NAYLAND BLAKE

MY STUDIO IS A DUNGEON IS THE STUDIO

WRITINGS AND INTERVIEWS

1983–2024

EDITED BY JARRETT EARNEST

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EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY JARRETT EARNEST

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If this collection is dedicated to anything, it is to the hope that reading it will help you make something. Please do. We all need to hear from you.

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A FAN WRITES . . .

AN INTRODUCTION BY JARRETT EARNEST

In a cache of Nayland Blake's childhood papers, there is a binder labeled "Program," an ambitious twenty-page science-fiction story they wrote at the age of twelve. Its dystopia finds human beings effectively imprisoned in heavily medicated comfort, strapped into chairs, and dominated by screens, regulated by artificial intelligence. "He readily accepted anything the machine told him; he allowed it to dictate what to do and when to do it. For example, the door to his small bathroom only opened on regular half-hour intervals. This meant that he had been trained since the time-of-coming-into-being to only need to use it on half-hour periods. In this way, the machine controlled the very workings of his body," prefiguring Blake's lifelong analysis of how social control is enacted on the physical body and on the spaces we inhabit.

Blake's parents met in racially segregated New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1959, when Nayland Sr., a Black Navy veteran, caught the eye of Joan, a young white woman, while he was working at a record store. Soon she was pregnant, and they fled disapproving families, relocating to Manhattan and eloping at city hall. Young Nayland, named after their father, was born the following year. The elder Blake worked as the super of their building at 101st Street and Riverside Drive, their mother as a secretary at the American Bible Society. A dripping abstract painting four-year-old Blake made in collaboration with their father evidences a loving, creative home, as do their early writings, fastidiously typed by their mother and kept safe for decades.

Throughout the 1960s the Blakes visited museums (the parents quizzing their child after the fact with postcards about the artworks they saw) and the theater: *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*; *Jesus Christ Superstar*;

and *Hair*. A ravenous diet of science fiction and fantasy fueled Blake's ambitions to write until they confronted William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* as a teenager. An artistic revelation—its effect, writer's block. They couldn't figure out how the language worked like it did, and not being able to think their way through it, Blake abandoned writing in high school, shifting their attention to theater and performance. By the mid-1970s, Blake and their slightly older classmates were going downtown to screenings and performances, such as Charlotte Moorman's avant-garde festivals, Jack Smith's films, and Richard Foreman's plays—*Book of Splendors: Part Two* (1977) was especially defining. Foreman's article about his eccentric, recursive methods of composition also transformed Blake's thinking. Foreman writes, "It's a style of living, at certain moments folded back on itself to produce a style of thinking; at certain moments folded back upon itself, which leaves a residue (look, look! The hand moved over the paper and left something!) of a certain style of writing."[1]

Blake attended Bard College in 1978, initially intent on becoming a filmmaker but soon switching to the visual art program. Being an artist seemed to mean being a painter, the horizons heavily circumscribed by the endgame of Jasper Johns and minimal abstraction. The installations of Jonathan Borofsky and a lecture by Judy Pfaff opened, for Blake, a path that further broadened when they saw Colab's shambling experiment *The Times Square Show* (1980). Blake began to create provisional spaces—arrangements of stuff, stage sets without a simple narrative where the viewer moved around like an actor in a scene. One fun-house installation included an altar to the Vodou *loa* Bawon Samdi, engaging with ideas they drew from filmmaker Maya Deren's groundbreaking book *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953). Deren's account focuses on the integrated Haitian Vodou practices and the meeting of signs and rituals (visible and invisible), as well as the highly sophisticated, racially charged syncretism of Indigenous, West African, and Catholic beliefs. Deren attempted to experience Vodou as a participant, describing her own possession by Erzulie, *loa* of love and beauty. For young Blake, Deren provided an early model of the artist who does embodied research in the world, who writes and makes and thinks and lives in ways that cannot be disentangled.

In 1982 Blake moved to Southern California to attend graduate school at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). At Bard their investigative installations were considered "brainy," but within the theory-driven culture of CalArts, their commitment to *making* was considered goofy and romantic. Blake identifies the effects of the toxic atmosphere in a text they

wrote in their second year, "The Difficulties That Afflict Us in Art School." The young artist argued that there was a fundamental and painful misrecognition of each other's intentions and actions, a context that produced a deformation of language: "We produce a language of defense to hide that knowledge from others and a language of attack to deride that knowledge when we find it elsewhere."

