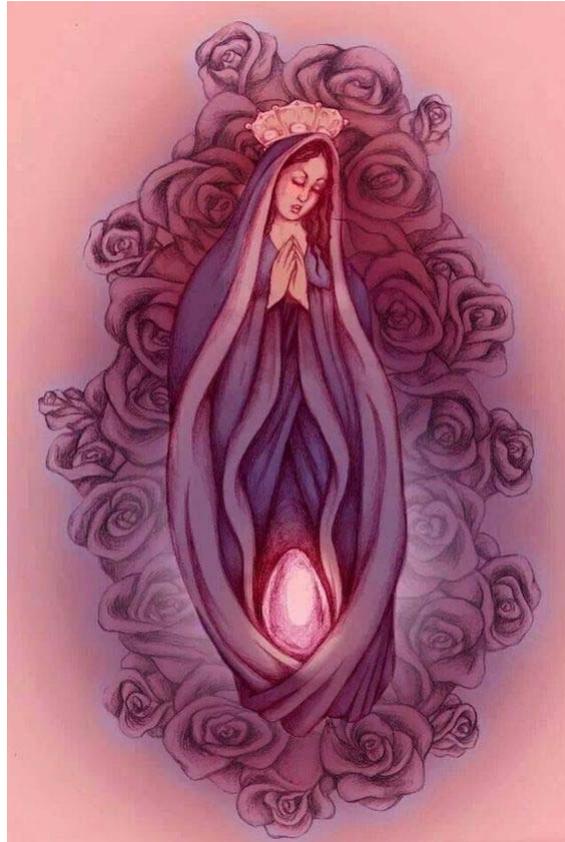
This project – including this essay and the physical presentation – has emerged with the help of the Internet; and more precisely, it's a product of drag in a post-internet time. My drag queen character and practice was not born in queer clubs or other places of the LGBT community, but it was born in and out of big online institutions: *Google, YouTube, Netflix* and *Instagram* - and even *Wikipedia*. Originally the knowledge of being a drag queen is inherited from an aspiring queen's "drag mothers" – more experienced queens – when now this information is also accessible for anyone surfing online, including me: a white cis-gendered queer female from a Finnish suburb. I'm interested in this specific sea of online information, and therefore most of the information I use is from the Internet and I'm attempting to remain critical towards it at all times.

My project is also tied to the institutional art context that I'm in and departing from. I'm interested in taking the drag practice from the clubs and use it in my own context – the dance field in Stockholm and studying at DOCH, School of Dance and Circus – to ask questions about gender, power and performing. When I'm talking about claiming space in my drag practice I don't mean that I'm trying to re-claim space from the minorities who has managed to take drag from their LGBT -spaces to the mainstream media – and make the information accessible for others. Although I'm shortly asking

questions about cis-female's role in the drag queen community through questioning gender, I'm not unaware of the history of suppression, secrecy and pain in the drag culture. I'm also not unaware about the aspect of cultural appropriation in the work, and even though I'm borrowing drag because of my deep love to it and the urge to fight for the equality and gender-reinforcing, I'm trying to be careful and respectful.

I'm still very newly introduced to the culture of drag and my lack of knowledge is evident; and although my hunger for information about the history of drag is insatiable, I'm also highly interested in redefining drag aside the traditions. I will therefore focus on the practice of being a drag queen as a biological woman, outside drag's original context and brought into mine. I'm trying to take drag practice and use it *in my own reality* of being a woman and therefore defined through my gender, living under the male gaze, experiencing patriarchal society and feeling ashamed to claim space.

BECOMING VULVA T



Picture found from Instagram, original source unknown

Once upon a time a strong, brave woman gave birth to a beautiful Baby Drag Queen. Fresh out from the mother's womb, the Baby Drag Queen had her eyes still closed, skin still red, bones still soft. The woman held the Baby Drag Queen in her arms and whispered: "You are strong, you are powerful, you are important. Whatever you want to do with this time you have on Earth, you can. Whoever you want to be, whatever you want to call yourself, you can. There's nothing that can or will stop you."

The Baby Drag Queen looked up to her mother and said (in a low voice):

"Okaaaay. Then I will call myself Vulva T."

DISCOVERING DRAG AND THE BIRTH OF VULVA T

25.05.2016

Self-interview

What is it that you've been working with?

I've been working on a drag queen character.

