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DIVERSITY IN CLUBLAND: A SAFE SPACE FOR GLAMOUR

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KEY WORDS: Glamour, Marginal, Masguerade, Drag, Self, Substance

ABSTRACT

The article investigates the presentation of self, in the diverse, glamorous and camp world of the nightclub. An analysis of what constitutes the self and of how the self is visually presented, is discussed in relation to the two different perspectives of masquerade and glamour. This constructs a dual analysis in which the alluring persona presented in a club environment, contrasts with the stigmas associated with the marginalized persona, presented in everyday life. The glamorous veneer of the clubber masks the suffering endured when they are confronted by day to day demands. Butler (1990) explores the idea that the presentation of the gendered self is essentially a social performance constructed to communicate a physical and sartorial message. In this article social performances are examined in photographs of clubbers; a diversity of drag queens and people who play with gender boundaries and camp within a safe environment. It strips away the glamour that disguises humdrum existences and exposes some of the heartbreak beneath the constructed images.

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MASQUERADE IN CLUBLAND: A SAFE SPACE FOR GLAMOUR

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INTRODUCTION

The presentation of self defined in this article, refers to the decoration of the human body within a safe and supportive environment allowing the individual to express visually who they aspire to be. The safe environment is explored in a case study that considers the work of the club promoter Suzy Mason, in the city of Leeds, located in northern England. The author was a regular attendee at the club nights and is able to reflect on the sartorial presentation of Suzy's customers, in their manufactured environment. Suzy ran two nightclubs with a central theme that celebrated glamour for all, from 1992 to 2008. As will be outlined, this was a difficult venture in a gritty northern England city however Suzy regarded her market as a community who ached for a glamorous arena in which to celebrate sartorial ideals. In popular culture, the nightclub has always been an alluring environment, or an escapist setting in which people can express who they aspire to be. As Suzy explains: "With the club there is reality within fantasy and vice versa. There is a lot of glamour which surrounds the club scene, but glamour without any substance underneath is a bit sickening. Everything may glitter and look fantastic, but it leaves you feeling empty. Glamour is not enough in itself and you have to make sure you get the balance" (Regina, 1998, p.29).

On personal reflection, attending Suzy's clubs was an intensely exciting event. It began with the co-ordination of your outfit, assembled to complement the dazzle of the night. The sense of theatre commenced outside with huge queues that constituted a cornucopia of alluring characters: drag queens, fairies, disco queens, burlesque artists, movie star look-alike's and fashionista's, all of whom were united in their passionate attempts to gain entry. This was controlled by a drag queen 'Door

Whore' (Tulloch, 1990), who carefully vetted the crowd, allowing only the most fabulously attired an entrance. Having survived these rigors, the incumbent was greeted by a technicolour wonderland, akin to Dorothy stepping out of her farmhouse in 'The Wizard of Oz' (1939). This included: trapeze artistes, stilt walkers, breathtaking drag queens, sensational cocktail waitresses, dazzling cigarette sellers, gender blurred boys and girls, exotic dancers and the glittering and intermittent appearances of the Suzy the hostess. Combined with the spectacle of the spectacularly kitsch interior decoration, this whetted appetites for the, re-invention, deception and performance in the night that lay before you.

The article also identifies 'substance' within the frivolity of the nightclub. This is defined as the solid, worthwhile quality of an environment that gives free reign to individual expression and demonstrated by the abundance of sartorial looks in the safe space provided. Both perspectives; masquerade and glamour, establish a visual vocabulary that flaunt the desires of the private self and the substantial rights of the individual to expose them.

SELF PRESENTATION: MASQUERADE AND GLAMOUR

The two strands of enquiry; masquerade and glamour, derive from studies that investigate visual theories in relation to fashion, style and gender. (Barthes; 2006, Beloff; 2001, Butler; 1990, Davies; 2001, Entwistle; 2000, Goffman; 1959, Lurie; 1981, Tseelon; 1995 and 2001)

