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SHE KNOWS WHO SHE IS

Solveig Nelson on the life and legacy of *Thing*



Cover of *Thing*, Spring 1991. Pam Johnson. Photo: Stephen Winter.

IN 1991, at “SPEW: The Homographic Convergence”—a showcase of queer zines, T-shirts, videotapes, and performance that took place at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago—Robert Ford described *Things* as a “black gay and lesbian underground arts journal and magazine kind of thing.” The publication, which he founded in 1989 with Trent Adkins and Lawrence Warren, highlighted what Ford called a “black sensibility” in the underground. Published “capriciously”—typically every three or four months—it featured original interviews, writing, and photographs by artists, musicians, writers, activists, and performers from queer scenes across the US, including figures such as Vaginal Davis, RuPaul, Joan Jett Blakk, Lady Bunny, Willi Ninja, Dorian Corey, Essex Hemphill, Lyle Ashton Harris, and many others.

“We knew for ourselves what a rich and important cultural thing gay black men have and share,” Ford later told the writer Owen Keehnen. “We wanted to make a magazine that would be a way of documenting our existence and contribution to society. Our idea was not so much [to] radicalize or subvert the idea of magazines as to make one from our own point of view.” This was a necessary intervention, Ford said at SPEW, because there was “so little of us in ‘mainstream media.’”

Thing’s title was in part a reference to self-organized, DIY culture, as in “do your own thing”; it sought in particular to build networks of “things” within and among underground cultures in Chicago and beyond. Ford described wanting to create alternative familial ties, inspired by the support he received from his parents and sister after he came out as gay. “As I look back on the projects which were my work,” he once wrote, “they

existed not only as magazines to inform the general public, but as structures to assemble a very special creative queer family.” While such relations often took shape through the sharing of images in *Thing* itself, they are also apparent in a 1992 photograph taken during a brunch with filmmaker Marlon Riggs in *Thing*’s offices. It shows Ford, sporting Harris’s MISS GIRL T-shirt (based on Harris’s influential self-portrait series), posing warmly with Riggs and *Thing*’s interracial, multi-gendered staff. That same day, Riggs had agreed to contribute to *Thing*—perhaps resulting in the moving piece printed in the Fall 1992 issue, titled “Letter to the Dead,” where he disclosed his HIV-positive status.



Page from *Thing*, Summer 1993.

Thing was an openly queer transformation of its predecessor, *Think Ink*, a black-and-white magazine Ford, Adkins, and Warren had launched in 1987 with the assistance of graphic designer Simone Bouyer. “Fashioned as a black arts paper with a gay sensibility, [*Think Ink*] was an ambitious zine which cost my entire tax refunds,” Ford recalled. Conceptualizing thinking as a procedure of multiplying forms of identification and belonging, he proposed: “The voice of *Think* is loud & varied embracing cultures and countercultures of thinkers male/female/black/white/straight/gay/etc. *Think* is to transcend labels & to express reactions, opinions, ideas.” In another draft of the magazine’s mission, which stressed the weight of visual images, he wrote, “*Think* is a record of how we think, how we look, who we are.” Of course, for the publication’s makers,

thinking also involved an exploration of who was meant by this we.

The cover of *Think Ink*’s “zero” issue featured artist Ken Hare styled (by Adkins) in a camp take on the 1970s television miniseries *Roots*. The declarative black-and-white image—whose caption, as in a high-fashion magazine, identified the jewelry worn (“African amber and railroad spike necklace courtesy of the Lucille Graham collection”)—proclaimed both an appropriation and a broadening of the Black Arts Movement of the preceding generation in Chicago, into whose creative force and institution-building ethos the zine tapped, while treating its ambiguous relation to the mainstream as an asset. Inside was a piece on two artists associated with the experimental Chicago gallery-café Holsum Roc (run by Bouyer and Stephanie Coleman, who also later worked at *Thing*); an essay by Andre Halmon on “acid tracks” in house music; an interview with the fashion designer Isaia; and, as an important anchor to an issue thematizing multiple forms of origins, a lengthy conversation with artist Margaret Burroughs, who had in 1961 cofounded what later became the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago.



Page from *Think*, Summer 1993.

