

readings of work from the past (or in Bloch's terms, the no-longer-conscious) with more contemporary queer work that displays how the radical promise of that work was part of a larger political impulse that actually exists in the present. In conclusion I turn to two examples of the aesthetic work that follows this Smithian thread, Los Angeles's My Barbarian and New York-based lesbian performer Dynasty Handbag. These artists offer a Smithian transport ignited by the force of queer utopianism. Utopia can never be prescriptive and is always destined to fail. Despite this seeming negativity, a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure. Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality. I align queer failure with a certain mode of virtuosity that helps the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld dominated by the alienation, exploitation, and drudgery associated with capitalism or landlordism. When I describe the ways in which Jack Smith, Dynasty Handbag, and My Barbarian perform failure, I am not claiming that they are not successful or accomplished as performers or that the performances are not strong, fulfilling, or interesting; indeed my opinion is just the opposite, as I revel in the aesthetic and political stimulation the work provides. Instead I mean to explicate the ways in which these artists thematize failure as being something like the *always already* status of queers and other minoritarian subjects in the dominant social order within which they toil. Queer failure, as I argue, is more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity.

#### Dynasty Handbag and the Strange Itinerant Beauty of Queer Failure

Queer failure is often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value. In speech act theory it is the failure central to speech itself. It is blatantly and irrevocably antinormative. *Normal* was a despised term for Smith, and it referred to much more than sexual object choice. The normativity against which Smith argued is not Michael Warner's idea of heteronormativity, a particular mode of normativity, but, instead, a more expansive understanding of the problem of the normal.<sup>6</sup> This expansive understanding of the normal can tentatively be understood as the antiutopian. Smith's use of the term *normal* spoke against straight time, which is laden with temporal obstacles and challenges that ensure a certain kind of queer failure as axiomatic for the queer subject and collectivity. Within straight time the queer can only fail; thus, an aesthetic of

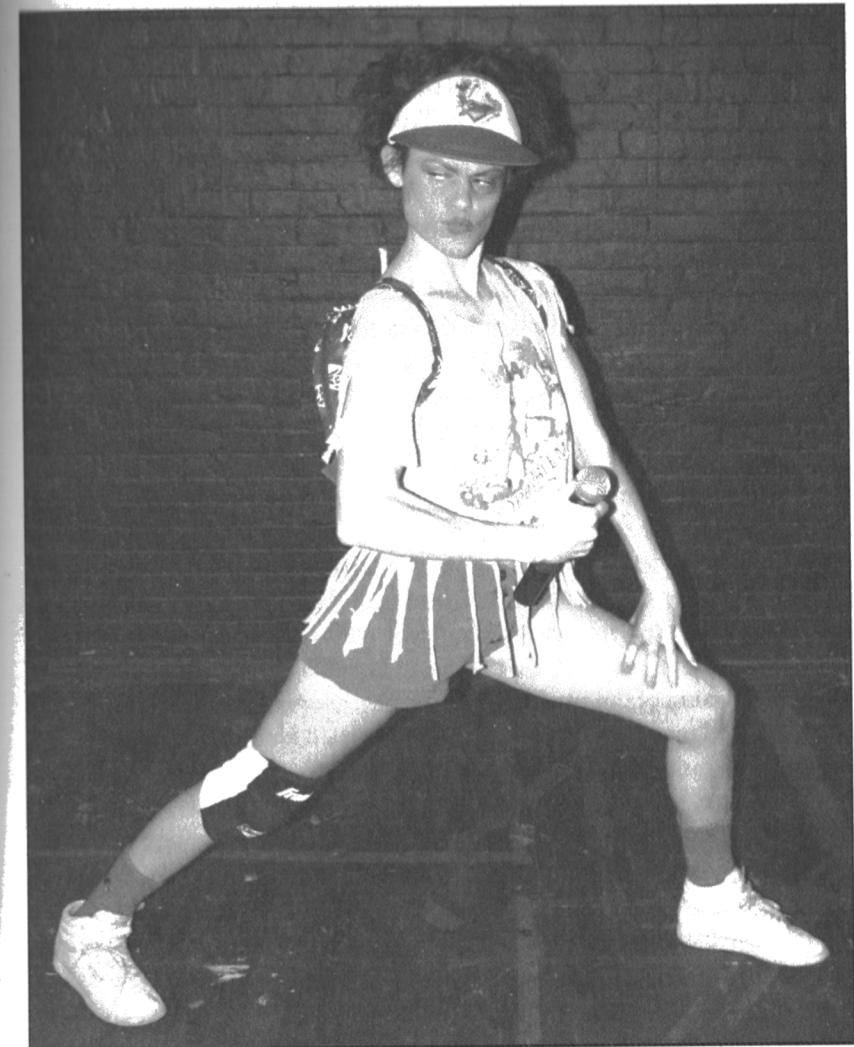
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Utopia's rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure. And, indeed, most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal. Throughout this book I have offered historical examples of queer aesthetic practices imbued with utopian potentiality. I have often aligned these

failure can be productively occupied by the queer artist for the purpose of delineating the bias that underlies straight time's measure. The politics of failure are about doing something else, that is, doing something else in relation to a something that is missing in straight time's always already flawed temporal mapping practice. Thus, we think about how Smith is legendary for "failing" to start his loft performances on time and keeping audiences waiting for him to emerge.<sup>7</sup>

The work of Jibz Cameron's art persona, Dynasty Handbag, illustrates the efficacy of a certain mode of queer failure. A musician and performer, Cameron created the character of Dynasty Handbag in 2002. Dynasty Handbag can perhaps best be described as a sort of quixotic bag lady dressed in an outfit that appears to be something of an eighties fringe-laden aerobics costume. Always prepared to negotiate a threat, both real but mostly imagined, she wears a rumpled backpack filled with energy snacks. Her constant nemeses are the voices in her head. None of the Dynasty Handbag performances I have watched has been an actual failure. Indeed, they have all been far from failures inasmuch as they have left audiences of alternative music, culture, and sexuality applauding and even seemingly edified. My own experience as a spectator at those performances has been valuable precisely because of the mimetic performance of a person, a spoiled subjectivity, who is considered a loser, or rubbish, who refuses to live by an outside rule, a system of categorization that celebrates the normal, and instead insists on her own value as a countercultural heroine. Dynasty Handbag is the utopian oddball par excellence.

In the 2006 performance *Hell in a Handbag*, the character/persona Dynasty Handbag restages Dante's *Inferno*. But in this inferno the different levels of hell represent different aspects of the character's life that she finds difficult to negotiate. At one level she is confronted with visions of cookies, and she responds with a musical/dance number that is certainly saturated with a punk ethos that celebrates a certain kind of nonmastery that is failure. Dynasty Handbag's performance represents a deliberate failure to achieve melodic or choreographic conformity. Instead, on the level of movement and sound, we see a brilliant offness. This is a modality of being off script, off page, which is not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity. The queer failure of Dynasty Handbag and countless other queer performers is a failure that is more nearly a refusal or an escape.



Dynasty Handbag. Photographs copyright Jibz Cameron; photographer Ves Pitts.



Cynicism, opportunism, and other bad sentiments can be responses to the current emotional situation, which many of us interested in the project of radical politics understand as hopelessness. Virno's reimagining of bad sentiments helps us understand them as something the worker can use to escape. "Bad sentiments" can be critically redeployed and function as refusals of social control mandates that become transformative behaviors.

Dynasty Handbag's queer failure is not an aesthetic failure but, instead, a political refusal. It is a going off script, and the script in this instance is the mandate that makes queer and other minoritarian cultural performers work not for themselves but for distorted cultural hierarchy.