

Pink Labor on Golden Streets Queer Art Practices

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A Chart of Universal History

Kaucyila Brooke and Vaginal Davis in Conversation
with Daniel Hendrickson

Daniel Hendrickson: Contrary to its worldwide reputation, Los Angeles is not a city where anything can happen. In fact, destiny rules over Los Angeles with an iron fist. It's just that destiny is not always predictable. For instance, Los Angeles is the locale that spawned Vaginal Davis, a miracle on its own terms, but also inconceivable anywhere else in the world. It's also the place where Marc Siegel and I first met Kaucyila Brooke. We had many mutual friends, so it was unpredictably bound to happen. And happen it did. (This, of course, was long before any of us had even heard of Susanne Sachsse.) I remember an evening when we all decided to go out to a club to see Vaginal Davis perform, probably at The Garage, but I can't really remember. Vaginal, however, declined to appear and sent the wheelchair-bound Lester Vartan in her stead. He was accompanied by his home health-care nurse, Rolanda, who, despite her long blonde cornrows, bore a striking resemblance to Ron Athey. But Ron was in the audience, so it couldn't have been him. Anyway, Vartan couldn't keep his eyes off of Kaucyila, and kept yelling out, "You fly, girl!" between songs. And he was right. She was fly.

Now, many years later, Vaginal and I are exiles in Berlin, and Kaucyila still lives in California, so we had to make use of some modern technology to have a long overdue chat. But the technology wasn't really working well, which really got the ladies going.

Kaucyila Brooke: As a lesbian Luddite, I value conversation. I find that I only have a few friends who enjoy this. I used to spend hours on the phone—my landline of course, which I still maintain because the audio is better and it doesn't heat up next to my head and it does not suddenly go skritch-y or blankety-blank or skeeeeshhhhh! My friends and lovers and I would discuss the finer points of politics, theory, art, lovers, and break-ups until the morning hours. Now I can hardly get a call returned. I leave a voice mail and what comes back is either a text message or an e-mail or nothing. My friend Susan Sifton often remarks that she is grateful that she can count on me to return a call and usually in a twenty-four-hour period. Is it just that everyone is so connected with each other that they don't need to return my calls or are they hiding out on YouTube or e-mail or checked out in some Facebook phantasmagoria of what they call "community"? How can there be such a thing as a Facebook community when the FBI and Coca Cola want to be your "friend"? Does your friend take your data and store it to check up on you later to see if you are a terrorist or consumer or someone whose identity they would like to steal?

Vaginal Davis: Oh, my darling duchess, since we're both Luddite lesbians, I don't mind telling you that I faced quite the dilemma recently when

I was appearing in Glasgow. The curators put me up in a cute boutique hotel there called citizenM. It's a very nice place with a staff of major Ms. Gorgeous youth-quaking millennials, but to access the lights and TV in the room I was forced to use an iPad, which I'd never used before. I can only say, it aggravated me to no end.

I do have an iPhone, which was given to me as a birthday present by my boss, the Empress Stefanie Schulte Strathaus of the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art, where I have been curating the monthly performative film program *Rising Stars, Falling Stars: We Must Have Music* for the last seven years. I am still trying to figure out how to work my so-called smart phone. I hate sending texts as my thick fingers just can't seem to handle typing on the tiny pad, but I realize that to stay in contact with my young students, I must. Most of them only do texting and don't really check e-mails, so I am at a disadvantage because of my lesbian Ludditeness.

KB: The term "smart" is an odd one because it makes me think about "stupid." Is the phone smart and therefore smarter than you or me? Are we stupid? Is the classroom "smart" because it has Wi-Fi and projectors and lights that switch on when we enter them? I thought that intelligence was something we were working on together in the classroom through reading, learning our shared histories, and looking at images and books. I don't believe that my ability to look everything up online is helping with my memory—although auto correct is making me look like a better speller.

VD: I've heard of technology being compared to a bad lesbian relationship, but I feel that there is no such thing as a bad lesbian relationship. What people call lesbian drama I find fascinating and full of merit. The same goes for lesbian processing and lesbian crib death, when lesbians stop having sex with each other. I find sex overrated anyway. I am becoming so, not just last century but the century before that. I am reverting to Victorian-era standards of sexuality and technology.

