Paideuma 51:111–131 (2005)

THE GREAT DRAG QUEEN HYPE
Thoughts on cultural globalisation and autochthony*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1993 the Afro-American drag queen RuPaul, who had arrived in New York ten years earlier, where she first lived with other homeless drag queens in a park and acted in underground gay porn movies (RuPaul 1995:82, 93), gained international success as a singer, performer and model when his or her video "Supermodel of the world" was shown on MTV. But RuPaul was only the most famous of a legion of New York drag queens who became the focus of international media hype at that time, after being 'underdogs' for decades. Only a few years later, a new phenomenon was observed in urban centres around the world. In the capitals and big cities of many countries in Europe, Asia and South America, and even in Polynesia, drag queens came to prominence both as members of emerging subcultures and as single performers.[1] The international drag queen hype soon became a worldwide drag queen hype. Surfing on top of the vogue for this new hype and performing the "Supermodel of the world" RuPaul gained the status of a worldwide 'drag icon'.

This conflation raises questions concerning cultural globalisation – the influences of 'the viral forces of a global consumer and media culture' (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997:15) – in general and the apparent diffusion of a specific western subculture in particular, questions that are also discussed under the heading of 'the internationalisation of gay identities' (e.g. Altmann 1996). As media coverage usually portrayed drag queens as performing transvestites, the rich diversity of gender identities and performativities[2] in this urban subculture was reduced to stereotypes and the drag queens' homosexuality denied. Thus, intercultural comparison leads to questions not only about subcultural autochthony, but also about the identities of drag queens. In the dis-

* I am very grateful to my friends and colleagues Birgit Uenze, Thomas G. Kirsch, Flawless Sabrina, Curtis B. Carmen, Rogéria and Chou-Chou de Briquette for their support and discussions. Furthermore, I thank all my informants in New York, Rio de Janeiro and Berlin for welcoming me so heartily. I would also like to acknowledge the NaFöG-Foundation of the Free University Berlin for financing my fieldwork in Berlin and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for financing my fieldwork in New York.

1 See among others Mageo (1996), Brubach and O'Brien (1999), and Balzer (2001).

2 Gender performativity is a very complex concept developed by gender theorist Judith Butler, which emphasizes the performative character of 'doing gender', a sociological perspective that views gender as a cultural practice (e.g. Kessler and McKenna 1978) within the context of power and discourse in the so-called 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990, 1993). The latter is also discussed as heteronormativity (cf. Haller 2001).

cussion of 'the global and the local', the western media are perceived as one of 'the leading agents' of cultural globalisation (cf. e.g. Beynon and Dunkerley 2000:13), some scholars arguing that 'identity has global, national, regional and local components as well as the specificities of gender, race, class and sexuality' (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997:12).

The above questions can be addressed by comparing the evolution of the drag queen subcultures of the mid-1990s in Berlin and Rio de Janeiro, which took place in comparable contexts but led to different forms, with those that emerged in New York, where the story of the drag queens began in the 1960s. All three cities are important migration centres for transgender people from other cities and the countrysides in these societies, thus blossoming vivid and well-established urban transgender subcultures.[3] Based on ethnographic fieldwork among transgender subcultures in New York, Rio de Janeiro and Berlin, the present article compares the current drag queen subcultures in New York with those in Rio de Janeiro and Berlin, retracing some of their cross-cultural influences and thus discussing the questions mentioned above.[4] Elsewhere I have demonstrated the importance of emphasizing the socio-historical and subcultural contexts of urban transgender cultures in order to understand their self-images, gender performativities and culture (Balzer 2004:69). To discuss questions of cultural globalisation and autochthony in the case of these selected drag queen cultures, it seems to me vital to reflect these contexts too. The title "The great drag queen hype" echoes "The great rock'n'roll swindle", the title of a 'documentary' about the rise and fall of the British punk rock band, the Sex Pistols. From the perspective of ten years' distance, I shall consider whether the "The great drag queen hype" was indeed an important factor in the globalisation of subcultures, a bubble that burst like the new economy bubble some years ago, or whether it was really just one gigantic swindle.

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3 Here and in the following, I use the term 'transgender' as an umbrella term, including a wide spectrum of gender identities both inside and outside the male-female-dichotomy. For further discussion of this multidimensional term, see, for example, Denny (1998), Valentine (2000), Balzer (2005)

4 The presented data were collected during five seasons of fieldwork amounting to a total of twenty months in Berlin, Rio de Janeiro and New York in the years 2000–2002. The fieldwork was based on multi-local research in each of these three cities, with participant observation concentrating on four areas (street sex work, nightlife and show business, social activism and informants' daily lives). A transgender person myself, and due to friendships in these subcultures I was welcomed very heartily in all places. Thus I was staying in a drag queen's apartment in New York and working as a volunteer for a transgender organisation in Berlin. From the several hundreds of transgender persons I came to know during participant observation and informal talks, I interviewed a total range of about 110 transgender persons. Of these, up to forty persons were defined, or defined themselves, as drag queens. The interviews were semi-standardized interviews with a focus on biographical aspects, self-images and self-organization. The ethnographical data collected in participant observation, interviews and informal talks were supplemented by the analysis of historical documents (video tapes, flyers, underground publications) and current publications (transgender and gay magazines, weekly magazines, tabloid newspapers). For an in-depth description, analysis and reflection of this particular fieldwork as well as an analysis of the difficulties and challenges of ethnographic research in urban transgender subcultures in general see Balzer (2005:18–52).

