

# Shusterman Goes to Camp: An Ars Erotica of Somaesthetics in Drag Culture

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**Abstract:** *This essay aims to begin patching a gap in the emerging field of somaesthetics, which suffers from a blind spot when it comes to queerness. Even when they occasionally gesture toward homosexuality as a part of global ars erotica, philosophers have ignored the virtues exemplified by drag cultural excellence. This essay deploys the framework established by RuPaul's Drag Race as a somatic lens through which campiness and queening provide analytical, pragmatic and practical conversation that is of substantial value in its contributions to the art of living one's best life.*

This essay aims to begin patching a gap in the emerging field of somaesthetics, which suffers from a blind spot when it comes to queerness. Even when they occasionally gesture toward homosexuality as a part of global ars erotica, philosophers have ignored the virtues exemplified by drag cultural excellence. Campiness and queening are a valuable locus for further analytical, pragmatic and practical conversation about the art of living one's best life.

## 1. Surveying the absence of queers

As a pioneer in somaesthetics, Shusterman may be straight, but at least he has not been so narrow. He's written in support of postmodern approaches to the aesthetic and even analyzed popular media forms of rap, techno and country music. And yet, aside from occasionally having to dip a toe into the steamy bathhouse waters of Foucault's personal kinks, Shusterman has left out performative manifestations of queerness in popular culture in the considerations of his own work.

Here's the only explicit mention of drag in Shusterman's work: "Judith Butler's arguments for the somatic performativity of gender parody (as in drag and cross-dressing) show how dramatically different aesthetic representations of female bodies can be used to transgress and subvert the conventional notions of gender identity, thus helping to emancipate women from the oppressive constraints that the ideology of a fixed and subordinate gender essence has imposed on them." That's from his book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and*

*Somaesthetics* (Shusterman, 2008, p. 90). Since it was published way back in 2008, we can offer him grace for that common elision there, that slide into the assumption that it's only women who get freed when we topple conventional notions of gender identity through the camp representation of them. We know now that drag emancipates everybody, even cisgendered white male philosopher kings.

So Shusterman makes plain his allegiance—that he is with us, us the queers—through this isolated invocation of Judith Butler. But it's a book from 2008 citing a book from 1990, and RuPaul has won 24 Emmy Awards since then. Plus, we're here to engage with Shusterman's newest work, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (Shusterman, 2021). Within this new book, there are 47 mentions of homosexuality. Any wagers on how this compares to the number of mentions for prostitutes and courtesans? 78 courtesans and 30 prostitutes, so 108 mentions of people doing it for money compared to 47 mentions of people doing it for the ass.

A quick survey of stats within the wider terrain of somaesthetics fares no better than its founder. If you Google "somaesthetics," there are about 52,000 hits. Add "drag queen" to that and the count lowers to a mere 176 hits or .338% of total mentions in the field. A number of the coolest and most useful mentions may be left out of Google because it's not an avenue for searching the majority of academic journals. Any wagers on how many hits there are for "drag" within *The Journal of Somaesthetics* itself? Just one, and it's irrelevant but amusing: the phrase "drag everyone off to jail" in Crispin Sartwell's 2020 essay on "What the Drug Culture Meant" (Sartwell, 2020, p. 84).

The results might be less depressing if we went in search of hits for more mainstream categories—The L or the G or even the B, but we are here to spill the T, that is, to give voice to the experiences of trans folks and genderqueers and those others who cannot be bothered to conform to either heteronormativity or homonormativity. I've made a lifelong academic study out of my fandom for the fine arts of drag queening, because it is a culture that speaks to me as a gender non-conforming woman who is married to another gender non-conforming woman. We're not lesbians, we're queers. Drag queens are nearly all gay men and trans women, and although I do not place any of those three specific labels upon myself, I find that our mutual interests and concerns in life overlap a majority of the time, so that's the source of my enthusiasm for analyzing the types of performance in which they engage. There are experts in the comparatively more culturally obscure fine arts of drag kinging out there, but as I am not one of them, the kings will be left out of my essay. Yes, this ironically replicates part of the very absence that forms the basis for my critique. But the cup of somaesthetics will be fuller for its inclusion of queens and perhaps someone will follow me on behalf of the kings. After all, it takes all kinds of fruits to make a fruit cup and Beyonce wasn't built in a day.

