

Vaginal Davis
VD as VB

“I am not interested in entertainment. I am not interested in ENTERTAINMENT. I am not INTERESTED in ENTERTAINMENT.”¹

Unlike a re-enactment of a historical event, which is concerned with the event and its traditions, the re-enactment of a performance necessarily entails a certain level of self-referencing. It is inevitable: the first concern regards the performance, the dynamics it sparks, the critical debate arising from it, the work of the artist and his or her position in art history, and then in second place come the issues raised by the work, the story it tells. The medium prevails over the message. All of this is especially true when the original is particularly recent, and has withstood the scrutiny of the institutions and the market but not yet that of history. In such cases a re-enactment inevitably risks becoming part of the critical success of the original, becoming part of its hype, functioning as a kind of explanatory note. For this reason, anyone undertaking this kind of re-enactment has to be fairly ingenuous (whether emulator or fan) or brave.

Courage is one thing that **Vaginal Davis** certainly does not lack, having cut her teeth on the Los Angeles drag scene before moving to Berlin, where she currently lives. Davis is an Afro-American drag queen, who over the last twenty years has been performance artist, actress, curator, musician and writer. Jennifer Doyle offers an incisive portrait of her in the book *Sex Objects*, which provides an in depth examination of her works: “Her presence, her voice, her charisma are all larger than life, amplified by an Amazonian physique. Well over six feet tall, she towers above her entourage. She is incredible to watch, partly because she welds a hard and intricate version of femininity to a super-sized black body: she could be Edith Piaf’s mulatta gay brother, magnified.”²

In January 2000, on occasion of *GIMP*, the “performance art boutique” organized by Davis and her friend and fellow artist Ron Athey, she organized a performance inspired by Vanessa Beecroft’s *VB39* (1999), in which the Italian artist presented uniformed American marines for the first time. In July 2000, on occasion of her participation in the Whitney Biennial, Beecroft staged a similar performance at the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum in New York.

At the time Vanessa Beecroft was a rising star in the international artistic firmament. Her elaborate performances had been round the world, garnering the most coveted stages, and were gaining institutional recognition. Her formula today remains the same, with a few - but significant - variations:

she exhibits bodies, set out in orderly rows, or apparently at random, usually models who are completely naked or wearing a few selected items of clothing, often haute couture. The models are given a few simple instructions: no eye contact with spectators, and no looking directly at the video or camera recording the event; to look impassible, vaguely bored; to remain standing for as long as possible, and not to speak. Beecroft's performances relate to the context where they are staged: the venue and its history, and the aesthetic and cultural models it reflects or promotes. Ever-obsessed with issues connected to the body and its compliance with certain aesthetic canons, Vanessa Beecroft explores the links between art and sexuality, the commercialization of beauty, and the economies of desire, art and voyeurism. However her works are not a critique, in so far as they lack a polemical vein and moral 'clarity': they possess the ethical ambiguity typical of much mainstream art, which has entered the economy of luxury and a system of specularly, not opposing it, but rather choosing to address it from an oblique angle.

This is why Beecroft, who is an attentive observer of advertising and the aesthetic strategies of designer fashion, is in turn also a source of inspiration for the advertising world. This is why the art establishment loves her in public, while secretly loathing her, feeding into the hype that surrounds her. And this is why the images of her performances around the turn of the millennium have acquired iconic status, like few other contemporary works of art have managed to.

One of the most significant characteristics of the Beecroft phenomenon, and many other darlings of the art world (Matthew Barney, for example) is the impossibility of separating the work from the persona. And although Vanessa Beecroft hardly ever appears in her performances, her habit of entitling all her works with her own initials (VB), followed by a serial number, is an explicit invitation to view them as self portraits. For this reason, in her works entitled "VD as VB", Vaginal Davis does more than just tackle individual performances, but reworks (and subverts) the entire VB phenomenon: the artist as celebrity and the subject of gossip, fully integrated not only into the art world, but also the realm of communications and advertising; the ritual nature of the performances, from the selection mechanism to the rules for the models (detachment, silence, endurance, etc.), and the cold, refined aesthetic of the images.

