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Vaginal's Veil

BY HENDRIK FOLKERTS



Details from VAGINAL DAVIS's memorabilia and ephemera, dimensions variable, at "The Wicked Pavilion," Eden Eden, Berlin, 2021-22. All photos by @GRAYSC. All images courtesy the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, unless otherwise stated.



VAGINAL DAVIS, *The Afro Sisters*, 1994, kaftan, 125 × 125 cm.

In the year 33 AD, on the Via Dolorosa to be exact, Veronica meets Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha. She offers him a cloth to wipe the blood off his face. Jesus returns the sudarium with the imprint of his face on it. Lo and behold, the blood-stained cloth becomes the Veil of Veronica, a cherished relic in the Christian Church that is said to represent the true face of Christ, not made by human hands. The first icon—an image to be copied ad infinitum, along with the Mandyion, the Veil of Manoppello, and so forth—is imbued with healing properties and even the power of resurrection. Veronica herself became a saint, naturally, although we do not know if that was her actual name, as it could also be argued “veronica” is a variation of the Latin *vera* and *icon*, meaning “true icon.” Say a prayer to Veronica this evening.

In 1994, a cloth of a different kind was created: a kaftan with the imprint of Vaginal Davis’s face. Rather than blood, it is makeup, markers, and maybe some paint that delineate the face of the award-winning blacktress, singer, songwriter, artist, drag terrorist, cult figure, international superstar, spokesmodel, movie director, mother and elder, and writer—oh, and “manipulative, filthy black jungle temptress who lures innocent suburban white boys into a world in which their only escape is madness or death,” according to *Agony Magazine*. The kaftan is named *The Afro Sisters*, after the band that Ms. Davis fronted as lead singer from the late 1970s until the mid ‘80s. Is this the true face of Vaginal Davis, our icon of queer history? What is the mythology of Vaginal’s Veil? What are its powers?

In the genesis story of Vaginal’s Veil, there are some key protagonists. I name but a few: Matt Dillon, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Judy Garland, Joan Didion, Tim Curry, Virginie Despentes, Karen Black, Nella Larsen, Octavia Butler, Tom Cruise, Angela Davis, Jeff Stryker, RuPaul, Elfriede Jelinek, Jenital Anuston,



Installation view of VAGINAL DAVIS’s “The Wicked Pavilion” at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2021–22.

Madonna, Aaron Spelling, and swathes of other risen and fallen stars, activists, writers, artists, drag personas, porn stars, punks, remembered and forgotten icons, pretty boys, grandes dames, and questionable types. They all populated, in some shape or form, the exhibition-cum-library-cum-cinema-cum-bedroom-cum-archive-cum-portrait gallery-cum-altar “The Wicked Pavilion” at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, which summarily collected and displayed the sprawling oeuvre of Vaginal Davis, as seen through the lens of her archive and work in zines, video, painting and drawing, collage, and installation.

The exhibition was split in two parts, across the main space of the gallery and the satellite space Eden Eden. The former saw the gallery transformed into a house—a white cube turned pink—each room highlighting a particular aspect of Ms. Davis’s practice. 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 salon housed key examples of the many zines that Ms. Davis has produced or has been featured in since the early 1980s—from the famed *Fertile La Toya Jackson* and *Sucker* magazines to *Punk Beat* and *J.D.s*—as well as *Speaking From the Diaphragm: The Vaginal Davis Blog* (. . .). From the *Counsel of Inter-Continental Balistic Principalities* with over 15,000,000



Cover of VAGINAL DAVIS’s *Fertile La Toya Jackson Magazine* (Harvest Issue/Second Issue), 29.5 x 23 x 2 cm. Courtesy Private Collection Vaginal Davis.