New York drag queens: from fierce creatures to fabulous superstars

In New York, drag queens started as 'underdogs' in the 1960s, being stigmatised in the majority society as well as in the gay subculture. The anthropologist Esther Newton, who conducted fieldwork among New York's female impersonators in the 1960s, when the term 'drag queen' became known, contrasted female impersonators as 'stage impersonators' with the drag queens as 'street impersonators, who are never off-stage' (1972:8), defining the latter as follows: 'The homosexual term for transvestite is "drag queen". "Queen" is a generic noun for any homosexual man. "Drag" can be used as an adjective or a noun. As a noun it means the clothing of one sex when worn by the other sex [...]' (Newton 1972:3).

Newton added that at that time homosexuals were considered 'perverse', and that as overt and 'professional' homosexuals, drag queens represented the stigma of the gay world (Newton 1972:2–3). The ubiquitous discrimination did not even stop at famous individuals. Flawless Sabrina, one of the first publicly known drag queens, who had been the clandestine organizer of drag queen pageants all over the USA since 1959, was arrested three times in 1968 for being dressed in drag when promoting her award-winning movie "The Queen" in Times Square in New York. The movie was a documentary about her last drag queen pageant in 1967 in New York and it had won an award at the Cannes film festival. As a result, Flawless was invited to take part in national TV talk shows, causing a scandal when she appeared in drag, a scandal which upset not only the straight world, but also the gay world. The fact that Flawless showed up as a drag queen in public was considered anti-social behaviour even among gay artists like Andy Warhol, who had helped finance "The Queen". Flawless recounted:

> I was hardly to belong together with Andy Warhol or any of those stars. I was very much a weed in that garden, because at the end of the day there was still a very high anti-social aspect to what I did. It was not acceptable. Even in the most sophisticated circles, it was frowned upon.[5]

What was frowned upon in her public performance was the presentation of an identity: the drag queen identity. In "The Queen", there is a scene in which Flawless explains the very nature of the drag queen and reveals the stigma that Newton has mentioned: 'I go to this queen and I ask her, "What's your name?" And the queen says "Monique!" And you say "Marvellous! But what was your name before?" And the queen will look you straight in the eyes and say: "There was no before!"' (Simons 1968).

Drag queens were 'professional' gays in being 'out of the closet' right from the start. Like many other drag queens of that time, Flawless experienced continual harassment by the police. '[The] police has been breathing down my necks since 1959', she

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5 Interview with Flawless Sabrina, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 18, 2001, tape-recorded.

recalls of the time before 1969.[6] After the so-called Stonewall riots in 1969, in which drag queens acted as a driving force – a rebellion that later became known as the birth of the modern gay liberation movement – their situation changed:

> At the 1969 Stonewall riots, drag queens were the first to pitch stones and rip up parking meters in a battle against New York police over harassment of gay bar patrons. The riots and the ensuing gay liberation movement smashed preconceived notions of sexuality and behavorial conformity. While countless drag performers from coast to coast were still doing unthreatening impersonations of Judy Garland, a handful of cross-dressers were fighting the system (Hilbert 1995:464).

The Stonewall riots, which occurred in the context of the civil rights movements in late 1960s New York, resulted in two major changes. First, it made a wider public aware of the situation in which homosexuals and drag queens were being forced to live. Secondly, it changed self-perceptions within the subculture: from feeling guilty and apologetic to feelings of self-acceptance and pride. Flawless considers this change, which finally led to the rise of the drag queens and the drag queen media hype, to have resulted from reciprocal processes of acceptance by society and self-acceptance by individuals in the subculture:

> And seeing the gradation going up to the decades accordingly, each time becoming more public and at the same time becoming more acceptable within the drag community and within the subsequent transgender community, becoming more acceptable to itself, as society found it more acceptable, so the people, the individuals found each other and themselves more acceptable.[7]

This change was the essential precondition for the evolution of the later drag queen and transgender subcultures and the drag queens' move into mainstream business in the following decades. During the 1970s, drag queens managed to establish themselves in the various subcultures that were emerging at the time, in glam rock and disco and later in punk rock. While glamorous Holly Woodlawn starred in the 'Studio 54' disco scene, the 'transvestite' punk rocker Wayne County, later known as Jayne County, acted as a fierce revolutionary drag queen in underground theatre productions and on stage in punk music clubs, and International Chrysis, known from "The Queen", performed in the radical drag theatre "The Hot Peaches", as well as in the renowned "Club 82", which attracted busloads of tourists from all over the USA with its 'female impersonation' shows, to name but a few of the newly emerging drag queen stars.[8]

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6 Interview with Flawless Sabrina, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 18, 2001, tape-recorded.

7 Interview with Flawless Sabrina, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 18, 2001, tape-recorded.

8 Simons (1968), Chermayoff, David, and Richardson (1995:117), County (1996:96–97), Fleisher (1996:61). For a detailed description see Balzer (2005:163–178).

