

# **Drag Narratives: Staged Gender, Embodiment, and Competition**

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### **Author's declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of London. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed:.....

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## Abstract

This thesis is the outcome of a practice-based research project into contemporary formations of gender and sexuality through the study of drag performance. It is composed of two elements, the film *Dragging the Past* (presented on a DVD) and this written text. The film offers a multi-layered view of the drag performances in Koukles Club, Athens, Greece. The written thesis offers sociological analysis of articulations of self, from both performers and audiences. The purpose of this thesis was to investigate productions of the self through the process of viewing, engaging, and performing in a drag show, and also to examine the ways in which subjects negotiate their gender during this process. Moreover, this study illuminates the deployment of drag narratives, by both drag performers and members of the audience, as tools to create a desired self, always in relation to the other.

A visual ethnography, that uses participant observation and video elicitation as key methods to gather empirical data, provides the foundation for this study. The ethnographic 'I' of the researcher combines with participants in the field and 'together' they produce ethnographic knowledge. Video elicitation interviews capture narratives of embodiment and competition; both film and text reflect that visual methods offer new perspectives on the way subjects form their gender and sexuality.

This study reveals productions of particular kinds of subjects, specifically those that perform gender in relation to the other, while engaged in the process of competition and embodiment (incarnation), while also interrupting and disrupting the other. These themes proved to be central to the narratives participants deployed to perform the self. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that photographs and the act of mirroring are important to the forming of gender and sexuality, as they become tools for the production of the self.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

“Σβήσε το φως” επέμενες  
θυμήθηκα μιαν άλλη μου αγάπη  
τα ήθελε όλα αναμμένα

Δεν ξέρω τι να προτιμήσω –  
μες στο σκοτάδι χάνεται η ασκήμια μου  
μέσα στο φως λάμπει η ομορφιά σου

“Turn off the light,” you insisted –  
I recalled another lover  
who wanted all the lights on.

I no longer know what to choose –  
my ugliness vanishes in the darkness  
your beauty shines in the light.

Ντίνος Χριστιανόπουλος (1979) (Dinos Christianopoulos, ‘Turn off the Light’<sup>1</sup>)

In this poem, gay poet Christianopoulos poses the dilemma of a lover caught between darkness and light, beauty and ugliness. This poem speaks of the humility and the fragility of a lover looking for ideal beauty, a beauty that has to be enjoyed in the bright light. This beauty, however, reflects light upon the other, which challenges the existence and the production of a humble self. Many years after this poem was written, Manos Hadjidakis, one of the most iconic gay Greek composers, added music to it and placed it in a compilation titled *The Songs of the Sin (Τα τραγούδια της αμαρτίας*<sup>2</sup>, 1996). In the liner notes, Hadjidakis describes his first impressions of entering the city of Thessaloniki in 1945. He says “My God, how much sin this city must contain, in order to have so many churches” and further comments “At the same time, I realized that the ancient Eros has not much value in our time, without this unconfessed feeling of sin and guilt that our Byzantine religious heritage gives us” (Hadjidakis, 1996: 5). This thesis is about beauty and ugliness, light and

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

<sup>2</sup> See Χατζιδάκις, Μ. (1996) *Τα Τραγούδια της αμαρτίας* [Audio CD]. Αθήνα: ΣΕΙΠΙΟΣ

darkness, Eros and desire, and the contemplation of these dichotomies within the continuum of the Greek aesthetic. It's about people who express their passions in front of the sparkling eyes of an audience.

This document offers a journey into the lives of a group of people whose beauty shines in the darkness. The idea of this research was born in 2000, in the Koukles Club in Athens Greece, while I was helping a friend with his drag act. Every Saturday night the club hosts drag performances that bring together a diverse group of people. Following in the footsteps of the performers, I began my research. However, my interests have their origins much earlier, probably while I was growing up as a child in a western suburb of Athens. My father, a truck driver, was away from home most of the time. My mother was a housewife, who worked from home using her tailoring skills. As a child, I used to spend my time watching her sewing dresses and imagining that one day I would similarly make dresses for women.

Our house was always busy with women coming to my mother to alter old dresses, due perhaps to their increase/decrease in size, or to make a dress for a casual or formal occasion. My memory is full of these dress fittings. People used to come and go and try on their dresses until the moment they were happy to wear it. I enjoyed listening to their chatty and untroubled conversations about clothes, and, most of all, I liked being able to take part in these performances: I helped my mother by bringing the box with the needles and by holding a big mirror for the women to admire the fit of their new dresses. Through these experiences I realised that the body is not fixed in shape, it is flexible, fluid, and alive. The women that were coming to my mother wanted to improve the way they looked, their femininity, but they also wanted to make a statement by demonstrating that they could afford to have their own personal tailor. Bags full of fabrics came into the house. Silk, velvet,

cotton, and satin were placed on the table to be touched by the sharp blades of scissors. Thinking about my experiences sociologically, these dresses were not only a symbol of an 'ideal' femininity, but they could be seen in sociological terms as reflections of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) and signs of the desire for social respectability (Skeggs, 1997).

That early part of my life was full of contradictions due to my father's gambling habits. My parents' closet was proof of that; my mother had very few clothes and most of them were dark, discrete, plain, and Doric. These were clothes that were worn in the house or on a Sunday visit to the church. My father, on the other hand, had lots of clothes with fine fabrics; expensive suits and shirts with cufflinks. These clothes were not for his work, but were worn on his nights out. Sometimes I thought my father's clothes were calibrated to match his activities. When he was wearing his work clothes the fridge was full; when he was wearing his suits the fridge was empty for days. The gender roles I witnessed in my family at that time reflected those described by ethnographers in the 60s, 70s and 80s; masculinity was associated with public space, and femininity with the domestic (du Boulay, 1974; Hirschon, 1978; Dubisch, 1986, 1995; Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991). My father was always out and my mother was always at home, but at the same time my mother had a sense of masculinity<sup>3</sup> both in public and domestic space.

While my mother worked, I used to collect the small pieces of fabric that dropped onto the floor. Lacking children's toys, I used to play with colourful swatches, sharp scissors, and needles with thread. I enjoyed combining different fabrics and making dresses/clothes for dolls. The problem was that I did not have a doll to put the

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<sup>3</sup>Cowan (1990), Faubion (1993) and Kirtsoglou (2004) describe that women could enter the public 'masculine' space as long as they maintain the domestic space also and this action was praised.

clothes on. I needed a body. I remember two plastic dolls that my sister kept on her bed. From time to time I used to play with them. One day, the dolls were gone. I guess my mother was terrified by the idea of me playing with dolls and she threw them away. For many years, there weren't any toys in the house.

When I was ten years old, having collected different loose parts of dolls from the streets for many months, I assembled a doll's body. To me, it was like a small miracle. First I found the legs, and then a torso with arms. The head came last, and it was badly damaged with a short uneven haircut, rather different to the long blond hair I had hoped for. Somehow I managed to put all of these different parts together and make a complete body. Picturing it in my mind today, I would say it looked like a Frankenstein doll. But at that time I was just happy to have a body for the clothes I was making. I used to hide the doll in the storage space in the old fridge. One day the doll disappeared. I asked my mum and she replied that she threw it away. I was very upset and sad, and I felt both guilty and horrified. Perhaps my sense of guilt was because I felt I was doing something I shouldn't do. I could see that my parents would never buy me a doll, or even any other toy, whether it was for boys or girls. So I continued making doll dresses, but without a body. Eventually the body I was missing entered my childhood drawings. Sometimes I dreamt of creating my body with the sewing machine.

At fourteen years old, on one of the days that my father was home, he proclaimed 'I hope you are not a poustis<sup>4</sup>.' I had no idea what a poustis was, but from the tone of his voice I knew it was something bad. My sister, being older, tried to protect me, by telling my father to stop saying things like that. Many years later, while I was having

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<sup>4</sup> Poustis in the Greek society has a negative connotation of the passive homosexual, who is immoral and evil; see Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991:223.

a drink in Koukles Club on a quiet Wednesday night, my father's words came back to me as I got involved in a discussion with three others: Elena, a transsexual and barwoman of the club; Mania, a transvestite and drag performer; and Aris, a regular gay client. They shared their childhood stories with me. I realised they were extremely similar to mine. Yet the four of us had taken starkly different routes from those beginnings.

When I was 17 years old, I met two guys in my high school that became and remain my best friends. Their names are Fokas and Lambros. Fokas has always been very funny and witty. He was quite popular at school due to his extraordinary performing skills. He could make the whole class burst into laughter just by imitating Michael Jackson or Madonna. He has a natural talent for dancing and comic performances. Fokas was also the first gay person I ever met. Lambros, too, is very gifted and creative; he impressed me with his multiple talents in painting, singing, playing the guitar, dancing, and acting. He was the second gay person I met.

Years later I realised that, apart from our common sexual orientation, we shared a common interest in clothes, though each from a different perspective. Lambros was very creative in choosing and combining clothes and fabrics, with an approach similar to a stylist in a fashion magazine, knowing exactly what was on the market and what the latest trends were in makeup. At the same time, he was a very talented designer of women's clothes, something his mother was proud of. Fokas, on the other hand, employed a more practical approach with regard to clothes. He used to tell me stories of making dresses from his bed sheets. He could make a dress with just a piece of fabric and two pins, creating a whole world of ideas and fantasies literally out of nothing.

Both Fokas and Lambros performed publicly in dresses. They took a piece of fabric, folded it around their body, placed a few strategic stitches, and went out and performed in our home parties. Both of them had a sense of fluidity and freedom in combining a dress with a performance. Compared to Fokas and Lambros, I was never such a performer. I never felt confident dancing and getting dressed up, nor did I have their desire to attempt to mimic a woman. The sense of guilt and disapproval, provoked by the comments of my parents and others in the neighbourhood, was lasting and contributed to my lack of confidence. I was very attracted to performance but I just couldn't do it. Instead I was the groupie.

There were so many reasons that stopped me from performing. I was shy and felt uncomfortable with my body. I had a sense I couldn't control it, order it, or coordinate it with the others. My worst fear was ruining a performance with my undisciplined body. Now, as I look back, I can see that in fact my friends were vehicles for expressing my own kind of performance practice. They were the bodies onto which I could put my clothes, my desires, my words, and my performance. Instead of performing, I chose to engage in dressmaking. I knew, for example, how to fold and cut a fabric into different pieces and then combine them in order to create a proper dress. I had primary knowledge that allowed me to perceive the structure of a dress and create a finished product.

Based on our shared love of clothes, we used to organize home parties with drag performances. Fokas and Lambros performed and I acted as assistant. As the parties got bigger, we decided to form a group with three more friends, Vaios, Sotiris and Katia, in order to organise parties for clubs. We called the group 'Express Yourself'<sup>5</sup>. After three years and a numerous successful parties, Lambros decided to quit drag

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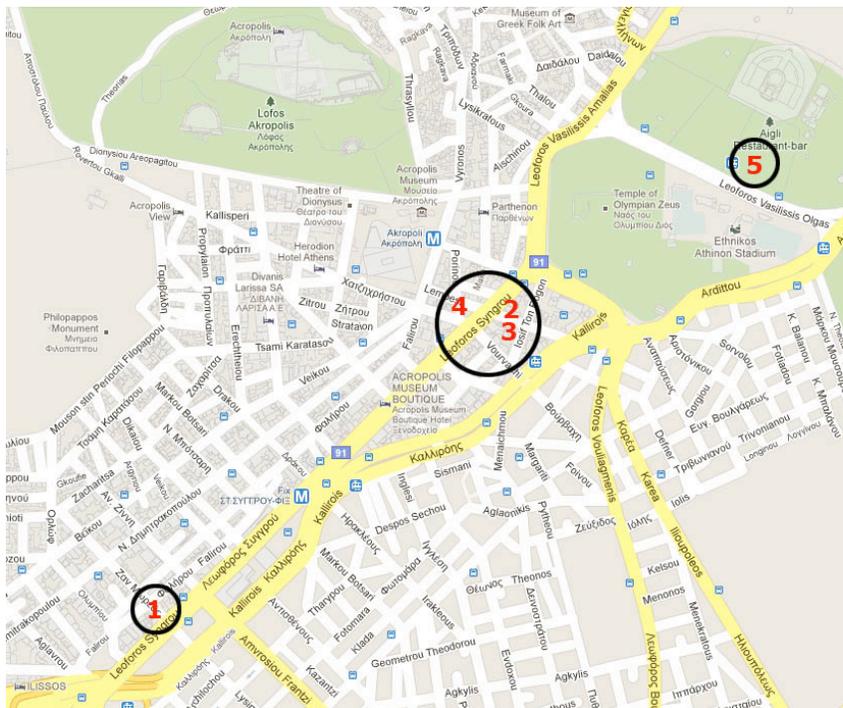
<sup>5</sup> The name was after the song of Madonna with the same name.

shows. Only Fokas continued to perform in a small club called Koukles. From time to time I used to go and see him. Koukles club incorporates a cabaret, very different to other clubs or bars in Athens. The main attraction of the club is the drag show that takes place every Saturday from the beginning of November to the end of April.

Drag shows affected my life. Although I never performed in drag, I was highly engaged in the preparation of the shows. I gave advice and shopped for clothes and cosmetics with my friends. In a metaphorical way, I was holding up a mirror for my friends, by telling them what was right and what needed improvement. I was able to hide my body behind the mirror and reflect the drag performance. In time this mirror evolved into a camera. I started taking photographs of my friends dressed in both 'male' and 'female' outfits. By placing myself behind the camera I felt able to transform my body into an invisible, flexible being. By documenting the drag show I felt that I was becoming a part of it.

Greek drag performances do not have the same popularity and visibility as those performed in London and big American cities (Newton, 1979; Ackroyd, 1979; Fleisher, 1996; Schacht, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Rupp and Taylor, 2003, 2004). Drag performances in Great Britain and the United States have a long history as entrainment forms, practiced, usually, by gay men imitating women (Senelick, 2000). In Greece, drag performances started mainly in gay bars and clubs, performed mainly by gay performers, and this is how I witnessed it during my coming out years. With the years this faded. In the mid 1990s, Marylou, owner of Koukles Club, introduced drag to her trans clientele. Trans performers gave new life to the drag culture in Athens. Now the majority of the performers in Koukles Club are trans with only a few exceptions, like Fokas. The audience for these shows is a mixed crowd of men, women, queers, heterosexuals, tourists, and locals. Koukles club

holds the longest running drag show in Athens, and they celebrated their eighteenth birthday in 2010. In the first few years, the club was so popular that there were drag performances every night. It was something new in Athens, and it brought together many curious Athenians and international artists. Apart from Koukles Club, a few gay clubs sporadically presented drag performances with great success. The crowd visiting the Koukaki area of Athens late at night is a mix of homosexual and heterosexual, seeking sexual excitement. Apart from the gay clubs there are many strip tease clubs with colourful neon signs lighting up the street. The Koukles Club is positioned at the beginning of Syngrou Avenue (see Figure 1), one of the busiest avenues of Athens, that connects the centre with the sea. The club is close to the new Acropolis Museum, the temple of Olympian Zeus, and the national garden. It is a very busy, vibrant part of the city, where many aspects of Greek culture coexist. The ancient ruins meet the modern busy avenue where many five star hotels are based, just a few blocks away from the red light district and the gay bars.



1. Koukles Club
2. Lamda Club (Gay)
3. Granazi Club (Gay)
4. Polichromo Club (Gay)
5. National Gardens

Figure 1: Map of Athens

Apart from Koukles Club there are a few other places in the area where my friends and I used to hang out in the late 1990s. A night out would start around midnight in Lamda club for a few drinks, then around 2:00 a.m. we would go to Koukles Club to see the drag shows. Around 4:00 in the morning it was to the national gardens for cruising, walking and socialising with other people. The thick darkness made everything easier for everyone; one could talk, touch and have sex in public. It was like making love to shadows. Yet the park also posed many risks. Both gay bashers and police could spoil your night. You could end up beaten and robbed by the bashers or ridiculed by the police, so you had to be careful. Gay places were few, so we used to go to some 'gay-friendly' spaces like cafes and bars. We were allowed entry, as everyone wanted the pink Drachma. But there were a few rules that had to be followed regarding behaviour. Gay and lesbian couples could not hold hands or kiss in these spaces. Those who broke the rules were kicked out of the bars. Kisses among homosexuals caused violent reactions among the public. Homophobia was not only part of the everyday life of a queer subject but was also present in the Greek media. In November 2003, the Greek national council for radio and television fined Mega channel, one of the largest private TV networks in Greece, 100,000 Euros for having aired a kiss between two male characters on the popular TV show 'Klise ta matia' ('Close Your Eyes') (Κατσαγιάννη, 2010).

The life of a queer subject in Greece is bound up with his/her legal rights. Although homosexual practice was decriminalized in 1951, it wasn't until 2005 that the first gay pride<sup>6</sup> march took place in Athens. Male and female same sex couples are legal in Greece; however, they do not have the same legal protection as heterosexual couples. The Greek juridical system and Greek laws have not granted the same

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<sup>6</sup> The first Gay pride in New York was in 1970s (Young, 1992) and in London in 1972 (Hughes, 2006)

rights to queers as have most countries in the rest of western and northern Europe (Γαλάνης 2010). There is an ongoing debate about the legal status of the same sex couple, which recently was covered by the Greek media due to a same sex wedding that was annulled by the authorities in 2009 (Γαλάνης 2010; BBC News, 2008<sup>7</sup>).

Although there is an increasing visibility of homosexuality in the Greek media, the Greek juridical system, and in Greek (mainly Athenian) public space, homosexuality as a subject in Greek scholarship has only been researched on a limited scale (Kirtsoglou, 2004: 21). In particular, the relation of drag to homosexuality, sexuality, and gender has not been previously researched in Greek scholarship; this is the gap this thesis aims to tackle.

The main research focus of this thesis is the relationship of drag performance to gender and productions of the self. This relationship will be studied by looking at drag performances and the layered relationships that develop between drag performers and audiences during the shows. The methodology, and the visual mixed-methods used to analyse this relationship, is part of the unique contribution of this study. This thesis is important, as it will shed light on the way Greek ethnographic studies might understand, research, and position drag and gender formations in Greek scholarship; it will also contribute to wider sociological debates on drag and gender formations.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the current debates on drag and build the literature review. I examine the key theoretical literature on gender and

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<sup>7</sup> See "Greece sees first gay 'marriage'". BBC News. 3 June 2008. Retrieved 7 May 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7432949.stm>.

drag performance, and in particular I argue that, although drag has been widely used and discussed in gender theory, the role of the audience has received little attention. An examination of gender literature reveals a gap in the scholarship about the role of the audience, which could help to illuminate contemporary formations of gender and sexualities in this arena. My field site, the Koukles Club in Athens, is the backdrop for this review. I will highlight the limited Greek literature on drag and gender and argue that the dominant heterosexism in the existing analytic frameworks has left many subjects and their practices unnoticed. In common with other scholars I explore drag performance, and its context, in order to understand the ways subjects articulate their gender. Here, I also discuss the debate about the subverting or reinforcing power of drag towards binary gender formations and heteronormativity. In this review, I discuss the works of feminists, lesbian and gay theorists, and transgender theorists in reviewing sex, gender, and sexuality. Through this discussion I aim to show the complexities of the notions presented, highlight the gaps, and explain the need for further research based on empirical examples. I follow a historical thread exploring the formation of female impersonation and drag performance that connects drag with particular gender subjectivities. I identify these gaps in particular: the process performers follow in embodying the impersonation on stage; the morphology of the club; and group dynamics. All are explored further in this thesis. I discuss the documentary film *Paris is Burning (1991)*, which is a key film in the academic literature on drag, and I argue the need to pay attention to the aspect of *competition* in the formation of drag, something that has received little attention in existing debates. My interest is in how empirical research, grounded on lived experience and theoretical frameworks, can help to explain this experience sociologically.

From the literature review I determined the focus for my fieldwork, which revolved around the role of the drag performance in relation to binary gender norms and productions of gendered subjectivities. Thus the research aims to tackle the following questions: What is the role of drag performance in subverting or reinforcing binary gender norms and heteronormativity, and how is this achieved? What is the significance of drag to the body and gender of performers? How does drag affect the production of the self? How are drag performances received and understood by Greek audiences, particularly in relation to the production of gendered subjectivities? As it emerged from the literature review, the theme of competition will be further explored. More specifically the research questions the role of competition in drag, and queries how it affects the gender and sexuality of performers and audiences. Lastly this thesis probes the question of how the morphology of Koukles Club shapes the relationship between performers and audiences and what affect this has on performances.

In chapter three I explain the methodology I used to answer my research questions and contextualize the production of a 60 minute film as the practice based component of the visual sociology PhD. I outline some of the methodological issues and debates encountered in researching the key themes of this thesis: drag, gender, sexuality, and competition. I explain and ground the use of video as part of my methodology, specifically referencing current debates in visual sociology and anthropology. I argue that video elicitation offers new perspectives on the way subjects form their gender and sexuality. I discuss the epistemological groundings of this thesis on feminism and also the impact of new media technologies on the empirical research and their implications for this study. I argue that the position of the researcher in the narration of the ethnographic knowledge, using autobiographical elements and visual methods, creates an experimental text that

visual sociology addresses both in its content and its form. I discuss the use of mixed methods in the field, reflecting on reflexive participant observation, video elicitation, photography, and their points of interconnection.

Chapters four and five focus on the analysis of interviews. Chapter four examines the performers' views on drag. Through these narratives the themes of competition and embodiment emerge, touching upon the production of gender. I argue that drag shows become the site of losing the self and embodying the other. Performers reject the classic definition of drag and redefine it — from female impersonation (μίμηση) to female embodiment (ενσάρκωση). The competition has the following feature: the main aim is to achieve the best 'embodiment (incarnation) of the star'. This incarnation does not occur unchallenged by others. Performers follow, with fellow performers and audience members, a process of 'bitching about the other (κράξιμο)', or trying to 'undo the other' with many 'interruptions and disruptions' of the incarnation. There is constant 'judgement' of the incarnation with 'winners and losers'. I explore the way competition functions among the group, and discuss areas of conflict — hair, body, clothes, and 'stardom'.

Chapter five is based on interviews from both performers and members of the audience. In this chapter I examine the importance of the audience for the show, as in a sense they are the ones who validate a star's embodiment. I also investigate aspects of competition and the significance they have to gender performances for performers and members of the audience. I argue that during the show, members of the audience create narratives where they can freely perform their gender and express their desires. Finally, following on from the debate about the subverting power of drag as discussed in the literature review, I suggest that drag is a complex phenomena; it can include in its constituency both a subverting and reinforcing

power towards heterosexual norms. The way drag is performed in Koukles Club, appears to subvert binary gender norms and heteronormativity, and reinforces a desire to move beyond fixed locations of gender.

Chapter six examines the use of mirrors and photography among performers and members of the audience. In particular I discuss the mirror as an object through which performers literally and metaphorically reflect on the self and the other, and I examine further the consequences this act brings to the relationships developed. I also question the impact mirrors have had in the shaping of this research, in particular by analysing the literal reflection of the researcher in the mirror while conducting participant observation. I discuss the role of photography in the interrelationships among performers while reflecting on two photo shoots<sup>8</sup> that I conducted in and for the club. I argue that the way photographs are used in the club reveals aspects of the competition of embodiment, but the photos also depict the hierarchy of power and authority among performers. In chapter seven, I offer my conclusions.

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<sup>8</sup> A sample of the photographs I did in the club was used in titles of the film. These photographs can also be found in Appendix.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### Introduction

In this chapter I explore the literature and theories pertaining to gender and drag, particularly interrogating the topics through a Greek context. In the first section I will argue that drag performance has been influential in the theorisation of queer gender in specific, and gender theory in general, however, the role of the audience in drag performance has received little research; I argue that analysis of this audience promotes a greater understanding of contemporary gender and sexuality.

Additionally I will explore the limited Greek literature; in particular I will examine the complexities and the limitations of the analytic frameworks used to study not only drag, but also sexualities outside of the heterosexual matrix. The existing hegemonic analytic frameworks have not produced extended research on lives outside of heterosexual norms. I will argue that there is a lack of ethnographic literature associated with gender linked to particular spaces, and I contend that studying gender roles through relationships in the family, marriage, and kinship has rendered homosexuality and drag performance 'non-existent'. Connecting gender to particular spaces, such as masculinity with public space and femininity with the domestic, turns the gay bar into a non-space. Another reason for this lack of ethnographic research, in Greece in particular, lies in the conservative attitude of Greek society towards alternative sexualities. (For example, this conservatism punished a researcher who worked on these subjects with imprisonment (Magrini, 2003)). I will offer a recent example of drag performance in relation to queer subjectivity, the film *Strella* (2009), creates a space of visibility and a point of discussion in the Greek landscape.

When I refer to queer in this thesis, I use McNulty's (1993) account, and he states:

"The term Queer is manifold; it seeks to encompass that which has been excluded, ridiculed, oppressed. Life caught in the margins. Sex yes, and sexuality, but also gender, race, class, and that which refuses easy taxonomy and suffers the fate of difference. A philosophy never fixed nor realized, but a politics of shared struggle, and a striving for community." (McNulty 1993: 12)

The term queer is not very popular in the Greek vernacular, and only a few research participants used it. However, some of the gender performances observed in the field could be described as queer according to gender theory.

In the second section I shall discuss the debate about the subverting or reinforcing power drag has towards maintaining binary gender formations and heteronormativity. Here I draw upon wider sociological debates on sex, gender, and sexuality, arguing that the sociology of gender can provide analytic frameworks to help understand and explain gendered subjects and their behaviours towards others. However, within these debates I will highlight the need for further empirical research on drag performance in relation to queer subjectivity. Within these debates I will question the role of the audience, as the audience can provide important information about the function of the relationship of drag to formations of gender subjectivity. The debates reveal the limitations of the existing representational texts and call for analysis of additional areas of subjugated knowledge.

In the last section I will provide an historical analysis of drag to demonstrate its relation to queer subjectivity, and question why there is a need to see drag through the perspective of the audience. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the gap in the existing literature, to uncover questions that need further research, and to highlight the need for more visual empirical research.

## 2.1 The study of Drag in Greece

There is a lack of ethnographic research on Greek drag performance, and in this section I will unfold some of the possible reasons for this. I argue that this lacuna is because female drag was connected with homosexuality in an era of valorised Greek male masculinity. Additionally, as Kirtsoglou states, “homosexual<sup>9</sup> relations between either men or women in Greece is a topic that lacks ethnographic substantiation” (Kirtsoglou, 2004: 21). The limited research available presents male homosexuals as effeminate individuals (Campbell, 1964; Brandes, 1981), and this connection could partly shed light on the limited research on drag.

Many ethnographers of the Mediterranean have uncovered an “exaggerated horror at homosexuality” which is seen as involving an “active” or supermasculine man with a “passive” or “woman-like” one (Campbell, 1964; Brandes, 1981; Gilmore 1987; Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991). This stance cannot justify the level of moral stigma attached to the poustis<sup>10</sup> (πούστης) (passive homosexual) in Greek society. Passive homosexuals are accused of lacking full humanity and their moral weakness exposes them to all sorts of evil dispositions (du Boulay, 1974:105; Herzfeld, 1985: 77; Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991). “Poustis comes to be a synonym for a liar or thief, a man without dignity, and it strongly contrasts with the characterization of the man who adopts the male role and who may claim a supermale reputation, much as he might if he consorted with a prostitute” (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991: 223).

Faubion supports the earlier claim of the passive homosexual and the supermale and he claims that the male homosexual behaviour in Athens is often trapped in the

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<sup>9</sup> Homosexuality in ancient Greece and how close Greek pederasty resembles modern homosexuality has been researched in the work of K. J. Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* (1978), David M. Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990), John J. Winkler's *The Constraints of Desire* (1990), and Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976).

<sup>10</sup> Riedel, B., (2009: 90) suggests that poustis “indicates not only sexual passivity but also femininity and conniving”.

bipolar model of the penetrating versus penetrated (Faubion, 1993: 220; Loizos, 1994; Yannakopoulos, 2001: 172). I argue that this negative image of male homosexuality pushed many people in to their closet, thus avoiding any behaviour with effeminate connotations.

Latent homosexual connotations, or any female behaviour adopted by a male, have severe consequences to the life of the male. Kirtsoglou claims "Greek men are 'haunted' by the possibility of being associated with female behavioural roles and attributes, since such an identification could have possibly effeminising effects with devastating results on their masculinity" (Kirtsoglou, 2004: 22, original emphasis). Women, on the other hand, can have a more masculine behaviour and men praise it, as long as women do not abandon their domestic world (Cowan, 1990; Faubion, 1993; Kirtsoglou, 2004). Female homosexuality is absent from most ethnographic accounts; it is a sexual behaviour that, although existent, as Kirtsoglou supports, is largely overlooked and unrecognized by virtually all institutions (cf. Faubion, 1993; Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991). I believe that drag has been overlooked in a similar way to female homosexuality.

Furthermore, the disregard of drag as an event in the Greek context could be explained due to its unique character and location, as it is performed beyond domestic and public spaces in a rather semi-public venue with limited accessibility to the general public — that of the gay bar. In Greece gender has been studied through the lens of the cultural and moral values of honour and shame<sup>11</sup>, as in other countries of the Mediterranean. This code unites ideas about power, sexuality, and gender relationships with a rigid spatial and behavioural division between women and men. According to this code, a family's standing within the community depends

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<sup>11</sup> See Peristiany, 1965; Campbell, 1964.

on the sex-linked maintenance of its reputation (Dubisch, 1995: 196). The public sphere is the space where the male has to defend his reputation. An honourable male has to protect the material interests of the family, react to possible insults, and at the same time safeguard the sexual chastity of other members of the family (Dubisch, 1995: 196). "Women on the other hand, preserve honour by cultivating their sense of shame" (Gemzöe, 2000: 5). The domestic sphere is mainly where women have to defend their reputation. Women should behave in a moral, modest, virtuous manner, and fulfil their duties as mothers, wives, and sisters. (Dubisch, 1995:196). Cowan, in her book *Dance and Body Politics in Northern Greece* (1990), argues that "there has been a tendency, both in the early (anthropological) studies and in the later work they inspired, to present gender as a set of essential and relatively fixed meanings, out of which a fairly rigid set of gender roles arises" (Cowan, 1990: 9, original emphasis). The honour and shame axis of analysing gender was criticised, due to its limitation of portraying women as passive and restricted in the domestic sphere while men were presented as active in the public sphere (Goddard, 1994; Dubisch, 1995: 199). I argue that the honour and shame axis overlooked activities like drag and aspects of homosexuality, which take place beyond the domestic and public domain. This is important to note because as there was no space for homosexuality in Greek society there was little research conducted into it.

Similar to the honour and shame framework, the model of kinship, which was used to analyse gender and was criticized due to its limitation to grasp the complexity of Greek society, also overlooked drag. As Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991: 4) argue "Greece is a 'complex' society, that is, a society in which some of the functions of kinship are performed by other formal institutions, but also one in which there are contexts other than marriage, diverse models of identity and personhood that cannot

be understood within frameworks made for the study of 'simple' societies" (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991: 4, original emphasis). Goddard argues that the kinship framework "privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes alternative sexualities, as individuals and relationships are saturated with idioms derived from kinship" (1991: 83). This is important to know because the kinship framework cannot be used to analyse sexualities, which are located outside the strict and limited definitions of kinship sexualities.

Contrary to the existing frameworks of honour and shame, and kinship, there are two additional models that present overlooked aspects and activities in Greek society that inform the analysis in this thesis. There are two texts that appeared in the early sixties and early seventies, which have received little attention by the public, and in one case the publication caused the author to be imprisoned as a result of his research (Αγγέλου 2005<sup>12</sup>). Costas Taktsis novel *The Third Wedding (Το Τρίτο Στεφάνι)* offers an alternative view on gender roles. Taktsis portrays the life stories of two middle class women in the decades between the 40s and the 60s in Athens. One of the women, Nina, who is presented as a powerful and active character, is in control of her life and she even marries three times; something that most women wouldn't be able to do at that time. Taktsis worked with notions of masculinity and stereotypes of men and he explained that he presented an inverted picture of gender stereotypes (active women instead of passive) in his novel because that was what he saw in reality (Tziovas, 2003). The novel was published privately in Athens in November 1962 after being rejected by publishers. It was reissued ten years later by the publishing house 'Ermis' in 1972. This is a sign that Greek critics and readers did

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<sup>12</sup> Αγγέλου, Τ. (2005, October - November). Μπενάβετε Καλιαρντά; Retrieved November, 13, 2011, from 10% Magazine, Τεύχος 12, Service website: <http://www.10percent.gr/old/issues/200510/09.html>

not initially welcome the novel, though later in the 1980s and 1990s it was appreciated and became popular (Tziovas, 2003).

The second case is the ethnographic work of Elias Petropoulos on Greek homosexual argot in his book *Kaliarda (Καλιαρντά)* (first edition in 1971). Petropoulos worked with homosexuals and transvestites to create a dictionary of Greek homosexual slang. He argued that kaliarda is an artificial language that places homosexuals in an enclosed group. Through this study it is possible to observe how homosexuals created a subculture of slang in order to protect themselves from outsiders and to communicate with each other. Through this book Petropoulos offered a discourse about homosexuality that was partly ignored in the existing frameworks of analysing gender. As a result of the publication of this book, Petropoulos was punished by the military dictatorship and sentenced to seven months in prison (Magrini, 2003). The poor sales, the author's difficulty with publication, and the risk of imprisonment are indications of a patriarchal, conservative society. The reception of these two texts can partly explain the lack of research on Greek drag performance.

The diversity of Greek culture, in combination with the wide variety of discourses on sexuality, which is present in the work of many ethnographers, offers the possibility of analyzing gender within its own plurality and outside of the conventional homogeneous matrix (Faubion, 1993; Herzfeld, 1986; Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991; Panourgia, 1995; Kirtsoglou, 2004). One no longer can "assume consensus about the meanings of male and female in contemporary Greece" (Cowan, 1991: 201). Kirtsoglou proposes that "When theorising same-sex behaviour, however, one has to acknowledge that s/he is dealing with 'homosexualities', rather than homosexuality, multiple and variant sexual expressions that carry distinct meanings and can only be analysed in their cultural, social and historical context" (Kirtsoglou,

2004: 26, original emphasis). In a similar way I maintain that Greek drag should be analysed within its own plurality, based on the lived experiences of the performers who come from different locations of homosexualities and transexualities.

## 2.2 Stella, Queer Greece

A recent example of the connection of drag performance to Greek queer<sup>13</sup> subjectivity comes from the film *Strella* (2009) by Panos Koutras. The plot of the film revolves around of the lives of two characters and a secret that bonds them together. George is released from prison after 14 years of incarceration for a murder he committed in his small Greek village. He spends his first night out in a cheap downtown hotel in Athens, where he meets Stella, a young transsexual prostitute. The aspect of the film that I want to highlight is the role of drag performance and its connection to gender. Stella works in Koukles Club in Athens, as a drag queen performing Maria Callas (see Figure 2). The drag stage gives Stella the opportunity to perform the eternal femininity of Maria Callas and to get recognition of her gender performance.



Figure 2: Stills of Mina Orfanou performing as Maria Callas in the Film *Strella* (2009)

There is a gap in the Greek scholarship exploring drag performance in relation to homosexual and transsexual subjects in Greek society. As there is not enough

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term queer as an umbrella term to include all homosexualities and transexualities.

existing research analysing the topic, I will use existing sociological theories of gender in its broad sense to explore the different ways subjects may articulate their gender and sexuality in relation to drag performance. Through the sociological framework I will shed light on the ways subjects understand their gender. In the next section I will explore bodies of work that discuss gender, subjectivity and sexuality, which will provide a framework for considering the evidence I will analyse in subsequent chapters.

