

WALL TEXTS

VAGINAL DAVIS: MAGNIFICENT PRODUCT

WALL TEXT 1: INTRODUCTION

Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product

Vaginal Davis is an icon. Her oeuvre, spanning over five decades, defies categorization: a published author, award-winning blacktress, visual artist, drag terrorist, celebrated film- and documentary maker, cult figure, international superstar, temple prostitute, spokesmodel, gossip columnist, influential socialite, performance artist, educator, fictional (auto)biographer, counterculture trailblazer, and, according to *Agony Magazine*, a “manipulative, filthy black jungle temptress who lures innocent suburban white boys into a world in which their only escape is madness or death.”

Vaginal Davis makes scenes for a living. Embodying intersectionality as a queer, mixed-race person, she was a founding mother of the queer punk underground of her native Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s, before moving to Berlin in 2005 to play a leading role in the burgeoning cultural life of the German capital. In this “magnificent product,” Ms. Davis’s work manifests itself through installations, folding in histories that took place on the stage, in recording studios, in Los Angeles’s Silver Lake nightclubs or Hollywood apartment galleries, spread far and wide through the xeroxed pages of her zines and extensive correspondences. Indeed, Ms. Davis’s installations at Moderna Museet metabolize her archive and stage it anew.

Vaginal Davis’s work is a home for everyone who feels different, and her genre-defying and multifaceted practice cannot be contained within the four walls and roof of Moderna Museet. *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* thus takes place at five other venues in Stockholm:

- Nationalmuseum: In the exhibition *Naked on My Ozgoad: Fausthaus—Anal Deep Throat*, Vaginal Davis’s lifelong fascination with L. Frank Baum’s books of Oz is highlighted in a new work housed in the Nationalmuseum’s Old Library, alongside a focused presentation of her paintings in the museum’s 19th-century galleries.
- Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation: The installation *Vaginal Davis’s Hofpfisterei* showcases Ms. Davis’s writing practice, from her years as a teen correspondent in Los Angeles to her groundbreaking zines and her mature years as a friction writer.
- Accelerator | Stockholm University: In the exhibition *Choose Mutation*, Vaginal Davis’s work with (and as part of) the Berlin-based CHEAP performance collective takes center stage.

- MDT (Moderna Dansteatern): On September 4, Vaginal Davis will introduce the films *All That Jazz* (1979) and *HAIR* (1979), as only she can.
- Tensta konsthall: Near the end of this “magnificent product,” on September 6–7, you are invited to *Vaginal Davis’s Universität for the Damaged and Gifted*, a weekend-long festival with “lecturinas,” performances, and screenings.

Welcome to the wondrous world of Mme. Vaginal “Crème” Davis!

Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product is curated by Hendrik Folkerts, curator of international contemporary art and head of exhibitions

The exhibition is supported by

Terra Foundation for American Art

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

WALL TEXT 2: GALLERY 1 INTRODUCTION

The Carla DuPlantier Cinerama Dome

Ms. Davis was born during the latter half of the twentieth century, in the eastern part of Los Angeles, to a French-Creole mother and Mexico-born father. A child prodigy, she graced the stage of elementary school theaters, enrolled in the local genius honors program, and, at the age of eight, mounted her first exhibition, a spin on L. Frank Baum's famous *Oz* books, at the local library. Inspired by the militancy of the Black Panthers' pursuit of social justice in the United States, she named herself after feminist political activist Angela Davis—forever inscribing her name in the annals of history: Vaginal Davis.

Her cousin, Carla "Maddog" DuPlantier of the band the Controllers, introduced Vaginal Davis to the Los Angeles punk scene. Ms. Davis started a band called the Afro Sisters in the late 1970s, followed by other bands including Cholita! The Female Menudo, Pedro, Muriel & Esther (PME), and black fag. Vaginal Davis became integral to the scene referred to as "homocore," which parodied and challenged the white heterosexual bias of punk and refused the normative gay mainstream. Ms. Davis created her own mythology—an interplay between dis/identification, fiction, and social critique—during the live performances of her multiracial, maxi-gendered bands. She spread the word across art and music networks through her self-published zines, and soon she was playing to superstars and plebeians alike on the stages of night clubs, gay bars, and punk pits.

