

vagina vérité[®]

an unabashed exploration of the plain, ordinary, mysterious matter of vaginas

by Alexandra Jacoby

how it began

I started work on *vagina vérité*[®] the summer of 2000. I didn't see it coming. In fact, I had just quit my job in order to paint. And, I wasn't painting anything about women's bodies. Vaginas weren't on my mind at all. I don't remember what I had in mind at the time—just that painting was what I did, and something about a shade of cyan that I'm still chasing in and out of endless autobiographical images. I left my job and signed up for graphic design classes, figuring to freelance and paint.

Then, one day out of the blue, a friend asked me if I liked the way my vagina¹ looked.

Apropos nothing. She asked me if I liked the way my vagina looked.

We were meeting for drinks and just as my butt hit the barstool, she said “Do you like the way your vagina looks?” It wasn't something we had talked about before, our vaginas. But, there wasn't anything we were supposed to, or not supposed to, be talking about, so, I responded—

“Yeh, I like it. Well, I never really thought about it in terms of liking or not liking the way it looks, but I'm fine with it. What brought this up?”

She did not like hers. There was “something wrong” with the way it looked.

Now, I knew that we were all different and that there was no right way to look, but I also knew that tone. Telling her that we were all different would not be enough. She really thought that there was a right way to look. And, anyway, I hadn't actually seen any other women's vaginas, just mainstream porn magazines [*Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler*] and I barely glanced at those, much less ever took a good long look at my own.

I knew nothing about this. But I knew that tone.

That *there's-something-wrong-with-me* tone. Pained, resigned to it, outsider. Sad. And, that annoyed me. Not the tone, but that I could not respond to it with anything that would transform how she felt into something good-feeling, empowering, satisfied: at-home in her body.

I'm a fixer, a consoler, a caretaker. I hate it when anyone is in pain. I am. compulsively. helpful. And, even though I hadn't actually seen any other women, I was sure that we were all

¹ Some of you may be bothered by my use of the word vagina here. You may want me to change it to: Do you like the way your vulva looks? Because that's the correct terminology: the vulva is the part you can see, while the vagina is the canal inside. But vagina is what my friend said. And, I knew what she meant. I'd like to tell you the story as it is. I address this again later on.

different. Like any other body part, all different. Whatever I had seen in magazines was just the usual smoothed-out skin and re-shaping of that body-ideal that convinces us all that we're too fat, too short, noses too big, breasts too small, and on and on. Very few women or men look anything like what I see in a magazine. Still, the images are mesmerizing, brain-washing and addicting. I was not immune. And, while I had my share of personal crap about my body, this wasn't a body part that I worried about being good-enough: vagina diversity felt right to me. We were all different. And, I was, as it happened, satisfied with mine.

I tried talking her out of it.

But, really, what could I say? Without any evidence to show her how we really looked, what was the point?

Now, I was really annoyed! How could it be that the two of us could have spent a combined 70+ years on this planet, in our bodies, and not know what vaginas looked like??

This should not be happening. We should not be sitting here figuring this out. This should be BASIC. I decided right then that there should be a book. For women. So we could see what we looked like. If there wasn't one already, I would shoot one². It would be called vagina vérité. Like cinéma vérité (which means "truthful cinema"; it's a style of film documentary that is known for taking a provocative stance toward its topics). Only this would be a vagina photo-documentary.

OK. I had a plan. I would fix this. I saw the book in my hands. I knew exactly how the images in it would look. They'd be square and about eight inches. They'd be of the gyno-pose. They would be proud v-portraits. I don't think I have ever responded to anything with such a complete end-vision like that. It felt totally right. I stopped trying to convince her, and promised to show her. We passed the evening talking about other things.

I don't recall how much time I spent, nor where I spent it, looking for the book that would set the story straight—I really did think that someone else must have done this already—but I didn't find it. It didn't exist. Not the way I wanted it.

I had no job at that moment. which meant I was living off my savings until the freelance thing kicked in. Not a calm and easy place for me. And, now, I needed to buy equipment. I had a camera, but I would not use film for this. I could not involve a processing house in these images. Too expensive. And then I'd be relying on them to make perfect, dust-free shots. That would be endless work and expense. I needed a digital camera. And lights. This was in the summer of 2000, and cameras were more expensive then. I sat with this, hid from it,

² Documenting things—taking endless photographs of them so that other people can experience something of my experience—was just something I did, and do, like someone who knits while listening to you. For me, it was a natural response to the absence of a visual reference. I had never done anything like this before and had no idea what I was getting into.

worried about it—for about a month. Then I remembered that this is what credit cards were for. **I just had to do this.**

call for models

I had the equipment now, my vision of where this was headed, and reasons why it had to be done. I was ready.

I sent an email to every woman I knew, announcing that I was doing a vagina book and looking for participants. Actually, what I sent was a *Call for Models*. It was blunt, and freaked a few women out. I thought I was being frank, but what I did was slap this sensitive, confronting topic down on the table without context, challenging women to step up.

There's a problem, and we can fix it. *You in?*

It's not as though anyone was necessarily thinking that there was a problem to solve, nor ready to talk about it. I wonder whether I would have answered it.

The Vagina Monologues were out (Thank you, Eve Ensler!³), but even I had not seen the play at that point.

Back then⁴ vagina conversations were surprising, discomfoting, embarrassing, totally taboo, unacceptable, strange, and definitely not something I should have sent to office email addresses. I learned this when I received a frantic call minutes after I hit <send> from a woman I hardly knew, but who was on my list, who was sure she would be fired for having an email with the word “vagina” addressed to her in her inbox.

In spite of this, a few women were up for participating.

I had previously spoken to them about the project, and I'm sure they were responding to that more than my call for models, which really was so badly done.

Meanwhile, the first woman was coming over to make a v-portrait!

As it happened, she had only enough time that evening to do a quick v-portrait and go, but she definitely wanted to do it, so I could I make it in fifteen minutes?

³ Eve Ensler is the author of *The Vagina Monologues*, *The Good Body* and several other plays. *The Vagina Monologues* is based on dozens of interviews Ensler conducted with women. It addresses women's sexuality and the social stigma surrounding rape and abuse. First performed in 1994, it created a new conversation about and with women. In 1998, Ensler founded V-Day, whose mission it is to end violence against women and girls worldwide. Learn about V-Day, the important work it does at www.v-day.org. Through performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler paved the way for this book and many other conversations about women's bodies and the quality of our lives.

