

Miss Thing | Sasha Frere-Jones

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An anthology of a legendary zine keeps it real

THING edited by Robert Ford, Trent Adkins, and Lawrence Warren. Primary Information, 460 pages. 2025.

In the debut issue of *THING* magazine, published in Chicago in November of 1989, you'll find, toward the back, a "THING/NO THING list." The word *things*—a kind of ad hoc mission statement—is almost invisible, a ghostly stand of elongated letters behind blocks of sans serif text. Under the heading "Homophobes who make you question the validity of the First Amendment," we find a list of eight people including Zsa Zsa Gabor, Spike Lee, and Jesse Helms. Under that, in "Most annoying pop songs of the late '80s," there are no less than five Paula Abdul songs listed. There is a fair amount of club culture in the listings—one is "The club tarts' all time panty rippers"—and another delightful list called "Bob Toledo's Top Ten Things To Do This Winter," which includes "Compare and contrast Telemann with Schœenberg" as well as "Buy American whenever convenient" (what the hell) and "Listen to *Virgin Beauty* by Ornette Coleman." There is a list of ten "Kids who sing along," none of whom I recognize, an entry called "Club Shirley" that seems to consist of people whose names either are Shirley or possibly sound like Shirley, and (maybe the list that explains the other lists), "Trent's favorite inside jokes." If you go to the indicia, you'll see that Trent Adkins is Lawrence Warren's co-editor, which does not explain why "house hayride" and "call your lawyer" are jokes. The list of "Some girls that gay men are stereotyped to love and emulate" suggests that it is both true and untrue that Diana Ross (under "The Black Girls") and Doris Day (under "The White Girls") are part of the gay male starter pack.

There is a ribald column from people named Bunny and Pussy who feel suicidal, give head in moving cars, and meet boys who read Proust. There are four good poems, and David Sedaris fanfic about marrying Mike Tyson that seems to have been borrowed from a zine by someone named Steve LaFreniere, whose "editorial stance is very (though not exclusively) gay lit" and is also "artfully Kinko-ed and boasting of REAL typesetting." This description of LaFreniere's magazine seems crucial: "not a business but a personal investment in free speech." That is how we get to *THING* being anthologized more than thirty years later, in its general visionary quality and its extremely particular samizdat friend traces. It is both a chat and a billboard, a vector, small but moving in a direction that was about to open unto a much larger cultural direction.

If you know, you know. For anybody active in pre-internet DIY underground in the early 1990s, the smell and feel of newsprint is an express back to a world of zines that *THING* both embodies and from which it meaningfully departs. We were reading catalogs, supermarket circulars, phone books, and all sorts of local information on newsprint. We didn't think of these as islands at the time, but they were: independent, strong, unrelated. *THING* was an avatar of the black, queer culture that ended up providing a basal layer of everyday speech, but it was also a local, gnomic instance of Chicago culture that mattered to a small group of friends, an example of positive limitation that is hard to instantiate now. I love reading this anthology not because it was the acorn of today's social media forest—and it is—but because it shows pockets of friendship and activity that are not represented elsewhere, that strengthened themselves and others. Things aren't better when they become more widely disseminated—that is not the thing.

By 1990, black queer culture was going mainstream—just not always in the company of black people. I'm thinking of Madonna's "Vogue," a song that is literally about the culture *THING* spoke of and for. Voguing was a form of dance and movement and ritual expression that began in black and Latino ballroom culture between the 1960s and 1980s and is now common dance vernacular. Madonna, and her exploits, are addressed more than once by *THING* (she was one possible answer to the "Which singer is the worst?" quiz in issue six). Huge pop hits by Black Box and C+C Music Factory rode the vocals of oft-uncredited singer Martha Wash, interviewed for *THING* issue nine. RuPaul, the cover star of issue six, is one of the rare figures with a mainstream profile.