Blessedly, the blind spot toward queerness at large has not resulted in steering somaesthetics in any direction that necessarily conflicts with queer theory. Instead, we have a bouquet of caveats that sweep this blind spot aside. We have a handful of "but unfortunately, our culture has a long way to go in respecting the rights and identities of queers" or other similar language. Thank you truly for your allyship, Richard. Now let's begin to plug this hole, ha ha ha ha, especially since drag queening culture fits clearly and easily within field of somaesthetics generally and your sense of the uses of ars erotica specifically.

## 2. Surveying the presence of queens

The analytical branch of somaesthetics can and should theorize drag queening by describing how the bodily practices associated with it function to construct a queer culture with attendant aesthetic and moral values that may often run counter to those of the heterosexual majority in-group. Drag opposes normativity and yet despite its useful modes of resistance, it establishes a normativity of its own in order to proliferate and advance its culture. Drag queens are not a new phenomenon, so Shusterman certainly could've included them in his study of antiquities. As a cluster of methodologies, drag is as old as civilization or sex itself. Here's a super brief history of some of the high points of drag queening across time all over the world.

One, ancient Greece: mimes in elaborate face paint who combined dance and audience participation to act out plays laid the foundation for camp aesthetics and genderqueer persona work. See especially Telestes, who was basically the first mime superstar and pioneered ways of mocking the gods as well as themes of love that would eventually yield burlesque. Two, harems in the Ottoman Empire of the 1300s: included not just women but also many male dancers who dressed as women, usually just as young and as highly skilled at belly dancing or playing instruments as the women. These *koceks* were in such high demand that there are reports of women in harems plotting to kill them to eliminate the competition. Three, Japanese kabuki theatre: originally starring women and eventually deemed too erotic for public consumption, men took over the art form in the 1600s and their approach to performing dramatic acts of femininity combined with delicately meaningful movement has been largely unchanged for four hundred years since, shifting the way we reflect on the history of geishaism itself.

Four, in Shakespearean theatre in England: men played all the iconic and queenly female roles like Cleopatra and Juliet because women weren't allowed to act on stage there until 1660. Cross-dressing was an explicit plot point in some of these stories, like the Viola character in *Twelfth Night*, generating a kind of meta-drag scene of layering where a man acted as a woman acting as a man. Five, Hindu Kathakali dances: since at least the 1700s, Indian folklore tales have been performed by men who train for years to master the art of "eye-dancing" in elaborate makeup with ornate costuming and intense choreography. Six, vaudevillian theater all over Europe and especially in British music halls toward the end of the 1700s. Seven, the Peking Opera in China, whose roles were all played by men until women were allowed onto the stage in 1912.

Eight, the so-called "Pansy Craze" in the early 1930s when men presenting as high femme in Jazz Age performances were considered the most glamorous and hedonistic of performers. See also: the Rocky Twins, a pair of Norwegian brothers who rose of drag fame in Paris and then toured all over the world with the stunningly extravagant costumes for their signature 1920s look. See also: a young Texan acrobat who began performing in drag as Barquette in 1919, beloved worldwide for daring physical feats who influenced the likes of such queer pioneers as Josephine Baker and Man Ray. And finally, nine, moving pictures became a thing: see Charlie and Sydney Chapman dragging it up in *The Masquerader* in 1913 or Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* in 1959. The modern history of drag begins in the Sixties, and we will pick up there in the next section of this talk.

No doubt everyone here understands drag as a performance art, but we must also answer for why it should be included in a symposium on *ars erotica*. The term "*ars erotica*" refers to the styles and techniques of lovemaking with the honorific title of art. We must determine in what sense the bodily practices of drag can be considered artistic in a manner that is equivalent or parallel or orbitally related to the styles and techniques of lovemaking, and trace how queening

contributes to the aesthetics and ethics of self-cultivation in the art of living.

First, there seems to be a presumptive understanding within studies of ars erotica that lovemaking is not a solo activity outside the realm of asceticism. It is usually categorized as a kind of interpersonal communication, as opposed to a more socially insulated opportunity for intrapersonal self-reflection. There are probably millions of people all over the world who either will not or cannot choose a sex life that engages another participant, and the values associated with this viewpoint should not be excluded from any serious study of ars erotica. Shusterman's latest book mentions masturbation eleven times, most often simply to gauge the extent to which it was explicitly forbidden or widely considered taboo. If no other part of ancient culture provides an adequate avenue for celebrating the physical pleasures available to the isolated self, then the revolutionary power of drag should be immediately clear.

