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It's a Drag: Finding the Divine in Drag Performance

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### It's a Drag: Finding the Divine in Drag Performance

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For over the thirty years, drag performance has been examined for its utility to subvert or reinforce traditional gender roles. Many of these examinations have focused on performances that emphasize subversion and separated drag into two categories: the progressive drag that subverts, and the regressive drag that reinforces. While this approach has provided a wealth of understanding about drag performance and gender roles, drag can be examined without separating its subverting/reinforcing aspects. If drag is seen as the consideration of a given gender performing the not given gender, then another consideration can be made to the subverting performing the reinforcing. This new consideration, referred to here as the *divine*, can provide new utility for drag performance and its role in understanding gender.

Keywords: drag performance, drag queens, gender roles

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## INTRODUCTION

RuPaul, the most successful drag performer of the last thirty years, received her first national exposure on April 17, 1990, an episode of the talk show *Geraldo*.<sup>1</sup> The episode revolves around the underground club scene that RuPaul frequented. Under the guise of trying to understand their lifestyle, Geraldo treats his panel of guests as a modern-day freak show. Most of the panel and the many club kids in the crowd were immediately set apart from the conservatively dressed Geraldo and audience members by their radical appearance. However, RuPaul's appearance was initially not radical. She looked like a typical female nightclub patron. When the camera pans across her face, there is little to connect her to the other much more outlandish club kids. Geraldo introduced her by saying, "RuPaul, currently known in *his* circles as the Queen of Manhattan in 1990," He emphasized the male pronoun. The audience could then make the consideration of RuPaul as a biological man dressed as a beautiful woman. When the viewer made that consideration, RuPaul became a subversive outsider with the rest of the panel.

Drag's most basic definition is performing a gender that is not your own, but the one unifying factor within drag is that moment of considering the performer's gender with the gender performance. This moment of consideration is found by necessity in all drag performances. Even an imagined drag performance where not even the performer is aware of layered genders is still considered by the one imagining. While this consideration can be weakly applied to every broadly construed gender performance, the deeper the surety, the stronger presence drag has. Every gender performance, on stage or off, could be scrutinized; but the stronger the evidence, the greater the surety. For instance, seeing a woman in a dress with a large Adam's apple might have a weak drag consideration. However, going to watch an advertised drag act comes with the

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<sup>1</sup> *Geraldo*, "Nightlife Agony and XXXtacy," produced by Investigation News Group, first aired on April 17, 1990.

almost perfect certainty of the layered genders and creates a stronger consideration of drag. Neither example relies on actual proof of the original gender; rather the effectiveness relies on the certainty of the person considering.

Defining drag by this layered moment of consideration leads to other layered consideration within drag. Evaluating drag is a deeper and more thorough consideration, and when gender representation is a part of that evaluation, it can be helpful to separate drag into the elements that reinforce gender roles and the elements that subvert gender roles. This helps identify problematic and/or useful ways drag performance contributes to the audience, performer, society, etc. While useful, this separation can unintendedly re-gender a performance that it inherently un-genders. It remains both male and female but is also either reinforcing or subverting, but the male and female layering can be applied again to this new duality. The reinforcing/subverting dynamic can be a layered consideration much like the male/female layered consideration. This new consideration, which I call the *divine*,<sup>2</sup> can also be deeply and thoroughly examined to expand the understanding of drag performance. By using the recreation of human tissue in drag performance as a framework, the *divine* emerges as a new way to approach drag and discover its benefits.

The reinforcing/subversion dynamic can be traced back to the early work of gender studies in the mid-eighties. At the time, Judith Butler was giving a deeper consideration to the gendered layering of drag. In *Gender Trouble*, she used drag performance as an example of subverting gender expectations and responded to the idea in her later book, *Bodies that Matter*,

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<sup>2</sup> “Divine” successfully captures the creation of the feminine through drag performance on several levels. One of which is a homage to Harris Glenn Milstead, whose drag character Divine paved the way for drag performances that were simultaneously true to themselves while also appealing to others, much in the same way RuPaul did.

to emphasize that drag can subvert but does not inherently subvert;<sup>3</sup> it can also reinforce gender stereotypes and problematic ideas.

Butler's warning is an early example of drag being re-gendered into a performance that either subverts or reinforces—heals or damages. Butler herself talks about the complications of understanding and separating the two in an interview with *Art Journal*:

My whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen, and that ‘performativity’ is not a radical choice, and it’s not voluntarism . . .

Performativity has to do with repetition, very often the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms . . . This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in... it seems to me that there is no easy way to know whether something is subversive. Subversiveness is not something that can be gauged or calculated . . . I do think that for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has to both mime and displace its conventions.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the work on drag over the past thirty years has been focused on the subversive side of this separation, and rarely delves into the reinforcing side. Theatre, gender, and sexuality theorist Jill Dolan saw drag as a turning point in the discussion of gender roles. She used the impersonation of gender roles to cast doubt on the accuracy of those roles and questioned gender representation as natural through drag's inherent unnaturalness in its representation.<sup>5</sup> Dolan and

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 174. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 84-91.

