



VAGINAL DAVIS

Magnificent Product

Edited by Hendrik Folkerts

CONTENTS



- 8** Dedication
- 9** Acknowledgments
- 15** Foreword
Gitte Ørskou
- 23** *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product*
Hendrik Folkerts
- 41** *Situated Readings*
Elisabeth Lebovici
- 53** *Intimacy and Tomorrow*
Lia Gangitano
- 65** *Precarious Glitter: The Many Revolutions of Vaginal Davis*
Bojana Kunst
- 77** *Early Diaries*
troizel
- Letters of Admiration to Ms. Davis
- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 94 Frank Rodriguez | 114 Mason Leaver-Yap |
| 96 Jamie Stewart | 116 Lisa Teasley |
| 98 Ron Athey | 118 Tavia Nyong'o |
| 100 Wu Tsang | 121 Anchan Daučíková |
| 101 Jennifer Doyle | 122 Sheldon Gooch |
| 104 Emi Fontana | 124 Darby English |
| 106 Daniel Hendrickson | 126 Julie Tolentino and Stosh Fila |
| 109 Susanne Sachsse | 130 Ricardo Montez |
| 110 Hyunhye (Angela) Seo | 131 Jonathan Berger |
| 112 Marc Siegel | 132 MYCKET |
- 135** *Mary Magdalene*
Vaginal Davis

This book is dedicated to the memory of Hans Ruiz, Club Sucker's resident beauty boy, killed too young by senseless gang violence at eighteen.



Hedy LaMarr Starlift List

(a special "thank-you" to . . .)

Fearless Leader Susi, Marcuse, and Muzlim Danny of CHEAP Kollektiv, Mark "Ears" Freitas & Joanna Brown of Homocore Chicago, Steve Lafreniere, Kembra of VHoKB, G. B. Jones & Caroline Azar of Fifth Column, Big Daddy Athey, Monika the Dressmaker & Alex, Glenn Belverio, former LA Weekly editors: Janet Duckworth, Sue Horton, Tom Christie, Kateri Butler & Michael Lassell, Marina Rosenfeld, Risa Needleman, Gala Verdugo, Lil Papa Frank Rodriguez & Master P., Crepe Suzette, Empress Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, Azteca Warrior, Larry-Bob, Maria Norman, Isabella Bortolozzi, Philip Reinartz, Amy Adams, Benjamin Tischer, Jeffreyland Hilbert, Science Holiday, Mark Simon, Craig Roose, Lisa Teasley, Jonathan Berger, Douglas Gordon, Love Camel, Bibbe Hansen & Sean Carrillo, Glen Meadmore, Richard Gabriel, Annette Frick & Wilhelm Hein, Lia Gangitano, Michele "Meesh" Mills, Father Larry, Marilyn Welch, Rick Owens & Michèle Lamy, Miss Joan Marie Moossy, Norman von Holtzendorf, Audre Beardsley & Uriel, Kimberly Kim, Cory Marie, Alice Bag & "Jailbait" Velasquez, Amelia Jones, Divinity Fudge, Dale Johnson, Paul Rossi, BLAB, Karen Lofgren, Emi Fontana, Julie Tolentino & Pippen, Nanna Heidenreich, Piero Bellomo, Salome Gersch, Markus Ruff, Uli Ziemons, Daphné Cousineau, Rebecca Voight, Richard Hoffman, Moises Ruiz, Dean the Babe, Big Dicque Sneaky Pete, Mark Morgan Perez, Atte Penttinen, Carmelita Tropicana, Ela Troyano, Dan Gunn, Ricardo Montez, Uzi Parnes, Helen Bed O'Neill, Mark Maxwell, Leslie Beatty, Maria Duvall, Bud Thomas, Priscilla Hazelwood, Kathleen Hanna & Adam Horovitz. That savior who was there from the very beginning at Berendo Junior High School Gregorio Estafano Hernandez, aka Fertile LaToyah Jackson.

All this would not be possible without the Magnificent Obsession, devotion, expertise, tireless energetics, and Nancy Drew fortitude of everyone's favorite dandy and art-historical Beau Brummel of dedication and charm Hendrik Folkerts.

This catalog is published in conjunction with

Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product
May 18–October 13, 2024

The exhibition is initiated by Moderna Museet and extends across several locations in Stockholm: Moderna Museet, Nationalmuseum, Accelerator | Stockholm University, Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, Tensta konsthall, and MDT (Moderna Dansteatern)

EXHIBITION

Curator: Hendrik Folkerts
Research associate: Nathalie Viruly
Exhibition design: MYCKET

Project group Moderna Museet

Exhibition manager: Elisabeth Creutz
Learning: Philippa Couch
Conservation: Alison Norton, Ellen Cronholm
Technicians: Fredrik Andersson, Jim Sims
Communication: Nina Strollo
Host representative: Mark Bengtsson

CATALOG

Editor: Hendrik Folkerts
Managing editor: Teresa Hahr
Copy editor: Tas Skorupa
Picture editor: Emma Whelan
Graphic design: Jeffrey Hilbert
Typesetting: Karla Scharbach
Printing: die Keure printing, Bruges 2024

Moderna Museet exhibition catalog no. 424
ISBN 978-91-984573-6-0 (Moderna Museet)
ISBN 978-3-7533-0643-8 (Verlag der Buchhandlung
Walther und Franz König, Cologne)

© 2024 Vaginal Davis, Moderna Museet, Verlag der
Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, and the authors

Published by Moderna Museet and
Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Cologne
modernamuseet.se
buchhandlung-walther-koenig.de

Distribution:
Buchhandlung Walther König
Ehrenstr. 4, D-50672 Cologne
+49 (0) 221 20 59 6 53
verlag@buchhandlung-walther-koenig.de

With support from:

TERRA
FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART



PHOTO CREDITS

front cover, pp. 14, 106–08: Photo © Frank Rodriguez;
interior, pp. 12–13, 21, 95, 99: Photo © Hector Martinez;
pp. 2–3, 8: Vaginal Davis. Courtesy the artist and Galerie
Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;
p. 6: Image Michele Mills. Courtesy the artist and Galerie
Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;
p. 9: Photo Enrique Marie Presley. Courtesy Enrique Ongpin;
p. 18: Photo © Catherine Opie. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los
Angeles, Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, London,
and Seoul, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Naples;
p. 19: Photo © Ann Summa;
p. 20: Photo Wolfgang Tillmans;
pp. 26–27: © Mikolaj Sobczak;
pp. 32–39: Photo Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet;
pp. 48–51, 60, 72–75, 117–20, 135: Courtesy the artist and
Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;
pp. 61–63: Courtesy New Discretions;
pp. 84–89: Photo © Graysc. Courtesy the artist and
Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;
p. 93: Photo © Jeffrey Hilbert;
p. 94: Photo Katja Perrey. Courtesy the artist and
Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;
pp. 96–97, 112–13: Courtesy Jeffrey Hilbert;
p. 98: Photo John Vlautin;
p. 100: © Wu Tsang;
p. 103: Photo L'Oreal DeHaven. Courtesy Gwangju
Biennale website;
pp. 104–05, 114–15, 122, 125, 130: Wikimedia Commons;
p. 109: © Susanne Sachsse;
p. 111: © Hyunhye (Angela) Seo;
p. 131: © Jonathan Berger;
p. 132: © MYCKET;
pp. 144–55: Courtesy Vaginal Davis and Participant Inc,
New York

© Vaginal Davis. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Isabella
Bortolozzi

Best efforts have been made to due diligence in locating rights
holders for permissions and crediting. In the event of any
questions or concerns, please contact Moderna Museet.

Cover: Vaginal Davis, 1996
p. 6: Vaginal Davis, Michele “Meesh” Mills, illustration for *Cholita!*
slam book, 1995
p. 9: Hai-Karate at Club Sucker, The Garage, Los Angeles, 1996
pp. 12–13: Vaginal Davis, *My Pussy Is Still in Los Angeles (I Only Live in
Berlin)*, 2012, performance. Curated by Emi Fontana, West of Rome, as part
of *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980*, Southwest Law Library
(formerly Bullocks Wilshire Department Store), Los Angeles
p. 14: Vaginal Davis, *Platinum Oasis*, 2002, Coral Sands Motel, Los Angeles





FOREWORD

It usually takes a village to prepare and present an exhibition. *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* took an entire city. Moderna Museet is collaborating with Accelerator | Stockholm University, Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, MDT, Nationalmuseum, and Tensta konsthall to show Ms. Davis's pioneering practice as a writer, visual artist, filmmaker, performer, educator, and organizer. At Moderna Museet, we are incredibly proud to present the arc of Ms. Davis's oeuvre from the early days of Los Angeles homocore to the fantasy libraries mounted in Berlin. From there, we invite you to our sister institutions to take deeper dives, consider highlights, and venture further into the wondrous world of this extraordinary artist.

Moderna Museet has a long and profound history of hosting artists and letting them shape the museum. One size does not always fit all, and an art institution should dare to experiment and align with the vision of an artist to emphasize and strengthen the new directions that art is constantly seeking out. In that sense, an exhibition of Vaginal Davis's work can only be "magnificent" and requires a different curatorial and institutional approach. The multinodal model of the project honors the way she has moved through and shaped so many spaces, communities, and institutions over the past, well, many years (a lady never discloses her age), while also acknowledging that dispersal and destabilization are needed to host such a radically queer artist. After all, Ms. Davis's practice holds no center. I am forever grateful for the trust Vaginal Davis put in our museum, allowing us to host her work and the histories it holds, which are marked in equal measure by their great strength and their exquisite vulnerability. I am in awe of the blazing, generous, critical, wildly funny, beautiful, and sexy spirit she brought to Stockholm.

Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product did not just take one city to materialize; it took a few cities—Stockholm, Los Angeles, Berlin, New York, and many satellites in other places. The extended family around Ms. Davis is breathtaking and heartwarming, and all of them have contributed to this exhibition in one way or another. Although I would not have the space to thank everyone here, I want to highlight a few people who have been instrumental in bringing this ambitious project to fruition: first and foremost, Jonathan Berger, Susanne Sachsse, and Marc Siegel, whose contributions to the exhibitions at Nationalmuseum and Accelerator are nothing short of immense. We are grateful to Lia Gangitano of Participant Inc in New York, for her unwavering support and guidance, and to Hector Martinez, Ron Athey, Frank Rodriguez, Andrew Gould, Glen Meadmore, Amelia Jones, Emi Fontana, and Jennifer Doyle in Los Angeles, and Steve Lafreniere in Portland, for their advice and helping shape the rich tapestry of memories, gossip, and histories. Isabella Bortolozzi and Philip Reinartz at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi offered crucial support at every turn, not to mention generous hospitality for the various meetings with Ms. Davis in Berlin. Additionally, we thank them for their help with the acquisition of the monumental installation *The Wicked Pavilion* for Moderna Museet's collection—acquired with the generous support of the Anna-Stina Höglund & Gunnar Malmbergs's Foundation. Adams and Ollman Gallery in Portland, particularly Amy Adams, as well as Benjamin Tischer of New Discretions/Invisible-Exports, New York, engaged with this project with nothing but joy, enthusiasm, and generous support. We are also indebted to Dan Gunn at Dan Gunn Gallery, London, for his help in locating Ms. Davis's works.

The impact of this exhibition was entirely dependent on the willingness of our Stockholm partners to host, cocurate, and coorganize parts of the project. Each of our sister institutions embraced *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* wholeheartedly. For this, we owe a debt of gratitude to Richard Julin, Therese Kellner, and the team at Accelerator | Stockholm University; Marti Manen and Isabella Tjäder and the team at Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation; Patrick Amsellem, Eva-Lena Bergström, Per Hedström, Martin Olin, and Carina Rech, and the team at Nationalmuseum, including former director Susanna Pettersson (and, of course, Richard Gabriel Gersch, aiding the project at Nationalmuseum from Berlin); Cecilia Widenheim and the team at Tensta konsthall; and Anna Efraimsson and the team at MDT (Moderna Dansteatern).

Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product was conceived through and held by the vision of Moderna Museet curator Hendrik Folkerts, who proposed the project nearly two years ago, devised the structure of the multivenue exhibition, fundraised toward its realization, and executed all facets of the project with great aplomb and curatorial acumen. I would like to thank him for his huge dedication. I would also like to extend my thanks to the team at Moderna Museet. Without the unflagging support, hard work, and undying commitment of the following colleagues, *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* could not have been realized: Fredrik Andersson, Eva Bergman, Jens Carlsson, Elisabeth Creutz, Ellen Cronholm, Albin Dahlström, Teresa Hahr, Annika Hansson Wretman, Carina Hundsdahl, Johan Larje, Fredrik Liew, Carl Ljungström, Krista Lough, Tove Nilson, Alison Norton, Tanja Obradovic, Jim Sims, Nina Strollo, Katarina Swanström, Nathalie Viruly, and Emma Whelan.

The book that you hold in your hands is a chorus of many voices, from the brilliant essays by Hendrik Folkerts, Lia Gangitano, Bojana Kunst, Elisabeth Lebovici, and troizel, to the letters, great in number and even greater in character, authored by Ron Athey, Jonathan Berger, Anchan Daučíková, Jennifer Doyle, Darby English, Emi Fontana, Sheldoon Gooch, Daniel Hendrickson, Mason Leaver-Yap, Ricardo Montez, MYCKET, Tavi Nyong'o, Frank Rodriguez, Susanne Sachsse, Angela Seo, Marc Siegel, Jamie Stewart, Lisa Teasley, Julie Tolentino and Pigpen Stosh Fila, and Wu Tsang. It is riveting to behold the immensely

creative writing and deeply moving to witness the love and dedication to Ms. Davis in each of these texts. Thank you to all the authors and to Jeffrey Hilbert, whose inspiring design forms the structure that holds it all together and, when necessary, takes it all apart.

I recently overheard one of my colleagues asking if a lender mirrors the character of the artist whose work they generously lend to an exhibition. In this case, I would answer that question with a resounding “yes”! Each of the lenders—comprising artists, friends and coconspirators, as well as public collections—responded to our request with great excitement. I am grateful to Amy Adams and Keith Wilkins, Jeff Briggs, Chris Cole, Cindy Sherman, Dan Herschlein, David Hoberman, Emily Gaynor, Frank Rodriguez, George Price, Glenn Ligon, Jakob Augstein and Anna Ballestrem, Jeanne Masel, Judi Roaman, Kaj-anne Pepper, Kim Tucker, Laura Steward, Lia Gangitano, Lynne Jacobs, Marc Siegel, Margaret Lee, Mark Freitas, Neal Baer, Nick Paparone, Renaud Proch, Reverend Stevin Azo Michels, Susan Merker and Thor Perpiles for allowing us to share Ms. Davis’s vision with the publics across the various venues.

Especially in times of uncertainty, our museum depends on the extraordinary generosity of individuals and organizations to support a dream project like this one. Foundational support for the exhibition and catalog was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

I hope you enjoy our “magnificent product,” whether you’re reading this while looking at Ms. Davis making scenes at Moderna Museet, her exquisite paintings and Oz installation at Nationalmuseum, the extensive library of Ms. Davis’s writing at Index, the CHEAP Collective’s manifesto on mutation at Accelerator, coming out of MDT or Tensta konsthall for the many events organized around the project, or at some point in the distant future, when, surely, Ms. Davis’s fame as the founding mother of queer punk, will continue to resonate throughout the land.

Gitte Ørskou, director





p. 18: Catherine Opie, *Vaginal Davis*, 1994, C-print
p. 19: Ann Summa, *¡Cholita!* (left to right: Melanie Sparks, Greg "Jailbait" Velasquez, Fertile LaToyah Jackson, Vaginal Davis, Alice Bag), ca. 1990
p. 20: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Vaginal Davis*, 2015
p. 21: Vaginal Davis, 2019

VAGINAL DAVIS: MAGNIFICENT PRODUCT

Hendrik Folkerts

Vaginal Davis is a relentless gossip. She knows the exact penis size of every man in Berlin, Los Angeles, and beyond, and is not afraid to share. She *will* spill the beans of what Klaus Biesenbach has been up in the toilets of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin or what compromising position M Lamar found himself in again at that party the other night. It may or may not be true, but as Louise Brooks—Lulu of Hollywood—said, the only way to tell the true story is through fiction.

Ms. Davis lives in Berlin now, where she keeps close tabs on the lives of her friends and collaborators—the revelry of the inimitable Susanne Sachsse, fearless leader of the CHEAP performance collective, whose name shall not be uttered without a triumphant adjective, as well as the other CHEAPs: scholaire extraordinaire Marc Siegel, whose wickedness knows no bounds,¹ the lose morals of Xiu Xiu founder Jamie Stewart and band member Angela Seo, or the perversions of Daniel Hendrickson. Get a drink in Ms. Davis and the stories she'll tell! It's like her pussy has a radar, knowing exactly what kind of no good her former Los Angeles crew Ron Athey, Andrew Gould, Hector Martinez, Glen Meadmore, and Frank Rodriguez have been up to. I won't even speak of Jennifer Doyle, Emi Fontana, Amelia Jones, or Julie Tolentino—these academics and curators know no shame. Vaginal Davis will happily share which Texas boys designer Jeffrey Hilbert has been seducing down in Houston or who artist Jonathan Berger has been luring to his cabin in Vermont. And don't get me started on Lia Gangitano, the living proof that

curatorial brilliance comes with a full spectrum of delicious, delightful, delectable deviations. I'd have no space left to write this essay!

Ulises Carrión (1941–1989), the artist with the lofty moustache, taught us the ways of gossip in *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners* (1981), a video work that documents the conceptual performance piece *The Gossip Project*, in which Carrión and his comrades actively shared gossip and spread rumors in Amsterdam about the artist himself:

Have you heard . . . ?

Ulises Carrión has inherited from a rich uncle. Ulises Carrión's ex-wife, whom he married years ago while he was still living in Mexico, is at present in Holland.

Did you know . . . ?

Frank Griblin is fixing the details of Ulises Carrión's show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Frank Griblin has managed to block a grant Ulises Carrión has applied for.

Is it true . . . ?

The Other books and so archive is going to be acquired by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

At the beginning of the video piece, Carrión provides a fully illustrated analysis of the concept of gossip and its associated areas of rumor, scandal, and slander, rendering the intentionality and directionality of each form of discourse through

the movement of arrows—gossip being a singular row of arrows (sounds like “clap-clap-clap”), rumor a multitude of arrows radiating in or out (sounds like “pss-pss-pss”), slander a directional point of convergence (no sound, it’s too nasty). Assuming the pose of documentarian, Carrión concludes, dryly, “Only gossip implies a certain degree of pleasure. Only gossip can have as the target people we love. And this gives gossip the possibility of becoming art. Not only gossip’s formal model or structure is suitable for artistic purposes, also the wide range of emotions that gossip is capable of embodying, make of it an excellent artistic terrain.”²

To make a magnificent product—this book, the exhibition across six institutions in Stockholm, and a plethora of programs—we had to redraw the map of Stockholm. After all, an exhibition on the work of award-winning Blacktress, singer, songwriter, artist, drag terrorist, icon, international superstar, spokesmodel, movie director, mother, and writer Vaginal Davis demands a museum that’s bigger than just four walls and a roof. So, let’s begin, in Carriónesque fashion, by following the arrows inward, all converging on the idyllic island of Skeppsholmen, like a rumor gone haywire, toward Moderna Museet, through the main entrance, down to the second floor, into the exhibition space. Here we see that Vaginal Davis’s practice is a world-building endeavor—after all, what is gossip and rumor, if not tools to create parallel and intersecting realities?—that manifests in installations that fold in histories that took place on the stage, in recording studios, in Silverlake nightclubs or Hollywood apartments, and on the pages of zines: histories documented in letters, recordings, and many, many stories. Indeed, Ms. Davis’s installations at Moderna Museet metabolize the archive and stage it every time anew.

The first room holds the Carla DuPlantier Cinerama, the façade of which is modeled on the iconic Cinerama Dome at 6360 Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, California, now defunct.³ In Vaginal Davis’s own words: “My cousin Carla [DuPlantier] was the first person to introduce me to punk. She was the Black lesbian drummer of the early 1980s punk band the Controllers, revived in the late 1990s as SkullControl. She moved to London in the late 1970s, modeled for Vivienne Westwood, and drummed for punk pop band Jimmy the Hoover. Carla created the punk trend of tying bandanas to one’s engineer boots.”⁴ The scenographic homage to Carla DuPlantier—the façade of the Cinerama is

multiplied in different scales to create three separate rooms, each with distinct seating denoting a particular space, namely a nightclub, a cinema, and a church—holds four of Ms. Davis’s foundational films from the 1990s: *That Fertile Feeling* (1983), *¡Cholita!* (1995), *The White to Be Angry* (1999), and *The Last Club Sucker* (1999), respectively. Together, they show Ms. Davis as a founding mother of Los Angeles’s “homocore” scene, a term coined by filmmaker and photographer Bruce LaBruce and G. B. Jones in Toronto to denote an antimainstream, antiestablishment, and propunk queer scene that was always in the making and taking North American cities, especially on the West Coast, by storm.⁵ Even though Ms. Davis lives in Berlin, Los Angeles remains a permanent fixture in her sprawling universe: “My pussy resides permanently in Los Angeles, where it first emerged a millennium ago from the primordial ooze of the La Brea Tar Pits.”⁶

The installation *HAG—small, contemporary, haggard* (2012/2024) graces the second room of the exhibition at Moderna Museet. Initially conceived as Ms. Davis’s apartment gallery at 7850 Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood (1982–89), allegedly for the sole purpose of finding a boyfriend,⁷ *HAG* now hosts numerous of her own works, including a suite of paintings of “women trapped in the bodies of women,” an installation of “lesbian domesticity wallpaper,” and two totemic sculptures made of bread, *Dirty Mariah* and *Timberlake*, described by Ms. Davis as “Rapa Nui Moai monuments vs. the Venus of Willendorf”⁸—all made for *HAG*’s manifestation at Participant Inc, New York, in 2012. The space is as much the work itself: a small room in the center of a dark space, with a tiny window from which the pink glare of a single lightbulb inside emanates, and through which one can peek into the so-called Ames Room, to witness an optical illusion of scale by which a person who stands on one side of the tilted floor appears enormous in comparison to a person on the other side. *HAG* is a space through which Vaginal Davis channels her own history, peppered with some archaeology, sprinkled with popular culture, and with a side of architectural virtuosity, ultimately spatializing how, in the artist’s words, “my medium is the indefinite nature of my own whimsy.”⁹

The pièce de résistance populates the third room, where we are fully introduced to the life and times of “arch-fabulist” Vaginal Davis.¹⁰ Riffing off quotidian spaces such as a library and a tween

bedroom, Ms. Davis presents *The Wicked Pavilion* (2021), named after Dawn Powell’s 1954 eponymous novel.¹¹ Stepping into a maze of pink diaphanous curtains, only slightly distinct from the pink walls, we make our way to the Fantasia Library, where a collection of over five hundred imaginary books with such titles as *My Deliberative Body*, *The Fiscal Clit*, *Beware the Retarded Whore*, *Hollywood Speaks*, and *The Hottentotten* crowns a number of pink vitrines with performance paraphernalia, letters, collages, and books by quintessential queer, Black, and punk writers, including Powell’s novel, Wanda Coleman’s *Mag Dog Black Lady* [1979], and the late great Liz Renay’s memoir *How To Attract Men* [1978], presented alongside a spectacular suite of Ms. Davis’s portraits of iconic literary figures and a sampling of her blog avant-la-lettre *Speaking from the Diaphragm: The Vaginal Davis Blog* [. . . *From the Counsel of Inter-Continental Ballistic Principalities with over 15,000,000 Followers and Subscribers*]. The diaphanous maze continues and leads to the tween bedroom, a sanctum sanctorum of sorts, where a humongous plaster dildo is tucked into a rotating bed (a Lazy Susan!), surrounded by a treasury of Ms. Davis’s collages on paper and boxes, where punk porn meets high fashion. The tiny boudoir in the corner speaks volumes: nail polishes of various shades (Ms. Davis’s primarily uses cosmetics to create her paintings, which I’ll return to later) are placed next to a mask-shaped diary (a note sticking out reminds us that “Tom Cruise Loves Women”), overlooked by two Afro Sisters posters (“Young, free and famous, the envy of all others”). Vaginal Davis’s signature clothesline completes the room: the big emancipator, where Elsa Maxwell meets Michael Pitt meets Christiane F. meets Gloria Williams meets Isabella Rossellini meets a gay threesome meets the CHEAP Collective meets the cover model for *S.T.H. Straight to Hell* magazine, among a wealth of extraordinary and pervy works on paper by Ms. Davis. And all of this against the soundtrack of an audio piece that includes an extract from the song “A Love Like Ours,” sung by Gloria DeHaven and June Allyson from the 1944 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film *Two Girls and a Sailor*, plus a voice message of Vaginal Davis’s secret admirer, and two interviews Vaginal Davis and Ron Athey conducted for their legendary “White Party Cover Story” for the *LA Weekly* in 1996.

This is the best version of a little girl’s room: imagine Shirley Temple as a radical Black thinker who is obsessed with gay porn, loves to gossip, has an encyclopedic knowledge of cinema history,

and knows her way around scissors and glue. *The Wicked Pavilion* becomes a scene of exquisite speculation, a space in which Ms. Davis goes with and against museological forms of display, simultaneously offering and withholding, describing and obscuring, and immediately rendering our understanding of such notions as fact and fiction, or art and life for that matter, as instantaneously and forever outdated, as she claims, to borrow some more from Tavia Nyong’o, “the everyday as the texture out of which the eventfulness of fabulation arises.”¹²

Now, after you make a stop at MDT (Moderna Dansteatern for Vaginal Davis’s annotated screening of Bob Fosse’s *All That Jazz* and Miloš Forman’s *Hair* (indeed, the year is 1979!), follow the whispers across the Skeppsholmen bridge to the hallowed halls of the Nationalmuseum of Sweden. The arrows of gossip disperse and converge on Gamla Biblioteket, also known as the Old Library.¹³ Here, in the exhibition *Naked on My Ozgoad, or Fausthaus—Anal Deep Throat*, among the tomes of primordial knowledge, some ancient tales are retold: L. Frank Baum’s *The Marvelous Land of Oz: Being an Account of the Further Adventures of the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman* (1904); *Ozma of Oz* (1907), with the impressive subtitle *A Record of Her Adventures with Dorothy Gale of Kansas, Billina the Yellow Hen, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion and the Hungry Tiger; Besides Other Good People Too Numerous to Mention Faithfully Recorded Herein*, and touchingly dedicated to “all the boys and girls who read my stories—and especially to the Dorothys”; and *The Road to Oz* (1909)—each one spectacularly illustrated by John. R. Neill. Vaginal Davis, in close dialogue with her confidante and mentee, artiste Jonathan Berger, reimagines Baum’s books, harking back to her very first exhibition, when she was a teeny tiny child prodigy, already retelling the tales of Oz in the local chapter of the Los Angeles Public Library. Upon entering the Old Library, the room may appear empty. I assure you it’s not. Lean into the Lilliputian statuettes on the shelves, the miniscule scribbling on the wall, the whispers in the room, and the miniature manuscript-cum-zine *The Middle Sex*—a library filled with the barely seen, the fugitive, the unheard of.

Just outside of the Old Library, a selection of Vaginal Davis’s paintings graces the collection galleries of the Nationalmuseum. These paintings—mainly depicting famous, infamous, and defamed



female icons across art, literature, cinema, politics, and fashion—layer various art-historical genres and categorizations, from Medieval icons and miniature portraits to various registers of abstraction. (Appropriately, the Nationalmuseum’s Treasury is just around the corner, which houses one of the world’s largest and most exquisite collection of portrait miniatures, set in jewelry, snuff boxes, and pocket watches.) Take, for instance, *Zora Neale Hurston* (2020) or *Wanda Coleman* (2021), the latter actually part of *The Wicked Pavilion* at Moderna Museet. Both works portray key figures in African American literature: Hurston was one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance and Coleman the uncrowned poet laureate of Los Angeles in the second half of the twentieth century. Although similar in their striking colors and frontal composition, the paintings differ significantly in how the two women are portrayed, as Coleman is almost anonymized with no recognizable facial features and Hurston, who was often photographed as a jovial figure, appears more vulnerable here, with her large eyes staring right at us. In the hundreds of paintings that Vaginal Davis produced over the years, she often worked in series to highlight different icons, whether they be hustlers (in her 2015 series *Flirtation Walk [The Ho Stroll]*, where her fierce portraits of the eighteenth-century French courtesan Madame du Barry and early twentieth-century socialite Countess Dorothy di Frasso stand out), dancers (the exquisite portraits of Martha Graham and Moira Schearer from 2018 are pivotal), actresses (the enigmatic double portrait of actress Hanna Schygulla and philosopher Hannah Arendt, made in 2013, comes to mind), or (demi-)goddesses (in the vast archival exhibition *Present Penicative* [Yerba Buena Center for The Arts, San Francisco, 2008], Ms. Davis presented a suite of her older paintings from the 1990s and early 2000s, a mixture between beautifully spectral faces, reminiscent of the art historical trope of Veronica’s Veil,¹⁴ and her very own fertility goddesses, that is, a face on two breasts). There is a phenomenal consistency in these paintings, in that they build an iconography that draws out the most tantalizing speculation of all: in the parafictional universe of Vaginal Davis, is she, indeed, all these women?

Another point of access to the expansive world of these paintings lies in their materiality. Consider the media line for *Wanda Coleman*: “Found paper, *Schminkstifte*, mascara, eye shadow, liquid eyeliner, 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.” Ms. Davis invariably uses an array of discontinued cosmetics to create her paintings. The surface on which she paints comprises a variety of materials as well. The verso of the portrait of Wanda Coleman appears to be a flyer for the Bears, Beards, and Beer (BBB) party, the only Bear Queer electronic party in Berlin (according to their Facebook page). The names of resident DJs appear as hieroglyphs on the front of the painting, pushing through the fluorescent colors of the portrait. At first glance, these works are reminiscent of how artist Marcel Duchamp approached the “readymade,” that is to say: to take objects from everyday life, whether they be a club flyer or cosmetics, and bring them into realm of visual art, in order to challenge normative categorizations of what constitutes art and how value is created through art’s institutional frameworks. And although that notion can’t be abandoned completely in Vaginal Davis’s paintings, if only for their insistence on breaking down all barriers between what is considered “high” and “low” culture, the notion of the trace or the “ephemera” is a more evocative lens—and, in fact, poses a challenge to the Duchampian paradigm. No writer spoke more eloquently about the potentiality of the trace than the late José Esteban Muñoz, in his juxtaposition between “queerness” and “evidence”: “Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”¹⁵ Here, the ephemera becomes a covert gesture of queerness, masked perhaps but certainly fleeting, only fully legible to those *receptive* to it. Muñoz connects the ephemera to critical and minoritarian approaches to historiography, memory, and narrative, as defiant to dominant systems of classification. The ephemera does not have a direct or ontological relationship to “the thing itself,” according to the author, but rather is “interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”¹⁶ The ephemera as the queer readymade—or rather, as the queer undoing of the readymade, for “the thing itself” is no longer the primary concern—is embodied fully in Ms. Davis’s paintings. The painting *Madame Sidonie Verdurin* (2019) portrays the eponymous

character from Marcel Proust’s novel series *In Search of Lost Time*, which the author employs to draw out the social vanities and aspirations of bourgeois society: “Mme Verdurin was genuinely fond of her regular visitors, the faithful of the little clan, but wished them to be entirely devoted to their Mistress.” A statuesque portrait of the snob, the demanding socialite, the hostess of the artistic and bohemian milieu, painted by Vaginal Davis in her signature array of cosmetics, which may register as paint, but it is not. Just as the canvas is not a canvas, but a press release leaflet of the German Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale. The relationship between these elements is seemingly random—or it may not be. Similarly, what does Wanda Coleman have to do with a queer party in Berlin? Nothing? Everything? In the recontextualization of “women trapped in the bodies of women” and through materials that compose suggestive and speculative relationships, these paintings carry the innuendo, the trace, the specks and glimmers, toward the buoyant sphere of queer possibility.

Now we must leave; we have stayed here too long, but the museum is an alluring place!

Before we radiate out, make sure to stop by the Grand Hotel. It’s hard not to—the hot waiters lurk in the shadows like sirens, humming their songs of temptation. They smile their dashing smiles, walk their perky walks, and bend their brazen bends, and like poor old Ulysses, before you know it, you will have spent all your time and money on cinnamon buns and champagne! But, on the upside, you get a golden Grand Hotel pen every time you make one of those charming boys ejaculate prematurely—or so I’ve heard.

After such carnal pleasures, we emanate, disperse, deviate.