Queening is first and foremost a masturbatory practice because it is a calling of body and soul that has nothing to do with finding an audience. To drag up and then later to de-drag is to spend all day making love to oneself. One is called to slip one's foot into a high heel for the first time, or one is called to slide into a corset and ball gown that have all the emotional and many of the physical qualities of medieval armor, or one is called to spend hours instinctively transforming one's face with make-up in the mirror, or one is called to move the weight of the world off one's shoulders by putting on a very heavy wig, and so on. These are acts that lay bare our naked selfhood, that allow safe spaces for experimenting with one's fundamental identity and values, with an escapism and hedonism and laughing lightness that provide the comfort and confidence necessary to face the rest of the world day after day. All over the world, there are people this very day sliding into their first pair of high heels. They may be six years old or sixty years old, and they may never feel safe enough to have an audience larger than their own conscience. The fact that they walk the runway alone should not be presumed to denigrate the validity or quality of their definitely very embodied self-cultivation in the art of living.

But of course, drag also operates easily within an interpersonal communications framework for ars erotica, wherein a queen finds herself in performance with an audience of at least one other person. The orgasmic currency of lovemaking is replaced by other exchange values like applause and tip money. Much of what Shusterman unpacks about the valuation of courtesans is just as applicable to the fine arts of queening. These two groups have generally cared about a lot of the same things—visual presentation of both look and movement, talented performance, witty improvisation skills, price tag, and the superior mood of a demonstrated ability to fulfill personal purpose. The work of queens and courtesans has often conveyed shared standards of campy excellence. So let's end this section of the talk with an obvious assertion: drag queens are sexy. Queening is often a turn on both to the people doing drag and to the people watching the drag show. Now we can really get into talking about the drag show.

### **3. Shante, you stay**

Pragmatic somaesthetics urges us to move beyond the simple description of drag queening as connected to Shusterman's analysis of ars erotica, into territories where we can examine how the somaesthetic values of queening compare to those itemized in Shusterman's new book and critique examples of how best to meet these values. To some extent, the implication of this project is that homonormativity prescribes a more ideal form of living than heteronormativity, but let's not construe that as a ringing endorsement of norms themselves or of the gatekeeping or policing needed for their cultivation.

We can productively use Shusterman's contextualization of Islamic and Japanese ars erotica to select a paradigmatic set of drag queen examples. His understanding of these as substantively derivative or aggregated cultures that therefore produce more variety and complexity than their ancient source materials provides a clear path to the oeuvre of RuPaul Charles, a black gay American man born in 1960 who is not as old as queening itself but is undisputedly the most powerful conveyor of drag cultural values for his ability to choose a la carte lessons from all of drag history and synthesize the merit of these values in a way that effectively proliferates them in modern society.

Just as Muhammad is construed as the last and best messenger of Muslim virtues, RuPaul is widely worshipped as the last and best messenger of drag values. Like Islam, which relies on a combination of the main text of the Quran plus reports on Muhammad's sayings and actions as well as a large body of religious case law, RuPaul's multi-platform dominion includes a main text plus extensive web and social media presence as well as a large body of scholarship generated by fandoms of drag. The main text for our consideration is his reality television competition show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The show began in 2009 and in the fourteen years of its run so far, it has not only launched the careers of hundreds of drag queens to carry its messaging across the globe, but also spawned three additional American shows, countless one-off special programs, and eleven international shows in Canada, Belgium, Spain, France, Holland, Italy, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

RuPaul is only 61 years old—which makes him a relatively young media mogul and yet an ancient within queer culture, a true living ancestor who has survived tremendous hostility from society as well as the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the sole judge of a long-running popular reality competition television show, RuPaul is the literal and explicit arbiter of what constitutes drag values. His lived experience of the logics of neoliberal capitalism and the shifting technologies of cultural inclusion have strongly influenced his sense of what drag queening can accomplish, and this informs his official "RUbric" for picking winners. So let us compare Shusterman's list of the somaesthetic values of lovemaking with RuPaul's *Drag Race* values.

The four primary categories RuPaul uses to evaluate drag queening are charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent—delightfully short-handed as CUNT values, and we can sort the majority of Shusterman's options into these four categories. His list includes beauty, grace, elegance, charm, refinement, courtesy, care, self-mastery, sensitivity to the feelings of others and harmony, and we'll consider them in that order.