<sup>4</sup> Liz Kotz, “The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler,” *Artforum* 31, no. 3 (November 1992): 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> Jill Dolan, “Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles,” *Women and Performance* 2, no. 2 (1985): 5-11.



Butler point towards drag performance acting as an inspiration to move the focus of female beyond a set of essential characteristics and toward a potential utopia that could include all qualities.

In 2002, Laurence Senelick produced a detailed history of drag in theatre in *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*,<sup>6</sup> and one year later, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor examined drag through its lived realities in their work *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. They spent months observing the lives of several drag queens at the titular 801 Cabaret. They saw firsthand how drag as a concept can be a subversive protest.<sup>7</sup>

The study of drag continued within the realm of queer studies alongside trans performers and queer performance. While these covered a wide range of queer experiences, drag performance is often regulated as a tool for navigating queer identities,<sup>8</sup> or as a reference point for offshoot performances, such as drag kinging.<sup>9</sup> The fringes of drag performance, which emphasize subversion are often the subjects of drag study which continues a pattern of emphasizing drag's role in subverting gender and sexuality.

In 2009, RuPaul returned to show business after a decade-long absence to host the reality drag competition program *RuPaul Drag Race*. Not only is it highly successful, but it also

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Rupp and Taylor, 184.

<sup>8</sup> E. Shapiro, "The Impact of Race on Gender Transformation in a Drag Troupe", in *Transgender Identities, Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, eds. S. Hines and T. Sanger, (London: Routledge, 2010), 153–69. Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *When the Girls are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens*, Signs, New Feminist Approaches to Social Science Methodologies. Vol.30, No.4, pp. 2115–39, 2005. The Drag Queens of London, London Live 2013.

<sup>9</sup> W. Shapiro, (2007) *Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities*, Gender and Society. Vol.21, No.2, pp. 250–71.

brought to the forefront of the public eye a kind of commercial, stereotypically feminine, queer-drama fueled, and entertainment-based drag performance. This style of drag veers much closer to the potential of drag to reinforce gender. *RuPaul* himself has drawn the ire of the queer community on several occasions for less than the progressive handling of trans issues, and watchers of drag race have often expressed problematic elements inherent in the show. However, the potential to reinforce does not automatically reduce its potential to subvert nor its ability to be deeply considered as a useful style of drag performance.

To understand how subversion is maintained, it is useful to return to the RuPaul of the mid-1980s. While Dolan was first writing about the subversive possibilities of drag, RuPaul was considering the financial possibilities of drag. RuPaul's gender expression was influenced by punk rock and challenged female expectations rather than adhering to them. His aesthetic specifically fought against the ideas of gender that Butler was simultaneously criticizing. This pre-fame RuPaul would have stood as a clear example of a subversive drag today. This subversion can be seen in former club kid James St. James' 2009 interview with RuPaul for the online video series *Daily Freak Show*. The interview begins by recounting the first time influential nightlife journalist Michael Musto and James met RuPaul at a club almost thirty years prior. James says,

You were in a pair of waders, ok, you had rubber waders... you had on football shoulder pads with mylar streamers coming off of it. You had the mohawk. You had the little love things written on your face, right? And your nipple da doos just waving in the wind.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James St James, "Ep. 70 - Part 1 of James St. James' Interview with RuPaul," *Daily Freak Show*, Youtube, Oct 16, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1-FAw7eSCA>.

The look that James described had clear features of subversion. The shoulder pads both mimic the shoulder pad craze of the eighties and displaces them with intimidating football shoulder pads. The waders elongate the leg while simultaneously fight femininity. A Mohawk was an extreme hairstyle regardless of gender. Early RuPaul's gender performance gave the middle finger to traditional views of gender. However, his style was not only a form of self-expression but also a promotional tool. James went on to say, "It was a force of nature. You came up, you introduced yourself and said, 'I'm RuPaul I'm going to be famous.' You did the little tap dance, everything, and ran off." It is no coincidence that James was talking with Michael Musto when RuPaul first approached him. Musto was the most influential journalist for the underground club scene. "We came to New York to take New York by storm," says RuPaul after James finishes. RuPaul wanted to make an impression, and at least part of RuPaul's specific gender performance was to raise his visibility, get work, and ultimately make a living.

But early RuPaul was not successful. RuPaul chuckles when James describes their first meeting. Part of the humor comes from the stark contrast between his early style and his signature style. RuPaul was not able to succeed in the entertainment industry with his punk rock approach to gender. RuPaul changed his approach to gender. Rather than scoff at gender, he embraced it and confirmed his drag style to one of sheer femininity. He transformed himself into the self-dubbed super-model of the world. With his infectious personality and convincing looks, RuPaul became a sensation. Unlike punk rock, this new aesthetic intentionally considered gender and repeated harmful stereotypes such as an emphasis on superficial beauty, sexuality, and unrealistic body proportions. Even the idea of the supermodel comes with unrealistic standards and painful histories. RuPaul gave up a drag style that aligned more with his own artistic identity and subversive expression for one that reinforces negative feminine stereotypes and caters to mass appeal.

