

Invisible Men: The Risks and Pleasures of Self-Portrayal in the Work of
Contemporary American Male Artists

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Jane Blocker, Adviser

May 2014

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Acknowledgements

To the Department of Art History at the University of Minnesota, I owe more thanks than I could ever adequately express. The mentorship and camaraderie I experienced with this cohort were invaluable constants over the often-tumultuous years it took to complete this dissertation. My department concretized their faith in this project by facilitating my travels to conduct critical research. In this program, I both learned how to teach and was, at critical junctures, mercifully freed from teaching responsibilities in order to complete necessary work on this dissertation. Amongst the remarkable faculty with whom I have had the pleasure to work with in this department, I am especially grateful to Steven Ostrow for his generosity, Michael Gaudio for his sagacity, Rick Asher for his patience and unwavering kindness, and to my adviser, Jane Blocker, for everything I am. Over my time in the department, I never ceased to marvel at my privilege in being surrounded by a graduate student cohort so fiercely intelligent whose company I still enjoyed so much. I shared with my peers in the graduate program innumerable drafts of this dissertation, and in exchange had the sheer pleasure of reading theirs. I am particularly grateful to have completed this process in the company of Anna Chisholm; sometimes first impressions are indeed correct.

The University of Minnesota granted to me in 2010 the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, liberating me to pursue the writing of this dissertation for an entire year. Katie Levin of the Center for Writing listened sympathetically to my feelings of fellowship guilt and provided critical feedback on early drafts.

The staff of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction encouraged me in the earliest stages of my dissertation research with their kind and commodious hospitality. For uncountable placid hours spent in the Walker Art Center archives, I owe deepest thanks to Jill Vuchetich, who allowed me all the time I needed. Patrick Scully and Margaret Patridge both lent me their time and recollections during the researching of my second chapter; Mag Patridge lent me more in so generously granting me access to her personal collection documenting the Athey controversy in Minneapolis. I extend my gratitude also to Beau Rutland at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and to Lauren Hinkson at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum for furnishing me with materials critical to the completion of my third chapter.

I have in writing this dissertation enjoyed the exceptional privilege of communicating directly with each of the three living artists that constitute the core of my inquiry. I am grateful to Glenn Ligon for his giving me the benefit of his conversation and for granting through his studio the permissions to reproduce his work in an earlier article that contributed to this dissertation. I spent a long, challenging, and glorious weekend in 2009 in the company of Ron Athey, Jennifer Doyle, and a group of astonishing artists for the performance workshop "You Belong to Me." I am thankful for the wisdom I absorbed in Doyle's and Athey's company, and for the gentle prodding Athey provided in getting me to perform again. To Kenneth Anger, who ignored resolutely every question about his work that I sent to him by post, but delighted me with hand-collaged letters savaging contemporary pop culture cognoscenti, I lift the brightest torch.

For Jane, who gave me my voice, and for my mother and father, who gave everything.

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In Memoriam

KENNETH ANGER

FILM MAKER

(1947-1967)

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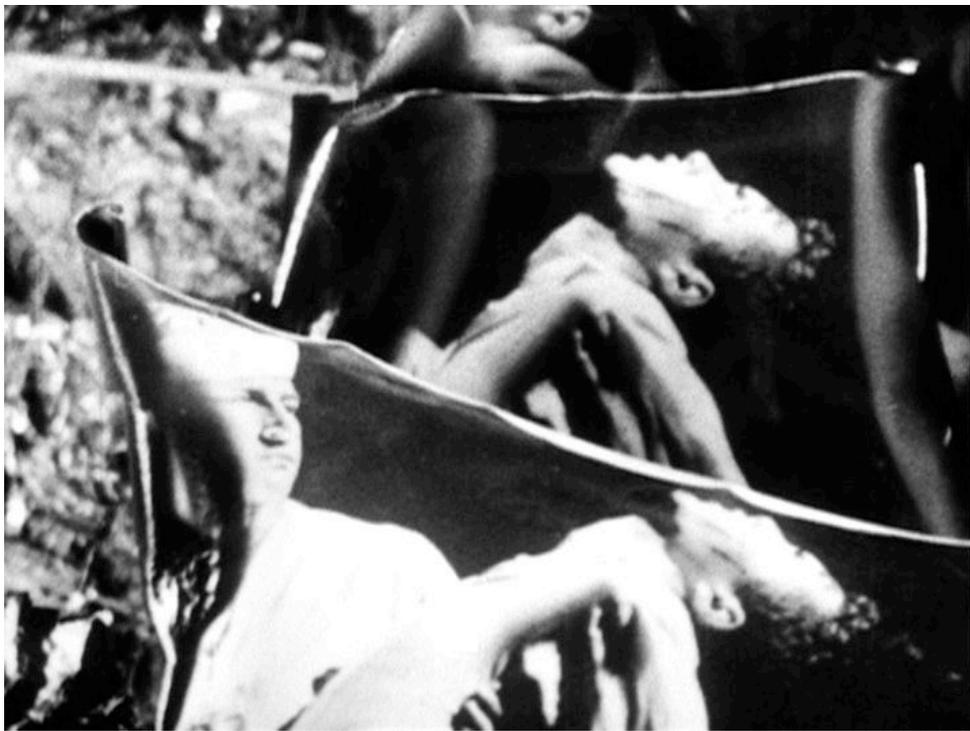


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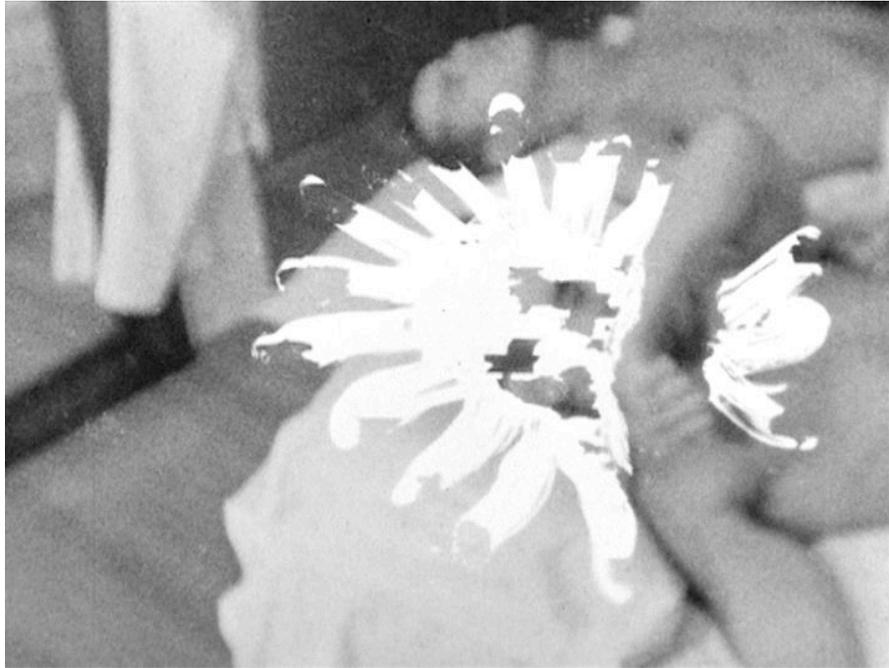


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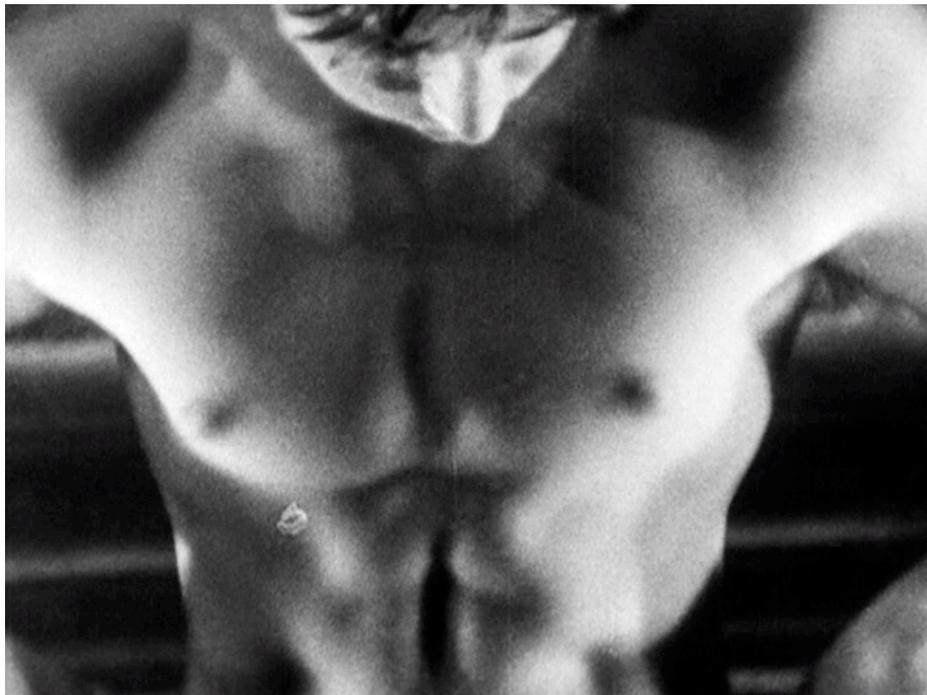


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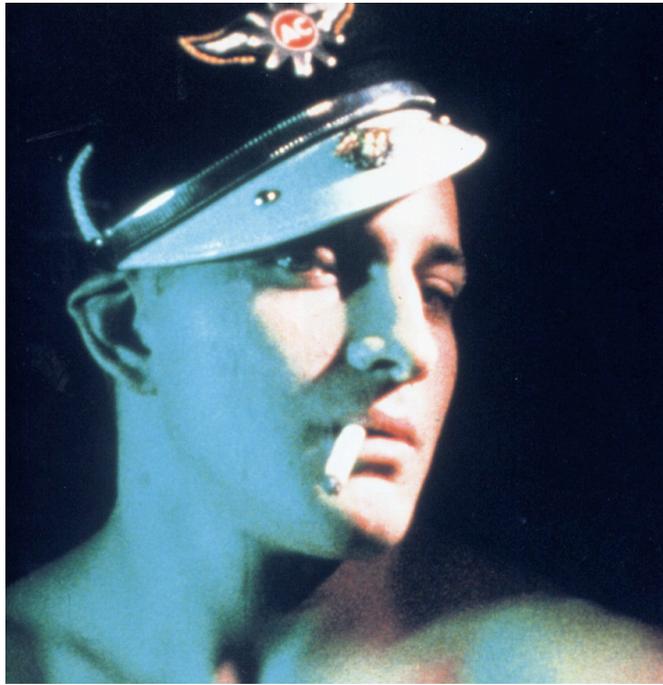


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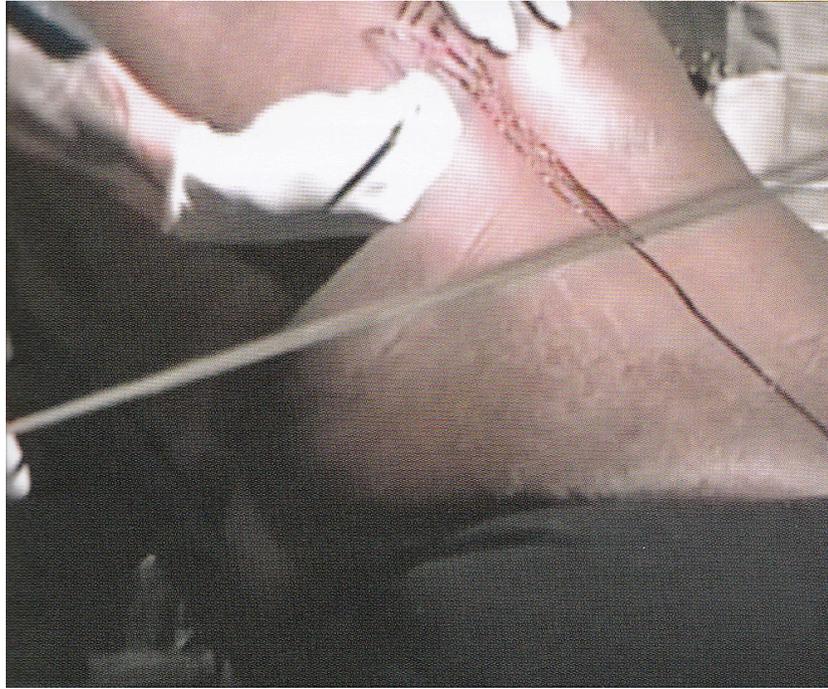


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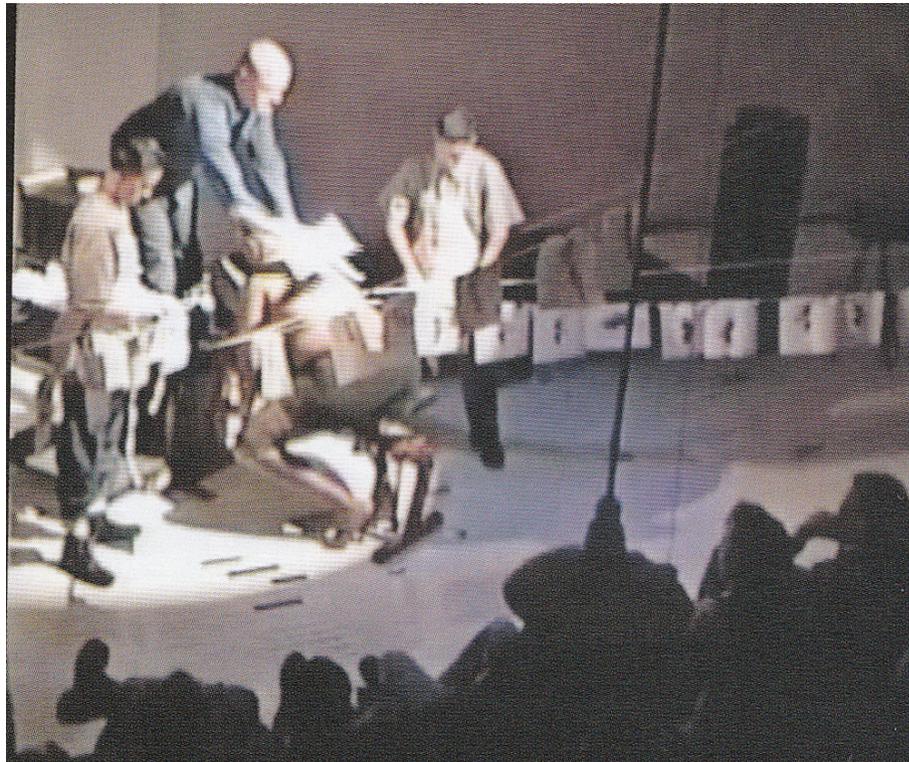


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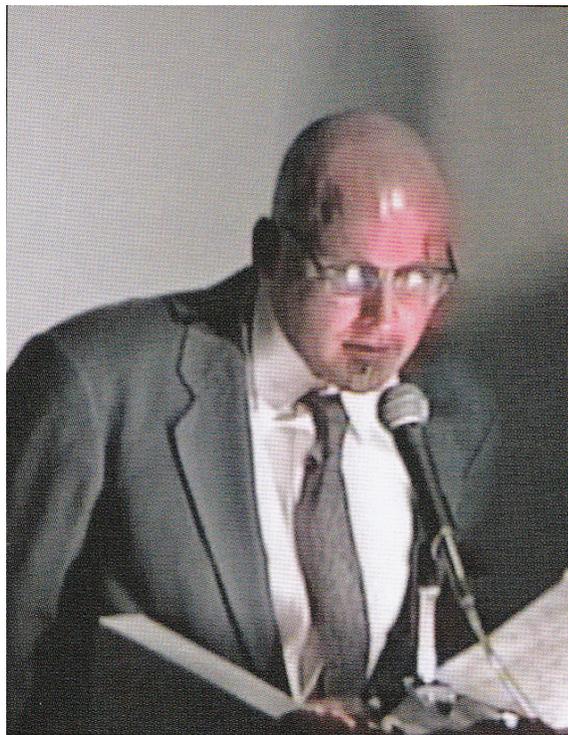


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I am an invisible man.
No, I am not a spook,
like those who haunt
ed Edgar Allan Poe,
nor am I one of your
Hollywood movie ecto-
plasmic. I am a man of
substance, of flesh and
bone, fiber and liquids
-- and I might even be
said to possess a mind.
I am invisible; under-
stand simply because
people refuse to see me.
Like the bodiless heads
you see sometimes in
churches and shows, it is
as though I have been
slandered by millions
of heartless people.
I am invisible, you see,
because my skin
has turned black like
the soot that hangs in
the air.

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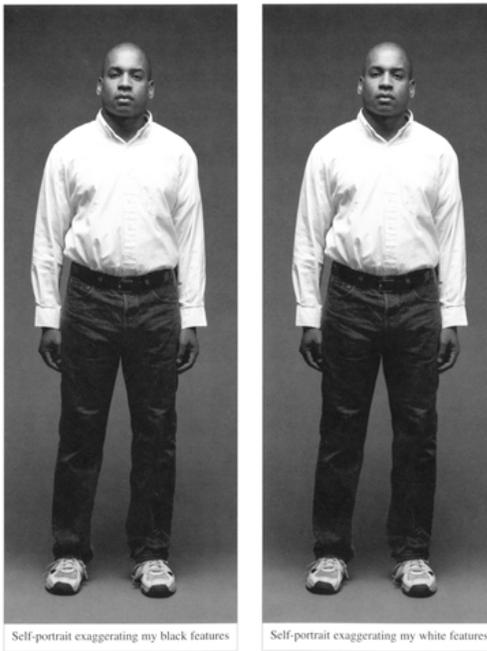


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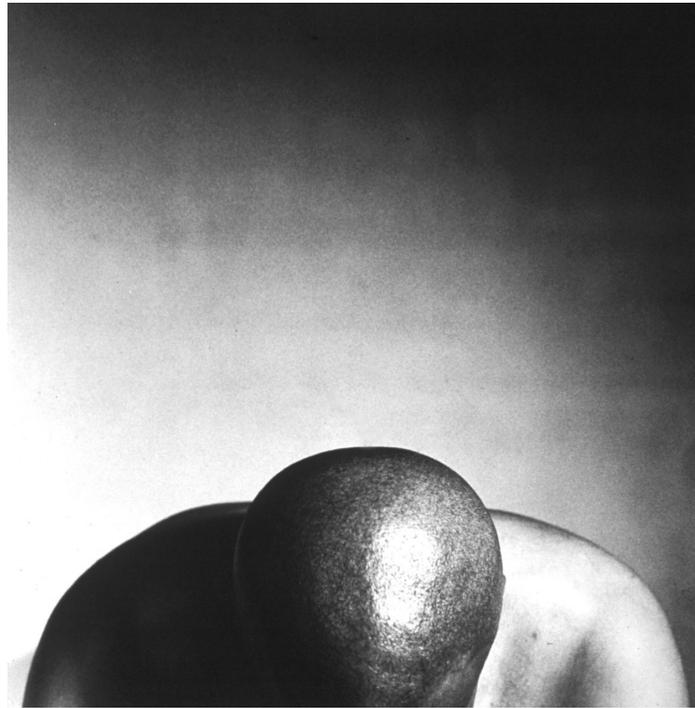
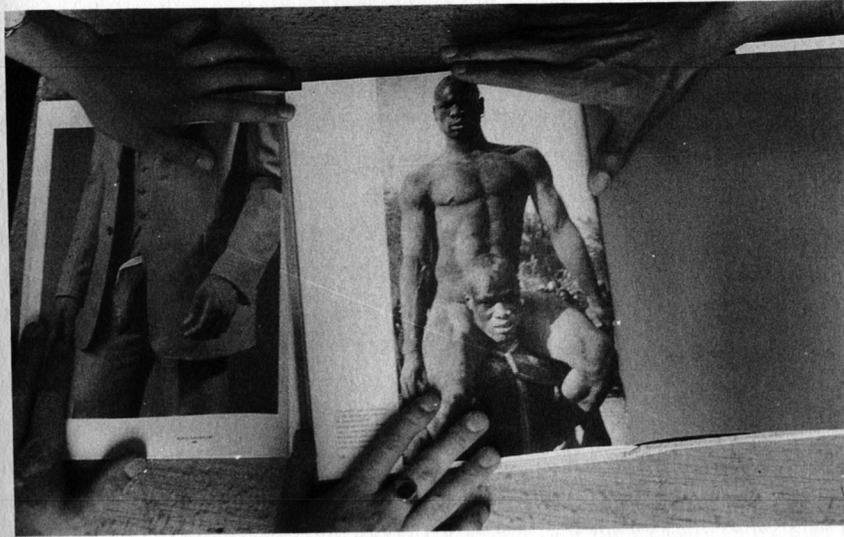


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Montage: Kobena Mercer/Simon Watney.

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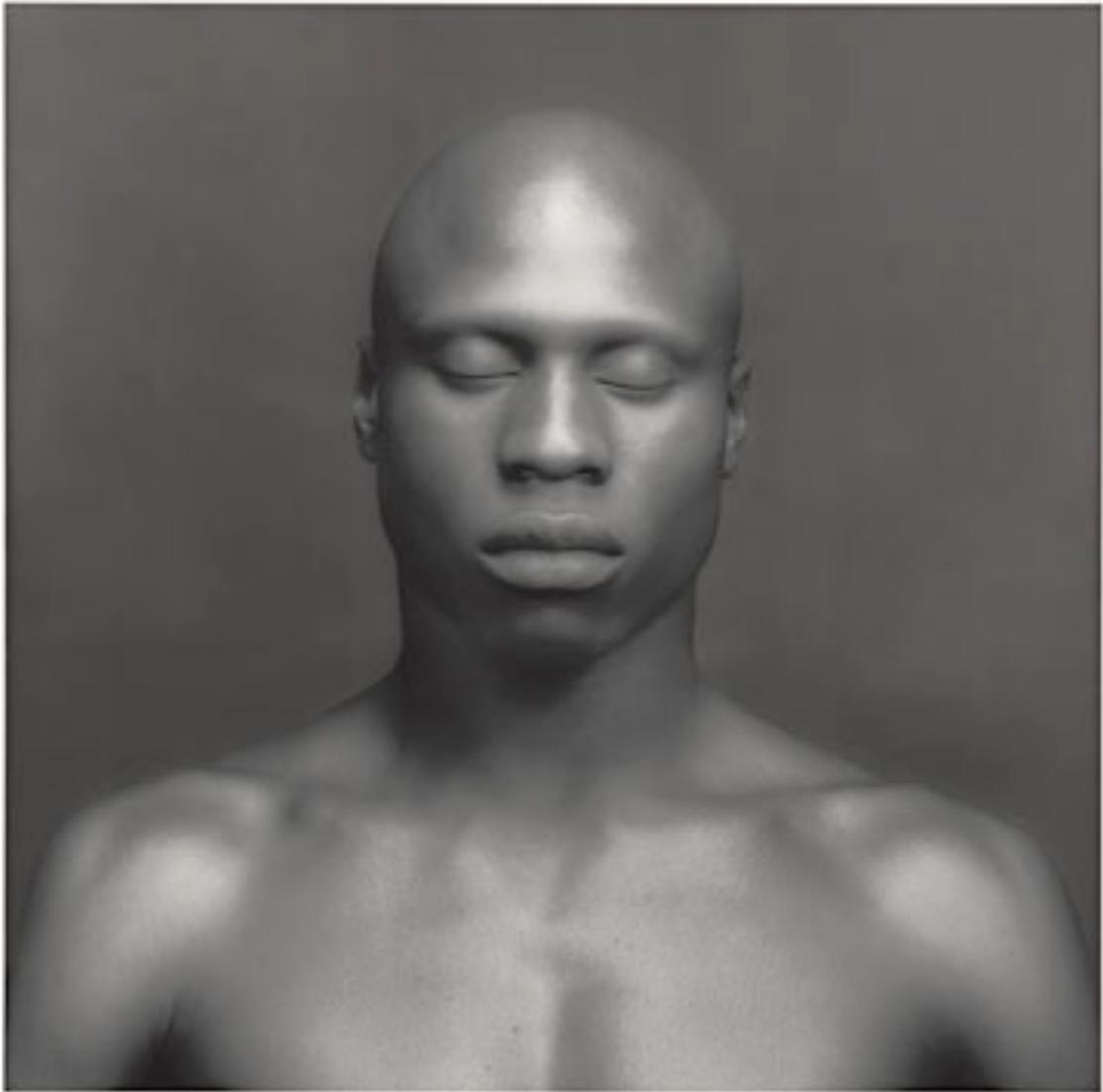


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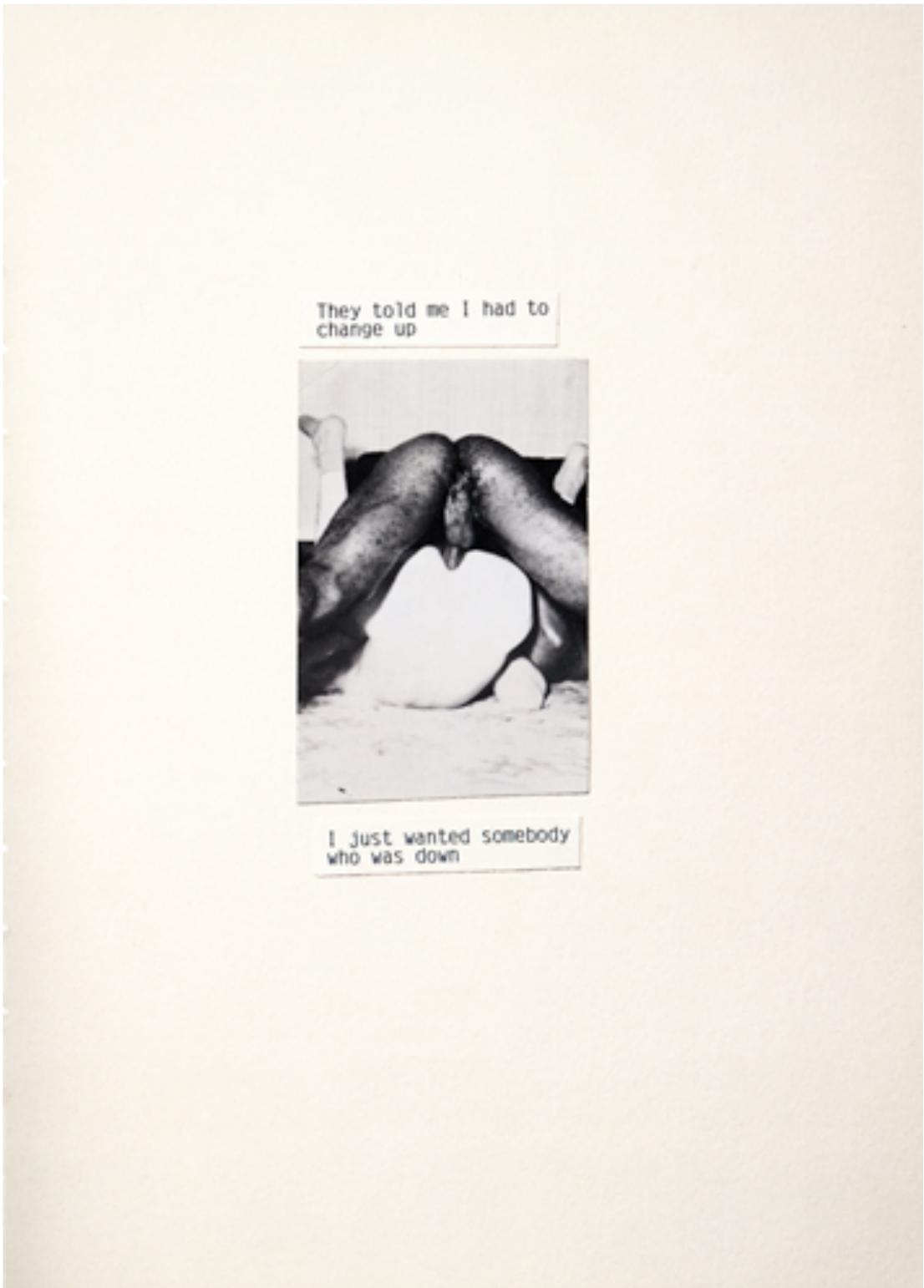


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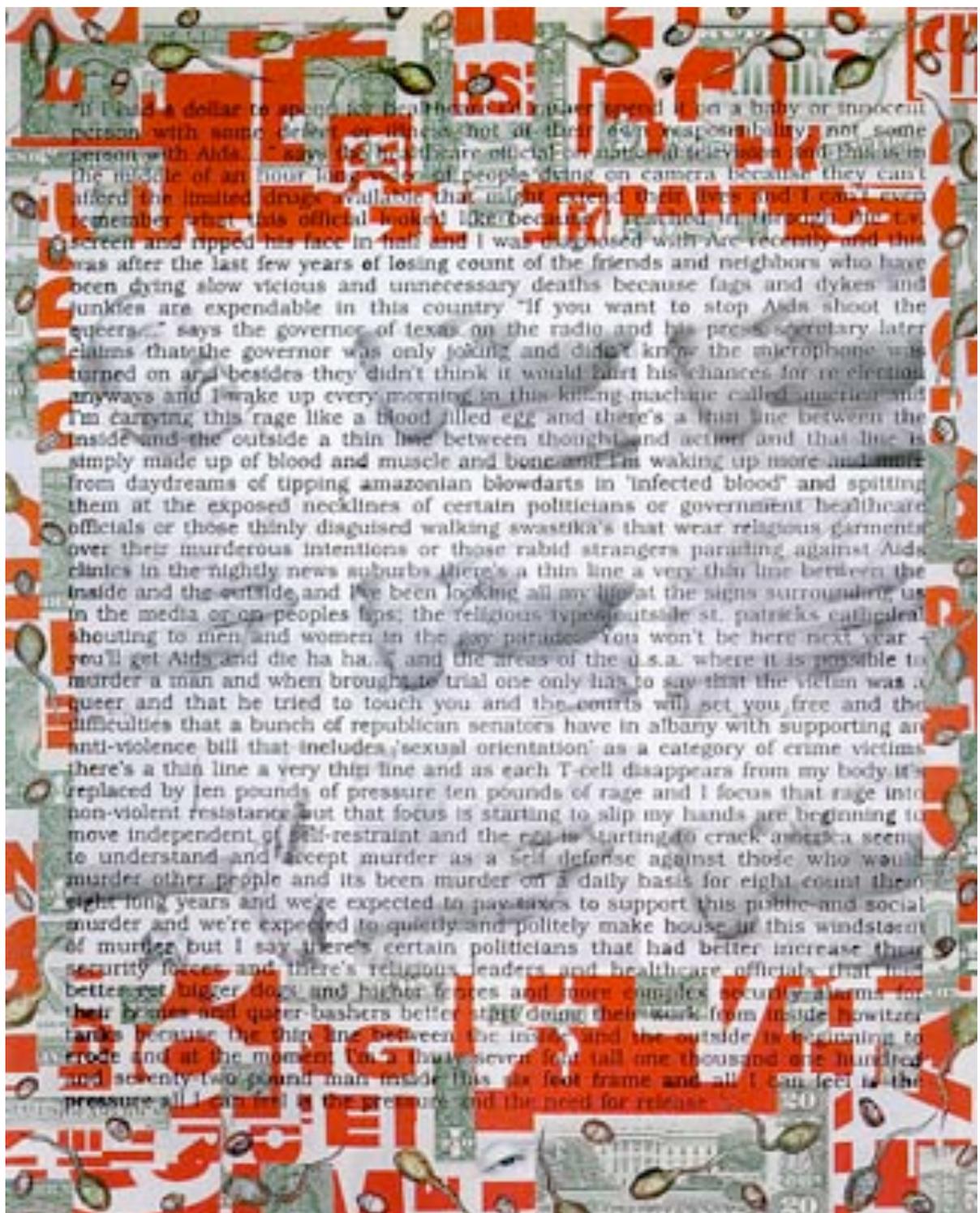


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Figure 57: Protestors with David Wojnarowicz masks at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C., December 2010

Introduction

A man is painting a picture, by the grey light of a fading autumn day, in the middle of a field. His brow furrowed in concentration, he hunches over the crystalline surface onto which he pours unctuous strands of glossy black paint. A man is splayed on his back beneath the painter, pointing a whirring movie camera upwards to capture the skeins of paint that sluice over the camera's eye, which is protected by the transparent veil of a pane of glass that substitutes for the painter's canvas. The filmmaker shifts and wiggles out from beneath the spider web of pigment suspended above him. The light is gone, he declares; the painting is over.

The painter silently reenters his home, ignoring the greetings of the guests that have converged there. With his painting rag, he pulls the cork from a tall brown bottle. He hoists the tumbler of amber liquid in a toast to the filmmaker: "First drink I've had in two years." He downs three pours in quick succession, and then turns on the man for whom he performed the dance that has so upset him; stumbling into the filmmaker's side, he repeats, snarling, in his ear: "I'm not the phony, you're the phony." The assembled guests, sensing trouble as they gather around the table for an elaborate meal, raise a hasty toast to their hostess, the painter's wife. Bellowing like a wounded animal, the painter overturns the table, shattering china into shards and sending Scotch and gravy pooling over the dining room floor.

The painter at the center of this legendary anecdote is, of course, the American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock. By the time of this notorious tantrum in November of 1951¹, Pollock had established himself in the popular imagination as the

face of American modernism—a position of perhaps dubious power, as practitioners and promoters of the New York School had yet to establish definitively the city as a global center of artistic production, and Americans themselves received their countrymen’s abstractions with grudging suspicion.² That Pollock would, by the time of his death in 1956, command a level of attention (however dubiously offered) beyond that accorded to any other of his American artist peers is in enormous part due to his collaborations with the camera-wielding object of his explosive rage, the German-American photographer Hans Namuth. The painter and the photographer together produced two short films and hundreds of still images documenting the “drip technique” that would consequently become synonymous with Pollock’s name between their introduction in the summer of 1950 and the first publication of a handful of these images in the Cincinnati arts journal *Portfolio* in 1951.³ (Figure 1)

If the famous *Life* magazine feature of August 8, 1949 that introduced lay audiences to Pollock’s painting had anticipated their distrustful responses (as indicated in the feature’s hedging subtitle, “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”), Namuth’s images of the artist at work appeared poised to contradict any doubts the viewer may entertain about the level of skill and ingenuity required to produce a Pollock. The photographs, in the romantic estimation of the Pollock scholar Francis V. O’Connor, achieved nothing less than a wholesale public reimagining of Pollock’s “seriously misunderstood painting technique,” establishing instead the artist as at once consciously engaged in a herculean struggle “against relentless, self-imposed limits,” and immersed in the primal thrall of the “mandalic dance” by which he executed his works.⁴

This paradox at the core of the Pollock mythos—the artist at once inspired and intentional, a manifestation (in the artist’s own words) of “nature,”⁵ but also the disciplinary force that converts it into culture—may have, in O’Connor’s essay and countless other treatments like it, been intended for the projected, philistine layman who presumably so “misunderstood” Pollock. Namuth’s images of the artist, however, found their most devoted audiences amongst the already faithful ranks of influential American art critics; as the critic Barbara Rose reminds us, Harold Rosenberg in “The American Action Painters” (1952) purports to discuss Pollock’s paintings while really describing Namuth’s photographs of them, beguiled by the body of the painter in motion that the images afford.⁶ The cultural currency of Namuth’s images of Pollock appreciated significantly in the later decades of the 20th century, notes the critic Sarah Boxer, first with a 1977 essay by Jean Clay hailing Namuth, by virtue of the mimetic way in which his camerawork hovered above the paintings, approximating Pollock’s physical process, as an “Art Critic” in his own right. Rosalind Krauss, Boxer reminds us, would take this assertion still further in writing that Namuth, in this identificatory methodology, possessed an understanding of Pollock’s work that exceeded that of his most eminent critic and backer, Clement Greenberg.⁷

Given the enriching power that scholars ascribe to the visual products of Pollock’s and Namuth’s symbiosis, it is especially striking that popular reiterations of the Pollock myth identify so ubiquitously Namuth’s collaborations with Pollock as the beginning of the painter’s precipitous decline. In Pollock biographies, Namuth is a vampire whose camera sucks away the vitality of the painter and his process;⁸ his demands that Pollock

stage and re-stage the nominally spontaneous gestures of action painting to accommodate the patchwork methodology of filmmaking imbue the artist with doubts about the very nature of his endeavors. The gaze of Namuth's movie camera sets him to unraveling: his painting suffers and degrades. He sinks into his alcoholism, and careens finally out of control and to his death (and taking a woman, Edith Metzger, often obscured in recitations of this familiar tragic narrative, to hers).

What I have described here is not, to be precise, the events that unfold in Namuth's film, but the narrative of Pollock's life and death as rehearsed by Ed Harris in *Pollock*, the Hollywood movie in which he directed himself as the titular character in 2000. It is with Harris' imagining of Pollock's fabled breakdown under the scrutiny of Namuth's camera that I begin this dissertation, and not simply because in a film filled with reenactments of Pollock's most storied bouts of misbehavior, this pivotal scene portends the most calamitous turns in the narrative. I wish to ask why Harris, like so many Pollock hagiographers before him, stages (ironically, as a dramatic performance and through the medium of film) the spectacular rupture of the last great modernist hero as occurring when the ostensibly unmediated expression of the painting process is conscripted into the patterns of rehearsed artifice demanded by the camera. Why does this man, who occupies such an indomitable place in the story of American ascendance in the arts, crumble so completely when his body and his work are observed, captured, translated, into the work of another man?

A chief object of this dissertation is to demonstrate that there exists in American culture a resounding imperative to render masculine gender performance as ruinous when

and where it becomes obvious *as* performance—in Judith Butler’s famous formation, as a rehearsing of stylized acts that gain their cultural legibility through repetition.⁹ If I here join the chorus of academic voices that have over the past quarter century made use of Butler’s compelling and eloquent dismantling of the binary of “sex” and “gender,” in which she maintains that the former is not defined by “natural,” inborn characteristics, and the latter by behavioral rituals performed in the service of the culture that imposed them, I do so in order to propose that the application of her theories in American culture has been uneven. As I go on to show in this Introduction, “gender” in academic parlance as well as casual conversation remains, too often, a synonym for “women,” and Butler’s proposal that gender exists only as a performative of socially-recognized signifiers is thus problematically made to refer only to the very sex that for centuries in the West has been associated with artifice, masquerade, and the deviousness that is presumed to drive these behaviors.

Men, in this schema, retain the quality of universality long presumed as their birthright. Across a vast swath of American socio-political discourses, this notion has proven deeply entrenched, in spite of the watershed changes in labor practices, social formations, and regimes of representation¹⁰ that radically restructured the roles of men in post-World War II America. For as Susan Faludi asserts in *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), feminist thinkers who contribute to the protracted conversation on the “crisis” of American masculinity and the antifeminist reactionaries who read this crisis as the direst symptom of the enfranchisement of the American woman agree at least on one point: that men, as the engineers of their own fate, need simply to take charge of

their circumstances in order to produce a more ideal set of social formations.¹¹ Against conservative theses that present the American man as a figure gutted and emptied by the demands of feminism, Faludi compels her readers to shift from a monocular focus on the mythic emasculated Everyman to focus instead on the American man as a subject among many in a rapidly shifting social landscape. American masculinity, she proposes, is not an ideal corrupted, but rather a promise reneged upon, a deal broken.

World War II and its booming economic aftermath in the U.S., Faludi argues, empowered American men to provide for themselves and their families what their fathers, mired in the Great Depression, had been unable to provide: the security of government-subsidized housing and a steady job (related directly or tangentially to the burgeoning defense industry).¹² These were the remunerations distributed through the G.I. Bill for service in the conflict through which, in Faludi's words, the United States gained "a sense of itself as a *masculine* nation," via the collaborative efforts of an armed forces operating upon a model of mentorship in which seasoned officers substituted for, and perhaps supplanted, the junior soldiers' actual, economically neutered fathers.¹³ The object of Faludi's treatise, however, are the myriad ways in which this generation's sons and grandsons were unable to cash the same checks issued to their fathers. The Baby Boom generation battled the spectral enemy of Communism with few clear victories and wrenching consequences; the grim march of globalization dismantled the infrastructure of high-paying industrial jobs that had in the post-war boom seemed so secure; and the demands for social parity from women, people of color, and others who stood to lose more than they did to gain from a return to the prewar social order signaled a broader

desire for expanded abilities to provide for oneself rather than a willingness to rely on the beneficence of paternalistic providers.¹⁴

American men who came of age in the postwar years, Faludi avers, have been swindled through a double deception that posits control as the single tenable form of masculine expression while closing off and constricting economic avenues to self-sufficiency and social functionality. In Faludi's formula, a man operating in the "old model of masculinity" (read: pre-and immediately post-war) gained a sense of self-worth through his admission into and mentorship within social, political, religious, and militaristic spheres.¹⁵ However, Faludi warns, the rewards once promised to adherents of this system--good blue-collar jobs that pay decent wages, male social systems that reward loyalty and mutual support, a family in which (white) women are as dependent on the financial support of a man as are children—are largely gone. What remains, she argues, is a masculine veneer, a model of manhood styled in the familiar fashions of American masculinity—dominance, sureness, heedlessness—but unsupported by substantive action. American men in our contemporary "ornamental culture," Faludi claims, define their masculinity through consumer choices, as surely as postwar American women in affluent suburbs defined their femininity by the same means. Their purported role models in this commercial economy, whom Faludi identifies as figures ranging from action heroes to underwear models to Viagra-schilling politicians, teach that "masculinity is something to drape over the body [...] that manhood is displayed, not demonstrated."¹⁶

While acknowledging the real and serious effects of the broad disenfranchisement of working-class American men in an era of globalism and outsourcing to which the bulk

of Faludi's expansive book is dedicated, I wish to challenge the limitations of the historical model she proposes, in which superficial, consumerist masculine posturing replaces the dignity of meaningful labor amongst brotherly ranks. This is not to say that Faludi is unaware of the ways in which the men of the Greatest Generation, too, posed for the camera; the author in her first chapter focuses intensively on the ideological battle over the paradigmatic role of the American man in the "American century." She stakes at opposite poles in this battle Henry Luce, the publishing magnate who in 1941 so brashly claimed the twentieth century as the United States' to levy to its military and industrial advantage on the global stage, and Henry Wallace, the agrarian Vice President who conceptualized the country's future in terms of expanded and equitable economic opportunity and stewardship on a national and global scale.¹⁷

In posing this dichotomy of two competing formulations of American masculinity, Faludi asserts that the former ultimately triumphed in the American imagination. However, the very necessity of pleading the case for a masculine paradigm (and Faludi in her chapter takes note of a wealth of popular images, articles, and films that did exactly that during and immediately after World War II) strongly suggests that the periods encompassing and following the war are not defined by masculinities that are "demonstrated" self-reflexively rather than "displayed" cosmetically. Rather, I propose that our contemporary, murky discourses of the crises of American masculinity first condensed in the immediate postwar period because it is at this point that the poses of American masculinity become irrevocably intelligible as such. The question we have

been belaboring is not why and at what point the role of the American man lost its substance, but how much of that substance was style to begin with.

From the competing cultural needs to reassert masculinity as elemental and to examine critically masculine performativity—skirmishes frequently played out on the fields of visual culture—the American male artist in the postwar period emerges as a figure of particular interest. For in addition to shouldering the obligatory burden of both representing and defining the zeitgeist of his particular era, the postwar American male artist would find himself never again able to retreat fully behind the canvas. After Namuth got his hands on Pollock, the public would remain ever-desirous of a glimpse of the man at work, not the least because the products of an artist’s labor are granted provisional, and often purely nominal status as, “work.”

Pollock, as Ann Eden Gibson argues in her chapter-length treatment of “The Abstract Expressionist Hero” in her *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997), struggled to establish himself as an artist working in what was at the time the most radically anti-representational aesthetic in the history of art¹⁸ in a country that harbored outright hostilities towards modernism and the brand of European elitism it was believed to represent. If the establishment of art production as patriotic labor inaugurated by the Works Project Administration in the 1930s served to slacken somewhat rigid cultural associations between the artistic pursuits and the “sissies” presumed, at least since the public trials of Oscar Wilde,¹⁹ to pursue them, this approval was apparently based on the expectation of legible, figurative works exulting scenes of Americana.²⁰ For Pollock and other American artists of his ilk, to produce abstract works that in no obvious way

functioned as a form of civic and nationalistic boosterism was to risk association with the foreign values associated with modern art: willful obscurity, anti-utilitarianism, and, worst of all, effeminacy.²¹

Pollock's perception of this risk, argues Gibson, informed the careful cultivation (on Pollock's part and probably through the guidance of his media-savvy spouse, the artist Lee Krasner) of the painter's rugged, workaday persona: his silence, his cigarettes, his insouciance.²² This self-conscious refashioning of "the artist" as an individualistic American hero on par with that of the cowboy that Pollock supposedly once was took place under the aegis of the New Critical insistence that the artist's identity factored not at all into critical assessments of his work. The emerging myth of the masculine American artist rebel thus depended crucially on the effacement of its own processes of mythologizing.²³

If we are to follow the logic of narratives like Harris' to their logical ends, we may conclude that Pollock broke when the choreography of this act proved too obvious even to him. A chief irritant in the process of filming the 1951 exposé of his painting process came allegedly in the form of Namuth's requiring Pollock repeatedly to remove and put back on his work boots for the camera.²⁴ The resulting scene in the finished film lingers on the sight of Pollock's paint-splattered footwear—a style of dress that would suit just as well a welder or a construction worker—and serves as a pedantic visual statement establishing Pollock as a blue-collar tough rather than a dabbler of watercolors. (Figure 2) Pollock's booted feet are in the film granted a place of importance nearly equal the paintings alongside which they shuffle, accumulating the drips of pigment that exceed

the boundaries of the canvas. As Namuth's film and the riotous events that allegedly followed it show, this veneer of unimpeachable masculinity was earned through donning a costume and performing a dance.

After his death, Pollock's performativity exceeded his painting as the object of popular and academic discourse on the artist. In his 1958 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Allan Kaprow famously claims Pollock as the spirit infusing the emerging brand of performance art, Happenings. Pollock's painterly sensibilities, which Kaprow even alleges to be inferior to those of contemporaries such as Robert Motherwell or Willem de Koonig, are not, he argues, the salient feature of his work; rather, Pollock's painting is revolutionary for the way in which it anticipates and entangles the spectator.²⁵ "[T]o grasp a Pollock properly," Kaprow proposes, we must be "constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint [...] and submission to the objective markings."²⁶

The marks of a Pollock painting, Kaprow claims, lead us inexorably to the body that produced them; too, Pollock's mural-scale compositions in Kaprow's discourse signal as a self-conscious recognition of the spectator which such works in their scale aim to envelop.²⁷ The lack of regard for the boundaries of the composition which are so lionized in the Pollock mythology (not the least through Namuth's insistent focus on the skeins of paint spilling onto the toes of Pollock's boots) to Kaprow suggests that whereas in "an older work" the edge of the canvas signaled the end of "the world of the artist" and thus its separation from "the world of the spectator and 'reality,'" in Pollock's painting a new, promiscuous proximity between the body of the artist and that of the spectator is

established.²⁸ This claim informs the ultimate imperative of Kaprow's article: after Pollock, he commands, the contemporary artist must embrace this new adjacency of art and life, abandon the canvas, and move out into "the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street."²⁹

There is probably no way to know for certain if Kaprow understood the underlying significance of the geographic location which, in this statement, he selects as an example of a terrain on which a new aesthetics of bodies in relation—art maker and art spectator—might be forged. Although he was most likely making a reference to the famous Broadway theatre district, by 1958, Forty-second Street was also a well-established center of gay male cruising culture, a spot that from the 1920s and well into the 1980s functioned as a hub of male prostitution as well as non-reimbursed sexual transactions between men, which were initiated or consummated in the bars, theaters, and the streets around Times Square.³⁰ If Kaprow indeed selected at random Forty-second Street as a place where the lines between the art and life could potentially be blurred, the enormity of this coincidence cannot be understated: Kaprow chose a spot in which men would gather to see, and be seen by, other men, a relay of visual exchanges that bore the potential for physical ones. The intervening object of desire that under other circumstances serves as a mediating point in this relay—the work of art—has already been done away with here, well ahead of Kaprow's call for its removal.

I believe, however, that Kaprow in this proposal is ignorant (willfully or genuinely) of the context of the location he names. I say so because, in the grand tradition

of the artist's manifesto, Kaprow in his call to activate the body as an object of art in real, public space employs the universalizing "we," in all its effacing power, thereby neglecting the inescapable fact that not all bodies experience public space in the same ways. If, as Jane Blocker persuasively argues in *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (2004), the body was in various anti-materialist art practices of the 1960s and 70s substituted for the work of art in ways presumed to be aesthetically revolutionary and anti-capitalist,³¹ this assumption is complicated considerably when one acknowledges that certain bodies within the social are presumed, more or less perpetually, to be for sale. This is emphatically true of the open-air meat market that Kaprow identifies, peculiarly, as the topography of a new social dynamics of the gaze.

This is true, as well, of the social spaces through which Kaprow's female contemporaries were obliged to travel, spaces that American women artists during the 1960s and 70s, under the nebulous aegis of what would eventually be known as the feminist art movement, would collapse with the imagistic space of their works; the long-term reverberations of these works within the culture at large have proved enormously important. In *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (2006), Jayne Wark suggests that a critical difference between Kaprow's professed objectives in developing a performance art practice and those developed by certain American women contemporaries with explicitly feminist aims amounted essentially to differences in these parties' respective positions in relation to gendered labor practices. Wark relates the story of a confrontation that occurred between Kaprow and the artist Faith Wilding, then a student in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of

Arts, where Kaprow was an instructor. Wilding's challenge aimed at nothing less than the very ethos of Kaprow's performance work, in which, he averred, even as simple a gesture as sweeping the floor could be art. Such a statement, Wilding argued, ignored completely the feelings and history of the full half of the population yoked by reason of their gender to obligatory domestic tasks.³²

Kaprow, I maintain, committed a similar, critical oversight in promoting the live body of the artist as a radical alternative to seeking this body, in a roundabout way, through the objects he creates; in so doing, he forgot that women, by virtue of their gender, are presumed already to be potential subjects, but not makers, of art. The recollections of the pioneering feminist performance artist and fellow traveler in the New York Happenings scene, Carolee Schneemann, evidence how completely intact the rigid gender binary designating man as maker and woman as the subject of art was in the late 1950s, when Kaprow penned his essay on Pollock and Schneemann began her career as a painter. Discouraged continuously from pursuing seriously her painting practice by her advisor, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, Schneemann recognized that the "predictive rejection" she experienced as an art student was a symptom of an overarching sentiment that she, as a woman, was on the wrong side of the easel.³³ When Schneemann, who supported her studies through her work as a life drawing model, began physically to break through the surface of her materials, fracturing deliberately the space of the picture, the studio, and the viewer, she took aim not only at conventional positionalities between art object, artist, and the observer of art, but also at that most venerated of Western artistic subjects: the female nude.³⁴

In December of 1963, Schneemann undertook in the environment of her loft studio a series of “Transformative Actions” the artist named *Eye Body*. (Figure 3) A singularly important work in the histories of both painting and performance art, *Eye Body* signaled Schneemann’s gravitation towards works executed in real time, while revealing clearly how deeply her performance work was rooted in a painter’s understanding of time and space, influenced profoundly by the hypertemporal qualities of Cezanne’s canvases. In a series of thirty-six actions staged for the camera, Schneemann posed with a work she had scaled to make of the loft an environment, a network of heavily impastoed panels that spilled effusively into the space by way of protuberant and kinetic additions like skeletal umbrellas, furniture both fractured and whole, and dress forms. Schneemann, her face and body contoured with broad strokes of paint, established herself as a mobile part of this composition, moving around and through the registers of pictorial and “real” space that the assemblage already confused. In one photograph, she appears to emerge directly out of the two-dimensional space of the painted panels, her portal a gap covered with a sheet of plastic that, via the flattening effects of the camera, appears to blend seamlessly in with the gestural brushstrokes around it. (Figure 4) The nude has stepped, defiantly, off of the canvas.

In a manner that would prove hugely impactful to the trajectory of Schneemann’s career and to the discourses of feminist art in general, *Eye Body* rendered explicit the ways in which the female body is taken in Western culture—on the streets as well as on the canvas—as the eternally available locus of spectatorial pleasure, and the concrete effects of this paradigm in the ways it conscribes women’s participation in the making of

images. Constrained by a dichotomy that posited the artist as active, ingenious, and masculine, and the artist's model as passive, obtuse and feminine—a centuries-old paradigm that Lynda Nead, in her study *The Female Nude* (1992) characterizes as definitive of "Art" itself in the Western imagination³⁵—Schneemann determined that her way forward would be through the deployment of her own body, "active, present, and accusatory," within and between the layers of imagistic and actual space at play in her work.³⁶

Over the course of her career, Schneemann developed the urgent question she posed with *Eye Body*—"Could a nude woman artist be both image and image maker?"—into an ongoing critical inquiry within the fabric of her work.³⁷ Crucially, in developing her creative responses to a gendered spectatorial regime that she had so often experienced as effacing and degrading, Schneemann via *Eye Body* (and in later works including *Meat Joy* [1964], *Interior Scroll* [1975], and *Up to and Including Her Limits* [1973-76]) insists on a representational model in which the object of the gaze may experience the pleasure of both observing and being observed. "The body," she asserts in a brief statement on *Eye Body*, "may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, and yet still be votive—marked and written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will."³⁸

The radicality of the spectatorial dynamics Schneemann proposes (an aspect of her work that remains tragically under-theorized) becomes apparent when compared to Laura Mulvey's much better-known schematic in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she coined the very concept of the male gaze upon which countless subsequent feminist analyses of art and visual culture have operated. Mulvey's

formulation is a tidy one: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”³⁹ Glossing Freud’s concept of scopophilia, which in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915) he associates with the pre-genital auto-erotic phase, Mulvey identifies scopophilic desire as a desire to return to the pre-Lacanian mirror stage; a return to the pleasurable sensation of the body undifferentiated, of understanding others’ bodily sensations as one’s own. Scopophilia, Mulvey writes, involves the pleasure of watching *others look* while denying one’s own voyeurism. Cinema, she argues compellingly, provides the perfect environment for scopophilic indulgence; wrapped in the dark of the theater, the libidinous body of the spectator is disappeared, his desires aligned with that of the hero and consolidated in the object of their mutual gaze, the heroine.⁴⁰

Whereas Mulvey does not in this essay consider at all female spectators, and identifies the female object of the gaze as necessarily “exhibitionist” and passively accommodating to male desires, Schneemann in positioning her own body in her work as both “desired and desiring” proposes that the gaze can be commanded, rather than simply submitted to. Occupying the gaze does not necessitate a surrender to voyeuristic or stultifying forces: vision, Schneemann insists, can constitute a mutual, pleasurable relay between “subject” and “object,” whose differences are significantly eroded once the

distinctions between “real” and projected, fantasized, pictorial space are simultaneously effaced.

In 1963, Schneemann could count as the single other example she knew of a woman using her body as the material and subject of her art.⁴¹ Over the next two decades, the ranks of this company would swell to accommodate Yayoi Kusama, Charlotte Moorman, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, Faith Wilding, Lynda Benglis, Martha Wilson, Yvonne Rainer, Shigeko Kubota, Betsy Damon, Mary Beth Edelson, Martha Rosler, Elizabeth Sowers, Eleanor Antin, Joan Jonas, Linda Montano, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Suzanne Lacy, Francesca Woodman, Howardena Pindell, Cindy Sherman, Karen Finley, and Lynn Hershman and her alter-ego, “Roberta Breitmore.” With this (extensive but not exhaustive) list, I identify a host of American women artists whose philosophically and aesthetically different approaches to art making would seem to divide rather than unite them. The qualities they share, while simple, signify nonetheless a sea change in American politics of vision and representation. All, during a period spanning roughly from 1963 to 1980, utilized their own bodies as the subjects of their works while choosing the immediacy of time-based media—performance, photography, film, and video—to the effect of upending Western visual conventions that posed women as the bearers rather than makers of meaning.⁴² Occupying simultaneously within the visual field the positions typically assigned to “artist” and “model,” these women imbued the model with an intellect, but also, and perhaps more crucially, the artist with a body—thereby exploding the Cartesian formula by which “art” constitutes the refashioning of base matter, via the intellect, into something sublime.⁴³

The sheer proliferation of American women artists making work from the activation of their bodies in real time during what is now recognized as the first burst of feminist art activity in the United States challenges the ways in which this history is typically periodized. Peggy Phelan, in the survey text she provides in *Art and Feminism: Themes and Movements* (2001), which she coauthored with Helena Reckitt, distinguishes almost offhandedly the work of early feminist artists from that of emergent generations of the 1980s and 1990s by asserting latter's penchant for replicable and temporal media, and thus implying the former's preference for the "traditional" media of painting and sculpture.⁴⁴ This purported shift in feminist art production from the unique, unrepeatable, handmade object to the ephemeral and the mechanically reproducible art event or object, I propose, is an imagined one that serves less as an accurate chronology of feminist art practices than it does as an illustration of the dominant ideology which holds that the chief difference between feminist art produced before and after 1980 is a collective shift in belief from "essential" to "constructed" femininity. 1980 in feminist histories of art marks the widening of a number of schisms that called attention to unexamined white privilege, class privilege, and homophobia within the mainstream feminist movement, challenges that necessarily destabilized the foundational notion that all women are united by way of their supposedly identical subjugation under patriarchy. This turning point, as it is so proposed by contemporary historians of feminist art including Phelan, Jayne Wark, Kathy Battista, Whitney Chadwick, Suzanne Lacy, and Laura Cottingham is generally regarded as a vital, if painful stage in evolution of feminist politics of representation.⁴⁵

Yet in identifying the artist/model and art object/spectator dichotomies as explicitly gendered, and by effectively jamming this established relay of the gaze by occupying simultaneously both poles, early feminist artists proposed a model of sexual difference based fundamentally not on innate biological or psychological differences between men and women, but rather on who is designated as “to-be-looked-at,”⁴⁶ and who is allowed to look. In this positively, presciently Butlerian formula, representations are the means by which categories of gender are constituted through their pervasive repetition. Such a reimagining of the still-unfolding effects of these early feminist works, I believe, holds significance for the culture at large beyond a simple project of historical revisionism: What if these strategic acts of self-portrayal on the part of American women artists can be taken to mean that the dyad of sexual difference is not male and female, but who depicts and who is depicted? Though these binaries are intrinsically linked in Western thought they are not, as a wealth of self-portrayals asserting the visionary power of the female artist show, indissoluble. And if such feminist assertions of simultaneous objecthood and authorship are today celebrated for liberating and empowering female subjects and spectators alike, does it follow that a male artist who similarly submits himself as the maker and object of his work—a body, in other words, courting deliberately the gaze of the spectator that is still, by default, gendered male—effectively troubles his own authorial privilege in assuming a position historically designated as passive, receptive, and, most dangerously, feminine?

In a phallogentric society, as Mulvey makes clear in her essay, the pleasurable representation is a projection of what one man anticipates another man wishes to see;

remove the screen, the painting, the woman who is the subject of both, and what you have left is but a gaze, shared and uninterrupted, between two men.⁴⁷ Narrative cinema is, to Mulvey, but one of the more recent and effective panaceas men have devised in order to stave off this confrontation: men, she asserts, “cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze on his exhibitionist like.”⁴⁸ If men understand even on a subconscious level the paradigm Mulvey is describing—and in this dissertation I demonstrate that within American culture colossal amounts of collective energy are expended to ensure that they understand it very well—then the risks of allowing oneself to become the object of the gaze should be to them quite clear: in showing yourself, you invite another man to show himself to you.

In his essay “The Gaze in the Expanded Field” (1988) Norman Bryson underscores this Western conception of the gaze, itself, as gendered masculine; moreover, he asserts, this gaze functions in Western philosophy as always terroristic. The initial objects of Bryson’s analysis are Sartre and Lacan and their respective attempts to disassemble the Cartesian subject position so fundamental to modern, Western paradigms of vision, cognition, and their relationship to reality. Though Sartre and Lacan both seek to dismantle systemically the Cartesian centralized subject who, God-like, makes real his surroundings through the power of the *cogito*, both, Bryson point out, nonetheless adhere to the model of a centralized subject if only to stage his annihilation within the dynamics of the gaze.⁴⁹ Sartre figures this destruction in the form of the lone watcher in the park, whose masterful surveillance of the landscape unfolding before him is interrupted catastrophically by the arrival of another spectator who both reflects back the watcher’s

own voyeurism and obliterates the omniscience of his gaze by interrupting the plentitude of the visual field, and representing everything he is not. The castrating threat of the vanishing point, this distant, malevolent oculus that gapes before the viewer, is configured in human form in Sartre's schematic, and, more oddly, as an object in Lacan's treatment. Informed jocularly by a fisherman that the sardine can he sees bobbing in the ocean off the Brittany coast can not see him back, Lacan ponders the extent to which this is true. For when, in Bryson's words, vision constitutes "the socially agreed depiction(s) of an intelligible world," objects, insofar as they act as disturbances within these socially regimented systems of vision, do indeed possess the ability to "look back," and therefore disrupt the coherence of visual paradigms.⁵⁰

The trouble with thinking, *pace* Lacan, of vision as intrinsically terroristic, Bryson suggests, is that doing so "naturalizes terror" as the gaze's effect, while masking the ways in which power "conceals its operations in visuality, in myths of pure form, pure perception, and culturally universal vision."⁵¹ If, per Mulvey's example, we take the male gaze as an exemplar of terroristic surveillance (as Bryson does, when he names the experience of a woman "under the voyeuristic male gaze" as a prime example of terroristic visuality wielded and concealed through power structures),⁵² we can begin to understand the risks men run in submitting themselves voluntarily as objects of the gaze. The patriarchal operations of prevailing systems of visual exchange are threatened, certainly, when women scramble the signals by stepping outside of their clearly demarcated subject positions. Yet the security of naturalized hierarchies of social and scopopic privilege is perhaps most damagingly belied when refused by those who stand to

benefit most from it. The vehement distrust our culture accords to men who present themselves as objects of visual delectation signals just how closely we associate the gaze with violence; why, after all, would anyone tolerate the invasiveness, the danger, the obliteration inherent in holding another subject's eye if one was not bound by a social script requiring them to do so?

To present oneself as a body to be looked at is to tempt association with a particularly feminine subject position of self-surrender, narcissism, seduction, and treachery; men, I contend, are not immune to these associations by virtue of their gender. If they were, the contents of the contemporary art historical canon would look very different. While strategies of utilizing one's body as subject and material has remained a mainstay of art produced by women—Holly Hughes, Marina Abramovic, Orlan, Catherine Opie, Coco Fusco, and Sharon Hayes represent but a few of those who did so even during and in the wake of feminist debates over whether it is ever possible to produce images of the female body that are not infected and inflected by the male gaze⁵³—the comparative dearth of male artists who make their own, allegedly privileged bodies the center of their works is as vast as it is telling. That a significant number of those who have presented themselves as embodied subjects in a receptive or reciprocal relationship with the spectator have over the past three decades in the United States in particular been deliberately singled out for vicious public opprobrium calls even more urgently for exhaustive scrutiny.

If the trajectories of feminist art are (schisms and all) grounded firmly within the broader history of the women's liberation movement, scholarship on contemporary

American male artists who take as the subjects of their works their own bodies is, like the works themselves, chronologically scattered and untied to a larger social or philosophical movement. Male bodies feature generally in feminist histories of art produced over the past four decades in a Mulveyan function: they serve as the perpetrators and perpetuators of an oppressive scopic regime out of which women, as subjects and historians, must navigate, the foil to the feminist project of the liberation of visual economies. I note this not to minimize or denigrate recent, excellent works that have conducted through explicitly feminist lenses nuanced critiques of masculinities that operate outside of such rigid representational binaries (Butler [1993], Phelan [1993], Sedgwick [1993], Jones [1998], Griffin [2000], and Doyle [2006] come immediately to mind). Rather, I aim to elucidate an alarming, and apparently growing tendency within the field of art history to evoke the term “gender” when what one is actually talking about is “women.”

If recent, gradual shifts from “Women’s Studies” to “Gender Studies” in academic programs across North America have signaled an understanding of the need to recognize and analyze gender, including when it is manifest as “masculinity,” as a multitude of shifting, overlapping, and historically- and culturally-specific positionalities, mainstream feminist art histories have largely registered these changes only on the terminological level: the past twenty years have given us a proliferation of exhibition catalogs, thematic art historical studies, and undergraduate-level introductory texts to “art and gender” that discuss exclusively or by overwhelming majority female artists or representations of women, produced by men, throughout the history of art.⁵⁴ That Charles Harrison could, in the twenty-first century, publish and claim as a feminist project a study

in which sexual “difference” is defined as that which separates the female flesh of a model from the male painter that so transforms her (*Painting the Difference* [2005]) indicates the need for a wholesale reevaluation of the static and monolithic formations of “gender” that undergird too many feminist readings of art history.

A survey of literature from a roughly contemporaneous period yields evidence of more concentrated focus on the male body as the object of scopical regimes in art historical studies cross-listed with the related disciplines of (visual)/cultural studies, American studies, literary criticism, critical race studies, and GLBT studies. The scholarly works that inform this dissertation have provided to me invaluable insights about how existing in a queer body, a raced body,⁵⁵ or, more complicated still, a raced, queer body force in the male subject a recognition of the systems of social surveillance by which men are typically assumed to benefit, and thus inspire the navigation of these systems through the strategic manipulation of the visual codes by which they operate. However, because these accounts factor race and/or sexuality as the *a priori* cause that requires these negotiations in the first place, the notion that occupying the focus of the gaze *itself* can marginalize the male subject is not examined in depth. American male artists engaged in the work of self-portrayal (which I will define at this juncture as men who take their own bodies as the subject and material of their works, a construct I will elaborate on shortly) feature typically in these works as illustrative examples within broader histories of men who produce and consume images of masculinities, rather than as a distinct subject in its own right. As I show in this dissertation, a concentrated focus on self-reflexive explorations of gendered codes of representation on the part of American male artists enriches this

ongoing reckoning with the cultural presumption that the male body factors in representation as always dominant and self-evident. This prevalent theoretical blindness has, conveniently for the scopic order it upholds, helped to obscure the scripted social machinations by which this dominance is reified.