RuPaul consistently judges physical beauty to be of very limited utility in the competition. Much of a queen's physical beauty is surfaced through make-up skills and expensive padding. One of his famous catchphrases is "we're all born naked and the rest is drag." Because drag queens work with and against their own bodies, generally to enhance any feminine features while masking their masculinity, any notion of "natural" beauty goes out the window and is replaced with consideration for how well a queen can manipulate her own body to pass as something she is not. Queens that easily pass for "real women" are the ones who explode the very notion that "woman" is a natural category, so passing is valued because deconstructing the gender binary is a mission of this competition.

And yet, when a queen achieves this extraordinary level of realness in her performance of female beauty, the common catchphrase on the show is "stop relying on that body." This means a queen is obligated to offer the world much more than stunning good looks. Beauty queens or body queens are respected for what they can do, but what they can do is considered the

lowest form of success on the show. There are two interesting sidebars here. One is the show's nuanced embrace of plastic surgery and body modification. For example, Michelle Visage's breast implant saga or Detox's recovery from a disfiguring car crash being construed as medical decisions to protect themselves, versus Trinity the Tuck's extreme makeover or RuPaul's own Botoxing being construed as personal style choices that harm no one. The other sidebar is the show's initial refusal to allow transwomen to compete. RuPaul said transwomen were basically too real as women to be classified as drag illusion, but he changed the show's policy of excluding transwomen in 2017 after being heavily criticized by the younger generation of queens and fans.

The values Shusterman refers to as grace, elegance, charm, and refinement can be bundled together under RuPaul's value of charisma. I've previously published about this as the terrain of Andy Warhol and the Factory superstars, several of whom were drag queens or transwomen and the majority of whom were queer, including Warhol himself. In 1987, RuPaul arrived in New York City just as Warhol was dying and thus never became one of his official superstars. But Warhol's understanding of "fifteen minutes of fame" and his methodologies for capitalizing on the currency of celebrity are a cornerstone of RuPaul's total media domination. RuPaul knows charisma when he sees it, but it can be difficult to objectively define. He finds grace in the smoothness of a queen's death drop into the splits on the dance floor. He finds elegance in a queen's choice of simple but expensive gown. He finds charm in a queen's nonverbal communication or micro expressions. He finds refinement in the clarity with which a queen steers her own total package of charisma or the instinctiveness with which she delivers on a challenge.

On the whole, RuPaul's understanding of star quality is firmly rooted in his own experience of rising to prominence through the acclaim of the MTV generation and has grown exponentially due to his instinctive embrace of the ideas coming out of New Media Studies that Warhol too would have loved if he were alive today. There has been criticism of RuPaul's use of his own music video successes as the primary lens through which to judge queens on *Drag Race*, most notably centered on the example of the rise and fall and rise of alternative country drag superstar Trixie Mattel and the unanticipated difficulties of mentoring drag pop star Adore Delano. Queens who plan to do something other than music when they exit the show also often face additional scrutiny from RuPaul, as he does not always see the value in more niche or modern career opportunities or trust that the pathways to success in these will be clear of major obstacles for his graduating queens.

Shusterman's next value is style, which RuPaul's calls uniqueness. These are equivalent, with the idea being that one is self-aware in holding an individual and specific viewpoint, which is then deployed in forms appropriate to the immediate context for an audience to appreciate. Style or uniqueness is unlikely to be copied by others either because of its fundamental inventiveness and outside-the-box thinking that no other queens could have anticipated or because it does something rather obviously iconic that most other queens would not be able to effectively pull off or sell to their own audiences for whatever reason. This includes the visual activism of wardrobe choices and any messages the queens wish to convey through fashion, but it also begins to get at the queer cultural centrality of a queen's general attitude.

These matters of temperament are actually the place where *Drag Race* perhaps diverges most interestingly from Shusterman's list of values. His ars erotica can bundle courtesy and care or sensitivity to the feelings of others into a total package of empathy that hinges on the value of self-mastery. Self-mastery involves awareness and then control or moderation of oneself to create the conditions of possibility for being considerate toward others. *Drag Race* usually declares one of the non-winners to be Miss Congeniality at the end of the season, emphasizing

that courtesy and care for others are indeed part of drag family values.