RuPaul's transformation initially seems to be a clear demarcation of reinforcing/subverting. However, under closer scrutiny, that separation fades. Despite abandoning a specific subversion of gender, RuPaul never lost the subversiveness. When on *Geraldo* in 1990, RuPaul had already transitioned into a drag that adhered to traditional femininity. *Geraldo* introduces the show by saying, "Welcome to what very well may be the most unusual edition of this program you will ever see." *Geraldo* and the audience treat the panel with smug superiority and no compassion or care. Even when reinforcing gender stereotypes, RuPaul was still considered among the most subversive members of society. As RuPaul grew in fame, he became more mainstream. He produced albums, became an MTV VJ, had roles in movies, and hosted a talk show. Despite this mainstream success, he continued to remain on the fringes. In much the same way that the male body of RuPaul was performing female, the *reinforcing* drag was performing *subversive*.

The supermodel style of performance can have two considerations: the male/female consideration typical of drag and a new unnamed consideration of reinforcing/subverting gender. This second consideration can be simplified much the same way the consideration of male and female has been retitled "drag." I call this second consideration the *divine*. Like drag, evaluating the *divine* is achieved through a deeper consideration of its layered elements. This could result in a re-re-gendered drag by creating another dichotomous structure which separates the *divine* into opposing terms, but if that dichotomy is resisted, understanding the *divine* exposes possibilities, advantages, and unseen connections happening to those who are making drag considerations, both the performer and the viewer.

Unlike the male/female consideration which has clear roles and markers, the reinforcing/subverting elements of the *divine* are more nebulous. The *divine* in drag is not only found in the re-creation and reinforcing of femininity but also through drag's ability to push

femininity to its limit.<sup>11</sup> There is a sense of perfection and detail that elevates drag beyond mere cross-dressing. This process of perfecting, imitating and expanding the feminine through drag performance shapes drag as both mythical and grounded. It is clearest when seen through inherent opposing tensions. Even the word “divine” has these tensions. It implies the presence of supernatural forces which affect the world. These forces have a multitude of origins and histories. They can be foundations for truth or studied as myth. Divinity is seen as an essential characteristic of existence or a characteristic that has been devised by man over time.

The tension between *essential* and *devised* becomes the foundation of the reinforcing/subversive layer of the *divine*. Essential corresponds with reinforcing the idea of the female gender having essential characteristics, and devised subverts those essential characteristics by exposing them as arbitrary and thus malleable. The essential view defines femininity as separate and distinct from masculinity in a way that is impossible to control. This is contrasted with the devised view of feminine where characteristics are created by society and are mostly present to serve a patriarchally driven agenda.<sup>12</sup> These viewpoints fit nicely with polemic dichotomies of conservative/liberal, religious/secular, and traditional/progressive; but favoring one side over the other obfuscates their complex relationship. In order to see the *divine*, the polemic views of feminine must be re-examined. Rather than one being true and the other false, they can have a more complex and dynamic relationship which explores simultaneity and

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<sup>11</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 466.

<sup>12</sup> Because devised risks implying specific unhelpful connotations within the realm of devised performance, those should be put aside in favor of contrasting the connotations of the closely related term; constructed. Constructed implies intentionality that is not always present in the devised. A constructed bridge has deadlines, designs, and material specifications. A devised bridge might be created over the course of generations using unrelated techniques and the goals of the person who started the bridge might be different from the person who finished it. The messiness that devised implies is more useful than the orderly constructed.

contradictions. This complexity reveals a *divine* that is reshaping and redefining itself and embraces the essential and the devised.

Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* has laid a groundwork approaching this deeper consideration of the *divine*. Morton questions separation between the cultural world and the natural world and reveals ecological relationships that are hidden when the focus is on the separation. The ecological thought is the implications that are made under the realization that all lifeforms are interconnected.<sup>13</sup> Two specific concepts are especially useful in discovering the *divine* through a re-examination of the essential or devised feminine. The first is Morton's idea of a *dark ecology* which describes the difficulty in walking within the darkness of unexplored connections exposed through the ecological thought. It is an attitude which encourages continued consideration even when initial connections are unpleasant. It requires taking potentially repulsive ideas seriously and giving them credit, but as Morton puts it, "like homeopathy, it uses poison as medicine. Rather than closing our ears and making loud noises to combat the sound of anti-ecological words, we shall absorb them and neutralize them from within."<sup>14</sup> Because the ecological thought focuses on interconnectedness, unsavory implications are still given credit for their role in the interconnectivity—sometimes to their own detriment. Giving weight to the dated notion of essential female characteristics might seem repulsive initially, but that same weight can cause the idea to buckle and show its inability to encompass femininity or the *divine* fully.