Particularly since letter writing has always been a big part of my art practice. I feel that it's necessary to make the time to write old-fashioned letters via post and to keep up with my correspondence with people all over the world, something I started doing as a child back in the 1970s. There is nothing I enjoy better than receiving a long letter in a creatively decorated envelope stuffed with photos, drawings, ephemera, and the like. As a member of the nobility, I am sure you receive lots of formal requests for an audience and the like. Do you have your own seal? Is this something that you engage in as well?

KB: I did for many years, on beautiful paper with fountain pens. Whatever was the current favorite became my most trusted companion—from pens that had rubber bladders to refill to cheap cartridges. Or for quite some time in the 1970s I would always write with a Rapi-dograph—0001 point—shaking the pen to release the ink flow. I must confess that the last letter I wrote was to Mother Flawless Sabrina—who does not use e-mail, is not on Facebook (me neither, I followed her example. She stated the obvious: “These people are not ‘friends!’”), and does not make calls but will receive them. Anyway, when I thought about reviving my letter-writing practice she seemed the obvious recipient. I took my Lamy fountain pen to paper and wrote several long pages, carefully folded them into a collaged envelope, and sent the missive on its way.

And yes, of course I have a seal! Here it is!



Fig. 144
Kaucyila Brooke with
Gala Porras-Kim,
Unofficial Seal, 2012

In any case, speaking of my lust for old technologies, I shoot on film and with numerous cameras, including the very basic large-format Toyo-View 4×5 Field Camera. The waterfalls that I exhibited in Vienna during the “Pink Labor on Golden Streets” exhibit were made with that camera. When I set up the camera on a tripod at the site of Multnomah Falls—I made such a spectacle of myself with a dark cloth over my head and cable release and 4 × 5 film holders—parents were bringing their children over to see the old-fashioned camera. What kind of camera is that? Are you using film???

confusion continued when I exhibited the prints. Because my exposures were thirty seconds to one minute long, the water from the fall is exposed to film over time and looks like a blur of white in the print. Those looking at the images wondered what sort of Photoshop filter or digital technique was used to make the effect. Funny, eh? The most basic relationship between time, the shutter, and light on film is still mysterious after 188 years. I love the trace of light on film and the magic box of the camera, and what emerges from the diabolical darkroom enchantments. The waterfall series is titled "The Last Time I Saw You," which is referring to the last time I saw my father or spent time with him while he was conscious before he died—but it is also about the disappearance of the experience of things through time and space and the attempt to fix the shadows and traces of light with the alchemical materials of silver halides.

DH: By this time our technological aids were giving out, perhaps because they were being bad-mouthed so much, so the conversation had to move to a written form.

Kaucyila wrote:

Your Majesty! or Yo Majesty!

First I want to say, how honored I am to be having such a correspondence with one of such glamorous glitz and good sense as you. You inspire me. I am always at your feet looking up at you as resplendent clouds surround you in the lofty halls of Olympian glory. Or is it Hades where I find you? I may be looking up and down all at the same moment.

Do you remember where we first met? It was 1992 and I had just arrived in Los Angeles to take a faculty position at CalArts. I saw that there were several queers among the faculty—Millie Wilson, Matias Viegner, John DiStefano, to name a few—and we decided to make something of it. We organized a Drag Ball, CAL ARTS IN FLAMES!, and because it is a school, we made it academic by holding a panel discussion on drag in the afternoon before the ball. Maybe that is how we got the money to pay our guests a small fee. The panel was you—Vaginal Davis, Gender, Cathy Opie, and Pigpen—kind of a butch/femme spread. I was the moderator. Honestly, I wasn't really good at it—I just thought I would introduce everyone and then it would self-manage. I had nothing to prepare myself for how you would enchant me and throw me off the task at hand. You began speaking

and the wit and wisdom dropped like so many gems from your perfect lips and the room faded around thy glory. Cathy tried to catch my eye and indicated her watch. Pigpen gave me a nudge and nodded her head in your direction and I understood that although time warped and enfolded me in your magic, others were waiting to speak. I stuttered and sputtered—breaking into your history lesson—trying to wedge open a few minutes for the rest of the panelists to do their bits.

We arrived to the event because we had a meeting and decided to do it. You know, in the same room—our fleshy bodies in one of those windowless offices at CalArts—where we recirculate our own hot air. Then we divided up tasks. Someone made a poster. Several of us made phone calls. Was there even e-mail in 1992? Certainly we weren't using it to do e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g the way we do now. I really didn't realize that I was such a lesbian Luddite until recently when I took on the job of codirecting the Photo and Media program last year and found myself confounded and inadequate to manage the number of daily tasks which formerly would have been handled by one or two phone calls—now become endless unwieldy e-mail chains—with multiple personalities writing volumes on small subjects. How did I end up sitting on my increasingly well-padded derriere for hours every morning and into the afternoon trying to catch up with all this frivolity masquerading as important business? I mean, it is not that I mind sitting, but it should be for something truly worthwhile—like reading de Sade, or Bataille, or Butler, or Acker, or looking at pictures or reading the *New York Times* style magazine—where you can learn so much about everything but the Internet.