Beside this diversity of (gender) performativities and performances, another diversity could already be observed at the beginning of the newly evolving drag queen subculture in New York, namely the diversification of gender identities among the drag queens. This change could be described in current terms as a change from transvestism to transgenderism, from a specific single gender identity to a wide spectrum of varying identities. In the 1970s, International Chrysis, J/Wayne County and many others started taking female hormones and living a gender role different from the one 'given' to them at birth, refusing, however, to follow 'the transsexual way' by opting for a sex-change operation (County 1996:98–99, Senelick 2000:433). Drag queens like Chrysis and County not only brought the street rebellion onto the stage, with their transformed bodies and street speech they also caused a visibility that unmasked the illusion of female impersonation and questioned the clarity of male and female. In her autobiography, Jayne County (1996:139) confirms: 'I am happy in between the sexes; I am comfortable and I actually like the idea: the whole thing of being neither male nor female'.

Among the events of the emerging drag subcultures in the 1980s, there were two that played an especially significant role, not only in community building, but also in achieving eminent success in the mainstream: the drag balls in Harlem, and the 'Wigstock' drag queen festival.

The drag ball tradition of Harlem dates back to pre-WW II times (Kaiser 1997:40). Since the 1970s, a very specific, highly organized and evolved drag culture emerged around the balls. In this drag culture, Afro- and Latin-American drag queens lived in so-called 'houses', that is, in family-substituting institutions with mothers, daughters, sisters etc. The 'houses' started to compete in the drag balls as 'gay street gangs on the dance floor' creating new styles like vogueing. Vogueing, a reference to the poses of the models on the cover of "Vogue", and the Harlem drag culture achieved international fame through TV reporting, Madonna's video "Vogue" on MTV, in which Harlem 'voguers' performed, and the documentary "Paris is burning" in the early 1990s.[9]

In downtown Manhattan, the drag culture of the 1980s was strongly associated with certain clubs. The most important was the Pyramid Club near Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, where drag queens mixed several different styles in their performances while continuing the wild and fierce character of 1970s 'gender fuck' drag (cf. Fleisher 1996:40–41). Punks, drag queens and other 'outrageous' people not only met at night in the bars and clubs, but also stayed together during the daytime in the streets, and especially in Tompkins Square Park. RuPaul, for example, among other young, homeless drag queens, together with punks and others, made Tompkins Square Park their home (RuPaul 1995:82). In 1984, the idea was born to bring the Pyramid Club's drag performances out into the daylight in the Park. And so 'Wigstock', 'the

9 Livingston (1991) and Fleisher (1996:51–52). For a detailed description see Balzer (2005:177–185).

Woodstock without that bad hair', was born. While in 1985 a thousand people attended Wigstock, by the early 1990s it had become an annual festival attracting several tens of thousands and was officially called 'Wigstock Day' by Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger. At the peak of the media hype surrounding New York's drag queens in the mid-1990s, 50 000 people from many countries attended Wigstock, which had become an immense commercial success.[10] Cyra, who came out as a drag queen in the 1980s East Village, explains this success by reminding us of Wigstock's cultural and social context: the capitalist New York: 'I mean one thing is, because you know, you're in New York. It's the capital of reward-based society and they were successful. [...] It was selling. It was popular'.[11]

The most important factor in winning mainstream rewards was the change of style and behaviour within the drag communities. RuPaul (1995:90) called her 'apocalypse drag' in the early 1980s her 'not-yet-ready-for-MTV-look'. Violet, a roommate of Jayne County in the 1970s, recalls another change that went along with the change of style: 'And the whole era of the bitchy drag queen is over. I mean, I was talking to Glamamore the other day, he said when the Boy Bar started in the eighties, that they were the first nice drag queens. They weren't the bitchy drag queens'.[12] Asked about the qualities of these 'nice' drag queens, she explained:

> Drag queens who are just, who show respect to other people, you know, just respectful and have human qualities instead of being bitchy divas or like real people. And they were also getting more acceptance as performers, you know; it wasn't looked down upon so much.[13]

These two factors, the reward-based society context and the changes in style and behaviour by some of the drag queens, later resulted in the enormous success of drag queens in New York's mainstream and the international media hype. They also led to a new perception of the drag queen as 'a profession' as formulated by Michelle, one of the famous 1990s drag queens.[14]

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10 See e.g. www.wigstock.nu/history (November 2004), and, for more details, Balzer (2005:187–190).

11 Interview with Cyra, conducted in English in Flawless Sabrina's apartment in New York, March 8, 2002, tape-recorded. – All informants' names are anonymous with the exception of Flawless Sabrina, Jayne County and Rogéria, who are publicly known through a wealth of interviews, articles, documentaries and autobiographies.

