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**Encounters with the Unsightly: Reading (AIDS)
History, Photography, and the Obscene**

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Rather than attempting to lay ghosts, it would be better to attend to all obscenities, past and present, that knock for attention at culture's door. Even better, to try to conceive what it would mean to open the door to them. And better still, as Derrida puts it, to begin to contemplate the question of "prolonging the moment of the open door" (*prolonger le moment de la porte ouverte*). Can we—to put it more idiomatically—not only open the door to the obscene, but also learn to keep the door open?

-Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions*

Me gustan las fotos cuando duelen.
-Alberto García-Alix¹

In his landmark work on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes, "the photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force . . .*" (91, emphasis in the original). If we consider every photograph a potential encounter between viewer and image, then this occasion may prove exceptionally provocative in the extreme: when the photograph wields a certain violence unto its viewer, compelling us to see *unsightly* images that forcefully "fill (our) sight." In this article we are primarily interested in thinking about how selected works by contemporary Spanish photographer Alberto García-Alix offer encounters with the "obscene" by framing unsightly images, thereby confronting the viewer with marginal areas of culture that may disgust, shock, arouse, or even turn the stomach. Although conventional notions of what constitutes an "obscene" image may encompass a much wider range of material—from gore to explicit pornography—than the photographs we analyze, here we will examine how these images interpellate us, the authors, to see beyond their frames. Though an entirely subjective endeavor, the reading we

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propose aims at generating a possible theoretical tool to approximate ways of seeing the obscene. We recognize that a viewer's individual response to obscenity is informed by a specific cross-section of cultural norms, personal tastes, and inculcated social proprieties, all of which undoubtedly require further investigation. Nevertheless, we table these considerations for now to explore how García-Alix's photography provides viewers with images that turn toward the obscene, filling the sight by force, to make visible cultural matters that have been historically dismissed, buried, or rendered unsightly.

Why look at the unsightly? The theoretical crux of our argument hinges on a hunch we share with Barthes and, noted in the epigraph above, with Chambers: that turning towards obscenity packs a forceful, perhaps even distasteful punch for its viewer, offering an encounter that may bring to light liminal spaces of history that are collectively recognized yet deemed unfit for viewing. We have in mind a specific encounter provided by the photographs in question, the marginalization and, to a large extent, the invisibility of a pandemic that is not unique to contemporary Spain: the HIV/AIDS crisis. One might contest that in no way does HIV/AIDS constitute an "obscene" matter, at least not in the same way pornography has drawn fire from its critics as a degrading obscenity for its gendered violence. But when we consider what constitutes "obscene" culture, we specify our definition from the word's etymology, from Greek *skene* into English *scene*, constituting the "ob-scene" as a subject matter excluded from a field of vision that remains "off stage" or is kept "out of sight." The term "obscenity" aptly describes, on at least two levels, a visual encounter (i.e., between photograph and viewer, in the "scene" or frame, this "stage" of viewer reception) and a socially conditioned response (i.e., what images are rendered "unfit for viewing" and thus provoke a viewer to turn away from them, to keep them "off-stage"); in this relay between the visual and the eviscerating lies the photograph's encounter *to be seen* within and beyond the frame. In turn, the cultural obscene, as we will refer to it hereafter, is threaded with modes of seeing and reception respondent to the social stigma of—i.e., collectively turning away from—HIV/AIDS. Ross Chambers argues compellingly that the HIV/AIDS crisis has been regarded a cultural obscenity, a phenomenon shared with other sites of collective trauma in recent history, in that the pandemic has been "covered" or "obscured" from public view, not only "tinged with a sense of the sacred (Latin *obscenus* meant of ill augur), but also of stigma and abjection, both of which refer to the mixture of fascination and repulsion exerted by objects that are expelled from within the social or human body" (23).²

