

Justin Vivian Bond

PARTICIPANT INC.

It's by no means a comparison with strict symmetry, but thinking recently about Justin Vivian Bond's work and person, I was reminded of Adrian Piper. Finding herself the object of various misrecognitions and slights, Piper took to entering all social situations armed with small, printed messages; handing them out, she could expediently address many unfortunate scenarios without having to deliver again and again the time-consuming, awkward clarifications face-to-face. *My Calling (Card) #2*, 1986, for instance, opens with: "Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark."

Justin Vivian Bond's much lengthier—and, I must say, extremely patient—explanation regarding the contours of how to approach an ostensibly slippery identity position appears on Justinbond.com, under the section tagged "Bio" and otherwise devoted to detailing the performer's multifaceted, now two-decades-long career. "This is an essay to inform you on the most sensitive, respectful ways to approach the continuing evolution of your friend, neighbor, family member, collaborator or subject, Mx Justin Vivian Bond as I begin a new era in

my life's adventures," it begins. Laying out key terms ("prefix: mx; pronoun: V; gender: trans or T; full name: Mx Justin Vivian Bond"), the online tract is meant to keep those writing on Bond's work from tripping up on V's personhood (as in a recent, lamentable, profile in *New York* magazine). "In the future," V writes, "if I see or hear the words he or she, her or him, hers or his, in reference to me, I will take it either as a personal insult, a weak mind (easily forgivable), or (worst case scenario) sloppy journalism."

I discuss this at length here because pronouns—and what they signify, cover up, or disallow—have ramifications that go well beyond flubbed niceties. Turning normative assumptions on their head has been a consistent element of Bond's career, from V's rise to downtown fame as Kiki DuRane, one half of the legendary duo Kiki & Herb, to V's later reinventions as solo cabaret singer, entertainer, and Radical Faerie. Yet in spite of these transformations, Bond has remained consistent in one important respect: Even as a child V had no confusion about V's trans position—though it continually inspired all manner of confusion about and around V.

"The Fall of the House of Whimsy," Bond's exhibition at Participant Inc., coincided with the loss of V's residence—a loft in the East Village surrendered to a swell of gentrification—and included all manner of personal effects transplanted from that space. The artist let such objects—furniture, makeup, clothing, books—comprise much of the exhibition, which scarcely demarcated the difference, or distance, to be had between life and work. Yet while so many of Bond's possessions were on view in the gallery, there was nothing of the nostalgic and little in the way of melancholy. This is not to say there was any lack of affect or inattention to pleasure, drama, or despair, all of which lingered like a musky scent. Rather, as with so much of V's work past and present, one could find a delicate—and blunt—attention to context: V cannot help but offer a kind of litmus test for any previously taken-for-granted environment.

The uprooting of Bond's domestic life offered an excuse for its details to circulate within a gallery structure, repurposed and repackaged. V's sweet watercolors of boys, trans men, and flowers, a wonderfully tawdry bronze decanter (codedigned with Jelena Behrend), and myriad tchotchkes constellated to comprise a spare theater set, activated in various ways during the run of the show. In addition to these newly homeless accoutrements, there was a limited-edition LP, *Dendrophile*, as well as *Tango*, the artist's recently penned memoir, and a music video by the photographers ioulex for a song by Bond and the late Essex Hemphill, which played on auto-repeat. Bond is, then, romantic and pragmatic, producing V's identity again and again, both to be consumed and as a protest against it.