Despite shifts in production value, *THING* was a decidedly analog affair. "The pale background letters would have been done in Quark," *THING*'s designer, Simone Bouyer, explained to me. "Halftone screens of images were done in the darkroom. This was before scanners, so images had to be screened by hand." The first three issues were Xeroxed in keeping with the 1990s zine purity, eschewing glossy production in favor of street cred that would signal *THING*'s audience of Chicago club kids and activists, but the fourth was professionally printed on newsprint, as is Primary Information's new compilation of all ten issues (a thick, perfect-bound book). *THING* began in 1989, when house music was beginning to influence top ten hits. By the summer of 1993, when *THING* ceased publishing, AIDS had ravaged cultural hubs like Chicago and New York, and dance culture had taken a backseat to grunge. But *THING*, and its creators, ended up winning by a wide margin. People now talk about *tea* and call each other *girl* and *queen*—to say nothing of how queer black physical communication has affected the hand gestures of an entire generation of influencers—though I would posit that the most pleasurable parts of this anthology are the private, folded notes that don't speak to anyone but the inner circle, the blood notes of friendship.

THING existed physically as a project that Bouyer and business manager Stephanie Coleman ran out of a small art gallery called Wholesome Roc in Chicago. Three men—Robert Ford, Trent Adkins, and Larry Warren—were the editorial forces behind *THING*, conceived of as a forum for gossip, dance music, and AIDS awareness. But the real mission was to do anything they felt like. Ford worked at the Rose Records shop and was a veteran of clubs like Smart Bar, Club Lower Links, The Warehouse (where it is widely believed that house music got its name), Medusa's, and The Powerplant. "He was the king of music," Bouyer said in an online interview for House of Thing. "He had a collection that took up one entire wall of his loft apartment." Warren, on the other hand, "was our James Baldwin," as Bouyer put it. "He could quote so many Black authors."

At the time, Warren was working as the national accountant for Barbara's Bookstore. "I remember meeting him for lunch one day," Bouyer said. "As we drove up, he was standing outside his apartment building talking to a young man who was just walking by. He was telling him that he was a prince, handsome and beautiful. He later shared with us, 'Young men don't get to hear that in our society. They don't know that they are beautiful.'" *THING* mainstay and inspirational figure, hair stylist Ken Hare, told me, "[Larry] absolutely loved being black and being gay. Despite his Christian upbringing, Larry knew he was attracted to the same sex from a young age and didn't mind being called a 'sissy.' In fact, he considered the moniker a compliment and wore it as a badge of honor. Whereas most black gay men abhorred the term, Larry reveled in it."

THING told an entire generation of young black queer people that they were beautiful and deserved a magazine the equivalent of *Vogue* or *Interview* (their inspirations) with a touch of *i-D* magazine thrown in (*i-D* having launched in 1980 and established an aesthetic of elegant, off-kilter design that Ford and company were keen to adapt for the black dance club set). Bouyer remembers that the architects of *THING* were all working day jobs and "then using our funds to manage this thing." After a few issues, "it suddenly was embraced and sought after, was more than we could have imagined," she reports. For anybody who had found the culture through hits by Soul II Soul or Black Box, *THING* was a way deeper in. For those who understood who all the bouncers and bathroom divas were, *THING* was a note passed between desks that outsiders would never be able to decode. Alongside that was a political stripe that stands out even now. (The analogous white rock culture mags were not particularly political, unless you count the Beastie Boys attention to Tibet.) A list of "Un-Things" by John Bernard Jones (we gather these are not things he likes) includes this commentary on "Gold": "How many dead South Africans have you hung around your neck today?" In the same issue, the legendary and still relevant poet and activist Essex Hemphill takes on the theories of Dr. Frances Cress Welsing in an essay called "If Freud Had Been A Neurotic Colored Woman," nimbly unpacking her view of black homosexuality as "self-destruction" and "sexual-genocide."