To Kungsholmen, the Isle of the King, where princesses lay on the grass reading Tommy Pico, gently dipping their toes in the Klara Sjö.¹⁷ There, at Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, we find Vaginal Davis’s *Hofpfisterei*. A library of sorts, not only housing the apparatuses with which Ms. Davis created her world-famous zines *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine* and the superb cut-and-paste letters that she writes to colleagues, concubines, and coconspirators to this day—think Xerox copier, mimeograph, and typewriter, to show, perhaps, that all you need to start a revolution are some paper and scissors—but

also the archive of Ms. Davis’s extensive practice as a writer. We present, Vaginal Davis as . . .

a novelist—her novel *Mary Magdalene*, about her mother Mary Magdalene DuPlantier, is forthcoming in a bookstore near you;

a poetess—“Girls against God: A Poem Manifesto” (2015) remains a personal highlight (“What defines the logic of a cultural moment? The efficacy of electoral results? Campaigns? Exhibitions? We urinate on insecurity, competition, alienation. Let’s mark our territory à la Romula et Rema. Subcutaneous, subterranean reflections on power structures and alienation. We who are poor with sexy paint a-glowing; electric, distorted landscape for a face.”¹⁸);

a diarist—“Guadalamara Canal Diary” (1999) shows that ten days in the life of Ms. Davis is a lifetime for others;

an experimental linguist—“Myself Sexual” in *Discontents: New Queer Writers* (1992), edited by Dennis Cooper, is pure genius (“i noticed lil madame ellis [the writer Bret Easton Ellis] was giving me dagger eyes like he disapproved of my african-american flamboyantcy, so i asked my companion if he knew the plump faye boy.”¹⁹);

a short story writer—the first sentence of “Mon-Star” (1994)—“I be wanting his cruel club cock.”²⁰—should be enough to cement her name in any writers’ hall of fame;

a scribe of erotic literature—“The Everlasting Secret First Family of Fuck: An Exposé” (2003) is a poignant case in point;

a travel guide—Los Angeles folks got out of their car and off their asses for “The Chanterelles Are Waning: A Vaginal Davis-Style Los Angeles Bike Tour” (2021);

a blogger—her aforementioned blog *Speaking from the Diaphragm*, a blog before a blog was a thing, remains accessible to this day;

a gossip columnist (“How dare Courtney Love call me a gossip?”), for her column “Because I Said So,” in *GLUE Magazine* (2000–02);

a fashion critic;

a teen correspondent;

a glamor reporter;

a book reviewer;

a neologist;

an essayist;

a journalist;

a biographer;

a chronicler of scenes in Los Angeles and Berlin, both lost and found;

and, of course, the epicenter of a sprawling network of mail art, with letters being sent from the headquarters in Hollywood, Koreatown, and now the Rote Insel in Berlin to places all over the queer world.

In short, in Vaginal Davis's *Hopffisterei* at Index, the history of which dates back to the year 1331, the annals of this Lilith of the Letters are shown in full, with various guests coming to the Isle of the King during the run of our magnificent product to say their piece about the virtuosic authoress.

Take me to a land north of Siberia, north of the animal farm, a place populated by scholars and researchers, where, at Accelerator, in a former particle accelerator, a mad scientist and his discerning deputy continue the delirious experimentation.²¹ The subjects of their inquiry are none other than the myriad members of the CHEAP performance collective, with fearless leader Susanne Sachsse on the front line of the creative process. CHEAP, which Vaginal Davis has been a proud member of since the early 2000s, just prior to her move to Berlin, has pushed the envelope of twenty-first-century performance practice since its inception, through children's theater, opera, radio funk shows, worn-out concerts, experimental cinema, talk shows, and, yes, gossip. Lots of it. Like Vaginal Davis, the CHEAP collective resists historicization and thus surveys, as a verb, in the form of a new installation, metabolizing their archive and histories in ever-evolving new frameworks. Inspired by philosopher Paul B. Preciado's exposé on mutation in the post-COVID-19 era, CHEAP suggests that we choose mutation: "To stay alive, to maintain life as a planet, in the face of the virus, but also in the face of the effects of centuries of ecological and cultural destruction, means implementing new

structural forms of global cooperation. Just as the virus mutates, if we want to resist submission, we must also mutate."²² Mutation meets paranoia in this new CHEAP work, which builds on their radio work (*Hörspiel*) "YOU'RE SO PARANOID, YOU PROBABLY THINK THIS RADIO SHOW IS ABOUT YOU," for the performance festival Steirischer Herbst's Paranoia TV in 2020. While Annette Frick's historical photographs show some of the CHEAP members in what can only be described as an utmost state of mutation, the other elements in the room rely on early twentieth-century mechanisms of mass communication—the speaker pole, the newspaper, the billboard. What is proclaimed are layers and layers of CHEAP history, where hearsay morphs into queer state doctrine.

Finally, we travel to a land way west, known for its lush parks and *Plattenbau* architecture, a place that held the promise of the Swedish postwar *Miljonprogrammet*, a utopia with Tensta konsthall as its beating heart. In this halle of konst, the magnificent product will come to a grand finale. Courtney Love will make a comeback. Tom Cruise will proclaim he loves women. The subversive debutantes of Radical Love—Samuel Girma and Sam Hultin—will make an appearance. Fertile LaToyah Jackson will leave the dread of her suburban life behind and join us on stage once more. Dawn Powell will read from *The Wicked Pavilion*. Glenn Meadmore will fly out from Los Angeles. Ron Athey will suck on toes. We might finally find Manfred. Rona Barrett will gossip. Bojana will put the Kunst back into Marxism. I hear troizel will be there, writing her diary. Tante Vag will shrimp once more. Hector Martinez will photograph. *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* will reach its apotheosis—an extended, prolonged, perhaps everlasting, climax that will have Stockholm quiver with delight.

It's all gossip and lies. Believe every word of it.

(Notes)

- 1 I am indebted to Marc Siegel for his brilliant text on gossip as a queer practice and vis-à-vis the work of Vaginal Davis. See Marc Siegel, "Vaginal Davis's Gospel Truths," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 67, vol. 23, no. 1 (May 2008): 151–59.
- 2 Ulises Carrión, *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners*, 1981, color video with sound, 45:13 min., courtesy of LIMA, Amsterdam.
- 3 The brilliance of Mariana Alves Silva, Katarina Bonnevier, and Thérèse Kristiansson of MYCKET shines through in all aspects of the exhibition design of the presentation at Moderna Museet. I'm serious. Hire them for everything you do from now on.
- 4 In a conversation with the author, November 16, 2023.
- 5 "We were tired of the gay scene, which even in the '80s was starting to get assimilationist and conformist, so we turned to punk rock because it seemed more glamorous and political and aesthetically pleasing," says [Bruce] LaBruce. "But we quickly discovered that the punk scene had become sexually conventional and boring, betraying its early roots. The original punk movement, like the early gay movement, was about embracing all sorts of nonconformist behavior. Early punks experimented with homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, and trisexuality—they'd try *anything*. But by the mid '80s, with the advent of hardcore and the mosh pit, a new era of machismo and heterosexual rigidity was ushered in. It was like being back in high school, with the sissies and the wallflowers standing on the side while the jocks took center stage. We started J.D.'s as a reaction against the increasing sexual conformity of both the gay and punk movements." In David Ciminelli and Ken Knox, *Homocore: The Loud and Raucous Rise of Queer Rock* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2005), 7–8.
- 6 Vaginal Davis, "My Pussy Is Still in Los Angeles (I Only Live in Berlin)," performed at Southwestern Law School, Tea Room, 3050 Wilshire Boulevard, 5th floor, Los Angeles, January 29, 2012.
- 7 In actual fact, it was a crucial space for queer, punk artistry in Los Angeles in the 1980s. It is worth quoting the press release of *HAG—small, contemporary, haggard*, as it is very informative and so damn good: "During the run of the original HAG, 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 mess 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, composed of broken liquor bottles, hypodermic needles, and squished cockroaches, marked the opening season of HAG. 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 antipaintings, 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 Surf'er Valerian of the South Bay, Klaus von Brücker, Martin Nesvig, Glen Meadmore, Psychodrama, Miracle!, Lisa Suckdog & Jean Louis Costes." Press release, *HAG—small, contemporary, haggard*, Participant Inc, New York, November 9–December 16, 2012.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 I borrow the term from Tavia Nyong'o's description of Vaginal Davis. See Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 15.
- 11 In my descriptions of *The Wicked Pavilion*, I build on my essay "Vaginal's Veil," *ArtAsiaPacific Magazine* 128 (May/June 2022): 72–77.
- 12 Folkerts, "Vaginal's Veil," 5.
- 13 Praise the team of the Nationalmuseum for their hospitality, as not all museums would respond favorably to this request—in particular Susanna Pettersson (former director), Per Hedström (chief curator), Eva-Lena Bergström (head of research), Martin Olin (head of collections), and Carina Rech (curator).
- 14 See footnote 10.
- 15 José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 6.
- 16 Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 10.
- 17 I am clearly referring to curator Isabella Tjäder, who, together with Index director Marti Manen, embraced this collaboration on Vaginal Davis's work fully and wholeheartedly. I am indebted to them and the entire team of Index—the Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation for their immense curiosity and expertise.
- 18 Vaginal Davis, "Girls against God: A Poem Manifesto," in Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl, eds., *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 121.

19 Vaginal Davis, "Myself Sexual," in Dennis Cooper, ed., *Discontents: New Queer Writers* (New York: Amethyst Press, 1992), 108.

20 Vaginal Davis, "MonStar," in Deran Ludd, Alice Wheeler, and Jim Jones, eds., *Good to Go: Short Stores West Coast Style* (Seattle: Zero Hour, 1994), 1.

21 These are, of course, Richard Julin and Therese Kellner, director and curator at Accelerator at Stockholm University, respectively. I am in awe of their alacrity to experiment and host the unexpected.

22 Paul B. Preciado, "Learning from the Virus," *Artforum* 58, no. 9 (May/June 2020): 32.

pp. 26–27: Mikolaj Sobczak, *Prima Venera*, 2024

pp. 32–39: Vaginal Davis, *Fertile LaToyah Jackson Magazine*, Paris issue

FERTILE

LA TOYAH JACKSON

M A G A Z I N E



FERTILE

LA TOYAH JACKSON

M A G A Z I N E

G.G. Allin, Lisa Suckdog, Bloody Mess, Joe Coleman, Psychodrama, Gender, Summer Caprice, Billy Wisdom & the Hee Shees, Robert Smith, Phranc, MDC, Johnny Depp, Sean Penn, John Wayne Gacy, Aaron Spelling, Vaginal Davis, Michele Lamy, Glen Meadmore, Herb Ritts, Jayne County, Cherie Curry, Red Hot Chile Peppers, Madonna, Bernard Figueroa, Studio Bercot, Jean Paul Gaultier, Isabelle Adjani and Sex Club Scandals

F A T I M A S E N T I M E N T S

Vagina | Davis in Paris!



photos by Helmut Newton

wise Fist Fuckle



Photographer Helmut Newton has his camera on the streets of Paris and has taken a series of photos that are both shocking and beautiful. They show a woman in a dark coat, her hands behind her back, being led away by a man in a dark coat. The scene is set in a dark, narrow alleyway. The woman's face is partially visible, looking down. The man's face is also partially visible, looking towards the camera. The overall mood is one of mystery and tension.



The woman in the dark coat is a central figure in the series of photographs. She is shown in various poses and settings, always with a sense of mystery and tension. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, creating a graphic and almost abstract quality. The overall mood is one of mystery and tension.

Helmut Newton's photography is known for its dramatic lighting and high-contrast images. This series of photographs is a prime example of his style, capturing a moment of tension and mystery in a dark, narrow alleyway in Paris.

FERTILE LOVES CUNNINGHAM

THE BUNCH AND THE
By [Name]



The woman in the photograph is a member of the group known as 'The Bunch'. She is described as being very popular and is often seen with her friends. The text mentions that she is a very nice person and is always ready to help others. She is also a very talented person and is often seen performing on stage. The text also mentions that she is a very beautiful woman and is often the center of attention. She is also a very kind person and is always ready to help others. She is also a very talented person and is often seen performing on stage. The text also mentions that she is a very beautiful woman and is often the center of attention. She is also a very kind person and is always ready to help others.

The woman in the photograph is a member of the group known as 'The Bunch'. She is described as being very popular and is often seen with her friends. The text mentions that she is a very nice person and is always ready to help others. She is also a very talented person and is often seen performing on stage. The text also mentions that she is a very beautiful woman and is often the center of attention. She is also a very kind person and is always ready to help others. She is also a very talented person and is often seen performing on stage. The text also mentions that she is a very beautiful woman and is often the center of attention. She is also a very kind person and is always ready to help others.



IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF

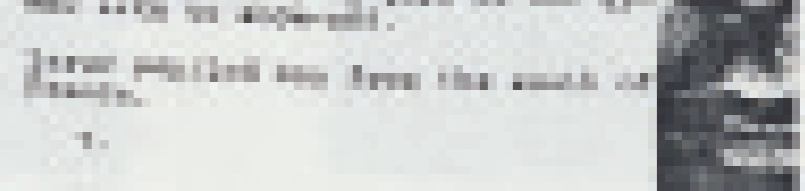
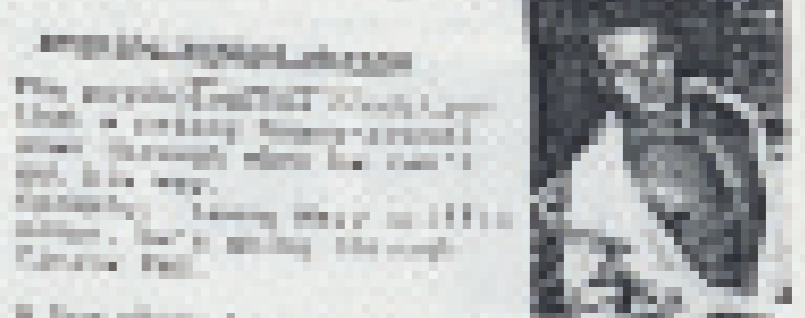
so
into
nature



De-posed Post-Studio [Name]

WHAT FERTILE SEZ PEOPLE COPY

The woman in the photograph is a member of the group known as 'The Bunch'. She is described as being very popular and is often seen with her friends. The text mentions that she is a very nice person and is always ready to help others. She is also a very talented person and is often seen performing on stage. The text also mentions that she is a very beautiful woman and is often the center of attention. She is also a very kind person and is always ready to help others. She is also a very talented person and is often seen performing on stage. The text also mentions that she is a very beautiful woman and is often the center of attention. She is also a very kind person and is always ready to help others.





The Hobbes Survey



Left to right and back with names and titles on page.

- 1. ...
- 2. ...
- 3. ...
- 4. ...
- 5. ...
- 6. ...
- 7. ...
- 8. ...
- 9. ...
- 10. ...
- 11. ...
- 12. ...
- 13. ...
- 14. ...
- 15. ...
- 16. ...
- 17. ...
- 18. ...
- 19. ...
- 20. ...
- 21. ...
- 22. ...
- 23. ...
- 24. ...
- 25. ...
- 26. ...
- 27. ...
- 28. ...
- 29. ...
- 30. ...

The First Chapter ... In the ...

From ...

1. ...

2. ...

3. ...



caption ...

caption ...

caption ...



what makes fertile mad?

... thing ...

... thing ...

... thing ...

- 1. ...
- 2. ...
- 3. ...
- 4. ...
- 5. ...
- 6. ...
- 7. ...
- 8. ...
- 9. ...
- 10. ...
- 11. ...
- 12. ...
- 13. ...
- 14. ...
- 15. ...
- 16. ...
- 17. ...
- 18. ...
- 19. ...
- 20. ...
- 21. ...
- 22. ...
- 23. ...
- 24. ...
- 25. ...
- 26. ...
- 27. ...
- 28. ...
- 29. ...
- 30. ...

... thing ...

... thing ...

... thing ...

- 1. ...
- 2. ...
- 3. ...
- 4. ...
- 5. ...
- 6. ...
- 7. ...
- 8. ...
- 9. ...
- 10. ...
- 11. ...
- 12. ...
- 13. ...
- 14. ...
- 15. ...
- 16. ...
- 17. ...
- 18. ...
- 19. ...
- 20. ...
- 21. ...
- 22. ...
- 23. ...
- 24. ...
- 25. ...
- 26. ...
- 27. ...
- 28. ...
- 29. ...
- 30. ...

THE RACK

A PRIVATE SEX CLUB



SITUATED READINGS

Elisabeth Lebovici

I don't know Vaginal Davis. We've never met properly. We're not internet buddies. We don't communicate on social media. We've never been introduced. I first saw Ms. Davis at her public lecture "Porno Adorno: F*ck Like the F*cking Blacks" at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris on April 9, 2008.¹ I remember being confronted with a projection of the opening sequence of the classic porn movie *Behind the Green Door* (1972) with Marilyn Chambers, before being entirely spellbound by Dr. Davis's larger-than-life size, use of language, and ample critical wisdom, delivered through her brilliant appearance. But we didn't meet then. Nor did we meet during the two and a half afternoons and sinful nights of the "Camp/Anti-Camp: The Queer Guide to Everyday Life" symposium at Hau in Berlin,² despite having both been invited. Vaginal Davis performed as the hostess and presented a new iteration of her legendary blog *Speaking from the Diaphragm* every evening, sitting with guests in an eerie take on the 1970s-style talk show, which she had obviously revised for the purpose of this druggy queer and trans drag symposium. We didn't meet then. We haven't met since. So I don't know Ms. Davis.

But I know *of* Ms. Davis. Or rather, I know *from* her, through the people who have been knowing *with* her since the 1990s, writing about the transformative experiences that this togetherness, this knowing *with*, has provided. It is through their writings that I eventually met her: remotely, in the flesh of the text.³ Because reading is performative, too.

This is my ritual of research. Going through the material that has been written about Ms. Davis—the texts alone and the texts that responded to these texts—I encountered the formative, informative, and "disformative" experiences with Vaginal Davis that resonated in the writing. These books, essays, poetry, prose, and praise—by José Esteban Muñoz, Jennifer Doyle, Tavia Nyong'o, Jack Halberstam, and Marc Siegel, to cite but a few—constitute an affectionate collective of incredibly engaging authors.⁴ Each of them cites and describes a specific performance by (Ms.) (Dr.) (Vaginal) (Crème) Davis (her names, as you may already know, vary). My exercise, classically called *ekphrasis* to refer to the vivid depiction of a scene, is employed to channel the body and soul of the authors and expand on the practice of the writers. Furthermore, I will approach this exercise, not as "advocacy criticism" but instead as "embracing the idea of performative collaboration between artist and writer," as the foundational queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz writes. Nevertheless, Muñoz continues, "With that stated, I must add that from my side this connection between theory and art feels incredibly one sided . . . in my work on Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Davis, Isaac Julien."⁵ The hypothesis I approach in this essay aims in both directions: in the messy melting of performance into theory and theory into performance. After all, as we will see, there is not much of a gap between "theorist" and "terrorist," in terms of homophony (Vaginal Davis plays with the homophony of "white" and "right" in her iconic music album and film, *The White to*

Be Angry [1999]), although the two terms can be mutually unbearable. Isn't this—the difference that erupts between homophonous words—what “disidentification” alludes to, a concept so foundational to both Ms. Davis's practice and Muñoz's scholarship? Indeed, it makes sense that a photograph of Vaginal Davis features on the cover of Muñoz's landmark book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). In it, Davis poses as Cicciolina, aka Ilona Staller, the Hungarian-born Italian porn star turned parliamentarian (she was a member of Italy's Partito Radicale from 1985 until 1992) who was the spouse of artist Jeff Koons for nine months. Her stage name, Cicciolina, is the feminized, diminutive form of the word *ciccio*, meaning chubby; it can also be used to address a “pal,” and, in certain dialects, *ciciolo* refers to the male infant's penis. A mix of incredible Berlusconi tackiness and streetwise sensibility, Cicciolina's figure was and still is characterized by her technicolor, antinaturalistic features (her props, her whiter-than-white skin, her pale hair, crowned by a garland of multicolored flowers) that could pass for a heterosexual appropriation of camp (is there any other?). Such characterization is both tactically mimicked and rejected by Ms. Davis's facial expression, pose, surrounding décor, and style. The fact that this was chosen as the cover for Muñoz's book would be sufficient proof of the strong affinity between the title and Davis's image, yet the chapter “The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Crème Davis's Terrorist Drag” (first published in 1997⁶ and then reproduced and cited ad libitum) evokes the title, subtitle, and all the subtleties of Muñoz's first volume. Guided by the wild tongues and torn languages inherited from lesbian feminist Chicana scholars Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, which deviate from the expectations of heteronormative/homosexual mainstream culture, Muñoz offers to Vaginal Davis—who, early in her life, named herself after Black feminist activist and thinker Angela Davis—the crowns of a “queer of color,” “performing politics,” in a “guerilla style of drag.” The latter expression has been put to use, Muñoz explains, by French theorist Félix Guattari's writing about the drag guerrilla theater performed by the collective Les Mirabelles. They are “experimenting with a new type of militant theatre, a theatre separate from an explanatory language, and long tirades of good intentions, for example, on gay liberation.” Drag, singing, mime, and dance are required “not as different ways of illustrating a theme, to ‘change the ideas’ of the spectators, but in order to trouble

them, to stir up uncertain desire-zones that they always more or less refuse to explore.”⁷ These zones of malaise shy away from binary solutions, and discourage the “identification to the woman, even less the mother.”⁸ A statement to which Vaginal Davis in chorus might reply, “She's a real fine chick. She's got tits and a diiiiick!”⁹

The trouble with Davis that Muñoz explores in his writing is stirred up in Davis's performance of the album *The White to Be Angry*, which he witnessed one Friday night in June (year undisclosed) at the Squeeze Box! in Manhattan.¹⁰ What is mind-blowing about Vaginal Davis's one-person act as “Clarence” is that, in it, she embraces two mutually exclusive personas: the Black femme queen (Vaginal Davis as the base identity) and Clarence, a white supremacist militia man sporting fatigue pants, a white beard reminiscent of the Texas rock band ZZ Top, and a butch hardcore stance. Muñoz refers to this “tactical misrecognition” of the self as “disidentification.”¹¹ Davis's “reconfigured cross-sex, cross-race minstrelsy, can best be understood as *terrorist drag*—terrorist in that she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender and sexuality. It is also an aesthetic terrorism.”¹² Here, disidentification occurs in a whiteface impersonation of a racist man, forced to reside in the body of a Black queen explosively occupying all aspects of the self, “blackness, gayness and transvestism,”¹³ including interracial homonormative desire. In foregrounding the potential of “queers of color” as a social and critical category, Vaginal Davis enacts a modality by which performance equals a philosophical act, a transformative *praxis*. For this assertion, Antonio Gramsci's theory of “organic intellectuals” is employed as a model “to emphasize the theory-making power of performance . . . [that] does not shy away from the theoretical practice of cultural critique.”¹⁴

In the realm of politics, the intellectual often comes as an afterthought, illustrating the gap between theory and action that runs through many debates about militancy, to borrow the word from Douglas Crimp. Gramsci urged intellectuals to move beyond the single sphere of wisdom and embrace the field of action. He called those who embodied this new and more actionable trope of intellectualism “organic intellectuals.” According to the notes the Italian thinker wrote while in prison, the organic quality of an intellectual involves their “degree of connection with a fundamental social group (or

class),” as opposed to the one who ignores their relationship to class struggle.¹⁵ Muñoz hones in on Ms. Davis's vexed relationship with academics (“A lot of academics dismissed my work because . . . it was too homey, a little too country.”¹⁶), leaning toward an associated term (*organic*), which helps him connect Davis's affinity to become a Gramscian “philosopher of praxis” on a subcultural terrain. According to Gramsci, “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passion, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, permanent persuader and not just simple orator.”¹⁷ Vaginal Davis endows Gramsci's statement with a sense of impermanence, vulnerability, farce, failure, and a potential for becoming what Muñoz refers to as a cultural politics of “queer of color” aesthetics. In this “vital act of naming ‘queers of colors’ as a subject worthy of critical care,” argues Muñoz's peer and friend Tavia Nyong'o, “I would suggest that ‘queer of color’ is not an identity as much as what Antonio Negri calls a ‘common name.’ Negri is interested in giving a vital materialist account of performativity, that is, an account of how and when names ‘do things.’”¹⁸ The term *queer of color* thus finds a political expertise without conceding any ground to so-called political experts. Muñoz states, “To think of cultural workers such as . . . Vaginal Crème Davis . . . as not only culture makers but also theory producers is not to take an antitheory position.”¹⁹ This is such an important move.

This is why queer scholar Jack Halberstam expresses a feeling of awkwardness (and not in a queer embrace of the word) when Vaginal Davis appears not as speaker but performer at the conference “Gay Shame” at the University of Michigan in March 2003—that is, as a queer of color, as Halberstam clearly describes: “A black performance/conceptual artist and self-proclaimed ‘ghetto androgene,’ Vaginal Davis, one of the only brown bodies intervening there, seems to have been relegated to doing their thing after a champagne reception.”²⁰ Halberstam insists on the “racialized division of labor,”²¹ developed in a series of binaries—gay/antigay, pride/shame, speaker/performer—that is “only relevant to white gay male identifications.”²² This certainly doesn't fit the “ghetto androgene,” whose many personas and characters chip away at the notion of a dissenting minority position within mainstream gay pragmatism. Halberstam thus reclaims a scholarship of the counterhegemonic, the kind

of knowledge production that lacks legitimacy, purpose, and profit, and finds alternative imagining to those academic disciplines “that confirm what is already known according to approved methods of knowing.”²³

Film scholar Marc Siegel discusses a performance Vaginal Davis staged at the conference “Queer(ing) Warhol: Examining Andy: Warhol's Queer(ed) Performances” (California Museum of Photography, Riverside, 2002). The performance, which includes Ms. Davis reading her text “My Favorite Dead Artist,” was announced as “an opening performance by the legendary drag artist, internationally celebrated underground Blacktress, and ‘organic intellectual’ Vaginal Davis.”²⁴ The Gramsci reference is quoted here to dote Ms. Davis with manifold means and expressions: “film, video, music, performance, painting, journalism, literature, zine publishing, club culture, (and) gossip.”²⁵ Plus, French kissing members of her audience. After some foreplay—beginning with the projection of a video in which Vaginal Davis is seduced by a white female academic, followed by the arrival on stage of go-go dancers who engage the attending scholars, before being fondled by Ms. Davis herself—Davis casually reads her lecture. *My Favorite Dead Artist* recounts her first meeting with Warhol, who took a Polaroid of Ms. Davis dressed as Frida Kahlo, her favorite dead female artist of color, who was still unknown to Warhol at the time. “Furthermore Davis presents us with a Warhol who is insultingly unable to distinguish between black drag queens,” writes Siegel.²⁶ Ms. Davis's witty disidentification with Warhol is not, however, “a simple dismissal,” he continues, but rather “a means of mobilizing Warhol for a transformative process of remaining social and artistic filiations.”²⁷ This vital process is provided by what Siegel calls “the disidentificatory function of gossip.”²⁸

So, let's talk about gossip. Marc Siegel's book *A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics*²⁹ conceptualizes gossip not only as a simple form of spoken (often whispered) communication, but as a productive means of circulating images. This speaks to Vaginal Davis's legendary performances at various night clubs in Los Angeles and San Francisco during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Whether appearing in a full gorilla dress reviving Marlene Dietrich's “Hot Voodoo” number from the film *Blonde Venus* (1932) or singing an a cappella version of Judy Garland's “Over the Banister Leaning” from

the film *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944),³⁰ Davis's hilarious and sexually charged performances are overloaded with multiple cultural references that are imbued with her "own brand of sexual and racial critique."³¹ Disidentification, then, is applied to those Hollywood cinema icons and images that Davis enacts and "dis-enacts," in order to generate new possibilities for a queer club counterpublic. Siegel calls these possibilities "gossip images." He argues, "Gossip is a means of circulating images with a queer investment. Such circulation of speculations, that is, of visualizations (if you take the word etymologically) about others, brings out a 'logic of thought,' informing queer culture and crucial for the construction of one's identities and intimacies." Such a theoretical framework certainly applies to Ms. Davis's intervention at an academic conference queering Warhol. She explicitly uses gossip as a reference. "Gossip is the one true living archive" is something that Dr. Davis has taught us on many occasions. Her conversational discourse directly challenges the performativity of dominant scholarly protocols; for instance, the judging of what is essential versus what is dismissible, or the fact-checking of "true" and "false" statements. In renarrating the encounter between Ms. Davis and Andy Warhol, as told by Ms. Davis, through this question of whether something is factual or not, Siegel grasps gossip's performative power, a speculation about what is passed on from mouth to ear in confidence, which he defines as "neither true nor false but fabulous."³²

According to Gilles Deleuze, fabulation is the very occasion to narrate "impossibilities and thereby create possibilities."³³ In her essay "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), feminist theorist Saidiya Hartman coined the term "critical fabulation" to describe her method of writing against the silence of the archive; in her case, looking closely at omissions in histories of people enslaved by the transatlantic slave trade.³⁴ According to Siegel, gossip is a fabulous form of fabulation, and "a powerful productive instrument out of which relationships and reputations are made or unmade and new possibilities for difference are envisioned."³⁵ By including such whispering practices among Ms. Davis's expressive pallet ("film, video, music, performance, painting, journalism, literature, zine publishing, club culture, [and] gossip"), little consideration is shown for the high-low culture divide, a normative, binary way of marking what matters and what doesn't—what stays and what is unstable. The frontiers of critical categories conceived as the truths of

universal human values are trespassed here. This critical "disaster" is what enables larger-than-life images that transform dominant representations and conceptions of collectivities, and that instead imagine genealogies, myths and legends, whose figures can speak to dispersed minoritarian lives without exposing and damaging them. To queers of color, this is the language of survival. This is the function of survival.

So what remains of criticism if cultural priorities have been shaken and prevalent hierarchies abandoned? The various contributors to the anthology *After Criticism*³⁶ do not impose a model, but rather consider "thinking" as a component of a world, both being always in the making. As Gavin Butt writes in the introduction, the volume engages with "the contingencies encountered while undertaking the act of criticism itself."³⁷ This is the case in Jennifer Doyle's essay "The Trouble with Men, or Sex, Boredom and the Work of Vaginal Davis."³⁸ Doyle fondly recounts a shared experience of boredom—which should be considered a form of cultural attention—at a performance of Vaginal Davis, in a back room at GIMP, a "performance art boutique run out of a queer bar in Los Angeles."³⁹ Among the series of events under the title *Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Care* (2000), Ms. Davis appears as Vanessa Beecroft, a white British female artist whose work is widely recognized by the market and art institutions, and reflected through her exhibitions in prestigious galleries, museums, and magazines. In her performance, Ms. Davis cites Beecroft's performances with the United States Navy SEALs and Marine Corps, which the British artist had begun one year prior. At first, she writes, Doyle had confused Ms. Davis's performance with the performance by Beecroft, the artist she was performing as.

Doyle's text takes up the complexity of Ms. Davis's parody of Beecroft's style of performance by positioning "Davis in a dialectical relation to the institutions of the art world as they are expressed in Beecroft's work, primarily through a discussion of the place of sex and boredom in the work of both artists."⁴⁰ The paragraphs that follow draw on the paradoxical excitement in considering distraction as a tool. Doyle uses "the series of failures (moments of collapse, unexpected turns in the performance, misrecognitions on the part of the audience)" as "the route by which the practice of 'art' becomes visible in [Ms. Davis's] performance as an object of critique."⁴¹ Failure, here, becomes a critical

compass pointed at institutional high art. First, in representing boring sex acts, when Ms. Davis, as Beecroft, underlines supposedly erotic passages in her reading from a handbook of military protocols for the Navy, calls for a small regimen of young men. Unlike the "pressed and manicured men" of Beecroft's performance, Davis's boys look more like "floppy haired aspiring bohemians," dressed "in Russian tailor shirts" from the waist up."⁴² A "marine," chosen by Ms. Davis, then starts stripping and touching himself, while being documented by queer filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, camera in hand. The result is no climax; there is no money shot. The porn star, failing to get an erection while being given a vigorous blow job, constitutes another flop; here, an attractive example of white masculinity comes to represent the relation of sex to boredom that Doyle wishes to examine as an object of critical thinking. Boredom contaminates the context and dissolves the content. Doyle observes how attention slides and glides from the spectacle to the space of the (non)event. In the collective boredom that emanates from the performance space, she identifies a powerful mode of dissent, first with the gay politics around the military and secondly, the atmosphere of the place, where chatting, gossiping, bitching, cruising—and fucking, too—are performed, ultimately, through juxtaposition, showing the aggressive regulation and neutralizing of sex and sexualities in (high) art institutions.⁴³ Instead of elaborating on the blatant differences between a straight white woman performing within the framework of a gallery, a bastion of high culture (Beecroft), and a queen of color mobilizing "a high camp version of femininity and the rhetorical force of the black power movement as well as an aggressively queer version of male homosexuality"⁴⁴ (Davis), Doyle points her critical gaze toward mood shifts and dissident spaces. To observe Ms. Davis's guerrilla-style staging of "a high art tradition in an inappropriate space (rather than inappropriate art in high art spaces),"⁴⁵ Doyle concludes, is to "revive a reanimation of art production not as career but as praxis."⁴⁶

Collective disidentification emanates from Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman's 1997 essay on queercore, which discusses the markers of dissent adopted by "participants in self-styled queer subcultures between 1989 and 1993, especially by that section that named itself 'queercore' or 'homocore.'"⁴⁷ They describe homocore as the making "of a new position ahead of gay and lesbian monopolies," and a variety of media, a number of

clubs and bars, and a choice of words become the terrain for the writers' observations. Vaginal Davis plays a key role. The activity of Ms. Davis is blurred with its archiving, in a "fantastic autobiography/autoethnography"⁴⁸ of her queer subculture. Du Plessis and Chapman claim, "Her writing is a dense mixture of Black English, sexual slang, queer gossip, homo-folklore, neologistic wordplay, ribald narrative and revenge fantasy which recalls the specifically African American traditions of boasting and signifying." I'm quoting here at length:

Words are decomposed: "penis-cilin" (MonStar 2),⁴⁹ "homey-sexual" (Fertile, Paris 5) or "Hell He Lou Ya" (MonStar 4). Portmanteau words abound, such as "beefthrob" (heartthrob+beefcake) (MonStar 1), "fourgy" (four+orgy) (Monstar 1), "beat-manifesto" (for masturbate: "beat your meat" + a reference to the industrial band Beat Meat manifesto) . . . alongside wild and willful malapropism, such as "pis de résonance ala eleganza," "coital simultaneouruptus" . . . and "hypo glysteria" (for hysteria, the effects of sex with Davis, according to her text.) . . . There are poetic flights of metaphor and alliteration: "donkey donged dorks" . . . Odd rhymes show up out of nowhere "sex in a tree, throw down the key, i'se got to pee" (Fertile, visual 4). . . . All of this is carefully crafted to make an argot that will be impenetrable to the outsider . . .⁵⁰

This defamiliarization of individual words and expressions has both aesthetic and political implications. I am reminded of the processes of code-switching—the practices of speaking two or more languages, dialects, slangs—which produces collisions that are usually not welcome in dominant culture. I am thinking, for instance, of how Gloria Anzaldúa describes her "tongue" as she moves "from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these," thereby creating "a new language—the language of the Borderlands."⁵¹ Code-switching is the lived experience of the borderlands. It is also a form of resistance to internal (and internalized) colonialism and its linguistic regime. In her language, Ms. Davis dialogues with "mestizo," creolization, and all those who declare that "we are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration."⁵² As a self-proclaimed Blacktress—Black+actress, slang for an African-American actress pioneering in the film industry—Ms. Davis also finds a proper name to

conjoin “mistress” and “Blackness.” Vaginal Davis’s speculative “wordling”⁵³ is a speculative *wording*, too.