The second concept is Morton's idea of *the mesh*. He avoids reducing ecologies into simple easy-to-digest bites and focuses on the dense enmeshment of relations. He specifically calls these relations *the mesh* because:

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 2010), 1-19.

<sup>14</sup> Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 68.

[“Mesh”] suggests both hardness and delicacy. It has used in biology, mathematics, and engineering and in weaving and computing-think stockings and graphic design, metals and fabrics. It has antecedents in mask and mass, suggesting both density and deception.<sup>15</sup>

Morton’s mesh is an ecological structure that rejects simplicity and promotes constant considerations of where lines are drawn. In a mesh, elements can still be seen as separate, but become difficult to separate. Any structure can be enmeshed by giving it the same considerations given to Morton’s ecological mesh. Enmeshment does not change the structure but does change the consideration of the structure. Enmeshing the essential or devised dynamic reveals the considerations necessary to understand the *divine*.

Enmeshment of essential and devised requires multiple heritages which have dynamic interactions. For instance, the patriarchy that determines the devised feminine could be itself driven by essential biological forces. Men who are genetically predisposed to impose a social limit of nurturing to the mother of their children could be more likely to pass those same genes to their male offspring who will then reinforce the social and genetic pressure through lines of heritage. This would give the devised an essential heritage. These lines of thinking can be traveled ad nauseam until boiled down to pure existential questions, but their usefulness is found through constant exploration and re-examination. Whether a patriarchy gene exists is not important in this example. What is important is the consideration provided by enmeshment that it could exist. The *divine* is found through similar considerations.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.

The framework for understanding the *divine* could be manifest in any number of ways, but the focus here will draw on aspects of Joseph Roach's *It*. In *It*, Roach explores and defines the "It" quality of celebrity. He describes "It" as:

...the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, and singularity and typicality among them. The possessor of It keeps a precarious balance between such mutually exclusive alternatives, suspended at the tipping point like a tightrope dancer on one foot; and the empathic tension of waiting for the apparently inevitable fall makes for breathless spectatorship.<sup>16</sup>

Roach describes "It" in terms of a dynamic tension not unlike the tension between the essential and the devised found in the *divine*. He uses specific moments in the physical creation of Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to outline the creation and connections of "It" through specific points of history. Each chapter of *It* focuses on one piece of that creation: accessories, clothes, hair, skin, flesh, bone. The *divine* is primarily found in the re-creation of these elements on the body of the drag performer during the hours between arriving at the dressing room and performing onstage. While the following process of examining these creations does not follow Roach's approach, it does draw structural inspiration from *It* by sectioning the examination of drag's recreation of fat, hair, and bone tissue.

By focusing on the physical re-creation of biological tissues, the nebulous *divine* can be anchored in lived reality. Because these tissues are present in all drag performance even if only through absence, the *divine* does not need to align with the specific messages, styles, and

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph R Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). In *It*, Roach explores a similar nebulous subject of celebrity using the physical objects that create the celebrity.



explanations found in the performance content. Even a theoretical performance that was designed to contradict the *divine* would have to go beyond just rejecting the tissue creation and still remain a drag performance. Choosing not to create any tissues can be part of the *divine* because one's own body can be an extreme example of devised femininity that has to be considered with the essential femininity of the audience expectation. The incredible landscape and contrasting nature of drag imply the limitless possibilities of a devised feminine but is always limited by essential elements outside of the creator's control. By examining the construction of these tissues, their functions, and their revelations, the *divine* can be understood.

### PADDING

Each tissue constructed in drag performance exposes different aspects of the enmeshed essential/devised dynamic. They all simultaneously subvert and reinforce the traditional expectations of femininity, but fat has the clearest balance. Fat's essential biological distribution is clearly understood, and its role in devised expectations is also evident. Fat is recreated through padding that can be parts of a unique costume, such as hip pads sewn into a dress, or a separate piece, such as a breastplate. The process is an at times painful effort to meet unrealistic ideas. Creating fat through padding rejects and is tethered to the actual baseline fat of the performer, but it also embraces and is not tethered to the baseline fat of someone who is not the performer. Through this, it reveals how considering the *divine* provides insight into the self and consideration of others.

The importance of constructing fat for drag performance can be seen in the existence of the website Boobsforqueens.com. It features "the silicone breastplate that creates the illusion of real breasts." They come in two sizes and eight colors ranging from fair to chocolate. The website caters strictly to drag performers. The product details page has a youtube video featuring the drag queen Sharon Sharealike telling her story of creating the product over twenty years ago

in order to enhance her drag, and how the demand for such a device in the drag community compelled her to create an online store dedicated to the padding of men chests in order to simulate female breasts.<sup>17</sup> The market for these breastplates indicates a need to meet expectations.

The consideration of drag by the audience can come with a set of expectations to judge the quality of the drag. These can be reduced to how convincing is the performer's portrayal of femininity. The audience expectation becomes an essential and uncontrollable aspect of the performer's consideration. Creating fat through padding requires the consideration of the essential uncontrollable aspect of the performer's baseline fat. While fat can be altered slowly over time, the baseline fat of any one night is stationary. Success is achieved by performers devised padding which subverts their own body and reinforces the audience expectations. While simple in concept, the process is complicated by the expected female body being both a biological expectation and a cultural expectation of ideal femininity.

