

**ART & DESIGN INSTITUT**

**BACHELOR THESIS**

**2020**

**Anna Pavel**

# **ART & DESIGN INSTITUT**

**Bachelor Thesis**

**DRAG IN PRAGUE**

**An exploration of sex, gender and identity;  
connected to the history and significance of  
the art of drag.**

**Anna Pavel**

**ART & DESIGN INSTITUT**

Study program: Fine Arts

Study branch: Visual Artwork and Artistic Practice

Studio: Photography

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Thesis supervisor: Doc. MgA. Miro Švolík  
Studio: Photography

Opponent: MgA. Aneta Vašatová  
Studio: Photography

Prague 2020

# ART & DESIGN INSTITUT

Academic year: 2018/2019

## ASSINGMENT OF BACHELOR'S THESIS

(PROJECT, WORK OF ART, ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE)

Author: Anna Pavel  
Study programme: Fine Arts  
Study branch: Visual Artwork and Artistic Practice  
Thesis Title: Drag in Prague - An exploration of sex, gender and identity; connected to the history and significance of the art of drag.  
Atelier: Photography

### Principles for elaboration:

Extent and format of work:

Consultation every week, continuous preparation of accompanying theoretical work, study of literature, proof of process and realization.

- September, October - Study and collection of documents, submission of sketches and variants
- October, December - drafts, submission of unfinished and completed proposals
- December, January - submission of the overall proposal
- February, March - finalization of projects, completion of the theoretical work
- 6th April 2020 submission of BT (both the theoretical and artistic parts)
- June 2020 Bachelor thesis defence (theoretical and artistic parts)

An integral part of the accompanying theoretical work will be the visual documentation of the development of the whole work, the text of the theoretical work itself and all other necessary materials stored on the CD.

The output will be:	Photographic Book
Size of art work:	depends on chosen technique
Range of the accompanying work:	10 standard pages of text
Form of the bachelor thesis:	printed

List of literature and references:

BAILEY, Marlon M. Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 2. 2011. p. 365+. Feminist Studies, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907>

BRENNAN, Niall & GUDELUNAS, David. Drag Culture, Global Participation and RuPaul's Drag Race. RuPaul's Drag Race And The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture. Pages 1 - 11. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-50617-3

BUTLER, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1993. ISBN-10: 1138834769

BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1990. ISBN10 0-415-38955-0

BUTLER, Judith. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISSN 01922882. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, p. 519-531.

LEVITT, Heidi M. et al. Drag Gender: Experiences of Gender for Gay and Queer Men who Perform Drag. *Sex Roles* 78, 367–384 (cit. 10-07-2017, issued 03-2018). DOI 10.1007/s11199-017-0802-7. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0802-7>

LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films.

Bachelor's thesis supervisor:	Atelier:
Doc. MgA. Miro Švolík	Photography

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MgA. Aneta Vašatová	Photography

Date of Bachelor's thesis assignment:	15th April 2019
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L.S.

Prof. PhDr. Július Gajdoš, Ph.D.  
rector

Bachelor's thesis supervisor

## **ABSTRACT**

These photos taken of Prague's members of the young and emerging drag scene are meant to bring the topic of drag as an art and performance closer to the viewer, who might not be familiar with the scene at all. The photos depicting moments during the show represent the hectic and active nightlife that this scene has to offer, while the ones I took of the drag artists at home depict the calmer side of it, the pleasure of preparing for a show, of putting on make-up and becoming an alter ego for a while.

In the book, which forms the final product of this project, I have added short texts with my own explanations and impressions, as well as quotes from a few performers, describing their work, their role in the art form, and the scene itself.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the growing importance of drag and cross-dressing in contemporary society. Be it the visual arts, performance art, the media or advertisements; drag has slowly but steadily found its way into each and every one of these realms; overcoming and destroying binary gender roles and making space for the colorful variety that the LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> community brings with it. One must only think of TV Shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and RuPaul's success as a drag queen, musician, entertainer and TV host, or other big personalities such as Heidi Klum, who is currently working on adaptations of a competitive reality TV show about drag queens in Germany. Along with that, make-up adverts and clothing commercials are becoming gender-friendlier as well; portraying non-binary models or selling more androgynous products, next to the ones actively promoting drag artists.

This bachelor's thesis shall now serve as an overview of the art of drag, its essence and the sort of questions it poses to the binary and heteronormal society. The theoretical part serves as a presentation of the practice of drag and its backgrounds, while the visual part is offering an insight into the daily life of a drag queen and the world of make-up, wigs and performances.

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1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender / Transsexuals, Queer / Questioning



## 2. INTEGRATION OF WORK IN THEORETICAL FIELDS

### 2.1 Role of topic in a historical context

#### 2.1.1 Definition of the term *Drag Queen*

Usually, the term “drag” is used to refer to men wearing clothing commonly associated with woman: a drag queen. Recently, however, the term has come to describe women wearing male clothes and thus dressing up as men, too, being referred to as drag kings.<sup>1</sup> The term drag is therefore not solely used for men performing and dressing as women, however, for the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on the queens.

Drag is not to be confused with crossdressing or transvestism, the sole practice of a biologically male body dressing in female clothing, or a biologically female body dressing in male clothing, even though the first would not exist without the latter.<sup>2</sup> The common notion that all men that perform drag are homosexual is not true, however often that might be the case. Additionally, drag performers are not necessarily transgender, meaning being born into the ‘wrong’ body with the wrong genitals though, of course, for some, this may be the case.

The first use of the term “drag” in connection to female clothing was recorded in the 1870s, where a woman’s garment was said to have been “dragging” across the stage.<sup>3</sup> The first association of the term with the queer community was not found until the 1920s, when the first so-called ‘ballrooms’ emerged.

#### 2.1.2 Drag in New York’s Ballroom Culture of the 80s

To fully understand the culture of ballroom, it first is necessary to explain key terms used within the community. The terminology is fundamental and should be properly explained in order to avoid confusion. Many of the terms have also been well explained in the

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1 MISIROGLU, G. (2009), *American countercultures: An encyclopedia of nonconformists, alternative lifestyles, and radical ideas in U.S. history*, Armonk, NY, Sharpe Reference, 2009. ISBN 9780765680600 0765680602. p. 213

2 NORMAN, Oliver. *Can drag become a philosophical object*. Florida State University MAP Conference. 2018. p. 12. Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/36353467/Can\\_Drag\\_become\\_a\\_philosophical\\_object\\_From\\_the\\_LGBT\\_minority\\_to\\_a\\_general\\_philosophical\\_concern](https://www.academia.edu/36353467/Can_Drag_become_a_philosophical_object_From_the_LGBT_minority_to_a_general_philosophical_concern)

3 MISIROGLU, G. (2009), *American countercultures: An encyclopedia of nonconformists, alternative lifestyles, and radical ideas in U.S. history*, Armonk, NY, Sharpe Reference, 2009. ISBN 9780765680600 0765680602. p. 213

documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990).<sup>4</sup>

Generally speaking, the ballroom scene of the 1980's was an underground safe space for people with non-conforming gender and sexual identities. It consisted of competing against each other through walking in different categories, requiring them to dress up and perform on the walk way in order to be judged by a jury.<sup>5</sup> The Ballroom culture in America reached its peak around 1987 in Harlem, New York.