Amid the onset of the AIDS epidemic, when LGBTQIA+ rights remained but a distant dream, Ms. Davis created a radical alternative for both punk and queer politics, and those living outside of polite society. In her own words, Vaginal Davis was "too gay for the punk scene and too punk for the gay." She became the embodiment of the fundamentally disruptive and destabilizing "terrorist drag," pairing joy with resistance as she championed anti-normative, anti-capitalist, and pro-punk aesthetics. An artist who threatens the moral fabric of society and understands pop culture like no other, Ms. Davis fearlessly paved the path to world domination. As she has reflected: "Everything that is culturally fascinating and interesting in the world originated in the Black queer demimonde then gets adapted by the Black straight populace, then co-opted into dominant or popular culture."

WALL TEXT 3: GALLERY 2 INTRODUCTION

HAG – small, contemporary, haggard

We invite you to step inside the Stockholm iteration of HAG—small, contemporary, haggard. The space echoes Vaginal Davis’s 1980s apartment gallery, in which she presented the work of artists living (happily) on the margins. It manifests here as an illusory Ames room, the window of which provides a view into Vaginal Davis’s mind, a space where conventional perspective and experience is skewed. HAG in its current manifestation was first staged at Participant Inc, New York, in 2012, as a solo exhibition of Ms. Davis’s own work. Have a look at the press release behind you.

WALL TEXT 3: CONT, PRESS RELEASE TO HAG EXHIBITED IN NYC 2012

“FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 1, 2012

Contact: Lia Gangitano 212 254-4334

Vaginal Davis

HAG—small, contemporary, haggard

November 4–December 16, 2012

PARTICIPANT INC 253 East Houston Street NYC participantinc.org

Opening Reception, Sunday, November 4, 7–9 pm

PARTICIPANT INC is delighted to welcome Vaginal Davis back to New York City for her first major solo visual art exhibition: *HAG—small, contemporary, haggard*. The name *HAG* in part refers to a subset within the queercore movement of the eighties, which positioned itself by reclaiming the negative connotations associated with the term *HAG*. The croan, the skank, the slattern, the fag hag, and the veritable sea hag: all took on new states of exaltation within this movement. Although *HAG* had proponents on both coasts, it was more active in Los Angeles, where Ms. Davis was hatched.

This exhibition is in tribute to and inspired by the original HAG Gallery (1982–89), which Ms. Davis opened at 7850 Sunset Blvd. in Hollywood, California. The new, botoxed HAG will function as a fractured gallery within the space of Participant Inc. As Davis puts it, “My medium is the indefinite nature of my own whimsy.” HAG at Participant Inc will feature new work that Davis has made while living in and being inspired by the Rote Insel section of Berlin: including her signature cosmetics-and-tempera paintings of women trapped in the

bodies of women, lesbian domesticity wallpaper collages, and totemic bread sculpture, which Davis describes as Rapa Nui Moai monuments vs. the Venus of Willendorf.

During the run of the original HAG Gallery in Los Angeles, Davis only featured the work of obsessive figures who didn't consider themselves artists and who did not go to art school. The gallery was located on the famed Sunset Strip at the Villa Rosa Rock'n'Roll Apartment Building, which was owned by Iranian Jews with a penchant for freaks. But then, who else would rent an apartment to a loud, unruly messticle like Vaginal Davis? Her next-door neighbor was John Drew Barrymore, the alcoholic and drug-addled son of stage and screen star John Barrymore and father of actress Drew Barrymore. Barrymore's paintings and assemblages marked the opening season of HAG: artworks composed of broken liquor bottles, hypodermic needles, and squished cockroaches. Every piece sold but sadly the former actor almost OD'd two weeks after the closing night, as he used his proceeds for one big drug binge, aided and abetted by some tired death rockers.

During the seven years of HAG, guests were often found fornicating among anti-paintings, decomposing sculptures, edible fashion, psychotic/psychotropic performances, vomitorials, alpha bitch slaps, and feral mudslides. Over the years HAG hosted work from Mari Kono, Charles LeDray, Rick Owens, Holly Woodlawn, Gorilla Rose, the late Wagner Vieira—the Brazilian David Wojnarowicz, Alice Bag, The Swing Set, The Cambridge Apostles, Michael Franti's The BeatNiggs, Tragic Mulatto, Clay Idols, Victor Banana, Tim Donnelly, Dora, Boofy Saint Marie, Nelson Sullivan, DeAundra Peek and the Peak Sisters, Peace Frog, Diane Paillette, Mark Maxwell, Quasi O'Shea, Gomorrah Wednesday, Momma Stud, Section Eight, Iris Parker, Johnny Dark, Janet Klein, Doberman, Colleen Pancake, Sex Red Bed Spread, David Monster, Tom Gallo, Ginger Surfer Valerian of the South Bay, Klaus von Brücker, Martin Nesvig, Glen Meadmore, Psychodrama, Miracle!, Lisa Suckdog & Jean Louis Costes.