We think of HIV/AIDS as an "obscenity" because the health

crisis in Spain is “culturally known [but] may not be readily acknowledged” (Chambers 23), a kind of “open secret” that, despite its prevalence, has not acquired a sustained space of public attention since the first reported diagnoses in 1981. That is, our discussion intends to participate modestly in bringing-to-sight a pandemic that was and continues to be socially marginalized, generally recognized as “out there” but considered “unfit for viewing”—perhaps embodied at its most horrible in the social stigmatization of persons living with HIV/AIDS who are often “closeted” with their positive status. By questioning how these photographs urge a viewer to look at and turn away from displays of wounded, injected, and otherwise unsightly bodies, we explore the ways in which photography interrogates modes of seeing, as well as the medium’s potential to make visible a pandemic that by and large remains “unseen” within a so-called “cultural stage of activity” in contemporary Spain. To invoke Chambers’ plea, how do the photographs in the following pages open a cultural door to interrogate the obscene? How do they not only make the obscene readable but also fill our sight with it by force? And to that extent, how can we theorize the unsightly as a helpful tool to read visual encounters with the body that allude to disease on the one hand and provoke the viewer’s dis-ease on the other?

At best, public visibility granted to the HIV/AIDS pandemic within official State discourse and in the Spanish media has been limited and, even so, has only come about in recent years—a problem not necessarily unique to Spain. Yet the gauge for this lack of visibility is perhaps most effectively located in the Spanish public’s reception of isolated awareness campaigns attempting to combat many erroneous assumptions about the virus, among them that “AIDS [. . .] only happened abroad” (Mira 247). Inasmuch as the pandemic has been perceived, drawing from its likeness to a foreign phenomenon, as some-“thing” that does not happen to oneself but to the *other*, primary incidence of HIV-transmission rates in Spain’s marginalized communities gave rise, in the 1980s, to the common prejudice that “those infected” were primarily heroin addicts and homosexuals “suffering the self-induced consequences of their aberrant behaviour” (Graham and Sánchez 415–16). For even among less conservative discourses that do not regard AIDS a “punishment” for at-risk groups, the spread of HIV in the early 1980s fit neatly into troubling narratives that recast the disease as a collective sacrifice for new democratic freedoms of identity expression in post-Franco Spain, in that “el sida acaba quizás con los gays y con los yonquis” (AIDS might finish off the gays and junkies). Borja Casani, founder of the 1980s magazine *La Luna de Madrid*, tells in a retrospective interview, “que [ellos] son la

vanguardia real de todo ese proceso de exploración, de vivir sólo una vez, pero vivir intensamente” (Gallero 45) (they are the real vanguard of this entire process of exploration, living only once, living intensely). Although not culturally specific to Spain, social attitudes have historically tended to collapse the HIV/AIDS pandemic into a consequence of excessive lifestyles, resulting in the construction of marginal categories of “otherness” and the ensuing stigmas formed from these misjudgments.

The partitioning of the collective social body into two categories, its “diseased” others and “healthy” survivors, is exhibited in the earliest State-sponsored campaigns for HIV/AIDS awareness, notably delayed in their response to the pandemic. Public health announcements from Spain’s Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo only began promoting condom usage exclusively as a measure to prevent HIV transmission in 1994, whereas previous campaigns arguably participated in the social marginalization of at-risk groups by labeling AIDS synonymous with homosexuality and intravenous drug use, evident in the posters’ visual and textual content.³ For example, the 1989 campaign aiming to inform the Spanish-speaking public of how “AIDS” (not HIV) is transmitted (Fig. 1) depicts cartoon figures of female and male gender symbols engaged in behaviors that “Sí Da [SIDA] / No Da” (Give It [AIDS] / Don’t Give It); above the “Sí Da” slogan are two grimace-faced, male cartoons positioned in a compromising sexual act, while another shares a toothbrush with a friend (albeit outdated information today on the risks of HIV transmission).



Fig. 1. Si Da. No Da. No cambies tu vida por el Sida. Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo. Poster 1989. Public domain.

Yet another, the blurry-eyed “junkie” cartoon with “SIDA” written in red across his chest, holds a syringe in one hand with a crack pipe and marijuana joint in his mouth. By labeling the figures with “SIDA” the poster conflates “disease” with cartoonish representations of practices that are visually collapsed into “junkies” and “homosexuals” (i.e., from “gay sex ‘sí, da [SIDA]”); to “gays are AIDS carriers”), further undermining a sense of public awareness that might encourage collective responsibility in preventing HIV transmission. Promoting a more formidable “othering” of intravenous drug users is the 1992 poster (Fig. 2), an image recycled from the first national awareness campaign in 1988. The poster displays a hypodermic needle bent in the form of a fishhook at its end and accompanied by the slogan: “No Piques. El Sida te engancha por la droga. Siete de cada diez enfermos del Sida son drogadictos” (Don’t Get Snagged / Don’t Be a Fool. AIDS hooks you in through drugs. Seven out of every ten people sick with AIDS are drug addicts).

