

Queer (R)aging

I AM A gender variant visual artist, intersex activist, and educator. I have been making queer art and politics over some forty odd years and my most reliable resource has always been my own life and body. Portraiture and Self Portraiture form the backbone of my working art practice, born out of the need to survive and the conviction that we need to create alternative representations in a world that is hostile to the very existence of people like me. When bodies like mine are labeled defective, deformed, deviant and/or abject, it is incumbent upon *all* of us to actively resist the norms and normative tropes that seek to govern our every move, from before birth unto death. Queer (r)aging is an act of rebellion.

What is age and what does it mean to age queerly? For starters, we all have numbers attached to us, a bit like dog shit stuck on the soles of our shoes. In Sweden, where I have lived for nearly ten years now, one does not exist without the all-important *personnummer*; a social security number that reveals your date of birth and your sex. Not only is this number used by the state and all authorities to register and shape our every move through systems of social security, health, citizenship, and so on, the frequent requirement to state our “personal numbers” serve as constant reminders of age, something many of us might want to forget in a society where youth and beauty remains hugely overvalued. The number currently attached to me is 58. Living queerly for more than half a century, I am now beginning to come to terms with the reality,

the inevitable and sad fact of life that what youth and beauty I may have possessed are long gone. I am still not quite sure how to replace these central dimensions of (queer) identity.

Truth be told, the gendered politics of aging have shaped my life and work in different ways for as long as I can remember. I was the eldest child of two eldest children, the first grandchild, a product of two teenagers desperate to escape their dysfunctional Midwestern family homes. Their marriage produced me, but not much else and did not last long. Even though my mother remarried and had two more kids, she was not what you could call “mother material.” She looked more like a fashion model than a mother and I remember longing for a “real” mother, that is, someone who was not always seen as my older sister. It was not until she developed emphysema in her late fifties that she began to age, fast. But for most of her life, and mine, the concept of aging and inevitable death was missing in action. Perhaps this was my inheritance, what she passed on: until I reached my late fifties I too was also perceived to be much younger than my actual age. Unlike her, I feel a bit guilty for the pleasure this gave me.

We know that we all make gender attributions about each and every person we meet. We also make unconscious age attributions based on norms about age-appropriate behavior and presentation. It is not our “fault,” we have been preprogrammed by our culture to behave this way. I am perceived as male but even when I “out” myself as a non-binary intersex person, the initial perception of me as male is quite sticky. What this means in real terms is that my physical level of attractiveness is far less important to others than it would have been if I were still being perceived as female. Youth and beauty are culturally synonymous constructs that disproportionately affect women. I get a “get out of the beauty parlor free” card. But my internal emotions tell another story, no doubt due to my early female socialization. Aging is, or can be, a conflicted experience.

One way to think about aging is through generationality; what we generate and pass on. I started making the images for this series, INTER*me, shortly before the birth of our first child (cf. Volcano et al.

forthcoming). The process of creating the child was not going according to plan and the waiting/hoping/disappointment period was extended far beyond what we had envisioned. Although I was a “love immigrant” and hugely privileged as a white, fairly well-educated person from the USA, the process of integration felt like a Sisyphean effort, especially living in Örebro, a city that even Swedes consider quite unfriendly. To make a long story short, I was depressed. The solution I found was to enclose myself in a storage space that doubled as my studio and make photographs, images that would force me to look at aspects of my aging body I despised; the folds of fat, the sagging skin, the double chin and the hair that grows in all the wrong places. It was a strange form of tough love but it worked. I emerged from my sad cocoon and started to feel interested in life again.

Over the years, my work has been created in conversation both with the subjects of my work and with queer and trans theorists. This dialogic and collaborative work has often made me open to new dimensions, other ways of seeing. Reflecting on this new body of work, trans theorist Eliza Steinbock (2014) writes: “[W]hat draws me into these abstractions of the aging, off-white, inter* body is how they work as fierce anti-portraits.” I had not thought about my new work as being the anti-thesis of the majority of my work to date but once the process was triggered by Eliza’s comments I realized she was right. Continuing on, she writes:

In the staging of being anti-portraiture, the series is working both with and against the conventions of portraiture. Most obviously, the back series rejects how since the nineteenth-century photographic portraiture formalizes the face as the key site of identity. Without a face, from where do we derive meaning about the sitter? (Steinbock 2014)

The vast majority of my work consists of the subject of the image looking directly into the viewer’s eyes in a manner that (when it works best) makes the viewer feel they are the object of the gaze. INTER*me consists of very few images that involve my looking directly at the viewer, which I believe allows the images to be consumed without guilt. They

are not “pretty” pictures. I do *not* look good according to those societal standards that I continue to both reject and be affected by, and yet, I find the images strangely beautiful and ultimately, compelling. I am forced to both see and accept my body for what it is and is not. This is one of the important dimensions of producing queer art, to redefine beauty in queer ways.