Masquerade

Davies (2001) discusses his idea that the majority of people are prevented from visually expressing themselves and considers that most people "only act out a restricted version of themselves" (p.38). He uses the analogy of the stage and performance to compare what makes a good or bad actor when presenting an image of self in everyday life. He believes that the majority of people are content to remain within the confinements of "age, sex, family position, social status, occupation, ethnic origin and social class" (p.38). Many homosexuals and transvestites make

good performers. Somewhat displaced in society and often having to mask the stigma of their minority with disguise, the nightclub for them is the sublime theatre in which to stage an idealized performance of self. Tseelon's: 'Masquerade and Identities' (2001), includes articles that consider disguise (or masquerade) in relation to the construction of visual identities. Consideration is given to the distinctions between self and artifice and the role disguise plays in representing marginal identities. Leeks, Maas and Lenning (2001) discuss how the disguise of the male body as female in Neil Jordan's film: 'The Crying Game' (1992), challenges traditional assumptions about the gendered human body. Belloff (2001), investigates the idea that masquerade is an attempt to present ourselves as something better and is examined through the evolution of lesbian dress.

Goffman, (1959), analyzed the props people use as expressions of identity including, houses, interiors, fashion, clothing and employment to present an image to the world. His investigation analyses people from different professions such as: beauticians or dentists and inhabitants of diverse geographical environments. He records the consequences to the individual when the presentation of self fails, particularly when situated in an unsupportive surrounding. This emphasizes the conflict endured by the everyday personas of glamorous nightclub protagonists. Tseelson (1995), examines the construction of the visual female image in Western society and describes the common perception "that fashion is a feminine affair, and that appearance is superficial – an antithesis to substance" (p.3). In Suzy Mason's clubs, much of the presentation of self is from a feminine perspective; make-up, wigs, heels and cross dressing are the accourrements of dress and the duplicity of this armour is in its concealment of the everyday presence. As well as masquerade the contributors to Tseelson's, 'Masquerade and Identities' (2001), also consider the presentation of self through this disguise.

Glamour

Glamour has been the subject of a number of works that attempt to define its meaning and place it in a sociological and chronological context. (Dyhouse; 2010,

Gundle; 2008, Gundle and Castelli; 2006, Rosa, Patton, Postrel and Steele; 2004, Wilson; 2007). It is presented by Gundle (2008) as a "bewitching aspect of contemporary culture" (p.1), a somewhat artificial phenomenon and a mask of alluring enchantment that can be applied to the physical presentation of an individual. "A dream version of the self can be forged, built to deceive, delight and bewitch" (p-4). In the nightclub glamour makes people feel more beautiful and attractive, with a heightened sense of sexual orientation however it can be too intoxicating for the majority to fully comprehend as it transcends everyday reality.

Wilson (2007) presents glamour as tragic,

"The emotions associated with glamour include desire, fear, loss, and an acknowledgement of death. Glamour is tragic; many of the most glamorous figures achieved glamour through suffering. Glamour is the result of work and effort – artfully concealed of course." (Wilson, 2007, p.100)

The suffering endured in the everyday lives of Suzy Mason's marginalized customers, who through great effort presented glamorous personas within the nightclub, contains elements of tragedy. This suggests that glamour can be threatening and mysterious, attainable only to those hungry enough to embrace it. To the majority of others, who Davies (2001) believes present "a restricted version of themselves" (p.38) glamour is only an aspiration.

Suzy and her exotic customers experimented with a type of glamour that is incredibly camp. Camp has been the subject of a variety of investigations, (Booth; 1983, Cleto; 1999, Core; 1984, Sontag; 1964, Meyer; 1996). It is a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon in terms of stylized artifice (Sontag 1964). Camp is an excessive and theatrical way of life, predominantly practiced by homosexuals who exaggerate their behavior and appearance, due to a sense of social displacement and by heterosexuals who perceive life through a homosexual context. Camp people often want to be accepted but find they are unacceptable to a majority of people. The adoption of a camp persona is a defiant self advertisement of

a private self and a mask that disguises emotional and physical insecurities. The jazz singer George Melly gave a suitably extravagant description; "Here they come, swishing and screaming, weeping noisily, laughing hysterically, living in luxury, dying in penury....from many countries and most ages the diverse, perverse legion of the camp" (Core, 1984, p.5)

THE NIGHTCLUB - A SAFE SPACE FOR GLAMOUR?