Vaginal responded:

My Darling Great Duchess,

I don't know if you know this, but I grew up in an all-lesbian separatist feminist household with my mother, a fierce barracuda-femme-top who ruled over a bevy of proper butches. So I came under the providential influence of my mother and her comrades-in-arms, who literally were women with weapons. They were fighting the patriarchal order, waging a war with their own stockpile of arms to create a feminist state somewhere in Palestine. The women in my mother's group went by names like "Manimal" and "Spyder" and I called them Uncle So-and-So growing up. There were no men in our household EVER. I grew up with my mother, my four sisters, and my mother's women's group. They were part of the women

who helped renovate the building in the Westlake section of Los Angeles that became the first Women's Building. Talk about going around in a circle! That famous photo that Cathie Opie took of me with the green hair, socks, and pubes was taken at the previous Women's Building location on North Broadway in Lincoln Heights, which has now been converted to studios and art spaces.

I have basically co-opted all my mother's work. She never considered herself an artist, but she was the most creative person, making what we would call now assemblage work and installations by dumpster diving at fabric houses in the garment district in downtown Los Angeles. I loved going on these forays with my mother and recycling things that were just thrown away. My mother was also an excellent seamstress, and she could knit and crochet. She tried to teach me these important skills but for some reason they never took hold. My mother hated cooking but was a great cook. She tried to teach me that and I was a complete and utter failure. Thank goodness I get invited to formal dinner parties and events at embassies for artists or I would starve.



Fig. 145
Vaginal Davis, *Denham Fouts – The Best Kept Boy in the World*, 2015

*Dear Princessa of Ho!Henzollern,
or Queen of My Heart Land Body All the Space around Us,*

Let's come back to the topic of "bad lesbian relationships." I think that they are different than my relationship to technology, but I am having trouble making the connection between the two. Other than that they are all-pervasive—like a relationship—and that technology is in my life to stay whether or not I choose to participate. This seems different than lovers, who can certainly choose to move on or I can choose the same solution to opt out of the struggle. "Dyke drama" (that is what we call it, to take advantage of the alliteration) seems to come with the territory of being one. Lesbian bed death? It is such a disappointment, but I agree that sex is not the whole relationship. What is called sex is just one part of intimacy—and everyone doesn't always want it the same way and at the same time. But in the movies that I watch, they do! They are always fucking on the countertops or shoving each other against walls and wrapping their legs around and getting fucked. It seems that the Victorians were at it all the time—or certainly they talked about it a lot and wrote about it and categorized it and put all the different kinds of sex into hierarchies of normal and abnormal—good, better, and best!

*Lusciously longingly yours,
Kaucyila*

Darling Major Ms. Gorgeous Duchess de Edendale,

Though you now live in Tujunga, you will always remain the grande Duchess of Edendale, as Edendale is so identified with your beauty and glamour, and you are one of Los Angeles' premiere ageless wonders and sterling talents.

Since we're on the topic of feminine delights, I think I forgot to give my mother's name earlier. I'm so excrement for brains sometimes. My mother's name is Mary Magdalene Duplantier. She hated her biblical name, but I think its divoon. When my mother married my sisters' father in 1937, his name was Sam Hall Williams. Williams is an awful surname. I have a different father from my sisters so my birth name is Clarence Dennis Ruff von Holtzendorf Sanders, which is such a hideous name, but my mother was trying to satisfy my oldest sister, who liked the named Clarence Dennis, and my father's relatives who are the Ruff von Holtzendorf.

Now moving on to the political understanding of humor in our work. I believe in utter whimsy and taking frivolous things seriously and serious things lightly. I was gagging on the lovely extravaganza of your *All about Eve* spoof.' I didn't know you did work like that and it's just brilliant and with great production values on a budget. I believe highly in working within a certain cheap aesthetics. That's why I recycle in my visual art, and art objects, and painting, using disused makeup brands or cheap nail polish and other kinds of makeup from ninety-nine-cent stores, or there is a thirty-cent store on Central Avenue and Adams Boulevard in Los Angeles that one of my former students sends me care packages from. I love this store.

