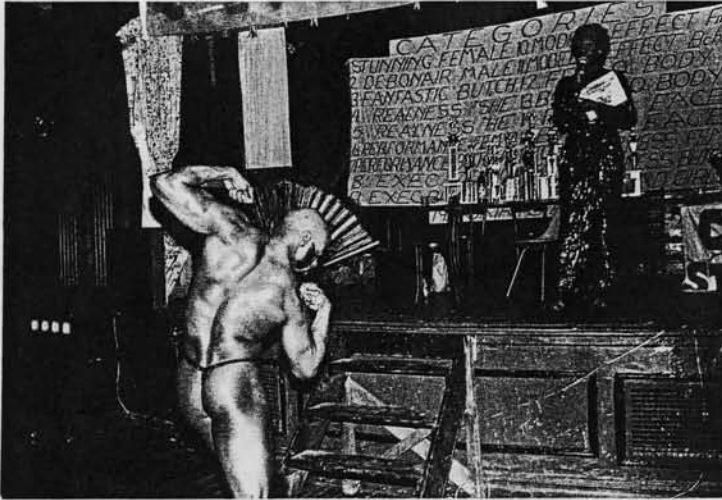


The Fairer Sex

By Jennie Livingston



Jennie Livingston, *Butch Body Queen*, Harlem Ball, 1985

The sexes are more akin than people think, and the great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in one phenomenon: that man and woman, freed from all mistaken feelings and aversions, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will unite as human beings, in order to bear in common, simply, earnestly, and patiently, the heavy sex that has been laid upon them.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, *Letters to a Young Poet*

When I was about eleven years old I figured out that people who dressed a little funny or walked too hard or too soft got it from the other kids, and that I was one of those. Objectionable girls were “tomboys” or “dogs,” and boys—before anyone really knew about homosexuality—were “fags.” Fags and dogs, dogs and fags. That’s what the other girls and boys called us, the ones who called themselves “foxy” or “cute” or other names to reassure themselves that they were normal. We were the ones who couldn’t play the gender game right. The boy who couldn’t walk tough: *faggy*. The girl who spoke up too many times, too loudly, or who didn’t have breasts yet: *doggy*. We didn’t know exactly *why* what we did was wrong. But we couldn’t help committing multiple acts of what was called in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* “gender treachery.”

What no one tells you when you’re eleven is that those kids don’t care whether or not you’re ugly or whether or not you like boys. Like any cry of “nigger” or “kike,” those names were power names. I look at pictures of me when I was eleven, and I was an average-looking kid, not gorgeous, not hideous. Those kids called me ugly to make themselves feel strong and to make me feel weak and ashamed. What they really meant, was, real girls are beautiful, that’s their *purpose* in life; real boys are strong, that’s their *purpose* in life.

Years after I’d stopped worrying about whether everyone on the street could see that I was a “dog,” I met some “foxes” who were realer than a fourteen-year-old straight boy’s pinup fantasy. These girls had perfect breasts, high heels, mincing steps. By exerting sheer will and by taking pharmaceutical hormones, they had become the ultimate antidog—or, the perfect woman.

I met these girls at Harlem drag fashion balls. It took me a few months to differentiate the men who look like women from the occasional lesbian or female cousin who looks a bit masculine. I was relieved to learn that if a bunch of buxom men in dresses—their shapes altered by hormones—could re-create the female gender, then perhaps gender itself is only something we learn.

Maybe some girls do “feel like a natural woman” when handed a baby or a doll; it’s possible that certain boys, running with a football, feel like a caveman, trying to spear a wild boar. I never felt that the sexes were born with no biological impulses. But who bought the girl the doll or handed her the baby? What movies about adventurers did the boy see?

You can look at how other mammals behave, but it’s pretty dangerous to admire the “natural” antics of animals on *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*, as most of these furry little actors were coaxed into “naturalness.” “True” gender, if it ever existed, probably began to fade around the time we all started to scratch out rules for other people in stone.

Black and Latino gay fashion shows have been around at least since the twenties in New York, but the current version of the ball revolves around the “houses”: gay street-gang-like groups that name themselves after European haute couture designers or media images. The House of Chanel, the House of Saint Laurent, the House of Ninja and a dozen others find their members in Manhattan gay nightclubs, and down along the Christopher Street piers. These men—and a few women—are not only people of color and gay, they are also poor. If anyone in America is despised, outcast, and marginalized, they are.

House members join together for support and for fun. A person’s position in the houses depends on his or her age or gender preference. The house contains titular sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, cousins, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, emperors and empresses. Each house has a “mother,” generally a drag queen who serves as the head of the group, as the nurturer. The gay “mothers” create a substitute family, standing in for the nuclear family that’s dissolved, or for the family that’s failed to respect their son’s gayness. Many members of houses have been harassed or even thrown into the street by their families, and the house members provide a support system, which can include places to stay, advice, and money.

