CROSS GENDER/CROSS GENRE

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I would like to say a few words about the aesthetics of the period from the mid-60s to the mid-70s, in regard to images of gender confusion. This period, which, for want of a better term, I will call "Psychedelic," is rife with such images. I will attempt to explain why I believe this is so, and to describe some of the various operative trajectories.

I think it's best to begin by explaining where I come from and why all this has some meaning for me. Having been born in 1954, I am part of the last of the 60s generation. I was 14 years old in 1968, old enough to feel part of the general social turmoil, and I was the last of the generation to still be eligible for the draft in the Vietnam War. I was, in essence, really too young to be a Hippie, but my worldview was very much a by-product of that movement of resistance. The 60s were a period of immense social change and unrest in America. As a result of this, I had nothing in common with my older siblings, eight years my senior. They were post-War; I was mediated, I was part of the TV generation, I was Pop. I didn't feel part of my family, I didn't feel part of my country; I had no sense of history: the world seemed to me a media facade, a fiction, and a pack of lies. This, I believe, is what has come to be known as the postmodern condition. This is a form of alienation quite different from post-War Existentialism, because it lacks any historical footing. There is no notion of a truth that has been lost, there is simply nothing.

Nevertheless, I was enough a part of the 60s trajectory to involve myself, at least as a spectator, in radical politics. The local version, in the city I grew up in (Detroit, Michigan) was the White Panther Party, supposedly a white spin-off of the revolutionary Black Panther Party. In reality, they were more a branch of the Yippies: a primarily white, hedonist, anarchist group. The politics of this group consisted primarily of "acting out"—making one's life into a kind of radical street theatre. The purpose of this exercise was to make one unfit to function in normal society, and

thus to prevent one from participating in and prolonging it. As the logic went, if you consumed enough drugs you simply could not work in the military-industrial complex. The White Panthers were centered in Ann Arbor, a college town, and my interest in their activities led me to related avant-garde music, theatre, film, and political events. This is what caused me to become an artist, which is quite remarkable, since I come from a working-class background and had little or no exposure to the arts as a child.

This psychedelic culture completely changed my worldview. When I first heard psychedelic music it was as if I had discovered myself. I had never much cared for music before I heard bands like the MC5, the Stooges, the Mothers of Invention, and Jimi Hendrix. The fractured nature of this music made sense to me; it mirrored the nature of the world, as I understood it, and my psyche. Of course, as every educated person knows, this was all old hat as far as modernism goes. I mean, Cubism was invented at the turn of the century, but we are talking mass culture here, not academia. What is interesting about this particular period was that the twentieth-century avant-garde was picked up and inserted into popular culture, under the guise of radical youth culture. In one swoop, Surrealism became teenybopper culture. This was possible because the artists involved in this period of crossover still considered themselves avant-gardists; this was a notion that was still conceivable at this point. Psychedelic music was "progressive" music; it was moving forward, formally, in concert with some notion of progressive social change. This facade quickly fell apart, even at its beginnings, which is evident in the irony of the Camp aesthetic, but it was still operable. There are several strains within this general progressive aesthetic, and almost all of them have some link to the notion of the feminine.