At Bard, Blake had attempted to cure their writer's block by taking a tutorial with poet Robert Kelly. Observing Blake's sensibilities, Kelly suggested the work of Kathy Acker. Finding *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973), Blake later said that Acker's early novels felt like "letters written to me," though they weren't clear yet on how to move forward with their own writing. They attended a reading Acker gave at CalArts from her novella *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1984), in which a first-person account of the murdered intellectual is shamelessly ventriloquized and intercut with all kinds of alternate voices, pastiches, and quotations without clear attribution. At one point the novella peels into a burlesque retelling of the plot of the James Bond movie *To Live and Let Die* (1973): "Because he's white, James is a dope and dopiness is his intelligence. He walks into a black bar in Harlem which every white man knows is a dumb thing to do. Of course the wall against which he's sitting flips around so he's down in black bestial animal hell voodoo where black man says 'Mr. Big gonna take care of woo.' James cause he's stupid tries an identity bluff."[2] Acker's style of metacommentary on the pop cultural text, as well as the confrontation with racist and sexist stereotypes, would have lasting echoes in Blake's work.

In their second year at CalArts, Blake's work took a decisive turn, examining the representational codes of gay men by making photographic self-portraits costumed in various personas, like a "clone" in an Izod shirt, smoking a cigarette and sporting a mustache. This married certain operations of the Pictures Generation with their own queer coming of age, looking at the commodification and formation of the self as a subject at odds with their gender presentation and appearance. By graduation Blake's work had expanded into a series of seemingly disparate practices that would take years to understand in relation. In a summary from 1984 included here as "Assessing My Work," Blake narrates in a daze, "Things that I was able to point to as interests and pleasures have become blurred and difficult to locate."

In the pursuit of these inchoate "interests and pleasures" as both an artist and sexual being, Blake moved up to San Francisco, the reigning capital of the queer world, instead of New York or Los Angeles, the typical destinations

of their classmates eager for art careers. There Blake published their first piece of writing for the radical queer publication *OUT/LOOK* in 1988. "Tom of Finland: An Appreciation" was also the first critical engagement with the famed gay pornographer whose distinctive drawings of muscular hunks became synonymous with leather and gay bar culture in the second half of the twentieth century: "Tom's work has been left on the sidelines of any debate about gay sensibility because it is pornography. Pornography remains a taboo: We consume it but will not commit to it. Yet when the history of gay images and representations is written, it will contain a large section on our pornographers. In a milieu that has produced a new connoisseurship of sexual acts, what we arouse ourselves with speaks eloquently about who we are." In eight sections Blakes goes on to discuss Tom of Finland from different vantages, as a pornographer, artist, craftsman, narrator, sensualist, voyeur, fascist, sadist, and physique artist. The resulting multidimensional portrait kept the work's contradictions intact and produced what remains the defining critical text on the artist. It also inaugurated a type of essay Blake would continue to write: considerations of artists who had an outsized influence on the formation of queer history and helped define the parameters of Blake's own artistic work.

In a public talk titled "The ABCs of Art Institutions" (1989), Blake noted the way artists, especially queer artists, were taking on the task of criticism for themselves. Citing the failures of contemporary art magazines to address their work in the necessary ways, the text questions how the particular economics of the galleries and audiences produce kinds of discourse. It ends by posing three questions:

> How do we as producers use critical writing?
> Where do we encounter it?
> What do its modes of production and distribution mean?

Attempting to answer these questions to their own satisfaction, Blake would further their argument on pornographers' importance in shaping "gay identity" by becoming a porn reviewer for the burgeoning VHS market, writing for the *Bay Area Reporter*—a gay newspaper.

These pieces take off from the semiotic analysis of erotic imagination with funny narrative recaps and bits of mise-en-scène ("As Matt neared the climax he had been telling us about for five minutes, the camera began a bizarre zoom toward a stack of books in the background. The only readable title was *Native American Architecture*."). While historical analysis

shimmers in these chatty pieces, erotic intent motivates the consistently applied criterion circling these images: As they put it in one piece, "Can you beat off to them?" There is an ongoing critique of the normalization of and assimilation within this supposed sexual freedom, always advocating for *queer* as a verb that unsettles. Take the opening of this review of a collection of vintage porn from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s: "If you're like me (not that there's any reason you should be), you sometimes find yourself frustrated with the sameness of contemporary pornography. In the past, people have accused me of not liking porn at all, but this is hardly the case. I just don't like run-of-the-mill porn—the kind of porn that doesn't offer the viewer a variety of bodies, positions, and attitudes. Too many porn films show the same things in the same ways."