⁴ And now? How are vagina conversations now? Is it any less taboo a topic?

My studio was my bedroom. I set up the lights and the camera and was ready to go when she arrived.

Focused on her needing it to be quick, and relieved that someone had actually shown up, I framed her vagina through the lens as if it were any object any time, not the first vagina that I had ever seen. I was mechanical. I positioned the lights; they were crazy-bright and way too close, but that was all the space I had. I moved the tripod in close and clicked off a bunch of shots without really looking at it. Fifteen minutes later, she was out the door.

So, I was alone when loading the images to my computer. And, now, I was actually going to see it.

The file took a bit to open up and then: there it was. HUGE on the 21" screen. I had never seen anything quite like it. It bugged me out.

I shut down my computer, and backed away.

How was I going to do this?? That was the strangest thing I'd ever seen.

While I was on the other side of the room now and somewhat freaked out, my conviction that this needed to be done and my commitment to doing it, hadn't wavered. There needed to be a visual vagina reference for women. That was clear and unchanged in me. It was absurd that we didn't have intimate relationships with our vaginas, what with sexuality being so integral to being human, the routine and significance of the menstrual cycle, the amazing act of giving birth...Vaginas were important! An unrecognized emblem of power in fact! My commitment to doing the book hadn't budged. I was in. On the other hand, **what I saw on that screen made me totally uncomfortable**. I went to bed.

I would keep going and see where it took me, deal with my reactions on the way.

A few weeks later, vagina model number two came by, and again it was to be a quick shoot; she had to run right after. Again, I was alone for the screening, and—this time: I was captivated.

It was nothing like the first one. They were completely different, totally unique. I put the first one up on the screen next to it. Yep, they were both fascinating. This is what we look like. The shapes, colors, textures and hair styles were very different: deeply different expressions of the same thing.

Seeing our uniqueness and sameness simultaneously like that had a transforming effect on me. This was it, the image I had been looking for: frank, unabashed—proud.

Until that moment, a photograph of a vagina was situated in either a pornographic or medical context for me—not that I was seeing them anyway, but if I was to see them, that’s where they’d be. But on my screen there, it was just us women. That’s what we looked like. Well, two of us anyway. **Totally unique.** Like everything else about us.

I definitely wanted to see more.

now what?

I had sent out the word, albeit clumsily, and after the first few, **women were not lining up to participate.** While some were initially startled by the subject, pretty much everyone agreed that there should be a book. But that didn’t mean that they were posing. After the *Call for Models* fiasco, I stood still, and thought about it before doing anything.

What I came up with was: that there’s no good way to ask a woman if you can make a portrait of her vagina. I should stop doing that.

This was a sensitive subject and different for each woman. Asking a woman to pose for a v-portrait came out like a dare. The opposite of my intention with this work, which was to create a comfortable space where we could see ourselves for ourselves. Where we could see, and talk, and think for ourselves. This space didn’t exist yet.

I’d have to create a forum for the conversation first. If this was something women wanted to see, then the v-portraits would follow. I thought back to the conversation with my friend, to the questions it raised for me.

How did we get here?

How could it be that we have so distant a relationship with our vaginas?

I mailed out an essay about the project and why I was doing it, and a vagina first-times questionnaire. I titled it yOur⁵ first-time stories.

yOur first-time stories

- the first time you met your vagina...
- what your mother first told you about it...
- the first conversations you had with your friends about your vaginas...
- your first period, what your mother told you about it before, and what you experienced once you got it...

⁵ These were your stories, specific and unique; and they were also our stories, the shared history of women in general. Your + Own = yOur.

- the first time you shared your vagina with someone else...
- also, if you have (or did have) a daughter, what would you tell her about her vagina?
- this conversation makes me think...

My premise here is that how things begin plays a major role in what you believe and expect going forward—until you reconsider it. Telling our stories, getting to hear other women's stories—taking a look at our personal beginnings would (I hoped), give us the opportunity to reconsider what we hold to be true about our vaginas, our bodies, ourselves and each other. And then, we could start talking about the place of our vaginas in our lives today. And then, if we wanted to make v-portraits, we would.

Responses to the questionnaire came in bit by bit. I was on the right track now. Women wanted to talk. We needed to tell our stories and to hear each other's.

We needed a website.

It needed to be anonymous and open to everyone, not just mailed out by me to women in my life.

I established vaginaverite.com in September 2000, posted the women's first-times questionnaire and also, revised the questionnaire to include men and their first-time vagina experiences and posted that as well.

We are, after all, in this together. While this project is for and about women, men are warmly welcomed.

You can read the responses submitted at the website⁶.

You'll find that your experiences will be just like, similar to, somewhat different from, or nothing like, part or all of what is included on the website. **There are no right answers to the questionnaires.**

Our stories matter. They become part of us, and they inform how we view the world, what we expect of others and of ourselves. They don't define the all of who we are. Other people's stories don't define the all of who they are either. And, what you make of your history and preferences, or someone else's, may change. Understanding happens over time.

As of December 2010, there are 240+ women's responses and 170+ men's responses to the first-times questionnaires posted on the site. You can add your responses, too, if you like. The website is an ongoing companion project to the v-portrait book.

⁶ I didn't include any of the responses here because I couldn't imagine choosing among them. Head over to www.vaginaverite.com to read women and men's vagina first-time stories.

creating space for conversation

With the website up, I was beginning to make progress. The conversation was unfolding. Topics were spiraling out—sexuality, sense of self, relationships—love, familial, with our bodies, with contraception, abortion, menstruation, violence, rape, basic human rights—it was beginning to feel like pretty much everything emerged from, or led us back to, the vagina.

What does this bring up for you?

I posted more questionnaires, included articles, links to websites, diagrams. It was a mishmash of stuff on the site, but in there, we were connecting with each other's stories.