12 Interview with Violet, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 20, 2001, tape-recorded.

13 Interview with Violet, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 20, 2001, tape-recorded.

14 Interview with Michelle, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, March 15, 2002, tape-recorded.

THE GREAT DRAG QUEEN HYPE AND BEYOND

Madonna's and RuPaul's videos, which were shown on MTV, marked the beginning of the international drag queen hype of the 1990s. Deirdre, one of the 'nice' drag queens of the Boy Bar in Downtown and mother of the "House of Ecstasy" in Harlem, describes the enormous increase in the number of drag queens after RuPaul's success on MTV in 1993: 'The day RuPaul came out it went from 20 to 1 000, 'cause every faggot thought I can be a star too. It was really crazy. I hated her for that'.[15]

Apart from a few balanced documentaries (Livingston 1991, Shiels 1995), most of the media presentation that followed failed to cover the immense diversity of (gender) identities and performativities and the social structures inside the drag queen subcultures, instead reducing 'the' drag queen to a stereotypical caricature: the entertaining transvestite. This development and with it the Great Drag Queen Hype over NYC drag queens reached its peak when in 1995 Hollywood discovered its potential. The Stephen Spielberg production "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! – Julie Newmar" (Kidron 1995) featured three flamboyant but non-sexual, New York drag queens, who get stranded in the countryside. Although some real drag queens appeared as guests or supernumeraries in the first scene of the movie, male, heterosexual actors played the main characters. The movie, which is regarded as an affront by some New York drag queens like Michelle[16] and by others as showing the flamboyant or conservative and out-of-date stereotype they overcame after Stonewall (cf. Fleisher 1996:39–42), was shown worldwide to entertain a heterosexual audience.

The entertainment value of New York drag could be observed in the city as well. Drag queens appeared as performers, singers, artists, actors and actresses, models, DJanes, hostesses, waitresses or sex workers in numerous places in both the mainstream and the underground. Restaurants with drag shows mushroomed, attracting tourists from all over the world. This golden age was not to last long. In the late 1990s New York's Mayor Giuliani's politics of 'zero tolerance' succeeded in ending the flowering of the drag culture by using bureaucratic procedures to revoke the licenses of many of the subcultures' club owners, the providers of the drag queens social autonomy and autarchy. Thus, by the turn of the century New York had ceased to be a drag Mecca, and numerous drag queens left for California or Europe. Thus, during my fieldwork in Berlin, I came to know five drag queens who had migrated from New York to Berlin after 1999.

Despite the fact that in the early 2000s it had become harder to earn one's living – September 11th and the new mayor Bloomberg changing New York into 'the city that

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15 Interview with Deirdre, conducted in English in a New York drag restaurant, April 24, 2002, tape-recorded.

16 Interview with Michelle, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, March 15, 2002, tape-recorded.

never smokes' has also had serious impacts on nightlife culture – the drag queens of New York still live in very vivid subcultures and to a lesser degree are able to earn their money as mentioned above. Their performances range from over-the-top drag performances to traditional female impersonation, from comic and clownish performing to professional acting on theatre stages, from porn-star-parodies, lap dance and strip performances to professional dance performances in music videos.

Nonetheless, an important topic of the inner diversity of NYC drag subcultures is the question of (gender) identity. Some drag queens define themselves as performers with a male gender identity. Michelle confirms: 'Well, I definitely see myself as male gender, but that in my life has been questionable through doing drag'.[17]

While Michelle has only been taking female hormones and living in a female gender role for a couple of months 'to see what it feels like' and assess whether she is transgendered[18] or a drag queen, others are taking female hormones and define themselves as drag queens and transgendered. These individuals remember the definitions of drag pioneers like Jayne County or International Chrysis. According to Violet:

> I see myself somewhere in between drag queen and transgender, a little of both. [...] for me it means that I am taking hormones, that my identity, what's going on inside of me, I feel that I am a woman, even if I don't look it at the outside everyday, I still feel it and a I hope some day to transition much at a much bigger pace.[19]

There are also drag queens who feel the same way as Violet does, but who will not take hormones or go for surgery. Deirdre once took hormones, but sees no need for surgery:

> I think I am genderless, because basically I see myself as a woman, even if I haven't done a surgery, I've done a few hormones here and there [...] I feel woman enough for my own feeling, my own presentation, I don't feel I need that yet. [...] I even call my genitals, like my penis, I call it a pussy-stick.[20]

Many drag queens like the 'genderless' Deirdre have their own definitions. Flawless, for example, defines him-/herself as 'pan-gender':

> Pan-gender: I think that there is an element of me which is a woman, there is an element of me that is a man, and perhaps an element of me which is seeing both with hopefully

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17 Interview with Michelle, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, March 15, 2002, tape-recorded.

18 'Transgendered', when used in opposition to other transgender identities, such as drag queen, 'transsexual' etc., means that one is living in a gender role that is not that 'recognized' at birth and that one is transforming one's body with hormones etc., but not opting for a sex change.

19 Interview with Violet, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 20, 2001, tape-recorded.

20 Interview with Deirdre, conducted in English in a New York drag restaurant, April 24, 2002, tape-recorded.

Drag queen couple Flawless Sabrina (left) and Cyra in Flawless Sabrina's apartment in New York (photo: Carsten Balzer).

> some perspective and since I have a cock and balls, I definitely physically see myself as a man.[21]

Finally, there are drag queens in New York who define themselves as a third sex, and others who define themselves as transsexual women and are opting for surgery. This briefly sketched panoply of New York drag queen identities implies that there is no one definitive identity, and least of all the 'performing transvestite' identity that is promoted by the media. The term 'drag queen' in the New York context may be defined best as both a kind of new 'profession' resulting from the media hype in a reward-based society and a subculturally formed panoply of varied gender identities that differ from the mainstream male-female gender dichotomy. Though very exceptionally (heterosexual) men or women perform as drag queens and are tolerated within the drag community, the drag queen identity is strongly linked to a gay identity, and all New York drag queens I came to know were born 'male' and attracted to men.