The subversion occurs by means of various strategies, the first of which is a change of "context": VB's performances are staged in leading galleries (from the Deitch to the Gagosian), museums or elegant, prestigious venues - like Vinsebeck Castle for *VB61* - while Davis puts on her performances in gay clubs, alternative venues or marginal art galleries. In these contexts the reference to the original

performances may or may not be decodable, on various levels. Davis uses this situation to great effect, in order to break out of the vicious circle of self-referencing, and direct the audience's focus to the issues raised by her own performance. Beecroft's level of fame has transformed her works into a cultural stereotype, reworked for advertising purposes by the main glossy magazines, and this makes Davis's version legible to those who have never heard of VB, or have only superficial knowledge of her works. This can be observed in *VD as VB - Erdgeist, Earth Spirit #27-29 10827*, performed in June 2007 at the Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana, a no-profit exhibition venue which attracts both the establishment and the general public. This performance was inspired by *VB53*, produced in 2004 by the Fondazione Pitti Immagine Discovery of Florence. On that occasion Beecroft, in the middle of the Tepidarium in Florence, an elegant, airy 19th century structure in iron and glass, installed a heap of dark earth, upon which models, in the usual sculpturesque poses, and wearing high-heeled sandals and long wigs, offered themselves to the public eye. The image drew explicitly on the Renaissance iconography of Mary Magdalene, observed by Beecroft in a museum in Florence. The artist, as usual, did not take part in the performance.³

In *Erdgeist*, on the other hand, the artist is present, right in the middle of the stage. After a recorded programmatic-type statement which proclaims the 'impotency of expression'⁴, she introduces herself as Vanessa Beecroft, with a hilarious imitation of the artist's ingenuous, understated manner ("Please forgive my English, I am Italian and I do not speak English very well") before going on to deny various stories about her love life: "I must also lay a disclaimer that I have not been involved in an illicit sexual love affair with fellow artist Matthew Barney... The father of my child Isabella is Damien Hirst, not Matthew Barney." What might seem an improbable, purely satirical, reference, to the pervasive presence of gossip in the art world (as in all other communities), is actually a key element in all of Davis's works, which show her interest in the social function of gossip, and its role in the creation of celebrities. She continues with a sort of disclaimer: "Behold the expanse of *VD as VB - Erdgeist, Earth Spirit #27-29 10827*, trademarked and registered, copyrighted by me Vanessa Beecroft of the Beecroft brand and entitlement. All rights, privileges, and responsibilities therein reserved." Here the focus is on VB as a brand, her links with the fashion industry, her performances which generate sets of lucrative images (the 'official' pictures printed in large format and sold by the galleries, which are usually taken by professional photographers before the actual performance is staged), and the consequent ban on photography for the public. This is not a criticism of the art market – a market that Vaginal Davis does not belong to in any case, as she works purely on the level of performance – so much as a reflection on two relatively recent phenomena: the commercialization of performance art, and how artists become brands.

Moving from the verbal aspect to the visual one, on one hand we witness the metamorphosis of a shy white girl (VB) - angst-ridden member of the middle class and international art superstar - into an extrovert, larger than life black drag queen (VD); and on the other we can observe the conversion of the highbrow approach adopted by VB, to VD's intentionally vulgar, lowbrow style. While the models in *VB53* all correspond, in different ways, to the same aesthetic canons, VD's models differ in age, sex and above all appearance: portly old men and muscle-bound gym bunnies, pretty boys and girl next door types – anyone can take part in her performances. During the selection process Beecroft's models are asked to fill in a questionnaire which attempts to assess their personal, cultural and emotional suitability for the project, as well as their looks. Davis's models, on the other hand, are invited to take part in a workshop where the artist teaches them to embrace their own entirely personal, non-standard form of beauty, and create their own costumes. Davis sets a participation-based mechanism against a selection process which is final and enforced from on high. While Beecroft 'depersonalizes' her models and violates their privacy (obliging them to wear the same wig, the same costumes, paint their skin the same colour, but also on occasions to shave their pubic areas), Davis elicits a process of self-awareness ('I am beautiful') and self-determination ('I decide how to present myself and relate to the audience'). During the performance, Davis asks her performers to repeat a number of phrases along with her: "I am beautiful... I am desirable... My breastage creates want... I have perfect genitalia." In the light of what we have said, these phrases can be interpreted as a criticism of Beecroft's work, which is accused of commercializing the body, manipulating desire, using sex in a hypocritical way and paying tribute, as Doyle says, 'to the most regressive impulses in art', and they can also be seen as the result of the work on the participants' self-esteem – I do not comply to a norm, yet I am still beautiful and desirable. Davis also systematically upends the rules that Beecroft's models have to obey: "Tonight I present a living breathing sculpture, the embodiment of all that is pure, new and transcendent. Drink them in, swallow them, look, look, and look some more, photograph, videotape and document for the king and his kingdom. But you can only touch if you ask them nicely, and they approve." The models and the audience do not have to comply with any rules, but can decide what they want to do. In this way, something paradoxical occurs: even when VD pushes back the boundaries of decency, both verbally and visually (like in her 2000 performance, where a marine, after stripping, attempts to get an erection), her performances seem much more equable, and on the whole, less uncomfortable than VB's. This is because in VD's works the body is not a mere object for contemplation, but an opportunity for dialogue, and also because instead of the intentionally cold, fascistoid settings chosen by VB we have the louche, freer approach of the underground scene.