And, I was beginning to get the word out about making v-portraits. Women heard about the project from me, my friends, the website, or cards that I left in a few places around town where I felt at home, like Eve Salon⁷ or Bluestockings⁸ book store, or cards that my friends, or my Mom handed out, and some of them wanted to make a v-portrait.

The cards were great. For one thing not everyone was so online all the time quite the way we are now, so they were a way of reaching people. And, it made starting the face-to-face conversation a lot easier. Handing out a card with a description of what I was up to, rather than diving into a conversation that began with the startling word “vagina”, gave people a chance to acclimate. To decided whether they wanted to talk.

I started making cards about the project after my Mom told me that she was helping me find v-portrait recruits at her gym. In the locker room. She was asking women if they would like to make vagina portraits. I love my Mom. She is my strongest supporter. I asked her to hold off on recruiting until I had some cards for her, and quickly whipped them up.

I remember some of my friends were getting surprised by reactions from their friends, who they expected would respond either more warmly or more coolly to the subject. One friend of a friend scolded her for bringing up such an idea in front of other people. What would they think of her?!

My friend knew her friend to be comfortable with her sexuality and, because of that, figured she'd be up for posing.

⁷ Eve Salon is the nail and skincare salon I had been going to since the early 90s. I still go there and still love it. It's co-owned by my best friend, and I started going there before we became friends. www.eveswebsite.com

⁸ Bluestockings is a radical bookstore, fair trade cafe, and activist center in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Through words, art, food, activism, education, and community, they strive to create a space that welcomes and empowers all people. Check it out. Go to one of their many readings and events. www.bluestockings.com

I have yet to identify any kind of indicator for how a woman will feel about the subject of our vaginas or the making of v-portraits. It's completely personal and specific. One of the things I've very much loved (after the fact) about this work is how it continually prevented me from settling into generalizations or sureness that I knew what people would say or think about it. If I wanted people to talk and feel comfortable talking about this, then I had to make room for everyone and every reaction. I had to be the open space.

Sometimes, the project would smack my head into the walls of my assumptions about people. People are icebergs. There's much more that we don't know about each other than that we do.

The women who have made v-portraits with me have nothing that I can think of in common, other than that they made a v-portrait with me.

They ranged in age from 19-60. They may or may not be comfortable with their bodies, or familiar with their vaginas. There were no requirements in order to pose, other than to be over 18. I don't know what their sexual orientation was, or whether they'd given birth ever, or ever had sexual intercourse—unless it came up in conversation, and if it did, I didn't make a note of it.

I didn't survey them on the way in, or ask them to review anything on the way out. I hoped they would feel comfortable. I didn't think about much else. I prepared the space for the shoot, blacked out the windows with lawn garbage bags and set up the crazy-bright lights.

Most of the women and I met for the first time when they arrived at my door to make a v-portrait. I never stopped being amazed by this.

Women were showing up and talking with me, making v-portraits, responding to questionnaires. We were having the conversation.

Because we were starting with such an intimate subject, it became easy—or at least common—to find ourselves having all kinds of conversations you wouldn't typically have with someone you hardly knew, or maybe at all, during the photo-sessions.

I didn't record any of it. There were no questions that I needed to ask. No one needed to do anything else. I wasn't studying anything. I just needed to hold the space, and make images.

going public

At about 30 v-portraits, I began exhibiting. I previewed vagina vérité® on its own, and as part of group shows, that I organized myself, helped organize, or that were produced by

someone else. The exhibitions and events explored a range of themes relating to women's bodies and how we feel about them and what that means for our quality of life.

In addition to exhibitions, I held salons⁹ at my apartment, where I invited people to view the v-portraits and participate in a discussion with a topic planned in advance.

I still do the salons, and I plan to continue exhibiting¹⁰. Some of the events were women-only and others were for women and men.

The most common response among women was "I knew we were different, but I didn't know we were that different!" And then, "So, I guess I'm not that weird after all."

Sometimes at an exhibition, one or two people would ask me to tell them something or other about the women who posed, or to say whether my v-portrait was on the wall. I always answered the same way: **I don't discuss the participants in the project.** I'm religious about that.

I invited women to make v-portraits to get us thinking about all women, about yourself, about the women in your life.

And, I believe that in order to make that happen, the participants should remain anonymous.

My experience is that most of us would not choose to bare all for a v-portrait, and that doing that seems to many people to mean something about those who do—maybe that they're more brave, or more irreverent, or more comfortable in their bodies, or don't value their bodies as much, or want to be looked at, or want to be touched more, or differently, than the rest of us do. None of this is true. And, it gets in the way of the conversation I want to have, which is about all of us. Not about who would and wouldn't pose and why. There are no general truths here about anyone. Just lots of individual stories.

We're all curious, and we all speculate, and we all judge each other based on very little information—often based on irrelevant information that has more to do with us, or other people in our lives, than the person we're judging.

I hope to avoid some of that by keeping it anonymous, so I offer no specifics about the women who participated in making v-portraits.

Another premise of mine is that what I know, or think, or believe, or experienced, and what I would or wouldn't do, is not more relevant than what you know, think, believe, experienced, would or wouldn't do. Yes, it is an unusual occupation to make v-portraits, and it's probably

⁹ A salon is a gathering for learning or enjoyment. It's a conversation in my living room, that I hope will spill out into the world.

¹⁰ I am continually seeking venues where we can view the v-portraits. If you have suggestions, or would like to host, please contact me via vaginaverite.com. Whenever there is an exhibition, I send out invitations via the leave the castle newsletter and announce it on the website. If you'd like to receive invitations, sign up for the mail list. It's free and open to everyone.

true that I have seen more vulvas than you have, but it doesn't make me more relevant as a woman or a human body in the world. That's just part of my story.

I do my best to stay out of the conversation and just hold the space for us. That means I won't answer all of your questions. But—if you come to one of my salons, I will serve you food and drink.

Talk among yourselves. Hang out in the background. Think what you think. Feel what you feel. **I'm just glad you're here, and that we're doing this.**

The women who participated in making v-portraits made this project possible and for that, I am deeply grateful, and in that way, they are special to me. But, for this conversation, their life-details don't matter more than anyone else's, nor do mine. **This is about all of us.**

what she said

So, now that I've told you why I won't tell you some things. Here are some of the things I will tell you.