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21 Interview with Flawless Sabrina, conducted in English in her apartment in New York, October 18, 2001, tape-recorded.

Drag queens in Rio de Janeiro: the travesti-transformista *drag queen-transformation*

Drag queens came to be known as a 'new' phenomenon in Brazil in the early 1990s. They were linked to new emerging youth cultures in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the club culture (*cultura club*) or nightlife culture (*cena noturna*) (E.S. Couto 1999:25, Palomina 1999:153–154). They are sometimes described as young heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual men, who cross-dress just to have fun in discotheques and clubs (E.S. Couto 1999:25).[22]

The first drag queens appeared in the clubs of Rio de Janeiro in 1993. They became widely known in Rio, when in 1994 the drag queen Isabelita dos Patins appeared on the cover of a newspaper kissing Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who later became president, in the street (Palomino 1999:162). The perception of drag queens in Brazil, as well as the evolution of their subcultures, was influenced and supported by the international media hype about New York's drag queens as well as by individuals who had travelled there from New York. Deirdre, who was invited several times to Brazil in 1994 to perform in clubs, recounts that 'vogueing' was very popular in Rio at that time.[23] And in 1996, the 'supermodel of the world', RuPaul, participated in the Rio carnival, showing a different kind of *transformismo* (female impersonation) as Palomino (1999:161), the researcher of club culture, argues. Palomino cites a club manager of the gay club "Dr. Smith" – in which Rio's rave scene started alongside the emergence of drag queens – who explains that the *carioca*[24] drag queens are closely linked to the *travesti* street culture (1999:191). Nanny People, a famous drag queen from São Paulo, defined a (Brazilian) drag queen as a 'transformista caricature in designer clothes' (Palomino 1999:162; all translations by C.B.). Drag queens in Rio de Janeiro today are seen as young people who cross-dress in clubs in order to start a *transformista* career. To clarify this *travesti-transformista*-drag queen confusion and to understand drag queens within the context of *transformista* and *travesti* subcultures, it is necessary to look back in time.

During Brazil's democratic period after WW II and especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, identifiable gay bars opened in Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana, and drag, which was closely linked to certain carnival balls in former times, became accepted outside Carnival by a wider public (Green 1999:147–148, 156). The historian Green (1999:148) informs us that 'glamorous cross-dressers emerged from these drag balls to perform in mainstream theatre productions that attracted a wide audience'.

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22 E.S. Couto (1999:25). Here it is worth noting that Rio de Janeiro's club culture is predominantly gay (cf. Palomina 1999:143) and that all the drag queens I met in Rio defined themselves as being gay.

23 Interview with Deirdre, conducted in English in a New York drag restaurant, April 24, 2002, tape-recorded.

24 'Carioca' is the Brazilian term for the residents of Rio de Janeiro.

One of these 'cross-dressers' was Rogéria, who became Rio de Janeiro's first drag star in the early 1960s and is nowadays known as Brazil's most famous *travesti* or *transformista*. At that time people like Rogéria were called *travestis*, meaning travesty performers. However, what people like Rogéria did was not simply 'female impersonation'. Rogéria explained that since childhood she always felt 'female'. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, like most of Rio's *travestis* at that time, she took female hormones.[25]

Travesti-transformista star Rogéria (right) with her friend drag queen-*transformista* Isabelita dos Patins in a theatre in Rio de Janeiro (photo: Carsten Balzer).

Rogéria's career collapsed with another event that was to have a strong impact on Brazil's culture in the coming decades, namely the 1964 coup d'état, which resulted in twenty years of military dictatorship. The military repression that started in the late 1960s and reached its peak in the 1970s had two main targets: anyone who was seen as part of the 'communist threat' or as part of the threat to 'Brazilian family morals'.[26] The latter was recognized primarily in gay people and of course in *travestis*, who were the most recognizable gays at that time. In Newton's terms they were 'professional' gays, just like the drag queens in New York. Military censorship forbade every *travesti* show on television and in the theatre, and males were imprisoned for looking gay, that is, feminine (Oliveira 1995:61). Rogéria and others who could afford to do so left the country. Those who stayed organized themselves in marginalized subcultures as sex workers. In the early 1980s, almost at the end of the dictatorship, in Brazilian cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, up to 5 000 *travestis* were living from sex work (Penteado 1980:2, Oliveira 1995:92). In order to be able to attract their 'bisexual' or 'closet gay' clients better, as well as for personal reasons, they transformed their bodies with female hormones and injected industrial silicone, but did not opt for a sex change (cf. Kulick 1998:66–73). Thus, they remind one of the transgendered in New York.[27]

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25 Interview with Rogéria, conducted in Portuguese in her apartment in Rio de Janeiro, December 29, 2000, tape-recorded.

26 See among others R.C. Couto (1999:23–27, 90–91), and Habert (1994:29, 74).

27 For a detailed description see Balzer (2005:222–242).

When the dictatorship ended in 1984, the formerly positive term *travesti* had become associated with 'prostitution' and crime, and *travestis* were often seen as criminals (*marginais*). When she returned to Brazil and started making a comeback in the 1980s, Rogéria dissociated herself from the 'street *travestis*' by calling herself a *transformista*.[28] Many of my informants agreed that Rogéria was the first to use the term 'transformista', which had not been known before the 1980s. Thus, Rogéria, who had formerly made the term 'travesti' famous, then did the same with the new and less prejudicial term 'transformista'.

