

The Drag Queen In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction

BY MARK LEGER

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC Library had an exhibition called "Revolution in Print." In a grand marble room, the viewer could see both the means of production and the product that spread the ideas of the French Revolution: the ancient presses, the cases of lead type, the book stalls, and the books, pamphlets, and broadsides. It was all very wooden and labor-intensive, a printing technology dependent on skilled craftsmen—hand typesetters, printers, and bookbinders.

In the year 2189, an exhibition of the print of today's social movements would present a fluorescent-lit lineup of photocopy machines, from the era when anybody could push a photocopier button, and, if they had the knack, engage a readership. Informational plaques would discuss the harried office workers who copied reams of leaflets and underground 'zines while the boss was at lunch. Today, around New York ACT-UP, this activity is called Xerox Anonymous. Or "taking a copy break."

Although *My Comrade*, the revolutionary gay magazine from Manhattan, is now offset print, it retains the collaged, techno-rustic of xerox art. Its editor, Les Simpson, coaxes in the contributions of about 30 contributing writers, photographers, and illus-

MY COMRADE

Premiere



Our first issue featured downtown drag queen, Tabboo!, armed with exciting slogans of gay and personal liberation

trators, then presides over the assembling, printing, and distribution of the magazine. *My Comrade* was originally distributed at "Whispers," a Sunday evening multi-media drag event at the Pyramid Club. It is now carried by several bookstores, and issue four, at this writing the most recent, had a 1000 copy print-run that sold out.

My Comrade arose out of the downtown Manhattan scene, which still provides its main distribution outlets and readership pool. But although the magazine does contain many idiosyncratic geographical and personal references, it is more a product of and for a mass gay culture. *My Comrade* assembles the documents of bygone popular homosexualities and contraposes them against the most recent: sexy guy photos old and new, ideology old and new, slang old and new, and drag queens eternally youthful. It wryly transforms these documents into a utopian guide that infuses a sense of missed possibility into everyday life. An inspection of the map of *My Comrade's* "Land of Enchantment" alters the meaning of Manhattan. The program listings for "Channel 69" call short network television.

In *My Comrade*, drag queens are the leaders, the shapers of opinion, the expert analysts; they are *My Comrade's* hero(ine)s in quotes. Mistresses of illusion, always forefront is the irony, the possible falsehood, of everything they pose. You never can take them too seriously, but yet they do know how to attract attention and how to get the word out. Drag queens willingly have taken on the guise of the abject, the emasculated, the gender fucker, and made themselves powerful in the process. This is the complete opposite of the academic or politician who uncritically adopts the demeanor and techniques of established power—the usual model of an "effective" leader. When a drag queen

speaks, it is not so much a question of "who do you trust" as "what do you find plausible?" Discourse may take imaginative flight, but always lands in the field of material reality; being a drag queen means the constant assertion of the *body*.

As Walter Benjamin demonstrated, before the techniques of mechanical reproduction, a work of art had a unique existence imbued with a ritual-based "cult value," an *aura*. With the development of mechanical reproduction—lithography, then photography and films, the *aura* was supplanted by an "exhibition value." The public now desires the end of uniqueness; it wants to be able to grasp the heretofore distanced art work.

Drag queens have been willing participants in this moment. Before, if you wanted to see drag, you had to venture out to small clubs where you would join small (but wildly appreciative) audiences. Drag queens were the first to recognize that they were separated from the masses by the tinniness of their *boites*. To create political art, drag queens resoundingly have destroyed their *aura* by photocopying their image and their discursive texts, both formerly presented only at privileged performances. Now anyone in the tri-state area can pin up star columnist, Hapi Phace, (and call her home phone number)—and not because of MGM or CBS, but only Not-a-Sloppy Copy Shop.

My Comrade provokes our mobilization. In the tradition of other homegrown 'zines, it desires our response, our involvement, our inspired imitation. ▼

FROM LES SIMPSON:

Whew! It ain't easy being publisher/editor of My Comrade, a small, underground, radical, gay magazine. There's porno to be edited, gay lib slogans to be typed, glamorous drag queens to be photographed, sexy hunks to be interviewed for potential Centerfolds, calls to be made, stamps to be licked...

But please don't think I'm complaining. The incredible benefits certainly have been worth all the time and energy. Although for years I'd been deeply involved in a passionate relationship with gay people, after two years of collaboration with the contributors of My Comrade, I'm head-over-heels, madly in love with them.

I'd like to think of My Comrade as comparable to one of those goofy Bob Hope USO shows that not only razzle-dazzled, but also inspired the troops. On My Comrade's stage appear scantily dressed young men, outrageous drag queens, lovely lesbians, and campy raunchy skits, intermingled with bold messages of gay pride, unity, and love. My Comrade's audience leaves with a smile on its face, but also with a tear in its eye and a fist clenched to the sky, eager to join the magazine's spiritually uplifting crusade.

"Onward to victory," the audience chants, "Onward to justice, Onward to liberation, Onward to My Comrade!"





PHOTOS BY KEITH NOTICK



In issue three, Lisa Lederer, co-anchor of "Sixty Photos," the "television magazine," profiled The Institute of Homosexual Inclination. Lisa is seen here interviewing star columnist, Hapi Phace, and centerfold hunk, Aner.