One of my favorite moments was at the Smithfield exhibition, the first one. There were about 30 v-portraits installed on the walls, and two of my friends were side by side viewing them.

The two weren't friends themselves exactly, but because of their relationships with me, seeing each other at my birthdays and events, and knowing how I felt about each of them, they had an intimacy-by-association between them.

One of them said to the other *"I think that's me."* And, the other woman said, *"No, it's not."* *"How do you know?"* the first one said. *"Because that's me!"*

I love that. A few of the women who participated told me that they wondered whether they would be able to identify themselves by their v-portrait.

This was the first time the v-portraits were framed and installed on walls, and viewed altogether like that, and—viewed by women who weren't directly involved in making v-portraits.

After the exhibition, I could not bring myself to box them up to wait for the next one, so I installed them in my living room. My apartment was vagina central.

the preview exhibitions

From the beginning, the plan was to hand my friend a book. So, I always considered the exhibitions as previews because I hadn't published yet and was still shooting. Each exhibition was of all of the v-portraits I had made up to that point, except in the two cases where I exhibited *Spire*¹¹, a 6'3" totem of eight v-portraits that I created specifically for the *Love Your Tree* exhibition.

Exhibiting gave people an opportunity to view the v-portraits and an opportunity to meet me, which, for some women considering participating, helped them make the decision to pose. I continually extended the invitation to anyone interested in viewing between exhibitions, to come by my place and view the v-portraits, and occasionally people did.

Depending on the dimensions of the exhibition space and whether they'd allow me to nail into the walls, I exhibited the v-portraits in their frames, printed and mounted them to fit on easels, or on a free-standing display thingy that my father made for me. Once, I took them out to Boulder, Colorado. For that, I created the travel-set that is unframed, does not require nails to install, and fits in a carry-on.

I really want everyone to see this. If you give me a space, I'll find a way to fit the v-portraits into it.

Here's where the v-portraits have been seen so far:

yOur Exhibition, Smithfield. NYC, Dec 2002

The first exhibition of the v-portraits was in Dec. 2002 at Smithfield (a bar in downtown NYC). It was a preview exhibition just for women. About 130 women attended, and the staff was all female. Most got their first view of other women's vaginas that night. It was a fun evening, where my mother's friends got to spend some time in a Lower East Side bar (one commented on the bathrooms being unexpectedly clean), my best friend made cupcakes (way before it was trendy!) and a few women were surprised to find that the v-portraits weren't large, head-swallowing sized images. One said: "*It's not that scary after all.*"

Threat, A Gathering of the Tribes¹². NYC, Nov. 2004

The v-portraits were exhibited at *A Gathering of the Tribes*, a gallery in the East Village, as part of a group exhibition, entitled: *Threat*. Standing together, unabashed, unaltered, these portraits of women's most private selves challenged the concept of power as domination and provide a forum for conversation where every woman is included, enfolded, safe.

¹¹ *Spire* is composed of eight v-portraits arranged vertically in one 6'3" frame. Paula Allen, who curated the *Love Your Tree* exhibition (for which I created this piece), also curated the images for it.

¹² *A Gathering of the Tribes* is an arts and cultural organization dedicated to excellence in the arts from a diverse perspective. Located on the Lower East Side of New York City, Tribes has been in existence since 1991. www.tribes.org

Love Your Tree¹³, ABC Carpet & Home. NYC, Dec 2004 - Jan 2005

Spire, an offshoot of *vagina vérité*[™] was on view in the *Love Your Tree* exhibition, an installation of 16 women photographers, each uniquely exploring the mystery, power and questions to be found in a woman's body. Each image evoked its own theatre of self-inquiry. This exhibition celebrated the debut of *The Good Body*⁴ by Eve Ensler. It was curated by Paula Allen and a stunning tree and red tent were created by Paulette Cole, CEO and Artistic Director of ABC Carpet & Home.

The Alliance for Women's Equality's¹⁵ AWE-inspiring authors series *Vaginas: An Exploration*, NYC, March 2005

A reading from *Vaginas: An Owner's Manual*, an exhibition of *vagina vérité*[™], and a spirited Q&A.

Society for Menstrual Cycle Research (SMCR) Conference. Boulder, CO, June 2005

vagina vérité[™] was exhibited at the SMCR interdisciplinary conference. The SMCR is a nonprofit organization, founded in 1977 by a multidisciplinary group of women who were pioneers in understanding the centrality of menstrual cycle research to women's health. The conference theme that year was the menstrual cycle as a vital sign.

Emerging Artists International (EAI) Open Studios, NYC, October, 2005

As part of the citywide open studios event, I invited viewers to experience the v-portraits, bold and proud, installed on my living room wall.

rated R for Random, Agni Gallery, NYC. September 2006

The v-portraits were presented in book form for the first time at Agni Gallery as part of the *rated R for Random* group exhibition.

Art Feast, Musée de Monoian¹⁶, NYC, September 2006

Spire was part of the *Art Feast* at the Musée de Monoian.

v-portrait viewing—open studio, NYC, October 2006

62 v-portraits were on view. No topic. Just come, view, eat, drink and talk. A river of people came through my apartment for this one. And stayed. It was a six-hour event of animated conversation. A really good time.

The V-Factor: A Private Matter in the Public Eye, NJ, November 2006

¹³ *Love Your Tree* is the vision of Eve Ensler, playwright-performer-activist and V-Day Founder. After early performances of her work "The Good Body," Eve was inundated with letters and emails from enthusiastic women who wanted to talk, to process, to heal and to help. www.vaginaverite.com/art/loveyourtree.html

¹⁴ *The Good Body* explores what has driven women to strive for physical perfection from the 1950s until now.

¹⁵ The Alliance for Women's Equality (AWE), founded in 2002, by Erin Michelson, sought to advance gender equality and help build sustainable organizations that protect and promote women's and girls' rights. AWE also conducted independent research on nonprofit sustainability issues, as well as hosted public education and outreach programs.

¹⁶ The Musée de Monoian, The Museum of One Being, was established in a rent stabilized East Village apartment in New York City in October 2004. www.myspace.com/Museedemonoian

presented by Intimate Engagements¹⁷

With over 60 v-portraits revealing what most women have not had a chance to see—our salon discussion explored the dynamic interplay between society's view on 'the -v' and our own evolving sense of self.