## **2.3 Sociological approaches to sexuality and gender**

In this research I follow Seidman's view on sexuality. Seidman argues that we have to "view sex in sociology" (Seidman, 2003: xiii). His rationale is based on his claim that "a social view encourages a public discussion of the morality and politics of sexuality, and also forces us to live with considerable moral uncertainty about sexual behaviour" (ibid: xviii). It is precisely to this point of Seidman that this thesis aims to contribute: to create a public discussion on drag, and its relations to sexuality and gender, while pushing further this moral uncertainty in the Greek context. Seidman comments on Freud's work and says, "although Freud saw sex as rooted in biological based drives and physical pressures, Freud approached sexuality as a social phenomenon" (ibid: 11). Freud explored family dynamics to understand the ways in which they shape an individual's sexuality. Seidman states "The sexual drama is a family<sup>14</sup> drama – and therefore a social – drama" (ibid: 11). Weeks also suggests:

"There are many different family forms especially within highly industrialized, Western societies - between different classes, and different geographic, religious, racial and ethnic groups. Today many people speak of 'families of choice' based on friendships networks and chosen kin. There are 'non-heterosexual families' as well as traditional families residing next to each other, more or less in harmony." (Weeks 2003: 24, original emphasis)

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<sup>14</sup> I want to make a link here and expand on the notion of the family. A family could be wide umbrella term, where individuals choose whom they consider to be their mother and siblings, those other than their family of origin.

Although psychoanalysis originated by working on sexuality, as Seidman argues it was the three social theories, Marxism, Feminism, and social constructionism, that developed a consistent social perspective on sexuality. This thesis will examine essentialist approaches of feminist theory on gender and sexuality in combination with trans theory. This combination will allow a closer view into the everyday realities of gender and sexuality as a lived experience, while at the same time allow me to maintain a reflexive approach to this research. I will discuss this framework in later sections.

Koukles Club can be seen as a home, and a family, but also as a cultural setting for all the individuals who enter its doors on a regular basis. Jeffrey Weeks suggests seeing “sexuality not as a primordially ‘natural’ phenomenon but rather as a product of social and historical forces” and that “Sexuality is shaped by social factors” (Weeks 2003: 18, original emphasis). Weeks supports his position by following a historical and social analysis of the notion of sexuality. He suggests:

“What we define as ‘sexuality’ is an historical construction, which brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities, and cultural forms — gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires, fantasies, erotic practices, institutions and values — which need not be linked together, and in other cultures have not been [...] the capacities of the body and the psyche are given meaning only in social relations”. (Weeks 2003: 7-8, original emphasis)

Weeks also highlights that “the forces that shape and mould the erotic possibilities of the body, vary from society to society” (Weeks 2003: 7). Kimmel and Fracher (2005) argue for sexuality as a cultural learning. They suggest “That we are sexual is determined by a biological imperative toward reproduction, but how we are sexual—where, when, how often, with whom, and why—has to do with cultural learning, with meanings transmitted in a cultural setting” (Kimmel and Fracher 2005: 141). I adopt Weeks’ approach by focusing in this thesis on the forces that Greek society places

around bodies in order to understand the ways in which Greek subjects negotiate and construct their gender and sexuality. At the core of this research will be analysis that considers Koukles Club as a family of choice but also as a cultural setting, where individuals live their lives.

Family plays an important role to the gender articulations and sexualities encountered during this research. For many of the participants, Koukles Club was a family of choice. It was a place that bonded people together but it was also an arena where many family dramas took place. It was a place called home. Or in a wider context, participants identified Koukles Club as the base where everything possible could happen, a place where they could freely express their sexual desires towards others.

Socially shaped sexuality is highly connected to gender formations. Kimmel and Fracher, while working on notions of masculinity, commented on the relationship between sexuality and gender:

“If sexuality is constructed, perhaps the most significant element of the construction—the foundation upon which we construct our sexuality—is gender. For men, the notion of masculinity, the cultural definition of manhood, serves as the primary building block of sexuality. It is through our understanding of masculinity that we construct a sexuality, and it is through our sexualities that we confirm the successful construction of our gender identity. Gender informs sexuality; sexuality confirms gender. Thus men have much at stake when they confront a sexual problem: they risk their self-image as men”. (Kimmel and Fracher 2005: 142)

In this quotation Kimmel and Fracher argue that gender is the foundation upon which an individual builds sexuality. The connection of sexuality and gender helps one to build an image of the self. This thesis aims to explore the role of drag and productions of the self, with subjects that engage in drag narratives while making sense of their own sexualities and genders.

In order to unpack the family relations, cultural settings, and social factors within which a subject is located, I will initially explore the analytic frameworks of feminist theorists (cultural feminists), trans theorists, Foucault, Butler, and Kosofsky Sedgwick. These analytic lenses will be used to answer the research questions in this thesis, which revolve around the gender and sexuality of a subject and his or her relation to drag.

Koukles Club attracts a wide variety of people from different gender and sexual locations. The categorization of the participants into sexual subjects is a rather difficult task. Early feminists (Daly, 1978; Rich, 1977, 1979) embarked on a journey to challenge the categories of subjects defined by male supremacy, and in particular the concept and the category of the woman. Their point of departure was the re-evaluation of social theory and practice from a woman's point of view (Alcoff 1988: 404). The concept of woman, they argue, is problematic, as it is loaded with definitions and determinations coming from a male point of view (Alcoff, 1988:405). In order to speak for women, feminists had to first define what a woman is. Cultural feminists<sup>15</sup> (Daly, 1978; Rich, 1977, 1979) departing from essentialism<sup>16</sup>, challenged the definition given by men and argued for a definition of woman based partly on undervalued female attributes and female anatomy. As Alcoff says, "For cultural feminists, the enemy of women is not merely a social system or economic institution or set of backward beliefs but masculinity itself and in some cases male biology" (Alcoff, 1988: 408). The response to the concept of woman proposed by cultural

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<sup>15</sup> The trend in feminism that defends this approach is defined by Alice Echols. See Alice Echols, "The New Feminism of Yin and Yang," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983:439-59).

<sup>16</sup> See Taylor and Rupp, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism" *Signs*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 32-61.

feminists has certain limitations, as it is based on biological aspects which create a fixed and rather homogenized portrait of woman. The part of cultural feminism that I use in this thesis is their departure point, the need to re-discuss the point of view of the subject.

Many theorists have challenged understandings and conceptualisations of gender and sexual identity as the fixed state of a subject with claims of natural origin (Foucault, 1998; Weeks, 2003; Butler, 1993, 2006; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1990; Seidman, 2003; Hines, 2010). Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1998) challenges the idea of a fixed heterosexual identity defined as natural through a historic account of constructions of sexuality. Foucault's insight into social norms inspired the work of many lesbian and gay theorists who question and challenge 'heterosexuality as naturalized and normalized' (Richardson, 1996, 2000; Richardson and Seidman, 2002: 7).

Butler, who also drew upon Foucault, proposes a gendered self constituted in time through the stylization of the body, and challenges identity categories of stereotypically binary hetero/homo sexualities as 'natural' and 'unnatural'. Butler proposes a performative theory of gender based on a linguistic model of performativity<sup>17</sup>, which I adopt in this thesis. Butler's work challenges the belief in two opposing genders, man/woman, and heterosexuality as natural, and she questions the work of many feminists<sup>18</sup> who perceived woman as a single category/subject. She asks feminists "Is the construction of the category of woman as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender

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<sup>17</sup> The notion of performativity, which is derived from speech act theory and owes an intellectual debt to the philosophical/linguistic work of J. L. Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things With Words*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

<sup>18</sup> The feminists Butler (2006: 41) addresses are the Cultural feminists (essentialism) that I discussed earlier. See Daly 1978, and Rich 1977, 1979.

relations?" (Butler, 2006: 7). Early feminists supported heterosexuality and binary gender assumptions by speaking on behalf of a stable woman/subject category (Butler, 2006: 41). Butler instead suggests that the subject is a performative construct. Butler proposed that there is no core gender identity, nor true or false gender (Butler, 2006: 186). We perform our gender identity. These gender performances are parodies of other parodies as there is no original gender identity (Butler, 2006: 188). Butler's work has been misguidedly read in the past by many scholars, which confused performativity with performance. Butler clarifies the difference between performance and performativity by saying that performance presupposes the existence of a subject, performativity does not (Butler, 1996<sup>19</sup>: 112). Salih notes that Butler contends that "This does not mean that there is no subject, but that the subject is not exactly where we would expect to find it, — i.e. 'behind' or 'before' the deeds" (Salih, 2002: 45, original emphasis). Furthermore, Butler suggests that although they may be performances, they are not freely chosen; a system of compulsory heterosexuality exerts enormous social pressure on each of us to 'perform' the appropriate gender and sexual identity (Butler, 2006: 31) Deviance from gender or sexual norms carries serious risks and dangers, from being denied respect to being the target of violence (Butler, 2004: 35-36). In Butler's words:

"Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self". (Butler, 2006: 191 original emphasis)

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<sup>19</sup> The interview was first published: Butler, J (1994) 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialists and Feminist Philosophy* 67 (Summer): 32-9. This extract is from Butler, J. (1996) *Gender as Performance* in Osborne, P. (ed.) *A critical sense: interviews with intellectuals*, Routledge: London and New York.

Another theoretical framework that partially theorizes gender as a performance comes from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman. In his book *Gender Advertisements* (1979) he talks about gender displays that humans present in social situations. For Goffman a display provides "evidence of the actor's *alignment* in a gathering, the position he seems prepared to take up in what is about to happen in the social situation" (Goffman, 1979: 1). Goffman continues:

"What the human nature of males and females really consists of[...] is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this capacity they have by virtue of being persons, not females or males. One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender." (Goffman, 1979: 8)

The statement that 'there is no gender identity' purported by Goffman is partly aligned with Butler's position. However, Goffman suggests that there is a core self / an actor who selects gender displays and further provides these gender depictions for other actors to read. In *Gender Advertisements*, he demonstrated that gender is a social performance, and it moves away from ontological understandings of the individual. There is a fundamental difference between Goffman's and Butler's work in the ways that they theorize self and gender. Butler suggests that there is no pre-existing core self that selects gender performances, but rather the self, similarly to gender, is performatively constituted. As Butler said:

"Gender is a 'doing', [...] though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed [...] there is no being behind the doing [...] the deed is everything ... there is no gender identity behind the expressions of identity [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."  
(Butler, 2006:34)

Butler's attempt to theorize gender as a performance based on performativity caused controversy amongst theorists. This is partly because it was associated with a gender performance, which implies a pre-existing self who does the acting. But Butler's gender performance rested on the linguistic model of performativity rather than

'theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts' (Butler, 1988: 520). As Butler suggested:

"The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction." (Butler, 1988: 528)

In this quotation Butler makes a clear distinction between gender as a performance which is performative, and gender as a role undertaken by a pre-existing self. In the next quotation she clarifies the relationship between self and gender. She said:

"[g]ender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. As opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman's which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various 'roles' within the complex social expectations of the 'game' of modern life." (Butler, 1988: 528)

Butler claims that it is a stylized repetition of acts that constitute beings as gender subjects in keeping with the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. She understands 'constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*' (Butler, 1988: 520, original emphasis). In other words, these 'acts and gestures, [and] articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality' (Butler, 2006: 185-186).

Butler's theory of performativity is very useful and helpful as an analytic framework. However, it has to be acknowledged that it is a theory developed within a linguistic framework, away from primary data such as the lived realities of subjects. This

thesis aims to use the theory of performativity in parallel to the lived experiences of the Koukles participants.

There is a strand in queer theory which argues against the categorization of identity, as identities are perceived as fluid, unstable, and multiple (Sedgwick, 1990). Hines (2010) suggests "Queer theory's politics of difference seeks to dissolve the naturalisation of dominant identities and to challenge the pathologisation of minority identities" (Hines, 2010: 5). One way of challenging the categorization of identities is by accounting for the bodies of transgender people. As Hines argues, queer theory "has often highlighted transgender as epitomising categorical instability," and she continues "queer theory thus embraced transgender practices as a deconstructive tool" (Hines, 2010: 5).

In order to understand further the complexities of sex, gender, and sexuality, transgender studies explore the lived experience of transgender subjects in order to criticize common beliefs on gender and sexuality. Stryker refers to these common beliefs as the connections that link anatomical sex with (social) gender, and the identification of the subject with the suggested social gender (Stryker, 2006). Stryker argues that it is this "relationship between bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity which is imagined to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic - a real thing and its reflections" that has to be challenged (Stryker, 2006: 9). She suggests that the bodies of the intersex prove that "sex, any sex, is a category which is not one" (Stryker, 2006: 9). This binary framework to divide numerous bodily components and misguidedly categorize them as two sexes reveals the social construction of sex categories. The bodies of transsexuals, transvestites and cross dressers confirm that this mirror-style association of sex with gender is problematic. Transgender studies argue that sex is not the foundation of gender (Stryker, 2006:

9). Following this argument this thesis will explore beyond sex as a defining tool of gender and sexuality, and it will focus on the way the gendered subject is formed in relation to the other. Koukles Club hosts a wide variety of subjects with different gender identifications, who challenge these relations between anatomical sex, gender, and sexuality. I argue that the points raised by trans theory are very helpful for developing a framework to analyze the lived experiences of the Koukles participants.

This mirror-style representation of sex to a particular gender is responsible for the moral drama that many transgender people face in their everyday lives. This is because transgendered people “are often considered to make false representations of an underlying material truth, through the willful distortion of surface appearance” (Stryker, 2006: 9). Transgender scholars have been critical of feminists’ understandings of identity representations, and queer theory’s lack of material analysis, as Whittle states:

“It is all very well having no theoretical place within the current gendered world, but that is not the daily lived experience. Real life affords trans people constant stigma and oppression based on the apparently unreal concept of gender. This is one of the most significant issues that trans people have brought to feminism and queer theory”. (Whittle,2006: xii)

In a similar way, Rubin’s work “challenges the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality. Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. To automatically assume that this makes it the theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other” (Rubin, 1984: 308). Rubin also questions the position of feminists to exclude transsexuals from lesbian communities based on feminist ideas of a naturalized gender category rooted in biology. Hines analyses this expulsion of both trans women and trans men and she says “trans women were positioned as

'outsiders' because they were not 'born women,' trans men were often viewed as feminist traitors; the argument being that, in transitioning, they were denouncing their feminist politics for male privilege" (Hines, 2010: 7).

The work of Namaste, likewise, challenges the assumption that lesbian and gay studies fully acknowledges the relation between gender and sexuality, even though they are more open to gender variance. Namaste argues that transgender studies "demonstrates the ways in which gender and sexuality are separated, and thus how the issue of gender is foreclosed by certain gay male community activists" (Namaste, 2006: 585). She argues that gender and sexuality get confused and in many cases collapsed into one. As a starting point for her argument, she deconstructs the violence of a 'gaybasher' against gays and FTMs. This violence has different origins and she argues "the fusion of gender and sexuality has distinct implications for the problematic of violence" (ibid: 588). When a gay is bashed, this happens on the grounds that he is not masculine enough. When an FTM is bashed this occurs on the grounds that both gender and sexuality have to be rewritten on the body. And as Namaste says "The act of rape functions as an aggressive transcription of the FTM individual's biological sex and social gender" (ibid: 592).

The work of many scholars of trans theory (Feinberg, 1996; Halberstam, 1998; Stryker, 2006; Sanger, 2008; Hines, 2007, 2010) highlights the limitations of the existing identity frameworks proposed by feminists and lesbian and gays studies. Hines suggests that "trans identities problematise straightforward readings of the relationship between gender and sexuality; showing the limitations of sexual identity categories as well as those of gender" (Hines, 2010: 8). Hines argues for a gender socially relational and performatively constructed, neither changeable nor unstable, but rather as a lived experience. It is this lived experience which is the key to the

development of a theory based on empirical research, which is an aim of this research.

There are many images of homosexuality constructed by the media, particularly in the Greek context, which portray an invalid and outdated image of non-heterosexual subjects. As Plummer argues "There are important studies to be done in the empirical world, and an obsession with texts is dangerous indeed. It is time to move beyond the text-and rapidly" (Plummer, 1998: 611). Non-representational theory, within critical human geography follows a similar way. Nigel Thrift discusses non-representational theory as "a radical attempt to wrench [research] out of contemplative models of thought... and towards theories of practice which amplify the potential flow of events" (Thrift, 2000: 556). Hines (2010) suggests that this development does not have to signal a move beyond or away from discourse, rather a move towards the interconnected relationship between the material and the discursive. This embodied 'lived' experience of transgender people, as Stryker suggests, is "as legitimate as other, supposedly more objective forms of knowledge, and is in fact necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed" (Stryker, 2006: 12). The voice of the lived experience does not claim superiority or extra validity towards other voices coming outside of the lived experience, but it is a voice that has to be heard and acknowledged in the creation of theory and identity politics. "No voice in the dialog should have the privilege of masking universality or authority" (Stryker, 2006: 12).

Stryker argues that transgender studies' methodology exemplifies what Foucault called "subjugated knowledges". Foucault identifies two different types of subjugated knowledge. Foucault positions the first as "blocks of historical knowledge that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the

critique was able to reveal their existence by using the tools of scholarship” (Foucault, 2003: 7). The second type is “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity” (ibid: 7). These two types of knowledge reveal a historical knowledge of particular structurations of power. Similarly transgender studies reread “previously marginalized forms of knowledge about gendered subjectivity and sexed embodiment” (Stryker, 2006: 13).

In the paragraphs above I offer different angles, perspectives and understandings on sex, gender, and sexuality offer useful analytic lenses, which I use in my research of drag narratives in Koukles Club. These different approaches help me build the argument that I will further explore in the analysis. This argument is shaped by both theoretical texts and empirical research, aiming to highlight the current research frameworks at play during gender research. The notions of sex, gender, and sexuality play an important role in the understanding of drag performance, both as an art form but also as a way of expressing gender. This research uses the work of Butler, Hines, Namaste, and Stryker to frame the research questions. The proposed theories of these authors will help to promote an understanding of the different subjectivities that visit the Club, and they offer a lens through which to answer the research questions. I will now turn to an historic account of the theorisation of drag in relation to queer subjects.

## **2.4 Debates on drag as entertainment**

Drag performance has a long history as an entertainment form in the Anglo-American world; it is an act of cross-dressing. Cross-dressing is the act of wearing

the clothes of the opposite sex and it has served a wide variety of purposes — religious, social, political, theatrical, and sexual (Baker, 1994; Senelick, 2000). Female impersonation is a form of cross-dressing that flourished in the context of theatre and performance art in Western Europe and North America. In particular, there is a long recorded history of female impersonators in theatre<sup>20</sup> from the first Elizabethan period in Britain, to the burlesque and vaudeville entertainment of the 19th century in the United States (Ackroyd, 1979; Baker, 1994; Bulliet, 1928; Bullough and Boullough, 1993; Feinberg, 1996; Herdt, 1994; Hirschfeld, 1991; Senelick, 2000; Thompson, 1974;). In many societies, for centuries, it was unacceptable for a woman to appear on stage as an actress. As a consequence of this exclusion, in Britain particularly, men performed the female roles (Ackroyd, 1979; Baker, 1994; Bulliet, 1928; Senelick, 2000).

In the 19th century, cross-dressing became more and more common in theatrical productions. This kind of cross-dressing was an opportunity for some men to play out their fantasies of being a woman. This was particularly true in amateur theatrical performances (Bullough and Boullough, 1993: 236). Eventually, in the 1920s, with the decline of gender impersonations on stage, and the acceptance of female actresses as performers, we saw “the rise of a different kind of female impersonator, one who no longer burlesqued women but who acted or appeared to act as a woman” (Bullough and Boullough, 1993: 237). This is called ‘Glamour drag’ and performances took place in nightclubs and pubs with a gay connotation and clientele (Bullough and Boullough, 1993: 237).

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<sup>20</sup> “The word ‘drag’, meaning wearing women’s clothes, was first coined publicly in the 1860s, and at that time it did not only take place within the relatively safe confines of the fancy dress ball” (Cocks, 2007: 121). In London, the cross-dresser was a regular feature of the police court. In general, such men were judged to be ‘rogues and vagabonds’ who were behaving indecently in a public space.

The development and growth of cinema in the 1930s, as a form of entertainment, in combination with the decline of vaudeville, led many female impersonators to perform in cabarets<sup>21</sup> and nightclubs instead of music halls and burlesque venues (Bullough and Boullough, 1993). These types of nightclubs were in big cities like London, New York, Paris, and Berlin. When female impersonators performed part-time in drag in a theatrical context, it was something 'acceptable'. But when they performed full-time, professionally, in drag in a nightclub or cabaret, they were regarded as homosexuals. In the United States an aspect of this connection between drag and homosexuality could be found in the way female impersonators were advertised in the newspapers. Back in the 1930s, it was not possible to openly advertise a club as gay or lesbian; instead, the club would simply feature a female impersonator in its ad (Bullough and Boullough, 1993). This would have brought a homosexual crowd into the club. Chauncey (1994), in his book *Gay New York*, based on his research of police records, newspapers, oral histories, diaries, medical records, and other texts, stated that drag balls were popular and lavishly described in the press in the 1930s. Many newspapers filled their pages with sketches of the most sensational gowns, worn by homosexuals and drag queens in the popular drag balls.

Gender orientation could be seen in early forms of drag in the military, during the Second World War, as it was used within the army for the soldiers' entertainment. "In these shows, performers were obviously male, but there were also sometimes more genuine attempts to pass as female. A play was often made on the performers'

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<sup>21</sup>Such a club in pre-Hitler Germany was featured in some of the Christopher Isherwood stories collected in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), from which the musical *Cabaret* was developed. In the musical Joel Gray played a role that required female impersonation (film version 1972).

attractiveness to the all-male audiences” (Cook, 2007: 147). “Drag in the forces did not need to compromise the manliness and presumed ‘normality’ of those involved; undertaken by civilians and ‘male harpies’ in the streets of Gateshead, Edinburgh and Brighton, however, it suggested a dangerous perversion – part (supposedly) of a wider outbreak of immortality during the war years in which women succumbed to ‘khaki fever’ and lesbian ‘ecstasies’ and (civilian) men leapt into each other’s embraces” (Cook 2007: 147, original emphasis).

The popularity of female impersonators declined with the entry of women into the army. Army audiences increasingly associated cross-dressing with deviant sexual identities. Those who continued to perform were regarded as homosexuals. After the end of the war some female impersonators continued performing in theatres and clubs in the U.S., Canada, and England (Halladay, 2004; Cook, 2007). I argue that particular audiences give shape to the gendered performances on stage. From personal experience in Koukles Club, the contribution of the audience to the performances on stage is vital. I argue that we have to examine this particular relationship as it is gender oriented. There are certain questions coming out of this point that need further research, such as what process do performers follow to embody the preferences of the audience on stage? How do audiences ‘ask’ for certain performances, and on what grounds do their preferences take shape? Next I will discuss how drag performances created a sense of belonging for the homosexual audience.

Cabarets and nightclubs became important urban territories where female impersonators and other cross-dressers could socialize. Beemyn suggests that during the night of the ball “participants were in control and could celebrate themselves for the night without fearing arrest or being made to feel like an oddity. As a result

these events affirmed the gay community and provided gay and bisexual men with a sense of empowerment and belonging” (Beemyn, 1997:193). Those female impersonators who performed individually in front of heterosexual audiences “were not regarded as ‘threatening’ but as isolated individuals who, rather than receiving validation for their cross-dressing, were often seen as a curiosity or laughed at for it” (ibid:194). It is worth noting here that a non-gay audience was seeing female impersonation as an unusual entertainment, while for a gay audience female impersonation gave them a sense of belonging (ibid:193).

Gay bars and clubs in major cities became meeting points for many homosexuals. D’ Emilio argues “the spread of the gay bar contained the greatest potential for reshaping the consciousness of homosexuals and lesbians” (D’ Emilio, 1983: 32). The Stonewall Inn, in New York City, was a popular bar among drag queens, butch lesbians, homosexuals, street hustlers, and others. In 1969, a series of riots over police action against the Stonewall Inn changed the landscape of the gay rights movement in America. The rioting that lasted an entire weekend signalled the start of a major social movement. Within weeks, gay men and lesbians in New York had formed the Gay Liberation Front. There are many views on what sparked the riots and the role of drag queens in them (Duberman, 1994). However, after the riots drag queens in New York were playing a key role as proud symbols of the gay liberation movement. A similar case to the Stonewall Inn appeared in the Greek media in 2003. On Thursday February 20<sup>th</sup> 2003, in Spices Club, police entered a men’s only party and arrested seven people. The official police report, as it was published in a Greek newspaper<sup>22</sup>, stated the action was against alleged organized

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<sup>22</sup> See Child porn ring linked to gay club. (2003, February 24) Kathimerini, Retrieved November, 13, 2011.

child pornography. Gay and lesbian activists<sup>23</sup> called the Police raid an attack on homosexuals and the places they gather, and also accused the police of failing to show evidence relating to any paedophilia activity. In the days that followed one person that was arrested committed suicide while in jail, while the Greek media publically ridiculed all of the others that were arrested. This incident initiated discussions among gay, lesbian, and trans activists (Riedel, 2009: 97). However, these discussions divided activists as to whether transvestites and transsexuals should be allowed to join the discussions (ibid: 97).

Bars like the Stonewall Inn were in urban centres across the United States and they made an important contribution to the gay community by offering a space to socialize and develop a sense of belonging (Newton, 1979; Achilles, 1997). Newton, in her book *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1979), describes the life of female impersonators in these bars. It was the first ethnographic research on drag performance and has become a key text in the debate on drag. Her research was carried out during the 1960s in several nightclubs and gay bars across the U.S., where she explored how the drag scene works and how female impersonators entertain and interact with audiences. She made a series of claims about the sexuality of the performer, their relationship with the audience, the blend of the audience (sexuality and class), and the actual space.

There are several factors that define the work and the success of a female impersonator and this is one of the points of interest in Koukles Club. According to Newton (1979) the audience is a key factor. The relationship of the performer with the audience has an impact on the drag performance. The blend and the behaviour

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<sup>23</sup> See Gays and Lesbians in Greece Speak Up. (2003, April 14). Retrieved November 13, 2011.

of the audience is vital. Newton (1979) argues that the mix of the audience is defined by the city, the area of the city, the class and the sexual orientation of the crowd. She highlights that the gay/straight distinction is more visible in the bars labelled as 'middle class'. In the 'lower class' bars there is a spirit of allowing entry to everybody; these bars tended to have a more casual style. Koukles Club has a wide variety of customers, being the only place offering drag shows in Athens. This thesis will answer what impact the mix of the audience has on drag performances in Koukles Club.

In Newton's (1979) book the performers describe the atmosphere of the gay club, compared to a straight club, as being more sociable, informal, and relaxed, but they also highlighted its competitive aspects. The gay audience was regarded as a repeating one, due to the limited options of spaces to socialize, and as an experienced one that knew drag well. Newton suggests that in order to gain and maintain respect from the gay audience, drag queens had to show superiority and excellence in appearance and verbal wit to overcome the competitiveness of the audience. Drag queens were sometimes envied by the gay audience due to their open homosexuality. Although Newton stated an omnipresent competition from the side of the gay audience, she did not examine in detail the affect of this competition on drag performance per se. From Newton's research more questions arise, which this thesis aims to answer: Who enters the competition? Why and how does this competition happen? These are some questions that I will answer in subsequent chapters.

The morphology of the club is another factor that shapes a drag performance. By morphology I mean the shape of the space. According to Newton (1979) gay bars tend to be small in size, with few or no tables. The audience in a gay bar is restless

and mobile. The clients can move in the space, get close to the performer, look at his costumes, and talk to him. The bar is an important feature of the space because it hosts most of the interactions that take place. In a straight club<sup>24</sup> the space is different. The bar is more peripheral, and there are more tables in the space at which the clients are expected to sit and adopt the role of the spectator (Newton, 1979). In other words, the gay audience actively participates in the drag performance, compared to a heterosexual audience that adopts a traditional spectator position (Newton, 1979). The difference in the morphology between a gay bar and a straight club can be partly explained by the way clients use it. Matejskova (2007) argues that a gay bar is a "space of privacy for gay customers, where their sexual identities, which are out of place in other (semi)-public spaces, can be enacted and performed. In heteronormative societies, gay bars then offer an opportunity for meeting gay partners as well as for inhibition-free socializing and organizing" (Matejskova, 2007: 139). A gay bar tends to be an empty space that hosts the flirtatious movements of the subjects, as compared to a straight club which is rather full and static. Valentine argues that this fullness is because gay spaces "are increasingly attracting heterosexual visitors eager to consume a bit of the exotic 'other'" (Valentine, 2002: 147). I argue in order to fully understand drag we have to examine how the morphology of the venue shapes performances, such as in Koukles Club.

There are a few critical points in Newton's work that indicate the need for further research. The first one is the role of the audience. Although Newton acknowledged the audience as a key element in the success of a performance, the perspectives of the audience were not discussed. Newton conducted interviews and participant

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<sup>24</sup> In this case a straight club is a venue that has drag shows and the audience is mainly heterosexuals.

observation with drag queens in various clubs across the United States. She offered that the most difficult methodological problem she had was with the audiences and that urban audiences are anonymous and transient and drag audiences are even worse (Newton, 1979: 135). In particular, the straight audience proved to be more difficult to approach as they wanted only “to have a good time” and they might also have felt slightly shameful for being there (ibid: 136). Schacht (2002a) criticizes Newton’s analysis as being grounded in a traditional anthropological — functionalist — framework, which is more concerned with viewing female impersonators through the eyes of the dominant culture than in understanding drag from the contextual intentions of such individuals, or than in recognizing the important roles drag performers play within the communities in which they dwell. I contend that perspectives from all members of the audience should be included when doing research on drag.

The power of drag to deconstruct gender assumptions was one of Judith Butler’s points, in her book *Gender Trouble*. Butler uses Newton’s research to claim that drag exposes the imitative nature of gender, showing that gender is an “imitation without an origin” (Butler, 2006: 138). She also claims that the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place. Butler quotes Newton to describe the discontinuities between gender and sex:

“At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion”. Drag says [Newton's curious personification] “my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine.” (Butler, 2006: 186, original emphasis)

Through this quote Butler proposes that “both claims to truth contradict one another and so displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity” (ibid:186).

## **2.5 Drag and visual representation**

Eventually, drag entered the cinema world (Bruzzi, 1997), while still keeping its prime position in the nightclub scene. This movement was reflected and discussed in several texts exploring the relationship of drag to visual representation in films and to gender formations (Bruzzi, 1997; Rabinowitz, 1994; Chermayeff et al., 1995; hooks, 1992; Butler, 1993). Some of the most commercially successful films presenting drag are: *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), *Victor Victoria* (1982), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). The main themes in these films focus on a heterosexual character that must cross-dress to escape or avoid a situation, only to be happily unmasked in the end. A general point made in these films is that people can change their clothes, but not their sexual identity. Hollywood’s position is generally that a heterosexual male can become a better heterosexual by discovering his inner femininity. In these kinds of films, according to Butler, the character in drag is not subversive (Butler, 1993). This is because the drag performance comes after we are informed about the heterosexuality of the performer. Drag has also a vivid presence in European and world cinema as evidenced in movies such as *La Cage aux Folles* (1978), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *High Heels* (1991), and *All About My Mother* (1999). These films, however, clearly present aspects of homosexuality, either through the gay sexuality of the main character or through the sexualities of the supporting characters.

A film that initiated a discussion between feminists, queer theorists, and film studies theorists, is Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning*. I argue that the theme of competition, although it plays a significant role in Livingston's film, has received very little attention in the scholarship. The debates of this film in the literature focus on two critical issues: the potential of drag to subvert or reinforce binary gender norms, and the gaze of the director upon them (hooks, 1992, 1996; Butler, 1993). Livingston explored the drag ball competitions of the African-American and Latino gay communities in New York City in the 1980s. The criteria for these competitions were the level of 'realness' conveyed through drag in order to pass as the object of the performer's intended personification, their clothes, and their dancing ability. Through the voices of the participants viewers gained insight into their personalities, dreams, and aspirations. Issues of class, race and gender performance were raised in the film as factors that influence drag performance. Although *Paris is Burning* presents the competitive nature of the drag balls, this competition went rather unremarked by the scholars who reviewed the film. The scholars' main focus was on the performative aspects of gender, class, and ethnicity. This raises questions as to why the competitive aspects of the balls remain invisible. How does competition affect the performativity of gender? What is the role of the other in this competition? What are the structures and hierarchies in this competition? In the following paragraphs I will explore how scholars reviewed the film and which aspects became topics of debate.

The decision of the director to let the participants speak for themselves caused a series of problems during the reception of the film in academia. hooks (1992), in her review *Is Paris Burning?*, criticised the decision of Livingston not to question her role as a white lesbian filming a subculture of racial minorities. Similarly, Flinn (1998) criticised Livingston for never questioning her voyeurism. Another critical point,

according to hooks (1992), was the preference of Livingston not to show the ball-goers at home, in poverty, beyond the ball context. With this choice, hooks suggests, Livingston made a spectacle of the black gay rituals, specifically for white consumption and pleasure. Further hooks commented, "Livingston does not oppose the way hegemonic whiteness 'represents' blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position that is no way progressive or counter hegemonic" (hooks, 1992: 62, original emphasis).

Butler opposed hook's argument, as she stated:

"What becomes clear in the enumeration of the kinship system that surrounds the ball is not only that the "houses" and the "mothers" and the "children" sustain the ball, but that the ball is itself an occasion for the building of a set of kinship relations that manage and sustain those who belong to the houses in the face of dislocation, poverty, homelessness...This is doubtless a cultural reelaboration of kinship that anyone outside of the privilege of heterosexual family (and those within those "privileges" who suffer there) needs to see, to know, and to learn from, a task that makes none of us who are outside of the heterosexual "family" into absolute outsiders to this film". (Butler, 1993: 137, original emphasis)

I am particularly interested in this account because of the way Butler explores the social group of performers as a "family". Butler offers a perspective on how drag balls recreate a new frame of "family" for the participants. *Paris is Burning* offers a 'reelaboration of kinship' beyond heterosexual norms while it reveals that the subject's position as part of this family destabilizes hegemonic racial and sexual norms.

Butler used *Paris is Burning* to provide examples of performances that confuse and transcend gender norms. Furthermore, she illustrated in her assertion that sexual difference does not precede race or class in the constitution of the subject, so that the symbolic is also a racialising set of norms and the subject is produced by racially informed conceptions of "sex" (Butler, 1993: 130). Drag reveals all identities as

artifactual and not just the gender identities (Butler, 1993). The drag balls in the film presented drag 'realness' not only in the relatively conventional form of female impersonation, but also in the form of college student impersonation, bank executive impersonation, military officer impersonation, and "banjee girl" impersonation, as well as more glamorous categories of female impersonation. Almost every conceivable kind of identity can be a form of drag insofar as, being imitable, identity is revealed to be itself imitative. We are all in drag, whether or not we are aware of it, and one purpose of the drag ball is to make us aware of it.

Butler's suggestion that drag has the potential to shed light on the fluid and thus changeable nature of gender with the possibility to subvert gender norms (Butler, 1993, 2006) triggered many researchers to explore drag further. Butler (2006 [1990]) in *Gender Trouble* (GT), illustrates drag as a way to undermine the notion of gender as natural and to illuminate the possibility for different gender constructions. This statement caused a huge debate in academia, which encouraged Butler to engage further with the subversive potential of drag, in her book *Bodies That Matter* (BTM), but to also look at the interactive nature of drag performances. In BTM, Butler clarifies the confusion that was created by GT by opening up possibilities for the entertainment characteristics of drag to reinforce gender assumptions. Butler questions "whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them" and notes that "...there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence" (Butler, 1993: 125).