So your character is a woman?

Yes.

Tell me what made you choose to work with that.

This year I finally started watching a reality show from Netflix that my friend has been preaching about for years. It's called *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In the show a legendary drag queen called RuPaul is searching for *America's next Drag Superstar*. They're competing in different tasks and areas of drag, and each week one queen is eliminated.

I got completely hooked to the show, I watched 6 seasons in one month! The queens are amazing. The best ones are such multi talents: comedians, makeup artists, runway models, actors, dancers, dressmakers and lip synch masters.

So then you wanted to try it.

Yes. I was questioning why there was only men doing queen characters in the show - only men playing with feminine characteristics. I looked into it and found out that there's some women doing queen characters out there, but they are not really appreciated. I don't get it: it's not like I came out from my mother having all these hyper-feminine characteristics in me.

As much as the culture was fascinating to me, I also felt the problematics. But at that moment I also just looked at the show and thought: "I want to do that!" That was the striving force. I just really wanted to try it.

Could you be more specific what was it in the drag queens that made you want to try it?

I can't articulate all the reasons yet, but at least there is many of my interests involved in the process. There's the acting side of it; the getting into a character. There's also the lip synching that drag queens do, which is something I've done for years: it's a skill and a performance task that I'm fascinated by. Then there's also the practical side of putting on the makeup, planning the look, making butt pads and so on. It felt like a very concrete practice, and I'm drawn into concreteness. I also felt that doing drag would be outside my comfort zone.

Overall it's very much a skill practice. I like to practice skills and really challenge myself.

My process with drag started in February, 2016. In the past I had seen some traditional drag queen shows with men acting feminine – or even imitating famous female performers – and dressing up in clothes associated to the female gender for entertainment purposes; other than that, my knowledge of drag was nonexistent. When I got introduced to the more modern drag scene that has been taking over the mainstream media with the help of the reality series RuPaul's Drag Race, I started to understand how drag as an art form has developed and transformed.

My first drag queen try out was at home with some make up products, a cheap-looking wig and YouTube -videos of drag queens doing their makeup. The execution was defective but the amazement about transforming oneself and affecting the personality with the visual appearance was there. I *felt* different. When I showed pictures to my friends, most common response was that I "really looked like a drag queen", and with that they were indicating to a man

dressed up as a woman. This meta-perspective to drag – being a biological female performing a character who is a man in female drag – was alluring, confusing and worth looking into.

Later on, with the help of more YouTube –tutorials, I learned other skills that drag queens have: I carved an accurately-shaped bum padding from foam and learned how to properly glue my eyebrows into the skin for covering purposes – which I failed repeatedly in! I spent a lot of time on the internet: researching drag queens, reading their interviews, spending time on their Instagram – feeds, watching their videos and slowly finding out my personal preferences. I started to be ready to let the character fully appear.

In May 2016 I had three weeks in my school's studio to create a solo presentation. I decided to include my drag queen practice in the solo since I had already been working on it in my free time. I dedicated these three weeks for creating and getting to know Vulva T and preparing a character presentation. During this time the character's foundation was born and the time after that has been more focused on creating the circumstances for her to act in. However, I don't want the character to get stuck: she's constantly fine-tuned.



2 pictures from the first try out: the birth of Vulva T.

TRANSFORMING INTO VULVA T: THE RITUAL

“The theatre dressing room is a very special place. It is where the act of theater begins – and make-up is kind of magic – the means by which you transform yourself into the character you hope to play. You make up your face as you think she might have looked; you dress your hair as you think she might have dressed hers. And then, there comes a moment when she looks at you in the mirror and you realize that she is looking at you and recognizing you as herself. It is through you, her love, her hope, her fear, her terror, is to be expressed.”

-Dancer and Choreographer Martha Graham in the film "A Dancers World", 1957

Doing the physical practice with Vulva T includes a time-consuming ritual of becoming the character: putting on the makeup, wig and costume and mentally preparing to play the character. With the makeup I attempt to make the face as "drag" as possible: I combine beautiful and grotesque characteristics and disguise my natural features under the heavy theatre makeup. Some tricks male drag queens do with the makeup, I want to do the opposite: when they want to soften their features to appear more feminine, I attempt to roughen up mine, and when drag queens often want to blend the make up to look as natural as possible, I leave the lines harsh and visible for people to see. Putting on so much make up that it can't appear natural makes me question *what's under the layer*, and I try to bring that questioning into the character. If the makeup ends up being too beautiful or proportional, the "drag" aspect of it easily disappears and the gender-bending of the appearance is not that obvious. However, I also want her to look appealing, so putting on the makeup is a constant balance between these different aspects.