My project thus expands upon a modest but important body of literature that posits the performance of American masculinities as a practice of camouflaging, of ducking and feinting, of the delicate act of hiding in plain sight. Keeping close in mind Peggy Phelan's important challenge to the ubiquitous model of American visibility politics which posits both that cultural representations reflect primarily images of the powerful and that this power can be diffused through representations that reflect marginalized subjects more equitably, I wish similarly to explore the means by which patriarchy operates via the mechanisms of privileged invisibility, wielding vision in the form of "surveillance, voyeurism, and fetishism," to mark and regulate marginalized subjects.⁵⁶ In taking a body of recent literature that analyzes gay men's strategies of resistance and negotiation through self-representation (and recent literature on the male subject of self-representation is, overwhelmingly, focused on gay men), I further argue that these strategies are in fact more self-conscious iterations of broadly mandated forms of masculine performance.

In *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (2005), Gavin Butt proposes gossip—a shifting, mutating form of discourse that is, by its very nature, unverifiable—as the chief means by which conversations about queer desires were carried out within a "world of suspicion" fomented by widespread national

panic in the 1950s over “infiltrators”—communist, homosexual, or perhaps both—in the form of men who are not what they profess to be. Analyzing the often-obscure cultural citations and elusive in-jokes through which queer and kindred New York artists of this period corresponded, Butt argues that gossip in its automatic exclusion from the preservational aegis of the archive provides a viable means to communicate queer desires via representation in the sense that it leaves no “hard evidence” by which to identify and condemn the subject whose desires are articulated and/or addressed.⁵⁷

Richard Meyer articulates a similarly clandestine model of communications in *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002), in which he proposes that over a period spanning from 1934 to the turn of the last millennium American men produced desirous images of other men under the formative anticipation of suppression by the dominant culture, regardless of how obviously apparent the “erotic” content of these images may be.⁵⁸ In so arguing, Meyer maintains neither that gay male American artists negotiated censorious forces in a merely reactive way, nor that these restrictions slackened eventually through a gradual, progressive march towards social acceptance. Rather, Meyer proposes that the very content of works from Paul Cadmus to Andy Warhol (lionized as “positive” examples in histories that seek to excavate the deliberately-obscured evidence of queer content in “high” art) was formed, productively, by the *negative* images of homosexuality with which these artists had to contend.⁵⁹

The constructive transformation of representations designed to subjugate and suppress is precisely the object of José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of*

Color and the Performance of Politics (1999). “Disidentification,” as Muñoz defines it, emerges as a method of self-articulation when identification with the heteronormative roles with which one has been raised proves impossible, and identification with vetted and approved models of “homonormativity”⁶⁰ equally impossible, especially for queers of color who are within these structures further marginalized, fetishized, and diminished. When both essentialist and social constructivist models of identity are thoroughly exhausted, there exists, he proposes, some useful meat on the bones of the stereotypes that the aforementioned representational regimes have both produced and discarded. Queers, and queers of color in particular, can through disidentification recoup valuable strategies from theoretical models that in different ways oppress them by performing, flamboyantly, a psychic break with damaging aspects, erecting a theoretical obstacle to identification by theatricalizing the means by which such poisonous paradigms present themselves as “the real.”⁶¹

The need to address the means by which certain male bodies prove dangerously pliable, rather than impervious, within the field of representation is realized most urgently in recent scholarship that focuses specifically on black masculinities, and the means by which these are persistently fabricated, to the black male subject’s detriment, by external forces. Roderick A. Ferguson, in *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique* (2004), unravels the dominant American social narrative that posits black men, in their supposed failure to assume a heteropatriarchal role as husbands and fathers, as the cause of disorder and dysfunction in “the black family,” and thereby the origin of greater societal ills including poverty and inequality. The “queer” of Ferguson’s title refers not

solely to black homosexuals, but rather to black individuals and families presumed already to be socially and sexually aberrant under the extreme forms of social surveillance to which they were subject.⁶² Robert F. Reid-Pharr, who likewise analyzes the discourse of the “crisis” of the black American family in *Black Gay Man: Essays* (2001) expounds upon the ways in which black subjects, themselves, become active participants in these scopoc systems of regulation in the name of racial “progress” and reformation.⁶³

In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994) Kobena Mercer outlines (in collaboration with Isaac Julien, in one essay) a host of imposed representational tropes with which black men are obliged to grapple. As the subjects of medical, sociological, criminal, and ethnographic discourses that provide a playing field for white fantasies, the black male is, within these compromising positions in didactic representational systems also vulnerable to the paternalistic interventions of whites who propose, through the forms of “high art,” to liberate the black subject while failing to analyze critically the systems of representation they purport to correct.⁶⁴ It is this paradoxical state of being both “invisible and overinterpreted” that Thelma Golden sought to address in curating the hugely necessary (and perhaps predictably controversial) exhibition “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art” for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994. In considering the hysterical and self-contradicting popular narratives that at once portray the black male as an excessive and destabilizing force within American culture, yet also teetering, from the weight of this social disorder, on the brink of “extinction,” Golden wonders in her contribution to

the exhibition catalog: “Since masculinity in general is about privilege as the internal force, is black masculinity a contradiction in terms?”⁶⁵

In their co-edited volume *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall provide a rich selection of writings by black men spanning from 1848 to the close of the twentieth century that mount challenges to sexist and homophobic discourses and recognize the overlapping of these oppressions with institutionalized racism.⁶⁶ Byrd and Guy-Sheftall’s compilation can be read as a productive answer to Golden’s query; when masculinity is not experienced as a position of power and dominance, what allegiances with other subjects, disenfranchised under the same system, may arise, and what regimes—political and representational—may be overthrown? The question of what occurs within the social when a man positions himself deliberately at the center of the gaze—when, according to the default Western understanding of the dynamics of the gaze, he presents himself *as a woman*—is, as I endeavor throughout this dissertation to show, a feminist concern. It is, however, one that challenges the presumption that man retains a position of privilege and superiority regardless of whether he projects or receives the gaze; that objecthood, in other words, is a type of drag he may assume and discard at will. The meanings of these roles—the one who depicts and the one who is depicted, art “lover” and art object—are too deeply ingrained in Western models of consciousness to be discarded that easily.

In “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other” (1986), Andreas Huyssen proposes that modernist writers reconciled their own positions in the shifting social and economic landscapes of Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries by

ventriloquizing, and subsequently disavowing, their desires through the figure of a woman. Taking as exemplary the ways in which Flaubert's critics parallel him to Madame Bovary in order to demonstrate how he succeeded in transcending banal, bourgeois existence where she failed, Huyssen asserts that modernist associations of women with the encroaching tides of "low," commercial culture, and men with the resilient bastions of the avant garde, were forged in no small part by modernist men adopting postures of "imaginary femininity" to criticize bourgeois society while simultaneously benefiting from the patriarchal values they pretended to oppose.⁶⁷ He makes another example of the Goncourt Brothers' *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), the "first naturalist manifesto," in which the brothers define and decry the ultimate example of the "false novel" as the graphically rendered record of the exchange of money for female flesh: that is to say, the "memoirs of street-walkers."⁶⁸

In the Goncourt Brothers' novel, according to Huyssen, the threat that mass culture bears to modernist expression is envisioned as a prostitute. This model stands in rather striking contradistinction to the claim, made only two years earlier by T.J. Clark and received with much fanfare, that modernity *itself* was inaugurated at the moment when Manet's *Olympia*, the well-known portrait of a prostitute, was first publicly exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1865. In presenting an image of such a woman that refused so flatly any of the pictorial conventions that would have allowed her to pass as anything else, Manet, Clark maintained, not only shook the genre of the academic nude to its very foundations; he also revealed irrevocably the painting as commodity, an object shaped by its anticipation of the spectator's desire—and by the contents of his wallet.⁶⁹

That neither Huyssen nor Clark discuss Mulvey's work specifically nor the male gaze generally in these respective treatments is strange, given that each, in their analyses of spectatorial dynamics, evoke formulations significantly similar to hers. In both Huyssen's and Clark's accounts, anxieties about how to maintain the differences between fiduciary and sensual values within a modernist framework that increasingly flattens the two are expressed in the figure of a woman who exchanges sex for money. In both accounts, too, she is a fantasy conducted by a male author or artist who in so doing anticipates the desires of a male audience; once again, when we remove the novel, the painting, and the woman who serves as the subject of each, what we are left with is a homosocial relay between men who seem to recognize quite cannily what it is the other wants.

To be returned so rudely to his body—and to its place at one end of a reciprocal gaze shared by his “exhibitionist like”—is not, moreover, a mere matter of experiencing the loss of pleasure that comes with the removal of the phantasmic female locus of desire. The supremacy of the male gaze is threatened precisely when the man gains *substance* as a sexual being; that is to say, when he realizes himself as subject to, rather than the master of, his passions. When realized most faithfully through the mechanisms of the male gaze, male sexuality is revealed to be an alarmingly empty signifier. Sex, in this schema is what one *does to* another person, rather than a series of sensations received through the body—one must, after all, be embodied for that. White, Western ideals of masculinity, Richard Dyer asserts, are founded on Christian ideals of transcending the flesh, and by extension of managing subjects—female and nonwhite—presumed to be

unfortunately less capable of regulating their own baser urges.⁷⁰ Amelia Jones, paraphrasing Leo Bersani's reading of Foucault, contributes that "masculinism or phallocentrism can be said to be above all the denial of the 'value of powerlessness' (the pleasure afforded by the 'radical disintegration and humiliation of the self' in sex)."⁷¹

Such "radical disintegration of the self," I maintain, is not found only in the physical exchanges associated under the umbrella of "the sex act." Vision, as Kristine Stiles writes, paraphrasing the words of Hermann Bahr, consists of an interplay between the "inner and outer eye[s]," which Stiles defines, respectively, as "the one which *is done to*... and the other which is performed by" a person.⁷² Vision, in this schema, is something one *inflicts* upon another, something one "does to" another subject. Visibility is the means by which a subject is coded as erotic, available, purchaseable, and these terms hold regardless of whether the subject registers as "biologically" female or merely transubstantiated as such by his occupying this denigrated position of visual receptivity. That women have historically proved eager to upend these conventions where men have proved, with but a few exceptions, unwilling to do so demonstrates simply the pervasiveness of the cultural conviction which maintains that men, in so doing, have more to lose. Yet the effects of this binary on both parties—the one whose embodied experience is voided through the projection of desire and the one whose subjectivity is eclipsed by this projection—is profoundly impoverishing, and can, moreover, be seismically disrupted through the assertion of the male body as a subject that gains its coherence through means other than control.

The Aristotelian ideal of the male body, in Lynda Nead's gloss of Kenneth Clark's influential treatise *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956) is defined by "culture, order, geometry;"⁷³ the intervening centuries that separate the present time from Clark's classical ideal prove that the male body in contemporary visual representation is not so stolid. The images of the male body that have stuck most persistently in the American popular imagination in the postwar period are works of self-fashioning by male artists that expose what substitutive strategies of gendered artist/subject dichotomy attempt to conceal: the male body as the locus of pervasive fears about the body's disparate, dislocated, fragmented nature. My project is a study of rare instances of contemporary American male artists who made their own bodies the subject of their works, to profoundly disruptive effect within culture at large. By turn, it is also a study of American anxieties about the body as expressed in the prohibitions—social, legal, aesthetic—that make such portrayals so rare. This is an investigation of what kind of men American men are allowed to be within the very social, political, and religious orders presumed to benefit them so completely.

In identifying this as a uniquely American problem, I aim both to acknowledge the impossibility of generalizing the culturally- and chronologically-specific constructs of "masculinity" on a global, or even Western scale, and to maintain that the economic, social, and political landscapes of the United States in the postwar period generated a perfect storm in which to uproot ossified concepts of essential masculinity. World War II and the demands for labor and service to further military aims, as I go on to examine further in my first chapter, mobilized American men and women into positions

traditionally barred to them by reason of sex and race. Temporary as these disruptions were intended to be, many, at the war's end, proved reluctant to return to the usual order; this is true of the women and black men dissatisfied with the rescinding of their economic opportunities in the workforce as well as it is for queer subjects who through military service were able to build communities with like-minded companions whom they had not, in the confines of their hometowns, previously believed to have existed.

The socially mandated imperative to return to a semblance of a normal order that defined the 1950s, combined with the knowledge that there indeed existed something beyond this new conformity, effectively brewed a culture of both dissatisfaction and suspicion. Gavin Butt identifies in the postwar period the growth of an increasingly sophisticated code amongst queer communities, the members of which developed a common lexicon of popular imagery in order to communicate safely their desires and affinities to one another while circumventing the surveillance of society. Butt reveals this scrutiny as symptomatic of rising anxieties about male sexuality as slippery, duplicitous, and “unfaithful” to the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family that, in the postwar era, provided the most ubiquitous template of masculinity for the American male. The shocking disclosures of the Kinsey Report on the *Sexual Behavior of the American Male* (1948) and the House Un-American Activities Committee witch hunts that sought to ferret out the sexual deviants who evidently concealed themselves so deftly are but two of the compelling examples Butt marshals in the service of this argument.⁷⁴

In keeping with this, I argue, uniquely American conception of male sexuality as elusive and chimeric, I employ a liberal definition of “self-portrayal” in examining the

works of postwar American male artists. These works are not always nudes (nudity is an often incidental detail in the works I survey); they are not necessarily representations designed to provide pleasure (my second chapter concerns performances that involve the literal infliction of pain, and are, for many, painful to watch); and, critically, they do not always appear in forms that are conventionally recognized as “art.” I survey exclusively works executed in the media of film, photography, and performance—all only recently, and grudgingly, admitted for canonical consideration as “art” at all. Each of these media, in distinct but interrelated ways, were long excluded from serious critical attention because their respective relationships to “the real” were presumed too close to allow for the transformative effects of art’s sublimation to take hold. The United States, as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, maintains a disturbingly stubborn literalness in taking the artist’s body, especially as presented in the time-based media of film, photography and performance, as a transparent representation of who the artist is. This apparent cultural difficulty in reading the body in real time as a representation of anything but the real, I contend, impacts seriously marginalized subjects who are already presumed to be exemplary “representatives” of a particular minority.

I am also concerned extensively with high art’s nemesis, a genre intertwined intimately with all three of these media: pornography. Images of the male body in contemporary American culture, I argue, provide fecund ground upon which to examine the mystifying and arbitrary distinctions arbiters of culture create to separate art from pornography, and make it further possible to trace the ways in which the media of photography, film, and performance have gained cultural credibility through these

processes of differentiation and distinction. Images of men that violate gender conventions—and as I have already argued, occupying the gaze, itself, constitutes such a violation—are, as Laura Kipnis notes, not only especially vulnerable to accusations of pornography, but are persistently legally classed as “more” pornographic than images of actual “intercourse.”⁷⁵ The relationship between female body and obscenity has been rigorously and persuasively examined, notably in Lynda Nead’s *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (1992) but, as I go on to demonstrate, men who are identified publicly as positioning themselves gratuitously in the place typically occupied by the female nude are subject to still wilder social condemnation.

To follow are four case studies of four contemporary American male artists. Three of them rose to prominence in the midst of the long American “Culture Wars,” a period I will define for my purposes here as a period in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which Rightist forces mobilized their political base around the issue of publicly subsidized cultural expression via the office of the National Endowment for the Arts. Through a series of targeted campaigns against specific artists, waged in the media and in the courtrooms, Rightist activists and their allies in Congress, deftly and to their long-term advantage, promoted the notion that the United States government had been in the business of subsidizing and promoting pornography and anti-Christian propaganda. Incredibly, of the multitude of scholars who have commented astutely on these events, there exists not one, to my knowledge, who has ever acknowledged that the vast majority of artists subject to these investigations were, overwhelmingly, male artists who focused in their work on the (often explicitly eroticized) male body.

While the majority of my project focuses on artists who became the targets of these investigations, I contend that risky investigations of male sexuality did not begin with the Culture Wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Chapter One, I posit the American underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger as an early, formative example of a subject dedicated to forging a masculine subjectivity that coalesces not in unity, but in elliptical, fantastical inventions. Anger, I contend, turns firmly the conventions of Vasarian biographical art histories on their heads; in Anger's case, the work constitutes the subject, not vice-versa. In my examination of Anger, I address a serious gap in the scholarship on pre-Stonewall queer identities by investigating *lying* as strategy of queer self-fashioning and artistic production. Anger's life, I propose, amounts to a protracted struggle against the imperative to reveal imposed by culture and art history. This is demonstrated in his refusal to "come out" while maintaining simultaneously an outrageously and precociously queer persona; in the difference he maintained through his work from the biographical revelations in vogue with his underground filmmaker contemporaries; and in his total resistance to the Western aesthetic ideal of the unified, self-identical subject. In Anger's work, I also identify a figure I posit as emblematic of the postwar American male subject at the center of the gaze: the "trade boy," a figure whose coherence and erotic appeal depend totally on his maintaining fastidiously a veneer of ignorance about the visual economies that revolve around him.

In Chapter Two, I identify the contemporary performance artist Ron Athey as emblematic of the literalizing powers of the anti-public art, homophobic Rightist forces that perpetuated the American Culture Wars on these grounds. Prior to the 1994

performance that landed Athey at the crux of these controversies, Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe were decried on the stage of Congress as threats to the moral foundations of the U.S. Athey, as I demonstrate, marked a drastic literalist turn in these debates as his body was posed in legal and news media discourses as an actual, biological threat to his audience. At a particularly fraught period in the representation of HIV and AIDS in America, Athey symbolized in popular discourses the male body as ruptured, porous, bleeding, and fundamentally dangerous—confusing the gender binaries that typically bracket male from female bodies at a time in which Rightist forces depended upon binaries more than ever in the service of their agenda.

In this chapter, I draw at length upon the persistent visual politics of the American AIDS epidemic, which I define as the urge to make visible the invisible. Rendering visible male sexual deviancy, I argue, at this juncture takes on a desperate urgency. The story of Athey's performance as it unfurled in popular accounts is, I contend, a narrative of displacement: the displacing of the actual performance with hyperbolic exaggerations on the part of the news media and Congress, the displacing of Athey's actual, specific body for the figurative "body with AIDS," the conflation of Athey's body with those of his fellow performers, and, finally, the reality of actual relationships between tax dollars and the arts supplanted by the fiction of a pornography- and blasphemy-endorsing government office that ultimately proved successful in drastically diminishing actual systems of public support for the arts.

I turn in Chapter Three to what may initially seem to be an odd example for my purposes. The conceptual artist Glenn Ligon, on the occasions where he turns to

figurative work at all, is best known for substituting other bodies for his own. These include the bodies captured by the camera of Robert Mapplethorpe, which substitute already black male bodies as a cipher of white gay male desire. I contend in this chapter that visibility does not impact all subjects equally; the temptation of simply asserting that self-portrayal constitutes a liberatory gesture does not account for the ways in which black male bodies are already over-represented in inglorious genres, coded as criminal, degenerate, obscene. The first half of this chapter focuses on one such decisive rendering of the difference between art and obscenity that took place under the auspices of the so-called “Mapplethorpe trial” in 1990, in which race, I argue, was erased from the discourse on Mapplethorpe’s photography in the name of free expression. Ironically, the stylistic traces of the racially charged pornography that informed Mapplethorpe’s work were by the defense effaced in the name of aesthetic formalism. In the example of this formative battle, race emerges as collateral damage in the Culture Wars, with debilitating, homogenizing effects on aesthetic discourse.

The second half of Chapter Three is devoted to Ligon’s insistent retracing of these lineages. Ligon does so first by demonstrating the transparency of black subjects in photographic discourses, in which black bodies function more familiarly as symbols of social ills or social progress than they do as portraits of individuals, and second by drawing attention to these dynamics at work in Mapplethorpe’s images of black men. Examining critically the writings of Frantz Fanon as an influential contribution to the tortured status of the sexualized, black male in discourse, I identify a persistent tendency in narratives of black racial “progress” to depict this subject as already and always

infected by white fantasies. Ligon, I argue, resists cultural imperatives to demonstrate progress via heteronormativity by tracing channels of desire that unite legitimate and illegitimate media, genres, and families.

My study, as this summary shows, focuses solely on work by gay men. My scope was impacted largely and simply by the fact that works of self-portrayal by American male artists in the postwar period were and are overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, produced by queers. Moreover, I believe that the artists I survey here, along with many of their queer artist brethren, share in common with their feminist artist contemporaries and predecessors a vested interest in disrupting productively socially agreed-upon systems of vision. Life in the postwar period required the queer American male subject to train a special kind of sight, as well as a keen sensibility for when and where to conceal himself in the culture's blind spots. Love and friendship he could secure only through cannily and correctly identifying sympathetic others through specific visual signifiers; misinterpreting these signals could cost him the veneer of privileged invisibility through which he tenuously (and only if he was white) occupied the authority accorded automatically to his gender. Gay men unwilling or unable to pass as straight, denigrated within scopic regimes as *choosing* perversely to make themselves available to the male gaze and all the connotations with effeminate passivity and receptivity it implies, shared with the pioneers of feminist artistic self-portrayal a willingness to challenge the stability of a system that presumed already that their subjectivity amounted to nothing more than a treacherous performativity.

There are, I maintain, no subjects better able to rupture the tunnel vision imposed by Western conceptions of the gaze than those who possess the peripheral vision required to pick out the movements of the many different watchers who lurk in Sartre's park. A model of visuality based on cruising—for in this dissertation I do indeed consider the possibilities of “the vastness of Forty-second street,” among other places—requires an infrastructure based on consent, and on the ability to discern between the sustained gaze that is an invitation to deeper engagement and the gaze deflected that disallows it. The possibilities of its implementation within the culture at large are profoundly radical for men, women, and those who identify as neither, and this transformation hinges on our collective ability to conceive of the male body as the simultaneous subject and object of desire. At stake is nothing less than one of the most fundamental models of Western epistemology: the man who fashions himself through the force of his thoughts. All of the men surveyed in the pages to follow are, to evoke the terms of that grand American myth, self-made; the evidence of this self-fashioning, however, is the prominent object of their respective oeuvres, and is carried out obviously for us, spectators perhaps unnerved, perhaps elated to find our gaze so readily received and returned.

Chapter One

To begin this brief series of monographical studies with the most venerable senior of the four artists I survey is perhaps, as art historical strategies go, thoroughly conventional. Yet in focusing my first chapter on Kenneth Anger, the early underground American filmmaker whose influence in the annals of high art and popular culture alike manages to be at once mythic and half-forgotten, I manage to avoid merely repeating the already well-rehearsed facts of an artist's life, which may plague writers who struggle to reveal a new dimension of a canonical subject. Anger's legacy is not wanting for the generative appellations so readily bestowed upon other patriarchs of twentieth century art movements: variously hailed as the father of the music video¹ as well the biker flick²; the godfather of punk rock;³ a revolutionary figure in the development of a polymorphous queer aesthetic; and an inspiration to filmmakers from sexploitation king Russ Meyer to such commercial successes as Martin Scorsese,⁴ Anger's status as the auteur of a film aesthetic that has spawned untold imitators would seem assured.

Yet to compare Anger to other, fellow luminaries (and noted self-mythologizers) of twentieth-century art, such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, or (Anger's detested nemesis) Andy Warhol, is to note the sheer dearth of quality scholarship that separates Anger from this company. Despite his having lived what is undeniably one of the most fascinatingly eclectic lives of any contemporary artist, playing variously the roles of prodigy, assistant, inspiration, protégé, Svengali, and guru to a motley cast of acquaintances ranging from filmmakers, artists, and writers to sexologists and rocket scientists, from drug addicts, hustlers, and rock stars to occultists and philanthropist millionaires,⁵ no such voluminous literature exists on Anger's life as that dedicated to the seminal artists just mentioned. The problems of the writings that do exist—

which range from pardonable points of theoretical blindness to serious scholastic malfeasance—stem in no small part from the masterful command Anger exercises as an “artificer of his own myth,”⁶ and his oft-demonstrated intolerance of any narrative of his life and work that departs from the fabulously convoluted one he himself has woven.

The task of parsing reality from fiction in Anger’s sprawling auto-mythology is one that some writers have attacked with gusto, and others simply ignored in mobilizing Anger’s aesthetics and philosophy to suit their own theoretical purposes. In this chapter, however, I propose to examine for the first time the theoretical implications and historical significance of Anger’s habitual displacements of socially agreed-upon realities with lushly fashioned fictions. In so doing, I interrogate the traditionally pervasive art historical tendency to rely overmuch on biography as a source of meaning in the artist’s work by taking Anger as a subject *constituted by*, rather than revealed through, his work. Against a propensity to piece together retrospectively the artist through the detritus of his work—which, as I will show, prevails even amongst scholars of Anger with radically dissimilar aims—I posit Anger as a subject forged in a continual present, perpetually, through his deliberate selection and manipulation of subjects not himself in his films. In this chapter, Anger, whose artistic influence is paradoxically as under-acknowledged as it is germinal, will at the very least be recognized for demonstrating resoundingly, and decades earlier than any of the other artists I consider, the condition of instability that endemically, counterintuitively, defines the American male subject in the postwar period. Against a reigning historical consensus that the status of the (white) postwar American man is both dominant and self-evident, I find especially illuminating counterevidence in the glamorizing, incandescent fictions from which Anger fashioned a life to replace the unbearable one which he was given.

I begin with a brief overview of the fragmented field of literature through which different authors have approached Anger as a subject. These I divide for my purposes into two camps: one, I exemplify with Bill Landis' *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (1995), a middlebrow work which presents itself as a journalistic exposé of the filmmaker's falsehoods while relying simultaneously upon their sensationalism to hold the reader's interest (a predictable strategy, perhaps, for a self-professed expert in "sleazoid" culture).⁷ The other I identify as a group of scholars who at the close of the last century and in the early years of the current century found in Anger a paradigm of a principal theory motivating the discourse of the then-still-embryotic field of queer theory: namely, the concept of camp, and the transaction of encoded knowledge between enlightened parties that the Sontagian definition of the term implies. These respective groups' use of Anger would seem immediately to be at cross-purposes: in claiming Anger's films as illustrative examples of camp at work, early queer theorists hailed him as a prodigy who exposed the currents of male homoerotic energy suffusing mainstream visual culture in a manner boldly prescient of generations of queer artists to come. By contrast, Landis, throughout his pulpy biography, singles out Anger for homophobic and effeminophobic opprobrium by linking again and again the sexualities Anger projects through his films as well as his own personal affectations to his alleged talents for deception.

These two apparently diametrical critical approaches to Anger's work and life are however united, I argue, by their investment in the positivist notion that a work of art ought to serve as a faithful reflection of specific historical and/or biographical truths. Landis in his biography mobilizes scintillating episodes from Anger's films as well as his personal life as a series of indictments pointing to what he understands as Anger's pathological aversion to truth.

Those who identify Anger's work as prototypical in the development of queer aesthetics praise him for speaking, albeit in a circuitous manner, the truth of a gay male eroticism that could not, in the pre-Stonewall era in which Anger came of age, be articulated freely. Yet both approaches to Anger's work—the condemnatory as well as the laudatory—fail to recognize within it the lie as a productive, *generative* force, rather than an unfortunate effect imposed by either mental instability or historical and social circumstance. The opportunity to analyze Anger's work as the result of harnessing creatively and affirmatively what has been posited as an unfortunate and inescapable imperative of disingenuousness has been neglected not only by commercially-oriented authors such as Landis, but by the queer theorists who ought to have been most sensitive to the social and historical significance of this strategy.

Anger's preference for embellishment, I contend, is indeed a product of his coming of age in the pre-Gay Liberation 1940s, in which lying was, for queer subjects, necessary to daily survival. Yet against a chorus of queer theorists who see in Anger's work an encoded transmission of homoerotic knowledge, deployed in the service of subverting societally-mandated falsehoods and therefore imagining utopic alternatives to the status quo, I maintain in this chapter that Anger's filmic vision is not oriented toward futurity, nor even the constellation that queers now call "the community."⁸ Anger has rather dedicated his entire filmmaking career to arresting and holding in suspension the moment of erotic initiation that was understood, in the cultural context in which Anger matured, to be the pivotal point at which an identity as a gay man was minted. The moment of initiation that Anger seeks to replay in each repeat screening of his films is, I contend, his own, and the self that Anger projects therefore exists within an immaculately pure *present*, a state of queer *jouissance* that both trumps the brutal restrictions of

what is by now Anger's past, and exceeds even the most idyllic projections of utopian queer thinkers.

Contrary to the dominant paradigm of gay liberation, however, which holds that revealing the truth of one's sexuality sets one free from the onerousness of living a lie, Anger gains his perfect queer present via his dedication to lying as a way of life. Anger found in film the beguiling power to supplant the positions of both the discrete deviant and the criminal pervert—in all “truth,” the only socially recognized identities available to a teenage queer in 1947. It was in this year that Anger created *Fireworks*, his earliest extant film—the first, and the last, in which he would feature himself as the primary subject. The relatively peripheral roles Anger would occupy in his own work from thereon out,⁹ I contend, signal the transformation which *Fireworks* effected in Anger's life and career; Anger would no longer need to figure himself explicitly in his own films, given that *Fireworks* inaugurated the substitution of Anger's work in the stead of his life.

Masculinity as a condition that is purchased through the sly swapping of one subjectivity for another is a theme that resonates throughout this dissertation, in this chapter and in the ones to come. Taking works of self-portrayal produced in the late twentieth century by American male artists in the context of their broader public reception, I analyze the ill effects of reading male bodies as representative of bodies not their own; I examine also the possibilities of substituting other bodies for one's own as a means of slipping the yoke of these same, oppressive systems of visibility. Anger, decades earlier than the other subjects I survey and with a striking thoroughness, pioneered these strategies of substitution in the mutually constitutive realms of his art and his life.

Fireworks exudes the rawness one may expect from any adolescent auteur, no matter how prodigious. In this brief, silent film in grainy black-and-white, Anger has not yet developed fully the skills to make meaning from the intellectual montage of seemingly discordant visual and audible elements, a talent he would wield to such tremendous impact in his mature work. Yet through a measured analysis of the film's formal elements and their corresponding meanings in the clandestine queer culture into which a young Anger impatiently emerged, I will demonstrate how *Fireworks* establishes a filmic formula that Anger would replicate faithfully throughout his career (though each time with remarkable innovation). Significantly, this formative practice begins with a lie. It was in 1947, avers Landis, that Anger first began to project publicly untruths about his life¹⁰—concurrent with the development of *Fireworks*, which was, Landis contends, created by a twenty-year-old Kenneth Anglemyer, and not, as the filmmaker claims, by a seventeen-year-old Kenneth Anger.¹¹

In my analysis of *Fireworks*, I make use of Landis' attempt to reveal Anger's "true" origins in order to conduct a critical reading of the film itself. I go on to show that it is indeed no coincidence that Anger, with *Fireworks*, renounced both his family name and the date of his birth: Anger stages in the film the symbolic sacrifice of his own body in a ritual of eroticized violence in order to stage dramatically the complete immolation of a self he considered bankrupt in its stifling proximity to patrilinear social structures. In so arguing, I establish my total opposition to what has been assumed as self-evident by nearly every author who has even briefly considered *Fireworks*: that with the film Anger "literally 'comes out'" as a gay man.¹² However facile this conclusion may seem in relation to a film as unabashed in its queer content as *Fireworks* was at the early date of its creation, it is, I go on to prove, nonetheless fundamentally

wrong; for it presumes both that Anger, through the film, reveals a “true” self; and, that he does so in order to gain either recognition or acceptance from parties he hopes are sympathetic to his desires.

“Coming out,” as Samuel R. Delany reminds us in an ambiguously similarly-titled essay, signified a different meaning in the pre-Gay Liberation era in which Anger fomented his sexual identity from the one it acquired post-Stonewall.¹³ Prior to the Gay Liberation movement’s popular mandate that gay subjects liberate themselves by confessing—especially to close family—their inclinations, “coming out,” Delany writes, referred to one’s first sexual experience, the act by which one entered *into* gay society.¹⁴ It is with the erotic ritual of the prior meaning, I argue, that Anger aligns his film, and it is the confessional imperative of the later-developed definition of “coming out” against which, in the same film, he stakes his vehement opposition. I utilize the lucid social history Delany provides in his “Coming/Out” to establish Anger as a figure rooted firmly in both the erotics and politics of a “pre-gay” consciousness. Film is the vehicle through which Anger marshaled this consciousness into a declaration of independence from—not an attempt to edify, and thus reconcile with—a family he could not wait to escape. *Fireworks* constitutes not a coming out, but a burning down.

Employing Kathryn Bond Stockton’s formulation of the “backwards birth” by which the moment of a queer subject’s realization in the social marks the retroactive death of the pre-sexual (and therefore not-gay) child he was once presumed to be¹⁵, I contend that *Fireworks* is a grave marker, signifying not only its maker’s sacrifice of the child Kenneth Anglemyer in order to become the filmmaker Kenneth Anger, but also the beginning of a perpetually reenacted surrender to, and incorporation of, bodies not his own. Marshaling evidence from Anger’s filmic

oeuvre as well as from the colorful anecdotes by which he constitutes his life, I show that the archetype Anger would, beginning with *Fireworks*, submit forevermore in the place of his self is that perennial subject of the gay male imagination: the trade boy.

It is this hypermasculine subject, whose erotic charge derives from his alleged ignorance of the homoerotic contexts in which he is nevertheless so often central, who in *Fireworks* guides Anger through the process of erotic initiation and subsequent bodily dissolution. The trade boy initiates a system of optics as perilously difficult to navigate as it is intoxicatingly tempting: visually, he offers the spectator everything, but only so long as his admirer adheres to a shared fiction maintaining that he understands nothing. In *Fireworks*, he takes the form of a sailor who preens for a male voyeur one moment, and beats him in the next. The men who populate the scenes of Anger's seminal film *Scorpio Rising* (1963) cultivate a more studied obliviousness while squeezing into their muscle shirts and straddling the leather seats of their motorcycles; only one seems to acknowledge, with a knowing and ever-present smirk, the camera for which these rituals are performed. Film provides Anger with the means of catalyzing and replaying the sexual surrender epitomized by the trade boy, and enables him to manage, and finally to survive, the violence of which the trade boy is, fundamentally, always capable.

Appropriating the method of "erotohistoriography" advanced by Elizabeth Freeman in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) I demonstrate how Anger's access to a perpetual queer present is guaranteed through his conjuring repeatedly figures from the past—bodies which, in Freeman's words, both Anger and his viewers may use as "a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter [with the past]." ¹⁶ In weighing the sexual initiation Anger figures in *Fireworks* against the events which, Landis contends, constitute Anger's true

“outing,” I argue that Anger’s continual summoning of the trade boy—a figure whom Landis posits in his biography as a source of traumatic violence in Anger’s life—effects a strategic stop in history’s flow that produces an otherwise impossible present, in which he is able, at last, to live.

Finally, I turn a critical eye to the epistemological convictions which, I argue, Anger and Landis, his accursed biographer, in fact share.¹⁷ I cross-examine the competing claims Anger and Landis put forth with regards to the subjects of Anger’s *Fireworks* and of his *Scorpio Rising*. Landis devotes a significant portion of his biography to disproving Anger’s oft-repeated claims that the actors in *Fireworks* were “real” sailors, and the motorcycle gangs of *Scorpio Rising* played by “real” bikers; Landis argues that both films were instead stocked with “hustlers,” an occupation which, in Landis’ estimation, negates any possible claim the actors may have to the unimpeachably masculine identities Anger claims for them. Prior to this point in the chapter, I invoke Landis primarily to show how his single-minded dedication to unearthing the “truth” of Anger’s life prevents him from appreciating how Anger utilizes falseness to render himself as an artistic, social, and chronological subject. Yet in this section I show that Anger’s erotic enjoyment of the trade boy is obtained through his agreement with the very same notions of genuine masculinity that motivate Landis to argue that “hustlers” cannot, by reason of their position in an economy of gay male erotic exchange, be “real” men; this very same homophobic and effeminophobic logic suffuses Anger’s exultations of the archetypal figures he refers to as “real guys.”¹⁸ Anger is explicitly invested, I argue, in maintaining his subject’s innocence of the homoerotic contexts that would condemn their masculinity, for it is only by way of their

purported ignorance that Anger can control them, as unwitting objects of a homoerotic filmic narrative of which he is the undisputed master.

In the pages to come, I adopt a method not unlike Anger's own, developing a portrait of my subject through productive slippages between different bodies (of people and texts), disparate eras, and the indistinct episodes of art and life. The reader will find that certain conventions of the art historical biographical study have been flipped: I begin my discussion of one of the most influential filmmakers of the twentieth century by evoking a film that may never have existed. I conspire, by way of my text, with the artist to present his films as instances in his life. I consider as serious subject matter texts of regrettably low quality. Throughout the better part of this chapter, I render the octogenarian Anger as a child. And I here begin my consideration of the oldest living subject surveyed in this thesis with the occasion of his death.

The demise of Kenneth Anger was announced in a full-page obituary that appeared in the *Village Voice* on October 26, 1967. (Figure 5) The end of Anger's career appeared to come cruelly on the heels of widespread acclaim earned by his 1963 film *Scorpio Rising*, which established Anger's signature style with audiences broader than those of any underground film released before or since.¹⁹ Utilizing the Eisensteinian montage techniques second only to Eisenstein's own in mastery, Anger sutured together seemingly antithetical objects of pop cultural fascination, wedding the image of the glamorous and dangerous motorcycle-riding rebel that had gained already iconic status in the American imagination with the moony crooning of

Motown and rock-and-roll singers—often pairing his laconic, leather-clad protagonists with the desirous wails of girl groups, to the effect of exposing the homoerotic currents that electrified even the most quintessential narratives of hard-boiled masculinity. In the dense thicket of double-entendre produced by combining pop music with deftly edited footage, Anger achieved something at once singularly innovative (no filmmaker, underground or mainstream, had ever used audio and visual elements in concert in this way),²⁰ and queerly, intimately familiar, enabling the film to cross over from the underground and pornographic venues in which it initially circulated to play for popular audiences. For the most dedicated of Anger’s growing fan base, the news purveyed by the *Village Voice* notice must have proved confounding, for Anger had not, as the obituary stated, been born in 1947—nor, as it turned out, was he dead.

As Anger would soon claim via a whirlwind of self-aggrandizing public statements, 1967 marked actually the death of his uncompleted film, *Lucifer Rising*.²¹ The story of *Lucifer*’s disappearance would become a mainstay in the litany of fantastically improbable events that constitutes Anger’s reckoning of his own life: a tapestry forged from statements and anecdotes purveyed through interviews, lectures, and public appearances whose threads have over the years intertwined in increasingly mystifying ways. In scores of public statements released over a period spanning four decades, Anger claims that *Lucifer* was stolen by the man once slated to play the film’s titular character.²² In 1966, Anger found “his” Lucifer—a figure who, in Anger’s Thelemite cosmology, represents the “crowned and conquering” child of the dawning Aquarian Age²³—in Robert “Bobby” Beausoleil, a former juvenile delinquent who by age seventeen had established himself as a heartthrob of the Los Angeles counterculture in his capacity as the guitarist for the psychedelic band Love.²⁴ By age nineteen, Beausoleil had moved into Anger’s

dilapidated Victorian mansion in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, intrigued, it seems, by the filmmaker's intentions to make a star of the aspiring musician and actor.²⁵ Around Beausoleil—an arrestingly handsome youth known familiarly as “Cupid”—Anger planned a film that would seize upon the trajectory towards which *Scorpio Rising* careened to its conclusion: from the themes of death and self-destruction that pervade the earlier film, he would evolve a grand vision of renewal and rebirth.²⁶

But this, Anger claims, was before Beausoleil, in an act of petty vindictiveness, absconded with the edited footage of *Lucifer Rising* and buried it in Death Valley in 1967.²⁷ Though Anger would for years identify his errant Cupid as the culprit responsible for *Lucifer*'s demise, Beausoleil's name did not become familiar to the public until two years later, after he was arrested on August 6, 1969, as a suspect in the murder of Malibu resident Gary Hinman.²⁸ On April 18, 1970, Beausoleil was found guilty of committing what was by then recognized as the first of the “Helter Skelter” murders ordered by Charles Manson, under whose influence Beausoleil had fallen since drifting to the Manson Family's infamous homestead at Spahn Ranch in Los Angeles.²⁹ Capitalizing upon Beausoleil's demonstratively demonic qualities, Anger continued to promote the story that Beausoleil had likewise “murdered” his film before it ever saw the light of the projector.³⁰

This charge, however, is one that Beausoleil has denied vociferously and consistently. In a 1991 phone interview that Beausoleil conducted from prison with Michelle Clifford, a researcher and ghostwriter for Bill Landis' *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger*, Beausoleil provided a considerably less sensational account of the *Lucifer* that never was. Anger, Beausoleil explained, had secured funds from anonymous backers to complete his next

work—funds that he ultimately used for ulterior expenses. Beausoleil maintains that Anger conjured the lie about the footage having been stolen to account for why he had no completed film to show.³¹ That Anger’s oeuvre is punctuated with film projects that were either aborted or abbreviated because he lacked the financial means to realize his original vision is not in and of itself evidence to support Beausoleil’s claim.³² One is nonetheless left to wonder why Beausoleil, who by the time of his interview with Clifford was best known as a convicted murderer and an affiliate of the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang,³³ would bother to deny so adamantly such a relatively trifling charge as petty theft.

Yet for Anger, yoking Beausoleil to the “death” of his film and the subsequent acts of symbolic suicide by which he determined to mark the end of his filmmaking career³⁴ has proved so imperative, that it was in the service of this story that Anger terminated his relationship with the man who remains his sole biographer. In his introduction to *Anger*, Landis explains the necessity of the “unauthorized” disclaimer that appears in the book’s title: upon learning that Clifford (Landis’ wife) had interviewed Beausoleil from prison, Anger declared via his trademark “magical” Puck Productions stationary³⁵ that Landis was “an avowed enemy” of his, and his biography only a “purported” one.³⁶ Landis thus became only one of many former friends and colleagues whom Anger has banished ceremonially from his life, in response to challenges posed to the veracity of a life story over which Anger claims sole authority.³⁷

Yet Landis, more than any other journalist who had previously found himself the object of Anger’s infamous rage, proved determined to respond in kind. As a writer for the *Village Voice* and a self-declared expert in underground and exploitation films, Landis claimed that his interest in producing a biography of Anger stemmed from his conviction that “a study of Anger’s

career could provide a microcosm of the phenomenon of American underground film.”³⁸ What Landis produced, however, represents the ultimate attempt to repeat, rebut, and revise each key point of Anger’s self-produced mythology. Beginning with a challenge to the actuality of the artist’s very name and birth date,³⁹ Landis continues throughout the book to argue that nearly every detail Anger offers in his accounts of his own work and life is to a significant degree untrue. Landis’ account, which remains the only substantive biography of Anger produced in English,⁴⁰ performs a curious function in that it is not, as Landis claims, devoted to the study of Anger’s films as much as it is to contradicting Anger’s accounts of how these films came to be; a biography whose main object is to undo the expansive *autobiography* Anger has so fastidiously maintained.

The treatment Anger receives in Landis’ biography, which unfurls a portrait of an artist whose narcissistic, volatile, and delusional qualities intensify and whose fabrications grow more desperate over the course of the sixty-seven years of his life which the book surveys, sets him apart in a field of biographically-oriented art historical studies that enshrine the self-aggrandizing tendencies of their subjects. Compounding these detrimental effects on Anger’s legacy are the few monographic works on Anger that do exist, which are largely plagued by a host of methodological problems that gesture with one hand to the difficulties inherent in taking on such a talented storyteller as Anger, and with the other point to acts of scholastic malpractice quite independent of the subject himself. Alice L. Hutchinson’s *Kenneth Anger: A Demonic Visionary* (2004), which bills itself as the first study of Anger’s “full body of work,”⁴¹ plagiarizes extensively from an essay by the American writer Carel Rowe that appears in *Moonchild: The Films of Kenneth Anger* (2001), an earlier, multi-author study of the filmmaker edited by Jack

Hunter.⁴² Within Hunter's compilation, an essay by Anna Powell exhibits a tendency unfortunately shared by several other authors who read Anger's investment in Thelemite philosophy as a key to interpreting his work, to the effect of reducing the rich visual and audible effects of Anger's films to mere illustrations of arcane theological concepts.⁴³ While Landis, to cite another example, never presents intentionally his biography as an academic study, the careless and unorthodox system he employs for citing his sources renders them in numerous instances all but untraceable.⁴⁴

The challenges of producing a scholastically sound study of Anger and his films are manifold, imposed by the contortions of Anger's artifice as well as by the unreliability of much of the scant literature on Anger, seemingly warped and distended almost by default in its relationship with its chimerical subject. For those who attempted to theorize rigorously Anger's work, roughly coincidentally with the emergence of the aforementioned problematic studies of the artist, the decision to shift focus from explicitly autobiographical readings of Anger's filmic output to the dispersive effects of the films on their audiences may have seemed as commonsensical as they did progressive. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, as writers broadened the parameters of the new field of queer theory, Anger enjoyed a surge of interest accorded to him by writers and theorists who exalted his formative influence on queer cinema, and on queer aesthetics more broadly. Overwhelmingly, those who claimed Anger for queer theory (including the writers Robert L. Cagle [1994], Juan A. Suárez [1996], Matthew Tinkcom [2002], and Vincent Brook [2006]) argued that both the style and content of Anger's films were illustrative of one of the principal theories to occupy the minds of the movement's early thinkers: camp.⁴⁵

Since Susan Sontag introduced camp as a topic of critical consideration in her landmark 1964 essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” queer theorists have employed critically the term in ways that depart significantly from Sontag’s famous articulation of the concept. Yet the form of camp that various writers identify in Anger’s work correlates directly with Sontag’s definitive articulation of the term, namely where she identifies this “variant of sophistication”—one with a particularly homosexual inflection—as “something of a private code, a badge of identity even.”⁴⁶ Sontag links unambiguously the ability to appreciate the “good taste of bad taste”⁴⁷ (which she, with this essay, established as definitive of camp itself) with a selectively-shared form of exclusive knowledge, the satisfaction of which is in no small part derived from the conviction that one can perceive things which others cannot. In a telling misappropriation of the noun form of the word—“a camp”—Sontag ignores its specific meanings in pre-Stonewall gay slang,⁴⁸ identifying it instead as an act of “duplicity” through which one is empowered to see “[b]ehind the ‘straight’ public sense in which something can be taken [...to find] a private zany experience of the thing.”⁴⁹

With near univocity, queer theorists who write about Anger argue that his films purvey exactly this sense of private, privileged, and transgressive knowledge via the mechanisms of camp. In his book *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (2002), Matthew Tinkcom, in his consideration of the popular “social performance” of avant-garde films, sees Anger’s idiomatic deployment of pop cultural sound and vision as characteristic of “camp intellectual production.”⁵⁰ The “gay sensibility” of Anger’s work, he argues, hinges on his “re-workings of mass cultural products [that] are most often informed by gay identifications and desires, and by the gay remotivation of cultural artifacts known as ‘camp.’”⁵¹ Mirroring this

sentiment in his book *Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (1996), Juan A. Suárez finds in Anger's work a particularly pre-Stonewall deployment of camp, in which specific pop cultural icons resonate as signifiers within an encoded chain of meaning that allows queer subjects to communicate safely their desires and thus provides for them a "strategy for survival."⁵² In their respective works, Suárez and Tinkcom, in concert with a host of other writers who examine Anger through a queer lens, agree: The purpose of Anger's camp filmic code is to activate established figures of hypermasculinity as homoerotic objects of spectatorial pleasure.

Certain of Anger's theorists find much to support this claim within his films: throughout Anger's oeuvre struts a parade of sailors, bikers, bodybuilders, and other figures whose respective statuses in the pantheon of iconic gay masculinities are certified. Especially in his films *Fireworks*, *Scorpio Rising*, and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965), Anger creates for his young, butch protagonists hedonistic spaces where women are blessedly absent, thus exposing how quickly concepts of heteronormativity and binary gender roles begin to deteriorate in the absence of visible gender "difference," a point Anger underscores gleefully through devices such as long, caressing shots of thickly muscled bodies belonging to subjects who feign obliviousness to their objectification, which is nonetheless signaled unmistakably in a girl group's triumphal chorus: "Hey-la, Hey-la, my boyfriend's back."⁵³ (Figure 6)

The function of such multilayered and mutually constitutive meanings in Anger's work, suggests Suárez, is to reveal the homoerotic subtexts of popular representations of American masculinity, from Marlon Brando films to the Sunday funnies (to utilize two examples highlighted in *Scorpio Rising*): the appearance of such immediately recognizable icons in

Anger's work, he writes, is to perform "a defamiliarizing that 'outs' the repressed homosocial and homoerotic signification of these specific popular texts."⁵⁴ (Figure 7) Too, where Suárez identifies Anger's appropriation of pop cultural ephemera as "dominated by a gay viewpoint that unveils meanings [...] such as homoerotic plots,"⁵⁵ we can consider productively the double meaning of the word "plot;" for Anger, as Suárez insists throughout his analysis, employs in his films a queer lexicon in order to communicate covertly with the gay male audiences to which, Suárez claims, he deliberately pitches his films.⁵⁶ This language of shared affinities is communicated via strategic evocations of idols such as Brando and James Dean, but also through the accessories employed by workaday men aiming to assert specific forms of postwar masculinity: muscle shirts and muscle cars, black leather and shiny studs, Navy whites and suggestively flaring matches.

That Anger would articulate the code of queer communication that Cagle, Suárez, and Tinkcom all claim for his work through the bodies of inscrutably masculine youths comes as no surprise (except inasmuch as Anger is one of the earliest filmmakers to engage explicitly this subject matter). What should (but heretofore has not) provoke both surprise and pause amongst Anger scholars is the reigning presumption that Anger's icons are totally and fundamentally ignorant of their own status as objects of homoerotic desire. Cagle and Suárez both rely on this presumption in their respective studies of Anger's films: to "out" the homoerotic "plot" allegedly present in a particular popular narrative means, after all, to claim the discovery of an ulterior sexuality of which the narrative's actors are (deliberately or not) unaware. Tinkcom, in his reading of *Scorpio Rising*, is explicit on this point: the film, he declares, "enacts the homoerotic

pleasure of its bike boy protagonists while withholding a sense of their having any intent to express their activities *as* homoerotic.”⁵⁷

While Tinkcom does not make entirely clear whether we are to believe that the cast of what is arguably the most instrumental film in the history of queer cinema had actually no idea what kind of picture they were making, his analysis leaves little doubt that the viewer’s enjoyment of the film depends upon the actors’ scripted innocence of their aggressively fetishized roles within it. More specifically, the viewer’s ability to enjoy Anger’s films as camp objects hinges absolutely on the presumed denseness of the sexy brutes featured therein. Should we assume that the Navy servicemen of *Fireworks* are cognizant of the ways in which the sailor, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has signaled homoerotic excess and access, or that the bikers of *Scorpio Rising* perform their ritual preening in leather and chains in correspondence with, not in spite of, the appropriation of these embellishments in gay male culture, there is simply no joke to be had, because it cannot be had at their expense. “Pure” camp, Sontag argues, is produced only when the sharp eye of an enlightened viewer discerns something satirical in cultural phenomena presented in total seriousness. “Camp,” she argues, “rests on innocence,” that is to say the innocence of the parties that are taken, by others, as objects of camp delight.⁵⁸ To attempt consciously—in other words consensually—to produce camp expression is “always harmful,” she declares. Thus by strict Sontagian doctrine, in order for camp to succeed, the camp “object” must always present itself as completely serious, or—to employ a useful synonym—completely “straight.”

There exists already a well-worn word for this perennial figure in Anger’s filmic lexicon, he who maintains a patina of unrefined masculinity even as he stands at the epicenter of an

economy of male homoerotic exchange. He is “trade”—a traditionally masculine, typically working-class man or boy who has sex with other men but retains nonetheless his identity as “heterosexual.”⁵⁹ He maintains this identity not only to the effect of enjoying the privileges extended to heteronormative subjects, but also for the pleasure of his male partners. “Trade,” a gay slang term of imprecise origins,⁶⁰ may imply that the ostensibly heterosexual partner participates in male homoerotic activities in exchange for money or other gifts; however, a boy or man may accept no such recompense for sexual favors, and still be identified as “trade” based on his perceived heterosexual identity. The trade boy’s erotic power hinges fundamentally on a pristine masculinity preserved through a mutually-agreed-upon amnesia that renders novel his every foray into male homoerotic activity, irrespective of his actual levels of experience. It is the trade boy—the perpetual innocent who proves a natural with every “first time”—whom Anger extols in his films, and whose innocence—and ignorance—he defends fiercely. Waxing nostalgic about the youths who portrayed the biker gangs in his *Scorpio Rising*—a group he identifies as working-class, Italian-American motorcycle enthusiasts from New York and New Jersey—Anger declares:

They were perfect actors for me because they lived in a state of wonderful innocence. [...] They would do things and wouldn’t say, ‘I shouldn’t do this because maybe I’m gonna get married two years from now and there’s going to be this picture of daddy getting fucked in the ass’.⁶¹

In this ostensible description of the making of his most famous film (aside from a bit of apparently simulated sodomy that occurs at a wild party, there is no scene in *Scorpio Rising* that matches this), Anger in fact fantasizes aloud an American subculture of Saturnalian homoerotic possibility beyond what even the most brazen of Gay Liberationists would dare to demand.

Within the walls of this Eden, fortified by an unassailable symmetry between masculinity and heteronormativity, “heterosexual” men literally stumble into one another’s rectums out of pure ignorance. Yet the hypermasculinity that fundamentally defines these subjects is so constitutive of this ignorance, Anger insists, that it must—indeed ought to be—defended violently against any suggestion of homoeroticism that threatens to encroach upon ignorance’s bliss. So he says of the attire of the bikers in *Scorpio Rising*, which as of the film’s release had already made its way into gay leather subcultures:

If you told them, ‘Hey, you must be kinky wearing those chains and leather jackets and tight Levi’s and engineer’s boots they would have knocked your block off. I admire that. They’re genuine people.’⁶²

By expressing admiration for cast members’ potential desire to “knock the block off” of anyone who would interpret their attire in homosexual terms, the godfather of queer cinema ironically upholds homophobic violence as desirable for preserving “genuine” masculinities. In *Scorpio Rising* and, as I will soon show, in *Fireworks* especially, Anger exults in the eroticism he derives from the dynamics of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines aptly as the “privilege of unknowing.”⁶³ Against that most fundamental Enlightenment equation of knowledge with power, Sedgwick argues that “ignorance effects can be harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking enforcements—perhaps especially around sexuality, in modern Western culture the most meaning-intensive of human activities.”⁶⁴ In this portion of her analysis, Sedgwick refers specifically to the “epistemological asymmetry” of laws that govern sexual violence perpetuated upon women by men, a system wherein the “ignorance” rapists claim in their own defense is explicitly rewarded, “inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed.”⁶⁵ In the case of men

and boys who suffer sudden violence at the hands of one who had appeared up to a point to be a willing male partner in sex or even mere flirtation, however, Sedgwick's formula takes on a new dimension: namely, that homophobic violence is excused or tacitly rewarded when executed by one who claims to have suffered a violation of *his* innocence/ignorance of the homoerotic context of his milieu.

This is the violence with which Anger flirts in his every filmic iteration of the trade boy, harnessing the petrifying effects of cinema to preserve like a fly in amber his coarse beauty, and keep at a tantalizing, yet manageable distance his potential for homophobic brutality. The themes of masculinity, ignorance, and violence that motivate Anger's desiring camera reveal fissures in the relationship between Anger's life and work and attendant issues of falsehood, veracity, and biography. The trade boy's fundamental falseness, in his willingness to maintain, against conspicuous evidence, that he does not "know" what he does, secures for him a paradoxical relationship with time: he is at once specific to the pre-Stonewall systems of gay male erotic expression with which Anger identifies, and timeless in his mystified origins and in the enduring appeal of his eroticized guilelessness. Anger thus produces the *jouissance* of a queer present unavailable in "real" time and space via his filmic invocations of the trade boy, through which he gains vicarious access to the eternal youth the trade boy enjoys from his enshrined position in the discourses of gay male erotic fantasy.

In order to re-member Anger's body of work, as well as the events he has endured in his own body, we must analyze bodies not his own: namely, those of the trade boy (who first appears in this chapter disappearing into the desert) and the film (buried, anthropomorphically, in its dunes). If we take as our guide through this murky critical territory the trade boy—a figure

fortunately adept at leading half-trusting parties through dark and winding passages—we will notice his appearance at pivotal junctures in Anger’s autobio- and film-ography alike, places where he is also, according to Landis, the center of a number of Anger’s most outlandish fabrications. Though he never identifies them precisely as “trade,” Landis throughout his biography of Anger returns repeatedly to the virile young men that vacillated in and out of Anger’s work and life in order to claim that their relationship to desire, capital, and film itself was contrary to what Anger claims.⁶⁶

While I confront later on in this chapter the mutual exclusivity which Landis presumes separates the subjects of male homosexual erotic exchanges from the allegedly impermeable masculine roles Anger claims for his subjects, I propose that Landis’ investigatory method can be strategically repurposed to explicate the significance of the trade boy in the overarching narrative that unites Anger’s life and work. We must then begin with the question that serves to collapse the camp code in which the trade boy appears as a subject for a knowing spectator’s pleasure, the question that the spectator must, and this is critical, ignore if he is to enjoy him: what, exactly, is the trade boy doing here? How has he come to occupy this lavatory, this street corner, this blue movie theater, this place dedicated to erotic exchanges between men with whom he purportedly shares no sociosexual affinity? What does he set in motion in Anger’s earliest surviving film, in which the trade boy, albeit dispersed across multiple bodies, is clearly for Anger the only boy in the world?

Fireworks begins with a clap of thunder heralding the appearance of a crumpled photograph, afloat in a pool of flickering water, yet alive with flames that melt paper and emulsion into an undifferentiated black. Quickly, the scene transitions to a strange pieta: A Navy

serviceman, silent and splendid in his dress whites, stands spread-legged to better balance the weight of a thin, birdlike young man, drooping unconsciously in his arms. (Figure 8) The sailor's eyes briefly meet the camera directly, and as if in response, the camera pulls slowly back as a flickering light throws the whites of clothes and skin into contrast with the surrounding darkness, shuddering with a regularity that evokes not quite convincingly flashes of lightning, or the glow of a growing fire.

Next we find the thin young man, still unconscious, but transported to the relative safety of his own bed. This is the adolescent Kenneth Anger himself. Anger's body is rigid, and his sleep fitful: his lips part, his chest heaves, and his fingers curl into the sheets, drifting towards his bedside and towards a plaster hand that is missing its middle finger. Anger is preceded in rising from bed by the erection of a singularly impressive tent in his sheets—but, with obvious disappointment, he discovers there only a tacky wooden “fetish”—a tourist simulacrum of an embodied object.⁶⁷ Scattered on the floor are identical photos of a single image: the same vision of Anger held in a sailor's arms to which we were just treated. The softly grainy film stock on which *Fireworks* was shot blurs further the distinction between the film itself and the mimetic repetition it contains, for Anger's surroundings seem neither sharper nor less distinct than these, the tangible residue of his dreams.

Anger dresses in what appears indeed to be his childhood bedroom, as confirmed by the presence of several sculptures Anger completed in high school, one of which he gazes at with uncertainty as he does up his pants. He collects the photos from the floor and tosses them onto the ashes of the cold fireplace. From his pants pocket he produces a matchbook bearing the insignia of the United States Navy, only to find the matches all spent. So bereft, he throws the

book in with the photos, and brushes his way past another, spindly sculptural composition, through a door marked with a hand-lettered sign reading “GENTS.” In all probability, Anger is in fact exiting into his bedroom closet.

Once through the door, however, Anger surveys a nighttime cityscape of a Los Angeles as silent as snow. Only the flashing lights of distant vehicles signal the presence of life—that is until outside is converted back to inside with the logic of a dream, and in this new interior shot Anger spots a muscle-rippled Navy sailor standing before a fully stocked bar. (Figure 9) The sailor shares Anger’s interest in his physique: he looks not at the smaller man, but at the knots of his own biceps and at the muscles that flutter within his abdomen as he flexes, poses, and preens before Anger’s appreciative eyes. The camera cleaves closely to each pose, splitting the sailor’s body into separate frames in a manner that, decades later, Laura Mulvey would claim is applied solely to Hollywood starlets, to the effect of stopping diegetic narrative dead.⁶⁸ The sailor begins to walk on his hands, launching himself bottom-up; suddenly emboldened, Anger produces a cigarette and silently mouths the only word in the film: “Light?”⁶⁹

The exhibitionist sailor turns vicious. Slapping the cigarette away, he overpowers Anger easily, backhanding him repeatedly and twisting his arm behind his back. Anger, twisting lithely, “takes” every (clearly false) blow on his feet. Dazed but determined, he returns slowly the cigarette to his mouth. The sailor takes advantage of their sudden proximity to a fireplace to provide Anger his requested light with a flaming “faggot” he plucks from the hearth.

The sailor departs and an evidently content Anger inhales deeply, appearing to contemplate (as he is once again outdoors) the winking lights in the distance. Suddenly, the strings of the Ottorino Respighi score Anger paired with the film⁷⁰ swell to signal the appearance

of a mob of Navy sailors, swinging thick chains with an ominous unanimity. (Figure 10) A series of cross-cuts from Anger's cigarette to the glowering men establish it as a burning brand marking Anger as both deviant and vulnerable. The men lumber slowly forward, their movements tracked by a series of shots focused directly at the level of their crotches—and also the chains that dangle at their sides. Anger all the while clutches defiantly his cigarette, until the circle around him closes; the cigarette falls and Anger follows, seemingly unprompted by physical force, straight down into the camera.

The sailors fall upon him, their faces alight with sadistic glee. As a suddenly-naked Anger gazes, dazed, up at the camera, a pair of thick fingers pry into his nostrils; this double penetration brings forth a geyser of watery “blood.” (Figure 11) As Anger's limbs are pulled asunder, he registers the rain of chains and fists upon his body through a choreography of overwrought writhing and silent screams. A bottle is shattered on the pavement, and the jagged edge placed against Anger's chest. Relentless fingers pry through the resulting wound, pulling apart layers of gore that resemble in no part human viscera to reveal a round meter, the needle spinning wildly within Anger's guts. Onto the peak of Anger's exquisitely chiseled chin pours languid strands of milky white fluid, which converge with the rivulets of blood on his chest. (Figure 12) Attentive viewers will here note a scene, brief as a heartbeat, in which Anger comes to at the end of a row of urinals, naked on the men's room floor but for a white sailor's cap on his head.

The door to the “GENTS” room swings open from the inside, the barrier between Anger's bedroom and the world beyond breached. Somewhere in this inchoateness, Anger's Navy savior smiles sheepishly. Slowly and deliberately, he parts the white cloth of his fly to

reveal a Roman candle, to which he lowers a match. The music swells triumphant as smoke billows and sparks fly. (Figure 13) A bandaged Anger is barely recognizable behind the fully decorated Christmas tree he brandishes before him. (Figure 14) Emerging sideways from the closet, dripping with tinsel and glass balls, the tree bears a flame in the place of a star. This sets ablaze, finally, the photos in the fireplace. A close shot captures the pictures, arranged in a curiously neat progression in the hearth so that the scene of Anger's rescue appears to repeat ad infinitum, a moment stilled in spite of the flames that lick the frame. (Figure 15)

We return to find again Anger asleep in his bed. Before we conclude with despair that we have been led again to that most banal of narrative clichés—everything our protagonist has been through was all but a dream—we see that Anger has returned to “a bed less empty than before”.⁷¹ next to his prone form lies another man, his face obscured by the flickering fingers of a halo of scratched emulsion. (Figure 16) Near him sits the plaster hand, its fingers, and wholeness, restored.

So too, argues Suárez, does Anger with this film posit himself as a complete subject whose wholeness is restored and whose desires resonate genuinely and defiantly in an artificial society. In a statement that at once summarizes and exemplifies popular critical interpretations of *Fireworks*, Suárez postulates:

The model of transgressive subjectivity the movie proposes is based on a model of depth which contrasts a spurious, superficial society and a ‘true,’ inner self. In this scheme, the external society (portrayed in the figures of the sailors) appears as unauthentic, violent, and insensitive; opposition to it takes place by validating the authenticity and sincerity of the artist's subjective experience.⁷²

Fireworks, to Suárez, is but the “most typical” of a number of postwar experimental films through which their creators attempted to forge introspectively gay identities against the effacing forces of majoritarian homophobia.⁷³ The film is, in Suárez’s estimation, distinctive amongst contemporary works such as Gregory Markopoulos’s *Psyche* (1947), Willard Maas’s *Images in the Snow* (1948), and Curtis Harrington’s *Fragment of Seeking* (1946-47)⁷⁴ only by the particularly classic fashion by which it utilizes the filmic utterance to illuminate the darkness of prejudice, projecting against it a vital (if vulnerable) gay male subjectivity.

Yet Landis characteristically reads the occasion of *Fireworks*’ creation not as an expression of an essential truth, but as a feint designed to draw attention away from another, more unpleasant one. In his biography, Landis’ discussion of *Fireworks* is prefaced with his exposé of an incident Anger has struck from his personal record, an episode which, Landis argues, constitutes Anger’s real “coming out” story. It begins, he claims, the moment a young Kenneth Anglemeyer was trapped inside a camera.