The Harlem balls, where house members compete for trophies in various gender-generated categories, provide a huge range of competition for every sex, shape and size of house member. I say “every” sex, as many shades of gender are represented at the balls. Men fit into two classifications: “butch



Sylvia Plachy, *Princess Myra, Field Ball At The World, May 1988*

queens” (masculine gays), or “femme queens” (men who dress like women). Women are either “butches” (masculine lesbians) or “best-dressed women” (feminine women, either gay or straight). Yet even at the drag ball, the gender definition is strict. It’s assumed that a “butch,” or very masculine woman, would *never* be heterosexual. Furthermore ball-goers also assume that, whether you date people of your own sex or of the opposite sex, you will always couple with someone of—more or less—the opposite gender. Participants adhere to commonly accepted codes of masculinity and femininity, as if even the

queens—who are true gender astronauts—still require within their spaceship some conventions of the home planet.

“Realness” is perhaps the most important ball concept: a Grand Prize “Femme Queen Realness” winner is the man who best impersonates a woman. In “Butch Queen Realness” the contestants are masculine men who are gay, but who want to be “unspookable,” which means that no one seeing them walk down the street would be able to “spook” them—to know that they’re homosexual. Gay people have almost always had to play the game of Realness to “pass” for straight, either to hold



Jennie Livingston, *Pepper Labelija Walking Fem Queen Executive Realness*, 1985

The ball becomes a chance to impersonate people from a society that consistently excludes poor black and Latino gays from its ranks, while eagerly feeding them television images of white prosperity, white beauty, white straight family life.

onto a job, to keep a community position, or to maintain the respect of family members. "Realness" is a bleak reality for gay people in most cultures, as it is for anyone, gay or straight, who for whatever reason doesn't fit into a conventional idea of manhood or womanhood. Consequences of failing to be "real" range from losing a job because of homophobic employers to suffering the ravages of gay-bashing. Friends of mine, a straight couple who are no longer together, where the woman was tall and handsome, the man, short and androgynous, were constantly pestered by carloads of boys who yelled "Dykes!" Other people, gay and straight, suffer far worse than ugly name-calling, and the statistics on antigay violence, like anti-Semitic and racist violence, are going up. Then there's psychological violence—the necessity of having to explain, "Yes, we gays are human beings too," or "No, I'm not going through a phase, I really am gay," or, "I may 'look like a fag' or 'dress like a lesbian' (whatever that means), but actually, I'm a heterosexual."

The care and expertise with which gender roles are enacted in the ballroom are mirrored by the demand for gender identification in the "outside" world. Except that at the ball, you can always change, from man to woman, from crisp executive to prim schoolgirl to savvy model. Gender roles and even social class become self-expression, self-exploration, even good-humored self-mockery.

Ball categories are designed not just for people of uncommon gender, but also for people who have been excluded from the economic and psychological perks of middle-class life. The ball

becomes a chance to impersonate people from a society that consistently excludes poor black and Latino gays from its ranks, while eagerly feeding them television images of white prosperity, white beauty, white straight family life. In "Executive Realness," ball contestants wear Pierre Cardin suits and carry designer briefcases filled with American Express Gold Cards, copies of the *Wall Street Journal*, and plane tickets.

It is ironic that this particular group of gay men of color should form a world based on celebrating the roles and appearances of a society that shunts them aside. But by exhibiting these exaggerated forms of "correct" gender, ball-goers offer physical proof that gender roles are malleable things, that can be painted on or wiped off, that can be made into a weapon against intolerance. When a 250-pound drag queen in a black dress competes in the "Bridal vs. Widow" category, wiping the tears from her eyes and looking for all the world like a black Magdalen by Titian, there are a lot of AIDS widows (or widowers) in that room who are happy to see her, even knowing she is a gay man impersonating a straight woman mourning a straight man. Here are people who are under fire for their gender crimes, frequently labeled by parents, church, and government *guilty as charged* if they become ill.

"Voguing" creates an even subtler form of gender-warp. Imitating fashion models' poses as they move down a runway, voguing combines the poofery of a model who impersonates a movie queen, with the angularity and speed of an Olympic gymnast. At the ball, voguers compete as individuals or in groups to see who can do the dance best, to see who most resembles the magazine after which the dance was named.

Though voguing began as a way for two house members to battle, it became an art form which symbolically fights the white, straight world that has excluded ball-goers from jobs, from representation in the media, from a sense of belonging to the rest of society. It's ironic—but not surprising—that voguing is being co-opted by the very world of mainstream media that had always kept the ball people at arm's length. The question is, of course, when Madonna makes a million-dollar voguing video, is it still voguing? Will voguing and drag balls, like the hippies' blue jeans and graffiti artists' spray-can become yet another symbol of revolt to be absorbed, packaged and neutered for the mainstream?

There remains a wildness, a realm of possibility about the ball people and the ball world. One house mother, a forty-year-old man who frequently used to dress in drag, had a long-term affair with a masculine lesbian. He adopted skirts, hormones, heels and furs while she donned pants and a jacket, short hair and a swaggering walk. When they had sex was it straight sex or was it some ground-breaking outer limits of sexual communication? Are the two children they have now—a boy and a girl—the products of a union between two gay people? Of two people temporarily playing a reverse-role relationship? Was this what Rilke was writing about? □