In their early days, the balls mainly consisted of white men dressing up in drag and performing in different categories. After members of color were forced by the community to lighten their faces in order to participate in the balls, they established their own ballroom culture, in Harlem, in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> The balls went through various stages of development, beginning in the 1960s with just a few categories, mostly with queens dressing up as Las Vegas show-girls.<sup>7</sup> When an activist and self-identified drag queen, Marsha P. Johnson, led the 1969 protest against the police raids at the Stonewall Inn (a queer friendly bar in Greenwich Village, New York City, known as the home of the Stonewall Riots), the self-perception of the queer scene changed and the ballrooms began to expand their categories. They managed to set aside racial differences, thus attracting more and more people of different backgrounds and identities. With the arrival of the 70s, the general aesthetic among the ballroom community changed from wanting to look like a showgirl to imitating the looks of celebrities and film stars such as Marilyn Monroe. And the 80s then brought with them the desire to be thin and beautiful, as the emerging super models of the time publicly presented with idols such as Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell.<sup>8</sup> The New York ballroom scene consisted of people of diverse ethnic background, as well as varying sexual and gender identities. Homosexual men of color formed the majority of the community, identifying or appearing in different, to the binary and heterosexual society, non-conforming ways; for example transgender women, drag queens or butches.<sup>9</sup>

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4 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews.

5 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews.

6 CUNNINGHAM, Michael. *The Slap of Love*. Open City Magazine Issue 6. <https://opencity.org/archive/issue-6/the-slap-of-love> New York, Grove Press and Open City Books. 2000. 1993. ISBN-10 189044717X

7 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews with Dorian Corey

8 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews with Dorian Corey

9 See Chapter 2.1.5 for closer explanation.

### 2.1.3 Houses in the Ballroom scene

Another important aspect of the ballroom culture are the so called Houses. Houses are an alternative family system established by the queer community to create a sense of belonging and togetherness. Every house has a house mother, who is mostly a butch queen or a femme queen, and sometimes a father, who is either a butch or a butch queen. Houseparents take care of their “children”, young queer people who were kicked out by their own families because of their gender and/or sexual orientations and offer them counsel about subjects like sex changes, gender identification and about the HIV wave of the 80s and how to protect themselves as queer members of the society.<sup>10</sup> Another very important function of the houses is their competing in the balls. Houses are basically the “teams” in which one can compete against other houses, therefore house mothers also have the role of preparing and recruiting their children for the competitions. People that compete on their own are referred to as “free-agents”.<sup>11</sup> In Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* (1990), which continues to be the most important and most referenced film about the ballroom scene and its culture, Houses are described as “gay street gangs” which compete against “other gangs” in the balls, which in that sense are “gay street fights”, where the active fight is walking a category. Formulated this way, just as street gangs get rewarded for winning a fight by earning respect and authority from other gangs, houses win trophies as well as respect and authority from the competing houses.<sup>12</sup> Being a member of a house means being surrounded by like minded people, getting the support and love that the blood family could not provide and having a name and a certain position in a community, where the most important act is to be one’s true self and to not let society rule over one’s sex, gender and sexuality.

Famous houses include the Houses and members of: **LaBeija**, founded by Crystal LaBeija, with other famous members like mother Pepper LaBeija; **Pendavis**, known members being Kim Pendavis and Freddie Pendavis; **Xtravaganza**, founded by Hector Xtravaganza, with other famous members like parents Angie and David Xtravaganza, and other children like Brenda Xtravaganza; **Adonis**; **LaMay**; **Duprée**; **Ninja**, founded by Willi Ninja (who

9 BAILEY, Marlon M. *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture, Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 2. 2011. p. 365+. Feminist Studies, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907> p. 367

10 BAILEY, Marlon M. *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture, Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 2. 2011. p. 365+. Feminist Studies, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907> p. 368

12 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews.

made an appearance in Malcolm McLaren's *Deep In Vogue*, dedicating the song to different houses from the ballroom scene), **Overness; Magnifique; St. Laurent; Omni; and Ebony.**

### Categories and Competition in the Ballroom Scene

Some of the best known categories include *Butch Queen, Luscious Body, High Fashion, Town and Country* and *Military* as well as different forms of *Realness*, such as *Executive Realness* or *School Realness*.<sup>13</sup> *Realness* was a category dedicated to imitate various jobs or occupations, usually ones reserved for the white, straight public, as realistically as possible, wearing suitable clothing and performing in a credible way. This allowed the colored and queer community to look "acceptable" and "tidy", in the sense that the white and straight community has given to these words.

Even though the ballrooms started out as an underground operation, everything started to change in 1990, when singer Madonna released her song *Vogue*. Around that time, it almost seemed like the balls would become part of the Mainstream, with many straight and heteronormative members of society coming in as outsiders to watch. **Voguing**, originally a form of competitive mirror-dance imitating poses from fashion magazines like *Vogue* (hence the name), in order to "throw shade" over someone else (a common expression in the scene, meaning to be bigger and better than the competitor by challenging them verbally or physically, e.g. voguing), was previously solely part of the ballroom scene.<sup>14</sup> Yet, thanks to Madonna, the dance form quickly turned into something that the straight society wanted to be involved in and part of. This slide towards the mainstream, however it was perceived by individuals of the scene, offered many members of the LGBTQ+ community a work place in an industry that was unthinkable for them before. Many dancers who previously only competed at the balls in the various categories were now being offered jobs at dance shows, as background dancers on tour and in music videos, while various trans women were offered modeling opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

#### 2.1.5 The Gender System

The ballroom community is responsible for creating the gender system, as a result of not wishing to live in a heteronormative world, to generate a feeling of belonging and iden-

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13 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews.

14 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews.

15 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films. Interviews.

tity which was not available as such before. Primarily, there is a clear distinction between the categories **sex**, **gender** and **sexuality**; sex being the biological and anatomical nature of a person, which itself is viewed as open and unfinished, considering the wide possibilities of sex change and hormonal treatment.<sup>16</sup> Compared to the other two categories, however, sex is a fairly fixed concept that might change over time, but simultaneously stays where it is. Consequently, the ballroom community mainly distinguished between the three sexes **female** (a person born with female anatomical sex characteristics), **male** (a person born with male anatomical sex characteristics), and **intersex** or **transsexual** (a person born with female and male, or with undefined anatomical sex characteristics).<sup>17</sup> It does get a bit more complex with gender and sexuality. As Judith Butler argues in her ground breaking feminist writing *Gender Trouble*, gender is what we do, not how we look or what we are born with.<sup>18</sup> Following this concept, the perception of gender is one that is in a constant state of change and development and is, such as sexuality, fluid. Therefore, building on the three-part sex system, the community has additionally established a **six-part gender system**, consisting of the following categories:<sup>19</sup>

1. **Butch queens**, biologically born male, as gay or bisexual identifying men, who can either be masculine, hyper-masculine or feminine;
2. **Femme queens**, (*MTF*, male-to-female), transgender women, who are biologically born male, but identify as female and are at various stages of going through a sex change, either or both through hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment;
3. **Butch queens up in drag**, biologically born male, who identify as male and homosexual and do not want to live as women, but perform in drag;
4. **Butches**, (*FTM*, female-to-male) transgender men, who are biologically born female, but identify as male and are at various stages of going through a sex change, either

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15 BAILEY, Marlon M. *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 2. 2011. p. 365+. Feminist Studies, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907> p 369

16 BAILEY, Marlon M. *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 2. 2011. p. 365+. Feminist Studies, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907>

17 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1990. ISBN10 0-415-38955-0

18 BAILEY, Marlon M. *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 2. 2011. p. 365+. Feminist Studies, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907> p. 370, 371

or both through hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment; or homosexual women, who identify as women but are very masculine in appearance; or generally women who appear as men, regardless of sexual or gender orientation;

5. **Women**, biologically born female, as straight, lesbian or queer identifying women;
6. **Men/Trade**, biologically born male, as straight identifying men.