There are gendered differences in the likelihood of fat distribution between men and woman. The anatomies between male and female are roughly equivalent. However, what is roughly equal is not congruent. The hips, the bust, the butt, are found in both sexes, but they have understood expectations in fat distribution between the genders. These biological expectations are driven by an essential balance of hormones in the body, specifically estrogen. Estrogen affects the body in several ways which determine the shape—especially where the body stores fat. High levels of estrogen cause fat to be stored in the hips, buttocks, and breasts. Males experience a similar but opposite shaping from the hormone testosterone. Their fat becomes distributed to the waist and abdomen. Yet, the broad range of shapes between men and woman

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Sharealike, "BoobsForQueens," accessed October 8, 2016, <http://www.boobsforqueens.com/>

do not fit easily into female shape or male shape. The levels of testosterone and estrogen between any two people of either sex can vary widely. The hourglass figure of a woman and the apple shape of a man are merely statistical possibilities rather biological guarantees. Each person has a fat distribution that is outside of their control, and each drag performer has an audience expectation of fat distribution that is outside of their control.

There is some some room for devising the baseline fat of the body. Diet and exercise can slowly change the amount of fat, but not its distribution. Medical means of surgery and hormone therapy can drastically increase the rate of fat removal or the fat distribution, but these methods are not always practical. Even if a drag performer can shape their original male body to match an expected feminine body perfectly, it is only one in a range of feminine shapes. Padding allows for reshaping the baseline body into a diverse range of feminine expectations.

Fat construction also plays a role beyond changing the shape of the performer. Mere presence is only a part of sufficient padding. There are several properties of fat that are dictated by biology. Because it is storage, rather than structural, fat is dynamic. It has give. At times, it jiggles, flexes, and vibrates. It responds. The material used to create the padding needs to maintain these properties to enhance the illusion. When the padding is exposed, it must mimic the skin, especially regarding color or texture. Flesh toned silicone can serve as the exposed pad and be highlighted with makeup as needed. In addition to creating the proper coloring of the skin, silicone also has the advantage of mimicking the “proper” skin texture.

Yet, this proper skin texture exposes the problem of padding strictly serving a biological illusion. The actual surface of silicone differs widely from human skin. It lacks hair follicles, pores, acne, wrinkles, scars, scabs, and other irregularities found all over the human body. In many ways, silicone fails to encapsulate the biological nature of skin and its texture. This incongruity highlights how biological expectations have devised ideals. The perfectly smoothed

continuous curve of flesh-colored padding provided by silicone creates an ideal that is impossible to capture within actual biology. The texture of silicone is preferred not for its imitation of skin, but its imitation of an unfair ideal skin which is based on essential tissues but is only achieved through devising.

Meeting expectations by padding is often the struggle to meet an ideal that is beyond everyone's biological baseline, but this struggle is not necessarily pejorative even if unfair. The positive aspects can initially seem elusive, and a closer look at the struggle of padding can help bring the positivity in focus. The construction of fat can have destructive elements where there is a removal of tissue to create the silhouette. One key aspect of tissue removal is "tucking," where the penis and testicles are flattened against the body to render them invisible. While not technically fat, the external male genitals behave like fat in the way they affect the illusion of a feminine silhouette. The testicles are often pushed up into the inguinal canal in the anterior wall of the abdomen while the penis is pulled back, flattened against the body, and held in place with tape. Tucking is painful, uncomfortable, awkward, and necessary; but, rather than being a hindrance to be removed, it is an experience to be gained. Tucking carries a sense of pride and achievement. This is not unlike athletes who conform to a physical standard outside of their control and suffer through painful, uncomfortable, and awkward physical feats to perfect their sport.

Because padding to meet expectations is difficult it is also rewarding. When properly applied, padding can quickly and dramatically alter the consideration of the performer's body. Successfully subverting their physical bodies opens the possibilities to subvert other seemingly immutable traits. This opening of possibilities within the biology allows for more opportunities within a performance. A usually shy and demure person can physically pad their biology which exposes the possibility of padding their personality. Behavior that was unacceptable in their

baseline fat distribution can be reconsidered in their padded distribution. The new possibilities of expressing personality exposed through padding is not another way of saying “you can be anything you want to be.” This platitude limits the range of possibility due to anything being limited by the finite wants of the performer. Because padding is limited by the expectations of the body and the audience, padding can create a body outside of the wants of the performer. The performer can become and behave like someone else; even someone never considered when just limited to their own wants.

The *divine* in padding also gives insight beyond the self. Padding has the benefit of not being exclusive to the world of drag performance. Padded bras fill out and lift breasts. Spandex foundational garments—commonly referred to as the brand name Spanx— help shape the hips and thighs. Shoulder pads are built into overcoats and suit jackets. Even football pads—although designed for protection—can create a menacing silhouette of muscle and intimidation. For the drag performer, the process of setting up the costume to impersonate the female, in turn, creates a unity between any man or woman who has stood in front a mirror and asked themselves, “Do my boobs look right?” before they present themselves to the public.

