

A Considerable Town

THE VAGINA DIALOGUES

TASCHEN CLOSES OUT ITS "BIG BOOK" SERIES
WITH A CELEBRATION OF THE HOLE TRUTH

BY DAVID COTNER

There are more pet names for the vagina than for any other part of the female anatomy. True, you've got your various badonks and cahueguas — but inversely proportionate to the insecurity women have about their vaginas is the number of nice names by which they refer to them when no one else is around. They more than outnumber the coarse and unkind words with which they're otherwise identified. No small feat, that.

At La Luz de Jesus in Hollywood, they're celebrating that plethora of perceptions with a launch for the latest Taschen volume, *The Big Book of Pussy*, edited by noted smut merchant Dian Hanson. It's a pink and meaty volume of almost 400 pages devoted to the finer points of this unnecessarily mystifying aspect of the feminine, heavy enough to send gangsters to the bottom of the sea were it chained to their nethers.

Sprinkled in amongst the 111 years of images of women nude as the news, and just as pleasantly delivered, are interviews with those special women whose pussies are somewhat more notorious than average. There's Vanessa Del Rio, the pornographic film star whose steroid injections gave her the superpower of a famously engorged clitoris; Flower Tucci, advocate of the female ejaculate; and Buck Angel, born

and raised as a boy but flaunting lady parts underneath it all.

The book sells briskly as a steady stream of well-wishers drops in to have books signed by adult-film star Nicki Hunter and the regal, Champagne-sipping Hanson. Hanson edited such magazines as *Juggs* and *Leg Show* from 1987 through 2000 for the late publishing visionary George W. Mavety, transforming the sloppy and the paunchy into the womanly and the carnal. *New York* magazine called her "the most cerebral pornographer in America" and "the Tina Brown of pornography." She's

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been editing books for Taschen in L.A. for the last decade.

The "Big" series of photographic meditations on body parts, launched in 2006 with *The Big Book of Breasts*, draws to a close with *The Big Book of Pussy*. Sensationalism and the specter of leering journalism aside, it's an exceptionally well-written and insightful book, shot through with Hanson's decades of experience with the public image of the pussy. Simultaneously wise and mischievous, she's a cultural touchstone when it comes to the presentation of body image, a time capsule of how we lately perceive this aspect of the female body.

One of the most striking series of photographs in the book pairs smiling female faces with images of pussies. Assuming that one naturally informs the other as they sit side by side on the page is understandable. Yet how can anyone know which vagina truly belongs with which face?

Some women look at men and wonder what their cocks look like. It's different with vaginas. Hanson asserts, "There's no way to generalize about people, but I think there are more men who look at women and wonder what their breasts look like, what their asses look like — and whatever that pussy looks like, they're ready to take it as it is."

Perhaps the most interesting thing, discussed in hushed tones among those paging through *The Big Book of Pussy* tonight, is the rise and fall and eventual rise again of pubic hair. It's the nearest thing approaching small talk, a unifying conversational titter that passes between those flipping through the book as they witness pubic hair materialize and vanish over the years, like a hillside during fire season.

"I think that most women think that it's an unappealing part of their bodies," Hanson says. "You know that all this shaving, it seems, is spearheaded by women. We're led to believe that men look at porn and make the women in their lives shave their pussies so they'll look like underage girls and/or porn stars.

"I've heard people say this over and over, but then when you talk to men, a large percentage of men say, 'Well, I'd like to see a little hair — because otherwise it looks underage!'" What about women? "They'll say, 'I feel cleaner with it shaved.' For the women, it's about hygiene — it's about something that's less graphic."

Even pussy in book form is treated like a shared secret, both acknowledged and withheld, somehow, in the same thought. And yet books are largely solitary experiences — it takes an event like this, in which there is a communal perception of pussy, to achieve vaginal consciousness.

Hanson, a staunch believer in both the pornographic and the philosophical, swears, "Most women have never seen their pussies. There's no way a woman can see her pussy without a mirror. Women, with their lower levels of testosterone, are less aware of their sexuality, their urges. And I've talked to plenty of women and asked, 'Have you looked at yourself in a mirror?' and they say, 'What?! No! I'm not curious — I don't want to look at that!'"

The overall attitude toward pussy — from the people happily leaving the launch party with their books, to my housemate who covered it up when he saw it on the kitchen counter (apparently the *Weekly* is great in this regard) — is like that old joke about understanding multidimensional thinking: Find a place you can call your own — and then stay as far away from it as possible.