A lack of empirical research was a point of critique in regard to Butler's assertions (Schacht, 2002a: 161). This led researchers to conduct empirical investigations in

order to examine the plausibility of Butler's arguments. Caceres and Cortinas (1996), through their ethnographic research, proposed that drag queens who "imitate women less than they exemplify drag queens" (Caceres and Cortinas 1996: 37) are not doing femininity, but rather are just a deviant masculinity, one that uses portrayals of hyper-femininity to assert masculinity, and one that has men as its sexual object choice. Schacht's text, *Gay Masculinities in a Drag Community: Female Impersonation and the Social Construction of 'Other'* (2000), proposes that drag performance continues the interpretation that "through strict adherence to conventional standards of female and male, combined with the masculine embodiment of the feminine, drag performances still result in a masculine hierarchy" (Schacht, 2000: 252).

## **2.6 Drag and audience**

The role of the audience in drag performance has been acknowledged and partly discussed in recent sociological research (Brown, 2001; Schacht, 2002; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Rupp et al., 2010). Brown, based on West and Zimmerman [who wrote that "a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others" (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 144)], criticized Schacht's (2000) research on drag. Brown suggested that "Schacht excludes the audience as participants in the construction of gender, he does not present the performers own interpretations of the performance, and by studying drag performances organized around publicly driven charitable events his setting was not conducive to the subversive quality" (Brown, 2001: 38). Brown (2001) further remarked that there is not enough in-depth analysis on the audience's role in the construction of gender in drag performances. In his case study of a professional drag queen, Brown used photographs, field observations, and interviews with audience members as methods,

and he proposed that “drag performance provides a context in which aspects of gay masculinities can be articulated and supported” (ibid: 38).

Most of the existing research emphasizes how outsiders study gender-bending behaviours — subversive to the dominant culture’s conceptualizations of gender — ignoring the intentions of those being observed (Butler, 2006; Epstein & Straub, 1991; Garber, 1992; Bergman, 1993; Baker, 1994; Harrower, 1995; Whittle, 1996; Schacht, 2000b, 2002c). In his later research Schacht agreed partly with Brown and proposed that “one must...consider the targeted audience for which the performance is undertaken, as they ultimately determine if one accomplishes the desired gendered or sexual presentation of self” (Schacht 2002a: 163). Schacht claims that although there is substantial and important research on drag in academic settings, the research is quite homogenous and based “on literary texts (movies and fictional books) and critiques of other writers’ interpretations while simultaneously neglecting to fully consider the actual motivations and experiences of individuals living such realities” (ibid: 161).

Based on the voices of both performers and audiences, Rupp and Taylor (2003), in their book *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, argued that drag queens posed a politicized challenge to beliefs about gender and sexuality through their performances. Drag can be an important collective social movement and tactic of protest (Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson, 2004). Rupp and Taylor claim that it is time for an “in-depth exploration of the world of drag queens” (Rupp and Taylor, 2003: 2). Drawing upon theory on drag, gender, and sexuality, Rupp and Taylor argue that “drag as performed at the 801 should be understood not only as a commercial performance but as a political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality”(ibid: 223). They build their research on

interviews with the drag queens and focus groups with audience members. They highlight the importance of assessing both production and reception of the drag performance when trying to understand "the construction of collective identity that took place during the performance" (ibid: 223).

Despite the inconsistency of the focus groups, as they state in the book, Rupp and Taylor provided useful information about who went to drag shows and why, and their findings in regard to the constitution of the individuals in the focus groups posed questions about drag in relation to a gay audience. The focus groups proved to be a useful tool when researching an American society, with many members of the audience showing confidence in talking in front of other people about gender and sexuality. I argue that conducting focus groups in Koukles Club would be inappropriate and could potentially distort the data. I state this because Greek society is rather conservative, with many homosexuals not yet having come out to their families, and with many heterosexuals entering the club just for curiosity.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to examine the key theoretical literature on gender and drag performance. I argued that although drag performance has been acknowledged in the theorisation of queer gender and gender theory in general, the role of the audience has received little attention. An examination of the literature revealed a gap in the scholarship about the role of the audience, which could help to explain contemporary genders and sexualities. Some parts of this review on drag research were placed in context to Koukles Club in Athens, which hosts regular drag performances. In the first part of this chapter I explored the limited Greek literature on drag and gender. I argued that the analytic frameworks used to study gender and

sexualities stemmed from a heterosexual point of view, which gave a distorted view of homosexuality. This was partly due to the conservative Greek society but also to the hegemonic heterosexual frameworks that connect gender to particular spaces, for example masculinity with public space, and femininity with the domestic. I examined how the study of gender roles through the family, marriage, and kinship made homosexuality and drag performance non-existent. I suggest that drag performance, and its Greek context, should be studied to understand the ways in which subjects articulate their gender.

In the second part of this review, I drew on wider sociological debates on sex, gender, and sexuality, aiming to clarify these notions as they are key to analysing components of this thesis. I discussed the works of feminists, lesbian and gay theorists, and transgender theorists in reviewing sex, gender, and sexuality. Through this discussion I aimed to show the complexities of the notions and the need for further research based on empirical cases. In the third section, I discussed debates on drag performance in relation to gendered subjectivities. In particular I followed a historical thread exploring the formation of female impersonation and drag performance that connects drag with particular gender subjectivities. I identified a gap there, which poses questions such as: what process do performers follow to embody the preferences of the audience on stage? How do audiences 'ask' for certain performances, and on what grounds do the preferences take shape? There are further points, coming from the work of Newton on female impersonation in America (1979).

I argued that two points that need further attention in the debates on drag are the morphology of the club and the elements of competition, which poses questions, such as: is it only the gay audience that expresses competition? On what grounds do

performers express a verbal 'competitive' wit in relation to other members of the audience? According to Newton the morphology of the club plays a critical part in the performance, and this is something that has to be examined in Koukles Club. In the section drag and visual representation I discussed films and debates that present aspects of drag in relation to gender. In particular I focused on the documentary *Paris is Burning* and I stressed the need to recognise the aspect of competition in the formation of drag, something that received little attention in the existing debates. In the last section, drag and audience, I discussed research on drag and gender that includes the voice of the audience. These examples of research stress the need for further empirical studies utilising different methods. To conclude, the key notions of this review are drag performance, sex, gender, sexuality, subjectivity, audience, competition, and the morphology of the club. I will now turn to the methodology that will help me to answer the questions and the gaps revealed in the literature review.

# Chapter 3 Methodology

## Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the methodological issues that arose from researching the relationship of drag to productions of the self and to researching the key themes of this thesis: gender, sexuality, embodiment, and competition. Here I will describe the paths that I followed during my fieldwork, my use of video as a means to explore these themes, and the benefits of utilising this approach in 'capturing' ethnographic material on gender. I will argue that video elicitation on drag captures new perspectives on the way subjects form their gender and sexuality.

This chapter has three sections. In the first section I discuss the methodology of this thesis and its epistemological groundings in feminism. This thesis researches drag performances and bodies on stage. The body has a central role, as it is the locus of gender performances, which are partly shaped by relationships and sexual desires. For this reason I will adopt a feminist epistemology suggested by Stanley and Wise (1993), where they place ontology as the foundation of their epistemology. As they suggest: "being or ontology is the seat of experience and thus of theory and knowledge" (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 192). Drag performance is based on experience; the experience of performing but also the experience of seeing. As Stanley and Wise suggest "People experience their 'selves' neither as complete social constructions nor as essential and 'uncultured' sites of unchanging difference. Rather, 'the self' is the production of interaction and social construction and is irrevocably social and cultural in its basis" (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 194, original emphasis). Drag performance is an experience embellished with many layers, symbols, sounds, and movements as it engages a performer with an audience.

As I have discussed in the literature review, there is a need to examine existing theoretical frameworks on gender that are grounded in empirical research. I will explore aspects that new media technologies, such as the web and social media, bring to empirical research, and the need to respond to this with the appropriate methods. I will discuss how the position of the researcher, in the narration of the ethnographic knowledge grounded in lived experiences, creates an experimental text that sociology must address both in its content and its form. Similar work to this approach is the research of Holliday (2004) on video diaries and Stanley (1992) on *The auto/biographical I*. I will also reflect on how autobiographical aspects intersect with visual methods in creating a visual autoethnographic text. In the second section I will explore the use of mixed methods in the field, reflecting on participant observation, video elicitation, and photography, and their points of interconnection. In particular I aim for a reflexive participant observation where the researcher is reflected on the same philosophical surface as his participants. This type of participant observation intersects with the process of video elicitation in the field. I argue that this connection point offers key perspectives in understanding ethnographic knowledge through the relationship of the self (researcher) with the other (participant). I also discuss the role of photography in the field and how subjects use it in the formation of the self. In the third section I discuss the ethical aspects of using visual methods and the difficulty of translating Greek cultural contexts to English ones. I now will set out the advantages of using the proposed ethnographic methodology.

## **3.1 Theory and Empiricism**

### **3.1.1 Epistemology**

There are several themes that emerged from the literature review. These themes were shaped into questions: what process do performers follow to embody the preferences of the audience on stage? How do audiences 'ask' for certain performances, and on what grounds do their preferences take shape? Who, why, and how does someone enter into competition during drag? How does this competition affect the performativity of gender? What is the role of the other in this competition? What are the structures and hierarchies in this competition? All of the questions that derive from the literature review expose the need for an epistemology that will promote further knowledge on drag performance and queer subjectivity based on empirical research. The empirical process allows for closer examination of the topic and permits a high degree of interactive engagement among subjects.

This knowledge must be acquired through a combination of visual methods and participant observation in order to understand the contemporary formations of gender and sexuality in the viewing processes of drag performances. The choices behind theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods are grounded in the type of knowledge this thesis aims to acquire, knowledge that is based on the lived experience of everyday life (Plummer, 1995: 16). In Koukles Club, this takes place every Friday and Saturday night. Furthermore, an epistemological perspective will clarify issues of research design (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002), which includes the structure of the research, "the kind of evidence that is being gathered, from where, and how it is going to be interpreted" (Gray, 2006: 17). The epistemology of this thesis is aligned with the theoretical perspectives of postmodern feminism (Butler, 1993, 2006) as they are placed on ontological foundations (Stanley and Wise, 1993).

An ethnographic methodology allowed me to gather knowledge from the lived experience, and the type of research questions determined that I employ mixed methods to capture the data.

### **3.1.2 Methodology**

Feminist approaches to epistemology (Stanley and Wise, 1993) give shape to this ethnographic research. It is also vital for this research, as a reflexive sociological text, to adopt a self-reflective approach in order to show the paths through which this knowledge was acquired, negotiated, analysed, and presented. Parts of my autobiography are reflected in the text; I am present as a researcher, but also as a child, a teenager, and an adult. I am located in London, in Athens, in the photographs, in the film, and on stage. I shift positions in a similar style to the participants in the Club. Richardson says about reflexivity, "I found a way to "give voice" to multiple positions, reflect upon or spoof my own, and thereby write pieces that show how openness and reflexivity look and feel, rather than simply talking about it" (Richardson, 1997: 73, original emphasis). I aim to show what this reflexivity looks like in a visual study. "Self-reflexivity unmasks complex, political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing" (Richardson, 1997: 93). This visual self-reflexivity places me in front of the camera as well as behind the camera, this occurs likewise in the text.

### **3.1.3 Ethnography**

In ethnography the position and the reactions of the researcher in the field are key to the way knowledge is acquired and presented. Pink defines ethnography "as an approach to experiencing, interpreting and representing culture and society that informs and is informed by sets of different disciplinary agendas and theoretical principles. Rather than being a method for the collection of 'data', ethnography is a

process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that uses ethnographers' own experiences" (Pink, 2007: 22, original emphasis). My aim is to offer an analysis of how I experienced the field, by stating and reflecting on my position in relation to others, but also by consciously including myself in the 'frame' while selecting methods that make this account a 'valid' testimony of the drag culture in Athens. The account that I present is not solely created by me, but rather is the outcome of collaborative crafting, grounded, fed, and raised through relationships. As Pink states, ethnographic "Knowledge is produced in conversation and negotiation between informants and researcher, rather than existing as an objective reality that may be recorded and taken home in a note book, camera film or tape" (Pink, 2007: 98). In a similar way, Geertz praises the work of the ethnographer by highlighting "the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (Geertz, 1973: 16). To this point I want to add that the life of the researcher is also included in the 'lives of strangers'. This ethnographic account and its 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) provides an analysis of the various positions and conditions within the drag culture, rather than offering an objective description based solely on theoretical models.

#### **3.1.4 Reflexivity**

Throughout the thesis, I follow a reflexive approach, questioning my gender and sexuality in the production of ethnographic knowledge. Looking at earlier research done on Greek homosexuality, the sexuality of the researcher is always questionable, as his or her status often remains unquestioned. As Strathern argues, reflexivity "makes a problem out of what was unproblematic" (Strathern, 2004: 8), and, unlike those previous Greek researchers, I am aware that different parts of myself play a significant role in this ethnography and must be disclosed from the start. Aspects of my experiences and character that influence this research are that: I am the friend

of Fokas, who used to work in Koukles Club; I am a member of the team 'Express Yourself' that organized drag parties in various clubs in Athens; I am a photographer; I am someone who migrated away from Greece; I am from the west suburbs of Athens; I am a researcher; I am queer; I am in my thirties; I am Greek; I am the mirror for the performers. I am aware that these are some of the lenses through which people choose to see me, because these are aspects of who I am, and others knew these characteristics prior my conducting this research, or they learned about them during the process. I am a gendered subject among other gendered subjects. In this research context, my homosexuality had an effect on my gaining access to the group, but it also effected the way they perceived me: as someone who grew up in the same context as they did, and as queer. The discussions that were had in the club made me aware that we all had more things in common than I had initially thought. I was surprised to hear how similar our narratives were, for example growing up as an effeminate child in the suburbs. It is these narratives that I aim to unfold in these pages: theirs, mine, and ours.

### **3.1.5 Autoethnography**

Reflexive writing creates a sociological narrative with an experimental form that brings together "the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection... [and] claims the conventions of literary writing" (Ellis, 2004: xix). By adopting this approach, this thesis aims to present a sociological praxis that has an inclusive character by gathering fragments of everyday lived realities; from personal narratives and photographs, to videos, confessions and memories. Clough explores the relationship between sociological discourse, narrative, ethnography, and new technologies. She argues that "not only that all factual representations of empirical reality, even statistical representations, are narratively constructed, but that the

narrative construction of factuality or empirical positivities has been the dominant form of mass media communication technologies developed since the rise of the realist novel” (Clough, 1992: 2). She also draws links between the forms of selfhood performed and presented in autoethnography to “the trauma culture of the teletechnological” (Clough, 2000: 287). But her overall argument is to point out the affect the new media technologies, in combination with global capital, have on these new forms of subjectivity, and she highlights further that “it is these figures of subjectivity appearing in autoethnography which cultural criticism must now attend” (Clough, 2000: 287). Cultural criticism and theoretical reflection should be, according to Clough, the criteria for evaluating this experimental writing. Following these two terms allows “experimental writing to be a vehicle for thinking new sociological subjects, new parameters of the social” (Clough, 2000: 290). I agree with Clough’s arguments while reflecting on the ways in which participants in Koukles Club use these new technologies to communicate, meet, interact, and upload their photographs and drag performances to websites and social media<sup>25</sup> (see Figure 3). All of these texts create visual representations of themselves that are made available to wider audiences.



Figure 3: Stills from the Koukles Club website and youtube.

<sup>25</sup> See [www.koukles-club.gr](http://www.koukles-club.gr), or see at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and the various results that come out by searching Koukles Club. Both accessed on Friday 02. 12. 2011.

Understanding the position and the limitations of an autoethnographer to narrate these lived experiences is key to the validity of the research. The autoethnographer must engage in a reflexive critique of her or his self in the social landscape to be what Butler calls a 'social theorist.' When the autoethnographic "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration ... an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence" (Butler, 2005: 8-9, original emphasis), and "There is no "I" that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" (Butler, 2005: 7, original emphasis). But it is not always possible to explain and critically reflect upon the rationale of the emergence of the "I" in the field and in the text. This is because while some minor parts remain hidden they nonetheless trigger further reactions in the field. This circumstance points towards my limitation to express all aspects of the process in the form of a narrative within a sociopolitical framework. All the physical and emotional interactions that do not have a verbal or visual dimension nonetheless influence my body to interact in certain ways in relation to other subjects. "This does not mean," writes Butler, "that I cannot speak of such matters, but only when I do, I must be careful to understand the limits of what I can do, the limits that condition any and all such doing. In this sense I must become critical" (Butler, 2005: 82). Although I understand my limitations in representing this knowledge, my critical voice will offer a counter balance to the claims that I make, while challenging the oppressive representations of the queer self which come from dominant (Greek, in particular) structures.

### **3.2 Mixed Methods**

Multiple methods are appropriate for this thesis, as the choice of data collection methods relies on the epistemologies that I have discussed in the previous sections. A reason for choosing mixed methods is their ability to capture the answers to the

variety of 'complex' research questions posed in relation to the culture that I research. In the Koukles Club, performers, but also members of the audience, record parts of their lived experiences and place them in online profiles and in social media forums. The methods I decided to use were participant observation, videography and photography, to capture video elicitation and performances, in order to present a series of layered narratives in written and visual formats. I also used the video data to prompt video elicitation from members of the audience. I used photography as part of my visual methods strategy to allow a means for giving something back to the performers, such as portraits and copies of the film. This was done mainly with photographs, but also with the video recordings. All of the visual methods and the multiple narratives they embody comprise parts of my autoethnographic strategy. In the next section, I will begin with a discussion of participant observation and then I will continue with a description of the mixed visual methods used in the field and elaborate their relation to the field.

### **3.2.1 Participant Observation**

The first method that I used to become familiar with the group was participant observation. This was rather useful as it gave me a primary understanding of the power relations within the club and provided an indication of my position. May argues that "It is necessary to understand the sorts of activities in which people engage, the events with which they deal, and the sorts of tools and technologies they rely upon to do their work. Therefore to become familiar with the setting it is often necessary to undertake extensive participant and non-participant observation, and in many cases to have lengthy discussions with participants themselves" (May, 2002: 107). I conducted participant observation in Koukles Club on and off between October 2008 and April 2010. I witnessed rehearsals, performances, and backstage preparations unfolding before of my eyes.

Over time my position became more and more fluid as I learned to move and talk in relation to the other bodies, but this was always within limits. This is what Delamont describes when she argues that “‘participant’ observation does not usually mean real participation: researchers do not usually catch fish, teach classes or dig coal, rather they watch these things being done, and ‘help’ occasionally. It is important to participate enough to be able to write feelingly about the nature of the work: its pains and pleasures, smells and sounds, physical and mental stresses...So ‘participant’ does not mean doing what those being observed do, but interacting with them while *they* do it” (Delamont, 2004: 218, original emphasis). It is in this way that I moved within the Club. I did not do any drag performances on stage, but I actively participated in the preparation and helped others to perform. I got into the role of the ‘audience’, a rather important role, as there can be no performance without an audience. I also engaged in other activities and discussions that helped me to design the visual methods. In some of the activities I had to help waiters to clean tables and serve drinks, help performers to zip/unzip dresses, and carry their costumes to their cars. I walked with them in the streets around the Club. I danced and had drinks with members of the audience. I photographed them and they photographed me. I used participant observation as a way to enable myself to excavate and collect data rather than to generate data.

One of the things that struck me during my first weeks of observation was the number of mirrors in the decor of the Club, and this had an immediate affect both in my field notes and in the visual methods and analysis I employed. In many cases the ‘observations’ took place through the mirrors, which led me not only to observe the others but to examine myself. Looking in the mirror creates a certain kind of reflexive participant observation, as it has been discussed in the work of feminists,

where the self is always present in the text. The mirrors also made more visible the paths I followed through the Club, as I was able to see myself all the time. This trope also highlighted a problem that I had to work out in relation to the visual methods, and that was my physical stance in the field, which also had methodological implications. Although I had selected a set of methods to use, the actual 'adaptation' of these methods in the field came from my fluid relations with them and my reflection in the mirror. I chose to change positions every night while holding the video camera rather than maintaining a fixed position, and this was because I realised while in the field that members of the audience and the performers saw the show from different angles and sometimes through the mirrors. However, as Mason suggests, participant observation is often one element in a broader 'ethnographic' approach, involving the use of a range of other research methods (Mason, 2002: 85). Now I will turn to the other methods I applied in the field.

I want to set out the ways in which video informs this thesis and the ways I have used it as an ethnographic method. My use of video was an attempt to visually capture the drag performances in Koukles Club, and then later I used the videos as means for performers and audiences to reflect on the performances. Within visual anthropology and visual sociology there has been a small number of film/video elicitation projects compared to the amount of photo-elicitation. Rouch, Flaes, MacDougall<sup>26</sup> and Asch are some of the ethnographers who helped in the development of video elicitation. Video elicitation as a method to gather data is based on the idea of including video or film material as part of an interview, and then often recording the interview process. The film *Chronique d'un été* (1961) (Chronicle

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<sup>26</sup> In *The House Opening* (1977), Judith MacDougall introduces a reflexive element in a broader sense than the visibility of the film-maker. This film shows the ceremony to reopen a house for a widow and her children to return to it after her husband's death. The widow provides commentary throughout the film, attempting to explain the events to a non-Aboriginal audience.

of a Summer) directed by Morin and Rouch was the first ethnographic film where amateur actors watched the rushes and reflected on their filmed performances. Two films by Asch *A Balinese Trance Seance* (1978) and *Jero on Jero: A Balinese Trance Seance Observed*<sup>27</sup> (1980) reflect the same technique. In the first film, Asch profiles Jero Tapakan, a Balinese spirit healer, working with some of her clients. In the second film, Asch presents the recorded reactions and comments of Jero watching herself in the first film. Asch's reflexive use of film within his two films was very influential on the way I used video in this thesis. I aimed to use video elicitation in two ways in this thesis: firstly, I produced a film as part of my data to prompt elicitation, then I showed this film to the performers and video recorded their reactions and comments. Secondly I used both films to create the final piece. I also used video elicitation with members of the audience; I audio recorded them and then later transcribed and used their responses in the written portion of this thesis. In the next section I will discuss ethnographic films that have shaped the debate of employing video in the field, while concurrently reflecting on my use of video in this thesis.

### **3.2.2 First Stage of Video Elicitation: Generating Data**

After the initial participant observation, I aimed to interview performers and members of the audience to gather knowledge about the drag performances and their relation to gender. I decided to use video elicitation to gather data in the interviews, as it would allow performers an opportunity to consciously reflect on their work and allow spectators to reflect on the shows they would like to see. In the first round of my fieldwork I video recorded for eight consecutive weeks and in the following round I filmed for two more weeks. I collected many hours of material, capturing all of the shows that took place in the club during that time, also the

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<sup>27</sup> *Jero on Jero: A Balinese Trance Seance Observed*, was co-directed by Asch, T., Connor, L., and Asch, P. (1980)

reactions of the audience. The performers were very helpful, and they provided special performances of their routines on stage for me to record. Having collected as many shows as I could, I started editing them to create a panorama of the best performances. This proved to be rather difficult, as I had only one camera and I could not create clips showing the same performance from different angles, with close ups and wider shots<sup>28</sup> that would give the final product a more professional look. Even though I had several clips of the same routine, that would only allow me to create an edited version that was a composite of many performances, rather than a variety of shots and angles of a single performance. Finally, I decided not to do an edited version, as it would create problems with the validity of the video elicitation. By creating an edited version of a performance, I would have to use parts from different nights with different audiences, and reactions that occurred at specific instances would be unfair to subject some of the performers to. So I decided to use one unedited recording of a night at Koukles Club, with the same audience throughout the show. Similarly, ethnographic films that presented edited versions of an activity as a single occurrence were highly criticized. Like the film *The Hunters* (1958) by John Marshall, "which purports to portray a giraffe hunt was actually put together in an editing process that used footage from several different hunts" (Aull Davies, 1999: 125). Or the film *Dead Birds* (1963) by Robert Graves, where the battle portrayed is edited from film sequences of several such occasions. According to Aull Davies these "practices undermined the validity of filmic ethnographies" (ibid: 125). In my data elicitation I decided to use 'whole pieces of shows' rather than edited versions that would potentially deceive the research participant.

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<sup>28</sup> I was aiming to create an edited version of a show, one that includes parts of a show filmed on different nights, to create more interesting data for the video elicitation.

A point that I would like to highlight is the effect that video elicitation had on the video 'capturing' of performers and their shows. When I showed them the first clips of the shows I received some 'guidance' on how I should frame and record their performances. Some performers even told me how they wanted to be filmed; as in the case of Akis, who told me not to do close ups of his face, or Mary, who told me to shoot her from a distance, not focusing in details. Many of the performers told me that drag needs distance, and dim lights. I followed their suggestions, although it was very difficult to shoot in low lights and with a crowd moving and dancing in front of the camera. An example of a similar way of working with video elicitation, but with more complexity, comes from Boonzajer Flaes' film *The Roots of Mexican Accordion Music in South Texas and North Mexico* (1989). Although the title directs the audience to connotations of Mexican accordion bands, it is not 'about' these bands but rather it is about an exploration of the relationship between the Mexican bands and the polka bands in Austria (Loizos, 1997: 92, as described in Aull Davies, 1999: 130). This is created through with the use of film elicitation<sup>29</sup>. Boonzajer Flaes showed Mexican groups films of Austrian bands, and vice versa, and "he eventually discovered that he learned more by considering how they themselves thought they should be filmed for presentation to the others," as Aull Davies describes (1999: 130). Boonzajer Flaes explains "[T]he players had very specific ideas about how their music should be represented. Moreover these ideas were so different, that I could use this visual self-representation as an important clue when later on analyzing and structuring the interviews" (Boonzajer Flaes, 1993: 114). Aull Davies argues that "these two kinds of accordion bands, therefore, both playing polkas, are really giving two different performances; and this understanding of what each is doing was developed through elicitation of their responses to their own representations on film"

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<sup>29</sup>Film elicitation is based on the idea of inserting video and film footage into a research interview. (see Harper, D. (2002))

(Aull Davies, 1999: 131). In Koukles Club, the video elicitation was not conducted exactly in the same manner as in Boonzajer Flaes' work, but still there are issues arising from the use of this method. I will discuss this further in chapters five and seven, where I aim to explore "what it is that visual methods are able to achieve" in the production of knowledge (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004: 6).

### 3.2.3 Second Stage of Video Elicitation: Use of the Data for Interviews



Figure 4: Screen shots from the video elicitations with Nikolas and Mania

The second stage of the elicitation, after creating the initial video, was to conduct the interviews with the performers. Most of the interviews took place in the backstage area of the club, except for three of them; one took place in the reception area of the club, and two were conducted at the performer's homes. All participants had the opportunity to choose the location of their interview. The most convenient place for many was the backstage area of the club. Each performer sat in front of her/his dressing room mirror, apart from the performers who did not have a mirror backstage. For example, Eva's dressing room is on the ground floor, and is not big enough for two people to fit into, so we conducted her interview backstage. Or in the case of Markella, who does not have a dressing mirror of her own, as she does very few shows in the Club; Markella's interview was conducted in the middle of the

backstage area. Akis' interview was conducted in his home, as was Marylou's. In all<sup>30</sup> of the interviews there was a laptop playing the video of their performances while the performers were being interviewed. The format was a 'loose' semi structured interview with participants being able to play and pause the video at any time they wanted. Some asked me to show only the shows they were in, while others left the video to play in the background during the interview. I will further discuss their behaviour towards the video and its significance in the subsequent chapters.

All of the interviews were video recorded with the performers in the foreground. In most of the interviews I am also visible, in the background as part of a reflection in the mirror, as can be seen in figure 4. Although my aim was to reproduce the same configuration with all performers, and include myself in the frame as part of my reflexive approach, that was not possible in all cases due to the physical limitations of some of the spaces. The camera was placed on a tripod in order to allow me to focus on the interview, and also to prevent me from hiding myself behind it. I also chose to use the dressing room mirrors as part of the interviews, as the act of looking in the mirror was part of the local culture. But it also gave performers more control over their appearance as they faced the camera. The configuration of the camera and the use of mirrors will be discussed further in chapter seven.

The same initial video was used for the audience member's interviews, but the means of capturing data was different as there was no need to video-record their responses. The interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants. Initially I had many informal conversations in order to get a broader sense of the audience's

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<sup>30</sup> In Akis' interview, he first viewed the video and then immediately after we did the interview. In all other interviews, participants viewed the video for the first time during the interview. Through this approach I aimed to capture their first impression of seeing themselves on screen.

reactions to drag performances. Then I asked people who regularly came to the club and were familiar with the show to provide feedback on the performances. The crowd that goes to the club is rather diverse, including people from across the entire sexual and gender spectrum. I tried to reflect that diversity by selecting a variety of people to interview. Some of them self identified as trans, gays, lesbians, bisexual, and heterosexuals.. The video worked as a connection point between the show and the interviewees. But it also gave audiences and performers 'distance' from the show, as they were able to actively reflect, comment, and discuss their ideas about the show. The audience in particular reflected that during the live shows many ideas and emotions arose, but often remained unspoken, as they focused only on the surface entertainment value of the show. Video is familiar to audiences as often they video record some of their favourite drag performances with their mobile phones or other recording devices. Video can be a log of reality and it was already part of the "local visual practice" (Pink, 2007: 34), as audiences were familiar with seeing a video clips and discussing them with their friends; video elicitation was not far removed from their existing habits.

The fieldwork in this case study was comprised of three journeys into the field between 2008 and 2010. Each journey to Athens and the Koukles Club lasted up to three months. Besides the interviews that I conducted with the performers and the members of the audience, this case study utilised a third type of data that allowed me to assess, clarify, and analyse the interview data, allowing me to uncover deeper and more specific meaning from the answers I received during the interviews. This third type of data consisted of my notes from participant observation and discussions with people who associated themselves with the club; photographs that I took but also existing photographs I collected; notes on drag rehearsals I attended; video

recordings of drag performances; testimonies from people who used to work in the club; online material; and magazine articles.

The composition of the subjects in my research included that they were participants who self identified as Greeks and ranged in age from 25 to 50. In relation to the Koukles Club staff I interviewed eight performers, the owner and a make-up artist. Of the eight performers, five of them self identified as trans, as did the owner of the club; two of the performers self identified as gay, as did the makeup artist, and one performer, who had a sex reassignment operation from male to female, self identified as a heterosexual female. In relation to audience members, I conducted ten interviews: four self identified as lesbians; four self identified as gay; two self identified as heterosexual. I also interviewed the director of the film *Strella*, Panos Koutras, who self identified as queer. In total I conducted twenty-one interviews. I acknowledge that gender identifications have limitations in the wider debates on gender identities, but there are also limitations in the way participants articulated their gender and sexuality in the Koukles Club. Some of the participants moved beyond strict categories of gender. However, for strategic reasons, I will use these categories to explain my position and justify my findings.

Another point I want to raise is about the total number of shows that appear in the film *Dragging the Past*. Each performer in the Club performs a number of different acts throughout the season. In the film I used only a limited number of routines. I selected the favourite acts of the performers, which tended to be those most popular with audiences in the club.

### 3.2.4 Third Stage of Video Elicitation: Combining Data and Interviews

One of the aims of video elicitation was to gather data about drag culture. A second aim was to create a visual testimony of this culture. After having done the video elicitation interviews, I edited the elicitation video with extracts of the video-recorded interviews, and other recordings of incidents from backstage to create a narrative about drag in Koukles Club. I also included myself in the narrative, as a reflection in the many mirrors in the Club, and as the voice behind the camera, as I followed performers on and off stage. I also appeared as a reflection in the dressing room mirrors while I conducted the interviews, and in front of the camera when I interviewed Marylou about the Club. I changed positions and followed the fluidity and temporality of the subjects' space. Zemirah Moffat's film *Mirror Mirror* (2006) was very inspiring in my conceiving of this methodology. Her film was an ethnographic study on radical queer subjects performing in London's Club Wotever. She argued that queer identities in the West derive their multiple-meanings, integrity, and *raison d'être*, within and through dialogue. A part of this dialogue was presented in the film in a conversation between her protagonists and herself. In *Mirror Mirror*, Moffat used video elicitation with performers who became an audience for their work. In her participant's narratives, Moffat was present and visible in the frame; sometimes in front of the camera, occasionally behind the camera, and always with a second camera recording her and her subjects. The two cameras allowed her to show to the viewer her relationship to the subject and provided insight into the way she produced ethnographic knowledge.

In the final edit of *Dragging the Past* I aimed to let the voices of my research participants to be heard along with my own, as those voices contributed to my reflexive process. Certain dilemmas arose when I was struggling to find my voice in

the narrative. I chose not to have a narrator or a narrative voice explaining the images and actions of the performers, but rather to go for a smoother approach where the story was told through the sequence of images and sounds. As Aull Davies suggests, there is a major criticism of commentary as “it is experienced as the voice of authority telling viewers how to interpret the images” (Aull Davies, 1999: 126) and I wanted to avoid this. I also decided to use English subtitles and not dub the voices of the performers who were speaking in Greek. This indicates my commitment to a visual sociology that does not prioritize the visual over the audio, but rather acknowledges the equal importance of sound in the field. I also maintain that the audio contributes to the value of the film a reflexive tool, by revealing aspects of my relationship to the performers.

### **3.2.5 Photographs**

During the fieldwork, photography played an important role for both my participants and me. Often members of the audience would take pictures of the show, or of their favourite performer, for their facebook profile or for other social media sites.

Performers also used photographs extensively to decorate their dressing rooms or to collect for their personal use. The first time I brought some printed copies of the photographs that I had taken in the field, of some performers and of some of the regular customers, the images disappeared instantly. The performers wanted to keep the photos and I wanted to give something back to my research participants.

Throughout the research process I took pictures of the people at Koukles and they took pictures of me. Photography became a shared experience, something that we contributed to and that connected us. It was an act of holding each other. I did my BA in photography and I had worked professionally as a photographer for more than ten years. For me photography is in act of remembering; exploring and expressing

how you see the other. It is an act of knowing the other but also the self. As Goldin says:

“My visual diary is public; it expands from its subjective basis with the input of other people. These pictures may be an invitation to my world, but they are taken so that I could see the people in them. I sometimes don’t know how I feel about someone until I take his or her picture. I don’t select people in order to photograph them; I photograph directly from my life. These pictures come out of relationships, not observation”. (Goldin, 1996: 6)

This is how I view and practice photography. Through the camera I am able to understand the world. As Sweetman suggests, “visual methods may be particularly well suited to investigating particular areas of sociological concern, not least those aspects of our everyday lives which, through familiarity or otherwise, may be difficult otherwise to recognize, let alone to put into words” (Sweetman, 2009: 493). I created a series of portrait photographs of the performers and Marylou, to be used in the new Koukles Club website and as an act of giving something back to them. Some of these photographs are part of the appendix. These images narrate a relationship between the self and the other. I will discuss and analyse parts of the process of creating these photographs as well as their use in the new Koukles Club website, in chapter seven.

### **3.2.6 Written Text and Film: An Inspiring Relationship**

This visual sociology thesis is composed of two elements, the film *Dragging the Past* and these written chapters. Both the film and text encapsulate the lived experiences observed from the field. My main aim with both components is to let the voices of the participants be heard, showing how they found ways to articulate their selves beyond the heterosexual matrix, but also to offer an interpretation and an analysis of these articulations, which draws upon existing conceptual and analytic frameworks. In some sections of the text the words of the performers are repeated directly from the film. This overlapping is justified on the grounds of the character of the data. The

video recorded interviews that comprised many layers of meaning. In the film, each interview with a performer responds to a drag performance. In the text, the words from the interviews are used as individual narratives where they are placed in context with the words of the members of the audience and reveal different aspects of the same story. There are some parts of the film that I do not discuss in the text but rather leave to operate visually on their own terms. These include the photographs in the titles, some of the drag performances, and some parts of the interaction between the performers and the audience. Elsewhere, however, I do discuss some of the effects this data has had on the relationships of the participants.