According to Bob Anglemeyer, Anger’s estranged brother upon whom Landis relies for most of his insights into the filmmaker’s early life, “Ken” was, while still living in the family home, caught in one of the entrapment stings that posed a notorious danger to gay men in the 1940s and 50s.⁷⁵ The Los Angeles police, with their legendary adroitness at such operations,⁷⁶ arrested him at the site of a giant camera obscura that still occupies the bluffs of Pacific Palisades Park in Santa Monica. Prior to the development of the modern movie theater, camera obscuras delighted tourists through the simple optical trick of projecting into a darkened room the surroundings outside, by way of a large, adjustable lens that cast a flipped image of the landscape onto a screen. The irony that Anger, who would come to describe his own filmic practice as a

method of seduction and entrapment,⁷⁷ would be thus ensnared within the belly of a great, primitive camera is one Landis recognizes and exploits throughout his third chapter. *Fireworks*, he declares floridly, represents Anger's efforts to "transform the shattering, traumatic camera obscura incident into an ecstatic magical experience."⁷⁸

By reuniting in his text the film and the devastating experience with which Anger sought to displace it, however, Landis effectively replicates the trauma already magnified glaringly when Anger's father, after bailing his son out of jail, made the incident the topic of a mortifying discussion involving Anger's entire family.⁷⁹ If Landis' account is to be believed, we can identify this discussion as the turning point that motivated Anger to leave forever the family home: shortly thereafter, he moved by himself into a tiny apartment in the Hollywood Hills with the financial help of his supportive maternal grandmother, Bertha Coler.⁸⁰ Aside from her, Anger would from this point on never attempt to maintain a close, or even cordial relationship with any member of his immediate family.⁸¹

The cruising sting, and the coercive revelation of Anger's sexuality that it produced, proved to be the rift that separated permanently Anger and his family. In Anger's capture, the vice squad entrapment dynamics functioned all too typically to the effect of excising suddenly from the Anglemyer family a son and brother, and replacing him irrevocably with a criminal degenerate. In her book *The Queer Child: Or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton describes an eerily similar formation that, she contends, persists even in the minds of ostensibly enlightened contemporary parents: "The phrase 'gay child,'" she argues, "is a gravestone marker for where or when one's straight life died."⁸² Extending the all-pervasive weight of heteronormativity, reigning Western cultural paradigms forbid the conceptualization of

the child as a sexual being, making “gay” or “queer” descriptors that can be appended to the term “child” only retrospectively, as Stockton explains:

Certain linguistic markers for [the queer child’s] queerness arrive only after it exits its childhood, after it is shown not to be straight. That is to say, in one’s teens or twenties, whenever (parental) plans for one’s straight destination have died, the designation ‘homosexual child,’ or even ‘gay kid,’ may finally, retrospectively, be applied. ‘I was a gay child.’ This has been the only grammatical formulation allowed to gay childhood.⁸³

It is through this time-traveling process of “backwards birthing,” Stockton writes, that the queer subject submits before the social, and before the family in particular, a self that will never quite cohere, forever displaced in the ghostly child that the queer adult nominally once was, but never presently realized himself as: “by the time the tombstone is raised (‘I was a gay child’), the ‘child’ by linguistic definition has expired.”⁸⁴ *Fireworks*, I contend, is such a gravestone, marking the adult Kenneth Anger’s sacrifice of the child Kenneth Anglemyer, and thereby screening the destruction of one kind of boy—introspective, imaginative, and effete—at the hands the boy who would come to replace him—careless, impulsive, and brutishly masculine. *Fireworks* would prove to be the last self-portrait Anger rendered explicitly as such, for once carried by the trade boy to the sparkling pyre, Anger would forevermore reference his own subjectivity in his films by replaying, in a variety of guises, this burning and euphoric moment of erotic initiation and severance from the patrilineal order. Too, with every celluloid frame, Anger conjures up again the ghost of the boy he once was. In so arguing, I join Landis in maintaining that *Fireworks* constitutes a displacement of the traumatic incident in the camera obscura, while emphasizing a critical difference: I view this substitution as a creative strategy determinative of

Anger's entire filmic career, rather than a desperate, if elegant means of burying a humiliating reality.

If we assume that Anger set out intentionally with his film to eliminate the child he was and the ties to the Anglemyer family that he encapsulates, then Landis' claim that Anger moved back his birthdate to make himself seventeen at the time of *Fireworks*' production⁸⁵ takes on a new significance, belying Anger's calculated decision to present the film not as the product of a twenty-year-old adult, but of a seventeen-year-old still defined legally as a child. Thus it will be helpful to determine what kind of child Anger forfeited in *Fireworks*, not the least because it was during his childhood that he discovered and grasped the power to create, through film, a viable place for him to grow into. For the incipient sensation of "knowing" one is different that, according to Stockton, haunts protogay children, inspires the worry that "there is simply nowhere to grow;" consequentially, writes Stockton, such children avoid growing up into a future they sense is already ill-suited for them by "growing sideways," retreating into metaphors which represent destinies they can control.⁸⁶ These sideways strategies, according to Stockton, are endemic to the play of all children, not simply those who turn into adult queers: it is by taking as real the imaginary that a child makes a spouse from a dog, a child from a doll,⁸⁷ or, in Anger's case, a life from a film.

On the topic of Anger's childhood, Landis and Anger's respective accounts concur at least on the point that Anger's earliest introduction to cinema is bound up indissolubly with the figure of his magical grandmother, Bertha Coler. It was she, writes Landis, who took Anger to his first movie, "a double bill of Al Jolson in *The Singing Fool* and Sol Lesser's *Thunder Over Mexico*," the latter a heavily-edited version of an

unfinished Eisenstein film which would nonetheless first expose Anger to the montage techniques he would later wield so expertly.⁸⁸ It was in the attic of her Holly Drive home, claims Anger, that he as a child would caper in the silks and beads of the flapper gowns his grandmother kept there; these, he avers, were souvenirs of her career working as a seamstress and an occasional extra during Hollywood's great silent film era.⁸⁹ It was his grandmother, Anger has long maintained, who entertained him endlessly with gossip about the film stars she met over her career, tales rather too racy for a small child that would later provide fodder for Anger's landmark compendium of salacious silver screen rumor, *Hollywood Babylon* (1965; 1975).

Given the clear importance that Anger's grandmother holds in his accounts of his personal history, it seems almost inevitable that Landis would decry these memories, too, as so much smoke and mirrors. Landis reveals that Anger's siblings, Bob Anglemeyer and Jean Anglemeyer Roof, deny "adamant[ly]" that Bertha Coler was ever involved in the movie industry.⁹⁰ The roles of Hollywood seamstress and inveterate gossip rather belonged, Landis claims, to a woman he identifies only as "Diggy," a close companion with whom Coler cohabitated beginning in 1932, when Anger was five years old.⁹¹ Landis does not elucidate whether he believes Anger's conflation of one woman with the other to be a conscious obfuscation or a slip of the memory on Anger's part. He is unambiguous, however, on the role that Coler, and by extension her live-in companion played in fomenting in Anger a pattern of creative indulgence and consequent, terminal immaturity. Through the bitter reminiscences of Bob Anglemeyer, a portrait of the child "Ken" as a coddled (grand)mama's boy emerges:

He was closer to our mother and our grandmother than *my* father. [Italics mine] I think my mother and grandmother spoiled him. They were overpowering to a certain extent. They thought he was a genius—even before school. Anything he wanted he got.⁹²

Coler and her daughter, in Anglemeyer's memory, undermined the authority of his and Anger's father, Wilbur Anglemeyer, by encouraging Anger's artistic interests and releasing him from his obligations to perform acts of patrilineal fealty. The details of Coler's life which Landis chooses to emphasize—her divorce at a time when American social norms rendered such an act almost unthinkable, her shrewd real estate investments which enabled her to sustain her children and their families throughout the Great Depression, her electing to spend the remainder of her life with her “ladyfriend,” and, as Landis dismisses them sneeringly, her “little artistic fugues”⁹³—render a subtle but sure picture of a woman who usurped the patriarchal order of the nuclear family, and moreover inspired young Kenneth to believe that he, too, could fashion a life to his liking. And it was Coler, the story goes, who presented Anger with his first 16mm camera as a birthday gift.⁹⁴

Anger's drive towards experimental film, according to Landis' schema of the filmmaker's childhood, is indebted to two factors: the first is his grandmother, who (by herself or together with the mysterious “Diggy”) supplied the child Anger with emotional support and creative stimulation, and bankrolled the newly-emancipated adult Anger with financial contributions that would, in Landis' view, render him puerilely dependent upon “family allowances and bursts of money” throughout his entire adult life.⁹⁵ The second, he asserts, is the brief career as a child Hollywood actor which Anger claims to have enjoyed in the 1930s. In the annals of Anger's personal mythology, the story of his playing the role of the Changeling Prince in Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) remains one of

his most treasured. (Figure 17) Anger's claim to have appeared as a turban-clad toddler in this effusively glittery product of Hollywood's Golden Age is, unsurprisingly, wanting for evidence: the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences professes to be unable to "confirm or deny" his presence in this uncredited role.⁹⁶ Yet the typically cynical Landis accepts Anger's version of these events with startling guilelessness: the Changeling Prince is truly the young Anger, he asserts, simply because "visually, he's immediately recognizable."⁹⁷

Landis is evidently willing to suspend disbelief so long as the stories to which he accedes suit his own conclusions. Were he not willing to proliferate the fable of Anger's childhood acting career, he could not, in turn, assert that Anger's inability to grow this career constitutes a formative failure that would shape his filmic output. Landis argues that Anger's still-nascent acting practice was cut short by reason of his soft, wispy voice, which he claims rendered impossible any chances Anger may have had of breaking into the "talkies" as an adult.⁹⁸ This, Landis maintains, inspired in Anger an enduring bitterness towards Hollywood that he would seek to avenge in the rancorous pages of *Hollywood Babylon* as well as in his deliberate decision to operate outside of the cinematic mainstream.⁹⁹

I have endeavored thus far to show how Landis portrays Anger's development as a filmmaker as rooted precisely in a failure to develop, inducted as Anger was into the escapist cinema-going culture of the Great Depression and supported in his artistic escapades by overly-indulgent female relatives who deterred him from the masculinist pursuit of earning one's own living through hard work. By the time Anger arrives at adolescence, in Landis' biographical sketch, his effete voice announces the detrimental effects of his habitual equivocations and financial irresponsibility on his masculinity. By implying that Anger's dedications to fiction, to

women, and to film are interrelated, Landis conforms tacitly to the model of homosexuality as “arrested development” espoused by rightist, anti-gay organizations and demagogues.¹⁰⁰ In forging explicit connections between the narratives of Anger’s childhood, which number among his most closely guarded, and the escapist aims of his films, Landis establishes Anger’s filmmaking career as the petulant protest of a queer boy who refuses to grow up.

Against this condescending view, I contend instead that Anger, beginning with *Fireworks*, developed a filmmaking methodology that empowered him to release himself from the obligations of performing a socio-sexual role with which he is especially incompatible, and moreover to destroy, by way of these explosively imaginative pyrotechnics, the heteronormative milieu that demands of him these pretenses, supplanting a suffocating fiction with a liberating one. If I grant momentary credence to the gravity Landis ascribes to Anger’s voice, in effecting his transition from appearing before the camera to disappearing behind it, then I must by turn note how especially remarkable was Anger’s later decision to append to *Fireworks* a spoken prologue. It remains, sixty-six years after the film’s making as of this writing, the single work in Anger’s oeuvre in which his voice is recorded. In the softly lisping cadences which, Landis claims, terminated Anger’s future as an actor, he summarizes eloquently the film’s enduring effects on the only audience with which Anger is here concerned: himself:

In *Fireworks*, I released all the explosive pyrotechnics of a dream [...] These imaginary displays provide a temporary release.¹⁰¹

The release Anger seeks in *Fireworks* (aside from the more obvious connotations of sexual release which pyrotechnics have come to signify in film and television) is clearly from the supervision of the family. It matters hardly whether this emancipation is sought early, by a

restless seventeen-year-old, or by a man of twenty who has perhaps overstayed his welcome at home. This is nowhere more obvious than in the film's spectacular crescendo, wherein Anger returns home from his harrowing cruising trip, pushing back through the closet into which he had disappeared with the boughs of a blazing Christmas tree. The strange composite of Anger's skinny torso and the tinsel branches, sneaking like stealthy Birnam Wood to lay siege to his father's fortress, compels the viewer to consider the typical positionality of the body to this most symbolically weighted of conifers.

It is beneath the Christmas tree that the American family huddles to profess gratitude for gifts provided, mythically, by a magical patriarch, a stand-in for the actual father whose labor ostensibly makes possible the family's festive bounty. It is during the Christmas season, argues Sedgwick, in which the voice of the church resonates most univocally with those of the nominally secular institutions of the state, of commerce, and of course, the family. It is the family, she asserts in her articulation of "Christmas effects," that merges most completely with the holiday, given how "the pairing 'families/Christmas' becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of 'the' family."¹⁰² So Anger chose purposefully the sparkling symbol of seasonal confederation between family, church, and state as the torch by which to light his childhood bedroom. It sets ablaze the remnants of Anger's sexual shame—the photographs of the vulnerable Anger in the arms of the strong sailor that were formerly the objects of his chagrin—and works in glorious concert with the Roman candle jutting from the same sailor's fly, exulting an era of independence in the way only fireworks can.

Fireworks, Anger flatly avers, became possible only once his family “went away for the first time in my life and left me alone.”¹⁰³ By Anger’s telling, the film was made in the precious hours afforded to him when his family left uncharacteristically for a weekend vacation. That Anger’s brother Bob counters this claim as untrue, maintaining that the film takes place actually in a Hollywood Hills residence and not the Anglemyer home,¹⁰⁴ effectively only underscores Anger’s conscious construction of the film as a statement of antipathetic opposition to the Anglemyer family. While the calculated blurriness of Anger’s personal chronology makes it virtually impossible to determine with certainty whether *Fireworks* was made prior to or in the aftermath of Anger’s entrapment in Pacific Palisades Park, the film delivers loud and clear the message that the “coming out” conversation that Anger was ultimately forced to undergo with his family will, within the controlled microcosm of his own film, take place only over his dead body.

For every author who has deferred to the most apparently obvious—yet deceptively contemporary—interpretation of Anger’s literal “coming out of the closet” in *Fireworks*, and interpreted therefore the film as a resounding public announcement of his sexuality,¹⁰⁵ has glossed over the fact that the transformational journey Anger undertakes in the film begins when he ducks *into* the closet. Nor is this the cramped metaphorical space of self-denial and compulsive deception that “the closet” signifies today, but rather a direct passageway to the perilous enticements of public sex between men. This is because *Fireworks*, logically enough, articulates an understanding of the terms “closet” and “coming out” specific to the pre-Gay Liberation era in which the film was made, and when, as Samuel R. Delany explains, both terms denoted significantly different meanings than the ones with which they currently correspond.

In his influential essay “Coming/Out,” Delany distinguishes the meaning of “coming out” as it appears in contemporary parlance from its use in pre-Stonewall gay slang, when, taking its cue from the “coming out” balls of Southern debutantes, the term designated the subject’s entrance into a rather different kind of social circle. To “come out” meant to have one’s first homosexual experience, and in so doing join the ranks of gay society.¹⁰⁶ Reflected in the contemporary understanding of the term is a facet of this more antiquated definition, in the movement it implies from the isolation imposed by impulses one dares not to act upon, to the unfettering relief of one’s recognition, and acceptance, within the social. Yet the critical distinction between the two lies in the difference between the intimacy implied in the earlier definition, in which the scope of one’s revelation may be as small as one likes, however deeply personal (as Delany reminds us wryly, this definition involves *coming*),¹⁰⁷ and the broad public confession that the later meaning of the term demands, as a political response to—and ostensible cure for—a society that criminalized and pathologized the desires coming out celebrated.

To conduct life as a queer in America in the 1940s and 1950s, under the constant threat of public revelation in the form of blackmail and police raids on gay social spaces, and the consequent loss of one’s job, family, and livelihood that such an indictment implied, mandated the constant encryption of crucial aspects of one’s life.¹⁰⁸ Shockingly, the relationship between Anger’s aptitude for mythologizing and the mortal necessity of maintaining a constant state of falsity that dominated queer life during his youth has up to this point gone completely unacknowledged; this omission gapes even larger when one considers the critical changes in the American queer’s socially-mandated responsibility to truth that Anger’s filmmaking career straddles. For as Delany notes, the coming-out imperative promoted by the Gay Liberation

movement was as much a reactionary response to the popular notion that gays are innately predisposed to falsehood as it was a means of releasing gay subjects from the isolation of socially-mandated silences. The House Un-American Activities Committee, he recalls, justified their aggressive persecution of homosexuals in the 1950s by claiming that homosexuals were vulnerable to blackmail and would thus do anything—even put at risk the nation’s security—to avoid public detection. The Gay Liberationist response to this stunningly circular logic was, Delany writes, to argue that, “if we’re ‘out,’ nobody *can* blackmail us and nobody can accuse us of being blackmailable.”¹⁰⁹

With this shift in address from the insular camaraderie of gay society to the explicitly hostile audiences of straight social formations as figured by the law, the church, and especially the family, the meaning of “coming out” changed completely with its adoption into the lexical and political strategies of the Gay Liberation movement. Suddenly, one “came out” of a closet (Delany notes that never before had these two terms been linked; a “closet queen” was in fact someone who derived *pleasure* from knowing that family and friends did not “know” his sexual predilections¹¹⁰) in order to plead one’s sexuality for the edification of straight audiences. The active, sexual connotations of the earlier definition of the term were thus replaced by the confessional and essentially passive position that the term’s newer formation implied.¹¹¹ Since Stonewall, Delany observes, “‘coming out’ has acquired extraordinary significance in the gay community—so much significance that many of us might even say coming out ‘defines’ the difference between being gay and an older, pre-gay notion of being homosexual.” In response to the now-dominant paradigm which maintains that if one has not “come out”—a confession that is first and foremost directed towards one’s immediate family—that one is committing a betrayal

against oneself and the “gay community” at large,¹¹² Delany muses: “[...] just when and if (in the post-Stonewall sense) I *did* come out?”¹¹³ “Or,” he wonders pointedly, “finally, is it something that I [...] can never *really* do, because I never came out to Mother?”¹¹⁴

Anger’s *Fireworks*, I argue, can be read not only as an expression of resistance to the coercive brutality by which pre-Stonewall American subjects were “outed” through state- and community-imposed surveillance, but also as a prescient rebellion against what Delany identifies as the “oppressive aspect of surveillance and containment”¹¹⁵ immersed within the contemporary definition of coming out, inasmuch as it demands the gay subject confess his sexuality preemptively to the very parties who constitute the social, religious, governmental, and commercial environments that threaten him with both psychic and physical violence. In *Fireworks*, Anger refuses emphatically the post-Stonewall formation by which one gains one’s politico-sexual identity by clearing it first with the family—encapsulated for Delany in Mother, but figured in Anger’s work as an aggressive absence that signifies Father.

Like Delany, who challenges the unilateral significance of the single, definitive coming out confession by reviewing in his essay a series of formative sexual encounters (the earliest occurring when he was seven years old) that occurred prior to his acknowledging directly to a general public his homosexuality,¹¹⁶ Anger denies the monolithic power ostensibly produced in the reconciliation of familial expectations with filial deviations that occurs in the coming out conversation. He too affects this by insisting upon a vision of sexual initiation that is multifocal, flaring repetitively across the field of space-time, rather than condensed within a single, transformative moment. In *Fireworks*, Anger unspools the action of erotic initiation up to a momentous *stop*—freezing the scene of sexual climax and forestalling eternally the subsequent

public recognition and condemnation of this erotic ritual that, by Landis' account, actually accompanied Anger's early initiation into sex between men.

The power wielded by the filmmaker, Anger declares in his short essay "Time Must Have A Stop," is no less than the power to interrupt the temporal flow and thus negate reality.¹¹⁷ All cinema, he declares, is an illusion of life forged by the persistence of vision, the audience's automatic compliance in suturing together disparate still photographs projected in rapid succession. The filmmaker who commands so easily the minds of others is thus a "master magician," and his usurping of the temporal order is for Anger encapsulated in the film still.¹¹⁸ The ideal, "ultimate frame" of Anger's imagination is one cut so closely that "it has no fractional part of a Past or Future remaining in it;" but in so doing, Anger continues, we have thus "eliminated *duration*," and created "[a] Present [that] cannot be said to exist at all." "The Present," Anger insists, "is the most obviously unreal and unprovable tense [of the Past, Present, and Future]; it surely *did not* exist in the Past, it surely *will not* exist in the Future; and it cannot be allowed any duration, for a fraction of an instant, NOW."¹¹⁹ Thus, Anger concludes triumphantly, "it cannot be proved that Time itself has *any existence whatsoever*."¹²⁰

Beginning with *Fireworks*, Anger has endeavored to create through his films the impossible temporal space of "now," a moment framed so tightly that the past can have no influence and the future cannot intrude. This supremely independent chronological state, like the interstices of black between each frame of film that are, when projected, invisible to the human eye, is represented by oblivion rather than form. It is produced, in *Fireworks* and evermore in Anger's oeuvre, in the annihilating collision between oppositional, but attracting forces that is the scene of erotic initiation: the point at which the figure of the small boy is dashed against the hard wall

of the trade boy, an impact from which he will never salvage a unitary self. It is, moreover and in defiance of the laws of time, a moment that can be respooled and replayed, interminably, while retaining, incredibly, the sensation of an innocence to be gloriously lost.

The figure of “a small boy,” writes Michael Moon in his book *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (1998), crystallizes in a range of popular narratives “[t]he processes that seem [...] to have been formative of modern queer childhood—of uncanny perception and imitation, of initiation and self-initiation, of the gradual recognition of one’s desires and the production and transmission of images and narratives of these desires.”¹²¹ It is “the scene of sexual instruction and initiation” that such young subjects are typically figured as undergoing, Moon argues, that is especially important to the formation of the erotic imaginations of many queer subjects.¹²² Moon moreover makes the crucial distinction that “initiation,” to many queers, is not synonymous with “singularity.” Moon makes his point in drawing on a formative gap in the gay S-M writer John Preston’s description of the New York gay sex club, the Mineshaft. In the 1970s, according to Preston, the bar served primarily an initiatory function for its patrons, yet the bar, he states paradoxically, was populated mostly by “regulars.” From this apparent contradiction Moon concludes that, “the queer theater of initiation is not about ‘one-time’ experiences, but about the restaging of fantasies and/or memories of or desires for ‘first-time’ experiences, endlessly.”¹²³ The obvious zeal with which queer subjects, such as those who returned compulsively to the Mineshaft, pursue reenactments of initiatory pleasure serves finally, in Moon’s estimation, to undermine critically the privileged position “originality” is typically presumed to hold over imitation.¹²⁴

In Anger's films, the scene of initiation is indexical to the work of productive falsehood and its purpose of making meaningless the concept of originality. By staging and re-staging the moment of sexual initiation, the point at which the coagulation of his sexual identity eclipses all other social identities to which he may once have answered, Anger triggers continually the dissolution of his origins and all the familial connections and expectations they imply. Anger, as I show in the pages to follow, replayed the instance of erotic commencement quite literally by taking private solace in repeat viewings of his *Fireworks*, but also makes this process of perpetual initiation evident within the diegesis of the film itself. For Anger's trip through the closet door and "into the blackness of initiation" is not the inaugural occurrence that Landis, in his reading of the film, presumes it to be.¹²⁵ We may presume as much because when Anger examines his matchbook—that coy device for inviting one to call—he finds he is out of matches, and therefore unable to immolate and forget his persistent dreams of being borne up in a sailor's arms. (Figure 18) This empty paper souvenir, emblazoned with the insignia of the U.S. Navy, signifies that Anger's forthcoming journey in search of a light is not his first—and perhaps that it will not be the first time that he has suffered for it. Why then, we are compelled to ask, does he return to this dangerous territory? Why, even after catching the back of a sailor's fist across the face for his impertinence, does Anger keep raising suggestively that cigarette to his lips?

The sexualized violence that Anger inflicts upon his avatar in *Fireworks* appears particularly disturbing—and Anger's intentions unsettlingly perverse—in light of the oral testimony Landis presents which suggests an autobiographical referent informing the film's vicious climax. Landis relates the reminiscences of Ed Earle, a former classmate and friend of Anger's at the University of Southern California. In those early days of the young filmmaker's

emancipation, Earle recalls, “[Anger] would have these bursts of energy and then he would disappear for two or three days, and you’d go over to see if he was alive or not or whether he had eaten or not or whether he had shacked up with somebody who’d beaten him up.”¹²⁶ Earle’s description of Anger as a newly independent student—poor, struggling, and manic—links intimately his efforts to develop his artistic vision with the energy he devoted to cruising. It suggests also a pattern of attacks on Anger by violent tricks.

Perhaps the most immediate response to this apparently problematic relationship between the non-consensual violence allegedly visited upon Anger by intimate partners and the blatant eroticization of a brutal, homophobic attack in *Fireworks* would be that Anger in creating the film essentially fetishized his own terrorization by his sexual partners. Against this (itself inherently violent) strain of reasoning, however, we must recall that the power wielded by the filmmaker “magus” Anger believes himself to be is the power to reorder reality, capturing within frames of film instants of life to be cut, reordered, and rearranged; divorced, as it were, from their temporal context and thus their relationship to reality. Summarizing the collected thoughts of Kathy Acker, Lynda Hart, and Ann Cvetkovich on the topic of sadomasochism, Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds* articulates the practice as “a phatasmatic return to a sexual trauma for the purposes of organizing it into an experience.”¹²⁷ With no real-life sexual horizons available other than the violence- and entrapment-plagued spaces of cruising, buffered by a society that by turns ignored and condoned such attacks, Anger provided for himself in *Fireworks* an erotic realm he could definitively control. Through the unreality of filmic time Anger is able to approximate the erotic suspension of the initiatory phases of cruising—the tension of which is maintained by the possibility of danger as well as gratification—while simultaneously determining when and how

and to what extent he will be “hurt,” and thereby displacing actual, violent realities with staged imitations.

The organization of sadomasochistic scenes, argues Freeman, can grant to the participants an uncanny power to direct the currents of time. Glossing Lynda Hart’s analysis of Sade’s depersonalization techniques (and the obliteration of local and temporal specificity which they effect), Freeman writes that such techniques provide “a means not only of producing temporal dissonance in the present but of recasting the future in terms other than those dictated by the past.”¹²⁸ In addition, Freeman claims, film is “about the rupture of the still image, about arresting a temporal flow then recatalyzing it—and eventually [revealing] the inherent eroticism of this very dynamic.”¹²⁹

The filmic rhythms of *Fireworks* serve to delay and extend, to slow almost to a stopping point the typically frenzied activities of sex and violence, as Anger edits both according to the same modular patterns, utilizing the filmic frame to isolate areas of interest in the male body. (Figure 19) Such sustained focus on the fragmented body, Laura Mulvey contends famously in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), disrupts the very coherency of the cinematic narrative, exploding the “Renaissance space” by which the viewer aligns his gaze with that of the hero on the screen. The flattening effect of focusing on select parts of the body, Mulvey argues, makes too obvious the filmic woman as a fetish, and makes too obvious the viewer’s position as a voyeur.¹³⁰ Mulvey was thinking specifically of Dietrich’s legs and Garbo’s face, but as Anger makes palpable in *Fireworks*, by the mid-1940s a quiet surge of interest in photography and film focusing on the posed male body was already underway in America. Created just two years after the infamous Athletic Model Guild Studios opened in Los Angeles, *Fireworks* approximates

(and to a significant degree anticipates) the aesthetics of such posing strap publications as *Physique Pictorial* and *Young Adonis*,¹³¹ magazines that adroitly purveyed soft-core pornography for gay men by passing as “health and exercise” magazines.

Yet while AMG publications tended to favor full-body poses depicting well-oiled and muscled men, alone or in pairs, Anger brings his camera closer and deeper, allowing the viewer’s eyes to run over the abdominal ridges and bicep bulges of the flexing sailor in the bar. Posing strap postures exult the masculine body for its hardness, its incontrovertible wholeness, obscuring all orifices and all traces of the bodily fluids that may leak from them,¹³² Anger, by dramatic contrast, depicts the desecration of his own body in *Fireworks* utilizing framing and editing strategies identical to those he employs to convey the tumescent beauty of the sailor’s muscles. In presenting his own body as a thing to be beaten, he frames tightly and stages intentionally specific violations: the penetration of the nose, the opening up of the belly, the drenching of the face. In frame by unhurried frame, the male body is stripped, slit open, made sticky with blood and “cream.”

In considering these suspended moments of bodily dissolution, and considering as well how Anger’s “journey” appears to consist of almost no travel prior to his abrupt evisceration, Freeman’s gloss on Beauvoir’s reading of Sade resonates particularly clearly: sadomasochism, in Beauvoir’s estimation, depends on “tableaux rather than adventures.”¹³³ Amongst Anger’s most remarkable achievements in *Fireworks* is his conveyance of the artful stillness of the tableaux within the inherently dynamic medium of film. He conveys this most lucidly in extracting the striking image of his listless body hoisted by his Navy savior from the opening scene of the film and reinserting it later into the narrative in the form of the identical photographs that litter

Anger's bedroom, forcing the viewer to consider this previously animated image as a still. It is this principle that organizes the photographs Anger had previously pitched carelessly into the fireplace into such an unlikely tidy sequence among the embers, images that appear exactly alike even as flames curl the corners of the prints, receding in a neat row to evoke a flipbook that conveys not movement, but stasis.

The identity of each photograph, isolated and suspended even from the narrative time of *Fireworks* itself, approximates as closely as possible the ideal and impossible "now" Anger strives in his films to conjure: an instant of total obliteration before a fierce form of masculine tenderness, unmarred by the influence of the past and forestalling whatever consequences the future holds. For sadomasochism, as Stockton crucially asserts, "is a special way of pursuing pleasure that comes on delay."¹³⁴ Yoking this strategy to the techniques of "delay" that, she asserts throughout her book, protogay children develop in order to stave off obligations to grow into roles they dread, Stockton notes that the masochist, in particular, slips the authority of the father by disrupting the pattern by which physical punishments are meted out for rebellious behavior. Following Deleuze, Stockton notes that the masochist's extending and suspending the abjection of the punished child into his adult future, long after the lessons such measured acts of violence were supposed to convey are presumed to have been learned, and the supplicating pose abandoned, effectively and vengefully "humiliate[s] the father and his law."¹³⁵ By choosing willfully the position of the subjugated child, and thereby refusing to grow into the image of the father who determines infractions and dispenses punishments, by his "submission," in Stockton's words, "to the law, the masochist undoes it. Whipping ceases to punish erection. Rather, it produces it."¹³⁶

So does Anger in *Fireworks* sever his filial obligations by performing masochistic acts so extreme as to be unendurable in actuality, destroying and replacing himself with a perverse subject his family cannot recognize legitimately within the social. Anger directs this scene from the bottom, setting into motion through the trade boy the cleansing and renewing violence he requires. He who was once trapped inside a camera uses now the arresting power of cinema to trap his tormentors, to control precisely what they will do and how far they will go—figures obliged to repeat their motions forevermore in the paces of the film projector.

And with the completion of Anger's first mature film began too the filmmaker's propensity to substitute his own work for lived experience. If the archetypal "small boy," in Moon's formulation, is just as likely to center "strong affective and erotic responses [around] a person and/or a body or body part seen or read about in a story, a photograph, a film, or on stage or television as they are [on] the body of a 'real' person,"¹³⁷ Anger has carried this childishly queer refusal to distinguish between the artificial and the real well into his adulthood. For the first two years of *Fireworks*' existence, Anger displayed no interest in screening the film publicly,¹³⁸ preferring instead to view it over and over in private. One of the few intimates allowed to share in these experiences was Ed Earle, who remembers:

Kenneth would say, 'Whenever I get blue and whenever I can't get high on anything else and whenever I can't find anyone else to enjoy, I turn [*Fireworks*] on.' And, as I recall, the two times he showed the film to me were virtually masturbatory experiences for him.¹³⁹

In the guardedly butch gay bar scene of the 1940s, when "sissies" were considered undesirable in their "obviousness" that threatened likewise to implicate any man with whom they associated, Anger, Earle recalls, was a nonentity in the clandestine social spaces of gay male social life in

Los Angeles: “People saw Kenneth as obviously homosexual, with that willowy body and that kind of oily personality and soft voice that never rose above a semi-whisper. [...] I cannot recall Kenneth ever being in a bar.”¹⁴⁰ Anger wrought an alternative to this effeminophobic atmosphere in his own film, and in the power the spectator enjoys to rewind and re-watch sexual climaxes that, as Freeman helpfully reminds us, film is capable of delivering “far beyond the capacity of the male body to produce them.”¹⁴¹ In the absence of anything resembling a community that reflected his desires, Anger created a realm of constantly replenished sexual possibility far in excess of anything available in queer “realities,” then or since.

“When I made [*Fireworks*],” Anger asserts, “I made it for myself.”¹⁴² This unambiguously hermetic statement, in conjunction with Anger’s apparent remove from the gay social spaces available during his youth in Los Angeles, casts into doubt readings which posit the film as a work of intentional camp, be it couched as a code to engender desperately-needed communication with like-minded fellows or a winking discourse between parties “in the know.” For even if we set aside Anger’s evident lack of affinity with gay communities (to use a term that holds a distinctly different value in the present than it would have signified in the 1940s), the Sontagian definition of camp, as we will recall, mandates that camp phenomena be encrypted sufficiently to communicate their meanings only to readers of a certain sophistication. The beloved object of Anger’s *Fireworks*, the sailor, is a gay icon of such glaring obviousness that this hardly-subliminal feature of the seafarer’s mythology is lost on virtually no one.

In the discourses of shared, popular fantasy between gay men, there is arguably no more adored figure than the man in uniform, a throne from which the sailor, in particular, exudes a particularly commanding presence. The sailor shines as an icon of adulation in works from Genet

to Fassbinder to Mapplethorpe, to the less canonical but certainly better known Village People. They appear by the hundreds in the pages of Athletic Model Guild publications, and in the deliriously rendered fantasies of Tom of Finland.¹⁴³ Yet like Anger himself, the sailor's place in the gay male imagination is based more broadly in myth and conjecture than in legitimized histories. There are, contend Paul Baker and Jo Stanley in their study of gay life in the British Merchant Marine, "[n]o serious maritime histories" on sailors who had sex with men (though they provide in their footnotes a selection of academic articles and sailors' diaries that establish exactly that).¹⁴⁴ Rather, they argue, popular notions of sex between seamen are informed by literature and song that explore to varying degrees of explicitness romantic camaraderie between crew members as well as the sexual abuse of younger, naïve seamen by older, more seasoned ship's hands.¹⁴⁵ The generalized perception of seafaring men as rough, crude, and indifferent to the behavioral codes dictating life on shore, as well as the sailor's fabled disposition towards alcoholism and sexual promiscuity all contributed to the widely-fantasized (and to no small degree confirmed) vision of the sea as a space where men could live unfettered by the homophobic law of the land.¹⁴⁶

By the time of *Fireworks*' creation, Los Angeles was the center of a vital cruising culture focused exclusively on servicemen, fed by the droves of sailors—many of them small-town boys from the Midwest—who settled there in the years following World War II.¹⁴⁷ Even if this relatively open secret was obscure to *Fireworks*' early viewers, the undisguised phallogical focus of the film could not have been. Anger's models are too clearly presented for the spectator's visual enjoyment, their parallels in already feebly-disguised pornography such as posing strap magazines too obvious, and the queer content of the film so loud and self-aware that

the film cannot be, by Sontag's reckoning at least, "pure," earnest camp. It is already too wry to be the butt of a joke.

For Anger, I argue finally, is uninterested in the drolleries of camp communication, and is fixated instead on a wholly different type of unequal exchange: that performed between the trade boy and his admirer and/or prey. The inequity between these two partners can be demonstrated by the trade boy, who is figured as capable of defending violently his laboriously maintained "normalcy." It can also be exploited by the partner who insists upon the trade boy's heterosexuality and thus imagines himself to be the only party "aware" of the homosexual context of their exchange. It is through the trap of the camera that Anger manages the trade boy's potential for violence, setting the lure of stardom and gloating subsequently over his ability to lead "real guys" to act out homosexual fantasies in the eternity of filmic time. It is especially in affirming the realness—i.e., the heterosexuality—of his filmic subjects that Anger professes the ostentatious commitment to the truth pledged habitually by gifted liars. To Anger, the trade boy's "realness" and desirability hinges essentially on his professed ignorance of male homosexual desire, and his place in this chain of signification.

It is in this conflation of hypermasculinity with heteronormative reality that Anger, against all odds, joins Landis in consensus. For while Anger and Landis are, in Landis' biography of the artist, at diametric odds regarding the *identity* of Anger's actors—Anger insisting that they are "real" sailors, "real" bikers, and Landis maintaining that they are not—their evaluation of masculinity as conditional on its ignorance of homosexual activity is resoundingly similar. Prominent within Anger's fantastic story about *Fireworks*' creation is his claim that the cast is composed of "real sailors," who were "studying at the University of

Southern California cinema department to become film technicians for the Navy,” and who even stole the 16mm negative upon which the film was made from its coffers.¹⁴⁸ Landis summarily deflates this story about what Anger refers to cheekily as his “first government grant” with the testimony of Ed Earle, who describes the cast as “dressed up [...] tricks who had no inhibitions,” plied with drugs into making a “porno film.”¹⁴⁹ Landis goes on in his book to challenge Anger’s claim to have populated *Scorpio Rising* with real “bikers,” [scare quotes Landis’]¹⁵⁰, maintaining that Anger scrounged his talent from such “notorious cruising areas and trick spots” as the Coney Island boardwalk and the corner of Forty-second Street and Eighth Avenue in Times Square.¹⁵¹

The question of Anger’s actors’ origins is of little interest to this inquiry. The dichotomies that both Landis and Anger create in maintaining vehemently their respective stances on this issue, however—sailor vs. trick, student vs. drug addict, biker vs. hustler, “real man” vs. rough trade, and even orgy vs. movie—are. Anger and Landis both advance their respective, overlapping conceptions of masculinity in denying the places where these categories, too, overlap. Landis’ position is best exemplified in his description of Bruce Byron, who played memorably the role of Scorpio in *Scorpio Rising*; a man whom Landis depicts as a Times Square hustler and a former Marine in Korea.¹⁵² Failing to note Byron’s personal history as a contradiction to the contradistinction he draws between the bikers and sailors—“real” men—and “hustlers,” Landis revealingly describes the reckless, solitary character of Scorpio thus:

Byron would embody everything negative about sexuality: narcissism, fake masculinity, sadomasochism arising out of impotence, sexual frustration seeking release in violence, delusions of grandeur masking self-loathing. [...A character for whom] [d]eath would prove the only acceptable sexual climax.¹⁵³

In this brief passage, Landis manages to revivify a host of antiquated phobias about gay men. Mining the classic psychoanalytical reading of male homosexuality as “narcissistic,” he posits

that the hustler, in his identificatory desire for other men, has strayed delusionally from some ill-defined “natural” masculine formation. Because of his failure to perform “normative” genital sexuality, Landis assumes, the hustler is spurred to violence, and by turn suffers inevitably a violent death. There is nothing authentic about the masculinities Anger’s films celebrate, Landis insists; rather, he beguiles us with the image of “the emulator—the macho caricature of the fake serviceman or biker.”¹⁵⁴ In his description of Bill Dorfman, an actor in *Scorpio* who bears more than a passing resemblance to the young Marlon Brando and whose slow promenade towards the viewer Landis compares to the posing sailor in *Fireworks*, Landis describes both, again, as “narcissists.”¹⁵⁵ (Figure 20) In his constant recourse to the term, Landis conveniently forgets that while Narcissus cared only for his own reflection, Anger’s posturing subjects derive their pleasure (however discretely) from the attentions of the filmic viewer—a viewer who is configured, paradigmically, as male.

Landis points to the “Blue Velvet” scene in *Scorpio*, which shows several bikers adorning slowly and solemnly themselves in denim, leather, and chains—a primping accompanied by the dulcet tones of Bobby Vinton, sighing over the blue velvet “she” once wore—as especial evidence of the “biker’s” falseness. (Figure 21) Landis finds all the visual evidence of this he needs in the simple act of the men’s costuming themselves in the trappings of masculinity which, he assumes, should be presented always as intrinsic; characters like “Pinstripe,” whom he denigrates as “a mere slip of a bleached blond with nifty leather fringes,” are but effete substitutions for the real thing.¹⁵⁶ The bikers of *Scorpio*, Landis maintains, are rendered emphatically unreal by fault of their obvious, visual emulation of *other men*. Landis for example

scuffs that the photos of James Dean that plaster the walls of “Scorpio’s” bedroom in the film suggest that the subject nurses something akin to “the unrequited crush of a teenage girl.”¹⁵⁷

What Landis is unable to perceive is the ways in which masculinity—and love—in Anger’s films is affected via one subject attempting wistfully and willfully to embody another. His characters seek encounters with the icons of American manhood by following their paces—seeking, through imitation, their initiation into a purely unreal fraternity. Anger stages such a dance between the character of Scorpio and Brando’s Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One*, which beams atmospherically in the blue glow of Scorpio’s television: Scorpio pulls on his black motorcycle boots to the tune of “Hit the Road Jack,” and Brando kicks his motorcycle into gear. Scorpio snorts from a jar of white powder, and the televised Brando tips his head back and grins. (Figure 22) Throughout this shot/countershot montage, the distinction between imitator and imitated is far from clear: the biker paraphernalia papering Scorpio’s room establishes that he has built his life around the mythos of the cinematic biker anti-hero, yet the consequences of Scorpio’s actions register on Brando’s face. Both subjects—of the movie and the movie-within-the-movie—gain their virility through mirroring one another, and thus paradoxically undermine it in revealing their reliance on the ostensibly feminine tricks of artifice.

It is finally this acquiescence to the drives of the (masculine) other that inspires Landis’ most overheated denunciation of the character of Scorpio, whose “inherent latent passivity” he reads as the ultimate indicator of both his phoniness and his duplicity. Scorpio, Landis imagines salaciously, “would be totally passive in the sexual sense: he would get fucked or get blown. This sort of person doesn’t do anything; he is not the aggressor that his hypermasculine appearance promises, but a mannequin.”¹⁵⁸ Scorpio, Landis projects, in buckling and lacing

himself into the leathers and rings of the “hypermasculine” biker, reveals himself through this ritual grooming as a mere pale imitator, a falseness underscored further in his failure to behave with sufficient aggression. This lack of violent initiative signifies to Landis only a particularly anal receptivity that determines once and for all that the subject in question is not “real.” The hustler’s perceived receptiveness to being “used as a woman” negates fully his status as a real man,¹⁵⁹ and, to Landis, any claim he may have to the affiliated identities of “sailor,” “biker,” “Marine.” By this formation, the masculine mystique which the hustler exudes and exploits to his advantage can never be authenticated, because of his willingness to *trade* it with other subjects of a more questionable masculine pedigree. So do shades of the McCarthyite conviction (and self-fulfilling performative) that homosexuals cannot be trusted emerge, sharp and intact, in this artist’s biography of 1995.

Yet, troublingly, what gives substance to the most deeply homophobic opprobrium of Landis’ book is Anger’s repeated insistence that his stars—his sailors, his bikers—are “real” precisely because they are not queer, a position that is ideologically perfectly aligned with Landis,’ even where they disagree on circumstantial details. In describing the filming of *Scorpio Rising*, Anger makes a case for the heterosexuality of his stars by gesturing to the definitive evidence which is, he claims, just outside of the frame: women:

They were *real* bikers [...] They had an exhibitionistic streak. They look very queer on the screen, but those guys were not gay, not queer, not homosexual. They all had girlfriends. Their girlfriends were present during nearly all of the filming, but, because of an Italian macho type of weirdness, they didn’t want their girlfriends in the picture. [...] They said [...] ‘Sit there and watch.’¹⁶⁰

In this description, which refers specifically to the “Walpurgis Party” scene of the film, which captures a group of costumed bikers partaking in a Bacchanalian romp, Anger fails to specify

what part of Italian-American macho culture compels certain of the youths to dress in drag—the only “women” who ever actually appear.¹⁶¹ The never-pictured girlfriends who, Anger maintains, sat “gossiping and laughing”¹⁶² to the side while their boyfriends simulated sodomy and smeared mustard on the naked torso of an initiate may be imagined simply as very good sports—or, alternately, as occupying positions very similar to that which Anger himself assumes, glorying in the spectacle of a bunch of dumb brutes tricked easily into performing acts supposedly in defiance of their true natures. For Anger perceives the seat of his power in the exclusivity of his vision—his ability to see a homoerotic paradise in the antics of nominally straight working-class toughs, to cut and suture together raw footage for maximum suggestiveness, to finally artfully triumph over the superior physical strength and social positionality of his subjects by sealing them, unwittingly, in a narrative of his own design. The merest suggestion that Anger’s subjects may have been cognizant—even consenting—in this slick transformation of prosaic homosociality into lushly decadent homosexuality is so repugnant to Anger because it denies him the impression of his own ability to refashion reality to his will, upon which he has come to rely.

Anger’s surrender in *Fireworks* to the arms of a sexy young tough was a permanent trade. The image of the thuggish and beautiful trade boy appears throughout Anger’s filmography as a marker of seismic change in the cycles of the artist’s own life. From the alchemical emancipation of *Fireworks*, to the seminal artistic innovation of *Scorpio Rising*, from the victorious return

signaled by *Lucifer Rising*'s eventual completion in 1972 to the chilling biographical revisionism of Anger's more recent *Ich Will!* (2008), the trade boy in Anger's work sets in motion, Shiva-like,¹⁶³ a cleansing, formative violence that obliterates the past while staving off the encroachment of the future. Landis' biography develops a portrait of Anger as a subject increasingly unable to navigate the contortions of this, his own formative legend, seeking every opportunity to contradict Anger's assertions about the men who populate his films and highlighting Anger's diminishing capacity to differentiate between myth and reality, as the aging filmmaker issued a series of claims about his having been the victim of bizarre attacks inflicted by gangs of young men.¹⁶⁴ Yet the presence of the trade boy in Anger's auto-mythology evinces not the loose ends of increasingly flailing fabrications, but rather a grand design of propulsive and often-elegant falsehoods, without which Anger's films could not be made, and the substitutive chain by which he has negotiated his survival could not be forged. To further this closing argument, I turn again to the cataclysmic moment in 1967 when Anger lost control of both his trade boy and the film intended to capture him, losses he responded to with a series of public rituals intended to "kill the artist in himself."¹⁶⁵

Bobby Beausoleil was born, coincidentally, in the year of the making of Anger's first surviving film in 1947. When he met Anger in 1966, his history of incarceration at a juvenile detention facility to which he had been sent after his grandmother, his primary guardian, proved unable to control him, was not far in the past.¹⁶⁶ Anger saw in Beausoleil the embodiment of the sixties countercultural youth movement that supported his theories regarding the immanency of the Aquarian Age and the plenary changes it would wreak on the dominant social order.¹⁶⁷ But Anger's new student, with his demonstrated "instinctive grasp"¹⁶⁸ of Thelemic theology and his

keen desire to get on with the seemingly constantly deferred shooting of *Lucifer Rising*, proved threatening to Anger by his dedicated *presentness* in the project. Beausoleil's repeated inquiries about when the filming would commence signaled to Anger a desire to "dominate" the project, to direct the film in which he was supposed to surrender his agency to Anger's will.¹⁶⁹ And Beausoleil, as demonstrated in an interview for Landis' book, proved all too cognizant of the vicarious mechanisms of Anger's filmic magic:

Ken would fluctuate between treating me like a god and treating me like a friend. It was kind of strange at times, because I was playing a role that he wanted to play himself. He would turn competitive because he would want to fill that role himself. It was just kinda odd.¹⁷⁰

In his awareness of Anger's methods of surrogated subjectivity, Beausoleil proved consequently incompatible with Anger's patented form of filmic discipline. When he disappeared—whether with or without the footage of *Lucifer Rising*—Anger accused Beausoleil of instigating within his life the calamitous change he was originally assigned to effect within the encapsulation of the film.

And it was at last through film that Anger would finally ensnare Beausoleil to his satisfaction. In 1976, after ceremoniously firing Jimmy Page for failing to deliver a suitable soundtrack for the completed *Lucifer Rising*, Anger met with Beausoleil in California's Tracy Prison, for the first time since their acrimonious parting.¹⁷¹ As Beausoleil assembled his behind-bars Freedom Orchestra to create the soundtrack, Anger promoted with excitement the collaboration to Bay Area reporters. He abandoned abruptly his story about Beausoleil having supposedly destroyed the original *Lucifer*.¹⁷² This newly brokered peace lasted exactly as long as it took for Beausoleil to compose and deliver the finished score to Anger. Then, as Beausoleil

learned from an interview with Anger he read while in prison, Anger resumed immediately his stories of Beausoleil's treachery.¹⁷³ Beausoleil, incensed by Anger's betrayal, again cut off all contact with him.

Anger, however, had already attained exactly what he wanted, completing the business left unfinished some nine years prior. With Beausoleil's body incarcerated and his established ability to commit mortal violence contained, Anger saw the ideal opportunity to finally trap his wayward trade in the corpus of his new film. In syncing Beausoleil's score with the exquisitely gaudy imagery of his most ambitious film, Anger succeeded ultimately in bending Beausoleil's creative vision to fit his own, heralding with the shimmering sounds of the psychedelic score the rising from a ceremonial bed of a dark, curly-haired youth, adorned in a satiny jacket designating in rainbow letters his role as Beausoleil's replacement: meet the new Lucifer.

Chapter Two

On March 24th, 1994, an article appeared on the front page of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* bearing the title, “Bloody Performance Draws Criticism.” The story was remarkable immediately for a number of reasons, primary among them the fact that it signaled the first time in local memory that any performing arts-related story had made the front page of Minneapolis’ preeminent news journal.¹ The story, which offered virtually no analysis of the performance within a broader cultural or art historical context,² did not fit the conventional format of an arts review; indeed, it appeared in print nearly three weeks after the performance in question, a selection of works by the Los Angeles-based performance artist Ron Athey, who appeared with his cast at the independent Minneapolis venue Patrick’s Cabaret on March 5th.³ The performance, which included fragments of Athey’s works *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1992) and *Martyrs and Saints* (1994) was presented by the Walker Art Center in conjunction with the city’s fifth annual Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Film Festival, and had until this point gone almost completely unnoticed in the local press.⁴ Moreover, despite the article’s seemingly reportorial function, Mary Abbe, the *Star Tribune* art critic and reporter responsible for the article, had not herself been in the audience that night. Abbe’s interest in the performance was raised belatedly when she learned that an attendee had filed a complaint with the Minnesota Department of Health,⁵ alleging fears that Athey’s audience “could have contracted the AIDS virus” [*sic*]⁶ in the course of the performance.⁷

During the performance, Abbe wrote, Athey had pierced the cheeks of two co-performers with “slender steel spikes,” he had studded his own arm with “about 30

hypodermic needles” and assumed a crown of surgical needles, which attendants wove directly into his scalp. In her lead, Abbe wrote that Athey had “sliced an abstract design into the flesh of another man, mopped up the blood with towels, and sent them winging above the audience on revolving clotheslines.”⁸ Declaring that Athey was “known to be HIV-positive,” Abbe repeated the complaint of Jim Berenson, who, after witnessing the performance, had contacted local health officials with the concern that audience members could have contracted HIV “if blood had dripped on them” from the towels strung above the audience members’ heads.⁹ That the blood impressed upon the towels was not Athey’s own seemed not to matter to either Berenson or Abbe, who deftly extended the perceived risk presented by Athey’s blood to his three co-performers. In so doing, Abbe simultaneously implicated John Killacky, the Curator of Performing Arts responsible for bringing Athey and his crew to town: Killacky, Abbe wrote, suggesting his negligence, “did not know the HIV status of Darryl Carlton, the man who was cut. Nor did he know the HIV status of [Athey’s] two female assistants.”¹⁰

Yet as Abbe notes only a few paragraphs later, officials in the AIDS epidemiology unit at the Minnesota Department of Health confirmed resoundingly that appropriate safety precautions had been taken at the performance, and that the audience had been in no danger. With this information, the already obscure reason for the publication of Abbe’s story becomes still more unclear; as a piece of art reporting that makes no effort to situate the performance within an arts context, it would appear that the sole purpose of the article is to relate the alleged threat of HIV communication—a threat which, as Abbe was obliged to acknowledge almost in the same breath, was not real.

That Athey's performance posed no actual danger to its witnesses did not, however, prevent a host of local and national media networks from building upon the threat of biocontamination alleged in Abbe's article. Within days, Minnesota media outlets ranging from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* to the radio and television networks WCCO, KSTP, and KTCA had run their own stories speculating whether, in the words of KSTP-TV reporter Randy Meier, the performance had "jeopardize[d] the health and perhaps the lives of the audience."¹¹ When a local news broadcast reported erroneously that Athey's own HIV-infected blood had passed over the audience, the falsehood was quickly recirculated by the Cable News Network.¹² Four days after it appeared in the *Star Tribune*, Abbe's story was reprinted in the conservative *Washington Times* under the turgid title, "Minneapolis Performance Raises Concerns About AIDS: Bloody Towels from Mutilation Hung Above Audience."¹³ Over the next few weeks, the story was picked up by the Associated Press, appeared in mainstream news outlets from the *Washington Post* to *Newsweek*, and rechanneled through the sensationalist mouthpieces of Patrick Buchanan, Rush Limbaugh, and Pat Robertson.¹⁴

Some news purveyors repeated verbatim Abbe's account of the performance; others inserted their own details freely, spinning increasingly more harrowing descriptions of the event. At the local and national level alike, nearly every article, editorial,¹⁵ and broadcast concerning the performance reanimated the threat of HIV transmission that was raised in Abbe's article, while disregarding or disputing the expert testimony dispelling that threat which Abbe had provided. In an opinion piece for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, then-columnist Joe Soucheray regurgitated Abbe's version of the

events while adding that he had also placed a call to the “Minnesota Health Department” [*sic*], thereby re-performing the complaint chronicled—and debunked, by the very same agency that Soucheray petitioned—in Abbe’s article. Where Abbe’s story apparently left too much to the imagination, the conservative news journal *Human Events* extrapolated a scene of mortal terror: “panic broke out as the blood-drenched towels dangled above 100 onlookers. At least one audience member fainted and several were roughed up as chairs were kicked over in the mad dash for the exits that began.”¹⁶

A subsequent article in the local alternative weekly *Twin Cities Reader* capitalized upon a growing tide of suspicion directed by the media towards parties involved at every level of the performance’s presentation and reception, including Athey’s cast, Walker Art Center administrators, and even officials at the Minnesota Department of Health. Writer David Schimke refers to the “alleged” clearance granted to the Walker by the Minnesota Department of Health without specifying his reasons for doubting its veracity (or, for that matter, why he did not simply make the phone call necessary to confirm it). Instead, Schimke develops the picture of menacing performers and malevolently neglectful administrators articulated more subtly in Abbe’s story: he charges then-Director of the Walker Art Center, Kathy Halbreich, then-Director of Public Relations, Margaret Patridge, and Killacky of “glossing over the facts” and thereby “obscur[ing] some legitimate issues raised by Athey’s performance.”¹⁷ It becomes quickly clear that the “facts” which Schimke believes Walker officials to be guilty of concealing are the serostatus of Athey’s co-performers: he writes, “Carlton is HIV-

negative, but Killacky, who was in charge of monitoring logistics and safety, didn't know that until days after the performance.”¹⁸

Written five months after the publication of Abbe's initial article, Schimke's story serves as a remarkable cross-section revealing how deeply entrenched Abbe's conflation had become: Athey's body had become inseparably intertwined with serious risks to the public health, and the bodies of Athey's co-performers had become interchangeable with his own. Schimke's charges of administrative malpractice hinge on his argument that an HIV-negative performer *could* have posed a risk to the audience had his status been positive and his blood, printed on the towels, had passed over the audience—an argument that Schimke can make only in light of his decision to ignore statements from public health officials that witnesses would not have been in danger even had this been the case.¹⁹ Abbe's article, and the threat of infection-disguised-as-art which it alleged, remained the template for mass media accounts of the performance even as these stories were gleaned from sources increasingly more distant from the event itself, which was consequently misrepresented still further.²⁰ This balance of willful distortion with slavish repetition is in evidence in an article of July 12th, 1994 in the supermarket tabloid the *Star*. The tabloid's account of the performance is part outright fabrication, describing a “near-riot as screaming spectators scrambled for the exits, fearing HIV infection,” and part plagiarism of Abbe's article, referring to Athey as a “[k]nife-wielding performance artist” who sent “[b]lood-soaked paper towels [...] winging over a horrified audience.”²¹ While the *Star* item may be easily dismissed as a sensationalistic bit of pulp media, it signaled how far the story of the Minneapolis performance had traveled down

national media channels—and, with its blaring headline, indicated the greater cultural debate which the performance had come to symbolize: “BIZARRE AIDS SHOW GETS UNCLE SAM’S BACKING.”

It took mere days after the publication of Abbe’s article for Athey’s Minneapolis performance to become the centerpiece of a freshly reignited debate over the fate of the National Endowment for the Arts, and the publicly funded artists and arts institutions under the agency’s umbrella. In an article of March 31st, 1994 for the *Washington Post*—the first account of Athey’s performance to appear in a national newspaper of record—Jacqueline Trescott reported that the Walker had received more than one million dollars from the NEA over the last three years; from this grant, the museum ultimately set aside \$150 to present Athey’s performance.²² As the chain of distortions of Athey’s work proliferated, a phalanx of conservative Christian watchdog organizations seized eagerly upon this \$150 figure.²³ Already well-organized and sophisticated from waging public battles against such federally-funded artists as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano only a few years before,²⁴ the American Family Association, the Christian Action Network, the Christian Coalition, Concerned Women for America, and the Catholic Anti-Defamation League bombarded Congress and their constituents alike with mailings identifying Athey as the latest artist to peddle sacrilege and obscenity on the public dole.²⁵

Immediately following the publication of her initial article,²⁶ Abbe herself began a regular correspondence with Laurence Jarvik,²⁷ at the time Director of the neo-conservative think tank, The Center for the Study of Popular Culture,²⁸ and self-

appointed gadfly committed to the abolishment of the NEA, public radio, and other federally-funded cultural agencies.²⁹ In the months to come, Abbe and Jarvik exchanged correspondence, articles, and information, as Jarvik turned his energies towards petitioning the National Endowment for the Arts for information about the Minneapolis performance—including the serostatuses of Darryl Carlton and the rest of Athey’s crew, in repeated requests for the results of their “AIDS test[s]” [*sic*].³⁰ Positioning himself as a point guard for Abbe, Jarvik penned letters to the editors of newspapers that had printed items contesting the accuracy of Abbe’s story, insisting her account was unimpeachable.³¹ Moreover, Jarvik took it upon himself to spread the word of the latest NEA “outrage,” compiling copious media reports on the Athey performance and sharing them with other journalists.³² As the story gained steam, Jarvik’s investment grew; in a page of handwritten notes based on a phone conversation with Jarvik, Abbe records his prediction: “I think it’s going to be raised on floor of Congress [*sic*] [...] This is the next level.”³³

While it is not known how active Jarvik may have been in realizing this prediction³⁴, he was nothing if not prescient: in June of that year, Representative Philip Crane (R-IL) introduced before the House an amendment eliminating the entire \$171 million appropriation for the NEA.³⁵ As Crane and other political opponents of the NEA argued on behalf of the bill, Athey was evoked as the new bogeyman energizing the perennial call to abolish the NEA altogether³⁶ and Abbe lauded as the stalwart responsible for exposing such excesses. Abbe, bristling at NEA Chair Jane Alexander’s public characterization of her article as inaccurate, had meanwhile taken matters into her

own hands, writing Alexander a letter angrily defending herself.³⁷ This she copied to Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), then-chair of the House Appropriations Committee and a fierce opponent of the NEA in culture wars past.³⁸ While Abbe's letter and her initial article would, interestingly enough, both be presented as evidence by Senators and Representatives seeking to protect the NEA as well as those seeking to eliminate it,³⁹ the impression Abbe made upon Senator Byrd would prove to be of ultimate importance.

On June 17th, Senator Byrd co-signed a letter with Senator Don Nickles (R-OK), issuing a stern rebuke to Alexander and quoting from the *Washington Post*'s rehash of Abbe's account of the Athey performance.⁴⁰ Declaring it "unconscionable" that the NEA would "fund and condone" a piece from which, according to the *Post*, a "horrified" audience had "fled" out of fear of "coming into contact with HIV-infected blood,"⁴¹ the Senators cited Congress' interest in "upholding the public's safety." Consequentially, they warned, future funding for the NEA would be "incumbent upon the NEA and its program beneficiaries to ensure that such projects are not funded."⁴² With this letter, Senators Byrd and Nickles also effectively buried any remaining ambiguity in the ongoing debate over the degree of risk posed by Athey's performance, declaring: "The public should be able to expect to attend a publicly funded performance without being exposed to HIV-infected blood."⁴³

Latching onto this vivid image, members of both houses of Congress offered their own versions of the Minneapolis performance as the NEA hearings wore on. Athey appeared in effigy before members of the House and Senate in the form of a life-sized poster, a totem upon which the NEA's most virulent political enemies projected their

ire.⁴⁴ On June 23rd, an amendment to the House Appropriations Bill by Representative Clifford Stearns (R-FL) which proposed to cut NEA funding by 5% was punted back and forth across partisan lines, but a final vote on the Stearns amendment approved with bipartisan support a 2% cut to the NEA budget.⁴⁵ On July 25th, after debating and narrowly defeating an amendment proposed by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) that would have imposed content restrictions barring the NEA from supporting “any kind of [work involving] mutilation or bloodletting,”⁴⁶ the Senate approved a bill authored by Senator Byrd, slashing the NEA’s budget by \$8.5 million, or 5%.⁴⁷

While a compromise bill ultimately reduced these cuts to 2%, stripping \$3.4 million from the NEA’s budget for 1995,⁴⁸ fundamental changes to the structure of the agency were to come: in November of 1994, the NEA eliminated its operating system allowing local, nonprofit arts organizations to fund individual artists with federal grants.⁴⁹ While allegedly motivated by the realities of Congressionally-imposed restrictions on the NEA budget, this decision rendered arts agencies accountable for any controversies their programming may potentially inspire, even as it removed the general operating grants that endowed these agencies with the freedom to present the work of whomever they deemed fit, without securing direct approval of these artists from the NEA itself. In order to mitigate the threat of further attacks from the Right, the agency responded by strategically shifting focus, and money, away from potentially controversial artists.⁵⁰ The climax of the Athey controversy would thereby herald the effective end of the NEA’s support of emerging American artists and the beginning of a new climate of careful self-censorship on the part of arts agencies.

The period of controversy following the Minneapolis performance also marked, as Athey would later recall, “the turning point in my career as a public figure [...] It was also pretty much the end of my career in America.”⁵¹ Foregrounding Athey’s statement is the particularly cruel fact of a career cut short by parties who had been almost completely ignorant of it prior to the publication of Abbe’s article. Athey’s work had been retrospectively and irreversibly transformed by the popular phantasm of his Minneapolis performance, the germ of which was developed in Abbe’s article, and subsequently turned into something altogether fantastic in its journey from a small city newspaper to the floor of Congress. It was this collectively produced, sensationalized vision of Athey’s work that ultimately proved more impactful, reaching an audience far in excess of the one hundred-odd people who witnessed the actual performance in Minneapolis, and it is to this work of the public imagination that the bulk of this chapter is dedicated.

Up unto this point, I have endeavored to sketch for my reader a detailed history of how a phobic, lurid, and incredible rendering of Athey’s performance work ultimately changed the relationship between public money and American art—all the while withholding an analysis, or even a comprehensive description, of the performance itself. While I must petition for more of the reader’s patience with the promise that these things are yet to come, I would like now to make clear my reasons for holding in abeyance any discussion of Athey’s aesthetics with an examination of a broader politics of visibility and sexuality, without which, I argue, the debates surrounding Athey’s work could not exist.

My decision to focus my analysis not on the artist's work (or at least not exclusively so), but rather on its hysterical reflection in the popular imagination, may seem at first unorthodox. However, to perform a traditionally formalist analysis of Athey's work, as if to offer my own corrective to the supposed excesses of the politicized stories purveyed by Abbe or any other agent, would be to assume an authority I do not possess: I was no more present in the audience of Patrick's Cabaret that evening in 1994 than Abbe was. Yet in declining to present this chapter as a nominally factual counterbalance to Abbe's distortions, I maintain that the ultimate "work" produced by the collision of Athey's performance practice with hegemonic beliefs about HIV, AIDS, and male sexuality is one of competing narratives. At stake is the problem of how to make visible what the media so consistently touted as an "invisible killer": AIDS.⁵² This desire to make plain what is construed as a visually undetectable threat to the social body ultimately renders identical the perceived threat of HIV infection with the deviant bodies believed to carry the virus.