Installation view of VAGINAL DAVIS’s “The Wicked Pavilion” at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2021-22.

followers and subscribers), which. . . well. . . that sort of says it all. Following a long hallway with a sublime selection of collaged boxes and handbags (in which large peni and recta meet high fashion), one entered the sanctum sanctorum: the bedroom. Here, a humongous plaster dildo tucked into a rotating bed with chiffon was surrounded by an exquisite treasury of Ms. Davis’s collages on paper and boxes. The tiny boudoir in the corner speaks volumes: nail polishes of various shades were placed next to a diary shaped like a mask (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”). This is a little girl’s room: imagine Shirley Temple as a radical Black thinker, who dips into large quantities of acid every now and then, and knows her way around scissors and glue.

If this was the house, then the presentation at Eden Eden was the dark room, focusing almost exclusively on Ms. Davis’s work in moving image produced in Los Angeles, where she lived and worked until moving to Berlin in 2006. Lesser-known films such as *The Last Club Sucker* (1999), on the final iteration of the punk rock and performance event “Club Sucker” that Vaginal Davis organized in Los Angeles, and *Tom Cruise Loves Women* (2000), which deliriously insists that Tom Cruise is heterosexual, were displayed with foundational works such as *That Fertile Feeling* (1983), the *Fertile La Toya Jackson Magazine* series from the early 1990s, and *The White to be Angry* (1999)—all showing Ms. Davis’s distinct approach to the moving image as a collaged form that marries camp with critique, and subculture with mainstream pop.

“The Wicked Pavilion” is Ms. Davis’s universe. At the risk of me being an all-too melancholic Catholic boy, I want to say the pavilion conjured the atmosphere of a martyrdom turned upside-down, the relics of the saint replaced with the memorabilia and icons of a pantheon in which Hollywood, punk, drag, and Black radical thought are synthesized into a queer iconography. The impulse toward iconography is tangible throughout the exhibition and Ms. Davis’s work. This is pronounced most clearly in her portraits, which are created on found paper, such as postcards

from the artist's extensive correspondences, stationery from museums she has been invited to, flyers for parties, and so forth. For instance, in *Janice Ian – Societies Child* (2021), Ms. Davis paints a portrait of Janice Ian, the American singer-songwriter whose 1966 hit-song *Society's Child* (*Baby I've Been Thinking*) tells the story of a young white girl ending her relationship with her black boyfriend because she cannot endure the social pressure. Notably, the portrait is not drawn with paint or pencil, but rather with makeup sticks, mascara, eye shadow, liquid eyeliner, blush, lip stain, Max Factor foundation, metallic tempera, Hamameliswasser with mandrake, henbane and datura plants, 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. (Now that's a media line!) Through the bold green of Ian's signature hairdo and the red of her costume, we see the scribbles of a thank you-note on a postcard from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. The backside of the portrait reveals Peter Paul Rubens's *St. Sebastian* (1614), annotated with the title and author of the 2021 portrait.

The verso of the portrait of Wanda Coleman—celebrated as the unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles—is a flyer for the Bears, Beards, and Beer (BBB) party in Berlin, the only Bear Queer electronic party in Berlin (according to their Facebook page). The names of resident DJs appear as hieroglyphs, pushing through the fluorescent colors of the portrait. Writer Joan Didion's likeness is created on the cover of the 29th issue of the magazine *Transvestia*. Edith Wharton is on a postcard showing Andy Warhol in front of the Odeon theater in New York. The list of this all-female cast goes on, 40 in total. Notably, the names of some of those who are depicted in the portraits appear misspelled. Janice Ian becomes "Janice Ian," Elfriede Jelinek becomes "Elfrieda Jelinek," Teena Marie becomes "Teena Maria." Although seemingly innocent glitches, they accentuate the fact that we are slipping in and out of a biographical reality. After all, the portrait, as a genre, is supposed to capture the essence of the sitter, her biographical narrative captured in a single look or pose. Ms. Davis's approach is one of radical collage, embedding the biography of her subject in the context of a found object, whether it be a museum postcard or a party flyer. They start to affect each other, naturally. What is Wanda Coleman's relationship to Berlin bear culture? Nothing? Everything? What does the patron saint of gay culture have to do with a song on White fragility at the height of the Civil Rights Movement? Nothing? Everything.