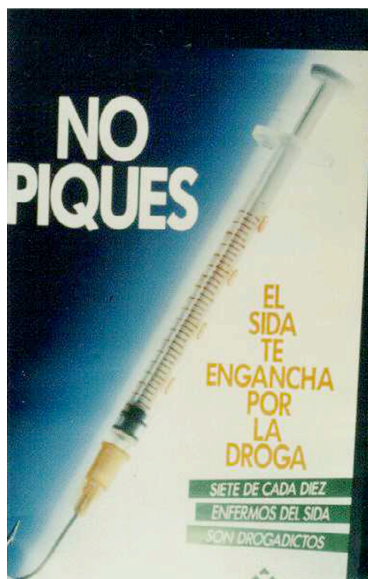


Fig. 2. **No piques. El sida te engancha por la droga.**
Poster 1988. Public domain.

In a matter of three lines, the poster effectively groups “the

diseased,” “AIDS,” and “drug addicts” into one social category of otherness, effectively diminishing a viewer’s identification with the pejorative labels it promotes.

Nevertheless, only since 1994 have national awareness campaigns taken a more positive spin in their promotion of condom usage and, eventually in 1996, in their efforts to combat the social stigma of persons living with AIDS (PWAs) under the slogan, “Lo peor del sida es el rechazo y la marginación” (The worst thing about AIDS is rejection and marginalization). The social perceptions and portrayals of *ellos* (those who may acquire the virus, presumably by practicing non-vaginal intercourse or by injecting drugs) undoubtedly played a crucial role in casting HIV/AIDS into an abject category of socially marginalized behavior. In this light, we might read these posters as the evidence of a paranoid attempt at a social cure, despite this cure’s grim consequences. For severing these stigmatized identities from the social body produced an amputation, so to speak, from the marginal category it had constructed for PWAs as “others.”⁴ Within this logic, the amputation or partitioning of the “diseased” from the apparently wholesome and otherwise “healthy” social body purges itself from—in identification with and responsibility for—the very category of “otherness” it fabricates in these images.

Concurrent with the formation of PWAs’ social status as diseased “others,” isolated instances of public awareness for HIV/AIDS tended to operate within a double bind: visibility of HIV/AIDS precluded achieving an awareness unhindered by the panic of infection. On the other side of the same coin, its marginalized status fostered an erroneous sense of immunity to the “other’s” disease, reflected in current awareness initiatives vying for attention from a public that tends to regard HIV as a health crisis that “does not affect (or infect) me.”⁵ From this miscalculation of *who* is susceptible to HIV—with the “healthy” social body falsely protected from its *others*—the subsequent marginalization of PWAs was concomitant to Spain’s slow institutional response to implement programs reducing infection risks for intravenous drug users, such as providing clean needle exchanges at treatment clinics. While healthcare institutions dragged their feet to prevent the spread of HIV through combined actions and educational programs (an inaction that current health reports regret), new reported diagnoses spiked dramatically in the late 1980s, placing Spain at the top of Europe’s HIV-transmission rates by the end of the decade (Secretaría del Plan Nacional sobre el Sida 14). Even since 1981, one might say that the public visibility of HIV/AIDS in Spain—or rather, its *invisibility* in news media and absence from public discourse—follows a pattern of remission, marked by the appearance of health awareness campaigns