Ms. Vaginal Davis, the Los Angeles born and braised doyenne of intersexed outsider art, has been a writer, performer, experimental filmmaker, and visual artist since her early teens. She first came to international attention with her literary tabloid *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine* and its supplement *Shrimp*, the magazine for licking and sucking bigger and better feet. Both magazines were published from the original HAG gallery address in Hollywood. Recent exhibitions include the commissioned piece *My Pussy Is Still in Los Angeles (I Only Live in Berlin)*: Getty/Pacific Standard Time, Los Angeles, January 2012; *Vaginal Davis Is Speaking From the Diaphragm: Camp/Anti-Camp—The Queer Guide to Everyday Life*, Berlin, 2012; *Tenderloin—Der Glock von der Lied: Antony's Meltdown Festival*, London, August 2012; *Memory Island*: Tate Modern, London, 2011; and *Dejecta*: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, January 2011. Since 2005 she has been living and working in Berlin, Germany, where she curates and hosts the monthly performative film event *Rising Stars, Falling Stars, Arsenal Institut für Film- und Videokunst.*"

WALL TEXT 4: GALLERY 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The Fantasia Library

“The Fantasia Library” is a collection of over five hundred pastel-pink imaginary books, a manifestation of Ms. Davis’s literary imagination and ability to inscribe her world. Writer Dodie Bellamy recently noted: “[Vaginal] Davis has repeatedly stated that she doesn’t fit in anywhere. . . . Language is one site where she reinscribes an unwelcoming cosmos, creating an alternate one in which she makes sense.” The shelves hold titles such as *My Deliberative Body*, *The Fiscal Clit*, *Hollywood Speaks*, and *The Hottentotten*, and crown a number of pink vitrines with paraphernalia of Ms. Davis’s infamous performances. Here you will encounter letters, collages, and books authored by quintessential queer, Black, and punk writers, as well as a vagina dentata-sculpture, a potent symbol of Vaginal Davis’s emasculation of the patriarchy. A suite of Ms. Davis’s portraits of iconic female forbears: literary and cultural figures such as Wanda Coleman, Joan Didion, Audre Lorde, and Minnie Riperton is also on display.

“The Fantasia Library” is part of Vaginal Davis’s installation *The Wicked Pavilion*, named after Dawn Powell’s 1954 eponymous novel on the thrills of New York high and low society. *The Wicked Pavilion* continues down the diaphanous corridors.

WALL TEXT 5: GALLERY 3.2 INTRODUCTION

A Tween Bedroom

In this sanctum sanctorum, a humongous plaster dildo—a prop from previous performances simultaneously celebrating sexuality and ridiculing masculinity—is tucked into a rotating bed. The tiny boudoir in the corner speaks volumes. Placed next to a mask-shaped diary are the accoutrements fundamental to the shaping of Ms. Davis and her art: nail polish of various shades that she uses for beautification and as paint for her portraits, as can be seen in the paintings that are part of “The Fantasia Library.” Above the boudoir, there are two posters of Ms. Davis’s art band The Afro Sisters, bearing the tagline “Young, free and famous, the envy of all others.” The clothesline completes the room, with images hung like laundry. Elsa Maxwell meets Michael Pitt, side by side with Christiane F. and Gloria Williams. Further on, Isabella Rossellini hangs shoulder to shoulder with a gay threesome, a flyer for the CHEAP performance collective, and the cover model for *S.T.H. Straight To Hell* magazine. And all of this against the soundtrack of an audio piece: an extract from the song “A Love Like Ours,” sung by Gloria DeHaven and June Allyson for the 1944 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film *Two Girls and a Sailor*; a voice message of Vaginal Davis’s secret admirer; and two interviews that Vaginal Davis and Ron Athey conducted for the legendary article “White Party Cover Story,” for the *LA Weekly* in 1996.

Through this room, we finally understand who inhabits *The Wicked Pavilion*: the fantastical imagination of Vaginal Davis as a curious young tween—a radical thinker and performer, who is obsessed with gay porn, loves to gossip, has an encyclopedic knowledge of literary and cinema history, and knows her way around scissors, glue, and nail polish. Scholar Tavia Nyong’o writes about the power of Ms. Davis’s fabulation and myth making: “[...] we need to live in a different world than the one we’ve been given. Especially for women or black and brown folk or trans and queer folk, this world is just not acceptable. [Vaginal Davis] doesn’t really tell you how to make that world, but she’ll show you how she’s made her world.”