There are a body of publications that analyze the culture and significance of nightclubs, (Jackson; 2004, Kummer; 1997, Malbon; 1999, Northcote; 2006, Owen; 2003, Regina; 1998, Smith; 2008, Thornton; 1995). Much investigation considers the social and cultural impact of clubbing, including dress and appearance. Jackson (2004) believes that "clubbing is an important and complex social experience that merits further investigation" (p.1). He examines how people transform themselves visually into fantasy selves. The safety of the club becomes their stage for the night in which "dressing up plays a significant role" (p.47). There are also publications that dissect the appearance of the club persona and the impact on culture and appearance. The profile of Suzy Mason in 'Regina' (1998) provides a valuable commentary about her club philosophy. Journalistic reports concerning the impact and significance of Suzy's clubs, (Dylan; 2000, Regina; 1998, Smith; 2004, Tilton; 1994, Willis; 1993) highlight appearance and camp glamour. The emphasis is superficial reportage that sensationalizes experimentation with gender and outrageous aesthetics for a wide public consumption.

Historically nightclubs provide many examples of hedonism through appearance. They offer an environment for people to transform and reinvent themselves in a visual way that is unacceptable in other social situations. Davies (2001) argues that the majority of "people have neither the skill nor the motivation to adopt a drastic disguise" (p.38). Although self presentation is of central importance, it is often done within a very narrow range, "if forced to go beyond this range" (p.38) people become embarrassed or incompetent. The night club could therefore be viewed as a safe

environment that supports those with the motivation and skill to express who they aspire to be.

Within a nightclub customers are given a themed space to present their fantasy selves without embarrassment. Uninhibited club goers often suffer in their attempts to reconcile their club persona with the demands and conventions of everyday life. As Davies (2001) implies, they are frustrated performers. "Those who habitually wear 'masks' to hide a stigma or resolve an uncertain identity are more likely to have the makings of a good performer" (p.38). This is supported by Jackson (2004) who describes how people invent alternative selves, seizing the opportunity to break down sartorial conventions within the club arena. "Drag queens are one example of this phenomenon as they perform constantly, adopting personas they add theatricality to the club event" (p.51).

Iconic clubs that encouraged glamour in supportive settings, include New York's 'Studio 54' in the 1970's. The club created a riotous environment that merged celebrities and a public who wanted to reinvent their everyday persona amid a hedonistic blend of glamour.

"For thirty-three months, 'Studio 54' was the 'giddy epicenter' of 70's hedonism, a disco hothouse of beautiful people, endless cocaine, and every kind of sex" (Kummer, 1997, p. 51).

The successful film 'Saturday Night Fever' (1977), in some way captured this moment. Its lead character was called, Tony Manero. His existence was humdrum by day, with a dead end job and a coterie of macho friends. By night he transformed himself into a stylish and flamboyant habitué of the disco. His white suit and open neck, black shirt were emblematic of this transformation.

In a similar vein London's, 'Blitz Club' in the 1980's marked the beginning of what the media termed, 'New Romanticism'. Presided over by the singer Steve Strange, it afforded a safe space for men and women to flaunt ostentatious make-up and clothes. It was populated by groups of art and fashion students who aspired to

glossy levels of camp in dress. This paid homage to the original 'Romantic Movement' of the 1800's when groups of artists alienated by the expansion of the Industrial Revolution, turned to fantastical and romantic ideals in the pursuit of their art and modes of dress, (Quennel, 1970).

VAGUE AND SPEEDQUEEN: SUZY MASON'S NIGHTCLUBS

Suzy Mason's club nights provide a primary opportunity to analyze the glamorous presentation of self. Her career charts the rise, decline and fall of two interconnected clubs called 'Vague' and 'Speedqueen'. Goffman (1990) described how individuals have many motives for controlling a situation when appearing before others. Suzy (2010) felt that her customer's motivation was to present a vocabulary of escapist glamour through a combination of experimental cross dressing and gender blurred visual styles . She felt there was little element of fantasy when she first went clubbing therefore she began to have house parties where everyone had to dress up (Smith, 2004). Her first club 'Vague' was described by Melody Maker as the 'dance equivalent of Warhol's 'Factory' (Tilton (1994), p.22). The club very quickly captured the imagination of a clientele who hungered after the camp and glamour that Suzy promulgated as an antidote to a drab world. A Daily Telegraph journalist described 'Vague' as a scene of Bacchanalian excess (Willis, 1993). Melody maker reported that people revolutionized their lives in the club (Tilton 1994), Sam, 20, a male student journalist who had previously worn Armani transformed himself modeling only a "feather boa and black, see-through undies. I'm a complete slut he explains" (p.22).