Blake's engagement with pornography took place within a particularly heated and heady landscape: the feminist sex wars of the 1980s. There were charged disagreements about the ethics of pornography, whether it was always exploitive of women, reifying their oppression by men, or whether there was a potential for liberation in female and queer pornography rooted within pleasure. The increased availability of commercial pornography was also paralleled by the proliferation of self-published alternative porn made for and about sexual cultures that sought to represent their own tastes and experiences. For instance, in 1981 Samois, the lesbian-feminist BDSM organization, published the book *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, and the porn magazine *On Our Backs* was founded in San Francisco in 1984, both controversially celebrating the lesbian S&M community. Three years later, *BEAR* appeared, staking out the sexual paradigm of bigger, hairier gay men as a viable alternative to the stereotypical dyad of skinny twink and muscular clones. In fact, Blake collaborated with D-L Alvarez on their own one-off porn zine, *Brains: The Journal of Egghead Sexuality* (1990), featuring the spectacled smirking cartoon genius-dog Mr. Peabody on the cover and photos of naked guys making out in a bookstore.

The impulses of these underground publications were similar to the culture of zines that circulated in the punk music world and the quixotic facsimiles of the mail art scene, all tightly circling questions of fandom and cultural value. Important theoretical work was also being done to problematize the hierarchy between high and popular culture, typified by Dick Hebdige's study *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Reading feminist critic Johanna Russ's analysis of erotic *Star Trek* fan fiction, "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love" (1985), catalyzed Blake's conception of

how art engages its audiences. Russ argues that these stories about baroque imagined romances between the television series' two protagonists (the human Captain Kirk and the alien Spock) "ingeniously, tenaciously, and very creatively . . . sexualized our female situation and training, and made out of the restrictions of the patriarchy our own sexual cues."[3] That is, pop cultural iconography could function as a complex, capacitating cipher. It proposes reception as itself a creative act, in which audiences collaborate on new, more idiosyncratic meanings. Like the alternative porn zines, these quirky stories coalesce communities of desire.

The insurgent theoretical work of the journal *Semiotext(e)* mirrored the impact of this fan-driven theorization within underground scenes that Russ describes. The 1981 special issue "Polysexuality," edited by the Canadian psychoanalyst François Peraldi, became a subcultural touchstone for how kink as a "technology of the self" might splinter, proliferate, and transform. On the occasion of Blake's installation of *The Schreber Suite* (1989) at the Berkeley Art Museum, they delivered a fascinating lecture which brings together Raymond Roussel, Marcel Duchamp, and the famous analysand Daniel Paul Schreber within fluctuating trans identifications through a collision of texts, in a drive they call *unmanning*. "I would like, at this point, to suggest a line of inquiry about homosexuality and meaning. I see in the homosexual, as well, certain aspects of a refusal of the phallus, and I wonder if this refusal can be the genesis for a different type of meaning—one that is aleatory, connective, and diffuse, rather than centralized." It should be noted that while Blake describes themself as a "gay man" in these early writings (later identifying as nonbinary with *they/them* pronouns in the early twenty-first century), a proto-trans sensibility was already in operation.

"The Bay Area has been a curious cross between a backwater and a safe harbor for the arts over the past two decades," Blake wrote in the preface to an exhibition catalog, *Bay Area Conceptualism: Two Generations*, contrasting San Francisco's particular brand of irreverent, material-based conceptual art with their peers' (like Lutz Batcher's and David Cannon Dashiell's) renewed engagement with objects. In 1988 Blake became program coordinator at the important alternative space New Langton Arts. The institution's curatorial remit was anything that did not have a home in commercial galleries: Video, performance art, poetry, and conceptual art abounded in hybrid forms. Blake was responsible for facilitating all aspects of staging these pieces, sometimes stepping forward to contribute critical texts or function as curator. From this intersection an entire alternative art history of the Bay Area materialized, and Blake became increasingly

interested in connecting and cross-pollinating the literary, conceptual art, music, film, and gay nightlife scenes—an endeavor that would expand throughout their life.