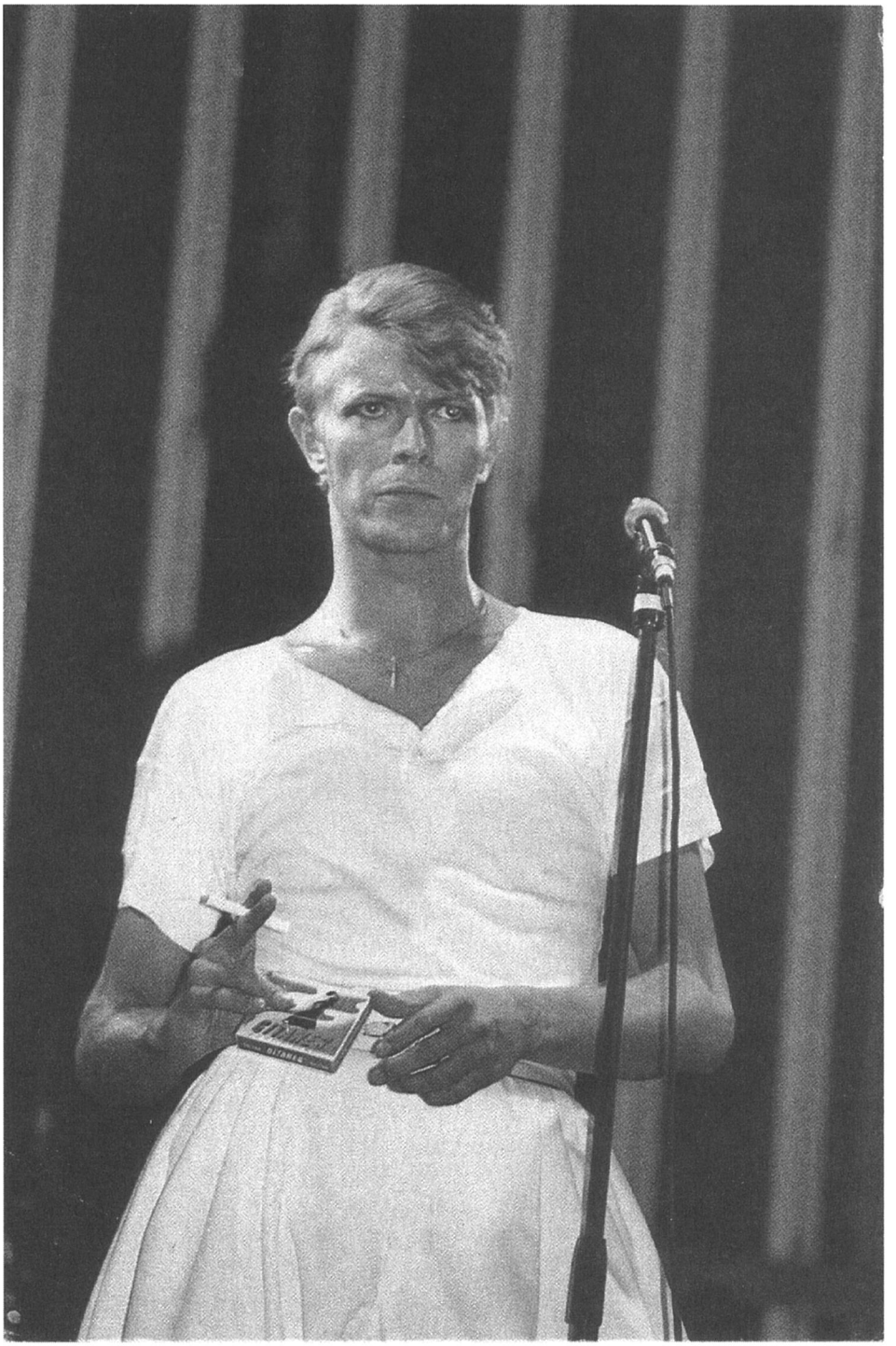
The popular appeal of 60s radical youth culture in America was very much a byproduct of the anti-Vietnam War movement. Complacent white youths, for the first time, found interest in politics via the threat of conscription into military service. The model for social protest at this moment was the Black Civil Rights Movement. The pacifist tendencies of Martin Luther King worked well with an anti-war message. It was this coincidental meeting of these two very different constituencies that provoked, I believe, a full-scale empathic connection in white youth for "otherness" in general. But the greatest Other was woman. If America's problem was that it was militaristic, patriarchal, and male, then the antidote would be the embrace of the prototypically feminine. Radical culture of this period is dominated by displays of femininity as a sign of resistance—femininity, and male homosexuality as well, for the two are conflated in the popular mind. If the female is Other, then the homosexual is doubly Other since he is "unnatural." I could make the claim that the Vietnam War itself promoted this posture, since one way to escape the draft was to play gay. Perhaps this is the root of the next ten years of popular homosexual posturing that finds its apex in Glam Rock.