I start by cleaning my face and even using disinfectant on my eyebrow area to remove all excess oils. I take a paper glue stick and glue and comb my eyebrows along my skin to cover them. This is a quite time-consuming part since a successful covering needs many layers of glue and each layer needs to dry completely.

When the eyebrows are covered, I shape my face with different-coloured theatre foundations. I over-exaggerate all shadows and highlighted areas and "bake" my face with powder: this is a technique of leaving a lot of loose powder to sink into the face for at least 10 minutes.

With "baking" the makeup sets better, doesn't crease and the highlights become more

dramatic. After dusting the excess powder off, I continue to shape my face with different-coloured powders and blush: I accentuate my cheekbones, sharpen my square jaw line for a more masculine appearance and even make my nose smaller by putting dark powder on the sides of my nose. This is called "contouring". In the end I add shining powder into my cheekbones and the bridge of my nose in order for those parts to catch light.

After the base of the makeup is done, I draw new eyebrows on top of the covered ones – just higher. This is an important step in making the face appear drag and unnatural. I choose to do a very high-arched and dramatic eyebrow which makes the character look slightly angry and mischievous – and less like me. After the eyebrows I re-shape my eyelids with eye shadows and lip liners: I make the eyelid bigger by drawing a new crease higher and move the lid bit closer to my nose. I usually use various different coloured eye shadows on my eyes. I apply a large amount of liquid eyeliner which I arch strongly up to re-shape the eyes. I often use different shades of glitter for a dramatic appearance and finally attach long fake eyelashes into the skin – arching them up as well to make my eyes appear tilted.

The final step of the makeup is the lips. I draw my upper lip bigger and closer to my nose and colour the lips with usually dark eyeliner and lipstick.

When the makeup is done, I put on the costume. The costume is made in collaboration with a design student Lucy Martin and is a dramatic ensemble with a black leotard, a neckpiece, a corset belt, a skirt and a long train. Under the leotard I have two pairs of broken see-through stockings and under the stockings I have large bum pads; later on I will also hopefully have shoulder pads. I leave the pads visible in the stockings in order to accentuate the artificial femininity of the character: hoping that if I show that I shape my body for a more feminine silhouette, it could make the spectator consider my natural body as more gender-neutral.

On my feet I put a pair of high black platform heels to make me as tall as possible and change my silhouette from normal. Finally I put on a wig cap and a pink short wig. The wig is messy, old and doesn't look like real hair, which might help the image of a drag queen. I've tried different wigs but the pink wig suits that character: the shape of it – graphic bob with straight bangs – is not too soft and natural.

Voilà! The character is on. I check if I need to add more makeup now that all the components are there. Sometimes I add jewellery and in the future I will try artificial nails. I go to the studio. It's time to work.



On the left: one of my favourite drag queens, Pearl. Picture by Camilo Fuentealba

On the right: Vulva T in Stockholm, October 2016. Picture by me.

CHARACTER TRAITS THROUGH THE STUDIO PRACTICE

When I've been in the studio with Vulva T, my main priority has been to get into the character work and learn more about her. I have really wanted to allow the character's personality and behaviour appear. Who is she and what does she do?

*Note: By asking questions about the character's actions I'm obviously asking: who am I and what do I do when having on a specific drag queen look with makeup, a wig, pads and a costume – and then let my imagination fly? I want to allow Vulva T to appear and therefore I must believe in her. So pardon my usage of words, but **she's real**: let's believe in her together.*

WHO IS SHE?

I have to be quite honest: I feel I'm far from knowing Vulva T. Getting to know a character thoroughly might take years, but I'll share my reflections. I'm not sure if I can articulate reasons for the following characteristics, but what I can claim is that Vulva T can be seen as my alter ego and therefore she is representing me in different ways. This is a departure point for my decisions. Sometimes I try to separate the character from myself in order for there to be a significant difference; however, often I notice my own behaviour and characteristics in her – just heightened.