But RuPaul's understanding of self-mastery is a departure from the way this value is understood by the ancients, who largely judged self-mastery through the evidence of moderated actions. If you're not upsetting the apple carts of interpersonal communication or social contract, you've got self-mastery. But drag is usually excited to upset these apple carts. RuPaul does not encourage queens to exercise moderation as part of the mission of drag is to create space for maximalist free expression. For a queen to fail at self-mastery on RuPaul's terms, her actions must be stiff or frozen due to a lack of self-confidence. RuPaul refers to this as the inner saboteur, as one of our unhealthy and unhelpful internal guiding voices that needs to be overcome before we can truly love ourselves for who we are.

More to the point, RuPaul's explicit and constant reference to the value of nerve is set against the values of courtesy and care. Courtesy and care are earned in the world of *Drag Race*, not freely given from the start. Nerve is about boldness and bravery. This value necessarily stems from the fact that gay men and trans women have always been a globally marginalized group. It is bold to stand up for one's rights, it is brave to come out of the closet because it can still get you killed or fired or ostracized by mainstream society. A drag queen must develop nerve simply in order to draw breath and move about in the world, and to compete on an internationally beloved show like *Drag Race* with all the social media attention and financial pressures it brings certainly does take nerve.

This nerve often comes at the expense of other queens in the competition. Another catchphrase on the show is "this isn't RuPaul's best friends' race," meaning that at the end of the season there is only one official winner and sometimes the competitors will need to operate strategically against other queens who they may have long admired or have been friends with in real life outside the show. And most of all, nerve is on display through the library challenge, which is based on the fundamental drag queening practice known as reading or throwing shade. Queens read each other by passing amusing insults back and forth as a way of lightly hazing and then bonding with each other, to make fun of their own collective and common problems as well as to keep their insult skills sharp in case they are needed for deployment against harassment on the street. When a queen reads someone for filth, the objective of this most extreme form is to make the target feel like trash and utterly denigrate them to get them to shut up.

If reads can be said to fit into the value of courtesy and care, it is when a read takes the form of homage, as when a young queen must acknowledge a veteran queen's trademark moves or legendary status in the community to establish the basis of the joke. When a veteran queen reads a younger queen, she will usually do so with a professional or at least mothering tone, offering the joke as a way of genuinely workshopping with the younger queen and helping her to spot areas in her work that need improvement if she is going to grow up to be a truly great performer. Part of the beauty and relief of reading is that it is explicit and direct, whether the tone is serious and professional or campy and hilarious. Queens can scream out a read if they're in fighting mode or simply offer it as part of general conversation while everyone is backstage before or after a show, whereas shade is the type of trash talk that is whispered.

A queen who shades is casting a chilly vibe toward another queen, but in a manner that is indirect. The shady queen might not laugh when the targeted queen makes a joke, to indicate that the target isn't succeeding at being funny or isn't worthy of the shady queen's attention. A shady queen might complain about something general to no one in particular in the room, but in a way that everyone in the room knows there is only one queen who exemplifies the complaint. In this case, the targeted queen might ask, "is that a read?" This partly combats shade

with shade, insinuating that the original insult was so weak as to be barely perceivable as an insult. But it also often results in escalation of a situation because the targeted queen is asking for more direct criticism and possibly implying that the shady queen lacked the nerve to dish up a read because she wouldn't be able to withstand any reply. A shady queen is often a lonely queen or one with a strong inner saboteur, criticized for not having enough nerve, but she may nevertheless be commended for her talent in flying just under the radar of proper insult.

Talent is the fourth and final category of value for RuPaul and it is directly comparable with Shusterman's values of skill and intelligence. Some queens make their own wardrobe. Other queens can sing and dance. Some are good at impersonation or lip syncing. Others are good at reading or stand-up comedy. Every season of *Drag Race* offers about two dozen mini and maxi challenges to assess each of these skills in turn, and seldom has any queen swept a majority of challenges. An outlier here is BenDeLaCreme, sometimes referred to as BenDeLaChrist because she won 5 out of 6 maxi challenges in a row and then shockingly eliminated herself instead of another queen when she was given the opportunity. This decision faced mixed reactions as she consistently delivered talent that was extraordinary, yet her intelligence seemed to be lacking with such a strategy. Its valuation of uniqueness and nerve are clearer cut.