Vagina Festival, NYC, February 2007

Inspired by vagina vérité™ and the many conversations it opens up, Vagina Festival, a visual and performance art experience, emerged as a space for conversations we don't usually get to have. The 2007 Vagina Festival at Agni Gallery was the first. We were part of V-Day's Worldwide Campaign¹⁸ to end violence against women and girls. Visual artists, performance artists, musicians, and speakers came together to raise awareness about the pervasiveness of violence against women, and raised money for V-Day.

Spark Your Fire, NYC, August 2007

WomanVision¹⁹ and vagina vérité® co-hosted an event exploring our whole, juicy, and sacred selves. With the v-portraits installed around us, Joanna and Dawn led us through an experience of the power and potential of an all-women's circle.

Red Tent Women's Project²⁰, NYC, November 2007

Vagina, vulva, pussy, cunt—and have you heard the latest celebrity darling: vajayjay? Why are there so many words and why do none of them seem right?

Wimodaughsis²¹ at Vagina Festival, NYC, October 2008

vagina vérité® was part of the Vagina Festival 2008 visual art exhibition of paintings, photography, sculpture, print, and video, curated by Rose Merola and engaging viewers with a range of work that explored our bodies, sense of self, sexuality, and our relationships.

intro to vagina vérité®, NYC, JUN 2009

vagina vérité®—documentary-style vulva portraits, straight-up photographs, that leave little between you and the images, and your experience of your personal experiences, your assumptions, your stories and questions—installed in the artist's living room.

¹⁷ Intimate Engagements is a cozy lingerie boutique in Montclair, New Jersey. www.intimate-engagements.com

¹⁸ V-Day's Worldwide Campaign: once a year, in February, March, and April, Eve Ensler allows groups around the world to produce a performance of The Vagina Monologues, as well as other works created by V-Day, and to use the proceeds for local individual projects and programs that work to end violence against women and girls, often shelters and rape crisis centers. www.vday.org

¹⁹ WomanVision creates rituals for daily living. Through circles, workshops, individual sessions, and a year-long program, WomanVision is a place where women are gathering to tell their stories, revision their histories, and reinvent their lives. www.womanvis.com

²⁰ The Red Tent Women's Project is a diverse and dynamic community of women who are catalysts for social change. By creating safe and empowered spaces we facilitate community building, information and resource exchange, and personal growth for women and girls. www.redtentwomensproject.org

²¹ Wimodaughsis means wives, mothers, daughters and sisters, as coined by Anna Julia Cooper. www.leavethecastle.com/Vagina_Festival/VF08-ExhibitionStatement.pdf

VULVAGRAPHICS. The Change You Want to See Gallery. NYC, OCT 2009

vagina vérité® was on view at VULVAGRAPHICS, a New View Campaign²² event, celebrating the diversity of the female vulva through classic and contemporary arts and crafts. The reception was packed, and bubbling over with lively conversation, crayon-activism and art appreciation. It was an all-out celebration of genital diversity—of our uniqueness and shared experiences. The New View Campaign honored Betty Dodson²³, foremother to the art and the activism of Vulvagraphics. We were honored to have her there with us!

the last #vv preview exhibition. installation at the artist's home. NYC, JAN 2010

92 v-portraits were on view in the artist's living room. This was the last of the preview of exhibitions. We celebrated the project's progress and engaged in the conversations that spiral out of it. Thank you all who attended in person & in spirit!

A few months after this last preview exhibition, I completed photography for the book.

But, before that—

“There should be a vagina festival.”

I can't remember whether she said it or I did. But, while one of the v-portrait models and I were looking at images of her on the screen just after the photo-session, one of us said shrieked, “There should be a vagina festival!” Now that we had started the conversation, there was just too much to explore and too much fun in it, not to all-out celebrate. For days.

It took me a while to get up my nerve, and I think it was a good year later, when V-Day's Worldwide Campaign for 2007 was being announced, that I decided to do it.

V-Day's mission is simple. It demands that violence against women and girls must end. To do this, once a year, in February, March, and April, Eve Ensler allows groups around the world to produce a performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, as well as other works created by V-Day, and to use the proceeds for local individual projects and programs that work to end violence against women and girls, often shelters and rape crisis centers. This is V-Day's Worldwide Campaign. What began as one event in New York City in 1998 today includes over 5,400 V-Day events annually.

²² The New View Campaign was formed in 2000 as a grassroots network to challenge the distorted and oversimplified messages about sexuality that the pharmaceutical industry relies on to sell its new drugs. www.newviewcampaign.org

²³ Betty Dodson, Ph.D., is an international authority on sexual self-help and the author of the multimillion-copy bestseller *Sex for One: The Joy of Self-Loving*. She has devoted three decades of her life to sexual liberation for both women and men. www.dodsonandross.com

I signed up with V-Day²⁴ and established Vagina Festival as a non-profit through Fractured Atlas²⁵. I booked Agni Gallery²⁶. It was just one big room. High ceilings and windows onto the street. It was on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood I loved to wander in. Perfect.

Scary. I had no experience producing events of any kind, much less a weekend-long event that would include two performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, a group exhibition of 13 artists' visual art, as well as 13 performers or speakers, including poets, performance artists, musicians and spoken-word artists.

It just had to happen though.

For *The Vagina Monologues*, I placed an ad in Backstage for actors and a director. I received over 100 resumes. I don't recall where I posted the calls for artists and speakers (I didn't get much sleep in those days, so sometimes I don't remember the details as well as I wished I did), but submissions came in and eventually that turned into a full program.

I set up the Vagina Festival website and I left Vagina Festival cards around town. My friends and supporters of vagina vérité® spread the word. I was a member of a women artists group then, The Exhibitionists²⁷, and some of my fellow members submitted their work, and helped spread the word. My parents, Ruth and Shaul Jacoby, and Haven²⁸ spa were the primary sponsors. I can't thank them enough for that. There really is nothing that we do entirely on our own.

Our theme for Vagina Festival 2007 was: RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT THE PERVASIVENESS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.