She is called Vulva T. This is obvious by now, but it's an important aspect of the character. The name came up while joking about drag queen names amongst friends, but quite soon after it felt right. "Vulva", female's external sex organs, is indicating to femaleness and sexual pleasure. "T" is indicating to my own name and a drag slang sentence "No T No Shade", which is about telling the ugly truth in an honest way: "This is just my opinion, and I am not trying to hurt you."

Vulva T is gender fluid. For a longer time I've thought about claiming her to be a man dressed up as a woman, but I no longer find it relevant. I think she can represent whichever gender the spectator experiences watching her. She can be a woman, she can be a man in drag, she can be a trans woman or she can be the "wo" in "woman". She can celebrate all genders beyond the binaries, since that is something I feel I can't personally do.

Vulva T has seriousness in her. My friends who I presented Vulva T to during May described her as a serious, defensive, vulnerable and even scary and angry. During this Autumn I've felt that the character has grown to have more dimensions: sometimes I can sense her being humorous and hopeful. The change and growth has been evident in her body and moving as well: when most of her movements were earlier executed through tension, slowness and muscle work, she's now slightly more relaxed and playful in her movements.

The seriousness could be a way to separate Vulva T's nature from mine, since I'm usually received happy and positive. On the other hand the seriousness helps her to *claim space*, which I will talk about more later on.

Vulva T's history is unknown. As it comes to biographical details, I don't know so much about the character yet. This hasn't been a focus on the character work though since my approach of getting to know her has been more through physical experience and witnessing. It's hard to write a biography for a character born from my personal needs, taste and preferences, but perhaps later I will find an urge to write a biography.

Vulva T is on a mission. Her mission can be interpreted through her performance – maybe a spectator knows about it more than I do – but some of her main goal seems to be to empower other people. She's my personal warrior. I will get back to this later on this essay.

WHAT DOES SHE DO?

Vulva T has some specific bodily actions and practices that I've repeatedly worked on them when being in a studio with her. These actions have emerged from the feeling I have when having the character on (claiming space), pre-assumptions I have about drag queens (lip synching) and from my toolbox and skills as a dance student (dancing).

I'm working on **claiming space** through the character. Even though this is evident in all her actions, it's intentionally practiced by standing, walking, posing and eye contact. I define "claiming space" as *feeling empowered, taking people's time, being seen and looked at and not apologising for it*. I'm using eye contact to establish relationships with the spectators: I even want them to sit below me and very close in front of me to confront them.

Lip synching is a practice that has stayed with the character from the beginning and is an essential practice for many drag queens. I often use artists and songs that many people know and edit the voice to make it sound different. If the singer is a female – for example *Rihanna* has been popular with Vulva T – I lower the voice with an audio program *Audacity* to make these famous singers sound more unrecognisable and unisex. When lowering the voice I often also slow the tempo since many pop songs are quite fast: with space in the music the character can have more time to play, express and enjoy. I have used songs from male singers as well – then I don't lower the voice – and artists who are not so that known, to sometimes shift away from the recognition. All these are tools of giving the character a voice and blurring her gender by "magic": a dark voice coming from a female drag queen.

At some point this Autumn I started to think that the character is so established that she would be ready to **dance** – and more precisely that she wants to dance. I started to work on a dance phrase. I used movements with some references to pop culture and dance and made the character repeat the phrase in different tempos and focus points. The phrase also has movements that could be connected to stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics.

I'm not yet sure why I decided that the character will dance: first I thought I wanted to use all the "skills" I have to make the character a spectacle, but later on I think it's more about breaking from drag stereotypes of how to perform and move. My friend suggested that in the dance Vulva T is lip synching with her body and I found that an interesting viewpoint; another friend said that it feels like Vulva T is trapped inside a repetition of movements. I instantly thought about Judith Butler's view on gender constitution: how gender is “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” and further, instituted through the stylization of the body (Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, 1988). Perhaps Vulva T constitutes her own gender and identity by repeating her movements that later could be associated to her.

I'm still unsure if the dance scene will end up in the physical presentation since I've heard mixed feedback about it and I'm not completely sure what it is about, even though it feels essential. I want to use the remaining weeks to let the performance structure rest: her actions are strongest when they are fresh.