Although *travestis* in Rio de Janeiro earn their money today not only as sex workers, but also as *transformistas* and as other artists, as hairdressers and stylists, and some even as employees of the national bank or in municipal government projects, the term 'travesti' has not lost its prejudicial meaning.[29] The term 'transformista' in present-day Rio de Janeiro therefore covers all people who perform on stage in drag, mostly *travestis* and (gay) cross-dressers. The latter sometimes call themselves *transformistas* even when not performing on stage. While this new term does not have the bad reputation of the earlier 'travesti', it is still associated with gayness. Although some *transformistas* in Rio de Janeiro disparage the drag queens, saying that most of them lack talent and explaining their success by calling it a vogue (*modismo*) and a 'fever', these drag queens are performing a new kind of *transformismo*. While 'traditional' *transformistas* impersonate famous Brazilian divas like Carmen Miranda or Eliz Regina on stage and sing (and nowadays also lip-sync to) romantic Brazilian songs, the drag queen *transformistas* generally lip-sync to international dance music, and some of them impersonate renowned blondes like Xuxa, a Brazilian 'Verona Feldbusch', or the American actress Michelle Pfeiffer acting as the latex-clothed Catwoman in Batman III. Most of them perform in a way that differs totally from the 'female impersonation' of the (traditional) *transformistas* and that is described as 'cybernetic' (*cibernetica*), meaning to impersonate artificial and futuristic characters by using exaggerated and futurist make-up with blond wigs. Thus, their performances are not serious female impersonation, but a rather clownish and fun-making parody.

Nowadays, there are only a few of the 'older' drag queens left who came to fame in the 'fever' of the mid-1990s, mostly very sophisticated and educated artists, who otherwise work as English or history teachers, or like Isabelita dos Patins use their fame for social commitment. Nonetheless, most of the drag queens in *fin de siècle* Rio de Janeiro were very young and did drag for different reasons, defining themselves as male guys (*rapazes*). Although defining themselves as gay and performing mostly in gay discotheques like Copacabana's famous "LeBoy", they did not equate their drag queen

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28 Interview with Rogéria, conducted in Portuguese in her apartment in Rio de Janeiro, December 29, 2000, tape-recorded. Cf. also Lampião da Esquina (1981:8)

29 Unfortunately, even some anthropologists, who focus on 'street *travestis*' in their research, define *travestis* generally as 'prostitutes' (cf. Silva 1993, Kulick 1998).

identity with their homosexuality. In the informal talks and interviews I conducted they often referred to the international success of RuPaul, citing her as a role model, or bemoaning the lack of a Brazilian equivalent. The 'female' or rather 'drag' character they perform is seen by many of them as part of their personality, a second personality or simply a stage character. Having fun and a passion for fashion are important factors in their performances and performativities. 21-year-old Branca's explanation of her drag queen identity is typical of many of these drag queens: 'To be honest, I feel like a personality created primarily to have fun at night';[30] or that of Berta, a 20-year-old drag queen, who defines herself as a fashion queen, 'a *transformista*, who lives for fashion'.[31]

Although some of them reported that they once worked as sex workers in female clothing, young drag queens like Branca and Berta do not take female hormones or inject silicone like most *travestis*. For this reason, and because of their diverting behaviour and their fun-making performativity, drag queens are not associated with 'prostitution' and drugs like the *travestis*, nor with gayness like the (traditional) *transformistas*, but are perceived in a more positive way by the wider public. Palomina (1999:158) argues that the success of the drag queens in Brazil's nightlife culture is based on their 'unsexed' and joking way of communicating with the public. Generally speaking, one can assume that while in the *transformista* subcultures there is a mistrust of the drag queens' sudden success, in the Brazilian mainstream they are honoured because of their camp and comic performance and performativity, which is perceived as non-(homo)sexual and non-threatening by the majority society. Nowadays (heterosexual) presenters like João Kleber perform as comic drag queens in their talk shows and entertain millions of Brazilians via TV.

Thus, besides the international media hype and travelling drag queens like RuPaul or Deirdre, the mainstream perception, which differed from that of *travestis* (and *transformistas*), and the newly emerging club cultures were important factors in the evolution of Brazil's drag queen subcultures. Scholars and gay activists stressed that modern, post-dictatorship gay life in Brazil is strongly shaped by consumerism and commercialisation, the so-called pink economy (*economia cor de rosa*) (cf. Parker 1999:122–123). Consumerism had already been focussing on the *travestis*, both as performers and sex workers, since the 1960s, and nowadays this also holds true for the club culture drag queens.

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30 Interview with Branca, conducted in Portuguese in her apartment in Niteroi, December 28, 2000, tape-recorded.

31 Interview with Berta, conducted in Portuguese at her working place, a tailor's shop in Rio de Janeiro, January 4, 2001, tape-recorded.

Beauty and the beast: the drag queens and Tunten *of Berlin*

Drag queens appeared in Berlin in the mid-1990s in a similar situation to the drag queens in Rio de Janeiro. They first came to be known as protagonists in the new club scene of the Techno music movement. The differences and tensions between drag queens and (traditional) *transformistas* in Rio de Janeiro can be seen in Berlin between drag queens and *Tunten*. Commonly, the latter are seen as both cross-dressers and performers. Although the differences between them seem at first sight to consist in different performativities and performances, they are much more deeply-rooted.