FILM ROOM 1

MAD DOG KINO PROUDLY PRESENTS:

That Fertile Feeling, 1983

Video, color, sound

8:27 min

Directed by Keith “Gomorra Wednesday” Holland and John “Quasi” O’Shea

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

In the no-budget documentary drama *That Fertile Feeling*, Vaginal Davis and Fertile LaToyah Jackson costar as two women at the edge of society. Refused access to healthcare in an hour of need, Fertile miraculously gives birth to eleven babies without medical support. *That Fertile Feeling* epitomizes Ms. Davis’s radical and humorous approach, in this case focusing a critical lens on American society and the limited access to healthcare across the spectrum of race, gender, and class.

To say that Fertile LaToyah Jackson was a muse to Vaginal Davis would be an understatement. In many ways, Ms. Davis created Fertile—“the political activist, the labor organizer, the prophet, the soothsayer, the ingenue, the debutante.” Fertile La Toyah Jackson featured in Ms. Davis’s art bands The Afro Sisters and ¡Cholita!, and, later, became the subject of her celebrated zine *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine* (1982–91), as she wrote through, channeled, and ultimately ventriloquized Fertile.

¡Cholita!, 1995

Video , color, sound

6:45 min

Directed by Michele “Meech” Mills

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

Following the success of her first art band the Afro Sisters, Vaginal Davis established the concept band ¡Cholita! The Female Menudo in 1987, in response to the stagnant “alternative culture” of the punk scene at the time. Riffing on the name of the popular Puerto Rican boy band Menudo, she claimed, in ¡Cholita!, that Latina teenage girls rule the world. Vaginal Davis assumed the role of Graciela, the forever-thirteen-and-a-half-year-old Latina girl, flanked by fellow band members Alice Bag, Fertile La Toyah Jackson, and Michele Mills. For certain concerts and events, the ensemble could include up to twenty people. Blending defiant fashion with rebellious lyrics, imbued with a hint of teenage angst and sassy melodrama, ¡Cholita! epitomizes how punk was never a static phenomenon in the hands of Vaginal Davis. Here, we see an anthology of live performances of the teenage heroines. As Ms. Davis recalls, “Once you turned sixteen, you were kicked out of the group, but of course we never aged.”

FILM ROOM 2

NEUTRON BOMB KINO PROUDLY PRESENTS:

The White to Be Angry, 1999

Video , b/w, sound

19:22 min

Courtesy of the artist and Isabella Bortolozzi Gallery, Berlin

Vaginal Davis's touchstone work *The White to Be Angry* challenges constructions and desires around white supremacist culture as it circulates across the entire political spectrum. The title of the piece is taken from Davis's live performances and a music album of her band Pedro, Muriel & Esther (PME), recorded in Chicago in the mid-1990s. The video is a visual album of songs as chapters, each referencing a different film director, separated by sequences of appropriated footage from television. Ms. Davis's PME bandmate Glen Meadmore appears in a chapter riffing on horror writer and movie director Clive Barker playing a serial killer, while an Angeleno skinhead by the name of Edward Ghillemluire plays a character who is both attracted to and violent toward the people his hate speech-spewing elders seek to demonize. *The White to Be Angry* embraces ambiguity and extravagant dark humor, creating an image of America that remains unnervingly topical today.

The label text was coauthored by Hendrik Folkerts and Solveig Nelson for Vaginal Davis's presentation *The White to Be Angry* at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2020.

FILM ROOM 3

TANTALIZE KINO PROUDLY PRESENTS:

The Last Club Sucker

1999

Video, color, sound

32:41 min

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

A self-proclaimed “sexual repulsive” and godmother of “terrorist drag,” Ms. Davis chose to performatively exploit herself engaging in rude provocations at her renowned club night events called Club Sucker, which ran from 1994 until 1999. In Ms. Davis’s own words, “For five years, Vaginal Davis’ Club Sucker has served as a startling expose of the twilight world of lavender sex that will shake the very foundations of the gay establishment. Whether you’re an alternahunk or guerilla filmmaker you’re likely to enjoy the witty and outlandish stupefied world of the legendary ebola flesh eating temptress Vaginal Davis.” This film records the last night of Club Sucker, where Ms. Davis’s various roles of organizer, host, performer, emcee, and temptress conjoin towards a crescendo of queerness: “Being queer isn’t just sexuality. Queer to me means not wanting to fit in *anywhere*. It’s relishing in your outsider status as a misfit, weirdo, freakazoid. Always being suspect, perverse, maladjusted.”