So many well-meaning liberal types hated my work in the 1980s. For instance, there was this activist named Dave Lumian, who was the publisher of a magazine I used to write for called *Twist*, and he had a management company that handled Phranc, the Jewish lesbian folk singer, and the ska band The Untouchables and The Dream Syndicate. I used to get into such heated discussions with him as he didn't get where the politics came from in the humor and the way I used humor. Well, my mother always used to say she would rather suck the four-horned penis of the grand cyclops of the KKK or French kiss Adolph Hitler and his halitosis-riddled mouth than deal with a well-meaning white liberal.

Dearest and Most Honored Majestic Being,

Edendale—we are in the dale of Eden in our mind's eyes or is it the vale? Edenvale, where the flowing veils of deep velvet and chiffon fly through the air flowing off our shoulders, but hopefully unlike Isadora, they will not wrap themselves through the spokes of a wheel and cause the end of our breathing—of course not because here we are in Eden Veil—a paradise of feminine delights in the garden of our conversation.

Your mother sounds amazing! Like the opposite of mine. My mother was not a feminist and would not have described herself as one either. She was an educated woman who said that she was satisfied with her role as wife, mother, homemaker, etc. I gave her a very hard time about that when I was first developing my feminist ideas in the 1970s and even earlier when I was confronting her with my ideas about the Vietnam War, marriage, and my budding radical politics. She is the one who introduced me to art. She took me to the Portland Art Museum to see the collection and later to see the blockbuster Salvador Dali jewelry show, which included a beating

heart of rubies—that was the most fantastic object I had ever seen—talk about a *Wunderkammer*! That was the beginning of my fascination with *Kunst und Wunderkammers* before I even knew they existed. When she found out that I was a lesbian she said that she understood why I felt closer to women and liked the intimacy of those relationships but she didn't know why it had to be a sexual relationship too. Then later when she was reading a biography of Edith Wharton who had both male and female lovers she amended her ideas about me and said that she was not convinced that I was a lesbian but she did think that I was artistic and that that led me to unconventional relationships. She grew up in the Philippines for the first eighteen years. Her father moved there from Minnesota to teach in an American school and later—after he married my grandmother on a trip home to Le Roy, Minnesota—he exported tobacco. I guess that was a more lucrative business, because my mother grew up with a cook, a chauffeur, a nursemaid, and went to all the fancy parties at the American officers' clubs. She would sometimes pull tissue-wrapped beaded flapper dresses from her carved Chinese chest and show me that the armpits were all rotted out from the heat and humidity in that climate. Her aunt was a missionary in China, which is where the chest came from—so on that side of the family there is history with American imperialist and colonialist economies. My mother was very sensitive about racism and social differences in class, language, and culture, I guess because of growing up in Manila, and this was something that she impressed upon me going up. She was much more worldly than my father who had not traveled beyond Oregon until 1933, when he went to the World's Fair in Chicago as a delegate for the Chi Psi Fraternity's National Convention.

My mother's name was Ann and my father's name was George. She was an English literature major in college and gave all of her children English names: Ann, George, Jane, and Edith. I am the youngest and they had a family meeting to decide on my name. At twenty-two I decided to offload the markings of my patrilineal heritage by dropping my last name and so for a period of time I went by Edith Grace. My father was a little hurt but my mother surprised me by backing me up and stating that she agreed to my objection to the name of the father sequence and although they all thought my frequent name changes ridiculous, when I finally landed on Kaucyila Brooke, she did attempt to call me by that name. I have been Edith

1 Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis, *Dry Kisses Only*, 120 minute video, 1990.

Grace Hibbard, Edee Hibbard, E, Edith Grace, Grace, Shady Grove, Grove, Nail, Conchita Rivales, Kaucyila Brooke, Brooke, Sunshine Daisy, Smokey Blueberry, and Queen Kaucyila. My cats have been called Ceres, Falodal, Abayoyo, and Buwara. My dogs have been called Kiki Parker, Cricket Hoover, and Mingus Dragonfly.

*All my love,
Kaucyila*

O Goddess Freya,

I didn't know about all your many names and persona changes. So very similar to me. I was coming up with new characters all the time and morphing into different identities since about the age of five, all of this under the guidance and encouragement of my mother and her lesbian kollektiv. I have gone by the name Vaginal Davis since about thirteen, and my mother, sisters, and entire extended family never blinked an eye. A normative friend from university was shocked when he was over at my Koreatown flat and heard me retrieving messages from my old answering machine. He couldn't believe that my mother called me "Ms. Davis." I think he was more shocked by her formality of tone than anything else.