While Berlin drag queens generally dress in a very glamorous way and often impersonate divas like Marilyn Monroe or current 'superstars' like Madonna in their performances, *Tunten* dress in a totally unglamorous and sometimes shabby or theatrical way, portraying on stage the woman next door – the cashier girl in the supermarket, the dumb daughter of a right-wing politician, the old woman in the restroom, and often just themselves. Members of both groups state, however, that their drag is not simply 'female impersonation', but more an expression of their female side and partly their (gender) identity. Only a very few individuals of both groups reported that they once took female hormones or are thinking of doing so in the future.

Following the differentiation made in subcultures between 'glamour queens' and 'trash-*Tunten*', and emphasizing the conforming beauty of the drag queens compared

Tunten-Ensemble "Café Transler" performing at the annual transgender festival "Wigstöckel", Berlin, October 2001 (photo: Carsten Balzer).

with the rebellious grotesqueness of the *Tunten*, in an earlier article I portrayed them as 'beauty and the beast' and argued that drag queens and *Tunten* are indeed two different transgender subcultures, which, socially and historically, are simultaneously connected with and detached from each other (Balzer 2004:57, 60).

The *Tunten* subculture started as the radical part of the gay movement in West Berlin in the early 1970s. In the context of the student revolt of the so-called '1968 Generation', radical gay men used drag politically at demonstrations by calling themselves 'Tunten'. At that time 'Tunte' connoted 'soft men', 'feminine men' and 'men in women's clothes', being used by heterosexual men as an insult before being transformed into a *nom de guerre* in a political sense by *Tunten* themselves. Thus, the West Berlin *Tunten* were not only stigmatised as 'professional' gays like the drag queens of New York and the *travestis* of Rio de Janeiro at that time, but, because of their 'scandalous appearance', they were also discriminated against by parts of the gay subculture. When in the 1980s West Berlin gained a reputation as West Germany's centre of alternative and counter cultures, the *Tunten* subculture bloomed. In inventing a new kind of travesty, the trash travesty, they combined an intrinsic (self-)parody with a double social criticism of the heterosexual and male-dominated majority and its clichés, as well as of the genre travesty itself. Using trash-travesty, they dissociated themselves from the renowned female impersonators of the time, who, in trying to gain success in the mainstream, denied their sexuality and gender identities in performing illusions for a heterosexual audience; so, at least, *Tunten* argued. At that time *Tunten* performed in ensembles of up to thirty individuals on stage, organized AIDS benefit concerts and founded the first mobile AIDS homecare service, as well as the first gay and lesbian artists' agency (cf. Balzer 2004:60, 62–64).

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the following process of the reunification of Germany and Berlin brought about major changes in the city, not only in the mainstream, but also in the subcultures. West Berlin, the former island and West Germany's centre of underground and alternative subcultures, was transformed into the capital city of Berlin and, with the Love Parade and the new club culture, the centre of Germany's Techno movement, which soon became mainstream. Here, sociologists diagnosed a significant paradigm shift in German youth culture, from the more collective and political '1968 Generation' to the heterogeneous, individualistic and more fun-and-consumption-oriented '1989 Generation' (see, for example, Leggewie 1995), which was first observed in the 'new' Berlin. The best example of this significant change was the Love Parade, which was 'invented' by a few hundred people partying in the streets of West Berlin in summer 1989 as demonstration for peace and happiness, but had turned by the mid-1990s into a major tourist attraction and commercial event drawing a million people to Berlin. Along the same lines as the Love Parade, 'Christopher Street Day', Berlin's annual parade commemorating the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, changed from a political demonstration in the 1980s to a partly commercialised Gay Parade in the 1990s. The response of the gay community can be

seen as a reflection of the shifts that have taken place in society as a whole. When the gay community started to adopt and to influence the new lifestyle of the party scene in Berlin, the *Tunten*-culture, which once played an important role in the gay movement, became marginalized within the gay subculture (Balzer 2004:64–65).

Symbolically, in the middle of these changes, drag queens, the new vogue, appeared on the Berlin gay scene. Despite the fact that there had earlier been a few people with the attitudes and gender performativity of contemporary German drag queens, the term 'drag queen' as a self-selected label became popular among German drag queens in the mid-1990s club culture. Angelique, who had been always an outsider among the *Tunten* of the late 1980s because of her glamorous style and manner (thus she always refused to see herself as a *Tunte*), did not start to call herself a drag queen until the mid-1990s, when popular drag queen movies, the success of the self-proclaimed 'supermodel of the world' RuPaul and the media coverage of New York drag queens supported and influenced the Berlin drag queens. Angelique points out that the term 'drag queen' did not have the homosexual connotations associated with the *Tunten*.[32] Thus, for many young people it was much easier to adopt this new term. Nonetheless, the younger ones especially, by 'embodying' divas with a noble attitude or performing a kind of 'superwoman', reveal self-images and gender performativities that differ from the majority of the post-Stonewall New York drag queens (cf. Balzer 2004:61).