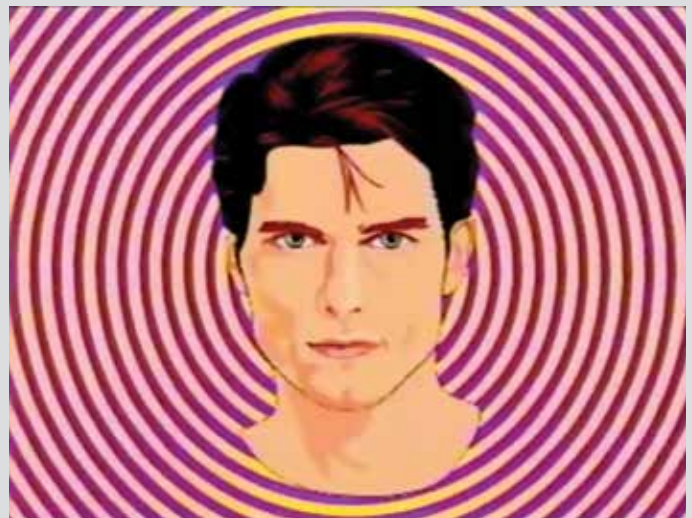
In many of Ms. Davis's video works, there is a similar tendency to apply collage as an instrument of critique and potentiality. For example, *The White to be Angry* is a visual album that takes its title from a live show and music album by Ms. Davis and her band Pedro, Muriel & Esther (PME). Each chapter of the video references a different film director, for instance Clive Barker or Woody Allen, separated by found footage from American television of the 1990s that lends the work an unambiguous timestamp. As a whole, *The White to be Angry* relies on appropriation and citation as key strategies to paint a simultaneously camp and poignant picture of the foundations and desires around White supremacist culture in the United States. In one scene, a straight Jewish couple goes from a Sunday afternoon gathering to a sexually infused killing spree, while in another part an Angeleno skinhead plays a



VAGINAL DAVIS, *That Fertile Feeling*, 1983, still from digital video: 8 min 27 sec.



VAGINAL DAVIS, *The Last Club Sucker*, 1999, still from digital video: 32 min 41 sec.



VAGINAL DAVIS, *Tom Cruise Loves Women*, 2000, still from digital video: 19 min.



Top two: The front and back of **VAGINAL DAVIS's** *Janice Ian - Societies Child*, 2021, found paper, Schminkstifte, mascara, eye shadow, liquid eye liner, blush, lip stain, Max Factor foundation, metallic tempera, Hamamelis Wasser with Mandrake, Henbane and Datura, hydrogen peroxide, glycerine, 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, 20.6 x 16.5 x 3 cm. Bottom two: The front and back of **VAGINAL DAVIS's** *Wanda Coleman*, 2021, found paper, Schminkstifte, mascara, eye shadow, liquid eye liner, blush, lip stain, Max Factor foundation, metallic tempera, Hamamelis Wasser with Mandrake, Henbane and Datura, hydrogen peroxide, glycerine, 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, 26.6 x 20.6 x 3 cm.



VAGINAL DAVIS, *The White to be Angry*, 1999, still from digital video: 19 min 22 sec.



character who cruises and then beats up the people that his hate-speech-spewing, potato chips-eating, Confederate flag-abiding elders seek to demonize. The soundtrack and general composition of *The White to be Angry* reveal Ms. Davis's roots in the queercore movement, particularly her relationship to punk-rock music. Yet this is not a series of video clips produced in relation to an album. Rather, the work assumes this composition to destabilize our change-the-channel-mentality to violence. Moreover, the references to mainstream Hollywood directors operate on two levels: on one hand, it gives the work iconographical dimensionality, similar to how the portrait series connects certain personalities to the lived realities of minoritarian communities; on the other hand, it also situates "American violence" in a cinematic culture that both fetishizes and profits from it.