On the cover of *Think Ink's* next (and last) issue, Spring 1988, the model Aisha Mays is dressed as a flapper in a photograph by Ernest Collins that evokes both the Jazz Age and the voguing scene of the '80s, characteristically bringing together different instances of cutting-edge glamour in African American culture. *Think Ink* was acutely aware of its own historical position, addressing the deaths of Harold Washington (the first African American mayor of Chicago) and the writer James Baldwin, for example, as well as interviewing DJ Frankie Knuckles, the longtime musical director of Chicago's much-loved club the Warehouse, which Ford elsewhere described as "a haven, owned and operated by black, gay men for black, gay men" that created a space for "kids black, white, gay and straight" to come together. Knuckles

defined *house* as neither what record executives were inventing nor the acid tracks created in basements: Instead, it was a "feeling" and an "attitude" that "not me alone invented or conjured up . . . it was something that people on the dance floor created themselves."

Think Ink's tag line was "participatory enlightenment." "Enlightenment" was positioned as something both emotionally and intellectually stimulating, "open[ing] up new channels of action." "Participatory" was elucidated in a list of synonyms for "participate" on the magazine's back cover, encompassing slang such as "make the scene" and civil-rights protest actions such as "sit-in." It could also be indirect, as in "be implicated in." *Think Ink* brought traditions of protest into dialogue with contemporary graphic design and a predilection for the interview format. For *Think Ink*, and even more so for *Think*, participation was about creating communities and forging links among them through new systems of reference, encouraging readers to multiply their own points of relation via action as well as representation.

Think launched in November 1989, its title prefigured in a glossary in *Think Ink's* final issue: "THING: A person or Thing of incorrigible and unbearable *Fabulousness*. As in the salutation, 'Miss Thing!,' or 'Thing's not buying it!'" The magazine's motto, meanwhile, was "*She* knows who *she* is"—a wry invitation to identify with one's own fabulousness rather than with essentialized parameters of gender or sexuality.



Think Ink, “Ground Zero” launch party, Holsum Roc Gallery and Café, Chicago, November 17, 1987.

Thing continued coverage of house and punk music and published reviews of art, including articles on Keith Haring’s murals for public schools, moving images by Riggs and Isaac Julien, and exhibitions by David Wojnarowicz and Adrian Piper. It was particularly attuned to

collectives, promoting work by the San Francisco–based African American gay theater group Pomo Afro Homos as well as club staples such as Deee-Lite. While the culture wars have often been narrated through art in traditional media by white artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, *Thing* emphasized the more ephemeral practices of zines, film/video, and performance—as well as alternative art spaces and dance venues that served as nodes of circulation. At the same time, it embodied the urgent need to critically reflect on sexual practices and fantasies and to generate new cultural forms in an era of censorship battles and government silence over the AIDS crisis. Ford wrote a column celebrating telephone sex, for example, and in the Winter 1992/93 issue, the magazine published glossaries elucidating the “different ways black & white gay men talk about sex.”

Subscription requests convey *Thing*’s importance to its readers. From Lexington, Kentucky: “Sisters, send me 3 issues of *Thing*. Thanks! I’m a black Dyke.” From San Francisco: “I’ve been accused, for most of my life, of being ‘one of those “avant-garde” bohemians’ . . . So it’s nice to see a magazine by black gays and artists.” Published out of Ford’s apartment, *Thing* was also sold in bookstores, clubs, galleries, record stores, and colleges across Chicago, with points of distribution throughout the country, eventually reaching a circulation of about three thousand.

Camp was central to *Thing*’s humor and politics. In a contribution to the 1990 “Summer Camp” issue, the editors defined this “indescribable aesthetic” as *a method for transcribing the effects of our modern postmodern society on us. It is arguable, eclectic, and personal; born of the free spirited gay intelligentsia as a reaction to the constricting mass culture we exist within. . . . An in-joke of cultural proportions, it’s the nudge and wink at the pervasiveness of the gay sensibility [in] modern life.*

Thing positioned drag as the camp aesthetic's most "visible symbol." Special note was taken of drag culture that explicitly aimed at "political provocation," such as the work of then-LA-based Vaginal Davis, a *Thing*darling. In an interview in the fourth issue (Spring 1991), Davis stressed that her influential autofiction zine, *Fertile LaToyah Jackson*, was ancillary to her live performances with what the magazine described as the "multiracial, maxigenderal" band Afro Sisters. She expressed her wariness of "performance art" (asking dismissively, "What is that?"), just as she refused to limit her audience. Davis explained that the directness and quickness of her performances allowed heterosexual black audiences to gain "a whole new look at a homosexual context." She continued, "I'm gay, I'm black, I'm a drag queen, I'm dressed up and I'm shoutin' and yellin' and I'm a MILITANT!"