In describing herself as a 'Social Entrepreneur' (Mason, (2010), Suzy explained how she became disillusioned with a social life that was limited and stereotyped. She was concerned that as a female there were few places for certain sections of the community to express themselves and feel safe. She said;

"There are a lot of racist and sexist attitudes, even in clubs. I decided to set up a proper environment and a mixed space. Everyone was welcome as long as they

didn't have a problem with the fact that other people were different from them, whether it was their colour, their age or their sexual orientation." (Regina, 1998, p.27)

She identified an important social issue, determined her market and through creative means provided a service through her clubs. Her compulsion came from a sense of social responsibility. She wanted to create a fantasy environment that encouraged people to be themselves. The decor was helpful as it provided a fairy-tale ambiance. Not only glamorous, it was also about exploring the inner self in order to express different sides to the personality (Regina, 1998). The image of the club interior in fig1 illustrates this, with its kitsch corner, comprising gold bed, pink zebra cushions, plastic flowers and balloons.



Fia⁻

The evolution of Suzy's own appearance complemented the environment as it documented her own glamour. She altered her appearance to correspond to the theme of the night. This could be viewed as a marketing gimmick however the different looks also corresponded to her deeper need to experiment with self presentation publicly in a supportive environment. Her photographs adhere to Lurie's (1981) ideas that our clothes talk noisily "to everyone who sees us, telling us who we are, where we come from, what we like to do in bed" (p.261). Fig2 is a lesbian dominatrix that says 'masculine and empowered'. The peroxide blonde 'Cigarette Girl', fig3, says 'feminine and vulnerable'. The blue haired disco queen, fig4 says 'fun and funky'. The washing basket and clothes peg look of fig5 says 'eccentric and experimental'. The decoration of Suzy's body also influences her physical stance. The vulnerable and coy peroxide blonde is a stark contrast to the hard confident

stance of the lesbian dominatrix. The looks also contrast with Suzy's less glamorous presentation of self in everyday life in fig6. The construction of this image does not conform to the persona she has adopted for her club appearances. This may be for practical reasons or her sense that it was inappropriate.





Fig3



Fig4



Fig5



Fig6

The images in fig7 and fig8 are revealing as they demonstrate a before and after metamorphism of 'Speedqueen' customers preparing for their night. The results challenge notions of sexuality and ethnicity. Both are male, one Caucasian, the other Asian. In their transformation both gender and ethnicity become blurred. The adoption of Asian dress is also distorted with the traditionally western application of glamorous facial make-up. The wistful pose in fig7 is transformed into the happiness of fig8. Like Tony Manero in 'Saturday Night Fever', this hints at the individual's enjoyment in his metamorphism. Lurie (1981) describes how 'a costume not only appears at a specific place and time, it must be 'spoken' – that is worn- by a specific person' (p.14). The combination of ethnicity in Indian dress and western ideals of glamour here 'speaks' through the gender blurred presentations of self.



Fig7



Fia8

In different societies males dressing in female clothes have been persecuted, due to their visual opposition to conventional gender perceptions. Lurie (1981) suggests that most men would not wear a skirt, just as they would not use words and phrases such a "simply marvelous" (p.6) which in western culture are considered exclusively

feminine. Drag queens as Jackson (2004) says; "perform constantly, adopting names and personas" (p.51) they are often the backbone to the club experience yet are also diverse. In the following analysis photographs of three different types of drag queen from 'Speedqueen' are examined in relation to the three dimensions of; pantomime, deception and acceptability.

Glamour and Masquerade - Pantomime

The 'Mad Hatter's Tea Party' in fig9 from the 'Speedqueen' first birthday party, is an example of the fairy tale fantasy Suzy sought to promulgate. It sends out a profusion of visual symbolism. The three drag queens in gingham pinafores, inspired by Dorothy from 'The Wizard of Oz' (1939) are pure pantomime. They perform amid the chaos of a children's tea party festooned with brightly coloured paper plates, ice-cream and birthday cake. The abundance of wigs, make-up and cleavage constitute some of the foundations of fashion and glamour, yet the effect is neither. The real emphasis is uninhibited fun and enjoyment. Tseelon (1995) suggests that unconventional clothing is often considered a symptom of abnormality. This hints at the stigma the drag queens would endure in society, but also reflects the incongruous placement of a children's tea party in the adult and sophisticated setting of a night club.