The diverse and insistent application of collage—as form and medium, narrative instrument, iconographical chisel, and a vignette of potentiality—points to the speculative, even parafictional desire throughout Ms. Davis's oeuvre. Parafiction is an elusive character, with one foot in reality and the other in the realm of fiction. As such, the parafictional is a space of projection that allows lived experiences to intersect with speculative encounters, histories, and iconographies. The parafictional is a queer space pur sang. And as art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty pointed out, parafictional

strategies are "post-simulacral," they are aware of their own fiction in a lived reality.¹ Ms. Davis's relationship to parafiction is indeed highly self-reflexive: the references she uses are always employed in relation to, or even as part of, her own persona.

Although I do not want to equate the two terms, drag and parafiction are at the very least non-exclusive lovers. Arguably, drag is the ultimate discourse of autobiographical fabulation, an accumulative persona created from a personality. At Eden Eden, there was a wall plastered with photographs of Ms. Davis through the years, alongside flyers for *Sucker* events, short scribbles and poems, performance announcements and photographs, pin-up models, and party pics. The rich parafictional tableau portrays Ms. Davis as a punk rocker, a seductive model, a transgressive performance artist, a little girl, or a diva, surrounded by the scenes and worlds she lives in and beyond—real, ambiguous, speculative. One poster, showing Ms. Davis photographed at the center of what looks like a giant pantyhose, is signed "Yours Trully, Vaginal Davis"—not quite always truly, but truly in many versions.

The real face of Vaginal Davis, like Jesus, remains unknown to us. However, I will settle for the kaftan, so consider me a convert: a good Christian boy led astray, seeing the world through the thick veil of the buoyant, defiant, ecstatic, and multitudinous universe of Ms. Davis.

VAGINAL DAVIS (b. 1969, Los Angeles) lives and works in Berlin since 2006, where she works with the CHEAP Kollektiv along with fearless leader Susanne Sachsse, film historian Marcuse Siegelstein, and the Jewish Muzlim translator to the academic scholars Daniel Hendrickson. She is the celebrated intersex doyenne of intermedia arts and sciences. Her medium is the indefinite nature of her own whimsy. Ms. Davis is the winner of the 2018 Queer Art Prize and the 2009 Ethyl Eichelberger Award. She is currently writing her first novel, *Mary Magdalene*.

HENDRIK FOLKERTS is the curator of international contemporary art at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Folkerts was previously the Dittmer curator of modern and contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago (2017–21); curator of documenta 14, Kassel/Athens (2014–17); curator of performance, film, and discursive programs at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2010–15); and coordinator of the curatorial program at De Appel arts center, Amsterdam (2009–11). Folkerts has (co-)edited various publications, including *Igshaan Adams: Desire Lines*, *Alexandra Bachzetsis: SHOW/TIME/BOOK BOOK/TIME/SHOW* (forthcoming 2023), *Mounira Al Solh: I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous* (with Laura Barlow, 2019), "The Place of Performance" (Stedelijk Studies edition, 2015), *Facing Forward: Art & Theory From a Future Perspective* (with Christoph Lindner and Margriet Schavemaker, 2015), and *The Shadowfiles #3: Curatorial Education* (with Ann Demeester and Edna van Duyn, 2013). His texts have been published in journals and magazines such as *South as a State of Mind*, *Mousse Magazine*, *Artforum International*, *The Exhibitionist*, *Metropolis M*, *Art & the Public Sphere*, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues. Most recently, he contributed to monographs on Alexandra Bachzetsis, Brendan Fernandes, Anne Imhof, Bouchra Khalili, Carlos Motta, Vivian Suter, Andy Warhol, Samson Young, and Evelyn T. Wang.

1 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausability," *October*, No. 129 (Summer 2009), p. 54.