Hippie and Flower Child culture are the "natural" versions of this dyad of the feminine and the homosexual, and is its unnatural cousin. They share many surface

similarities yet they are aesthetically opposed, despite the fact that they are both generally "progressive" and "leftist." Jack Smith is a good person to talk through these issues with. Smith is the godfather of the New York 60s avant garde theatre and film scene. He was a major influence on a diverse set of New York trends, amazingly influencing both the Minimalist and Maximalist camps. Warhol's films and the theatre of Robert Wilson would almost be inconceivable without him. Yet what he is most famous for is making the first avant-garde transvestite film, Flaming Creatures, a kind of structuralist parody of Hollywood Orientalist films of the 40s. Smith revels in the phoniness of these films. This embrace of phoniness is the essence, and politic, of the Camp aesthetic. This is an aesthetic that is, itself, suspect, for you are never sure whether its joys are real or ironic. Camp is an arcane aesthetic. Hippie culture, similarly, embraced non-Western cultures, mixing them together in a general psychedelic stew, just as Smith did. But the Hippie aesthetic has a stake in truth; truth is to be found in the Other, which is our savior. There is no room for irony in this position. Yet this essentialist position is itself suspect, for the Other in Hippie culture is generally presented through clichés of the exotic. Thus, Hippie aesthetics now seem kitsch, even if that was not the intention. Hippie has become Camp by default.

The pastiche aesthetic is the primary signifier of psychedelic culture. It is one that promotes confusion, while at the same time postulating equality; all parts in chaos are equal. This stance could be understood as either very democratic or, on the other hand, nihilistic. I could describe the difference as being one of a "utopian" versus a "black" version of Camp. The Cockettes and the films of Steven Arnold are a good place to start relative to a discussion of this difference. The Cockettes were a San Francisco-based theatre troupe who produced a kind of campy and parodistic transvestite theatre. But unlike traditional transvestite shows, they reveled in the exhibition of the incomplete pose. Though they wore extravagant costumes that mimicked Hollywood notions of glamor, this was done in a purposely poor, half-accomplished, way. The "queens" often had beards—a definite "no no" in transvestite acts where "passing" as a woman is the sign of quality. The cast members of the Cockettes included women as well as men, yet they did not often cross dress as men. The general aesthetic of the group seemed to be an attempt at a redefinition of glamor, an "alien" glamor if you will, but one still rooted in a feminine pose. This is the group's debt to Hippie culture. They represent a true crossover between Hippie communalism and a later, more overtly defined, "queer" aesthetic.

In John Waters's films, by way of comparison, there is no vestige of Hippie left. Yet there is a similar play with gender slippage in the figure of the grotesque "drag queen" Divine, who could never be mistaken for a woman. "Queerness" is celebrated for its abject nature in American society. There is no search for an outside aesthetic, because "you," the supposedly empathic film viewer, already represent the Other. The negative connotations of being "artistic," that is, pathological, are presented in Waters's films in a completely unsublimated way. These are low comedies with no ascendant intentions and no redeeming social value: they are post-avant-garde and proto-punk.



David Bowie in X-CAPEES, a San Francisco Punk Photo Documentary, 1981.
Photo: Courtesy *f* Stop fitzgerald.

The Mothers of Invention have an abject aesthetic similar in some ways to that of Waters, yet they are more traditionally avant-garde. The Mothers were a rock band formed by white R&B musician Frank Zappa in the mid-60s. Zappa, under the influence of new music composer Edgard Varèse, combined dissonance with his R&B roots. The music of this band exemplifies the psychedelic aesthetic in its use of pastiche structures, combining elements of pop, rock, free jazz, new music, electronic music, and comedy. The effect is akin to a live performance of a tape collage work by John Cage. They were also overtly theatrical, adopting the transgressive stage approaches utilized in such modernist, post-Brechtian, theatrical forms as the Happening. Audience baiting and performative discontinuity are examples of their trangressive stage manner. Their visual aesthetic was neo-Dada, an abject junk aesthetic of the ugly. The Mothers were part of a larger community of musicians and artists in the Los Angeles area, centered primarily around Zappa, called the "Freak Scene," which openly positioned itself in contrast to the Hippie aesthetic of the natural. This scene included the avant-rock groups Captain Beefheart, Alice Cooper, and the GTOs—an all female band composed of groupies. All of these acts employed drag elements from time to time.