Fia9

Glamour and Masquerade - Deception

The photograph in fig10 is of 'Tiara', a drag queen. A full anatomical examination reveals the assemblage of the female appearance is intact, yet the look has a bedraggled veneer as though 'Tiara' has not quite made it in her deception. It's interesting to speculate on its meaning. Is it a tacky caricature of femininity? The man's beard has begun to show, the wig is askew, the neck is muscled and seems unbalanced with the toned and shaved legs. It is also threatening as the man's height is exaggerated by spike heeled platforms. There is a sense of longing and 'Tiara's' sexually inviting pose, suggest an availability perhaps never fulfilled. 'Tiara', has defied notions of conventional gender in a safe environment unfortunately at the end of the night she has to challenge these notions outside the club, in order to navigate a homeward journey in a predominantly heterosexual environment. Northcote (2006) argues that attending nightclubs serves as a means of adjustment for young adults undergoing a transitional phase from youth to independent identity (p-13). He continues, stating that clubbing activities are a process of balancing different modes of identity, both within the club and outside, once outside the club the drag queen is perceived in an entirely different light. In this context 'Tiara's' photograph makes an interesting comparison with her alter ego 'Eddie', fig11, in reality the same person, but in this guise he is a butch male Go-Go dancer.





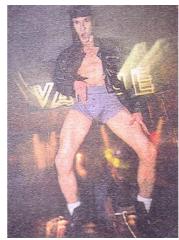


Fig11

Glamour and Masquerade - Acceptable

The two drag queens in fig12 render a more polished image compared with the shabbier 'Tiara' and the childlike trio in gingham. Their look has a professional veneer and reveals nothing tattered or comical. The make-up and hair is flawless, the jewelry expensive and considered. Although their pose is provocative, it has none of the desperation of 'Tiara'. It celebrates an impeccable glitter presenting a more acceptable level of drag as it adheres to the conventions of accessible allure promoted in fashion magazines. The photograph also demonstrates expertise in putting together the look. It is haute couture compared to 'Tiara's' bargain basement approach and the dressing up box of 'The Mad Hatters Tea Party'. It is not a total disguise as the male jaw lines and physique cannot be concealed.



Fig12

Aside from drag, the majority of looks created by Suzy's customers maintain a sense of camp masquerade. Contemporary press descriptions focus on the "flamboyant mix of anarchy angels, devious devils and club kids who gather for a night of sheer unadulterated madness" (M8 Magazine, 2000, p.96). You are invited to:

"Visualize false eyelashes, painstakingly applied make-up, big hair, impossibly high heels, tanned limbs, encased in sexy, silver micro mini skirts and heaving, ample bosoms straining against skimpy designer tops....and that's just some of the boys.' (Absolute Leeds, 2004, p.43)

The different styles justify Davies' (2001) view that socially displaced people are drawn to the theatrical and flamboyant. He considered that the theatre is attractive to

the "stigmatized and those of uncertain identity" (p.4) because it offers tolerance from a hostile and rigid world and the theatre is "the home of disguises" (p.4). Suzy's clubs provided a theatrical production that emphasized the clash between the joyous safe space that celebrated sartorial expression and the world outside that considered many of the customers socially dislocated.

Analysis of further 'Speedqueen', customers in outfits beyond the confines of cross dressing maintain elements of masquerade, camp and glamour but are less ambiguously gendered. They re-assemble more obvious fashion references that adorn, emphasize or conceal the body. In the 'Vague R Us' postcard (fig13) each person was asked to customize their image in an idealized way. The postcard was then used as a flyer to promote the club.



Fig 13

Suzy's clubs ultimately created an arena for self presentation that diversified genders and sexualities, celebrating a glamorous ideal. As has been discussed, displaced and stigmatized people such as the experimental dressers in 'Vague' and 'Speedqueen' are drawn to the theatricality of clubbing, as a natural stage from which to perform. Davies (2000) argues that the presentation of self is "typically done within a narrow and often stereo-typical range that comprises what the person thinks he or she is" (p.38). This justifies the nightclub stage as an opportunity to explode the stereotype. The article suggests that glamour makes you feel more beautiful and heightens your sexual attraction and orientation; it therefore needs a

specialist environment in which to flourish yet also maintain and encourage individuality. The girl in the classic Gucci dress, described by Jackson (2004), would have been welcome in 'Speedqueen'. This is a tribute to the success of Suzy's concept of a safe space to celebrate glamour. The girl however would probably have been a boy.