Yet the social project of visualizing HIV and AIDS does not end with the identification and conflation of the virus with the "carrier;" a dominant narrative on HIV and AIDS reaches its denouement only when, one way or another, this menace is eliminated. It is no coincidence that Athey entered the popular imagination in the midst of an ideological war between two fundamentally different paradigmatic approaches to HIV and AIDS. After over half a decade of government indifference and media neglect, by late 1980s and early 1990s representations of HIV/AIDS had in fact reached an oversaturation point in American culture.⁵³ Yet this glut of representations still hinged

upon the fundamental question: when will the specter of the person with AIDS (the PWA) vanish from our collective sight? While representations of HIV and AIDS in the first decade of the epidemic had exclusively staged the spectacle of the person “dying from AIDS”—thereby reifying the elimination of biological threat to the “general population”⁵⁴—by the late 1980s the efforts of AIDS activists had produced a counter-narrative of the person “living with” HIV and AIDS. This attempt to effect a social attitudinal shift was both pragmatic, as it became increasingly clear that some seropositive persons were living long, active lives without developing AIDS-related illnesses,⁵⁵ and rhetorical, as it was presumed that the public would not demand of the government and the scientific community a comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS until they were convinced that HIV-positive persons were not already doomed.

Yet the challenge of implementing the notion of “living with” HIV and AIDS in the consciousness of the American public was not rhetorical in nature, but rather anecdotal. The story of AIDS in America had, since its earliest seeding in the public imagination, taken on a patently narrative, even melodramatic form: the virus is “identified” via its association with a subject outside the dominant social formation (be it a gay man, a non-white person, or a non-middle class drug user); the evidence of the subject’s transgression is played out in the form of the symptoms that plague his (for in these early narratives, the subject is nearly always male) sickness unto death; and with this death, both the transgressive subject and the biological threat he poses to the social body conveniently disappear. In these narratives, the correlation between deviant behaviors and the virus is explicit, and the sense of closure provided is definitive—and,

for a public eager to believe themselves exempt from the threat posed by the virus, much desired. The narrative of “living with” HIV and AIDS offers no such neat correlatives: as the specter of death is eclipsed by the possibility of life with the virus, the dogmatic connection between the “deviant” act of infection with the cleansing effected through elimination is disrupted. Where the narrative of “dying of AIDS” offers certainty, the possibilities of “living with AIDS” remain inchoate, inconclusive. What does one do with a condemned subject who fails to die?

In this chapter, I argue that Athey’s performance work proved ultimately so incendiary because it ruptures dominant narratives about HIV and AIDS by denying the audience the closure provided by narratives that either deliver “AIDS victims” from their suffering—a rhetorical figure that I will identify as the AIDS martyr—or deal out divine retribution for their sins, as in the case of the AIDS monster, or, as I will refer to it throughout this chapter, Patient Zero. In his performance work, Athey stands in as both the literal and the symbolic body of the person with HIV. As his own death is rehearsed, but ultimately overcome, Athey staves off the ultimate climax of the popular AIDS narrative, prompting his more hostile critics to resort to the most familiar, and the most pernicious, narratives about HIV and AIDS in order to reconstruct the sense of closure which Athey’s work denies.

To these ends, I will first discuss the contemporaneous history of the AIDS epidemic and its representation in the popular media to show the emergence and persistence of the narrative of “dying of” AIDS, and its metaphorical extension in the dual figures of Patient Zero and the AIDS martyr. I then describe in detail Athey’s

Minneapolis performance (with its enactments of sex work and stigmata, fevered evangelism and an unorthodox wedding) and discuss its aesthetic and historical contexts. I also situate the performance within Jennifer Doyle's concepts of boredom and anti-climax in order to introduce the potentially generative counter-narrative that I argue Athey enacts, at this critical historical junction where "dying of" begins to give way to "living with" HIV and AIDS, thereby destabilizing the neat, moralizing closure offered by the former narrative.

I aim throughout this chapter to demonstrate how Athey's body became in public discourse the locus of larger questions about the construction of masculinity and male sexuality at the close of the twentieth century—more so, I argue, than any other artist in a decade fraught with politicized attacks on artists, usually male and queer, who incorporated these facts of their corporeality into their work. Masculine in stature, yet flagrantly queer, and drenched in the most feared bioproduct of the late 20th century—blood—Athey's body would come to symbolize a strain of dangerously excessive masculinity that, if not contained, threatened the integrity of the social whole. Indeed, as I will show later in this chapter, Athey's body signaled danger to so many precisely because of the ways his performance practice thwarted the status of containment and restraint upon which the contemporary masculine ideal is based, giving way to a fluid, permeable sensibility most often associated with *female* bodies. In so undermining the alignment of biological sex and gender performance, Athey posed a threat to the integrity of binary gender codes—codes upon which many had come additionally to rely upon as indicators of who may or may not pose the threat of HIV/AIDS.

The aesthetic content of Athey's work, and its potentially transformative social effects, have been largely ignored in the sensationalist dispatches through which most Americans came to know the artist's name. This chapter affords me the opportunity to give a complex work its critical due; yet I maintain that a comprehensive discussion of Athey's Minneapolis performance requires a thorough examination of the cultural climate it represents. The degree to which the two are inextricable becomes still clearer when we are reminded that definitive action against HIV/AIDS was stalled, with globally devastating consequences, because of the ways in which the virus was initially represented. The dogged persistence with which the medical and scientific communities and the media alike pursued presumed connections between the virus and demographical details such as sexual preference, gender, and race created an illusion of particularity for a virus evolved to wreak havoc indiscriminately. Simon Watney argues that since the emergence of HIV/AIDS, efforts to understand the epidemic have focused disproportionately not upon how to prevent the spread of the virus or treat those affected, but rather upon how to identify and *make sense*, in a narrative or moralistic way, of their affliction:

[The person with AIDS is] confined not only within the ordinary regime of medicine, but also by the entire apparatus of modern sexuality, both of which are continually monitoring and controlling the public *meaning* of his illness, as closely as his presenting symptoms.⁵⁶

That representations of HIV and AIDS and the public "meanings" they forged dictated the material realities of the AIDS epidemic is by now a well-established claim in the works of AIDS activists and cultural critics alike.⁵⁷ It is precisely this intimacy

between representation and reality that propelled Athey's Minneapolis performance immediately away from the realm of aesthetics and into that of public health, and finally of the law. The cycle of righteous indignation and retaliation that constituted much of the popular dialogue around American art and public money in the later decades of the twentieth century reached a fever pitch with the Athey controversy and also betrayed a common, chilling rhetoric of causality amongst political enemies of publicly-subsidized art and opponents of progressive HIV/AIDS policies as well.⁵⁸ While earlier campaigns against the allotment of public monies to support the work of artists such as Serrano and Mapplethorpe had posited such works as moral contagions, inspiring blasphemous or perverted impulses in their viewers and spurring them to act on them,⁵⁹ the Athey case marked the first time that an artist himself had been configured as a literal, biological threat to his audience. The Athey case thus itself contains lessons both rhetorical and practical: it serves by turns to expose the ways in which collective comprehension of HIV/AIDS depends heavily upon the forms of preestablished narratives; the sobering degree of literalism with which body art is typically interpreted in the United States; and the gulf between "official" and popular knowledge about HIV/AIDS, risk, and transmission at this point in the epidemic's history.

The totality with which Athey's public persona was absorbed by his HIV status, and the alleged threat to the public health that he would come to symbolize, is conveyed succinctly with a dire metaphor selected by Mary Abbe for a follow-up article on the Athey controversy. Adopting a posture of incredulity at the Walker's efforts to manage

the fallout that ensued after her initial article in the *Star Tribune*, Abbe begins with this opening volley:

Walker Art Center officials appear surprised and angry that people have complained about their staging a show that involved ritual mutilation by a man infected with the AIDS virus. [*sic*] That's odd, because their action was akin to adding blowfish to the buffet of a Japanese restaurant without warning the clientele.⁶⁰

The blowfish, Abbe explains for the uninitiated, possesses poisonous glands, and is only safe for human consumption when prepared by expert chefs trained to avoid these fatal portions of the fish's flesh. "Occasionally," Abbe adds ominously, "the chefs go too far."⁶¹ While Abbe is obliged in this article again to repeat that state health officials had found no risks involved in the performance, the figurative language she adopts in her opening paragraph is unambiguous: by hosting the Athey performance, Walker officials knowingly and deliberately endangered the lives of audience members innocent of the risks involved.⁶² Insinuating broadly that Halbreich and Killacky were continuing to conceal the realities of the performance from the public, and dismissing as diversionary the administrators' claims that their critics were motivated by homophobia and AIDS-phobia,⁶³ Abbe concludes her article with this brazen conflation of physical risk with psychic violence: "[T]he museum shirked its responsibility to let its audiences decide for themselves what risks they will run, and what brutalities they will endorse as art."⁶⁴

Five days after the publication of her initial article, and on the precipice of what would become a media firestorm over the Minneapolis performance, Abbe once again set the tone for national media coverage of the Athey controversy. Virtually every article and interview about the performance produced over the coming months would discuss Athey,

HIV, and mortal risk in a single breath; many pieces conveyed this through simple shorthand, referring to Athey as an “AIDS artist” or HIV-positive artist” in their headlines.⁶⁵ It seemed thus inevitable that this specter of corrupting and terminal contagion would be extended to the debate over publicly subsidized art, itself: Jeff Jacoby in *The Boston Globe* made an example of Athey, decrying the Minneapolis performance as an “abomination” and NEA-subsidized works in general as a form of “pollution.”⁶⁶

The degree to which Abbe’s journalistic approach to the Athey performance resonated with other journalists is demonstrable, and the unanimity with which it was adopted remarkable; thus the intended and the effective functions of her initial story demand closer scrutiny. As Congressional threats to both the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities mounted in the spring of 1995, Mary Abbe submitted an indignant letter to the editors of *Art in America*, in response to “Multicultural Wars,” an overview of the current threats to both endowments by Douglas Davis, who mentioned briefly Abbe’s coverage of the Athey performance. Taking umbrage with what she describes as Davis’ characterization of her reportage as “sensationalized and erroneous,”⁶⁷ Abbe declared that her article “was neither a review nor an editorial,” as she claimed Davis had implied in a parenthetical remark about her having never attended the performance.⁶⁸ Abbe claimed that Davis, in his “irrelevant asides,” was attempting to “sully [her] integrity by implying, falsely, that [she] was reviewing something [she] had not seen.”⁶⁹

Abbe’s letter to the editor raises a more pressing issue: at the time Abbe, by her own description, worked as a “visual arts critic and art news reporter” for the *Star*

Tribune.⁷⁰ Reviews of visual arts exhibitions were, and to this date remain, Abbe's stock in trade at the paper. Abbe's title as an "art news reporter" would also seem to have dubious value when read in conjunction with her piece on the Patrick's Cabaret performance; the article ignored the work's local cultural impact, and, published three weeks after the performance date, was hardly current enough to constitute "news."

A critical question thus asserts itself: when Abbe set out to produce this ultimately incendiary piece of journalism, exactly what kind of story did she intend to write, and, in turn, what kind of story did it ultimately become via the mechanisms of its dissemination and popular reception? I propose that in writing about Athey's performance, Abbe in fact followed a formula by then well-established in the American news media: that in which the author publicly identifies a person whose HIV-positive status is either known or suspected, to whom the author alleges to "trace" local cases of HIV/AIDS. The scapegoated individual, usually a liminal character in terms of sex, gender, race, or housing status,⁷¹ is then publicly condemned for "bringing AIDS" into innocent and unsuspecting communities. Throughout this chapter, I refer to this style of narrative as the "Patient Zero" model—a term I adapt from Randy Shilts's enormously popular and equally problematic book, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. In the book, Shilts, who was praised widely for his reportage on HIV/AIDS in the early years of the epidemic, provides a model example of journalistic "exposés" on the epidemic by purporting to "trace" the outbreak of AIDS in America to a single person, the French-Canadian airline steward, Gaetan Dugas.

Shilts, as Douglas Crimp points out in his critique of *And the Band Played On*, presented his book as an antidote to the political doublespeak impeding a comprehensive public response to the epidemic, a form of mass deception which Shilts sees at work in the actions of government officials and representatives of the gay community alike.⁷² In Gaetan Dugas, Shilts found the perfect figure through which to bolster his credentials as an investigative journalist while simultaneously indulging in a narrative of sex, death, and premeditated evil of gothic proportions. In 1984, the Centers for Disease Control published research identifying an anonymous “Patient 0” as the locus of an outbreak of AIDS-related complications in a network of gay men in New York and California, all of whom allegedly had sexual encounters with Dugas in common.⁷³ From this preliminary cluster study, Shilts extrapolated a character to personify the moral bankruptcy which, in Shilts’s view, compelled gay men to mortally endanger one another through promiscuous sex.⁷⁴ In *And the Band Played On*, Dugas (for Shilts, against the express wishes of CDC officials, identifies the airline attendant by his real name),⁷⁵ spreads death as a consequence of his own vanity and arrogance. Shilts forges an image of a man so enthralled by the cultures of anonymous gay sex that he continues to slake his lust even at the price of his partners’ lives:

It was around this time that rumors began on Castro Street about a strange guy at the Eighth and Howard bathhouse, a blond with a French accent. He would have sex with you, turn up the lights in the cubicle, and point out his Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions. “I’ve got gay cancer”, he’d say. “I’m going to die and so are you.”⁷⁶

As Shilts makes clear in this perhaps most infamous passage from his book, Dugas’s treachery is traceable in the form of *markedly* mysterious symptoms that manifest first on

his own body, and then upon those of his conquests all across the continent.⁷⁷ Shilts's Dugas is a vampire who terrorizes first the marginal homosexual social circles he frequents and then, via his infected partners, the public at large.⁷⁸ To the mass media outlets that received Shilts's book eagerly, the neat, novelistic⁷⁹ reduction of an overwhelmingly complex phenomenon such as the AIDS outbreak to a single, morally reprehensible source proved irresistible. Dugas would be henceforth immortalized, in the words of one newspaper headline, as "The Man Who Gave Us AIDS."⁸⁰

Yet the most obvious testament to the power of Shilts's monolithic narrative is the scientific facts available well ahead of the book's publication that contradicted it. The CDC study from which the "Patient Zero" theory originated presumed a period between HIV infection and the onset of AIDS-related illnesses of about nine to eleven months; subsequent research revealing that the incubation period averaged between eight to ten years proved retrospectively that Dugas could not have been responsible for infecting men displaying KS lesions at the same time as he.⁸¹ While Shilts would claim his book as the first work of objective truth to be produced in a national narrative on AIDS degraded by phobic misconceptions and political hedging, the Patient Zero myth would prove ultimately more compelling than the hard science of the epidemic itself, and, consequentially, of any preventative or treatment measures to be potentially derived from it.

The Patient Zero model dominated early, formative narratives surrounding HIV/AIDS in journalism and entertainment media alike, influencing even official policy of local and federal governments in dealing with the epidemic, as proposals to quarantine people with

AIDS and to make publicly known their serostatuses were entertained seriously in the press and in the halls of Congress.⁸² In 1986, William F. Buckley articulated the conservative call for mandatory identification and isolation of people with HIV and AIDS in his now-infamous *New York Times* article, “Identify All The Carriers”: “Everyone detected with AIDS,” Buckley proposes, “should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.”⁸³

Buckley’s call for the mandatory branding of people with HIV and AIDS represents the sickening lows to which some public figures were willing to sink in their quest to render HIV/AIDS visible in the public eye, and yet betrays a fundamental uncertainty with the physical signs that had come to represent HIV/AIDS in public discourse. Buckley’s suggestion that the truth of a person’s serostatus be etched permanently onto his skin belies fears about the impermanence or mutability of the various physical and social markers which the American media had strived so hard to identify with HIV/AIDS, such as KS lesions and effeminacy. Responding to Buckley’s article, Simon Watney notes, correctly, that the last time people were forcibly tattooed as a marker of their difference from the social norm was under the Nazi regime.⁸⁴ Indeed, Buckley’s logic mirrors that of the Third Reich in its compulsive reinforcement of its own propaganda, claiming at once that Jews could be instantly set apart from other people by their physical features, and reifying this supposedly unmistakable difference with yellow stars and tattooed numbers.

While Buckley cynically disguises his call for overtly fascistic government intrusion into the lives of the sick with feigned concern for homosexuals and IV drug users heretofore unexposed to the virus, proposals to contain HIV/AIDS through quarantine were in no part intended to aid those already suffering from its spread. Rather, as Watney argues, such proposals were influenced by a growing “official” concern that HIV/AIDS would come to affect the “general population”—a term, Watney notes, derived from the notion of an “uninfected and exclusively heterosexual” public threatened suddenly by interlopers crossing undetected between both deviant and heteronormative social constituencies, and bringing the virus with them.⁸⁵ The fear of AIDS becomes thus identical with the fear of social rupture caused by human vectors, giving way to an “ideology of ‘leakage,’”⁸⁶ and to increasingly overt attempts to minimize the risk of infection by closing social ranks and identifying visibly and publicly any trespassers.

The Patient Zero narrative is thus concerned fundamentally with the politics of visibility: it enacts a desperate need on behalf of the public to render AIDS, a so-called “invisible” killer, visible by conflating it with bodies that are marked. It at once engages the notion of “risk groups” that dominated early discourse on the disease,⁸⁷ confining HIV/AIDS to such figures as the homosexual male, the IV drug user, and the nonwhite person, while at the same time acknowledging, hysterically, the flimsiness of these categories as the virus spread inexorably through every sector of the American public. As HIV/AIDS proved indifferent to the particularities of gender, race, sexual preference, national origin, and so forth, manifestations of the Patient Zero narrative revealed an

obsession with patently visible, physical manifestations pointing to the presence of HIV/AIDS.

This desire to know HIV/AIDS on sight crystallized in popular representations of the Kaposi's sarcoma, or KS lesion, a form of skin cancer associated early on as an opportunistic infection to which people with HIV/AIDS were vulnerable.⁸⁸ In Shilts's *And the Band Played On*, the blood roses of KS lesions bloom on the bodies of Gaetan Dugas' sex partners, creating a visible trail back to Dugas, condemned by the telltale presence of the cancers on his own body. The use of the KS lesion in ferreting out the "truth" of a person's HIV status was further dramatized in Jonathan Demme's popular 1993 courtroom drama, *Philadelphia*,⁸⁹ and cemented in the public consciousness by media representations of people with AIDS that highlighted the presence of KS, rendering identical the mark with the invisible, blood-borne HIV virus, as well as with the socially deviant figures typically selected to represent the disease in the popular media. So, too, the KS lesion renders newly visible bodies and practices otherwise cloaked by heteronormativity. Through this process of identification and visualization, the Patient Zero narrative serves to stoke and dramatize anxieties surrounding people with HIV and AIDS, and to perform, in a public way, the containment of these human "threats" by marshalling the surveillance powers of specific communities and, by extension, the punitive powers of both the law and the medical establishment.

Yet influencing the urgency with which HIV/AIDS is associated with visible symptoms—especially one as relatively obscure as KS lesions—is the truth that HIV and AIDS remain stubbornly resistant to consistent representation. Lee Edelman writes:

“[A]s an inscription of difference whose ‘subject’ is always the subject of ideology, ‘AIDS,’ in the first place, and on the most literal level, lacks a coherent medical referent, remaining a signifier in search of the determinate condition or conditions it would signify.”⁹⁰ Edelman refers to the host of opportunistic infections to which an immune system sufficiently weakened by HIV infection can succumb, infections that differ significantly from person to person, and express themselves physically (where and when they are obvious to the naked eye) in drastically different ways.

Indeed, the only real consistency in the American response to HIV/AIDS in the first two decades of the epidemic was its constant rehearsing of AIDS as a “subject of ideology”—to the point where moralizing fictions about *who* was presumed to carry the HIV virus had eclipsed practical knowledge about *how* to prevent its spread. Newspapers that gladly printed salacious stories of sex workers and bisexual men “bringing AIDS” into idyllic communities declined to use supposedly “rude” words like “semen” in their coverage of how the virus was actually transmitted, notoriously causing mass panic with vague statements that HIV was transmitted through “bodily fluids.”⁹¹ Industry bans on television advertisements for condoms and Congressional bans on federal funding for any HIV/AIDS educational materials which would “promote or encourage, directly, homosexual or heterosexual activity”⁹² coincided, unsurprisingly, with the mass reception of media reports and books that claimed to expose, for example, “*The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS*.”⁹³ This perfect storm of misinformation undergirded the Athey controversy; it also undermined the stance taken by the *Star Tribune* editorial board in response to criticisms of Abbe’s reporting. The paper, in maintaining that its writers and

editors had simply “put the facts out there [to] let readers decide for themselves,”⁹⁴ assumed a level of knowledge of the facts of HIV/AIDS transmission that many of their readers could not realistically be expected to possess.

The Patient Zero model, however, would by 1994 have been patently familiar to most Minnesotans: in 1986, local news station and CBS affiliate WCCO dedicated the bulk of the first prime-time television story on AIDS in Minnesota to examining Fabian Bridges, a young African American gay man accused of working as a prostitute and deliberately spreading HIV/AIDS in the Twin Cities, where he was a transient resident. In March and April of the same year, the *Star Tribune* ran two separate stories about two Twin Cities-based sex workers, a white gay man and an African American woman, respectively, each of whom were purported to have had sex with clients while refusing to inform them of their HIV-positive status. In the name of defending against the “public menace” of the female prostitute, the *Star Tribune* went so far as to publish both the woman’s home address and police mug shot.⁹⁵ Moreover, a look into Abbe’s personal files pertaining to the Athey story, as collected by the Walker Art Center, show the connections that Abbe herself drew between the Athey saga and the Patient Zero narrative: her files on Athey contain two *New York Times* items pertaining to Dr. David J. Acer, a Florida dentist accused by the Centers for Disease Control of infecting six of his patients with HIV, despite their being unable to prove how this may have occurred.⁹⁶ The “AIDS dentist” story, however infamous at the time,⁹⁷ would appear completely unrelated to Athey’s performance if not for the common denominator of the men’s serostatus, and the style of journalism used to indict them. Abbe’s rendition of Athey’s performance was repeated so

broadly and so consistently at a national scale precisely because it was already so eminently familiar to journalists, politicians, and the public alike—a narrative vacillating, in the words of Cindy Patton, “between the *story* of a virus and a *description* of bodies who might disperse it.”⁹⁸

In her article, Abbe evokes this familiar threat of contagion as it was allegedly posed to members of Athey’s audience, claiming that audience members were “trapped” beneath the blood-imprinted towels, knocking over their chairs in an attempt to flee for safety.⁹⁹ Jim Berenson, whom Abbe interviewed for her article, details these claims in more vivid language in a letter sent to *Star Tribune* editors on March 30th.¹⁰⁰ Berenson goes still further in claiming that Athey’s audience was menaced by the performance, alleging that a fainted woman was denied medical attention by attendants working the doors at the Cabaret, and that in the event of an emergency, the audience would have had to “trample through blood products of the HIV infected performers [*sic*]” to evacuate the theater. Berenson claims that these purported bio-medical threats went unchecked in order to ensure the uninterrupted videotaping of the performance for the Walker library. Berenson then puts forth a call for Halbreich and Killackey to make this video available to the public, maintaining that the museum had deliberately supplied footage of a tamer version of the performance to the press. Berenson promises that the truth about the Walker’s recklessness and ill judgment in hosting Athey would be made clear with the video’s release.¹⁰¹ To screen the videotape of the Athey performance that is currently housed in the Walker archives, however, is to feel a sense of anticlimax after reading and having one’s interest peaked by Abbe and Berenson’s stories.¹⁰²

The performance begins with a flare in the dark, as Athey, whose burly stature and bald scalp is offset by a round, almost babyish face, fires up a cigar. By the light of a few candles flickering on a podium and to the beat of a poppy kind of lounge music, an imposing figure dances onto the stage. This is Divinity Fudge (the stage name assumed by Athey's co-performer and friend, Darryl Carlton), resplendent in silvery eye make-up and an enormous Afro wig, and wearing nothing but long silver gloves and a bouquet of balloons encircling his body.¹⁰³ (Figure 23) In a recital of a classic burlesque act, Divinity shimmies and twirls seductively for Athey, who rocks in his chair with apparent excitement. Athey proceeds to drive the red-hot tip of the cigar into each balloon, revealing an orange thong bikini holding back a pair of preposterously large false breasts as the brightly colored orbs burst. The meager distance that normally separates dancers from their clients dissolved, Athey clamors onto the stage and buries his head in Divinity's ample hindquarters, licking his thighs and ass. Divinity begins to struggle as Athey becomes rougher, pushing him finally to the floor. The room goes dark.

As the next scene begins, two women, both endowed with ropy muscles and cropped hair locating them within the visual codings of "butch," take the stage to an electronic soundtrack undergirded by what was called rather problematically, by the "New Primitives" movement of the time, "tribal" drumbeats.¹⁰⁴ The two gently help Divinity out of his ruined clothes, revealing a pair of black shorts and nipple rings beneath. Divinity is bent over a short bench, his bare back at the apex of a triangulation of clotheslines stretching from the stage and out over the heads of the Cabaret audience. The women (Julie Tolentino and Lisa "Pigpen" Rifkin)¹⁰⁵ and Athey don latex gloves and

clean the exposed flesh with alcohol. In a series of short, deliberate movements with a scalpel, Athey proceeds to cut a few parallel lines into Divinity's back, spreading slightly the flesh after each incision to draw forth the blood. (Figure 24) Divinity holds resolutely still, appearing only occasionally to shudder slightly at the touch of the blade. Athey and his helpers work swiftly and efficiently, as Athey blots the cuts with thick paper shop towels and hands them one by one to the stone-faced Tolentino and Pigpen, who clip them onto the clotheslines and send them in a slow procession over the audience. (Figure 25) The room goes dark once more.

The lights go up to show a change of scenery. Athey, dressed in white, reclines on a bed, performing a fitful night's sleep. As he thrashes in the sheets and blots his face with a cloth, a recording of his voice wavers in and out through the metallic grinding of the soundtrack. The overbearing, almost corny repetition of select words does little to make less dismal Athey's recitation of his young life: a Valium prescription that led to his becoming addicted at age nine; seven years spent as a heroin addict in his effort to achieve sufficient highs; and, beginning in his childhood, a series of attempts, by "intentional overdoses, wrist-slashing, poison injections," at suicide, all failed.¹⁰⁶

As this miserable litany proceeds, Athey performs a series of gestures that condense and reflect his own history of self-destruction. He wraps a red tourniquet around his bicep, and starting at the wrist and working his way up, inserts a number of slender hypodermic needles just under the skin of his arm. Slowly and deliberately, Athey arranges two columns of needles in his arm, creating a formation of white, quivering syringes similar to the quills at the end of an arrow. After removing these methodically,

he takes a new set of long, willowy surgical needles to his scalp. As Athey implants the needles beneath the skin of his cranium, his chest heaves as if from sobbing, and blood runs in rivulets down his face like Jesus' tears in scores of mass-produced images commemorating most melodramatically his sufferings. As the soundtrack fades out, the only audible sounds come from Athey, tossing and panting in bed.

The women reappear, clad in red robes. They drape the bed in a red cloth and strip Athey of his clothes. He sits cross-legged and surrenders to their hands as they wipe the blood from his scalp—passively, like a bedridden person having her hair washed. (Figure 26) As one woman stretches taut the skin of his scalp, the other begins to insert still more needles, Athey's disembodied voice reflects:

I never came to shake this crown of thorns obsession. When I was a child I was overwhelmed by the sensation of how beautiful Jesus was. And later in my anger at the concept of Christ, the dramatic punishment was the only redeeming quality. And now the martyr's crown is rightly mine and ours, to sit atop the suffering body of AIDS.

The time it takes to produce this crown of thorns onstage, however, outlasts this zealous statement. The women work slowly together, crisscrossing the needles beneath the skin and winding gradually a thin wire over and around the spikes in his skull. The crown glimmers gold in the stage lights, as the women recede into the background and Divinity reappears in a white robe. He lifts Athey into his arms, pieta-style, and carries him across the stage to a furrow of white sheets. (Figure 27) Laying Athey upon it, Divinity wraps him in a white robe. He dons latex gloves and pours a small bucket of water over Athey's head, soaking and spreading faint rust-colored stains over the robe. Athey pants under the water, and Divinity begins to remove the needles. Athey's eyelids flutter, his mouth

opening and closing, his head now a bloody mess of vague cross formations. Divinity rubs gently Athey's scalp, face, and neck, making unbecoming the skin. (Figure 28)

Remarkably, it is at these moments when the performance borrows most obviously from Western visual renditions of Biblical narratives that Athey's body is, simultaneously, least in line with traditional conventions of upright, stalwart masculinity. His body open and oozing, Athey submits feebly to the ministrations of Rifkin, Tolentino, and Fudge as they by turns create, wash, and massage his wounds. The vision of Athey, limp in their gore-soaked, capable hands, harkens to classic Biblical images of martyred men and the women who cleaned, carried, and tended their broken bodies. Athey's tableaux conjure inevitable comparisons to Saint Irene, bent over the listless, pierced body of Saint Sebastian, and of the two Marys (the Virgin and the Magdalene) who fondled the dead Christ as they mourned him.¹⁰⁷ Athey's decision to reenact such scenes could be interpreted as deliberately provocative—here, two of the beatific women attendants sport moustaches and nipple rings; the third is not a woman at all, but a corpulent man. Athey offers his own body—pierced, shaved, stretched, and covered with a network of tattoos—in place of the martyr's. Yet in so doing, Athey thus reminds us that the male nude in Western art is not limited to (however overwhelmingly associated with) the dominant ideal that has since antiquity determined it as heroic, vigorous, and “supremely confident.”¹⁰⁸ The agonies of the male body are glorified in the supine, suffering figures of male martyrs and Christ after the crucifixion that populate both the most canonical images of Western art history and the cheaply-produced objects that reproduce these scenes of torture in plastics and paint-by-numbers kits.

The final stage of the performance, which begins to the strains of organ music, is redolent with the fervid yearning that energizes such displays of religious devotion produced on the cheap. Athey stands in the guise of a tent revivalist preacher in a tacky grey suit and thick, black-rimmed glasses, at a lectern, a book and microphone before him. (Figure 29) “Oh!” he booms, “There are so many ways to say Hallelujah!” He proceeds to demonstrate the intricacies of a few different kinds of this exclamation, his voice by turns rasping, wailing, and breaking: “There is the dominant male evangelist Hallelujah, loud and commanding: HHallelujah! [...] “The prayer meeting Hallelujah: HALLELOOOOOOO-JAH!” [...] “The cleansing and the fire of the Holy Ghost Hallelujah,” a choppy sound which, Athey notes, “could double as an epileptic seizure,” and “the plain & simple churchgoer Hallelujah”—the lackluster quality of which causes the Cabaret audience to laugh. In the lilting, hypnotic tones of a seasoned spiritual salesman, Athey continues:

I have family members blessed with the gift of prophecy. They discerned that I had the calling on my life while I was still in the womb. I was raised for the ministry—the Pentecostal ministry [...] I sat in tent meetings and cried, and my tears were collected on prayer cloths. Oh, the grandiosity of my ministry! [...] and I was only a nine-year old child. And at age sixteen I ran from the calling, and I ran, and I ran, and I ran. And I named false prophets, and I rebuked the Father. And I saw no way of saying Hallelujah. But somehow, today, I’ve ended back up at the podium.

We are gathered, Athey announces, “in honor of a union. We stand here to partake in a ceremony of marriage for Julie and Pigpen—two passionate bulldaggers. Give me a powerful Kathryn Kuhlman Hallelujah: HALLELUUUUU-JAH!”¹⁰⁹ Tolentino and Pigpen proceed solemnly past the podium and turn towards the audience, each

transformed into a bulging white cocoon by the diaphanous veils that ensconce them, revealing only their faces. Athey proceeds to deliver a decidedly unorthodox address for this “wedding,” calling into question the meaning of the very ritual taking place:

“...what’s this wedding really about? [...]Where are *queers* to draw their traditions from? Eastern body rituals? Paganism? Wicca? Should they be ignored, or invented? Or should we continue aping straight people in America? Give me a harsh, Leroy Jenkins Hallelujah—HARRRRRE-ULJAH!”¹¹⁰

As the lights on the podium begin to dim and the organ plays, Athey’s address dissolves into nonsense, his phrases deteriorating into stuttering repetition. When the stage is again illuminated, a shirtless Athey proceeds to unwrap the swaddled fabric from the daggers’ bodies. The women wear white loincloths, adorned otherwise with large, shiny objects that cleave mysteriously to their bodies. (Figure 30) Athey places something upon each of their tongues, and each in turn spits it back into a goblet he holds up to their mouths. He cleans their lips and inserts one long needle each into the right side of both women’s mouths. As Athey begins to beat a steady tattoo on a handheld drum, the daggers begin to sway, and a sweet ringing sound is heard. The objects are bells. As the women dance, flailing their limbs with increasing abandon, Athey leaps onto the stage, hammering frantically on the drum, as Divinity accompanies him on a large black barrel. The women begin to howl joyously, and the bells gradually drop from their bodies as their movements grow more frenetic. (Figure 31) The daggers drop to all fours on the black mat where they were “wed,” and pound on the stage with their hands as the lights

go out. The drumbeat peters out slowly, and we hear, at last, only the sounds of the performers heaving for breath.

As the house lights go up at the conclusion of the nearly two-hour-long performance, we see that roughly 90% of the audience members chose to stay, many chatting congenially with their neighbors. The next ten minutes of the videotape document a sedate portion of the post-performance question and answer session, in which cutting, piercing, and blood are scarcely mentioned.¹¹¹ It is therefore tempting indeed to posit the tape in the Walker collection as a definitively “factual” counterbalance to Abbe’s articles and Berenson’s letter. From the recording that Berenson claimed would prove the real danger of the performance, one can extract myriad pieces of evidence to support an argument that no such danger existed: from its position behind the small audience of about one hundred people at Patrick’s Cabaret, the camera offers no visual or audible evidence of audience members scrambling to avoid the blood prints. We are afforded neither a view nor the sounds of a panicked stampede for the doors. The fainted woman is nowhere to be seen.¹¹²

Yet I am no more entitled to claim an objective reading of the course of events that occurred at the Cabaret that night from my viewing of a deteriorating videotape, from a distance of seventeen years, than was Abbe from her interviews with witnesses to the performance (however cherry-picked their statements may have ultimately become). There exist within the tape a number of ellipses that only the imagination can fill in: during the cutting scene, the camera does not afford a view of the audience, and little can be heard over the percussion-heavy electronic soundtrack. During the extended pause

between this scene and the next, the sounds of footsteps and furniture scraping across the floor register through the dark; these could come from audience members fleeing the room, or from the performers onstage as they dragged out large props for the next portion of the performance.

These blank spaces in between scenes signal both the insufficiency of the videotape in conveying the performance, and the evocative power of the performance itself—or, rather, the prolific power of the re-creations of the performance as imagined by a public almost wholly unfamiliar with Athey's work. Pockmarked by these patches of darkness, the video recording cannot confirm definitively any single version of the events offered by myriad witnesses,¹¹³ nor those of the commentators who built upon these testimonies without the benefit of having been present at the performance. We viewers, waiting in the dark for something to happen (and the gap between the cutting scene and the next feels oppressively long), find ourselves subject to what Jennifer Doyle characterizes as that “paradoxically generative form of inattention:” boredom.¹¹⁴ It may seem counterintuitive to analyze Athey's performance, which became the object of such impassioned histrionics, in terms of boredom. Yet I argue that the wild differences between the Athey performance as evidenced in the videotape, and the version of the performance that was rehearsed, rearranged, and blown up in the American imagination, were seeded precisely in the psychic space of boredom, and produced by one of its most powerful triggers: anticlimax.

Boredom, as Doyle writes in *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*, is interest's twin in the anatomy of both erotic and aesthetic response: wherever the burning

attention of desire is present, the cooling affect of disinterest is possible, and in the arenas of sex and art alike, most would understand the arrival of such disinterest as a sign of abject failure. Yet as Doyle notes, boredom can be more productively conceptualized as a kind of psychic resetting, an opening up of new possibilities as our current occupation threatens to lose our interest.¹¹⁵ The inclusion of a few minutes of the post-performance question and answer session at the end of the Walker tape offers up such an opportunity for potential reevaluation and resetting from the paradigmatic narratives surrounding HIV/AIDS at this point in time—including those that were produced in response to the purported health risks purveyed by the performance. The calm (and, arguably, even dull) exchanges between Athey's cast and the Minneapolis audience contradict later characterizations penned by some critics, including those who posited the Minnesotans as innocent victims entrapped by cynical and sadistic urban interlopers, as well as those who dismissed the Minneapolis audience as a group of Midwestern rubes, beholden to outdated prejudices and hopelessly ignorant of contemporary information regarding HIV/AIDS.¹¹⁶ The notion of a sophisticated audience bearing sober witness to a performance that, in its inclusion of blood products, cannot but evoke strongly the specter of HIV/AIDS does not make for very interesting copy, at least when compared to already-debunked accounts of contamination and contagion. Yet the mutual dialogue shared between the performers and their audience proved unpalatable to the mainstream media for reasons beyond its transcendence of the simplistic model of stalwartly heterosexual communities threatened from without by a queer, HIV-bearing menace.

For one, the post-performance discussion necessitated acknowledgement, from all parties, of the distinction between Athey's daily realities as an HIV-positive person, and the dramatized version of these realities as presented in the performance. In short, by focusing their commentary on the affective and symbolic content of Athey's performance, the audience signals their ability to parse out Athey's HIV status from his expressive interpretations of living with the virus; experiencing the performance is thereby not interpreted as experiencing the risk of HIV communication. Yet more challenging still to dominant narratives about HIV/AIDS is the bare fact of the post-performance discussion's having taken place: bodies queer and straight, HIV-positive and HIV-negative, all emerge from this confrontation alive, breathing, and speaking. Their presence underscores the formative absence with which paradigmatic narratives about HIV/AIDS conclude; something is missing, precisely because all are accounted for.

The transition from ritualistic bloodletting to cordial conversation captured by the Walker tape, while perhaps illuminating, is nothing if not anticlimactic. One purpose of the Patient Zero narrative is to force a climax to the seemingly never-ending saga of AIDS, performing the containment and thereby elimination of the disease by staging perpetually the death of the story's anti-hero, the person with AIDS. Applying a rhetoric of divine justice over the dispassionate patterns of HIV infection, the Patient Zero narrative bears gloating witness to the demise of "deliberate" bearers of disease—or, in the case of such nominally bolstering stories such as Demme's *Philadelphia*, perpetuate the figure of the "AIDS martyr," in which the protagonist's suffering is dramatized, aestheticized, and eventually used to usher him along to a well-earned death.

While the AIDS martyr construction initially appears to provide a more compassionate treatment of the PWA, translating his suffering into bravery and his death into transcendence, it in fact seeks only to redeem what the Patient Zero narrative makes explicit: the “original sin” of gay male sex, which in both narratives is linked to the advent of AIDS. Demme’s *Philadelphia*, lionized widely for its ostensibly sympathetic portrayal of a PWA, makes this point so pedantically it borders on the absurd. Demme’s protagonist is Andrew Beckett, a hardworking and straight-laced lawyer fighting his dismissal at the hands of his homophobic bosses in an AIDS-related discrimination lawsuit. As Beckett battles both the symptoms of his disease and the social stigmatism it brings to him, he is supported by his partner with whom he is monogamous, and his extended nuclear family. Numerous and repetitive references to the family’s fecundity lead the viewer to the distinction that the Beckett family is, with the sole exception of Andrew, an exclusively heterosexual and heteroreproductive bunch.

This carefully cultivated simulacrum of heteronormativity—the means by which Demme establishes Beckett as an average son, brother, and partner, “just like” any of us—is however ruptured by the single explicit reference to gay sex, and gay social spheres, in the film. When Beckett is called on the stand to recount the circumstances leading to his infection with HIV, the film’s audience is indulged with a flashback to the scene of the “crime,” as it were: for here, we see Beckett, young, nervous and captured in the flickering light of a blue movie house as he exchanges terse introductions with a fellow patron over a soundtrack of heavy panting. As he confesses his excursion into a space reserved exclusively for sex between men—an act established as identical with his

contracting HIV—Beckett looks predictably terrified. As the only character shown to transverse the clearly delineated spheres of hetero- and homo- sexual existence in the film, Beckett must, according to the internal logic of the narrative, atone for his deviation from even his apparently supportive family.¹¹⁷ He does so by suffering as stoically as possible: hiding the KS lesions that creep across his body and betray his illness until they become impossible to contain; struggling to remain upright in the courtroom until he faints, finally, dead away, and ultimately disappearing into the trappings of the quiet funeral his family gives for him.

The AIDS martyr narrative is ultimately no less explicit nor less condemnatory in its rendering identical the act of sex between men with the spread of HIV than is the Patient Zero narrative. The AIDS martyr narrative rather sets itself apart by cloaking its subject in the tropes of heroic and stoic male suffering in order to re-masculinize him, and thereby offer a form of redemption from passivity and femininity, which both his homosexuality and his seropositive status connote. The persistence with which HIV and AIDS has, in popular discourse, been amalgamated with gay male sex in general and passive anal sex in particular indicates a broader panic over Western masculinity, which the AIDS epidemic threatened to unmask. Implicit in alarmist tales of queer and bisexual men whose promiscuity threatens the public at large is the looming fear of the collapse of notions of sexual control around which the very concept of Western masculinity is organized.

Richard Dyer contends that the Western masculine ideal (which Dyer, for the purposes of his own analysis, specifies as a *white* ideal) is forged on the ability to control

one's physicality, and hinges critically on the ability to command one's sexual urges. While, as Dyer notes, "[n]ot to be sexually driven is liable to cast a question mark over a man's masculinity," the ideal Western male is "divided," possessing of "powerful sex drives but also a greater will power."¹¹⁸ That a man be able to exercise carefully this will power over his libido is equally as important to his masculinity as his possessing these drives in the first place, for without the demonstrated ability to exercise the power of his mind—or, as Dyer would have it, his "spirit"—over his body, the man is dangerously in thrall of his physicality, to the point where his corporeality threatens to control him.¹¹⁹ For when the male subject surrenders himself to receiving sensation, and loses as his objective the control of bodies—his own and others—via the sexual act, how can the condition of male dominion and authority be enforced?

If sexuality provides slippery and treacherous grounds upon which to demonstrate masculinity via the orchestrating and overcoming of drives, physical pain proves a more ideal means to these ends: enduring suffering enables the male body to transcend itself and "display the fact of the spirit within."¹²⁰ In the West, Dyer argues, this paradigmatic demonstration of masculine restraint rehearses the central narrative of Christianity:

The divided nature of white masculinity, which is expressed in relation not only to sexuality but also to anything that can be characterized as low, dark, and irremediably corporeal, reproduces the structure of feeling of the Christ story. His agony is that he was fully flesh and fully spirit, able to be tempted though able to resist. In the torment of the crucifixion he experienced the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed that he could transcend it. The spectacle of white male bodily suffering typically conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence in such pain.¹²¹

The AIDS martyr narrative “redeems” its subject by drawing upon these same Christian tropes of sin and penance: if the (de facto male and queer) PWA was in the past guilty of trespasses against masculinity, indulging his baser needs, HIV/AIDS is, perversely, presented as his opportunity for repentance and transformation. The Christian narrative of male suffering that Dyer outlines initially appears to signal a way back into the fold of heteronormativity by offering the PWA a culturally sanctioned position in which to be a man in pain. By enduring quietly his illness, suffering stoically unto the “merciful” release of death, the PWA may, paradoxically, regain “control” over his body even as it deteriorates.

However, yet another Western narrative convention intervenes to prevent this transformation from ever becoming complete; the PWA is never fully exonerated or re-masculinized, because of the ways that long illnesses and silent suffering intersect with Western notions of model femininity. One thinks of the tubercular Victorian maiden, whose angelic paleness and divinely patient agony is marred only by her sporadic coughing fits, resulting in the spray of blood on the white handkerchief. Too, the heroine’s ultimate inability to contain the viscous, physical evidence of her affliction intersects with contemporary anxieties about sexually unrestrained male bodies and the biological threats they are presumed to pose. For as Lynda Nead famously contends, the integrity of the female body is in the annals of Western thought and aesthetics always suspect, threatening at any moment to supercede cultural efforts to plug its leaking orifices, overflowing these impositions and “issuing filth and pollution.”¹²² The ideal female body, argues Nead, is “hermetically sealed.” Yet, she notes, uncomfortable

connotations remain: “If nothing is allowed in or out, then the female body remains a disturbing container for both the ideal and the polluted.”¹²³ The problem posed by the female body is thus only temporarily held at bay by its sublimation in the classicizing forms of Western culture.

Pace Nead, one can conclude that the figure of the perpetually and patiently ill woman is venerated precisely because in her uncomplaining state she performs the culture’s anxious need to seal up the oozing, porous, and potentially infectious female body; yet her best efforts to remain quietly beautiful unto death are betrayed by the very threat of biological deterioration she attempts to conceal. While the long-suffering woman may be admired for her efforts to hold back the flood of biological instability that we associate with femininity itself, she will ultimately be always undone by this force. So is the body of the HIV-positive gay male consigned to a similar fate in American narratives about HIV and AIDS; having submitted to the sensory overflow of same-sex male eroticism, and thus irresponsibly relinquished his control over the social body as well as his own, he will be eventually, visibly exposed and undone by the symptoms of his illness. The degree of sympathy with which the audience will receive the death of the PWA is determined entirely by the degree of stoicism, and silence, with which he meets his end, even as we await with a certain amount of smugness the inevitability of his descent into physical and mental ruination.¹²⁴ His death serves also to erase conveniently the evidence of male bodies that move, via the ties of sexuality, between both nominally straight and gay social spheres, and all the gender instability that this movement suggests.

In its perennial focus on pain, sexuality, and the opening up of the body, body art thus exists in a particularly trenchant relationship with the Western gender ideals intertwined with these physical states. The male body artist can, on the one hand, turn his work into a testament to his stoicism, his virility, his ability to bear and work through pain. On the other hand, perpetual suffering, and the theatrical, visual means by which this suffering becomes known, is also associated definitively with women: the lovelorn maiden who wastes beatifically away; the mother who dies in childbirth so that her child may be given life; the dutiful daughter/sister/mother who suffers through years of hard physical labor on behalf of others. And of course, the naked act of puncturing the body—thereby implying that the male body is porous, penetrable—carries all manner of uncomfortable connotations for patriarchal forms of masculinity.

Nevertheless, as Amelia Jones contends, “[m]ale body artists are known for more explicit and far more dramatic (histrionic) bodily mutilations than female ones;” male body artists, Jones muses, also seem to “[i]ronically [...] relish the appearance of *blood*, as if it confirms their masculinity, their prowess, their live-ness.”¹²⁵ The relationship Jones alleges between the drawing of blood and the maintenance of male prowess, I argue, is maintained because in the work of early male body artists, blood serves as little more than a direct material signifier of the body in pain.¹²⁶ This is equally true of straightforward acts of macho physical endurance (i.e., the blood that spurts from Chris Burden’s arm at the climactic moment of *Shoot* [1971]) as it is of the most grandiose forays into the goriest of Judeo-Christian symbolism (the mock-crucifixions and buckets of blood that formulate Hermann Nitsch’s *80th Action* [1984].)¹²⁷

In the work of certain contemporary women artists, however, blood assumes a more nuanced material and symbolic value, resonating more as a bodily trace that conveys meaning than as an incidental product of a painful process. From this one may draw the admittedly essentialist, but also difficult-to-dispute conclusion that the material realities of living as a woman render more complex the symbolic relationship between blood and the body. Menstruation dislodges the correlation between blood and body in distress; the body bleeds, yet not from a wound. Moreover, it challenges even the most fundamental physical boundaries by which Self is distinguished from Other and identity is forged, in serving as a constant reminder of the female body's capacity to create other bodies, and of hosting an entity that is simultaneously of the Self, yet still Other.

It is no coincidence that Athey's American forbearers and contemporaries in "blood works" are overwhelmingly female, nor is it surprising that in many of these works, the appearance of blood evokes not the singular body, but the body spilt, gone beyond itself, in the ways that the appearance of blood as a bodily trace registers with other bodies. In the photographs of Athey's contemporary, Catherine Opie, blood beads on the surface of freshly cut incisions, indicating the ways in which Opie's desires forever render her socially "marked" (*Self-Portrait* [1993]; *Self-Portrait/Pervert* [1994].) Ana Mendieta executed numerous performance and installation works that focused specifically on human blood and spectator's reactions to it (*Rape Scene* [1973]; *People Looking at Blood* [1973]; *Self-Portrait with Blood* [1973]; the *Body Tracks* series [1974], and certain of the *Siluetas* series [1973-77] number among them.) Years later, Carolee Schneemann, already no stranger to working with blood as both material and muse (*Blood Work Diary* [1972];

Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology [1981-83]) created a bloody tribute to Mendieta after her death (*Homage to Ana Mendieta* [1986]).

Yet amongst all the works in the history of feminist art in America where blood appears as both material and subject, there are arguably none so notorious as certain dispatches from participants in the Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts in the 1970s, the heady days of feminist art's infancy. The eruption of oversaturated tampons that comprise Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* in the Womanhouse installation (1972), and the overwrought female *Sacrifice* (1971) that Faith Wilding chose to embellish with unctuously dripping Kotexes encapsulate perfectly everything that poststructuralist and "anti-essentialist" feminists would come to criticize about their feminist forbearer's work and politics; essentialist, messy, and insistent in yoking the concept of "woman" to an irrepressible biology.¹²⁸ (Figure 32) After this somewhat ironic turn of events by which American feminist artists of the 1970s incorporated blood into their works to challenge the culturally-enforced stigma that surrounds female bodies in their porous, leaky viscosity—only to have their efforts condemned as reactionary by later generations of feminists—blood never quite effectively lost the stigma of a particularly feminized shame.

Blood is not, however, delivered of its connotations with a specifically feminine weakness in the face of biological forces once incorporated into the work of a male artist like Athey. This stigma rather mutates into a new form in the era of HIV/AIDS: while blood is but one of the four bodily fluids through which HIV may be conveyed, it is arguably, above all others, the vector most closely associated with the virus in

mainstream media reporting on HIV and AIDS;¹²⁹ by the second decade of the epidemic, blood and HIV had been rendered thoroughly indexical. Though the popular conflation of HIV/AIDS with the queer male body had in turn tarred it with the stigma of infected blood, blood retained an expressly feminine shame even when transposed onto the male body. Jane Blocker, in a chapter, “Blood’s Work,” that surveys many of the artists I have listed here, reminds us of the old misogynist joke, “I don’t trust anything that bleeds for a week and doesn’t die.” This adage, which Blocker relates to performance art, itself, in the tenuous position from which it mediates between “art” and “life,”¹³⁰ finds a bizarre correlative in a culture that stages publicly and obsessively the death of the PWA in the name of its own collective health, and then responds with overt hostility when he fails to expire quickly and quietly. Indeed, a similar sort of hostility is betrayed by the suspicion expressed in the original joke: the healthy woman who menstruates and blithely continues with her life is the converse of the sainted, suffering woman who secretes secretively but at least has the decency to die. The former is suspicious precisely because she performs corporeally what Western culture conceives of as a spiritual miracle: she suffers *through* the trials of occupying a mortal, human body; she bleeds but does not die. Athey, too, by staging over and over the puncturing of his own body, presents himself as an HIV-positive body that bleeds but does not die, conjuring up comparisons to the female opening that regularly bleeds and never closes, yet is not a wound.

The figurative language employed in mainstream media accounts of the epidemic are further revealing in this regard: in the first two decades of the epidemic, a common buzzword used to refer to the emergence of HIV/AIDS among the “heterosexual

population” is “leakage.”¹³¹ This “leaking” of HIV into presumably hermetically sealed heterosexual “communities” is in these narratives portrayed frequently as the fault of bisexual men, whom such narratives configure always as deceiving their female partners while carrying on clandestine sexual encounters with men.¹³² While the mere concept of bisexual men already threatens the integrity of mutually exclusive homosexual and heterosexual “communities” presumed by these stories, the term “leakage” advances further this notion of dangerous gender subterfuge: the male homosexual anus becomes a lethal permutation of the leaky vagina, threatening to spill over the boundaries of the gendered body and destabilize the general populace. The implicit aim of the cultural project of divining visible evidence of HIV and AIDS on the queer male body—evidence fed by the media to the general populace in images of KS legions, AIDS wasting, and of blood dripping from Athey’s veins—is to expose these “deceptions” and draw a clear correlation between HIV/AIDS and imagined acts of anal penetration, thereby indicting the seropositive person as passive, feminine, and morally weak.

The circumstances of Athey’s era and of his own health thereby set him firmly apart from other, earlier male “endurance” body artists, from whom bloodletting signified merely their successful endurance of bodily pain. After AIDS, this simple correlation could no longer exist; from this point forward, blood would come to signify not only the pain of the bleeding body, but also potential risk to bodies in proximity. That Athey is particularly sensitive to this symbolic shift is evident from the aesthetics of his performance work alone; as if in echo of the work of some of his feminist forebearers, Athey in his performance utilizes blood as a particularly symbolically loaded artist’s

material. In *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, blood takes the place of ink in the “human printing press” scene (which is itself a commentary on cultural attitudes that turn women’s bodies into resources to be pillaged),¹³³ in the scenes featuring the piercing and bathing of Athey’s scalp, it provides at times a surprisingly delicate painterly effect, coloring his face and clothes in washes of rose and rust. That his copious displays of blood would become the center of a controversy beyond the artist’s making indeed indicates that at this point in the epidemic’s history, blood did not, for most people, register on a *symbolic* level at all: the threat associated with a queer, bleeding, HIV-positive (or, in Carlton’s case, HIV-negative) man was perceived as actual and immediate. Yet amongst the hundreds of news stories on the Athey performance feeding these hyperbolic rumors of panic and contagion, might one detect a common, lesser-articulated anxiety, not about the blood itself, but about the acts that produced it: namely, the opening up of the male body?¹³⁴

Expanding or creating such holes in the male physique is fundamental to Athey’s performance work. Athey developed his oeuvre not through a traditional academic studio practice or a background in theater, but through his immersion in the Modern Primitive culture that taught body modification as a spiritual practice.¹³⁵ Transcendence through bodily pain is attempted through various methods of penetrating the body: piercing, tattooing, and the stretching of orifices. Athey’s incorporation of these processes into experimental performances within the queer club scene in Los Angeles, where public acts of sex and body modification coexisted, laid the foundations for his later, more conceptually realized works.¹³⁶

The penetration of the male body is performed in nearly all of Athey's mature work, and the body being opened up is most often his own. In *Leather Daddy Bootshrine*, a scene from *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* which was not performed in Minneapolis, a male performer submits to the prick of a needle that transfers saline from a bag into his testicular sack, producing the disconcerting sight of male genitals that appear both hyper-masculine in size and precariously fragile in their pink swollenness. In *Deliverance* (1996), Athey and several male performers receive enemas, and undergo similar transformations of their genitals: Athey's penis is sewn onto his abdomen, creating a strange facsimile of a vagina; a butch "surgeon" "cures" the other men, presented within the performance as mortally ill, by rendering them fake "eunuchs." The performance crescendos with Athey sharing a double-headed dildo with another man, enthusiastically rocking back and forth while reading from a script. *Solar Anus* (1998) stages that most condemned of all orifices dripping with riches, as a string of pearls is pulled, orb by orb, from Athey's anus; (Figure 33) in *Judas Cradle* (2005), Athey stretches this orifice by means of a medieval torture device used on heretics; in *Incorruptible Flesh (Dissociated Sparkle)* (2006), with an aluminum baseball bat, conjuring haunting associations of gay-bashings carried out with that particular weapon. (Figure 34)

The performance at Patrick's Cabaret contained nothing on the scale of these grandiosely taxing gestures, yet the phobic reactions it provoked, I contend, respond to even the smallest acts of penetration performed there. The holes torn by the needles in Athey's skin, and the red slits opened up across Divinity's back, serve as an unwelcome reminder about the male body's permeability. This corporeal reality is the object of our

most compulsive cultural disavowal: the notion that the male body can sustain the invasion of a foreign body is uncomfortable; the notion that hosting such a body might be pleasurable is unbearable. The conviction that AIDS is the tangible result of such trespasses had immediate and irrevocable impact on the epidemic's course.

Simon Watney famously summarizes this correlation when he writes:

That the male rectum is the most thoroughly policed part of the male anatomy suggests that a particular effort is needed to redirect the libido away from deeply repressed memories of anal erotic pleasure in infancy, at a time when our primary awareness of our bodies is erotogenic. Aids [*sic*] offers a new sign for the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave.¹³⁷

The imagined act of anal sex between men that Watney describes serves as the genesis point in the quasi-journalistic narratives on HIV/AIDS that initially formed both popular opinion and civic response to the epidemic. In "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism," Lee Edelman notes that on June 3, 1991, coincident with the tenth anniversary of the first official reports of what is now known as "AIDS," an editorial in New Hampshire's *Manchester Union Leader* stated unequivocally that "[h]omosexual intercourse¹³⁸ is the genesis of every single case of AIDS in that every case is traceable—either directly or indirectly—to the practice. However the disease is transmitted, the sexual perversion that is anal intercourse by sodomites is the fundamental point of origin."¹³⁹ Comparing this popular mythology about the "origins" of AIDS to "creation science," Edelman writes, "[i]n this version of a now familiar quasi-Miltonic speculation on the origins of 'AIDS,' the gay male anus as the site of pleasure gives birth to 'AIDS' as a figuration of death."¹⁴⁰ So is forged the

equation of death with male surrender to eroticism, be it produced by the penetration of the body, or the gaze:

Were we to think of gravity, for a moment, as expressing the narcissism of matter, we might consider that the place of the anus, as the “black hole” in the mythology of “AIDS,” figures the lethally disavowed narcissism that heterosexual masculinity, to define itself as such, must misread as the lethal narcissism associated with gay men—lethal because it draws the male subject back into his imaginary “history,” the nonbeing that is the experientially unapproachable condition of nondifferentiation, by permitting the gay man to take himself, narcissistically, as an object, and allowing him, in consequence, as an object, to be “taken.”¹⁴¹

In this passage, Edelman theorizes that the persistence with which homosexuality is rendered indexical to passive anal intercourse is borne of deeper fears about what the body becomes when it is undifferentiated from its surroundings. The anus becomes effectively the dark mirror of the womb, and of the state of only tenuous difference from another body in which we all once existed. In the dominant culture, gay men are imagined as being suspiciously comfortable in this egoless state, submitting easily to objectification via sexual relations.

In performance, too, the actor performs such a narcissistic surrender: by presenting himself as an object of the audience’s gaze, he risks the dissolution of his hermetic self in favor of re-constitution in the imaginations of others. As I have argued earlier in this dissertation, the man who transforms his body into an aesthetic object is rendered already vaguely suspect in a visual economy in which the artistic/erotic subject is configured as female, and the subject who appraises her as male. The resilient associations with prurience and prostitution that cleave to live performance make it an already precarious venture for men, who are obliged by the culture to perform Cartesian

command over their own bodies and those of others, without acknowledging it as performance *per se*. If the dynamics of live performance threaten to undo cultural precepts about the sovereign autonomy of the male body where it renders it the object of the spectator's delectation, performance such as Athey's, which stages the actual invasion of the male body by foreign objects and deals conceptually with the male body as the host of a living virus, shatters these fantasies completely.

At the heart of Abbe's complaint with Athey's performance, and echoed by countless others writing after her, is shock and outrage at Athey's temerity in claiming the role of a performer: how dare he present HIV, and the body that bears it, as "art?"¹⁴² Where they were not presumed to be outright lethal, Athey's dramatizations of life and death after HIV and AIDS—messy, indulgent, flamboyant—were at least considered to be in poor taste.¹⁴³ The notion that HIV/AIDS is somehow resistant to sublimation or artistic interpretation would seem truly illogical if not for how this backlash produces a cover for the narrative fictions that substitute for comprehensive information on HIV and AIDS. The vehemence with which the mass media attempted to mold Athey to fit established narratives on HIV, homosexuality, and risk, along with its total lack of regard for the aesthetic context of his work, is ultimately a testament to how successful the latter was in disrupting the former.

At a point in history in which the HIV-positive person was posited either as an active menace, deliberately spreading the disease to "innocent" parties, or as a wasted and martyred body on the brink of assumption, one cannot underestimate the significance of Athey presenting himself as a *living and bleeding* subject. Abject, penetrated by long

needles, and drenched in that most fearful of substances—blood—Athey seems almost too perfect a target for the Patient Zero narrative; too perfect in that his visual and physical grandiosities leave nothing to the imagination, taking the pleasure of investigation and juridical conviction out of the story. The process of scrutinizing the body for physical or social signs of queerness—and, by the logic of the Patient Zero narrative, for HIV infection—is rendered altogether moot by Athey’s body of work, in its brazen focus on the open, the porous, the bleeding male body, and its trenchant relationship to the bodies of its beholders. Despite the endless media emphasis on the “shocking” qualities of Athey’s work—his frankness about his serostatus, his use of body modification and live sex acts—Athey’s Minneapolis performance was perhaps most significant at the moment of its anticlimax, when the show was over, the blood wiped up, the encounter complete, and every member of the cast and the audience still alive and breathing.

Athey fell under such universal opprobrium for his failure to enact the narrative of dissipation, disease, repentance and assumption that by 1994 constituted the popular understanding of the life and death of seropositive persons.¹⁴⁴ The unrestrained and overwrought enactment of Christian rituals and iconography in Athey’s work serves further to indict the cruel rhetoric undergirding these narratives, in which AIDS is configured as a kind of divine judgment. This is equally true of popular narratives that portray the PWA as a sympathetic figure as it is of smug conservative assertions that AIDS constitutes the wages of sin: while the former may presume that the PWA is destined for heaven, or some murky approximation thereof, and the latter that he is

destined for hell, both rationalize the spectacle of mass AIDS deaths; the former presumes that death brings peace; the latter that it brings justice. When observed objectively, both appear maddeningly indifferent to the plight of those still living with HIV and AIDS, and the problem of how to keep them that way; but then, neither is the objective of the popular HIV/AIDS narrative. For what is more frustrating than a story that lacks origins, motives, intentionality, even an end?

“Nothing,” writes Judith Williamson, “could be more meaningless than a virus. It has no point, no purpose, no plan; it is part of no scheme, carries no inherent significance. And yet nothing is harder for us to confront than the complete absence of meaning.”¹⁴⁵ In producing work that deals explicitly with HIV/AIDS and the staggering losses it has caused in his own life,¹⁴⁶ Athey, by his own admission, has found it difficult to resist the allure of the intimately familiar narratives of sin and redemption.¹⁴⁷ No less formative to Athey’s work, however, was the wrecking of these tropes in the very course of his religious education during his exceptionally brutal childhood. In Catherine Gund Saalfield’s documentary *Hallelujah!: Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*, Athey traces the senses of yearning and frustration infusing his own performance work to a formative disappointment in his childhood. Athey’s family were Southern Pentecostal Christians who developed their own ministry, into which Athey was born under a prophesy that he would serve as a child preacher and John the Baptist figure while awaiting the Second Coming of Christ, who was prophesized to be born unto Athey’s aunt. While the Vaudevillian¹⁴⁸ displays of Athey’s fellow parishioners were formative to his later work-- which includes the art of speaking in tongues—Athey recalls, in a Mexico City

performance of *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, an especially vivid turning point in his spiritual development. A woman, one “Dr. Velma Jagers,” or “Miss Velma,” had visited Athey’s church, claiming to have the gift of stigmata. As the young Athey watched, he became increasingly angrier as the woman failed to bleed before the congregation:

Towards the end of the service, when she still had not bled, I wanted to have a temper tantrum. I thought, she’s just a big fat fucking scam artist. I couldn’t understand why everyone else was so patient with waiting for a gift. All she had shown us were pictures—cheap snapshots of her bloodstained clothes, as if that were sufficient evidence of a miracle. And further, she shared with the congregation that impressions of blood would appear in her Bible. But I didn’t want to hear stories of psychic phenomenon—I wanted her to bleed. I’d come there with the strong desire to be anointed in the blood seeping directly from her palms.¹⁴⁹

Around the time of the failed stigmata, Athey recalls, he took a razor blade to the tips of the fingers of his little sister, and then to his own hand, attempting in a crude and childish way to realize the failed promise of spiritual cleansing through bloodshed that had been denied to him.¹⁵⁰ In his performance work, he continually rehearses this formative sensation of anticlimax. To claim the gift of stigmata is to offer oneself up as physical proof of the existence of God—to realize, on the corporeal plane, the evangelical promise that to believe is to overcome death.

Yet to perform such tricks is also to expose, cruelly, how deeply and definitively the human imagination fails at picturing eternity. As a young boy possessed by a fervent yearning to know God intimately, Athey was frustrated by the banality of the physical relics offered in lieu of the divine. Awaiting a miracle, but offered only crude tokens, he grew angry, impatient, disgusted with what he had been offered. Significantly, Peter

Toohy identifies these emotions that Athey suffered as related to, and even constitutive of, boredom—the state of frustration one suffers in realizing that the thing one awaits will not come.¹⁵¹ Salvation is nothing if not the promise of blazing difference, of liberation from the everyday, but beyond the simple negation of that which vexes us, the imagination fails to paint a compelling picture of paradise. Scripture promises that the glass that serves as our window to the divine is dark only for now; that later, we will at last see face to face.¹⁵² Yet the joy of this nakedly corporeal metaphor belies the cognitive limits that structure it: for when we think of God, we picture a human face. We have no reservoir from which to draw in imagining the hereafter other than what has come before.

To attempt to conceptualize spiritual transcendence is to collide directly against the anti-climactic. The promise of heaven, that the self will remain even through death, is ultimately a promise of stasis—and human beings are fundamentally unable to imagine a form of stasis that does not regress into the prosaic. The hope that some aspect of the self survives the ravages of death is, in the wake of a global health catastrophe, simply intuitive, and narratives about HIV/AIDS in America would ultimately muddle towards different visions of spiritual stasis, attempting feebly to picture “what comes after” the forced climax of the PWA’s death. Among the sympathetic, arts organizations and media outlets joined forces to commemorate the dead and “raise awareness” about HIV/AIDS through arts programming, and by promoting the artistic legacies of the fallen.¹⁵³ The Religious Right, in turn, projects a sadistic version of this stasis, guaranteeing that deviant individuals who contracted HIV will be punished in hell, remaining wretched for all eternity. In the second decade of the AIDS pandemic, the promise of the self surviving

the body rings at once desperately desirable, and devastatingly hollow—not the least because it does nothing to recognize the realities of the people with HIV and AIDS still present, anchored in their bodies and trying for the time being to remain that way.