The written chapters and the film are equal component parts of this thesis. As the reader encounters the narrative in the text, details about my reactions in the field are revealed, and it also includes many autobiographical elements, reflexive accounts of how I acted in the field while holding a camera, and how respondents perceived me. These are intertwined with the voices of the participants and their reactions are conveyed in the written work. I did not want to place my reflexive account in the film, as I was aiming to give the participants maximum exposure. However, I am 'present' in the film, reflected in all of the mirrors backstage and in the club. The viewer can see how I move within the space in accordance with the performers. It is a choreography that encapsulates my reactions in the field. On another level, I needed distance from the field in order to understand and analyze the data captured on film. Similarly, the photographer Nan Goldin (1996) compared her visual diaries and her written diaries and she highlighted the distance her written works gave her that allowed her to analyse her life and her beloved ones in her photographs. I conducted my work in the same way.

*Dragging the Past*, in particular, is a critical component of the process of ethnographic knowledge production, and this is mainly for two reasons. Firstly because "Video is not simply a 'data collecting tool' but a technology that participates in the negotiation of social relationships and a medium through which ethnographic knowledge is produced. (Pink, 2007: 168). Secondly, the use of the video in the field allows for a certain type of visual reflexivity to be developed. This reflexivity reveals aspects of the relationships between participants and researcher in a different way, comparing to the reflexivity in a written text. It is within these aspects, one can see how this ethnographic knowledge is negotiated and produced. Furthermore, this reflexivity becomes another entry point to ethnographic knowledge by capturing flowing moments and fluid bodies and relationships at play.

### **3.3 Translations and Ethics**

Translating the interviews was one of the most time-consuming and challenging aspects of this thesis. Performers often used words that are part of Greek queer slang<sup>31</sup> and that made the translation difficult. I had to translate these words into official Greek and then into English. In some cases performers did not know the exact meaning of the words that they had used. Like the word 'soukelele' 'σουκελελέ', which Akis used to describe me one day. When I asked him what it meant, he said it was an insulting word but that he did not know exactly what its meaning was. He directed me to ask Nadia, who was a regular customer and performer at the club, about the meaning. But it is not the words that were most complicated; it was the need to translate the Greek cultural context into an English equivalent. As a result, a part of the 'smartness' and 'naughtiness' in the performer's use of language was lost in translation. In some parts I chose to use the Greek word

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<sup>31</sup> *Kaliarda*, see Petropoulos, 1980.

in the text next to its English translation, as I presume the reader will see the theoretical connections that the words imply.

Another aspect of the translation, which was very complex, was the use of female indefinite articles with male names, and the reverse. In many cases the pronouns 'he' and 'she' are mixed and confused within the same sentence, proving the limitations of language to capture the complexity and fluidity of the subjects. The objects that surround them also are described in the same way. In the Greek language articles and adjectives change 'gender'. A simple example of that would be η καρέκλα (i karekla) - the chair. In Greek the chair is feminine and takes the article η, similar to the French language (Une chaise). Participants, mainly performers, constantly play with the rules of Greek grammar and syntax. So the grammatical concord (agreement) is often altered and instead they use neologisms. In other Greek ethnographic studies (Kirtsoglou, 2004; Campbell, 1964; Dubisch, 1986; Faubion, 1993) this aspect of language is not remarked upon. This is because participants in those studies probably made a correct use of the Greek language, which made it easier to translate into English. However, Kulick, in his book *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, describes a similarity to my thesis in regards to the use of language (Kulick, 1998: 215 - 219). Overall in this thesis I have tried to translate the context rather than the singular meanings of words. All of the interviews I conducted in the field were fully transcribed, translated, and coded into core themes.

One of the criteria in the design of this methodology was that the ethical responsibility of the researcher was to ensure that all participants were informed about the project and all of the possible risks. Getting permission to film in the Club was the first step towards meeting these criteria. In the first meeting I had with

Marylou, owner of the Club, I explained to her the ideas informing this research, the methods that I would use, and the possible risks they might pose to the people in the Club. Marylou agreed to grant me access to film in her Club. She placed only one condition upon me, that I would give her a copy of all of the material. She asked me to film not only the shows, but the girls in the backstage, her at the bar, and the reactions of the audience. She explained to me that she needed the material for the archive of the Club, but would also use it on the Koukles Club website.

In the second step, I asked the performers for permission to film their work. Almost all of them accepted, asking for copies of the film in return, which was fine with me. Filming the audience's reactions to the performances was rather daunting for me. Imagining that some members of the audience would not want to be filmed on their night out, I tried to inform them before the performances began. Initially I thought of placing explanatory notes on the walls, but due to the dim light in the club people would not have been able to read them. I decided to ask for help from Mary at the reception desk. I asked her to inform the costumers, when they came in, that I would be filming during the performances. If they did not want to be in the film, they should stay away from the stage, and let me know immediately so I would not film them accidentally. Indeed, a few people approached me and asked me not to film them, as nobody knew that they were at the Club. In this way I followed May's approach where the participants "are asked beforehand to participate in the study and thus they are aware that the camera is filming" (May, 2002: 108-109).

Visual methods pose critical questions to aspects of anonymity, especially if the participants are well known in the public sphere. In Koukles Club I asked all of the performers and Marylou to sign consent forms in which the risks of participating in the research were explained. The limited aspects of anonymity in this visual research

were especially highlighted. I would like to state here that all of the performers have appeared on TV shows as guests presenting their work. On the Koukles Club website there are examples of these TV appearances<sup>32</sup>. All of the performers signed the consent form, which also stated that they had the option to remove any of their words or performances before the final version was submitted for examination; they also had the option to terminate their participation in the research at any moment they liked, without giving further explanation. The final video received the approval of all of the performers, with minor alterations.

The audience members had a different consent form, as there were no visual methods involved. In that consent form I explained the issues of anonymity. Members of the audience were free to decide their desired level of anonymity; from complete anonymity, to the use of pseudonyms, to the use of their legal names. Almost fifty percent selected pseudonyms, while the other fifty percent chose to use their legal names. I subsequently emailed them to ask permission to use their selected quotations.

## **Conclusion**

I often had to wait in big colourless rooms for passport control while going to and from the field. In those moments, while I flicked through the pages of my passport, I would find my photograph looking back at me from the second page. I would wait in the queue, following the instructions of the immigration officer; 'open your passport to the page with your photograph' he would shout. Next to the photograph there is a name, a date of birth, a nationality, and a sex; all are written in a bold black font. I would hand over the passport and wait behind the yellow line. The officer would look

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<sup>32</sup> All of the performers participated in a TV documentary about Koukles Club called '*Protagonists*' in which they appeared in drag. They also gave individual interviews about their life histories and their work.

me in the eyes and ask me to remove my hat. In that moment he and I would possibly think the same thing; is he really the guy in this document? I would ask myself, 'do I look like my picture'? The person in the picture looks very cold, almost detached from reality; it is not me. The officer would check the colour of my eyes, hair, and gender, which all matched the passport. 'You can go' he said. 'Are they blind?' I am thinking. It is a similar structure I want to challenge with the proposed methodology outlined in this chapter. I aim to provide a 'view' of the drag culture and my subjects that reflects their lived experience, and not just a 'static, lifeless, frozen picture'.

In this chapter I discussed the methodology that I used in this thesis for researching the relationship of drag performance to subjectivity, and also for researching the four key themes of gender, sexuality, embodiment, and competition. I argue for a visual methodology that offers the possibility of gaining more ethnographic knowledge on gender based on empirical grounds. Video, in particular, is the main tool in this exploration. I aim to offer a view of Athenian drag culture in both a written format and also a visual one. This is not just a 'new' view of the drag culture in the Greek ethnographic context, but rather it is the only one thus far. I aim to show the routes my participants followed in expressing their desires, and aspirations during their everyday lives. Their passion and the enormous effort they put into their drag performances is a beautiful image to behold. It is this beauty that I want to share sociologically. Goldin (2000), in her book *The Other Side*, reflected on her passion to photograph the drag world in several cities, such as Boston, New York, Paris, Berlin, Manila, and Bangkok, from 1972 to 1992:

"Completely devoted to my friends, they became my whole world. Part of my worship of them involved photographing them. I wanted to pay homage, to show them how beautiful they were. I never saw them as men dressing as women, but as something entirely different – a third gender that made more sense than either of the two. I accepted them as they saw themselves; I had

no desire to unmask them with my camera. Since my early teens, I'd lived by an Oscar Wilde saying, that you are who you pretend to be. I had enormous respect for the courage my friends had in recreating themselves according to their fantasies... My aspiration was to be a photographer; my goal was to put the queens on the cover of Vogue". (Goldin 2000: 5)

My aspiration is to show the fluidity with which these bodies move through Koukles Club. To share a perspective that is the outcome of a relationship. Both in the visual and written documents, aspects of this relationship are evidenced in photographs, mirrors, performances, and clothes, but also in the gender theories and ethnographic research methods which offer an understanding of the matter that subjects are made of.

**Before you continue reading the following chapters of this text, it is important to now view the film *Dragging the Past*. In the film you will be introduced to the club, the show, and the performers. The remaining chapters reflect and build upon aspects of the portrayals in the film, including interviews and lively backstage discussions.**



# Chapter 4 Competition and Embodiment

## Introduction

It has been more than a year since I last walked the streets of Koukaki in central Athens to go to Koukles Club. At the time I write this it is April of 2011, and I have returned to Athens to show the film to the performers and to hear their feedback. The fragrance of orange blossoms, in combination with a light drizzle, covers the city with a shiny, silky freshness. It is early spring, just two weeks before Easter, and the city is preparing for the holy week. In the past year many things have changed. Greece has entered an economic and social crisis that had an immediate effect on the lives of everyone. Values, political parties, the deficit, unemployment, and the Euro were the topics of everyday discussions. With the extreme Right on the rise, immigrants were under attack and criminality was high<sup>33</sup>. The idea of bankruptcy<sup>34</sup> made everyone scared for the future. The Greeks felt betrayed, cheated, desperate and poor<sup>35</sup>. Two of my friends were already unemployed, and many bars, clubs and restaurants had closed down. The atmosphere in Koukles Club, though, was very different to the rest of the city. Outside of the Club there was a long queue of people waiting to get in. In the past year Koukles Club had become the talk of the town. A few weeks previously Jean-Paul Gaultier had visited the Club to watch the show. A long list of celebrities had visited the place in the last 12 months. The city was changing, and so was Koukles Club.

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<sup>33</sup> Article in the Greek newspaper To Vima published on 22/05/2011, accessed on 04/12/2011 <http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=401995&wordsinarticle=%CE%B5%CE%B3%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%84%CE%B1>

<sup>34</sup> See article on BBC, published on 06/05/2010 on (accessed on 04/12/2011) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8664161.stm>

<sup>35</sup> See article on BBC, published on 21/06/2011 on (accessed on 04/12/2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13850580>

In this chapter I aim to explore the complex and polysemic discussions related to competition and self-realisation in the process of understanding, creating, and performing drag shows by the Koukles performers. The drag shows become the platform where competition occurs, touching upon aspects of gender identification. All of these transformations happen under the critical eye of the audience. The performer can see this audience either as a collective group that challenges and/or validates the realisation of the self on stage, or as individual sexualised units who give performers a gendered performance. I will foreground the competition process and the impact it has on the shows and on the performer's relationship with the audience. I will argue that performers enter a process of 'killing'<sup>36</sup> (σκοτωθήκαμε) each other and simultaneously constructing the self by posing a challenge to the traditional gendered cultural norms. The respondents re-work and recreate traditional drag to create a new hybrid show where a sexually mixed audience enters a game of constantly shifting gender identifications and sexual orientations. Aspects of the competition in Koukles Club have many similarities with Klein's (1993) ethnographic study from the world of professional body building in California, which I will discuss in a later section.

For many performers the classic definition of drag is rejected, redefined and/or readjusted, indicating an evolution from female impersonation (μίμηση) to female embodiment (ενσάρκωση). Some performers even make a distinction between two types of 'drag': a travesti show and a drag show. I will explain this difference later in the chapter. I have discussed female impersonation in the literature review, in particular in the work of Newton (1979), Schacht (2000, 2002a, 2002b) and Rupp

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<sup>36</sup> The expression 'we killed each other' 'σκοτωθήκαμε' is often used in the Greek context to express a tense argument or a fight between two individuals. I have heard performers using this expression quite a few times in their discussion, when they want to highlight a verbal argument they had with somebody. I have seen some of these verbal arguments taking place, which I present in the film *Dragging the Past*.

and Taylor (2003, 2004). Most of the theories that I discussed previously explore the themes of impersonation, imitation, and mimicry. In Koukles Club the performers revealed one more theme, that of embodiment. The performer's childhood idols and memories became the core of their embodiments. But often the performers were challenged by competitive behaviours. I argue that the different competitive materializations that took place backstage, and on stage during the shows, affected the gender identifications of both the performers and the audiences.

Parts of the competition between performers in Koukles Club can be explained by their ongoing struggles to secure stable incomes. These struggles included negotiations between performers, about the right to be on stage, marking territories backstage and in the club (for example, placing their photographs on walls and mirrors), and creating allies that would help them secure their place in the club. The club became the arena where all of these power relations unfolded. The central theme of these power struggles was the precariousness of employment.

The competition between performers was high due to the lack of job opportunities for trans people in the wider Greek society. Arguably, there are very few employers who would employ a trans person at their company, and this is because they are afraid of the bad reputation it would give to their business. Koukles Club is among the few places that trans people can work, either as performers or in the bar, without having to hide their gender and sexuality. This created a tense atmosphere in the club, as there were plenty of candidates for very few vacancies. In some cases there were some trans people willing to perform for free or for very little money in the beginning, just to secure a place on stage. This put pressure on the relationships amongst trans performers and some trans members of the audience. Marylou, the owner of the club, held an important role in the way relationships developed in the

club. She needed to create a successful team that would bring customers to the club. Often it was very difficult for her to balance interactions, fights and demands, of both the performers and from members of the audience, in order to ensure the show went on stage.

Competition was omnipresent in many of the relations that took place in Koukles Club. One of the aims of the competition was to receive wide acceptance from the audience. In this competition there were no formalised rules; here were, however, clear rules that performers followed to reach excellence in their impersonations. Performers did not explicitly articulate them, but they followed them. Areas of tension and controversy concerned the hair, the body, the clothes and the stardom<sup>37</sup>. The role of competitor could be anyone who posed a threat to any performer's efforts to be the best; this included both audience members and fellow performers. The consequences of this competition were visible for both performers and audiences. The main aim of this competition was to achieve the best 'embodiment (incarnation) of the star', yet this incarnation did not occur unchallenged. Both performers and audiences followed a process of 'bitching about the other', or trying to 'undo the other' with many 'interruptions and disruptions' of the incarnation. There was constant 'judgement' of the incarnation with clear 'winners and losers'. These are the themes that will unfold in the following sections. I will start the narration of this chapter with the changes that have occurred in the Club.

## **4.1 Going Back to Koukles Club**

During the year that I was away, many changes occurred that touched upon several aspects of the way Koukles Club functioned. Some of the changes could have been

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<sup>37</sup> Participants describe stardom as a position. They self identify as stars with expressions like "I am the star here" (Εγώ είμαι η Star εδώ μέσα) or "the Star arrived" (η Star έφτασε)

predicted by looking at my field notes and the collected data. Others were unexpected and were the result of unpredictable relations and actions among performers and audience members. One of the saddest changes though, was the death of Mary, one of my research participants. Mary used to perform in the Club a few years ago. In the last five years she was ensconced at the reception desk, welcoming people to the Club. Another girl from the bar, Elena, replaced Mary at the reception desk after she passed away. The Club was very busy from eleven in the evening, which was something rather unusual, as the majority of people used to come just before the show began at one in the morning, and would leave a few minutes after the end of the show at three in the morning.

Compared to how the Club previously appeared, there were many additional chairs and tables, and two big sofas opposite the stage. One wall was covered with photographs of celebrities that had recently visited the Club. On another wall, behind the bar, there were the photographs that I had taken of the girls for their website. But not all of the photographs of the performers were there; some were missing and had been replaced by new photographs, done in a similar style to my own. Akis, Jenny and Markella were not in the team anymore. New faces appeared. Ria returned after a couple of years away. Anna, the barwoman, was now performing as Marilyn Monroe, and Evita, a new performer, joined the group. The audience was still mixed, but with less trans and more heterosexuals, who were now the majority, in the Club.

Everybody was very excited to see the show. The show began with the song 'Cell Block Tango'<sup>38</sup> with all the girls on stage dancing with a male dancer. The song was performed to a high professional standard, different to what I had recorded in my

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<sup>38</sup> Cell Block Tango (he had it coming) is a song performed in the musical *Chicago* by Velma and the Murderesses.

data. The show had changed. My data provided a snapshot of the Club a year ago, before it turned into the highlight of Athens nightlife. The preparation, the hard work, and the tension between performers, however, still remained high. What will follow is an extract from a backstage discussion, during my fieldwork in June 2009, between Mania, Akis, Jenny and myself, that occurred just before the performers went on stage, during their preparation. I should add here that Akis and Jenny are no longer working in Koukles Club. Akis stopped performing at the end of June 2009 and Jenny stopped one year later in June 2010.

Akis: - Move Vesuvius. Or!

Jenny: - You are bitching (κράξιμο) me, and you are the worst team, needless to say.

Akis: - She even learned the word team, the bitch.

Mania: - Junk, go to your dressing room now.

Akis: - Stupid, you came out of your grave and you think you are the singer of...

KP (accidentally I switched off the lights to Akis's mirrors, and I caused the following reaction)

Akis: - Fuck you, fuck you (to me).

Jenny: - Ah! You deserved it (to Akis).

Akis: - To switch off the lights to Marinella.

Jenny: - Ah this Marinella, shame on you.

Mania: - Hi I'm Madonna... Did you bitch me?

Akis: - Who me? When?

Mania: - Now that I said I am Madonna.

Akis: - You are mad. Are you hearing voices?

Mania: - Voices, I hear voices.

Akis: - Tell me what you want?

Mania: - Come on sing his line now.

Jenny: - Likable, I'm likable.

Mania: - Irrelevant. Jenny why don't you go to prepare?

Jenny: - I'm not working tonight.

Mania: - You are not. So why are you here then?

Jenny: - To throw you yogurts.

Mania: - To show us your divine body?

Jenny: - I have a divine body.

Mania: - Like an eel.

Jenny: - I will call you tomorrow on your mobile...

Akis: - Talk to the other side, you bull.

Mania: - Jenny, how can you allow this? I don't want you to start a fight.

Jenny: - Yeah right.

Akis: - You are a criminologist Mania Lembesi.

Jenny: - It's all right! If you didn't have this bitchiness towards me.

Mania: - We are stars darling, and stars can do whatever they want.  
Jenny: - No darling, I am the star in here.  
Mania: - You are sitar [wheat in Greek], not star.  
Jenny: - Soon I'll place a curtain right here.  
Mania: - Place curtains and shrouds together.  
Akis: - To be objective, do you have to be lame? Is it not true? You are a closet.  
Jenny: - Yes.  
Akis: - You are a fat mare.  
Jenny: - Yes, continue.  
Akis: - You're orca the killer whale.  
Jenny: - Continue your bitchiness.  
Akis: - Which bitchiness, am I blind?  
Akis: - I have the other bitch here, go to hell (to me).  
Jenny: - Film the jewellery.  
Akis: - My precious jewellery that managed to survive, because somebody else is mourning them.

This exchange is also present in the film *Dragging the Past*, but in the film it is in a different context. Here I use it stripped from any visual aesthetics, in its plain form as a text to highlight the major themes of this chapter, namely competition, embodiment of the star (incarnation), bitchiness, words to undo the other, the body, and aspects of interruption and disruption. This quotation is a mild example of 'killing the other'. The main theme coming from this extract is the competition between the three performers about who is the star. More precisely it is about who embodies the star the best. Each one of them expresses this in a unique style but also in a similar way, readable by the others. My presence backstage uncovered this competition in the following ways. Accidentally, with my back, I switched off the lights to Akis' mirrors. I received his angry response 'Fuck you, fuck you'. Jenny entered this episode between Akis and me, commenting that Akis deserved it. This stirred Akis reaction, to reply that I cannot switch off the lights to Marinella<sup>39</sup>. Marinella is a Greek diva and one of the main characters that Akis performs on stage. Even earlier when he was preparing his makeup, he was looking at himself in the mirror and commenting in front of everybody that 'I am just like Marinella'. When I turned the

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<sup>39</sup>Marinella is a big star in Greece and one of her songs that Akis performs is called *Switch on the Lights*.

camera towards Mania, she grabbed this opportunity to declare, to me and to the camera, 'Hi, I'm Madonna'. Akis, with a playful sigh, expressed doubt at Mania's statement. Mania, being experienced in reading such signals, reacted by saying to Akis 'Did you bitch me'? Akis again, in a playful way, refused that by saying 'Who me? When?' Mania replied 'just now when I said I am Madonna'. Akis replies to Mania, 'You are mad, you are hearing voices'. It is a clever way for Akis to tell her that she is crazy and that he also challenges her perception. Jenny apparently feels unnoticed for these few minutes and interrupts Mania's singing, by singing the song that she performs on stage 'I am likable'. With her interjection, Jenny makes a statement that if Madonna and Marinella are here so is Rita<sup>40</sup>. This interruption annoys Mania, who asks Jenny to leave and go to her dressing room to prepare. Jenny says that she does not work tonight and that she came to throw yogurts at Mania. Mania then asks Jenny if she came to show her divine body to them. With this statement Mania wants to attack Jenny on a key aspect, the body. Jenny ignores the comment and shows superiority and a strong self-confidence by saying 'I have a divine body'. Mania challenges that statement by making a comparison between an eel and Jenny's body. Often in the Greek culture, when someone wants to highlight a point she/he uses an example that is often the extreme opposite, in an ironic way, to show the contradiction in an exaggerated scale.

In this case it is the size of the body that is in focus. At this point, Akis re-enters the episode by interrupting Jenny and calling her a bull, attacking her body size. Mania sees that as an opportunity to leave, as Akis and Jenny start a fight while she remains unharmed. Akis identifies Mania's intention and calls her a 'criminologist'. Jenny re-enters by accusing both of them of bitching about her. Mania defends the

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<sup>40</sup> Rita was a popular singer in Greece and one of her songs is the *I Am Likable* in a free translation of the song it would be 'I am popular'.

accusation by justifying on the grounds that they are stars, and that they can do whatever they want. Jenny reacts and states that 'I am the star here'. Mania gives an ironic reply by saying 'you are sitar [wheat in Greek], not star'. Akis attacks Jenny with a series of comparisons between huge animals and her body in order to make a statement that you cannot be a star with that fat body. Akis' statements are interrupted by my decision to film his dressing table. I received an angry response and was pushed away. By looking at the footage again and again, I realised that Akis was threatened by my decision to film his fake nails that were placed on the table; in particular, the glue he used to attach the fake nails onto his fingers. This was done with blu-tack. In my decision to show his precious secret, I challenged, in a way, his construction of Marinella. This was an example of a typical exchange among the performers, which highlights the constant competition they had amongst each other.

The competition was present mainly in the relationships between the performers, but there were aspects of it, that occurred knowingly or unknowingly, between performers and audiences. The performers instantly recognized the challenges posed and responded in turn with new challenges. The performers competed for the best embodiment of stardom and this stardom usually took the shape of famous divas from popular culture. This competitive atmosphere partly explains their need to constantly reinvent themselves. These reinventions touch on aspects of the body, hair, clothes, dancing, playback, femininity, and gender performances. These reinventions also became the criteria on which they judged themselves and others. The competition was important as it helped them to develop and refine aspects of their gender identity. Anyone who threatened them by setting a challenge became a competitor, similar to the role Akis gave me for switching off the light and filming his nails. Everyone had an effect on the competition either by his/her words or actions. The competition was expressed in a verbal and physical way, but it also had an

impact on the body and the gender constructions of both performers and audiences. An aspect of this competition can be seen in some key Greek words that performers used in their conversations, and that are also used as part of defining the self.

## **4.2 Mirroring: Bodybuilding and Drag performance**

This competition that I describe here has many similarities to sports ethnographies as they are analysed in the sociology of sports. In particular, the world of competitive bodybuilding, as it was described in *Little Big Men*, the ethnographic study of Alan M. Klein (1993), which has many points of connection to this current study. Klein offers a glimpse into the life of a group of bodybuilders in the Olympic gym in California, on the West Coast of the US. He explored aspects of gender in relation to muscularity and masculinity. He described the gym, the bodybuilders, the use of mirrors in their training sessions, the hierarchy, the competition that developed among them, the constituency of this competition, the use of photographs in the subculture, and their idea of achieving an Olympic god's body.

All of these themes that are present in Klein's ethnography are similar to the themes I observed in the drag performance in Koukles Club. For example, the rehearsals of the performers in Koukles Club had similarities to the training sessions the bodybuilders endured before going on stage. The rehearsals in Koukles took place when the Club is closed. All performers got together and trained on a new choreography or a new show. This was happening in front of the other performers. They might also have rehearsed some lines of their songs in front of their mirror just before going on stage. In chapter seven I will expand further on the use of mirrors in the field, and their use by performers and audiences. Klein, in his ethnography of the world of bodybuilding, described a similar process where bodybuilders at Olympic gym trained among their competitors while looking at them through mirrors (Klein,

1993: 75). He says 'On the one hand, a cooperative atmosphere exists, yet each contest generates competition that threatens the camaraderie... During contest time, relations in the gym get severely strained. Everything is framed within the context of strategies: diet, training, routine, coping, posing and gathering information on opponents' (Klein, 1993: 75). Klein also described a process of 'psyching each other out' by spreading accusations of hustling gays and drag use. In Koukles Club performers followed their own strategies to get the best clothes, wigs, props, and makeup to impress the audience, but they also followed a similar 'process of psyching each other out', which is called bitching. In the next section I will discuss the rules and criteria of the competition in Koukles Club.

### **4.3 Bitching and Incarnation: Translation Dilemmas**

After having done the first interview with Akis, I told him that I had to transcribe and translate it into English. He almost laughed at that and said 'I want to see how are you going to translate all this'. It proved to be a painfully difficult and time-consuming job. In many cases I could not find the right words to explain the exact meanings behind what he had said. Not all things can be translated, as there is no immediate translation that reflects the difference between the Greek and English cultural contexts. I have tried, in many cases, to paraphrase the words in order to give them a more accurate meaning in the English context. In some cases I did not paraphrase Greek words but rather chose a more direct and literal style of translation, as that had significance for my analysis and for understanding the essence of competition. The root of this problem began with the Greek slang<sup>41</sup> that some of the performers used in order to communicate in a coded way. I knew many words from this dialect and I had used it in the past among my friends, but there were still words that I could not translate from Greek. Some of the concepts were

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<sup>41</sup> Kaliarda. I have discussed this in the literature review page 20

born and developed in the Greek context and there are no equivalent words in English, or they are not used in the same way. Two of these words performers used a lot were *bitching* (about someone) and *incarnation*, and the English reader might find these words odd.

*Bitching* and *incarnation* played a significant role in the competition. *Bitching* is an action performers take in order to attack each other. The Greek word for *bitching* is *ῥαξίμο* *'kraximo*<sup>42</sup> and it means *caw*. *Caw* is the harsh cry of a crow or similar bird, but in the Greek context it also signifies a tense language to attack someone for a mistake s/he made or for a certain behavior or action. This is a crucial part of the competition, as *bitching*—*kraximo*— often came in the form of a challenge that both performers and audiences gave and received reciprocally.

*Incarnation* is a strong theme that emerged from the field. The Greek word is *ἑνσάρκωση* *'ensarkosi*'. The literal translation is *incarnation* and it is borrowed from a religious context. To *incarnate* is to *embody* or *represent* (a deity or spirit) in a human form. In particular, *incarnation* highlights the aspect of the *flesh* (*carna*)—*σάρκα* (*sarka*). The paraphrase of *ἑνσάρκωση* *'ensarkosi*' would be that of *embodiment*. But I use the word *incarnation* because it brings to the surface, in a metaphoric sense, a religious aspect in the drag show. This is what makes it a distinctive type of drag performance as compared to the cases discussed in the literature review. The religious beliefs of some of the performers, which were not expressed verbally, had a presence in the field in the form of small golden crosses worn around the neck and also in the way performers approached drag. In the following dialogue some aspects of this *'metaphorical religiosity'* are revealed when

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<sup>42</sup> There was a very famous Greek gay activist magazine called *To Kraximo* (1981–1994) published by Paola, a transgender activist. Paola also connects with Ilias Petropoulos and his book *Kaliarda*. She was one of the informants Petropoulos interviewed for his book.

the original Tania Tsanaklidou visited Koukles Club to see Markella performing her version of Tania Tsanaklidou.

KP - You told me that Tania (Tsanaklidou) came to Koukles?

Markella - She came to the Club and joined me on stage. So we were two Tsanaklidou on stage.

KP- How was that as an experience?

Markella - I don't know, but I feel blessed. Some feel blessed for other reasons, I feel blessed that Tsanaklidou was on stage with me in Koukles, and she came only for me, because I went to see her live. I told her that I am doing her, so she came to see me and came on stage only for me. It is something unbelievable.

The original Divas are perceived as goddesses and worshiped by performers and audiences alike. Other performers have stated similar sentiments. For example, Mania has Madonna and Anna Vissi<sup>43</sup> as her goddesses. Last year Anna Vissi visited Koukles Club to see Mania performing Vissi. At some point during the show Anna Vissi joined Mania on stage. At the end of the show, Mania knelt in front of Anna Vissi. It was an act of appreciation and admiration towards her goddess.

#### **4.4 The Researcher as a Competitor in the Second Stage**

One of the roles I was given by the performers during my time backstage was that of a competitor. In addition, my presence as a gay male, in combination with the video camera, gave me the role of the audience. But in many respects, as I will discuss later, even the audience can be identified as a competitor. In Koukles Club, a competitor can reveal secrets, spot a flaw in the performance, bitch about seeing the same clothes twice, and not applaud. My role as a researcher, as the one who asked the questions, stirred several reactions from the performers. The same questions were received as threats in some instances and at other times as opportunities to show off their strengths and uniqueness. My question 'what does a drag show mean to you?' (Τι σημαίνει το drag show για εσένα;) provoked a series of reactions and

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<sup>43</sup> Anna Vissi is a famous Greek singer, with a long successful career. A video recording of Vissi's visit in the Club can be found in youtube but also in the Koukles website.

answers. Most respondents differentiated their work from the traditional definition of drag. This question created mixed feelings of anger, relief, boredom, pleasure, and appreciation, amongst others. This is because there is ambivalence over the word drag when it is placed next to words such as queen, performance, performer, and show. People with different sexual orientations and genders formed the team of performers; in particular there were transvestites, trans, transsexuals, post-operative transsexuals, and gays. Every Friday and Saturday they all performed in front of a similarly sexually mixed audience. Apart from the feelings I provoked with my question, the performers used it to explore aspects of competition and incarnation, and also elements of their gender identity.

Eva, one of the oldest performers in the Club, elaborates:

Eva: - Look, basically I am not a drag queen; Akis and Nikos are drag queens. This is a travesti show, because there is a difference between the drag show and the travesti show. But I like to come out as a drag queen, with excessive make-up, with big lashes. I like it. And lately I try to do it, like in Lady Gaga or Jessica where the make-up is extreme.

KP- What is the difference between drag show and travesti show? How do you define it?

Eva: - [travesti] is more feminine. Yes, it makes a more feminine impression.

KP: - While the other is more...

Eva: - The other is drag queen, OK, like Nikos that does Angela Dimitriou. He is a drag queen.

KP: - What does drag show mean to you?

Eva: - The drag show for me is feathers, sparkling jewellery, and glitter. It is shine. For me it doesn't fade away even when I finish the show and the lights are off. I still have the glitter, a lot of shine. I will go out and I will still shine, still shine. It doesn't go away, not only for me but also for all the girls here. We sparkle.

I think Eva was rather bored with my ignorance about the type of show she was doing. She also made a distinction between drag and travesti. She clarifies that what she does is a travesti show, which is more effeminate, and Nikos, who is a gay male, does a drag show. Drag is characterized by excess in the dress and makeup, and is when a male does a female persona. Later in the same interview, Eva expressed

ambivalence by saying that she likes to come out in drag, which puts her in multiple positions. The point I want to raise here is that Eva competes in two kinds of shows: in a travesti show and in a drag show. Eva's statement that she can do both is supported by Akis. When I asked him to define for me his relationship with the other performers, he stated:

...in the Club that I work, I have to deal with travestis. The big difference between them and me is that I need more time to change from one face to another as they have breasts, make up, feminine eyebrows and I don't. There is competition if you want, which never bothered me, because I knew what I was doing, it would work. Not in a competitive way that I'm better than them because I consider travesti already an excess, what I mean is travesti shouldn't do drag shows. What I mean is, they don't change lots. If a travesti makes the effort to look like the person she's doing, then I will congratulate her. Travestis because they have the second (female) nature as an obsession they want to come out as women. So the audience, male or female, sees them as travesti. They don't see the heroine that she performs. They can't say the same for me. So eventually from the travesti's side and my side we don't have lots of competition. Always of course there are minor issues regarding the order of appearance, I'll come out first, you'll come out last. You'll come out first to break the ice with the audience, and I'll come out later. So I don't bother with this, I will come out first, second, whatever.

Akis reacted calmly to my question. Maybe the fact that he knows me played a role in this. However, he drew a distinction between his work and travestis'. He also stated, like Eva, that the travesti show is more effeminate. He described their need to be contested as women and not as performers, and this is a point where he thought his work was different. He tried to disqualify travesti by saying that they do not do much, they do not put enough effort in to resemble the heroine that they portray, and that the audience sees them as travesti and not as performers. He also stated that although they did a different kind of show there was still competition among them. Later on, when I asked him to define himself, he distanced himself from the term drag queen and adopted the term entertainer. He also stated that in Greece the term drag is connected with travestis and sex change.

When I asked Markella what does 'drag show' mean to her I received a rather aggressive response. She became unfriendly and annoyed.

KP: - What does the drag show mean to you?

Makella: - I don't do drag show, I don't do drag show.

KP: - How do you call what you are doing?

Markella: - I don't do drag show. I play theatre here, if you want to call it with the proper sense of theatre. That's why I'm not interested to do neither the beautiful nor the ugly. I play something that I like and has touched me.

Markella received the question as a threat to her gender. My question had placed her in the position of a drag queen, the position of a male homosexual, which was clearly not the case. She vehemently rejected the classification I proposed, and positioned herself in the realm of the theatre as an actress. In my next interview, with Tania, I changed my question to what does the show mean to you, avoiding the word drag. Tania answered the question of how important the show was to her life. Although later in the interview she stated "When we are talking about a trans show, because we are not drag queens, we are trans"; Mania, in her interview, also stated a similar approach to Tania's. She did not get annoyed; she referred to trans people who deal with the art of drag. Mania sees the drag show as a more generic category of someone incarnating feminine roles. Although Tania and Mania did not receive the question as a threat, they felt the need to justify their engagement to drag through their gender and this highlights the relationship of drag to gender formations. Jenny expressed a rejection of drag. She said:

- The moment I enter the stage as Rita, I feel that I am Rita, and not that I am a drag show. I feel this from the bottom of my heart, it comes out and the applause that I see from the people I feel it.