CONCLUSIONS: A DEGREE OF SUBSTANCE

In his analysis of clubbing, Jackson (2004) declares:

"Clothes make people fuckable, approachable, desirable, lickable, glamorous, aloof, funky, playful, fun, slinky, seductive, passionate, invisible, bizarre and beautiful" (p.54)

Clothing in clubs also presents people as, disguised, shrouded, confused, celebrated, masked, flawed, threatening, frightening and 'tragic' (Wilson, 2007, p.100), as many club goers achieve glamour through some level of endurance and suffering. In their visual presentation clubbers can be disorientating because "looking different confuses people and they are unsure how to deal with it" (Jackson 2004, p.52). Confusing people, confronting them with a sartorial language that makes them uncertain, also presents challenges. It alters ways of seeing. Clothing is fundamentally functional. It can for instance, protect or communicate authority. Fashion instead decorates and adorns the body in a visual vocabulary comparable to the way a writer uses words, mixing, matching, opposing and challenging. For inspiration it needs to consider those who will challenge its sartorial norms and experiment with different looks. This substantiates the essential role of the nightclub as a safe space in which to trial and exploit new and ultimately glamorous dreams. The New York drag gueen Jodie Marsh confirms this in her statement: "I love a trip to the disco. There's no better arena in which to dress up and have a good time. I believe the dance floor can offer something of a sanctuary for the misfits of society – those with far to much fabulousness to just dress up as one

gender, or simply to much creativity to avoid experimenting with shape, form, height, size and overall appearance" (Smith, 2008, p.133)

All individuals have choice in their sartorial presentation. This relates to Butler's (1990) ideas about gendered social performance and the persons decision in advance as to how this is socially permitted to appear. The nightclub provides the substance and diversity in which to safely exploit these choices. Individuals must however accept the reactions their appearance or 'performance' provokes with others in more perilous locations. The self proclaimed social and sartorial outsider, Quentin Crisp said:

"I am not a drop out I was never in. I have not spent my life hacking my way through the constraints of a bourgeois existence. I was always free – appallingly free" (Crisp, 1981, p.7)

His concept evolved after spending his adult life dressed as an effeminate homosexual, complete with dyed hair and make-up. This was in the early twentieth century when homosexuality was illegal in the UK and Crisp's presentation of self, was shunned by much of society. People such as Suzy Mason still face social ostracism because of their individualism she echoed this in her reflection that when asked as a child what she wanted to be when she grew up, she answered: "Suzy Mason" (Regina, 1998, p.24).

The price paid in the 'appalling freedom' (p.7) that Crisp (1981) describes, was loneliness and rejection. In Suzy's case, her adamant declaration that she wanted to grow up to be herself, suggests a lack of compromise which ultimately led to the phenomenal triumph of her club nights. They gave Suzy and her devotee's the substance of a safe and supportive arena in which to experiment with glamorous masquerade. Glamour as Suzy indicated in Regina (1998) is not enough to retain a balanced life. She recognized a need for a level of equilibrium beyond the mask of fantasy because in itself, the club night only lasts for a few hours. It is however within this precious space of time, that the spellbinding diversity in glamorous masquerade needs to be celebrated and distilled.

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INTERVIEW

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ILLUSTRATIONS (all photographs Suzy Mason apart from fig 2)

- Fig 1) Speedgueen interior
- Fig 2) Suzy Mason peroxide blonde (photograph Linda Molyneux)
- Fig 3) Suzy Mason dominatrix
- Fig 4) Suzy Mason blue haired disco queen
- Fig 5) Suzy Mason washing basket and clothes peg look
- Fig 6) Suzy Mason casual dress
- Fig 7) 'Before'
- Fig 8) 'After'
- Fig 9) Mad Hatters Tea Party
- Fig 10) 'Tiara' a drag queen
- Fig 11) 'Eddie' a Go-Go dancer

- Fig 12) Two drag queens
- Fig 13) Vague Flyer