It was within this multipronged approach that Blake's art practice took shape: tableaux of functional objects—furniture, rugs, metal trolleys, televisions—*détourned* via a haphazard and unexpected selection deployed with surgical precision. Blake took to calling them "props"—not only mobilizing their long-term engagement with artists like Jack Smith but precisely identifying the way each arrangement situates the viewer, imagining one's own body in the increasingly threatening scenarios. Steel tables, chains, and collars are deployed, evoking S&M scenes. In *Work Station #5* (1989), an aluminum-and-glass prep table displays black rubber restraints and meat cleavers swinging from chains below. Far from just objects, these items allude to a scene for which the viewer already knows the script, thanks to countless cultural representations. Implicated, a visitor must acknowledge how their own impulses playact with these props; the experience becomes reflexive, a navigation of that recognition.

In a series of wall-mounted plexiglass boxes Blake began in 1990, each minimalist cube encases mass-market paperbacks: camp diva Beverly Sill's autobiography, *Bubbles* (1976); Xaviera Hollander's sexploitation memoir, *The Happy Hooker* (1971); trash pop biographer Kitty Kelley's biography of Elizabeth Taylor, *The Last Star* (1981); Brooks Stanwood's yuppie horror novel, *The Glow* (1979); and Germaine Greer's feminist manifesto, *The Female Eunuch* (1970); filling the phenomenological emptiness of Donald Judd's cubbies with the detritus of mass cultural unconscious. This mystifying time capsule—its contents all cheaply available from thrift stores—constitutes an ironic disquisition on the self as an accretion of text, the commodification of confession, and the infelicities of taste.

Joining the Bay Area community that prized experimental readings and ad hoc performance art, Blake began composing performance scripts in the vein of their twin influences Acker and Foreman. "Performance Script" (1990) enacts the textual suturing of the kind of paperbacks in the sculptures, juxtaposing excerpts from the memoirs of actress Patty Duke and drag queen Margo Howard-Howard and James Spada's celebrity biography *Judy and Liza* (1983) with their narrative critical examination of William Friedkin's controversial thriller *Cruising* (1980), set in New York's gay leather bars. Other performance scripts form mosaics from disparate sources: Sybil Leek's *Diary of a Witch* (1968), novelizations of the television shows *The Partridge Family* and *Star Trek*, Elizabeth L. Ray's *The Washington*

Fringe Benefit (1976), and Pamela Des Barres's ultimate tell-all, *I'm with the Band: Confessions of a Groupie* (1987). Often these different voices are stitched together with the preface "a fan writes" in which the voice of the devotee/expert moves kaleidoscopically from confession to critique. The authorial *I* of the shifting first-person material, delivered in the same tone, is culturally and psychologically unlocatable, rendered fluid, delimiting a queer subject position.

These collaged performance texts evolved within San Francisco's New Narrative movement, cofounded in the 1970s by writer Robert Glück, referring more to a decidedly queer shared sensibility than to formal connections and uniting writers as different as Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, Kevin Killian, and Dodie Bellamy. Glück retrospectively characterized their overlapping attitudes: "We brought gossip and anecdote to our writing because they contain speaker and audience, establish the parameters of community and trumpet their 'unfair' points of view. I hardly ever 'made things up,' a plot still seems exotic, but as a collagist I had an infinite field. I could use the lives we endlessly described to each other as 'found material' which complicates storytelling because the material also exists on the same plane as the reader's life. Found materials have a kind of radiance, the truth of the already-known."[4]

The freedom of these experiments opened the door to short fiction for the first time since Blake's teen years, inspiring them to write a science-fiction parable called "Queer Mysteries" (1993) for the exhibition of the same name by David Cannon Dashiell. The story was a pendant to a speculative fiction by Rebecca Solnit set in the deep past; Blake's contribution envisioned a queer genderless posthuman future. Both texts ran imaginatively parallel to the art rather than explicating it. "The Story of H (Excerpt)," which Blake wrote for their zine *Bunny Butt* (1994) as a parody of Pauline Reage's *Story of O* (1954), describes its protagonist permanently sewn into a bunny costume by a cruel Master, Andre, in a fragment of S&M fantasy: "Once inside the outfit, H had looked into the mirror. Staring back at him was a ludicrous figure, a six-foot-tall rabbit with silly booties and a pair of ears that bobbed with the slightest movement of his head. The suit hung from his shoulders, flaring at the waist and giving the impression of a wide and low-hanging ass that the cottony tail did nothing to dispel."