dating from 1987 to common knowledge today that the disease exists but only resurfaces to grasp the public's attention in the occasional news column or headline.⁶ Suggesting why this may be, Paul Julian Smith has noted that among at-risk groups the lack of a formal discursive presence in the LGBT activist community has made for difficulties in establishing public health awareness (i.e., a movement similar in nature to Act-Up, for example, has not surfaced in Spain), further complicated by the autonomous communities' disparate institutional structures that have become an obstacle for achieving a unified, public visibility in their prevention program initiatives.⁷ Conversely, the prevalent stigma associated with HIV/AIDS proves damaging to the Spanish public health sector's ability to collect proper information on HIV-transmission rates, and was cited in a public health study as the primary reason why a vast majority of at-risk individuals prefer not being tested at all.⁸ Public disregard for HIV testing, as well, translates to an alarming statistic that 38% of Spain's AIDS diagnoses in 2003 were for persons previously unaware of their HIV-positive status (Chamorro 666). While these are only a few of the intricately complex social and institutional factors that have contributed to the cultural status of HIV/AIDS as an ob-scene or disregarded matter, they furthermore speak to the marginalization of persons living with HIV/AIDS, who are, by this common prejudice, perceived to inherently embody disease themselves.⁹

In Spain, as elsewhere, HIV/AIDS has emerged as a crisis of visual representation.¹⁰ The invisibility of the HIV virus (at least to the naked eye, notwithstanding microscopic images and computerized graphic representations that occasionally make their way into the media) remains outwardly undetected until the later stages of AIDS, when visually legible symptoms manifest in the body: severe weight loss, purplish sarcoma lesions, and the wasting away of limbs from muscle atrophy associated with the first diagnosed bodies seen in the 1980s. So too has HIV's invisibility translated into the social imaginary of the disease as a silent killer, whose "carriers"—playing into paranoid narratives of the dangerous foreign "other" that lives "among us"—frightfully remain unidentifiable until the body withers from symptoms that publicly reveal one's positive status. The (in)visibility of HIV/AIDS in this sense has made all social articulation of the virus a sort of signifying free radical, a fluid metaphor for "otherness" that plays upon—and readily speaks more about—the social projections cast onto the very (un)readability of disease and onto the bodies hosting the virus.¹¹ For these reasons and the overreaching social (in)visibility of HIV/AIDS, we have chosen to insert the pandemic in brackets within the title of

this article, constituting an editorial mark that embodies the greater discursive strategy aimed at making its overwritten character visible. Having in mind this radical potential to see what [HIV/AIDS] obscenities lay beyond the frame, we turn—with our own predispositions and projections—to the photographs.

Alberto García-Alix's photography brings marginality into the spotlight, making his subjects strikingly and undeniably visible. One of Spain's most celebrated contemporary photographers, García-Alix has developed a highly stylized, black-and-white oeuvre in which photographs from the artist's earliest period (1976–1986) have become synonymous with the punk rocker face of 1980s Madrid, at once at the center and periphery of the “happening” called *la movida madrileña*. An overview of García-Alix's artistic trajectory provides his viewers with a corpus of work that oscillates between glamorous and freakish displays of allure, including portraits of Spanish pop icons (e.g., actress Rossy de Palma, singer and performer Alaska, flamenco *cantaor* Camarón de la Isla, porn star Nacho Vidal) as well as unknown, often naked subjects (e.g., a bare-chested portrait of the photographer's brother Carlos; an anonymous porn actress exposing her breasts from a dominatrix bustier; an unnamed contortionist displaying her orifices for the camera; the reclining, tattooed “Isa” who clinically parts her labia). García-Alix's self-portraits likewise retain this explicit quality in the photographer's seemingly spontaneous approach to snapshots that expose his own body: an aesthetic that engages the viewer with authoritative force, leaving little to one's imagination by indiscreetly showing us *almost all there is to see*. Whereas the explicit nature of García-Alix's photography might falsely conjure up immediate comparisons among conservative audiences to pornographic content—also an *ob-scenity* since pornography displays all for a viewer, keeping nothing “off-stage”—folded within the photograph's force is the other side of the ob-scene: that by showing almost *everything*, what remains to be seen is not located in the image's explicit content, but in the photograph's allusion to what remains outside the frame. Indeed, although it was never the photographer's expressed project to show “la otra cara [. . .] de la alegría del cambio” (the other side [. . .] of the happiness of change), or an alternative and, at times, harrowing side of a rapidly transforming Spain and its new politics of identity expression, one of the effects of his work has been to “dar visibilidad a lo invisible de un periodo” (give visibility to the invisible from this period) by exposing the raw bodies and emerging subjectivities, scarred and tattooed, within counter-culture movements (Talens 45). Keeping in mind this notion of exposing the invisible through photography, we turn to a close reading of three images by the artist.