### 2.1.6 Wartime Drag

During both the First and the Second World War, female impersonation was an established practice performed by soldiers in the trenches as a form of entertainment.<sup>20</sup> Soldiers would dress as their female counterpart and perform in theatre pieces, sing, dance or do an early form of stand up comedy, mostly made up of parodying women. During WW2, several unofficial entertainment groups such as *Stars in Battledress*, the *Army Welfare Players*, and the *Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA)*<sup>21</sup> were formed, serving the amusement of their soldiers, to help them stay in good spirits. In the time after the Second World war, pieces like *Pacific Showboat*, *Soldiers in Skirts*, *Forces Showboat*, *Misleading Ladies*, and Ralph Reader's *Gang Show* entered popular culture and celebrated a lot of fame.<sup>22</sup>

There are several notions of soldiers dressing up in drag to perform as "serving wenches", all of them wearing both make up and a personal female name.<sup>23</sup> This was both entertainment as well as a sort of role play for the soldiers, allowing them to leave the trenches for a moment<sup>24</sup> and forget the *restrictive social conventions that usually governed everyday life*.

20 VICKERS, Emma et. al. *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; Revised edition, 2002. ISBN: 9781137524607 Chapter 3: JACKSON, Emma. VICKERS, Emma. *Sanctuary or Sissy? Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945*. p. 1

21 VICKERS, Emma et. al. *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; Revised edition, 2002. ISBN: 9781137524607 Chapter 3: JACKSON, Emma. VICKERS, Emma. *Sanctuary or Sissy? Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945*. p. 2

22 VICKERS, Emma et. al. *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; Revised edition, 2002. ISBN: 9781137524607 Chapter 3: JACKSON, Emma. VICKERS, Emma. *Sanctuary or Sissy? Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945*. p. 1

23 VICKERS, Emma et. al. *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; Revised edition, 2002. ISBN: 9781137524607 Chapter 3: JACKSON, Emma. VICKERS, Emma. *Sanctuary or Sissy? Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945*. p. 5

24 JOHNSON, C. *Camp Life: The Queer History of "Manhood" in the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1937*. American Studies, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 19–36, here 29. Kansas, The University of Kansas. 2007. ISSN 0026-3079

(Johnson, 2007)

### 2.1.7 Female Impersonation in the Vaudeville Scene

Vaudeville was a form of entertainment show with elements of theatre, cabaret, burlesque, female and male impersonations, musical inputs and comedy. The term originated from a form of French entertainment, however American Vaudeville, active between 1880 and the 1920s and the best known carrier of the name, was the first of its kind, breaking boundaries of public comedy performances and coming up with very early gender questions.<sup>25</sup>

Female impersonation has played a big role in American Vaudeville, presenting either comedy characterisations, which are supposed to make the audience laugh and are not intended to portray actual representations of women, or the work of illusionists, who are supposed to make the audience forget they are watching a fake.<sup>26</sup> Some of the most famous female impersonators of that time include Julian Eltine, who was the first man to impersonate a woman on stage, Bert Savoy, Arthur Blake and Charles Pierce.<sup>27</sup> One might therefore say that drag started out as mostly impersonating women, until it, with the end of the second World War and the ability to freely perform artistically, turned into a more entertaining form of performance, ultimately developing into a main part of the underground ballroom scene of New York in the 80s.

### 2.1.8 Modern popularisation of Drag through *RuPaul's Drag Race*

In the area of drag and LGBTQ+ television programs, the reality show RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) firmly keeps the foremost position on the line. The show first aired in 2009 on Logo TV, an American TV channel directed towards LGBTQ+ audiences.<sup>28</sup> The aim of RPDR

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25 CULLEN, Frank. HACKMAN, Florence. MCNEILLY, Donald. *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. London, Psychology Press, 2007. ISBN 0415938538, 780415938532. p. XI

26 CULLEN, Frank. HACKMAN, Florence. MCNEILLY, Donald. *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. London, Psychology Press, 2007. ISBN 0415938538, 780415938532. p. 375

27 CULLEN, Frank. HACKMAN, Florence. MCNEILLY, Donald. *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. London, Psychology Press, 2007. ISBN 0415938538, 780415938532. p. 376

28 BRENNAN, Niall & GUDELUNAS, David. *Drag Culture, Global Participation and RuPaul's Drag Race. RuPaul's Drag Race And The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*. Pages 1 - 11. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-50617-3

is to find “America’s Next Drag Superstar” through competitions and challenges, which are evaluated and criticised by well known judges, each episode peaking with the “lip-sync for your life” performance, where the two weakest participants of the week compete against each other, lip-syncing to a famous pop song, in order for RuPaul to eliminate the weaker queen.

RuPaul Andre Charles, born 1960 in San Diego, California<sup>29</sup>, is the host and namegiver of RPD, and surely the best known drag queen of the contemporary scene.

According to Fatale Vanity, a drag queen based in Prague, anyone that does drag nowadays that says they were not influenced by RPDR is lying. Fatale herself was introduced to the world of drag by watching early seasons of the show on YouTube and is still following it passionately. RPDR has shifted the position of the drag performer from the underground spaces of gay bars and clubs to the shiny program featured on Netflix and various big American channels.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.1.9 Drag in Prague

The drag scene in Prague is one that is not easy to find. Even with the modern popularisation of drag and crossdressing, and the country’s tradition of cabaret and similar means of entertainment, the Czech Republic is still a country that has not been taken over by drag just yet. One of the first things that I came across when I started to meet up with different drag performers to talk about this project, was the clear distinction between drag and “travesti” in the country. Drag, I was told by Fatale Vanity, is drag as we now know it, therefore it is a performance that may include lip-sync, comedy, choreographies and commentating/moderating, and is most commonly performed in night clubs and cabarets. “Travesti”, on the other hand, is more comparable to female impersonation, it may however also consist of dance performances and lip sync, but it is more commonly performed in somewhat “traditional” places, such as Czech cuisine restaurants and pubs (“hospody”), as well as the musical choice being less pop, and more traditional Czech.

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29 CHARLES, R. *Lettin’ it all hang out: An autobiography*. In D. Cashion (Ed.). 1995. New York, NY: Hyperion.

30 BRENNAN, Niall & GUDELUNAS, David. Drag Culture, Global Participation and RuPaul’s Drag Race. *RuPaul’s Drag Race And The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*. Pages 1 - 11. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-50617-3



As to the House system established during the Ballroom Scene in the 80s, it does not seem to be too active here in Prague. One drag queen, Gizela Kova, has founded the House of Kova, helping emerging drag queens to find their first gigs and shows. Another active House here is the House of Garbage, founded by Tonic Garbage. There is also a certain rivalry that can be noticed between those two main houses and their offsprings, as expected from the competitive nature of the balls and the houses there. Other than that, I have not come across many more houses and similar establishments. That is probably due to the small size of the community here; even though every one seems to know each other, the competition is big and the drag performers seem to want to leave the Czech Republic as quickly as possible, in order to achieve bigger goals in more queer-friendly cities.

Although still a very young scene, more and more places are opening up toward the art of drag and host different weekly events accompanied by drag queens, such as the Drag Karaoke Night at Patra or features of drag queens in comedy, cabaret and burlesque shows.

## 2.2 Philosophical movement accompanying the work

The act of drag raises many questions around the subjects of gender identity and its act or performance. How are women perceived in society? How are men perceived? Why is the only seemingly valid system one of gender binarity, *“a norm that chooses us, but that we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely?”* (Butler, 2005)<sup>1</sup> And what about fashion, why is it still perceived as unnormal to wear female clothes as a man, and male clothes as a woman? And what does it all matter anyway, where did this binary system come from, and why does it still seem to remain the “one true” way of perceiving and categorizing people?