Picked up on the spur of the moment at a shop on Hollywood Boulevard, the rabbit suit first entered Blake's work as a costume for performing "The Saddest Story I Know." It has become a central surrogate ever since, morphing in scale and function—from custom-made suits to ready-made

stuffed animals—allowing allusions to slide from the traditional West African trickster to Br'er Rabbit to Bugs Bunny. It entered the repertory of disguises, puppets, toys, props, and restraints that has formed Blake's unique visual grammar since the late 1980s.

In 1991 Blake co-organized the trailblazing exhibition *Situation: Perspectives on Work by Lesbian and Gay Artists* with Los Angeles–based curator Pam Gregg at New Langton Arts. The show included recent work by a diverse group including G. B. Jones, Hunter Reynolds, Martin Wong, Carrie Yamaoka, Catherine Opie, and Rex Ray, among others. Strikingly, in their brief "Curator's Note," Blake introduces an anti-essentialist framework for thinking about queer art: "These artists are willing to adopt any voice, from art historical, to psychoanalytic, to documentary, to pop cultural, in order to make that voice speak queerly. This is a marked departure from previous attempts to essentialize gay voices. These artists do not assume any sort of truly gay way of making work. Instead, they use a position of gayness to skew standard ways of making and reading."[5] This radical proposition blossomed four years later in the exhibition *In a Different Light* at the Berkeley Art Museum. It was one of the most consequential shows in the nascent field of queer art history and an expansive proposal of "queer sensibility" as a lens on making and being. Cocurated with Lawrence Rinder, the exhibition was organized into overlapping constellations, sexual and social as much as aesthetic. In an attempt to map a lineage in which histories and identifications constitute a central concern, Blake writes in their curatorial essay:

> The extremely provisional nature of queer culture is the thing that makes its transmission so fragile. However, this very fragility has encouraged people to seek retroactively its contours in a degree not often found in other groups. Queer people must literally construct the houses they will be born into and adopt their own parents. . . .
>
> From the margins, queers have picked those things that could work for them and recoded them and rewritten their meanings, opening up the possibility of viral reinsertion into the body of general discourse. Denied images of themselves, they have changed the captions on others' family photos. Left without cultural vehicles, they have hijacked somebody else's.

Here we see a theorization and articulation of the procedures that have animated so much of Blake's own output as a writer, sculptor, and performer. They go on to sketch a little parable of history that unsurprisingly aligns

with the contours of Blake's intellectual and artistic development, tracing the permissive sign of Duchamp ready-mades through radical film and theater, Fluxus and performance and conceptual art, feminist art, and punk—linking subcultural practices of zines, flyers, street art, and AIDS activism. Nine thematic groupings are proposed, moving from solitary absence and grief in increasing social units, eventually encompassing a holistic visionary social order: void, self, drag, other, couple/family, orgy, world, utopia. This ever-entangled, enlarging vision is not limited to the individual psyche or a set of discrete acts and as such remains the most capacitating conception of queerness. Blake's explication of these sections flashes with ingenious and sometimes provocative interpretations. Take, for instance: "Robert Gober's *Plywood* (1987) is drag in a different key. Gober uses painstaking individual craft to make an object that seems simply mass produced. The plywood is a high-class (unique, handmade) object masquerading as a lower-class one. It also plays on the history of minimal sculpture, evoking the 'humble' materials used by many artists in their efforts to avoid artifice. Gober provides what is in essence a second layer of artifice, making a sculpture that looks like the raw material for the sculpture." This short paragraph, which constitutes one of the great instances of art criticism on its own terms, could have come only from a maker—someone who has thought deeply about the physical and cultural implications of material. It provides an indispensable lens through which to rethink Gober's labor-intensive objects and, beyond that, all the kinds of stuff that populate our lives in the world.

