



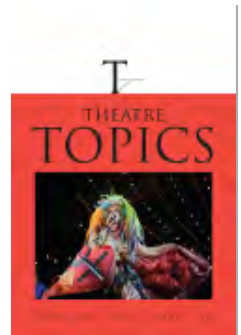
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Sissi Liu

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# Designurgy, Being Queer: Taylor Mac Wears Machine Dazzle in 24 Decades

*Sissi Liu*

For the viewer-participants of Taylor Mac's legendary work *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* (2014–16, hereafter *24DH*), the scenic set-like and sculptural costumes designed by Machine Dazzle constitute the most provocative visual spectacle of the twenty-four-hour adventure. From wigs made of 3D glasses or champagne corks, to an antebellum freedom-river necklace, to four-foot-tall, six-foot-wide light-up butterfly wings in the shape of double vulva inspired by lesbians, to an AIDS shroud consisting of hundreds of cassettes, to a phosphorescent hooded centerpiece with ping-pong ball eyelets on Mars, Machine Dazzle arouses the wildest and queerest imaginations of those who experience the performances. His designs are not merely costumes; they constitute living sets that challenge chrono-normative ways of being and offer queer modes of unpacking and reenacting history. Without underestimating Mac's role as writer, co-director, and performer, I argue that much of the show's affective and transgressive efficacy flows from the designs. In this essay, I propose *designurgy* as a productive method for conceptualizing designs like those of Machine Dazzle that place design at the heart of a production. By analyzing Machine Dazzle's method and practice in *24DH*, I highlight what designurgy—especially a queer one—looks like and how it functions in performance.

## Designurgy and Queerness

I coin the term *designurgy*—short for “design dramaturgy”—to emphasize the connection between *design* (herein costume design) and *dramaturgy*, and to highlight the dramaturgical nature of design. Design is the process of conceiving and giving form and/or content to artifacts and experiences, to the purpose of solving problems and making connections among people, communities, time, and space. A designer's work in many ways parallels a dramaturg's task. Broadly defined, dramaturgy is a comprehensive theory of “play-making.” In the Brechtian sense, dramaturgy “comprises the entire conceptual preparation from its inception to its realization” (Schechter 21). In contemporary theatre-making, dramaturgy has increasingly become an important skill that is, as Magda Romanska notes, “detached from the specific theatrical function” and necessary for the entire creative team to “employ in the process of development and audience outreach”; it also comprises tools to “cross artistic boundaries and gain applicability in a world outside of theatre” (8). Like a dramaturg, the designer conducts research on sociohistorical and vernacular contexts of the performance at the beginning stage of a production. Like a dramaturg, the designer develops a holistic overall concept for all the items in a performance based on research. Like a dramaturg, the designer then thinks compositionally and structurally throughout the rest of the phases of one's design work, building interconnections between the visual outcome and the messages of the performance.

Why do we need this special frame—designurgy—if designers do dramaturgical work already? Designurgy is a concept, both dramatic and postdramatic, that highlights the central role design plays in stage productions and other performative activities, including performance art, concert, fashion runway show, gaming, and mixed reality experience.<sup>1</sup> Designurgy refers to both a particular kind of design process/product from a practicum perspective, and, from a theoretical one, a par-

ticular critical lens for analyzing designturgical results. As a design process, designturgy generates an overarching design philosophy that not only ties together a performance conceptually, but extends beyond a specific performance. In a stage production, a designer supports and realizes the director's visions; a designturg goes beyond the director's artistic expectations. Designturgs may work with directors, but their vision operates as a distinct element in conversation with a director's vision rather than being subordinate to it. Designturgy encompasses design, but goes further than the normal requirements of design. As a theoretical method, designturgy demands a new mode of analysis for the theatre/performance critic, historian, theorist, and the common viewer. A designturgical analysis explores both standard design questions and those extra ones that turn design into designturgy. Some standard questions include: How does the design represent the where, when, who (the race, class, gender, and sexuality of the who)? Are there metaphoric messages in the opening and ending of a performance? Does the design surprise and startle? Is there historicity in the design? Is there activism in the design? Some extra-layer questions include: Does the design develop a holistic overall concept for the performance? What are the semiotic interpretations of different layers and levels of the design—and how do they interact with one another? How is the design performed over time? Does the design compress, suspend, or elongate time? How does design convey affective experiences visually? How does design provide transgressive power to a performance? How does design hold the entire performance together?

Designturgy proves especially amenable to queer performance. Designturgy as a practice, although not always queer, can often be approached from a queer lens. A good example would be *Scenario* (1997), a dance piece choreographed by Merce Cunningham, sometimes dubbed the “lumps and bumps” show—with gingham outfits featuring down padding that form irregular bumps on dancers' shoulders, chests, backs, and hips. Rei Kawakubo had free reign to create her distinct costume and stage designturgy to explore the balance of distorted bodies, twisted spatial relations, and radical movement. Designturgy as a theoretical method also parallels with queer critique. In the chapter “Critically Queer” from *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler writes that “[i]t's necessary to affirm the contingency of the term, . . . to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments” (230). The term *queer*, contingent and constantly shifting, resists a static notion of its potential subjects, audience, and participants. Queer theory, since its rise after 1990, has generated key concepts and methods with a wide critical reach in its first and second waves. The first wave spawned concepts of, among others, sexual politics, homosociality, camp, queer nation, queer performativity; the second wave encompasses temporality, futurity, historiography, utopia, gaiety, and so on. Posing deep challenges to the normative frameworks of knowledge and world-making, queer resists confining aspects of identity in favor of creative and playful flux. Queer as method rethinks relationships between intersectionality and normalization. In a similar vein, designturgy contemplates the historical variety and complexity of the other ways of being in the world, moves across subjectivities, forms, spaces, and cultures, and insists on considerations of oppression and activism.