Only one of the images from INTER*me is not a self-portrait. Although the body growing within the body, the full and fecund pregnant belly, is not mine, it has become a central part of my identity.

Fifty-four years, three months and twenty-two days after I came into this world, Mika Alexis Volcano came into mine. And there really are no words that can begin to describe the magnitude of the transformation I have undergone by becoming a MaPa, a parent.

I have never scheduled my life in a timely fashion. I literally do not know how to act my age, nor do I care to learn. So, here I am in 2016, the MaPa of two children under five and a partner in the middle of pursuing a doctoral degree. I no longer live in a great metropolis, filled with queer possibilities, but in a small, square Swedish city. No one here is impressed by my back catalog of work and my “fans” are mostly under five. Strange as it may seem I am happy in my latest incarnation as MaPa Del, house herm and occasional intersex activist.

But ... and yes, there is a but ... I am also much more aware of my mortality now, than I have ever been and this is a direct result of being out of sync, out of time, literally. No matter how you slice it I am (probably) going to die before my kids reach middle age. Still, questions of aging haunt me: How long will it be until someone asks my kids if I am their grandparent? How long will I remain able-bodied and active? And how do I prepare them for my death while they are still young?

There are some aspects of queer aging that I do not hear being discussed much; namely those that are tied to the complexities of redefining, what Judith Jack Halberstam (2005) has called, reproductive time by having children and making family in queer ways. What I do hear is a lot of noise and complaints from childfree queers who seem to consider queers with kids sell-outs to the heteronorm and/or as people with a

built in insurance policy for their old age. When a queer person makes the choice to take part in, what Johanna Hedva (2016) describes as, “the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring” for themselves or another adult in need of care, this is seen as a revolutionary act. But when these same practices are applied to parenting, not so much. For my generation, those born in, say, the 1950s and 1960s, being radical and queer meant open defiance of the heteronorm, as represented by marriage and the family. I totally understand how some friends might feel let down by me both partnering up and having kids. And I can feel disappointed that they do not seem to understand both the radical potential of queer parenting and how much pleasure (and pain) I enjoy and endure. I know I was really triggered by an article written by queer journalist Tomas Hemstad called, “No More Babies” (2012), republished in English as, “Why I Fled the Stockholm Toddler Ghetto for Berlin” (2013). I know that Tomas was speaking for lots of my queer Swedish friends who feel pressured to have kids, get married, and give up fighting and fucking for the revolution. And I know that lots of people who fall under the queer umbrella, fail to question or queer norms of any kind when it comes to their child rearing practices. Perhaps some are subconsciously, or even consciously, seeking the privileges that follow from behaving as a productive (reproducing and consuming) member of society should. And others are queering the parenting pitch every chance we get, and then some!

I suppose the practice of parenting and what it means for the 21st century queers is hugely dependent on one’s cultural context. I am from the USA and am a child of the 1950s. Not only were there no expectations that I marry or have children, I was actively discouraged from even considering it. And I almost never did. “Normal life” was not accessible to the likes of me. And then I moved to Sweden, a land that seems to value conformity more than most. Looking at the issue from a Nordic context, I can and do understand the dismay so many queerly oriented people feel as they observe marriage (and divorce) equality in action, not to mention the ever-growing BLT baby boom. (I have deliberating left out the G because let us not forget that in Sweden reproductive as-

sistance is still limited to those who can give a convincing performance of binary partnership and are in possession of at least one womb – the latter of which excludes most gay men!)

It does seem that access to some forms of social capital is becoming increasingly predicated on one's ability to achieve heteronormative milestones, such as marriage and the family, regardless of one's sexual orientation. I freely admit that the sharp edginess of my queerness have been blunted by my parental status. Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, my Mormon father even paid for us to visit him last year!

On the other hand, perhaps the sharp edges, my previous rep as “queer as fuck” may also be/coming softer with age. Maybe I am no longer as interested in my own sexual practices or those of others because, as they say, “been there, done that... and then some.” Does being queer always have to be about how you fuck or who? Or could it be more about fucking things up? About “finding a way to get in the way” to paraphrase the African-American Civil Rights leader and Senator John Lewis (Finfer 2013).