In *Tarde de verano II* (1977) (Figure 3), we see the photographer sitting down, his arm supported with the help of a girl whose secure fastening of a tourniquet just above the elbow gives prominence to the bulging veins in García-Alix's forearm.¹² The two gazes of the subjects depicted here converge at the point of intravenous injection, a hypodermic needle piercing the skin, centered symmetrically within this square frame. Their activity, unmistakably and perhaps uncomfortably for a squeamish viewer, is forcefully exposed as the photograph's only site of visual information. Given few distractions within the frame to deter a second glance (e.g., where to? the face of the young girl? the profile of the artist? perhaps the detail of his wrist bands?), we are powerfully instructed to view one inescapable scene: the protagonists shooting up one summer afternoon.



Fig. 3. Alberto García-Alix. *Tarde de verano II*. 1977.
Courtesy of the artist.

This is the tour de force of García-Alix's approach to framing his photographs: his images act intensely on the viewer, often redirecting one's gaze towards a single, ineludible feature that minimizes any possibility of visual distraction within the frame. The photograph's composition, centered on the needle and guided by diegetic cues such as the directional gazes of the two photographed subjects, forcefully turns our sight towards an undeniable display of a socially marginalized, perhaps even "dirty" practice. Effectively diminishing the viewer's (immediately contemplative) participation in this

encounter, the photograph commands our gaze; its force is violently acted upon us. In this sense, *Tarde de verano II* is representative of the other images to follow, in that the *punctum*—the image’s accidental force—leaves little to the viewer’s imagination in each of García-Alix’s photographs. Barthes defines the *punctum* as a visual detail in the photograph that punctuates or interrupts the viewer’s looking. It is not actively “sought out” but rather occurs in the chance encounter between photograph and viewer, a “sting, speck, cut, little hole,” or wound that touches [*touché*] the viewer with immediacy (27). Although Barthes initially assesses the *punctum* as a visual detail that may fill or distract the sight, when viewing the portrait of a prisoner condemned to death, Barthes expounds on the metonymic force of the *punctum*, referring to its impossible temporal coexistence between “*this will be* and *this has been*” (96, emphasis in the original). However miniscule or accidental its visual detail may be, according to Barthes the *punctum* also extends to what lies beyond the frame, or the impending death of a man awaiting his execution, causing the author to stir: “I shudder [. . .] *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*” (96, emphasis in the original). Aside from the photograph’s most immediate shock value or its visual aesthetic, the force of the photograph’s *punctum* may come to light over the passing of time and history, perceived in retrospect as a sort of accidental document to a double tense, both before and after the catastrophe.

The *punctum* of *Tarde de verano II* is, at least for the authors of this article, an intersection between the needle puncturing the skin and its metonymic, atemporal referent to a disaster that simultaneously *will be* and *has been*—the ravaging consequences of heroin abuse in Spain, captured at the very moment of injection. For the manner of framing this photograph provides a simple close-up that testifies to both an autobiographical and a collective practice throughout these years, while appealing to the fringe cultural status of *la movida* and the individualist body politic (or, experimentation with sex and drugs) that the early post-Franco era connotes; yes, shooting-up did indeed happen, and heroin abuse did claim victims. Plainly stated, the photograph’s frame saturates the image with its own historicity. Here García-Alix portrays the collective ritual of heroin injection, in which users often shared the same needle, a past event of seemingly little importance beyond individual or autobiographical immediacy. Or, if we paraphrase the title, it might read, “the artist, getting high one summer afternoon in 1977,” one day like any other. Yet the metonymic function of the *punctum* consists in the photograph’s casual gesture towards a collective disaster (shared, like the girl holding the tourniquet), into which

García-Alix's camera intervenes. For, the marginal practice depicted here, albeit unknown at the time, would become Spain's leading cause of HIV transmission over the course of the decade, burdened by a strong statistical correlation between injected drug users and new reported HIV cases in Spain until the early 1990s (Secretaría del Plan Nacional sobre el Sida 14). García-Alix tacitly leaves a mark on the viewer with this unsightly interplay, whereby our vision is filled (perhaps, injected) with the obscene—at once attributable to the uneasiness it provokes in a viewer and to the sight the photograph detains upon a marginal social practice at a specific time that we, as viewers, have no choice but to see. And yet, paradoxically, the metonymic possibility of the *punctum* falls short of achieving an outright similarity between its relation to HIV transmission and communal heroin injection portrayed here. It is not enough for us to see where the camera lens turns towards HIV/AIDS unless we read this image as one point in time, endowed with historical specificity, in conversation with the following two images as a triptych.

