

Drag and Fashion

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In her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,”¹ Susan Sontag discusses the notion and concept of *camp* – a sensuality extravagant, big-time, funny, kitschy, honest, failed, sincere, love-made. This text is not about Susan Sontag or the notion of *camp*, but it cannot open up without mentioning it. The current text is about drag art and fashion, and where they intersect in many cases is the heart of the outright *camp*.

Camp is a concept applicable mostly in art, but it extends beyond it. In her notes, Sontag repeatedly mentions the enormous influence that queer people have had on the creation not only of the term *camp* and the art that can fall into this category, but also the very essence and feeling of *camp*. Without LGBTI+ people, it would not exist. Sontag talks about androgyny and refuses the seriousness of gender roles imposed on us by society. She mentions the overexposed femininity and masculinity and the exaggerated attempts that we be fully and completely the embodiment of these archetypes. Through the prism of *camp*, everything is in quotation marks - and if the table is a “table,” then the woman also becomes a “woman.”

A woman in quotation marks - for many drag artists, this is what they themselves embody when they are sprinkled with brocade and put the long nails, huge breasts and the even bigger eyelashes on.

The woman – or, an exaggerated, forcefully bright and almost animated version of her.

¹ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 1964): 515–530; the Bulgarian translation was published in 2008.

The woman in quotation marks is, however, often the starting point of most pinnacles in fashion. The woman with almost-drawn proportions; the woman who does not feel the pain of the ungodly high heels; the one whose daily life allows it for her to wear the clothes of *Comme des garçons*. Designers who try to be accessible to the average woman rarely find themselves in the spotlight (an example for one of the few famous designers who treats women with care is Gianni Versace – it is precisely his true love for his models, luxury and good life that is the reason for his worldwide success).

In the world of fashion, the expression “art requires sacrifice” is in full force, and although the main consumers of fashion design’s harvest are women, sacrifices are often suffered by them – either because of their comfort being taken away, or because of the blows to their self-esteem brought by the unattainable standards of beauty to which fashion contributes.

Fashion does not exist in a vacuum, but reflects or opposes the basic social, political, and economic preconditions in which it develops: patriarchal society, racism and capitalism leave a clear imprint on clothing design and the concept of taste/style – as they do on everything else under the sun in our times. Our perceptions of what is kitsch,² of what is stylish and what reveals a lack of taste are often elitist and stem from our prejudices about certain sections of society.

For many people, clothes, make-up, hair, and the overall way they let the world see them are a way of expressing themselves. Our style and appearance can be not only art and a kind of creativity, but also a form of communication with others. Historically, it was people of color, queers and women who were the founders of fashion as we know it today. All its currents and dimensions have as their origin those who, deprived of access to more traditional methods, have sought new and different canvases on which to create and through which to

² Jo Weldon, “Who Decides What’s Tacky Anyway?: On Bad Taste and Leopard Print in the 1970s,” *Literary Hub* (August 2, 2018), <https://lithub.com/who-decides-whats-tacky-anyway>.

express what cannot or should not be said in words. Modern fashion continues to evolve because of the contributions, ideas, and skills of those same marginalized groups of people, although their ideas are quickly assimilated and capitalized by the fashion industry and the more privileged ones there. In recent years, we have witnessed numerous cases of plagiarism by extremely popular brands with a lot of capital at the expense of independent artists who have either recently entered the industry or prefer to work in a sustainable way and refuse to become part of fast fashion.³

Queer culture and fashion are inextricably linked. They draw from each other and would be orphaned without each other. The trans community and drag culture in particular (both of which were in the past considered a single entity) usually give rise to all new trends in fashion design, makeup, hair. The designers, make-up artists, hairdressers and stylists behind the most discussed fashion looks in the media are usually queer people.

On the other hand, drag artists are often among the greatest connoisseurs of fashion. Clothes may not make the person, but (to some extent) make the drag artist. Drag performances are often visual spectacles and the appearance of those artists is of paramount importance to this type of performance art. If you have watched even one episode of RuPaul's Drag Race or been to a show on the local drag scene, you know that most drag artists spend hours on end to prepare their make-up before each show so that they achieve their desired look, and even when they are not on TV or have no audience in front of them, they invest a lot of money in clothes, make-up and wigs and often spend a lot of their free time conceptualizing and embodying their persona. With the popularization of drag in the last couple of decades and its entry into the mainstream world, we increasingly see drag artists who can afford designer clothing and highly sophisticated looks. Not once have we witnessed

³ "Does Dolls Kill Steal Designs?," *Toreador Magazine* (2021), <http://toreadormagazine.com/the-world/model/does-dolls-kill-steal-designs>; Eliza Huber, "Young Designers Get Ripped Off All The Time. Is There Any Way To Stop It?," *Refinery 29* (May 3, 2021), <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/05/10387892/fashion-copying-independent-designers-plagiarism-law>.

an even closer symbiosis between designers and drag artists in fashion shows, when drag artists become models for new collections.

The interest of this text is focused on the Bulgarian context of the 1990s and the early 2000s of the twentieth century, when the nightclubs of the time glamorized the country as these tiny oases of drag and gave a platform to the performances included in the program of Tamara Night Show. Places like Caligula, Spartacus, Oscar Wilde, Alexander all became spaces filled with fun and love for those who are otherwise pushed to the edges of society. With the popularization of clubs and the performances that became the reality on their stages, drag queens and the designers who were dressing them quickly became a beloved and significant part of the Bulgarian LGBTI+ community.

We will hear of the artists who were involved in the flourishing night and stage life at the time. From the stage clothing designers of the drag queens of the 1990s and the judges in the drag beauty contests, through the creators of costumes for the Tamara Night Show, to some of the designers who dressed cult artists like Ursula. In what follows we present an interview with designer Svetla Dimitrova and her brand Aries Unicat.