This was the second time DeLa competed for RuPaul, after she won Miss Congeniality on an earlier season. None of these queens exist in the vacuum of a single season of the show. They have often had long careers on stage before they appear on the show, and certainly all of them have many new opportunities and fandoms once they graduate. This would be a locus for examining Shusterman's value of harmony, which RuPaul would characterize instead as legacy. Both are talking about a unity within variety, a peaceability found within oneself and in relations with fellow citizens. To a limited extent, the competitive nature of *Drag Race* is fundamentally not conducive to harmony with other people.

That RuPaul chose this format to deliver the values of drag shows how his experience of the global fight for LGBTQ+ equality and his faith in market-based resolutions for this fight presume a high degree of hostile cacophony with which queens must engage if they are to survive and infiltrate or assimilate into mainstream society. This point is not made as a critique of RuPaul's clearly neoliberal viewpoint, but rather simply to label him as a pragmatist whose ends may justify his means. His interest in building a legacy that achieves long-term harmony between queers and the rest of the planet overrides any short-term interest he has in choosing a more harmonious television show format where queens don't need to fight each other. RuPaul's legacy rests on whether he has succeeded in proliferating the general aesthetic principles that govern the erotic art of drag queening, so we now turn to the practical branch of analysis in somaesthetics to examine the impact of *Drag Race* upon the world.

#### 4. Now available on iTunes

Robin James has theorized extensively about how white supremacist patriarchy has become multi-racial, how the system has needed to become more flexible in order to move from Fordist capitalism to deregulation capitalism. This means that RuPaul will be embraced by the system for as long as his work aligns with the discipline of capitalism itself, where otherwise—as in the first twenty years of his career—he could be held off at the margins because he is Black and an empowered queen. At first glance, it seems like RuPaul's "gay agenda" should explode capitalist ideology as it deconstructs naturalist gender binarism. Indeed, this is still the main objection political and religious conservatives lob at *Drag Race*. But RuPaul responds to this with a simple



catchphrase, “Unless they’re paying your bills, pay them bitches no mind.”

His wild marketplace success proves this more crucial point: RuPaul has developed the reflective and corporeal practices of drag queening into a branch of somatic self-improvement and styled himself into a highly profitable new age “guRU” offering the somaesthetic as a tool for resiliency. The story of RuPaul is that he overcame social prejudice and discrimination to be successful and happy, that he is essentially resilient. Capitalism loves this narrative of resiliency because if one individual can overcome hardship then any individual can, and this denies any need to fundamentally change an oppressive system by making it seem instead as though some individuals are merely too melancholy to pull themselves up by their bootstraps like RuPaul did. Marginalization starts to look like the result of individual poor choices instead of an inherent injustice of the marketplace.

These considerations are the most prominent terrain for contemporary theorization of drag culture. Perhaps *Drag Race* is changing individual lives while reifying the assumptions that materially ruin those lives in the first place. Whether his methods will ultimately rack up more points for or against liberation of the LGBTQ+ community, and whether there is any genuinely solvent alternative to his methods remains to be seen. The extent to which RuPaul himself is aware of this dilemma, and whether he feels resourced or trapped by it, also remains to be seen. His campy catchphrase, “now available on iTunes” amusingly applied to a variety of things not available on iTunes, does indicate he has some appreciation for these critiques. Nevertheless, RuPaul makes an unironic truckload of real money off things he puts up for sale on iTunes.

Practically speaking, there are three avenues by which RuPaul has been able to proliferate drag values as a form of somatic self-improvement. That is, the foundational text of the television series *Drag Race* is broken up and broadly disseminated into mainstream culture in three modes: social media conversation, drag queening merchandise, and live events that combine fandoms with productization. Let’s briefly examine how each of these three modes offers corporeal methods of creative care and fashioning of the self.

First, there is a vast network of groups online that extend discussion of the television show and all its component parts. Those component parts include RuPaul’s personas as in-drag judge and out-of-drag host, the permanent panel of experts like Michelle Visage and Ross Matthews, the rotating cast of celebrity guests, all the competitors both in and out of drag, the actual competition challenges, and the brands who sponsor the show through prizes or provision of the material resources needed to execute the challenges. These components require a specialized vocabulary that has already often been in evidence during this essay. The massive community of people on the internet who are talking about *Drag Race* are thus given platforms upon which to become practitioners of drag through the extensive use of drag’s unique language. The show also provides examples or demonstrations of how drag tools like make-up and fashion are best used, and then the fans practice using it on the internet by sharing their own ways of achieving similarly stunning looks. This then seeps out into mainstream culture, such that you can find people using catchphrases like “slay, queen” or tongue popping without having any understanding of the drag-related etymology but nevertheless circulating the drag-related values.