The chaos is part of what makes *THING* so ripe for rediscovery—in our age of social media identikit, there is something redemptive about its the lack of what people call now, in full sight of god, a *brand*. Decades before TikTok, a glossary presents with a definition of “BUSSIN’!” It read: “It, The thing of the moment. Syns.: SMOKIN’, COLD, ICE, or HOT. Happnin’ The Answer. The Tee. The Real Thing. You want it. The One To Buy.” And the angels of queer culture had no interest in presenting as angels—much of this would not pass the smell test today. Bitchiness is prioritized over inclusivity; to be part of the community was to be subject to its barbs. Though she is lionized elsewhere, Martha Wash shows up in quiz called “Which singer weighs the least?” (Yes.) In an interview about (among other things) AIDS activism with *Village Voice* writer Michael Musto, Trent Adkins asks the kind of question that only shows up on Twitter now: “What do you think of Queer Nation, anyway? They’re getting a lot of criticism from everywhere that they’re ineffective and too militant, as bad to work with as the organizations they splintered from in protest.” Or perhaps try this after-hours party advice from Adkins: “Don’t tempt fate. Clean up behind yourself. Don’t go tossin’ your empty pony packs just anywhere. You never know who’s coming in behind you lookin’ for evidence. If you want to get busted, just say so.”

In the late eighties and early nineties, this kind of anti-authority inside baseball was also the stock in trade of abrasive rock culture zines like *Forced Exposure*, or magazines like *Ego Trip* and *Grand Royal*. None of these titles, *THING* included, were immediately connected to anything outside themselves. Without an internet to instantaneously connect disparate mythologies and affinities cross-country, these magazines created worlds that could stay safe, themselves, unborrowed. The combination of political incorrectness and insularity, paradoxically, created a safe space. (Social vernacular violence is bonding paste.) This would all change before the close of the century, but for now every culture was, in all the ways that mattered, local. The four DJs who list their top ten favorite club records in issue five of *THING* all worked at clubs that I’ve never been to (or heard of) but which must have described an entire world at the time: Shelter, Insanity, Substance, Ka-Boom!, Cairo.

A print magazine distributed at a few galleries and record stores, *THING* could have remained merely thelingua franca for a set of friends. Some of the entries, as Bouyer reports, were by pseudonymous authors who remain unknown. “Fire Chick’s not a real name as far as I know,” she told me. “We’re still trying to figure out who Bunny and Pussy were . . . Those secrets died with those guys,” Bouyer explained, meaning the original three editors. (Ford and Adkins died of complications related to AIDS; Warren of diabetic complications.) Without profiles to search, Fire Chick could safely excoriate Madonna for her *Sex* book, far from the emails of furious publicists:

Go back to bed you self-absorbed naughty girly. Sex looks like a typical fashion-photo shoot. [Photographer] Steven Meisel knows beautiful lines, beautiful faces and camera angles, but he doesn't know a hot fuck, and he doesn't capture souls. The sex here is just another prop in his arsenal—fake as the glued-on sesame seeds on the bun in a McDonalds ad.

Now, anonymity takes far more work and rarely lasts. Fire Chick would have been doxxed and beset by the Madonna hive were this yesterday's post.

In some ways Bunny and Pussy are the most *THING*-like of the *THING* cadre, in that their frank sex talk never really found resuscitation in any mainstream iteration. In one issue, after talk of sore throats, prison, and dicks in formaldehyde jars, Pussy delivers a perfectly written account of photographing the people you fuck: "Though she's not a shutterbug, Libidinous Letita understands the value of empirical verification. Too well-bred to whip out a ruler, the dear lamb-largely to appease us—has managed to record the size of her more substantial visitors by counting the squares on the plaid bedspread as the errant swains doze, *après la prod*." Sophisticated, learned, filthy—the life that so many people who borrow gay culture want to lead others to believe they understand.

There's also the glorious riot of rubylith layout and newsprint reality. There are lots of free-floating boxes in Bouyer's design, and typefaces gleefully existing outside something like a brand or identity. Lists keep popping up in *THING*, sometimes free of any clear concept. Names beginning with D? Gary Indiana talking about the normalizing benefits of porn? The cultural tendencies that state power is trying to undo now, violently and without lasting success, is here in these ten issues of *THING* as testament that you can rig the game, but you can't fake influence.