It is to this type of “durational body” that Athey’s work ultimately gestures: bodies that have suffered interminably the pains of living but have, for reasons of refusal or denial, avoided the closure provided by “transcending” completely the body. The critic Ken Thompson, in a typical description of Athey’s work, claims that the artist enacts a kind of “spiritual transcendence through physical mortification,”¹⁵⁴ yet Athey’s performances are too bare, too brutal—and yes, at times, too boring—to allow such complete sublimation. The cheaply tailored choir robes and the pierced and tattooed individuals therein locate us in the present, not in a Biblical past as rendered through Western painting’s brush. The medical-grade latex gloves return us to the body, with the reminder that there are contagions to be guarded against. Borrowing from the “burlesque” in which he was raised, Athey claims the “martyrs [*sic*] crown [...] to sit atop the body suffering from AIDS,”¹⁵⁵ but with a sharp awareness of disappointing results of attempting to produce materially a miracle. The spectacle will be realized, the blood will flow, the stigmata manifest, but the mechanisms of this process—the needles, the arrows, the catheters—are in plain sight, and God is nowhere to be found. The body bleeds and suffers but does not die; it is sundered, but remains stubbornly whole. In the visual and rhetorical economy governing representations of HIV/AIDS from which *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* and *Martyrs and Saints* emerged, in which the spectacle of sacrifice and

elimination was so eagerly reenacted, the performance of disappointment and survival constitutes one ultimately radical possibility.

Chapter Three

“The trap of the visual field is that it seems to promise to show all, even while it fails to show the subject who looks, *and* thus fails to show what the looker most wants to see.”

-Peggy Phelan

The American conceptual artist Glenn Ligon built his international reputation on a body of work notably free of figures of any kind. The large-scale, text-based paintings and prints produced by the artist over the late 1980s and early 1990s appear nonetheless haunted by subjectivities at once assertive and indistinct: “I am an invisible man” declares over and over an untitled work of 1991, before the stuttering text bleeds into illegibility at the bottom of the canvas. (Figure 35) A brief survey of Ligon’s contemporaneous works reveals the sustained use of this declarative “I”: another painting of the same year states “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” (Figure 36) An untitled work of 1992 reads, “I’m turning into a specter before your very eyes.” Unencumbered by other visual cues, Ligon’s paintings appear to be a straightforward series of self-reflexive statements, organized along the axes of racial and gender identification.

Yet for the reader, a persistent sensation of familiarity invited by these seemingly autobiographical statements is belied by these texts’ origination, respectively, in works by Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Genêt. In repurposing these textual fragments from seminal works on racial identity and social formations, Ligon charts a conversion of the subjective experience of occupying a raced body into the generalities of

fiction, from which he selectively gleans fragments to approximate his own experience in a black male body. The sources that comprise the “I” of Ligon’s work are a multitude, appropriated from art and literature to suggest a series of racial, sexual, and gender particularities that resemble Ligon’s own, an “autobiography” of which the subject has written not a single word.

Even the appearance of Ligon’s own body in his work does not signal a simple act of self-reflexivity. This is deceptively true of a photo-serigraphic dyad of 1998, which initially appears to report the facts of Ligon’s physical features with a simplicity bordering on banality. (Figure 37) Yet the inscrutable sameness of Ligon’s *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features* and *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features* exists to critique notions of racial “difference” put forth in a 1981 self-portrait in which the conceptual artist Adrian Piper purported to exaggerate her “*Negroid Features*.” (Figure 38) In Ligon’s work, identificatory declarations come from the lips of others, and the artist’s body represents not a unitary self, but a dialogic, citational, and wholly subjective being-for-others. The self revealed in Ligon’s work is personal, confessional, and yet always as impalpable as Ellison’s invisible man.

It is for these reasons that Ligon, in the nascence of this project, appeared to me as both a beguiling possible subject, and a potential risk to the coherence of my thesis. While Ligon throughout his oeuvre is perhaps more consistently engaged with the problem of self-representation than any of the other artists I survey (as both Anger and Koons have only rarely featured themselves in their own work, and Athey in his performance work offers forth his body as symbolic surrogate for others), Ligon’s

method of self-portraiture is so elusive, so associative, so altogether resistant to representing directly his own black, male, queer body. The fact of Ligon's work, in other words, prevented me from concluding simply that the relative lack of self-representation in the work of contemporary American male artists is indicative of uniform and preemptive cultural censorship, which severely curtails men's participation as erotic subjects within the visual field. In order to do so, I would have willfully to ignore the fact that visibility does not impact all male subjects equally.

Emerging from an era in which fervent dedication to visibility politics was as ubiquitous on the Right as on the Left,¹ and representations were accepted as stand-ins for the real by the arbiters of high culture as readily as they were by politicians and pundits, Ligon's works *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* (1993) and *A Feast of Scraps* (1994-98) refute the supposedly commonsensical notion that subjects plagued by under- or mis-representation are best compensated through more and "better" representations. The object of Ligon's investigations is the black male body, in its historically vexed and rhetorically precarious relationship to photography. In these two pieces, the chain of substitutions initiated in Ligon's text-based works continues, but with the black male body functioning itself as the sign through which other subjectivities are deciphered. Against a strain of popular argument which maintains that black male bodies have historically been effaced in photographic representations, and subsequently ennobled by more contemporary, "positive" depictions, Ligon shows the status of the black male body in photographic discourse not to be invisibility, but transparency, a

treacherous kind of versatility by which the black male body is never assumed as self-evident, but always as “standing for” something other than itself.

In this chapter, I myself employ an associative, perhaps even promiscuous methodology in order to explicate Ligon’s substitutional strategies. I “write” Ligon through invocations and analysis of other subjects. The first half of my chapter focuses extensively on the artist Robert Mapplethorpe, whose *Black Book* (1986)—an ample portfolio of photographs of black men—is replicated in its entirety in Ligon’s *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book.”* I do so not simply to inaugurate a conversation about how issues of race, class, and sexuality emerge through Mapplethorpe’s images of black men—this conversation, as Ligon makes exceedingly clear in the sheer volume of discourse which he provides as an addendum to Mapplethorpe’s photography in *Notes*, is already well underway. Rather, I propose that the position Mapplethorpe currently occupies within contemporary art histories—that of the embattled but ultimately vindicated paragon of free artistic expression—was effected through the unyoking of Mapplethorpe’s aesthetics from a particular genre of racially charged, anonymously-produced gay pornography, a lineage which Ligon’s work helps us to trace.

This process, I argue, climaxed in the infamous “Mapplethorpe trial” of 1990, when the by-then-deceased photographer’s advocates defended his oeuvre and solidified publicly his place within the art historical canon by shifting focus away from the considerable influence of delegitimized forms of photography, including pornography, on Mapplethorpe’s work. This forced schism also conveniently removed Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men from the context of a veritable history of images in which the

presumed sexual potency of the black male is collapsed with and read as exemplary of gay male desire itself. Black, male, and queer, Ligon is thus implicated in the economy of desire that plays out across the pages of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, even as he represents the work under his own auspices. Evoking familiar theoretical arguments that sexuality, and race, are formed in discourse, Ligon raises unsettling questions of the degree to which sexual subjectivities are forged outside, and thus beyond the control of, the subject himself, as his appropriation of Mapplethorpe's erotic imaginings was by some interpreted unproblematically as a disclosure of Ligon's own sexuality.²

Yet is with *A Feast of Scraps* that Ligon begins to articulate more closely a history of his own erotics, albeit still through the bodies of others. In this ersatz family album, Ligon produces a genealogy through which the aesthetics informing Mapplethorpe's images of black males are evidenced in the anonymously-produced, pornographic images of black men that Ligon places at interstices throughout the album, which is comprised otherwise of fairly benign photos of black families. While in this chapter I analyze separately *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* and *A Feast of Scraps*, I also maintain that reading these works in conversation with one another is critical to understanding the indistinct subject/object positions that constitute the "self" in Ligon's work. Examining these works together facilitates a reunion of Mapplethorpe's highly stylized and critically lauded images of black men with the inexpensively and clandestinely produced photographs from which they were, in spite of the formal similarities they share, estranged. I argue that Ligon effects within and between these works (the *Black Book*, *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* and *A Feast of Scraps*)

a number of reunions between categories that gain their very coherence from their respective estrangement: fine art and pornographic photography; heteronormativity and queer sexuality; notions of socio-racial deviance and of socio-racial progress. I propose that in placing these elements in suggestive proximity to one another, Ligon creates what I conceptualize as a kind of textual and aesthetic miscegenation.

Miscegenation, is, as I define it, a phantasm: characteristic of (but not exclusive to) the white racist imagination,³ miscegenation is evoked as a threat to the integrity and coherency of supposedly natural formations; namely, that of white and non-white peoples existing as de facto separate species. In this way, phobic imaginings of miscegenation give lie to the fixed racial categories they purport to defend, for if race were in fact based in such fundamental biological difference, the threat of “intermixing” would be nonexistent. Rather, racist evocations of “miscegenation” attempt to redirect the imagination towards purported *threats* to the integrity of biologically and socially distinct racial castes (often to the effect of wreaking devastating violence against the non-white, alleged purveyors of these threats), while at the same time effacing the fact that such categories have never existed, denying or eliding the existence of people who carry the evidence of this cross-racial confluence in their own bodies. In Ligon’s work, this evidence is inscribed upon the body of the black, possibly queer male, whose mere presence, I argue, troubles the stability and exclusivity of fundamentalist notions of aesthetics, sexuality, and race.

The black male, as I argue throughout this chapter, emerges in Ligon’s work as a perpetually disquieting subject in the history of photography, not for reason of under-

representation, but rather *over*-representation within a number of inglorious photographic genres, including the didactics of sociological, criminal, medical, and ethnographic studies, and, most crucially for my purposes, pornographic photography. As I will demonstrate, fine art photography gains its coherence as a category only when parceled out from these instructional and commercial forms. The black male, when he appears within the auspices of fine art photography as he does in Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* photos, brings these connotations with him; as the sheer proliferation of discourse collected within Ligon's *Notes* shows, photographs of black male bodies are virtually never received as being about "just" aesthetics.

It is the burden that black subjects bear in being interpreted as "proof" of socio-racial formations external to themselves that is evidenced within Ligon's *A Feast of Scraps*, in the pornographic images of black men and the mundane portraits of black families alike. I take the tension between the pornographic visions of mythical black male potency and the buttoned-up images of black middle class domesticity in Ligon's album as emblematic, not only of the damage wrought by white racist imaginings cemented in sociological literature on the sexually- and socially-deviant black family, but of the anxious restrictions on sexuality and expression imposed from within black communities striving to prove these racist projections incorrect. In this economy of perpetual surveillance, the black male is particularly implicated; presumed already to be a sexual deviant within the white racist imagination, and cognizant of the fact that his behavior will be interpreted as "representative" of his race by white and black people alike, the risk of being perceived as *actually* deviant—that is, of appearing queer—becomes more dire.

For Ligon, this problem intersects fundamentally with the work of self-portrayal, as the expectation that the black speaking subject represent always bodies external to his own emerged at the selfsame moment as the notion of the “black artist” itself. “[B]lack art,” writes Darby English, “began its life [early in the twentieth century] as a component of a political program of uplift,” as leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois deemed “positive” representations of black American life to be a central plank in the project of enfranchisement.⁴ The development of the Black Arts and Black Aesthetics movements in the 1960s and 1970s imposed still more specific expectations upon black artists tasked with “representing” on behalf of their race,⁵ a responsibility further compounded by external as well as internal pressures in the 1990s as the politics of multiculturalism evolved into a central concern of a white-dominated art world suddenly interested in staging self-consciously the spectacle of racial difference within cultural forums. When one takes into consideration also that the black body itself constitutes, in English’s words, “a black representational space par excellence,”⁶ in that the actions of individual black subjects are routinely scrutinized and judged to be indicative of qualities endemic to their race, the full weight of the burdensome and promiscuous task of developing “black subjectivities” comes to rest.

By offering appropriated declarative statements on race in lieu of his own black body, Ligon captures the sensation of being transformed continually into an object to be measured against competing definitions of what “black is/black ain’t,” while cannily slipping the bonds of surveillance and fetishism by which these scopic regimes operate.⁷ And the visual field, it seems, is littered with such traps: a voluminous literature exists on

the ways in which black bodies, and black male bodies in particular, have been deployed as part of a visual and rhetorical lexicon articulating the fears, desires, and anxieties of white people, of which bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Toni Morrison number only a few especially notable authors whom Ligon cites directly in *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book."*⁸ While the two works with which I am concerned rehearse this dynamic of cross-racial interpolation, Ligon does not merely stage the ways in which dark figures function as a subject of white fascinations. As a black artist releasing cryptically autobiographical disclosures through the bodies of other black men, Ligon draws our attention to the perpetually slippery subjectivity of black figures in the chain of cultural signification, raising questions about authorship and archives, and the names and contributions preserved therein.

Yet as *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* and *A Feast of Scraps* demonstrate, Ligon's own position as a queer man of color within this economy of representations is too precarious to allow him the critical distance that facilitates the normal order of visual exchange, in which, in the words of Peggy Phelan, the image of the other can never be "other-than a cipher for the looking self;"⁹ for when Ligon turns an appraising eye to the spectacle of black male flesh as played out in his appropriative works, he also understands the sensation of finding oneself the object of this same scrutiny. Implicated by the historical gaze by which black subjects are constituted as objects of scientific study, social scrutiny, and artistic signification, and thereby denied the critical distance deemed necessary to Kantian aesthetic contemplation, Ligon's connection with his adopted photographic subjects is an empathic, *prurient* relationship

that conjures up the spectatorial dynamics of both pornography and family photographs.¹⁰ The affective power of both hinges critically on the sensation of recognition they inspire in the viewing subject, initiating a process of self-fashioning forged uneasily through images of others. Whether in the contours of the face of a long-lost relative through which one recognizes the traces of one's own features, or in the contraband or surreptitiously acquired photograph that enables one to recognize the shape of one's own desires, both offer a winding, associative path to the realization of where one (however uncomfortably) belongs.

The premier of *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* at the 1993 Whitney Biennial Exhibition revealed a startling addition to Ligon's visual lexicon. The textual elements upon which his earlier works had relied are still present, in reams of neatly framed quotations arranged in a procession along the gallery walls. (Figure 39) Yet *Notes* marked Ligon's departure from his near-ascetic focus on text alone, for the long horizontal row of "notes" is bracketed at top and bottom by scores of bodies, a confluence of images of black men. The men's bodies beckon to the viewer from within their simple black frames, offering a sensation of visual abundance previously unknown in Ligon's work. Black faces, chests, and limbs oiled to a silvery sheen glisten under the photographic flash. The shining swell of buttocks, backs, and biceps evoke the austere curves of modernist sculpture; as if to underscore this transformation, other models sit nude upon actual pedestals, making pedantically clear their status as *objets d'art*.¹¹ (Figure 40) The vision of black masculinity offered in these images is rigidly invariant: muscle-rippled, sculpted and polished, the models embody a highly aestheticized phallic

plentitude. Given the total absence of bodies in Ligon's work prior to this point, this sampler of black male flesh comes as a surprise—indeed, the work seems quite “unlike” him.

This is because *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book”* presents the disgorged pages of Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, a portfolio of the artist's photographs of black men published in 1986. In so doing, it strips away the sense of chronological coherence that normally accompanies the steady march through a book, from beginning to end; to view *Notes* is to refute the organizational logic of the “father” text from which the photographs originate. Two rows of pages replicating Mapplethorpe's lushly toned black-and-white photographs encase the plainly presented “notes” that hang in between.¹² If the viewer approaches the work from the left wall and works her way to the right, scanning from top to bottom, and thereby following the orientation to which readers of the Roman alphabet intuitively resort, she will begin at the end of Mapplethorpe's portfolio, her gaze unreciprocated by the closed eyelids of the model Ken Moody. If she begins with the right wall and works her way to the left, she will begin at the beginning of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* (and with the similarly inscrutable image of the top of a model's bent shaved head), but must move to examine the installation in a direction counter to the way she typically reads. The navigational challenges presented by the installation, and the perhaps inverse relationship between its scope and the attention span of the viewer, virtually guarantee that no two viewings of the work will be alike: the individual will gravitate towards the images that catch her attention, taking from the work only the bits and pieces that appeal to her particularly.

Whether perused methodically or piecemeal, the texts that appear as a running commentary at the “margins” of the photos impose no real narrative organization upon the installation. Within these texts chime a multitude of voices of wildly varying provenance: art critics, cultural theorists, conservative Christian activists, drag queens, politicians, bartenders, and a few of the models who appear in the photographs are among those represented. The arrangement of the quotes evokes conversations of which the object is sometimes obscure: the blocks of text chatter, argue, contradict one another; some refer to specific images from the *Black Book*, to which they are only sometimes proximally arranged; of these, some argue for the integrity of the images, others against. The seventy-eight blocks of text collected within *Notes*, however, are not limited to such direct references to the images on display; rather, they tend to get away from the specificity of individual photographs, inaugurating conversations on race and representation, artistic power and privilege, queer sexuality, AIDS, and death. In transforming the *Black Book* into an extra-textual document of staggering weight, *Notes* gestures towards what appears to be a critical inability on the part of the original book to address the material and individual realities of the black men pictured therein.

Mapplethorpe’s black subjects—often rendered anonymous or credited by only their first names in his titles—are more easily situated within a generalized constellation of contemporary societal ills than they are as portrait subjects, and thereby individual human beings. By contrast, the authors of the fragments of texts reproduced in the piece are credited—marking the first appearance of citations in Ligon’s text-based works—bestowing an authority which the photographic subjects distinctly lack. The cacophony of

voices collected within *Notes* documents numerous attempts to claim some measure of subjectivity for Mapplethorpe's black models, often for starkly different reasons and towards different ends. Yet the combination of Mapplethorpe's photographs with the selected texts is perhaps nowhere as striking as where both seem to point towards the unknowability of the black subjects on display.

The first image of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* shows the top of a man's clean-shaved head, bowed between two smoothly sloping shoulders. (Figure 41) The photo is dramatically cropped to obscure his facial features, and the model's body takes up remarkably little pictorial space, most of which is given over to the gentle gradients of the background. In a portfolio widely noted for its obsessive focus on rock-hard muscles and huge black cocks, the soft curves of this curiously natal image—a black man “crowning,” fully formed, before us—situates a rather literal “origin” for Mapplethorpe's book. In *Notes*, the image is paired with a quote from the cultural theorist Stuart Hall:¹³

Not only, in Said's “Orientalist” sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as “Other.”¹⁴

A reader who approaches *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book”* from the beginning of Mapplethorpe's original text is thus confronted, via Hall, with an entirely different promise than that of the bounty of black male flesh which the *Black Book* offers. Hall evokes the sensation of alienation and disembodiment that haunts the black experience—a mis-recognition of one's own self, enforced by institutionalized and internalized racism. For the white viewer, to begin at this point in *Notes* is thus to be seduced by

Mapplethorpe's beautiful black bodies, and simultaneously admonished that many black people suffer from the feeling that they would rather not look at—or be looked at while in the state of occupying—their own bodies.

This is immediately followed by a quote from Henry Louis Gates, in which he proclaims that, despite our vested interest in race as “a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference,” the biological basis of “race” is so unstable that we “*will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations” via language. In other words, race—the ostensible focus of the conversation that *Notes* rehearses—exists solely in the form of the collective cultural need to continue this conversation. (Though to say “collective” is not to imply that everyone involved in the conversation on race holds the same stakes, or arrives equally equipped).

The discourse around race in relation to Mapplethorpe's work, however, is marked by the contributions of discussants who sought to limit drastically the conversation's scope. Even prior to the publication of the *Black Book* in 1986, certain of Mapplethorpe's more sympathetic critics embarked on a rather circuitous task: at once desiring to praise Mapplethorpe's deeply sexualized depictions of black male bodies, and anticipating the criticisms of cultural commentators interested in problematizing the spectacle of racial fetishization, his champions—a few whom I discuss below—tried to make the case that Mapplethorpe's photos of black men, by virtue of their sublime beauty and supposed uniqueness in Western visual culture, constituted a liberatory and even anti-racist gesture on behalf of his black subjects. Yet, as Edmund White declared in a catalogue essay for Mapplethorpe's “Black Males” exhibition, “racism is something that

cannot be photographed;” in other words, Mapplethorpe’s critics argued that the artist’s camera can function as a tool of racial uplift, but the “blindness” of racial prejudice cannot register in the visual field.¹⁵

In claiming that Mapplethorpe was for the first time shedding light on the maligned subject of the black body, White attempts to preempt a dialogue on the ways in which racism, in the guise of “surveillance, voyeurism, and fetishism,”¹⁶ functions patently as vision rather than blindness. White’s early essay sets a daunting precedent hereafter echoed in the work of other influential critics; though a broad range of commentators from Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien to Essex Hemphill and bell hooks (to name only a few represented within *Notes*) insistently situated Mapplethorpe’s images of black men within broader conversations about racial fetishism and the politics of the gaze,¹⁷ these analyses went up against a vociferous critical consensus that to question the racial politics of Mapplethorpe’s images of black men constituted a gauche display of philistinism. For Mapplethorpe’s devotees, race enters into the conversation on the *Black Book* images only when it can be proffered as proof of the artist’s supposed dedication to racial parity via the enlightening effects of photography. Kay Larson, in a catalogue essay for the exhibition “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment,” declares, “Mapplethorpe’s black men are the first, in my memory of photographic history, to be given full dignity and equal stature as sexual beings.”¹⁸ Ingrid Sischy, addressing the “objections” of unnamed parties to Mapplethorpe’s nudes, goes so far as to presume that the photos have brought “a great deal of pleasure on the part of many of those who the image police would expect to file complaints.” Rather, she concludes, “[t]he pictures

have [...] redistributed assets such as strength and pride in the blanks of mass-media and art-historical imagery, which have always shortchanged the accounts of [...] people of color.”¹⁹

Sischy’s vague formation of a shadowy “image police” menacing Mapplethorpe’s work warrants a closer look. At the date of Sischy’s essay in 1988, Mapplethorpe had yet to burst into public consciousness as the most notorious artist in America, and the figurehead of the political battle to define and distinguish art from obscenity. The enemies to which Sischy alludes can thus be construed as anyone who challenges the racial and sexual politics perceived in Mapplethorpe’s work. The conflation of criticism with censorship that Sischy performs here would come increasingly to define the position of Mapplethorpe’s supporters in the annals of culture as the religious Right launched their attack on Mapplethorpe the following year. The political battle over Mapplethorpe’s work—which reached a turning point when the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati was brought to trial on obscenity charges for displaying Mapplethorpe’s photos in 1990—is regarded widely as the pinnacle of political persecution of the arts at the headiest peak of the “culture wars,” and the eventual clearing of the CAC on all charges heralded as a resounding victory against the forces of censorship. What this uplifting narrative occludes is the rigid critical coalition formed by Mapplethorpe’s most prominent defenders, who grouped those who critiqued the social and political impact of Mapplethorpe’s racial imagery in with the artist’s enemies in the Religious Right, conflating these radically incompatible parties under the censorious banner of the “image police.”²⁰ The critical voices of black writers and artists who evaluated Mapplethorpe’s

work in terms of its role in the social currency of racial imagery were thereby silenced—ironically, in the name of “free expression.”

The mechanisms of this critical coalescence and subsequent silencing are, as I will go on to argue, subtle. Indeed, the “Mapplethorpe trial” in Cincinnati would not initially appear to have anything to do with race (inasmuch as “race” is equivocated especially with “black” in a white racist culture) at all: of the seven contested photographs which the prosecution singled out from the exhibition “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment,” none feature a black model. Despite the considerable fuss raised by Senator Jesse Helms over Mapplethorpe’s infamous photo, *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980) only a few months before,²¹ the prosecution in the Cincinnati case appeared altogether unconcerned with Mapplethorpe’s depictions of black men. Yet as I will show, the Cincinnati trial became the public platform in which Mapplethorpe’s defenders—academic, cultural, and litigious—would attempt to demonstrate objectively the value of Mapplethorpe’s work in a landmark ruling on the boundaries of art and obscenity, and the state’s ability to define the two. The defense won their case via a two-part strategy that consisted of: establishing Mapplethorpe as part of a classical art historical canon with which the working-class jury was largely unfamiliar; and, by turn, erasing the clear and traceable influence of anonymously-produced commercial pornography, articulated via a racialized erotic visual lexicon aimed at a gay male audience, on Mapplethorpe’s work. I argue that Mapplethorpe’s engagement with gay pornographic tropes is inseparable from his racial aesthetics—a point that Ligon makes evident in his work *A Feast of Scraps*, which is the focus of the second half of this

chapter. Mapplethorpe's images of black men owe much to the anonymous photographers and models who collaborated to produce images of black males specifically designed to appeal to white gay male fantasies; yet as the "art expert" witnesses for the defense painstakingly extracted Mapplethorpe from the pornographic milieu in which the artist had once immersed himself, this racialized lineage was disappeared. The oft-repeated claim sounded by admiring critics of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*—that he was the "first" to depict positively the eroticism of black males—was thus quietly, but prominently confirmed in a public forum, and cemented as a matter of critical consensus and historical truth.

As the dialogue staged by *Notes* reveals, a persistent problem of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* is the readiness with which the models fade into transparency, becoming a mirror for Mapplethorpe himself. In a range of literature reproduced throughout *Notes*, critics and commentators utilize the bodies of the men preserved within the pages of the *Black Book* to divine or proffer some truth—be it artistic, intellectual, or sexual—about Robert Mapplethorpe. In spates of literature from academic articles to museum monographs to tell-all biographies produced for middlebrow audiences, Mapplethorpe's images of black men are purported by some to show the artist's masterful control of his own aesthetics, where others see his weakness, beholden to his own erotic fixations. They are offered as proof of Mapplethorpe's love and respect for his black models, or of his virulent racism. Ligon, evidently aware of the ways in which certain of the authors represented in his work repeatedly look through the men of the *Black Book* in hopes of discovering the Great White Father behind them, renders this conundrum within the work

itself. Between two images of black men—one represented as a gleaming, muscle-rippled torso, the other in the abstracted form of a crouched back, and both rendered headless--

Ligon offers this selection from Richard Dyer's *White*:

It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just 'people') in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyse their representation, whereas white people—not there as a category and everywhere everything [*sic*] as a fact—are difficult, if not impossible, to analyse *qua* white. The subject seems to fall apart in your hands as soon as you begin.

The absent white person—invisible but omniscient, denied but desperately desired--is, in *Notes*, the one who has rendered these black men so patently visible: Mapplethorpe himself, who is equally indicted by the accompanying James Baldwin quote, which declares that “by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is.” In *Notes*, the black male body emerges as the cipher by which the life of the white, gay male artist is interpreted. Crucially, even the texts collected in *Notes* which identify and critique this dynamic of race and representation, in Mapplethorpe's work and in the Western literary and artistic histories that precede it, are constrained by these terms. In mounting a critical conversation about black representation and sexuality, the authors are compelled repeatedly to refer and return to the erotic imagination of a white gay man. Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* thus effectively established an aesthetic and intellectual monopoly around the subject of the erotic black male body. Indeed, as I will go on to show, the long-term critical response to *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book”* indicates that even Ligon himself is critically configured within the terms of Mapplethorpe's erotic vision.

It is therefore too simple to posit *Notes* as a corrective to the problematic aspects of *Black Book*—as though Ligon has “fixed” Mapplethorpe’s original text by interjecting the race debate back into the images. By reproducing the *Black Book* alongside a multi-vocal, multi-focal and querulous conversation, Ligon does re-contextualize Mapplethorpe’s photography within larger questions of race and visibility, and thereby draws attention to the ways in which these issues were diminished, becoming collateral damage in the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s.²² Yet the sheer prolixity of arguments present within the piece—and their tendency to get away from the individuals represented within the pages of the *Black Book*—also demonstrate the severe slippage of black subjectivities in discourse. In the context of *Notes*, the black subjects of Mapplethorpe’s photos are transformed into textual evidence by a vast array of individuals in the extended and wildly contradictory argument waged at the photographs’ edges. The only topic that seems beyond the critical faculties of most of the individuals reading the *Black Book* is its ostensible subject--the black men represented in the photographs. A quote from the artist Lyle Ashton Harris, seemingly anticipating the elusive object of the inter-textual conversation in which he is included, asks:

The whole notion that these men are in control of their representations is tired. We know what Mapplethorpe got out of it—the photographs. What did these men get?

The answer Harris demands is not to be found within *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book,”* for all its textual effluence. Mapplethorpe’s black male models—so often transformed by the photographer’s vision to the point where they no longer recognized themselves, and, in so many cases, gone to early deaths by the time of the book’s

publication—remain obscure despite the prolific discourse produced in their names. The meaning and effects of Mapplethorpe’s images of black men would become the subject of academic and political battles, but, as *Notes* reveals, the meaning of these photos is constituted solely by how the viewer uses them, or by how she imagines they are meant to be used.

The notion that objects and images are transformed via artistic appropriation, their meanings molded by the application of the authorial signature, is accepted now (among the ranks of educated cultural elites, if not more generally) as both an established fact and the foundational gesture of postmodernism. In *Notes*, however, Ligon does more than simply rehearse this familiar tactic: rather than affirming the power of individual artistic genius to bestow new life upon a prefashioned object, he broaches the possibility that the artist is himself formulated by the images he chooses—or by those that are chosen for him. Ligon leads us to the unsettling conclusion that we, the ostensible shapers of the imaginary, are shaped indelibly by it.

It is thus highly remarkable that the complex questions of art, authorship, and identity put forth in *Notes* would be so perfectly encapsulated in a question posed to Ligon by a complete stranger. Beneath the classicized crouch of Mapplethorpe’s *Tom* (1986) is reproduced this innocent query:

“Are these your photos? Are you Robert Mapplethorpe?”
—Drag Queen, patron at Sound Factory

This question—posed by an anonymous drag queen, looking on as Ligon perused the *Black Book* in a Chelsea nightclub—articulates aptly the central concern of *Notes on the*

Margin of the "Black Book": how does Ligon make Mapplethorpe's photos "his?" The astuteness of this inquiry resonates at once in spite of and because the asker is too unfamiliar with the contemporary art world to know that Mapplethorpe was white, and that he was, by the time of this conversation, dead. Here, while *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* was still in its inception, the drag queen in her naïveté opens up the exciting question of what it would mean for a black man to claim authorship over the seductive and problematic vision of black male sexuality put forth in the *Black Book*. In so doing, Ligon takes advantage, precariously, of the instability that constitutes the black subject within discourse, utilizing—as did Mapplethorpe and a chorus of viewers and commentators afterward—the black male body for his own rhetorical needs. At the same time, Ligon pulls a dizzying about-face: just as the authors represented within *Notes* use Mapplethorpe's black models as a means of reading Mapplethorpe, Ligon invites his viewers to formulate a sense of his own identity through Mapplethorpe's images of black men. As in his early, text-based works, Ligon performs an act of self-fashioning out of absence, consequently diminishing Mapplethorpe's importance. The "truth" of Mapplethorpe's artistic intentions cannot be discerned within *Notes*, because Mapplethorpe is no longer "there." He exists, like race, only in discourse.

The constitutive discourse that established Mapplethorpe in the public imagination as a dual figure symbolizing on one hand the dangerous effects of unchecked sexual licentiousness, and on the other the boundless condition of freedom of expression, coalesced with the opening of *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center*²³ in a courtroom in Hamilton County, Ohio, on September 28, 1990. The trial marked the first time in

American history in which a museum was brought before a court of law on the charge of “pandering obscenity.” The trial, and the chain of events that led to Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center being forced to defend itself for showing Mapplethorpe’s work, heralded a growing boldness on the part of what was by then a vigorous and well-connected anti-pornography movement in the United States. In Cincinnati, where powerful local anti-pornography organizations had already succeeded in driving out all “adult” businesses from the city, the attacks on the CAC and Mapplethorpe signaled these moral crusaders’ readiness to take aim at entities positioned higher up on the social ladder. In the process, Mapplethorpe’s name became, more than any other artist targeted in the attacks on the NEA in the late 1980s and early 1990s, synonymous with the bitter battles over art, public money, and standards of decency.

The exhibition “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment” arrived at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in April of 1990 already mired in controversy. In April of the previous year, the American Family Association, under the leadership of the Reverend Donald Wildmon, had launched a mass campaign targeting “blasphemous” art, which would establish Mapplethorpe as the *bête noir* of the Christian Right.²⁴ Targeting the Mapplethorpe retrospective, which had been organized and debuted by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia with the support of \$30,000 in funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the newly formed Christian Coalition, under the leadership of the Reverend Pat Robertson, bombarded their subscribers with mailings decrying the use of taxpayer money to support “homosexual erotic photographs.”²⁵ The grassroots furor over the Mapplethorpe exhibition also attracted the attention of

Representatives Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Dick Armey (R-TX). Using the Mapplethorpe exhibition as a springboard, Helms, Armey, and a bipartisan coalition of Senators and Representatives launched an aggressive campaign to change the NEA's grant-making procedures so "that shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving art would not get money."²⁶ For some Representatives, including Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), the ultimate goal was the complete abolishment of the NEA itself.²⁷ In the midst of this political firestorm, Director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art Christina Orr-Cahall announced the cancellation of "The Perfect Moment" exhibition, which had been slated to open at the Corcoran on June 30th.²⁸ In ceding to political pressure, Orr-Cahall in fact intensified the fever pitch of the Mapplethorpe controversy, inciting broad public dialogue around the topic of censorship and spotlighting the city to which the exhibition would soon travel: Cincinnati.

By the time the Mapplethorpe retrospective arrived at the CAC in April of 1990, federal attacks on the funding structure of the NEA had worsened considerably. On September 29th, 1989, Congress passed restrictions banning the NEA from supporting "obscene" art for one year.²⁹ Based on the precedent of *Miller v. California* (1973), the resolution defined obscenity as "including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts."³⁰ The resolution seemed tailor-made to menace the Mapplethorpe retrospective—which, in its inclusion of the artist's "X Portfolio," contained thirteen images of men engaged in sadomasochistic activities, and dozens of more benign male nudes within the whole of the exhibition. At home, the CAC had to contend with a still

more hostile climate: Cincinnati, as the leaders of numerous local anti-smut organizations were proud to boast, represented the “pinnacle” of anti-pornography activism in the United States.³¹ As the headquarters of the National Coalition Against Pornography, the Children’s Legal Foundation, and home to many other community- and church-based anti-smut organizations, Cincinnati forbade by law the establishment of peep shows, adult bookstores, X-rated theaters, bars that allow nude dancing, escort services, and massage parlors.³² Despite early efforts on the part of the CAC to direct the public dialogue preceding the Mapplethorpe exhibit through mailers and meetings with city councilmen, clergy, and civic leaders,³³ by March the museum seemed destined for the political skirmish that the Corcoran had attempted to avoid. Cincinnati law enforcement officials, anti-pornography groups, and business leaders had joined forces in a preemptive campaign for the cancellation of the upcoming exhibition;³⁴ Hamilton County Sheriff Simon Leis, declaring Mapplethorpe’s pictures to be “criminally obscene,” signaled his plans to target the museum himself should Cincinnati police fail to do so.³⁵

On April 8th, the CAC debuted “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment” to the general public. Among the crowds that queued up to view the exhibition that day were nine members of a Hamilton County grand jury, who then reported back to the police. A few hours later, police and sheriff’s officers arrived with indictments against the CAC and the museum’s director, Dennis Barrie. While a crowd outside chanted “Gestapo, go home!” and “Sieg heil!,” officers ordered four hundred visitors out of the museum while they videotaped Mapplethorpe’s pictures to collect evidence to support the indictments.³⁶ Seven of Mapplethorpe’s photos were charged as criminally obscene: two

of these, *Rosie* (1976) and *Jesse McBride* (1976) featured child subjects in different states of undress. The remaining five photos all originated from Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio," including *Helmut & Brooks, N.Y.C.* (1978); *John, N.Y.C.* (1978); *Lou, N.Y.C.* (1978); *Jim and Tom, Sausalito* (1977-1978), and Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait* of 1978. The CAC was indicted on two misdemeanor charges of pandering obscenity and illegal use of a minor in nudity oriented material, facing a maximum fine of \$5,000 on each count. Barrie, who was indicted on the same charges, faced a maximum penalty of a \$2,000 fine and six months in prison.³⁷ The possibility that a museum director could be imprisoned on charges of peddling pornography signaled a dramatic turn in the national debate over art and obscenity: by the time *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center* arrived in Hamilton County court on September 28th, the chants of anti-censorship protestors gathered outside the courthouse seemed frankly accurate: "The whole world is watching."³⁸

The selection of the jury in what would come to be referred to colloquially as "the Mapplethorpe trial" appeared to bode ill for Barrie and the CAC: the eight jurists were largely blue-collar³⁹ residents of conservative suburbs of Hamilton County, where anti-pornography sentiment was believed to be strongest by the defense and the prosecution alike. One jurist in particular, an affiliate of two local anti-pornography organizations, had already seen photocopies of two of the disputed photographs, and confirmed during interrogation with an attorney for the defense that she believed them to be "not morally decent" and unfit for a museum exhibition.⁴⁰ By contrast, none of the jurors could claim an active interest in art: only three had ever been to an art museum,⁴¹ and, prior to a

seconds-long visit to the museum's foyer as per the request of the defense, none had ever been to the CAC.⁴² As law scholars across the country weighed in on the pending trial, some expressed "grave doubts" about whether any Cincinnati jury would have the ability to differentiate fairly between art and obscenity.⁴³

In fact, by 1990, extant rulings that attempted to differentiate between the two rendered it practically impossible for a jury anywhere in the United States to determine "fairly" the differences between art and smut. Per the prosecution's request,⁴⁴ the jury in *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center* had to adhere to the precedent set by the landmark Supreme Court ruling, *Miller v. California*, in deciding whether "the average person, applying contemporary community standards," would find that Mapplethorpe's photos appealed "to the prurient interest," depicting "in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law," and "whether the work[s], taken as a whole, lack serious [...] artistic [...] value."⁴⁵ The *Miller* decision thereby declared artistic merit and prurience to be mutually exclusive; in order for something to be ruled obscene, it must be determined to possess no redeeming artistic value.

Yet while *Miller* appeared to situate the definition of obscenity relative to locality—thereby declaring effectively obscenity to be relative—a later decision, *Pope v. Illinois* (1987), attempted to clarify the *Miller* ruling in opining that "[o]nly the first and second prongs of the *Miller* test—appeal to prurient interest and patent offensiveness—should be decided with reference to "contemporary community standards."⁴⁶ The question of "value" or "artistic merit," the Court determined, must be judged by national, or "objective" standards, as they exist in the judgment of the archetypal "rational man."⁴⁷

While *Miller* established the process of defining and prosecuting pornography practically as a form of democratic exercise, left to the discretion of individual municipalities, the *Pope* ruling effectively neutralized this power in determining notions of “literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” to be outside of a community’s jurisdiction. In order to prove that an object fell outside of the definition of obscenity as determined by the three-pronged *Miller* test, one needed only to prove the object’s merit according to the extraordinarily nebulous concept of “objective” standards. Obscenity law in the United States thereby hinges on a critical contradiction that operates upon the pernicious class-based anxieties that define most Americans’ experience relative to culture: the law may not grant communities the power to define “art,” but they are free to determine what they do *not* like. The Mapplethorpe trial would prove emblematic of the late twentieth-century culture wars not because it delivered an ultimate verdict on the sanctity of free expression, but rather because it exposed a central conundrum in American culture: while numerous communities have proved eager to define “obscenity,” very few lay people feel comfortable defining “artistic merit.”

The stakes in the Mapplethorpe trial were thus determined well before the CAC and Barrie faced charges in Hamilton County court: the museum’s innocence or guilt would be determined by whether the pictures could be “proven” as art or pornography, based upon the assumed mutual exclusivity of the two. The task of the prosecuting attorneys representing the city was thus considerable: in order to prove that Mapplethorpe’s work was pornographic, they would have to argue successfully against one of the foundational (however unwritten) principles around which American obscenity

law and policy is based: that a work cannot, by mere fact of its inclusion in a museum, be pornographic.⁴⁸ In his opening arguments, Lead Prosecutor Frank Prouty offered the jury, in plain language, the chance to affirm that a museum could indeed function as a purveyor of obscenity: “This is the opportunity for you to decide: What is the limit? Where do you draw the line?”⁴⁹ Prouty’s enticement amounted to an invitation for ordinary citizens to storm for the first time the allegedly insurmountable ivory tower.

The supposed polarity of art and pornography colored the arguments of the prosecution and the defense to the point where, as journalist Isabel Wilkerson noted, the opposite sides seemed to be “speaking completely different languages.”⁵⁰ Local opponents of the Mapplethorpe exhibition had attempted early on to set the tone for the debate with familiar anti-smut arguments, such as declaring to the press that if the city allowed the photographs to be displayed, they would open the gateway for depictions of bestiality and necrophilia in their community.⁵¹ Others argued that by exhibiting the photographs *Rosie* and *Jesse McBride*, the CAC would “tacitly advocate [...] [the] abuse of children,”⁵² a point argued forcefully in the testimony of the sole expert witness for the prosecution, Judith Reisman.⁵³ As the prosecution rested its case after calling to the stand only Reisman and three other witnesses—all police officers present during the April 8th raid on the CAC—it became increasingly apparent that prosecuting attorneys were counting on the well-rehearsed anti-obscenity rhetoric that had been fomented in Cincinnati prior to the exhibition’s arrival to make their arguments for them. Indeed, the prosecution seemed unwilling to engage directly the question of whether the photographs could be considered “art,” hoping instead that the jury—whom, during the selection

process, the prosecution had quizzed about their familiarity with adult magazines such as *Playboy* and *Hustler*⁵⁴—would recognize automatically the photographs as obscene. As jurors received their first look at the contested images on October 1st, Lead Prosecutor Prouty announced his intentions of leaving them to their own conclusions: “The state’s case is in some respects very simple [...] You’re going to ask, ‘Shouldn’t we hear something more?’ ...The pictures are the state’s case.”⁵⁵

The defense, by contrast, arrived with a veritable arsenal of “experts” selected to persuade the jury that the pictures were indeed art. After viewing the five contested images from Mapplethorpe’s “X Portfolio,” the jury heard testimony from Janet Kardon, the former director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia who had organized the Mapplethorpe retrospective. Kardon’s testimony set the tone for the defense, explicating the photographs according to a value with which none of the jury were likely to have been familiar: formalism. “[Formalism],” Kardon testified, has to do less with subject matter and more to do with light, color, composition, and arrangement.”⁵⁶ Under examination by Prouty, Kardon stressed the formal similarities between the disputed images and the rather inoffensive studies of flowers that made up Mapplethorpe’s “Y Portfolio:” asked for her comment on a photo of a fist and forearm inserted into a man’s anus,⁵⁷ she said: “The forearm is in the very center of the picture, which is very characteristic of his flowers, which often occupy the center of the photograph. And the stamen comes forward [like the forearm].”⁵⁸ On a photograph of a finger inserted into a penis,⁵⁹ she said: “Interestingly enough, Robert Mapplethorpe commented on this very image and spoke about how beautiful he thought the hand

gesture was.”⁶⁰ (Figure 42) Kardon also stated that she would classify the works as “figure studies,” as opposed to “sexual expressions”—the term favored by the prosecution.⁶¹

Never once did either the defense or the prosecution entertain the notion that Mapplethorpe’s work could constitute both. As the trial wore on, the defense proved just as studious in avoiding any discussion of sex as the prosecution did in their reticence to formulate their own definition of “art,” a dynamic perhaps best encapsulated in this exchange between an attorney for the prosecution and CAC Director Dennis Barrie:

Prosecutor: “Would you call these sexual acts?”

Barrie: “I would call them figure studies.”

Prosecutor: “This is a photograph of a man with a finger inserted in his rectum, what is the artistic content of that?”⁶²

Barrie: “It’s a striking photograph in terms of light and composition.”⁶³

As witnesses for the defense made the case for Mapplethorpe’s formalist sensibilities, placing him within a continuum of Western aesthetic tradition, they consequentially neutered the photographs’ content. By compelling listeners’ attention towards the hand in Mapplethorpe’s *Lou, N.Y.C.*, Kardon neglects to mention that the “beautiful gesture” in question is the subject’s penetration of himself—a rhetorical gambit that attempts to minimize the discomfort experienced by many upon being forced to contemplate the porousness of the male body, but in so doing strips the image of its charge. In the words of Kardon, Barrie, and numerous other witnesses for the defense, Mapplethorpe’s visceral, often painful images become positively bland. Carefully avoiding the words

“gay” and “homosexual” in his arguments, lead attorney for the defense Louis Sirkin seized upon the opportunity to turn Mapplethorpe’s photographs of sexual subcultures into props in a morality play, stating that the images documented “a period of American history in the 1970s which we may never have again, and perhaps we never should have again.”⁶⁴ By claiming (erroneously and rather bizarrely) that S&M leather communities had been disappeared in the age of AIDS, Sirkin evoked a narrative of extinction already well established in media accounts of the epidemic: Mapplethorpe’s images were appropriated to serve as both a tableau of a bygone era of sexual abandon, and a tombstone to those brazen enough to participate, placing both the sexual acts and the queer men who engaged in them at a safe historical distance from the stolid citizens of Cincinnati.

After hearing the testimonies of a phalanx of art and cultural professionals, the jury delivered its verdict on October 5th, after less than two hours of deliberation.⁶⁵ By a vote of 7-1, the jury acquitted Barrie and the CAC on all charges.⁶⁶ In the midst of a culture war marked by fervent attacks on the part of the religious right and consequent sanctions against art institutions, the Cincinnati ruling was trumpeted as a resounding victory for free expression—and as an affirmation of the role of the museum as an unequivocal arbiter of culture. “I think it sends a very important signal that these museums are protected and that they are part of our culture, and that, as a part of our culture, they should be kept sacred,” Barrie declared to the press.⁶⁷ Sirkin, calling the ruling a “serious blow”⁶⁸ to anti-obscenity groups, stated: “Cincinnati was the place they thought they could win. If not here, where?”⁶⁹

The verdict, however, was determined not by the jury's deeply seated convictions regarding the "sacred" role of art in American culture, but rather by their pliability in the hands of the art experts called by the defense. As jurist James Jones said of the witnesses for the defense, "All of them, to a person, were so certain it was art. [...] We had to go with what we were told."⁷⁰ Indeed, as jurist Anthony Eckstein testified to the press, the jury could have just as easily ruled in favor of the prosecution, had their side only been willing to confront the question of artistic value: "If the prosecution could have come up with just one credible witness—a sociologist, a psychologist, somebody, anybody—maybe we would have voted differently."⁷¹ Beholden to the rather contradictory roles assigned to them as avatars of the "average person" applying "community standards" as established in the *Miller* and *Pope* rulings, several of the Cincinnati jurors stated their beliefs that the homoerotic photographs did appeal to prurient interest in sex and depicted sexual content in a patently offensive way—but were far less confident in their ability to arrive at a definition of legitimate artistic expression.⁷² Expressing annoyance at the lack of input from the prosecution, jurist Eckstein appeared aware of how attorneys for the prosecution had counted on the jurors' presumed parochialism to make their case for them: "The prosecution basically decided to show us the pictures so that we'd say they weren't art when everyone was telling us they were."⁷³

Eckstein's apparent resentment at the prosecution's attempt to make him into a rube for their purposes reveals the true motivation behind the Cincinnati decision: the defense won their case not by claiming certain of Mapplethorpe's themes—namely, male homoeroticism and sadomasochistic sex—to be legitimate artistic subjects, but rather by

exploiting pernicious, class-rooted anxieties regarding art, expertise, and “good taste.” Despite their lack of exposure to or education in the arts, the eight jurors were well aware of their own position relative to culture—that is to say, thoroughly subjugated to the authority of “experts.” If the Religious Right launched the culture wars by exploiting the increasingly alienated relationship between “high” art circles and the general public, the nominally Leftist forces that rose to fight “censorship” were not above utilizing this same relationship, and in so doing, reinforcing the malignant cycle of alienation and hostility that constitutes many Americans’ relationship with the arts.

The sanitization of Robert Mapplethorpe, which began as an academic project of several of his more ardent critics and coalesced in the progressive narratives inspired by the *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center* ruling, exemplifies one of the greatest strategic failings of the art world in the thick of the culture wars: namely, the failure to defend artworks by advocating openly for the artistic legitimacy of controversial subjects. To reduce certain of Mapplethorpe’s photos, in their blatant focus on queer and sadomasochistic sexualities, to academic studies in light and symmetry, ultimately expands the gulf which the CAC and fellow institutions exist allegedly to bridge, delegitimizing the elemental responses of viewers who sense—quite correctly—the sexual enticement which many of Mapplethorpe’s images offer. Moreover, such revisionism has the effect of rearranging the *Black Book* wholesale, smoothing over the difficulties of race and sex as they pertain to Mapplethorpe’s images of black men by effacing the pictures’ place in the pornographic history that informs them.

In his 1986 essay “Imaging the Black Man’s Sex,” Kobena Mercer offered a complex response—at once critical, theoretical, and personal—to Robert Mapplethorpe’s images of black men. The version of this essay that appears in Mercer’s book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994) includes a remarkable illustration. (Figure 43) The picture shows two books laid side by side, each open to a photograph; on the left is a replica of *Man in a Polyester Suit*, (1980) Mapplethorpe’s notorious photo of a black man—or, more precisely, of the man’s impressive sex, dangling out of the fly of his cheap suit. On the right, a nude, smooth-shaven, muscular black man sits astride the shoulders of another solidly built black man, who also appears nude save for a large ornament around his neck.⁷⁴ The illustration’s caption, which simply credits the photo to Kobena Mercer and Simon Watney, gives no clue to the second image’s provenance, nor does the text of the essay. Indeed, it would fit just as comfortably within the pages of an ethnographic photo spread in *National Geographic* as it would in more clandestinely circulated photojournals of black male bodies—those marketed towards the sexual appetite colloquially known as “jungle fever.” In the context of a standard academic text, the picture of the two photos appears hastily composed and decidedly unprofessional: two pairs of hands jut from the margins of the images, splaying the pages to display both the famous and the anonymous images of black males for the viewer to see.

This presentation of Mapplethorpe is surely not one that his more vociferous supporters would prefer: hastily spread open and buffered by an image of black male sexuality filtered through a decidedly ethnographic lens, Mapplethorpe’s photo takes on a

tint of illegitimacy; the viewer is caught off guard by the anonymous⁷⁵ hands that eagerly thrust the images her way, like illicit wares flashed from the lining of a trench coat. The sense of anxiety this picture produces will be familiar to anyone who has ever feared being “caught” viewing sexual materials in public: an anxiety produced not so much by what one is looking at, but rather by the fear that one will be observed in the act of looking—a sensation, I will go so far to argue, not dissimilar to that experienced by the subject who finds herself discomfited by visual stimuli in another public setting—the museum.

In his essay “The Exhibitionary Complex,” Tony Bennett draws parallels between Foucault’s Panopticon and the modern museum, with an important caveat: whereas the optical disciplinary function of Foucault’s prison hinges on the constant visibility of the prisoners before prison guards whom they themselves cannot see, the organizational logic of the museum allows the subject a full pictorial experience—while at the same time making her aware of herself as an object to be seen in the act of looking.⁷⁶ The formation of the modern museum in the late eighteenth century, Bennett argues, involved the transfer of “objects and bodies” from the private domains of the aristocracy and into “progressively more open and public arenas” through which power was broadcast via an educational framework.⁷⁷ Bennett’s formulation is useful in understanding two critical factors of both the Mapplethorpe controversy and Ligon’s restaging of this controversy in *Notes*. First, the concept of the museum as a site in which an object intended for private delectation is transformed into one for public contemplation unsettles the already feeble arguments that posit the museum as incapable of purveying pornography, due to the

magically transformative power of “context.” Second, this notion of the museum presents an apt picture of the viewer, conscripted into the role of uneasy witness to this public revelation of what was once private, and then expected—as were Mapplethorpe’s working-class jury—to understand the difference between the two, and respond appropriately.

When Dennis Barrie declared to the press that a museum displays work of a sexual nature for “far different” reasons than those of “a peep show and an X-rated bookstore,”⁷⁸ he set up a provocative comparison—and, like many cultural professionals before him, failed to elaborate compellingly the process by which a sexual image is transformed within the privileged auspices of the museum. Indeed, compared to the liminal space of the museum—where, we are told, sexually provocative images are no longer about “just” sex, and where a sexual response to said images is certainly inappropriate—the mission of a strip club or an adult bookstore is far more clear. There is at least no question about the purpose of the stimuli on display; if one becomes bored, or disgusted, one will likely conclude that the sex for sale is simply not to one’s tastes. Within the distinguished vaults of the museum, however, an unfamiliar order is imposed over otherwise familiar images: the viewer may recognize the sexual content and context of images such as Mapplethorpe’s, while realizing simultaneously that the intimate criteria by which she would normally evaluate such images are rendered incongruent by the museum environment. The pressure to understand an image “correctly,” according to the standards set by the bewilderingly obscure transformational process that has landed the image in these surroundings, is acute, and the potential for confusion and

defensiveness on the part of the lay viewer is high.⁷⁹ Thus caught looking, some viewers intuitively resort to a certain nervous response—compulsive chatter.

In her wish to demonstrate that she has arrived at the “right” reading of the work, the viewer is compelled to vocalize her reactions. In this way, the experience of viewing art publicly is akin to the dynamic produced by viewing sex acts or images in the presence of other people. The public performance of this typically private activity compels the viewer to register her opinion, in anxious anticipation of what the other person(s) may think. To be out of sync with the other—to take pleasure in something the other may find disgusting, or vice versa—is to risk being marked as deviant, as possessed of unnatural desires. For the viewer, navigating the disgorged *Black Book*, accompanied by Ligon’s *Notes*, approximates the anxiety inherent in viewing publicly both art and porn. If the viewer chooses to defuse the anxiety by nervously and verbally weighing the relative merits of the pictures, she will, rather awkwardly, find her chatter reflected in the cacophony of interjections already present in the textual element of the piece.

The very title *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* anticipates this confabulation, and thus connotes a specific kind of spectator: irreverent, unruly, scribbling asides and contradictions in the limited blank spaces of a master text whose authority she cannot allow to go unchallenged. Several years before the debut of Ligon’s installation,⁸⁰ Mercer’s essay and the accompanying illustration performed a similar contextualization; by inserting Mapplethorpe’s work into a history of largely anonymous images of black men, including ethnographic, pornographic, medical and criminal photography,⁸¹ the author adds a critical footnote—and a rather unwelcome one, for the

academics who prefer to keep Mapplethorpe's artistic lineage pure. Mapplethorpe, on a number of occasions, voiced his preference for enjoying photographs in the intimate format of a book.⁸² By dissecting and spreading out the pages of the *Black Book*, inviting a protracted debate, both Mercer and Ligon take viewers out of the safe territory of the connoisseur, browsing alone in an armchair, and into a riskier place—namely, the public sharing of fantasies, fears, and areas of discomfort.

Part of Mercer's and Ligon's respective missions is thus to take a body of work which numerous of Mapplethorpe's critics have attempted to discipline—by heralding the artist's images of black men as the emergence of a never-before attempted subject in Western photography—and making it once again uncomfortable, unruly. This discomfort is fundamentally promiscuous, eschewing the linear progression of the art historical canon for a messy web of largely unaccredited, but nonetheless prevalent images, and crucially drawing attention to the affective response of the viewer herself. This relationship is poignantly signaled in the doubling that appears in Mercer's illustration: within this image we see two photos, two depictions of black men, and two pairs of hands displaying these pictures for our perusal. The placement of this illustration within the context of the essay is mimetic, forcing in the reader an atypically intimate consideration of the author's subjectivity: we see here a hint of two male, queer subjects, one of whom, like the men on display, is also black, reviewing and responding to the specter of desire in these inescapably problematic photos. Mercer, in a later reading of Mapplethorpe, confessed that in 1982 Mapplethorpe's *Black Males*⁸³ served as an "illicit object of desire" for himself and a friend with whom he shared the book, even as both were

troubled by the racial dynamics they recognized within the work.⁸⁴ Acutely aware of the psychic weight of surveillance and fetishism in relation to their own black bodies, Mercer and the filmmaker Isaac Julien write together that, though seduced by Mapplethorpe's images, they find themselves unable to slip easily into the role of the omniscient bearer of the gaze: "Our starting point is ambivalence, because *we want to look, but do not always find the images we want to see*. As black men we are implicated in the same landscape of stereotypes which is dominated and organized around the needs, demands, and desires of white males."⁸⁵

A portion of this quote appears in *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* where it is paired provocatively with a statement issued by Mapplethorpe about his practice of photographing black men:

They were taken because I hadn't seen pictures like that before. That's why one makes what one makes, because you want to see something you haven't seen before; it was a subject that nobody had used because it was loaded.

Yet with this simple statement Mapplethorpe sets up his own contradiction: how, exactly, does a subject that has never before been broached become "loaded?" Had Mapplethorpe spoken more clearly or candidly, he may have maintained that there existed virtually no fine art photographers willing to take *credit* for contributing to what is in fact a vastly circulating library of images of black men—the very images that reflect and produce the "loaded" cultural climate to which he refers.⁸⁶ Indeed many of what the critic David Joselit refers to as the "types" comprised in the *Black Book*—"classical nudes, jungle inhabitants, athletes, allegorical figures, soldiers, and tough guys"—seem very familiar.⁸⁷

In *Raymond Murray* (1984), the subject is depicted wearing nothing but a do-rag, photographed in the act of slashing the air with a switchblade. The photographic blur created by this motion merges hand and blade, transforming the black man's body itself into a weapon. In *Isaiah* (1980), a half-naked black man poses draped in an animal skin, holding an ersatz spear. These "types"—the black man as thug, as ethnographic and/or erotic object—emerge from the familiar patterns of the nightly news, of popular movies and TV, of police mugshots, "scientific" and medical studies, pornography, and a host of other media in which the authorship of such images is usually merged, distorted, or rendered altogether anonymous. Yet we know that we have seen images like these before—and it is only too clear that Mapplethorpe has, too.

It would therefore be grossly inaccurate to claim, as Mapplethorpe did, that the images collected in *Black Males* and the *Black Book* inaugurated a tradition of black photographic subjects where none had previously existed: in the history of photographic and filmic media, race emerges as a problem of how to perpetually demonstrate, rather than neutralize or efface, difference. As David Green reminds us in "Veins of Resemblance: Photography and Eugenics," social scientists who enlisted photography as a didactic tool in the discourse of scientific racism committed themselves to making visible the physical "signs" of genetic weakness and degeneracy to which, they feared, superior Anglo-Saxon citizens were blind, and therefore vulnerable. Green provides pointedly a quote from Sir Francis Galton, father of the term "eugenics": "the worst cases" of "weakly and misshapen individuals," Galton warns, "are out of sight." Urging that such problem people ought to be "parad[ed]" in the mind's eye in the interest of

serving as a sober warning to “our human civilized stock,”⁸⁸ Galton anticipates the critical role of nineteenth-century photography in providing a catalogue of racial “types” for the edification of supposedly better-bred humans, and the extension of this project in the scopic consolidation and reinforcement of colonialist regimes performed in ethnographic and travel photography.⁸⁹ If by the later half of the twentieth century these kinds of studies in racial difference had come to be regarded as embarrassing relics of the past, the news media had, by turn, normalized the spectacle of black poverty, crime, and degeneracy in the American landscape. Black bodies were certainly not exempted from photography and film; rather, they abounded in the dispatches of journalism, of scientific and social studies—a host of didactic media, not coincidentally, from which Mapplethorpe struggled to disassociate himself throughout his career.

As an ambitious young artist, Mapplethorpe came into photography rather reluctantly.⁹⁰ In the 1970s, the medium had yet to find wide acceptance as a form of high art, and remained tainted by its association with the scientific, the demonstrative, the “purely technical.” With characteristic diligence, Mapplethorpe ventured to change this paradigm, first by guiding the development of the enormously influential photography collection of his lover, the wealthy and respected Sam Wagstaff, and ultimately by positing himself at the forefront of a new, elegant era of the photographic medium. In so actively directing changing perceptions of photography, Mapplethorpe found it necessary, in his roles as both artist and curator, to do more than a little editing, seeking to elevate photography by distancing the medium from its utilitarian origins.⁹¹

Many of Mapplethorpe's critics followed this line faithfully, writing as if his aesthetics had sprung, like Athena, fully formed from the artist's head, without the gestational influence of other forms of photography. In the early stages of his career, Mapplethorpe, the critic Richard Marshall assures us, "was not a 'photographer,' did not think of himself as a 'photographer,' and did not aspire to become a 'photographer.' He merely wanted to take his own pictures rather than use someone else's from magazines."⁹² The studiousness with which Marshall avoids any specifics regarding the type of magazines which feature prominently in Mapplethorpe's early mixed-media works is betrayed by the accompanying catalogue illustrations. Images torn directly from the pages of gay pornographic magazines feature prominently in this stage of the artist's career: Mapplethorpe's collages from the early 1970s abound with images of body builders, leathermen, and ersatz cowboys and sailors.⁹³

By positing Mapplethorpe's decision to start taking his own photos as a matter of original genius versus reliance on "someone else's" images, Marshall attempts to erase Mapplethorpe's formative education in gay pornographic tropes. His careful work is however undone by an anecdote of Mapplethorpe's, related by Ingrid Sischy in the very catalogue in which Marshall's essay appears:

I would see a young kid walking down 42nd Street and then go into a magazine storefront, which were places I didn't know anything about. I became obsessed with going into them and seeing what was inside these magazines. They were all sealed, which made them even sexier somehow, because you couldn't get at them. [...] I got that feeling in my stomach, it's not a directly sexual one, it's something more potent than that. I thought if I could somehow bring that element into art, if I could somehow retain that feeling, I would be doing something that was uniquely my own.⁹⁴

Mapplethorpe, by his own admission, evolved his signature style from “faggot art”⁹⁵ and gay pornography. This is precisely why numerous attempts by several of Mapplethorpe’s critics to articulate the differences between the artist’s work and pornography are ultimately so unconvincing: Mapplethorpe’s work exists not as an originary moment in the history of photography, but in a continuum of images produced by mostly anonymous contributors—consigned to even greater invisibility by writers like Marshall, who disappear them as Mapplethorpe’s artistic forbearers.

Critical attempts to divorce Mapplethorpe’s work from its pornographic lineage have a particularly significant impact on the reception of Mapplethorpe’s images of black men. In a quote reproduced within *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book,”* Sischy writes: “Mapplethorpe understood that what he wanted to see—homosexuality brought out of the closet and into the light, sex brought out of the dark or up from under the counter [...] black men who are vigorous, beautiful, and classical instead of usual bottom-of-the-pile image [*sic*].” Mapplethorpe, Sischy suggests, is a liberator of black male sexuality, rescuing the image of the “classically” beautiful black man from the closet imposed by homophobia, and the inglorious counter of the adult bookstore. Yet it is from under this unloved image “pile” that Mapplethorpe’s influences emerge; that is, in the racially charged images of black men created for white gay audiences. Pornography is the arena in which the visual tropes that constitute black subjects’ historically difficult relationship to photography collide: the black male body as the shiny fetish of advertising, the deviant subject of scientific racism, the seal of authenticity on the exotic landscape, the glowering face in the police mug shot, reside therein. That black men have

been consistent subjects of such “low” forms of photography may initially seem to bolster Sischy’s argument—why not congratulate Mapplethorpe for “elevating” these subjects above the base images in which they usually appear?

A kind of answer may be found in a comment by the writer Thomas Yingling, which Ligon posts near Sischy’s text as if by way of rejoinder: Mapplethorpe’s alleged granting of “‘equal status as sexual beings’ to black men,” Yingling states, “does not in itself guarantee the text as free of the history and discourse of racism.” To assume, as many of Mapplethorpe’s critics do, that to show the body of a naked black man is to affirm his intrinsic worth is willfully to ignore the ways in which white racism has historically manifested itself as sexual fascination, from the relatively benign (such as the obsessive focus on huge black cocks that is a pornographic mainstay) to the overtly violent (like the sexual mutilations that were a regular feature of lynchings).⁹⁶

Sischy, like many of the critics included in the textual pantheon contained within *Notes*, assumes of Mapplethorpe’s images of black men a kind of impermeability: sequestered in the cool space of the white cube, broken down into gradients of silver and platinum, the black skin of Mapplethorpe’s models is aestheticized beyond the point of association with the sordid photographic past that precedes it. Interestingly, Sischy also assumes from Mapplethorpe’s story about discovering the gay bookstores of 42nd street a similar, internally-directed evolution on the part of the artist: she writes, “What Mapplethorpe calls the feeling in the stomach is the internal, physical signal that a change in one’s self-awareness is taking place, brought on by intensified or intensifying sensations, emotions, and perceptions.”⁹⁷

Yet the process of sexual self-discovery that can occur in consuming porn, which Mapplethorpe describes, is a cumulative, patently *outwardly* directed identificatory process, through which one learns something about one's own body and desires *through* images of other people's bodies, and through the fantasies and feelings they inspire. This logic of extrapolation and substitution is clearly at work within *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* in which some of the collected commentators take Mapplethorpe's images of black men to function as a sign of the artist's sexuality, others of the benign or malevolent quality of his racial attitudes; still others regard Mapplethorpe as representative of paradigmatic white attitudes towards the raced body. This promiscuous process of affiliation—not exclusive, but absolutely quintessential to the process of viewing pornography—undermines critical attempts to place Mapplethorpe and his work above and beyond genres of photography that utilize race as a means to an objective end, whether that end is to posit essential biological racial difference, or to achieve an orgasm. Ligon's work has an unsettling way of suggesting that the meaning of any given photograph within Mapplethorpe's book is determined not by the artist's intent or a critical consensus, but by the use value which the viewer attributes to it.