This unity is consequential, and not necessarily intentional. Even if the subject matter of the performance is protesting conformity, it is still affected by the process of padding the silhouette to meet essential, devised, and personal feminine expectations. Whether the performers are lip-syncing, dancing, doing stand-up, or sitting on the sideline; the padding creates a biological response from the performer. The extra insulation from padding can cause sweating. The additional volume of the pads changes the choreography. The extra weight from the breastplate tires out the lower back. The performer must accommodate all the biological responses to the padding. These reactions change how the performer moves through spaces and how they remain stationary. These responses alter mood and perception. The performance

becomes intertwined with a strictly biological reaction to the padding. To successfully meet the expectation of the audience, they must react to the pads as if it was the baseline body they always move through the world with. Through their devised body they gain insight into another person's biological body that most closely resembles their padded body.

Because the performer's body is always insufficient to meet several expectations, the *divine* becomes expansively inclusive through equality of lack. There is no room for being perfect just the way you are. Instead, everyone is lacking and needs to change their shape, and because everyone falls short, anyone can attempt to meet the ideal. Each attempt falls short but gives insight on someone else's baseline experience. Because that person falls short of the ideal as well, they can also attempt the ideal, fall short, but gain insight on a third baseline. This process of providing a small insight into another lived experience could incorporate all bodies with enough permutations. Padding to reach an ideal creates an array of un-ideal feminine shapes which is more in line with the vast biological distribution of the female body.

#### WIGS

While fat construction can create the harmonious enmeshment of essential and devised, hair construction creates a cacophony. It gains its meaning through its meaninglessness, its limitations through its versatility, and identity through conforming. It exposes how the *divine* reinforces feminine expectations by unexpected means, as an essential tool in rewarding drag performance.

The Bible's first epistle to the Corinthians reads, "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man has long hair, it is a shame unto him? However, if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given her for a covering."<sup>18</sup> This sets up an easy separated

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 11:14-15 KJV.

essential/devised dynamic regarding the expectation of feminine hair. Either an all-powerful God established an essential truth, or a man used the idea of an all-powerful god to devise a social expectation. What is striking about this dynamic is that either side is appealing to a biological imperative (“Doth, not even nature itself teach you”) which does not seem to exist. Hair is similar to fat in terms of biological heritage. Hormones dictate hair distribution on the body, and there is a distinct difference in predominantly female distribution and predominantly male distribution. However, that distinction is least obvious in scalp hair. Scalp hair can vary widely from person to person in color, texture, and thickness. Men are more likely to go bald, but outside of baldness, it is not a clear biological indicator of gender. Despite this, it is heavily dictated by feminine expectations.

Hair is a vacuum of meaning, which creates a need to give it meaning. Even the body seems to mirror this by constantly rejecting the hair protein yet refusing to let it go. There is so little biological advantage to hair color, hair length, or hairstyle that it becomes the symbol of advantage. The many genetic possibilities, the lack of biological need, and its near-constant visibility allow hair to play a strong role in the social designation. The specifics of those designations are devised, but the need to give it a designation can be as unintentional as the reflex of lifting your leg when a doctor hits you just below the knee with a rubber mallet.

Unlike fat, hair can be quickly and radically altered. Even length can change with relative quickness and reliability. This has resulted in thousands of hair designs. Most designers have a strong correlation to a particular time, gender, race, personality, or relationship. In drag, hair acts as the single most symbolic object of the drag transformation.<sup>19</sup> Although hair is one of the most alterable components of the body, it cannot change fast enough to facilitate several looks over

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<sup>19</sup> Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 19.

several nights. One's hair is also genetically limited in color, texture, and thickness. Drag looks require a vast range of options which makes relying wholly on one's altered hair for performance difficult.<sup>20</sup> Instead, wigs are used to re-create hair tissue and worn over the naturally occurring hair.

A wig's authenticity is also tied to its authenticity of aesthetic not just its ability to mimic biological hair or a temporal, cultural moment. A bright green curly polyester wig can authenticate clown drag. A wig might be a spray painted a form-fitting piece of stiff foam and sculpted to mimic a popular cartoon,<sup>21</sup> or the wig could consist of a bouquet of flowers. The wig can also be present through absence when the performer is bald. The drag performer's ability to pull unconventional materials and themes into performing wigs show how the *divine* embraces hair's capability of inserting meaning into the meaningless.