How does one age queerly in a country where casual conformity is the rule of law? I remember my first photo exhibition in Malmö, in 2002. After the opening, we wanted to find a queer club and ended up at a place called Indigo. “We came to the wrong place,” I confidently declared. There was not a butch dyke to be spotted and the men just looked rather well groomed but not particularly “gay.” Welcome to Sweden! Where standing up or standing out is just not the done thing!

But living on the other side of that coin has been a revelation to me, a former small Californian town girl, who has spent the vast majority of my life in a queer metropolitan bubble. I lived in London for more than twenty-five years and most of the people I socialized with were queer. We were poly and childfree. We marched against all forms of isms, ran queer sex clubs, produced books, magazines, films, and music – all celebrating our rebel dyke outlaw status. It was a good life. It was not until I moved to Sweden in 2006 that my sphere of existence expanded to include a much greater variety of human experience. Odd that. Odder still that not only do I appreciate being an accepted part of the whole, for the most part, I also feel appreciated.

I wonder when the day will come when I am no longer age-ing but age-ed? Will I ever NOT care about getting old and all that this implies? Unlike fine wine (or cheese), human beings are not considered more valuable or enticing as we age, at least not those perceived (or socialized) as female.

Perhaps we have to look to other models of queer aging. I had a friend called Lucy who lived to be 102 and was my astrological twin. We were both born in the Year of the Cock, both of us Leos with Leo Rising and Cancer Moons. We met through her granddaughter, an awesome butch dyke (the subject of one of my most famous photographs, “Jax Back”). When we met Lucy was in her late seventies and I was Della Disgrace, a fairly well known lesbian photographer. One Sunday afternoon at Jackie’s after “highballs” (her word for cocktails), she confided to me that she had never had an orgasm. Jackie was eavesdropping and was worried about the gleam in my eye. She found a way to derail our conversation before I got a chance to learn more *or* do anything about it.

A few summers back we celebrated her 100th birthday in a small village just east of London. I travelled from Sweden to attend and was amazed to see her dancing, singing, and reciting poetry for a huge circle of friends and family. On the way back to London, we held hands for most of the journey. It was as if we both knew this would be our last meeting. Out of the blue she turned to me and said: “It’s so strange but I feel that I have been so many very different people in this one lifetime. I expect you know what I mean better than most.” I nodded and squeezed her hand. I thought back to that moment so many years ago when I was considering what it would be like to make love to someone so much older than myself. I wondered if she had any inkling of what had been going through my mind back then. She had known me as both Della and Del. But neither my gender adjustment nor her butch dyke granddaughter’s sexuality seemed to faze her in the slightest or affect her love for us.

One of the most radical things Lucy did in her life was at the age of ninety she married her eighty year old “toyboy,” Cornelius. Her daughter disowned her (Cornelius was Asian), as did many of her previous so-

called friends. They were together only four years before he died on the very day he predicted he would. What my twenty-year friendship with Lucy taught me is that there are so many different ways to queer aging, even if your sexual orientation is heterosexual.

One of my living role models for queer aging is Mahide Lein. I do not have a recent picture, so try to imagine an Amazon Kewpie doll with a platinum mohawk and ice blue eyes that look directly into your soul. Mahide has always impressed me with her intensity and passionate commitment to queer politics and antiracism. "Communication is the best medicine," she tells me. "Sex is also very important when you get older. You have to 'train' it or you lose it." Which I think is the German way of saying, "use it or lose it!"

I have had, and still have, a handful of friends who constantly question and consistently queer the social conventions we associate with age. Until the day she died of cancer at the age of fifty Kathy Acker refused to give up or give in to the disease or the notions of what a middle class, white queer woman could be. Dossie Easton, who must be in her mid-seventies by now and still an "ethical slut," is proud to discuss her passion for intergenerational BDSM sexual relationships (Easton and Liszt 1997). My old friend, Sukari Addison an African-American cis straight woman, now in her eighties has been part of San Francisco queer anti-racist communities all her life and has recently found a new true love. It is not just that she looks at least twenty years younger than her actual age, but the way she talks about politics, life, and love are so amazing and absolutely queer.

What all of the above have in common is that they are trailblazers who had lived their lives to the full, without apology or the need to "behave." They are all truly heroic in my eyes.

I have a feeling that instead of queer (R)AGING I will return to my earlier dyke roots and age "disgracefully." Stay tuned.

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