In *Autorretrato con cuerpo herido* (1981) (Figure 4) we are confronted with the gruesome image of García-Alix's wounded body. The photograph of the bloodied torso offers a limited frame of view, cropped from the shoulders down to the artist's thigh, thereby excluding the subject's face. At the photograph's center, a tear in the bloodstained underwear is displayed for the camera by hands that lift the dark spotted shirttails up to his stomach. The hands, fingers spread, are arranged with palms pressed against the body, imagined as a cautious touch, the gesture of convalescence and self-comforting. The genitals are covered, but the tear in García-Alix's briefs reveals dark pubic hair below and, in a parallel play between covering and revealing what lies beneath, a patch of toilet paper escaping the lowered waistline of his underwear blots the groin to prevent bleeding. We are presented once more with an image that commands the viewer—in part, by framing the body, placing it at the photograph's center; in part, by shocking the viewer—to fixate on the bloodstained wound. For us, the body part turned protagonist constitutes the photograph's first sting, its *punctum*. Violence has been done to the groin, photographed here as the partially revealed evidence of an unseen wound. Thus, the photograph's *punctum* within our field of vision inspires two curious possibilities: was this the consequence of a risky sexual escapade that led, with unfortunate results, to the tearing of flesh? (And as a secondary concern, just what might that be?) Or if sex was not the culprit, then was the cause of the wound an injected vein that could not stop bleeding? As García-Alix makes us privy to his avid heroin use in photographs like *Tarde de verano II*, we might assume that the loss of healthy veins

has led to alternative sites of injection. In either case, the *punctum* leaves us with seemingly little recourse other than to speculate *in the past tense* what caused this gory aftermath.



Fig. 4. Alberto García-Alix. *Autorretrato con cuerpo herido*. 1981.
Courtesy of the artist.

The ambiguity of the wound's origin plays on a viewer's imagination to frame the obscene within the photograph: heroin abuse, on the one hand, and risky (i.e., blood-letting) sex practices on the other, both of which share their place in a borderline category of social behavior that diametrically opposes bourgeois decency, much less what the same standard would consider appropriate for public viewing. To varying degrees, the spilled blood, the posture of a wounded and convalescent torso, the allusion to risky sexual practices, and the potential culprit of intravenous injection all constitute, through inference, a space of reading the *punctum's* second obscenity outside the frame: the diseased social body. By naming the unidentified torso in the title as García-Alix's own, the photographer achieves a suggestive interplay between any-body and his own, between the damaged whole and the private wound made public. Whereas the event of the photograph in *Tarde de verano II* provides us with evidence of two subjects partaking in shared drug use—undeniably showing us “the point of injection”—*Autorretrato* turns towards the ailing body as evidence of a trauma that did happen, but is only made visible by its bloodstained trace. If we read these two photographs in tandem, García-Alix marks a shift from the moment of injection (the “punctured moment-now-past”) to the aftermath (the “wounded present”); and, in this shift, it is no longer the present but the post-traumatic moment that now takes center stage. In this way, the metonymic function of the *punctum* achieves an indexical, however ambiguous, figuration in the photograph, referring at once to a private mishap and a wounded body made public, to an undisclosed trauma and its visible evidence—a collective hemorrhage that continues to bleed out from the social corpus.