Like padding, wigs also have a moment of connection when constructing the drag look. Before stepping on the stage, the drag performer must place the wig on their head. This connects them to any performer who wears wigs, but the connection is more apparent with the women who wear wigs in their daily life. For most stage performances, putting on a wig is in preparation for portraying someone who does not wear a wig. The wig is supposed to be forgotten and hidden in the role. Drag performers put on wigs to portray a wig wearer. The wig is meant to be considered by the audience, as both a centerpiece for the look and an authentic

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<sup>20</sup> Thorgy Thor, *Thorgythor*, Instagram, accessed July 12, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/thorgythor/?hl=en>. Although some do. New York based Thorgy Thor's large bundle of dreads are often incorporated into her look. As a result, all wigs she wears must be big enough to fit the dreads underneath.

<sup>21</sup> Phi Ohara, *PhiPhiOhara*, Instagram accessed January 28, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/phiphiohara/?hl=en>. Phi Ohara will often recreate the looks from famous cartoon characters and foregoes traditional wig material to create a cartoon aesthetic. This is particularly evident in her 365 days of drag project in 2017.



culmination of time, effort, skill, and money. It is supposed to be considered and convincing simultaneously. No one expects it to be real hair (even if it is),<sup>22</sup> and part of the experience for the audience is taking the wig into consideration. This “behind the curtain” aspect of the wig has been mocked by drag queens. Popular Drag performer Alaska 5000 sings a song called “This is My Hair,” in which she sardonically mocks the notion of a drag queen trying to convince the viewer that her hair is real. The humor is tied to the ludicrous notion that a drag queen’s hair is not a wig. Superficially, this might emphasize the man who is playing the woman, but doing so ignores how wigs are deeply connected to feminine expectations.

Beyond scalp hair, facial hair must also be taken into account. Like fat distribution, facial hair represents statistical probabilities between the sexes, not specific designations. Some men are never able to grow facial hair; and more importantly, many women are able to grow facial hair. Because of the social stigma associated with facial hair, the beards are often shaved, waxed, or removed permanently. Drag performers will also go through the same procedures as a way to ease the process of creating their look. The burden of facial hair connects to the female experience. The practice of bearded drag allows for performers to experience and often express unseen and shameful part of a woman’s biological existence, but it can also be celebrated through the performance, not as a comment on the masculine, but fully committed to the feminine. Likewise, bald drag can reject the masculine limitations by being a reflection of women rejecting feminine expectations as a feminine act.

The word wig implies female, as compared to “hairpiece” or “toupee” for the male. The need to wear a wig is most often a female issue. Hair loss due to aging, disease, hormone imbalance, or chemotherapy treatment can necessitate a wig to meet expected standards of the

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<sup>22</sup> Alaska 5000, “This is My Hair,” Sidecar records, on *Anus*, accessed on November 13, 2016, MP3.

traditional feminine. Racial pressures might necessitate a wig to have the right kind of hair. Alternatively, the pressure might come internally. A woman might want to have a variety of different looks accessible in the same way a drag queen might. Putting on wigs can fill a vacuum of identity. Whatever devised feminine identity the wig represents, placing the wig on serves as a reflexive need to claim an identity. This reflex is human and not unique to women, but the *divine* privileges the ability to freely identify oneself with a feminine trait. There are essential human experiences best found in devised femininity. The male drag performer placing a wig on their head is accessing possibilities denied to their masculine identity.

Because wigs are so heavily connected with identity, they hold a burden of expectation. Sometimes the wig is pulled off during moments of high passion, where the crown of glory is rejected by the performer. Although this move can be electric, it risks alienating the experience of those whose hair is not so easily portable by returning the performer to a safer ambiguous world of masculinity. On a season four episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Roxy Andrews starts her performance with a wig removal, but instead of revealing her natural hair she has another near identical wig underneath. The judges are visibly shocked by Roxy's ability to take something which by then had become easy and turned it into a brand new consideration.<sup>23</sup> It was a gimmick, but it went beyond shock or cleverness. Roxy's wig reveal showed how the removing of an arbitrary symbol signifying status, limitation, and expectation could reveal the same arbitrary symbol signifying surprise, power, and the unique self. The *divine* construction of hair does not have the message that femininity can be anything. Rather, it has the message that the ability to be anything is uniquely feminine.

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<sup>23</sup> *RuPaul's Drag Race*, season 5, episode 7, "RuPaul Roast," aired on March 11, 2013, on LogoTV.

## NAILS/HEELS

While the construction of fat and hair create illusions of actual biological features, bone construction is the illusion of features that never actually existed. They are purely devised, but their construction challenges a fundamental expectation of the essential/devised dynamic. If something is oppressive, painful, and can be changed, the expectation is that it should be changed. Bone construction shows the *divine* as a means to question that expectation and convert devised into essential.

Bones are the ultimate structural tissue of the body, and also the least visible. The major differences between the male and female skeleton are subtle and esoteric. The skeleton lacks a strong biological difference between the male and the female. Unlike the previous tissues discussed, the skeleton is neither distributed differently between men and woman nor is it used to significant differences between men and woman. Biologically bones act as a support for all other tissues and actions. The skeleton is fundamental to the point that there is little that can be done to alter or mask it.