According to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, gender is an accumulation of performative acts, where the act is a *“shared experience and collective action”* (Butler, 1988), which are performed around and by a person.<sup>2</sup> Butler states that a performative act, *“the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that’s been going on before one arrived on the scene.”* (Butler, 1988)<sup>3</sup> In that sense, gender is an idea of acts and roles created by society over a period of time, played out by its members, and passed on with the generations. In her studies, Butler repeatedly refers to Beauvoir’s notions, a specific one being that *“when Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity.”*<sup>4</sup> On that account, there is an evident distinction between the anatomical/biological sex as a truth, and gender as the cultural and societal interpretation and the thus resulting portrayal or performance of that truth. These “truths” about how women or men are supposed to act and behave are fundamentally embedded in the course of human history, which results in them becoming a societal norm, where any view or thought of acting against that norm are frowned upon.

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1 BUTLER, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1993. ISBN-10: 1138834769. Chapter 20: *Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion*. p. 385

2 BUTLER, Judith. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISSN 01922882. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, p. 519-531. p. 526

3 BUTLER, Judith. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISSN 01922882. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, p. 519-531. p. 526

4 BUTLER, Judith. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISSN 01922882. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, p. 519-531. p. 522

Contradicting this established norm, Butler argues that *“assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the body of males, or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (...), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. (...) When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.”*<sup>5</sup> This concludes in biologically female bodies having the freedom of expressing themselves as masculine, which includes behavior, appearance and sexual preferences, as well as biologically male bodies being able to express themselves in a feminine way. Additionally, Butler argues about the structure of gender binarity, the fact that there are only two possible genders to choose from, for the simple reason of there being two different biological sexes.<sup>6</sup> This is of course a logical conclusion as well as one that has been accepted for centuries, however it does cause many a problem in today’s society, merely categorising each and every being into those two groups, regardless of personal interest and without opening up to the possibility of there being more than two valid genders.

Concluding Judith Butler’s notions in connection to drag, one might say that the act of drag definitely fights against the binary system by opposing the rules that it has set for the two genders “male” and “female”, specifically in terms of behaviour and appearance, as well as the role of “women” in society throughout history through the means of performance. Therefore, drag is as much an expression of the inner true self as it is a parody and exaggeration of what it means to be a woman. All of these factors, however, simultaneously add up to the contradictory notion of drag promoting the binary system, where some even see it as an act towards reinforcing male, cisgender and heterosexist privilege, particularly in how women are portrayed by men in drag.<sup>7</sup> This presumption leads to drag having the ability to encourage and at the same time deconstruct today’s gender norms, with the need

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5 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1990. ISBN10 0-415-38955-0. Chapter 1: *Subjects of Sex, Gender, Desire*, p. 9

6 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1990. ISBN10 0-415-38955-0. Chapter 1: *Subjects of Sex, Gender, Desire*, p. 9

7 LEVITT, Heidi M. et al. Drag Gender: Experiences of Gender for Gay and Queer Men who Perform Drag. *Sex Roles* **78**, 367–384 (cit. 10-07-2017, issued 03-2018). DOI 10.1007/s11199-017-0802-7. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0802-7>

to distinguish between pastiche and parody in drag, pastiche being the reidelisation or repetition of gender norms.<sup>8</sup> This can be well observed in the TV Show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, having been criticised by feminists for the use of phrases such as “fishy”, used to refer to the “*legitimacy of drag queens’womanly presentation*” (Brennan and Gudelunas, 2017) or RuPaul’s approach of judging the contestants by the factors of *Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent*, which forms an equally sexist acronym without the need of further explanation.<sup>9</sup> As Brennan and Gudelunas argue, “*the issue with RPDR for many feminists is that it is (still) biological men who are deciding on and playing with notions of women.*” (Brennan and Gudelunas, 2017) This leads to RPDR throwing a misogynistic shade on the LGBTQ+ community, no matter how good or funny the intentions may have been. On the other hand, of course, one needs to consider how those minorities of the LGBTQ+ community and with that the drag performers, crossdressers and transgender people, had to endure decades of homophobic phrases and words such as “fag” or “queer”, which can now be negative or positive in meaning, depending on the speaker’s position, surrounding and situation.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the position of men playing with and deciding on images of women may as well be seen as “*a position that should also consider the fluidity of queer culture in a society reckoning with LGBTQ rights and visibility in rapidly changing ways.*” (Brennan and Gudelunas, 2017)

Furthermore, leaning on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Olivier Norman discusses the nature of drag in terms of gender, agreeing with Butler on her notions of gender being performed, particularly as soon as we enter social situations, concluding that drag “*is an activity whereby the concrete socially constructed norms, be they of space or of gender, are opened up and become dynamic spaces of self-expression or creation.*” (Norman, 2018) Using the metaphor of a blank canvas, Norman states that “*if the self becomes a blank canvas then it is up to the performer to paint a new self, to create a new self through their performance*” (Norman, 2018) , meaning that drag is a way of creating a new part of one’s

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8 TON, J.T. (2018) Judith Butler’s Notion of Gender Performativity: To What Extent Does Gender Performativity Exclude a Stable Gender Identity? (Bachelor Thesis). Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands.

9 BRENNAN, Niall & GUDELUNAS, David. *Drag Culture, Global Participation and RuPaul’s Drag Race. RuPaul’s Drag Race And The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture.* Pages 1 - 11. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-50617-3. p. 4

10 BRENNAN, Niall & GUDELUNAS, David. *Drag Culture, Global Participation and RuPaul’s Drag Race. RuPaul’s Drag Race And The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture.* Pages 1 - 11. Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-50617-3. p. 4

self, a new side to a person's personality, opening up the space of the radically binary gender system and finding something other than male or female. Additionally, Norman asserts that drag is existential, as far as being the recreation and reshaping of one's self, therefore also of one's existence.<sup>11</sup> Hence, gender seems to not be transformed from male to female in a drag performance rather than being opened up for a period of time<sup>12</sup>, allowing the performer the artistic freedom of creation needed.

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11 NORMAN, Oliver. *Can drag become a philosophical object*. Florida State University MAP Conference. 2018. Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/36353467/Can\\_Drag\\_become\\_a\\_philosophical\\_object\\_From\\_the\\_LGBT\\_minority\\_to\\_a\\_general\\_philosophical\\_concern](https://www.academia.edu/36353467/Can_Drag_become_a_philosophical_object_From_the_LGBT_minority_to_a_general_philosophical_concern). p. 11

12 NORMAN, Oliver. *Can drag become a philosophical object*. Florida State University MAP Conference. 2018. p. 12. Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/36353467/Can\\_Drag\\_become\\_a\\_philosophical\\_object\\_From\\_the\\_LGBT\\_minority\\_to\\_a\\_general\\_philosophical\\_concern](https://www.academia.edu/36353467/Can_Drag_become_a_philosophical_object_From_the_LGBT_minority_to_a_general_philosophical_concern). p.12

## 2.3 Psychology of work

Drag as a practice poses, as previously discussed, clear questions about the binary gender system and its boundaries. The nature of these questions seems to be one of identity, there is a clear need to belong to a community and to be accepted for whatever one is or identifies as.