Commenting on his inception of “imagined communities,” the late anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson explains that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁵⁴ This is what I have been circling around in my ritual of research, guided by the promise of a performative embrace in my readings between artists and writers. The collage of quotes I have excerpted from my readings has made legible, hopefully, the style in which a community has imagined itself, through the network of their conversations with Ms. Davis’s performances and person. This composition of citations has crafted a queer time and space. Such conversations happened in the 1990s and 2000s among the Western, subcultural, and minoritarian “archivists of deviance”⁵⁵ who were crucial in providing a political and cultural recharge outside of binaries. I constantly fear that all messiness and dangerousness has been scrubbed away, replaced by a certain lionization, accompanied by feelings of nostalgia. But in the affinities of feelings that circulate in the *knowing with* Ms. Davis, I still imagine a communal form, not in likeness but in significant differences. And by this, I very much think about the form of the short-lived revolutionary government Paris Commune (1871) and its imaginary, as described by Kristin Ross.⁵⁶ It was an imaginary of “lived experience of equality in action,” rallying all variety of artistic intelligence—whether they were cultural producers of so-called original forms or of “translations of an art by another”⁵⁷—that had been devaluated, or deemed limited, or secondary. To this imaginary, trespassing the frontiers between cultural workers, the people of the Commune gave the fabulous name of “communal luxury”—a communal luxury for situated readings.⁵⁸

(Notes)

- 1 “F*ck My Brain, Queer, Trans and Postcolonial Performances,” program by Sam Bourcier with EHESS, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2008–10.
- 2 “Camp/Anti-Camp: A Queer Guide to Everyday Life,” curated by Susanne Sachsse and Marc Siegel, HAU 2, Berlin, April 19–21, 2012. Along with Vaginal Davis, guests on the first night included Holly Woodlawn, Douglas Crimp, and Narcissister; “Tropicamp” and Carmelita Tropicana on the second night; and José Esteban Muñoz, “The Taylor Mead Show,” and The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black on the third. For my part, I tried to “camp-anticamp” gardens and architects, from Étienne-Louis Boullée and Jean-Jacques Lequeu (France) in the eighteenth century to the Bawa brothers (Sri Lanka) in the twentieth.
- 3 The texts I’ll be mostly referring to are José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Jennifer Doyle, “The Trouble with Men, or, Sex, Boredom, and the Work of Vaginal Davis,” in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 81–100; Marc Siegel, “Vaginal Davis’s Gospel Truths,” *Camera Obscura* 67, vol. 23, no. 1 (2008): 151–59; Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2019); Judith Halberstam, “Shame and White Gay Masculinity,” in “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?,” special issue, *Social Text* 84–85, vol. 23, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 219–33; and Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman, “Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture,” *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (February 1997): 45–58; Fred Moten, “José Muñoz,” in *B. Jenkins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Other readings include Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021); Kirin Wachter-Grene, “A Scene of Her Own: The Inimitable Vaginal Davis,” *The Black Scholar*, April 16, 2020; and Shaka McGlotten, *Dragging: Or, In the Drag of a Queer Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022).
- 4 They were costudents, particularly of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, they were student and teacher, coeditors, etc. But not only: this text is about a network, not a singular person.
- 5 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 101.
- 6 José Esteban Muñoz, “The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag,” in “Queer Transxions of Race, Nation, and Gender,” special issue, *Social Text* 52–53 (Autumn–Winter 1997): 80–103; published as chapter 4 of *Disidentifications*, 93–115, and reprinted in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2006) and *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, ed. Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 202–14.
- 7 Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972–77*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2009), 225.
- 8 Guattari, *Chaosophy*, 226.
- 9 Vaginal Davis at the start of “Anna-Ee,” by Pedro, Muriel, and Esther (PME), one of the quintessential 1990s queercore bands with Davis as lead vocal.
- 10 The album *The White to Be Angry* by PME led to the creation of a visual album/video in 1999.
- 11 Muñoz, “The White to Be Angry,” 106.
- 12 Muñoz, 108.
- 13 Muñoz, 106.
- 14 Muñoz, 33.
- 15 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12.
- 16 Vaginal Davis, quoted in Tommy Gear and Mike Glass, “Supremely Vaginal,” *aRude* 1 (Fall 1995): 42.
- 17 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Gramsci*, 10.
- 18 Tavia Nyong’o, “In Finitude: Being with José, Being with Pedro,” in “Being With: A Special Issue on the Work of José Esteban Muñoz,” special issue, *Social Text* 121, vol. 32, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 73 and 74.
- 19 Muñoz, “The White to Be Angry,” 32–33.
- 20 Halberstam, “Shame and White Gay Masculinity,” 219–33.
- 21 Halberstam, 229.
- 22 Halberstam, 230.
- 23 See J. Halberstam, “Queerly Utopian,” foreword to *Queer and Subjugated Knowledges: Generating Subversive Imaginaries* (Sharjah: Bentham Books, 2012), i–ii.
- 24 Siegel, “Vaginal Davis’s Gospel Truths,” 151–59.
- 25 Siegel, 151.
- 26 Siegel, 154.
- 27 Siegel, 155.
- 28 Siegel, 152.
- 29 Marc Howard Siegel, *A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2010).
- 30 See note 1 in Siegel’s introduction, 4.
- 31 Siegel, 2.
- 32 Siegel, 155–56.
- 33 Marc Siegel quotes Gilles Deleuze’s use of the word *fabulation* in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* from the English translation of 1989 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), in which the translators have unfortunately chosen to use “story-telling” for the French word *fabulation*.
- 34 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
- 35 Vaginal Davis cites Mark Siegel as quoted in “Six Questions for . . . Vaginal Davis,” *Exberliner*, April 16, 2012, <https://www.exberliner.com/stage/six-questions-for-vaginal-davis/>.
- 36 *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
- 37 Gavin Butt, “The Paradoxes of Criticism,” in *After Criticism*, 17.
- 38 This text is published under the title “White Sex: Vaginal Davis Does Vanessa Beecroft,” in Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects*, 121–40.
- 39 Doyle, 122. In actuality, GIMP was a monthly event curated by Vaginal Davis and Ron Athey, which took place not in a queer bar, but a Japanese restaurant called Zen Sushi in Silver Lake, Los Angeles.
- 40 Doyle, 122.
- 41 Doyle, 125.
- 42 All quotes in Doyle, 125.
- 43 And “the boredom produced by the gray-on-gray commodity world,” adds Doyle.
- 44 Doyle, 126.
- 45 Doyle, 139.
- 46 Doyle, 140.
- 47 Du Plessis and Chapman, “Queercore,” 45–58.
- 48 Du Plessis and Chapman, 52.
- 49 The names of the zines including such words are indicated in parentheses.
- 50 Du Plessis and Chapman, “Queercore,” 52–53.
- 51 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, introduction to *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).
- 52 Anzaldúa, 35.
- 53 Ways of making worlds. I take this word from Donna Haraway, *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures* (Kassel: Documenta, and Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 5.
- 54 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 15. Cited by Jack Halberstam, “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance,” *Social Text* 37 (Winter 1993): 187–201.
- 55 Du Plessis and Chapman write about our becoming “archivists of deviance” in “Queercore” 55.
- 56 Kristin Ross, *L’Imaginaire de la Commune* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2015), 51.
- 57 According to the Fédération des artistes de Paris, created during the Commune. See Ross, 68.
- 58 Ross, “Luxe communal,” chap. 2 in Ross, *L’Imaginaire de la Commune*, 51–81.

pp. 48–51: Vaginal Davis, *The White to Be Angry*, 1999, film stills





INTIMACY AND TOMORROW

Lia Gangitano

When Vaginal Davis was presented the Sustained Achievement Award by Queer|Art in 2018, I invoked our mutual and beloved friend José Esteban Muñoz to say a few words about the unconfined horizons that Ms. Davis has cleared for us. To preface, José was a great boyfriend. On our first date he invited me to Madrid to speak on a panel about performance. We didn't know each other very well, but we shared a certain family, mostly one emanating from Vaginal Davis, whom José loved in the most sophisticated way. She was his first cover girl. Vaginal and Jack Halberstam were there in Madrid, too—José's family of friends, on an academic vacation. I knew we would get to know each other better. As colleagues, it was always our shared professional loves that instigated our being together—we needed a work excuse, which, for us, usually involved Ms. Davis. We dealt with Hurricane Sandy together because Vaginal was in New York. And soon, after floods, blackouts, and many postponements, José and Vaginal, *together*, cleared the air . . .

In the introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013), Jack Halberstam references the 2009 film version of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*: "That Max fails to make the wild things happy, or to save them, or to make a world with them, is less important than the fact that he found them, and he recognized in them *the end* of something, and potentially the path to an alternative to his world."¹ In thinking through this psychologically complex children's story (in which

Max asks the Wild Thing, "Carol, did you know the sun was gonna die?"), I imagine Tony Soprano as Carol, which conjures remarks by Ron Athey and Vaginal on growing up poor and queer in LA: "Vaginal: . . . we didn't know about mainstream gay culture at all, coming from a queer underground. There was a big difference between queerness and gayness. Ron: And also when queer meant queer, as in 'fuck you,' not queer as in unicorn stuffed animals and the cult of tenderness. We weren't tender."²

Back to the post-Sandy talk: in a packed room somewhere at NYU, José and Vaginal practiced "the art of conversation." José made reference, in his introduction, to a published conversation between James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, "A Rap on Race." But they spelled *wrap* with a *w*. José went on to explain that Baldwin and Mead were, of course, figures that "we have great fondness for because they, like the two of us, are from the twentieth century They were iconic figures but also figures shrouded in a mist of inappropriateness, self-importance, and grifter-i-ness that we *very much admire*."³

Then, Vaginal *ended* something to clear a path as well. She apologized profusely for bringing the audience together under false pretenses:

What I am about to reveal to you here in NYU's hallowed Performance Studies Studio, I know you are all going to find very hard to believe. And some of you may be shocked by this revelation In good conscience I can no longer live a lie. . . . Forgive me for having led you astray for

so many years. Letting you go on thinking I am something that I am not. And can never be . . . I want to use this occasion to celebrate my true self . . . I feel that this is the right time for me to shout from the highest mountaintop that I am indeed, yes, really truly—*BLACK*.⁴

José as Margaret Mead went on to thank Vaginal for clearing this up and questioned her about life as an African American sexual outsider, an expatriate in Berlin. It was not until years later, after many viewings of the video of this conversation and my first listening to an interview with Octavia Butler, that I heard the inspiration for Vaginal's articulation, a tribute, which was more Butler than Baldwin.⁵

Also being from the twentieth century, I live on the social character of art-making, and the dysfunctional yet deeply familial bonding that occurs between artists who work in ways that directly draw from their lives in alternative culture, whether it be radical feminist politics, AIDS activism, or the club performance scene. We experienced the resurgence of art practices linked to “the political” when it was not really a choice, it was just how life was. We lived through culture wars, but more predominantly the AIDS crisis that devastated our communities. We understood politicized engagement in the wake of extreme uncertainty and loss. Thinking with artists such as Vaginal, José defined our twentieth century through ideas like disidentification, world-making, optimism against exhaustion, minority performance, queer futurity, utopian force, radical attempt, belonging—not just words, but a “not yet here” worth being here for. I also should mention some words by José's friend and mentor, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “whose touch,” José said, “is everywhere for me”⁶:

The ability to attach to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest these sites with fascination and love.⁷

In trying to encompass all the feelings that Vaginal's work has manifested over our years of friendship, *fascination* and *love* would be predominant among them.

1993, or, from Funk Stations to Fancy Library

In discussing Ms. Davis's exhibition project with curator Hendrik Folkerts, I misheard the word *fantasy* and took the note: *fancy library*.⁸ And thinking of both fantasy libraries and fancy libraries brought me back to the year Vaginal and I met, 1993. I was a twenty-five-year-old art worker at the ICA Boston who invited Vaginal to participate in the exhibition *Dress Codes*. I remember picking her up at the airport in Laura Nix's tiny car—Nix, an organizer with the collective Fishnet who programmed film and performance for the exhibition.

I grew up at the ICA, working there from the late 1980s through the 1990s, and understood this early '90s period as largely impacted by what came before—the theoretical debates of the '80s regarding representations of race, class, ethnicity, gender; the political conflicts raised by these representations; and issues of responsibility on the part of arts institutions to reflect these realities within the context of their traditionally undiversified organizations. Notions of multiculturalism, community involvement, and various nonspecific definitions of “the Other” were prevalent as mainstream projections of difference, and these ideas soon became viewed as a coercive positioning of certain artists to make identity-based work. At a 1995 discussion held at the ICA, artist Lorraine O'Grady stated, “I appreciate being asked to speak about something I know, rather than something I am.”⁹

In 1990 Renée Green had already written “I Won't Play Other to Your Same,” in which she suggested the term “Other” had become “a cultural industry” and that “a reexamination of this cultural and political construct is in order and that its unexamined use can in fact reinforce dominant ideology.”¹⁰ Three years later, Green participated in the 1993 Whitney Biennial with the installation *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992–93), an archive-like sculptural installation that inferred a dislocation from primary sources, firsthand experiences. Tracing the possible translations of hip-hop music, culture, history, and language via the collected books, magazines, and records of cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen, in whose apartment Green had lived for a number of months, the installation reassembles and indexes this library. Embedded within this selection of ephemera, arranged on gray industrial shelving units

surrounded by labeled audio and video stations, the viewer could engage with multiple plotlines. One of the notable historical trajectories referenced through Green's arrangement of material is the convergence of Angela Davis and Theodor Adorno (when Davis traveled to Germany in 1960 to study at the Frankfurt School).

In a recent conversation revisiting the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Homi K. Bhabha noted, “We have to think beyond identitarian clichés toward differential and diverse structures of affiliation and solidarity. That was the aspiration of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, and it remains a work-in-progress to this day.”¹¹ Some artists have been doing this all along: “Inspired by the militancy of the Black Panthers, [Vaginal] named herself after Angela Davis, and started a band called the Afro Sisters, followed by ¡Cholita!; Pedro, Muriel & Esther (PME); and black fag.”¹² On the topic of surveying Ms. Davis's frameworks of affiliations and solidarities, art historian Amelia Jones has noted, “Writing a survey of it is like trying to narrate a linear story for a time-traveling, erotically charged shape-shifter from an Octavia Butler novel—and one that has morphed rapidly over a four-decade-long career.”¹³

HAG, or Lost Ladies: I Want to Buy Your Faces¹⁴

In 2012, Participant Inc welcomed Vaginal to New York City for her first major solo visual art exhibition, sans performance yet performative: *HAG—small, contemporary, haggard*. As she outlined for her press release, “The name HAG in part refers to a subset within the Queercore movement of the eighties, which reclaimed 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.”¹⁵ The exhibition was in tribute to and inspired by the original HAG Gallery (1982–89), which Ms. Davis opened at 7850 Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, California. The new, botoxed *HAG* functioned as a gallery within a gallery and featured work made while living in 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.”¹⁶ During the run of the original HAG in the 1980s, Davis only featured the work of obsessive figures who didn't consider themselves artists and who didn't go to art school. Her literary tabloid *Fertile LaToyah Jackson Magazine* and its supplement *Shrimp*, “the magazine for licking and sucking bigger and better feet” were both published from the original HAG gallery address in Hollywood.

Baking life-size bread sculptures from Vaginal's sketches of Mariah Carey, Justin Timberlake, and Ryan Gosling, among others, and fabricating an architectural space within Participant Inc's space based on her description, all occurred over email, mail mail, and telephone. When asked what the gallery should look like, Vaginal's response was a prompt to make a room that “makes me appear as the petite woman I am.” We proceeded to build an Ames room with diagrams and incomplete formulas from the internet and a copy of *A Brill's Bible of Building Plans and Collection of Much Information Useful to Showman, Carnie, Fairman and Amusement Park Operator* obtained via eBay. Writer Dodie Bellamy recently noted, “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.”¹⁷

Walking into a dimly lit and entirely empty larger space, the visitor encountered, in the distance, a diminutive structure with a white façade, slanted top, pink light emanating from a tiny window and the structure's open ceiling. The original HAG signage was referenced in black cardboard and vinyl lettering on the front, gallery-style. If one looked into the tiny window from the outside, the space's illusion of straightness was somewhat convincing, but upon entering this gallery from the side door, its slanted floor and uneven walls presented a fragmented space, a gallery specifically designed for a multitude of *HAG* portraits painted on letterheads, envelopes, matchboxes, and cut-up cardboard and Corn Flakes boxes. All these paintings were confined to the single-windowed wall, with hand silk-screened *HAG* wallpaper installed on two opposing walls, and life-size bread sculptures straining the fourth wall. “Ryan Gosling” was so large, his weight pulled him off the wall, and he was promptly replaced with “Justin Timberlake,” while “Dirty Mariah Carey” held strong for the duration. There was also a soundtrack.

The Magic Flute

Artist and actor Susanne Sachsse, who cofounded the Berlin-based art collective CHEAP in 2001, and artist Jonathan Berger, who was director of NYU's 80WSE Gallery at the time, asked me to moderate *The Magic Flute: A Press Conference* on June 7, 2016. *The Magic Flute: An Opera in Six Steps* was a performance/installation occupying the entirety of 80WSE's 3,500-square-foot space from December 1 to 5, 2015: "Well your words might sound noble, but the dream of pure objectivity is the hugest myth of them all! When it was announced that the perfect library contained every book, the first reaction was one of extravagant laughter. So I'm calling with a myth after all."¹⁸ This multifaceted project was a radical reinterpretation of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera that was created collaboratively by Berger, Sachsse, Vaginal Davis, Jesse Bransford, and Jamie Stewart/Xiu Xiu.¹⁹ A second exhibition, presented in the summer of 2016, consisted of a multichannel video installation by Michel Auder and Michael Stickrod, using footage shot during the performance. Vaginal has cited the influence, "at age seven," of seeing *The Magic Flute* on a field trip to the opera.²⁰ My interest in image-based theater and unfeasible performance fueled my love of CHEAP, and I wondered why this type of antitheater didn't happen enough in New York City.

My introductory remarks for the press conference included "Welcome to the press conference. As some of you may know, and Wikipedia tells us, *The Magic Flute* is an opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It premiered on September 30, 1791, in Vienna, two months before Mozart's death. It involves trials of initiation, a community of high ideals, the vanquishing of a queen. Much of it was collaboratively written, a fairy tale. Mozart wrote the music to specifically accommodate the differing ability levels of the ensemble."

The project's press release noted of *The Magic Flute*: "It amplifies the subversive alternatives to humanism already quietly suggested in Mozart's music and Schikaneder's libretto, staging an intervention in an ongoing conversation concerning the nature of humanity. The production's libretto and imagery refract contemporary politics through radical strands of Early Modern philosophy in order to learn more about the conditions that our current moment has inherited from the Enlightenment."²¹ In a microcosm within a monologue, "Episode 666," the Mummy of Vaginal describes a scene: "The

Bake-Off with the ISIS or ISIL will also include a half-time show with a Busby Berkeley styled production number as filtered through Disney's *High School Musical* complete with Whirling Dervishes singing in unison, 'the mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers—gateway drugs to extreme radicalism.'"²²

These were my questions:

1. Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* described the "Open Rehearsal" of *The Magic Flute* as "minus Mozart—but packed with magic."²³ Do you believe in magic?
2. Susanne, when you call Vaginal with a myth, she replies, "No you're not, and you never were. All myth turns into objectivity through alienation . . ." Do you believe in objectivity?
3. In the final tableau, you speak of tests: ". . . The bird-organ is made of wood; the human is made of flesh.' But our test cannot end here, since this is not an answer to the test but instead a refutation of its premises. We are in the crucial moment now. Admitting that there is no longer a defensible division between the human, the animal, and the machine, admitting that we are all composed of the same matter and that there exists no special substance for humanity." Do you believe in humanity?
4. Jamie, you conclude the piece, whose music you composed instead of Mozart, by citing Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, who seemed to have reneged on the bargain when he became a Republican . . . I quote: "Renege on the bargain / You do all the flexing. / I'll do all the fucking. / The Brain must control The Body." Michel, do you believe that your film version of *The Magic Flute* constitutes the Brain or the Body?

The piece (and the press conference) ended with the following:

"Administrative power is concentrated at the apex of society in the Godhead Distance from the apex."

Cybelle—Demanding Your Gonads to Make a Necklace of Testicles²⁴

I've been thinking about performance and José a lot lately, his ideas about queer futurity and world-making. I've been thinking about his sibling-hood with Fred Moten—Moten's "erotics of fugitivity," "diabolical errands," and Muñoz's "terrorist drag." I cannot *stop* thinking about something Moten said at his talk "Blackness and Nonperformance" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which was part of a series convened by Adrian Heathfield and André Lepecki: "Performance is increasingly documented, archived, institutionally incorporated, and globally disseminated. While its ephemeral nature is often celebrated, its inherent transience binds it to its many returns—its mediations and afterlives. Today, criticism is focused more on the recurrence and persistence of performance than on its disappearance. Performance's material remains linger as vague memories, oral legend, transmitted techniques, or infrastructures of feeling."²⁵

Moten said something like, "performance studies is embarrassed of performance." But not José—we actually saw each other *at performances*. From his description in the chapter "The White to Be Angry" in *Disidentifications*, I think we were at the same show at Squeezebox in New York City in 1994. Shortly after the ICA exhibition, I invited a colleague to what I naively expected to be a *Cherries in the Snow* (PME's "white privilege love anthem"²⁶), *Intimacy and Tomorrow* (participatory durational toe-sucking), "snow period" variety performance. But instead we waited a very long time for the arrival of Clarence, the inspiration for José's formulations of Vaginal as an "organic intellectual (who possesses a 'fundamental connection to social groups')"; Vaginal as philosopher (in a Gramscian sense of "dismantling universals"); and Vaginal as cultural terrorist: "Davis's drag, this reconfigured cross-sex, cross-race minstrelsy, can best be understood as *terrorist drag*—terrorist in that she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality."²⁷ Like most life-transforming experiences (often occurring in clubs), I didn't realize its significance would keep expanding over time.

In the aforementioned conversation with Ron Athey, Vaginal and he discuss the club as a place for workshopping performance, their personal pedagogies, Vaginal noting that, "[e]specially with college kids or art school students, when I talk about my life, or about growing up poor, being housing

insecure or food insecure or any of those issues, for them it's like reading about something in a fairy tale."²⁸ In my experience, Vaginal's teaching style involves collaged scripts, performative lectures, and compelling students to start bands. One especially memorable question posed to Vaginal after a class lecture was, "Can I hug you?" Ms. Davis imparts the importance of letter writing, an expansive practice that traverses her queer zine network-building, with *Fertile LaToya Jackson* and *Shrimp* zines and VHS tapes sent in the mail (how I learned about Vaginal Davis in the first place), expanded once more through the *HAG* paintings on stationery and envelopes, charting her worldwide art travels. All of which are also chronicled on her blog *Speaking from the Diaphragm*.

In 2010 Vaginal mounted a dream project of the same name, but in the form of a talk show she hosted at PS122. Considering her analog proclivities, it is interesting to note that while the throwback pre-Zoom format prevailed with panels of invited guests being questioned IRL, audience members being offered beverages to drink from tiny saucers, there were also, scattered around the seated audience, collaborators in their underwear preoccupied in frisky projected conversations on Chatroulette. Despite the luminaries on stage, the audience activation (multiple conversations, scantily clad young people, others drinking from the floor like kittens) created an atmosphere in which the separation between performance and audience seemed negligible. Perhaps this double deployment of gossip-generating activities was the key to Vaginal's level horizon?

Another CHEAP collaborator, film scholar Marc Siegel deploys José's framework of "disidentificatory performances" to posit gossip as one of Ms. Davis's primary mediums. He states, "I would like to extend Muñoz's argument by tracing the disidentificatory function of gossip."²⁹ He goes on to describe Davis's performance at a conference on queer perspectives on Andy Warhol, which includes a reading of her text "My Favorite Dead Artist" (also the theme of a party at Area, which Vaginal describes in the text). Of course, she arrives not as Andy Warhol but as Frida Kahlo at this party. Gossip about Warhol ensues: "Davis effectively *disidentifies* with the white, gay male Warhol, who is presented as never having heard of Kahlo;" and later Vaginal says, "The only one who immediately knew I was dressed as Frida was Louise Nevelson, who I gather must have known Frida Kahlo back in the day."³⁰

Sometimes gossip incites reality, calls it into being, like this chance meeting with Nevelson at Area may have led to their eventually exhibiting together in a 2017 two-woman show, *Chimera*, at Invisible-Exports, New York. Either way, Vaginal's shout-outs to Kahlo, Nevelson, hags, proper butch goddesses, femme shopkeepers, artists, and activists are being heard. Holland Cotter's *New York Times* review of Vaginal's sculptures in *Come On Daughter Save Me* at Invisible-Exports in 2015 (with related works later included in New Museum's *Tigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* in 2017), notes, "Feminized in their materials, the works are epic in their titles, which include 'Sabine Women,' 'Horn of Roland,' 'Proper Butch Goddess Freya' and 'Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra.' Each title derives from a narrative that accompanies the show. Bracingly feminist, prophetically antipatriarchal—it promises that 'sexist racist lackeys of the imperial ruling circles will be vanquished during open revolt'—the text is (very, very faintly) recited by the artist on a vinyl LP played at the gallery."³¹

For some, this form of radical feminism central to Vaginal's being is unexpected. Dodie Bellamy invokes an encounter with the video of Vaginal's "Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo—Black Screen Images and the Notion of Freakiness," a 2013 artist talk at Vienna's Augarten, in which Vaginal lays it out, as clarifying:

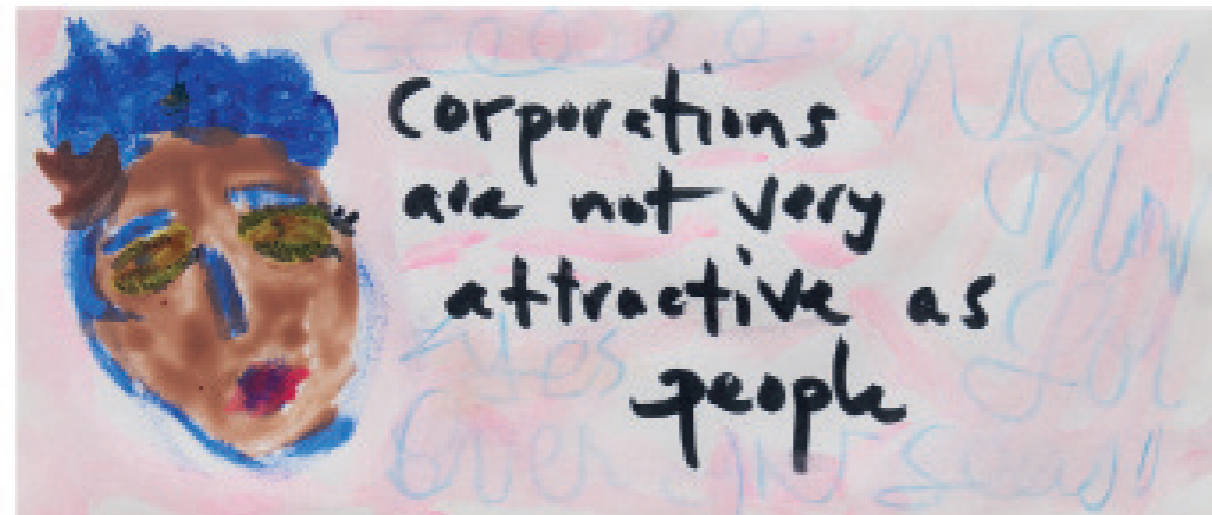
It is a well-documented fact that Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers reached out to gay and feminist brothers and sisters in the struggle against the white bourgeoisie ruling class. Jean Genet famously supported the Black Panthers, solidifying the connection between gay and Black outsider opposition to the dominant order. Angela Davis's strong revolutionary voice dovetails nicely with feminist radicalism. The point is that all three movements share anti-capitalist values, and the abandonment of that platform is what killed counterculture and true opposition in the postmodern Western world.³²

As one painting in *HAG* calls out to "Dismantle the social structure of patriarchy," another points out, "Corporations are not very attractive as people." This persistent radicality and intersectionality is the visionary throughline of Vaginal Davis's life-work, and comprises its distinguishing factor—not fitting in.

(Notes)

- 1 Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 7.
- 2 Ron Athey, "The Royal We, Vaginal Davis in Conversation with Ron Athey," *MOUSSE*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/vaginal-davis-ron-athey-2022/>.
- 3 Transcribed from the video, "'No One Leaves Delilah': A (W)rap on Race," a conversation between Vaginal Davis and José Muñoz, Performance Studies, New York University, November 13, 2012.
- 4 "'No One Leaves Delilah.'"
- 5 "Octavia Butler Interview: Transcending Barriers," recorded at Balticon 34 in April 2000 as part of "Fast Forward: Contemporary Science Fiction," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG68v0RGHsY>.
- 6 José Esteban Muñoz, "Acknowledgements," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), xi.
- 7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.
- 8 "The 'fantasy library' juxtaposed an imaginary collection of over 500 pink books with such titles as 'My Deliberative Body,' 'Beware the Retarded Whore,' 'Hollywood Speaks,' and 'The Hottentotten,' with books by quintessential queer, Black, and punk writers (including Dawn Powell's *The Wicked Pavilion* [1954] to which the exhibition owes its title), alongside an impressive range of Ms. Davis's portraits of iconic figures (I daresay icons). . . 'The Wicked Pavilion' is Ms. Davis's universe." Hendrik Folkerts, "Inside Burger Collection: Vaginal's Veil," *Art Asia Pacific* 128 (May–June 2022): 74, https://www.burgercollection.org/usr/library/documents/main/aap_128_vaginal-davis.pdf.
- 9 Lorraine O'Grady, speaking at a March 16, 1995, meeting at the ICA, Boston, cited in Lia Gangitano, "Ghost of New Histories," *New Histories*, ed. Gangitano and Steven Nelson (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 10.
- 10 Renée Green, "I Won't Play Other to Your Same," in *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings/Renée Green* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 53.
- 11 Homi K. Bhabha and Kate Fowle in conversation with Jessica Bell Brown, Kimberli Gant, Elena Ketelsen González, and Xiaoyu Weng, "Retroaction: On the 1993 Biennial and Its Place in the Present," *Ursula* 9 (Fall/Winter 2023), <https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/retroaction-on-the-1993-whitney-biennial-and-its-place-in-the-present/>.
- 12 Dodie Bellamy, "Vaginal Davis Troubles the Smile," *MOUSSE* 79 (Spring 2022), <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/vaginal-davis-dodie-bellamy-2022/>.
- 13 Amelia Jones, "Anarchic Abundance, or The Art of Living," *MOUSSE* 79 (Spring 2022), <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/vaginal-davis-amelia-jones-2022/>.
- 14 "Vaginal Davis, 'Dames egaree: je veux acheter vos visages,' 2001. Mixed media (glycerin, Milk of Magnesia, Lydia J. Pinkham eyeliner, Maybelline eyebrow pencil, Wet 'n' Wild nail polish, Wet 'n' Wild lipstick, eye shadow, Fashion Fair foundation, olive oil, Afro Sheen, food coloring, shoe polish) on cardboard. Dimensions variable." (Davis's translation of the title: "Lost Ladies: I Want to Buy Your Faces.") Caption from Hilary E. MacGregor, "Of Dada and Dr. Davis," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2004.
- 15 Vaginal Davis, *HAG—small, contemporary, haggard*, 2012, press release for the exhibition at Participant Inc, New York, <http://participantinc.org/content/2-seasons/12-season-11/2-hag/hagpressrelease.pdf>.
- 16 *HAG* press release.
- 17 Bellamy, "Vaginal Davis Troubles the Smile."
- 18 Script, "The Magic Flute: An Opera in Six Steps," text by Roger Matthew Grant, November 27, 2015.
- 19 Jackie Shemesh, as lighting designer, and Roger Matthew Grant, as dramaturg, also contributed to the project, as did a large number of NYU students and the vocal group New York Choral and the Horkheimer Arkestra.
- 20 Connie Monaghan, "Vaginal Creme Davis," *Coagula Art Journal* (May 1997).
- 21 Press Release, *The Magic Flute*, 2015, 80WSE Gallery at NYU Steinhardt, <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/december/magic-flute-reinvented-at-80wse.html>.
- 22 Script, "The Magic Flute, An Opera in Six Steps," text by Vaginal Davis, November 27, 2015.
- 23 Holland Cotter, "The Best in Art of 2015," *New York Times*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/09/arts/design/best-art-2015.html>.
- 24 Vaginal Davis, *Cybelle—Demanding Your Gonads to Make a Necklace of Testicles*, 2015, clay, stucco fragments, Wet 'n' Wild (Brickhouse) Nail Varnish, Neon Nail Lacquer, Rival deLoop Nylon Nail Enamel, Hydrogen Peroxide, Glycerin, Witch Hazel, Pam, Aqua Net Extra Strength Hair Spray, Jean Naté perfume, exhibited in *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at the New Museum, New York.
- 25 Press release for the series *Afterlives: The Persistence of Performance* of which Fred Moten's "Blackness and Nonperformance" was a part, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/1364>.
- 26 Holly Warren, "New Anthems: Vaginal Davis' The White to Be Angry Is a Bold Assertion of Self," *New Art City*, July 31, 2020, <https://art.newcity.com/2020/07/31/vaginal-davis-the-white-to-be-angry-is-a-bold-assertion-of-self/>.
- 27 José Esteban Muñoz, "The White to Be Angry," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 108.
- 28 Athey, "Royal We."
- 29 Marc Siegel, "Vaginal Davis's Gospel Truths," *Camera Obscura* 67, vol. 23, no. 1 (May 2008): 153.
- 30 Siegel, 154–55.
- 31 Holland Cotter, "Vaginal Davis's Feminist Wall Reliefs Pledge 'Open Revolt,'" *New York Times*, December 10, 2015.
- 32 Bellamy, "Vaginal Davis Troubles the Smile."