DENYING THE FAUXNESS

“The only reason that faux drag exists as a form is because even though drag tries to deviate away from gender, gender is still imposed upon it. So when women enter into it, it becomes politicised”

-Drag Queen **China Dethcrash** on faux queens in an internet interview for *The Tab*

“We're all born naked and the rest is drag”

-Drag Queen **RuPaul** in his song *Born Naked*

FAUX QUEENS AND UNINTERESTING CHARACTERS

I happen to not be the only biological female who has started to perform as a drag queen. Even though there are many names for female artists who are performing as drag queens (for example: female queens, lady queens, bio queens, cis queens), they are generally called *faux queens*. When searching "bio queen", Your Dictionary offers a definition: "A biologically female performance artist who performs in female drag at drag shows, or acts like a drag queen. Essentially a woman pretending to be a man who is mimicking and parodying another woman."

Note and reminder: loyal to my internet-research and topic I'm meeting unreliable sources constantly; however since my research is linked to the information one can access and be influenced by through internet, I choose to use them. My criticality towards these dictionaries is of course necessary: for example, when searching "drag queen" from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it suggests: "a male homosexual who dresses as a woman especially for comic or theatrical effect". This is obviously not accurate since there are all genders and sexual orientations performing as drag queens – with different agendas.

Looking through tens of online dictionaries to map out the surmises of faux queens, I found a lot of interesting claims. Under the topic "Drag Queen" Wikipedia suggests that faux queens are women who dress in an exaggerated style "to emulate drag queens". The usage of words suggests that women can't be drag queens but they can imitate them, strive to equal and rival with some degree of success.

Separating faux queens from drag queens is a mentality I've noticed extensively when researching information about drag and women doing drag. In one of the many reddit.com conversations about women in drag, "Your honest opinion on faux queens?" a nickname *muffettuffet* stated an opinion that faux queens are not doing drag, and continued:

"(Faux queen is) A fierce performer maybe, but there's no need for these endless stupid labels, it's a female performer, not a drag queen. Doesn't mean they're not fierce or talented or I wouldn't pay and enjoy seeing them, but a "faux queen" is just a fancy way of saying woman, where's the illusion? Why not call a spade a spade?"

Similar responses were received from anonymous chat users:

"Same! I love the art of drag, but knowing it's a biological woman is a turn off for me."

"Cis-women doing female-drag takes away a lot of the gender-bending, clownish aspects of it; faux queens rarely do it right."

"It's hard to be a drag queen. From covering up hair, to tucking, to painting, to being able to accept yourself and find your identity. Faux queens don't have to do that. --When I go to a show, I don't want to see a girl wearing make-up, that's boring. I want to see a man who's made up a character and put a lot of work into his act. It's like the age-old thing about short models. Some girls on the faux queen tag just put on eye-liner and call it drag."

These are naturally singular subjective voices instead of facts but I wanted to bring them out as an example since these are common thoughts about faux drag in online conversations. I personally would claim that instead of gender, many of these arguments could be read as descriptions of successful and insufficient executions of a drag character: *of course* a woman with only eye liner is hard to be recognised as a drag queen. For me an interesting drag queen, no matter what gender, puts a lot of work and thought into the character. I do agree that it requires certain amount of gender-disguising, references to drag, claiming and work on the character in order for females to be recognised as drag queens, and the same goes for males.

These comments could also be read as evidence about an existence of misogyny in drag culture: some people don't want women to enter and exist in the drag queen scene. When I searched information about faux queens online I found out that the drag reality series that introduced me to drag, RuPaul's Drag Race, doesn't even accept applications from females doing queen characters. *We're all born naked and the rest is drag?* For sure I'm not at all interested entering that world, and I understand that the format would face a lot of challenges judging women alongside men, but I was still surprised. Not even applications? There has been at least one trans woman in the show and some contestants came out as trans women after the show. An anonymous reddit.com user commented in a conversation "Can a female enter RuPaul's Drag Race?" in a following way:

"Drag Race is the biggest and most diverse show on TV in terms of sexuality and gender identity. By having a straight cis woman on the show, you're taking that spot away from LGBT people."

But what if a woman is not straight? This is a foreign topic for me as a queer woman who hasn't practiced drag in queer clubs and isn't necessarily linking her own drag to sexual orientation, but: I

personally think that today's drag – celebrating self-expression and diversity – should be welcoming people with all backgrounds and sexual orientations; however, those who don't identify themselves as LGBT should be respectful and aware about the importance of the (relatively) safe spaces of the community.