In a society which is so fundamentally built and historically underlined by the binary gender system, the pressure of conformity and the need to be “normal” or “like everyone else” poses a crucial series of problems. According Rajiv Jhangiani and Hammond Tarry, Eastern countries are more likely to conform to the societal and with that gender norms, whereas Western countries tend to have more of a resistant attitude towards them, showing this on an example of magazine adverts in both the USA and Korea. The US magazine ads focused more on individuality and uniqueness, by for example encouraging the reader to “choose your own view”, while the Korean ones are built on the concept of conformity, basing their advertising lines on facts like “7 out of 10 people used this product”, etc.<sup>1</sup> Even though these two countries are an example of far West and East, one could argue whether these statistics can be adapted to Eastern and Western Europe as well. From my own experience, I dare say that they can. Being a part of the modern LGBTQ+ community seems to pose a lot less pressure and anxiety in Switzerland than it does in the Czech Republic. These facts may of course be explained by the financial and overall historical situation of both countries, since Switzerland, as opposed to the Czech Republic, has never had the problems of foreign occupation. This would explain the general xenophobia that can be observed in more Eastern countries, especially in the older generation, and with that the fear of something different than the binary system that said generation grew up in.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community have, in the non-accepting cases of society, been told that whatever they are feeling is wrong, that one can only be a woman who is attracted to men, or a man who is attracted to women. Nothing outside or inbetween this frame can be accepted as a valid human being. This attitude towards LGBTQ+ has led to many cases of depression, drug use and suicide. One can of course say that society is growing more accepting each day, but the fact that it actually has to try and accept other

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1 JHANGIANI, Rhajiv; TARRY, Hammond. *Principles of Social Psychology - 1st International Edition*. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2015. ISBN13 9781946135209

human beings for not fitting into a made up frame of behaviour, sexuality and identification is rather shocking.<sup>2</sup> Mental health issues are a commonly observed result of the pressure of society, the beginnings of the attacks on a person's mental health reaching back to childhood a lot of the time, when other children's mocking comments about one's individual personality and expression start to arise. With the influences of religious scripts such as the bible, stating a man is "forbidden to lie with another man" and similar notions, the acceptance of one's self grows even harder to the point of trying to change and adapt to society's norms, which should not be a solution.

Additionally to the previously mentioned self-arising mental issues, the individual is often, even by some governmental institutions, already categorised as "mentally ill" for not acting and living in a way the binary system dictates. An example of this is the Czech Republic, where transgender people are categorised as exactly such, thus having to visit psychologists before they can start the transformation to the opposite gender, so the medical professional can decide whether or not this person truly is transgender. As an effect, the individual's insurance pays for all arising costs connected to the clinical transformation. This of course poses the question of what is better in this scenario - being put in the group of the mentally ill and having all operations and additional costs covered by your insurance, which does come up to a stately sum; or being seen as a real, healthy human being, however having to come up with all the money on one's own.

The fundamental need of overruling the binary system and being accepted as a man and a woman at the same or at different times turns drag not only into an art and performance, but also into a sort of political debate. As previously mentioned, the Stonewall Riots in 1969, led by drag queen and activist Marsha P. Johnson, have without a question influenced today's perception of the members of the LGBTQ+ community, bringing along the annual event of the Pride Parade, which takes place in most major cities across the world. The Pride Parade is definitely a strong sign that the LGBTQ+ community sets every year, celebrating love, diversity and sexuality and coloring the streets in each and every color for a day.

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2 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York, NY, Routledge, 1990. ISBN10 0-415-38955-0

## 2.4 Reasons for choosing this subject and Role Models

Growing up in Basel, Switzerland, I have always been surrounded by people from very stable households, who truly had all the ways open for them. This resulted in a lot of my friends becoming artists and performers, because they had the means to follow their artistic dreams and express themselves in the way they wanted to. As I turned 18, I started to properly notice the left political scene, where more and more of my friends joined in time. The longer I moved in those circles, the more was I introduced to the queer scene of Basel as well - something that I have not encountered as such before. I myself identify as a cisgender heterosexual woman, so I have always been more of an observer to the scene. However, many of my friends are active parts of the LGBTQ+ scene, so I was soon introduced to non-binarity, the different spectres of sexuality and gender identification and of course; drag. I first came across the subject of drag on a lazy Sunday afternoon, when one of my friends suggested to watch *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As a big fan of contest and modeling shows, I agreed, and was very soon captivated by the art of Drag. I adore the heavy make up, dramatic outfits and hilarious performances, because they are over-the-top and fabulous.

Other than that, coming from such a gender active town like Basel, I quickly noticed that the subject is not very surfaced in Prague. It seems that the LGBTQ+ scene is more underground and that it still poses a certain taboo. I am aware that there definitely is a scene and that the pride takes place in Prague annually, nevertheless, compared to other European cities, the community is fairly small. I have also realised that the subject of gender and feminism has not yet been properly worked with at Art & Design Institut either, especially in the field of photography, which came as a big surprise to me. In my view, all subjects that fall under the umbrella of LGBTQ+, are visually and thematically very interesting and therefore must have an established position in the world of art. In my view, along with many other works concerning the questioning of identities, the subject of gender politics cannot be amiss. I do realise of course that, as a white, cisgender woman I have had the privilege of not needing to question these particular aspects of my life, because I have never struggled with the notion of my gender or sexuality. However, even as an outsider, I feel that this subject should be represented more strongly, so that privileged people who might not be understanding at all and who closed themselves off to other systems than the one of gen-



der binarity will have the possibility of seeing the subject through different eyes.

After watching the recent series *Pose*, I was inspired by the 80s Ballroom Scene in New York, where the art of Drag was rewritten and started turning into what it is today. The extravagant clothes, the drama, the categories they walked in - I find it fascinating and beautiful. The art of drag as a phenomenon is important in the sense of questioning what the meaning of “female” truly implies in today’s society, how “women” are to look and act, and, above all, how degendering various aspects of life influences a person’s view of themselves. Additionally, I consciously linked this work to the ballroom scene, as it has shaped drag the way it is today, introducing the probably best known feature of drag shows, the lip sync<sup>1</sup>, as well as finding its way onto the big screens in shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which may be compared to the ballroom scene in terms of being a competition and the winner being chosen on how well they master the given categories.

A direct visual inspiration was Ellen von Unwerth’s series *Wild Wild West*. When I visited the exhibition at the Leica Gallery in Prague in 2018, I was very intrigued by the roughness and simultaneous intimacy depicted in the photos, especially the ones portraying Marilyn Manson and his friends at a party. After giving it some thought, the pictures do strongly remind me of the 80s Ballroom Scene in New York, with a rougher, more western touch to it. Another visual inspiration was of course Nan Goldin and her famous photos of New York’s drag queens in the 80s and 90s, having established a leading role of sorts in the genre of drag photography.

Drag is of course, to a certain extent, also a parody of the “woman” and of her role in the past, present and future. It is an exaggeration, which plays a big role in the aspect of performance in drag. With this work, I want to question the concept of gender and the binary concept that it stands in, as well as the binary aspects of fashion and performance, or self presentation, that this binary system brings with.

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1 LIVINGSTON, Jenny. (1990). *Paris Is Burning*. United States: Miramax Films.

### 2.4.1 Inclusion of subject in photographic works

Drag is a subject that has repeatedly been visually processed for many decades now. Crossdressing itself is also becoming more popular, especially in the areas of fashion and make-up photography. Crossdressing and drag are of course not the same practice, however crossdressing is part of drag, making both of them equally part of the destruction of gender binarity. I focused on four photographers, Jan Klos and Magnus Hastings, who are contemporarily active, and Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin, who were active between the 60s and 90s.