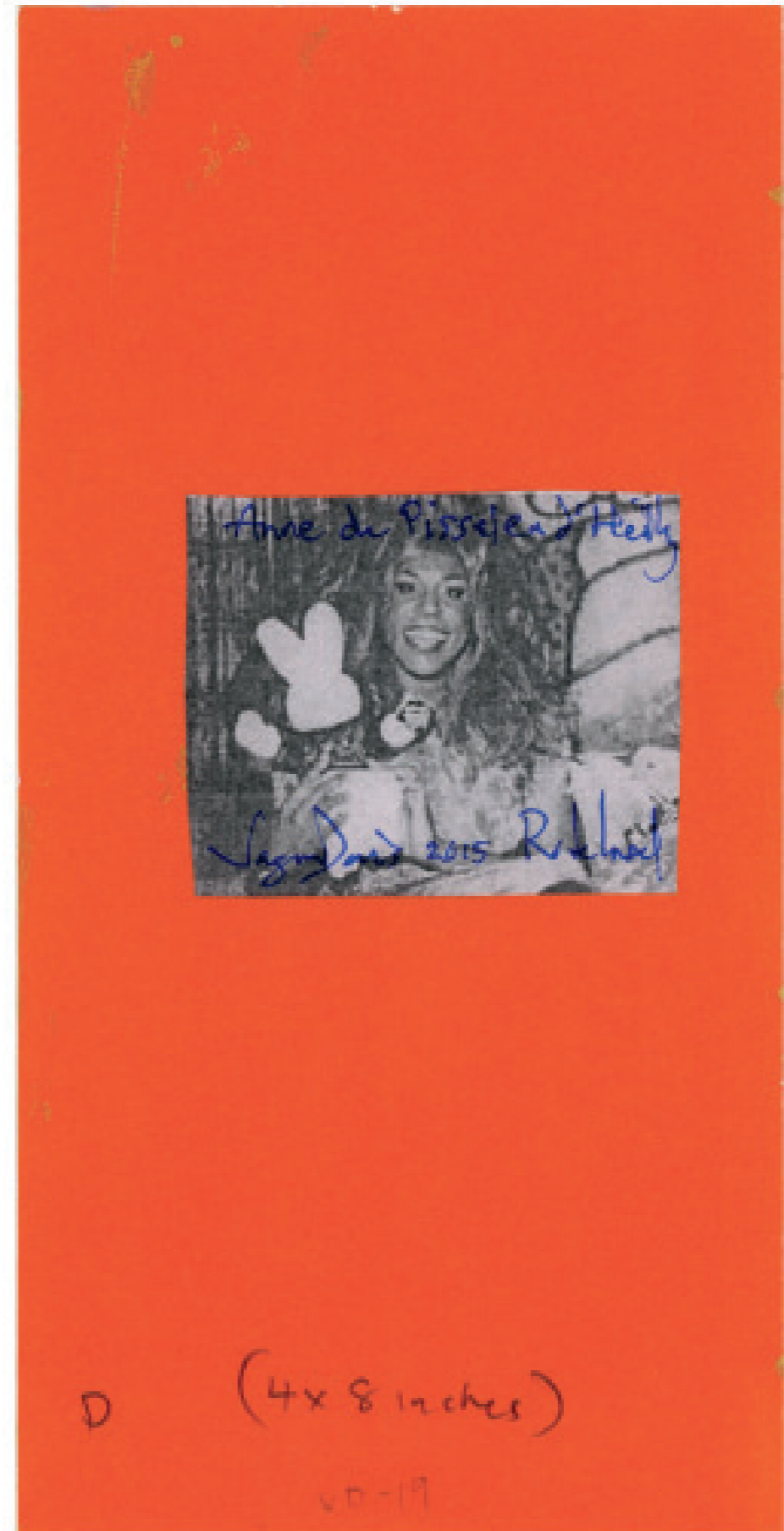
p. 60: Vaginal Davis, *HAG*, 2012, mixed media. Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi
p. 61: Vaginal Davis, *Susan Kohner—Imitation of Life*, 2017, mixed media. Private collection
pp. 62–63: Vaginal Davis, *Anne de Pisseleu d'Heilly* (front and back), 2015, mixed media. Private collection



Film und Medien
Stiftung NRW



Film und Medienstiftung
NRW
Postfach 14
40221 Düsseldorf
Telefon: 0211-990 500
mediastiftung.de
www.filmstiftung.de



D (4x8 inches)
10-19

PRECARIOUS GLITTER: THE MANY REVOLUTIONS OF VAGINAL DAVIS

Bojana Kunst

I first encountered Vaginal Davis's work about two decades after she made her indelible mark on the underground art scenes of Los Angeles and New York of the late 1970s and 1980s. It was in Ljubljana in 2004, at Kodeljevo Castle, where Ms. Davis, along with artist Ron Athey, staged *Visions of Excess and the Philosophy of Gifts*, an endurance art happening saluting Georges Bataille. In one glittering night, many artists I knew, some remotely, some intimately, from the famous Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana were presented there. *Visions of Excess and the Philosophy of Gifts*, which had already taken place in Los Angeles and other cities, was announced as "an all-night cabaret loaded with glamour, libido and offbeat humor."¹ I remember that it was a must-go event in Ljubljana for anyone involved in the art scene, and I just *had* to be there. The cabaret night was sumptuous, full of wild humor and a ticklishly sexy nighttime flow. The audience was invited to attend wearing red, black, and gold colors, and, above all, lots of latex. Ms. Davis led the evening in one of her many incarnations and villainous disguises; she was announced in the festival program as the "famous black transvestite" who would lead us through the events of the festival as "emcee of the night." Although I was unfamiliar with the

work of Vaginal Davis, my first encounter with her immediately drew me into a kaleidoscope of conflicting understandings and emotions. She was full of exuberant sensuality and flirtation. She entertained, but at the same time it was impossible to overlook the curiously anarchic, rebellious power of this performative persona. For what constitutes the role of the Black transvestite that Vaginal Davis assumed, as the entertainer, performer, and worker of this cabaret night? What kind of entertainment economy of exchange took place in the night through which the famed drag superstar led us? This gesture may have been an address to the white and bourgeois audience that attended this festival. It can also be read as a willful self-exoticization that holds up a critical mirror to the many sexual and racial meanings that cut across the entertainment labor of Black drag, but this self-exoticization is imbued with a type of jouissance because it refuses to give up the pleasure that such work produces. This gesture is a heartfelt and joyful homage to the history of the work of Black performers as well, whom Vaginal Davis described in one of her interviews as "freakazoids." If *zoid* in high school slang means "someone who is excluded," "a freak," or "an outsider," *freakazoid* is a freak and an outsider in the strongest sense. And

it is this double freak that is the origin of all that is “culturally fascinating and interesting in the world of entertainment,” because all of it, as Vaginal Davis says in an interview, “originated in the Black queer demimonde and then gets adapted by the Black straight populace, then co-opted into dominant or popular culture.”² So that night at Ljubljana’s Kodeljevo Castle, in the midst of a sensual cabaret party, I also got a historical and critical lesson about the labor of entertainers and artists: it is not possible to participate in an exchange of pleasure without taking into account how this work has always been part of the “black queer modality.”³ It is this modality that is at the heart of the economy of entertainment and, ultimately, of any gesture of radical art. Vaginal Davis makes this modality visible through her performances, appropriating it and affirming it at the same time, literally throwing it in our faces with a friendly invitation: *Here you go, darling, now enjoy.*

Maybe it was because of that lesson that her work never left me after that evening. It hit me with a poison dart, but with love. Later, when I learned more about her work by encountering chunks of it on the internet and read through its academic reception, it occurred to me I can compare her early work with the local context of the punk and queer movements in Ljubljana, which were important social and artistic movements in socialist Yugoslavia, especially in the 1980s. At that time, explosive and provocative connections between socialist labor, poverty, punk rebellion and sexual glamour, gender fluidity, and Marxist theory were created in underground clubs, in punk bands and their lyrics, in zine newspapers, with cheap video films and low-budget video spots, and within queer and homosexual movements. The critique of totalitarianism and corrupt communism was carried out through the connection of labor themes and the demand for emancipation, freedom, and queer pleasure. But compared to the underground scenes in which Vaginal Davis played with her many queercore bands in the 1980s and 1990s, the scene closer to home still seemed too restrained, retaining a somewhat puritanical socialist suspicion of excessive consumption, glamour, and redundant production. Interestingly, this reticence disappeared in the mid-1990s, but only when the now capitalist Ljubljana became, for a short time, the center of the body art scene and radical performance practices. This art had a more bourgeois art audience that followed these body practices as their personal aesthetic and intimate emancipation

rather than as part of a common political practice of insurgent living. So it seems that I encountered Vaginal Davis’s work at a moment when the values of progressive art had already shifted: with the transition to the mainstream, radical body practices of art addressed an emancipatory personal aesthetic rather than a politics of the commons, and favored matters of lifestyle over rebellious political gestures. That evening, Vaginal, as a Black transvestite, problematized precisely this liberated innocence of sensual entertainment, pointing to its historical and material background and bringing both contexts together. For without considering the rich history of the labor of freakazoid bodies, it is impossible to practice the pleasure of consumption of art.

As I write this essay, responding to the invitation to contribute to the catalog of Vaginal Davis’s exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, I find this situated context of encountering her work significant. For I am writing about her work not only by looking at bits and pieces of her work on the internet as I did two decades ago, but also by browsing the archive that the museum—an institutionalized context of contemporary art—has made available to me. At the same time, I am writing this text on my university laptop, on which I cannot access Vaginal Davis’s website because “your organization forbids access to websites in the category Adult/Sexually Explicit.” These playful contradictions are part of her irresistible practice of living defiantly and problematizing the values of life. Her work thus takes place primarily at the various intersections of social, artistic, and libidinal values. From its earliest creative beginnings, her practice shows how creativity and the work of art cannot be practiced without the explosive interplay of class, race, and gender articulations that cut across different artistic and social milieus, such as underground movements and alternative forms of life, the capitalist entertainment industry, and the professional contexts of contemporary art. In her work, Vaginal Davis continually makes sensual, engaged, and at the same time transversal connections between different social and economic communities, as well as contexts of creativity and artistic work, moving fluidly between her audiences and pointing to the paradoxical similarities between these contexts. In her self-narration and interviews, she often returns to her first living and artistic community, particularly to her mother, with whom Vaginal Davis and her sisters grew up in Ramona Gardens, one of East LA’s housing projects. This is how she describes the “wack” sense of fashion

of her mother, Mary Magdalene DuPlantier: “She was doing underwear as outerwear before Gautier was born.”⁴ Ms. Davis writes about the many names her mother used, although it was not clear if this was a reflection of schizophrenia or if she was just using them to avoid debt collectors. “It is surreal that I got the attention as a performance artist when the real performance artist is my mother.”⁵ She describes growing up in an art installation, with toys her mother made from trash—even now, Vaginal Davis’s apartment is a collage. In the midst of everyday life, of poverty, of growing up as a Black intersex person, confronted with many attempts to regulate subjectivity, it is the creation of spectacle from the quotidian, that shape and influence the subversive and survival strategies of Vaginal Davis. She creates a dazzling drama out of the wracked and rudimentary material conditions of everyday life, invigorating the glowing of their aura. With the ceaseless artistic labor, she queers the relations, things, and objects of her life and turns the precarious life into glitter.

Vaginal Davis is not just one, she is always more than one. Like Mary Magdalene adopting different names to outwit debt collectors, Vaginal Davis is plural, with her multitude of appearances avoiding the appropriation under singular value. Her early bands, collectives, friendships, and alliances are not just anecdotes or life stories of the artist’s biography; they are the social essence of her work. Her work is always an articulation of the many, and even when her work enters the professional field of art, it is not separated from its social environment, from the communities within which it is produced. This impacts the dynamics, as well as the aesthetics and formal processes of her work. It is not just that Vaginal Davis provokes the protocols of artistic value production or that she challenges institutional contexts and boundaries. Nor is she some kind of heroic con artist, clown, or trickster. Such interpretations make her a bit too individualistic and much more of a fetish, too isolated. I read her work more as an affirmation of friendships, of erotic, transfamilial, and translove alliances that poke at dominant gender, class, and race relations. Her trash and self-made aesthetics derive precisely from the queer or transversal conviviality, the camaraderie and solidarity between the many characters and players in her works (it is not unusual that Vaginal Davis also has a long history of performing for or with friends). This camaraderie can be between different companions during her lifetime, but also a camaraderie across

time. Her creativity emerges kaleidoscopically in the midst of a multitude of cultural and social references, and amid a series of temporal affinities and intimate debts, especially to a variety of queer and Black figures in the history of (popular) art. It would also be too narrow to read her work as a kind of pastiche of many references or as a playful accumulation of quotations. I believe that the principle of her work is not collage, but rather 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. In a now-classic text, José Esteban Muñoz writes of her work as “terrorist drag” through which difference is not obscured but constantly interrogated, pointing to the paradoxes through which Vaginal Davis herself emerges as a social threat.⁶ Nevertheless, we can also approach her through the related notion of “temporal drag,” which Elizabeth Freeman uses in her book *Time Binds* to describe the erotic historicizing at work in queer art practices.⁷ Vaginal Davis immerses us in a display, a kind of phantasmagoria of sensual, magical, desirous affinities between the various freakazoid articulations. It is only in this way that values are transforming in her work, as if she were a kind of magician, or rather an alchemist, who produces gold from waste and vice versa. She dynamically plays with the transformation of the values of contexts, bodies, materials, language, sensuality, and as Dominic Johnson argues, her art is “antagonistic low-cost high impact work.”⁸ And the secret formula, the magic wand, that makes this alchemical mixing of values possible is the community, the multitude of the creativity that flows between bands, performances, films, zines, columns, paintings, but also friends, lovers, and allies.

It is precisely through the exuberance of desire, alliances, and love that Vaginal Davis’s work resists the emotional poverty and misery that characterizes contemporary modes of life under late capitalism and its control over the creative forces of life. Amelia Jones writes that “an entire period of her work constitutes a praxis, a lived creative life.”⁹ Today, the difficulty of separating life and work is often discussed mainly because of the precariousness of artistic work and work in general, as more and more workers are trapped in unstable and flexible forms of work, without security and without basic social rights. These precarious forms of work further exacerbate gender, race, and class inequities.

In addition, amid the greatest misery it creates, contemporary capitalism requires its workers to live a creative life, that is, to constantly produce and perform themselves and their subjectivities. Exploitation is not limited to human labor, as this regime of production feeds above all on human subjectivity, on human desires, on the libidinal currents of life, or, as Brazilian philosopher and psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik writes, “on the energy of the drive.”¹⁰ In her writing, Rolnik creates the figure of a “pimping capitalism” that continually appropriates the currents of our desires, structuring and controlling the unconscious formations of social processes and transforming them into value. The author thus places the pimp at the center of the functioning of contemporary capitalism, intertwining its production of commodities with the production of pleasure, which at the same time paradoxically serves to regulate and normalize existences. This is also why we can observe that nowadays capitalism often has no problem with sexual emancipation, feminism, and with the critique of racism, but only to the extent that this emancipation does not subvert the working and productive body. The emancipation should not limit or interfere with the exploitation of the labor power of bodies, it should leave untouched the “free” economic relations of the market. It is here that the libidinal pimping of capitalism collides perversely with the most reactionary ways of ordering life. At its core, it’s about work, not fluid enjoyment, and when we do enjoy, it’s certainly not because of idleness. We can only enjoy within the framework of regulated leisure, where some have to work in order for others to enjoy. It is within this ordered leisure that artists and entertainers also work.

This is why it is not possible to understand race, gender, and class relations unless we think of them through the lens of capitalist value creation, since their categories and conflictual relations are already part of the exploitation of laboring bodies and are also closely linked to the relations between work and leisure. Despite sexual liberation and gender fluidity, despite resistance to racism, it is still more or less impossible to imagine a life (however emancipated and progressive) without labor, impossible to imagine the values of life that are not also, somehow, the values of work. The work of Vaginal Davis can be related to the writing of Marxist theorists such as the avant-gardist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai and the key philosopher of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse. Both made the connection

between the creative invention of love and fairer forms of social coexistence, insisting on the eroticization of everyday life and the power of love as part of the resistance against capitalism and the exploitation of the working body. As opposed to Vaginal Davis, Kollontai and Marcuse remained with rather normative ideas about who could stay in bed together to make these new revolutionary inventions of life.

We find Vaginal Davis in bed together with Kim Ghia and Beautiful Keith in the short film *Designy Life* (1994), inspired by *Design for Living* (1932) by the famous 1920s comedy writer and cabaret artist Noël Coward. In Ms. Davis’s short film, the trio are three friends of fluid sexual orientation, who are in the middle of a rumpled bed in a scruffy furnished bedroom with a guitar and some food. The film gives the impression of a homemade, self-made shot, the camera constantly moving to show us the playful intimacy of the three protagonists, with occasional flashbacks to the partners of the characters on the bed, who are trying to finally put the daily mess of their lives in order. The three friends on the bed erotically play around, tickle each other, prick each other, and chat about sex, desire, the body, work, order, music, art. Together they persist in a restless, circular, and sensual idleness, through which an erotic resistance to productivity and order literally spills out. I see this film aligned with many of her works, which can be described as embodiments of a nonnormative conviviality that also arises from a resistance to productive ways of life. For it is on the bed that the pleasurable appropriation of time takes place, the opening up of time for nonutilities such as friendship, love, play; it is only in this way that everyday life (also poor life, marginal life) becomes luxurious, full of time for friendship, idleness, as well as for sensual emancipation and the fluid politics of love and desire. Idleness is productive and creative, but in a different way from the leisure of capitalist productivity (where one must find a job and work and rest in an orderly way in order to work more); it is not lost time, but above all time spent with others, time in which one can lose oneself with others. From the history of art, we know several explorations of this kind of idleness and its relation to art. One of them is the famous series of photographs by Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović, entitled *The Artist at Work* (1978), in which he shows himself asleep in his bed in various poses, thus providing an insight into the paradoxical nature of artistic productivity. Again, the difference

is that here the artist sleeps alone, while in Vaginal Davis’s messy bed there are always more of them, because the rebellion to productivity cannot be realized without loving, befriending, and playing together.

In the precariousness of contemporary life, Vaginal Davis creates utopian, ironic spaces of love, filled with profane hope, queer desire, and fluid forms of sensual care. In *VooDoo Williamson-Dona of Dance* (1994), a seventeen-minute performance that was recorded on VHS, screened at various film festivals in the mid-1990s, and then presented a decade later as part of the exhibition *Invitation to Dance* in Portland,¹¹ Vaginal Davis stars as prima donna VooDoo Williamson, the leader of a dance company and a kind of guardian, the Mother of Dance, who introduces the film to the dance class and her dance company. There is a lot of parody of contemporary dance and its universal healing power, and it reminds me of the very beginnings of modern dance that is marked by domineering white and bourgeois mothers (such as Isadora Duncan, who adopted six girls in her lifetime, the “Isadorables”). Vaginal Davis presents this collaboration as an “extemporaneous contemporary dance company” from Lynwood, California, in which her friends, fellow dancers, or “my children” as she calls them, participate. VooDoo also tells us that this is a group with meager means and financial troubles, but they all believe in “The Daaance,” which she always pronounces emphatically with an exaggerated English accent. Thus, through the dance training, which the Donna of Dance leads with sensuality, exuberance, and tenderness, a space is opened for a different kind of community invention. For this is a dance group that is also a spiritual and physical refuge for the vulnerable bodies and lives among whom their wacky mother hovers. I agree with Ashley Stull Meyers, who, in her review of the Portland exhibition, describes the short film as “a bodily proposal for other ways of inhabiting space in the face of insecurity and transience.”¹² She describes the “awkward exercises in sensuality, tenderness, and rhythm,”¹³ which are happening in-between different trainings of informal techniques and charmingly funny choreographies. In the film, each member of the dance group has a short monologue about why they joined the group, whether it be due to drug problems or job loss, so we clearly see this is a group of marginalized people, outsiders, living precarious existences, who find themselves together in this strangely sensual, expressively dramatic dance class. They

hold this space of unrestricted creativity together, to open toward forms of being and love, to heal the consequences of the pimping of capitalism, which exploits human desires by turning them into value by isolating and destroying the social, erotic, and communal bonds of solidarity. On the wall of the studio (which is actually Vaginal Davis’s apartment), there is a drawing in the shape of an octopus, a kind of mind map of this group, with the main statement at the top: *noncooperative reproduction*. “You don’t cooperate with someone who wants to get you pregnant,” says the Donna of Dance, when explaining this statement in the film. It could also be read as an embodied and erotic resistance to the exploitation of the body, a resistance to the pimping of life energies, to the ordering of bodies through their labor and their closely related reproductive and sexual functions. Indeed, it is a clear call for a different coexistence and a resistant production of queer and nonracialized bodies.

Vaginal Davis’s many series paintings, which were almost all created in the space of her home, are no exception. It is here that the glitter of precarity starts to shine with a particular power. For instance, the series *Flirtation Walk (The Ho Stroll)* (2015) is painted on tiny hotel stationary, using hair spray, nail varnish, hydrogen peroxide, a variety of other cosmetics, and a watercolor pencil. Comparably, the series of paintings that were created under the title *The Wicked Pavilion* (2021) was painted on postcards sent to Vaginal Davis, more hotel stationary, club flyers, and so forth, employing a combination of mascara, eye shadow, liquid eyeliner, body oil, and other cosmetic utensils. In both series, we find numerous portraits of historical femme and queer socialites, notorious artists, courtesans, and fashionable personalities; the contours of their faces and bodies appear through the combination of colors and lines made with the cosmetic utensils. When I look at them, it seems as if these palimpsest figures are emerging from the messed-up traces of glamour and glitter, gazing back at me through the blurred traits of their bodies: through their lips, maybe eyes, their hairstyles, the form of their heads, cheeks, breasts. Their presence is real and ghostly at the same time, maybe also because they seem like the kind of imprints someone has left on paper when wiping off their makeup with cleansing lotion after a dazzling performance. These paintings are created with the very intimate and private touch of the body, with its glittery residue, and can be also read as a spectacularly cheap celebration of the queer

life and its waste. Here I return to the notion of temporal drag, as theorized by Elizabeth Freeman, to expand on the ways we can make history—where the contact with history can be also precipitated through a specific bodily predisposition, evoking bodily response. Freeman uses this notion to show how historiographical work is not only citational and performative, but also “physical and erotic.”¹⁴ Vaginal Davis’s paintings embody this temporal drag, as they explore affinities and friendships through time. They surround Ms. Davis with extemporaneous traces made from an everyday beauty kit. Among them, she, once again, exists as more than one.

To conclude this essay, I would like to return to that analytical but pleasurable gesture of Vaginal Davis’s work that struck me so much in Ljubljana: *Here you go, darling, now enjoy*. This gesture could also be understood with the help of Bertolt Brecht, through the notion of *Gestus*, which for him is one of the fundamental principles of materialist and critical theater. It is not an expression of the human interior; instead *Gestus* literally sets the social relations between people in motion. Vaginal Davis’s film *That Fertile Feeling* (1983) has a classic status in queer and race studies today, but I think it is worth returning once again to the film through the perspective of its *Gestus*. This provides insight into its unique poetics of common rebellion against desperate social relations, which in the film mostly happens through noise of care: the screaming. In this film, Ms. Davis guides Fertile LaToyah Jackson, after watching some porn films together, through the birth of eleven-tuplets in her boyfriend’s apartment after a hospital turns her away for lack of having insurance. Loud, high-pitched, hysterical, excessive screaming either from enjoyment or pain is present in this film and reaches its crescendo with the eleven babies coming into the world. The screaming in this film is much more than a parody, since the *Gestus* of this scream sets various gender, race, and social relations in motion and reveals the luxurious, annoying, and rebellious noise of care. Screaming is the expression of an alternative care for each other, especially when no one cares (when social and public structures are absent). It can be read as a lavish, ear-piercing incantation of a cosmic force of friendship and support, an eccentric, lavish drama that taps directly into the ambivalent bodily sensations of the audience, parodying the very place from which the film is being watched. It is through this scream that Vaginal Davis reclaims the power of desire, luxuriously kneading her work out

of poverty, despair, resistance to everyday racism, and sexual pleasure, and brings glamour, luxury, and extravagant consumption to our experience of capitalist misery. The scream is an expression of the noise of care, stricken by creative, sumptuous, and luxurious energies of precarity, which are too contradictory, genderless, and pleasure-anarchic to be easily commodified and coopted. Or as Vaginal Davis says, “Honey, baby doll, I’ve always been too weird for any scene I’ve ever been in.”¹⁵

(Notes)

- 1 The festival announcement reads, “Each summer, Ron Athey and Vaginal Davis organise in Los Angeles the now legendary Visions of Excess, which on December 17 2004 was translocated to Ljubljana and enhanced with Slovenian stars. The Grad Kodeljevo Castle will be transformed into a wild cabaret setting featuring, in a span of twelve hours, with more than ten glittering performances loaded with libido and wild humour!” See Visions of Excess, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://aksioma.org/visions/index.html>. Among the artists who performed at this festival were Ron Athey, Vaginal Davis, Dominic Johnson, Kirra O’Reilly, and Juliana Snaper.
- 2 Keenan Teddy Smith, “‘The Maladjusted RULE!’: A Conversation with Vaginal Davis,” *Hyperallergic*, July 30, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/554360/vaginal-davis-the-white-to-be-angry/>.
- 3 Smith, “‘The Maladjusted RULE!’”
- 4 “Mary Magdalene DuPlantier was a revolutionary feminist, community activist, and Louisiana transplant who planted food on vacant lots for the whole community, hoarded weapons—including hand grenades—in her apartment closet, and is rumored to have helped hide Angela Davis shortly before her arrest in 1970. She slept with Davis’s father, a Mexican-American Jewish man, just once at a Ray Charles concert in the 1960s.” In Riley Yaxley, “It’s Time for Us to Off Vaginal Davis,” *ADF Magazine*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.adfwebmagazine.jp/en/art/vaginal-davis/>, and “Vaginal Davis: The Real Performance Artist in My Family,” Because I Said So, *Glue Magazine*, July/August 2001.
- 5 “Vaginal Davis: The Real Performance Artist in My Family.”
- 6 José Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry’: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag,” in “Queer Transxions of Race, Nation, and Gender,” special issue, *Social Text* 52/53 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 80–103.
- 7 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 8 Dominic Johnson, “Vaginal Davis Biography,” *Frieze*; reposted on www.vaginaldavis.com/bio.shtml, accessed December 19, 2023.
- 9 Amelia Jones, “Anarchic Abundance, or The Art of Living,” *Mousse Magazine*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/vaginal-davis-amelia-jones-2022/>.
- 10 Suely Rolnik, “The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating the Pimping of Life,” *e-flux journal* 86 (November 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life/>.
- 11 *Invitation to Dance* was an exhibition at Adams and Ollman in Portland, Oregon, in 2018.
- 12 Ashley Stull Meyers, “An Invitation from Vaginal Davis: Creating Family and Language through Dance,” *Bomb*, October 8, 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/an-invitation-from-vaginal-davis/>.
- 13 Meyers, “An Invitation from Vaginal Davis.”
- 14 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 95.
- 15 Greg Kot, “What a Drag: Brawny, 6-Foot-6-Inch ‘Girly Girl’ Powers Queencore Bill,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 1, 1995.

cho-li-ta: [n.] Diminutive of 'Chola'.
Refers to young latina
girl gangsters.





EARLY DIARIES

troizel

July 1982

Girl, you won't believe what happened today! I was hanging with Fertile LaToyah Jackson, having a glass of Merlot out on the lanai, as we do. Moments like these, when the sun's warmth smiles down on our skin, mimics the feeling of our Afro sisterhood that I cherish so much. We do everything together: shopping, makeup, clubbing, cruising around town. We're practically conjoined twins; it's rare to see one of us without the other. There's something full-bodied and fragrant about our experiences together. I want to swirl it around, breathe it in deeply, and savor it. Can you imagine it? Always having someone by your side? A head below you? A head beside you? Putting your heads together to get over, under, and through this labyrinth we affectionately call life? I don't know what we'd do without one another, but that's of no concern for now. *Let's get into the funk.*

So, we're having wine on the lanai, and I look at Fertile. She looks back at me from behind pussy-pink reflective sunglasses, her eyes masked underneath the bush of her brows. I've seen this girl day in and day out for years of her life; I've seen so many iterations of that beautiful round and porcelain face, that gorgeous Afro crown with the middle part. I know when something's changing, growing in her. I watch as ideas rise from deep

inside of her, germinate, then reach a maximum volume up through her neck and out of her mouth. That's why I love singing with her; the energy of our voices together is such a heavenly and syrupy sound. In fact, have you caught our funky, punky record debut *Indigo, Sassafrass, & Molasses?* Everybody's spinning it.

So, I say, *Fertile, you are always pregnant. What is the story with you, girl? How many babies have you had in one sitting?* And do you know, this girl said one at a time?! Then she tried to come for me and my children. I said, *how many illegitimate children have I had?* She said something like twelve. The nerve! Then, she tried to come for my men, but I had to tell Miss Thing that *all of the boys I go out with are smart, beautiful, gorgeous, and hot.* They were nothing like the men that ran in and out of her life. Later in the day, when I was reading Ellen Frankfort's *Vaginal Politics*, I suggested male birth control as a solution for Fertile's unwanted pregnancies; maybe it was the way to *stop those men from sneaking into her bed and impregnating her.*

She knows as well as me that I could keep my men, and I did; she said it was all in my dreams. As if! She's been in them, she should know! But don't you get to thinking that Fertile and I are on the edge,

ever at war. Fertile and I never truly fight, but we always disagree. I think what holds us together most is our similar differences and our flair for negotiating them for fun. We get a kick from trading markers of identity like a costume constructed from those old tin-foil baseball cards. Remember those? When you look at us, you might look at my long blond hair, statuesque figure, her Afro, and our skin and ask how could we ever be sisters? When to look at us is like illustrating the very picture of difference? Were we mad?

Later, I was turning on Fertile's VCR so we could watch some educational television, and we ended up watching a porno movie. Fertile was so excited to watch it. Her eyes got as big as her head. She was just squealing and giggling and falling all over me. It was getting juicy; *they were doing it until they were satisfied*. I wanted to switch the movie but Fertile was acting like she'd *never seen people doing it on a movie before*. And she hadn't, she said, not on her television, honey. Suddenly, Fertile shrieks that her water broke! Water? *What water?* This girl was telling me her placenta water broke. I knew she was pregnant but all that eroticism on the screen made the baby excited to make its entrance into the world. Fertile was screaming that I needed to get her to a hospital. I was running back and forth and all around; it was like I knew what to do but had no clue what to do. A baby on the way and at this moment of all times. What did I know about birthing babies?