I'm not getting that much into the problematics of drag culture but I still find it worth mentioning that when introducing myself to drag queen culture I constantly ran into insulting jokes and terms referring to the female gender – and I still do. Now that drag has entered the mainstream media and gained status, power and success, and the men performing as drag queens have different sexual orientations and they come from different social backgrounds, it's easy to ask: is today's drag is a misogynist art form?

I understand the history of drag as a politicised statement of driving queer rights and equality, but if one strictly looks at gender and the possibilities to execute an interesting drag character despite one's biological body or gender, why couldn't females create greatness inside this art form? There are a lot of male AND female drag queens I find uninteresting due to my personal taste of execution, appearance and actions, but it has nothing to do with genitalia. However, these are questions and thoughts I constantly carry with me in my practice, and I still find it extremely difficult to be a good drag queen as a biological female: everything has to be surprisingly multi-layered and considered for the “dragness” to be evident. Luckily I'm willing to work hard.

WHY DON'T I WANT TO CALL MYSELF A FAUX QUEEN?

3.11.2016

I seem to have a problem with calling myself a faux queen, and I want to elaborate the reasons why.

Looking up the word "faux" from the dictionary, the direct definition of the word is false or fake. I'm curious: why should biological females call themselves any more fake queens than biological males? For me the term faux queen says that women are not "real drag queens". Why? Is it because they don't tape their genitals or shave their

chins? Mostly I've heard that women are not considered drag queens because they don't have to learn to be like women - they "are already women".

Honey, listen! Let me tell you something. Drag queens have often nothing to do with women. Drag queens don't look or act like women. I didn't come out from my mother's womb knowing how to walk in heels, put on makeup, tie my corset or curl my lashes. And I certainly did not come out from my mother's womb knowing how to glue my eyebrows on my skin, put on 4 sets of fake lashes, pad my ass, lip synch, tease a wig or contour my breasts. These things have nothing to do with gender. These things are practices and performances. American drag queen RuPaul once said, "I do not impersonate females! How many women do you know who wear seven-inch heels, four-foot wigs, and skin tight dresses?" He also said: "I don't dress like a woman; I dress like a drag queen!"

I also don't want to call myself a faux queen because of drag categories. There are many different categories, styles, forms or types of drag queens. *Pageant queens*, *comedy queens*, *fishy queens* (fishy is drag slang referring to queens who look very feminine: the word suggests that a woman's vagina smells like fish), *goth queens*, *club queens*, *trashy queens*, *genderfuck queens* (using a clear combination of masculine and feminine characteristics) and many more. Then there's *faux queens*, and for example in this article as their own category:

<https://www.queerty.com/11-common-drag-queen-styles-20140603>

I claim that all faux queens could categorise themselves into these other styles if necessary: there are pageant queens, camp queens (style that uses exaggeration, satire, and comedy), trashy queens and many more done by female performers. So why should biological women be their own category if it has nothing to do with their character?

I don't have a huge issue with other women calling themselves faux queens; I just don't want to do that myself. I don't see the necessity of using language to separate women from men if we are doing the same thing. I'm a drag queen playing with all gender norms, masculine and feminine characteristics, magic and illusion: putting on wigs, padding my behind, shaving my legs and lip synching Rihanna. So can I just call myself a drag queen -without clarifying to be "faux" in the next sentence?

GENDER TROUBLE AND DRAG

21.10.2016

We all look the same.

Tonight I saw a dance performance called 7 Pleasures: it was choreographed by Mette Ingvarstsen and it had approximately 12 performers on stage. There were male and female performers and most of the performance all performers were naked. The bodies were athletic dancer bodies, so not so much diversity in size. Or let's be direct: there were a lot of skinny young white people on stage. There was one non-white man, but the general impression was the same. No visible make up, the hair colours looked natural, and there was body hair. Sweat, breasts, muscles, sexual organs. The only thing I could think about was how they all looked so similar. There was something different between their legs and some of them had breasts in order to feed babies after they're born; other than that the resemblance was evident. In my mind I put drag queen costumes on all of them. I made them drag queens. They all looked amazing in drag! It would have been drag in each case, despite the sexual organs, despite the sex. Why is gender such a big deal?

Few words about gender trouble:

I was introduced to Judith Butler in 2014 and her thoughts about gender have travelled with me these two and a half years. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler suggests that gender identities are performative: they're not natural or tied to our anatomy but a construction through repeating stylized acts.