Within the photograph's frame of an ailing body (i.e., the diseased social body), the clothes that bleed through to show us the only visible evidence of damage provide a poignant encounter for a viewer who would rather not see, for one who would rather turn away. Evocative of obscenity, the photograph stops short of pulling back the underwear and showing us the wound. And yet, by showing us too much without displaying all, the photograph becomes a site wherein artistic production and social realities converge, overlap, and are encountered as evidence in the present perfect tense. In a sense, the passing of time has turned this photographed evidence of “risky” practices into a document, into visual evidence for the aftermath of a trauma that *has been*, but which bears its consequence *upon the present*. The camera divulges an obscenity that shuttles between a display of the collective social body and its repulsive state of private injury, between concealing the site of trauma and showing us, at

present, the hemorrhaging evidence of a previous laceration. That is, the photograph forcefully underscores a site that literally and figuratively “bleeds out” across time, a scene whose origin remains off-stage, yet comes into view through the camera lens.¹³

We see García-Alix’s representation of an ailing body as a metaphor for divulging the ob-scene from the private realm into public view. The visibility of the bloodstained torso (a metonym for the social corpus) gestures towards a photographic, temporal specificity for the year it was taken (1981), a time marked by the initial anxieties surrounding the clinical identification of HIV/AIDS. Somewhat paradoxically then, the ambiguous identity of *Autorretrato* opens up the private body to become, on the one hand, a visible trace of a larger social obscenity and, on the other, a temporal location: an unknown accident that did occur and continues to bleed out over time. Nevertheless, the photograph frames the body as the locus of an unsightly matter that, judging from the photographer’s choice to turn his camera towards it, ought to be seen. Oscillating between full- and non-disclosure—perhaps in the same way the viewer teeters between seeing the body and not seeing it, between dressing and un-dressing it—obscenity in *Autorretrato* is at once an encounter with the unsightly that should remain concealed and the concealment of a wound that bleeds out revealing the damage it has done. This paradox is overwhelming for us, precisely because it is so obvious, and so ob-scene. García-Alix detains his viewer’s glance upon something that should not be witnessed (the injured body, the body in crisis) and doubly masks it, showing us enough detail (too much, some might say), but without uncovering the wound in its entirety. For the image interrogates what we may expect to see, what we wish to remain unseen, and what we may only see through evidence that continues to bleed out from a concealed origin.

Many of García-Alix’s images stage a sort of “theater of the ob-scene” providing encounters with everyday social realities from an era, often cast under the more conventional umbrella of unsightly visual content. Perhaps nowhere is this staging asserted more directly than in García-Alix’s abject photograph, *Una pequeña historia de amor* (1995) (Fig. 5), which displays a close-up of a bent forearm exhibiting a knotted, semen-filled condom. As in the two previous photographs, the centering of this image within the frame leaves little visual distraction for an unsettled viewer, lest we study the arm’s intricate tattoos or, perhaps regrettably upon closer inspection, the dark matter speckling the fingers and the condom itself. Nevertheless, the residue—the inevitable trace of human expulsion—is displayed prominently as our referent to an “off-stage” or ob-scene past occurrence, a “small love story” as it were. In this

productive play between seeing the unsightly and our preferred response to look away, lies the photograph's hold on something that should be kept concealed (i.e., literally and figuratively, an ob-scene "matter") and its uncensored exhibition (i.e., "making it matter"). The image, in the figurative sense, places at stake a viewer's response to engage what we see or to dispose of it entirely, the way one would with the used condom itself. The image, thus, doubly speaks to us. It says that this particular residue—the contents of a love story—is a matter somehow worth seeing, underscored by its centrality within the frame and the camera's sharp focus on the condom's texture in contrast to the hand that barely grasps it. The imagistic cues in García-Alix's photograph posit that this residue, or *what remains after* the event, does indeed matter. For, social constructions that inform a viewer repulsed by this image to turn away, to consider the residue "waste" and "dispose of it" from our sight, ultimately participate in granting invisibility to matters that share an "abject" status with the cultural obscene. After all, the photograph's ironic title alludes to what is at stake in making the obscene visible. Twisting conventional notions of a "love story" laced with social proprieties, the title and image lead us to question our own participation in rendering matters ob-scene, by turning away from the event's uncomfortably visible trace.



Fig. 5. Alberto García-Alix. *Una pequeña historia de amor*. 1995.
Courtesy of the artist.