Fertile just sat on the couch while I hurried around packing her suitcase. Once I finished that, I put on my good fur coat and some furry slippers—I wanted to be comfortable and look my best—and got Fertile to the car. Normally, I wouldn't use a car because they're such nasty things. *I don't even know how to drive! I never took my driver's education*. I'd take a bike, but can you imagine me with a pregnant and laboring Fertile, whizzing and wheezing through the city? It would be the sight of the century, wouldn't it? Well, we were still a sight, if you can believe it. While Fertile was huffing and puffing, I was screaming that I could in fact drive. It was a gorgeous day for adventure.

I pulled into the parking lot of Clinica de Las Americas since I had some girlfriends who had gone there. But the windows were barred when we got there. I think they pretended to be closed, so they could turn us away. I guess they assumed we didn't have insurance. Well, we didn't! This seemed like the worst time to be trying to have a baby. With no assistance, we'd have to do it ourselves. We had to

find another comfortable place to have this baby, so I took Fertile to Nude Husband's house. As we scurried past an alabaster fountain in the courtyard, we were hoping aloud that Nude Husband was home. We pounded on the door and a cute blond boy ran to the door with nothing on but an apron and a feather duster in hand. It was Nude Husband. He was shocked to see us, but we had to explain to him that we needed a clean place for Fertile to have some babies because insurance was such an obstacle to proper care. He let us in and told us that we could operate while he cleaned the house.

I got Fertile to lay down in the center of the living room on a woven rug. I knew more about driving than I did about having babies, but we got a blanket to put over her lap and then the babies started to come! After the first baby emerged, Nude Boyfriend and I noticed that there was another baby on its way down the birth canal. *Fertile, you're having twins!* As soon as I finished my exclamation, another baby came and another and another! Each time one was born I put them in a laundry basket that Nude Boyfriend had brought over. One by one the babies came into the world, and I plopped them down into the basket. Once I counted all the children; there were ELEVEN babies that *looked like puppies*. Fertile birthed an entire litter. *She's the first woman to have eleven-tuplets!* And would you believe that this woman disappeared after having that many children? I got a glimpse of her outside skateboarding. *Fertile, you get back here you should not be skateboarding after having all those children!*

*Sincerely,
An Afro sister*

December 1991

Today was my wedding day. How many times have I imagined this day? The smell of the bridal bouquet, the feeling of the soft material of my dress, the look of my husband through teary eyes. The celebration was quaint but gorgeous. An intimate guest list, no wedding party, but who cares! I felt so enraptured by the love of my amour. There weren't many in attendance, except for a small number of my husband's friends, none of mine. It warmed my heart to see them shower him in love for us. They even took him to a showing of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Boat!* I thought it was the sweetest gesture. They swept him up and took him right out of the wedding to celebrate. In all the rush, I guess they forgot about me. That was fine,

they were so excited. I wonder if they even realized I wasn't with them when they got to the theater. An ebony statue in billowing white and a wedding veil should be hard to miss, but I stood alone in the community center. I couldn't think about it too much or it would ruin the day.

Though I wasn't invited to the newlywed activities, I decided to go to *my favorite bar, the Spotlight, and get a drink*. When I finally get there, donned in my bridal white, I grab a drink and sit by the billiards to watch the boys play and enjoy the music. It was a rather empty night at the bar this night, but that was alright. I could fill the room with rays of happiness I felt on this day. I felt like a magnet of good fortune. Though, somehow, I happened to attract the most crazed and opinionated woman. She said her name was Elizabeth Wolf, and she had a microphone and a cameraperson in tow. I was sipping a Merlot and she came right over to me after talking to some punk, shoved the mic into my face, and asked me what I was doing there. I told her how excited I was that I just got married to *the most beautiful man*. She rolled her eyes and told me that she didn't want to be cynical. I'm young and lovely now, but this great moment wouldn't last. I was so taken aback by her brazen approach to sharing her opinion. *I was so lucky!* I could tell that she had been drinking when she questioned why my husband was at a gay theater and not with me. What was happening in society? She wouldn't accept any of my attempts to swat her away. I kept telling her that I was so excited to be married because I've always wanted to be a bride to someone as sweet as my husband. It was the dream of a lifetime. A little girl's wish to find her Prince Charming had come true. But Ms. Wolf kept badgering me, telling me that I needed to take control of the situation before I became old and cynical like her. I needed to take hold of my man and not lose him. We all get old and ugly, she said. She shared that her husband left her for a much younger woman. *I felt sorry for her*, so I tried to keep my composure while she scattered my dreams. Who was she to be defiling my fantasies? *I'm a gorgeous, lovely bride and, sure, I would get old and ugly one day but that was in the future. I can live a happy life!*

Just when she started to annoy me, she asked me if I wanted to play a game. She insisted that I just needed to acclimate to the cruel reality that is the game of life. She wanted me to accept a grim fate, even in the face of this magical moment. Why would I want to play a game at the Spotlight? I just wanted to dance to Madonna's "Vogue"; it was my wedding night! I wanted her to *vogue!* She never did. She said

that Madonna was old and that we could tell money doesn't stop you from becoming ugly. I was so perturbed by this woman, I just twirled away.

*Happily in love,
Marie Antoinette*

May 1982

It's been two years that we've been together. Things have changed drastically. We were friends before and admired each other from afar, but he was on the East Coast and I was on the West. The distance was a welcome thing so we could both maintain the respective businesses we've built from the ground up. Looking back, we sort of fell into a relationship with one another. We're both creatures of habit and routine; we looked up and we were in love it seemed. It all happened so fast for it to have happened so slow. Time seemed to be elastic, but we've been having troubles lately. Troubles I haven't felt able, or willing, to share. The person I fell in love with, Fonda, is no longer who they were when I met them. Fonda has taken on being a drag queen. First, it started with borrowing my clothes and wearing my shoes when we go dancing. Then, it became buying his own wigs and moving my wardrobe around to make room for his ever-evolving costumes. Let me say, I didn't mind sharing clothes or even sharing the vanity mirror in the morning, but it began to affect our sexual intimacy, which was new for us both.

I thought we tried everything to get back into alignment because our relationship has gotten to the point where we only speak to each other in snarky quips. We were never truly having a conversation with one another. One of us was always talking above or around, but never to the other one. This evening, Fonda came into the living space and sat opposite me in a slinky black dress and some gold pumps. He wanted to talk about our relationship, and I told him that *I loved him but I was never in love with him*. Now that he's doing drag, I find myself in a lesbian relationship or some sort of tepid coexistence with someone I thought was my lover. I'm trying to love the person I fell in love with as they change, but it's so hard. This is not what I expected. I'm afraid of what else will change if such fundamental concepts like gender are liquid.

Fonda says that maybe we need a relationship psychologist to help us figure these things out. He told me that an article in *Psychology Today* said that people who were together a long time are with each

other so long they wake up and realize they don't know who they're sleeping next to. I was reticent to the idea that a psychologist could really help us, but I felt open to doing what it took to make our coexistence pleasurable. Fonda said he was glad to hear it because a PhD from Sarah Lawrence was on her way to our high-rise condo to come and talk to us. It was a sneaky thing to do, and I wasn't happy about it. This impromptu session felt like an ambush, but Fonda made me a cocktail—a Bitch—to calm my nerves like a good partner. I would miss having a boyfriend for reasons like this. Fonda was always thinking of me in the little ways, in ways I often couldn't think of for myself. Would I lose those things?

When Dr. Christeen got there, she complimented us immediately on how beautiful of a couple we were. After remarking on our two years, she assumed we were having a lot of problems in our relationship. Fonda drove straight into what he thinks is the major problem of our relationship: our lack of sex. I thought it was something more than sex. Dr. Christeen remarked that we had interracial problems and obviously some issues of gender. I was astounded that she was so frank with us so quickly. I immediately pulled back. *You don't even know us!* She seemed ready for my resistance and assured us that she had handled lesbian relationships before. She knew the ins and outs; she had studied with Anna Freud. I didn't even know there were so many intimacy problems relating to lesbians, but I knew that it sounded similar to what I was experiencing with Fonda. The words Dr. Christeen used were a *little too highbrow for me*. It was hard to keep up. I just wanted *someone to be for me*, solely for me. I wanted the sexual roles to be reversed from time to time. I didn't want to just be Fonda's Lady Mandingo. I wanted him to *take a dildo and fuck my brains out*. Dr. Christeen said that she could help us with these intimacy problems. She had brought toys to get us to experiment with a new routine for sex. I told her that she had been so honest and open that it made me feel soothed. Maybe a change might happen.

She told us that we needed to be mindful of lesbian relationship dynamics because they applied to us as lesbian drag queens. The reason, she said, that lesbians who had been together so long started to get bored with one another was because they were getting bored in sex. We needed to get in tune with the dildo as a penis. We needed to feel comfortable with it so that we could be comfortable with one

another. She had Fonda undress and affix the dildo to her front. I was beginning to *feel a sense of danger immediately*. I was frightened by it because I had never seen a dick in this context. It was big and black, but I was ready for the challenge. She told me that I was now to perform the role of butch bottom. We followed Dr. Christeen into the bedroom where I took an all-fours position on our bed. Fonda got behind me, and I said that I felt too comfortable in that position. *Wasn't the point of this to feel uncomfortable?* Fonda said that all lesbian sex was supposed to be uncomfortable. I guess we were just getting the awkward jitters out. Committing to difference in a relationship is a difficult thing, but here we were, trying our best to stay together.

Dr. Christeen gave Fonda a hairbrush and told him to use it on me, laying on the bed. He thought she meant brush my hair, but she wanted him to paddle my ass cheek. As I submitted myself to the taps, I screamed out and wanted to quiet myself, but Dr. Christeen said that we needed to make sure that the neighbors heard. It was a confirmation of our love to the world. We were apprehensive to start penetration, but Fonda stepped into the role quite naturally. When Fonda entered me, I gave him very clear instructions on what to change for my pleasure. This kind of communication felt foreign to my tongue. We had been together so long it became hard to even say what I wanted, hard to articulate. I was afraid of how he might recreate, but this was my moment to open up as widely as possible. *Harder, but slower. Slower, but harder. Okay, faster, now softer*. Fonda pulled my hair and licked my heel—I called them my “social climbers”—and gave me the satisfaction I needed. It was a moment of unbridled passion in us both. It felt like a floodgate in our relationship had broken open, and we were so wet from the flow.

*All yours,
Vaginal Davis*

September 1983

You've probably never even heard of *LA Weekly's* “LA Dee Da,” but that's okay. It's “the place to dig if you're looking for dirt” and “the place to scan if you're looking for a scoop, hot flashes for cold action.” The first columnist, Pleasant Gehman, had written that as a description in August 1980. When I read it (you know I read every word put in front of me), I just knew I had to be a contributor. I was

always in the know somehow. It wasn't so much that I went digging for dirt; somehow, I always found myself in the right place at the right time. Strange things were always happening around me: a private conversation between secret lovers, a street vendor sale gone wrong, a racist tirade. “LA Dee Da” was an opportunity to use these quirky happenstances to my advantage. As *LA Weekly* advertised it, “Fame is only a postage stamp away.” I would finally get to actualize my dream of being a private investigator with a touch of *Dear Abby*. The charge was to capture nightlife gossip and give truthful personal reviews of club venues. When I started writing to them and finally got reprinted, the buzz had all but died off. That was better for me though, less competition. If the others were afraid of fame, I wouldn't be.

My first feature, May 1983, was a short detail of the funny little scene I saw at Uuuug-ly Café, over there on Ninety-Second and Normandie. It caught the editors' fancy, so they put it in the paper for all of LA to peruse! Fifty punks scarfing down *piles of hogmaws, pigsfeet, and monkeybread*. I don't even know if they knew what they were eating, but they sure took it down *like a pizza* after the club let out. Maybe they were just hungry, maybe it didn't matter what it was. All the while, A'nt Bea, the owner, *saw fit to teach the white boys how to Georgia Bo Bo*. *LA Weekly* had no clue how the Georgia Bo Bo was done (so much for a step-by-step diagram), but anybody who knew Louis Armstrong Hot Five, or Lil's Hot Shots, knew the Georgia Bo Bo. And now, so did these white boys, whether they knew who Louis Armstrong was or not. What an exchange of culture!

The next, June 1983, got me a credit as “our black teen correspondent,” who always amazed and amused when I dropped them a line. I cut this one out when I got a copy and pasted it to a composition notebook I had lying around. It was right above a horrendous and bloated photo of Diana Ross in an advertisement for Motown Night at Club Lingerie. I wanted to remember this, so I kept the full page—terrible portrait and all. I decided to chronicle my experience at the popular Radio, which I described as *a trip 'n' a half*. *The pattys* had seemed to finally find *last year's black dances*. It took them long enough; those dances were waiting for them just outside the club doors. To my surprise, there were a few who could really get down. *A buffalo-clad girl* was Gigoloing and her *Otis/Parsons* partner had some nice moves. Some kid who looked like Ron Howard knew all the dances: *LeCoste, Polo, K-Swiss,*

Med-Fly, Worm, and Nasty. Of course, I wasn't out on the dance floor, but I could tell he was moving *better than a lot of colored boys*. Myself included. *Hey! I'm one of those Negroes who can only stand so much of that funky penguin/rap-a-thon stuff B 4 it puts me to sleep!* I think the editors down at *LA Weekly* were excited to have some representation from someone like me: someone black who couldn't stand rap music. I let them think they understood me, their black teen correspondent. The rest of this feature reported the former Uuuug-ly Café had now become Old Dog, South because the punks were outnumbered by the *Santa Monica hook-hims*. Also, I had heard that the Catch One, on Pico by Crenshaw, was starting to serve the *very in-crowd original Hollywood Mod Squad*. *LA Weekly* editors admitted that whenever they had gone down to the Catch One—“since honkies also needed culture shock”—it was a très gay affair. According to them, “a good party knows no color line (and apparently no sexual boundaries either).” Suffice it to say, we had different experiences of the place.

The latest and last feature of mine to be found is from July 1983, and I'll have you know they never asked for a photo of me to accompany the column. I'm introduced there as “ever-strange,” which has an enchanting musical whimsy to it that I enjoy. You'd think I was an urban sprite with the way *Weekly* parenthetically illustrates me: “(Would this person please appear to us in the flesh and verify his existence?)” It seems I'm quite elusive, which worked for me because I was also becoming quite the tabloid journalist. Did you know that Alfie of Loyola High, Steel of Cathedral High, and Leroy (who owned Allen and Hideaway) were *joining forces to bring you Moded Magazine, LA's first rag to concentrate exclusively on teens and their scenes?* I bet you didn't. I was excited to be the one to break the story. You know Grace Hernandez, the sixteen-year-old who leads Saliva Shakes, with the slam book? She'll be on the cover. I snuck around down at the photo shoot two weekends ago. While I was running out of there for fear of being caught, who did I see, except the *sharpest couple in Hollywood?* *Henry “Black Flag” Rollins and Irene Cara sharing a peach cobbler at a rib joint on Santa Monica near Western Ave*. The *Weekly* asks me directly, again parenthetically, whether this was for real. How could I tell them that I know what I know, even if they don't know me?

*Ever-strange in the flesh,
Denning Taylor*

December 1993

Child, let me tell you an unlikely story. I need to write it down to truly believe it was real. You know I've been trying to get out more since the divorce. My three years of marriage were some of the happiest I've ever experienced. The time have been so hard on me. He was my entire life. He provided financially and, as a couple, we kept in close contact with only his friends. Now, that's all gone: the husband, the money, the friends. I've been spending so much time alone lately. So much time concentrating on what could've been different. Wondering what could've changed. A divorce cracks you open in ways you can't imagine. I feel like I completely lost myself when he told me that he didn't love me anymore. That's when I started drinking red wine. I had always been partial to whites when I was married, but I was trying to change up all my little habits now that I was single again. That's what I was drinking, a Sauvignon Bordeaux, when a woman approached me. She was sitting behind me and then asked me what I was reading because I was so engrossed in it. It was *The Mammoth Hunters*, a novel by Jean M. Auel, but I didn't want to bore her with the details. After a small silence, she asked if she could see it and so I let her. I wasn't too sure what this was about, but the bar was empty, and I appreciated the companionship.

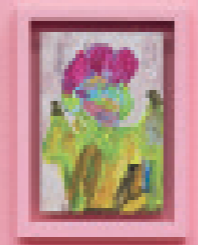
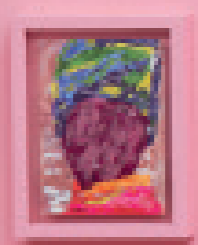
While she was looking at the book, I started to reapply my makeup. She asked me what lipstick I was wearing—Susceptible by Lancôme—and she remarked that she didn't know too much about makeup, but it was a lovely shade. Of course, I know a bit more about makeup now. In fact, I was here at this bar for a management training program for Mary Kay. I had really risen the ranks. I was so proud of myself because this was the first thing that I had accomplished since the divorce and told her so. *I haven't been out in the workforce in years*, but nothing to complain about, *I was free now*.

By this time, she had moved around to the seat across from me. The next thing I knew, she took a microphone out of her purse and asked me questions about women's new place in society. She wanted to know my opinion, as a recent divorcee, on how divorce had become so acceptable these days. She handed me the microphone, but I was taken by surprise. In my silence, she took to introducing herself, Dr. Gloria Taylor, a PhD from Sarah Lawrence who studied women's roles in societies. She was interested in a postfeminist exposé of

women's societal fit now that so much of gender roles had changed. She asked whether I felt lonely now that everything had been taken away from me. I told her that I didn't want to be rude to her, but I didn't know how to answer her question. I expressed wanting to meet someone and get married. I had come to this bar to meet men, but there weren't any around. I often felt lonely, being in a new city, in a new job, in a new life. She asked if I wanted to get a drink and continue talking about women's power in marriages. She advised me to follow something she called "1950s feminism" and get back into the home because I would feel better there. I told her that I had read Dr. Toni Grant's *Being a Woman, Fulfilling Your Femininity, and Finding Love*, but I wasn't too sure about all these thoughts. I was getting older, and things were starting to fall apart. She told me that she believed that I was fertile and still young. For only a second, I thought she was flirting with me. When I needed to go to the powder room, she came with me, and we talked about breast augmentation. I couldn't help but admire her silicon breasts; they were so perky. She went on about feminism in academia, but I was just there to powder my nose. In the end, she asked me if I wanted to come back to her place for another drink because her husband and kids were away. Oddly, she assured me that she wasn't a lesbian, but, seconds later, she tried to kiss me in the elevator! She pulled me down to the ground while kissing and fondling me. I would have never suspected that of her. She was such a sweet girl. I didn't know what to do!

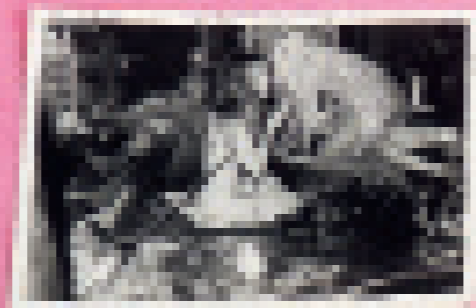
Simply confused,
Lilith Hollywell

pp. 84–86: Vaginal Davis, *Fantasia Library*, part of *Wicked Pavilion*, 2021. Installation views, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Moderna Museet
p. 87: Vaginal Davis, *Joan Didion*, in *Fantasia Library*, part of *Wicked Pavilion*, 2021. Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Moderna Museet
pp. 88–89: Vaginal Davis, *Fantasia Library*, part of *The Wicked Pavilion*, 2021. Installation views, Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Moderna Museet

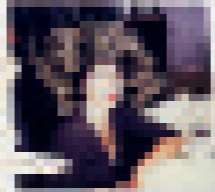





RETAIL SLUT
 The Summer of
 the Slut
 by [unclear]
 [unclear]

[unclear]



[unclear]



[unclear]

[unclear]



[unclear]




Mexico
Lennox
 Bad Hot
 Salsa
 Party




Backville. St.
on ON LTE 188.

Air Mail Per avion



9278

VAGINAL DAVIS

P.O. Box 741278
Los Angeles CA
90004 9278
USA.

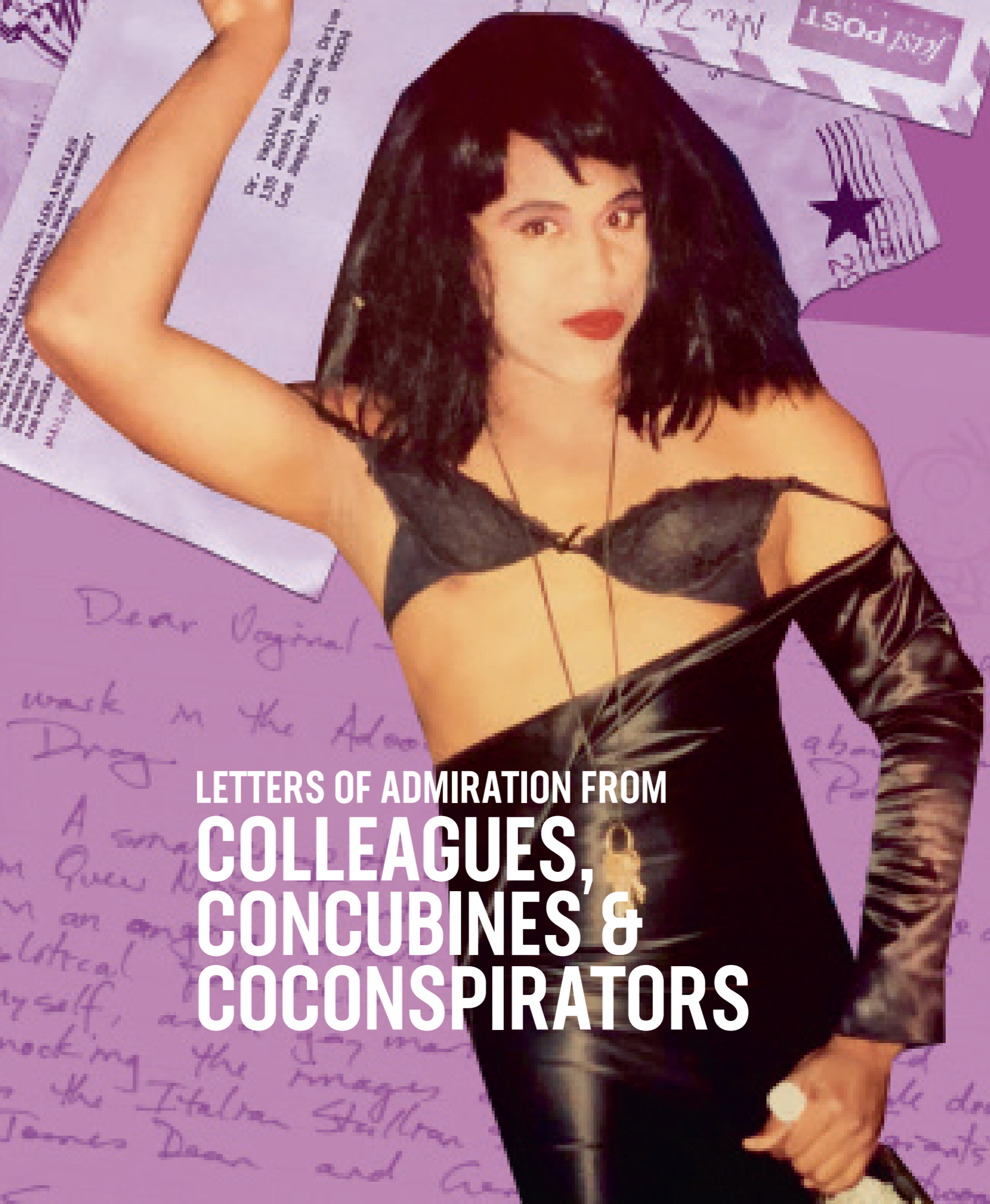
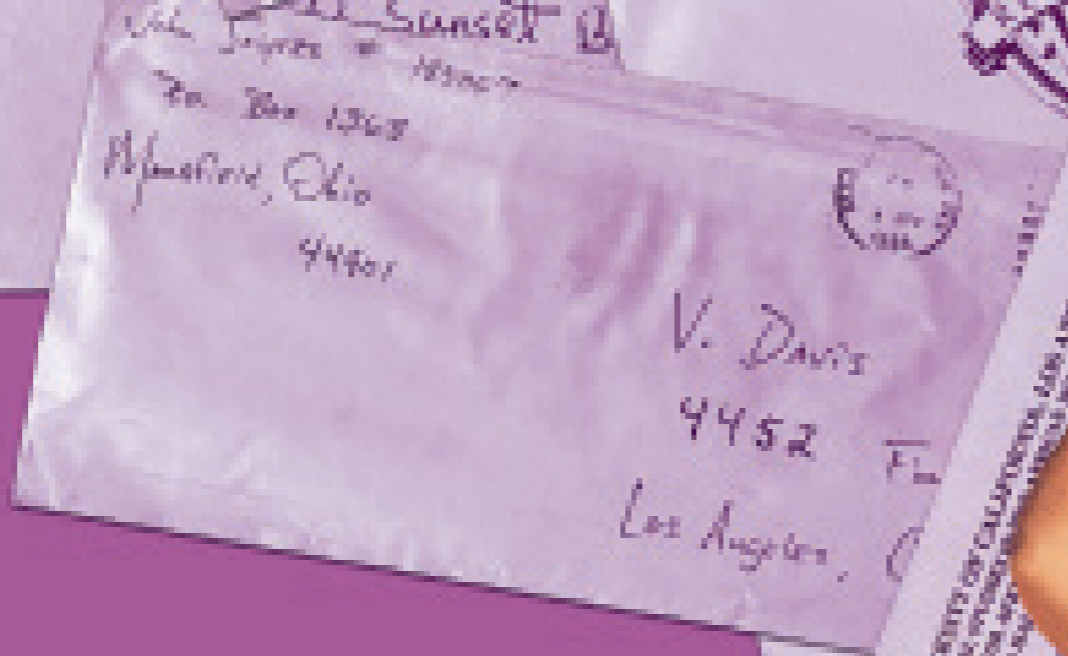
1010

DEAR MS. DAVIS,

LETTERS OF ADMIRATION FROM
**COLLEAGUES,
CONCUBINES &
COCONSPIRATORS**

Dear Original -
work in the Adoo
Drug

A small
in Queen
in an ang
Political
myself, and
knocking
as the Ital
James Dean





**“Is that your act, that’s all you do,
you put guys’ feet in your mouth?”**

–Rosie O’Donnell

**A Letter to Vaginal Davis,
3:00 a.m., September 1, 2023, Los Angeles**

Dearest Lady of Ladies,

I can’t fucking sleep. My mind is racing. Tonight I’m thinking about you and how proud I am of your hard work and giant art-starry successes. It makes me think of poor Rosie O’Donnell who just posted on IG that she doesn’t know what to wear to Beyoncé’s concert because she doesn’t have any silver clothes (she can certainly afford a stylist btw). She’s the same Rosie who asked you backstage in Miami when you opened for Margaret Cho, **“Is that your act, that’s all you do, you put guys’ feet in your mouth?”**


She may think she understands showbiz, but she doesn’t understand art—and besides that, she’s mean. I saw her heckle a young comedienne at a cancer benefit, and the audience recoiled at her joke. It was like watching someone kick a puppy. Some people just manifest their unhappiness, and it’s fugly. Not you, honey! Someone (but not me) should buy Rosie an airplane ticket (coach) to your big show in Sweden so she can understand just what it is that you do. This is your time, your moment, and you should be soaking in it. **You always want to know what’s going on in Los Angeles and what you are missing out on. The answer is NOTHING.** Money has made the city more boring; it’s overdeveloped and just untenable. So many cool things keep disappearing (RIP the French Marketplace in Weho), especially the long-gone cheap accessibility of everything in the 1990s and the wonderfully grimy-yet-naive character of your hometown, captured perfectly in that George C. Scott movie *Hardcore*. Like, for instance, the notorious gay sex motel the Coral Sands on Western Ave is now a fancy boutique hotel and a place for aspirational Kardouchians to snap brunch selfies. At least Quentin bought the historic Vista Theater in Los Feces, itself built on the sacred site of D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* set, and he is saving it for posterity and future cinephiles. But back to

Coral Sands for a second. **You are always wanting the piping-hot gossip, and I’ve been keeping this delicacy warm in the oven for twenty years,** I’m absolutely constipated with it. I was literally sworn to secrecy. I was literally challenged not to tell. But on the occasion of your big retrospectacle, the toothsome cat finally needs to come out of the proverbial bag . . .

Remember the now legendary first Platinum Oasis twenty-four-hour performance art event in 2001 that you and Ron Athey curated at the Coral Sands? (Did you know Patrick’s room installation was really his first-ever public exhibition? I got to DJ, and I passed out on the stage. Bruce LaBruce had his infamous blood room. Hector’s perfect ass was glorified in your window installation, *Topping from the Bottom*. Lots of people got laid. So much subversive art was seen and experienced and consumed and lives were changed. I was there when the sun came up, and you were baptizing people in the pool.) What I want to talk about is the second year of the Platinum Oasis, which is rarely discussed, because the memory of it still hurts all these years later, like a traumatic miscarriage where the baby already had a name. After the success of the first year, every cool creator wanted to be selected to do an installation in a dirty motel room. Some artists traveled from Europe to participate, and local folks spent lots of time and money on their displays. Then the fire marshal closed down the event after only a couple hours, right after midnight. Now really, local authorities never cared who was fisting who at the Coral Sands when it was tweaker central and the first year of Platinum Oasis was under the radar and had gone off without a hitch. What happened in year two? Well, someone who is SO MUCH more punk than any of us didn’t want to wait on the long line to get in. He and his lingerie tycoon bf “allegedly” texted friends on the inside to get them in but you know, once the party was going, no one was looking at their phone or wanted to leave the fun. **So this guy, well-known in Silverlake for having really bad taste, “allegedly” called the fire marshal** and reported a dangerous, overcapacity event because they couldn’t get in easily and for free. His rotten nihilistic selfishness masquerading as random anarchy “allegedly” shut down something rare and magical that so many people had worked very hard to create. I wonder if his ex-friend Exene knows what he did. Platinum Oasis was really a grassroots art happening and could never happen in the Los Angeles of today. I know that carrying around anger and resentment about this secret for two decades has not been healthy for me, but I guess I am a true revenge queen. (I’ve watched *Extremities* a few too many times, where Farrah Fawcett imprisons her rapist in the fireplace). Now you and Ron can finally know what “allegedly” happened and why. And my healing can begin!

Whew! I feel better already. I feel lighter. I think I’m finally getting sleepy.

Congratulations on your big show! You deserve it. I miss you. Come visit, we’ll make you dinner again and use the fancy dishes.



**Love,
Your little papa,
Frank Rodriguez**

Dear, dearest, most refined, most delicate, most indelicate, finest, squishable, squashable, microscopic, macrocosmic miss D, MISS D, When we met for the first time at Club Sucker in Los Angeles during the anthropological late 1990s/1890s after I had been privately obsessed with you for years, something happened that I don't think I have ever told anyone. So, as you may or may not remember, you came up on the stage to introduce my little band, and you got me to take my pants off. Never a difficult thing for anyone to do, but for me because it was YOU doing it, this was a particularly hallucinatory and unforgettable delight. After said disrobing you did three noteworthy things.

Number one: You gently pushed a drum stick up my ass and then proceeded to sing, "OOOOOOOOOOOOOH look at all the dingle berries! Look at all the lovely dingle berries." It was such an important lesson to me in personal downstairs hygiene. No one had ever taught me to clean my ass more carefully. There are many people who owe you thanks.

Number two: We had played almost no shows, and as my idol was presenting it, I was very nervous. My already not-much-to-write-home-about-sized cock shrank right up into me. You then also sang, "OOOOOOOOOOOOOH look at the little mushroom cap! What a cute little mushroom cap!" You laughed good-naturedly, the small audience laughed good-naturedly as did I. It was a very valuable lesson in unashamed freeballing. There are many people for whom I may or may not owe an apology.

Number three: This is the part that I have never told anyone. Thrill upon thrill, you proceeded to put the little mushroom cap into your mouth and give me a very brief and sweet blowjob, for like three seconds. I have incredibly sensitive skin, and it has horrible reactions to anything all the time. Apparently, I was allergic to the lipstick you were wearing, and I got a virulent rash all over my everywhere. I lived in San Jose then and had a six-hour drive

home. It was extraordinarily itchy, and while I wouldn't say painful, I would say quite uncomfortable. My bandmates, all nice but pretty square, had no idea why I was thrashing about and amusingly groaning in the back of the van the whole way, and I could never tell them. It faded out a few days later, and I was fine. The opposite of scarred for life.

