

The Anguished Cry

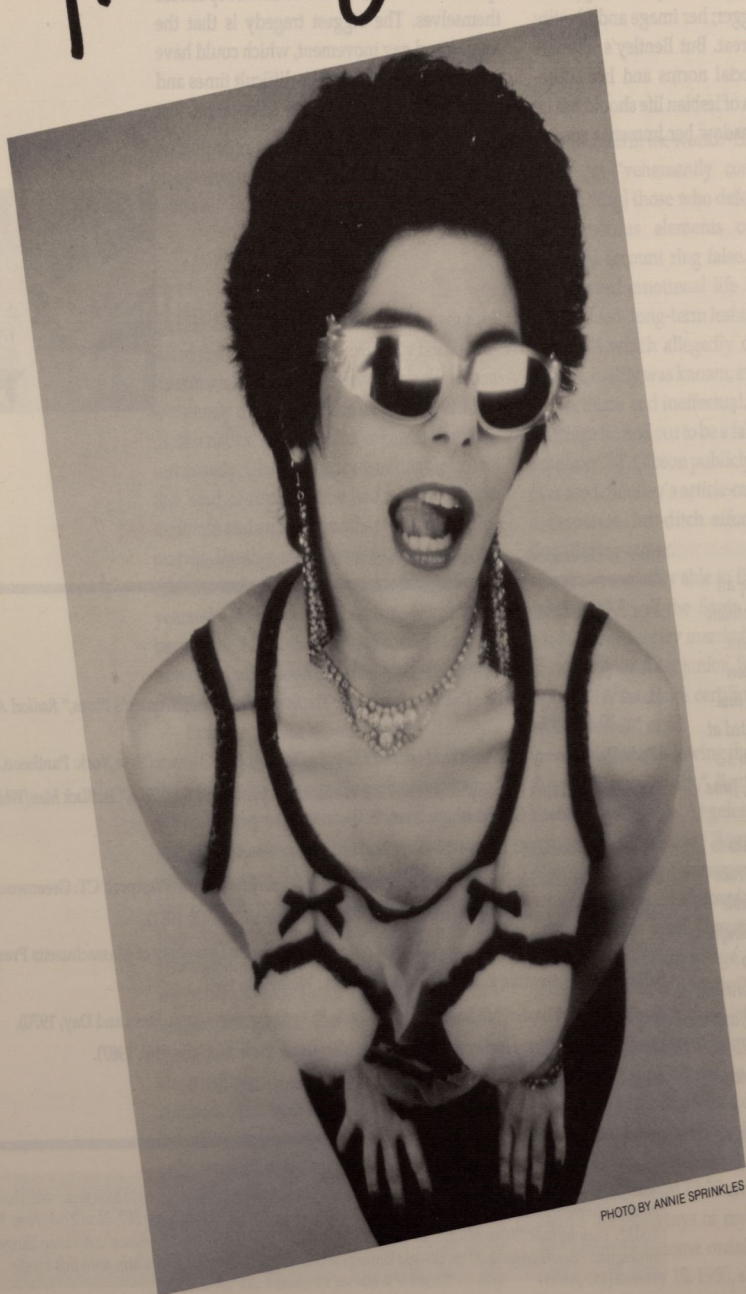


PHOTO BY ANNIE SPRINKLES

of an 80s Fem:

"I WANT TO BE A DRAG QUEEN"

by Lisa Duggan

TEN YEARS AGO, gay men and lesbians used to argue over the political meanings of style. Gay men often claimed that too many lesbians sported the Drab Dyke look, which the fashionable fellows interpreted as indicative of simple tastelessness or a more complicated, coded kind of sartorial hostility. Lesbians went after drag culture, which they assailed as misogynist—the gender equivalent of a minstrel show.

Now we're all a little embarrassed, and things have changed a lot. This past summer in a little cottage in Cherry Grove, the boys and girls were disagreeing again. But this time, our politically advanced gay male compatriots were complaining that the drag culture, which still predominates in public life in the Grove, was a dinosaur, an apolitical holdover, boring, and dying. We dykes were at a loss—we were going to Drag Search every Sunday night, we planned our schedules around the drag teas at Cherry's and the drag mock-

invasion of the Pines on July 4. The fems had taken to borrowing boas from the boys to go dancing on Saturday night. We defended drag as gender theater, as subversive fun. We didn't see why the guys had to be so goddamned serious.

Let me put it another way. A charming and debonair butch lawyer of my acquaintance recently received a camping catalogue in her office mail. Her gay male associate received a copy of the Fredericks of Hollywood catalogue. The camping catalogue was quickly discarded into the circular file, as the lawyer, her associate and another gay male staff member began to fight over the Fredericks catalogue. It had to be xeroxed so everyone could be satisfied—the two boys, and the lawyer's girlfriend.

The point here is that the lesbian sense of style is in a state of transition, from 1970s political puritanism, to a 1980s butch-fem revival with a punk influence. Dykes in their 20s in the major urban centers are looking

less like nuns and more like motorcycle club members and their molls. Even more pastoral college campuses are not immune from this shift—the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Yale lesbians were divided between the "crunchies" (the familiar 1970s college women's center look) and the "lipsticks."