As a result of the gay activism and the struggles for respect and visibility by the *Tunten* during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as because of their different (gender) performance and performativity, with its different perception by the mainstream as a consequence, drag queens were accepted right from the start on the new Berlin party scene, into which they fitted better than the *Tunten* ever did. Soon they were appearing on the cover of gay magazines, and the first real Berlin drag queen star, Biggy van Blond, was given her own locally-broadcast TV talk show and her own column in the national tabloid newspaper "Bild". But although Berlin drag queens were influenced by the media hype over New York drag queens right from the start, and later on by migrating individuals who left New York for Berlin in the late 1990s, they are not simply copying the New York drag queen subculture. Rather, they are touching the nerves of the new German youth culture, as well as the changes in the contemporary Berlin gay scene, thus being very selective in choosing international role models like RuPaul.

Just as drag queens in Berlin are not simply an imported trend from America, but a reflection of a significant change in German youth and gay culture, the contemporary *Tunten* subculture of Berlin is a reflection of a German youth and gay culture that dates back to the 1970s and 1980s and that now enjoys at best a marginal existence.

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32 Interview with Angelique, conducted in German in a restaurant in Berlin, November 10, 2001, tape-recorded.

Behind the hype: does 'the' international drag queen exist?

In discussing the 'internationalization of gay identities', Dennis Altman (1996:77) suggested that '[i]t has become fashionable to point to the emergence of the "global gay", the apparent internationalization of a certain form of social and cultural identity based upon homosexuality'. At the same time, scholars of queer studies have started to emphasize different 'homosexualities' (in cultures as well as in subcultures), instead of a single 'homosexuality' (cf. e.g. Herdt 1994, Parker 1999). So when Altman asks (1996:79), 'Is there, in other words, a universal gay identity linked to modernity?', our question remains whether the great drag queen hype has shaped an international drag queen identity along with other forces of globalisation, which Altmann sees in consumerism and individualism.

We have seen that three decades ago drag queens in New York, like *travestis* in Rio de Janeiro and *Tunten* in Berlin, bore the same stigma of being so-called 'professional' gays. In changing styles and attitudes and thus becoming 'nice' drag queens, the New York drag queens obtained rewards and commercial success in the mainstream of a reward-based society, which resulted in a media hype. The reduced portrayal of internationalised media hype about them changed the perception of 'the' drag queen. This changed perception, along with the emergence of new (consumer-friendly) youth and club cultures in the 1990s and thus changing gay subcultures, helped young gay people in Rio de Janeiro and Berlin to live and perform an identity that is more playful and less stigmatised than the *transformista* and *travesti* or *Tunten* identities. By calling themselves drag queens and by partly adopting and altering the styles and performances offered by the media hype, they are not also or inevitably adopting the (gender) performativities and identities of New York's drag queens, which are not covered in all their complex diversity in the media. Instead, drag queens like RuPaul are role-modelled because they are 'symbols of success', not because of their gender identities or performativities. Rather, the drag queens in Rio de Janeiro, like those in Berlin, reflect changing processes in their cultures and subcultures, both having developed their own and varying performativities in the context of other transgender subcultures and performing arts.

The data provided show that in comparing drag queens interculturally it is absolutely essential to take into account the context of the subcultures and the cultures in which they emerged. In the present case this emphasis leads to the result that one cannot point to a sole drag queen identity as suggested by the media hype and that the diversity of New York drag queen subcultures must be compared with the *travesti-transformista*-drag queen-complex in Rio de Janeiro and the *Tunten*-drag queen antagonism in Berlin. Behind the direct and indirect influences of the international drag queen hype, a great deal of autochthony, embedded not only in historical evolution, but also in internal conflicts and other factors of the local transgender subcultures, must be explored. Altman, who questioned 'the extent to which the forces of globali-

sation can be said to produce an identity based on homosexuality', cited a gay Filipino writer, who argued in respect of the discussion of the 'global gay', 'We are like you!', adding 'Only different!' (Altmann 1996:79, 90).

When we consider the 'great drag queen hype' as one of the forces of globalisation, the differentiated view shows that it has not directly shaped an international drag queen identity or performativity. Rather, in changing the perception of the mainstream, it has provided a younger generation with new possibilities and opportunities to establish themselves in the niches of the majority society. Thus, in presenting a standardized, non-sexual stereotype of 'the' drag queen as a global phenomenon, the international media hype was indeed a great swindle, but at the same time a swindle that was able to benefit parts of the local transgender subcultures in a way that should not be underestimated. This important fact underlines the argument of certain cultural globalisation theorists that

> [f]or some, a global media culture provides new sources for pleasures and identities that redefine gender, new role models and fantasies, and new cultural experiences. [...] From this perspective, the intersection of the global and the local is producing new matrixes to legitimize the production of hybrid identities, thus expanding the realm of self-definition (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997:10).

According to this discussion, the 'great drag queen hype' outlined here may serve as another argument in favour of thinking beyond an oppositional global-local-polarity and preferring alternative concepts that mediate between the global and the local, concepts like Roland Robertson's g l o c a l i s a t i o n, which emphasizes 'the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local' (Robertson 1995:28) or more specific concepts such as Cvetkovich and Kellner's a r t i c u l a t i o n, which has already functioned to provide an understanding of 'Madonna' as a global phenomenon that is 'articulated very differently according to the class, ethnicity, sexuality, and region of her audiences, which may have very different effects in different local cultures' (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997:16–17).

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