For Jenny the show was an entry point to become the star. She disconnected herself from the drag show and declared how well she felt she had incarnated Rita, using the applause of the audience as a proof of that. In the next part I will develop further how this competition on incarnation functions.

## 4.5 Competition and Incarnation

This section considers the respondents' engagement with the process of incarnating stars. The components of the incarnation are divided into two groups. In the first group are the motives and the internal components of the incarnation as it was described: it is based in childhood memories; and it includes aspirations of what someone wished they were born as. In the second group are the external aspects: the body's resemblance between the performer and the star; the matching hair, wigs, and clothes of the star. I will now further explore the inspiration behind these incarnations, but also the process of materialization. The process provided an opportunity to show excellence and to distinguish oneself from the others. Although Eva identified with three stars, she did not use the word incarnate; instead she described a similar process:

KP: - Would you like to tell me which shows you kept for years?

Eva: - I've kept Jessica, Milva and Christine<sup>44</sup>. Sometimes they tell me that they heard the music of Christine and they imagined me, or they heard Milva and imagined me.

KP: - Can you tell me how come you decided to do Jessica?

Eva: - She brings out... she brings out myself. Yes, she brings out myself. Some shows like this one or like Christine or Milva are... all these I feel them very familiar. I think... maybe I exaggerate ... but I think no one else can do these shows better than me.

Eva has three favourite characters. She described a process where the audience associated her performance with the song, more than associating the song with its original singer. She took the place of the star she incarnated. She claimed that nobody else could do those shows better than her, and that the audience validated this. Through this statement she underlined the competition by saying that she was the best. She expressed that the heroines she incarnated brought out her self and that she had a body that highlights those costumes and performances. The

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcSsrHRikjY&feature=related>

incarnation she described reflected on the connection of Jessica's curves with her own; Eva had the body to do those shows. The expression 'they bring out my self' signifies that some elements of the three characters Eva chose to perform repeatedly matched with some elements of the performance of her self. In a Butlerian sense the self is constituted by repetitive stylized acts, as was the case when Eva said 'all these stars [she feels] are very familiar', as this familiarity was partly explained by the constant repetition of these acts (the shows). Also in Eva's quotation there is a direct association between the performed self and the materialization of this performance on the body.

Tania, on the other hand, connected her childhood memories with her incarnations.

She elaborated:

- Aliko meant a lot to me, I grew up watching her, and her films...she was my Cinderella. The other kids had Cinderella, I had Aliko for Cinderella, because all of her films had a happy end, except two or three. It's been a while now, but I guess this entire thing I had for Aliko has faded away. I don't have the obsession, or the illusion that I'm Aliko Vougiouklaki, nor would I die for Aliko. Other role models have come to my life.

Tania described a process of creating an incarnation based on her childhood aspirations. She became Aliko, her Cinderella. She described that now she does not have the obsession to be Aliko. This establishes that performers build a mechanism that contributes to their belief that they are what they incarnate. Although she stated that she was over Aliko, during the video interview Tania looks into the camera and pulls faces similar to the ones Aliko used to make in her films. She also wore a flower in her hair to resemble one of Aliko's photographs. She used the phrase, similar to Eva, 'I bring out Aliko'.

Markella similarly described a process of becoming her childhood role model, Tania Tsanaklidou<sup>45</sup>. She elaborated:

KP: - What does Tania mean to you?

Markella: - I grew up listening to her. She is my whole life. From when I was little, I grew up listening to her. She nurtured me. She has a poetic / theatrical presence that expresses me absolutely. This is my best show. I feel it, that's why.

KP: - You mean you feel the song?

Markella: - Yes, it tears me apart when I perform this, I want to cry but I don't, I respect the spectators... `Do not stop loving me<sup>46</sup> perhaps this is what I've been missing all my life, love.

KP: - Do you find love on stage?

Markella: - Love? It's all right; I think I'll find it at some point. Because I've been searching from the day I was born, and I haven't felt it yet. I am just like her, incredible. She is the one I love. Tsanklidou is the one I love, for me the word love is Tsanaklidou.

Markella articulated the inspiration of her incarnation, to become Tsanaklidou, in several layers. She repeated several times how close she is to Tsanaklidou. It is her best show because she feels it, but also because she got the approval of Tsanaklidou in person. It is this recognition that differentiates her from the others and gives her credit for her show. Also, she highlights that Tsanaklidou came to Koukles to see her doing Tsanaklidou, and only for her and not any other performer. Markella, with her words, distinguished her value and signalled that she competed with the other performers.

Akis also expressed a similar process to Markella. He elaborated:

Gradually I started working on the artist I adored and I wanted to imitate... I started with Marinella, she is a great star in Greece, as you know, I grew up listening to her. So I started working on her focusing on her appearance. I knew her movements...

The central point in regard to these quotations is that performers choose to repetitively perform famous characters that closely resemble their own self and

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<sup>45</sup> Tania Tsanaklidou is a famous Greek singer, her songs talk about femininity, unfulfilled love, deserted women, but also powerful women who chose love instead of family and conventional values. She is like an anti star with a rebellious liberal spirit.

<sup>46</sup> This is the name of the song

gender performances. They need to repeatedly enact these performances in order to achieve a sense of self.

Nikos similarly described a process where the performance of a character helped him to perform aspects of his self that he rarely performed in other situations. This is why he did not recognize himself on stage anymore. He stopped being a certain version of Nikos and became someone else; it was an incarnation:

- Plus, you don't see yourself as in reality. You change appearance, dress, and characteristics. I've been seeing myself for many years I've had enough. By changing, by doing a show, I change characteristics. I immerse myself in another psychology, in a role. I'm not Nikos anymore I'm someone else.

Mary also talked about the process of incarnating; about how well she did the incarnation and that the audience honoured her with their applause. She also talked about a competition that comes from the audience.

- Yes, I was feeling the magic; especially in my first show, an Arab-Indian dance, I was coming out as a queen dressed in gold with a crown and stuff. I was feeling the orgasm, as artists say, not the orgasm of bravo, but the orgasm of seeing the audience undressing me with their eyes. That moment I loved what I was doing. Except this show I did Angie Samiou, when they listened the music without knowing, especially in the beginning, that it was me coming out of the lift, I heard them saying you're just like her, just like her, just like her. This of course satisfied me in a sense that I achieved what I incarnated. That moment for me was success. People here like the successful shows. What I mean, they like to see whatever you take out that moment, and they judge you and say 'ah she is Tina Turner', and they see Tina Turner which means success when you brought it out I want to believe that a majority of travestis, gays and from the heterosexual as we now learned to call them, would love to do what the guys do here, because we should not forget that all of us deep inside or in some part of our brain would say 'why not me up there?' I think this not only for the shows, even the singers we see in reality shows. Everybody imitates someone. So I'm telling you drag shows are very difficult, very difficult, and painful, and you have to spend lots of money on costumes, shoes, wigs.

In a similar way, I asked Marylou, the owner of the Club, to explain to me the criteria for doing these shows. She described the shows as good mimicries, but when

I later asked her to explain the expression 'just like her' she remarked upon the bodily resemblance between the performer and the star.

KP: - I will tell you a name and you will tell me why are you doing her. Rita?

Marylou: - Rita, we do her, firstly because she was a popular singer of Greece, secondly because Jenny has the body type and the face of Rita. So she comes out as Rita. It's a successful mimicry.

KP: - Jessica Rabbit?

Marylou: - We have Eva, who is a clone of Jessica. She is exactly just like her, it would be a pity not to do her.

KP: - Can you explain to me what do you mean with 'just like her'?

Marylou: - The shape of the body, these curves, these breasts of Jessica's match Eva exactly. This is a successful show of Eva. She has this snobbish looks when she wears make up and the red wig. So she is exactly like Jessica Rabbit.

Mania explained the importance of her incarnation by stating that she incarnated what she wished she was born as. She described a similar process to what Nikos had stated earlier.

KP: - What is Madonna for you?

Mania: - She is my life. She is my mother queen.

KP: - Can you develop?

Mania: - She is what I wish I were born

KP: - So by doing her on stage you come closer?

Mania: - I identify with her; I take a small piece of what she feels globally. That's how I feel.

KP: - The audience applauds, you get in to Melina, and you come out of Melina. How does it work to enter the show? Where is Mania at that moment?

Mania: - You have to enter the show. At that moment Mania is nowhere to be found. I have to perform, or if you like to immerse as much as I can in the personality I incarnate.

Mania, in this quotation, described her aspiration to be Madonna. Later on she described a process of losing the self by saying that "Mania was nowhere to be found". This losing of the self, in a sense, is the moment where the performer performs aspects of him/herself that are not visible in other situations; this is why the performer does not recognize him/herself. In a Butlerian sense these constituting acts are not only constituting the identity of the actor, but they are constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief.

All of the performers described the process of embodiment of the star. The accounts may differ in some of the inspirational sources or materialization procedures, but still they described a process of becoming the other. This was the main topic for competition among the performers in Koukles Club. With the intensification of competition, the best incarnation was judged on how closely she resembled the star. The performer was inspired by childhood dreams. They constantly trained to reach excellence. This was not an easy process, as it demanded performances of the self to be matched with performances of the character they incarnate. As competition became more vigorous, behaviours and actions were pushed to extremes as performers tried to outperform each other. This process became painful. Painful to achieve excellence. But this pain could also come from the other, and as, Tania says, 'we kill each other'.

In Klein's ethnography, body builders have a different relationship with their body. The self and the body are separated, and Klein says "the self is distinguished from the body, and the body is beaten into submission" (Klein1993: 245). "Objectification turns the body into another, the other that can reflect back one's ideal sense of self in narcissistic fashion" (ibid: 245). The Koukles performers presented a different relationship of self and body. In the process of incarnating, the self follows the body in becoming the other. This relationship reveals that the objectification turns the self into an object similar to the body. This objectification has a performative and fluid manner, which allows individuals to reflect upon an ideal self to an ideal body in motion.

## **4.6 Undoing the Other**

The aim of all performers who entered the competition was to constantly reinvent themselves and at the same time discredit the other. They tried to disqualify the

other at every opportunity, by hitting any way that they could. But they also needed each other in order to push their own boundaries. Competition amongst the performers was continuously expressed in the whole ambience of their behaviour, but it was also made concrete in what we may consider to be certain stylistic/symbolic discourses centring on the areas of: hair, body/gender, stardom, and clothes. The performers, in their efforts to achieve their best incarnation, entered a process of 'killing the other'. Anyone who could hurt their incarnation or who competed with them became a possible threat. The 'killing' and the disruption of the other became the goal. The hair became an area of argument. The act of pulling someone's wig equated to the damage of an incarnation. This could be done in a metaphoric way, but also in an actual way. One night, when Eva did her final song, and just before introducing the rest of the team, Jenny attempted to remove Eva's wig. Eva saw that and pulled off the wig herself, letting her long blond hair down.

Hair matters, as it plays an important role in the incarnation; it has an economic value but also a sentimental value. Hair has an exchange value and it can be stolen or traded. The demand for wigs is high, both for performers and also for some members of the audience. During my interview with Mania, Marylou interrupted us to show off her new wig. It was a short one that she recently bought from Akis. All of the performers expressed a need to show their hair. One night while I was having a drink with Markella, Tania entered the Club. She had her hair down. It was long and blonde. Markella saw Tania coming in and she told me that most of Tania's hair was fake. She added 'I'm using only two hair extensions and the rest of my hair is mine, but Tania is using five hair extensions'. 'I have more real hair than Tania' was her point. The hair has to be disciplined, tamed, prepared, fixed. Akis said that he did not care if his wig came off on stage, but backstage he spends hours brushing and fixing the wigs before the show. When I asked Tania about her last thoughts before

entering the stage she said 'my hair, to puff them up to give them volume'. But this is not only Tania, many of the performers checked that their hair was fixed properly before going on stage. If a wig comes off the performance is ruined. Jenny wanted to show me her hair during the interview. When I did my interview with Mania, Jenny interrupted us. She came close to Mania in order to check Mania's hair.

Mania: -Hi Jenny.

Jenny: -How are you?

Mania: -I'm fine baby.

Jenny: -I've just seen your hair.

Mania: -Ah! Don't touch them.

Jenny: -Let me see them.

Mania: -Don't touch them only it will be a mess.

Jenny: -Why?

Mania: -Because it is chromo gel.

Jenny: -What's this?

Mania: -What I've said, Jenny.

Jenny: -This one? (showing a small tube on the table)

Mania: -This is lipstick (shows her lipstick), and this is chromo gel (shows her hair)

Jenny: -Aha, you look rather fake tonight.

This is an example of the rapport between performers when they are focusing on hair. Jenny interrupted Mania. Jenny wanted to touch Mania's blonde/silver hair. Mania stopped her, and told Jenny that it was chromo gel (and she looked annoyed, having revealed her secret). Then Mania attacked Jenny when she asked what type of gel it was. At that moment Mania decided to put on some lipstick. This was where Jenny made the mistake of asking if 'this' (lipstick) was the chromo gel. This was the opportunity for Mania to attack Jenny by making a point that she did not know the difference between a lipstick and a chromo gel. Then Jenny attacked back by saying 'you look fake tonight'. Fake in the sense of not real, not original, fixed up.

#### **4.7 Disruptions: Vital Components of the Competition**

Competition is played out through disruptions. The game of disruption and attack is imbedded in the answers the performers gave me in the interviews. Indirectly performers used their points of strength to defend themselves and to attack others.

In one of her answers Tania said that she would stop doing shows when she grew older. Her answer was directed towards Eva, because Eva, in one of her TV interviews, said that she would keep doing shows even when she reached the age of 75. Tania had seen the interview and wanted to challenge Eva on her age. Another way to discredit the other was by revealing to me the male names of other performers or by calling them by their male names. On one evening Jenny tried to destroy the set for the first show of the night, which was Tania's. Jenny's dressing room was next to the lift; she pressed the button for the lift to go down and tried to destroy the set that was beneath the platform. This was a way for Jenny to attack Tania. In this case Marylou had to scold Jenny for her actions.

The disruptions were a form of covering the other or of having the last word. It was a verbal beating in the form of a smart and quick reply. In the following extract Mania was challenging Eva to speak in English in front of the camera. Eva spoke only a few words of English and had to answer Mania's question in Greek, in front of Mary and me. She replied to Mania, 'five minutes' by showing her open palm. The open palm has a double meaning in the Greek context, as five minutes but also as a gesture of fuck off/ curses for bad luck. Eva was playing with this double meaning. Mary was watching Eva's reply and looked back at Mania to see what she would reply to this challenge. Later on Mania made the statement that she was the star provoking Eva. Eva answered to Mania that she was the boss here by giving her work, and then she threw one of her gloves at Mania.

Eva: - My name is Lolita.

Mania: - Your name is psycho.

Eva: - Sarah Bow... get out!

Mania: - Psychiatrist where?

Mary: - Answer that.

Eva: - Five minutes.

Mania: - Aha five minutes.

Mary: - Ok enough, go to your dressing room now!

Mania - How dare you tell me what to do!

Eva: - I said go!  
Mania - Stop that, I think I spoiled you. You should address me with respect. I am a star.  
Eva: - You were living in the streets and we gave you something to eat.  
Mary: - Tell her more.  
Eva: - Eat this (throwing her a glove).

These disruptions appeared in every conversation. The performers interrupted and challenged each other's statements, but also provoked arguments between other performers. Areas of disruption became the body, the incarnations, and stardom. Mania repeated several times that she was the star, Tania interrupted Jenny's interview by shouting 'the star has arrived'. Jenny, in her interview, said that she was the biggest star after Eva. Eva also told me that she was the star here because she did the finale. The phrase 'I am the star here', was the one that was most interrupted by the others. The disruptions were more visible backstage, when the performers prepared for the shows. Most of my interviews were interrupted, and in some cases, more than once. In some cases there was a visible interruption by performers entering the frame of the interviewee. In some cases it was just an audio interruption by making a statement while the interviewee was talking, or other forms of audible interference, as when I did the interview of Mary, and Elena increased the ambient music to more than the usual level. For example, Jenny interrupted Tania's and Mania's interview, and Mania interrupted Jenny's and Niko's.

Jenny: -Are you doing the interview? Do you record now?  
Mania: -You're in my frame, Jenny.  
Jenny: -Excuse me?  
Mania: -You're in my frame.  
Jenny: -Yes, but you are lucky that I'm in your frame.  
Mania: -Thank you darling.

Mania interrupts Nikos' interview.

Mania: - From the day you were born did you start talking? Even if you were born in 1922 you would have had finished by now.  
Nikos: - What can I do.  
Mania: - Yeah right, your tongue doesn't want to stop.

Nikos: - He is asking me, shouldn't I answer?  
KP: - I ask him.  
Mania: - Blah blah.  
Nikos: - Are you jealous?

They did not miss an opportunity to interrupt and attack each other. The camera was one reason that these interruptions appeared more often. But in some case the interruption started before I arrived, such as in the extract that follows. I was not there to see why and who started this argument between Mania and Eva. This extract shows the power relations between the two and the process of discrediting.

Eva: - Did you hear me?  
Mania: - I love you too.  
Eva: - Ridiculous, you are ridiculous.  
Mania: - I love you darling.  
Eva: - Be careful because the next time, I'll kick you out from here. These are your last shows.  
Mania: - Your career is ending, my little girl.  
Mania: - I'm a goddess.  
Eva: - Yes, a doll.  
Mania: -Your careers are ending, to all of you.  
Eva: - You can't tell me that my career is ending.  
Mania: - Your career has already ended...You should go to your dressing room now.

The disruptions, apart from stardom and the body, concentrated on clothes. For example, in the way Eva flicked through Mania's clothes and asked her whether they belonged to her. Akis wanted to show the dress of Nana Mouskouri in front of the camera, highlighting how expensive it was. By filming the shows again and again I realised the same shows often had different outfits. Performers tried to show off their wealth in clothes. Sometimes they were just altering an existing costume. This constant reinvention of the costumes came from the perceived need of the audience to see new outfits. The audience had the opportunity to disrupt the show by making comments such as 'all the time you wear the same clothes'. As Koukles is mainly a trans Club, the trans audience had more power in the Club. They were the ones who competed with the performers the most. Often they focused on the clothes by calling

names to the performers and spoiling the performance. They had the power to do so, that is why the performers did not like them as an audience.

The disruption and the undoing of the other was also present in the body building culture. The one accompanies the other and as Klein says, "Basically, psyching out is gamesmanship wherein opponents in an event attempt to disrupt the confidence and /or concentration of one another" (Klein, 1993:76). This intimidation is expressed by showing the rival how confident or aggressive one is. The Koukles Club performers had a similar approach; every time they highlight how well they performed their chosen character they were comparing themselves to others who still needed to work on their characters. This was an important means for the performers to come out of the crowd, and show excellence.

#### **4.8 Layers of Judgement**

The audience was important for the life of the Club. The ideal audience for the performers would be one that came to see the show and applauded the performers without interrupting the performance. Apart from the applause, audiences can express their love and admiration towards the performers by cheering and shouting about how close the performer came to resembling the original diva. Often the audience had to be disciplined by the performers. For example, during the performance the audience might talk to each other, ignoring the performance. When this happened during Akis' performance, from a couple of transsexuals who were sitting at the front table, Akis interrupted the performance and asked them to go outside to talk. They stopped for a while but they started again. So when he finished his show, he approached the table and he grabbed the handbag of one who was talking earlier. She told him in response 'there is no money in there', without doing anything else. Akis then replied to her, in front of everybody, 'Do you think I did it

for the money? I did for your cosmetics! Can you live without your cosmetics'? This was a way for Akis to take revenge.

The performers perceived the audience as one, and they competed for the most passionate applause. The applause validated how successful their incarnation was. Often the performers measured their success on the volume and duration of the applause. For example, one night during the finale, Eva introduced the performers and told Akis that Jenny was the star by stating, 'listen to how much applause she will get'.

The audience can spoil a performance by: not looking, constantly talking, not applauding, calling names to the performer, and shouting that she wears the same clothes all the time. Eva stated:

- I like to have a good audience, gay, straight or travesti, a good audience without rivalry, or acting snobbish. Sometimes we say when the Club is full, and only few applause, we call them Swedes, because they are cold. Especially with the gays, because in our circle among travesti/ transsexual there is competition, but with the gays I have a different connection...

Eva stated that she wanted a good audience, without rivalry or acting snobbish.

These two elements can spoil and interrupt a performance. Rivalry in particular, takes the form of a disruption tool in the hands of the audience. It is expressed as disapproval in the performer's clothes, their selection of songs, and the perception of repetitive performances. I have witnessed several times when members of the audience have told the performers to withdraw from the stage. In most of the cases the harshest reactions have come from trans people. Many performers confirmed that in my interviews. Tania said:

Tania: - I believe the strictest judge in the audience is the trans.

KP: - Why do you believe this?

Tania: - Because trans do it, they judge. Generally trans will find the worst thing they have to say or even comment on a single detail. When I mean comment I mean comment negatively without looking something positive.

Gays are not, they worship what you do, the same goes for lesbians and the heterosexuals too. I believe the most negative, the most negative customer in such a Club is the trans when the Club is a trans Club. When we are talking about a trans show, because we are not drag queens, we are trans.

Tania addresses several issues here. She clarifies that in a trans Club the trans audience is the most critical of the performances. The trans audience has the power to discredit and interrupt. The trans audience becomes competitive towards the performers. By interrupting the performers the audience turns towards the hecklers, taking the attention away from the performer. During my filming of the shows, many trans people were moving from one position in the club to another. Their movement created a second stage in front of the actual stage. This behaviour annoyed the performers as it broke the concentration of the audience. Performers and some members of the trans audience were both performing, albeit different types of performance but still performances, which aimed to get the attention of the audience. This second type of performance, coming from the trans audience, challenged performers who then became hostile towards trans audiences and vice versa. All the other members of the audience tended to remain fixed in their position throughout the shows. This second type of performance intensified the competition. Markella, for example, reacted in a different way with the audience. She completely isolated herself from the audience by not engaging with them during the performance. She did not give them the space to discredit her.

KP: - How is your relationship with the audience?

Markella: - Good and bad, I'm rather distant as a person, when they approach me I built up a wall. I don't want lots of interaction.

KP: - So with the audience?

Markella: - With the audience... I don't communicate with the audience. It is more the magic of the moment that I live. I love the lyrics and the music, I love what I am living. What I do I do it for me, it sounds egoistic but it's true.

KP: - So the stage is...

Markella: - The stage is for me, yes.

Akis has a different relationship with the audience. He stated:

- Look ... I feel gifted ... I understand what sort of audience I have in front of me. For example, it's like the theatre when they say 'tonight we don't have an

audience' when the actor returns to the changing room, it means that we will not get the applause or we will not make them laugh easily. Even though the text is the same... so the role of the audience is crucial. From the moment I realize that the audience will not ... it's not that they will not applaud me... it's that the audience will not receive what I do ... I think quickly to find something that will make them laugh... and not for the applause... they will applaud from politeness ...anyway

... I managed to pass in the gay audience too. Which is very strict, very harsh judge as I consider myself to be very tough/harsh with everything. For example if I go to see a performance I will judge it harshly. I want the something extra, I want to be pleased with what I see. I want to see professionalism. This is what is happening with the gays in Greece. Maybe some of them would want to do what I'm doing on the stage. Maybe they identify with what I m doing on the stage and that's why they like it more.

...There are times that I choose, other times it happens. A viewer that could insult me by looking at the other side, for example, I will find a way to insult him and make him pay attention to the show. At times, members of the audience talk loudly or look elsewhere than the performance. My aim is not in a sense to make him turn his back and look at me but he has to respect what he sees, but as we said not all members of the audience will accept the drag show.

Akis felt that he had to discipline the audience. The audience had to receive the performance one way or another. They had to pay attention and give him the recognition he deserved. If they did not behave correctly, they will be insulted or discredited, like in one case, where Akis teased a guy from the audience by challenging that he had a small penis.

Nikos sought acceptance from the audience for his performances:

KP: - What has drag shows brought to your life?

Nikos: - It helps me escape reality.

KP: - Is it like a door that you open?

Nikos: - It helps me escape the everyday routine. I have a morning job with lots of problems, lots of intensities, of course you can argue the same for the night, by doing drag show I have problems, I get tired this and that, but by receiving the applause from the audience, by seeing their acceptance your mood changes.

Mary also used the audience as a source of validation for her performance. Great recognition is expressed in the words 'you are just like her'. Marylou stated that the audience and the performers need new shows, as they get bored easily. The

performers needed to reinvent themselves with new incarnations; the audience needed new shows to re-enact their viewing aspirations.

KP: - Do you think the audience needs to see changes in the costumes?  
Marylou: - Yes, they need to see new costumes, and new shows also, because we have people who come every Saturday. They get bored to see the same shows, the same costumes. They want to see something new. This is a problem that we always face, what's next because the audience got bored. But not only the audience, the girls also complain that they can't do the same show every week for two months, they want to change.

For Jenny the audience was the reason to be on stage. They were her motivation. There was communication between her and the audience. Jenny repeatedly highlighted the value of the applause she received, but at the same time she tried to discredit the other performers by saying that they used fake applause in their shows. Fame has to be conquered.

KP: - What does Jenny think before entering the stage?  
Jenny: - The clap, you see that I come out shining. You can see it, right?  
(Asking me to agree with her)  
KP- I can see that you play with the audience.  
Jenny: - This is what I am saying to you. The people love me very much. It is a communication with them very good.  
KP: - What does Koukles mean to you?  
Jenny: - I have both good and bad memories. You might find it funny, I am smiling but deep inside of me sometimes I feel a bitterness, cause you know, in front of you, your friends and colleagues, I am not talking for the guys I am working now, I'm talking about the previous season to pretend that they are your friends, and when you turn your back they are bitching about you, because they know that you, even in a small way, you are taking some of the fame. This 'bit' from the applause.  
KP: - So is there competition?  
Jenny: -Very much so... very much competition.  
KP: - Apart from Rita and Marisa, which other artist would you like to do?  
Jenny: - In the next season I would like to do Pitsa Papadopoulou, Galani and some others.  
KP: - Why those?  
Jenny: - Because they are popular singers, and the gay audience likes popular music. I can see that when I come on stage as Rita they applaud a lot, I don't know if they applaud that much in the other shows, ok I hear the applause but being up here you can't tell if it is a real applause or fake applause from the CD. But when I come out the audience is true.

Another point that comes out of her words is the value of the gay audience. Eva, Mania and Tania also quoted that their favourite audiences were the gays. Mania elaborates:

KP: - Is this to say the applause is important?

Mania: - Of course it is, it indicates that what you did was nice. That these three minutes were respected and appreciated by the audience, they were applauded, the audience had a good time...

KP: - How do you feel when the show is over?

Mania: - If they applaud, splendid. If they don't applaud, right after the curtain falls, I start cursing.

KP: - Which people from the audience do you approach?

Mania: - The gays

KP: - Why the gays?

Mania: - Because they are more relaxed and with humour. The trans are strict the gays are not.

KP: - Why are trans strict?

Mania: - They'll criticize you from the dress they might see twice up to the tights, for everything. The gay audience is having more fun, and can even forgive some mistakes you might make.

KP: - OK, You said the trans are strict, the gays are...

Mania: - Yes, I don't want them at all in the Club.

KP: - Do we have any lesbians?

Mania: - Yes many. Lesbians admire us for our femininity. They look at us with the eyes of a man.

KP: - How do you perceive the changing audience?

Mania: - I have experienced the changes in the audience. From totally straight people coming to find a trans, he was forced to see the show in order to make his acquaintances, so you could see them being a bit cold as an audience ,Yeah, ok... and we reached the days that people come to have fun, and to appreciate the drag show and not to pick up or make contacts with a trans, and I like this.

Mania expressed a disapproval of the trans audience being in the Club. She described a shift in the reason why the audience comes to the Club. In the past, she stated, they were coming to meet other regular trans customers. Now they come to see the show. In a way the performers are competing with the trans for the attention of the non-trans audience. She also described lesbians as holding a male gaze at the shows. So in a way the gay audience gives them the validation of stardom. Lesbian audiences give them a feminine validation. The aim is to be seen as an incarnation of a famous star, so they seek this validation. This validation is proof of a really good performance. In a Baudrillardian (2006) sense, this validation is a simulation of

reality. This is the point where all visual symbols and signs are reflected in several screens and surfaces, absorbed by performers and audiences, and later on incarnated in their performance. It becomes their reality and it is perceived as reality. As Baudrillard states in regard to simulacra

“It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes”. (Baudrillard, 2006: 2)

This incarnation reflects that the ‘real’ in Koukles Club has its foundation in the hyperreal. “A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences” (Baudrillard, 2006: 2).

## **4.9 Winners and Losers**

This stiff and continuous competition has winners and losers. Although I mentioned that there were no clear rules on the way this competition is marked, it has clear losers and outcomes. During my fieldwork I witnessed what I would call the ‘death’ of a drag queen. At the end of the season Akis decided to give up drag performance. I was close to him during the last weeks of his decision making process. He told me he had enough of them; his real value as a performer was not appreciated. He decided to sell everything from his closet, leave the city, and move to the countryside. He started selling his wigs to fellow performers. One after another they were going to Akis place to buy his wigs. Akis later told me that he managed to sell many of the long ones but not many of the short ones. On the last night I was at Koukles he came to the Club with a black bin bag full of wigs in order to sell them. He needed money so he was selling everything. On that night I overheard two of the

other performers talking about Akis' decision. They were at the bar having a drink. They started by saying it's a pity that he decided to quit, as he is such a nice guy. Then straight away they started laughing about him, in the sense that he would be out of the way, no longer a competitive threat.

The consequences of the competition were more visible in my last visit to the Club, when I returned one year on to give them a copy of the film. I knew Akis was gone, but Jenny had also gone, and Markella had stopped performing. Ria was now performing some of Akis shows. Ria was among the first people I talked to in Koukles when I began this research. She used to perform in Koukles, but, after an argument she had there with fellow performers and owner Marylou, she left. After a pause of three years she was back on stage. The ongoing competition creates a circular movement of people leaving, but also returning to the Club with new ideas and strengths.

Another consequence of this competition touches upon the mix of the audience. Although Koukles Club is a trans place, in my last visit there I saw only a few trans clients apart from the performers. This absence is the affect of a few factors, but one of them is the fact that the performers perceived the trans clients as competitors and tough judges. This is something that led them to eventually push them out of the Club. Heterosexual clients have taken their place. The more popular and successful the performers become the more heterosexual the audience becomes, and the less trans people go to the club. But this is a continuous cycle as the audience is in constant motion.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I analysed the structural form of competition that develops in the process of preparing and performing drag shows. Although drag performance in Koukles Club is not explicitly a drag competition, like in the film *Paris is Burning*, performers compete continuously with each other for excellence in their portrayals and acceptance by the audience. The show is what brings all of the performers together to form a group. The constituency of the show is divided into individual acts in which each performer impersonates a star. Performers, however, have moved away from traditional female impersonation and drag performance in order to reinvent it and adopt it in a new context. In this new context performers enter a process of performing their self and gender in stylized repetitive acts, which partly match self-performances of the character they perform. It is a process of embodying (incarnating) the other. The incarnations are highly related to childhood ideals, and female myths, that are connected to the life of the performer. These incarnations are continuously contested in front of a critical audience who validates or challenges their performances.

Religiosity is an aspect that makes drag and competition in Koukles Club a distinctive case. This religiosity has extensions to the body and prompts the actions of the performer. Their approach to drag is channelled through a need to incarnate. Their body becomes the medium to carry them closer to their childhood idols and goddesses. They create an incarnation based on childhood images of stars. It is an image-like performance. They also adopt some of the behaviour patterns of the stars. These stars are adored and accorded the status of gods and they are the only ones who can give the performers blessings.

Competition plays an important role in the life of the group. The goal of the competition is to best incarnate the star. The pursuit of the ideal incarnation becomes the underlying goal, which motivates all actions and behaviours. Obstacles to this pursuit include the actions of fellow performers when they 'bitch about each other', 'undo the other', and 'disrupt the other'. All of these actions aim to spoil the incarnation and are targeted towards the major components of the incarnation, which are the body resemblance, the hair and wigs, and the clothes. The body of the performer is under scrutiny by fellow performers and audiences, as it becomes the platform on which the incarnation is produced. There is a need to establish immediate similarities between the body of the performer and the artist that they portray. If the similarities are weak, then the incarnation is easily challenged. This process is similar to the bodybuilding subculture, where contestants train and struggle to reach the ideal embodiment of a Greek god. The more distance their body has from the ideal, the less acceptance they will receive from the audience. In the same way hair and wigs play an important role in drag performance. They are carefully crafted to match the star's hair. Wigs become a target among performers in their need to find ways to spoil the incarnation of their peers. Wigs can be pulled off, intentionally or unintentionally, to reveal the foundation of the performance. Performers rarely change the wigs in specific performances and they can keep them for a long time, as they are an important part of the incarnation. Clothes, although they are equally important as hair, have a different use. Performers prepare them, adore them, and use them in the shows. However, after a while they need to change or alter the clothes of the performance, as audiences get bored. This boredom is expressed in the form of negative feedback during the performances, which can spoil the show.

The main competition is amongst performers, but anyone who becomes a threat to the realisation of their incarnation takes on the role of a competitor. Such was the role I was given when I filmed the sensitive secrets of performers or when I asked questions that exposed these secrets. In a way, I was ruining their performance. Some members of the audience are also perceived as competitors; this is because their behaviour and actions unsettle the incarnation. The unsettling of an incarnation can be done in three ways: bitching, undoing, and disrupting. Performers and members of the audience follow these routes to challenge performances they do not like. This challenge usually comes in the form of 'covering up' the other. Through this covering up they are able to produce a self and a performance that is reinvented in its content but that follows the same composition. This reinvented self is challenged anew by another reinvented self. This process is what keeps performers together as a group, but also facilitates a continual need to find, try, and expand on roles and performances. In the next chapter I will further explore the impact that competition and incarnation have on the gender and sexuality of both performers and members of the audience.

In this chapter I set out to answer: how does competition affect the performativity of gender? What is the role of the other in this competition? What are the structures and hierarchies in this competition? It was revealed that performers compete for the best embodiment (incarnation) of a star while defending their gender performances. This process has implications: first, on the way they perform their gender and sexuality on stage, and second, on the way they socialize and interact with each other. The body becomes the platform where this incarnation is materialized. In the socializing aspect the constant competition places performers in an isolated position, with no real friendships or bonds. Performers compete with their fellow performers, in order to climb up in the hierarchy of the best embodiment. From a sociological

perspective, this hierarchy is about power and acceptance, but it is also about the hierarchy of gender. This is because performers use their gender performances to defend their place on stage. The competition and the fluid structure of this hierarchy not only challenges traditional gender arrangements, proposed by essentialists based on biological and anatomical structures, but reveals a hierarchy which is based on repetitive stylized acts that constitute self and gender performances.

This chapter also revealed aspects of the relationship between researcher and subject. Harper (2003) discusses, in his paper *An argument for Visual Sociology*, the possibilities for visual sociology and photo elicitation in relation to the new ethnography. Harper claims, "The photo-elicitation interview may redefine the relationships between subject and sociologist, and the interview material may be presented in any of a number of creative ways" (Harper, 2003: 36). He supports a collaborative spirit rather than "a one way flow of information from subject to researcher" (Harper, 2003: 35). I support his position, and expand upon it by saying that the researcher needs to address the impact that visual methods has on the relationship. Video and video elicitation in Koukles Club showed a competitive aspect in this collaboration, between researcher and subject which otherwise might not have been visible.