As in the Cockettes, the Mothers's version of drag was an incomplete version. But there are differences. The Cockettes, despite the ridiculous nature of their image, have a playful and positive quality that is absent in the Mothers. The Mothers's use of drag has more in common with the traditional comedic adoption of female garb by the male, and in that sense it is an abject usage. In Western culture, men who dress in female clothes are considered funny, while the opposite is generally not the case. A woman dressed in male clothes has little comedic value. The sexism at the root of this difference is obvious, for why else should the adoption of feminine characteristics by a man be abject. This is not to say that the Mothers were not a politically conscious band: the opposite is the case—they were one of the most politically conscious musical groups of the period. But they were, in a sense, a realist band that ridiculed the romantic utopianism and exoticism of Hippie psychedelia. Their satiric ugliness was meant to be a distorted mirroring of the values of dominant culture.

Alice Cooper is somewhat similar, but more Pop—that is, the aesthetic is more flat; they are less open in their intentions. Their early records, like Zappa's, are a mixture of rock-and-roll and noise elements influenced by avant-garde music. There is a similar anti-Hippie reveling in the aesthetics of the ugly—in their case this is a mix of transvestism and cheap horror film theatrics. This "decadence," this mixture of horrific and homosexual signification, was designed for a much more general audience than Zappa's music was. Like John Waters, they were unapologetic in their embrace of the low. It could be said that they were the first truly popular Camp band, with two separate audiences. Alice Cooper was a truly successful pop band, with a string of top ten hits which included ironic saccharine ballads that some of their audience recognized as parodies, and which others embraced as truly emotional. Similarly, some of their audience empathized with their freakish "decadent" personas, while others perceived these roles as, simply, comedic. In this

sense, because of their use of Camp strategies, Alice Cooper could be said to have "outed" the spectacular aspects of pop music.

Pop music in America has long embraced the "glamorous," a.k.a. the homosexual, in closeted terms. Liberace's Campy stage act was never openly discussed relative to his homosexuality. He himself prevented such discussions. Liberace won a lawsuit against a British gossip columnist who only intimated that he was a homosexual. This trajectory of sublimation continues in rock-and-roll, which is ironic considering the "sexual" nature of it as a musical form. Elvis was repellant at first to his primarily country music audience because of his use of makeup, but as he became more and more of a popular figure this aspect of his stage act became invisible—naturalized. The so-called British Invasion bands of the mid-60s, like the Rolling Stones, picked up on this "glamorous" posturing, filtering it through English visual tropes of foppish "decadence." Mick Jagger's stage movements were at once "black" and "gay," which made him doubly evil, and sexualized, in the eyes of his teenybopper fans. This posturing signals a major change in the pop arena, for the open play with "evil" is something that Elvis, in his desire to be a mainstream pop star, would never have entertained. It was only within the framework of the 60s counterculture that such a "transgressive" aesthetic could find acceptance as "pop" music.

From Jagger on, there are a string of figures who up the ante on this mix of "decadence" and danger. The two most important are probably Jim Morrison of the Doors, and Iggy Pop of the Stooges. Morrison is said to have lifted his leather-boy look from the rough trade posturings of the Warhol scene, and his confrontational stage act from the methods of the Living Theatre. Iggy Pop's vile and self-destructive stage persona became the model for the later Punk Rock performers of the 70s. Much of these aesthetics of "homosexual evil," in American culture at least, can be traced back to the work of filmmaker Kenneth Anger. Anger's book *Hollywood Babylon*, which focuses on the dark and degraded sub-history of Hollywood glamor, is the bible of Camp. And his films detailing various American subcultures, seen through a homosexual gaze, set the standard for much Pop Art following in the Warholian tradition. It is through Kenneth Anger that the leather-clad 1950s juvenile delinquent, and his emotion-laden songs, finds his way into the Camp pantheon, enters the Velvet Underground, and rests finally in the leather uniform of Punk. It is through him that the macho posturings of the biker thug become the sign of the alienated and sensitive artist. Consider Patti Smith's image mix of leather boy and romantic poet. Likewise, it is through Anger, whose interest in subcultural ritual led him to an interest in ritual magic, that Satanism, as another sign of decadence, enters the pop music world—primarily through the Rolling Stones in their psychedelic period when they adopt his look lock-stock-and-barrel.