Drag is a good example of a gender performance. Butler herself has used drag as an example in the book: "I would suggest as well 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" (p.182)

I'm not so interested in the connection between traditional drag and Butler's idea of gender performance; for me Gender Trouble is connected to deciding to do a drag queen character as a woman and denying the term "faux queen". Butler's claims are confirmations to my thoughts: my gender, even though I have it and I identify myself through it, is not natural and therefore it shouldn't be a restriction from doing certain things.

Butler thinks – and I agree – that the term "women" is inadequate to describe such large group of individuals. There are some women whose appearance and behaviour are closer to drag queens who attempt to pass as women – but there are many kinds of women, and many kinds of drag queens.

When I started doing drag I assumed I could find a more feminine side of myself through the practice. It didn't happen, but what I found out was that connecting masculinity to a drag queen character was more interesting for me since imagining a female body under a feminine character *is a performance done by many women each day*, and therefore not often considered as drag.

The questions I want to ask are:

If there's no natural gender, what do you drag?

If there's no natural gender, why should the performer of a drag queen be a man?

Why is it so revealing to be dressed as a drag queen since it blurs my female gender?

The questions I'm asking myself:

If gender roles didn't exist, how would I be like? How would I act or dress? Would it feel necessary to put on a drag queen alter ego?

VULVA T AS A TOOL: TRANSMITTING PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS THROUGH THE CHARACTER

TOOLBOX POEM

male privilege

white privilege

resources

time

skills

the objectified body

stereotypes

transformation

drag

the Internet

assembly of art forms

pop culture

humour

naivety

anger

hope

And then, Action!

“There was a time when a woman's opinion did not matter. If you were black, white, Mexican, Asian, Muslim, educated, poor or rich, if you were a woman, it did not matter. Less than 100 years ago, women did not have the right to vote. Look how far we've come from having no voice to being on the brink of making history again by electing the first woman president. Yes! But we have to vote.”

-Pop singer **Beyonce** about Hillary Clinton at *#GetOutTheVote* –concert 5th of November, 2016.

“I was of course inspired by Debbie Harry and Chrissie Hynde and Aretha Franklin, but my real muse was David Bowie. He embodied male and female spirit and that suited me just fine. He made me think there were no rules. But I was wrong. There are no rules — if you're a boy. If you're a girl, you have to play the game. What is that game? You are allowed to be pretty and cute and sexy. But don't act too smart. Don't have an opinion. Don't have an opinion that is out of line with the status quo, at least. You are allowed to be objectified by men and dress like a slut, but don't own your *sluttiness*. And do not, I repeat, do not, share your own sexual fantasies with the world. Be what men want you to be. But more importantly, be what women feel comfortable with you being around other men.

What I would like to say to all women here today is this: Women have been so oppressed for so long they believe what men have to say about them. They believe they have to back a man to get the job done. And there are some very good men worth backing, but not because they're men — because they're worthy. As women, we have to start appreciating our own worth and each other's worth. Seek out strong women to befriend, to align yourself with, to learn from, to collaborate with, to be inspired by, to support, and enlightened by.”

-Pop singer **Madonna** in the *Billboard Women in Music* –event 9.12.2016

PLAYFUL ATTEMPT TO CHANGE THE WORLD

17.10.2016

What I want to action on/ask questions about/change is: gender-inequality, the stereotypes of gender, the construction of gender, the objectified and passive female body, the shame in women who are claiming space, that still very few women have power in today's society, the definition of drag, the rape culture, the dominance of the male gaze and that the ideal spectator is too often a man, the casual and pedestrian performing trends, being ashamed of doing art because of my privilege, and being ashamed of doing art because of my suppressed position as a woman.

During this Autumn I've worked on a performance score for Vulva T in my studio sessions. Showing the character to colleagues and supervisors I received feedback that I must feel empowered by performing as Vulva T since she appears powerful. The possibility of having power in a performance situation gave me an urge to use this power to manifest something: to use the character's status for political purposes. I wanted to experiment with building a performance score that could open up the audience for Vulva T's manifesto. I started to playfully call the character Vulva the Warrior.

The most governing aspect of the performance building has been to give her status and make the spectators believe her in order to have an impact by performing. I've had different strategies for the character to be credible: taking a power position by having a strong appearance; using stereotypes of looks, movements, positions and other characteristics indicated to the male gender, which is the gender who often has the right to speak and have an impact; attempting to have a working dramaturgy in the presentation AND being fully engaged in performing the character while being transparent about the character's artificialness.