This point is nowhere more evident than in the remarks clustered around *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980), the photograph identified in a quote by Mapplethorpe's lover and model, Jack Walls, as the photographer's personal favorite.⁹⁸ (Figure 44) In *Notes*, more comments appear concerning Mapplethorpe's ode to unruly black male sexuality than to any other individual photograph in the *Black Book*, a fact reflective of the sheer volume of controversy generated by the image, from Jesse Helms's obsession with

repeatedly exposing the image to the press, to Essex Hemphill's pointed complaint, represented within *Notes*, that Mapplethorpe believed "the faces, the heads, and by extension, the minds and experiences of some of his Black subjects are not as important as close up shots of their cocks." As if anticipating the ease with which the image may be appropriated for a remarkably broad spectrum of political and rhetorical purposes, much of the collected critical response to *Man in a Polyester Suit* attempts to neutralize the photograph's incendiary qualities almost to the point of banality: Sischy suggests that the image be read in fun, declaring it to be "a joke on the way everything that has to do with sex is supposed to be zipped up." The critics Stuart Morgan and Janet Kardon choose to focus on the incongruous relationship between the "mundane" suit and the "outrageous" phallus,⁹⁹ a relationship that David Joselit posits in the familiar terms of the avant-garde gambit of shocking the bourgeoisie: within "the sequencing of the *Black Book*," Joselit suggests, *Man in a Polyester Suit* "implies a violent eruption/erection of sexuality in a setting of middle-class composure."

The cautious tone struck by many of the critics who respond to Mapplethorpe's image within the broader text of *Notes*, however, is itself disrupted by the sudden eruption of a quote positioned directly below Joselit's:

Honey, I want to suck this dick. Much more than some of the other penises in the book because it has this hook your tongue can get into. That's definitely my favorite picture.

--Michael, patron at Keller's

Michael's vivid description leaves little doubt that the dick to which he refers is the infamous protrusion from the polyester suit. This burst of unbridled enthusiasm in the

midst of so much academic hand wringing produces a dual dislocation, with regards to the history undergirding Mapplethorpe's photograph, and to the already fragile and always contested state of artistic legitimacy which his supporters have sown cautiously for it. The tempered analysis of Sischy, Morgan, Kardon and Joselit, and even Hemphill's eloquent outrage, cannot consolidate a definitive monopoly on the meaning and effects of Mapplethorpe's work in the face of Michael's energetic statement: what this bar patron and lay viewer so succinctly shows is that "prurient interest" is in the eye of the beholder. Read in the context of the more cerebral statements nearby, Michael's opinion epitomizes the threat of class-based embarrassment which high-minded cultural critics so scrupulously attempt to avoid in crafting a legacy for works such as Mapplethorpe's: for all the breath and ink on classical forms, light, and symmetry which Mapplethorpe's photos have caused to flow, there emerges the specter of a working-class queer who is interested primarily in the pictures as masturbation material—and is happy to say so. The assertions put forth by Mapplethorpe's opponents in *Cincinnati*, that such images will be used as fodder for sexual fantasies—however strategically undermined by the lawyers and experts who rallied to the art's defense—are thus proven frankly correct.

A more obscure detail of Michael's quote underscores the pornographic use value of Mapplethorpe's *Man in a Polyester Suit* by resituating the image within its formative environment, as it were. Readers familiar with Patricia Morrisroe's scintillating biography of Robert Mapplethorpe will recognize "Keller's" as the New York bar that was Mapplethorpe's favored cruising ground in the 1980s, an establishment that catered predominantly to black, working-class men, and, in smaller numbers, white gay men

angling for cross-racial sex.¹⁰⁰ Mapplethorpe, Morrisroe claims, was doing exactly that in another West Street bar when he met Milton Moore, the man who would play the role of lover and muse in their extraordinarily tempestuous relationship—and the man who volunteered his body for *Man in a Polyester Suit* and many more of Mapplethorpe's photographs between 1980 and 1982.¹⁰¹

Michael thus abruptly—and in all likelihood unwittingly—returns firmly the photograph to its point of origin in the racially charged atmosphere of a gay male meat market, and lays bare the status of the photo—and of the black body it portrays—as the accepted currency thereof. Making reference to a conversation between the poet and playwright Ntozake Shange and Mapplethorpe in an introduction to the *Black Book* in which the two flip through the photographs looking for the images of their former lovers,¹⁰² the writer Jane Gaines, whose words are reproduced in *Notes*, further clarifies the ways in which the *Black Book* functions as a catalogue, and the black male body as commodity. Through this way of reading the book, she declares,

[O]ne is invited to look to find the former lovers of the famous playwright and the infamous photographer. This is a neat cross-over marketing device, which attempts to reconstruct the icons of an exclusive gay subculture for a wider group of consumers.

For readers/viewers of *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* both Michael's and Gaines' words show Mapplethorpe's images to operate within a facet of gay culture in which black men are appraised as the ultimate totem of sexual plenty and possibility to gay white men, and thus provide a critical contextualization for a pivotal turning point in Ligon's installation. In one of the few direct references to himself that appear in *Notes*,

and the only quote in which his name appears, Ligon provides a transcript of this conversation:

Cliff: After they met you some people asked me if I was a “dinge queen,” or if I was “into dark meat.”

Glenn: After they met me? You mean people I talked to, had lunch with?

Cliff: Yes, it happened several times.

–Cliff Chase

From the brief exchange relayed here, we can understand that this conversation occurred between the artist and a white gay man, who by virtue of appearing with Ligon in public has been asked by other white gay men if he is a “dinge queen”—a particularly hateful term for a white man who is interested sexually in black men. Posted nearby, a quote from Essex Hemphill helpfully elaborates upon the meaning of the loathsome phrase by which Ligon is implicated:

Open fraternizing at a level suggesting companionship or love between the races was not tolerated in the light of day. Terms such as ‘dinge queen,’ for white men who prefer Black men, and ‘snow queen,’ for Black men who prefer white men, were created by a gay community that obviously could not be trusted to believe its own rhetoric concerning brotherhood, fellowship, and dignity.

Like the pair of black hands that emerge from the periphery of Kobena Mercer’s illustration to lay bare the spectacle of black male sexuality, Ligon’s sudden insertion of himself into the textual body of *Notes* proves distracting precisely because of its marginal status within the context of the whole. A dedicated reader of *Notes* will be startled by the appearance of such a direct self-reference on the part of an artist whose subjectivity has,

until this point, remained elusive; the more casual viewer is unlikely to recognize the artist's words at all, as Ligon's voice bleeds into the near-interminable conversation carried on throughout the work. This is precisely the position in which Ligon finds himself in the relayed conversation with Chase, in his stunned realization of himself as an object of racist, salacious speculation among those whom he believed to be friendly. Buffeted on either side by images of black men in unfastened jeans and ripped, dripping-wet shirts, Ligon portrays himself in the act of seeing how certain others see him: as a black body among an array of other black bodies, his person converted into a sign of socio-sexual transgression. Ligon's claustrophobic intimacy with Mapplethorpe's models is revealed in the impossibility of his ever being able to peruse these beautiful black bodies without being simultaneously aware of himself as an object to be looked at.

This process through which Ligon emerges as a subject, ironically, as a consequence of his generalization within a field of undifferentiated black bodies, repeats itself in the mode in which *Notes on the Margins of the "Black Book"* was received. The work, Ligon says, "outed" him as a gay man in a "public, professional" context,¹⁰³ establishing him as a doubly hyphenated subject—black and gay—in an exhibition panned for its didacticism and over-indulgence in visibility politics.¹⁰⁴ Yet Ligon's art-world recognition as a sexual minority is predicated upon the ease with which the Biennial's viewers and critics substituted the spectacle of black queer sexuality as played out in Mapplethorpe's photographs for Ligon's own. Had the equation of the black male body with boundless (homo)sexual abandon not registered so automatically, the assumption that a body of work by a male artist featuring nude male bodies constitutes a

statement on the artist's sexuality may have struck some critics as overly facile—or at least, strikingly similar to the arguments put forth by the type of Right-wing culture warriors who opposed Mapplethorpe's exhibition in Cincinnati.¹⁰⁵

The ease with which Ligon's own subjectivity is dissolved within the body of *Notes*—becoming, in the words of the writer Hilton Als replicated within the piece, “Not a self, just black and gay” —underscores the terminal versatility of the black male subject within the field of visual signification. Indeed, the inscrutability of the *Black Book*'s models seems only to increase in proportion to the burgeoning literature in *Notes* that attempts to address and redress this condition of unknowability. Some commentators embrace the innominate status of the models as romantic; others mourn the effacement of their subjectivities; some rage against this abrogation, and others try, desperately, to invent or pin down some fragment of selfhood on the models' behalf. Yet as Ligon shows, this condition is not to be remedied even through the most direct confrontation of Mapplethorpe's omissions: that is, by providing the models with a forum in which to “talk back,” as he does with the choreographer Bill T. Jones, who recalls:

When I sat for the portrait I asked Robert why he was doing photographs exclusively of black men. He never really answered me: instead he gave me an essay Edmund White had written about him.

In Mapplethorpe's hands, the text becomes a tool of evasion rather than enlightenment; he offers White's words in order to create a buffer between his model and his reasons for photographing him. Confronted with a direct question about his predilection for

photographing black men, the artist himself can offer only a proxy, ventriloquizing his intentions through the mouthpiece of an ardent critic.

If a single constant can be recognized within the widely fluctuating discourse staged throughout *Notes*, it is this dynamic of substitution, which infuses the piece with a paradoxical sense of sacrifice. According to the triumphant narrative spun by Mapplethorpe's proponents, the marginalized subjects collected within the *Black Book*—black, male, and, at least as they are understood via their representation in the book, queer—attain a heretofore-denied subjectivity by submitting to the regulatory gaze of Mapplethorpe's camera. Couched in the tropes of formalist aesthetics and of a particular kind of privileged queer sexual consumerism, the models are ostensibly discernable at last, illuminated and enshrined within these paradigms of vision. By the terms of this argument, Mapplethorpe's models are allowed to see themselves through the only channels of recognition that matter; as the critical reconstruction of Mapplethorpe's work shows, such images stand a better chance at cultural incorporation when contextualized in terms of Greek sculpture rather than adult bookstores. By the same turn, the subject emerges on the other side of this lens unrecognizable to himself. In a quote replicated within *Notes*, a frequent model of Mapplethorpe's, Ken Moody, gives an affecting voice to this contradiction:

It didn't even occur to me that I might be attractive, or that I might be something somebody would want to look at, or would want to photograph. And so when it happened, I thought, "Well gee, isn't this a good way for me to at least get to see what I look like."

Moody, as indicated by the severity of his self-deprecation, is blind to the value of his own body, and puts himself before Mapplethorpe's lens in order finally to see and gauge its worth. Yet Moody is unable to reconcile a single image produced of himself by Mapplethorpe with his own selfhood:

When I look at it as me, and not just a piece of art, I think I look like a freak. I don't find that person in the photograph necessarily attractive, and it's not something I would like to own.

Unable to reconcile the coextension of his own image into an art object, Moody sees something other than what he initially hoped to recognize—a circumvention that is mirrored in Mapplethorpe's portraits of Moody, whose eyes are shut in every picture in which his face appears. (Figure 45) Moody's closed eyelids deny consistently the satisfaction of a reciprocal gaze, rebuffing even the subject whose need to witness what Moody "looked like" was most keen—himself. In this long succession of swaps—Mapplethorpe's models offered in the stead of Mapplethorpe, Mapplethorpe in the stead of Ligon, Mapplethorpe's images in the stead of a host of political and academic concerns over race, gender, and representation—the "true" object/subject remains obscure. *We want to look, but do not always find the images we want to see.*

* * *

Shortly after debuting *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* Ligon turned his attention to a class of images designed, in the degree of anonymity infusing every stage of their production, distribution, and consumption, to frustrate the organizational discipline of both the archive and the museum display. Produced via collaborations between models and photographers equally fastidious in preserving their namelessness,

and circulated within clandestine circles of connoisseurs, these images draw their power from their anonymity, and thus their ability to be absorbed by any number of individuals for any number of reasons.

With the careful arrangement of a cache of creased and faded photographs upon a few bound pages that constitutes *A Feast of Scraps*, Ligon conjures a resemblance to a lovingly assembled family photo album, tracing a genealogy from the 1940s to the 1980s and touching on the familiar milestones of marriage, birth, military service, and family reunions.¹⁰⁶ Some of these are photos of Ligon's own relatives, gleaned from his family's archives.¹⁰⁷ Tenderly tucked among the photos of couples and parties are pornographic images of black men, some clearly amateur snapshots created for personal gratification, others produced in collectable packs in the style of trading cards.¹⁰⁸ These images lack distinctly the polish of a Mapplethorpe photograph: discolored prints project oppressively orangey hues dating the photographs to the 1960s and 1970s; scant attention to lighting washes some figures out while leaving others in the dark; backgrounds distract from the models, some captured with haste amidst the clutter of private rooms, some deliberately posed in stark outdoor locations, or against clusters of trees, reinscribing the "jungle fever" tropes of sexualized racism. This vision of chiseled black masculinity, filtered and refracted through the distorting lenses of colonialist and racist legacies, constituted a quiet trade in black male bodies in the kind of bookstores in which a young Mapplethorpe would go to get a particular feeling in his stomach. It was in such a Greenwich Village bookstore, *Gay Treasures*, where Ligon discovered the photos collected in *Scraps*, within a box labeled simply "Black Men."¹⁰⁹

Ligon would come to conceptualize *A Feast of Scraps* as a means of reconciling the sense of “unfinished business” which *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book”* had left him.¹¹⁰ Despite the persistence of themes binding the anonymous images with Mapplethorpe’s work—such as a familiar focus on muscular bodies and excessive cocks—their respective channels of circulation have granted to the images collected in *Scraps* a dearth of scholarship that appears particularly stark when compared with the sheer volume of erudition piled up within *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book.”* The Polaroids and snapshots retrieved from Gay Treasures are orphan images, unclaimed by their authors, estranged from their models, and finally abandoned unceremoniously by their audiences, cast out of individual collections and into the muddled archive of the adult bookstore.¹¹¹

The only connections Ligon can forge between these pictures and their eminently more distinguished descendents in Mapplethorpe’s work are thus based upon the ultimately nonobjective sensation of recognition—a “family resemblance” detected between one represented body and another, in the shared idiosyncrasies of a pose, of an expression. Given the obscurity that typically cloaks every stage of pornography’s production and consumption, Ligon’s makeshift genealogy in contextualizing these images within the format of a family album is particularly startling. This effect is heightened through the presence of brief descriptive fragments of text, such as “Daddy” and “Brother,” that bring these disparate images into relation through punning and double entendre, yet for the viewer leave open the question of how these nude, solitary black men fit with the wholesome images of black middle-class domestic life.

In the enticing blankness that constitutes the material and narrative history of these images of black men, Ligon finds a stopgap for the holes in his own family history. “The photos of black men in *Gay Treasures*,” writes Ligon, “are the photos left out of my family albums.”¹¹² In Ligon’s hands, the family album emerges as a text dually marked by history and the ineffable, the vehicle through which the narrative of heteropatriarchal family unity is mobilized, and the end product of the excisions necessary to produce it. Ligon recalls albums full of family photos from the 1970s that document the “unkempt afros” and “flowery polyester shirts” of his teenaged self and his male cousins. Yet the most personally significant fact of the historical moment chronicled therein—Ligon’s discovery of his sexual attraction to men, a desire awakened by his cousins—is precisely what these photos cannot record.¹¹³

Ligon’s essay on *A Feast of Scraps* seems initially to document the failure of the family album to remember histories external to a fixed definition of what “family” constitutes, as he appears to mourn for the critical aspects of his personal history that are “left out” of these accounts. Yet in another statement, Ligon hints at the polysemous possibilities of the family archive. The artist recalls flipping through family albums as a child and asking of his elders what must be the most commonly posed query with regards to family photos: “Who’s that?”

[I remember] being told, “Oh, that’s Uncle James’ friend,” and I thought, “What does that mean?” If you didn’t know, you weren’t supposed to know.¹¹⁴

The family album, as illustrated by Ligon's anecdote, is not a pristine genealogical record. Rather, it is full of interlopers, friends and relatives who have meandered in and out of the family's lives and collective memory. The passing of time both ensures the blurring of these memories and imparts an oddly democratic treatment upon the photographic subjects: the viewer knows no more about a once-revered, but chronologically distant ancestor than she does about the anonymous "friends" who provided companionship of an unspecified nature to more readily identified relatives.¹¹⁵ In this way, the family album does more to trouble the coherence of the nuclear family than it does to maintain it. I take Ligon's album, and the trouble it makes, as a means of explicating the problems of identification and representation as they pertain to that most overburdened symbol of the state of America's social, sexual and economic health: the black American family.

Robert Reid-Pharr declares:

The belief that the black family, the black home, is in crisis, in ruins, has been one of the most palpable realities of U.S. culture. It has been bemoaned and pronounced upon by both black and white, from both the left and the right. It has been used as an argument for the erection of the welfare state—and for its dismantling [...] From at least the mid-nineteenth century, American social commentators have been announcing the death of the black family and administering last rites.¹¹⁶

As the inheritors of economic hardships wrought by generations of racial iniquity, and as subjects of the social and institutional scrutiny to which (potential) recipients of state-provided relief are required to submit, black American families are thereby conflated into the symbolic family buckling under the strain of maintaining itself against the forces of late-stage capitalism and the erosion of the welfare state.¹¹⁷ Images of black American

family life, once introduced into representational economies, can thus never function purely as personal, intimate histories: the lives they depict are too readily absorbed as the pieces of sociological evidence that black bodies have come to symbolize in American discourse, although the conclusions to which this “evidence” points depend upon the politics of the interlocutor.

In this portion of my chapter I utilize Ligon’s album, and the multitude of possible readings for which it allows generously, in order to chart a few of the numerous socio-political trajectories along which notions of the black family have been mobilized. The vexed and anxious sociological narrative of “progress” from the slave-era nadir of American history plays itself out compulsively through the trope of the black family; the uneasy business of developing a cohesive identity for a people denied their humanity is thus conducted through attempts to formulate an archetypal “one” from “many.” *A Feast of Scraps*, as I will show, provides a particularly fertile ground upon which to reexamine seemingly antithetical political imaginings of the black American family—such as the socially prescriptive goals of the Moynihan Report on one hand, and the revolutionary and revisionist aims of Black Liberation movements on the other—because it both visualizes and actively contradicts the ideal of the black, male-headed, heteropatriarchal family to which both default. Liberationist groups such as the Black Panther Party promoted the black family as the stronghold wherein black Americans would together resist systemic racist oppression. Yet as Roderick A. Ferguson argues eloquently in his *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique* (2004), in asserting the primacy of the patriarchal, male-headed household as the black liberationist ideal, the Panthers

and others in fact reiterated and enforced a host of sexist and homophobic attitudes that ultimately dovetailed with white conservative social prescriptions for “the Negro problem.”¹¹⁸ The rhetorical promotion of these inadvertently shared ideals necessitated the banishment of a host of diluting influences, both real and imagined: the formative traces left by queers of color on the black American cultural and intellectual landscape, and the specter of female dominance and control encapsulated in the figure of the black matriarch had to be excised in order for the ideal vision of the productive, reproductive, and patriarchal black family to thrive.

Ligon forges *Scraps* from these discarded subjectivities, placing them in disquieting proximity with the visual narrative of black, heteropatriarchal family unity from which they are excluded via cultural processes of disavowal. The material reality of the scrapbook medium facilitates this unsettling reunion; thus prompted to read these seemingly incongruous subjects as members of the same “family,” we are reminded of Barthes’ statement that through amateur photography, too, we presume to extract the truth of an individual through the multitude; the “one” of the subject becomes comprehensible through the “many”:

the Photograph [...] sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face [...] a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor. [...] The Photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it parcels out the body. But this truth is not that of the individual, who remains irreducible; it is the truth of lineage.¹¹⁹

The associative, identificatory affect of family photography thus intersects harmoniously with Ligon’s methodology: both offer a means of discerning the individual subject through investigations of *other* subjectivities that have, in some way, incubated the

individual. I argue that in Ligon's hands, the fraught image of the black American family becomes at once evocative of respite—a shelter from the pressures of institutionalized racism, a site at which the burden of “representing” for one's race may be temporarily lifted—and of suffocating responsibility, as one is expected not only to represent on behalf of oneself in the world, but also on behalf of one's kin. Ligon catalyzes the process of confrontations, disappointments, and revision of expectations that make up shared family lives through the figure of the black gay man, whom remains the most pernicious specter haunting the black utopias prescribed by thinkers across the political spectrum. Black male sexuality, I contend, emerges within a host of literature on black identity and the black family as fundamentally suspicious. Configured in social policy such as the Moynihan Report as a destructive force to be reigned in and regulated, the sexuality of black men fares little better in ostensibly radical texts on race and liberation from the critical period of the 1960s and 70s: here the crude and enduring fascination of some whites with the ostensibly awesome sexual prowess of the black male casts an *a priori* pallor over the subject, as though mere consideration of the black male as a sexual subject constitutes a kind of collusion with the fetishizing gaze of white racism.

Ligon elaborates on this problem in his accompanying essay to *A Feast of Scraps*: “Pornographic images of black men usually fall into a narrow range of types: black men as closer to nature, sexually aggressive, enormously endowed. Black men *as phallus*. Fanon and others have argued that these stereotypes allay the fears of whites while serving their needs and desires.”¹²⁰ Here Ligon refers to an oft-quoted passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the enormously influential anti-colonialist text by the

author and revolutionary, Frantz Fanon. Fanon, with his famous contention that the black colonized subject is invariably doubled through institutionalized racism, existing for both for himself and as a specularized “Other” for the dominant white “being,” provides an invaluable framework for investigating the dynamics of association, disassociation, and the splitting of the subject that occur in Ligon’s work. Moreover, I argue that in *BSWM*, Fanon is concerned particularly with the transformative effect of white hegemonic surveillance on the black *male* body and psyche: the white spectator, viewing the black subject through the distorting lens of racist projections, “is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis.”¹²¹

The collapse of black man into phallus is played out on Fanon’s own body and psyche in his fifth chapter, “The Fact of Blackness:” at the midpoint of the text, the authority of the author is disrupted and corrupted by a single, devastating declaration: “Look, a Negro!”¹²² It is Fanon himself who is the object of this exclamation, uttered by a white child frightened by Fanon’s appearance in a train car traveling across the French countryside. As the child continues audibly to panic in Fanon’s presence, Fanon experiences the dissolution of his own subjectivity; pinned under the gaze of a squalling white child, Fanon the physician, the philosopher, the revolutionary is eclipsed. He feels himself dispersed across space and time: “In the train I was given not one but two, three places. (...) I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.”¹²³

For Fanon, to be a black person within a society historically and linguistically premised on the denigration of nonwhites is to be constantly incorporated into mytho-

historical narratives not of one's own making. The fundamental iniquities of slavery and colonialism, he argues, render the reciprocal dynamics between the Self and Other unavailable to the colonized subject. For under colonialism, the "absolute reciprocity," which the Hegelian dialectic assumes, cannot exist:

It is in the degree to which I go beyond my own immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within myself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself.¹²⁴

This refusal of recognition constitutes an insidious form of institutionalized racism that begins in the terrain of the imaginary and thus remains stubbornly impervious to the law and to mechanisms of social change. For the black subject is not reified via the gaze of the white Other, but rather fragmented, dislocated, "woven (...) out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories."¹²⁵ The black subject is consequently forced to enact a schizophrenic self-negation against the "crushing objecthood" imposed by the preconceptions of whites.¹²⁶ In Ligon's work, we see a performance of this psychosocial conundrum, as Ligon's oeuvre presents a "self" that is rendered coherent completely through "others." In *A Feast of Scraps*, this fragmentation of black identity is reenacted through that most disruptive and dislocating of media: photography.

Fanon feels himself tripled under the pressure of surveillance, at once responsible for his race, his ancestors, and himself, and ultimately usurped as a subject by the white beholder's concept of "Negro." Fanon's description of this process of objectification, fragmentation, and finally self-effacement parallels strikingly with Barthes' description of the experience the subject undergoes in posing for a photograph. From the assumption

of the pose to the click of the shutter, four competing “image-repertoires” inform the final photographic product:

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture.¹²⁷

For Barthes, to become a photographic subject is to experience a sensation of being “neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object.”¹²⁸ In posing for a photograph, the subject anticipates the perceptions and judgments of others; while he may attempt to fix a desirable image of himself via the reality effect of the photograph, his very anticipation of the competing views of the photographer and other potential beholders distorts his own sense of self. To pose for a photo is always thus to submit to a process of self-fragmentation, and to risk the indefinite appropriation of one’s image as “proof” to support any number of obscure and often oppositional convictions.

It is the burden of existing as “living proof” that the subjects of Ligon’s album have in common, irrespective of the apparent differences between the pornographic models and the bourgeois images of family life to which they stand in contrast. While Fanon—and more recently, Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien¹²⁹—have argued that the black male body plays an overactive role in the sexual imagination of whites, Ligon’s album facilitates a conversation about the sociological practices that have long situated the African-American family as a site of social and sexual deviance. Roderick A. Ferguson, reflecting on over half a century of studies that posited the African American family as the *de facto* subject of American sociology, writes:

As figures of nonheteronormative perversions, straight African Americans were reproductive rather than *productive*, heterosexual but never *heteronormative*. [...] This construction of African American sexuality as wild, unstable, and undomesticated locates African American sexuality within the irrational, and therefore outside of the bounds of the citizenship machinery.¹³⁰

In his book, Ferguson traces the trajectory of twentieth-century sociological publications and concomitant public policy decisions that sought to locate the origin of social and economic strife within African American communities squarely within the black body itself. He begins with the 1937 publication of *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, in which the American psychologist John Dollard argued that African-Americans had inherited a joint lack of economic responsibility and sexual regulation under the sharecropping system, thereby fomenting sexual aggression and weakening the “monogamous family” among black communities.¹³¹

This portrait of African-American kinship structures as sexually uninhibited and inimical to the model of the American nuclear family established a pattern repeated over decades of sociological studies and joint political initiatives. In his 1944 book, *An American Dilemma*, the economist Gunnar Myrdal famously maintained that female-headed households in African-American communities bred familial dysfunction, which led to inner-city poverty and crime.¹³² Following this hypothesis, New Deal social policy allocated benefits for women on the basis of their status as wives and mothers, thereby excluding a full fourth of African American households.¹³³ In his 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Daniel Patrick Moynihan marshaled Labor Department data to cement the notion of the deviant black matriarchy in the American consciousness. The Moynihan Report linked such problems as poverty and poor

performance on the part of blacks in public schools to deficiencies in “the family structure,” which Moynihan believed suffered from a crisis of masculinity. Black men, argued Moynihan, had been stripped of their earning ability and thus emasculated under institutionalized racism, thereby creating the “pathological” phenomenon of the black matriarchy.¹³⁴

These are the hypotheses against which the people presented in Ligon’s photo album were measured, submitted as evidence before the appraising gaze of the welfare state. Ligon has described the album as a site in which “the family represents itself to itself,”¹³⁵ yet the birth announcements and family gatherings that make up Ligon’s album also carry the burden of proof for their subject’s race, for their ancestors. Within the pages of Ligon’s album, anonymous black families gather again and again across a span of four decades to pose stiffly in their Sunday best. In these photos the image of familial closeness and relative financial stability is compulsively created and re-created, this repetition underscoring the social narrative to which these photos point, compelling the viewer to look and believe.¹³⁶ It is the narrative of Progress—the treacherous process by which post-slavery black American identities are forged, which sociological literature urges, and much African American art and literature anxiously reiterates.¹³⁷ If the family photos gathered in Ligon’s album function not only as personal keepsakes but also as sociological documents to be scanned by parties searching, for one reason or another, for proof of the subject’s humanity, the pornographic images that share their space threaten to undo this hard-earned veneer of social respectability, pointing to and “proving true”

sociological narratives designating the African-American family as sexually deviant and intrinsically nonheteronormative.¹³⁸

Ligon devotes two pages of the album to a collection of birth announcements and snapshots featuring black infants. (Figure 46) The babies appear strangely isolated, posed against plain backgrounds or propped upon furniture sized for absent adults. The sole adult presence on the page appears in a snapshot of a nude, grinning black man, gripping his erect phallus and reclining among the detritus of ashtrays and dirty clothes, in what appears to be a slovenly bachelor pad. The man bears the suggestive label, “The baby’s father,” yet his carefree manner renders him indifferent to the children populating the pages, as he is impervious to the viewer’s efforts to search for similarities between his face and those of the babies pictured around him. (Figure 47) Positioned as such, he assumes the stereotype of the absent black father, which Moynihan identified as a present threat to urban peace and stability, and Black Panther Party “Supreme Commander” Huey Newton decried as a symptom of black male rage and impotence in the face of the system.¹³⁹

Apposite to the sociological myth of the absent father and the black matriarchy is the page simply labeled “Daddy,” in which the majority of figures pictured are actually female. (Figure 48) Two snapshots aligned along the left side of the page each feature a solitary black woman, dressed in the formal uniform of a good suit, gloves, hat, and pumps. The women clutch handbags as if to go out: it matters little whether they are destined for work or for leisure; either way, the photos gesture towards the sociological

fantasy of the working-class black woman, dangerously at liberty to both earn and spend her money as she chooses, in the absence of a “Daddy” to provide her livelihood.

The photo at the bottom of the page initially appears to depict a benevolent “sugar daddy” enjoying the company of five smartly dressed young women who cluster affectionately around him, ignoring the presence the younger man to the left. Yet a closer investigation of the photo reveals a flowered armchair and an upright lamp, identifying the setting as a living room and the older man as a beloved patriarch. If the stately gentleman pictured in this photo can thus be read to represent the strong father figure that Moynihan and others believed to be lacking in American black families, the stridently sexual “Daddy” in the photo directly above—packing an impressive phallus beneath his trench coat and cowboy hat—may represent the type of man that black women were presumed to be taking up with in their willfully deviant relationships. As Ferguson recalls, in the 1960s welfare aid to single black mothers was offered on the condition that they submit to the surveillance of “welfare detectives” who would invade their homes in the middle of the night “to look through dirty clothes hampers and refrigerators in search of black men.”¹⁴⁰

“[T]he Photograph,” writes Barthes, “reproduces to infinity [that which] has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”¹⁴¹ For Barthes, this inherent contradiction is the essence of photography: it is the ultimate signifier of the Real, yet unrepeatable in reality. So do the photographs of black families in Ligon’s album gesture towards a vision of racial progress and familial cohesiveness against which the actual, human subjects of the pictures were constantly

measured, and always coming up short. For Barthes, to pose for a photograph is actively to transform oneself into an image, and to file that image under the category of the Real.¹⁴² This accounts for the uncanny power that the pornographic pictures collected in the album effect over the adjacent scenes of domestic tranquility; by agreeing to pose in porno tableaux that work to stimulate and satiate white fantasies surrounding the black male body,¹⁴³ these models threaten to actualize sexualized racist preconceptions.

Fanon possessed both a heightened awareness of the oppressive weight of white racist fantasies and, as a closer investigation of *BSWM* reveals, a deep suspicion of black subjects whom he believed to be collaborationists in the fashioning of these fantasies. In *BSWM*, the terrain of black male sexuality is rendered as a minefield riddled throughout with the salacious objectifications of whites, a condition that threatens, in its invocations of interracial sex, Fanon's attempts to arrive at a watertight definition of "Negro" identity as much as it does the author's personal comfort. This is nowhere more evident than in the means by which Fanon extracted himself from that unbearable situation in the French train car. Fanon relates the comment of a woman, presumably the mother of the boy who initially objectified him, who attempts to rectify the situation by paying Fanon an indirect sort of compliment: "Look how handsome that Negro is!..."¹⁴⁴ Thus submitted as an object for the aesthetic *appreciation* of the whites in the car, Fanon retorts: "Kiss the handsome Negro's ass, madame!"¹⁴⁵

Fanon will not be reassured of his physical beauty by a white woman; he feels it to be a reemphasis, rather than a negation, of his own objectification. In delivering his retort, he refers to himself in his tormentor's terms, as if to highlight the theft of his

subjectivity for her uncomprehending ears. If the woman's comment broaches the forbidden possibility of cross-racial sexual attraction, Fanon's reply renders it explicit, provoking her shame even at the expense of denigrating his own black body.

Nor is this the first point in the text in which black male sexuality emerges as the locus of white racist fantasies; Fanon dedicates two entire chapters of *BSWM* to the topic of black sexuality, organizing his chapters Two and Three according to the heteropatriarchal pairings, "The Woman of Color and the White Man" and "The Man of Color and the White Woman."¹⁴⁶ The fact that sexual and romantic relationships between black men and black women are never discussed—much less investigated as a potential site of liberation and resistance—is indicative of the degree to which Fanon in *BSWM* presumes black sexuality to be not merely overdetermined by white racist fantasies, but fundamentally corrupted by colonialist perversions. Fanon locates the seat of this corruption firmly within the black woman, in whom he presumes exists a fundamental desire to breed her own race out of existence by partnering with and bearing the children of white men. He dedicates his second chapter to savaging the Antillean memoirist Mayotte Capécia as emblematic of this desire, abrading her work *Je suis Martiniquaise* (1948) as "a sermon in praise of corruption."¹⁴⁷

The terrain of sexuality proves to be an especially fraught one for Fanon in his efforts to sketch out a schema for post-colonial black identities, for as Reid-Pharr notes, the sexual unions that produced the inhabitants of places such as Fanon's native Martinique in the wake of colonization demand that one recognize in the dark face "not simply the slave but the slaver," making difficult the business of distinguishing "the

torturer from her victims.”¹⁴⁸ Fanon’s suspicion of black colonial subjects whom he presumes seek to “whiten” their way out of abjection through sexual alliances with colonizers is not, however, directed solely towards the reproductive processes by which this deracination is presumed to occur. The brief remarks which Fanon dedicates to homosexuality within *BSWM* are remarkable particularly in the ways in which Fanon so swiftly conflates the subject with the dynamics of coercion and iniquity which he identifies as intrinsic to interracial heterosexual relationships within a colonial setting; indeed, in his first reference to homosexuality, Fanon simply swaps one for the other. Speculating whether “Negrophobic” women are justified in their fears of sexually rapacious black men, he concludes, “the Negrophobic woman is in fact nothing but a putative sexual partner—just as the Negrophobic man is a repressed homosexual.”¹⁴⁹

The ease with which Fanon declares the fear of the white racist woman before the imaginary figure of the avaricious black male to be synonymous with the white racist man’s desire for the same figure demands further scrutiny. In Fanon’s schema, homosexuality in the colonial world specifically connotes the one-sided desire of a white man for a black man, the realization of which Fanon interprets as an appetite for self-degradation on the part of the former, and a desire for revenge on the part of the later.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, Fanon reads these desires as a more virulent manifestation of the white subject’s failure to recognize black subjects—or, more precisely, to misrecognize them as an embodiment of and outlet for forbidden passions.¹⁵¹ The desire for interracial sex on the part of the white subject can thereby signal only as perversion, a type of masochism reliant upon the social strictures of racism itself, a point which Fanon makes clear by

contrasting what he perceives to be the desires of “passive” European homosexuals with those of “Negrophobic” white women who nonetheless “putatively” desire cross-racial intercourse. For Fanon, homosexuality constitutes simply another infectious European disease, imposed upon unwilling colonial populations with deleterious effects.¹⁵² It is indeed Fanon’s failure to develop a vision of black sexuality outside of the dynamics of coercion and imposition that limits so severely his articulations of black sexual subjects; speaking only of and to the white racist tropes of the sexually excessive black male, the sexually sycophantic black woman, and the coveted fetish of the black male “homosexual,” Fanon is distressingly in the thrall of the racist imagination that he purports to criticize. The hyper-sexualized black “Other” of the white imagination—the only black sexual being present in Fanon’s text—must, by the logic of his critique, be banished if the black subject is to recuperate a unitary sense of selfhood from the dislocating impositions of white racist projections.

Given the limited, and, as Kobena Mercer claims, disappointing scope of Fanon’s writings on black sexuality,¹⁵³ the regularity with which Fanon emerges as a source cited in a host of literature on the topic of black male sexuality is startling.

Mercer, Isaac Julien, Robert F. Reid-Pharr, Charles I. Nero, Charles Johnson, and, notably, Ligon himself have each in turn grappled with Fanon’s fragmented musings on black male sexuality, as if attempting to complete an unfinished, but nonetheless foundational chapter in the rendering of black subjectivity; much of this recently-revived critical attention, notes Stuart Hall, focuses on issues of subjectivity and difference raised in *Black Skin, White Masks*.¹⁵⁴

The urge to pursue the unfinished business of black sexuality in Fanon's work may not have resonated so strongly with contemporary theorists had not sexual politics proven, in Mercer's words, to be "the Achilles heel of the black liberation movement."¹⁵⁵ Fanon's concept of homosexuality—exclusively male, integrally sado-masochistic, and always a product of European colonial impositions—echoes especially persistently throughout the culturally formative black liberationist literary dispatches of the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps most notoriously in the work of the Black Panther Party's Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver. In his 1966 essay "Notes on a Native Son," Cleaver attacked James Baldwin for what he perceived to be the author's "fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites"—an act of "race-betrayal" which, according to Cleaver, was both motivated and encapsulated by Baldwin's homosexuality.¹⁵⁶ The black homosexual, writes Cleaver, is "a white man in a black body," and his putative desire for white male bodies signifies nothing less than a self-annihilating drive to extinguish his race from existence, a deliberate turning away from "the sacred vehicle of life and love" by which black Americans would supposedly be sustained by consolidating their powers in heteropatriarchal unity.¹⁵⁷ Comparing Baldwin to Yacub, the mythical black scientist whom followers of the Nation of Islam believe to have selectively bred the white race into existence out of a mad desire to obliterate the "original" black inhabitants of the earth, Cleaver rages that Baldwin and his work constitute an attack on black masculinity—the "stud" power by which Cleaver clearly believed the revolution would be achieved.¹⁵⁸ Cleaver's condemnation of Baldwin's "little jive ass,"¹⁵⁹ according to Rudolph P. Byrd, thus "legitimized homophobia in Black public discourse" at a crucial

turning point in African American history, as the goals and ideologies of various black liberationist movements began to coalesce.¹⁶⁰

While different manifestations of the Black Power movement continued to multiply, as ideological differences caused black activists to gravitate, alternately, towards Afrocentrism, the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, or the burgeoning field of black studies, individuals central to all of these movements advocated for the purging of black homosexuals from their ranks. Cleaver's conviction that homosexual desire in black men constituted a "racial death wish" found audiences through a diverse body of African American literature and activism, from black liberationist poet Imamu Amiri Baraka's tirades against "faggots" to African American studies pioneer Molefi Asante's declaration that homosexuality "is a deviation from Afrocentric thought."¹⁶¹ The notion that homosexuality constituted a present threat to the very survival of African American communities was reiterated in the fiery pronouncements of Ministers Louis Farrakhan and Khalil Muhammad,¹⁶² and couched in clinical terms in the writings of psychologists Frances Cress Welsing, and Nathan and Julia Hare.¹⁶³ The work of creating an Afrocentric history from which black Americans could draw sustenance thus became a simultaneous exorcism of the contributions of black gay Americans from the Harlem Renaissance to the present, who were amputated from the black diaspora as abruptly and painfully as Fanon's separation from his own, specularized body while trapped in that French train car.¹⁶⁴

In *A Feast of Scraps*, language is the thread that sutures together these disparate histories, allowing for a host of multiple meanings that permit points of contact and

overlap between the seemingly irreconcilable lives represented therein. “To speak (...), writes Fanon, “means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”¹⁶⁵ As a colonial subject, Fanon conceives of language in terms of imposition and loss, expressing a nostalgic yearning for a pre-colonial state of linguistic cohesiveness, a desire to name something outside of the oppressor’s lexicon. Yet in *A Feast of Scraps*, Ligon reveals the polysemous possibilities of the master’s language, utilizing terms that denote the relative positions of authority within the heteropatriarchal family structure—“Father,” “Brother,” and so on— and using double entendre to assert the existence of alternate relationships beyond the hegemonic kinship structures that these terms officially represent. This quick-witted transformation of meaning is encompassed within Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s concept of signifying. “Signifying,” writes Gates, is “the black term for what in classical European rhetoric are called the figures of signification,” or “the indirect use of words that changes the meaning of a word or words.”¹⁶⁶ Charles I. Nero adds, “As a rhetorical strategy, signifying assumes that there is shared knowledge between communicators and, therefore, that information can be given indirectly.”¹⁶⁷

It is the indirect conveyance of multivalent meanings that brings the erotics of *A Feast of Scraps* to life; the words Ligon has chosen resonate within both black and queer idioms, establishing an implicit understanding between the figures of black middle-class respectability and their subaltern relations who have been officially disappeared from the community. Above the label “Brother” lies a young black man sporting an Afro that situates him within the context of the heady debates over black identity that

consumed Afrocentric movements of the 1960s and 1970s—a time period that coincides, roughly, with Ligon’s own sexual awakening. (Figure 49) Like Fanon’s black body, the suggestive coupling of the title with this intimate photo bestows a triple meaning upon the subject: he is the child of your mother, your blood brother; a “brother” in racial solidarity, the child of Mother Africa; and finally, a “down-low brother”—the slang term for a sexually discreet black gay man. Anticipating and desiring the understanding of the reader as well, a “brother” in the photo below winks suggestively at the camera. In this way, Ligon’s album both compels the viewer to look and catches him in the act: the wink of the gentleman at the family table becomes a tacit acknowledgement of the spectator’s not-entirely-disinterested contemplation of the photographic models: it is as if he knows what thoughts these images may provoke in the viewer’s mind, and wants him to know that he knows.

This polymorphous discourse between text and image, photographic subject and beholder, gives the images collected within *A Feast of Scraps* the photographic quality that Barthes identifies as “pensive”: a photograph is only truly subversive, he writes, “when it thinks,” or when it encourages associations that go beyond the literal, *unary*¹⁶⁸ image which the photograph initially appears to offer.¹⁶⁹ If the family photographs collected in Ligon’s album fall under Barthes’ definition of unary photography, reproducing the ideal of familial harmony without doubling or disturbing the generative scene from which it derives, it is the inclusion of pornographic images that provide this “family album” with Barthes’ *punctum*: the detail that at once distracts and seduces the

beholder from the self-evident content of the photograph, and encourages him to imagine “a whole life external” to what the photograph purports to show.¹⁷⁰

The photographic *punctum*, according to Barthes, is that which “pricks” the viewer, a partial detail which piques his imagination.¹⁷¹ To discover the *punctum*, writes Barthes, is “[t]o abandon disinterested contemplation: to admit certain desires, repulsions, tendencies, prejudices.”¹⁷² In other words, to allow oneself to come under the sway of the *punctum* is to abandon the Kantian state of detached aesthetic judgment and to tread dangerously into the territory of the emotional, the corporeal, into that nebulous legal concept called “prurient interest.”¹⁷³ Admitting the power of the *punctum* over oneself is not unlike the process of exploring, via “dirty” images, the dimensions of one’s “desires, repulsions, tendencies, prejudices:” in both, one is compelled to “give [oneself] up,” a harrowing liberation brought about through following one’s fascinations without regard for “morality or good taste”: “the *punctum*,” writes Barthes, “can be ill-bred.”¹⁷⁴

This parallel between the process of reading the *punctum* and that of reading pornography resonates in spite of Barthes’ claim that “[n]othing is more homogenous than a pornographic photograph,” which he writes, “is completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing: sex.” In pornographic images, claims Barthes, no *punctum* “ever manages to half conceal, delay or distract” from the straightforward presentation of carnality.¹⁷⁵ Yet *A Feast of Scraps* exceeds Barthes’ notions of the limits of both the *punctum* and of pornography: in the album’s pages we recognize the points of rupture that cause us to imagine ulterior narratives beyond what the individual photographs initially appear to offer, through their juxtaposition with other photographs.

The *punctum* in Ligon's work is mobile, multi-faceted, and changeable, as dependent upon the combination of details provided by the grouping of family functions and forbidden desires as it is by the viewer's own idiosyncratic ways of reading them. And, despite Barthes' insistence on the monofunctional nature of pornographic images, the album makes it distinctly difficult for the viewer to concentrate on sex. Confronted at once with a host of images that play to primitivising fantasies of virile black men and with a collection of pictures geared towards the reproduction and enshrinement of the familial ideal, the viewer is compelled to contemplate the very last thing one wishes to think about when using the image of another for one's fantasy: who is this model, and where did he come from? Do the family pictures clustered nearby afford us a look into his origins, and if so, how does he reconcile them with the image he now presents?

Whether pornographic or prosaic, the photographs collected in *Scraps* ultimately cast doubt upon the ability of images—"positive" depictions or otherwise—to cancel for good the derogatory charges brought about by institutionalized racism. The didactic use of representations of black familial stability towards projects of social change proves ultimately redundant, as the black family's status as a constant subject of social surveillance establishes it always already outside of the heteropatriarchal norms against which it is measured. Subjected thus to white preconceptions of what constitutes black sexual realities and possibilities, the subjects of the family photos prove not so dissimilar from the black male subjects of the pornographic photos, despite the ways in which the later fail to provide "elevating" visions of the black family and black masculinity.

Through Ligon's intervention, these images appear no longer disparate but linked, albeit through a history of conflict, schisms, and separations: in short, a portrait of a family.

The queer desires animated within the album draw substance and verve through their articulation in familial tropes; it is the power and protectionism implicit in the patriarchal household that makes the word "Daddy" attach itself so seductively to a lover. Yet this queer appropriation of kinship also points towards the sober reality of many gay black subjects, rejected by their families and forced to seek new support structures within predominantly white queer communities. "They told me I had to change up," declares a block of text pasted opposite of a page containing a single, well-worn photo of an extended family gathering. (Figure 50) "I just wanted somebody who was down," is the cocky conclusion to this statement, punningly positioned beneath a washed-out snapshot of a black man topping a white bottom. (Figure 51) The sheer multiplicity of smiling faces in the portrait of this inter-generational family throws the adjacent picture into stark relief: cropped precariously closely around the legs and asses of the two men, the photograph at once consigns them to anonymity and expels any other potential figures from the scene, underscoring the couple's isolation from the reproductive family presented in the photo opposite. Presumably, the members of this extended family have withdrawn their collective support as a punishment for the behavior which their deviant relative was expected to "change up"—namely, wanting a man—and a white man in particular—to get "down" with him.

Cast outside the family structure, this anonymous black man is presented without a genealogical lineage, a history, even a face: in the photograph, his single defining

feature consists of the white man impaled beneath him. Casting the black homosexual male in the role of executioner to his own race, Eldridge Cleaver conflates homosexuality and interracial sex into a single nefarious threat to the survival of black people: “it seems that many Negro homosexuals,” declares Cleaver, “are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man’s sperm.”¹⁷⁶

The strange formation that Cleaver employs in order to express his vitriol towards black male homosexuality warrants close investigation. Cleaver performs a classic fetishistic disavowal: leaving aside the fact that he “knows very well” that no offspring, “mixed” or not, are generated through gay male interracial sex, Cleaver “just the same” projects this fantasy onto the mind of the black gay male, utilizing bizarrely the white supremacist phantasm of “miscegenation” towards a rhetoric of black masculinist resistance. Cleaver in one breath condemns both homosexual and heterosexual acts of interracial sex, and for the same reason: both fail to reproduce “authentic” black subjects under the auspices of the black male-headed household. In this way, both photographs fail to meet Cleaver’s projected ideal: the faces in the family photo display a wide range of skin tones, testifying to interracial sex as a reality that has shaped American families for centuries. Yet the vast white gulf of the page gutter that separates this family gathering from the specter of queer, interracial sex just opposite underscores the ways in

which heteropatriarchal ideologies such as those espoused by Cleaver have changed the make-up of black families: not all acts, nor all individuals, are allowed to become a matter of family record.

“Necessity is a mother,” proclaims the text beneath a muscular and determined-looking nude black man. This dual play on the expression “Necessity is the mother of invention”—and, more provocatively, “Necessity is a motherfucker”—raises the question of the necessity to which Ligon’s subjects are bound. The heteronormative lifestyle represented on this page by military, marriage, and children does indeed inspire a particular kind of “invention” in subjects compelled to participate by a sense of necessity rather than desire; namely, the wholesale reinvention of one’s persona to “pass” in a heteropatriarchal world.

Yet at the same time Ligon allows for the possibility that this passing may not always be necessary—or convincing. “Mother knew,” declares the text accompanying a photo of a sweetly smiling young black man, who leans coquettishly towards the camera, his robe hanging suggestively open, projecting a definite sense of the unspoken truth which “Mother” has intuited. (Figure 52) More than any other junction in the album, this convergence of image and text prompts a consideration of *whom* is typically responsible for the creation of the family album, and by implication the executor of the family history which it encapsulates.

Further consideration of the family album as an authored document is prompted by the fact that something about viewing *A Feast of Scraps* in its typical iterations never feels quite right, whether in a gallery context or the exhibition catalogues in which it is

reprinted. To view the pages of a scrapbook, disgorged and presented at a respectable distance from the spectator in a glass vitrine, runs counter to the typical, indeed definitive context in which we normally view the pictorial history of a family. *Console* (1995), an installation work produced concurrently with *A Feast of Scraps*, reminds us of the settings in which the perusal of familial histories normally takes place. (Figure 53) Ligon provides a mock-up of a family room, with various markers of middle-class comfort (a cocktail set, a souvenir Disneyland mug, copies of *Jet* magazine) arranged as fastidiously as doll furniture atop an entertainment console. The open pages of a family scrapbook remind us that the offer to peruse intimate histories via the family album usually occurs concurrently with an invitation into the home itself, and that this invitation is typically extended by the keeper of the both the family home and the family history—the mother. Her invitation opens up the possibility for both intimacy and embarrassment, threatening to disclose details of personal histories which the subjects would sometimes rather leave behind. By employing the gendered labor of scrapbooking, Ligon poses a similarly chiding corrective to the heteropatriarchal, revisionist ideals of black American history, reuniting them with the queer, feminized black subjects cut long ago from the cultural record.

The role of the mother indeed cannot be ignored in considering the medium of the family album, because she is doubly responsible for the family reproduced therein: as a progenitor and as the axis around which the family coalesces, she is responsible both for the subjects themselves, and for building their histories through the family archive. If the family album which she assembles is meant to serve as a reflexive confirmation of

familial stability, the mother first bears the responsibility for reproducing a narrative of familial cohesiveness through her own body—a body which, in its potential for promiscuity and unregulated reproduction, simultaneously threatens the undoing of this institution. Reid-Pharr traces the roots of what he declares to be “a constant misogyny embedded within Black American radicalism” to a pernicious cultural expectation that black mothers are uniquely responsible for “maintain[ing] a fiction of black unity” by reproducing and raising ideal black subjects; an expectation which, as Reid-Pharr notes, is already undercut by a fundamental conviction in the perfidiousness of black female sexuality in the black American imaginary.¹⁷⁷ Citing Angela Davis’ claim that “the enslaved woman is understood to be treacherous precisely because of her centrality to the reproduction and maintenance of the slave family,” Reid-Pharr reminds us that the black American woman carries the evidence of white “colonialism” in her body, and, by extension, in her offspring, the lighter skin tones and pale eyes serving as a constant reminder of black American’s subjugation—and, by extension, signaling the black woman’s supposed complicity in this situation.

A symmetry between the reproductive black female subjects and the queer black male subjects of Ligon’s album thus emerges: in certain strains of Black Liberationist thought, both are held in suspicion of collusion with the oppressor; of taking in “prodigious amounts of the white man’s sperm,” and perhaps affixing to these unions and any offspring produced thereof, the term “love.” Cleaver’s strange and of course redundant choice of reproductive rhetorical tropes in his condemnation of black gay males thus comes into focus: in accusing black gay men of trying to do the “job” of

women, he simultaneously evokes the specter of the traitorous black woman who sleeps with the enemy in her efforts to produce a “half-white offspring” through which, in Reid-Pharr’s words, she might “displace the white father from his seat of victory.”¹⁷⁸ The black woman is the object of such constant antipathy in Black Liberationist discourse because she threatens fundamentally the system of self-replicating patriarchy which it (futilely) demands. In a peculiar echo of the divine right of European kings, the ideal of Black Power put forth by black male theorists is handed from black male subject to black male subject without the messiness of women and reproduction, and the fundamental insecurity about paternity and miscegenation which the black female body signifies in this discourse. It is she who produces these subjects—pale, queer, or otherwise outside of the essentialist racial ideal—and she who secures the place of these bastards in familial and cultural histories by way of her tolerance and love. “Mother knew.”

In assembling the motley family encompassed within *A Feast of Scraps*, Ligon becomes the mother to this multitude: it is he who prompts the viewer to read the assembled figures as a unit, compelling us to compare the genteel faces of the black middle class families with those of the pornographic models—searching here for a distinctive profile, there for a similar smile—and he whose subjectivity is consolidated and reflected in their collective image.¹⁷⁹ As a subject eclipsed by black heteropatriarchal discourse—black, male, and gay—Ligon finds a means of articulating himself through bastard subjects picked from “archives” of dubious pedigree, creating a queer lineage by filling in the gaps where information has been deliberately effaced, displaced, or disappeared, creating a history informed by speculation, fantasy, and desire.

The final words of Ligon's album articulate succinctly the risks, and potential pleasures, of reintegrating black male queer subjectivities, long discarded as symptomatic of white, fetishistic impositions, back into the black cultural family circle. A caption reading "It's a process—It's not natural" accompanies a series of photos that effectively chronicle the African American quest for social dignity and economic stability. (Figure 54) The ideals of marriage, child-rearing, and brotherhood repeat themselves within the photos, culminating with what appears to be a sizeable family reunion, composed largely—but not exclusively—of black individuals, proud to gather under the nationalist banner of the "Yankee Doodle Lodge." (Figure 55) Yet this pointed juxtaposition reminds us that the notion of "process," and progress, in African American histories has long facilitated a culture of scopophilic surveillance around the black family, and within certain black communities has fomented the notion that black culture and queer desire cannot coexist.

This fraught history weighs upon the adjacent photo of four nude black men clustered against a "naturalistic" background, an image that seems to reiterate suspicions harbored by Fanon and others with regards to erotic portrayals of black male bodies: the photo rehearses a white fantasy, the twisted desires of a racist imagination. Such images are truly not "natural," but a perverse mimicry, a reenactment of a long process of colonialist imposition. Yet it is through the productive reuse of these discarded ciphers of desire that Ligon makes apparent the psychic weight that they share with the subjects of the black family photographs, likewise subject to social scrutiny and speculation over the barest intricacies of their sexual, familial, and personal lives. In so doing, he produces a

kind of solidarity: a network of tenuous, prodigal bonds, approaching something like family.

Conclusion

The impetus for this dissertation began with a messy male body in a bathtub. In 2004, I was an undergraduate student enrolled at an arts institute in the Midwest. I supplemented my studies through an internship at a gallery operated by the college, which hosted that year a salon-style exhibition consisting of a mix of works submitted by current and former art institute students as well as faculty and other local artists. A video work submitted by a graduate one year my senior captured my attention. In describing the work, I have only recollections on which to rely, and this is perhaps not inappropriate since I am concerned here not with an empirical analysis of the work, but rather with what it compelled me, and others, to do.

The entirety of the short video is filmed with a stationary camera, possibly perched directly on the bathroom counter. Its object is a half-full bathtub, sealed to the wall of what appears to be a low-rent apartment. A young man marches into the frame, preceding himself with the jaunty, wheezy tune he plays on a child's plastic wind instrument. Having ceremoniously announced his arrival, he sashes into the tub, turning the pale briefs he wears translucent in the water. The performance that unfurls over the next ten minutes or so consists simply of the boy, the bathtub, and a series of painterly and auditory expressions he carries out therein. He produces a kit of watercolors and produces feathery stains that spread across the tiles and drip into spreading, pigmented pools in the bathwater. He refashions pieces of chocolate into soggy pastels that he uses to contour his slick body. He babbles, avowing repeatedly that he is possessed by water. He rolls onto his belly and falls silent, staring directly at the camera through heavy-lidded

brown eyes, his expression obscured by the edge of the tub as the water laps almost inaudibly at his still form.

The video captivated me because I had never seen anything like it. My art school cohort were in their practices object-based and frankly conservative; a foundations teacher's attempt to instill a performance art unit at the end of our semester had resulted in his dragging nearly the entire class, mystified and whining, through this unfamiliar territory. Male and female students alike went on to produce bronze studies of female breasts in the sculpture department, or large and boldly colored abstractions in the painting department, with clocklike regularity. Nothing in my educational experience indicated that the male body was a fit subject for aesthetic investigation, even to those whose desires and preferences gravitated towards men.

That a tacitly demarcated boundary had been breached through the work's inclusion in the exhibition was made clear to me by the uncomfortable experience of viewing it alongside one of the visitors to the gallery. Flitting my gaze between the screen and the man who was watching the spectacle with narrowed eyes and curled lips, I realized that the vision that so delighted me had inspired in him total disgust. I could not forget this display of naked revulsion; not even some weeks later, when I arranged for a private home screening of the video with a male friend and fellow art student. My friend gloried in the video, beaming and cackling with laughter at the artist's capering. I felt less than vindicated, however, by our "private, zany experience"¹ of this piece whose potential, I sensed, lay in the disruption it caused once submitted to the public eye. Whatever campy satisfaction I may have derived from savoring with a like-minded

companion that which had been so decisively rejected was diminished by the sensation that something critical was lost in the work's transference from the public space of the gallery to the discrete environs of my home computer.

I lacked at the time the sophistication to realize that the work constituted an example of a fugitive class of images in American visual culture: the male body, presenting consciously itself as a subject both erotic (conveyed unmistakably in the juxtaposition of the artist's soaking underwear clinging greyly to the island of his buttocks with the steady, unbroken gaze he exchanges with the camera) and in the process of dissipation. The painterly marks the artist produces on both his body and the surface of the tiles dissolve into the damp that envelops him, and he appears not a bit to mind as his authorial gestures liquefy, leaving us with nothing to observe but his increasingly stained body. Without yet possessing the theoretical language to articulate what I sought to analyze, I set out to discover who amongst contemporary American artists would dare undergo in his own body the "radical disintegration"² experienced by the object of the gaze, and what risks they would run in coming so publicly apart.

The ethic of visibility that I develop throughout this dissertation is rooted in my conviction that the ruthless and rigid gender binarism of the gaze in Western culture is effectively destabilized not through simple acts of role reversal, in which the gaze is projected back by formerly oppressed female subjects onto male objects—as if the gaze itself were not already, by the visual syntax we hold in common, gendered male. Rather, this order is most resoundingly upended when the gendered nature of the gaze is acknowledged openly, and masculinity recognized, therefore, as a routine of gestures

performed in anticipation of male audiences whose interest in the performance may shift rapidly from ardent approval to viscous “corrective” violence, carried out through the apparatuses of church, state, and the law. If an enormous range of feminist arguments may be reduced simply to the point that women are unfairly constrained and confined by the roles impressed upon them by the patriarchy, a most productive catalyst for social change may be sparked through the broad acknowledgement that decidedly fewer and fewer male subjects, too, benefit from the roles available to them in a Western patriarchal society in the grip of late-stage capitalism. The new “male model” of the twenty-first century, I aver, will be self-forged, self-consciously, with a canny awareness of the actualizing power of artifice.

In this dissertation, I have argued for the moral integrity of building a subjectivity through deceptions and fabrications when the subject positions one may occupy “honestly” prove impossible. I have traced the mutations of performance narratives in the viral vectors of discourse, wherein a work’s effects can prove profoundly different, and even antithetical to those the artist intended. I have argued for the potentialities of a versatile, slippery masculine subject position by demonstrating the effacing impact of our rigidly literal American constructs of masculinity on those who do not pass within them. I have deconstructed the subtle mechanisms developed by arts and cultural institutions over decades of battle with Rightist cultural forces, which hinge chiefly on disguising or rejecting preemptively anything that may provoke the latter’s ire. I have, by exercising a perverse version of the formalist analysis that has allowed certain contested works to pass provisionally within the annals of high culture, sought to resituate these works firmly in

the context of the delegitimized classes of images from which they derive. I have warned of the homogenizing effects of seeking to elevate difficult images above the fray of popular arguments about the constitution of our culture, and endeavored to remind the reader of what, and whom, are left behind when we deny the traces of these illegitimate histories.

Finally, I have, over the course of this dissertation's progress, come to the increasingly heavy realization that the conclusions I draw in this study of decades-old works and the cultural consternations they inspired are of vital consequence in the present moment. Their importance became apparent to me in a pressing (and depressing) fashion in late November of 2010, when I learned that the Smithsonian Institution had elected to override its own curators and remove from its National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. a work from the exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture."³

I recognized with weary familiarity the script of this story, played out so predictably in the texts of my research and, in this instance, expedited by the channels of digital social media. The mere existence of the exhibition truly would have been the most remarkable feature of this narrative, if only the Smithsonian had determined to support to the end its premise. That the same city that had launched itself into the eye of the storming debates over art, obscenity, and public money with the Corcoran Gallery's preemptive cancelation of the exhibition "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment" in 1990 would, twenty years later, play host to an exhibition dedicated to examining the codified ways in which queer American artists historically communicated their desires—

and under the aegis of the straight-laced Smithsonian—seemed nothing less than astonishing.⁴ The first month of the first exhibition at a major U.S. museum centered on queer expressions in portraiture passed nonetheless with very little fanfare, until November 29th, when a review of the exhibition was published through the online Cybercast News Service, a subsidiary of the far-Right Media Research Center.

The grievances enumerated in CNS reporter Penny Starr’s review of the show are standard bromides for an anti-gay activist of her métier:⁵ she warns that the National Portrait Gallery is peddling on the taxpayer dime images of “male genitals, naked brothers kissing [...] and a painting the Smithsonian itself describes [...] as ‘homoerotic’.”⁶ Starr captured the attention of a select but powerful few, however, with her claim that “Hide/Seek” blasphemed one particular male body that conservative Christian activists have parlayed in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries to their decisive political success. In Starr’s claim that the exhibition included a video depicting an “ant-covered Jesus,” William H. Donahue, as President the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (an organization richer in gall than in members), spotted an opportunity to capitalize upon the incoming, majority-Republican Congress. Donahue recycled rapidly Starr’s claims about the “Anti-Christian” exhibition through his own online forum;⁷ on the same day, incoming House Speaker John Boehner and Representative Eric Cantor made public their call for the exhibition, which they maintained constituted “hate speech” against Christians, to be cancelled.⁸

The Smithsonian acquiesced instantaneously. Under the direction of Smithsonian Secretary G. Wayne Clough, the National Portrait Gallery removed on November 30th the

work in question: a four-minute, posthumously edited version of an unfinished video by the artist David Wojnarowicz, entitled *A Fire in My Belly: A Work in Progress* (1986-87).⁹ The decision, the Smithsonian assured in a public attempt at mollification, was made because the video had “generated a strong response from the public” and “distracted from the overall exhibition.”¹⁰ In this staggering testament to their own devious weakness, the Smithsonian demonstrated precisely what “public” they, as an arts and educational institution, believe themselves beholden to: a tiny but well-connected network of online culture warriors and political opportunists, only one of whom, twenty-four hours prior to the work’s removal from the exhibition, had ever seen the video at the center of this manufactured “controversy.”¹¹ This, it seems, is the feather touch required to topple the resolve of the largest museum and research complex in the world, in the twenty-first century.

It makes it easier, of course, when the lamb you sacrifice in order to atone for the abuse of a tacky plastic Christ is a dead queer who dedicated his life being the thorn in the side of all structures of institutional power—religious, governmental, and cultural—that crossed his path. David Wojnarowicz, who received his modest success in the commercial art market with a strong reservations about the bankruptcy of the system itself,¹² would have likely harbored deep ambivalences about his work appearing at the National Portrait Gallery, had he lived to see it. He would have detested certainly National Portrait Director Martin Sullivan’s craven obfuscations in stating that Wojnarowicz’s work was removed because, as a “religious” work, its content was “off-topic” to the exhibition.¹³ Motivated by the same sentiment, he would perhaps have found

a source of perverse glee in William Donahue's citation of Wojnarowicz's 1989 essay, "Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell," in which he notoriously excoriates "those thinly disguised walking swastikas that wear religious garments over their murderous intentions;" that Donahue would replicate these remarks in an attempt to prove the artist's anti-Christian bias would suggest, at least, that his words had found their mark.¹⁴

Wojnarowicz wrote this screed from the ground zero that was New York City in the grip of the AIDS epidemic in 1989. Suffering from the disease that had claimed already 14,544 American lives, he had no time and no inclination to disentangle the ways in which queer sexuality, religious dogma, and the state-supervised distribution of public health services collide to wreak havoc with private lives. He dedicated instead his visual and performance art, writings, and AIDS activism (and the numerous expressions in which these categories overlapped) to a strategy of naming names. At the forefront of an activist movement committed to inverting the visibility politics that specularized the person with HIV/AIDS and staged his demise for the purposes of public catharsis, Wojnarowicz in his textual provocations and through political theatrics developed with ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) turned instead an accusing eye towards "certain politicians," "government healthcare officials," and those who perpetuate HIV/AIDS as a political crisis from within the benignly diffuse and unmarked infrastructures of power.