Dear Fantastico Fabuloso Fire of Life,

This conversation has really got me thinking again! Thank you for getting it off the ground.

I was thinking about your mother the lesbian separatist and wondering about you navigating that world as Clarence Dennis Ruff von Holtzendorf Sanders. Your account of those days makes it sound like it was all okay in your household and that you were included in those early days at the Westlake Women's Building. My memory of the lesbian separatists in the Pacific Northwest was that they were hostile to male children and after the age of eight they were not welcome to attend all women events. Those women most certainly pushed the definition of radical lesbian feminism to exclude not only boy children, but straight women who they thought of as sleeping with the enemy, and obviously gay and straight men. I lived in a log cabin in a former logging camp on the Siuslaw River and the landlady, Bertha Fitch, only rented to "girls" and we never knew if she knew we were all dykes. Anyway, there were a couple of separatists living there but they were quite phobic toward those of us who did

not define ourselves the same way. A male friend from college days visited my cabin and that made my membership to the "sisterhood" teeter toward oblivion—after that they were convinced that I was just a tourist.

Although I quickly found out that my dream of living in a feminist utopia was an unrealizable fantasy filled with divisive politics, I was not dissuaded from pursuing my own path through the history of feminism and feminist theory. Mostly I realized this through starting a radio program where I could produce programs related to my research and true to anarchist feminist ideals. The program became a collective and more women were trained to take over the programming. That remained my primary creative outlet until I picked up photography. I started making pictures of my friends at the river cabins with my mother's No. 1 Pocket (Kodak) Camera from the 1920s. I still have the photos of us cutting up logs with our collectively owned chainsaw, who we called "Run Ten Ten" since to us everyone had to have a good name. We weren't reading Monique Wittig but we could have been. Documenting beautiful women in costumes and meadows and naked creek walking became my pre-occupation and eventually led me to take photo classes at the local community college. I became an artist because I wanted to picture my feminist friends who were making up a new world at the edge of the forest. When I eventually made my way to graduate school in Tucson, Arizona, one of my male colleagues took me aside and advised me to drop the queer and feminist content out of my work if I wanted to be taken "seriously" in the art world. Another confessed to me that she envied me because I had something to say rather than what she felt was her own vague ambition to be an artist. It is not that I was not making art or had no ambition to have it seen, it is just that feminism was the foundational moment that propelled me into the field of the image.

Weirdly out of context and never part of some urban group of feminist artists like WAC or the Guerrilla Girls, I was surprised one day to wake up and find out that feminism had become a brand or a banner and some feminist artists had become pillars in the pantheon of art stars. I remember thinking, "Ain't I a feminist?" and later "Ain't I a dyke?" when *OUT* magazine started reifying its own brand of queer artists. The same power-dykes populate the art world and take a visible position sometimes at the risk at losing the nuances of ambivalent ambiguities or the contradictory complexities that make it so difficult to define the subject or inhabit the fiction of a stable or singular subjectivity. Certainly humor undermines the unified and

proliferates signs and signifiers until the multiplicity of associations can become dizzy and indirect. What exactly is her position anyway? Is there a story here? I think that humor is both a way into the play of the subject and her many invented meanings and a way to cut against the power hierarchies by turning my back on them, or turning aside ever so slightly to deflate the puffed-up daddies and bring the attention back to the dandy. Because who wants to be taken seriously anyway?

Humor and play both abstract the image out of its most expected relation to meaning. Turning it over and spanking its hiney means the possibility of another synthesis that allows me to slam and Post-it note dissimilar things together. If gender and the feminine are only associated with a certain kind of body, it becomes very difficult to see the other alliances that are drawn. For example, I took my waterfall photos while thinking about my father at the end of his life. The photos look like big wet cunts, or that is how the creamy watery slit in the green wall of ferns has often been anthropomorphized, and I admit this is a desirable association for me. But before I put it away into that corner of my mind and leave it as a representation of a female body, I have a strange sensation of something missing in the equation. For me, these pictures came out of my thinking about my dying father. Is the falling water then the stream of life? The cum that contained the semen that eventually became me? Is water falling to a pool and then in an undefinable whoosh of wind and sound moving on to join the great Columbia River and out to the sea of souls no longer individuated into the biographies of great historical subjects? What does any of this have to do with being queer? It is queer to think about, don't you think?