There's a relevance for me in having an uncanny resemblance to different things but being slightly off; never letting the performance become a recognisable act even though it has concrete elements. The character is lip synching popular songs that people know but the

singer sounds different; she is visually resembling a drag queen but having a body that most likely belongs to a female; she is dancing but not in a way drag queens would usually dance; she is flirting with a traditional drag entertainment show but within a different context and dramaturgy.

I've decided to erase the part where I literally explain and walk you, the reader, through the performance, because while I'm in Finland writing the last pages, the performance is moving on and morphing. The performance is a presentation of the character, showing of some of the practices, an experiment of an audience interaction and a physical conclusion I had to make until the deadline.

I'm not sure if my performance score will do and ask what I'm hoping it to do, and I naturally can't assume what the spectator sees or experiences. I still trust that it will represent my research and decisions and that it will be a good starting point for me to continue the process further.

Perhaps the actual attempt to change the world will happen after this project; perhaps not. I will need to decide where to proceed now that Vulva T is here and ready to act, but at this moment I'm not certain enough to answer that question.

VULVA T MANIFESTO

Inspired by the performance "Black" by Mette Edvardsen

I'm a drag queen I'm a drag queen I'm a drag queen

I'm a queer queen I'm a queer queen I'm a queer queen

A drag queen

This is a drag queen

Look at me

Give me some space

Let me be seen, outspoken, heard and daring

Look at her

Give her some space

Let her be seen, outspoken, heard and daring

Supporting Empowering Celebrating

Love Love Love Love Love

Not annoyed by cis women claiming space Not threatened by

cis women claiming space Not hating cis women claiming space

For, with and by: Strong Individuals

Don't step out of the way!

Right now:

Not a woman Not a woman Not a woman

Not a man Not a man Not a man

A drag queen A drag queen A drag queen

This is a drag queen

This is genderless genderless tenderness

I am a drag queen.

CONCLUSIONS

31.12.2016

Self-interview

I think my research has opened up a lot of questions that could be projects on their own.

Like?

Superstar-practice as a political performing tool. Movement qualities in an alter-ego practice. Makeup choreography. Stealing from suppressed for suppressed (Robin Hood but not at all). Drag Queen Dances. Researching the interaction between audience and a performer. Avoiding dance. Avoiding pedestrian performing trends.

After all this, let me ask you for the last time: Why are you doing a drag queen practice?

I did it because I wanted to show that I can do it the way some men can, but I guess I'm passed that now.

I'm doing it because it's important:

I think it's a good practice to use to ask questions about gender, stereotypes, power, dance and fine arts.

I'm doing it because it makes me discuss and because it's political, but not only through anger but also enjoyment and entertainment.

I'm doing it because it's hard. It's challenging and rewarding.

I feel guilty doing things that are easy. Is that a female thing?

Good girl syndrome -thing?

I like how the practice is a collision of art forms that I'm interested in.

I'm doing it because I can: *shout out to my privileges!*

My project is a feministic act. It could be seen as a manifesto for women's abilities and potential. Standing up for sisterhood, celebrating femininity, celebrating women owning their sexuality, celebrating women using their potential to claim space. *Womance.*

The part of me that experiences shame:

When I started this project, I didn't criticise my work as cultural appropriation or stealing from minorities; when watching RuPaul's Drag Race, all I could see was a lot of privileged men with very expensive designer clothes and make up – making fun of women.

I got angry, challenged and excited.

Now I'm not sure if I should do drag as a cis-woman, no matter how queer.

I always experience shame about my privileges, and yet again I'm there. But if I just borrow a little?

With respect, questions and redefining?

The part of me that is JUST DOING IT:

Drag is about celebrating – and not only gay men.

Every art form departs from somewhere.

Today's drag is beyond class, race or gender. Reinforcing.

Today's drag is moved from secret clubs to social media.

I feel like I can't do what I want to do by just being a woman.

I need tools!

May I take this tool?

I took it already. I'm using it already.

You took stereotypical female characteristics to use for your purposes; I'm borrowing something back for mine.

Maybe in the future I will stop calling it a drag practice and make it an alter-ego character practice with the same goals, hopes and dreams.

I have to be careful but I also have to be brave.

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