**Diane Arbus** might not be the first artist to think of concerning the subject of drag, however she did take a fair amount of photos depicting female impersonators and drag queens. As she was active in the 60s and 70s, the photos show a different era of the art of drag, when the ballrooms were not quite what they were in the 80s. Her work is strangely surreal in general, which she is able to integrate in her photos of the female impersonators very well. The photos being black and white adds to the notion of drag being a historical subject rather than a newly emerging trend, as some people believe.

If one thinks of drag related photographers, **Nan Goldin** is definitely on top of the list. Her timeless photographs of drag queens getting ready for a show, sitting in a taxi or riding a bike at the New York Pride are important milestones in LGBTQ+ photography, especially because they allow such an intimate view into the life of the gender queer public of that time. The 80s were important in the shaping of drag and its culture into what it is today, therefore Nan Goldin's photos form a stable ground of drag queen photography.

With his series *Queens at Home*, **Jan Klos** manages to capture the fabulous and fierce spirit of several different drag queens, in their own personal and known surrounding of their own home. The results are beautiful and intimate portraits, which give the viewer an interesting insight into the life of contemporary drag performers, how they live and in what way they express their personality, both in drag as well as in their own home.

**Magnus Hastings** has published a photographic introduction to drag, *Why Drag?*, which features many contemporary drag queens as well as texts containing personal opinions and reasons by the pictured performers. The photos are generally bright in color and

seem very posed, therefore they do not correspond to my style of photography, however the book has celebrated a lot of fame recently and therefore is worth a mention here. Many contemporarily active queens are depicted, which certainly poses a sort of win win situation between the photographer and the subject.

## 2.5 Marketing strategy for successful establishment of practice

The main aim of this photographic project is to expose a subject to an audience that might not be too close to it yet. As previously discussed, the Czech Republic is still not too familiar with drag as an art form, only really knowing the “travesti”, the female impersonators at restaurants and pubs. Drag as a form of expression, a political statement and as a deep questioning of gender rules is not yet known by the local general public, definitely not as it is known in the USA. That is of course due to the fact that the main points of drag have taken place there, including the Stonewall Riots, the ballroom scene and the introduction of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Nevertheless, I think it is time for the introduction of drag in the Czech Republic, and also to shine the light on the self-titled “first wave of drag” in Prague, to support the artists active in it and to give them an opportunity to have a voice and to share their story.

Considering the fair amount of drag queens that I worked with for this project, social media is a great place to start promotion. My photos have already been shared on several of their instagram accounts as I am writing this, as posts, stories and re-posts, with my account tagged on them. This surely increases the reach of my work and it will arrive at their fanbase, as well as that base having the chance of looking at my profile and pictures. Therefore, the photos can be well used for self-promotion of the drag performers, as well as promotion of the clubs that some of the photos were taken in.

Additionally, I am making a selection of the photos to publish on my website<sup>1</sup>, so it will be accessible to the public at any time. Promotion for this will once again take place on instagram, as it gives me the possibility to reach a variety of people from different backgrounds.

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1 [www.annapavelphotography.com](http://www.annapavelphotography.com)

### **3. MAIN WORK**

#### **3.1 Preparation Process**

##### **3.1.1 Theoretical part**

When I first started working on this thesis, I did not know how I could possibly find the right texts for it. I knew this was a contemporary subject, but I was afraid it might be too contemporary to even have been discussed much. Of course, this notion comes from the fact that I rarely ever read social or feminist literature, which opened up a whole new world of authors and titles for me.

I was lucky enough to be visited during my Erasmus semester by a friend of mine, who happens to live in Berlin, a city where drag is celebrating great glory with the rest of the LGBTQ+ scene, who was able to give me access to the library of the Humboldt University, so I could have a look for texts that I might need. At that time, the one relevant book I knew of was Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, but searching through the archives has showed me that this is indeed a much discussed topic. Most of my references I was able to find and download there, whereas the rest I found online, knowing by then what I was looking for exactly.

I had my difficulties with Butler's style of writing, however it would probably be a lie if anyone said they read it without problems. She tends to create snake-like sentences that slither down half a page, bursting of big words for things that could be described more easily, making me forget the beginning as soon as I start to read. I realise that socio-cultural literature is written in a more academic style, but her writing is something else. This is not to criticise what Butler has to say, I do see many valid points in her writings, this is simply a critique on how it is written, seeming to complicate the already complex subject of gender identity even more.

##### **3.1.2 Practical Part**

In order to properly document and capture a subculture, one must become part of it. For me, this meant that before I could even think about what I wanted the photos to look like, I had to find the drag queens. As previously mentioned, the LGBTQ+ scene here in Prague is not that easy to find if one identifies as cis-gender and heterosexual, and there-

fore does not directly belong into the sub groups provided by the scene. I started with typing the words “drag queens prague” into Google, which resulted in predominantly expired websites showing shows that have happened between one and three years ago.

Since Google was no help, I decided to scour Instagram and Facebook for pages of local drag queens and LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. On Facebook, I came across Friends Bar & Club, located close to Narodni Trida, where weekly drag events take place. I started out by taking a friend to one of their shows on a Thursday, to watch the performance of the team Crazy Goddess, consisting of Naira Delairo, Vlasta Wild and Brona, who, as I later found out, performed mostly as the previously mentioned “travesti”. I decided to ask Vlasta first, as she had a great energy about her and seemed to be fairly confident and familiar with the local scene. Unfortunately, she said that she has already worked on several similar photographic projects and that she does not like photography that much anyway, but that I should try and ask some of the younger queens in the scene. As I was leaving, I asked the youngest of the three queens, Naira Delairo, whether she would be interested in a cooperation, to which she answered that she would be glad to help. I arranged a meeting with her, so she can get to know me and this project a little better, and also so I can start thinking about what the photos will look like. Unfortunately, Naira has not answered me since, which inclines a lot of problems and struggles I had during this time; I was cancelled on a lot, and before I actually got to take photos, I had to endure a couple of failed attempts.

After being cancelled on a couple of times, I found several queens on Instagram and asked most of them for cooperation. Like this and by going to the right clubs and places, I managed to find six queens in total that were willing to work with me. I met them all either for a coffee to talk, or I went to one of their shows, so I could talk to them backstage, before and after the show. I explained that I would like to take the photos in their home, in their usual surroundings, therefore seeing them before the shoot helped to build trust and confidence on both sides.

The queens I am portraying include: Fatale Vanity, Gigi Stardust, Dima Arrest, Melancholia Blackbile, Miss Petty Pisces and Saila Lior. They are all between 19 and 24 years old, therefore belonging to my own age group, which made cooperation easy and smooth, as well as all of them speaking English very well, making communication easier for me, as sometimes I miss a few words in Czech and have to say them in English.

### 3.2 Creation Process

The first proper opportunity to shoot material for the finalised book was at Friends Bar and Club, close to Narodni Trida in Prague. Gigi Stardust and Dima Arrest invited me to come to their event, which in this case was a so called Connection Party; all visitors were asked whether they were looking for friendship, sex or whether they were open for anything, receiving a bracelet with the corresponding color and a number, both of which were supposed to be worn throughout the night. On a website, one could direct a message to a preferred number before communicating in the actual room.

I was taken backstage straight upon my arrival, both Dima and Gigi seemed very happy to meet me and to be part of my project. Before their show started I explained what this project is about and how I want to take the photos, which was met with positive reactions. I arranged dates to shoot both of them at Gigi's place, as Dima lives outside of Prague and usually gets ready at a friend's place. Around 10 pm, the actual show started, consisting of party games, dance performances and lip-sync, all of which I was able to capture fairly well, considering the amount of people and the light inside the club. As the night went on, I met Fatale Vanity, who that night was there as a guest, but who also does drag and happily agreed to participate as well, agreeing on a date straight away.