Unlike with padding or wigs, there is no attempt to create a natural look of bone. The re-creation is meant to be exposed and adorned. It constructs a feminine look that is entirely fabricated. Because of this, the entire process of creation is the same as a drag queen as it is for any person. A clear example of this creation is through fingernails. Rather than create the illusion of biological perfection, the nail becomes clearly constructed as separated from reality. The masculine expectations essentially keep nails in their utilitarian state. This gives them a parallel to wigs in the feminine, having a wide array of options as compared to men, but nails also have a unique relationship with drag performance.

The cumbersome nature of artificial nails can limit the wearer to adorning them only on special occasions. Largely detailed nails can be cumbersome and make everyday activities

tiresome. Even a coat of polish is not always necessary to achieve a feminine look. For drag performers, nails are a similarly complicated part of the process. Many of the tissues created for drag performances can be altered and removed entirely. As wigs are placed on styrofoam busts and pads are hung up to dry, the creations process becomes mirrored by an un-creation at the end of the night, when the items are removed from the body. Because the process of altering nails is no different for a biological male than a biological female, the most effective way of creating the illusion is through those shared processes. Single night nail options do exist, but other more convincing nails require the construction to exist beyond the performance. The *divine* shows that the nail is a physical example that exists beyond just performing drag. The created drag identity has a role in the offstage lived identity. Drag performs in the nightclub, but also at the grocery store, at the party, and while the performer sleeps. However, the persistence of the performance is evidence of the impact drag performance has on identity. Truly committed drag performances impact identity with such force that rippling aftershocks through daily life seem inevitable. While anyone can go through the motions of constructing tissues, the *divine* shows that drag requires a dedication that is willing to risk sacrificing one identity for a new one.

The other significant bone being created is heels. Heels stand as the most devised objects in drag performance. The use of heels stems from social pressures for a woman to appear more attractive to men. Heels lengthen the leg, lift the buttocks, and add height. This can explain the appeal of heels, but the expectation of heels is fluid among the sexes. The necessity of heels for feminine expression is in flux from one situation to the other. Whereas hair and fat are always considered, heels have become accessory. They are often only expected during heightened occasions. The bigger the moment, the greater the representation and the ideal image of feminine still includes high heels.

Because drag performance is striving for an ideal feminine, heels remain mandatory for drag artists. Even as heels become less mandatory in the actual feminine expectation, they still remain firmly in drag. Drag performance might shed them symbolically aesthetically, but the way in which they make day-to-day life difficult and ultimately oppress can enhance Drag performance. Dancing, walking, and standing in heels takes practice. The ability to effortlessly move while wearing them is a sign of commitment and strength for drag performers. The pain and struggle inflicted initially for the convenience of men can be turned into a badge of pride—a skill that men cannot do.<sup>24</sup> The pride can only be gained by accepting the pain and struggle.

However, the mandatory nature of high heels for drag performers highlights the oppressive features high heels expose in the *divine* beyond the physical difficulty. High heels reinforce an idea that no matter what the standard is, the essential part of the person, their unchosen unasked-for biological arrangement, is always inadequate. Even a lifetime of bodily perfection, purification, exercise, diet, yoga, and prayer can never achieve a purely biological drag ideal. No matter how perfect the silhouette, the hair, the teeth, or the clothes. No matter how long the legs are or how tall the person is, they will always be a few inches too short. Any imagined configuration of essential characteristics can always be enhanced via the constructed heels. There will always be a need to create the physical, biological perfection through material means. Heels then become the single most overlapping feature of drag and the traditional feminine. While many of the processes of drag creations share an empathic connection with the female experience, wearing high heels is a creation that always will be an act of drag. It is both submissive to an unattainable expectation but also empowering and impressive through the struggle to achieve the unattainable.

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<sup>24</sup> Tristan S. Bridges, “Men Just Weren’t Made to do This: Performances of Drag at ‘Walk a Mile in Her Shoes’ Marches,” *Gender and Society*, 24, no. 1 (February 2010): 5-30.

## CON“DRAG”ULATIONS

When RuPaul emerged as a mainstream outcast in the early 90s, it came at a personal cost. He sacrificed his preferred artistry for one that relied on spectacle. With his supermodel looks, wit, and charisma, RuPaul rose above the New York club scene and became a worldwide success. In doing so, it created opportunities for other performers to have their work taken seriously and achieve levels of acceptance that continues to progress thirty years later. This achievement was possible because RuPaul embraced the *divine*. He knew the feminine standard of beauty was devised; but instead of rejecting or reforming the standard, he chooses to celebrate and revel in it.

RuPaul was able to find success in considering the less appealing approaches of drag. The consideration of drag's ability to simultaneously subvert and reinforce gender promises future success of drag performance. As progress is made to eliminate expectations of gender, drag that embraces the *divine* can continue to reinforce a traditional feminine. This expectation can separate itself from a standard imposed on a particular gender, and become a standard for any person regardless of gender to attempt to perform. The consideration of drag will still be a person performing what they are not, but instead of the “not” being the opposite gender it can become adhering to a high standard that is not imposed.

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