Naturally, music played a key role in Club Sucker. Here is Vaginal Davis’s top 10 Sucker playlist:

Rufus Wainwright, “Beauty Mark”
Glen Meadmore, “Blow You” + “Eternal Love”
Nymphs, “Sad and Damned”
Danielson Famile, “Rallying the Dominoes”
The Make-Up, “Save Yourself”
Cat Power, “Sea of Love”
Sonic Youth, “Eyes & Teeth”
Kahimi Karie, “Le Roi Soleil”
Pleasure Box, “Single Girl, Married Girl”
Turbo Negro, “Imorgen Skal Eg Daue”

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

Archival material

1970s to the present

Mixed media of various dimensions

Courtesy of the artist, Hector Martinez, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, with special thanks to Jonathan Berger, Frank Rodriguez, and Lia Gangitano.

Ms. Davis's archive is a vast universe. Peak behind the curtain to see fragments of her histories, through photographs, flyers, collages, correspondence, and other material. It is all here, from her early art bands and the nights at Club Sucker, to the legendary performance event Platinum Oasis, held in 2001 and 2002, where she brought together "lowlifes and highlifes," a scene of "queers, anarchists, artists, debutantes" bonding "for a day and a night under the sun and stars." Shortly after, in 2005, she traded Los Angeles for Berlin, where she continues to work, frequently as part of the art and performance group CHEAP Collective—Ms. Davis's work with CHEAP is highlighted in the exhibition at Accelerator | Stockholm University. Jamie Stewart, band leader of Xiu Xiu and member of the CHEAP collective, writes:

"Never had I encountered or even vaguely conceived of, even as a premise and certainly not as a person, an individual who was out queer, a visual artist, a musician, a writer, theorist, a performance artist, a professor, physically beautiful, feminine and physically strong, incredibly glamorous, punk rock and art rock, vocally political, socially insightful, willing to deal with pain and trauma, super intelligent, sexually fascinating, and very, very funny. The possibility of what moving through the world *could BE* began to burn and burn with profound, inspiring clarity. Finally, and for the first time, I had a model, someone to look up to for everything I wanted to believe in."

THE WICKED PAVILION SIGNS, GALLERY 3

Wanda Coleman, 2021

Purchase 2024

Schminkstifte, mascara, eye shadow, liquid eye liner, blush, lip stain, Max Factor foundation, metallic tempera, Hamamelis Wasser with Mandrake, Henbane and Datura, hydrogen peroxide, glycerin, watercolor pencils, discontinued over the counter medicine including Anacin, Excedrin and Lydia E. Pinkham Health Tonic, coconut oil, nail polish, enamel, perfume and Aqua Net Extra Strength hairspray, on found paper.

Vaginal Davis paints “women trapped in women’s bodies.” In her paintings, many of which are also on view at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, she celebrates rebellious women, queer, and Black figures across time. She uses a kaleidoscope of cultural and social references, questioning the constructs of womanhood or femininity under patriarchy, refusing the reduction of these figures to a singular identity.

This painting depicts Wanda Coleman (1946–2013), an American poet who was known as the “LA Blueswoman” and the poet laureate of the city of Los Angeles. Ms. Davis often uses found materials as a canvas to paint on—in this case a flyer for BBB, the Bears, Beards, and Beer dance and play gay party at Undertage, Mehringdamm 32, Berlin—as well as a variety of nonart materials, such as discontinued cosmetics, to paint with. The tools of beautification for women, queers, and drag queens thus become the instruments for portraiture painting. As Bojana Kunst writes in the catalog of the exhibition, these works form a “a kind of self-made magical séance, a spiritual calling, an almost obsessive incantation that, with an exuberant and luxurious desire, opens the door to the ghosts of rebellious, transgressive, and mismatched existences.”

VAGINAL DAVIS'S BLOG, PRINTS

Speaking From the Diaphragm: The Vaginal Davis Blog (. . . From the Counsel of Inter-Continental Ballistic Principalities with over 15,000,000 Followers and Subscribers)
2003–20

A4 prints from blog.vaginaldavis.com

In the early millennium Vaginal Davis launched a blog, taking her practice as a writer and zine-maker to the digital realm. She started on April 23, 2003: “oh my heavenly little four foot three word I’m blogging. I had no idea such advanced technology existed. Thanks to Larry Bob-Goblin for introducing it to me, without him i would be trapped in the middle of the road ages in a century i don’t even want to think about.”

Feel free to take a page or two and read at leisure. At Index— The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation you are invited to experience the full library of Vaginal Davis’s writing.