Of course this transition does not apply evenly to all. It is partly a marker of age (younger), geography (urban), politics (sex radicals rather than anti-porners) and culture (Rocky Horror rather than Olivia Records). But the semiotics primarily communicate a new eroticism, a deliberate resexualization of the lesbian image. You can tell by looking that these lesbians may very well do their woman-bonding with a dildo and a pair of handcuffs.

Even though I'm a little older than 25 myself, I've been an enthusiastic fan of the new eroticism. I wanted to be a slut at 16, but the costs were too high. Now, I can at least dress like one and hope. I've bought

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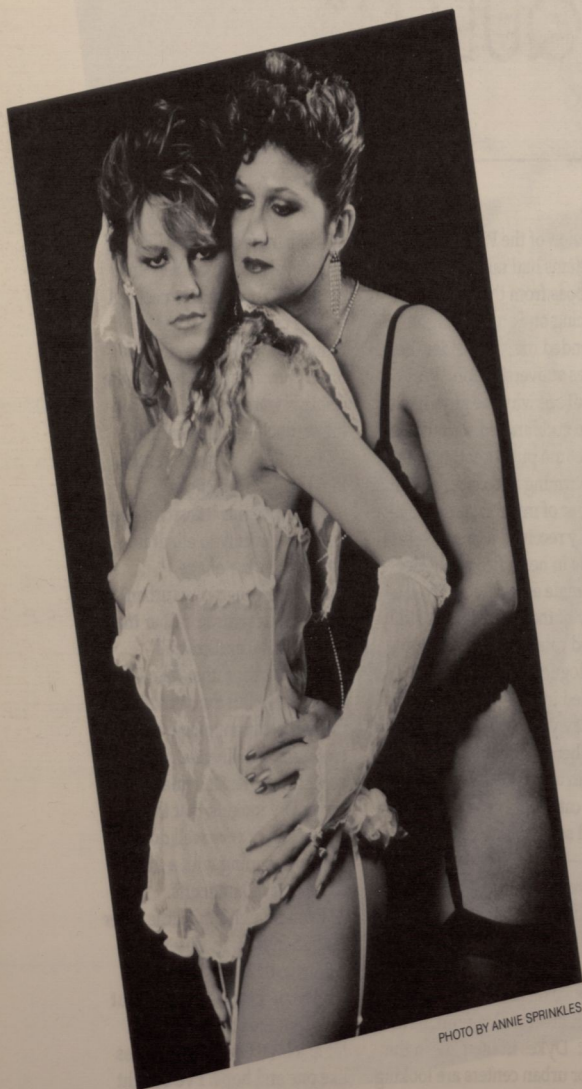


PHOTO BY ANNIE SPRINKLES

every issue of *On Our Backs* and *Bad Attitude*, gone to the strip shows in New York and San Francisco, donned bustiers and borrowed boas. But I have noted a persistent difficulty—lesbians are having a hard time building an eroticized public culture.

Signs of the problem include the closing of San Francisco strip shows, as well as the closing of various lesbian night spots in New York. A symptom can also be found in the developing lesbian drag-envy out in Cherry Grove.

The growing dyke population of the Grove goes to the drag shows, though these are events by men for men. We go because we like the public erotic performance, even though it isn't meant for us. Drag performers present an image which emphasizes display and access, a traditionally fem sexual semiotics, in a setting which is fundamentally, indisputably gay. The thrill is a vicarious one, but powerful enough to incite fem envy and butch fascination.

So why stop at envy, why not develop our own public erotic culture? We've tried. So far it hasn't worked very well. When lesbians sponsor strip shows, or other fem erotic performances, it is very difficult to "code" it as lesbian, to make it feel queer. The result looks just like a heterosexual performance, and lesbian audiences don't respond to it as subversively sexual, specifically ours. So the regular strip show lost its audience; eventually only tourists attended for the thrill of novelty, not sex.

New York strip shows have performed to indifferent audiences as well. Only one per-



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ROSEN

formance incited unrestrained enthusiasm—a butch/fem lingerie show. The interaction made it queer, and the girls went wild. The implication here is that the butch/fem erotic style (unlike drag) requires a butch or a pair to communicate lesbian sexuality. The problem with this solution lies in the butch style. Butches don't signal display in their dress, they don't generally gravitate to public performance. Trying to get most butches on stage requires a level of coercion even most fems won't stoop to.

I've seen one direction of change which may point a way out of this quandary. A small grouping of dykes have begun to develop a mode of dress which is explicitly sexual, but

which transcends the erotic language of butch/fem. We call one of my friends the High Pervert—a designation of a new category. Her dress denotes a particular kinky erotic style, the language of which is more about particular practices than about playing with gender codes. I'm talking spandex, plastic, rubber and metal, a few chains or a leather collar, and a nipple clamp on the belt. If this new style continues to develop and can be coded as specifically lesbian, we may find a way to have our fun and watch it too. Maybe.

In the meantime, I'm still stuck on butch/fem—waiting to see if anyone will show for a James Dean look-alike contest on the Grove this summer

(which I will altruistically volunteer to judge), planning my new lesbian photo calendar (having trouble getting models for vol. 1—Butches in Bondage). If all else fails, maybe the guys will let me be a drag queen...I'm saving up for the dynell... ▼

Lisa Duggan is really (really) a very serious journalist and historian, whose articles on sexual politics have appeared in the Village Voice, Ms. Magazine, the Washington Post, Gay Community News and other periodicals, as well as in anthologies including Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship and Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public.