Something else you gave me (get it?) was an idea of how to live. When I was sixteen years old, I was an uncomfortable



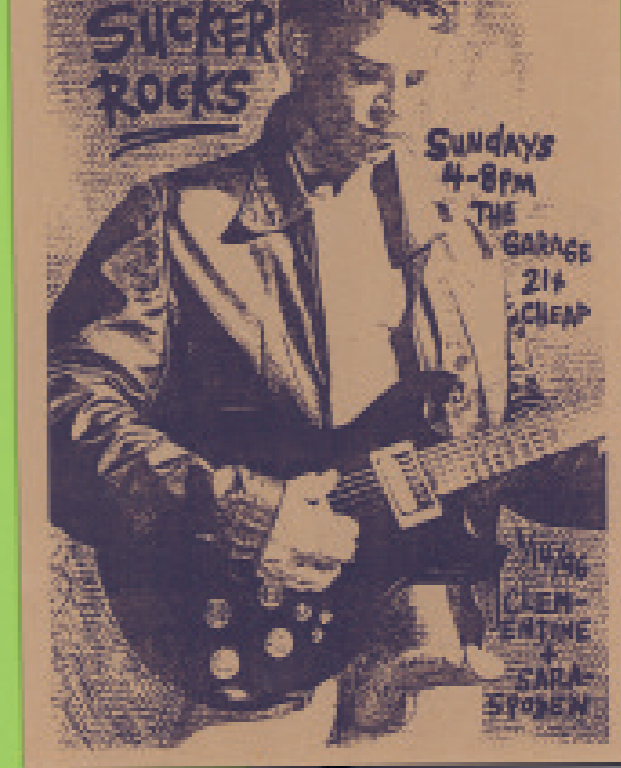
loner. Not that I was badly bullied so much or pointedly excluded, but I was fundamentally shy. My home life was chaotic and could be abusive, and I needed a lot of space to silently regroup. Many nights I would drive my beat-to-hell Peugeot diesel station wagon from the Valley, slowly over the hill into Los Feliz to the Onyx. I would go to sit for hours, lost, considering my options, trying to figure out who, what, why, where, or how I was going to exist. While there, of course not buying anything, just taking up space while

reading the hundreds of underground newspapers and zines they had lying around, I came across a back copy of *Ben Is Dead*. This was an extraordinary moment for inside it was . . .

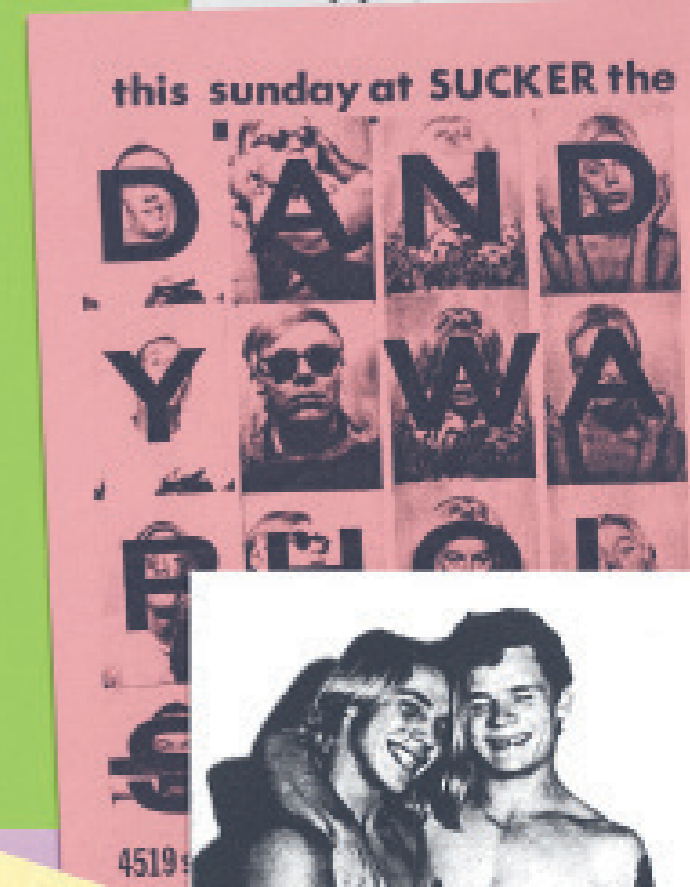
THE PRINCESS VAGINAL MUTHA
FUCKIN' DAVIS

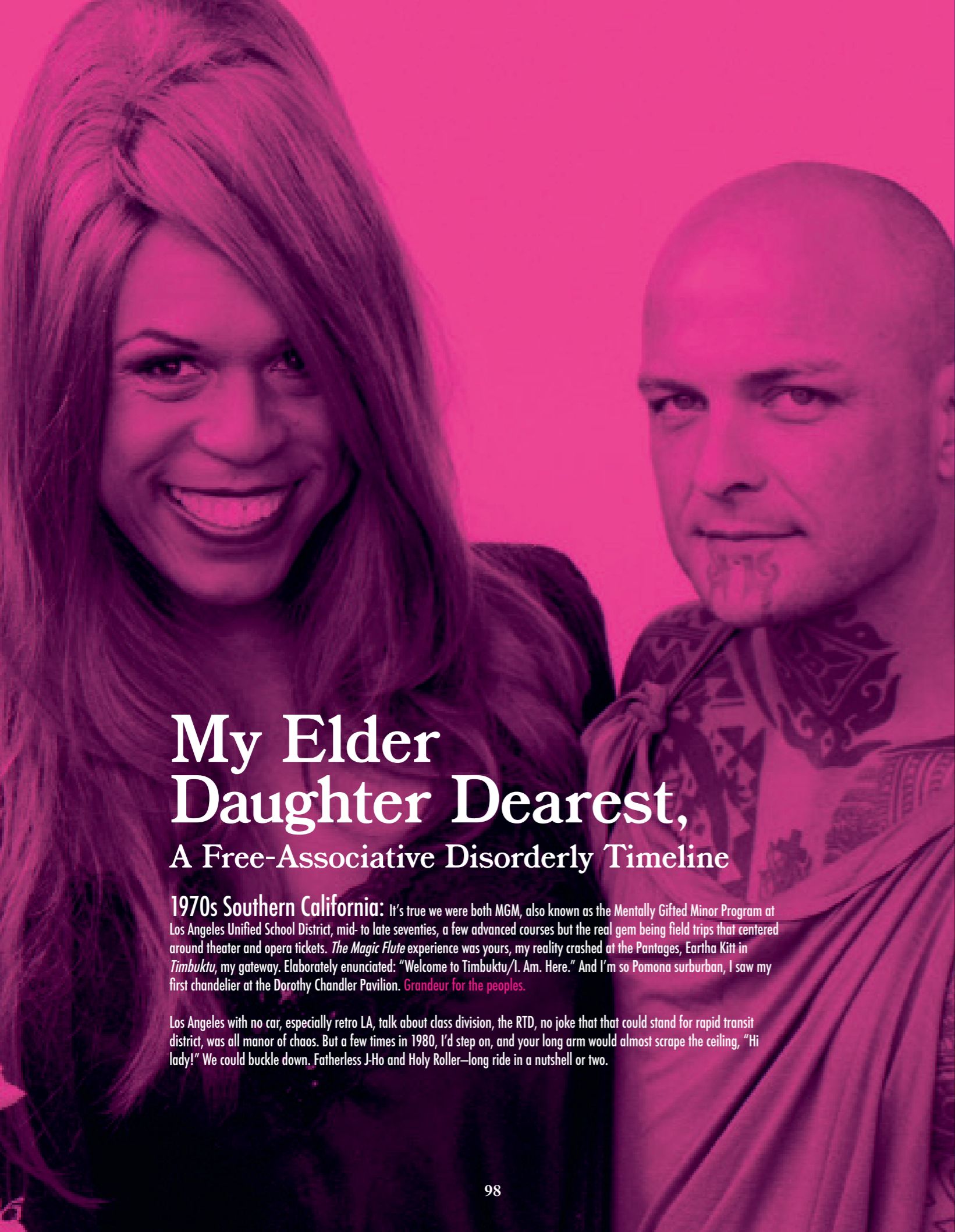
Never had I encountered or even vaguely conceived of, even as a premise and certainly not as a person, an individual who was out queer, a visual artist, a musician, a writer, theorist, a performance artist, a professor, physically beautiful, feminine and physically strong, incredibly glamorous, punk 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. This was a spiritual and aesthetic miracle for me in that there was now a direction to follow that felt so right. From that broad and dedicated direction, you have been a primary guiding light for the entirety of my aesthetic aspiration. I could not be more honored and amazed and stunned that the person who opened and has kept open THE art possibility door has, in addition to being my idol, become a colleague and friend. Also, as we are both Pisces, I hope we share birthday cakes forever.

Love and more love,
Jamie



manly yes, but I like it too





My Elder Daughter Dearest, A Free-Associative Disorderly Timeline

1970s Southern California: It's true we were both MGM, also known as the Mentally Gifted Minor Program at Los Angeles Unified School District, mid- to late seventies, a few advanced courses but the real gem being field trips that centered around theater and opera tickets. *The Magic Flute* experience was yours, my reality crashed at the Pantages, Eartha Kitt in *Timbuktu*, my gateway. Elaborately enunciated: "Welcome to Timbuktu/l. Am. Here." And I'm so Pomona suburban, I saw my first chandelier at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. *Grandeur for the peoples.*

Los Angeles with no car, especially retro LA, talk about class division, the RTD, no joke that that could stand for rapid transit district, was all manor of chaos. But a few times in 1980, I'd step on, and your long arm would almost scrape the ceiling, "Hi lady!" We could buckle down. Fatherless J-Ho and Holy Roller—long ride in a nutshell or two.

Blessed to be in the last wave of alt cult. The pivotal Theoretical Parties at the One Way Leather Bar. Cabaret at the Lhasa Club: your Afro Sister, but is it too soon to bring back the '70s in the early '80s? Chalita, the female menudo at Sunset Junction Street Fair, you as Graciela: "I like the gays and the lesbians, but I don't believe in them." Complicated! Buffalo Gals. Fertile the Kinky Issue, flash mob turquoise jewelry party at the Numbers sweater queen hustler bar. The Black Goddess Bunny at the Spotlight, the Goddess Bony: *Sucking Her Unborn Cock* performance at Sinamatic.

But our dumb everyday keeping-food-and-shelter reality. How the hell to make LA work for you but never catch a break: job-sharing my eighteen-year editorial position at *LA Weekly* newspaper, "Hello, Editorial, may I help you?" in Ms. Davis voice. And whacked assignments like our intervention on shoppers in gentrified old town Pasadena, or our own beast, infiltrating the circuit: Palm Springs White Party dressed for 1950s high tea, in our "White Like Me" feature, humpy dork fashions with humpy dork twins in Vivienne Westwood. Memoir writing group with Lisa Teasley, cocurating GIMP unltid monthly performance concept at Zen Sushi 1999, and onto institutions:

Platinum Oasis: *La Terra Vista Dalla Luna*, *Visions of Excess*. Interject our first copformance, *Epiphany: The Technotronic Opera*. And the second, *Pleather the Dorian Corey Story*, yous as Dorian, I'd as Robert Welles aka The Mummy in the Closet at Spicy Beef Curtains, hosted by the Parlor club. Onwards euro, Visions Brum, Visions Ljubljana. I Preach Hate/My Name's Saleesha Tate. VD is VB: US Navy. *History of Ecstasy* at the MADRE Napoli. Create your reality and still end up homeless, she's a hardnut town.

Exile to my London and your Berlin (though I returned from whence I came, Los Angeles, with a pittance in a bucket). We always knew it was cold-blooded here in the sunshine. There'll always be a hole in LA without you, but we don't deserve it. It was cuter here before it "arrived."

To the king and his kingdom. Long live the queen and everyone involved.

Worldly and Miraculous. Your Loving Father



12 December 2001

DEAR MAMA,

THE REASON TO YOU LATE—(ALSO EARLY IN THE MORNING)—
 BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THE LETTERS IS LONG OVERDUE
 BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THE MANY YEARS...
 I DON'T HAVE MUCH FAMILY THAT I'M CLOSE TO ANY
 YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A MOTHER TO ME, AND I WANTED
 TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS WHAT YOUR
 SHINING LIGHT HAS MEANT TO ME. AS I WRITE TO YOU
 I AM TRYING TO HOLD A PLACE TO CREATE, AMIDST OTHER
 AND WHAT FEELS LIKE AN ACCELERATING, UNSTABLE WORLD.
 I HAVE BEEN STRIVING FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS, IN A WAY,
 THROUGH MY VOICES, I'M ALSO STRIVING FOR THE SOCIETY
 THINGS I AM PART OF—AND I'VE BEEN THERE. THERE ARE
 MANY SIGNS THAT ITS COLLAPSE HAS ALREADY BEGUN
 OF ART, OR BEING AN ARTIST. WHICH MAKES ME THINK
 OF YOU. IN MANY WAYS, YOU ARE THE REASON I BECAME
 AN ARTIST. MEETING YOU BACK IN 2005 (I CAN'T BELIEVE
 THAT WAS ALREADY 20 YEARS AGO!) ILLUSTRATED A PATH
 TO BECOMING WHO I AM, AND YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THERE
 TO GUIDE ME ALONG THE WAY. YOU PROBABLY DON'T
 REMEMBER MEETING ME THEN, BUT I'M SURE YOU WILL
 REMEMBER THE DAY, BECAUSE IT WAS THE LAST "BECOME"
 PARTY IN LA. I WAS JUST VISITING, BUT I'LL NEVER FORGET
 THE FEELING AND ENERGY OF THAT SPACE YOU CREATED—
 THE FEELING THAT MOMENT WAS MY "AHH!" (OF RECOGNITION OF
 MYSELF THAT MOMENT WAS MY "AHH!") AND TO THIS
 DAY MY MAMA HAS BEEN MY HEROINE IF YOU AND YOUR
 LEGACY, YOUR ARTS THAT NIGHT, AFTER ARRIVING TO LA.
 I CANNOT A PARTY WITH FRIENDS CALLED "WILDED" WHICH
 WAS (AND IS) INSPIRED BY YOU. OVER THE YEARS OUR KINSHIP
 HAS GROWN & STRENGTHENED. YOU ALWAYS REMIND ME
 WHAT'S IMPORTANT, TO LAUGH, AND LIVE THE MOMENTS OF
 DISCOMFORT, TO TREASURE THE ECONOMICLY INDIVIDUAL
 BEHAVIOR, TO FIND BEAUTY IN WHAT'S BEEN DISCARDED,
 TO NEVER ABANDON YOUR VOICES, AND GROW THE ROOTS IN ALL
 ITS MOST COMPLEXITY. YOU ARE A LIVING, WORKING ART
 MAMA, AND I AM FOREVER YOUR DAUGHTER.
 LOVE FROM THE WIFE



Dearest Dr. Davis,

A letter about 9/11 is probably not what folks are expecting from me, but when I ask myself what I might take up in a letter that is addressed to you and to the readers of this catalog, this story from oh so long ago bubbles up to the surface.

I hardly need to tell you this tale. But I suppose I do need to tell you what it meant to me. And perhaps it helps people understand some things about us, and by us, I mean not just me. I also mean our friend José. Sometime in the early 1990s, José introduced you to me by giving me a copy of an interview with you—so I was already a fan before he introduced us when you were in New York for Wigstock in, I think, 1998. At that time, I was a graduate student in North Carolina. I really fell for you, in no small part because of the way José was around you. I think he felt seen by you—you have that effect on people—and it might be that you felt seen by him—I think that might not happen so often.

Part of what drew me to Los Angeles was the chance to live in your world—which I did, for a few years.

In 2001 you were on tour with the comedian Margaret Cho, traveling the country as her opening act. You had a date at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles: September 15, just four days after 9/11. The theater, which holds six thousand people, was sold out. There must have been a huge back-and-forth about performing at all. That whole month was somber, the country was in a wild panic. All channels were blasting the war on terror. To say things felt very unsafe is an understatement. That time was

doubled horror—horror of course at what happened. But there was this other feeling, a form of dread, as the whole culture of the country seemed to distill into its most fascist tendencies—you could feel where we were heading, and it was to an ugly place.

My heart twists with anxiety just remembering that week. I was on the periphery of what had to have been stressful for you, for Margaret and her team. Performing was a huge risk for you, in particular. It was hard to joke about anything that week. What you do is miles and miles beyond joking.

Now, my memory of this performance is warped by two things: my total adoration of you, and the fact that you had enlisted me to help out with that performance by playing the role of your assistant.

The auditorium was packed, and the atmosphere was supercharged. I believe there were just a few things on the stage: a microphone stand, a chair, and an eight-foot flag pole from which was draped the American flag. The US is generally prone to grotesque displays of nationalism, but post-9/11, the American flag was absolutely everywhere, and if you weren't waving it, you were somehow supporting terror. So, this was a heavy thing to see.

And then you came out onto the stage. You were wearing a gown—patriotic red and white vertical stripes with a star-spangled blue bustier. You were wearing a blonde wig, your hair was swept up and back and fell in elegant rolls down your shoulders. You looked gorgeous, like you had stepped out a 1940s musical in which you were

about to entertain the troops, but it also felt like you had just stepped out of Eugène de la Croix's *Liberty Leading the People*. That was your vibe that night.

When you went out onto that stage—a stage inside an amusement park in Los Angeles, not an underground venue of any kind but one of the main stages in the city for live comedy and music—we didn't know what was going to happen. Not only were you wearing the flag, underneath that dress you were wearing a merkin-like thing except instead of fur, it was a sequined flag the shape of Texas. How would people react when you ripped off your dress and saw that? Would there be silence? Jeers? Would people throw things at you? I remember being so scared for you I was in an altered state, holding my breath and trying not to panic. But you seemed really quite calm about it all. Because of course, you'd been stepping into the zone of the unthinkable and making an art out of it your whole life.

You sang in the key of punk. You sang "Cherries in the Snow." I'm listening to you sing this while I write. I'm sitting in a café in Silverlake, about three geological layers into the waves of ruthless gentrification I've witnessed since I moved here in 1999. I can't think about this time, nearly a quarter of a century ago, and not think of your old apartment. Of dinners, sessions working on projects. Or that time when a class from one of LA's art schools came for a studio visit, which was essentially a visit to your

home. You had me helping out by working as a butler, or concierge, for the day. I escorted them to your bedroom and would escort them out when you were done with them. I have no idea what happened in there, but I think it was a form of seeing and being seen.

It's hard to talk about your practice when you are the art. Linda Montano is also like this: you really can't talk to her about her "work," she'll throw that label off and make you go deeper. It is work and it's not work. It's anti-work. You don't just model this for people. You help people find the part of their way of living that is their practice.

José once said you were "all concept all the time."

As soon as you walked out on stage, the audience erupted. The crowd was all yours. I watched this from the wings, waiting for my cue to step out and help usher a man you'd chosen from the crowd to take a seat on the chair. We blindfolded him, took off his shoes. And then you covered his feet in, I think, whipped cream, syrup, and adorned them with maraschino cherries—and then treated his feet like a delicious sundae. And all through this, you were worshipping this man like he was the most beautiful, sexy man every put on this earth. My memory is that he was in his early twenties and had an everyday kind of sexiness—there was nothing remarkable about his outfit. He was wearing Birkenstocks. Knee-length shorts, a T-shirt, and maybe a button-up shirt over that. He was very ticklish so the whole thing was very dramatic and funny. You made six thousand people appreciate his beauty and

charm. He loved it, he was radiant when it was over. Not long before he died, José was writing about *methexis*—a Greek term which means something like "sharing-in-the-beauty."

For reasons I can scarcely put into words I think often these days of the scandalous genius of that performance. People had so much fun that night they were crying.

That night at the Universal Amphitheater was some kind of miracle. It affirmed the oppositional, anti-fascist core of your practice and the scenes of which you were and are a part.

Love,
Dr. Doyle



Dear twin sister from a different mother,

I hope this letter find you well. We miss you tremendously here in Los Angeles.

Remember when in 2012 you did the performance for West of Rome (East of Azusa as you would say, brilliantly short-circuiting as usual) for the *Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival*, sponsored by the Getty Research Institute? It was on the history and influence of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. When I asked you about which kind of venue you wanted, you didn't hesitate a second and gave me an address, 3050 Wilshire Boulevard: the Bullock. Now on a busy stretch of Wilshire not far from present-day MacArthur Park, swarming with legal and illegal activities, cars, and even pedestrian traffic; once upon the time in a fancy residential neighborhood. The building, a beautiful early example of Art Deco, was ultimate in 1929; the exterior has a warm terra-cotta color, decorated with tarnished green copper. The tower is an actual skyscraper and featured a light on the top that could be seen from very far away. The Bullock was a luxury department store, the first of its kind, designed to accommodate the upcoming car culture; display windows were decorated to attract the driver's attention. The customers arrived in their fancy cars, welcomed by valets in livery. Early Hollywood stars fluttered through those stained-glass doors. On the first floor there was the famous Perfume Hall; **pretty girls wrapped in simple elegant garments of Neoclassical flavor were constantly pushing on pump spray bottles** enveloping the patrons in clouds of sophisticated fragrances; bright and vivacious notes of bergamot, mixed with intricate flower notes of luxurious jasmine and romantic rose, exotic patchouli, and sandalwood with a hint of spices like cloves and cinnamon. All around the store, small jazz orchestras performed live music. On the other floors, clothes and accessories were displayed in low glass cases placed on rosewood stands, living mannequins walked around showing on demand the last creations of various designers. For refreshments, whispered conversations and clandestine rendezvous, the patrons would go to the Tearoom on the top floor with its private lounges. **Yes, the Tearoom! Where on January 29, 2012, we all gathered for your performance, la crème de la crème of Los Angeles art world.** Mirrors all around, red carpet, fresco paintings evoking idyllic landscapes, golden stuccos, Murano chandeliers, heavy draperies around the big windows opening on the great vistas of Los Angeles. Everybody sitting at the tables sipping champagne and tea, waiting for your appearance. Finally, behind the glass door we got a glimpse of your silhouette. For a long while you trembled, stage fright maybe—or just pretending it? The effect anyway was beautiful and dramatic; right away the audience erupted in a big applause. Your statuesque body was wrapped in a white silk peplos exuding true classical elegance, your hair was big and red, reminiscent of mine at the time, dear sister, classical perimenopausal red, just bigger. The expression on your face was startled like a deer caught in the lights at night; you didn't know where you were in time. **What year was it? 1930, 1973, the year of foundation of the Woman's Building, 2012, 2023? It doesn't matter cause "It's all a memory now!"**

It was the refrain of your piece and also your last words before **you died a little death and collapsed on the red carpet buried by a standing ovation**, showered with a cascade of fragrant blossoms, the colorful petals landing on your peplos creating a kaleidoscopic effect. In that evening of magic and revelation, you shared with us a fundamental truth: "My pussy is still in Los Angeles (I only live in Berlin)." During the performance you revealed even more: your pussy could be "dry and fidgety like a cactus caught in climatic disarray between the Santa Ana winds and inversion layers." You confirmed to us that your pussy resided permanently in Los Angeles, where it first emerged several million years prior from the primordial dark womb of the La Brea Pit. You also told us that your detachable pussy was at that time kept in a climate-controlled storage unit on Normandie and Pico. Now we get to the point, the main reason of this letter.

A while ago the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs in agreement with the Cultural Heritage Commission took **the unanimous decision to declare your pussy a Los Angeles Historical Cultural Monument**; from the storage on Normandie and Pico it was gently handled by men in white gloves, accommodated in a custom-made museum crate and transported to her destination. You should have seen the motorcade going down Pico and Broadway! People were clapping on all the sides of the street. Yes, the destination was the Tearoom of the Bullock on Wilshire. Last night there was the opening ceremony, the new major, Karen Bass, cut the ribbon. The room was dimly lit, bathed in golden sunset glow. At the center there was this case in polished mahogany, with a velvet pillow inside that held the treasure beyond measure, your pussy, indeed, surrounded by a crown of red hair forever frozen in time by massive doses of hair spray, it offered the essence of the lush of an enchanted forest after the rain, it sparkled like captured starlight transcending the boundaries of the mortal world. Paparazzi were going crazy outside. **They came from all planes of existence and marveled: Marlene Dietrich, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, Bette Davis, you name it**, but also Judy Chicago, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Arlene Raven, Terry Wolverton, Suzan Levi Strauss, the Silver Lake Power Walker, Mike Kelley, Marnie Weber, Hector Martinez, Ron Athey, Karen Lofgren, Jennifer Doyle . . . the list could go on and on. Many of the guests gave generous contributions; millions were raised. I am sure you will be pleased to hear, dear sister, that the money will be devolved to the housing and care of the many thousands of homeless people in Los Angeles. Once again, the collective healing power of art has been channeled through you, its impact will become evident, and your praise will be sung in the streets of Los Angeles.

**Hugs and kisses,
Your loving sister,**

Emi



*"My pussy
is still in
Los Angeles
(I only live in Berlin)"*



A Letter to Several Unknown Women (In Six Parts)

1. As you know, my brother and I were both given what my Southern Baptist family calls “biblical names” when we were born. And not just biblical, but Old Testament biblical, that is, Hebrew: David (דָּוִד, skilled musician and infamous horn pig) and Daniel (דָּנִיֵּל, good at reading the writing on the wall and relatively unflappable when exposed to high temperatures). In my good Southern Baptist family, names were not just a convenient place marker; they held deeper meanings, potentially even cosmic and eternal ones.

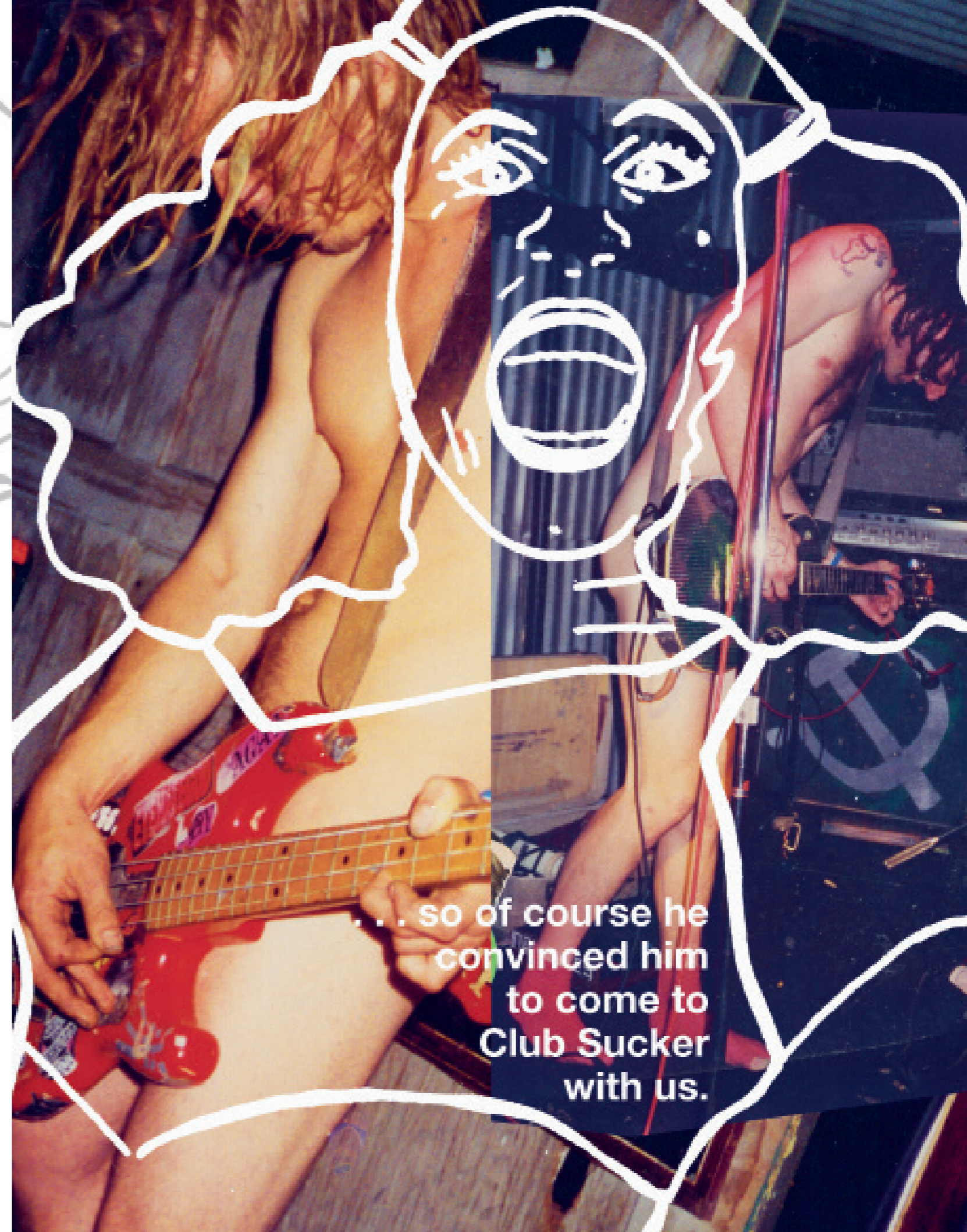
2. Despite the weight of my overburdened name, I lived for a long time in relative ease with it. It had a lovely Irish song to go along with it, and I liked how it passed easily from language to language. It made things very simple. And they were simple.

That is, until I met you. Then things started to get complicated.

3. Long before you began doling out names to others, you were giving them to yourself. Sometimes for practical reasons (hiding from editors or creditors or other unsavories), sometimes out of whimsy or perhaps even boredom. If there is magic in a name, then you have been a sorceress for years. You quickly expanded your range beyond just yourself, giving new names to both friends and enemies (those are often the best, and I won't repeat them here to protect the guilty), but also to people who, in a certain manner of speaking, don't actually exist. But then, they have a name, so I suppose they do exist.

4. Sometimes the naming doesn't involve people at all. I remember one of my favorites of your performances was an introduction to an evening in the film series *Contemporary Vinegar Syndrome*. We were showing two documentaries made by collectives from the

Arsenal Archive. Tiny b_books in Kreuzberg was packed to the rafters on a beautiful night in early November. The performance consisted entirely of reading out the names of Black community, without commentary, without explanation, albeit with an occasional slice of innuendo. The words didn't surprise me, I knew exactly what they would be ahead of time. But still, I was mesmerized by the act of calling out these names as you moved among the crowd. Sometimes a name can also be a weapon against forgetting.



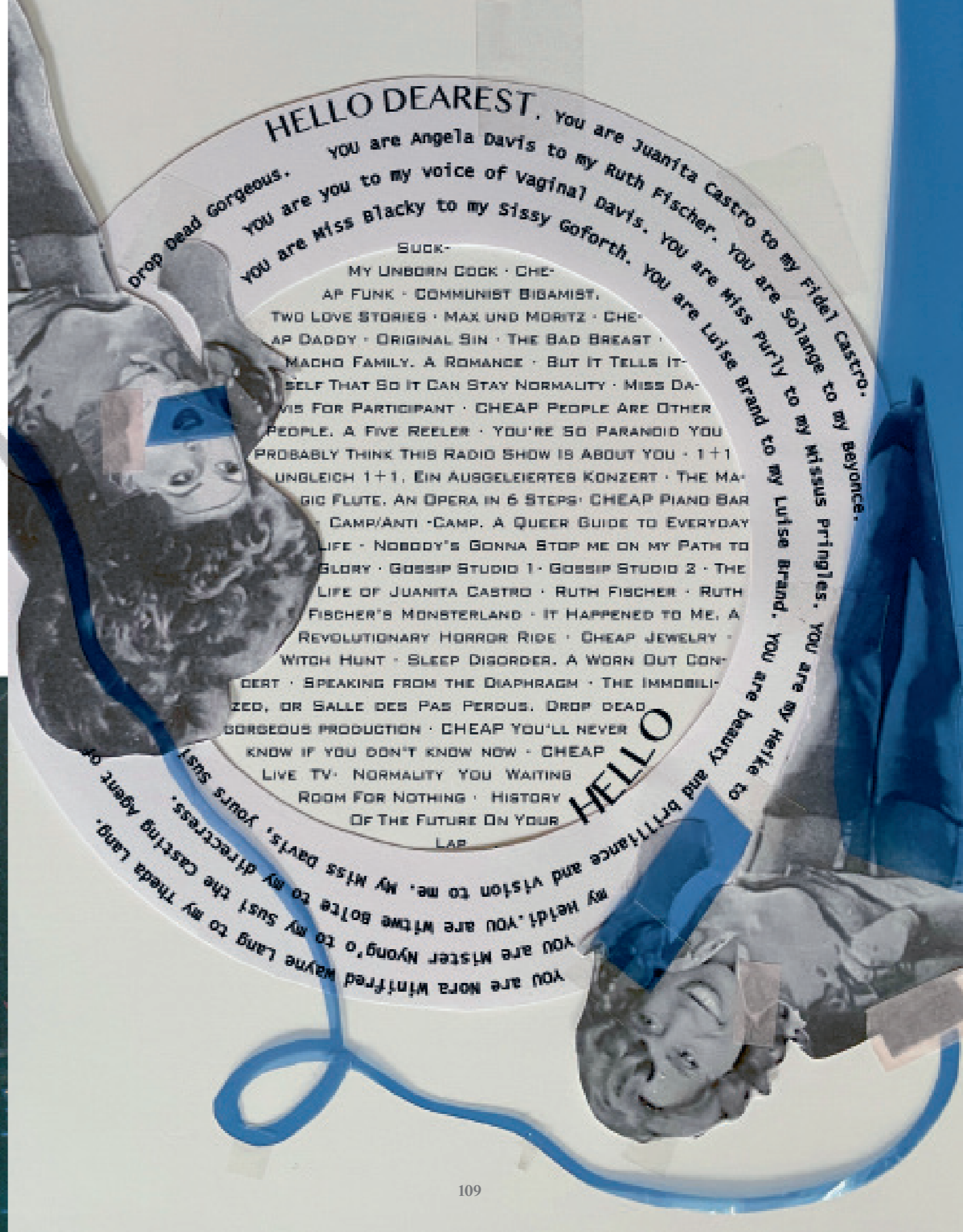
... so of course he
convinced him
to come to
Club Sucker
with us.

