

Vaginal Davis: HOFPFISTEREI 17 May - 1 September 2024

With the exhibition *HOFPFISTEREI*, Index, in close collaboration with Moderna Museet, highlights Vaginal Davis as a writer – presenting a library of text material produced between the 1980s and the present day. The body of work of performance artist, writer, and icon Vaginal Davis chronicles Black queer existence with absurd humor and cutting precision. Her practice comprises performance, text, painting, installation, fanzines and films. With a legacy that has resonated across several generations, locations and cultural spheres, Ms. Davis is a reference for the homocore and punk scenes of late 1970s Los Angeles, testing its limits in the 1980s, and finally creating a scene of her own through self and co-orchestrated club nights and performance events in the 90s and early aughts.

The title of the exhibition hints at one of Vaginal Davis's key methodologies. Attracted to the word and its sound after noticing it on a number of shops in Germany – “Hofpfisterei” is the name of a German bakery chain – Ms. Davis takes it and appropriates it for another use and context. As the title of this exhibition, the word becomes an act of performative naming and a conceptual placeholder for a working space, a production and presentation site, a possibility of invention embracing joyful irreverence.

Vaginal Davis's agile leaps between downtown nightlife, academy lectures and gallery settings are mirrored in her equally kaleidoscopic writing. The exhibition at Index features a multitude of genres – from poetry to long format journalism to falsified confessional literature and tabloid rag gossip columns. Ms. Davis shapeshifts with assurance while moving from scene to scene, changing position and mode of address, to ensure her audience is always uncomfortable; never allowed to grow complacent.

The different formats hint at the various avenues of dissemination and circulation that Ms. Davis has employed over the decades: pamphlets handed out at club nights, fanzines distributed by mail, and community circulars paved the way for myriad digital iterations of self-publishing. In *Speaking from the Diaphragm*, Ms. Davis's long-running online diary, conceived in the early days of the internet before the existence of blogging through pre-coded platforms, visitors are invited to scroll through decades of gossip, tell-alls, and caustic culture reviews in their original forms.

The diary entries continue a legacy from print media: throughout the 80s, 90s and 00s, Ms. Davis wrote spirited chronicles and columns for LA Weekly, Glue Magazine, UR Chicago, Dutch and later Zoo Magazine, amongst others. With a distinct voice and the intimacy of a first-person narrative, these texts often gave an almost real-time account of the events covered. The exhibition also presents Vaginal Davis's crucial Zine production. Davis created

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Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine while working her day job at the student counseling office at UCLA, using their xerox machine to copy fanzines. Typed on her 1920s typewriter and illustrated with polaroids, magazine cutouts, the work of photographer friends and images from an acquaintance who was the art director for a large porn publisher. The texts crawl with fabricated and repurposed words and phrases, and glossaries defining new additions to the "vag-vernacular" were a recurring feature in *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine*.

Exploding not just literary but linguistic conventions, Vaginal Davis's texts present a language that voices issues which cannot be expressed within the confines of customary vocabulary. A language that acknowledges and names the people and cultures which, in standard jargon, exist only as negations or inversions of their normative counterparts. In this way, Davis deconstructs simplistic binary oppositions, and challenges preordained ideas of supposedly given divisions. Dodie Bellamy, writing in *Mousse Magazine* in 2022, quotes that "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."

Marrying old school glamor and urban grit, Ms. Davis's productions interlace highbrow poetics with crude colloquialism and sexually explicit content. Her verbal takedowns of celebrities, authors and public figures honor ballroom culture's custom of *reading* – delivering elaborately inventive insults and mockery; this in turn a continuing lineage building on Black vernacular traditions like "The Dozens", a verbal game of tender trash talk, common in African American communities, where opponents trade increasingly harsh insults, usually directed at the opponent's appearance of family members, until one of them gives up. Ms. Davis's texts both assume a readership which is part of the community, familiar with its particularities, and teasingly dares the outsider to enter.

The exhibition invites visitors to enter into the library of Ms. Davis's text archive as a site of research. Beginning in June, a summer course titled *Text as an artistic medium* will be held in situ within the framework and duration of Vaginal Davis: *HOFPFISTEREI*, with the participants gathering in the exhibition's reference library amidst Ms. Davis's multifarious writings. The course is led by Index in collaboration with The Royal Institute of Art, applying yet another institutional layer to the reading of Ms. Davis's writing.

HOFPFISTEREI at Index presents an archive that is (a)live; growing, morphing and mutating, with fresh perspectives and new material generated throughout the exhibition, as invited artists and researchers interact with the material as part of the public program. The design of the exhibition has been made in collaboration with the collective MYCKET, with a permanent duality between production and presentation in mind: a stage and a working site, a club and an office space, glamor and machinery.

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This exhibition has been developed in collaboration with Moderna Museet in Stockholm, as part of the exhibition *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product*. The museum presents a major retrospective of Vaginal Davis's work while, in parallel, Index is the locus for research on her text production. Vaginal Davis's solo exhibition *Magnificent Product* is initiated by Moderna Museet and extends across several locations in Stockholm: Moderna Museet, Nationalmuseum, Accelerator, Index – The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, Tensta konsthall and MDT (Moderna Dansteatern). Each institution highlights a different aspect of Vaginal Davis's expansive practice.

WORKS

Entrance

Vaginal Davis, *HAG 2*, 2012

Britney Spears eye shadow, Wet 'n Wild nail polish, Afro Sheen hair conditioner, Aqua Net Extra Hold hair spray, watercolor pencils, and glycerin on cardboard

Monitor

Vaginal Davis with Rick Castro

Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine Premiere Issue, 1992

Color video converted to digital

52 min 45 sec

Vaginal Davis with Rick Castro

Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine #2 The Kinky Issue, 1993

Color video converted to digital

61 min 33 sec

Listening station

Reading by Vaginal Davis of her ongoing autobiographical novel *Mary Magdalene*

Visitors' computer (iMac)

Vaginal Davis's blog *Speaking from the Diaphragm*

Bookshelf containing library of books, photocopied press material, reading copies of zines.

Radio show (on iPad): *CHEAP Funk* Title: CHEAP Lyrics (Originally aired in May 2020)

Three vitrines containing zines including *Fertile La Toyah Jackson* (issues 1-5); *Crude*; *Sucker* (issues 2-5); six tiny notebooks, and other selected text works including playbills, scripts, letters. Please see the separate map for the vitrines' contents.