## Chapter 5: Subverting Gender Norms or Not: a Musical of Competition

'I'm not interested in how people move, but what moves them'<sup>47</sup>

Pina Bausch

### Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that the competition discussed in chapter four is a key element in the performance of gender during a drag show, both for performers and audiences. I argue that during the process of viewing the show, the audience sees, on stage, versions of their ideal gender aspirations and desires. I argue also that drag includes in its constituency complexities embracing reinforcing and subverting powers. As it is performed in Koukles Club, it seems to subvert heteronormativity, and reinforce a desire to move beyond fixed locations of gender. The show is also the site where performers perform a hyperbolic femininity in their efforts to achieve the best embodiment of a star. Fellow performers, and audiences in many cases, pose a threat in the embodiment process. Most performers highlight the importance of the audience in the articulation of the show. However, when prompted, they expressed a particular preference towards gay members of the audience. Clapping and cheering was a way to measure success and validate a star embodiment. Negative comments, disrespectful reactions and talking during the show were seen as obstacles that performers had to overcome. Usually the negative comments, apart from challenging the embodiment, aimed to challenge the production of the gender of the performer.

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<sup>47</sup> What moves people? Commemorative lecture of Pina Bausch at Kyoto Prize ceremony in Arts and Philosophy 2007

I will begin by exploring the preparation process that took place in the backstage area of the Club, which revealed that competition for the best incarnation stood on the grounds of gender. Most performers used their gender and their bodies to secure and defend their right to be on stage. I continue by exploring the gender identifications or dis-identifications of the audience, by interrogating their desires during the show, which were evidenced in the audience interviews. In particular, this chapter is based on interviews with both performers and audiences, as the existing literature calls for the need to provide accounts from the audience. All members of the audience perceived the entertainment value in the shows. Some of them, however, according to their gender and sexuality, moved beyond the entertainment to enter into a process of creating narratives that helped them to perform aspects of their gender, which are oppressed in the public. Drag works as a tool to help some individuals 'come out'. Some of the 'coming out' narratives took the form of competition. This competition did not have obvious winners and losers, but rather operated as a continuous process which allowed participants to reinvent their gender performances. I argue that respondents from different locations of gender used the drag show as a playground for emerging genders and sexualities, away from the binary formations of gender found outside of the Club. The show posed the questions what is gender and what is the body? This research probed the relationship between the two, while offering a different understanding of corporealities and the definition of the other.

This chapter will shed further light on the complex relationship between drag and gender. In particular, I will reflect on the ongoing debate about whether drag subverts or reinforces hegemonic binary gender formation and heteronormativity (Dolan, 1985; Frye, 1983; Gagné and Tewksbury, 1996; Schacht, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Tewksbury, 1993, 1994; Butler, 1993, 2006; Garber, 1992; Lorber,

1994; Muñoz, 1999; Rupp and Taylor, 2003; Rupp et al, 2010). In this chapter I argue that aspects of the subversion of heteronormativity is happening through the form of drag, as it offers grounds in which performers and audiences create narratives in which they are able to play and try out different gender formations.

In this chapter I present what a typical night out in the Club would be like, just as in the film *Dragging the Past*. I decided to use some of the songs from the film *Cabaret* to organize the ideas in this chapter. Two reasons that guided my choice to use the song titles in the text were the popularity of the film among members of the group, and that there were two classic acts based on the film that were performed in the Club. In particular, the song '*Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome*' is performed as an opening act every Friday and Saturday. The second song; '*Mein Herr*' is adored by one of the performers and is among his favourite acts. The song titles inspired the chapter's headings and I use them as a conceit to bring forward my ideas.

## **5.1 Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome: Competing Genders Backstage**

In the film *Cabaret*, one of the main characters introduces the performers and musicians to the audience while singing the lines of '*Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome*'. Here the lyrics in the section headings will introduce the Koukles performers to the readers of this text, and I will use this song as a metaphor to reflect upon the transition from backstage to on stage. In particular, I will focus on the interactions among performers just before they go on stage and during the first act.

As the night falls, Koukles Club comes to life. One by one the performers and patrons pass through the thick iron door to get into the Club. Performers come early, as they have to get ready for the shows. Up a narrow, iron circular stair, they make their way to the dressing room, which is located above<sup>48</sup> the stage. Bags and small suitcases filled with glamorous dresses, tights, and high heels, transform the lifeless backstage area into a lively 'arena'. Little bags are bursting with sparkling jewellery, and makeup bags are opened up and laid out on dressing room tables with surgical precision. As the lights are switched on, one after another, the room becomes hot and stuffy. Some electric fans are scattered around the room and they fill the space with a light circular breeze, but they also make the fabrics from the dresses hanging on the rails look like sails on the ocean. Performers begin applying their first layers of foundation to transform their faces. Flawless skin is created as their lips try to remember the words from the playback. A performer starts singing his opening act from the musical *Cabaret*. His quiet voice sings 'Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome! Fremde, etranger, stranger.' All of a sudden he stops and asks Akis 'what does it say afterwards'? Akis answers, while he puts on his black Versace high heel boots for his act as Catherine Zeta Jones in *Chicago*. Performances, one after the other, come to life.

The tense atmosphere backstage can lead performers into fights. Reasons for an altercation could be anything, but many of the insults and attacks target one thing, the gender of the other. I offer below an exchange between Akis and Jenny, who were arguing about the position and the ownership of a dressing room mirror. With this quotation I aim to show how the competition of embodiment correlates to

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<sup>48</sup> In the appendix there is plan of the Club, in order to get an idea of the space in which the participants move.

gender. As Jenny entered the dressing room Akis found the opportunity to have a 'chat' with her about a mirror.

Akis: - My darling Jenny, I'm telling you this politely. We have this mirror here from the start. It's for drag queens and not for transsexuals. You are a travesti, you have boobs, you have a pussy you are a woman. You have a woman's identity. Identity. This is for drag queens that have fake boobs...

Jenny: - But I had this inside. [Pointing at the mirror]

Akis: - Yeah, but this one belongs to me, as Anna Vissi says. Basically it does not belong to me, but it should be in this part of the dressing room. I repeat you are transsexual; you have a pussy, very deep, you have boobs; very firm and you are a woman.

Akis, in an attempt to secure his territory and his props in the dressing room, told Jenny that the mirror belonged to him. In an indirect way he also made a remark in front of the camera about Jenny's gender by saying this mirror was for drag queens and not for transsexuals. He 'reminds' Jenny that she has boobs, she that has a vagina and she is a woman. By thus describing Jenny's body and gender, he made the point that she was a woman and not a drag queen, therefore she should not have been there.

There were many tense moments between Akis and Jenny and often they bitched about each other. Akis told me in his interview that travestis usually did not make the effort to resemble the artist they perform on stage, that they did not put enough effort into their likeness. They just added a few elements to their existing appearance. But Akis, as a gay male, completes a full transformation from a male into a female star.

These struggles to define territories signified aspects of a gender hierarchy. Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro (2010), in their article '*Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes*', discussed a similar case where some drag queens accused a performer, who had breast implants but kept her penis, of being a 'tittie queen'

and disparaged another performer who was about to have sex reassignment surgery because “she was not a real drag queen because of her breasts and did not belong in the show” (Rupp et al, 2010: 283). Rupp et al suggested that ‘transgender sensibility does not always, for the drag queens, translate into real understanding of transgenderism’ (Rupp et al, 2010: 282). From a sociological point of view, in Koukles Club the struggles performers followed to define their territories, and their ‘presentations of the self’, manifested in their gender performances. These struggles also reflected a need to subvert the existing gender hierarchies, and consequently, heterosexuality. Each one of the performers competed to be the one on the top of this hierarchy.

One point that I would like to highlight is that the troupe in Koukles Club was composed, in the majority, by trans performers, as compared to the club discussed in the book *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Rupp and Taylor, 2003), where none of the performers were identified as transgendered. However, in Koukles trans performers used their gender to defend their right to do drag. Jenny, in one of our moments alone backstage, confessed to me that ‘You assume that all of us here are the same’. I replied to her ‘No, I do not assume anything unless you tell me’. She continued, ‘I would like to tell you in front of the camera that I had sex reassignment [surgery] and now I am a woman.’ Jenny used her sex reassignment to differentiate herself from the other performers and to highlight an ‘advantage’ she had compared to the others, she believed she was closer to the star that she embodied. I will use one more quotation to make my point clear. What follows was part of a discussion, held a few minutes before going on stage, between Dimitris, a male dancer, Marylou, the owner, Mania, a trans performer, and Akis, a gay male drag queen.

Dimitris- Marylou I am ready.  
Marylou - What?  
Dimitris - I'm ready.

Marylou - You are, but them?  
Mania - You are so selfish.  
Akis - You got nerve.  
Marylou - Eva move to your... he has nerve?  
Mania - If they are ready, they should wait for us, they got here an hour ago.  
Marylou - Mania, you still have time, you are here.  
Akis - We are professionals.  
Mania - The girls have to prepare lots... [laughs]

There are two points I want to make about this dialogue. First, Akis' statement, that 'we are professionals', linked him with the other male dancer, and second, he attacked Mania, Jenny, and Eva, for not being professionals. Mania replied to his comment by stating 'the girls have to prepare lots...', in the sense that Akis and Dimitirs are girls but they had not arrived yet, and they had to prepare lots in order to 'be' girls like Mania and Eva. In Koukles Club the 'real understanding of transgenderism' came in the form of competition, as trans and non trans performers competed with each other to achieve the best embodiment.

The competition about gender did not only occur between trans and gay performers, but is also presented amongst trans performers. As time flowed and performers got prepared for the show, they undressed, put on costumes, and applied makeup. In the next exchange I will show the competition that developed during preparation time and that lead to a gender dispute. I asked Eva to show me some of her makeup tips on camera. Her dressing room was on the ground floor and tiny. So we decided to do the shooting in the dressing room above the stage. Mania was there during the shooting. This is the dialogue that developed between them, with Eva wearing makeup and making statements about her status in front of the camera.

Eva: What am I doing to be the queen of the night..  
Mania: Queen of the ass.  
Eva: I am the queen of the drag queens.  
Mania: Yeah, right. You wish.  
Eva: I am the queen of the Trans.  
Mania: Yeah, right. You wish.  
Eva: I am the queen of the women.

Mania: Yeah, right. You are the queen of the Transformers. You are a truck carrying cargo from Italy to Greece.

Eva tried to show her superiority but faced a hard time with Mania. The discussion started with Eva claiming to be the queen of the night, which was challenged by Mania. Her next statement, 'queen of the drag queens', can have a double meaning, either that she was the queen in Koukles Club, or that she was the queen of all the gays. So Eva entered the gender arena. Mania challenged that statement. Eva continued by saying she was the 'queen of trans'. Mania challenged her again. Eva continued and said she was the 'queen of women'. Mania challenged Eva again by attacking her femininity, using the words transformers and truck. 'Transformers' implies an action/figure and film about men and car-robots. Truck means that she is like a truck driver, or rather this was an accusation of masculinity intimating that she was a butch lesbian, as truck (νταλικά) in Greek queer slang means butch lesbian. The discussion continued even further when Eva sprayed herself with perfume, stating that this was a new perfume and someone brought it for her from the US. Mania continued to challenge her, and also entered into the frame of the video. Eva then made a final movement and told Mania 'take this then' (giving her a box of condoms). Eva, through this action, implied that Mania used condoms in a more active role in her encounters. Then Mania replied to Eva, 'I do not use them', implying she played a rather passive role. The climax to the competition of the most successful drag performer led to a competition on gender grounds, and was a competition about who would have the last word.

The competition poses questions about the masculinity and femininity of performers, but also has physical implications. The shape and size of breasts are aspects of a physical attribute that was contested. In particular, the breast is one area of the body that both performers and audiences used to define themselves. While getting

dressed for the show Mania was sitting with her breast exposed to the rest of the performers, and also to the camera. Then Dimitris asked 'Are not you feeling ashamed'? Mania replied 'Are you crazy? Why should I be ashamed? Why did I do them then... to be ashamed'? Then Dimitris replied 'Yours look amazing, they are even a bit saggy'. Mania replied, 'yes of course... because I did not do plastic boobs like the other travesties out there'. The point Mania wanted to raise here was that her breast was more 'natural' and real, not plastic (fake, unnatural) like the others. In the following paragraphs I will discuss how breasts and other body parts were perceived, negotiated and analysed on stage, initially between performers, and then between performers and audiences. These body parts were often linked to the production of gender.

## **5.2 Maybe this Time... I'll be lucky: Competing Gender on Stage**

As the text and the night progresses I continue with the song 'Maybe this time ... I'll be lucky'. In the film *Cabaret*, Liza Minnelli enters the stage and sings the lines of the song 'maybe this time... love won't hurry away'. I use these words as a metaphor to describe the desire of the performers to receive love and acceptance from the audience, each time they enter the stage.

The show, as presented in the film *Dragging the Past*, was a combination of classic musical performances and burlesque femme fatales, but it also included some contemporary pop stars. It began with the welcome track of the musical *Cabaret*, and continued with Jessica Rabbit, Catherine Zeta Jones in *Chicago*, and others. There was a long list of performers coming on stage one after another. It was a spectacle full of colours and impressive, revealing dresses. The main reason for the show was to entertain the audience. But during the show there was lots of

competition going on, and in many cases this had to do with the body parts and the gender of the performer. In some cases the competition that occurred backstage moved onto the stage. The competition was not always directed at one person but could have indirect recipients, both other performers and members of the audience.



Figure 5: Eva performs as Jessica Rabbit

In the next quotation I want to present how one of the performers, Akis, dealt with his fake breasts on stage during the show. At the end of his performance, as Yma Sumac, he moved up and down the stage pretending he was trying to locate a mobile phone that was ringing. He stopped at the centre of the stage and took one of his fake boobs out of his blouse and placed it on his ear like a mobile phone. He said 'Hello', while the audience burst out in laughter. He left the stage talking to his boob. Akis used this fake breast to distinguish himself from the other trans performers. Through his joke of 'femininity calling' he played with the audience, questioning what a breast is. Later on in the finale, just before taking his final bow, Akis again played with his breast on stage in a creative way. While Eva was talking to the audience, Akis started touching his fake boobs. He moved them to the centre of his chest, creating an unnatural distorted breast. Then he took them off and placed them like shoulder pads in his blouse. Then Dimitris took one boob from Akis and put it under

his fishnet t-shirt in the middle. He then looked at the audience. Eva looked at him and told him 'You are on the right track...' In this incident Akis created a misshapened body and made fun of the idea of what a breast is. One reading could be that Akis acted in a misogynistic way. This is a plausible statement in relation to his ridicule of the breast. A second reading could be that he performed the subversion of the binary gender dichotomy by standing in full female drag in a body without breasts.

The competition about gender between performers could be more specific and directed at body-parts while on stage. In the following incident between, Akis and Eva, there was gender teasing. After finishing his show, Akis moved towards the curtain to leave the stage; he saw Eva waiting to come on stage and returned back to the centre of the stage and said:

Akis - And now ladies and gentlemen, I present you the biggest diva of the Italian music scene, Milva.

A - Come Milva. Come Milva love.

[Eva enters the stage, and stands next to Akis]

A - Bella! Que Bella! [Akis shouts while touching Eva's breast]

A - Que Bello! [While touching her genitalia]

With this exchange I want to show how the gender competition takes place on stage. In a humorous style Akis teased Eva, and at the same time he used her breast and genitalia to expose her gendered body formations. He played with the words Bella/Bello [the feminine and masculine forms of 'beautiful' in Italian] to create fun, but also to question what is gender. He presented Eva's body as a manifestation of gender beyond the binary dichotomy.

The gender competition also 'touches' some of the members of the audience, and the main theme revolves around specific body parts and gender identification.

Individuals get their gender identification through the other. As I have discussed in

the literature review, '[t]rue subjectivities come to flourish only in communities that provide for reciprocal recognition, for we do not come to ourselves through work alone, but through the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us' (Butler, 1987: 58). But it is not only confirmation we receive from the other but also, in some cases, a sense of competition. Participants 'play' with the different scales of masculinity and femininity to define each other. This gender competition functions by disqualifying the other and qualifying the self. I argue that these embodiments offer performers another way to construct their gender. Similarly, Rupp et al. (2010) argue that the gender and sexualities of drag queens and drag kings influence, and are influenced by, the performance of drag, and are key to understanding the boundary-deconstructing potential of drag.

This thesis aligns with the work of many trans theorists (Namaste, 2006; Feinberg, 1996; Halberstam, 1998; Stryker, 2006; Sanger, 2008; Hines, 2007, 2010) who acknowledged the relationship and the difference between gender and sexuality, and proposed that they should not be collapsed into one category. Hines (2010) argued for a gender that is socially relational and performatively constructed, neither changeable nor unstable, but, rather, as a lived experience. Hines (2010: 8) suggested that "trans identities problematise straightforward readings of the relationship between gender and sexuality; showing the limitations of sexual identity categories as well as those of gender". The audience in Koukles Club witnessed a gender education presented in a humorous style by the performers. Here the competition for the best embodiment touched on aspects of gender formations beyond heteronormativity, and beyond clear-cut connections between gender, sexuality, and bodies. I will explain the role of the audience and how the performers used it in the following section.

Often performers teased some members of the audience with some sexual hints, either about their body and sexuality or their gender. Through this teasing performers made a point about their own self also. With the following quotation I want to show how performers overwhelm the audience. Eva picked up on a member of the audience who had her hen party at the Club. Eva started the teasing by saying:

- Maestro get ready, we're having a party here. [voices in the audience, shout that there is a party in the first table]  
What? Birthday? [voices in the audience, shout that someone gets married]  
She is getting married. [Showing a girl who sits on the front table]  
Are you getting married? With a man? With a man? Are you sure? OK, I warn you. Do you have his photograph to show me? I might know him. [The audience laughs]  
No? Anyway...

Through this banter Eva teased the future bride by asking her where did you find a 'man', implying that it is difficult to find a 'real' man. She doubted the response of the bride by saying are you sure he is a man, in the sense of 'have you tried him'. Then Eva stated a warning that there are not 'real' men out there. She even continued her teasing by asking for his photograph, saying that she might 'know' him already. Which, in a way, made fun of the bride, as through this talk Eva made fun of heteronormativity. She proposed that there are no 'real' men, or at least that she has not met any.

The teasing of the audience could also occur during the lip-synching of a song. Eva, during her performance of 'Why Don't You Do Right?' by Jessica Rabbit, teased a trans member of the audience. Eva wore a revealing dress<sup>49</sup> that exposed her breasts and other parts of her body. She embodied a classic femme fatale. Through the lyrics of the song she teased a trans spectator and made a point. The song goes 'why don't you do right like some other men do? Get out of here and get me some

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<sup>49</sup> See page 133 for a picture of the dress

money too'. Eva sung these lines while looking at the trans client and showing her the exit of the Club. She looked at Eva and with her body language asked Eva 'who me?' and laughed. A second later she replied to Eva's tease with a feminine gesture by turning her head away and pushing her long blond hair to the back. The competition started with her decision to sit on the edge of the stage, too close to the performer, and continued with the tease from Eva 'like some other men do'. In a later section I will analyze why performers wanted to push back the trans audience and why their presence was received as a threat.

The role of the audience was important as it gave the performers the applause and the validation that they sought. The relationship between performers and audiences was shaped by a constant challenge. With the following quotation Tania described the stage as a process of challenging.

- Stage, stage... you enter, they look at you, laugh, admire you, some look at you erotically, others admire what you are, others what you do. Stage for me is challenge. I challenge those in front of me to gaze at me with all possible ways they can. This is what stage means to me.

Tania explained how she felt about being on stage. She received erotic stares from the audience. She also made two points: that some people admire what you are, while some others admire what you do. People admire someone that they cannot be or something that they cannot do. In the next section I will discuss the way the audience saw and understood the show.

### **5.3 But if You Could See Her Through My Eyes: The Audience's Point of View**

In this section, I use the song 'if you could see her through my eyes'. In the film *Cabaret* this song is performed in a very dark, but at the same time jolly, way to talk about race. I do not aim to make a connection with the dark character of the song or

to comment about race, but rather I use it only as a conceit to discuss the different ways members of the audience see the performers on stage.

At this point I will discuss the video elicitation interviews that I conducted with members of the audience. In particular I will focus on the way members of the audience, from different locations of gender, perceived, understood, and reacted during the process of viewing the show. As revealed during the audience interviews, many participants expressed an initial curiosity to visit the Club and to see the show, but they were also interested to see what 'kind' of people gathered at the Club. The video elicitation prompted participants (audience) to talk about ideas and issues that occurred to them while they watched the shows. However, during the actual show they did not discuss or reflect on these issues, as they were mainly focused on the entertaining parts of the performance. Many participants (audiences), during the elicitation, posed questions to me about the life stories of the performers, their sexual orientations, and the performers everyday experiences.

When Koukles Club first opened, it was a meeting place for the trans community. It was the only place for trans to go to meet friends, socialize, and have some fun. Over time the audience has changed, but so have the motives to visit the Club. As Mania, one of the performers, described:

- I have experienced the changes in the audience. From totally straight people coming to find a trans, he was forced to see the show in order to make his acquaintances, so you could see them being a bit cold as an audience "Yeah, ok, you better finish because..." and we reached the days that people come to have fun, and to appreciate the drag show and not to pick up or make contacts with a trans, and I like this.

The shift that Mania described has occurred for various reasons and has happened over a long period of time. In the past the club's two main groups of clients were trans and straight people who wanted an encounter with a trans. In this quotation it

is interesting to note that the early male clients who were seeking an encounter with a trans are portrayed as 'straight'. From my discussions in the Club, I got the feeling that some of the heterosexuals, who self-identify as straight<sup>50</sup>, often sought encounters with trans and gay males.

When I started this research I was advised to immediately video record the shows, as the Club might close. Back then the Club was not busy, only a few trans, gays, and lesbians were going there. Some nights the show did not take place, as the Club was almost empty. The audience was rather unstable and unpredictable. In the second year of my fieldwork, Panos Koutras<sup>51</sup> made his film *Strella*, which he shot partly in the Club. The film was a big success. After the film, the TV show 'Protagonists' was broadcast on one of the main TV channels, and it presented Koukles Club to a broad audience. With the increase in visibility of Koukles through the media, more and more people were coming to see the show. My data encapsulates this transition from an almost empty to very busy Club. Now the Club celebrates its newfound success with many clients, including many heterosexuals, coming to see the show.

For the majority of the straight audience, which is not familiar with this type of show, curiosity was their main motivation to go. They saw the drag performance as just another kind of show, without focusing on particular details such as clothes or hair. When I asked a heterosexual male to comment on one of the shows during the video-elicitation he said: 'I have not seen this act. Aha! She is a very good-looking girl, very good-looking, very sexy. She is Tania, is not she? She is very pretty.' So he

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<sup>50</sup> In Greek gay and lesbian life, there is a joke making fun of heterosexuals who have not come out and self-identify as 'straight'. It goes: I am straight, but my partner is gay.

<sup>51</sup> I have discussed the film *Strella* as one of the very few Greek films presenting the world of drag in contemporary Athens. Koutras was also one of my interviewees.

focused mainly on the physical appearance of the performer. He saw Tania in an erotic way. Later on I asked him to describe the feelings he had when he decided to go to the Club. He told me:

- It was nice and fun. It moved me. Especially a show of Callas seemed like art. And I am not referring to that because she does Callas it is art. The whole setting and the way she was singing, the whole place had truth and realness. When they perform ... in their eyes I see passion. That's why I liked it.
- So you saw it more like a piece of art?
- I saw it as a show. Irrelevant to any race or gay or straight connotations, that's why I cannot expand more.

It is interesting that he made the claim that he perceived it only as a show without questioning it any further. A heterosexual female expressed similar views. She said: 'I do not see it as something more than it actually is. I do not think of anything, not even that they are travestis who do the show after a while. Their self-sarcasm makes me laugh.' Another reason she went to the Club was her curiosity to see what type of people go there. She said:

- A reason to go is to see what sort of people goes there. The curiosity to see what would be in there, or how will they move... to see how the audience behaves.
- So the regulars made an impression on you?
- Yes, especially there was one dressed with a mini shiny dress, with golden and red hair extensions and long white boots dancing a zeibekiko<sup>52</sup> like a super macho<sup>53</sup>. I told to myself, no I am not living this now.

It is interesting in her answer that she sees the performers through the entertainment lens; the audience members, however, are seen through a different lens. She was impressed by the female appearance of an audience member dancing a macho dance. It was this ambiguity of male/female 'dancing' performance that impressed her. Towards the end of the interview, I asked her if she took any photographs of the performers. She replied in the positive and she justified it as an act of taking a picture of something exotic and strange. For her, a visit to the Club

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<sup>52</sup> Zeibekiko is a Greek folk dance, mainly danced by a male while the others watch.

<sup>53</sup> The exact expression is like Nikos Kourkoulos. Kourkoulos was a famous Greek actor.

was a kind of introduction to gender and sexualities outside of the heteronormative framework.

A lesbian member of the audience, while reflecting on her heterosexual past, talked about the performers as something exotic, weird, and strange; she said:

When I first visited Koukles Club, it was in a period of my life that I was with a man, then as a spectator I used to see it as something more exotic, I can say as something foreign to me, more exotic, and something which... like a show... like all these people who participate in this show, I do not know how to explain it like they are not living organisms, like something fake, like they are dolls, as the name of the Club says [Koukles], I did not see them as living beings, I saw them more like a show that entertains you a lot, much more grotesque, let's say, from something that you are used to see, and more exotic. For example like all these straight people that say that they hang out with a travesti and they say it like they hang out with an alien. Got it? Like that.

The main theme that comes out from these straight accounts is the curiosity to see something exotic and strange. The entertainment value was their main reason for going. Heterosexual men admired the femininity of the performers on stage and saw them in an erotic way. Heterosexual women admired the sense of humor and the sarcasm of performers. From my interviews and from the participant observation I found that a motivation to go was to see alternative or non-heterosexual subjectivities performed on stage. It worked as a lesson about the different gender performances that occur beyond the binary gender dichotomy.

The queer audience had a different reading of the show, as they used it to project their own questions of gender and sexuality onto the performers. Gays had a different way of looking at and understanding the show as compared to heterosexuals. Some gays, apart from the entertainment side, admired the performers for what they did on stage. By looking at the drag performance gays created narratives where they could dream of themselves being on stage. This was a

process that Tania commented upon earlier. When I asked a gay male to tell me what he thought of the show, he said:

I get impressed and I believe other times that I've been there with gay friends; they get impressed also. Maybe deep inside in the mind of a gay there is a possibility to imagine that he is on the stage; because I have thought about it although I do not like to be a transsexual, I have not reach that level and I do not want to, I do not like it... I thought that I could be on stage that moment doing an act, always as an artist; but maybe in my mind to think that these 2-3 minutes to be the person [the trans] that is on the stage who is doing this artistic act. And I know that my gay friends have thought about it too.

He saw it as an art form and less as a display of gender. It was an opportunity to project the self onto somebody else that was on stage. One can mirror one's self during the show in an identification process. One can enjoy it, become passionate about it, dream of it. All of these feelings can be accompanied by great admiration for the artist who performed it. This, of course, can create some forms of competition towards the performers. This competition, however, was not about their gender performance but about the actual show. Successful performers are appreciated for the work they did as artists.

Another gay male expressed a similar way of seeing and analyzing the show. He focused on the details of the show, the makeup, the clothes, and how close the performer came to the original. However, he was very critical of the work of some of the performers. He classified some trans performers as not good and indicated that the reason they were on stage was due to their egoism. He thought they ought to be more playful with the audience, and he picked up the gender of the performers as one defining factor of the lack of playfulness. He said that a big difference was that drag queens saw performing as a job and they had to be excellent, while some 'travestis because they are dressed like that day and night and this is it, they do not pay further attention to it.' He was very critical with some of the performers about their decision, after reaching a certain age, to still perform the young and fresh

characters, even when they did not have the body to do so. He was very strict about the facial features of Eva and justified her success on her gender. He said:

- Eva's face is distorted from the many plastic surgeries. It is not nice. Sometimes I think, that the people who like her are those who like to fuck travestis but have a taboo, and by seeing a female body they are the straight ones.
- Have you discuss this with anyone else?
- No, I have not, but I think it's obvious. Who would go with Koumarianou? Someone who thinks he is straight and he wants to fuck a female figure or to get fucked by a female figure.

With this quotation I want to highlight how gays focus on the artistic elements of the show, while they are also able to read a gender motive into the show, both for the performers and for some members of the audience.

Another gay male indicated his preference for performers to interact with the audience. 'When the performer plays with the audience it's nicer. When they are very diva-like I like it less and find it boring'. He liked to see the style and the aesthetics of the performer in the show. He said:

- I like Mania a lot and in some shows I think she is... I like a lot what I see and maybe I like even better than the original. Especially when she does Duffy, I like it a lot the whole style, the cloths, the performance.
- Is it because it is closer to the original?
- Not only it is closer to the original, but I appreciate the taste of the performer. I think Eva brings out more her self rather than try to imitate somebody, at least in my eyes. I like Jenny also, and she brought the upside down to what I expected to see there. I thought I would only see the super woman with the perfect body and Jenny was a nice surprise.

Additionally, he praised the atmosphere in the Club, which was created by the interaction between the performers and the audience, as the key to the successes of the place, comparing it to other gay places. He said:

- In there [Koukles] the atmosphere is playful, and it's a nice place to start playing. I believe this starts from the performers when they tease the audience and places you in another position also.
- So at that position could you flirt with anyone?

- At that point you could. I think lots of people go there because they see the performers in an erotic way. Even with straight people who see on stage what they are looking for. In this atmosphere you feel nice, relaxed, it has nothing to do with any other bar/Club... it has a unique atmosphere that I cannot describe.

So this interactivity opened the way for the audience to approach performers and start flirting with them. Performers, by being interactive, created a good environment for erotic encounters. Some lesbians also noted that the interaction between performers and audiences lead to a playful atmosphere but also to a gender identification process. The show could be perceived and used by the audience as a safe place to perform some aspects of their self and gender, which might be oppressed in other public situations. A lesbian explains:

It has a different effect on you, which I can imagine you never wanted to be a woman and a different effect on me as I have a big gender dysphoria. It opens up a way to express myself. What I mean is that I can flirt with the drag queen and at the same time I get into the role of the man. At that moment a suppressed part of myself is liberated, and I have placed moustaches in front of the mirror to see how I would look like as a man. Whenever I see a drag queen, which is the highest, the super feminine, because you do not see women like that. A door opens, to take out of me the super macho<sup>54</sup>, the masculinity at a hyperbolic state. It is a nice ground, you make a nice game and it gives me much pleasure. Whenever I enter Koukles Club I feel man, and I feel safe to feel like a man.

With this quotation I want to underscore the different viewing processes within the audience. Here a lesbian described the viewing of the drag show as a way to perform oppressed aspects of their self, gender and sexuality. The flirting game, and in some cases the erotic gaze, gave her an identification she desired, that of a man. The drag show became fertile ground for the oppressed gender to come out. She also underscored the importance of this viewing process by stating that she even tried to see herself in the mirror with a moustache. The viewing process of the self in the mirror got transformed into another type of reflection; a reflection of a hyperbolic femininity that brought out a hyperbolic masculinity. In the following quotation the

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<sup>54</sup> Anestis Vlahos and Nikos Kourkoulos are the exact words used. Both of them are Greek actors with a macho attitude.

same person explained the mechanism of this viewing process. She said:

Whenever I come in contact with drag queens, trans, and M2F immediately I become F2M. It is like an automated mechanism that myself brings out immediately. Instead of you defining yourself; the other defines you, and you must be ashamed not to be seen in order not to do it. In an environment, which has dragging up, you feel much more familiar if you have it inside you... I see them as women and they see me as a man and it is like... how can I express, it happens unconsciously, automatically. Let me give you an example: whenever you are thirsty, you go and drink water, you do not think about it. It is exactly the same thing.

The previous account indicates that drag partly subverts binary gender dichotomies and heteronormativity, and it also provides the opportunity for non-heterosexual people to create narratives where they can perform aspects of their oppressed gender and sexuality. Another lesbian commented on the female stereotypes that were displayed in the show and she identified two types of femininity on stage, one that is supported by accessories and one that is closer to female 'nature'. She explained:

The stereotypes they show, they do not reproduce them. They deconstruct them, especially those who ridicule them. That's why I find it annoying when they take it seriously. What I mean, obviously you are not a woman just because you are wearing high heels. You are a woman because you feel like one. Some of them feel like women and they are convincing. For example, Koumariou over-relies her femininity on her high heels. I do not like it, I like to see the ridicule of stereotypes. So the reproduction of all the stereotypes has to do with each performer and if this performer relies on the accessories or relies in some things that come from the inside. I have seen only Mina Orfanou in the film *Strella* and I can say that she brings out an authentic female nature. She is like that and she is convincing, nobody can doubt it. While Eva relies her femininity on her accessories and this annoys me. Because I am a biological woman and I do not rely at all on the high heels the perception of myself.

The proposed femininity on stage is something that members of the audience decode, translate, explain, and use in order to define themselves, either by becoming super-masculine as in the previous account, or by seeing their own femininity in relation to the performer. In both ways the drag performances were used as a reference to gender construction, which positions them away from heteronormative ways of thinking.

Another theme that arose from the viewing process for some of the lesbian audience members was the 'coming out' of the performer. Questions like 'How did they do it? How were they accepted by their circle?' emerge in the elicitations.

- When you see a drag performance, do you question your own gender?
- At moments yes, many questions come to my mind. Like, ok, they do the show, but what else do they have to do in order to survive, where are the parents? What sort of childhood did they have and how did they reach this point? All these questions come to my mind for a second but, ok, you stick to the entertaining part and you admire the show... The truth is that if you are not gay it is difficult to follow it, because there is a clash. Gays have an understanding on what is happening, straights cannot have this understanding. Even I, that I know and feel a few things more; I can't understand the drag kings. Why do they want to reach the male character? These [the drag queens] I can understand them better, because they bring out something shiny, something beautiful. The male is not beautiful, that's why I react like this.

The drag performance is highly correlated to the way gender and sexuality is understood. It is also interesting, in the previous account, to see questions about the coming out of the performer to his/her family and also his/her environment. Does the family know? Here the participant projected onto the performer her coming out dilemmas. She also made the distinction that gays saw beyond the actual show as they made links to their own coming out stories. Another lesbian expressed similar views on the coming out process. She elaborated:

- So, do you enter in the life story and the role of the performer?
- Yes, yes but this has to do with me I believe, in what I've been through and it makes me enter in their position... that I lived some things unprecedented, I felt rejection from my family, some things were falling apart, some things that I took them for granted, a sense of security, a sense that my relationship with my mother is stable, a feeling of psychological unbalance due to these situation. So then I realised that all these people might look, for someone who is outside of all this, sparkly and liberated ... and oh look how liberated this individual is and behind the surface there might be a very difficult or sad story.

Some lesbian members of the audience expressed mixed reactions. They saw anchor points that connected the show to their own subjectivity, but also with the coming

out process, the acceptance/rejection of family, their position in terms of flirting with the other, or even confirmed by the other.

The trans audience was very energetic and responsive to the drag show. In the past they were the majority audience as this was the only place they could go. As time passed, the trans community had more options and places to go, resulting in less trans visiting the Club. Also, Koukles has an 18-year history, which led some trans clients to consider it a boring place to go out. However, there are still some trans who go there regularly to see the show and meet friends. The ones that I approached for an interview were very skeptical of participating. Some of them gave me a reply like 'I have enough problems with them already I do not want more. I want to be able to come here again'. After reassuring them that it would be anonymous they gave me their phone numbers, but they never answered the phone. I cannot provide specific examples of what they saw in the show, but I can offer insight into their viewing practices based on the participant observation I conducted and from the accounts I have had with the various people I spoke with anecdotally throughout the process.