And, this was our invitation challenge:

At least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Violence against women and girls is a universal problem of epidemic proportions. *Can we do something about this?*

24 Vagina Festival 2007's proceeds were donated to V-Day in support of its efforts to end violence against women worldwide. www.leavethecastle.com/Vagina_Festival_2007

25 Fractured Atlas is a non-profit org that provides artists and arts organizations with access to funding, healthcare, education, and more, all in a context that honors their individuality and independent spirit. www.fracturedatlas.org

26 Agni Gallery, established by artist, Agni Zotis in 2004, is a space for the organic expression of intellectual process, of unrestricted questioning and conversation, and the intimacy of raw emotion. It maintains a standard of high quality work that reflects the environment and the needs of the community. <http://www.facebook.com/agnizotis>

27 The Exhibitionists are New York City-based professional women artists, writers, dancers and performers who host monthly salons in pursuit of fresh dialogue about the arts. www.exhibitionists-nyc.com

28 Haven is an urban retreat in SoHo, NYC. It's a serene day spa on Mercer Street. Haven offers peaceful pampering and top-notch service in an environment that encourages relaxation and comfort. www.havensoho.com

A group of artists challenges you: to go inside the statistics, consider what so many women endure daily, and to envision a world of peace and respect—and everyone’s capacity to participate in making that vision a reality.

At Vagina Festival 2007, we proudly and provocatively presented women’s stories through visual art, music, dance and performance art, and talks.

It warranted the ALL-CAPS title.

Producing it was intense. I had a full-time job, and worked on Vagina Festival weekends, at night and early in the mornings, sometimes all night long. I hadn’t learned the word delegate yet, didn’t really know how to ask for help (until I hit total meltdown), and was terrified of screwing it all up. That last part really kept me busy.

For *The Monologues*, we held auditions in my apartment. Actresses waited in the living room, where the v-portraits were installed, and I served light snacks. Not the usual audition waiting-room. The director, Michelle Dean, signed on the night before during our first and only meeting—by phone. She called me at exactly the moment we agreed on. I knew she’d be great. And she was. Michelle called them in to the bedroom one at a time, and, by the end of the afternoon, had cast our eleven actresses.

One thing that gave me solace from the beginning, was that we had a sound engineer. Austin Publicover had attended one of my salons or open houses²⁹, and miraculously said yes when I asked him to do sound for Vagina Festival. Not only did he make sure everything sounded perfect during the festival, but he also improved and expanded on the audio of some of the performance pieces. He was a gem. All that, and he took it in stride when it turned out that I had completely overlooked that he would need back-up or time off, for the occasional meal or bathroom break.

The weekend kicked off with the opening reception, celebrating the visual art and establishing our theme. Joanna Lindenbaum and Dawn Copeland of WomanVision performed an opening ceremony, which was interactive—meaning everyone had to participate. They asked us to form a circle and to hold hands. I was one of the people who swallowed and rolled her eyes at that one. And, like everyone else there, I did what they said. They have that kind of energy. It’s not in-your-face commanding, but somehow they keep talking and singing at you until you’re doing whatever they want you to—and *liking it*. It’s special what they do.

They got us to tell the circle what our vaginas would say (if we had one—this was co-ed) and also to make offerings about the different kinds of violence in our lives. Playful and serious, and we probably had to sing, too.

²⁹ One of the best parts of vagina vérité® for me is that I got to meet so many people. Everyone is interesting. Everyone is special and matters. When there’s something requiring you to pay attention, to be a good listener and keep an open mind, you get to see that more easily than say when you’re absorbed in your work, worries or fears. This project is the best thing that ever happened to me.

My friend's husband told me after that, while he'd go anywhere to support his wife's work (she was one of the visual artists exhibiting)—this reception was actually fun.

Another thing I totally missed was that I would need help during the festival. That even though, it was all happening in the same room, that I could not be in more than one place at once³⁰, that there was money to take in, and there were questions to answer, attendees and artists to take care of in one way or another, the door opening and closing, performances beginning and ending... I had not recruited anyone to be there with me, other than Austin, who was in the corner, surrounded by equipment and booked solid with the back-to-back program I set for us.

Fortunately, Gabrielle and Marla, two amazing friends of mine, were paying attention. I have no idea what I was thinking. Clearly, I wasn't. But they arranged to be with me at Vagina Festival, from start to finish. Earlier that week, Marla drove me to three different boroughs, plus into Long Island, all in the same day, to buy 11 stools, 22 chairs, and I can't remember what else we crammed into her car. Not to mention the endless listening, the two of them—and everyone else close to me—must have been doing (for weeks!) as I released (and stirred up) my never-ending anxiety about how to do this thing.

I don't know what to tell you about next. There's so much. I haven't even finished telling you about the opening night's performances, or how Judith Steinhart cleared a day for me and took the other cab filled with chairs and stools and artwork and I don't know what else, because I was in a filled-up cab, too. That was the day before Agni Zotis helped me hang the visual art (something else you can't do alone). And, there are two more full days of Festival to go.

The whole thing was a fantastic blur of talent and heart and storytelling via a range of artwork, music and voice—of people who gave of themselves and made this thing happen, that I really should have videoed for you. Because everyone should experience Priscilla Taylor delivering a monologue of her rape. It's really. hard. to take. And, not nearly as hard as it should be.

Instead, for now, I'll direct you to the web, where you can find something about all the work, and everyone who participated, performed and supported us. Go to www.leavethecastle.com and click on the Vagina Festival 2007 link.

At the time, both times—because there's a Vagina Festival 2008, too—I was deep into the how-to-do-it side of it. All of it seemed over my head and both times I wanted to turn around and call it quits most of the way through. BUT—I had to do it. There had to be more people, more voices, more stories being told and told out loud, live and in person and using other media.

³⁰ This was one of the most important things I learned: that you cannot actually multi-task, so let that fantasy go. And, that you need help. We all do. Plan for it. Ask for it. People are generous. They will show up.

The more time I spent photographing v-portraits, reading stories submitted to the site, meeting people at exhibitions, the more this needed a three dimensional space.