At the essay's conclusion, Blake issues a warning that frames their subsequent relationship with the art world and the work they do as a writer within it: "As it is presently constituted, the mainstream art world is a system for the production, exhibition, valorization, and distribution of the work of heterosexual white men. As long as queer people look to it for their sole source of recognition, they will be disappointed. A few will be picked, as long as they can keep their noses clean, and the rest will be condemned to their 'one-dimensional' life on the sidelines. It is up to queer artists not to wait around for approval but to become agents in the development and support of the work that they value."

In 1996 Nayland Blake left San Francisco and returned to New York City. There they began work on *Hare Follies*, a performance commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the third year of their Artists in Action series. Created in collaboration with musician Chris Cochrane and choreographers Patricia Hoffbauer and Ishmael Houston-Jones, it would be

Blake's most ambitious spectacle to date, its script the culmination of the collage methodology Blake had developed over the preceding decade. Taking cues from the history of minstrelsy and turn-of-the-century vaudeville, Blake's script combines stretches of the blaxploitation film *Blacula* (1972) with racist texts such as Dion Boucicault's play *The Octoroon* (1859) and William Luther Price's hate tract *The Turner Diaries* (1978), broken into bits, pulverized into a swirling textual DNA of the racial imaginary. The performance is in dialogue with two works that greatly influenced it: Reza Abdoh's *Tight Right White* (1993)—itself a debauched deconstruction of the film *Mandingo* (1975)—and Darius James's genre-defying fantasia of America's unconscious, *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable* (1992). As a text "Hare Follies" (1997) is the fullest and most complicated examination of Blake's own Blackness, specifically the experience of being a white-passing Black person and the complex system of signification around race and eroticism, violence and sexuality, images and words—the conflicting mythologies that inhabit a self.

Hare Follies marks an important turning point in Blake's trajectory, shifting from the verbally discursive to the materially embodied. Blake's anti-essentialist and provisional definition of queerness was now worked through their own raced, classed, and gendered body, allowing experiences of physical pain or pleasure to guide. This tracks Blake's becoming more deeply involved in kink and S&M communities, where the social-sexual space of the dungeon emerged as the extension of the artist's studio. The video performance *Gorge* (2000) is emblematic; in it, Blake, stripped to the waist and sitting in front of a white wall with a clock, is fed a succession of food and drink—doughnuts, pizza, a hero sandwich, watermelon, and chocolates, punctuated with sparkling water and quantities of milk—by another shirtless, darker-skinned Black man. A mind-numbing loop of the 1950s song "The Bunny Hop" plays in the background. Notably, not a word is said, but the complex communication between them speaks loudly. Exhibited beside the sculpture *Feeder 2* (1998), a life-size three-dimensional gingerbread house with cookie panels held together by steel armature, the video marks a synthesis of Blake's art and kink practices—a kind of coming out as part of the kink scene of gainer/encouragers (eroticizing increasing physical size). Subsequent performances of *Gorge* took place live with the audience feeding the artist in homage to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964).

As Blake freed their artistic work from the burden of language, they turned to more straightforward writing for magazines like *Artforum* and museum and exhibition catalogs. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Blake's

brilliant and authoritative essays on Jack Smith, Ray Johnson, Nancy Grossman, and Anthony Friedkin further articulated the alternative histories Blake had advocated for from the beginning. Essays on peers such as James Gobel, Matthew Benedict, Judie Bamber, and Jim Hodges extended the notion of art as an intergenerational knot. These texts stand out within the terrain of art criticism not only for the clarity of purpose—the implicit declaration that all these artists have collaborated in building a world in which Blake themself is more vividly and comfortably recognized—but also for the insights of a mind concerned with larger lineages of making and being.

One of the most striking essays from this time is Blake's complicated engagement with artistic influence and personal friendship, confronting a figure who had loomed so large for so long: Kathy Acker. Written ten years after her death, "Kathy Acker: 'Because I Want to Live Forever in Wonder'" (2006) reflects on their shifting relationship, from fan to collaborator and friend, over a twenty-five-year period. Blake talks about the intensity of their identification with her as an artist, commissioning her to write a text for their first New York show, *Low*, in 1990. In retrospect, Blake's consideration of that piece shifts, but so does their sense of their own intention, a desire to become a character in Acker's art, for a returned fervor.

