

VARIOUS ARTISTS

# THING

EDITED by ROBERT FORD, TRENT ADKINS, and LAWRENCE WARREN  
Primary Information, 2025 (1988–93)  
460 pages

Personified, *THING* is that cool older cousin who blows into town with stories to tell, a blunt in hand, slightly jaded as the black sheep but willing to show you their latest playlist. On the cover, the seductive snarl of Ultra Naté, bold charcoal block letters gracing her head like a self-appointed crown. *THING* collects in book form the magazine's ten issues, focused solely on the Black queer music and art scenes of the 1990s. Its mission is to uplift and educate above all else. By praising underground tastemakers, founding editor Robert Ford created a full-bodied "punk bible" worth coveting, each page more reflective, bawdy, and cutting than the last. Honoring the legendary Sylvester and his flamboyant effervescence, highlighting the reclamation of natural hair culture, covering the root causes of homelessness among Black youth, and maintaining the importance of a healthy sex life during the HIV/AIDS epidemic: Before there was FUBU, there was *THING*, untamed and ready to display the bountiful talent existing within Chicago and beyond.

The book's foreword, which chronicles the daily grind of running a publication, reveals Ford as a savant in his own right. Each story, phone-sex ad, and editorial paved the way for the connoisseurs we see today! Today's "influencers" would be put to shame by the unabashed radicalism exhibited in full-frontal guerrilla editorials, carried out on shoestring budgets. Halfway through this hefty read, there is nothing but respect for the unwavering tenacity of being an other amongst mainstream publications. I immediately think of Telfar—how he navigated pushing forth an unfamiliar vision that is now part of the fabric of Black American history. There is comfort in reading interviews by Essex Hemphill, Willi Ninja, Lady Miss Kier, and Matt O'Neill. In one exchange, RuPaul is asked about racism, and they exude both grace and aloofness in their response: "It's the Dorothy thing; it was within herself all along. It's not something you'll find in a drugstore shelf, or from going out and having all these one night stands. I hope that the world, with the millennium coming, will have people look within to spirituality." Those words hold a different weight now, with our current unhinged social climate and an overwhelming desire to extinguish. As I read, I basked in the warmth of something my queer child never received, reluctant for the pages to end. This is the kind of documentation that cements a history of subcultures that die out and are deserving of excavation. Long and short, it was and is a beautiful *THING*. —UMESI MICHAEL LOUIS