5. It's been so long now that I can no longer remember the first time you gave me a new name. But I have noticed over the years that mine tend to be quite malleable and flexible. The first one I can really remember was already unstable from its inception: was it Daniela Ramona or Daniela Romana? Just that tiny alternation of two vowels oscillated between Mexican and Italian. Not a bad place to be in fact.

Later on, after we had both abandoned the City of the Fallen Angels for the City of I'm No Angel, the edges started to fray even more. I would be forcibly converted (these days we say reverted) from my good Baptist Hebrew name into a Latter Day Sanctified Islamic version, initially as the Scandinavian Muslim, but then interchangeably and intermittently as the Jewish Muslim. Uzi Parnes once asked me why I was called the Jewish Muslim, since, he speculated, "I don't believe that you're either one." But of course, it was a rhetorical question. He knew perfectly well.

6. I don't know if I ever told you this, but Marcuse and I ran into the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas at the Faultline Beer Bust one Sunday in the early 1990s. As you know, he thought and wrote a lot about names and naming. Bhaskar was there too, so of course he convinced him to come to Club Sucker with us. Anyway, he left a little early, because he was quite an old man already, but as he was leaving he muttered something about you "denying or absorbing the differences that appear to betray or limit." You seem to have triggered a vague hope in him ("perhaps" he would caution) that naming could allow us to divine "the end of a certain intelligibility but the dawning of a new one." He died only a couple of years later, but I often think of him when someone calls me by one of your names.

Daniel Hendrickson



Ms. Davis,
Vag,
Vaginal!

W. H. Auden has said that “proper names are poetry in the raw. Like all poetry, they are untranslatable.” And indeed, Ms. Vaginal Davis, you are absolutely untranslatable.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve spent the last three decades of my life trying to be more like you. I remember vividly a day in my third year of elementary school: every student was asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. I could see the faces of my classmates contort in thought as they saw the tangled webs of possible futures spread before them, and wondered which end they should reach for and use as whip to ride ingloriously into that darkening night of our adulthood.

As our teacher went down the rows of squinting faces, asking each to announce what they wanted to be, I could feel my excitement grow. For with every platitudinous reply of “firefighter,” “teacher,” “doctor,” “milner,” “smithy,” or “artiste” meekly bleated out from these six-year old plebians, I grew more certain of the power and wisdom of my own bright destiny.

When it was finally my turn, and my teacher asked, “Hyunhye, what would you like to be when you grow up,” I shot up from my chair, and with a voice clear and loud, declared, not only for the teacher, the class, but for the *world*,

“I WANT TO BE . . . VAGINAL!”

A few days later, my teacher put up on our class wall the photos of each student with the names of their desired futures. For me, of course, this was a proper name, untranslatable, irrevocable, divine.

Every morning, as I entered the class, I would give that photo, which has now become a personal good-luck talisman of sorts, a little rub as a ritual for all that is to come.

Now, I must admit that I have not quite realized this dream of becoming completely Vaginal. But I am not deterred. For I’m continuously inspired by your giant gift of grace and gab, your power and poise, your disruption and reinvention of the familiar, fierce, fragile, farcical, fashionable, forbidden, filial, fucked, and fabulous. Vaginal is not simply something to be achieved, but a way of becoming. Untranslatable in its radicality.

Here’s to a lifetime of becoming ever more Vaginal.

With endless love,
Hyunhye/Angela





So Ms. D, I'm thrilled that it seems that museums, collectors, and gallerists are finally taking note of your brilliant little paintings, sculptures, and installations. We know that most of those art-world institutional people are size queens who somehow think it makes more sense to pay over the top for a big ugly canvas by some white straight cis guy rather than value the history, complexity, and artistic ingenuity packed into one of your business card-sized little ladies. I know that you don't really care about all this. I mean, you're happy to get the money, of course. But you say often enough that you go in and out of fashion every five years, so why bother licking your lips over all the attention now? I figure that's your blithe way of dealing with the racism and homo- and transphobia that would relegate your work to some kind of marginal entertainment, spice of diversity, or drag queen art. It's certainly a constructive approach to the forces of oppression you've had to confront your whole life. I love and deeply admire your refusal to accommodate yourself to the institutional or mainstream demands of the moment, like that time you got a call from Marilyn Manson's people who wanted you to direct a new music video because they were so inspired by your brilliant video, *The White to Be Angry*. You matter-of-factly agreed and turned in a treatment. "But where's Marilyn in here," they asked. "Oh darling, no," you responded, "I'm not going to use tired Marilyn Manson in this video." They never called back. Love it! But even if you're not invested in getting recognition for your work, I'm determined that you do. I want you to get all the kudos and moolah you so obviously deserve. Sarah Siddons Award for Distinguished Achievement. MacArthur Foundation, where are you? José and I talked about this over twenty years ago. C'mon. Rather than another prize for a well-paid professor, what about this Black intersex ghetto warrior whose work has confounded and sustained generations of queer kids for decades. In terms of critical attention, I was extremely happy to read that brief review of one of your shows by Catherine Taft in *Artforum* (before I canceled my subscription!) because she touched on aspects of your painting practice that have yet to be adequately addressed: the use of found printed objects as a kind of canvas, including hotel or university letterheads, business cards, other people's art opening invites, pages from magazines, and postcards or letters from friends; the unusual list of elements that function as an art medium ("beauty elixirs, makeup, herbal tinctures, lotions, painkillers, and other tonics," as Taft put it); the choice of women for your portraits from an idiosyncratic archive of known and lesser-known figures from old Hollywood, art and literary history, and Black American and queer

culture. Your paintings are images of great temporal density, not just because of the retro associations of your dreamy brushstrokes—Fauvist here, Impressionist there, Dada over there—but because of the layers of reference simultaneously conveyed by each painted over found object. If I may say so, your paintings take the temporal dynamics and fabulatory potential of gossip, which characterizes most of your art practice (and your everyday life, my darling sister of dish), to a whole new level of aesthetic complexity. Take your portrait *Della Reese at the Cine Grill* (2020), for example, that is painted over a small white business card advertising CHEAP and XIU XIU's 2017 performance of Susanne's concert, *Original Sin*, at silent green in Berlin. Reese's face emerges from the left side of the upright card in yellow and aquamarine, with black eyelashes and mascara, the suggestion of a short black hairdo and the memory of red lips. Her head is embraced by thick gray and white brushstrokes that cover most of the black text on the card's left side, while pink shades dominate on the right. "CHEAP presents" is visible beneath the almost transparent yellow at the bottom left and "and Jamie Stewart" vertically slides out of the gray in the upper center. With the yellow linking CHEAP to Reese and with Jamie escorting the singer to the pink on her right, it's as if the silent green cultural center in Berlin-Wedding, the site of many of your and our performances over the past years, conjures up associations with the legendary Cinegrill at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel from days of yore. Vaginal Davis presents CHEAP's production of Della Reese and Jamie Stewart at a cabaret in Berlin, Los Angeles. What if? Who knows if Jamie is even aware of his luck at appearing in this fabulated performance in the space-time of your speculative cosmology? But why care about what those who appear in your found printed objects think about being mobilized as reference points for your intimate, indiscreet fabulations? Who asks permission to gossip?

Love,
Marcuse



Tante Vag,

J tells me he saw you in the park the other day, but it was so swampy and full of mosquitos he was being eaten alive—not in the way he wanted—and so he had to rush off. I'm remembering this now because I'm watching a young guy wearing nice shorts cruising this park. I can see him bending down, using his clean, medium-length fingernail to tenderly press a criss-cross onto a blushing insect bite coming up on his leg. My dad once showed me how to do the exact same thing after I got eaten to shit in my grandmother's back green one summer. He learned this trick when he was in the Boy Scouts. Don't scratch it, just put a hex on it, he says.

By the time my thoroughly scratched mosquito bites swelled to the size of golf balls, merging their throbbing masses together in expressive merriment, my dad tried to distract me with other things he learned from the Boy Scouts: how to boil a pot of water up in a tree (why? all the predators here can climb and care little for tea); what to do if you accidentally camp on a scorpion's nest (again, this seems like one of many oversights); what do when a fellow Boy Scout tells you he's been bitten by a snake. Now *this* last activity had a solution that excited me: you have to immediately slap him in the face, while simultaneously slashing his wound with a small knife. This isn't the only solution to the problem, apparently. Other times, my dad told me, it's better to suck the poison out. This is about when I began to fantasize about saving boys from snakes. Slapping, slashing, and sucking. They all sounded like intimate kindnesses between Boy Scouts, though I imagine it's probably considered something other than that today. Being a homo here still carries fines, caning, possibly prison. Spoiler alert: You *can* be a homosexual in the movies, but only if your character repents and/or dies—then it's okay.

I remember that summer of my devouring especially because it was the first time I watched *Predator* and ate Pringles. The Pringles were consumed in celebration of my cousin who had just starred in its new TV commercial, as the company attempted to expand into and conquer the Southeast Asian snack landscape. *Predator* was just a pirate VHS tape my dad bought at Central Market to keep me occupied and stop me scratching myself to death.

I'm not sure if you saw that movie, but the thing I remember most about it is that you don't see the Predator for a long time. Instead, the audience gets to see the Predator's POV as it snacks on a buffet of anabolic bouncy castle mercenaries as they prowl around the jungle. This summer movie felt apropos of my condition: like mosquitos, the Predator senses its prey through heat and smell. Sweaty Schwarzenegger is rendered as a tasty little heat-leaking protein packet. I watched it again yesterday and was surprised at the implicit politics of the film. An early target of the Predator is identified because he laughs at a misogynistic joke, another because he is homophobic and racist. Did you know the Predator's blood was created from blending the inner goo of glow sticks with lube? I had no idea that it was such a circuit boy flick until I watched it back last week. As I write, I recall this was also when my dad tried to explain to me why some people want to inject hormones. Anyway, in more ways than one, it all seems incredibly influential in retrospect.

With unrepentant hexes / kisses,

Mason



December 15, 2023

Dearest Gorgeous Auntiela,

I didn't know that you get up with the saints every morning at five a.m. until just happening upon your fantastic "No One Leaves Delilah-A (W)rap on Riots" interview! What an incredibly vivid living map you created of our city of Los Angeles, focusing on the 1940s through early 2000s. I shouldn't call it "our city" as you've been done with it now for more than twelve years, while it continues its ruthless sale to the highest bidder, and the homeless are in tents all over the streets. I'm still here, no matter how many times I have seriously reconsidered moving to your Berlin, which I know is becoming ever more expensive too, and exaggeratedly so after my last visit in 2017, when we had so much fun on your Cheap Funk Reboot FM radio show. Thank you again for having me. While watching your Riots interview, I was so fascinated to hear your family history in the context of the second wave of the Great Migration, having moved from Louisiana to Los Angeles in the 1940s and living in East LA, which was a multiracial neighborhood at the time. I also didn't know your family lived in the 1949 Ramona Gardens Project House designed by Lloyd Wright and stayed there until 1966.

I missed the 1965 Watts uprising; my family moved from LA to Durham, North Carolina, a few years before that and remained in the South for seven years, missing everything from the riots to the Manson Murders. Wanda Coleman told me probably two decades ago in the bathroom of Cal State University, where we were doing a reading performance together, that Manson used to talk to her in a Venice Beach park, and she said this with wide eyes and a girly giggle since she'd also just told me that she used to hold her pee all day in school, every day, not wanting to go in the dirty school bathrooms. You know she wrote so brilliantly about Watts, having grown up there. So, I could very much picture in your describing your mother taking you as a toddler outside to see the soldiers, the tanks, and the smoke everywhere, and how utterly terrifying it was. It's now indelible in my mind, after hearing you. And that you were there all because you happened to be visiting your godmother and got stuck for a week due to curfew. Even after curfew lifted, you all went to see your sister in the Pico Union area only to find more soldiers, the National Guard right there in mid-city LA. It's so true how much of an effect this had, no matter where any of us were at this time in America, and that once you became part of the punk scene, with the Afro Sisters, it was the outlet for the anger of growing up poor and Black in the inner city.

I so enjoyed hearing about your mid-eighties birthing of the band ¡Cholita!. I knew your father was born in Mexico, and by the way, since you mentioned listening to it back then, the radio station KLOVE* still exists—my Uber driver was playing it on the way to the airport for my flight to Kenya, staying with the Maasai this past May. Your writing songs in Spanish, collaborating with Alice Bag, your art band Pedro, Muriel, and Esther (PME) period was all so fabulous to place in the historical context of the 1940s Zoot Suit Riots, the Sleepy Lagoon Race Riots, and the rejection of joining the troops. I didn't realize you were influenced by the Pachuca, nor did I know they were the first to do miniskirts and the lipliner above their lips, and so your ¡Cholita! was combining Pachuca with the mid-seventies girl gang look.

When you talked about Audre Lorde being your muse and that your Speakeasy, Bricktops, with Andrew Gould, inspired your name for Andrew—Audre Beardsley—it reminded me of the fun we had doing yours and Ron's** discotheqa performance *Pleather, the Dorian Corey Story* at the Platinum Oasis fundraiser, "Spicy Beef Curtains" at Andrew's Parlour Club.



I am so excited for your Moderna Museet show! I have a thing for the Swedes—in high school it was the Swedish exchange student who asked me to the prom. My parents wouldn't let me go with a white boy, even though they knew him well and liked him. I have always been a little obsessed with Hilma Af Klint's work and Swedenborg's words, and I find myself binging Swedish TV shows on Netflix like *Bonusfamiljen* and *Kärlek och anarki*. I just finished writing the opera libretto "The Passion of Nell," which is based on the stalker of the Swedish soprano Birgit Nilsson; it is slated for a 2025 premiere.

Your Marc Selwyn gallery show of paintings in Beverly Hills was exquisite; I wished so much that you would have come. I miss you, and I'm so very proud of you and all of the genius work you continue to gift the world.

Eternal love and kissyz,

Niecy

* The actual radio call letters are KLVE.

** Ron Athey, who Ms. Davis calls "Daddy" and I call "luv" so I simplified with "Ron."

Monday, November 20, 2023

My Dear Ms. Davis,

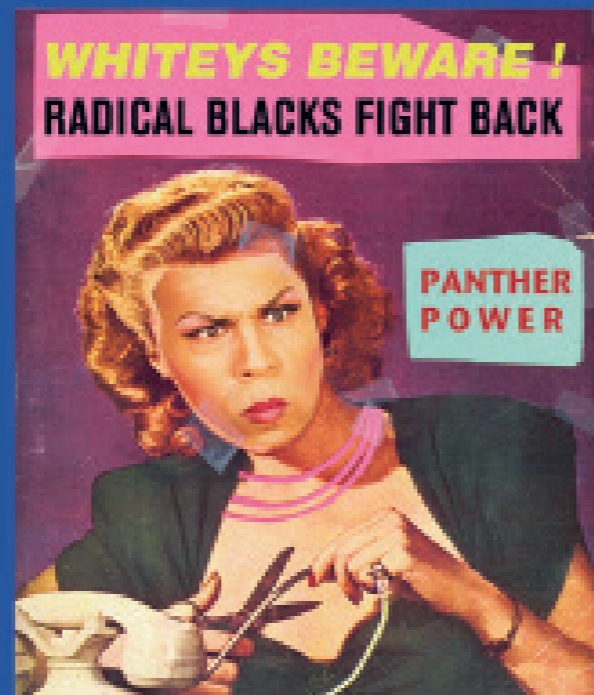
I have sat down to write this letter dozens of times, but this time I intend for it to stick. There is a certain camp mode of affectation common in queer correspondence, I know, but let me suspend it for the duration just this once. I recognize that I am writing partly to you, partly to an icon. And that this is an "open letter," joining a chorus of your other admirers, comrades, and confidantes. Amid that crowd, I am only that most impossible of a thing, a friend. Before the academic and curatorial positions, and after them, I am just someone who was enchanted by your presence and seduced into your world. I had the nerve to write a book titled *Afro-Fabulations*, but every word of it, I feel, was my imperfect transcription of your mythmaking.

I think I know from reading your blog that your preferred mode of correspondence is confession. You want to know every secret of our desires, that you might broadcast them. I know I can come across as reticent, compared to the bawdy company who are gathered by this solicitation. I have long flattered myself that I could nevertheless somehow remain some sort of use to you, even in my tongue-tied, nonrevealing manner. You once said that you like to art direct people's lives, and it was always a secret, shameful wish that you might one day condescend to art direct mine.

But already I fear I have fallen into a camp idiom, designed to protect the queer from criminal prosecution, when what your career announces, before anything else, is the furious arrival of punk, destroying all closets. And while this written occasion may call for little more than my basking in your deserved glory, I hope I may write something of actual interest to you, to deliver some news that may serve as a kind of public gossip.

I can never forget the *Rising Stars, Falling Stars* introduction

where you introduced your aghast German audience to the fact of your blackness (a fact we bear in common, however differently, as you know). That evening changed me, and I am still ruminating it. I have never felt so bold an impulse as to want to protect you from the vampire's kiss of whiteness, but I do confess to wishing that your candor, your example, could somehow protect me. Almost too late did I come to learn the lesson you were freely advertising: that there is no safe harbor, only temporary respite, from the "ontological terror" of being

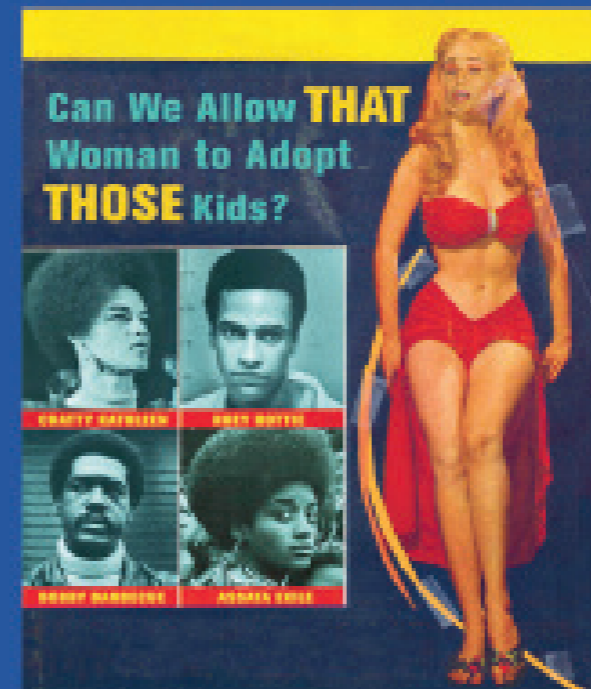


black in antiblack spaces, as the thinker Calvin Warren has put it. Only with my youth well behind me, perhaps, could I afford to bear the contemplation of the awful truth that it was never our sameness that I was bound to protect, but our differences.

That we have both survived up to this juncture is, I hope I may observe, a shared improbability. You have invented and reinvented yourself with the devoted support of a circle that is also a spiral, a spiral into which I humbly place myself. But I do not flatter that I have been much practical use to you. I have rather

been a sharer in your survival, along with so many others. Only at midlife, only in the wake of the pandemic, has it come to weigh upon me the great cost it must be to you of having such a fandom. To sustain us, to mother us, is an infinite demand and I'm sure a thankless task. The arrival of this museum survey and this publication comes very late, however sweet the victory must surely feel.

Save me from turning into a church lady in this letter, however. There is no need to "give you your flowers," you who transfigured the very idea of efflorescence with the desperate



inventiveness of your life and art. You endowed black punk faggotry with a repertoire that secondary and tertiary imitators will be drawing from for the foreseeable future. You have achieved that most human of fates and become immortal.

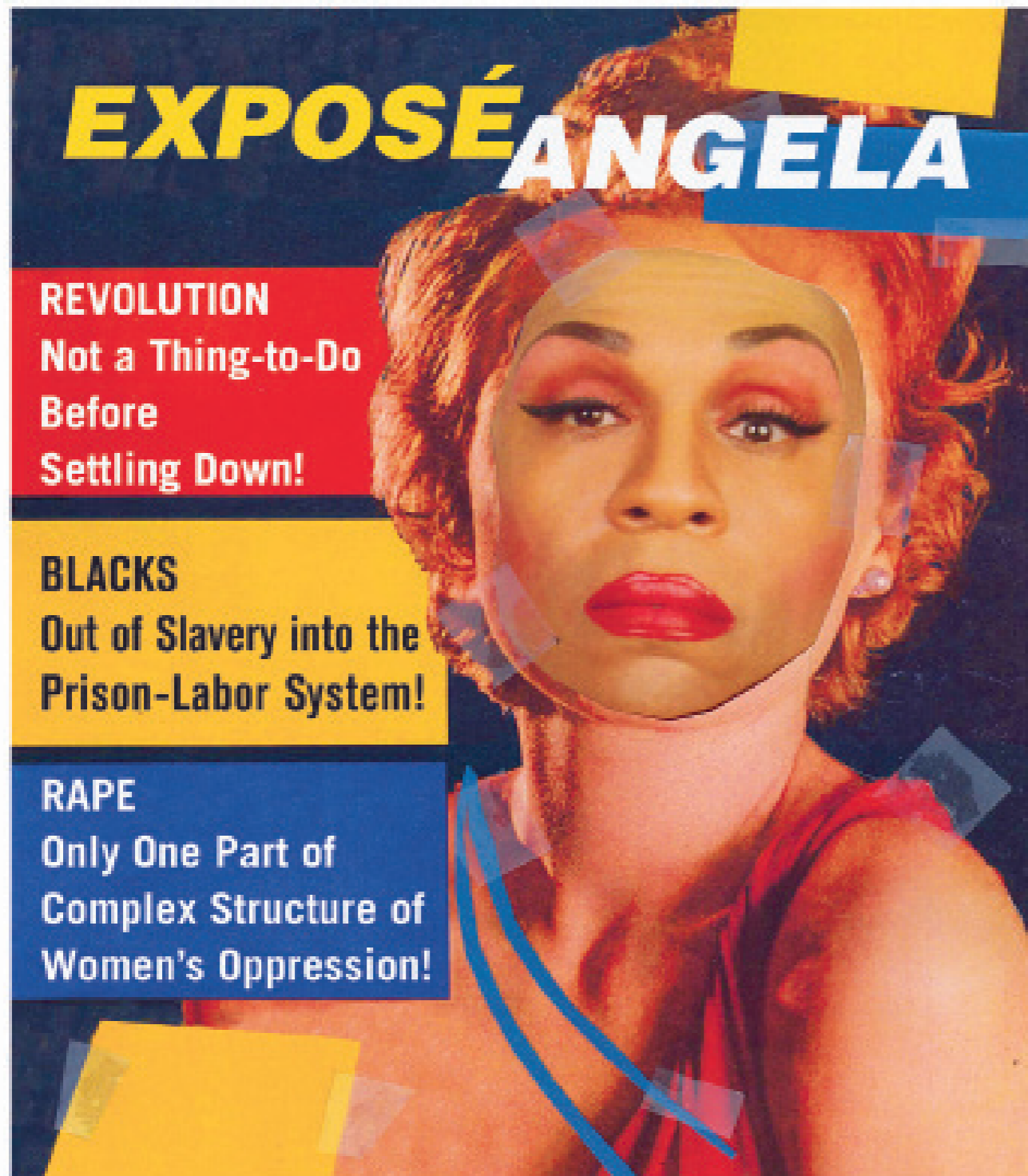
When I made it my business to study performance, not yet age twenty, I had already put away my own ambitions toward the stage. I wanted to be a freeloader, perhaps a groupie, reasoning that every star needs a halo. From the moment you appeared on the cover of *Disidentifications*, you were the brightest star in my

firmament, the avatar of a queer counterworld announced and enacted in the prose of our late friend José Muñoz. Meeting José, meeting you, I was like the dog who caught the car: I could not imagine a future beyond this, my wildest dreams. I confess this now, at the risk of it coming across as spooky or, as the kids say, cringe. It turns out that I do have some stomach for confession after all. Yet, I do not count it against myself at all that I wanted and needed you to invent me, a possible me, a professor of black queer performance.

But to profess, I also know (because you have reminded me), is itself a performance. And all too often, an unintentionally comic one. Someone in the academy once advised me to bore my audiences, because that way they will respect me. If I entertain them, I was warned, they will think me trivial. This, I know now, was just about the most homophobic thing ever said to me, and I still struggle not to internalize it. Perhaps that is why you, specifically, have saved me. Saved me, so far, from the terrible fate of respectability. It terrifies me a little to acknowledge that neither of us will fail to pay the price, even as I know that you, unlike me, are never boring.

Let me take a leaf from your playbook, for once, and quit while I am ahead. Or behind, which may be more to my own style. I am just a member of your audience who has risen to applaud, who corroborates your eloquent rage against the venality and duplicity and sham of this world. Whatever system I am tempted to adopt I foreswear it, in allegiance to the inimitable example you set of how to cut a tear through that veil. When you speak from the diaphragm, you will always thrill these ears. And leave this body with newer, better marching orders for navigating the stunning dreadfulness that it must awake to, always, of course, with love, with love.

Ever yours,
Tavia



. . . I am writing from Prague to pay you my respect, admiration, and gratitude for your amazing work. Dear Ms. Davis, you are undeniable. Thank you for being in this world, which desperately needs you. Here are some words for you, for us, for them.

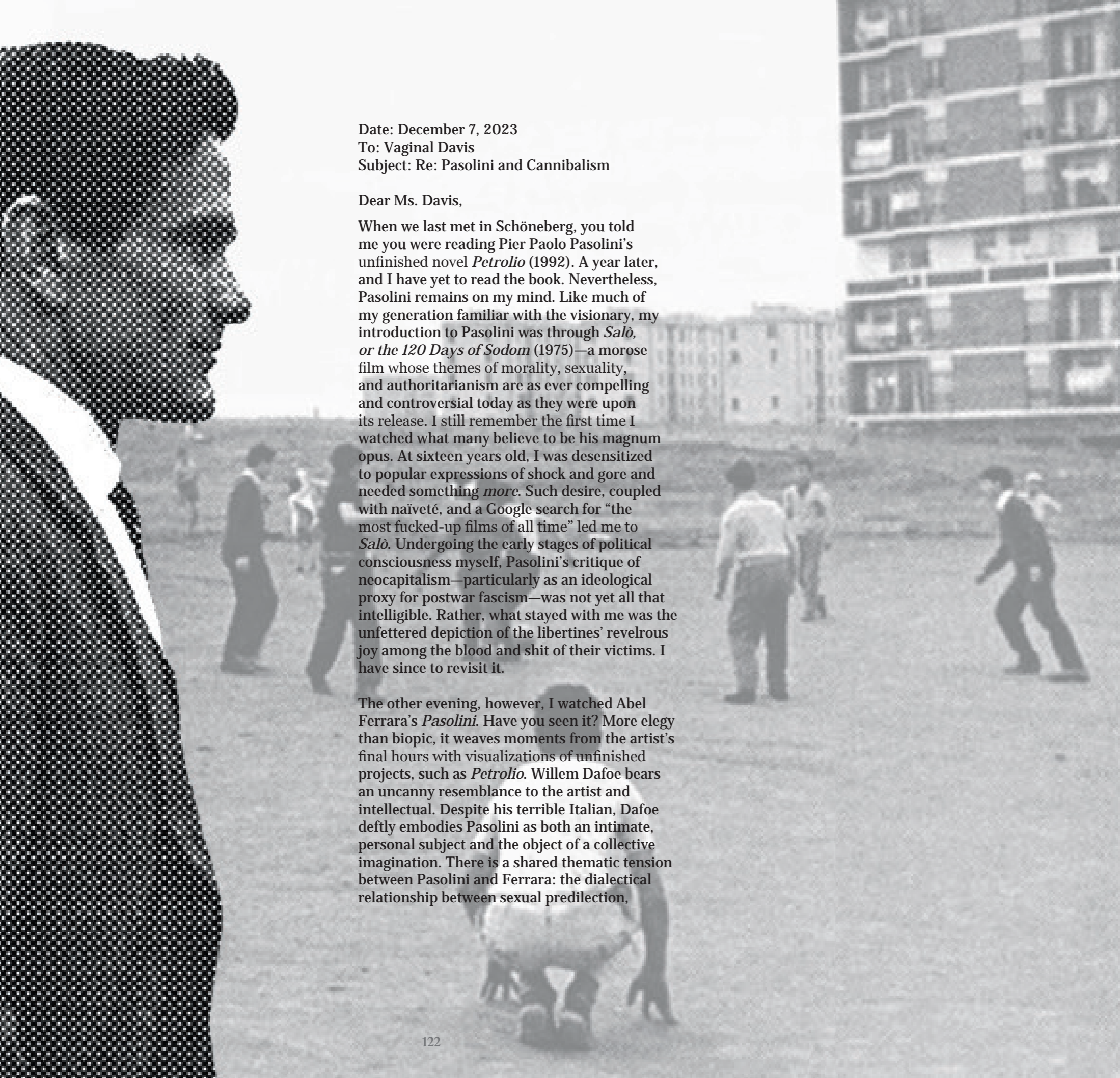
*In the thick of it. To be with one's whole being in matter.
In harmony with the reliability of its transitoriness.
Beyond the dividing lines of masculinity and femininity,
beyond the boundaries of standards, beyond the limitations
of cowardice and indifference.*

*Exhale. When symmetry is only a blink of an eye,
resembling a pause, only a silly assumption of immobility.
As naive as the illusions of all those identities,
which are nothing but railroad switches in unceasing motion.*

*In the interstices.
"Probably," "almost," "more likely," "rather," "well-nigh,"
Balancing in each of them.
Exposed—and how willingly!—to the porousness of gazes, questioning,
the fluidity of sympathy, compassion, hatred,
indifference, confusion, by-the-way-ness.*

*Negotiating the gaps of the cobblestones,
placing your step, your being.
With those who are attacked and killed every day
because of their skin, because of their smell, because of their body.
Being, however, nothing less than a challenge
to blind rudeness, for our common survival.*

Anna_Anchan Daučíková, November 20, 2023



Date: December 7, 2023
To: Vaginal Davis
Subject: Re: Pasolini and Cannibalism

Dear Ms. Davis,

When we last met in Schöneberg, you told me you were reading Pier Paolo Pasolini's unfinished novel *Petrolio* (1992). A year later, and I have yet to read the book. Nevertheless, Pasolini remains on my mind. Like much of my generation familiar with the visionary, my introduction to Pasolini was through *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975)—a morose film whose themes of morality, sexuality, and authoritarianism are as ever compelling and controversial today as they were upon its release. I still remember the first time I watched what many believe to be his magnum opus. At sixteen years old, I was desensitized to popular expressions of shock and gore and needed something *more*. Such desire, coupled with naïveté, and a Google search for “the most fucked-up films of all time” led me to *Salò*. Undergoing the early stages of political consciousness myself, Pasolini's critique of neocapitalism—particularly as an ideological proxy for postwar fascism—was not yet all that intelligible. Rather, what stayed with me was the unfettered depiction of the libertines' revelrous joy among the blood and shit of their victims. I have since to revisit it.

The other evening, however, I watched Abel Ferrara's *Pasolini*. Have you seen it? More elegy than biopic, it weaves moments from the artist's final hours with visualizations of unfinished projects, such as *Petrolio*. Willem Dafoe bears an uncanny resemblance to the artist and intellectual. Despite his terrible Italian, Dafoe deftly embodies Pasolini as both an intimate, personal subject and the object of a collective imagination. There is a shared thematic tension between Pasolini and Ferrara: the dialectical relationship between sexual predilection,

societal norms, and personal value systems. Oddly enough, this theme has come up quite a bit in a number of things I've recently watched. Films such as David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* explore the dangerous potential of sexual repression, rendering the dissonance experienced when fetish transforms from a personal theory to relational praxis.

It reminds me of the consensual cannibalism happening among gay German men in the early aughts. I remember you telling me about these people with such wonder and delight. Was your admiration one of the transgressive act or a recognition of some latent kink uncovered? A friend once told me that cannibalism is a metaphor for love, one in which the distinction between yourself and the other is fully negated in consumption. It is, according to them, the ultimate consummation. I do not know how much I agree with this, although I do think it was a compelling metaphor in Julia Ducournau's *Raw* in which it is such a primal, human act of both sexual and familial longing. (Luca Guadagnino's *Bones and All* was too saccharine for my tastes. It was nothing more than a gimmick.)

Anyway, I would love to connect you with this friend for further discussion. They are a young performance artist and friend of Ron Athey—such a small world! I'm sure you will have plenty to discuss. Let me know if this interests you.

Much love,
Sheldon

Dear Ms. Davis,

For all I can see and feel, you don't have a way of going about a likeness. It's more as though likeness is a way of thinking through doing about being. And "being," on the model your art suggests, occurs in relatedness and only in relatedness. Nothing here is for itself or by itself.

But the first thing I want to tell you about is my fervent wish to acquaint my one-year-old daughter with your painting as soon as possible. This would need an attention span, and concepts, and language she doesn't have yet, but it seems to me that this part of your work teaches a crucial life lesson: coherence is optional. All the better, then, that I can introduce her to something that's objectively-in-the-world, an existing reality that's also "important"—seen, revered, and used by many diverging souls—and is the work of someone like herself, and boldly declares, "Coherence is optional," as soon as possible.