> It doesn't work that way. Even though queers can choose their tribe, artists can't choose their clan—the clutch of people who will see their work for what it is and value it—any more than one can choose the person who's going to fall in love with you. Artistic communication is more complex than simple identification. My own convictions about the similarities in what we did were no guarantee that she would see it that way. I hadn't reckoned on the one thing that we perhaps had most in common: the highly cultivated narcissism we each used to make our work.

This kind of personal interrogation is also evident in Blake's role as a public lecturer and speaker on queer histories and subcultures. Included here are three representative interviews, from 1993, 2008, and 2018, charting the evolution of Blake's thinking in relation to kink and queer subcultures. A number of Socratic pedagogical texts are also included, such as the workbook for their 2012 show *Free! Love! Tool! Box!* (which includes questions like "What is the best thing about your body?" and "What is your most powerful piece of clothing and why?" for generative self-examination), expanded in the list "100 Assignments: Toward a Curriculum." These kinds of directions are extended in notes for a workshop on "status play" Blake

teaches in kink gatherings. Blake advises that an essential aspect of defining one's comfort within the limits of a sexual scene is a commitment to discovering the unconscious structures of desire:

> What are the things they value? Ask them about what they value in others and how others see them.
>
> Who do they believe they are better than? People are trained not to reveal this information directly, so you have to listen carefully for it.
>
> What are their core beliefs about themselves, those things they would hate to lose?

Blake's ambition has always been much larger than objects displayed in a gallery or museum, and their vision has pushed to account for the absences that have produced and that insulate the contemporary art world. On its own terms, it seeks to bring forth another world. A sustaining characteristic of that world is its multivalence—a life practice that interweaves criticism, curating, teaching, art history, queer history, the erotic and marginalized, and the shifting technologies of the body and self that S&M explores. What emerges is an artist who refuses to separate or diminish any part of their life and loves in favor of any other. Their writing is a record of their commitment to an embodied "now" that entails dredging up sometimes thorny figures from the past, which, of course, opens into our shared fantasies. This incredible advocacy, with its philosophical and aesthetic implications, is breezily summed up by Blake's dictum: "Teach it. Promote it. Create it. You are responsible for the continuation of the culture you love. Keep it alive through your actions."[6]

This is a book meant to be read in fits and starts, misread, and remade by what is done with it. It's a self-theorizing primary source for not only queer histories but queerer futures, wherein different kinds of writing are woven together as they appeared, unable to be separated into discrete categories like "performance script," "art review," or "lecture." Many of these pieces are preceded by short, chatty remarks by the artist, helping situate their specific contexts within the unfolding arguments of the book. The cover Blake created for the book is a direct re-creation of and response to the seminal "Polysexuality" issue of *Semiotext(e)*, whose organizational mélange provided the guiding inspiration for the layout. In the introduction of that issue, François Peraldi described the large black-and-white details that unfurl throughout his issue as an artistic and conceptual whole: "Polysexuality is not only a set of texts written by carefully chosen authors

and illustrating the plural aspects of sexuality. Polysexuality is a text in itself, the editor of which are the authors. Let's call it a collage or a textual patch-work, if you prefer. It tells what the reality of sex has always been with respect to alienation to 'usurp' and exploitation."[7] With this model in mind, Blake has patched together a visual essay in *My Studio Is a Dungeon Is the Studio*, visually punctuating the texts and fusing them into a wildly textured collage, cutting across forty years, two coasts, and a wide array of histories. The text leads by example; it shows the reader what to do with it. If you don't like its objects or sensibilities, it models how you can do something about it. If you love it, it urges you to do something else with it too. Either way—it's now up to you.

Notes

1. Richard Foreman, "How I Write My (Self: Plays)," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013) (1977), 99.

2. Kathy Acker, *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, in *Literal Madness* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 292.

3. Joanna Russ, "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love," in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 87.

4. Robert Glück, "Long Note on New Narrative," https://poets.org/text/long-note-new-narrative, accessed January 16, 2025.

5. Nayland Blake, "Curator's Note," in *Situation: Perspectives on Work by Lesbian and Gay Artists* (San Francisco: New Langton Arts, 1991), unpaginated.

6. Nayland Blake, http://www.naylandblake.net/, accessed July 5, 2024.

7. François Peraldi, ed., "Polysexuality," *Semiotext(e)* no. 10 (1981), unpaginated.