Or maybe I just kept getting lonely, working on the website and the images on my own. vagina vérité® needed to be among people.

again, do it again

When it came time to start pre-production work for Vagina Festival 2008, I postponed it for six months because I was unable to move. I had quit smoking after 26 years³¹ and was paralyzed with shock and grief and I don't know what else, just that I was in a pit and could not crawl my way out.

Showing up for my job every day was about all I had in me. For those of you considering it, or wondering what the big deal is, you should know that it sucks. Quitting smoking sucks beyond anything you can imagine—unless you've already kicked heroin or alcohol, or whatever it is that you don't give any thought to, but that completely runs your life. And then you already know what sucks really means, and you don't need me to tell you.

What eventually got me out of that hole was practicing yoga. If you don't like yoga, don't worry. Whatever path you choose in order to make a major change in your life, it works out the same: you have to stay with it, work hard, and live it every single day. There are no shortcuts. Liking it isn't relevant, just that you believe in it, and that it inspires you to stick with it. Yoga wasn't fun³² for me and I wasn't good at it. I just knew that it was helping me.

For more than a year and a half, if you asked me about it, I would tell you that not-smoking still sucked, and that I had no idea when it was going to get any better.

It turned out that it was for the others who would collaborate on Vagina Festival, as much as for myself, that I postponed it. Being around me was not easy.

Eventually though, regardless of how I felt everything sucked, it was time.

Vagina Festival 2008 was due—and it was larger. We needed more rooms. And staff. I was going to delegate this time! I wrote job descriptions and posted them at idealist.org³³ and

³¹ I started smoking at age 15. So, I had no experience of being me, as an adult, without cigarettes. Everything I had ever done, every painting I had made, every word I had written, every thought, belief and creative act that meant anything to me as me, was something I only knew under the influence of nicotine, caffeine and somewhat sleep-deprived. While you'd think that clearing out the smoke, decreasing my caffeine intake and getting some rest would feel good in my body, it didn't. It was too unfamiliar, the withdrawal was too painful, and I just didn't want to do anything that hard. What if I couldn't make it to the other side? And, what if I did and I didn't like what I found there either?

³² Actually, practicing yoga eventually led me to redefining my ideas about fun. Doing something difficult, and really doing it, that's a different, cool kind of fun I highly recommend.

³³ Idealist connects people, organizations, and resources to help build a world where all people can live free and dignified lives. www.idealists.org

interviewed candidates. I rented out Sage Theater, a 99-seat theater on Seventh Avenue between 47th and 48th Streets.

Rose Merola curated the powerful visual art exhibition, “Wimodaughsis”; Kathleen Adams coordinated a kick-ass performance art program, and Jessica Smith, my delightful production assistant, did what was needed, and understood, regardless. The list of volunteers, performers and artists tops a hundred people. We presented painting, photography, sculpture, print, and video and performed plays, music, spoken word, poetry, ceremony and dance.

Vagina Festival 2008 was spectacular. It told stories of birth, menstruation, feminine power, body image, genital mutilation, hope, stereotypes, rape, love, motherhood, sexual taboos, self-image and perfectionism, personal boundaries, coming of age...it told so many of our stories. And whether they were painful or sweet, by telling them, we celebrated ourselves.

There were 25 live performances and the works of 14 visual artists. Our stage crew, led by Shannon O’Neil, Austin, and Ray Rodriguez, and our greeters, ushers and attendants—all volunteers³⁴—made sure everything ran like clockwork. And, it did. Shoshi, our Mistress of Ceremonies saw to it that the transitions were lively and hot. Kevin Laverty headed up the art installation crew, who transformed the room in the back into the clean, well-lighted space you expect a gallery to be. Darryl Knight coined the phrase “Vagina Security” to describe his role at the festival. We all loved that. So I printed up tee-shirts: black tee, white block letters: simple, elegant, tough.

Magic happened that weekend and in the days leading up to it.

Again, I direct you to the [leave the castle website](#) to read about these fantastic people and their work. We do have video of this one. And, we have Evan Burr and Mike Harlow to thank for that.

This time it wasn’t part of V-Day’s Worldwide Campaign. There just needed to be a Vagina Festival, a place for conversations we don’t usually get to have.

That’s what was so cool about it all. Everyone involved was there to create this space for conversation. For our stories.

³⁴ Vagina Festival was an all-volunteer production. Everyone donated their time, talent and energy.

it was time

As I mentioned earlier, I was struggling with how to move forward.

I include what I do about myself because, much as I'd like to have been the pure observer, and just make portraits, that just not possible. We leave our mark on everything and everyone we touch. Who I am seeped into it everywhere.

Eventually, I was ready to focus on **just finishing photography and coming out with the book.**

No more festivals. No seeking to expand the conversation. Just get my piece of it done. It had been in my apartment for long enough.

To finish work for the book, I had some issues to address—personal ones, and ones about the project. The personal stuff was mainly about finding my voice when I'd really rather stay back behind the camera, and the project stuff centered around an endless debate with myself as to what the accompanying text should be.

Sometimes, it's just time to go forward, and you go, regardless.

the sticky subject on my mind whenever I talk, or write, about vagina vérité®

Vagina is what I have always³⁵ said when making general reference to what I have down there (I'm pointing at my crotch). Many women I know do the same. Others call it: pussy, coochie, snatch, crotch—one woman wrote in that she calls hers a cheeseburger...

Not long after I started photographing vaginas for vagina vérité®, it was pointed out to me that it is not the vagina I am shooting, it's the vulva.

That's right.

- **The vagina is the canal.**
- **The vulva is what's on the outside.**

I think of our vulvas as the faces of our vaginas. I stand by the naming of my project: **it's a vagina exploration.**

Maybe the subject is: Why did she ask in the first place?

³⁵ Vagina is what I always called it—until I began this project. The more time I spend in this conversation, the more I call it a vulva. I think genitalia would be most literally accurate, but I like using that word even less.

And, the answer to that is about much more than what vulvas do our don't look like.

That my friend and I, and maybe you, don't call it by its literal name when we're talking about what it looks like down there is part of the story. I don't want to "correct" that out of view when I don't feel we're anywhere near the end of this conversation.

These images, the website, the salons I hold where people get together to view the images and talk about v-subjects, the ten years of conversation so far—everything that went into vagina vérité®—is my way of opening up the space for questions and for you to find answers that work for you.