Wojnarowicz understood, bitterly, the ways in which public hunger for the sight of the abject, diseased queer body could be wielded and redirected to identify and condemn the body's murderer, heretofore camouflaged by the protections of normative

social formations. This he does in *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988-89), in which the ostensible object of the work—the dead body of the artist’s dear friend and mentor, Peter Hujar—is a remarkably unassertive feature of it. (Figure 56) Images of the hollowed sockets of Hujar’s eyes, and of his shriveled and stiffening limbs, tessellate palely across the canvas, but do not dominate it. They recede faintly behind a hard black block of text—the very same in which Wojnarowicz furiously redirects our attention to the “certain politicians,” “government healthcare officials,” and the murderers cloaked in “religious garments” responsible for what the image shows. In order to so expose and condemn the guilty living, Wojnarowicz must, wrenchingly, bid Hujar’s body to recede, to sink behind this promise of vengeance, and to be buried by the weight of the words.

Given the depth of Wojnarowicz’s harsh understanding of the impactfulness of the abject male body in the age of AIDS, there is a mirthless sort of humor to be found in the ways in which Wojnarowicz’s body was in 2010 resurrected, by factions positioned in diametric opposition to one another over the very topic of the artist’s work. The Right, eager to employ the familiar playbook by which the conservative base is rallied around the apparition of taxpayer-funded blasphemy and pornography, lacked a living contender for their latest straw man; the success of culture wars past in instilling self-censorship as an institutional value within arts organizations had guaranteed that. In order to achieve preexisting goals to dismantle further what is left in the way of a publicly-funded arts infrastructure, conservatives in the incoming Congress needed a scapegoat.¹⁵ They needed the specter of Wojnarowicz, a malevolent, dead pervert risen from the grave for the express purpose of ruining the Christmas season.

Moreover, the protest tactics adopted by those who organized to condemn the video's removal as an act of censorious intolerance proved that these advocates on Wojnarowicz's behalf needed his body, too. At demonstrations protesting the Smithsonian's decision in New York and Washington D.C., proponents of free speech covered their faces with paper masks of Wojnarowicz's face—his own lips bound tight and dripping from ersatz “sutures” affixed to them for his appearance in Rosa von Praunheim's 1990 documentary film *Silence = Death*. (Figure 57) Wojnarowicz's glowering visage in this image is unforgettable: his impossibly long face, offset by the tiny ears that lent his hulking frame an air of perpetual boyishness; the flinty stare that emanates from beneath his thick, knit brows; and the fake stitches that can approximate the most paralytic of political silences only through the overwrought theatricality of a painted Christ on a cheap votive candle.

I look at this image of Wojnarowicz, donned as a disguise and proffered as a votive in the culture wars still marching drearily on, and I wish for the deep, sonorous resonations of his voice. I search the body of work he has left behind, and am consequently troubled by the uneasy sensation that we, his survivors, have let the architects of his—and countless others'—demise out of our sights too many times. I worry that we are trained insufficiently in the close and quick vision required to recognize and render visible those for whom invisibility is the very locus of power. I wonder finally if the faceted optics that we practice in experiencing ourselves as a subject shaped in and by the relays we share with others in the unpredictable terrain of the open visual field offers a view beyond the tunnel vision of Western subject-object formations.

This study constitutes a test of these hypotheses, and of my efforts to see, blearily, with a gaze I possess only provisional permission to wield. I emerge with no intentions to surrender it.

Notes

Introduction

¹ The art critic Sarah Boxer, in an article about Pollock and Namuth's photographic collaborations, identifies this confrontation between the two men as having occurred in 1950. Namuth's actual video of Pollock painting on glass, however, begins with the artist painting "Jackson Pollock '51" on the glass surface, suggesting that the film was in fact created in 1951. See Boxer, "The Photos that Changed Pollock's Life," *The New York Times* (December 15, 1998): <<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/15/arts/critic-s-notebook-the-photos-that-changed-pollock-s-life.html?src=pm>> (January 15, 2014). I viewed Namuth's film through the following source: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cgBvpjwOG0>> (February 12, 2014).

² In her analysis of two *Life* magazine features on Pollock published on 8 August 1949 and 9 November 1959, respectively, Ann Eden Gibson argues that public interest in Pollock was forged on the perceived gap between Pollock's work and the ability of laypersons, like his neighbors in rural Springs, New York, to comprehend it. Through the "mythic terms" the magazine used to discuss the artist, Gibson suggests, *Life* established Pollock as a figure whose genius was, despite the "baffling" nature of the works he produced, beyond reproach. These features suggest that the bewilderment of lay audiences, itself, is a sign of Pollock's genius. Gibson's chapter-length treatment of Pollock, "The Abstract Expressionist Hero," was a formative influence on the first portion of my Introduction. See Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997): 1.

³ See Francis V. O'Connor, "Hans Namuth's Photographs of Jackson Pollock as Art Historical Documentation," *Art Journal* Vol. 39, No. 1 (Autumn 1979): 48-49. See also Boxer.

⁴ O'Connor, 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶ See Boxer.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*; Boxer even relates an anecdote about Namuth being barred by funeral directors from photographing Pollock in his coffin.

⁹ See Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 40, No. 4 (December 1988): 519-31.

¹⁰ This term is Stuart Hall’s. See “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994): 394.

¹¹ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1999): 9-10; 13-16.

¹² I should specify here that the historical circumstances Faludi describes are those of *white* American men, a distinction I feel she does not make quite sufficiently. *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16; 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁸ In the 1940s and 1950s “the history of art” would have been configured unproblematically as synonymous with Western art.

¹⁹ See Paul B. Franklin, “Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* and the Art of Queer Art History.” *Oxford Art Journal* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2000): p. 45, n. 108.

²⁰ Gibson, 9-10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 1-5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁴ Boxer relates this story from the 1989 biography *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith.

²⁵ Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in Kaprow, and Jeff Kelley, ed., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1993; 2003): 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (London: Flamingo, 1995): 191-95; See also Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue: Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

³¹ Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 1-18.

³² Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006): 56.

³³ Carolee Schneemann, "Interview with Kate Haug," in Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann: Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: 2002): 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Nead writes, "More than any other subject, the female nude connotes 'Art.' [...] it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment." *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992): 1.

³⁶ Schneemann, Haug, 28.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Schneemann, "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions," in *Imaging Her Erotics*, 55.

³⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁴¹ Schneemann, "Eye Body," 56. It is unclear which of Ono's works Schneemann refers to here.

⁴² Mulvey, 15.

⁴³ Nead, 11.

⁴⁴ See Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in Phelan and Helena Reckitt, *Art and Feminism: Themes and Movements* (London: Phiadon, 2001): 40.

⁴⁵ See Phelan, "Survey," 38-41; Wark, 72-73; Kathy Battista, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013): 5; Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 5th Edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012): 378-82; Suzanne Lacy, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art: the American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994): 270-73; Laura Cottingham, "The Feminist Continuum: Art After 1970," in Broude and Garrard, 276-79.

⁴⁶ Mulvey, 19.

⁴⁷ I am indebted in my thinking here to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20. Mulvey's evocations of the "Renaissance space" that the visual tropes of narrative cinema approximate establishes her understanding of the male gaze as a construct that has shaped visual representations in the West for centuries. See p. 26.

⁴⁹ Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, No. 2 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988): 87.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107-08.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵³ For an analysis of these debates, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 24-25; 29.

⁵⁴ A few of these include: Judith K. Brodsky & Ferris Olin, *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: The Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art, 2012); Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition:*

Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Linda C. Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005); Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004); Angela Dimitrakaki & Pam Skelton, eds., *Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain & Estonia* (London: Women's Art Library, 2000); Gill Perry, ed., *Gender and Art* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999); Patricia Townley Mathews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow & Claire L. Lyons, eds., *Naked Truths: Women Sexuality, and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997); Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ I employ the term “raced” rather than “nonwhite” or an equivalent term because, while it is far from an ideal descriptor, it better approximates my thinking on race as the product of a social process of “racing” a subject. I owe much to Richard Dyer’s *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997) on this subject.

⁵⁶ See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993): 6.

⁵⁷ See Gavin Butt, Introduction, “Gossip: the Hardcore of Art History?” and Chapter One, “The American Artist in a World of Suspicion,” *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 1-50.

⁵⁸ See Richard Meyer, Chapter One, “The Red Envelope: On Censorship and Homosexuality,” *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 3-31. Meyer, to clarify his scope, is in this book concerned almost exclusively with homosexual men; the sole woman artist he considers at any length is Holly Hughes, in the book’s Afterword, “Unrespectable”: 277-284.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁰ The phrase Muñoz employs here is Lisa Duggan’s; see Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): xii.

⁶¹ See Muñoz, Introduction, “Performing Disidentifications,” 1-36.

⁶² Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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- ⁶³ See especially “At Home in America,” in Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2001): 62-82.
- ⁶⁴ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994).
- ⁶⁵ Thelma Golden, “My Brother,” in Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (New York; Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994): 19.
- ⁶⁶ Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).
- ⁶⁷ Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986): 44-46.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ⁶⁹ T.J. Clark, Chapter Two, “Olympia’s Choice,” *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 79-146.
- ⁷⁰ Dyer, 14.
- ⁷¹ Jones, 125.
- ⁷² Kristine Stiles, “The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time,” in Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 4. Italics mine.
- ⁷³ Nead, 18.
- ⁷⁴ See Butt, Chapter One.
- ⁷⁵ Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996): 67.

Chapter One

¹ Tom Gunning, “Magick Weapon: Tom Gunning on Kenneth Anger,” *Artforum International*, Vol. 45, No. 7 (March 2007): 99.

² Alice L. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger: A Demonic Visionary* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004): 126. While I find it necessary to discuss this volume in my survey of the scant literature on Anger’s work, I cite it with serious reservations about its scholastic integrity. See note 42, p. 305 for details.

³ Bill Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1995): 222.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 131; 120: See also Martin Scorsese’s introductions to *The Films of Kenneth Anger*, Vols. 1 & 2. Fantoma, 2007.

⁵ The list I provide in the text of this chapter refers to a few of the fascinating characters whom Anger curated for (and, often, drove out of) his circle of acquaintances. These include the American sexologist Alfred Kinsey, who until his death in 1956 was a close friend of Anger’s and an early proponent of his work. Another early acolyte of Anger’s was the French poet and filmmaker, Jean Cocteau, whose praise for *Fireworks* (1947), Anger’s earliest extant film, convinced Anger to move to Paris in 1950.

At home in the United States, Anger’s underground film cohort included Stan Brakhage, Willard Maas, Marie Menken, and Curtis Harrington, among others; mainstream filmmakers who acknowledge Anger’s influence on their works include Martin Scorsese and George Lucas. Anger knew the American rocket propulsion engineer John Whitehead “Jack” Parsons, at the time a leading proponent of solid-fuel rocket research through their mutual devotion to Aleister Crowley’s Thelemite religious order. This acquaintance led to Anger’s introduction to Parson’s wife, the artist and infamous occultist Marjorie Cameron, whom would choose to star in the role of The Scarlet Woman in his 1954 film, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. While living in San Francisco in the 1960s, his occultist circle expanded to include the Satanist Anton LaVey. A temporary move to London in 1968 would allow Anger to draw into his orbit the musicians Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Jimmy Page, as each were for a time fascinated by Anger’s self-professed powers as an avant-garde filmmaker and occultist. Arguably the most important contact he formed in London, however, was with the philanthropist John Paul Getty, Jr., who extended intermittent financial support to Anger for years to come. See Landis for a contextualization of these encounters.

⁶ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 93.

⁷ “Sleazoid Express” is the name of a fanzine Landis produced from 1980 to 1985, and with his wife, Michelle Clifford, in 1999. The magazine documented the culture of the “grindhouse” theaters clustered on 42nd street in New York, where during the 1970s and 1980s audiences could view cheaply produced exploitation films amongst rowdy audiences. Landis and Clifford expand upon this material in their book, *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* (New York: Fireside, 2002).

⁸ For an expansive analysis on the topics of queerness and futurity, and for the source to which these brief remarks are indebted, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁹ Anger plays the minor roles of Hecate in his film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), and The Magus in his *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1964).

¹⁰ Landis, 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5

¹² See Hutchison, 26; see also Carel Rowe, “Myth and Symbolism: Blue Velvet,” in Jack Hunter, ed., *Moonchild: The Films of Kenneth Anger* (London: Creation Books, 2002): 24. Unfortunately, I must count Hunter’s book amongst a number of volumes dedicated to Anger’s work with a decidedly shoddy history. In the course of writing this dissertation, I discovered a website dedicated to revealing Creation Books to be a fraud company run out of Thailand by a British citizen named James Williamson—who, under the pen name “Jack Hunter,” has allegedly plagiarized from the works of Agnès Pierron and published them as his own work, as well as defrauded a number of authors from the United States and the United Kingdom signed by Creation Books. See “About this Website,” *Creation Books Fraud*, last modified 2012, < <http://www.creationbooksfraud.com/index.html> > (February 17, 2014). These tawdry details are echoed, incredibly, in Alice L. Hutchison’s own plagiarism of Rowe’s essay in *Moonchild*; see n. 42, p. 305.

¹³ See Samuel R. Delany, “Coming/Out,” in *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & The Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover; London: Wesleyan University Press, University Press of New England, 1999): 67-97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-82.

¹⁵ Stockton formulates her concept of “backwards birthing” thus: “Certain linguistic markers for [the queer child’s] queerness arrive only after it exits its childhood, after it is shown not to be straight. That is to say, in one’s teens or twenties, whenever (parental) plans for one’s straight destination have died, the designation ‘homosexual child,’ or even

‘gay kid,’ may finally, retrospectively, be applied [...] ‘I was a gay child.’ This has been the only grammatical formulation allowed to gay childhood. The phrase ‘gay child’ is a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died. Straight person dead, gay child now born, albeit retrospectively.” See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2009): 6.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010): 95.

¹⁷ “Accursed” is not a term I employ hyperbolically; in the Introduction to his biography, Landis claims that Anger, at a chronological point in the book’s production which Landis does not specify, sent him a proclamation on his signature “magical” stationary declaring Landis “an avowed enemy” of his. See Landis, xiii.

¹⁸ The source of this quote is a statement Anger gave onstage at the 48th Ann Arbor Film Festival, in an interview with the film writer and critic Dennis Lim, on March 27, 2010. I viewed this talk through the following source:
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfySTA-ey4c#t=116>> (February 17, 2014).

¹⁹ *Scorpio Rising* debuted at the Gramercy Arts Theater in New York in October of 1963 and quickly became a popular feature within art cinema circuits. Landis asserts that the film just as quickly became “the strongest crossover into the newly burgeoning exploitation market of any underground film of the time” (Landis, 119). The long-term effects of this fortuitous cross marketing would become legendary: in 2004, Alice L. Hutchison would bestow upon *Scorpio Rising* the title of “the most viewed underground film in history.” See Hutchison, 13. See also Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996): 141.

²⁰ Rowe notes in “Myth and Symbolism: Blue Velvet” that Bruce Connor “anticipated” Anger’s innovative use of pop music two years prior to *Scorpio Rising*’s completion, when he paired found footage with Ray Charles’ “What’d I Say” in his 1961 film *Cosmic Ray*. (See Rowe, in Hunter, 29). In Connor’s film, however, the pop song functions simply as a soundtrack, whereas Anger in *Scorpio* exhibits his full mastery of intellectual montage, editing together audio and visual elements to produce meanings that become apparent only through this synchronization of seemingly unrelated elements.

²¹ The version of *Lucifer Rising* that Anger maintains went missing in 1967 is distinct from the film of the same name that he completed in 1972.

²² For a selection of these claims, see Landis, 157-60; 179-80; 204-05; 240.

²³ Anger is a self-proclaimed Magus within the Thelema order, a set of philosophical tenets developed by the British occultist Aleister Crowley. Thelema conceives of history in three Aeons: the Aeon of Isis, in which prehistoric peoples are presumed, under the tenets of the faith, to worship a mother goddess; the Aeon of Osiris, which Thelemites define by the dominance of Abrahamic religions that exult God the Father; and the Aeon of Horus, Crowley's emblematic "crowned and conquering child," an era Thelemites believed would usher in a new age of self-realization and actualization, and which Anger associated with the dawning Aquarian Age. See Landis, 26-34; 145. See also Lon Milo DuQuette, *The Magick of Aleister Crowley: A Handbook of Rituals of Thelema*. (York Beach, Maine: Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC, 1993; 2003).

²⁴ Landis, 142.

²⁵ Ibid., 144.

²⁶ Ibid., 145

²⁷ See Rowe, in Hunter, p. 46, n. 36

²⁸ Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974): 33.

²⁹ Bugliosi maintains that Hinman's was the first of the murders intended to trigger Helter Skelter, a race war that Manson predicted would commence in the summer of 1969. On July 27, 1969, Beausoleil went with Manson associates Susan Atkins and Mary Brunner (who were also involved in later murders) to Hinman's Malibu home to demand money meant to compensate for a bad batch of mescaline Hinman had allegedly sold to Beausoleil. When Hinman refused to pay, Beausoleil called Manson at Spahn Ranch, who instructed Beausoleil, Atkins, and Brunner to hold Hinman captive in his home in hopes of extorting the money. For two days and two nights, Atkins and Beausoleil held Hinman captive in his own home, sleeping in shifts in order to keep watch on their captive. Allegedly, Manson himself later arrived, sliced off a part Hinman's ear with a sword, and then ordered Beausoleil to kill him. After stabbing Hinman to death, Beausoleil, as per Manson's instruction, left false clues around the scene meant to indicate that the murder had been committed by the Black Panthers, drawing a paw print and the words "Political piggy" on the wall in Hinman's blood. Police finally found Beausoleil roadside in Hinman's Fiat on August 5, 1969 and arrested him. See *ibid.*, 33, 75-77, 102-104.

³⁰ Roy Frumkes, "Look Back with Kenneth Anger," *Films in Review*, Vol. 48 (January/February 1997): 6.

³¹ Landis, 158. Landis in his book utilizes an unorthodox citation style that makes it difficult to contextualize this information; in his notes for the chapter in which these remarks appear, he relates only that Clifford interviewed Beausoleil by phone on July 22, 25, and 26, and September 30 in 1991. He gives no indication of which of these interviews yielded the remarks I summarize, nor does he specify which prison Beausoleil was in at the time. Beausoleil, in his correspondence with Clifford, maintained that he was present for all the shots for the film that Anger referred to as *Lucifer Rising*, but would eventually become *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, and that Anger had not shot nearly so much film as he claimed, and certainly not hours of footage. See Landis, 147.

³² Hunter's *Moonchild* provides a list of works that Anger counts as "Lost, Fragmented, and Abortive Films;" it consists of films that Anger claimed were either destroyed or abandoned before ever meeting the public eye, such as *Thelema Abbey* (1955) and *L'Histoire d'O* (1961), as well as works that were intended as parts of larger projects that Anger decided to screen publicly despite their fragmentary nature, such as *Puce Moment* (1949), *Rabbit's Moon* (1950-1979), and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1964-65). It also contains a reference to the film Anger alleges Beausoleil stole in 1967. See Hunter, 114-124.

³³ Bugliosi, 489.

³⁴ In the fall of 1967, shortly after Beausoleil's alleged theft of his film and on the heels of his ersatz *Village Voice* obituary, Anger arrived at the office of the Film-Maker's Cooperative in New York. He there publicly burned dozens of films, which he claimed made up the entirety of his childhood filmmaking output—films that the general public had never seen. See Landis, 159. Landis writes that the first film Anger claims to have completed was *Ferdinand the Bull* in 1937, when the filmmaker would have been seven or eight years old by his own chronology, and ten years old by Landis'. See Landis, 13-14. Hunter in *Moonchild* provides a list of seven films Anger claims to have completed between 1941 and 1946; we can only speculate whether these alleged films, seen only by Anger himself, met their end by fire at the Film-Maker's Cooperative in the fall of 1967.

³⁵ Ironically, Beausoleil himself designed this stationary for Anger while incarcerated, in the spring of 1975.

³⁶ Personal correspondence from Anger, quoted in Landis, xiii.

³⁷ See Landis for a litany of examples.

³⁸ Landis, xiv.

³⁹ Landis maintains that Anger was born in 1927. It would appear from Landis' and other's accounts that Anger has dated himself inconsistently; if, as he claims, he created

Fireworks at age seventeen, this would put his birthdate at around 1930; Landis also claims that in the mid 1970s Anger shaved five years off of his age, giving his date of birth as 1932. See Landis, 44; 203.

⁴⁰ I employ the term “substantive” to refer to the biography’s length rather than its quality.

⁴¹ Hutchison, 7.

⁴² Hutchison’s Introduction plagiarizes wholesale from Rowe’s “Myth and Symbolism: Blue Velvet,” in Hunter, *Moonchild*. Beginning on page 16 of the Introduction, Hutchison lifts directly the text of Rowe’s pages 12-13; see Hutchison’s passage that begins “More so than any of his contemporaries, the Baudelairean literary references pertain directly to Anger’s aesthetic [...]” and compare it to the paragraph on Rowe’s page 12 that begins “Many analogies can be drawn between the Baudelaire-inspired school of French Decadence/Symbolism [...]” The reader will note that Hutchison has merely rearranged Rowe’s sentences to create a semblance of her own work.

This scholastic dishonesty first came to my attention through the following source: Edward Champion, “In Which I’m Threatened with ‘Legal Action’ by Alice Hutchison for Something I Didn’t Even Write,” *edrants* (blog), January 27, 2007, <<http://www.edrants.com/in-which-im-threatened-with-legal-action-by-alice-hutchison-for-something-i-didnt-even-write/>> (February 17, 2014).

⁴³ See Anna Powell, “The Occult: A Torch for Lucifer,” in Hunter, *Moonchild*, 47-103; See also Nikolas Schreck’s reading of Anger in his book *The Satanic Screen: An Illustrated Guide to the Devil in Cinema* (London: Creation Books, 2001).

⁴⁴ Landis does not provide a system of footnotes or endnotes that correspond with any particular points in his chapters, either through in-text citations or numerals leading to specific citations. He instead provides for each chapter an endnotes section that gives a list of sources from which he drew, leaving the reader with no real way to know what sources inform which portions of the chapter.

⁴⁵ I employ the lowercase form of “camp” in part to distinguish my understanding of the term from Sontag’s (who employs an uppercase version of the word), and to acknowledge its history prior to her essay.

⁴⁶ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1999): 53.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁸ See Delany, “Coming/Out,” in *Shorter Views*, 89.

⁴⁹ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in Cleto, *Camp*, 57-58.

⁵⁰ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham; London: 2002): xxvi, 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁵² Suárez, 131-32.

⁵³ These lyrics are from The Angels’ 1963 hit song, “My Boyfriend’s Back,” which appears in a sequence of *Scorpio Rising*.

⁵⁴ Suárez, 163.

⁵⁵ Suárez, 142. He refers specifically to *Scorpio Rising*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁷ Tinkcom, 131-32.

⁵⁸ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in Cleto, *Camp*, 58-59.

⁵⁹ My definition of the term draws from Paul Baker, *Polari—The Lost Language of Gay Men* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002): 104.

⁶⁰ “Trade,” as Baker notes, is part of a group of terms in an older, “general gay vocabulary” that either originated or was utilized in the United States independent of the formation of Polari, a form of jargon employed primarily by gay men and lesbians in urban centers in the United Kingdom in “the first 70 or so years of the twentieth century.” “Trade,” along with the terms “butch,” “camp,” and “cruise,” were terms used broadly within gay subcultures in both the U.S. and the U.K., despite the more complex parlance of Polari being “barely known” in America. Though Baker provides in his “Chapter 2: Historical Origins” a rigorous study of numerous intersecting subcultures and language varieties that may have indeed over the course of several *centuries* influenced the argot of Polari, he does not (and perhaps cannot realistically be expected to) provide an exact estimation of the origins of the slang term “trade.” *Ibid.*, 1, 19-38, 124-25.

⁶¹ Anger, quoted in Landis, 111.

⁶² Anger, quoted in Landis, 112.

⁶³ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot’s *The Nun*,” in

Tendencias (Durham; Duke University Press, 1993): 23-51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁶⁶ Beginning with his questioning of Beausoleil's role in the vanishing of *Lucifer Rising*, Landis goes on to argue that none of the iconically masculine characters in Anger's films are as they appear: counter to Anger's oft-repeated claims that the Navy servicemen of *Fireworks* are "real" sailors, and the motorcycle gangs of *Scorpio Rising* represented by "real" bikers, Landis maintains these roles were played by mere "hustlers"—thereby producing a dichotomy of mutual exclusivity which I interrogate thoroughly later on in this chapter. Landis notes also that the trade boy would come to spill over the confining frame of Anger's films into his waking life, as Anger in his later years came to report fantastic tales of gangs of boys who inflicted upon him sporadic violence.

⁶⁷ A shot that follows soon after aligns this statuette, with its pointed and rather phallic head, at a closeness that makes it roughly equal in stature with the similarly rigid and angular Anger—establishing him, perhaps, as a sexual tourist about to embark on another journey?

⁶⁸ Mulvey, 19-20.

⁶⁹ In an interesting bit of symmetry, Anger would smoke the first and last cigarette of his life in this, the first and last of his films in which he would play a starring role. Anger, as evidenced by his short video *Don't Smoke that Cigarette* (2000), is vehemently opposed to smoking.

⁷⁰ In his notes to the film that appear in the *Fantoma* collection, Anger credits the soundtrack only as "Music by Respighi."

⁷¹ Hutchison, 25.

⁷² Suárez, 130.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ It is not clear from Landis' account exactly when these events took place. See Landis, 37.

⁷⁶ For a brief but illuminating view of the problems of blackmail and police surveillance as they pertained to the queer communities of Anger's native Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s, see Ann Cvetkovich, et. all, *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, 2011).

⁷⁷ Anger has asserted: "My reason for filming has nothing to do with 'cinema' at all; it's a transparent excuse for capturing people, the equivalent of saying 'Come up & see my etchings'... So I consider myself as working Evil in an evil medium." Excerpted from Tony Rayns, "Lucifer: a Kenneth Anger Kompendium", in Jayne Pilling and Mike O'Pray, eds. *Into the Pleasure Dome: the films of Kenneth Anger*, (London: BFI Distribution, 1989): 5.

⁷⁸ Landis, 39.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

⁸¹ See Ibid., 241-42.

⁸² Stockton, 6.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Landis peppers his biography of Anger with numerous claims to have uncovered Anger's "first" lie about one or another biographical fact of his life, to the extent that Landis himself seems unable to keep track of them all: on his page 44, Landis asserts that Anger told "his first lie about his age" in asserting that he made *Fireworks* when he was seventeen years old. However, based on Landis' citations, this statement would have been relayed to him by Anger in an interview that took place from April 30th to May 1st, 1980, which provides the reader with no clues as to whether Anger actually began publicly lying about his age around the time of *Fireworks*' production. By Landis' own account, Anger would have by 1980 spun already untold numbers of lies in public, including in 1976, when, Landis claims again on his page 203, Anger "made himself five years younger, moving his birthdate to 1932," capitalizing upon on the popularity of the English edition of his book *Hollywood Babylon* by changing also his birthplace from Pacific Palisades to Beverly Hills, in order to corroborate better his insider narratives about silent film stars. The task of identifying definitively Anger's "first" publicly related falsehood, as Landis' example shows, is rather more trouble than it is worth.

⁸⁶ See Stockton, 2; 11; 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁸ Landis, 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 7.

⁹² Ibid., 6.

⁹³ Ibid., 5, 7.

⁹⁴ See “Kenneth Anger: The Experimenter” in Matthew Hays, *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007): 27. The facts of when this gift was allegedly made are, like so many aspects of Anger’s biography, unclear. Hays claims that Coler gifted the camera to Anger when he was an adolescent; yet Anger claims to have made his first film, *Ferdinand the Bull*, in 1937, when he would have been, by his own chronology, only about seven or eight years old. See Hutchison, 22.

⁹⁵ Landis, 38. Anger, I should note, could not depend upon Coler for financial assistance for long; she died in 1948, incredibly, not long after *Fireworks*’ completion.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11-12.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁸ Landis pins Anger’s failure to break into movies squarely on his soft, effeminate voice: “Though he may look like Valentino, his voice undermined his chances, as voices had affected so many silent screen stars.” Ibid., 94.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ The notion that homosexuality indicates a “certain arrest” in one’s sexual development was, Stockton notes, pioneered by Freud, who does not comment on either the positive or negative effects of such an arrest. Nonetheless, anti-gay activists have annexed this concept for their own rhetorical purposes. See Stockton, 22-24.

¹⁰¹ Anger's words are heard in a prologue included in the version of *Fireworks* that appears in the Fantoma DVD compilation of Anger's work. I have not been able to find any information on when, exactly, Anger added to the film this prologue.

¹⁰² Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 5.

¹⁰³ Anger, quoted in Landis, 44.

¹⁰⁴ Bob Anglemyer, quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Hutchison, 26. List others as well.

¹⁰⁶ Delany, 80-82.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁸ For a brief but illuminating view of the problems of blackmail and police surveillance as they pertained to the queer communities of Anger's native Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s, see Ann Cvetkovich, et. all, *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, 2011).

¹⁰⁹ Delany, "Coming/Out," in *Shorter Views*, 89.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82, 89.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89-91.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-80.

¹¹⁷ Kenneth Anger, "Time Must Have A Stop," reprinted in Hutchison, 8-9; original printing in *Kenneth Anger: Icons*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Institut Français de Vienne, 1995).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9. Emphasis original.

¹²⁰ Ibid. Emphasis original.

¹²¹ Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1998): 3.

¹²² Ibid., 10.

¹²³ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Landis, 4.

¹²⁶ Ed Earle, quoted in Landis, 38.

¹²⁷ Freeman, 142.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 148.

¹³⁰ Mulvey, 19-20.

¹³¹ See Landis, 39.

¹³² See Dyer, 146-164, for a sustained analysis of the racial dynamics of bodybuilding culture.

¹³³ Freeman, 150.

¹³⁴ Stockton, 78. Emphasis original.

¹³⁵ Ibid; Stockton provides the following passage from Deleuze's *Masochism*: "The masochist feels guilty, he asks to be beaten, he expiates, but why and for what crime? Is it not precisely the father-image in him that is thus miniaturized, beaten, ridiculed and humiliated? What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father's likeness in him... Hence the father is not so much the beater as the beaten."

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Moon states his objectives for his book thus: "This book focuses on a series of instances of an adult artist's productive revisitation of a remembered scene of himself as

a protoqueer child ‘looking to be’ (as the colloquial phrase has it) ravished by images of his own desire, experiencing such ravishment and gradually learning to exploit various aspects of the fantasied/remembered initiatory scene for his subsequent work.” Given how relevant these words seem in relation to Anger’s *Fireworks*, it is rather remarkable that Moon focuses on *Scorpio Rising*, instead. See Moon, 6.

¹³⁸ Anger did not arrange for public showings of *Fireworks* until 1949. See Landis, 45.

¹³⁹ Landis, 46.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Freeman, 1-2.

¹⁴² Landis, 38.

¹⁴³ See Paul Baker and Jo Stanley, *Hello Sailor!: The Hidden History of Gay Life At Sea* (London; et. all: Pearson Education Limited, 2003): 8.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 9.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 3. Such inter-generational sexual abuse is depicted transparently and as early as 1931, in James Hanley’s *Boy*, which Baker and Stanley describe as the best-known novel about male-male sex in the Merchant Navy. See 3, 6.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ix, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Cvetkovich, et. all, 41.

¹⁴⁸ Landis, 44-45.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 102. See also Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

¹⁵² Landis, 102.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵⁸ Landis., 113.

¹⁵⁹ Here it is helpful to recall Sedgwick's words: "Interestingly, to 'use a man as a woman' means *exactly the same thing* as to 'use a woman as a man'—i.e., to penetrate them anally. The point of this strange and insisted-upon euphemism can only be in the way it signposts with gender and with heterosexuality (on however nonsensical a pretext) the entrance to an organ and to forms of pleasure that need not have very much to do with either." *Tendencies*, 98.

¹⁶⁰ Landis, 111.

¹⁶¹ Another exception is a model on a pornographic trading card that flashes briefly on the screen during the party scene.

¹⁶² Landis, 111.

¹⁶³ "Lord Shiva" is the principal character in Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*.

¹⁶⁴ Landis writes that in an interview with the New York radio station WBAI of November 16, 1982, Anger claimed to have been robbed in his neighborhood by "the Budweiser Gang," a group of local "Irish-American hoodlums." Anger claimed that members of a gang of sixty-five had held him in his home and threatened to march him to his bank the next day and force him to withdraw all his money. He further claimed that they threatened to disfigure him if he filed a complaint against them. The Budweiser Gang, Landis claims, were in fact a group of "teenage guys from the Ninety-first Street housing projects [...] known by the old white folks who still lived in the projects as local heroes who kept the area safe." Landis, 247. Earlier, on page 128, Landis relates Anger's bizarre claim of 1965 that he was beaten up by unspecified parties onstage at the Cinema Theater in Hollywood "as Jack Smith and Gregory Markopoulos laughed and jeered."

¹⁶⁵ See Frumkes, 6.

¹⁶⁶ Landis, 142.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 146.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 145.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 211.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 240.

Chapter Two

¹ Patrick Scully, proprietor of Patrick's Cabaret where Athey's Minneapolis performance took place, recalls: "I was stunned that [Abbe's story] was on the front page—I couldn't remember, in the course of my whole career, any performance making the front page [of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*]." Patrick Scully in conversation with the author, June 15, 2010.

² The article spares a glance at artistic content only in the form of brief quotes from Kathy Halbreich, then-Director of the Walker Art Center, and John Killacky, who in his capacity as Curator of Performing Arts had invited Athey and his crew to present their work via the museum. Halbreich is represented with a brief quote about the religious iconography and rituals incorporated into Athey's work, and Killacky with a sentence expressing his belief that Athey's work addresses issues of homophobia and fear of AIDS. The author of the article, Mary Abbe, attempts no art historical or cultural analysis of her own. See Abbe, "Bloody Performance Draws Criticism: Walker Member Complains to Public Health Officials," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 24, 1994.

³ Patrick's Cabaret is a community-oriented theater where artists may hold classes, rehearsals, and performances, including music, dance, theater, literary readings, and film screenings. The Cabaret was at the time located at 506 East 24th Street in Minneapolis. The cabaret is located currently at 3010 Minnehaha Avenue in Minneapolis.

⁴ A brief notice about the upcoming Athey performance in the *City Pages*, a Twin Cities alternative weekly newspaper, appears to be the sole exception. The performance was previewed in the "Night and Day" feature of the paper on March 2, 1994.

⁵ For her article of March 24th, Abbe relied primarily upon the eyewitness testimony of two attendees of the Patrick's Cabaret performance: Dennis Yelkin and Jim Berenson, both residents of the Twin Cities metro area. Both Berenson and Yelkin would later dispute publicly Abbe's use of their testimonies, claiming they were misquoted. Both penned letters to the editors of the *Star Tribune* alleging their words were taken out of

context (see n. 26, p. 319, and n. 99, p. 328), and both signed an open letter of July 14th, 1994, which stated in part:

[W]e are mortified that our words have been taken out of context, have been repeated and exaggerated in the media, and have been used in congress [*sic*] and in rightwing [*sic*] organizations to harm the National Endowment for the Arts. We were asked questions which encouraged us to make negative, sensational statements.

We come forward now to offer our support for the NEA and set the record straight.

It should be noted, however, that Berenson persisted for some time with the claim that members of Athey's audience had been at risk of HIV infection: see p. 165. Jim Berenson and Dennis Yelkin, open letter received by the Walker Art Center, July 14, 1994. Courtesy of Walker Art Center Archives.

⁶ Here the *Star Tribune* replicates one of the most pernicious bits of misinformation still perpetuated by the mainstream media in 1994, thirteen years after the identification of HIV in 1981. By blithely conflating HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, with the vast and variable host of symptoms that give shape to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, the *Star Tribune* reifies what Simon Watney identifies as one of the most dangerously and persistently maintained myths about HIV and AIDS:

Many of the most basic misunderstandings about HIV infection and AIDS stem from a fundamental failure by journalists and others who mediate medical information to non-professionals, to appreciate the significance of the distinction between HIV, with its well-established, limited modes of transmission, and AIDS. [...] For example, many people still talk about 'catching AIDS,' as if you could contract a syndrome.

See Watney, "Taking Liberties," in Erica Carter and Simon Watney, *Taking Liberties* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989): 16.

⁷ Abbe, "Bloody Performance Draws Criticism."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. Berenson, as Abbe noted in the article, called the health departments of Minneapolis and Hennepin County after witnessing the performance, who in turn referred him to Minnesota Department of Health officials.

¹⁰ Ibid. Abbe's conflation of Athey's blood with Carlton's, and, to a lesser extent, with their two female co-performers, Julie Tolentino and Lisa "Pigpen" Rifkin, is repeated unhesitatingly in scores of articles covering the Minneapolis performance thereafter. An article in *Human Events*, a conservative news journal, casts suspicion upon the serostatus of Athey's co-performers, writing ominously, "The HIV status of his assistants is unknown." In all the articles that raise the question of Carlton's, Rifkin's, and Tolentino's respective serostatuses, none speculate whether any of the three were at risk of contracting the virus from Athey in the course of the performance--this is clearly not among the writers' concerns. Rather, numerous authors seem to suspect that the performers are, by virtue of proximity to Athey, already infected, and thus potential vehicles of contamination for the audience, as well. See "AIDS 'Artist' Draws Blood," *Human Events* 50, no. 13 (April 8, 1994): no page number available.

¹¹ Transcribed by the author from an undated KSTP-TV broadcast, videotape collection of the Walker Art Center Archives.

¹² Jon Tevlin, "Did the Walker Go Too Far?," *Minnesota Monthly*, October 1994, 46.

¹³ Mary Abbe, "Minneapolis Performance Raises Concerns About AIDS: Bloody Towels from Mutilation Hung Above Audience," *The Washington Times*, March 28, 1994.

¹⁴ In his article on the Athey controversy for *Minnesota Monthly*, Jon Tevlin relays the level of distortion reached by Buchanan's "review" of Athey's performance on the television program *Firing Line*: Buchanan spoke of "nutcake art up in Minnesota where some guy cuts himself, bleeds—it's probably HIV—throws the bloody towels in the audience." Limbaugh also spun his own version of the events for television, as the following synopsis was aired unchallenged: "You got a couple guys on stage. HIV-positive. Cut each other up, blot the blood with paper towels... send them dripping over the audience—audience fleeing, saying 'Let me out of here.'" See Tevlin, 47. Pat Robertson capitalized upon the indignation provoked by media narratives about Athey's Minneapolis performance—outrage sparked in no small part by Athey's use of Christian iconography as well as his practice of bloodletting—to his own gain, ending his rendition of the events on his program *The 700 Club* by entreating his viewers to send money. See Erin Cosgrove, "Blood, Art and the NEA," *Minnesota Daily*, July 8, 1994. See also "Stop the Bleeding," *Twin Cities Reader*, 30 March—5 April, 1994.

¹⁵ Tevlin reports, "[o]f the scores of writers doing editorials, only two bothered to call the Walker to check the facts, according to the museum's PR director Mag Patridge." See Tevlin, 47.

¹⁶ "AIDS 'Artist' Draws Blood," *Human Events*.

¹⁷ David Schimke, “A Bloody Debate,” *Twin Cities Reader*, July 20-26, 1994.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. Schimke for his article interviewed officials with both the Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota AIDS Project—the later of which worked with the Walker Art Center to develop safety guidelines for the Athey performance—but quotes these officials only so far as their words appear to suit his own conclusions. Then-Public Information Director for the Minnesota Department of Health, Buddy Ferguson, confirms that no one at the performance was in “significant” danger, but goes on to say: “If for some reason a towel fell, or something went wrong, it could be troublesome.” This kind of vague language, and the implication of HIV infection via surface contact that it strongly implies, is emblematic of mass media misinformation campaigns on HIV and AIDS that made for a woefully ill-informed and panicked American public. The obfuscations conveyed here by a high-ranking public health official are a disheartening sign of how deeply dysfunctional American public health campaigns addressing HIV and AIDS remained in the second decade of the epidemic.

Schimke does not afford nearly as much ink for Bob Tracey, then-public policy director of the Minnesota AIDS Project; he writes only that Killacky and Halbreich “maintain the performance was in line with safety standards” established by MAP, and that Tracey “concur[s].” Since Schimke devotes a considerable portion of his article to casting doubt on the Walker administrators’ credibility, this hardly reassures. He also accuses the Walker of being “cagey” in dealing with the media, and of “muzzl[ing]” its staff, forbidding employees to speak about the performance with reporters.

²⁰ Following the publication of Abbe’s article, scores of critics and commentators—most of whom had never written about Athey or indicated publicly any knowledge of his work—adapted Abbe’s account of the Minneapolis performance to create their own screeds against Athey’s work. A typical example is Hilton Kramer’s article “Loathsome Performances,” (*New Criterion* Vol. 13, No. 1, September 1994): no page numbers available. Kramer repeats the details of the performance as Abbe presents them, with a few embellishments of his own (“[audience members] were reported to be in a state of panic”); he raises the question of Carlton’s serostatus, even as he admits the now-public knowledge that it is HIV-negative; and finally, he accuses Walker administrators of deliberately concealing the health risks that Kramer, like Abbe before him, insists had to have been present. He also accuses Walker officials of deflecting scrutiny by “mount[ing] an attack on Mary Abbe,” though Kramer does not specify what this “attack” consisted of, outside of Halbreich and Patridge’s claims that Abbe’s story was misleading. Kramer also references David Schimke’s “very good article” in the *Twin Cities Reader* as a source for his account of the events.

²¹ “Bizarre AIDS Show Gets Uncle Sam’s Backing,” *Star*, July 12, 1994.

²² Jacqueline Trescott, “Art on the Cutting Edge: Bloody Performance Renews Funding Debate,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 1994. Trescott characterizes the controversy as “the first of seasonal land mines” for newly-minted NEA Chair Jane Alexander, an actress who had been drafted to the agency as a peacemaker after a string of controversies had rocked the administrations of her predecessors, Anne-Imelda Radice and John Frohnmayer. According to another of Trescott’s articles, Alexander won praise in the first eight months of her tenure for helping to mend rifts between opponents and supporters of the agency, and had allegedly even managed to assuage Senator Jesse Helms’ impassioned feelings on the subject. This, however, came to an abrupt end as the Athey story entered the news mainstream, after which Helms declared her a “flop” and resolved to address her as such. See Trescott, “Honeymoon’s Over: Legislators Threaten Arts Agency Again,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1994.

²³ *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich noted the irony of how the Walker Art Center grant from which the \$150 allotment for the Athey performance came was not even approved by Alexander, but by her conservative forerunner, Anne-Imelda Radice. (Radice, however, denied having signed the grant in a letter to Rich. See Radice, letter to Rich, September 6, 1994. Courtesy of Walker Art Center Archives.) He noted also that the Christian Action Network, in a mailer bearing the heading “Declaration of War,” circulated a claim that the NEA under Jane Alexander had a \$50 billion budget—a figure, Rich notes dryly, “a mere \$49.83 billion short” of the NEA’s actual budget. See Rich, “Trail of Lies,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1994.

²⁴ For a brief summary of the popular and Congressional debates over the fate of the NEA that erupted in the wake of controversial exhibitions featuring works by Mapplethorpe and Serrano, see my Chapter 4, pgs: 218-220. See also Cynthia Carr, “An NEA Timeline (Just the Lowlights), in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Revised Edition) (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008): 237-44; Carole S. Vance, “War on Culture,” *Art in America* 77, no. 9 (September 1989): 39-45; Meyer, “Barring Desire: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography,” in *Outlaw Representation*, 158-223.

²⁵ The following letters and news releases, courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives, offer a sampling of the literature on Athey and the NEA circulated by the aforementioned organizations: Martin J. Mawyer (President, Christian Action Network) letter to members of the U.S. Congress, March 30, 1994; Mawyer, undated direct mail letter; Peg Cullen (President, Catholic Anti-Defamation League) to Minnesota State Senator David Durenberger, April 7, 1994; Donald E. Wildmon (President, American Family Association) undated direct mail letter; William A. Donohue (President, Catholic League), “NEA-Funded Athey Offends Catholics,” news release, October 26, 1994; Mawyer (President, Christian Action Network) direct mail letter, May 22, 1995; Wildmon (President, American Family Association) direct mail letter, April, 1995. See also Judith Weinraub, “Arts Agency Again Under the Knife,” *The Washington Post* (July

20, 1994); Jill Lawrence, "NEA Under Fire...Again," Associated Press Online, Thursday, June 23, 1994 (Copy courtesy of the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives).

²⁶ I say "initial" article because over the coming months, Abbe would continue to produce for the *Star Tribune* a number of articles on both the Athey performance and the Congressional debates over federal allotments for the NEA that the popular narratives about this performance inspired. Though numerous readers penned letters to the *Star Tribune* questioning ethical implications of Abbe's covering a controversy that many believed she had partially engineered (Jon Tevlin in his article quotes a party from a "national arts source" who described the paper's decision to allow Abbe to cover the House debate as "unbelievable"), the newspaper's editorial staff defended their decision to keep Abbe on this particular beat. See Mary Pleshette Willis, letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 30, 1994; Nicky Tamrong, letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 31, 1994; Tom Borrup, letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 4, 1994; Paul Shambroom, letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 4, 1994; Dennis Yelkin, letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 4, 1994. The Walker Art Center Archives also retain copies of a number of letters expressing similar sentiments that were not published in the *Star Tribune*: see the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives. See also Tevlin, "Did the Walker Go Too Far?," 112.

²⁷ The earliest dated piece of correspondence between Abbe and Jarvik is a letter from Jarvik to Abbe dated March 28, 1994; however, in this letter Jarvik thanks Abbe for speaking with him about her article on Athey, indicating that they began communicating before this date. On the same date, Jarvik sent a letter to Cherie Simon, Director of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts. In the letter, Jarvik cited Abbe's article and asked whether \$150 of NEA money had indeed funded the performance, and whether the NEA had in place any "policies regarding the risk of HIV infection in Performance Art supported by the Endowment." Laurence Jarvik, letter to Cherie Simon, March 28, 1994. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

²⁸ The Center for the Study of Popular Culture is now the David Horowitz Freedom Center.

²⁹ In an article for the *National Journal*, Kirk Victor writes that Jarvik's tenure in Washington, D.C. began with a stint at the Heritage Foundation from 1991 to 1992; from there, he claims, Jarvik "made waves crusading against what he sees as the sins of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting." The article notes his equally impassioned opposition to the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as the Public Broadcasting System and even private philanthropic organizations. Jarvik in the article characterizes his dedication to ending these agencies as

part of a greater project of “defund[ing] the Left,” and compares his role as the founder of several right-wing newsletters dedicated to scrutinizing these agencies to that of “an investigative journalist.” Kirk Victor, “A Gadfly Who Relishes the Limelight,” *National Journal* (March 20, 1996): 894.

During Abbe and Jarvik’s correspondence, Jarvik was busy stirring up his own personal quarrels with the NEA; a letter sent on his behalf by John W. Howard (President, Individual Rights Foundation) to Karen Christiansen (General Council, National Endowment for the Arts) on April 15, 1994 threatens the NEA with legal action after Jarvik was allegedly prevented from distributing copies of his right-wing journal, *Comint*, at the conference *Art-21: Art Reaches into the 21st Century*, which took place over April 14th-16th in Chicago. In a letter from Jarvik to Jane Alexander (Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts) of May 2, 1994, he petitions for an opportunity to testify about the alleged censorship before the NEA Council. To the best of my knowledge, neither Jarvik’s threats nor his requests came to fruition.

On February 23, 1995, Jarvik provided expert testimony before the Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, arguing for the total abolishment of the NEA. Jarvik provided a draft of the testimony he would read before Congress to Mary Abbe in a fax dated February 22, 1995. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

³⁰ See Jarvik, letter to Cherie Simon, March 28; Jarvik, letter to Simon, June 23, 1994; Jarvik, letter to Simon, July 7, 1994; Jarvik, letter to Simon, August 8, 1994. Jarvik also requested, and received, from the NEA a copy of the grant letter to the Walker Art Center from which the funds for the Athey show were indirectly apportioned. See Melody Wayland (Freedom of Information Act Officer), letter to Laurence Jarvik, September 6, 1994. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

³¹ Jarvik, letter to Leonard Downie, Jr. (Executive Editor, *The Washington Post*) June 23, 1994; Jarvik, letter to the editor, *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1994. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

³² See Jarvik, letter to Edwin Wilson (Leisure and Arts Section, *The Wall Street Journal*) August 3, 1994; see also Jarvik, letter to Robert Bartley (Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*) September 29, 1994. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

³³ Undated, handwritten note partially transcribing phone conversation between Jarvik and Abbe. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

³⁴ The degree of influence Jarvik may have had in establishing the Athey controversy as a central plank in Congressional efforts to fiscally discipline the NEA—and the degree of

cooperation Abbe may have provided to Jarvik in this endeavor—is an investigative project that is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this chapter. However, a semblance of Jarvik’s involvement in the controversy can be sketched from his correspondences listed in notes 27 and 29-32, as well as from the frequency with which Jarvik’s name appears in articles on the 1994 Congressional hearings on the fate of the NEA budget, in which he is frequently quoted as an “expert”: see William Grimes, “Performer’s Pain Spreads To Arts Endowment,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 1994; Weinraub, “Arts Agency Again Under the Knife;” Rod Dreher, “Arts Agency’s Fortunes Mixed as Senate Battles Over Budget,” *The Washington Times*, July 26, 1994. Remarkably, Jarvik’s patently antipathetic statements are published even in a publication designed to boost the NEA’s profile and trumpet its achievements: see Sandra Stenchel, Editor, “Arts Funding,” *The CQ Researcher* (Published by Congressional Quarterly Inc.), 4, no. 39 (Oct. 21): 913-936.

An article published several years after the Athey debacle offers a possible clue as to Jarvik’s unusually broad sphere of influence during the NEA hearings of 1994; Kirk Victor’s article on Jarvik quotes Horace Cooper, legislative council to then-House Majority Leader Dick Armey, whom in the wake of the Athey controversy lead the charge to abolish the NEA entirely. Praising Jarvik for doing “the Lord’s work in an evil town,” Cooper also notes that he “worked with Jarvik on NEA issues several years ago”—although the dates of this collaboration are not specified. See Victor, “A Gadfly Who Relishes the Limelight.”

³⁵ See Lawrence, “NEA Under Fire...Again.” This effort marked Representative Crane’s fifth attempt in as many years to eliminate the NEA entirely (Lawrence mistakenly asserts mistakenly that this was his third attempt).

³⁶ See Grimes, “Performer’s Pain Spreads To Arts Endowment.” The Athey performance, writes Grimes, “dominated debate” on the NEA’s budget on the floor of Congress in late June of that year. Athey, he states, “was item No. 1 on the agenda” when the budget went up for debate.

³⁷ Mary Abbe, letter to Jane Alexander, June 21, 1994. Courtesy the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

³⁸ Tevlin, “Did the Walker Go Too Far?,” 112.

³⁹ The ideologically oppositional Senators Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Paul Wellstone (D-MN) both utilized Abbe’s article in their arguments on the Senate floor, to very different ends. See 140 Cong. Rec. S17795 (July 25, 1994) (statement of Sen. Wellstone). 140 Cong. Rec. S17797 (July 25, 1994) (statement of Sen. Helms).

⁴⁰ Senators Nickles’ and Byrd’s letter actually predates Abbe’s letter to Chairman Alexander by four days, which indicates that at this point the Senators were familiar with

her only through her articles for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. However, as I go on to show in this chapter, both Senators would later make political use of the copies of the Alexander letter that Abbe had sent to them.

⁴¹ Senators Don Nickles and Robert C. Byrd, letter to Jane Alexander, June 17, 1994. Courtesy Walker Art Center Archives.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. See also “HIV-Infected Artist’s Show Draws Anger of 2 Senators,” *The Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1994.

⁴⁴ Ron Athey, interview in Catherine Gund Saalfield, *Hallelujah!: Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance* (New York: Artistic License Films, 1998), Videocassette.

⁴⁵ The final vote on the Stearns amendment passed 380-41. Stearns boasted afterward, “It’s a step forward, and we couldn’t have done it without Democrats coming over and supporting it.” See Joyce Price, “House Disciplines Arts Endowment With 2% Cutback; Members Objected to Bloody Show,” *The Washington Times*, June 24, 1994. See also 140 Cong. Rec. H14198; H14199; H14203 (June 23, 1994) (statements of Rep. Stearns).

⁴⁶ 140 Cong. Rec. S17791; S17792; S17796 (July 25, 1994) (statement of Sen. Helms).

⁴⁷ In an article preceding the vote in the Senate, Judith Weinraub dissected Senator Byrd’s proposed cuts to specific NEA programs: Byrd proposed reductions of 42% to theater programs, 41.7% to visual arts, 40.9% to commissioning grants and 5% to challenge grants. Helen Brunner, then-executive director of the National Association of Arts Organizations, is quoted thusly: “This is the first time we have had targeted cuts [to the NEA coming from Congress], [a]nd because of the way they are targeted, the way they are directed at the programs that seem to have misbehaved, they are punitive.” See Weinraub, “Arts Agency Again Under the Knife.” See also Jacqueline Trescott, “NEA Budget Sliced Over Bloodletting,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1994.

⁴⁸ A correction run in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* on November 2, 1994, states that the NEA budget was later pared back even more: “the agency lost another \$319,588, or .19 percent, in Interior Department cutbacks, reducing the budget to \$167.3 million.”

⁴⁹ Diana Jean Schemo, “Endowment Ends Program Helping Individual Artists,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 1994.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Athey, interview in Gund Saalfield, *Hallelujah!* While Athey continued to tour intermittently his performance works in the U.S. in the wake of the controversy dogging the Minneapolis performance, the artist thereafter deliberately focused his energies on developing and touring new works in countries outside of the U.S., including England, Mexico, Portugal, and Brazil. While Athey maintains in this documentary that his kind of work “is not supported in the U.S.,” Athey has in recent years performed more frequently in the United States and served in a Visiting Professor capacity at numerous universities, including the University of California, Riverside, from 2008-2009.

⁵² I avoid grouping both HIV and AIDS under the moniker of the “invisible killer” in the main text of this chapter; however, innumerable media reports from the first two decades of the AIDS pandemic do exactly this (see note 6, p. 315). The coverage of Athey’s Minneapolis performance, as I establish at the onset of this chapter, is unexceptional in this regard.

⁵³ Gabriele Griffin, *Representations of HIV and AIDS: Visibility Blue/s* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2000): 1, 5. For an outline of instances of neglect on the part of governmental, medical, and media establishments in response to HIV/AIDS, and of activist responses to this neglect, see Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990). See also Deborah Lupton, *Moral Threats and Dangerous Desires: AIDS in the News Media* (London; Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1994).

⁵⁴ Watney, “Taking Liberties,” in Carter and Watney, *Taking Liberties*: 44.

⁵⁵ Peter Beharrell, “AIDS and the British Press,” in John Eldridge, ed., *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993): 214.

⁵⁶ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 22.

⁵⁷ See for example Sander L. Gilman, “Seeing the AIDS Patient,” in *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1988): 245-72; Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, eds., *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 2002); Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*; Griffin, *Visibility Blue/s*.

⁵⁸ Indeed, a brief review of the legislative histories of Senator Helms, Representative Dana Rohrabacher, et. al. all indicates that the most dedicated enemies of the NEA likewise utilized their political leverage to block comprehensive HIV/AIDS education, prevention, and treatment programs. In 1987, Senator Helms successfully introduced a piece of

legislation banning the use of federal funds for any HIV/AIDS educational material which would “promote or encourage, directly, homosexual or heterosexual activity;” this effective on ban sexual education materials that “promote” sex—which would remain in effect until 1992—was inspired by Helms’s reaction to educational comic produced with private funds by Gay Men’s Health Crisis that depicted sex between men. See Vance, “The War on Culture.”

⁵⁹ See my third chapter for an analysis of these dynamics: pgs. 220-228.

⁶⁰ Mary Abbe, “Walker Seems Surprised at Reaction to Mutilation Show,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 29, 1994.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Abbe would repeatedly defend her initial piece on Athey’s Minneapolis performance with the claim that her critics could not point to a single factual inaccuracy in her initial story, bristling at various claims that her article constituted a piece of personal conjecture rather than factual reporting. However, in her second article on the Athey controversy, Abbe is more stridently subjective, employing a decidedly loaded metaphor in her opening paragraph in order to suggest that the Walker deliberately put the lives of its audience at risk. Jennifer Amie, then a University of Minnesota graduate student working in Media Ethics, notes the distinction between the two articles in her unpublished paper, “A Case Study in the Ethics of Arts Criticism and Reporting: the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*’s coverage of Ron Athey.” Amie analyzes Abbe’s follow-up piece and points out the predominance of evaluative and figurative language in this article, which also appeared in the paper’s Variety section, leaving unclear whether this piece constitutes a work of art criticism or not. See Amie, “A Case Study in the Ethics of Arts Criticism and Reporting: the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*’s coverage of Ron Athey.” (unpublished, undated manuscript): 6-7. Courtesy the Walker Art Center Archives.

⁶³ In her article, Abbe claims that the museum appears “unusually conflicted” about the performance, and purports to detect in Halbreich’s and Killacky’s official statements a “squeamish” tone about “what [Athey] does and how much they wanted the public to know about it.” She then accuses the Walker of distributing deliberately misleading advertisements for the performance: “The monthly calendar sent to Walker members did say that Athey’s show incorporated ‘erotic torture’ and used ‘bondage and discipline techniques.’ It didn’t say he’d be cutting someone up. Nor that he’s got the AIDS virus [*sic*—a pertinent fact only because this public performance involved bloodletting.” See Abbe, “Walker Seems Surprised.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ See for example: “AIDS ‘Artist’ Draws Blood,” *Human Events*; “HIV-Infected Artist’s Show Draws Anger of 2 Senators,” *The Los Angeles Times*.

⁶⁶ Jeff Jacoby, “Insufferable Art,” *The Boston Globe*, July 7, 1994.

⁶⁷ These are Abbe’s words, from a letter to the editor published in *Art in America* Vol. 83, No. 6 (June 1995): 27. Davis, in his article, makes general reference to “uninformed news reports” on the Athey performance, and accuses the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* of “gathering a sensational string of quotes from two eyewitnesses,” noting as well that Abbe had not attended the performance. See Douglas Davis, “Multicultural Wars,” *Art in America* Vol. 83, No. 2 (February 1995): 40-41.

⁶⁸ Abbe, *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Abbe’s letter to the editors of *Art in America* is both the most comprehensive, and the most public example of her standard defense in the wake of the Athey controversy. In the letter, she argues that Walker officials could cite “no errors of fact” in her article. She also claims therein that Athey’s characterization of the show corroborates her own. She further states that Davis and the NEA do the agency a disservice by “blaming others for problems that are the agency’s responsibility--” but aside from a vague reference to the “public confidence,” Abbe does not specify what she believes these problems to be, or whether she believes them to be related to the health risks her article alleged of the Athey performance.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ By “housing status,” I refer to the state of homeless or transient individuals.

⁷² Douglas Crimp, “How To Have Promiscuity In An Epidemic,” first printed in *October* 43 (Winter 1987); reprinted in Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*: 46-49.

⁷³ D.M. Auerbach, W.W. Darrow, H.W. Jaffe, and J.W. Curran, “Cluster of Cases of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Patients Linked by Sexual Contact,” *The American Journal of Medicine* Vol. 76, No. 3 (March 1984): 487-92.

⁷⁴ See Crimp, 55-56.

⁷⁵ Crimp, “Randy Shilts’s Miserable Failure,” in *Melancholia and Moralism*, 121.

⁷⁶ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 165.

⁷⁷ This argument, and the earlier-cited passage from Shilts, feature prominently in my unpublished paper of 2007, “Speaking Wounds and Stigmatized Marks: Inscribing AIDS on the Body.”

⁷⁸ “In the Gothic mode, passivity provides a frisson—frequently sexualized—of fear [...] whereby the vulnerability of the victim is as important to the production of horror as is the violence of the monster [...] Close to this, however, is the pity that is evoked by a similar passivity in the Sentimental mode. Things happen *to* people, in this genre, and then they *suffer*. The classic Sentimental novel elevated suffering to an art form, also to provide a frisson in the reader. So where the stress is on the *activity* of the viral monster, one might say that AIDS discourse is closest to Gothic horror, and when it is on the ‘passive’ (non-complaining) suffering of the ‘victims’ it moves over into Sentimentalism.” Judith Williamson, “Every Virus Tells A Story: The Meanings of HIV and AIDS,” in Carter and Watney, eds., *Taking Liberties*: 75.

⁷⁹ Crimp describes Shilts’s treatment of Dugas as indicative of the “bourgeois novelistic form” to which *And the Band Played On* conforms: see Crimp, 53.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 51. This headline appeared in the *New York Post*.

⁸¹ Crimp, 121.

⁸² See “Helms Calls for Aids Quarantine on Positive Tests,” *Chicago Tribune* (June 16, 1987) <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-06-16/news/8702140384_1_aids-virus-sen-lowell-weicker-prison-inmates> (August 3, 2012); see also “Rights of Citizens and Society Raise Legal Muddle on AIDS,” *The New York Times* (October 14, 1987) <<http://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/science/aids/101487sci-aids.html>> (August 3, 2012).

⁸³ William F. Buckley, “Identify All The Carriers,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1986. Excerpted in Watney, “Taking Liberties,” in Carter and Watney, *Taking Liberties*, 44.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ See Gilman, 245-72.

⁸⁸ See Griffin, 31.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 179-97. See also DeLand, "Inscribing AIDS on the Body," 16-26.

⁹⁰ Lee Edelman, "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism," in Murphy and Poirier, *Writing AIDS*, 9.

⁹¹ Jenny Kitzinger, "Understanding AIDS: Research Audience Perceptions of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome," in Eldridge, *Getting the Message*, 287.

⁹² See Paula A. Treichler, "How to Use a Condom: Lessons from the AIDS Epidemic," Joshua Oppenheimer and Helena Reckitt, eds., *Acting on AIDS: Sex, Drugs & Politics* (London; New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997): 47-48.

⁹³ Michael Fumento's *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS: How a Tragedy Has Been Distorted by the Media and Partisan Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) was but the most popular of a number of books and reports by health professionals claiming to debunk the fact of HIV/AIDS transmission through opposite-sex intercourse. See also: Peter H. Duesberg, *Inventing the AIDS Virus* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1996); Robert E. Gould, "Reassuring News About AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why *You* May Not Be at Risk," *Cosmopolitan*, January 1988, 146-204.

⁹⁴ Lou Gelfand, "NEA Joins Fray Over Report on Athey Performance," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, June 26, 1994.

⁹⁵ Ryan Patrick Murphy and Alex T. Urquhart, "Sexuality in the Headlines: Intimate Upheavals as Histories of the Twin Cities," in Kevin P. Murphy, ed., *Queer Twin Cities* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): 76-77.

⁹⁶ The articles that appear in Abbe's files are: Lawrence K. Altman, M.D., "AIDS Mystery That Won't Go Away: Did a Dentist Infect 6 Patients?," *The New York Times*, July 5, 1994; Sanford F. Kuvin, M.D., "No Evidence Clears Dentist in AIDS Case," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1994. Courtesy of the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives).

⁹⁷ One of the accusers in the "AIDS dentist" story was Kimberly Bergalis, whom in 1991 appeared before a Congressional Committee on AIDS in Washington D.C. to declare, with regards to her own serostatus: "I did nothing wrong." "Bergalis," argues Simon Watney, subsequently "became [...] America's [...] acceptable votary in the AIDS pandemic." See Watney, "Art from the Pit: Some Reflections on Monuments, Memory and AIDS," in Ted Gott, ed., *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS* (Melbourne; London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994): 66.

⁹⁸ Cindy Patton, "Queer Peregrinations," in Oppenheimer and Reckitt, *Acting on AIDS*, 235.

⁹⁹ Abbe quotes Dennis Yelkin, of Hopkins, MN, in stating that the bloodied towels seemed ready to “drip or fall apart,” and that “People knocked over the chairs to get out from under the clotheslines.” However Yelkin, in a letter to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* editors of July 2nd, 1994, claimed that his comments on the performance were given out of context in Abbe’s and in subsequent articles. Abbe also repeats Jim Berenson’s claim that he had not been able reach an exit due to unspecified obstacles, despite his wanting to leave the performance. See Abbe, “Bloody Performance.”

For more on the ways in which both Yelkin and Berenson were allegedly misquoted, see Frank Rich, “Trail of Lies.” Rich describes in his article “two middle-aged friends—Dennis Yelkin, a hair stylist, and Jim Berenson, a flight attendant,” and designates them further as “arts-loving suburbanites.” Rich claims that one week prior, Yelkin and Berenson, “furious at their exploitation by N.E.A. opponents, told me that their words were taken out of context in the original *Star Tribune* article; both called the Athey performance ‘valid,’ if shocking, art.”

¹⁰⁰ Jim Berenson, unpublished letter to the Editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 30, 1994. Courtesy of the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* Because the *Star Tribune* declined to publish Berenson’s letter, one would assume that his call to release the videotape of the performance did not reach a broader public. However, Laurence Jarvik, too, set out on a personal quest to acquire a copy of this videorecording, as evidenced in an undated letter he shared with Abbe via fax. (The letter contains no salutation, so it is unclear whether it was addressed specifically to Abbe or to another party). In the letter, Jarvik states that he had contacted Athey at his job at the *L.A. Weekly* to inquire about the video. He reports also speaking with Jim Bucalo, whom Jarvik indicates is the producer of an unspecified “performance art video” of Athey’s. Jarvik closes his letter with the following request, which indicates that in searching for a videorecording of the Athey performance, he was collecting information for an article to be completed by a journalist whose identity is not specified:

Also, you don’t have to worry about giving me credit for this. I would prefer that if any of the people involved ever saw the article they didn’t know where the information came from since I feel kind of guilty for misleading them, plus, that only encourages them to be more secretive.