At this point, in the light of what we have seen, it can be useful to return to the previously mentioned concept of 'moral ambiguity'. In her work Beecroft creates a mechanism for repressing natural urges and standardizing the body and aesthetic tastes, and she does this without passing judgement. Her work is seductive yet unsettling: it appears to want to make us reflect on an issue, but it acts with the complicity and active support of the system which is the root of the problem. It is both statement and negation. It tackles something obscure, but does not combat it, seemingly more interested in getting us to reflect on the reasons behind its success. Why are models still dying of anorexia? Why are car adverts still presenting us with these visions of Aryan-looking, glamorous, aggressively sexual, inaccessible women? Why does the image of the soldier continue to function as a symbol of power and masculinity? Beecroft does not critique these models, but exposes us – with a force never achieved by advertising – to their power of seduction.

As for Vaginal Davis, she manipulates much more direct expressive codes, such as homosexual exhibitionism, the extroverted nature of the gay world, but also cultural guerilla action and political activism. This puts her in the position to understand the pernicious nature of Beecroft's work (and the same goes for Koons, Richard Prince and many other artists, from Warhol onwards): by veiling criticism in the language of power, and presenting it in a way that pleases the system, Beecroft (like Warhol, like Koons) produces works that may be more mature and lasting from the artistic point of view, but are useless, even counterproductive, when it comes to cultural guerrilla action. The difference between the work of VB and VD could be likened to the difference between Pop Art (critical? conservative? the jury is still out), and situationist art, which is without a doubt critical. This is why the target of the détournement is Beecroft, rather than just any kind of image from the world of advertising. Davis uses Beecroft's performances as a Trojan horse to attack the institutions of the art world, and through them, the mainstream, the image of reactionary political power, aesthetic conservatism, which is culturally white and sexually hypocritical.

This approach returns to great effect in *The Madonna of Laibachdorf* (2007), the image produced during Davis's stay in Ljubljana, as a response to Beecroft's *White Madonna with twins* (2006). The latter is part of a series of works which came out of a trip to Sudan in November 2005. In this war-torn country, Beecroft – the guest of a Catholic mission – created a number of sacred shots, including this one, which shows her as an ethereal presence clad in the wonderful dress created for the occasion by the designer Martin Margiela, breastfeeding two African children. The children were Sudanese twins whose mother had died, and who were actually breastfed by the artist during her stay (she had recently

given birth to her second child). There is no need to say that the image – like the others in that series – is a masterpiece of ambiguity. Springing from her desire to report her encounter with History, but also the contradictions of the humanitarian effort, these images feature a striking contrast between content and form, which is formal to the point of kitsch: the models (all Sudanese apart from the artist) are beautiful, the clothes they wear simple but elegant, the photography as cold and impeccable as ever, and the Christian iconography is presented in a mawkish, scholastic way. The moving gesture of breastfeeding two orphaned children sits awkwardly with the Margiela dress. In an interview the artist declared: 'Yes, it is an ambivalent image – everyone is either very happy or very angry.'⁵

In *The Madonna of Laibachdorf*, Davis, wrapped in an immaculate sheet, holds two white children. She is not breastfeeding them, but gazes at them maternally, an absurd expression on the face of a drag queen. While the image of Beecroft was taken in a difficult situation, *The Madonna of Laibachdorf* is the result of a fun session, which involved not only the babies but also their respective mothers. Once more, Davis, rather than attempting to re-enact the project faithfully, appropriates the figure and her hallmark style to develop an entirely independent discourse of her own. While Beecroft's Madonna is the symbol – successful or otherwise, this is of little importance - of our troubled relationship with the southern hemisphere, Davis' Madonna is an emblem of our atavic fear of diversity, be it racial or sexual. By breastfeeding the Sudanese twins, the wealthy white woman attempts a gesture of charity, but actually perpetrates an act of colonialism, while by cradling two chubby white babies, the black homosexual reveals the hypocrisy that lies under the thin veneer of tolerance, brandishing diversity like a threat. A genial threat, because the fear lies not in Davis, but in the eyes of the spectator.

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¹ Vaginal Davis, quoted in Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 121.

² Ibid, pp. 121 – 122.

³ See the catalogue AAVV, *VB53 Vanessa Beecroft*, Charta, Milan 2005.

⁴ The complete text: “VD as VB, VD as VB, VD as VB / Valid art today is polarized into an unassuaged and inconsolable expressivity that rejects every last trace of conciliation, and becomes autonomous construction; and, the expressionlessness of construction that expresses the dawning powerlessness of expression. / VD as VB, VD as VB, VD as VB / The discussion of the taboo that weighs on subject and expression touches on a dialectic of maturity. / VD as VB, VD as VB, VD as VB.”

⁵ Neville Wakefield, “Progetto Sudan. Invocazione alla Madonna Bianca“, in *Flash Art*, n° 260, October – November 2006, pp. 87 – 90.