Trans people as an audience tend to be strict. They can loudly comment during the show, interrupting and upsetting the performer. They had power as spectators and Koukles was their base, which gave them a different position amongst the other members of the audience. Newton (1979: 61) described a similar situation where gay audiences interrupted and challenged the show performed by gay performers. The comments of the audience could be about the performance or about the outfits that they may have seen too many times. Trans could become hostile and negative towards the performances that they did not like. They moved in the space with ease, often creating background noise that interrupted the show. They could also be

engaging and passionate while watching the show, which in some cases annoyed the performer, as they 'come too close' to the stage. Due to all of these reasons most of the performers did not like trans in the audience. When I showed the recordings of one evening's performance to a group of performers, they all noted that a particular trans person used to sit 'too close to the stage', and I heard comments suggesting that they should push her away from the stage as it spoiled the frame. In the next section I will discuss the performer's perspective on the audience.

## **5.4 You Have to Understand the Way I Am, Mein Herr: Performers Views on the Audience**

Under the heading 'You have to understand the way I am, Mein Herr', which is also a line from the song 'Mein Herr', I will discuss the way performers perceived and reacted to different members of the audience. Here I discuss the performer's point of view on trans, gay, straight, and lesbian audience members.

### **5.4.1 On Trans Audiences**

Acceptance and recognition by the audience was important for performers. They did, however, have preferences amongst the members of the audience that they would have liked to receive acknowledgment from. For example, performers expressed that the trans audience was their least favourite while the gay audience was their most favourite. Trans, as an audience, tended to be rather harsh with the performers and their passionate criticism could cause a similar reaction in performers. As Tania, one of the performers, said:

I believe the strictest judge in the audience is the trans. Generally trans will find the worst thing they have to say or even comment on a single detail. When I mean comment I mean comment negatively without looking something positive. I believe the most negative, the most negative customer in such a club is the trans when the club is a trans club.

This fear of being criticized could create tense moments between trans performers and trans audiences. Criticism was received in the form of negative comments on certain details during the performance. This was the reason performers pushed trans audience members back from the stage and even confronted them outside of the Club. Mania also described the trans audience as difficult. She said:

Mania: The trans most of the times will not respect you. For example from seeing the same clothes twice she will shout it in front of you. So she will criticize you the moment you are doing the show. And you, as a performer, have to keep calm not to respond and also not to show that it hurts you.

KP: So trans are a strict critic?

M: They are much stricter yes, and if you want, they can you make fun of you like ... look how she became... or again and again the same thing... all this. I do not want them [the trans] at all in the club.

The gay makeup artist of the Club commented on the way the trans audiences saw the show. He claimed that trans audiences did not see the actual show but rather a gender performance on stage. This could be very stressful for the performers as it challenged their work and their entire process of embodiment. He said:

The trans have some similarities with the gay audience. They like to see the stars they grew up with, they identify with them or even they dream of themselves on stage. In addition they see the show with a more critical and competitive eye; I say this after spending many hours with them. The trans will do a scanning of the drag queen on stage. If she is friendly, if she is feminine, if she has a nice body, how feminine are her movements, if her makeup is good... she sees with the trans eye the trans person on stage and not as an artist doing an imitation. A gay person will not see it this way, but will focus on how close she resembles his beloved artist, the movements and will adore her. The performers will receive a part of this love towards Madonna, Duffy and the rest. The gay person will show this admiration to the stars he loves.

He highlights some of the elements that the trans audience saw in a performance.

His main point was that the competitive viewing process was what the performers had to respond to. By receiving comments on small details the performers felt their insecurities and the process of embodying the star was spoiled. He also noted a contrast between the viewing process of the trans and of the gay audience. The gay audience would focus on how successful the performer was at achieving their resemblance to the star. Although within the gay audience there may be people who

saw the show in a competitive and critical way, according to Mania and Akis, this happened when performers chose to perform gay icons. In those cases the gay audience could be much harsher, with the big difference being that the gay audience would not comment during the show.

The viewing process was filtered through gender. My point here is that trans were the most competitive towards the performers, and they posed a threat to the gender of performers as their criticism was directed towards the performer's gender on stage; trans' comments were received as competition.

#### **5.4.2 On Gay Audiences**

The key factors in the affinity of trans performers towards gay audiences are that gays are the least competitive and they are the most passionate. But this affinity could also be gender justified. Eva gave a different explanation for this. She elaborated:

In our circle among travesti / transsexual there is competition, but with gays I have a different connection because I feel gay, I'm gay. OK my appearance is for my job. Everyone who works, wears a suit, the doctor wears a costume. Likewise my appearance is my job. I play a role.

With this comment Eva clearly remarks upon the competition between travestis. She praised the gay audience as her favourite and she made a connection with them on the grounds that she herself was gay. Eva, with her statement that she is gay and her female body is part of her job, proposes another way to construct and perform gender. She challenged any assumption of heteronormativity and gay sexuality with a trans body. Her words prove that her body, gender, and sexuality pose a challenge to traditional readings that consider gender and sexuality as one and the same. This statement supports Hines' (2010) position that argues for a gender that is socially relational and performatively constructed as a lived experience.

The makeup artist gave a testimony of his engagement with trans and suggested that one of the motivations behind drag is the same-sex desire of some of the girls.

He said:

Being gay 15 years ago was not easy to have a good-looking man next to you. So they adopted female looks to attract more good-looking lovers and not because they felt like women. They thought by wearing the 'dress' they would have access to beautiful men and more straight men, more masculine.

The previous account cannot be generalised outside of this specific context, as this would be untrue for many trans. But it must be acknowledged that this process existed and may have directed some gays to follow this path in their realisation of gender. This account supports the position of Rupp et al who argue that 'desire for men when young was what they described as the critical factor in becoming drag queens.' Rupp et al clarify that it was only a particular type of man that gay men desired, that of '*straight* men, or straight-seeming traditionally masculine men' (Rupp et al, 2010: 282, original emphasis). In the next section Akis reflects on one of his encounters with a 'straight' man from the audience.

### **5.4.3 On Straight Audiences**

The straight audience, as I have discussed in previous sections, usually came mainly to be entertained by the show. They got impressed easier than trans or gays as they were not a 'trained' audience. They arrived five minutes before the show and left right after the end of the show. In Koukles Club, because the performers were trans in the majority, the straight audience might have expressed a comment like 'look how successfully they look like women'. However, there were some men in the straight audience that had a different reason to visit the Club. They enjoyed the show and at the same time they flirted with the performers. They saw the performers and imagined having a super feminine encounter. But in many cases the performers perceived the straight audience members with hesitation. Akis confessed how drag could become a trap for the gender of the performer.

With the straight audience, now I have seen many people desire me dressed as a woman. And I have lived the experience. I had sexual encounters with straight dressed as a woman. The situation there, if you can't control it, can be a trap. What I mean by trap. If I had started the drag show at the time when I was searching my gender, as I did search it, and this thing was happening to me, and it was starting in this way or if I met a transsexual back then, deep inside of me I say that today I would be a transvestite. What I mean by that, due to my body and state of mind I could have done it, but when I started doing this job, I had already found my gender, how I wanted to continue my life... due to this situation I say sometimes I got trapped when I had an encounter with a man who likes to go with a transvestite. And I can say at that point I was devastated... and I was picking my pieces because there was an emotional factor that played a role. Because the one I wanted as a man I could never have him unless I was dressed as a woman. He was saying that in me he saw the female prototype he was always dreaming. But with a big difference as I have the male genitalia, I'm not a woman. In this situation I had to deal with myself, I was wondering how is it possible, he knows that I'm not what he sees ... but I got through that situation.

- How does it feel to hear someone saying to you I see the female prototype in you?

- I'm thinking that this person... I believe that he is fooling himself by saying... how can I explain it differently? there is something going on with this person. Deep inside, he is homosexual, but it is not clear. There is the fear of the society, of the religion and the 'forbidden' that I am a man so whenever I m going with a transvestite they do not see the penis. They fool themselves by thinking they are going with a woman. Plus the roles are changing, the sexual roles I mean for example he might not be the stallion and I have to be the stallion... at this point I do not know what to say [laughs] what to think for the other. Everyone has his perversion, his homosexuality and his beliefs, as he thinks is best for him.

This difference from the heterosexual norms that can exist in some straight people leads many performers to be suspicious of the straight audience. It created some distance between them and the straight male audience in particular. Rupp et al also suggested a similar situation where 'Drag queens report that often when straight men approach them after the show, they are interested in taking the insertee rather than inserter role in sexual encounters' (ibid, 2010: 288). This situation created problems for some trans performers who looked for a straight male to be with. The inversion of the role put some of them in a position they did not want to be in. This was why Eva, in a previous quotation, said there were no 'real' men out there.

#### 5.4.4 On Lesbian audiences

The lesbian audience had a vivid presence in the Club. The performers declared that the lesbian audience admired them for their femininity, and often lesbians looked at them with the eyes of a man. It was perceived as a nice way to flirt while on stage, to be looked at with a dose of eroticism. It was perceived as admiration. Akis said:

- What about the lesbians as an audience?
- With the lesbians I face a different situation. I arouse them sexually. I think this is because ... my body really does help me a lot at the job. I m rather short, I wear small size in shoes. So whenever I dress as a woman, apart from the job now, I become a little doll. So with the lesbians, there was an instance in Corfu, I was on the bar dancing, dressed as a woman and not as a drag queen. And I was hearing comments from a group of girls like we want to fuck you. I do not know how can you translate that. I do not have any problem with the lesbian audience.

The flirting on stage was acceptable and desired, but off stage it was different. Many of the lesbian participants asked me if the performers would go out on a date with a lesbian. When I posed this question to the performers their reaction was rather negative. They did appreciate the lesbian audience but they would not go out with them. These were some of their responses. Mania said:

- K: How are the lesbians as audience?
- M: They worship us. Yes. They make us (laughs) they worship us.
- K: A few girls asked me if you could have a date with them...
- M: Yes, to start a relationship [ironically]
- K: Yes, some of them were really interested...
- M: Nope, I am not interested.
- K: All right OK.
- M: I can understand it, as part of fun [joke]...
- K: But you receive this as a compliment, as a flirt... no?
- M: Yes... perhaps it is my style that attracts them. Maybe it's my short hair maybe it is my street fashion and depending with my mood sometimes with my gothic style. Maybe I inspire them for something different. As a look I come closer to their dens.

Markella received the question as an attack to her gender. She said:

- Some lesbians from my interviews asked me if they could go for a date with one of you?

- No way, if they were my friends' yes, OK. But since I entered this process and changed everything you see, no way I would do that... it does not move/interest me and in general it does not interest me neither the masculine nor the feminine. Okay? What interests me most is myself, I can't fall in love nothing else apart from myself.

All of the performers expressed similar views. They liked and respected the admiration of the lesbian audience, but they would not go out or start a relationship with one of them. The bodies and the gender performances of the performers inspired sexual desires in the audience. As Tania, one of the performers, said earlier, 'I challenge those in front of me to gaze at me with all possible ways they can'. She mainly referred to all possible erotic ways. Drag in this case became a locus of desire. This desire challenged aspects of heteronormativity, but also gay, lesbian, and trans who might self identify or be well positioned in their own gender. In this regard drag subverted 'fixed' locations of gender and proved the fluidity of the lived experience. Off stage, this desire might not be fulfilled, but that depended on each performer.

## **Chapter Finale (Auf Weiderseh)**

In this chapter I set out to explore the potential of drag to subvert or reinforce binary gender construction and heteronormativity. A description of the relationship between performers and audiences was the key to understanding the different ways drag achieved aspects of this subversion. I noted how the structure of the drag show embodied a performance that was the outcome of the relationship between performers and audiences. The body of the drag queen became a 'white canvas' where audiences from different gender locations projected their gender aspirations and questioned their own desires. The hyperbolic femininity on stage was the outcome of competitive structures in gender realisations. In many cases it was only the other who could confirm them, but the other also competed with them in defining

their gender. I have explored how male and female heterosexuals, gays, trans, and lesbians, who were all members of the audience, saw, understood, and used drag performance in their articulations of gender. I have also explored how performers received these different viewing practices in the articulation of their genders.

The competition for the best embodiment, which was discussed in chapter four, was highly correlated with gender realizations. Most of the performers entered a process of competing with each other on who came closer to recreating the star, and this included the gender of the star. The body had a principal role in this as it was the place where competition was materialized. The breast in particular played an essential part in the competition. Underneath the entertaining aspects of the drag show many narratives arose about the coming out process, to the family and to society in general. The drag show became a vehicle for expressing an repressed gender; the lesbian's account on how she entered the role of a man was a good example of this. The drag show could also become the site of a gender struggle, for performers, when they engaged with 'straight' spectators. Some 'straight' spectators sought encounters with performers that had very effeminate bodies— in order to externalize their own repressed desires. In the case of 'straight' spectators adopting a less passive role, they became a threat to the femininity of the performer. Gay audiences could also become competitive in the eyes of the performer as they compared performers with their own projected aspirations for the stage. The trans audience was a strict judge of the show; it was the competitive eye that sought 'mistakes' in the performances in order to value the self. The next chapter will explore the relationship of mirrors and photographs to the process of constructing gender. I will also look at how the competition during embodiment affected this relationship.

# **Chapter 6 Mirrors and Photographs: Competition and Hierarchy in the Club**

## **Introduction**

My aim in this chapter is to show the performers' use and understanding of mirrors and photography. In particular I will focus on the use of mirrors and photographs in the morphology of Koukles Club, as these two elements cover the majority of its walls. I argue that these two elements influence the performance of the self and affect relations among the participants in the Club. When I refer to mirror/s in this chapter I imply the use of the mirror as an actual object analysed through sociological theories (Baudrillard, 2005). I want to explore how the mirror is used as an object to reflect the body but also the other. I will focus on the consequences that the mirror brings to the relationship of the self with the other. I will not focus on the mirror as it is explored in psychoanalytic theories, particularly in the work of Lacan, because I am more interested in the interactions between the participants. I will examine how mirrors and photography were used in the competition that developed among participants.

In the first section I examine the position of the mirrors in the Club and the centrality they had in to building relationships. I explore the locus of the reflection as part of the interaction that gave shape to the performer's relations. I explore further the impact mirrors had in the shaping of this research, in particular by questioning the reflection of the researcher in the mirror, while doing participant observation. I also discuss the relationship between mirrors and notions of reflexivity and autoethnography. In the second section I will examine the role of photography in the interrelationships amongst the performers. The data for this came from two photo

shoots that I conducted for the performers and the owner of the Club, Marylou. This series of portraits, both of individuals and groups, were used on the new Koukles website. The process of the photo shoots reveal aspects of the competition discussed in chapters four and five.

Both mirrors and photography figured significantly in the culture of bodybuilding as it was explored in the work of Klein (1993). Mirrors, in particular, become an important tool in the hands of competitive bodybuilders. They used them as an integral part of their training sessions in the gym, in order to observe their body, the way their muscles moved, and the postures and movements they needed to perform in front of audiences. At the same time the mirror became a tool of comparison. They could check their body in reference to other bodies. The Koukles performers followed a similar process, where they trained in front of mirrors, checked their body, and observed the movements and postures that they needed to perfect in order to impress their audience. Koukles' performers used the mirrors to observe other performers' movements and rehearsals. I will draw links and examine points of difference between the two cultures. Both cultures, in their own terms, concentrated on creating a 'hyperbolic' masculinity or femininity, focusing on the body while competing with the other. I argue that mirrors and photographs played an important role in the relationships built. The group photographs, in particular, revealed the hierarchy of power and authority among the Club's performers, and shed light on the constant struggle of performers to rise higher in the hierarchy.

## **6.1 Mirror, the Object**

The blinding white light outside Koukles Club, made the façade of the Club look like an oasis in the darkness of night. This vivid light attracted insects, flies, and other creatures around its bare bulb. The white light that passed through the door of the

Club was dispersed into all of the colours of the spectrum. The mirrors covering the walls reflected again and again this plethora of colours and hues. As I mentioned in the introduction, this research has been a journey into the lives of a group of people whose beauty shined in the darkness. This beauty was often reflected in the mirrors around the Club.

Mirrors have existed for a long time and they have been used widely as a decorative item in households and public spaces (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002), as part of other inventions such as photographic cameras and microscopes (Frizot, 1998), and also as tools to construct a desired image (Baudrillard, 2005). The main quality of the mirror lies in its surface, to reflect light and everything in front of it. Individuals use mirrors in their everyday life to reflect their image, sometimes to get a different perspective of their body or the space it occupies, but also as a 'mocking' device of the body when it is reflected in distortive mirrors. Mirrors can also be used as a tool of control, by looking at the body in the mirror while also looking at the other behind you. Mirrors also place the body into context, in relation to space and others.

Baudrillard (2005), in the 'System of Objects', portrayed the mirror as an object with a glorious past but with a restricted present. He elaborated:

"The mirror is an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual the opportunity to exercise his privilege – to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions. ... The mirror still exists, but its appropriate place is in the bathroom, unframed. There, dedicated to the fastidious care of the appearance the social intercourse demands, it is liberated from the graces and glories of domestic subjectivity". (Baudrillard, 2005: 21)

The restriction of the use of the mirrors in houses is justified, according to Baudrillard, due to the modern approach with a 'proliferation of openings and transparent partitions' (ibid, 2005: 21) but also with the 'current demand for frank use of materials' (ibid, 2005: 21). According to Baudrillard (2005), family portraits,

pictures of the master of the house, wedding photographs, and close-ups of the children, have disappeared from walls in tandem with mirrors. Although Baudrillard was referring to a bourgeois house, Koukles Club makes a different use of mirrors and photographs, which draw upon links with the past.



Figure 6: Jean-Paul Gaultier at Koukles Club

When one entered the Club the extensive use of mirrors on the walls appeared to make the space look bigger than it actually was. Koukles Club offered an exception to the modern approach to mirrors mentioned earlier, perhaps because it was not a house (although many considered it a home) or maybe because it was not a 'bourgeois' place, although it had many 'bourgeois' customers. This rather small Club, through the use of opposing mirrors, created an illusion infinite space. Sparkling mirror balls reflected colourful beams of light, which were in turn reflected again on mirrored walls. Opposite the stage, all of the walls were covered with mirrors. Photographs of the performers, that echoed glorious moments from the past, interrupted the mirrored walls behind the bar. Photographs of the performers with celebrity guests gave a different meaning to the term 'family photographs' (Figure 6). Gazes met on the other side of the mirror. This was the platform where

all of my participants moved and interacted. The point I want to raise here is that Koukles Club had many walls covered with mirrors and photographs. It might just have been an indication of the anachronistic and retro style of decoration in the Club. But I saw beyond the decorative aspects and looked further into what affect those mirrors and photographs had on the dynamics which developed amongst the performers and audiences in the Club.

Mirrors and photographs became tools in the hands of the performers. The function of the mirror was vital to the Club's setting, as performers used it as a tool to improve and test their performances. There were two groups of mirrors in the Club, one in the main hall and one in the dressing room. The mirrors in the dressing room had lots of photographs of stars attached to them. This photo collage included images of famous movie stars and singers like Madonna, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Marlon Brando, but there were also a few Greek stars present. Amongst this panorama of celebrities there were a few photographs of the Koukles performers in drag. These photographs became extensions of the mirrors. The photographs were used as inspiration for the performers. These were the performances and roles that they had to study before going on stage. The mirrors helped them test how they will appear out front; they posed and applied their make up in the same way each time, and made the same facial expressions to get into their roles. Contrary to the mirrors in the dressing room, the mirrors in the main hall had only photographs of the Koukles performers attached. Baudrillard would have called these photographs a diachronic mirror of the family. In the next section I will unfold the process of preparing a drag show in front of the mirror.

## 6.2 Looking in the Mirror

The narrow spiral staircase next to the main entrance was the passage by which, one by one, the performers entered the dressing room. Clothes and props were scattered around the small room, but the use of mirrors made the room look bigger and messier than it actually was. It is here that performers got ready for the show; the process of preparing had many phases and became a role in itself. The mirror was a silent witness to all of this, a best friend, an assistant, but also a critical audience. Here, in front of the mirrors, the performers started crafting their roles. The mirror played the role of the audience, and in front of it performers were able to prepare their drag act. They were the performer and the audience of their own performance. This performance did not utilise a verbal dialogue, but there was a dialogue between the gaze and looks. This performance included several steps: applying makeup, moving and posing in front of the mirror, brushing and wearing the wigs. All of these orchestrated movements were part-rehearsal, part-performance. The mirror-audience was a very strict judge and potential mistakes had to be amended. The photographs of the stars on the mirrors provided guidance for what the performers would become. The dressing room had many mirrors all around which gave performers a cross-eyed view of each other. They were performers and audiences for each other. But fellow performers often challenged those performances by disrupting them. The aim of all these performances in the dressing room was to gain practice in obtaining the acceptance of the audience.

Once actors finished performing in the dressing room they took the narrow staircase down to the ground floor. Opposite the stairs was the entrance to the stage, which was covered by a red curtain. On the right and left of the entrance there were two big mirrors. This limited space was where performers waited for their turn to enter

the stage. Usually the waiting time lasted three to four minutes and offered the final opportunity to look in the mirror before going on stage. The size of the mirrors allowed performers to have a full-length view, although most of the performers focused on the upper part of the body, with the hair and the face occupying the majority of their attention. In these three minutes performers were usually alone reflecting on their image in the mirror. Appearance and manner were put in the test. Applause signalled that the previous act was over and their turn was coming. In the last few seconds most of the performers thought about the applause they would receive once they were on stage. This would indicate that their performance was successful; the more the applause, the greater the acceptance. Other thoughts were about their hair or their wigs, and whether they had been fixed in order to avoid accidents that could spoil the performance out front. When I asked Tania what she thought about before entering the stage, she said 'I am thinking of my hair, to make it fluffy'. The mirrors provided the final indication that the performance would be successful. However, in the Club there were some mirrors that did not give approval of certain performances and appearances.

Apart from the literal mirrors there were many metaphorical mirrors which performers used in the Club. Critical mirrors could be those individuals who revealed flaws in the front, in the setting, or in the appearance. One night I witnessed the judgement of such a critical mirror. It was a quiet Friday, with no performances in the Club due to the summer break. Marylou was behind the bar serving drinks and only a couple of customers were on the other side. While I was talking to Marylou, Mania entered the Club. She came to say hi, she said, and to have a drink. She sat on the stool next to me and we started talking. At some point she gave a glance in the mirror opposite her and said 'I don't see Mania today'. Marylou, at that same moment, was looking herself in the mirror. She turned her head towards us and said

'today you are not Mania, you don't sparkle and shine like Mania.' The cause of these comments and reactions was the observance of Mania's reflection in the mirror. This exchange revealed something that belonged backstage or off stage while the performer prepared for the front. That night Mania came to the Club without the makeup, glittery hair, sparkling attitude, joy, and energy that typically characterized her. She was 'stripped' from all the elements that defined the role of Mania. She did not stay long; she finished her drink and left for an early night at home. After Mania left I had a glance in the same mirror as Mania, seeing my own reflection. All of the mirrors in Koukles Club made it impossible not to look at one's reflection. At one's hair, at one's face; the mirror demanded conscious orchestrated movements, as it brought to the surface a critical eye.

### **6.3 The Researcher in the Mirror**

It is in rare circumstances that a researcher has had to conduct research in the pervasive presence of mirrors. Apart from having an effect on the lives of the participants, the mirrors in the Club also affected the way this research was formed. There have been many discussions about the ethical issues of using one-way mirrors to observe participants, and the possible implications that would impact on the ethical validity of the research (Gray et al., 2007). In Koukles Club the position of the mirrors brought this researcher and the research participants into the same frame. My reflection entered into the panorama with the other figures. I left my privileged and safe position of having a wall behind my back and entered the centre of the research. I became aware of my image, sexuality, and body in relation to others. My reflection was not only a metaphoric situation captured in the mind of the researcher, but a literal visual image that proved this condition. I had to ask what the role of the mirrors was in this research. How did the mirrors affect the relationships between the performers and researcher? What did the gaze entail in

terms of the body and in relation to the gaze of the other, while posing questions through a reflection in a mirror? Most conversations in the Club tended to take place via the mirror. In the beginning, I felt awkward talking to people while they contemplated their image reflected in the mirror. It was the lack of attention they paid to me that pushed me to recognise my reflection in the mirror. What were they looking at the mirror? What did they see? I was asking myself these questions while I contemplated my own reflection. This was one of the entry points where I began to question my position in relation to others, to question my reflection and reflexivity in this research.

The relationship between reflection and reflexivity has been widely discussed in the work of many scholars across several disciplines (Bourdieu<sup>55</sup>, 1992; Woolgar, 1988; Taylor and White, 2000). Watt (2000) describes reflection as a process that involves all of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. We constantly reflect on our past and present life experiences. Being reflexive, however, involves a deeper analysis of these reflections by asking questions, such as what was my part in this? Reflexivity for Watt (2000) is more than just a reflection, as it demands a theoretical, ethical, and political stance from which ethnographers reflect on their position within the field, the research, and the wider cultural context. Holliday (2004), based on her research on queer subjects and video diaries, suggests that 'the concept of reflexivity could be replaced with the notion of reflection, which is always a process that takes place outside the researcher's (and the respondent's) self (Holliday, 2004: 50, original emphasis). This reflection is 'not an internal process but a comparative one by which we look for explanations in the social world and compare them with our existing discursive repertoires and those of our respondents' (Holliday, 2004: 62).

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<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu calls for a reflexive practice in sociology. He argues that every sociological inquiry requires a simultaneous critical reflection on the part of intellectual and social conditions that make the inquiry possible (see in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Holliday argues that this reflection 'is best undertaken through the lens of the camera where the reflection of selves is more fully present than in the text' (Holliday, 2004:62).

In Koukles Club, I argue that notions of reflection and reflexivity coexist. Participants and researcher actively reflected on their images in the mirror, but also entered into a process of questioning their positions in the Club. Participants might not have fully examined the theoretical aspects of reflexivity, but they entered into a process of defining their selves, appearance, gender, and sexuality, in relation to the other. They did not actively write and analyse their thoughts on this reflection, but it became incorporated into their elicitations as they constantly gazed upon their reflections in the mirror. The mirror became a daily visual diary, which reflected this process. A similar process can be found in the work of other researchers who have worked with mirrors and particularly in the world of bodybuilding. Klein (1993), in his research on competitive bodybuilding, described a similar process where the researcher had to ask questions in front of mirrors. As he stated:

'I used the mirror as a technique to get at body image after noticing that many people in the gym would communicate through the mirror. Even when standing next to each other, rather than speak with the person at their side, people would communicate with the mirror reflection of the person at their side. I, too, began to ask people questions through the mirror'. (Klein 1993: 210)

The gym, similarly to Koukles Club, had mirrors all around for users to observe their technique and admire their body, but also to observe the other. The mirror was the locus where participants and researchers met their reflections but also trained and performed in relation to others. The other is acknowledged and becomes an audience for gender and self performances.

Reflection and reflexivity influence the way autoethnography is carried out, both in the field and in the text. The mirror becomes a self-portrait of the ethnographer within the wider context he studies. Autoethnography looks to 'extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived' (Bochner, 2000: 270). It is through the experience of looking in the mirror that meaning is given to the autoethnography. An autoethnography enacts 'a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other' (Denzin, 2009: 209), and allows for a different relationship to develop between the ethnographer and his participants. It is an ethnography that asks the researcher to look in the mirror, where reflections become narratives. It is upon these reflections that participants gaze at the other. It is in these reflections that drag performers and audiences seek the self next to the other. The gaze is a vital part in this process and it creates ambivalence towards the audience. In a focus group that I conducted with a group of girls, in a café<sup>56</sup>, many of them told me that in some cases they were not able to tell whether the performers were looking at them while they were performing or if they were looking in the mirrors behind them. The mirror had a critical position in the relationships that developed, among the performers and between the performers and the audience. Similarly, photographs had a critical position in these relations.

## **6.4 Photographs of the Self: Snapshots of Hierarchy**

In this section, I compare the process of reflecting in the mirror with the process of posing for photographs, to explore the similarities the activities have in the performance of the self. Photographs, like mirrors, played an important role in the construction of the self in Koukles Club. They had a collectable value, as they tended to disappear in the hands of the performers. In many cases the photographs were

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<sup>56</sup> The girls selected the location.

placed on the walls, one next to each other, creating a panorama of people, a family album on the wall. Apart from walls, they were also attached next to dressing room mirrors or carried in handbags for giving away to fans. Everybody wanted to be photographed, and everybody wanted a copy. Photos were also used as a proof of how well a performer embodied the star. During the fieldwork I took some photographs of the performers, mainly portraits for the new Koukles Club website. The portraits were a means of saying thank you for helping with my research. The process of photo shooting revealed other aspects of the competition that took place amongst the performers. The final photographs of the performers were published on the website; they reveal and crystallize, in a visual form, the hierarchy of the group. The shooting took place over two days; on the first day I took portraits of the performers in the Club, and on the second day I created various portraits of the owner, Marylou, in her home.

Session One: It was a hot, quiet Tuesday in June of 2009, around seven o'clock in the evening, when I arrived at the Club; the door was open and most of the performers were already there. They were gathered around the bar in preparation for the shooting. Some of them did their make up at the bar, while some others were correcting their existing make up. The Club looked different with no clients and only the performers, in their casual clothes, moving around. The lack of music made their voices to echo off of the mirrored walls. The heat of the day added spice to the preparation, stress with extra tension filled the air. With the help of a friend who came to assist me, I managed to quickly set up the lights. Marylou had the role of the chief-stylist for this session.

Marylou had a clear idea in her mind of how she thought the photographs should look. She wanted to achieve a classic Hollywood glamour-style portrait from the 40s

and 50s. She had in her mind classic Hollywood divas posing with feathers and sparkling jewellery. Each performer would pose twice with the same props; once with a red background and once with a black one. The curtains of the stage were used for the background. Marylou had brought a few props in for the shoot. The key accessory was a long black feather fan similar to the ones used in cabaret acts, like in the film *Moulin Rouge*. Other props were a black velvet and satin hat with feathers, crystals, and other glittery ornaments; a set of long sparkling earrings,, and a pair of black velvet gloves. Her concept was that the sitter would be naked with the feather fan covering the breast, the hair would be placed in the hat, and they would all wear the same earrings. It was like a drag uniform that they all were expected to wear. When Marylou showed the props and explained the concept to the performers, they looked rather disappointed and suspicious. Various comments were expressed like: 'the same concept?' 'We will come out all the same?' 'And the same accessories, all of us?' The key element in the photographs would be the pose of the sitter. Marylou demanded that the sitters give good poses, like Hollywood goddesses. Attention was placed on the body posture, and the face.

The photo shoot, in combination with Marylou's stylistic decision, brought to the surface another layer of competition, even though it was not Marylou's intention to do so. As she explained to me, she had decided to give them all the same props so she would not have to deal with any complaints and fights about the perception that she may have given more props to one performer rather than the other. The point I want to raise here is that although performers were confined to use the same props in the same context, which might have resulted in similar images, they still created a space for competing with each other in order to distinguish themselves. There was an omnipresent desire to stick out from the group, to be different, and to be recognized as different even if they performed with the same props in the same

setting. Although Marylou's decision was clear and strict, performers found ways to differentiate their appearance and performance. They mainly tried to achieve this in two ways; through the use of their hair and their pose. The following quotations reveal some of their interactions during this process to distinguish themselves. For example, when Marylou told Jenny to play by the rules in the following quotation:

Marylou - Place all your hair in the hat, and remove the earrings, the crosses, and the chains from your hands.

Jenny - What do you mean? Not to wear anything?

Marylou - Nothing, I said

Or later when one performer corrected another one and told her to put her hair up, in order to fit inside the hat. One performer complained to Marylou that the performer in front of the camera had some loose hair.

Tania - She has let some hair out of the hat,

Marylou - You also had some hair out of the hat

Nikos - I hadn't let any hair out of the hat

Performers used their hair to differentiate themselves, but also used the hair of the other to complain and score a hit in the competition. Here the hair was connected with a form distinction, and if this distinction was not evident enough they made it apparent by highlighting it. For example, when one performer asked Marylou her opinion of whether she liked the light blond colouring of her hair while I was taking a picture of her, and while she was reflecting on her image in the mirror behind me. Hollywood stars, in this case, influenced her blond hair. In the next section I will discuss how performers used posing to compete. The point I want to make here is that the self performs in relation to the other. The mirror and photography played a vital role, as elements of competition took place through them.

## **6.5 Posing the Self**

In this section I would like to emphasize the importance of posing in the process of performing the self during the photo shoot. Performers used their stature to compete

for the best and most effeminate pose. One after another they sat on the stool and posed for a few clicks. Behind me there was a mirrored wall that allowed them to reflect on their pose during the shoot. Their nudity enhanced an excessive sexuality and became part of their pose. They aimed to create a sexualized image that would lure the viewer. Marylou had a key role in this phase, as she was the one who asked them to pose in that style and she set the rules. Her instructions were expressed in phrases like, 'take more feminine poses'; 'I want normal poses, not stupid ones'. This photo shoot that I just described brought to the surface many similarities to the world of bodybuilding culture. The training, the mirrors, the posing, the outfits, the audience, the hierarchy, and the competition are points that exist in both cultures, and I will compare the two in the next section.

My research participants, like Klein's bodybuilders, had to try hard to change, master, and improve their body in relation to others. The body was the platform where competition took place. Bodybuilders and drag performers both trained in front of mirrors to improve their technique. Mirrors were used as a personal trainer, but they could also play the role of a harsh critic. They both exposed their bodies in outfits that revealed the 'trained' body. They both posed to show the capabilities of their body, aimed to win the competition, and attempted to rise to the top of their hierarchy. Photographic portraits could have a double use, as an example of an existing reality or as a weak depiction of a body that needed improvement. Images were valued as recognition, but photographs were also able to reveal 'mistakes' and weaknesses, similar to mirrors. Koukles performers were very critical of their own photographs; they saw themselves as fat, unattractive, and ugly. The posing and the mirror were the means to enter the competition and claim the trophy. As Klein said:

"Whether or not they like what they see in the mirror is a question no serious bodybuilders ever answer with an unqualified "yes." ... Rather than seeing an ideal self-image reflected back to him or her, as is so often presumed, the

competitive bodybuilder is consumed by a quest for bodily mastery and perfection that will invariably bring him or her up short. Hence the mirror provides a more realistic and/or deprecatory self image for this segment of the gym." (Klein, 1993: 210, original emphasis)

The competition between bodybuilders "relies purely on how your body looks compared to others" (Hansen, 2005: 313). There was no objective measurement of the body but only a visually aesthetic comparison. In a similar way, the competition amongst my research participants was judged on the grounds of looks and best embodiment. The audience was the ultimate judge and the source of recognition and acceptance for the performers.

## **6.6 Photographs on Walls: a Constructive Tool**

In this section I will examine the way performers used photographs of themselves. I suggest that photos are employed as a tool for constructing the self, and to testify to the successful embodiment of a star. Photographs capture a 'certain reality', and are used as proof to convince the other in order to gain acceptance and recognition.

Sontag said:

"Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images". (Sontag, 1979: 163, original emphasis)

It is in this way that most research respondents treated the photographs of themselves. They enlarged them, printed them in various sizes, placed them in frames, hung them on walls, covered them in protective plastic, glued them on mirrors, but mostly they displayed them on public view. Photos could be an extension of an omnipresent self and mark their subject's territory. During the fieldwork and while I was video recording, many respondents wanted to show me their photograph on the wall. I remember Mary vividly asking me to do a close up on a picture on the wall next to where she was usually sitting. When I asked her, "what

am I looking at”, she said “it’s me on stage, naked. And over there it is me again”. For Mary these images were successful performances, accepted performance, a performed self on stage which received applause. The placement of the photographs on particular walls signified to clients and fellow performers the justification of Mary’s value. Jenny also used the photographs as a proof of success. She had several copies of her best image printed and she carried them in her bag. She used them during a confession to the camera to justify how close to the original she was, while flicking through the same photograph in various copies. I suggest that participants used photographs as a reservoir of successful moments to base their narratives of acceptance and recognition upon. The importance of photographs was such that the new Koukles Club website hosted hundreds of them organized chronologically. In addition to the main website, each performer was given a dedicated page to display their own photographs and videos. The photographs we did together hold a central position on those pages.