Courtesy of the Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey at the Walker Art Center Archives.

Nearly a year after the Minneapolis performance, an article in *The Washington Times* showed that the right-wing quest to possess video documentation of Athey’s stage work was far from over. In “S&M ‘Art’ Video Exceeds Shocking Stage Version,”

journalist Rod Dreher chronicles how antagonists of the NEA were searching for video documentation of *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* in order to “prove” that Abbe’s initial account indeed did not cover “the half of it.” The *Times* claims to have obtained a videotape of the performance (it is not specified where the performance took place, though they note that the videocassette is “for sale in stores and by mail order”). The article also indicates that the Reverend Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association would “absolutely with a capital A” send copies of the Athey video to members of Congress in its efforts to abolish the NEA; “a Christian Coalition official” likewise indicates in the article his interest in viewing and distributing the video as part of its lobbying strategy against the NEA. William Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights are also listed amongst these organizations attempting to attain a copy for political purposes. Athey is quoted in the article as warning activists against pirating his video, threatening legal action for copyright infringement. See Dreher, “S&M ‘Art’ Video Exceeds Shocking Stage Version,” *The Washington Times*, January 26, 1995.

¹⁰² How this tape came to reside in the Walker archives is something of a mystery; indeed, Walker archivist Jill Vuchetich was as surprised as I was when I discovered that a videotape supposed to contain only the question and answer session following the performance at Patrick’s Cabaret actually documented the entirety of the performance, and only a truncated portion of the dialogue with the audience that follows. The performance, Vuchetich explained to me, was taped by a videographer working with Athey and his crew, and the recording belongs legally to them. However, the identity of the videographer, and the means by which the tape became integrated into the Walker archives, seem to be lost to the generational shifts that shape the institutional memory of the museum. My viewing of the videotape, which documents the entirety of the March 5th performance at Patrick’s Cabaret and roughly ten minutes of the post-performance question and answer session between the artists and the audience, is courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives.

¹⁰³ My decision to refer to Darryl Carlton/Divinity Fudge with male pronouns is consistent with the commentary provided by Athey and his other co-performers in Gund Saalfield’s *Hallelujah!*, in which all refer to Carlton/Fudge as male. In the Minneapolis performance, Carlton/Fudge plays both female and male characters.

¹⁰⁴ I qualify this sentence due to my own misgivings of what I view to be the problematically essentializing racialism and unchecked cultural appropriation of the (predominantly white) “New Primitives” movement. While I will for the sake of brevity limit my comments on this subject here, I will refer readers to a letter from Janice Command to the editors of the *Twin Cities Reader*, July 27-August 2, 1994, for a pointed examination of these issues as they pertain to Athey’s Minneapolis performance. For a more generalized examination of ethnic appropriation in Western body modification practices, see Christian Klesse, “‘Modern Primitivism’: Non-Mainstream Body

Modification and Racialized Representation,” in Mike Featherstone, ed., *Body Modification* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000): 15-38.

¹⁰⁵ Where in this chapter I discuss the performance at Patrick’s Cabaret, I refer to Darryl Carlton and Lisa Rifkin by the names by which they are credited in the program: Divinity Fudge and Pigpen, respectively. Elsewhere in my discussion, I refer to them by their given names. In so doing I follow the example set by Gund Saalfield’s *Hallelujah!*, in which the artists are referred to by both their given and assumed names.

¹⁰⁶ This and all following quotations in my discussion of the Patrick’s Cabaret performance: Excerpts from *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* and *Martyrs and Saints*, Ron Athey, videographer unknown, Minneapolis, 1994. See n.102, p. 329.

¹⁰⁷ Athey had this to say about another of his performances, *Deliverance* (1996), which stages a similar relationship between his male and female performers:

[I] am often asked, why is [*sic*] the women always tending towards the men? Why are the men sick and the women strong? And I think of, you know, the images of religious paintings, and it’s always, you know, this hard woman tending some broken-down man, because in depictions of women saints, they’re never tended. They’re just left with their cut-off breasts or their poked-out eyes in a somewhat more dignified state, but the men are collapsed all over the place, being held up by three or four women.”

Ron Athey, in “CPR-3: Ron Athey: On Paintings and Performance,” posted by DPS Video Library on April 21, 2008: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQKPsnmgwQM&feature=player_embedded (July 30, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (London: John Murray, 1956): 79; quoted in Nead, 17.

¹⁰⁹ Athey here gives a nod to Kathryn Kuhlman, an American evangelist who took her faith healing show to the airwaves in the 1960s and 70s with her television program, *I Believe In Miracles*.

¹¹⁰ Leroy Jenkins is an American televangelist. Like Kuhlman, his faith healing act reached the height of its popularity in the 1960s and 70s, though Jenkins continues to broadcast to this day.

¹¹¹ The recording in the Walker collection, however, documents only the first ten minutes of the question and answer session, after which the tape cuts out. I therefore have no way of knowing what was discussed during the remainder of the dialogue with the audience.

¹¹² See Schimke, “A Bloody Debate,” where he reports: “According to Margaret Patridge, the Walker’s public relations director, 10 people left before Athey was finished, 80 people stayed for a post-show discussion, and two people fainted.”

¹¹³ The Mary Abbe Collection of Ron Athey and the Performing Arts Department Collection of the Walker Art Center Archives contain scores of letters, published and unpublished, to the editors of both the *Star Tribune* and (to a lesser extent) the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in which the authors weigh in on the Athey performance with their own versions of the events. Some letters come from individuals who claim to have been present in the audience, and these writers furnish their own descriptions of the performance to either contradict or corroborate Abbe’s points. Others, like Abbe, felt their not having been in attendance for the performance was no hindrance to their commenting upon it in a public forum.

¹¹⁴ Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): xxviii.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx.

¹¹⁶ One such slight against the sophistication of the Minneapolis audience comes from Judith Lewis, a former Minneapolitan and a friend and coworker of Athey’s at the *L.A. Weekly*. In an unpublished letter of March 28, 1994 to the editors of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Lewis despairs that the “enlightened, artsy hometown I so often brag about [...] has suddenly turned so intolerant and ugly with the support and encouragement of local media.” Extrapolating from a rumor seeded by Abbe’s article, Lewis wonders, “I heard people at Patrick’s Cabaret ran from [the blood prints]—can this be true?”

Another such instance occurs in an interview between John Killacky and host Eric Eskola in a March 25th broadcast of a local program, KTCA-TV’s *Almanac*. Killacky had been invited on the show to discuss the Athey performance and the subsequent controversy with hosts Eskola and Jan Smaby. During the interview, Eskola wondered aloud if the controversy over the Minneapolis performance stemmed from Minnesotan’s lack of acculturation: he asks Killacky, “Are we not hip like [audiences in] L.A. and New York?” Lewis’s letter and videorecording of the *Almanac* interview both courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives.

¹¹⁷ Griffin, 183-97.

¹¹⁸ Dyer, 27-28.

¹¹⁹ Dyer writes that the central objective of Western masculinity is that “the white spirit [...] both master and transcend the white body.” This is effected through “abstinence or at any rate planning in relation to appetites,” thereby enabling the white body to “display the fact of the spirit within.” *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²² “If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms of art perform a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears. This can, however, only be a fleeting success; the margins are dangerous and will need to be subjected to the discipline of art again...and again. The western tradition of the female nude is thus a kind of discourse on the subject, echoing structures of thinking across many areas of the human sciences.” Nead, 7.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁴ A particularly vivid example may be derived from Sir Ian McKellen’s portrayal of the gay rights and AIDS activist, Bill Kraus, in the 1993 television adaptation of *And the Band Played On*. A passionate and articulate character in this “docudrama,” Kraus by the end of the film is rendered incoherent by AIDS-related dementia, his impassioned political speeches replaced by gibberish. See Roger Spottiswoode, *And the Band Played On* (1993).

¹²⁵ This despite, as Jones asserts, the ways in which the drawing of blood “produces the male body as a kind of menstruating (permeable), ruptured sack.” Amelia Jones, “Rupture,” *Parachute* no. 123 (July/August/September 2006): 29-30.

¹²⁶ Jane Blocker in *What the Body Cost* proposes that pain constitutes a gendered phenomenon within the history of Western aesthetics; see Blocker, 29-35.

¹²⁷ Nitsch and the other Viennese Actionists come inevitably to the fore of any discussion of performance work involving blood and the human body; however, the Americanist scope of my project forecloses any close comparisons here. Yet I find it significant that American contemporary male artists seem to dabble in blood very rarely; while even a cursory survey of body works by Americans such as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, and Chris Burden shows male artists pinching, biting, burning, and otherwise battering their own bodies, only in Burden’s case does the artist go so far as to puncture the skin. I could problematize this further by bringing Paul McCarthy into the conversation, but as McCarthy himself says, there is a big difference between blood and ketchup.

¹²⁸ See Jones, *Body Art*, 22-29.

¹²⁹ The relative neglect of the other three bodily fluids that can communicate HIV-- semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk—in mainstream media reports on the virus can be attributed to a number of factors; one is the aforementioned reluctance on the part of many news outlets to publish or say “rude” words like “semen” or “vaginal secretions” in the first place; See Kitzinger, “Understanding AIDS,” in Eldridge, *Getting the Message*: 287. Another is the persistence of the “strong vagina vs. weak rectum” paradigm in popular information on HIV/AIDS, which Watney discusses in *Policing Desire*, 142.

¹³⁰ Blocker, 114.

¹³¹ Watney, *Policing Desire*, 103.

¹³² Cindy Patton summarizes this contrivance as such: “Bisexual men [in mainstream media narratives on HIV and AIDS] went to the dense spaces of homosexuality and returned from it, to the heterosexual home, infected with HIV.” See Patton, in Oppenheimer and Reckitt, *Acting on AIDS*, 242.

¹³³ See Athey’s and Tolentino’s discussion of this scene in Gund Saalfield, *Hallelujah!*

¹³⁴ That Athey’s two female assistants were also pierced in the course of the Minneapolis performance is rarely acknowledged in news reports, and mentioned only incidentally when it is; the focus of the mainstream media analysis of the events is, without question, the cutting and penetrating of Athey’s body, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Carlton’s body.

¹³⁵ Athey was a disciple of the California body-modification master Fakir Musafar, the man who coined the term “modern primitive” in 1967. Musafar’s body-modification practice was spiritual in nature. Athey became aware of Musafar in the early 1980s, and the two men eventually became friends. Athey, for his own part, adapted Musafar’s practices into a form of masochism, a way of working through self-hatred and into catharsis. See Tom Liesegang, “Perforating Saint,” <<http://www.fadmag.com/items/athay/athay.html>> (August 7, 2012). See also V. Vale and Andrea Juno, eds., *Modern Primitives* (San Francisco: RE/Search, 1989).

¹³⁶ In the early 1990s Athey and his co-performer, Julie Tolentino, both presented work regularly at Club Fuck!, then a hub of the Los Angeles “Modern Primitive” club scene. There Tolentino curated regular rosters of performance artists, and Athey worked as a go-go dancer, and eventually began presenting theatricalized displays of body modification that would lay the foundations for his later works. It is perhaps significant to note, in light of my earlier analysis of feminist art and blood as it pertains to Athey’s work, that Athey

cites as his sole influence of this time the performance artist Joanna Went, who in her performance work aggressively and campily confronts taboos surrounding genitals and bodily fluids. See Athey in Gund Saalfield, *Hallelujah!*

¹³⁷ Watney, *Policing Desire*, 126.

¹³⁸ In this context, as in innumerable stories before it, “homosexual intercourse” is used as shorthand for anal sex between men. An unintended effect produced by mass media coverage of the AIDS crisis was the revelation that in this culture the two are so ubiquitously conflated as to suggest that few Americans are willing or able to conceive of any other kind of sexual activity between men—while sexual contact between women is not considered under these auspices at all.

¹³⁹ Quoted in Edelman, “The Mirror and the Tank,” in Murphy and Poirier, *Writing AIDS*, 14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴² It is perhaps of some significance that Abbe’s article arrived on the heels of a controversy sparked by the *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce. Croce, in a show of resistance to what she deemed “victim art,” declared in a column her refusal to see *Still/Here*, (1994) a dance performance by the choreographer Bill T. Jones that takes as its subject the lives of people with HIV and AIDS. Declaring the performance to be “unreviewable,” Croce then still proceeded to dismiss it summarily, thereby making herself the object of considerable criticism and debate over the role of the critic. In her baldfaced assertion that HIV/AIDS is not and never could be an appropriate artistic subject, Croce’s example points to a dearth in comprehensive cultural criticism of HIV/AIDS and its impact on the artistic community at the time. One could argue that Abbe abandoned her role as an art critic and adopted instead the incendiary style of mainstream journalism stories on HIV and AIDS in part because so few within her field had attempted to write intelligently about art and the epidemic. See Arlene Croce, “Discussing the Undiscussable,” *The New Yorker* (December 26, 1994): 54-60. See also Amie, 3.

¹⁴³ The account of the Minneapolis performance in the conservative news journal *Human Events*, for example, fumed that Athey “trumpets his HIV-positive status.” See “AIDS ‘Artist’ Draws Blood.”

¹⁴⁴ A particularly indicative example of this can be found in early in Jacqueline Trescott’s account of the Minneapolis performance for the *Washington Post*. In a strange and telling turn of phrase, Trescott refers to the subsequent controversy as a “post-mortem”

discussion among “audience members, health officials, media commentators and critics.” If, as I argue, this controversy was ignited in part by Athey’s “failure” to enact the expected death of the seropositive person, then perhaps Trescott’s choice of words is not inappropriate: the aftermath of the performance could be considered as a way of hysterically re-staging the performance, in order to effect the desired death and produce a sense of closure for the “audience” following the controversy through the news media. See Trescott, “Art on the Cutting Edge.”

¹⁴⁵ Williamson, “Every Virus Tells A Story,” in Carter and Watney, *Taking Liberties*, 69.

¹⁴⁶ Athey’s work *Martyrs and Saints* (1994), a portion of which was presented at Patrick’s Cabaret, was specifically about AIDS, and also a work of mourning for Athey’s close friend, Cliff Diller, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1992. Athey recalls in Gund Saalfield’s *Hallelujah!*: “Cliff dying was the most painful thing for me, because I was so close to him, and everything just collapsed. I haven’t been able to feel anyone else’s death to the full extent because of that.”

¹⁴⁷ Athey muses in Gund Saalfield’s *Hallelujah!*: “I have trouble living on Earth. Y’know, my brain wants to live in this psychic mumbo-jumbo, that’s how I was raised. It’s strange that I mostly use performance as an outlet in my work, because part of this frenzy I’m in with AIDS is, ‘Oh, my god, I’m going to die in a few years and I have to leave my mark, what’s my mark?’ How did Ron Athey change the world, how did Ron Athey shape things up and subvert things, what did I leave behind? Was I just some stupid fag who died of AIDS, or was I just this damaged boy who was never a minister, who rebelled and lashed out at himself so between drugs and promiscuous sex, he contracted a disease and died? Do you know, it’s like this frenzy to make it bigger, to make it more, to make it mean something, and how can you do this without God, how can you do this without spirituality, how can you do this without a belief system and a support group?”

¹⁴⁸ Athey described the faith he was raised in as such: “This religion wasn’t like Catholic religion, or other Protestant religions where there’s a lot of rules. People would prophesize anything. The probably dynamic thing about it is the gifts of the spirit, so you’d go to church, and people would be speaking in tongues, hallucinating the walls were on fire, faith healing, which, y’know, is Vaudeville, in a lot of ways.” Athey, in Gund Saalfield, *Hallelujah!*

¹⁴⁹ Athey, *Four Scenes in A Harsh Life*, Mexico City, performance date unknown; excerpted in Gund Saalfield, *Hallelujah!*

¹⁵⁰ In the program for the Minneapolis performance, Athey describes a part of his work as being dedicated to “Reinterpreting the false prophecies I lived my life by as a Christian.”

“Walker Art Center presents: Ron Athey, at Patrick’s Cabaret, 3/5/94.” Courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives.

¹⁵¹ Peter Toohey, “Chronic Boredom and the Company It Keeps,” in *Boredom: A Lively History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011): 48-81.

¹⁵² I Corinthians 13:12 (King James Version).

¹⁵³ Amongst the organizations, projects, and commemorative occasions that comprise these efforts, the Estate Project for Artists and AIDS, The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, and Day Without Art are but a few examples.

¹⁵⁴ Walker Art Center, “Body Artist Ron Athey Performs Ritual-Like Works at Patrick’s Cabaret,” news release, February 11, 1994. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives.

¹⁵⁵ Ron Athey, “Tattoo Salvation/Crown of Thorns Obsession,” in “Walker Art Center presents: Ron Athey, at Patrick’s Cabaret, 3/5/94.” Program courtesy of the Walker Art Center Archives.

Chapter Three

¹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 2.

² I go into this point at greater length on pgs. 247-48.

³ As I show later in this chapter in my analysis of Eldridge Cleaver’s writings, the concept of “miscegenation” is deployed in the service of black nationalist arguments, as well: see pgs. 269-70; 276-77.

⁴ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 2007): 9. As English notes, “‘a revival of art and literature’ ranked second in the itemized program for black uplift” that Du Bois published in 1915 in the magazine he founded, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*.” (English, 54-55). Du Bois’ investment in the development of a quintessentially black American culture of arts and letters is examined at length in English’s first chapter, “Beyond Black Representational Space:” 27-70.

It is worth noting, as well, that Du Bois was concerned particularly with photography as a means of creating and disseminating images of African American economic and cultural progress and prosperity. For an analysis of Du Bois’ use of photography as a didactic tool in his contribution to the Exhibit of American Negroes at the 1900 Paris Exposition, see David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis, *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress*, exh. cat. (New York: Amistad/HarperCollins, 2003).

⁵ As English notes, the expectations imposed by proponents of the Black Arts and Black Aesthetics movements demanded even that black artists develop an “ethnic consciousness” through their work by dedicating “special attention to the accurate rendering of black physiognomy”—as the stability of such a category was assumed to be self-evident. See English, 64.

⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁷ “Black is/black ain’t” is both a phrase from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and the title of a 1994 film directed by Marlon Riggs. *Black Is, Black Ain’t* is also the title of an exhibition organized around the topic of racial identity that appeared at the Bergman Gallery at the University of Chicago in 2008, in which Ligon exhibited a work. My thinking on “voyeurism and fetishism” is indebted to Peggy Phelan’s skeptical reinvestigation of the power dynamics of visibility politics. See Phelan, *Unmarked*, 6.

⁸ See for example bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 26.

¹⁰ In the U.S. Supreme Court’s definitive ruling on obscenity law, *Miller v. California* (1973), the Court defines “obscene material” as “material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest.” I will later in this chapter address the ways in which the Court defines prurience as mutually exclusive from “serious” artistic or social value, and the implications of this standard for the ways in which both Mapplethorpe’s and Ligon’s work may be read. See *Miller v. California*, No. 413 U.S. 15 (1973). <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0413_0015_ZO.html> (September 27, 2011).

¹¹ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 179. See also Robert Mapplethorpe, *Black Book* (Boston; New York; Toronto; London: Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company, 1986). I refer particularly to Mapplethorpe’s *Derrick Cross* (1983), p. 16; *Bob Love* (1979), p. 27; to two images from 1979 of *Philip Prioleau*, pgs. 50 and 51; and *Tom* (1987), p. 97.

¹² *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book”* is a profoundly conversational work; over the course of its exhibition history, the photographic and textual elements of the installation have appeared in different configurations, thereby opening up the possibilities

of multiple new readings. When Ligon first debuted the work in at Art in General in Manhattan in 1991, he included only half of the photographs from Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, and a smaller number of texts than he would ultimately include in the work for the 1993 Whitney Biennial. See Scott Rothkopf, "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA," in Rothkopf, et. all, *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA*, exh. cat. (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2011): 34-35; 48, n. 34. My reading of *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* refers exclusively to the work as it was displayed in the exhibition "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art," which appeared at the International Center of Photography in New York, from Jan. 18th-May 4th, 2008. This showing of the work replicated its configuration at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the sole difference being that the Whitney installed the work over two walls, and the ICP over three.

My work was made possible with the kind help of Beau Rutland at the Whitney Museum of American Art, who furnished me both with copies of the texts that are part of this iteration of *Notes*, and with installation shots from the ICP. After photocopying the entirety of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* and printing copies of the texts, I was able to create a mock-up of the way *Notes* appeared in the exhibition. My reading of the work is thus specific to the particular way in which the work was displayed at the ICP. I am grateful as well to Lauren Hinkson at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York for providing me with images of *Notes* as it appeared in the Guggenheim's "Moving Pictures" exhibition (June 28, 2002-January 12, 2003), and enabling me to appreciate *Notes* in a few of its different iterations.

¹³ Ligon acknowledges Hall's work as critical to his thought process in formulating both *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* and *A Feast of Scraps*. Ligon, in discussion with the author, July 20, 2010.

¹⁴ Here I must make a note on the methodology I employ in citing the texts included in *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book."* Since Ligon cites his sources only by name, the work of hunting down the original textual source for each would be daunting—and, in the several instances where Ligon's diaries or personal conversations are transcribed, impossible. Therefore, rather than search for the source material for each of the quotes Ligon provides, I take them in the context in which they are offered: as constitutive elements of a textual-visual work of art. From this point on, I cite the texts as Ligon does, with only the name of the interlocutor, and, where I find it necessary, an idea of the text's placement in proximity to the nearby photographs. These references to the special configuration of the work follow that which I discuss in note 12, pgs. 337-38.

¹⁵ Repeating the old trope of prejudice as "blindness," White conveniently occludes the role that fetishism and violent sexual fixation plays in a racist society. Mapplethorpe is thus given a free pass: with the declaration that "racism is something that cannot be photographed," White maintains that Mapplethorpe's camera "cannot accommodate a thought too abstract to be seen, a bogus thought that is always defeated and erased by the

particular.” Because Mapplethorpe sees his models either “esthetically or erotically,” White claims, the charge of racism cannot stick. White, “The Irresponsible Art of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in Robert Mapplethorpe, *Black Males*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Galerie Jurka, 1980): 6.

¹⁶ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 6.

¹⁷ See for example Kobena Mercer, “Looking for Trouble,” *Transition*, 51 (1991): 184-197; “Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race: True Confessions,” (with Isaac Julien), and “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 131-170; 171-219; Essex Hemphill, “Does Your Mama Know About Me?,” in Hemphill, *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, Inc., 1992); bell hooks, “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic,” in Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, exh. cat. (New York; Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994).

¹⁸ Kay Larson, “Robert Mapplethorpe,” in Janet Kardon, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1988; 1990): 16.

¹⁹ Ingrid Sischy, “A Society Artist,” in Richard Marshall, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, exh. cat. (New York; Boston: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with New York Graphic Society Books and Little, Brown and Company, 1988): 78.

²⁰ The call sounded by Mapplethorpe’s supporters for critical univocity with regards to the artist’s work were sometimes quite overt: Edmund White in an article declared the writer Essex Hemphill to be “so insulting” for stating that Mapplethorpe’s images of black men employed stereotypes symptomatic of racial inequities within the gay community at large. Hemphill also recalled being contacted at the time by “the editor of a Black literary journal” who advised him to stop criticizing publicly Mapplethorpe’s images of black men; the editor, fearing that Hemphill’s statements could be appropriated by political enemies of the National Endowment for the Arts, threatened that unless Hemphill reigned in his critique of Mapplethorpe, the journal would be no longer able to publish his work. See Hemphill, “Miss Emily’s Grandson Won’t Hush His Mouth,” in *Ceremonies*. See “Does Your Mama Know About Me?” in this volume for Hemphill’s criticisms of Mapplethorpe’s images of black men.

²¹ During the media furor over “The Perfect Moment” exhibition, Helms actually carried in his pocket copies of what he considered to be four of Mapplethorpe’s most egregiously offensive images, in order to show reporters. One of these was *Man in a Polyester Suit*. See Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 202.

²² The relevance of race to the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s has gone relatively under-examined in contemporary scholarship. One notable exception is Michele Wallace's essay, "The Culture War Within the Culture Wars: Race," in Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds., *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999).

²³ *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center*, 57 Ohio Misc. 2d 15; 566 N.E.2d 214 (1990), See John Henry Merryman and Albert E. Elsen, *Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts*, 3rd ed. (London; Boston: Kluwer Law International, 1998): 489-493. For a summary of the charges brought against the CAC and its director, Dennis Barrie, see *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center*, 57 Ohio Misc. 2d 9; 566 N.E.2d 207 (1990), in this volume: 487-489.

²⁴ The American Family Association began their public campaign against federally-funded art in April of 1989, sending reproductions of Andres Serrano's photo, *Piss Christ* (1987), to every member of Congress, along with a letter decrying the use of NEA funds to support such "blasphemous" work. By October of that year, the AFA began targeting in full force the exhibition "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment." See Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995): 371-372.

While the chronology of the "Perfect Moment" controversy that Morrisroe provides is useful for my purposes, I find her biography of Mapplethorpe to be problematic on a number of levels. The chorus of "person X, who died of AIDS," which appears constantly throughout her book troubles me greatly, as does the sensationalistic and somewhat tawdry tone of the text itself. She did, as she writes on p. xv of her Author's Note, interview Mapplethorpe sixteen times in 1989; however, there is no way to prove conclusively that much of what she writes—such as such the private thoughts of or personal conversations between her subjects—are true or accurate. My citations of her work in this chapter are tempered by these reservations.

²⁵ From a direct mail letter of October 25, 1989. Excerpted in Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 3-4.

²⁶ From a letter signed May 18, 1989, by thirty-six Senators calling for the elimination of NEA funding for such allegedly "undeserving" art; see Morrisroe, 372. One month later, Mapplethorpe was the object of a June 11 conversation between Representative Dick Armey and then-NEA chair Hugh Southern, "to discuss guidelines for grant recipients that 'clearly pay respect to public standards of taste and decency'." Armey had previously complained in a letter to Southern about "The Perfect Moment" exhibit, which he characterized as including "nude photographs of children, homoerotic shots of men and a sadomasochistic self-portrait of the artist, and other morally repugnant materials of a sexual nature." See "Public Funds Furor: Mapplethorpe Show Killed," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), June 14, 1989.

²⁷ In July of 1989, Representative Rohrabacher introduced before Congress a bill to eliminate the NEA's entire budget. See Margaret Quigley, "The Mapplethorpe Censorship Controversy: Chronology of Events: The 1989-1991 Battles," *Political Research Associates: Researching the Right for Progressive Changemakers* <http://www.publiceye.org/theocrat/Mapplethorpe_Chrono.html> (September 27, 2011).

²⁸ Following Orr-Cahall's announcement, Corcoran Board Member Elinor Farquhar declared that the museum's decision stemmed from their conviction that "the artist [...] had the right to have his work presented in a non-sensationalized, non-political environment, and [...] deserves not to be the hostage for larger issues of relevance to us all. If you think about this for a long time, as we did, this is not censorship; in fact, this is the full artistic freedom which we all support." See "Public Funds Furor." Orr-Cahall would admit later, however, that the Corcoran board had been worried that the exhibit "might violate local pornography laws." Elizabeth Kastor, "Museum Takes Art Debate to Ohio Court; Ruling Sought on Mapplethorpe Show," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1990.

²⁹ Morrisroe, 373. The "Helms Amendment," which forbade funding for "offensive or indecent materials," passed in the Senate appropriations bill in July of that year, along with another clause exempting the ICA in Philadelphia and SECCA (the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winson-Salem, North Carolina) from NEA funds for five years. The cuts to the ICA constituted a punitive measure for organizing and exhibiting "The Perfect Moment." See Judith Tannenbaum, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Philadelphia Story," *Art Journal* Vol. 50, No. 4 (Winter 1991): 71-72.

³⁰ Elizabeth Kastor, "NEA's 'Clean-Art' Campaign; Writers Upset by New Grant Conditions," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 1990.

³¹ "Cincinnati is the pinnacle," exulted Phil Burress of Citizens for Community Values, a local anti-pornography group instrumental in fighting the Mapplethorpe exhibition. "We enforce the law to the nth degree." Isabel Wilkerson, "Cincinnati in Uproar Over Exhibit," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 29, 1990. Robert Hubbard, then-executive director of the Cincinnati-founded anti-pornography group the Children's Legal Foundation, also enthused over the near-total control of organized public arbiters of morality in the city: "Cincinnati is an area where pornographers do not like to operate or don't think about operating." Rita Ciolli, "Crusaders Keep Porn 'Banned in Cincinnati'," *Newsday*, April 10, 1990.

³² Wilkerson, "Cincinnati in Uproar"

³³ According to then-CAC director Dennis Barrie, the museum anticipated controversy over the Mapplethorpe exhibition, and took the initiative of sending out "thousands of

letters explaining who Robert Mapplethorpe was, what the [Corcoran-related] controversy was in Washington” to a range of people from CAC members to city councilmen and members of local clergy; there were also “dozens of meetings” with civic leaders to discuss the upcoming show, and the controversy that had sprung up as a result of Helms’ actions. “And the response was excellent. People said, well, this doesn’t seem to be a problem. Articles appeared in the paper that were very supportive.” This changed in February of 1990, when a Cincinnati TV station did a three-part series on art and censorship: said Barrie, “It became very evident that week that certain anti-porn, far-right religious groups were already gearing up for a major battle against us and one city official stated openly that Mapplethorpe’s work was ‘criminally obscene.’” See Kenneth Baker, “An Intimidating Battle Over Censorship,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 8, 1990. The CAC also attempted to immunize itself against charges of using public money for “indecent” art: though ten percent of the museum’s annual budget came from local, state, and federal monies, the exhibition was financed completely by private donations and ticket sales, and the museum voluntarily excluded itself from the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts, an umbrella group that raises money for the arts, in order not to sully the organization’s reputation. The CAC even prohibited anyone under the age of 18 from viewing the show. See Leslie Phillips, “Art vs. Pornography; Mapplethorpe Exhibit Stirs Up Cincinnati; Critics Call City’s Efforts ‘Intimidation,’” *USA Today*, April 5, 1990; Isabel Wilkerson, “Trouble Right Here in Cincinnati: Furor Over Mapplethorpe Exhibit,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1990.

³⁴ One consequence of this campaign was the departure of Chad Wick, the museum’s board chairman, who was forced to resign amid boycott threats against his employer, Central Trust Co, a local bank. See “Mapplethorpe Flap in Cincinnati: Museum Moves to Keep Anti-Smut Crusading Sheriff from filing Obscenity Charges to Close Show,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 29, 1990.

³⁵ See Kim Masters, “Mapplethorpe Standoff in Cincinnati: Museum Braces for Battle After Judge Declines to Rule on Exhibition,” *The Washington Post*, April 7, 1990; “Mapplethorpe Flap in Cincinnati,” *San Francisco Chronicle*. During his tenure as both Sheriff and Hamilton County prosecutor, Leis earned himself a reputation as a tireless local crusader against pornography. In his twelve years as Hamilton County prosecutor, Leis purged Cincinnati of eleven adult bookstores, six massage parlors and five X-rated movie theaters. In 1977, he prosecuted *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt, and succeeded in banning the magazine from local stores. See Leslie Phillips, “Art vs. Pornography; Mapplethorpe Exhibit Stirs Up Cincinnati; Critics Call City’s Efforts ‘Intimidation,’” *USA Today*, April 5, 1990.

³⁶ Kim Masters, “Cincinnati Gallery Indicted for Mapplethorpe Show,” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 1990.

³⁷ The First Count charged the CAC and Barrie with possession of “a photograph of a minor male child, under age 18, with a lewd exhibition or graphic focus on the genitals and a photograph of a minor female child, under age 18, with a lewd exhibition or graphic focus on the genitals either or both are in a state of nudity, and neither of whom are [*sic*] the ward or child of The Contemporary Arts Center nor the ward or child of Dennis Barrie, in violation of section 2907.32.3(A) of the Ohio Revised Code and against the peace and dignity of the State of Ohio.” The two photos in question are *Jesse McBride* (1976) and *Rosie* (1976). The Second Count charged the CAC and Barrie for the “public display [...] of the following material: a photograph depicting the forearm and hand of one person inserted into the anus of another, [*Helmut & Brooks, N.Y.C. (1978)*] a photograph of a finger inserted into a penis, [*Lou, N.Y.C. (1978)*] a photograph of a cylindrical object being inserted into an anus, [*John, N.Y.C. (1978)*] a photograph of a man urinating into the mouth of another man, [*Jim and Tom, Sausalito (1977-78)*] and a photograph of a man with a whip inserted in his anus, [*Self-Portrait (1978)*] any one or all of which are obscene as defined by the three prong requirement established in *Miller v. California* [...] and Ohio Revised Code [etc.]” See Merryman and Elsen, 487-88.

³⁸ Isabel Vincent, “Mapplethorpe Coverage Slow Off the Mark; But, As Reporters and Protesters Declare, ‘The Whole World is Watching Cincinnati,’” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), September 28, 1990.

³⁹ The jurists’ professions were listed as such: “A secretary, a sales clerk, a warehouse manager, a telephone repairman, a data processor, an X-ray technician, an engineer, and a shipping worker.” See Isabel Wilkerson, “Jury Selected in Ohio Obscenity Trial,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1990.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² On the morning of the first day of the trial, the jury took a brief field trip to the CAC, as requested by the defense. Led by a bailiff, the jury was allowed only to stand inside the museum’s foyer for a few seconds. Judge David Albanese would not allow the jury inside the galleries for fear that the current exhibition would “distract” them. See Isabel Wilkerson, “Obscenity Trial Hears Opening Arguments: Prosecution Claims Art Homoerotic, Lewd; Defense Says Exhibit Chronicles ‘Wild’ Era,” *The Vancouver Sun*, September 29, 1990.

⁴³ Opinion of Franklin Feldman, then a lecturer at Columbia University Law School. See Isabel Vincent, “‘Can We Obtain Objectivity Here?’; Observers Voice Concerns Over Jury Selection in Mapplethorpe Trial,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), September 26, 1990. The odds also seemed to be stacked against the defense in the selection of the judge: municipal Judge David Albanese worked for then-Hamilton County prosecutor

Simon Leis from 1975 to 1981, at the height of the later's crusade against purveyors of "smut" in Cincinnati. See Kim Masters, "Judge Named for Art Trial; Mapplethorpe Jurist Believed Tough on Pornography," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1990.

⁴⁴ At a hearing of May 22nd, originally requested by the CAC to dismiss the charges brought against them, the prosecution asked Judge David Albanese for permission to modify the charges against the CAC to conform to the standard set by *Miller v. California*. See "Cincinnati Prosecutors Seek to Alter Obscenity Charges," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1990.

⁴⁵ See *Miller v. California*,
<http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0413_0015_ZO.html>
(September 27, 2011).

⁴⁶ *Pope v. Illinois*, 481 U.S. 497 (1987)
<<http://supreme.justia.com/us/481/497/case.html>> (September 27, 2011).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Immediately prior to the Mapplethorpe trial, Frederick Schauer, then a professor at the University of Michigan Law school and a former appointee to Attorney General Edwin Meese's Commission on Pornography, summarized this opinion: stating that the prosecution could "absolutely not" successfully convict the CAC under the *Miller* standard, he asserted that "The very fact that [the work is] by Mapplethorpe and it's in a museum would still lead me to say that it's not even close [to the definition of obscenity as established by *Miller v. California*.]" See Laura Mansnerus, "The Cincinnati Case: What are the Issues and the Stakes?," *The New York Times*, April 24, 1990. As then-chair of the NEA, John Frohnmayer, put it plainly while testifying before Congress: "Art and obscenity are opposites [...] Obscenity will not be funded with taxpayer's money." See Bob Dart, "Congressional Debate About the Funding of Arts Expected to be Fierce," *Austin American Statesman*, May 7, 1990.

⁴⁹ In their opening arguments, the prosecution vowed to prove the CAC "knowingly pandered obscenity in the form of homoerotic and sadomasochistic images and it illegally displayed photographs of nude children with a 'lewd exhibition or graphic focus on the genitals'" in the Mapplethorpe exhibition. See Wilkerson, "Obscenity Trial Hears Opening Arguments."

⁵⁰ "Where the prosecution sees a 'pornographer,' the art experts see 'a brilliant artist.' Where the prosecution sees a photograph of a man urinating into the mouth of another man, the art experts see 'symmetry' and 'classical proportions.' Where the prosecution talks of 'genitalia,' the art experts talk of 'retrospective' and 'intentionalism.'" Isabel

Wilkerson, "Clashes at Obscenity Trial on What an Eye Really Sees," *The New York Times*, October 3, 1990.

⁵¹ Monty Lobb, then president of the anti-pornography group Citizens for Community Values, invoked this "sliding scale" argument: "If this is art this year, what's next year's art going to be? Sex with animals? Sex with dead people?" See Phillips, "Art vs. Pornography."

⁵² Henry Dorfman, then-publisher of the weekly Greater Cincinnati Business Record, quoted in Joe McDonald, "Opponents Label Some Photographs Child Pornography," *Houston Chronicle*, March 31, 1990.

⁵³ Reisman delivered the prosecution's rebuttal on October 5th, 1990, despite protests on the part of the defense regarding her qualifications to serve as an "expert" witness. Reisman, who described herself as a mass media analyst specializing in visual communication, claimed that her expertise in art and performance stemmed from her experience producing music videos for the children's television show *Captain Kangaroo*. However, Reisman was better known as the author of a 1,600-page study on children, crime, and violence, for which she reviewed more than 700 issues of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* magazines. The study, published in 1986 and funded by the United States Department of Justice to the tune of \$734,000, became the subject of a congressional inquiry and much controversy. See Kim Masters, "Defense Rests in Mapplethorpe Art Trial; Gallery Director Testifies to Ethical Commitment," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 1990. Reisman had also conducted research for the American Family Association, the very organization that had spearheaded the movement against Mapplethorpe's work and the National Endowment for the Arts. See Isabel Wilkerson, "Witness in Obscenity Trial Calls Explicit Photographs 'Destructive'," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1990. See also Terry Kinney, "Obscenity Trial Stalls Over Witness Art; Mapplethorpe Case Defense Lawyers Finish, But Proceedings Have Halted Over the Qualifications of a Rebuttal Witness," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1990; Kim Masters, "Controversial Witness Says 5 Mapplethorpe Works Are Not Art," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 1990.

⁵⁴ "Jurors Are Questioned in Obscenity Trial; Men's Magazines, Arts Links Are Issues," *The Sun*, (Baltimore), September 25, 1990.

⁵⁵ Kim Masters, "Art Trial; Obscenity or Slice of History?; Opening Arguments in Cincinnati Case," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 1990. See also Terry Kinney, "Mapplethorpe Photos Shown to Jury; Prosecution Rests Its Case After Calling Its Third Witness," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 2, 1990.

⁵⁶ Kim Masters, "Obscenity Trial Asks; 'Is It Art?'; Jurors Examine Mapplethorpe's Works," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 2, 1990.

⁵⁷ The photo is *Helmut and Brooks*, N.Y.C. (1978).

⁵⁸ Masters, "Obscenity Trial Asks."

⁵⁹ The photo is *Lou*, N.Y.C. (1978).

⁶⁰ Masters, "Obscenity Trial Asks."

⁶¹ Ellen Uzelac, "Jurors Offer Little Reaction When Shown Controversial Mapplethorpe Photos," *The Sun* (Baltimore), October 2, 1990.

⁶² Of the five contested works from Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio," none feature "a man with a finger inserted in his rectum" as described by the Prosecutor. The picture to which the attorney refers may be *John*, N.Y.C. (1978), which features a man inserting a dildo into his anus.

⁶³ See Merryman and Elsen, 492.

⁶⁴ Mary T. Schmich, "Art or Smut? Trial opens in Cincinnati," *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1990; Masters, "Art Trial." CAC Director Dennis Barrie also fostered this notion in interviews, claiming that certain of Mapplethorpe's photographs were "really documentation of a subculture that no longer exists, because of AIDS." See Karin Lipson, "Art Museum, Director on Trial Faces Obscenity Charge Stemming From Mapplethorpe Exhibition," *Newsday*, September 23, 1990.

⁶⁵ In addition to Barrie and Kardon, the jury also heard testimony from *Cincinnati Post* art critic Jerry Stein; Jacquelynn Bass, director of the University Art Museum in Berkeley, California; Stuart Schloss, legal counsel for the CAC; John Walsh, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and a videotaped deposition taken from Robert Sobieszek, a senior curator at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. All testified to the artistic integrity of Mapplethorpe's photographs. See Kim Masters, "Jurors View Photos of Children; Mothers Approved Mapplethorpe Works," *The Washington Post*, October 3, 1990; Masters, "Obscenity Trial Asks;" Terry Kinney, "Ruling Asked Before Photo Show Opened," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1990.

⁶⁶ "Mapplethorpe Jurors Discuss the Verdict," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 8, 1990.

⁶⁷ "Museum is Acquitted in Mapplethorpe Case; Director is Also Cleared in Obscenity Trial," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 6, 1990.

⁶⁸ Eric Harrison, Allan Parachini, “Jurors Clear Gallery, Director of Obscenity; Verdict Over Mapplethorpe Photos Will Spur the Assault on NEA, Anti-Pornography Group Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1990.

⁶⁹ Stephan Salisbury, “Despite Verdict, Tremors Linger From Mapplethorpe Case,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 7, 1990.

⁷⁰ Isabel Wilkerson, “Obscenity Jurors Were Pulled 2 Ways,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1990.

⁷¹ Jonathan Yardley, “In Cincinnati, Experts as Witnesses,” *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1990.

⁷² See Ellen Uzelac, “Jurors Found Mapplethorpe Pictures ‘Gross’—But Not Without Artistic Value,” *The Sun* (Baltimore), October 7, 1990; “Mapplethorpe Jurors Discuss,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

⁷³ Wilkerson, “Obscenity Jurors Were Pulled 2 Ways.”

⁷⁴ See Mercer, “Imaging the Black Man’s Sex,” in *Welcome to the Jungle*, 174.

⁷⁵ Both Mercer and the writer Simon Watney are credited for this montage, which leads us to believe that the hands pictured are theirs; however, the image alone provides no clue to the identity of the bearers of the photos.

⁷⁶ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations*, No. 4 (Spring 1988): 78.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 74.

⁷⁸ Barbara Reynolds, “Art & Obscenity: Public Knows What’s Obscene, What Isn’t,” *USA Today*, October 24, 1990.

⁷⁹ The sense of social unease that can accompany museum-going is aptly formulated by Jody Newmyer: “The social pressure of being part of a group of people one knows well, who may judge what one says about an art exhibition as indicative of one’s own moral or life-style preferences, may increase timidity and orthodoxy. The kind of embarrassment felt by one who thinks he should be offended—or perhaps is actually offended—by a work of art, the feeling that one has been made a fool of in public or forced into an unwilling self-revelation, creates a corresponding anger and outrage toward the artist or exhibitor who has subjected one to such an experience.” Newmyer, “Art, Libraries, and the Censor,” 46 *Library Q.* 46 (1976); quoted in Merryman and Elsen, 493.

⁸⁰ Ligon has stated that Mercer's writings, produced both independently and in collaboration with the filmmaker Isaac Julien, were critical to his formulation of *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* in which quotes from both authors appear. Conversation with the artist, July 20, 2010.

⁸¹ The "text" of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, Mercer writes, "opens an aperture onto aspects of stereotypes—which govern the circulation of images of black men across a range of surfaces from newspapers, television and cinema to advertising, sport, and pornography." Throughout the course of the essay, Mercer touches on tabloid images of black rapists and muggers, idolatrous images of black athletic prowess, and that mainstay of modernism, African "tribal" art. See Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," in *Welcome to the Jungle*, 173-74.

⁸² Janet Kardon, "Robert Mapplethorpe: Interview," in Kardon, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, 27.

⁸³ Mapplethorpe's *Black Males* is an early portfolio of the artist's photographs of black men, which predates the *Black Book*.

⁸⁴ Mercer's statement appears in a version of "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," collected in Wallis, et. all, *Art Matters*, 183. In this essay, Mercer describes the reactions that he and his friend shared in relation to Mapplethorpe's photos: "We wanted to look, but we didn't always find what we wanted to see." (183.) Here Mercer echoes a statement made with Isaac Julien in their essay, "True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality:" "Our starting point is ambivalence, because *we want to look, but do not always find the images we want to see.*" (Emphasis original.) One may infer from this that Julien is the friend—also black and gay—to which Mercer refers. See Mercer and Julien, in Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 133.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Two exceptions are the relatively lesser-known photographers F. Holland Day and George Platt Lynes; the influence of both artists' black male nudes is abundantly evident in Mapplethorpe's later treatment of the same subject. See for example F. Holland Day and James Crump, *Suffering the Ideal* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 1995); James Crump, *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from the Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).

⁸⁷ Text reproduced in *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book."* Joselit, however, does not go so far as to claim these "types" delve into the stereotypical; he concludes, rather facetiously, that the subjects are "endowed by Mapplethorpe with enormous power: Their physical presence is immediate and unavoidable." Within the text reproduced in Ligon's

piece, at least, Joselit fails to address whether most people really need to be convinced of black men's physicality, as opposed to other aspects of their personhood.

⁸⁸ David Green, "Veins of Resemblance: Photography and Eugenics," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Photography (1984): 9.

⁸⁹ A sustained study of the myriad photographic genres in which the black body emerges as a key figure—including scientific and medical studies, ethnographic and photojournalistic dispatches, and criminal and lynching photography—is beyond the scope of this chapter. For further reading, see Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index;" Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerrotypes;" Leigh Raiford, "The Consumption of Lynching Images," collected in Coco Fusco and Wallis, *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003); and Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*. For an astute history of attitudes regarding black skin as a photographic "problem," see Dyer, "The Light of the World," in *White*, 82-144.

⁹⁰ Towards the beginning of his life in New York City in 1969, Mapplethorpe, writes Morrisroe, "held the popular notion that photography was not an art form and had no desire to pursue it seriously." See Morrisroe, 69.

⁹¹ Mapplethorpe held firm convictions about the qualities that make a photograph "art," and believed that the inclusion of lesser works in Sam Wagstaff's sprawling collection could have a contaminating effect on the superior pieces; in a letter to Wagstaff, he pleaded with his lover and mentor to stop diluting his photography collection with works by unknown artists: "Please stop this insane collecting [...] The photographs that are art have to be separated from the rest—then preserved—you have no right to treat art the way you do." See Morrisroe, 196.

⁹² Richard Marshall, "Mapplethorpe's Vision," in Marshall, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, 9.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 18-25.

⁹⁴ Sischy, "A Society Artist," in Marshall, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, 81.

⁹⁵ In a 1979 interview in the gay leather publication *Drummer*, Mapplethorpe stated, "There's all this energy now around faggot art [...] It would be nice to see something legitimate as art come out as well. I don't see why it couldn't." That Mapplethorpe would come to see his own work as the "legitimate" manifestation of this sensibility is unquestionable. Quoted in Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 204.

⁹⁶ As Brian Wallis notes, the abject status of the black body in nominally scientific photographic studies of the nineteenth century suggest a kind of spectatorial interest

beyond the didactic purposes for which they were ostensibly created: “The subject’s clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether; the body itself was often shown being whipped, beaten, hung, pierced, bitten, branded, or otherwise subjugated to a white oppressor. Moreover, many of the exposed and attacked bodies were shown in explicitly erotic poses, raising the question of how these largely proslavery images functioned as a type of pornography.” Wallis’ essay points to the artist Carrie Mae Weems’ series *From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried* (1995/6), in which Weems makes eminently clear these elements in Louis Agassiz’s commissioned photographs of partially nude slave subjects. See Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerrotypes,” in Fusco and Wallis, *Only Skin Deep*, 176. See also Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*.

⁹⁷ Sischy, “A Society Artist,” in Marshall, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, 81.

⁹⁸ Walls relates in a quote provided within *Notes on the Margin of the “Black Book”*: “Although he’s never said to me which one’s his favorite picture I would have to say “Man in a Polyester Suit,” and not for the obvious reasons. It’s a really personal picture and I think that it has a great amount of sentimental value for him.”

⁹⁹ In the quote excerpted in *Notes*, Kardon quips, “The photograph catches the viewer in a binary pull. The action cannot be perceived unless the eye constantly darts in opposite directions as in a tennis match, or, in this instance, between the mundane polyester suit and what outrageously protrudes from its trousers.”

¹⁰⁰ Morrisroe, 233-34.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 244-49.

¹⁰² The Shange quote is excerpted in *Notes*: “We flipped through the photographs looking for former lovers we knew were somewhere in the book. I said, ‘I can’t seem to find him right now, but I know he’s there somewhere.’ Robert lifted his head slightly with a telling half smile: ‘I know what you mean, I can’t find mine either’.”

¹⁰³ Richard Meyer, “Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language,” in Glenn Ligon, et. all, *Glenn Ligon: un/becoming*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania): 21.

¹⁰⁴ See Peter Schjeldahl, “Missing: The Pleasure Principle,” *The Village Voice* (16 March, 1993): 34, 38.

¹⁰⁵ The criteria by which an image may be recognized as “gay,” to the conservative activists and politicians who publicly opposed Mapplethorpe’s work, is simple: a homoerotic image is any image of a male, by a male, that may be remotely construed as

sexual. The images targeted by the American Family Association, the Christian Coalition, and Cincinnati law enforcement officers in their joint efforts against the CAC exhibition show that an image need not include two or more men engaged in sexual activity to be considered homoerotic, as indicated by the number of photos of lone figures selected for examination; nor need the subject be explicitly sexual, as the furor over *Jesse McBride* indicates. While it is almost beyond question that this line of reasoning would strike many advocates for the arts as hyperbolic and primitive, one must question whether the mechanisms by which *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* registers as a confession of Ligon's own homosexuality are significantly different.

¹⁰⁶ *A Feast of Scraps* was commissioned for the exhibition *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, which appeared at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in 1995. The first iteration of the work appears in the exhibition catalogue with an accompanying essay by the artist. It is to this initial presentation of the work that my essay refers. In subsequent exhibitions in which *A Feast of Scraps* was included, the photos were presented in conventional albums, or a copy of the *Masculine Masquerade* catalogue was provided for the reader's perusal. I am grateful to the artist for clarifying these points for me in a conversation on July 20, 2010. See also Glenn Ligon, "A Feast of Scraps," in Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner, Eds., *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: London; The MIT Press, 1995): 89-99.

¹⁰⁷ Conversation with the artist, 20 July, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Ligon, "A Feast of Scraps," in Perchuk and Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade*, 89.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Conversation with the artist, July 20, 2010.

¹¹¹ Ligon, "A Feast of Scraps," in Perchuk and Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade*, 89.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Conversation with the artist, July 20, 2010.

¹¹⁵ This is especially true for observers from "outside" the family, as all who view *A Feast of Scraps*—including Ligon himself—necessarily are.

¹¹⁶ Reid-Pharr, 62.

¹¹⁷ Moreover, as Samuel F. Delany reminds us, the institution of “family” that is presumed to be crumbling under black American custodians is itself a fairly recent rhetorical construction. Urging caution against the assumption that the family is “a transcultural absolute, arcadian in origin [...] an ‘authentic’ form of sociality that is somehow battered and undermined by ‘inauthentic’ forces of urbanism, industrialism, and modernism,” he cites Philippe Ariès: “the family is specifically a bourgeois institution that originates in the upper middle class [...] When times are bad, it crumbles from the bottom up.” See Delany, Introduction to Reid-Pharr, xiii-xiv.

¹¹⁸ See Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*.

¹¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981): 103.

¹²⁰ Ligon, “A Feast of Scraps,” in Perchuk and Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade*, 89.

¹²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967): 170. Because in this chapter I read *Black Skin, White Masks* in conjunction with writings on black male sexuality produced by American black liberationist thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s, I refer to the English translation that would have been available to American black revolutionaries at the time, instead of the more recent translation of 2008 by Richard Philcox.

¹²² Fanon, 109.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²⁷ Barthes, 13.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹²⁹ See Mercer, “Looking for Trouble;” “Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race: True Confessions,” (with Isaac Julien), and “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 171-219.

¹³⁰ Ferguson, 87.

¹³¹ Ibid., 75.

¹³² Ibid., 88-89.

¹³³ Ibid., 37.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 119-122.

¹³⁵ Darby English, "Glenn Ligon: Committed to Difficulty," in Ligon, et. all, *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, exh. cat. (Toronto: Power Plant, 2005): 70.

¹³⁶ "[T]he Photograph," according to Barthes, "is never anything but the antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language." Barthes, 5.

¹³⁷ Ligon has observed that literature has served a "treacherous" function for black Americans, as "literary production has been so tied with the project of proving [African American] humanity through the act of writing." See English, "Glenn Ligon: Committed to Difficulty," in Ligon, et. all, *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, 68. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. expresses similar sentiments in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. Gates argues that scientific racism and dominant eighteenth-century theories on the inferiority of the African intellect spurred African Americans to point to their own literature as proof of the "progress and perfectibility of man," and of "the artistic potential of a 'race'." See Gates, xxiv. See also English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*: 2-70.

¹³⁸ Ferguson, 87.

¹³⁹ Newton argued that urban black men suffered from a crisis of masculinity under American "colonization," and that this crisis asserted itself in the form of certain pathologies. For instance, the ghettoized black man "may even father several 'illegitimate' children by several different women in order to display his masculinity." Yet, Newton predicts, he will soon see that his actions have no effect on the white superstructure that dictates the conditions of his being, and will be thereby condemned to live in "a constant state of rage." See David Ray Papke, "The Black Panther Party's Narratives of Resistance," *Vermont Law Review* Vol. 18 (1993-94): 659-60.

¹⁴⁰ Ferguson, 123.

¹⁴¹ Barthes, 4.

¹⁴² Ibid., 10.

¹⁴³ Ligon asserts that the images he collected from *Gay Treasures* were “definitely intended for a white [male] audience.” Conversation with the artist, July 20, 2010.

¹⁴⁴ Fanon, 114.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Fanon spends Chapter Two excoriating the memoirist Mayotte Capécia, whom he holds up as a prime example of the Antillean woman’s supposed urge to “whiten,” to get outside her race by partnering with and bearing a child by a white man. He dedicates Chapter Three to abrading the timidity of fictional character Jean Veneuse, whose relationship with a white woman is derailed by his own feelings of self-loathing, and whom Fanon reads as a transparent stand-in for his author, René Maran. Fanon, 41-82.

¹⁴⁷ Fanon, 42. I am indebted on this point to Robert Reid-Pharr, who notes that Fanon’s “difficult relationship to the questions of blackness and Americanness [...] is mediated through Fanon’s hostility to the productive black female, the bad black mother.” Unwilling to recognize Mayotte Capécia as his “intellectual peer” in the common goal of exposing “the lie of racial difference,” Reid-Pharr writes, Fanon instead turns her into a sick subject to be analyzed, a “bad mama” desiring of a mixed-race child. See Reid-Pharr, 69-71.

¹⁴⁸ This problem, Reid-Pharr believes, proved too complex for Fanon’s tastes, prompting a shift in his scholarship following his relocation to Africa: “The Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *A Dying Colonialism* [...] is a man considerably less troubled by the intricacies of racial difference than the one we see represented in *Black Skin/White Masks*.” Produced in the context of colonized Martinique and of France, while Fanon was surrounded by the products of “racial mixing,” *BSWM* is itself a sort of reluctant hybrid, which Fanon would abandon in favor of a tidier philosophy of racialism and unity in his later works. Ibid., 79.

¹⁴⁹ Fanon, 156.

¹⁵⁰ Fanon, for instance, claims knowledge of “men who go to ‘houses’ in order to be beaten by Negroes; passive homosexuals who insist on black partners.” (Ibid., 177). Fanon mentions desire between women only once, and only in order to posit the mere possibility of such attraction as ridiculous. In a scalding retort to Michel Salomon’s writings on the “prodigious vitality of the black man,” Fanon declares, “M. Salomon, I have a confession to make to you: I have never been able, without revulsion, to hear a *man* say of another man; ‘He is so sensual!’ I do not know what the sensuality of a man is. Imagine a woman saying of another woman: ‘She’s so terribly desirable—she’s darling...’” (Ibid., 201). Fanon, reacting to Salomon’s racist sexualization of black males,

is compelled to declare the very concept male sensuality to be unthinkable. Lesbian sexuality is invoked to further underscore the preposterousness of this idea.

¹⁵¹ Fanon declares that the figure of the maleficent black man inspires in the white man “regression to and fixation at pregenital levels of sexual development [...] the Negro is taken as a terrifying penis.” *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁵² For instance: while he claims to have never detected the “overt presence of homosexuality” in his native Martinique, Fanon is quick to add that he has known “several Martinicans” who “became” homosexuals after arriving in Europe. Even in these circumstances, he argues, Antillean men remain fundamentally different from their “passive” homosexual European partners, stooping to homosexuality only “as a means of livelihood,” rather than out of any particular “neurosis.” *Ibid.*, 180, n. 44.

¹⁵³ See Mercer, “Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Fanon’s Sexual Politics,” in Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. (London; Seattle: Institute of Contemporary Art, London, and Bay Press, 1996): 115-129.

¹⁵⁴ See Mercer, “Looking for Trouble;” “Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race: True Confessions,” (with Isaac Julien), and “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Welcome to the Jungle*, 131-170; 171-219. See also Reid-Pharr, “At Home in America,” in *Black Gay Male*, 69-80. See also Charles I. Nero, “Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature,” in Essex Hemphill, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1991): 229-252, and Charles Johnson, “A Phenomenology of the Black Body,” in Byrd and Guy-Sheftall, *Traps*: 223-235. See also Stuart Hall, “The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks?*,” in Read, *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*: 14.

¹⁵⁵ Mercer, “Decolonization and Disappointment,” in Read, *The Fact of Blackness*, 116.

¹⁵⁶ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York; Toronto; London; Sidney: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968): 99. While it should be noted that Cleaver was an avid reader of Fanon’s—declaring *The Wretched of the Earth* to be the “Bible” of the black liberation movement—Cleaver does not cite Fanon as a formative influence on any of his sentiments regarding black homosexual men, despite numerous similarities between the two authors’ writings on the subject, which I note in this essay. See William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 60.

¹⁵⁷ Cleaver, 103. Judging by his remarks that “Negro homosexuals” attempted to indulge their “racial death-wish” through a prodigious “intake of the white man’s sperm,”

Cleaver, like Fanon, was unable even to conceive of intimacy between black women. See Cleaver, 102.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵⁹ This, along with “Sugar,” is but one feminizing (and thereby, to Cleaver, derogatory) nickname given to Baldwin in “Notes on a Native Son.” See Cleaver, 100; 106.

¹⁶⁰ Rudolph P. Byrd, “Prologue: The Tradition of John: A Mode of Black Masculinity,” in Byrd and Guy-Sheftall, 16. It should also be noted that Cleaver’s opinions, while obviously enormously influential to the formation of the Black Panther Party’s philosophy, did not go unopposed within his own party. In 1970 no less than Huey Newton, the Minister of Defense and “Supreme Commander” of the Black Panther Party published “A Letter From Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters About the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” in which he urged black revolutionary support for and collaboration with feminist and gay activists. In a distinct departure from Cleaver, Newton declared that “maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary” in the ongoing struggle to transform American society. See Newton, reprinted in Byrd and Guy-Sheftall: 281-83.

¹⁶¹ Byrd, in Byrd and Guy-Sheftall, *Traps*, 18-19.

¹⁶² Ibid., 17-19.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 19; see also Nero, “Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic,” in Hemphill, *Brother to Brother*, 231.

¹⁶⁴ “Unmercifully imprisoned” by the white other, Fanon wishes to slip the bonds of his body altogether: “[w] hat else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood?” See Fanon, 112.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶⁶ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*: 81.

¹⁶⁷ Nero, “Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic,” in Hemphill, *Brother to Brother*, 230. For a useful discussion of signifying as it pertains to Ligon’s oeuvre, see Okwui Enwezor, “Text, Subtext, Intertext: Painting, Language, and Signifying in the Work of Glenn Ligon,” in Rothkopf, et. all, *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA*: 51-63.

¹⁶⁸ Here Barthes deploys a rather under-used term meaning “having, consisting of, or acting on a single element, item, or component : monadic.” <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unary>> (August 31, 2011).

¹⁶⁹ Barthes, 38.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 40-42; 57.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷² Ibid., 43.

¹⁷³ See *Miller v. California*,
<http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0413_0015_ZO.html>
(September 27, 2011).

¹⁷⁴ Barthes, 43.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 41. Barthes does admit to the possibility of the *punctum* in sexualized images via an ultimately unsatisfying attempt to differentiate between “pornography” and “erotic” photography: “Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object (a fetish), flattered like an idol that does not leave its niche; for me, there is no *punctum* in the pornographic image; at most it amuses me (and even then, boredom follows quickly). The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward ‘the rest’ of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.” This distinction between pornography and erotica, like all others I have read, is determined entirely by the author’s personal definition of eroticism, and thus of little empirical use. Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁷⁶ Cleaver, 102.

¹⁷⁷ Reid-Pharr, 67-68.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷⁹ Ligon writes in his essay on *A Feast of Scraps*, “Many of the images I’m looking at replay [racist] stereotypes, yet as I try to put them aside I find I can’t. A look, a face, a body, keeps bringing me back to them. The images are somehow familiar, like portraits of long-dead relatives you never met but in whose faces you can trace the contours of your own. I look closely and I begin to remember.” See Ligon, “A Feast of Scraps,” in Perchuk and Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade*, 89.

Conclusion

¹ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in Cleto, *Camp*, 57-58.

² Jones, *Body Art*, 125.

³ Portions of my analysis to follow are derived from my earlier articles: “Hide/Seek,” *Quodlibetica*, February 2011 <<http://www.quodlibetica.com/hideseek/>> (February 19, 2014); “Live Fast, Die Young, Leave a Useful Corpse: the Terrible Utility of David Wojnarowicz,” *Performance Research* Vol. 19, Issue 1, 'On Abjection.' Forthcoming. The later essay, in particular, examines some of the definitive confrontations with censorious forces that took place during Wojnarowicz’s life, which I must for reasons of space hold in abeyance here.

⁴ In a Prologue to the online incarnation of the exhibition, the National Portrait Gallery articulated the aims of “Hide/Seek” thusly: “This is the first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture. “Hide/Seek” considers such themes as the role of sexual difference in depicting modern America; how artists explored the fluidity of sexuality and gender; how major themes in modern art—especially abstraction—were influenced by social marginalization; and how art reflected society’s evolving and changing attitudes toward sexuality, desire, and romantic attachment.” See “Prologue,” <<http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/hideseek/index.html>> (February 19, 2014).

⁵ A brief history of Starr’s career as an advocate for conservative and anti-gay policies can be found here: Kriston Capps, “A Fire in Her Belly: Penny Starr, the Conservative Activist Who Punked the Smithsonian,” *Washington Citypaper*, December 8, 2010. <<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/artsdesk/visual-arts/2010/12/08/a-fire-in-her-belly-penny-starr-the-conservative-activist-who-punked-the-smithsonian/>> (February 19, 2014).

⁶ Penny Starr, “Smithsonian Christmas-Season Exhibit Features Ant-Covered Jesus, Naked Brothers Kissing, Genitalia, and Ellen DeGeneres Grabbing Her Breasts,” *Cybercast News Service*, November 29, 2010. <<http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/smithsonian-christmas-season-exhibit-fea>> (February 19, 2014).

⁷ “Smithsonian Hosts Anti-Christian Exhibit,” November 30, 2010. <<http://www.catholicleague.org/release.php?id=2033>> (Post has been removed).

⁸ See Christina Wilke, “Boehner and Cantor call for closing of Smithsonian exhibit,” *The Hill*, November 30, 2010. <<http://washingtonscene.thehill.com/in-the-know/36-news/7223-boehner-and-cantor-call-for-closing-of-smithsonian-exhibit>> (January 26,

2011). That this bluster was motivated by opportunistic politics rather than deep-seated religious conviction is perhaps especially obvious in the case of Cantor, who is Jewish.

⁹ It is not my intention to offer here an analysis of this truncated portion of *A Fire in My Belly*; indeed, I maintain that such a weighing of the video's aesthetic merits would be superfluous in this discussion of how a few twenty-first century culture warriors successfully agitated and energized their base through their condemnation of a work they had never seen. I will then only state that the image of the ant-covered plastic crucifix of which Starr complained appears in the NPG's edit of the four-minute video for a total of twenty-three seconds.

¹⁰ "Smithsonian Stands Firmly Behind "Hide/Seek Exhibition," December 6, 2010. <<http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/exhide.html>> (February 19, 2014).

¹¹ Neither Boehner, Cantor, nor Donahue ever viewed the edit of Wojnarowicz's video. See Capps, "A Fire in Her Belly."

¹² See for example Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York, et. al.; Bloomsbury, 2012).

¹³ "The God Vote: 'Sacrilege' at the National Portrait Gallery," *The Washington Post*, December 6th, 2010. <http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2010/12/the_god_vote_sacrilege_at_the_national_portrait_gallery.html> (February 19, 2014).

¹⁴ The text that Donohue replicated in part in his post "Smithsonian Hosts Anti-Christian Exhibit" can be found in Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991): 111-123. It is replicated in part, as well, in Wojnarowicz's work of 1988-89, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*.

¹⁵ The squall kicked up by Starr's review offered to Boehner and Cantor an opportunity to move on a proposal submitted just weeks before by the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. On November 10th, the committee released its proposal to offset the deficit by slashing the Smithsonian's federal funding (among other things). Seeing the chance to make this non-binding, largely toothless recommendation a reality, Boehner warned in a statement on November 30th that the Smithsonian would face "tough scrutiny" from the incoming Congress. See Wilke, "Boehner and Cantor call for closing."

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