Advertisement for The Black Line, published in *Thing*, ca. 1991.



Joan Jett Blakk, another "celebrated person" for *Thing*, relished "stomping on that line between male and female and erasing it." Born Terence Smith, Blakk had emerged on the scene at a 1990 ACT UP protest in Chicago, and the following year was the Queer Nation candidate for Chicago mayor. Blakk ran for president in 1992, the same year poet Eileen Myles conducted her own presidential campaign and artist Zoe Leonard wrote her influential text "I want a president . . ." In a marked contrast to the anger invoked in, say, a "die-in," Blakk used humor to bring visibility to trans and queer identities. In *Thing*, she wrote: "We need to trust each other even if we don't agree on certain issues. We need to tell each other when that shirt absolutely does not go with those pants. And we need to get out and vote." At key moments, Blakk pivoted from humor. On the subject of Anita Hill, she insisted, "It's hard to make [sexual harassment] funny because I know too many women who have to go through that every day." Mostly, however, Blakk used satire to call for an involved, participatory citizenship that at key moments provocatively pushed against humor's limits.

Ford encouraged *Thing*'s contributors to articulate "your opinion about what's made while it's being made" and promoted artists who responded fearlessly to the culture wars, as in an admiring report from a cabaret show in which Paula Killen acted out being chased by a mob of Pentecostals, "egged on by the ghostly remains of her first abortion," and a piece on the "defiant" performances at a Chicago ACT UP benefit in May 1990 titled "Bend It." After Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* was released, also in 1990, Adkinsnot only wrote in *Thing* that it "should stand up as a major historic chronicle of the black gay culture that we currently see so much misunderstanding and exploitation of by the mainstream," but the magazine also invited stars from the film to give their own perspectives on the controversy raging at the time around the cultural appropriation of voguing. Dorian Corey praised the film as an "enlightenment," while Willi Ninja described voguing's transformation from a fan-dance performed on the periphery to challenge dance to a "major art form created by the black and latin gay community."



Simone Bouyer, Stephanie Coleman, Robert Ford, Marlon Riggs, and Terry Martin at a brunch co-hosted by Women in the Director's Chair, *Thing* office, Chicago, April 1992.

Complementing its dedication to history in the making as well as its avowal of complexity, a recurrent feature of the magazine was humorous lists—book recommendations, abstract wordplay, best/worst play-lists—which created networks of association or appeared as a discursive version of

drag-ball competitions. James Baldwin was anointed a “Thing,” while Tom Wolfe was a “No Thing.” Racist North Carolina senator Jesse Helms was on a list of “homophobes who make you question the validity of the First Amendment.” The Fall 1992 issue, meanwhile, approached Conceptual art in its deconstruction of race, with lists of “Black Black People,” “Black White People,” “White Black People,” and “White White People.”

Thing stopped publication in 1993, because of Ford’s declining health as a result of AIDS, as well as financial constraints. Its final issue, the tenth, featured Jazzmun, “the living black Barbie,” on the cover (with a clued-in interview inside) and an extensive report by Todd Roulette from the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. Conveying the flavor of the issue, New York–based drag queen Linda Simpson wrote in her column: “Being glamorous is fabulous, darling, so is gay liberation. Combining the two is truly divine.”

It is becoming clearer that the effects and influences of *Thing*—like those of the people associated with it—are still unfolding. After languishing in obscurity, the magazine was featured in a 2016 exhibition at the University of Southern California Libraries in Los Angeles and at Participant Inc in New York, and its archives are now accessible to researchers at the Chicago History Museum (where my thanks are due to Julie Wroblewski, the Research Center staff, and Angela Hoover, as they are to Michael Thompson, Steve Lafreniere, and so many others from *Thing* for their help with my research).

In a recent conversation, Harris raised the question of whether the near-loss of the history of publications such as *Thing* has contributed to the blindness toward racism within parts of the Left today. One could go further and say that *Thing* demands a historicization of Black Lives Matter that renders visible its queer prehistories. The black, queer, and transgender perspectives the magazine foregrounded were intimately intertwined with a decisive phase in the history of AIDS activism, feminism, and the culture wars in ways that are still too often overlooked. But perhaps the most important legacy of *Thing* is that, for all its reveling in a punkish negativity, it advocated a politics of love. As Hemphill said in an interview in its fifth issue (Fall 1991): “It is imperative for us to make up the evidence of us loving ourselves. So that that can be absorbed. We need to show ourselves loving ourselves fiercely, even if we think or believe or fear that it is perhaps lacking right now.”

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