From time to time, some photographs of the performers have been published in magazines. This is very similar to what Klein described in the bodybuilding culture.

As he stated:

“The photos of bodybuilders that appear in magazines and which they have taken professionally certainly play this dual role of imprisoning reality as well as enlarging upon it. Bodybuilders demand larger-than-life self-images precisely to compensate for their poor self-esteem. In this way they enlarge upon reality. ... In needing overblown self-images to compensate for the way they feel about themselves, bodybuilders differ from the general population only in degree, not kind”. (Klein, 1993: 211)

In this section I will discuss the dynamics that developed among the performers during the shooting of the group photographs I took for their website. As has been discussed in the portraits section, performers used their hair and their pose to differentiate themselves within the group. Here this differentiation took a different

form as performers had the possibility to wear any outfit they wanted and could choose any hairstyle. Their choices were based on their need to stand out from the group. Four of them had blond hair and they all wore it up. Nikos had black hair and Eva wore a big puffed pink wig<sup>57</sup>. Each one of them employed elements to help her to stick out. Eva stuck out because her hair looked unnaturally shaped, she was the tallest, and was almost naked, covering her body only with a transparent fabric that was embroidered with stones. Next to her, Tania was wearing a tiara on her head accompanied by a pair of long earrings. She wore a strapless floor-length pink satin dress, similar to the one Marilyn Monroe wore singing the song 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend'. They all worked hard on their poses, and they became aggressive with each other, as when Jenny had the same pose as Nikos and then Nikos shouted at Jenny not to copy him, or when Mania complained to the other girls that they hid her with their costumes. This all happened for one reason, they all wanted to be seen.

We tried several group compositions; on the stage, on the bar, but they all turned out to be difficult to structure due to the composition of the individual bodies. The last shot we did was one of everyone just standing while leaving a gap in the middle, to later place Marylou in the image via photoshop. That group photograph I will discuss in the next section, as it crystallizes the hierarchy of the relationships in the Club.

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<sup>57</sup> The style of the wig is similar to the hair style of the cartoon character of Marge Simpson

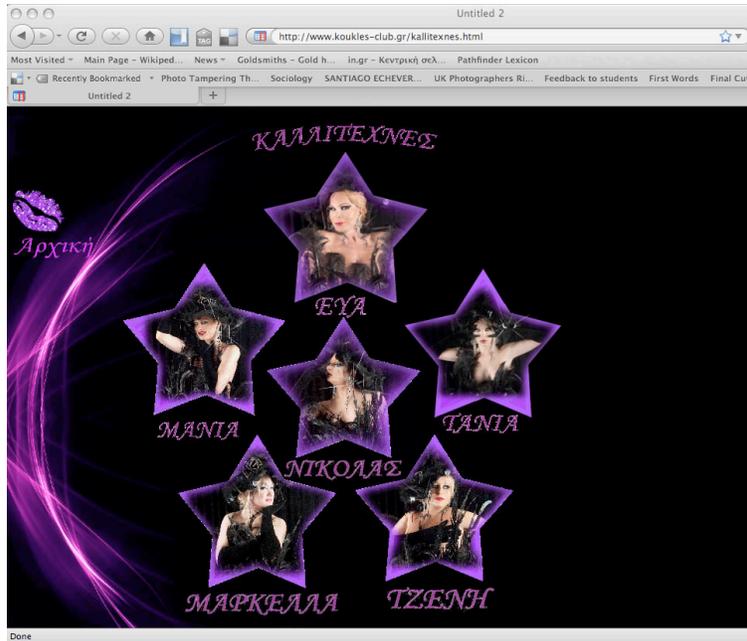


Figure 7: Still from Koukles Website. The artists

Here I will discuss the way portrait photographs have been used on the website for Koukles Club. I argue that the display of the photographs captured a snapshot of the hierarchy amongst performers, at that time, in a visual form (Figure 7). On the webpage the portrait photographs of the performers were laid out in the shape of a pyramid. On the top of the pyramid was Eva, a bit lower, almost on the same level, were Mania and Tania, on the third line was Nikos, and at the bottom were Jenny and Markella.

The competition I have discussed in the previous chapters aims to challenge this pyramid order. Performers, by competing, tried to defend their positions and, if possible, move upwards. Performers achieved this movement by presenting new shows, improving existing ones, and maintaining their popularity with the audience. This hierarchy changed from season to season. Eva and Jenny tried to defend their position by stating their longevity in the club, but their statement failed them both. For example, Jenny, the following year, was out of the group and the pyramid also,

while other performers took her place. Eva, although in the last six years she was at the top of the pyramid, felt the competing threats of Mania and Tania. For example, Mania's comments that Eva's career was over, or Tania's comment that she would stop drag once she became older as she would not want to perform with a face full of wrinkles. These comments were direct threats to Eva, who had to compete with them by reinventing herself, in order to keep her position at the top of the pyramid. Tania, Mania, and Nikos, being in the middle, had to compete with everyone. Eva mainly competed with Tania and Mania, while Jenny and Markella competed with all of the ones above them.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the ways performers used mirrors and photographs in their articulation of their subjectivities, but also as they used them as a means to continue the competition described in chapters four and five. Mirrors played an important role in the way the performers interacted with each other, but also in the way they responded to the audience. The respondents' use of mirrors signals a complex world, where reflections of the self are read alongside reflections of the other. The mirror became a tool in the hands of the performer. Through them performers were able to practice performances. They became the audience of their own performed reflection. Mirrors acted as a critical audience that helped performers to improve their technique and succeed in the embodiment of the star they wanted to perform on stage. This process could begin in private while watching videos and copying the movements of the star, but a crucial part of the process was completed in front of the mirrors in Koukles Club, next to other performers. The mirrors in Koukles Club carried a collage of photographs of famous stars from magazine articles mixed with images of the performers acting as those stars. Performers rehearsed

their roles in front of the mirrors. The process they followed reveals that the interpretation of a role came through an interpretation of the visual aspect of that role, either from an image or a video, which became part of the visual aesthetic they incorporated into their performance. The performer's theatrical postures reflected other theatrical postures that they had in their mind. But even the way they understood their own performance came through an analysis of their own reflection.

The other was also read and perceived as a reflection. The mirrors gave performers better control over their position among others. They perceived me as an image-reflection, and through the camera I perceived them as an image-reflection. I argue that the complex reflections of selves in mirrors accounted for the respondents' articulations of selves. I propose that respondents used mirrors as part of their competition to embody the image of the star. Performers also knew that the criteria set by the audience, to give them their approval, relied on the images they had in their minds. Images were crucial to achieving acceptance and recognition. Photographs were perceived as fixed images of the reflections in the mirror. However, they could have contradictory interpretations, as either positive proof of a successful moment shown to the other, or as a moment of weakness. This contradiction revealed the low self-esteem of performers, who aimed for acceptance and recognition from the audience. A yearning for the biggest show of acceptance shaped the competition.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

My research has tracked the journey of a drag troupe in Athens, moving from backstage, revealing the construction processes involved in drag performances, to centre stage, highlighting the relationships that developed between performers and their audiences. The main contribution this research makes is to address the questions and topics discussed in the literature review via a visual sociology methodology. Over its course, this thesis has traced multiple processes of embodiment and competition in order to demonstrate the complexity of blending gender and self performances, desires, and sexualities. The use of visual methods offered an innovative approach to an exploration of the establishment of gender formations through drag, thus allowing for a significant contribution to gender and sexuality theories to emerge from the research.

This thesis has sought to explore the interactions and the relationships that developed amongst performers and the relationships between performers and audiences, while using the body as a compass to navigate the routes that gender performances followed that gave shape to fluid sexualities. In so doing, I have shed light on the way subjects constructed their gender in an enclosed space while engaging in drag. At the same time it was my intention to disclose the social factors that shaped the construction of processes and defined the relationships under scrutiny.

Following my reading of Newton's work on drag, Butler's work on performativity and its relationship to drag, and trans' theory on gender formations and its relationship to the body, this research has been conducted by paying close attention to how participants attempted to understand their own lived gender realities, and to how

relationships were built through images, videos, and words. Performers commented on their work, and the different layers of interaction between backstage and centre stage, in their video elicitations. Audiences, similarly, commented on their visits to the Club, and their multiple interactions with the performers and other audience members. This dual account of space, the physical space of the Club and the virtual space the videos created through the elicitations, demonstrates the value of visual sociology in analysing complicated, multi-layered aspects of the social interactions between individuals involved in manifesting a range of gender formations.

In this final chapter I will evaluate the results of this study, beginning with some of the core threads of embodiment (incarnation), competition, bitching, undoing, and disrupting the other during drag performances. I will trace how this research answers the questions and problems explored in the existing research outlined in the literature review. I will explore these threads and the points of connection that give shape to the lived realities of the participants, and I will discuss how these threads contribute to a sociology of gender and sexuality. Finally, I will address the limitations of this study and reflect on the uses of the material developed through visual methods.

## **7.1 Core Threads in The Case of Koukles Club**

One of the central claims this thesis has made is that drag performance has to be understood as a composite relationship between performers and audiences. By unpacking these relationships and interactions, while reflecting on the existing literature, I have explored the bidirectional character of these relationships in which bodies play an important role. From the moment performers entered the Club, they entered a competitive process that had an immediate effect on their bodies and how their bodies were understood. In this thesis I have discussed the interactions

between performers and audiences, and within these two groups there was a broad range of genders and sexual orientations. In the performers group, members were self-identified as gays, trans, transvestites, and post-operative transsexuals. In the audience group, members were self-identified as lesbians, gays, heterosexuals, trans, and queers. However, despite their different genders and sexualities, I argue that all participants engaged in competitive interactions with each other. This competition did not lead to resolution or conclusion, as each individual was entrenched in their position both bodily and performatively, which sustained the ongoing cycle of competition.

This ongoing cycle of competition had an immediate affect on all relationships and interactions within the club. A few of the reasons why this occurred can be explained by the lack of job opportunities for trans people, but also by the lack of space for trans people to show and receive appreciation for who they are and for what they can do on stage. Those who were on Koukles' stage already entered into an ongoing struggle to keep their position, while those who were off stage engaged in battles for an opportunity to enter the clubs' stage. This lack of space and job opportunities has had an impact on establishing long lasting friendships and/or fostering co-operation amongst the group of performers. Those few friendships that developed among trans performers and trans members of the audience can be characterised as fragile and short-lived. There could be friendships between trans performers and members of the audience, but usually performers treated this possibility with initial suspicion as some of the members of the audience saw the performers as exotic creatures rather than as ordinary human beings. This omnipresent competition overshadowed any potential way of relating to one another in the club.

Competitive interactions took place in the performer's everyday lives. Although drag shows occurred only twice per week, participants perceived them as their everyday reality, since the afterglow of the show lasted for several days, as the data demonstrated. This everyday reality or lived experience enclosed, as Mills suggests, the sociological imagination that "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills<sup>58</sup>, 2000: 6). The everyday interactions between performers took the form of bitching and disrupting the other, and amongst performers and audiences it manifested as flirting, shouting, applauding, and disrupting. These interactions referred to both performances and bodies, and the motivation behind them was either the acceptance and recognition, or the rejection, of an embodiment. Interactions and personal narratives were intertwined, and through them individuals conveyed social meanings about their position, the other, and society.

## **7.2 Challenging Theories**

In the literature review, I discussed a number of theories on drag, gender, and sexualities. Some of those theories, I suggested, have structural limitations and methodological problems. This thesis resolves some of these problems. Firstly, it fills the gap in Greek scholarship that explores drag performance in relation to homosexual and transsexual subjects within Greek society. Secondly, it is aligned with the work of scholars of trans theory (Feinberg, 1996; Halberstam, 1998; Stryker, 2006; Sanger, 2008; Hines, 2007, 2010) which highlight the limitations of the existing identity frameworks, proposed by feminists and lesbian and gay studies, as lacking in material analysis. This thesis provides material analysis of the lived

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<sup>58</sup> See Wright Mills, C. (2000) *The Sociological Imagination*. First edition 1959

experiences of its participants, which are the key to the development of gender and sexualities theories.

Thirdly, this research is grounded upon the perspectives of both performers and audiences. I included members of the audience from a variety of genders and sexualities. I argue that particular audiences give shape to gendered performances on stage, and this allowed me to paint a wider picture of all of the relationships that developed in the club. Fourthly, I also explored the morphology of the club, as I argued that its structure and design elements were key factors in the shaping of relationships, genders, and sexualities. It is important to note that the mirrors, as a design element, were critical to the perpetuation of the ongoing cycle of competition, through the conversations that were held through the mediation of the mirror.

Fifthly, with the help of visual methods, I was able to include myself in the film, by showing my face and my body next to those of the performers. In this way I managed to address the critical points made by hooks (1992) and Flinn (1998) in regard to Livingston's *Paris is Burning*: that we do not see the person and the intentions behind the camera.

Lastly, this research challenges a series of claims made by Rupp and Taylor (2003) in their research at the 801 club. They suggested "That drag as performed at the 801 opens a window to multiple and confusing genders and sexualities" (Rupp and Taylor, 2003: 212). My research suggests that instead of contextualising genders and sexualities as confusing, the participants understood it to be subjects who desired other subjects while negotiating their own gender. Rupp and Taylor (2003) view drag as a form of collective political protest "that challenge conventional understandings of male and female, gay and straight, to create new collective

identities, and disrupt existing collective identity boundaries” (ibid: 212-213). Rupp and Taylor’s argument was based on focus groups with audience members which, they suggest, allowed them “to assess the construction of collective identity that took place during the performance and to observe the audience members’ interactions, as they were asked to interpret collectively the meaning of the gender and sexuality displays used in the performances” (ibid: 223-224). It may be true that, when asked collectively, a focus group may view drag as a collective identity that is lacking in diversity and nuance. This research suggests that their methods obscured what visual methods were able to unpack. My approach was to conduct video elicitation interviews with members of the audience, which evidenced that they did not have a collective view on drag, they did not feel that drag opened up new, unexplored areas of gender for them, but rather drag was seen through personal narratives. The Koukles audience did not feel that drag contested a fixed gender, but rather that drag was a fertile ground to play with gender and sexuality, as it allowed them to perform aspects of their gender, which in some cases remained oppressed in the public arena due to the violent reactions they might receive.

## **7.3 Main Findings: Revealing What is New, Answering the Research Questions**

### **7.3.1 Lived Realities: Performers**

The essential contributions of this thesis to the sociology of gender and sexuality, is the discovery that the performers in Koukles Club rejected the classic definition of drag, as it has been explored in the Anglo American literature, and they redefined it from female impersonation (μίμηση) to female embodiment (ενσάρκωση). This has an immediate impact on the way bodies are perceived and constructed, and it also shifts the point of interest from the performance to the body. Even though the drag

show in Koukles Club was not a drag competition, like in *Paris is Burning*, the performers competed continuously with each other for excellence and acceptance by the audience. This thesis, which is based on empirical findings, highlights the significance of drag to the body and gender of performers. I argue that drag shows become the site of embodying the star. In the process of becoming the best embodiment of the star on stage, performers engaged in competition with each other. This competition created fragile relationships, as performers entered into the constant and continuous cycle of challenging one another. These competitive aspects in drag effected performances of the self: from the way bodies were dressed, to the ways bodies became gendered, such as in the case of Eva, when she said that Jessica Rabbit. Through drag, performers are able to perform their self and gender, get acceptance for these performances which materialize on the surface of the body. They also used their bodies to defend their right to perform in drag. These two notions were intertwined for many of the performers, as the recognition of a body signified the recognition of a gender performed, and vice versa.

The competition in drag impacted the gender and sexuality of both performers and audiences. This was done through a challenging process shaped by 'bitching about the other', and also by 'undoing' and 'disrupting' the other, which were themes that emerged from the field. These are important to note as they demonstrate not only possible ways of doing gender, but also ways of undoing gender. Butler, in her work *Undoing Gender* (2004), addresses the critique of her earlier work (Prosser 1998, Namaste 2000) as omitting the materiality of sex. Butler's earlier central claim of 'doing gender' becomes an act of 'undoing gender', as she stated:

'If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that 'undo' the person by conferring recognition or undo the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially

produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not'. (Butler 2004: 2)

This process of recognition involved several layers of judgment in the competing process, but mainly it was the audience who gave the 'verdict' of who was the best by clapping and shouting 'you are the same (as the original)'. The verdict of the audience, however, did not determine the winners and losers of the competition, but rather it was the tense relationships among performers, and their harsh critique of each other, that pushed some performers out of the Club or elevated some of the performers to the top of the hierarchy in the Club. This hierarchy was evidenced through the placement and relative positions of the individual portraits of performers displayed, in a pyramid configuration, on the Koukles Club website.

Performers understood drag as an embodiment, and in particular as an incarnation. This incarnation had theoretical but also practical implications for the body and actions of the performer. Bodies were mirrored on the star they chose to incarnate. This incarnation was often based on their childhood dreams to 'become' a specific somebody. So they entered into a process of building a body close to their childhood ideals. Rupp and Taylor, in their book *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2003), presented the life stories of drag queens, where they disclosed that they used to dress in their mother's clothes, pretended they were their mothers, and that they admired the female body. At Koukles, performers adored specific characters from popular culture during their childhoods, and they later constructed their bodies with those characters as references, as opposed to any female body or the bodies of their mothers. Apart from the 'shape' of the body of the 'star' they also adopted some of the imagined behaviour patterns of the stars, by behaving snobbishly or acting like divas on occasion.

A second aspect of incarnation was that the embodied stars were adored, in a metaphoric sense, as divine by the performers. In two cases, mentioned in Chapter four, where Greek stars visited the Club to see the Koukles performers performing them, Koukles performers treated them as divine and viewed them as the only ones who could give them blessings and provide the ultimate recognition for their work. Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar in his film *High Heels* (1991), showed a similar situation where the original artist visited her impersonator. After a close examination of the looks of the impersonator the original artist gave her/him the pair of earrings that she was wearing (See Figure 8).



Figure 8: Stills from Pedro Almodóvar's film *High Heels* (1991)

This scene in the Almodóvar film has many similarities with the Koukles performers, although there were no religious connotations referred to in the film, and the performed and the performer never shared the same stage. The film was set in Madrid, where Catholicism is an important and vivid component in Spanish society. The metaphorical religious aspect to drag in the Greek case is based on the central position religion holds in Greek society and the importance of religion in the life of the performers. Most performers expressed their affiliation to Christianity either by words or by wearing a golden cross around their neck, as this symbol was very popular and strong among Greeks. The performer Eva, in one of her interviews in a

Greek gay magazine, talked about her relationship to drag, but also described her affiliation to Christian religion. She said:

'I believe in a Christian way, I do not go every Sunday to the church, but whenever I see one I enter it to light a candle. I believe that the merciful God, Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and whoever else happens to be up there, and look upon me, they accept me. The fact that I am still alive, full of life is because I believe they accept me. Now about the church and the priests who do not want me, I do not want them either. It is a mutual relationship. In general, whenever I enter a church or a monastery I feel very good, I feel the power of awe'. (Koumarianou, 2011: 40)

In this way, Christianity played in a metaphoric way a role in the life of the performers, and this was also reflected in the way performers approached the process of embodiment (incarnation) in Koukles Club.

### **7.3.2 Lived Realities: Audiences**

The use of visual methods in this research was particularly fruitful as it allowed me to tackle some of the problems that I pointed out in the literature review. Newton (1979) stressed that her most difficult methodological problem was the researching of drag audiences. She stated that one of the reasons was that members of the audience did not want to be questioned during or between drag performances, as all they wanted was "to have a good time" (Newton, 1979: 136). This research, through the use of visual methods and video elicitation in particular, provides an answer to this problem: through the video recordings of the shows, participants were able to express and contextualise their reactions in real-time in relation to the drag performances. Video elicitation was useful in gathering data from audiences; individuals commented that during the show many ideas and questions came into their minds, but they could not be acted upon as they did not want to be disturbed during the show. Video elicitation created a platform where participants could express their ideas expediently and in close proximity to the time and location of the performance.

The audience in Koukles Club played a significant co-constructive role in the way performers performed themselves but also in the way they performed their gender on stage and in the club. The wide variety of reactions from the audience influenced the way performers built up their performances. These reactions took the form of applause, laughter, flirtation, screaming, bitching, and whistling, amongst others. All of these reactions can express either an appreciation/ admiration or critique/ disapproval of the drag performance. This is part of the role of the audience when they come to the club to see drag performances of Madonna, and Lady Gaga, amongst other singers. Successful and appreciated aspects of these drag performances became part of the way performers performed themselves and gender. This type of reaction relates to Mania's aggressive behaviour towards Jenny when she told her that she was the star in the club and therefore she could behave like one. The appreciation of the audience influences and is mirrored in the behavioural patterns of the performers.

The tensest competition developed amongst trans, either among the trans performers or among trans performers and trans audience members. There was also a tense competition between trans and gay performers. The gay audience appeared not to express competition towards the performers with the same intensity as the trans audiences. At times the smart and sharp sense of humour of the performers was used to express serious insults, which were based on magnifying or exaggerating a 'mistake' another performer made. In some cases this competition overlapped with bitching about a performer. Bitching usually had more serious connotations and was more along the lines of a verbal attack. Performers and members of the audience engaged in these behaviours to challenge performances and to cover up the other; this challenging and covering up occurred continuously by

all participants. In a way, this process provided group cohesion, and it also provided the impetus for trying out new material and expanding upon roles and performances.

Applauding the performers could also be interpreted as a judgment or recognition of the performance. The trans audience was a strict judge of the show; it was the competitive eye that sought 'mistakes' in the performance in order to overcome the performers. In particular, some members of the trans audience took a rather critical view of the show, critiquing both the appearance and the gender performance in the act. An example of this trans critique can be seen in *Dragging the Past*, during the performance of Akis as Nana Mouskouri, where a member of the trans audience whistles in a disrupting way<sup>59</sup>. In addition to the entertainment components they evaluated details of how femininity was performed on stage, specifically the appearance of parts of the body such as the breasts and hair, the details of the clothes, and how effeminate the dancing appeared. The audience member's trans gender position worked as a lens through which to view both aspects of the show. Performers, in an effort to overcome the trans critique, constantly reinvented and tried to improve aspects of both their appearance and gender performance. This process to overcome the critical voices of the trans members of the audience was draining to performers. This was why they did not like the trans audience and opposed their presence in the Club.

*Paris is Burning* also presented passionate competitive acts, which led to certain gender performances. The Koukles performers, similarly to the *Paris is Burning* performers, stated that drag was their world, a moment of coming closer to a dreamed reality. I suggest that the trans performers and trans audiences were the most competitive in the Club, because they sought recognition for their gender

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<sup>59</sup> See *Dragging the Past* 28:45

performances. That gender recognition, which trans people do not get anywhere else in Greek society, became a matter of great importance. Koukles' performers received this much sought after gender recognition, which partially explains their hyperbolic femininity on stage.

Some lesbian members of the audience focused on the performer's appearance, but they were also focused on the gender performance displayed on stage. Other lesbians said that they would enter the role of the man by engaging with a trans performer. Performers also confirmed that 'some lesbians look at them with the eye of a man'. While a number of other lesbians expressed narratives of sexual desire, they did so without identifying as a man. Performers on stage would engage with the lesbian audience, and seek their acceptance and approval for their performance. Elements of the lesbian viewing process were read by the performers and incorporated into the performance. There was an ongoing flirtation and many lesbians would 'chase' the performers. Off stage the performers would set limits to their responses to this desire. Performers expressed a rejection of further 'engagement' in this flirtation.

Lesbians could enter the role of competitor, but this competition was grounded in their gender rather than in wanting to be on stage as a drag queen. (This was in sharp contrast to the trans audience, which partly desired to share the stage with the performers, fuelling the intensity of the trans critique). I suggest that this was because performers felt a sense of competing female femininity to their trans femininity from the lesbians. A trans performer who performs a hyperbolic femininity on stage and enters into a process of female embodiment would feel 'less' effeminate positioned next to an effeminate lesbian. This suggestion does not include all lesbians, as some of them have very masculine looks and effect performances similar

to men. Another explanation for the performer's rejection of lesbian flirtation could be that lesbians admired the trans performers for their excess femininity while still retaining male genitalia. For some lesbians the body of the performer fulfilled their imagined body of desire. However, my second hypothesis cannot be generalized as only one participant confirmed this position.

Some gay members of the audience focused on the appearance of the performer and the performance aspects of the show. The gender performance of the performer became secondary. Gays identified with the star embodied and they passionately expressed their connection to the star/performer. Gays could also have a critical voice, but this was mainly concerned with the actual embodiment of the act. Gays were the performers favorite audience; this was because of the passion they expressed, but also because gays focused on the performance, which indicated that there was little competition between performers and gay audiences. This audience was less stressful for the performers as it allowed them to focus on their incarnation. However, the gay audience could become competitive when they compared themselves with the performer. This was what Newton (1979) described, where drag queens competed with informal drag queens in the audience.

Heterosexual members of the audience focused mainly on the show, and were detached from the competitive aspects of the performance. For heterosexuals, trans performers had an 'exotic' flavor. One member of the audience said that she saw them as 'not living organisms, like something fake, like they are dolls...' This standpoint reflected a different perspective on humanness, and as Butler proposed:

'The terms by which we are recognized as humans are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer *humanness* on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-humans'. (Butler, 2004: 2, original emphasis)

For this reason the trans performers did not favour the heterosexual audiences. Instead, they made fun of heterosexuality, like the comments Eva made in Chapter five towards a member of the audience, poking fun at "her future husband". Through the empirical study of the relationship between performers and audiences, I suggest that Koukles drag encloses in its form both subversive and reinforcing elements towards binary gender construction and heteronormativity, however members of the audience tend to enjoy and appreciate more its subversive nature.

### **7.3.3 Lived Realities: the Morphology of Space at Koukles and the Use of Mirrors and Photographs**

Mirrors and photographs covered the majority of the walls in the Club and were the two central components of decoration in Koukles Club. These two components drew attention to the value of using visual methods in the field, as they had an impact on the formation of relationships amongst research participants. In particular, the dressing room mirrors backstage and the mirrors covering the wall opposite the stage were locations for competitive engagement and conversation. Performers used the dressing room mirrors in the Club as a tool to improve their appearance and to rehearse their acts, and also to observe the other through their reflections. In their reflected image the performers became their own judge in the process of learning their role and improving their embodiment. I argue that mirrors captured some aspects of competition whenever performers looked at each other through the mirrors, and they captured elements of self-regulation in performance.

The dressing room mirrors also displayed collages of photographs of famous stars, taken from magazine articles, which were mixed with images of Koukles performers emulating those stars. I argue that performers incorporated whatever was reflected

in the mirror into their embodiment, including their own reflections, the photographs they saw, and the reflections of others, including myself. All of these elements provided forms of recognition for the performers. Respondents used mirrors as part of their competition to embody the image of the stars they emulated. Furthermore, their embodiment appeared to incorporate aspects of this competition. Performers used photographs as guides to what they wanted to achieve or become through altering aspects of their appearance.

Performers knew that audiences would judge them based upon the star's characteristics that they chose to enhance. These were displayed in the images on the mirrors and actualized through the performer's imaginings. I argue that through the photographs I captured of the performers and through the way the photographs have been displayed in the Club, aspects of competition within the process of embodiment have been revealed alongside the hierarchy of power and authority amongst the performers at Koukles. I argue that it was this hierarchy that performers tried to challenge with their competitive comments and actions. Performers tried to challenge this order because they associated it with a recognition of their own gender. They engaged in these competitive behaviours in order to receive acceptance by the audiences, and by other performers. This claim can be supported by the association performers made by connecting drag to gender performances on territories of the body.

## **7.4 Reflections: Limitations, and Uses for Research Materials**

This thesis has certain limitations in regards to the application of its results. Drag, as an activity, is confined to certain spaces: mainly clubs, house parties and, on few occasions, public spaces during Pride celebrations. As such drag cannot be compared

to other activities or entertainments that take place in mainstream venues and analysis of drag is limited to specific locations. This thesis provides a snapshot of the Koukles Club in all its glory. It is a picture within a frame, and its frame is Greek society. Picture and frame contradict and define each other. Visual methods facilitated the capturing of this picture, which in turn provides insight into new perspectives on the way subjects perform their gender and sexuality while engaging in drag performance.

Through the use of video and photography in the field I was able to capture fragments of the performer's lived realities and their performances, allowing for further observation of their actions and speech after the fieldwork had been completed. These visual fragments helped me to deconstruct the several stages of the process of incarnation, from backstage where performers engaged with reflections in the mirror, to centre stage where they performed for audiences. I would not have been able to recognize the importance of mirrors for the performers without reviewing my footage and analysing the ways performers looked at each other indirectly through the mirrors on the walls. With this comment I suggest that, during the practice of visual sociology, cameras, mirrors within cameras, and mirrors on walls could be considered to have two functions: first, they have the possibility to encapsulate performances and processes not immediately visible to the naked eye; and, second, they can make substantial contributions to facilitating reflexivity during the research process.

This study has two parts: an ethnographic film and a written text. Both parts are the outcome of a collaborative relationship between the participants and myself. Working collaboratively implies a reciprocal, give-and-take relationship, and I would offer that the production of tangible research material, specifically photographs and films, can

impinge on the collaborative process and has implications for the use of the material beyond the confines of the research. Upon reflection I would offer that it is necessary to consider the potential uses for the outputs of visual sociology prior to conducting research. The film *Dragging the Past* has proved to have unintended use value for the performers who participated in its making. Marylou has asked me to place the film on the Koukles Club website, which offers another platform of visibility and recognition for both the film and for the performers at the Koukles Club. Recognition and visibility are vital to the performer's ideas of how they portray and promote themselves. However, there is a vast difference between a promotional tool and empirical evidence derived from an academic study, which raises concerns about the potential for complicity in the promotion of an individual, location or type of activity. The material that visual sociology makes possible can become a form of currency, which the subject may want to utilise beyond the scope of the research, such as Koukles using the video on its website. In this way the material of visual sociology becomes part of the everyday lives of its subjects, which can result in it being distanced or removed from the initial intentions of the researcher.

This research, and particularly the film *Dragging the Past*, has evidenced that trans performers, through drag, are able to gain recognition for their hard work and their gender while fighting the norms that oppress them. Outside of the club this recognition disappears, with only a few exceptions. This is why the results of this study cannot be applied to the wider Athenian society or to any society, as there are different factors that shape bodies, genders, and sexualities outside of the localised space of the Koukles Club.

This thesis and the film are important for one more reason: they fill a gap in my heart. Both elements are part of a family album created with love and respect for all

of the people I encountered along this journey. It is an album of all of the things I considered important, but never dared to mention previously, as I thought they were too ordinary; such as the pieces of fabric, that my mother dropped to the floor, which flew through the air to rest on the cold mosaic tiles where I sat by her side; or the voices of the performers, their loud laughter, the way they danced, or the way that smoke curled from their nostrils as their sparkling eyes roved across the mirrors. It is a family album, maybe not in a conventional form, but it is comprised of a linear sequence of images that narrate the story of a family. I believe that there are many families out there whose stories have not been researched or recorded in any way. It is important for sociology to continue researching this type of family, using visual methods, as I believe that there are still dimensions that have not been explored.

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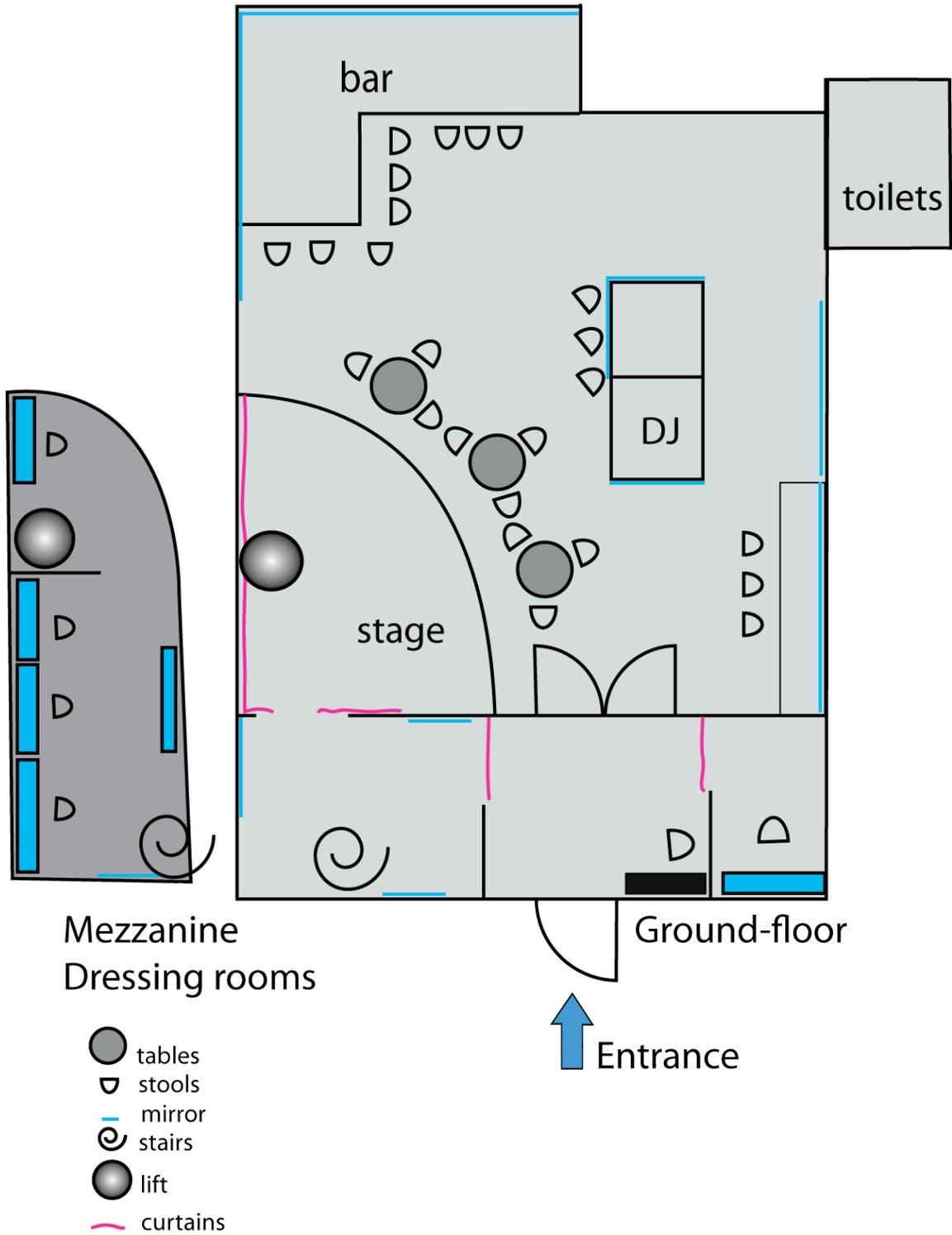
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# Appendix



Plan of Koukles Club

## Portraits of Performers



**Nikolas Markakis**



**Tania Kelly**



**Markella Delli**



**Jenny Alexiou**



**Mania Lembesi**



**Eva Koumarianou**



**Akis Ioannou**



**Mary**



**Marylou**