Taylor Mac's and Machine Dazzle's work is an outstanding example of how the method of designturgy can advance a queer critique. It offers ample ground for exploring concepts of archival drag (Román),<sup>2</sup> queer temporalities (Freeman), gaiety as embodied thought (Warner), and the queer legacy of the Ridiculous (Edgecomb). In *24DH*, observe Román et al., “the community [is] actively rebuilding itself,” as the audience “take[s] seriously the power of queer intimacy” and participates in a “‘radical faerie realness ritual’ meant to honor the past, deconstruct the present, and move the culture forward by creating something out of this process” (404–7). Designturgy in this work propels the building and rebuilding of community through a strong queer sensibility.

As one of Taylor Mac's closest collaborators, Machine Dazzle is no ordinary “costume designer.” He calls himself a “disguise” designer who makes things that imitate costumes (interviews). Among the many things he designs are clothing, accessories, wall arts, and household deco. An autodidact, he never went to design school, admits to having no tailoring skills, and creates art based on instinct

rather than training. One unique aspect about his design process is the constant and incremental changes he makes on his works, which put his design in a permanent living state. It is therefore impossible to give any of his *24DH* costumes a solid or complete description, as they change from one performance to another and, like human beings, gain or lose a few pounds and switch to a different hair color on occasion. This also reflects Machine's queer designurgy of always surprising the audience and "keeping them guessing" (interviews).<sup>3</sup> An extraordinary aspect of Machine as the *24DH* designer is his stage appearances alongside Taylor Mac. On the stage, he is not only Taylor's dresser, but caretaker, lover, midwife, alter ego, and comrade. His stage roles in the performance other than his role as the designer offer additional layers to his queer designurgy in *24DH*. I now turn to a thick description/analysis of Machine Dazzle's designurgy as it plays out in the twenty-four decades of Mac's production.

### Wearable Sets

At the start of the show, the stage space is populated with twenty-four backup musicians (including Mac) and knitters, who are seated on stage left and right under unostentatious lighting. The set consists of indistinctly asymmetrical twenty-four strings of lights on the back wall, resembling twenty-four roads that lead to a distant horizon. The set designer, Mimi Lien, strategically makes a minimalist set that befits a twenty-four-hour concert covering twenty-four decades of historical period. The string lights are selectively lit throughout the twenty-four hours, giving the concert minimum scenic support. Taylor Mac's larger-than-life attire therefore stepped in to become more than costume sets and props, which turned out to be the visual center of the stage. Machine Dazzle thereby plays the role of the scene-setter who magically turns anything into a wearable set, whether it be fireworks, a barrel, a river, house railings, ice cream, AIDS epidemic, or a vulva.

Designurgically, I propose, the opening and ending attire of the twenty-four decades form a full circle from birth to rebirth. Both ensembles are highly representative of Machine Dazzle's designurgy of surprises. The opening costume (the first decade, 1776–85) signifies the birth of the US nationhood and heated celebration. For the beginning decade of the US nationhood, one would naturally expect to see some reference to the Star-Spangled Banner. The designer, however, cleverly shunned the national flag, and instead employed pennants and mylar ribbons of vibrant colors other than white, red, and Old Glory blue. The pennants were hooped together to form four pannier-like layers that increased in size as they went down the waistline. Machine Dazzle piles up the mylar ribbons to create a tall headdress with long celebratory strips falling down from the top. Mylar, a heat-resistant material, is used here effectively to symbolize massive energy, festivity, and explosive enthusiasm. The crowning characteristic of this look is the exploding fireworks constructed with long sticks extending from Taylor Mac's lower back and Mylar blossoms as firework tips. The bodice features a large number "13" in glistening purplish blue Mylar, indicating the thirteen colonies that declared independence (fig. 1).

The ending decade (the twenty-fourth decade, 2006–16), in contrast with the heat and fireworks celebrating the birth of the nation, encapsulates a different kind of birth—the unflashy and lonesome rebirth of the self. After each hour of the performance, a backup musician is sent off the stage, resembling the way that AIDS took away lives one by one. At the beginning of the ending decade, all the other twenty-three musicians are gone, leaving Taylor Mac as the sole performer on an empty stage. The decade begins with a giant pink cloth in the shape of a vulva descending from the ceiling. An almost naked Taylor Mac pokes his cleanly shaven head through the labia, and—again surprising the audience—the vulva cloth niftily falls onto him and turns into a dress (fig. 2). It epitomizes the tactically designed and surprising transformation of props and set into attire. Wearing nothing but the vulva (dress) and holding a ukulele, Taylor, like a baby residing in the liminal space between mother's womb and the outside world, croons original songs and poems about what the world in 2016 was like now—the Orlando nightclub shooting and corpses being washed up on





FIG. 1 The opening ensemble, the 1st decade, 1776–85. (Photo: Little Fang.)



FIG. 2 The ending ensemble, the 24th decade, 2006–16. (Photo: Sarah Walker.)