That vagina vérité® is a photo-documentary of something you can't see is fitting. This isn't v-anatomy 101. This book isn't where you go to learn about the mechanics of your genitalia. It's where you get to see for yourself what many of us look like down there. It's where you get to show up as you are, with lots of or little knowledge about your body, or other women's bodies specifically, or women's bodies in general. Men, you're welcome here, too.

This set of v-portraits is intended as a starting point.

what I couldn't do

While I want everyone woman to feel included here—because she is—the images don't represent all women. They can't. We really are that unique and I really would have to photograph every woman on the planet to represent every woman on the planet.

Even so, **you are included here**. You are included in the conversation, in the shared-space of questions, silence, secrets, shame, pain, discovery, sisterhood, joy, love—humanity in all its forms, expressions and stories.

That said, I want to acknowledge that I was not able to include v-portraits of transexual women, nor women who have survived Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C)³⁶, nor women who have undergone Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery³⁷. I wanted to, but wasn't able to make that happen.

Please, don't read anything into that. I have no personal experience with transexuality, nor

³⁶ Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), or female genital cutting, refers to a number of practices which involve cutting away part or all of a girl's external genitalia. Mutilated/cut infants, girls and women face irreversible lifelong health risks, among other consequences.

³⁷ Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery describes a number of procedures marketed to improve vulva appearance or enhance sexual experience, such as labiaplasty, clitoral un-hooding, G-spot augmentation and hymen reconstruction.

with FGM, nor with Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery, and word of my project didn't reach and/or didn't attract any women who did and who wanted to make a v-portrait with me.

I hope you see that this tells you something about my experience working on this project, and that it doesn't tell you anything about them. There is no them. Not here. This is about us.

Most of you viewing these pages have not been photographed for vagina vérité® either. But, in my heart and in my intention, you are included here. **This is about us.**

My hope is that every woman finds herself here by implication: that seeing over 100 totally different vulvas will make the case for specificity as a fact of being human.

so, what is normal?

I am not a vagina expert, not a doctor, scientist or sociologist. I'm a woman whose friend asked a question that took me ten years to answer.

Here's what I have for her, and for all of us on the subject of what is normal: **we are each unique and special and different.**

We are different, in our bodies, our minds and our experiences, and it's all sacred, to be respected, appreciated, and understood just as they are. Not relative to any standard.

When I look at the v-portraits, I see landscape. Human landscape. We are each a world.

Yes, there's truth in generalizations; human bodies act similarly under similar conditions, and stereotypes stick for a reason. I know. But those "truths" do not override what I feel and know in my body. Or what you feel and know in yours. Generalizing, abstraction and expert testimony and data are sources of information. Yes, I go to doctors, and search online for answers and generally believe what I hear on the news. I'm not saying to dismiss any of that.

Another premise behind my making this book is that I think **the primary, overlooked, source of information is your own body.** Notice what you feel and count that as important. Trust yourself first. Especially, when it comes to your body, how it feels to you, and what you do with it. And, everyone else isn't having a conversation that you're not part of. They aren't living together in that magazine-world. They're each in their own worlds. Like you. Like me. Unique, specific, individual.

I'm saying that I don't want us to disappear into the inconspicuousness of the normal, good-enough, right-way-to-be. I'd rather revel in, and deeply appreciate, diversity and the non-expert story of each of us.

more

There's more. Lots more. I couldn't begin to hold it all in a book.

It's been over ten years since I began work on vagina vérité®. Hard to believe it's been that long.

This project has been, and continues to be, the most meaningful work I've ever engaged in.

While the outcome of the work is the set of v-portraits on the following pages, at the core of the project are the endless conversations that spiraled out when a friend asked me: Do you like the way your vagina looks?

The conversation continues online, in exhibitions I intend to produce, and in your hands as you view the v-portraits in this book.

I think my only conclusion is that talking is liberating, and we should do a lot more of that.

vagina vérité® celebrates individuality, and the beauty of all women. The book presents the point of view typically reserved for gynecologists and lovers, the view that is generally hidden or avoided.

The portraits are close-ups—just the elusive faces of the vagina in plain view.

I'd love to hear what you think.

You can reach me at alexandra@leavethecastle.com

To my family and friends, to everyone who shared their stories at vaginaverite.com, who attended an exhibition or a salon, who read my text for me, emailed me, challenged me, listened to me, who supported me with cupcakes, or by showing up when I had no idea how much I needed you, or by building exhibition displays, or by walking me around the block, or by helping me produce Vagina Festival (twice!)—thank you! thank you!

enough

That's it. That's all I'm going to say (that sound you might be hearing would be my friends and family laughing their asses off at the idea that there will ever be an "all I'm going to say" from me that is actually followed by silence on my part).

Regardless, and while I may keep talking in the background to whomever will listen—without further ado, please turn the page.

I made this for you.

It's an unabashed exploration of the plain, ordinary, mysterious matter of vaginas.

This book celebrates the you of you. From the inside out. Only you know what that means.

vagina vérité[®]

an unabashed exploration of the plain, ordinary, mysterious matter of vaginas

**The v-portraits go here. over 100 of them.
Each on the right-facing page, with the left blank.**

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about the author

Alexandra Jacoby is not a vagina expert. She just thinks that women's bodies are fine the way they are, and is tired of being told differently.

She's a painter, photographer, writer, events producer and yoga instructor.

vagina vérité® is her first book.

Jacoby is based in NYC.

She's a Member of the [Society for Menstrual Cycle Research](#) and highly recommends you check out their blog [re:Cycling](#). It's also about our bodies.

She's into quantifying—tracking things to learn what's working and what isn't—and creating space for conversations. She thinks that between these two is the opportunity to make things better for ourselves and each other.

Also, she's deeply moved by trees as bodies, and many mixes of cyan—both in oil paint and, lately, watercolor.

Mostly, she finds that everything is interesting.

websites and contact info

www.leavethecastle.com - Here you'll find paintings, photography and links to Vagina Festival 2007 and 2008.

www.vaginaverite.com -This is the companion website to vagina vérité® and where you'll find over 1400 pages of questionnaire responses.

contact Alexandra at alexandra@leavethecastle.com