What becomes of this "outing" of the culturally agreed-upon abject nature of the feminine? As this "transvestational" counterculture trajectory leaves the utopianism of the 60s behind and enters the economically harsher social climate of the 70s, two major trends emerge: feminism and Punk. With all of this feminine posturing going

on, it only makes sense that women artists would finally demand to have a say in it. As I said before, even though there were women in such "transvestite-oriented" groups as the Cockettes or the various versions of the Ridiculous Theater in New York, the outward sign of most of the costuming was gendered feminine. In discussion with some of these women artists, they describe their experience in these theatre companies as being one of self-exploration in terms of their relation to glamor. As part of the general anti-patriarchal thrust of the period, these women were not particularly interested in playing with the adoption of male gender stereotypes. Mary Woronov is the exception here, with her overtly S&M persona as the whip dancer with the Velvet Underground, her "butch" roles in Warhol's films, and her masculine portrayals in John Vaccaro's productions.

But more often, these women were more concerned with their own relationship to feminine stereotypes. The GTOs, for example, invented a look that was a trash version of the female Hollywood stars of the 20s and 30s. Like the Warhol "Star System," this was meant to be a retooling, a redefinition of that beauty, yet still tied to it through the inversions of Camp. Various women artists in the early 70s began to play with shifting roles and identities in relation to issues of glamor and gender. Eleanor Antin did a work, *Representational Painting*, where she sat in front of a mirror applying makeup, removing it, and applying it again in a constant state of "pictorial" self-definition. She later adopted a series of overtly theatrical personas, including a king, a nurse, and a ballerina. This kind of play reached its zenith in Judy Chicago's feminist workshop programs in the Los Angeles area in the early 70s. Here, women artists collectively explored their relationship to various feminine stereotypes in a much more critical and politically conscious environment than had previously been done. Performances were made utilizing such stereotypes as the cheerleader, bride, waitress, beauty queen, and drag queen, as a way of exploring and doing battle with them.

Concurrent with this movement was the rise of Glam Rock. I would say, at least in America, that Alice Cooper is the transitional figure here. He is the figure who leaves psychedelia behind and fully embraces the Pop framework—trying to balance irony and popular appeal. Glam Rock was a music that fully understood the commercial music world and accepted it as an arena of facade and emptiness. It used the image of the drag queen as a sign of this status. David Bowie is the great example here. He adopts and throws away personas as the seasons change, always reinventing himself for the market. In this sense, he is a mirror of our culture of planned obsolescence. The argument has been put forth that, in relation to consumer culture, the constantly changing chameleon persona is empowerment. Madonna's practice has been discussed this way in certain feminist contexts, though I personally have grave misgivings about this reading of her practice, just as I do of Bowie's. She becomes the sign of a spectacular female producer in contrast to the traditional image of the passive female consumer. I might add that this is how the GTOs thought of themselves: as consumers, groupies who became producers, rock stars themselves. The spectacular is tackled head on.

Tab Hunter and Divine in John Waters's *Polyester.*

Charles Ludlam in the title role of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's production of *Camille.*

Punk was the immediate answer to this fixation with spectacular consumer culture; it replaced the spectacular with the pathetic. Punk was the last gasp of avant-gardeism in Pop, played out with the most extreme signs of decadent nihilism. As a symbol of this "end state," the gender signification of the previous avant-garde was reversed: maleness became the general referent. The Punk uniform is the macho rough trade look of Kenneth Anger's Camp leather boy, for men and women alike. Androgyny remains a factor here. Whether this "unisex" approach was a vestige of some connection to the utopianism of the feminine androgyny of the psychedelic period, or is simply consistent with the capitalist cult of youth culture, is open to argument. But that is another story.

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