With Fatale Vanity, I had a shoot at her place soon after that show. It was very easy and fun to shoot with her, documenting the transformation of man to woman, especially the make up part. Fatale is a woman who loves to pose for photos, therefore the process of this particular shoot was very smooth and unproblematic. The atmosphere was very light and fun, allowing us both to relax and feel comfortable.

My next shoot was with Gigi Stardust, she invited me to her place before another show she had. I again documented the transformation, that time it was a bit more rushed however, as she had to leave for her performance at a certain time. Gigi is transgender and she told me some things about how she handles it here in the Czech Republic and how she is proceeding in her transformation. Just after this, my work flow was interrupted by the state of emergency that was called out by the government, as the country was put under quarantine. I do believe my next shoots will be similar to the ones described above, however, therefore that should not be an issue at this point.

Being a very indecisive person, it was very difficult to choose the final range of photos that I would use in the end. I see beauty in many things, therefore a photo that might not be the best technically still has a lot of charm to my eye, especially for its imperfection.

At first, I wanted to create a book, with at least two main chapters, one showing the drag queens at their shows and backstage, and the other one consisting of the photos I took in their homes. However, as I quickly realized, the danger of drowning the viewer in photos of drag queens is high, especially when creating a book. This led to playing with the thought of installing the best photos as an exhibition, accompanied by the book as a deeper insight of the subject. On the other hand, an installation does require a lot more precision and a lot more deciding, whereas a book has the ability to tell a visual story, accompanied by small texts of the portrayed performers, which I in the end decided to do.

### **3.2.2 Materials and Technologies used**

Due to the insufficient lighting in the clubs and at the shows, I took these photos on my digital Fujifilm XT2, 35mm lens, with the grain filter on weak. I purposely did not turn it off, as I personally like the slight vintage effect it gives to a photo.

The photos of the drag queens at home were taken on a Canon point and shoot camera, with the hard flash on, on a Kodak 400 35mm color film. This style creates, to quote *Fatale Vanity*, a “90s-Berlin-vibe”, often used by fashion photographer Jürgen Teller.

### **3.2.3 Description of the Work**

The final product of this thesis is a photographic book, consisting of two main chapters; the first being a visual representation of the show and the moments around it, and the other being the chapter of the drag queens at their own place, in their own private environment, in order for them to be able to be themselves completely, without the necessity of a performance per se.

The book contains little texts about each queen that I portrayed, giving a short introduction to their person, sometimes including a quote that I found memorable.



#### 4. SELF REFLECTION

Dealing with the topic of drag and the LGBTQ+ scene in Prague has brought me a lot of new insights and impressions. It was not easy to find the scene in the first place - if one identifies with the binary gender norms provided by society, it can get hard to step out of those circles. I got to know my own personal underground ballroom scene in a city where I was not too sure I would find one at all, leading me anywhere from the obvious night club to the speakeasy hidden behind a library unit.

Very importantly, I got to know a lot of interesting and special people with open minds and welcoming hearts, who did not mind taking the straight girl to the gay bar and showing her how it works in those circles. I spent a lot of time with the drag queens I portrayed, talking to them about the photos I would like to take, the scene and their experiences. There were no real awkward silences, I was interested and they were happy to talk about drag, especially to someone who is not in the community as such. Seeing how happy the queens that I portrayed were about the photos I took of them made me feel proud, not because they liked the way I take photos, but more because they liked the way I saw them and the way I captured them. The pride was also not necessarily a feeling I had for myself, rather than being proud of them for finding themselves as beautiful as they were.

Additionally, I learned a lot about the importance of proper time management, as well as handling cancellations, trying not to sit around and be grumpy about this one person cancelling on me, but rather to look for new solutions, for other drag queens that might appreciate a cooperation with another young artist from a different field.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Discussing a wide, gender related topic such as drag brings along many questions which need to be answered one by one. I do believe that I have made the most important points clear and that a person with no background knowledge about the scene will gain a well enough overview to understand the history and role of the art of drag. I especially wanted to point out that drag itself is not simply a product of the 21st century, that it has been practiced for a long time by various groups of people and that it indeed plays an important role in today's gender politics.

As I worked my way through the questions, answers and theories that the subject of gender has posed to humanity, I realized the importance of the role it plays in terms of identity. Concluding the gender questions discussed in chapters 2.2 and 2.3, I dare suggest to agree that gender, as theorized by the discussed authors, is something that we do rather than something that we are, as well as gender being here before one is born.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is a sort of performance that is taught to every one of us from a young age, which a lot of the time works out well enough, however there is a certain need of building the gender system in a way that everybody may feel included, or to abolish it altogether. This, as well as educating people on the subject, would create a broader and more comprehensive surrounding, allowing the fluidity of gender to spill free the way it should.

As for the drag scene in Prague, it is surely one that is emerging right now, and everyone who is involved at the moment is actively helping to build and shape it to what it will be in a matter of time. More and more drag related shows and events are emerging, leading to more exposure through the venues and the performers themselves. The local artists are talented and fierce, and I believe they will manage to build a career and finally own their money solely from drag performances. Even though the local scene drips of competition and rivalry, the queens do realise that they are all in this together and therefore respect each other, no matter what personal differences they might have. Every one of the queens that I met while working on this thesis had her own personal magic about her, each bringing different talents and specialties, adding their own personal color to Prague's growing LGBTQ+ scene.

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1 BUTLER, Judith. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISSN 01922882. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, p. 519-531. p. 526

I am grateful to have had the opportunity of meeting many amazing drag performers, who welcomed me in their circles and let me have a look into their daily life. This thesis has certainly opened my eyes in terms of the variety of gender and sexual identifications which can be found in drag, as well as allowing me to find my own version of the 80s ballroom scene.

I have built up a lot of respect for the local performers, especially the ones that are more or less my age, for doing what they do best and for expressing themselves in exactly the way they want to. They are setting examples for everybody out there that has a dream, showing them that with a lot of work, confidence and will, anything is possible.

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VICKERS, Emma et. al. *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; Revised edition, 2002. ISBN: 9781137524607 Chapter 3: JACKSON, Emma. VICKERS, Emma. *Sanctuary or Sissy? Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945*