Second, for drag queening to be a career it must pay the bills, and so even the winner of the show each season must be able to sustain the monetization of her drag once the prize money has been spent. The most obvious money to be paid is for live gigs, but that’s a lot of work when there are so many passive revenue streams to set up. Just like rock stars, touring drag queens mostly have music albums and tour t-shirts for sale. Many queens also set up accounts on Patreon, Cameo or Only Fans to provide exclusive and customizable content like a birthday greeting

video for a superfan. Some queens just slap their logo on everything from coffee mugs to throw blankets to stickers to notebooks and wait for the cash to roll in. A handful of queens launch a line of cosmetics or a fragrance. All these products contribute to the circulation of drag values and most of them are applied directly to the body of the fan.

And third, there are the live events. Drag queening is a performance art that of course necessitates a stage and an audience. That stage is commonly assumed to be at a gay bar late at night with a ten-dollar cover charge or possibly at a weekend brunch with a twenty-dollar ticket. But more often now, there are fifty-dollar tickets to a full two-hour variety or cabaret style show, with some of the most experienced and beloved queens like Sasha Velour raking in these ticket prices for solo performances. RuPaul himself has built an entire touring company for the *RuPaul's Drag Race Werq the World* show so that the top queens from the previous season's competition are immediately funneled into a year of tour work. He has also launched a *RuPaul's Drag Race Live* residency for top queens that runs five shows per week at The Flamingo in Las Vegas. Neither of these shows has any age restriction, so again we have the strong possibility of disseminating drag values even in cases where the audience is a six-year-old who has no idea what a drag queen is.

But the most impressive live event by far is DragCon, whose mission is to celebrate “the art of drag, queer culture and self-expression for all.” The annual expo event began in Los Angeles in 2015, then it was followed by the launch of annual events for New York City in 2017 and for London in 2020. DragCon contains plenty of academic panels, all kinds of meet-and-greet opportunities, dozens of live performances and endless rows of merchandise for sale. These two-day spectacles are full of artistry and activism. In 2016, the 200 vendors at DragCon LA raked in \$2.3 million. In 2018, the two US DragCons topped 100,000 visitors and made over \$8 million. RuPaul himself usually gives the keynote speech at these events and the theme is always related to self-love. DragCon has been compared to the Burning Man festival for its similarly radical and inclusive support for self-expression. Demographic studies of DragCon attendees reveal that its audience is only 40% male and 60% queer, evidence that RuPaul's values are circulating in mainstream society particularly by appealing to straight women.

## 5. Category is...Futurism

The survey of RuPaul provided by this essay is not even remotely exhaustive or comprehensive of his total body of work. To do a close reading of all of it and produce the Encyclopedia RUtannica would take a lifetime. Even if we were to accomplish that, drag queening is just the tip of the iceberg. It is absolutely the most obvious and low-hanging fruit for injecting queerness into somaesthetics. The study of drag queens should lead us to the study of drag kings. The study of drag as ars erotica should lead us to the study of cabaret, burlesque and stripping that points toward strong overlap between the fields of somaesthetics and performance studies.

This injection of queerness is itself only one of the injections needed. Differently abled bodies have also been held off at the margins. Show me a cyborg somaesthetics of assistive technologies, deaf somaesthetics, blind somaesthetics. Old and aging bodies have also been held off at the margins. Show me a decaying somaesthetics of chronic pain management, mobility somaesthetics, a somaesthetics grappling with memory loss. Neurodivergent bodies have also been held off at the margins. Show me an autistic somaesthetics, somaesthetics for highly sensitive people, somaesthetics for those with PTSD or ADHD or OCD.

All these types of bodies have always existed. Yet they are largely invisible in ancient ars

erotica, so if that's where somaesthetic study were to end, it ends with the increasingly narrow category of heterosexuals who are youthful and able-bodied. It's clear from Shusterman's pioneering work in this field overall that he hopes it will turn into a properly inclusive discipline capable of supporting wildly diverse kinds of practitioners. His newest book contributes a beautifully wide historical background to that project, and I hope this essay has provided some usefully modern updates that begin to make visible a few of the truly gorgeous ways queers have practiced the art of living our best lives.

## References

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