My immersion in your paintings has brought repeated thoughts about how completely this world is a strung-along unfinished thing.

I feel like this art's priority is to maintain contact with reality. Sometimes it's surprising to find myself feeling that way, since everything in your art (of which the paintings are just one region) is so fabulous, not to say mythical. By "reality" I must mean the wide environment where everything's in the making, even what appears already made, whole, or complete—including the lives and stories of others.

When artists and thinkers with such a high tolerance for reality offer accounts of themselves, they rarely invoke steady companies of prime objects, modifiers, and plot points. They just don't. That makes it hard to come to terms with them. In accounting for yourself in painting, you invoke an unsteady stream of others. "That feels right to me" is something Audre Lorde might have said in reply to that particular use of the erotic.

Speaking of the world-work the erotic can do. While immersed in your paintings and my reactions to them, sometimes I took notes. Now I see *VD* all over: on notebook pages dedicated to preparing this letter, in marginal notes on material I'm reading for unrelated purposes, in the turmoil that is the Notes app. To this child of whatever the 1970s and 1980s were in the history of Western sexual cultures, *VD* signifies something communicable and threatening. Something coming for my sovereignty. Something coming for the safety in certain key comforts. And at the same time, my *VD* notes themselves spread way beyond the boundaries I set to contain this project. That's just beautiful, another beautiful something for which I want to thank you.

I also want to thank you for this space devoid of major men, who are only here by implication. Absent, though not destructed. The void showed me in another way how connivingly major-ness (not only of the masculinist kind) reinvents ways to orient everything by flattening everything else.

The many "historical personas"—do we risk so much by simply calling them people?—who do proliferate suggest a natural estrangement between yourself and any idea of "I." As soon as I wrote that, I saw the easy opposition it exploits, as though one either is or isn't an "I," as though it's down to another limiting versus. More accurate, I think, is that the many designate a more, with which the parts of your personal life are continuous. And by this I don't mean to tell or show you anything about yourself, only to convey as clearly as I can how your painting suggests I go about thinking. They, too, make a demand on the mind (and more) for work. Maybe a natural estrangement your many does suggest is the all-too-forgettable inimicalness of "I" to "1." That I and 1 should equate, or even be analogous, is one of the batshit-craziest, most dangerous ideas we ever popularized.

And there sure is turbulence in the many interdealings of material and category and geocoordinates out of which emerge your paintings' likenesses, new identities, statements, notations, and phantoms.

From looking over the vast literature treating you, none of the above stops writers arriving at confident wisdom about what you are, what you do, or what it means. I wonder how that makes you feel. Do you imagine



THERE IS NO FUN IN
V.D.

that those feelings, once broadcast, would affect the course of treatment in the slightest? It continues to seem as though being multiple just increases your (one's) chances of getting divided.

Turbulent is a word that describes my daughter well, or is it life with a toddler who keeps being surprising that's the turbulent thing? Some of our favorite pictures of her are the blurry ones; these see the situation true. That's another reason I want your work—not an object, but the ethos—for her. I want its mix of the daily, the ordinary, the found, the lost, the gorgeous, the sparkly, the muddy, the ravishingly honest, the ridiculous, the hidden, the vaunted, the vanquished, the other-than-me with the me—wherever that might be found. I want its honesty, in which all facts go accompanied by a question mark.

Thank you for asking me to write you.

With every good wish,
Darby English

Professor Doctor VCD,

I am here at the circular glass table that stands in for desk, art surface, and meals-on-the-run. Beside me, Pigpen sips their coffee from a still warm bed. Around both of us are pried-opened photos albums, with the one of you and Cyril curled up and rising to the top. My Cholita cassette tape, the song and the fierce nail lacquer, Cherries In The Snow, hover as I click open PowerPoints with your writing and image(s), other people's writing, my own notebooks and travel itineraries that point at our overlaps: 1990s club spaces, galleries, live shows, theaters, the Museo and kitchen table lingering, hideouts at house parties, Clit Club at the Garage, Lia's mega-performance vision at Participant for Performa's first festival when your crew debuted naked above my twenty-four-hour performance, *A True Story . . . P*, the ever-handsome, ever-hot, full-on lover of this realm as you remind us, and who, like you, always inspires, just remembered when we picked up a gift for Robert Summers—an ashtray featuring your gorgeous face from Y-QUE Trading Post. (RS loved you so—with all their messy and scholarly might.)

It would be one path to trace our friendship through our beloveds, but I appreciate this moment to surface the imprint that is you and your work, life, art, and daintiness.

So, playing writer to you as muse—and to tap into the sticky precision of your pulsating sharp brilliance & to share the insistence on what it is to be out here, out there, in/out of the live appearances, in/out of the grasps of school, art world, world-world, and to refuse mere survivance, I fall into the ungovernable opera that is you, back, back—back and forth.

In Her Hot Hands, We Tumble Wet, Still

Every chance I can, I unfurl a sticky memory from the Then-Children (us) to the ones of the Now. I reopen and teach from the Book of and the House of Dr. Vaginal Crème Davis.

First learned of her Everything-ness from one devotee after another.

Truth: So many Angelinos became whole and remade in the wake and pitch of Dr. Davis's High Dark Arts.

I remain smitten, tongued, touched, and undone by every direction that is Her.

The Writer. The Singer. The Philosopher. The Host. The Painter. The Brain. The Club-Maker. Le Performer. The Punk. La Passionata. The Searing Influential Beauty.

A city takes a fierce cue from the Queen. Then, too, every city after alights.

Queers gather 'round.

Her voice tears through to your toes. (We have been forever altered, necessarily.)

The Ultimate.

&

The Lover.

Tell me something good, she says.

V of The Dance, also known as a Seer, says it then gyrates and serves a glossolalia sermon to our nonsense, our hungry senses. We become more and less. Her arms embrace the (w)hole.

Vag trains me toward new, bigger-means-better words (for all that doubled and tripled consciousnesses). Direction: Merge stage left. Spot and savor her triple-threat *Deliciosa* and *Tender-oisty*. She serves (and stands for) *Unforgettable Hotness*. A *Hostess* to our greedy seeking.

I taste the swarm of desire gathered from hand to mouth.

She taught me by drawing us into a future that was to come: take on CalArts students and remake a world in rosin pink, serve tiny morsels of delights while drowning with Honey in order to surround oneself with brilliant friends, colleagues, and chosen family as we stand fleetingly on flimsy platforms that tremor with our words, song, bodies, and other things that as artists we insist on. Then, as an instruction: both forget AND remember it. Remember to retell it. Misremember, too. (I recall that one time in the PS122 transition with Josh and Jonathan when Ms. Davis gave Pigpen and me nothing but time and then, years later, her summit shout-out to us at Creative Time. (*I think*) we were touring in Berlin at the moment when we got word of your keynote love to us through multiple friends' texts. This, too, a tiny future shadow of *your* family-making and horizon.)

For the desert, Vag packed us up with handwritten titles on painted Pepto-pink books (as a pact) alongside the black steel bonfire housing from which we might rid ourselves of the cold or the loneliness. I partially buried the other thing she endowed to us: her throne. Her throne with a tall back thrives in the wide-open yet stolen land in the northern section of the parcel, next to an eighty-plus-year-old slab hardened in the relentless Mohave sun. Next to it, growing alongside is a desert specialty. This shrub bears both Spikes and Dainty Paper Flowers, which are flanked with dark purple velveteen buds: the *Salazaria mexicana*. Prolific like Dr. Davis, both a Sage and a Mint, she is a calyx that moves with the wind. Sending seeds beyond the borders, infecting us with fearlessness, taking up (our) aging, and remaking radical queer cultural border-crossing.

She Gives.

& Gives.

I love her.

But wait,

I want toward You, Vag.

What I am trying to say is I love you, Vag.

We do.

As Robt S. taught & to quote from Luce Irigaray: "I love to you."

This drips from us still.

What you've instilled in me and us, the We called your devotees, aka beloveds, is the making of a searing Beyond. I give back with a mouthful of blood. Through each other, we tumble into a world-making habit of allowing another's words/body/grievance/rage/insistence to spill. Pages of sibling-maternal rage and hungry-lover lineage rip loose one's sheath to wrap oneself around the Other. Sharing a small pulsing touch, sound, scent that slips through me/us to you, for you, Babe.

From Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*:

"I want to say something else about desire. I really do not know what it is. I experience something which, sometimes, if I pull it apart, I cannot make reason of. The word seems to me to fall apart under the pull and drag of its commodified shapes, under the weight of our artifice and our conceit. It is sometimes impossible to tell what is real from what is manufactured. We live in a world filled with commodified images of desire. Desire clings to widgets, chairs, fridges, cars, perfumes, shoes, jackets, golf clubs, basketballs, telephones, water, soap powder, houses, neighbourhoods. Even god. It clings to an endless list of objects. It clings to the face of television sets and movie screens. It is glaciated in assigned objects, it is petrified in repetitive cliched gestures. Their repetition is tedious, the look and sound of them tedious. We become the repetition despite our best efforts. We become numb. And though against the impressive strength of this I can't hope to say all that desire might be, I wanted to talk about it not as it is sold to us but as one collects it, piece by piece, proceeding through a life. I wanted to say that life, if we are lucky, is a collection of aesthetic experiences as it is a collection of practical experiences, which may be one and the same sometimes, and which if we are lucky we make a sense of. Making sense may be what desire is. Or, putting the senses back together."

In your hot hands, Vaginal Crème Davis, we tumble

wet,

still.

With love,

jt

&

P

(end)

Tejano, autumn 2023

Querida Doctora Davis,

I am home sick in New York with a nasty stomach bug (you know how my tongue likes to wander). It's been so long since I've seen you and even longer since I've been to Berlin. How is that city now? Has the endless parade of art twinks in search of sex and cheap rent ceased to arrive? Perhaps they are all now mustachioed and calling themselves twunks? I remember our long walks across Charlottenburg and through Tiergarten, where you immersed me in gay history. You also taught me that Mexican food and public sex, in the right order, do work well together—a revelation! Have had much success using your tactics here in the Rambles to get a real scene going. Who knew that hiding in the shrubbery while making slapping and grunting noises by oneself would be so effective in bringing out the pervs? I can hardly get a quiet moment to myself anymore for birdwatching. The Rambles are back because of YOU! Douching is also back. The bottoms are cleaned out for what they call *churning*. Quite a scene that I hope to show you when you're here next, if you can find the time. I know how much these hungry curators, directors, and fans demand of you during your always too-brief visits.

I thought of you the other day while I was getting a massage. The therapist was obsessed with my big feet and began sucking on my hairy toes before trying to get an entire foot into his mouth. I let him go to town on my ape feet as I reminisced about the night my blond twink ex-boyfriend and I spent as your interns. No one had ever attended to my feet in that way—the thorough whip-creaming and maraschino-cherry-topping. Who was I to have a punk-a-rock goddess such as yourself devour my toes? Kate Moss beamed with jealousy from the front row as flecks of cream splattered her face. I'm sure she felt doubly wounded when you left the stage to make out with Gwyneth Paltrow instead of her. It was truly the most glamorous moment of my life, and I'm so glad you got to meet my Orchard Street neighbor Alec Wek after the show. I can't believe I was there for the beginning of your epic friendship.

The masseur's slobbery attentions transported me so deeply to that blissful night at the Roxy that I completely lost track of time. As did he. He gave me the session on the house, and I didn't have the heart to tell him what the going rate was for time with my—thanks to you—famous feet. Leaving with the shoulder pain that prompted the appointment was worth it to get to spend time with you again.

When and where will I see you next? Hopefully not just in my memories. If you agree to take my hand again and go on a stroll, I promise to wear *chanclas* that accentuate the length and width of my wide Mexican feet.

Your Chicano flaneur,
Ricardo





ARCHITECTURAL PLAN
STOCKHOLM GOES VAGINAL DAVIS
EXTERIOR PERSPECTIVE
(not in scale)

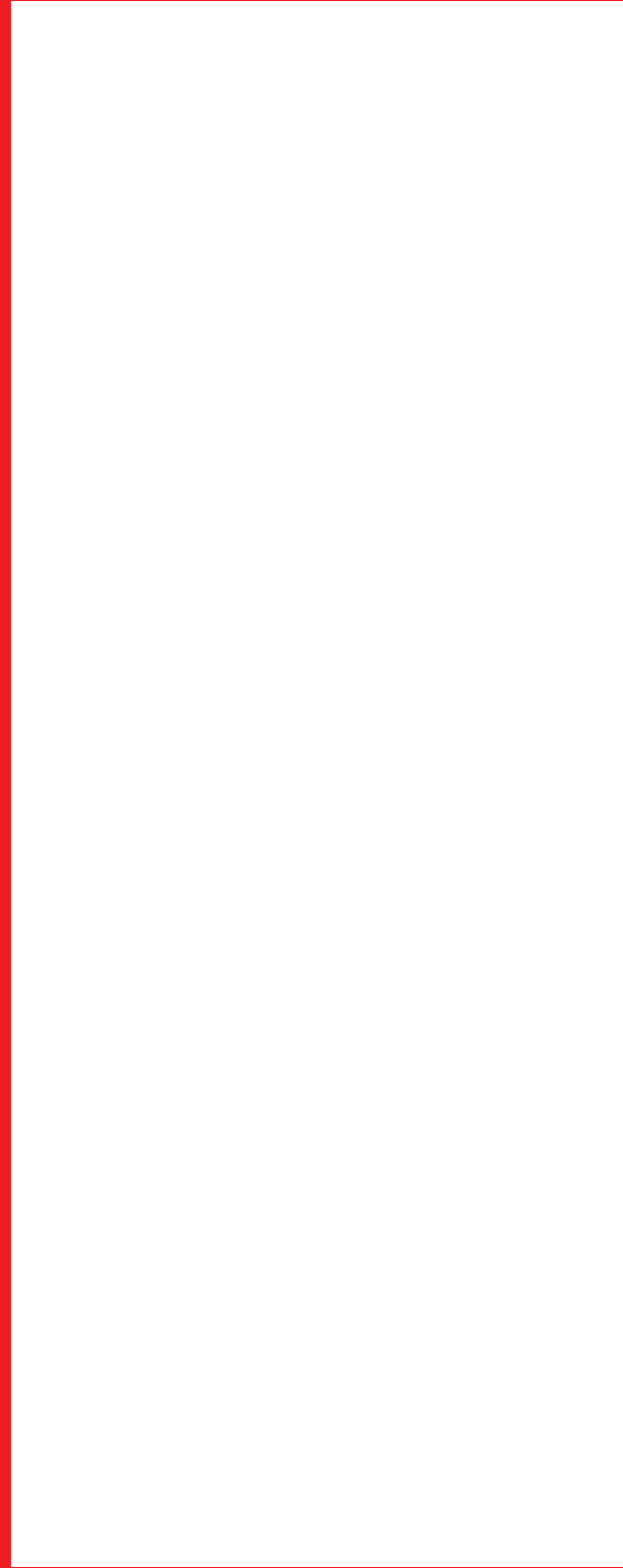
NEW CONSTRUCTION OF ANAL VORTEX PORTAL

Drawing Nr. A0098

2023 12 05
FOR PERMIT

DESIGN BY MYCKET
Mariana Alves Silva, Karolina Borenovic, Thibaut Kristiansson





*Vaginal
Davis*



Mary Magdalene

She could never remember the names of her children.

Goya Jeet, Gayla Leigh, Gerese Wray are her legitimates born from marriage to Standard Samuel Hall. Standard, her husband, was known all throughout Shreveport, Colfax, and New Orleans as the “Patot.” He could suck the rust off a cock while tying a cherry stem with his tongue; such were his many and varied skills at the time.

The illegitimate children: Girly Fayt and me, born with the strange name of Gadance Genna Gadee. Why my mother let my oldest sister name me I will never be able to figure out. My sister named all her siblings except Girly Fayt. I don’t know who named her—probably the white man who fathered her.

Mary Magdalene would always wind up pregnant when she was on a drinking spree. No one sober would ever concede to childbirth. Mary Magdalene never wanted to have children. Babies are disgusting. What good are they? Can a baby produce a milk product? No.

□□□

Because I was part of the Mentally Gifted Minors Program in the Los Angeles Unified School District I found out that I was qualified to attend a boarding school on scholarship for a school year. One of the librarians at the main branch of the Los Angeles library, Elvira Curtis, helped me research the schools and we came up with a list that included Choate Rosemary Hall on the East Coast of the United States in Wallingford, Connecticut; the Institut Le Rosey in Rolle, Switzerland; and the Harrow School in London, which was the finishing school of choice that would bring me closest to the London punk scene that I felt it was my destiny to be a part of. I really didn’t know anything about punk other than what my cousin Carla DuPlantier told me about it, as she was the drummer of an early LA punk band called the Controllers. Sometimes I would go with Carla to the Swap Meet in the Capital Records Building parking lot in Hollywood, but I had never ventured inside a punk club. The closest I got was hanging outside Blackie’s, a club on LaBrea off of Melrose Avenue in Hollywood. Carla was a butch lesbian and, like me, also grew up as a Jehovah’s Witness. There was some heritage beef between my mother and this side of her family, the nature of which my mother was very evasive about. There had always been a large Black Creole population in Los Angeles from the very beginnings of the Great Migration of Black people from the segregated South at the turn of the last century.

Carla’s clan and other Creole families like hers had lived in Los Angeles since before World War I. My mother didn’t migrate to the West Coast from Louisiana until 1944, first living in Portland, Oregon, and then moving to Los Angeles in 1945. Only very recently did I find out from my sister that my mother was the star witness to a sensational murder trial that took place in Portland in a nightclub where my mother was employed singing and dancing. I tried to press my sister for more information, but she gave her usual line of “Oh, I don’t remember.”

□□□

I used to be six feet six inches tall, but now that I am older, I am shrinking, and the last time I was measured at the doctor’s office I was six feet four inches and a quarter.

□□□

When I lived at the Karnak Apartments in Hollywood one of my neighbors was Bobby Belltower, who founded, along with Inger Lorre, the Gothy-inspired band the Nymphs in New Jersey. They moved out to Hollywood and took residence at the Karnak, which was located at 5617 La Mirada Avenue between Fountain and Santa Monica Boulevard off Western Avenue. The Karnak was a rock 'n' roll building with lots of people in bands inhabiting the place at the time. The manager was a drunk named Marty who was a big queen who, when he was on one of his alcoholica binges, would get very fresh with all the young male musicians in the building, grabbing at their privates and kissing them full on the lips. I'm sure some of the boys gave him mercy fucks when they were short on the rent.

Inger became a legend in music circles for peeing on the desk of her A&R guy at Geffen Records. Before the band was signed to a major label, Ms. Lorre supported her band with a very successful modeling career. We in fact modeled together for an advert that was photographed by the diminutive Matthew Rolston. When my performance group the Afro Sisters appeared in *Interview Magazine*, Ms. Lorre was very complimentary of the iconic Albert Sanchez's photograph of my group. We would have long discussions on the roof and fire escape of the Karnak. Sometimes being joined by Bobby Belltower or Cherry Jefferson and once an elderly gentleman who lived in the building whose name I don't remember who used to work at the old nearby Fox Studios that was a Zody's department store at the time but is now an Armenian discount supermarket.

Also living in the Karnak was a very handsome, tall white gay man in his early thirties who had a younger Latino lover in his late teens or early twenties who he treated like a virtual slave. Many times in the apartment laundry room in the basement I noticed their peculiar dynamic. The gay white man wasn't friendly in the least. He was the ultimate ice queen with the darkest black eyes that radiated nothing behind them. He also had cruel thin lips that turned down like the French actress Jeanne Moreau. His Latino lover was very warm and sweet, but you could tell he was afraid of his boyfriend. My Afro Sister and I along with Fertile LaToyah Jackson helped the young boy escape and return to his family in Tijuana. His boyfriend was never the wiser. A few weeks later he turned up with another young Latino lover and didn't seem particularly shaken up at the loss of the one he lost.

□□□

Lisa wrote in my yearbook, "You are a gossip. Please change, I don't like you this way."

□□□

Carolyn Langendorf was the first persona I ever created. This was when I was seven years old. Carolyn Langendorf was a child actress from a loving two-parent home with a father who was an architect and a mother who was a housewife. Carolyn had an older brother named Carem. He was four years older, and she also had a sister, Catal, just two years older. They lived in a beautiful three-story manor house in the Hollywood foothills near the Bronson Caves in Griffith Park below the Hollywood sign. Carolyn appeared in a Saturday-morning children's live action TV program called *Free to Be You and Me* on the ABC television network. The program took place in a dilapidated mansion where a group of children would hang out and have crazed adventures. It was like a mixture of the children's game show *Wonderama* that was hosted by Bob McAllister from 1967 to 1977 and the British TV series *Here Come the Double Deckers* that was aired on ABC from 1970 to 1971. These were two of my favorite programs as a child, so I invented a TV show for Carolyn to star in. The name Carolyn I stole from Carolyn Jones, the actress best known for playing Morticia Addams in the TV series *The Addams Family*, and the surname of Langendorf I took from the California bakery and bread company rival of Wonder Bread.

For a time my family believed that Carolyn was a real person since I received letters regularly from her and I had pen pals from all over the world as I kept correspondence with other children in faraway lands. I saw myself early on as an internationalist. The letters that I wrote as Carolyn had the return address of the old Paramount Pictures entrance on Marathon Street in Hollywood. This address I got from *Tiger Beat Magazine* as it was the address given to fans to write to the cast of *The Brady Bunch*.

I have always been consistent in my insanity. Why did I feel a need to keep up this ruse from the age of seven until I was about thirteen? I used pictures of the child actress Pamela Franklin to substitute as the made-up Carolyn Langendorf. It was actually quite a clever machination as well as being completely unhinged. That's the inherent quality of my personality. I fluctuate between low self-esteem and an overly inflated sense of self. Carolyn Langendorf was the first of many alter egos I have conjured up: Chrome Chastain, Steele Carrera, Loreal DeHaven, Elmer Occasion, Kayle Hilliard, Gleeson Brevard, just to name a few. I'm like Joanne Woodward in *The Three Faces of Eve* or Sally Field in *Sybil*, but my multiple personality disorder manifests itself in theatrical guises that help me deal with early trauma. I guess it stems from an accident with a hobbyhorse, and my mother took me to General Hospital. I became the center of an incident with a doctor who spent too much time examining my privates when the injury was to my hand. The memory of exactly what happened has been lost to time, but this doctor must have done something inappropriate or my mother would not have reacted so violently. What has been retained is that my mother thrashed this doctor so badly that other doctors were called in and they met the same fate, being tossed in the air and throttled about. Doctors and security could not subdue her, and I was crying hysterically not because of what happened to me but because of the commotion that resulted. It wasn't the first time that my mother showed superhuman strength. About a year later before I started school, we were on Broadway downtown during the holidays waiting for the 26 bus to return us to East Los Angeles when some Broderick Crawford/Burl Ives-looking man chomping on a cigar with a bulbous W. C. Field nose grabbed at my mother's tush, and when she pulled away from him he called her some expletive like "nigger bitch" or "porch monkey" and she let go of my hand, put down her packages, and shoved the man so hard he went flying into the holiday display window of the May Company department store. It was quite a distance to the window, but he went flying through the glass causing a lot of noise and disruption. Don't mess with Mary Magdalene. My mother quietly took hold of my hand and her packages and boarded the bus, never mentioning the incident to my sisters when we arrived home.

□□□

I got stuck in a Goodwill box at the local charity store. They had to call the National Guard to release me. This was back in 1977 or 1978 when Van Halen released their first album and I was crazed by David Lee Roth and I grew my hair to look like his, and then I used tear gas, a cheap substitute for poppers, but it wasn't working properly.

□□□

The place was christened Blak and Bloo, and on Tuesday evenings at 7574 Sunset Boulevard it was packed to the gilly as Trade with a fertile mix of alterna fags and their admirers from Silverlake and East Hollywood with a scattering of the more adventuresome Weho body fascist types who by the late 1980s had discovered that the scruffy boys on the Eastside were mighty humpy and provided a unique fresh and juicy big dick flavor. Thursdays at Blak and Bloo was the tired Boogie Lounge, which with a name like that was decidedly hetero. I lived just a few blocks up from the club at 7850 Sunset Boulevard, where I produced *Fertile LaToyah Jackson Magazine* and HAG Gallery, and could just walk to the club to do my performances. Many times men cruising in their cars tried to flag me down as the area was a notorious female prostitution zone. It's where Hugh Grant had his dalliance with Divine Brown. Jeffery and Richard hired me at least three times a month, and the majority of my income other than my day job at UCLA came from Trade as well as doing performances at the nearby Sin-a-Matic at Peanuts Disco on Santa Monica Boulevard and Fairfax and Café Largo on Fairfax and Beverly across the street from the Jewish deli Canters. Several times when I was performing at Trade at Blak and Bloo, Mr. Stallone and his brother Frank were checking out the scene and seemed to be quite comfortable interfacing with the homo sexy shenanigans of the place. From what I observed I'd venture to say that the Stallone Bros. had a little sugar in their tank. Lots of celebs came to Trade, including director Martin Scorsese when he was dating Illeana Douglas, who was pals with Richard Glatzer, appearing in his New Queer Cinema film *Grief*; film director and Spiegel catalog heir Spike Jonze, who at the time wrote for *Dirt Magazine*, the funky little brother publication of *Sassy Magazine*, who was directing skater and rock vids; and Anderson Cooper before his fame as an entertainment news reporter, when he was dating the beautiful and captivating Beverly Hills boy bon vivant Treffely Bedard. At that time Mr. Cooper was just known as Gloria Vanderbilt's young patrician son.

□□□

My former PhD student Robert Summers had a Jewish father and a Mexican mother. His mother's sister, whom she hated, was Gloria Molina, a celebrated Los Angeles politician who was a longtime city councilwoman, a member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, and also served on the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Robert Summers even looked a little like his famous aunt in that he was a bit zaftig like her. When I first met Robert in the late 1990s he was brilliant. His lover, who was also Jewish and Mexican, was the art photographer Matt Lipps, who resembled a stunning young Anthony Perkins.

Robert loved to send me letters via post that featured photos of him showing off performing fellatio on Matt and other well-endowed men. Robert Summers was so filled with olde school faggotry that on some level he was new school. He really excelled in being an A level-size queen, and his need for all intensive phallus worship knew no bounds.

Robert organized an amazing international art conference called "Queering Warhol" at the University of California at Riverside that I was invited to as a headlining speaker. A few years after the conference I had invited Robert to be the first academic to give what I called a mini lecturina at my performance space/speakeasy Bricktops at the Parlour Club in the early evening hours of the club starting around 10:45 p.m. I gave Robert the theme: Judy Garland Modalities—and he ran with it.

□□□

My sister Goya died from breast cancer right before I left Los Angeles for Berlin. Her last years were spent sharing an apartment with my older sister, Gayla, at the Park LaBrea Towers.

□□□

There is a cute dark-haired boy with pale skin, long shapely legs wearing short shorts. His calves look like the speed skater Eric Heiden during his Olympic heyday. The boy's lips are full and pillowy, and he is sitting outside of the Portuguese Unser Cafe at Julius-Leber-Brücke eating what looks like a hot bowl of brown, squiggly fermented excrement.

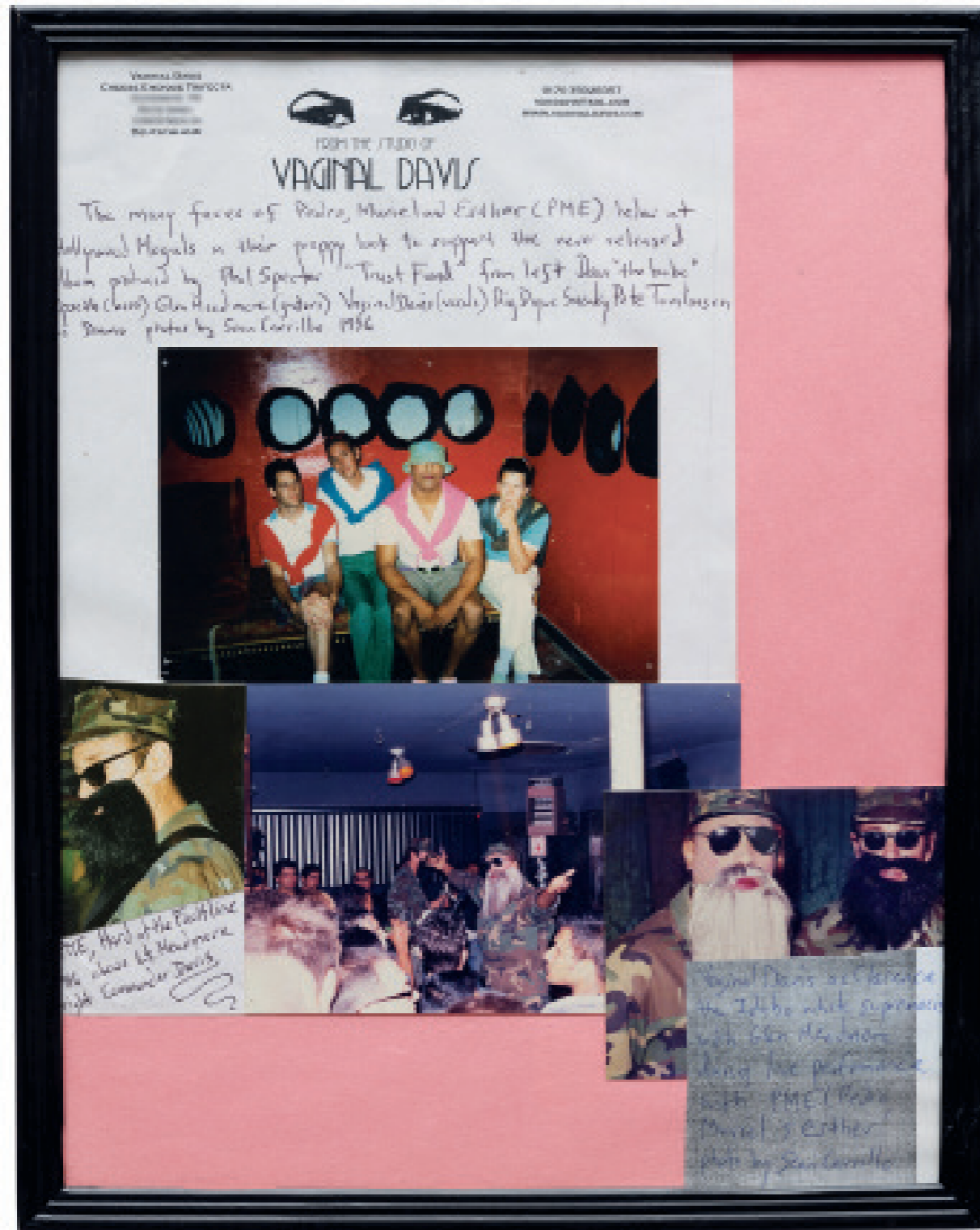
Here in Berlin it could very well be just that, but I think not, because I am close enough to smell it and it does not give off even a slightly faint aroma of feces so I think it must be some kind of chocolate or Nutella in the bowl. The boy scoops it up with a spoon and puts it into his mouth with such force and conviction that I am left utterly spellbound. Yes, bewitched, bothered, and bewildered am I. I'm expecting the cat Pyewacket to make an appearance at any moment or Veronica Lake in *I Married a Witch*. The boy in question does look a little like a young Fredric March. The Fredric March who had a sizzling homosexy love affair with his *Design for Living* costar, the lanky, well-endowed butch actor Gary Cooper.

□□□

I just heard that someone wrote an anonymous autobiography about me called *Life Is Cheap, But My Pussy Is Expensive*. I don't know how this person found out about such personal items of my life like the fact that I was forced to sleep in a cradle until I was twelve and that I was kidnapped and gangbanged by the Brady Bunch led by Christopher Knight, who played middle son Peter. When I turned sixteen my mother wanted me to have proper African American role models, so she convinced Stevie Wonder to give me driving lessons. Well, that didn't turn out so well and I was left traumatized, which in turn led me to never wanting to learn how to drive a car. To help me deal with the Stevie Wonder situation, I started to take swimming lessons, which gave me a lot a confidence and I noticed that it helped improve my self-esteem so much that I was encouraged to enter a local swimming tournament. One of the judges at the contest was the famed Olympic swimming champion Mark Andrew Spitz who showed a keen interest in mentoring me; he felt that I had potential, but his attentions turned nefarious and was just an excuse to verbally harass and sexually molest me. Spritz got away with it because he won seven gold medals at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. Also, it is a proven fact that chlorine used in modern-day swimming pools doesn't leave any traces of sperm, and Spritz would leave me covered in his sperm over a two-year period where I was being trained by him and I was left under his complete domination and control. I estimate that I must have ingested at the very least several hundred gallons of his spermatozoa.

The most outrageous claim in this unauthorized biography is that my first orgasm took place when I was a mere four years old while learning how to vocalize like Sarah Vaughan.

The texts are excerpts from Vaginal Davis's unpublished and ongoing autobiographical novel *Mary Magdalene*.



pp. 144-55: Collages from the installation *Vaginal Davis – My Temper’s Getting Blistered, Go Take Your Place in History*, included in the group exhibition *Nothing Up My Sleeve*, organized by Jonathan Berger, Participant Inc, New York, 2009