## **7. LIST OF ATTACHMENTS**

### **Attachment 1**

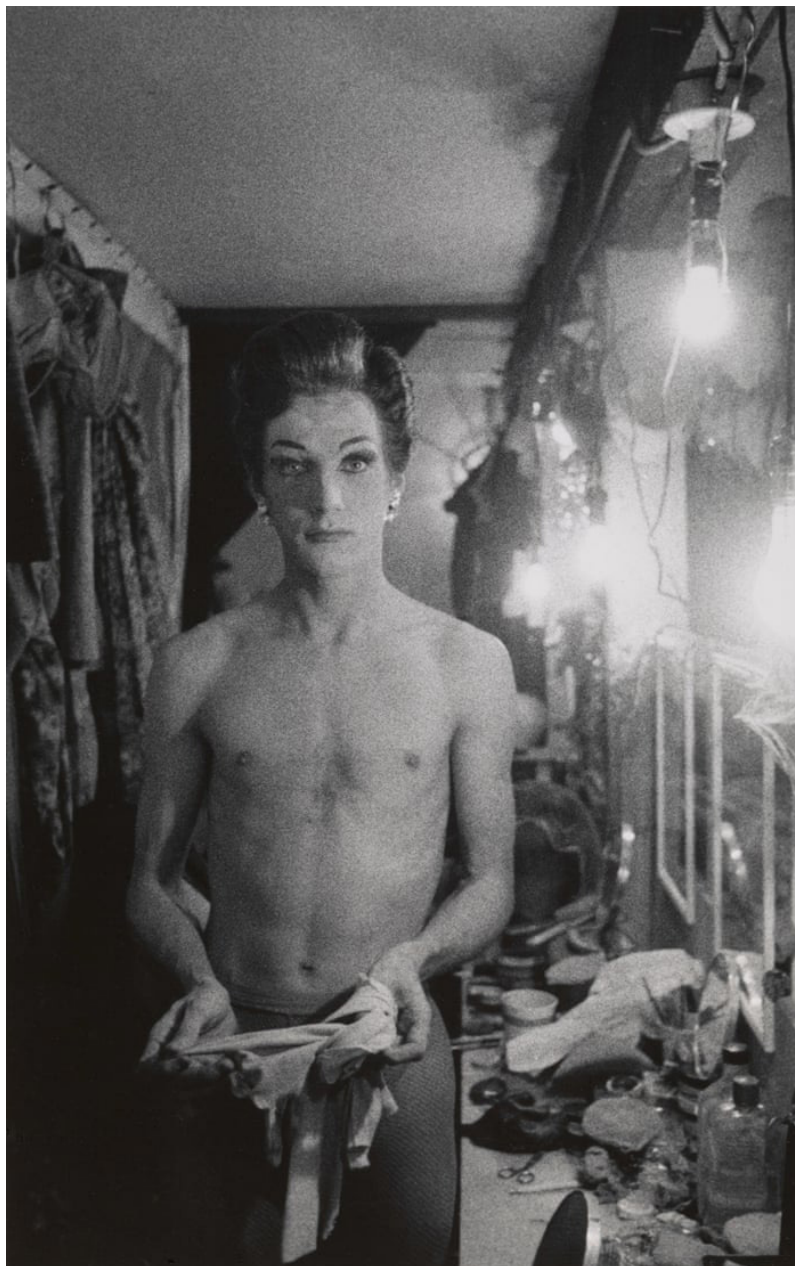
Visual examples of authors discussed in Chapter 2.4.1

### **Attachment 2**

Documentation of Chapter 4.2

## 8. ATTACHMENTS

### Attachment 1



Diane Arbus - Female impersonator holding long gloves, Hempstead, L.I., 1959

source: [https://i.guim.co.uk/img/media/0ddfd23a20b40974c680d093375c7cf-607401bf6/0\\_0\\_4497\\_7132/master/4497.jpg?width=700&quality=85&auto=format&fit=max&s=9f9131ea67268b26bcf88a683ff65414](https://i.guim.co.uk/img/media/0ddfd23a20b40974c680d093375c7cf-607401bf6/0_0_4497_7132/master/4497.jpg?width=700&quality=85&auto=format&fit=max&s=9f9131ea67268b26bcf88a683ff65414) (16.03.2020)



Diane Arbus - Young man in curlers at home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C., 1966

source: [https://www.moca.org/storage/app/uploads/public/5a6/a3a/ff5/  
thumb\\_2958\\_1120\\_0\\_0\\_0\\_auto.jpg](https://www.moca.org/storage/app/uploads/public/5a6/a3a/ff5/thumb_2958_1120_0_0_0_auto.jpg)

(16.03.2020)





Nan Goldin - Jimmy Paulette and Taboo! in the bathroom, NYC, 1991

source: <https://anotherimg-dazedgroup.netdna-ssl.com/3000/azure/another-prod/370/2/372080.jpg>

(16.03.2020)



Nan Goldin - Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC, 1991

source: [https://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/P/P78/P78046\\_10.jpg](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/P/P78/P78046_10.jpg)

(16.03.2020)



Jan Klos - Sue Gives A Fuck, 2019

source: [https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/58e3abe8d1758ec5d22b-3b27/1561304188607-9W2J7XENE5P8IPM1WIGL/ke17ZwdGBToddI8pDm48kGh1VBOTY-BMFp8BsZbSZPm17gQa3H78H3Y0txjaiv\\_ofDoOvxcdMmMKkDsyUqMSsMWxHk725yiiHC-CLfrh8O1z5QHyNOqBUUEtDDsRWrJLTmHy9fWX2TbgcwCD5LYAWJ6Q4Eni-3f0eHSHa6n-BUBOh2abGK2vFbvrovWChKztO0G/SUE06.jpg?format=750w](https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/58e3abe8d1758ec5d22b-3b27/1561304188607-9W2J7XENE5P8IPM1WIGL/ke17ZwdGBToddI8pDm48kGh1VBOTY-BMFp8BsZbSZPm17gQa3H78H3Y0txjaiv_ofDoOvxcdMmMKkDsyUqMSsMWxHk725yiiHC-CLfrh8O1z5QHyNOqBUUEtDDsRWrJLTmHy9fWX2TbgcwCD5LYAWJ6Q4Eni-3f0eHSHa6n-BUBOh2abGK2vFbvrovWChKztO0G/SUE06.jpg?format=750w)

(17.03.2020)



Jan Klos - ShayShay, 2019

source: [https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/58e3abe8d1758ec5d22b-3b27/1561285409838-DX0ULKD7W8BPCN9GN966/ke17ZwdGBToddl8pDm48k-D8Xroq\\_AX5Zgi3HGn2a5gd7gQa3H78H3Y0txjaiv\\_ofDoOvxcdMmMKkDsyUqMSsM-WxHk725yiiHCCLfrh8O1z5QPOohDlaleljMHgDF5CVIOqpeNLcJ80NK65\\_fV7S1UQ-Q0iLpUJJ55dW55w\\_oZ6JvHnXlmx4oSoNzVwIPskgplsLIXfY3DEqu8fc08UsQJ-4w/SS01.jpg](https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/58e3abe8d1758ec5d22b-3b27/1561285409838-DX0ULKD7W8BPCN9GN966/ke17ZwdGBToddl8pDm48k-D8Xroq_AX5Zgi3HGn2a5gd7gQa3H78H3Y0txjaiv_ofDoOvxcdMmMKkDsyUqMSsM-WxHk725yiiHCCLfrh8O1z5QPOohDlaleljMHgDF5CVIOqpeNLcJ80NK65_fV7S1UQ-Q0iLpUJJ55dW55w_oZ6JvHnXlmx4oSoNzVwIPskgplsLIXfY3DEqu8fc08UsQJ-4w/SS01.jpg)

(17.03.2020)



Magnus Hastings - Coco De Ball

source: <https://www.dodho.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Coco-De-ball-2-copy.jpg>

(17.03.2020)



Magnus Hastings - Bianca del Rio

source: <https://queerty-prodweb.s3.amazonaws.com/content/docs/2016/08/08191019/>

Bianca-Del-Rio-Why-Drag-Magnus-Hasting-Drag-Queen-Coffee-Table-Book.jpg

(17.03.2020)

## Attachment 2



Dima Arrest performing at Friends Bar & Club (26.02.2020)

Source: Own photo.



Dima Arrest backstage at Friends Bar & Club (26.02.2020)

Source: Own photo.



Gigi Stardust backstage at Friends Bar & Club (26.02.2020)

Source: Own photo.



Fatale Vanity at her place (03.03.2020)

Source: Own photo.





Fatale Vanity at her place (03.03.2020)

Source: Own photo.



Gigi Stardust at her place (11.03.2020)

Source: Own photo.



Gigi Stardust at her place (11.03.2020)

Source: Own photo.