The “small love story” then conjures up its metonymic function as a narrative piece, *una historia* that shows evidence of its past tense as pure residue, ready for disposal. Like *Autorretrato*, our evidence of the off-stage event (the origin of the wound in *Autorretrato*, the sex act in *Una historia*) takes the form of abject corporeal secretions: blood, semen, and other remainders. However, in contrast to the wounded torso in *Autorretrato*, we note that whereas the bleeding body requires patching to recover from damage, the love story turns the trace into a controlled, contained, and, we might even say, quarantined matter. The posture of the hand in this narrative is key, for the condom dangles from two fingertips, a gesture that minimizes the hand’s contact with the object and its unsightly contents. The tied knot also proves important: it contains the human secretion within a confined, latex barrier, effectively keeping what’s inside from spilling out. This double inference to containment and repulsion relates as much to a figurative matter of transmissible disease as it speaks to the photograph’s capacity to transmit a viewer’s dis-ease. After all, the preventative measure exhibited here is, and was at the time of the photograph, the most effective measure to inhibit HIV/AIDS transmission. Transmission here not only operates to transgress social proprieties between what is suitable for seeing and what remains invisible, but it functions across the image’s narrative time. If the social body formerly revealed its ailment through bloodstained secretions, now this corporeal trace is no longer mapped onto the body but has been expelled from it, isolated for disposal. In this narrative, the latex barrier functions as a vessel for containment, lending the condom’s status here to be read as a “carrier” of human waste.

If the love story is framed and indexed by remnants, by human (transmittable) waste, then García-Alix takes that residue—the *remainder* of the obscene act and the *reminder* of the culturally obscene—and places it at *our* disposal in front of his viewers’ eyes. In doing so, our reading of García-Alix’s work constructs a body politic of exposure to (and from) the HIV/AIDS crisis within the narrative arc of these three photographs. From the shared practice of injecting heroin in 1977, to an ailing social body that bleeds-out to show evidence of its trauma in 1981, to the containment and disposal of the obscene trace in 1995. When read as a triptych, these images echo a narrative of the public’s social reaction to the HIV/AIDS crisis that played out in Spain, as elsewhere.



Figs. 3, 4, 5. Alberto García-Alix.
Tarde de verano II. 1977; *Autorretrato con cuerpo herido*. 1981;
Una pequeña historia de amor. 1995.

The images' visual continuity and temporal dissemination across two decades in contemporary Spain mark three moments experienced in both a public and private, collective and individual *historia*: the point of infection (puncture), the point of post-transmission (bleeding-out), and the point of perceived containment (isolation and disposal). In other words, the narrative that emerges from García-Alix's three images is reflective of a larger socio-political pattern of (and subsequent "coping" with) the pandemic, which earlier we called the social symptoms of an attempt at a cure. Inseparable from these three moments is an underlying historical narrative for the social body and the expulsion of its "diseased" others: for if the point of post-transmission only becomes visible from identifying the symptoms of a wounded (collective) body (Figure 4), then the subsequent point of containment exhibits a repulsed, casting-out of this transmittable "waste" from the social body, not without disgust (Figure 5). Simply stated, intertwined within the narrative triptych of HIV/AIDS transmission is the social expulsion of a marginalized category in opposition to the "healthy" social body, namely the stigma associated with PWAs. And although the photographs examined here offer three separate encounters with the obscene (temporally and corporally speaking), they do have a common denominator: the occasion, which prominently displays unsightly matters *within* the frame, brings them into focus, and, thus, carefully locates their narrative at the photograph's center within our field of vision.

If the aforementioned examples (Figure 3–5) provide us with a case of the cultural ob-scene, the medium of photography may offer viewers a particularly provocative insight into encounters with

unsightly matters, posited here as evidence of marginalized social realities. Since the spread of HIV/AIDS in Spain posed a true threat to society, but, nevertheless, was subverted into the realm of the obscene (a real and present, but invisible matter precluded from public view), photography's metaphorical flash doubly illuminates. On the one hand, traces or allusions to disease are captured and granted a space from which to be viewed. On the other hand, images that refer to the obscene as a marginal or even unspoken matter, as we have suggested, might lend viewers to interrogate the social containment of obscenities as their primary subject matter (recalling Figure 5). Specifically in the case of García-Alix's photography, real events and poses in the photographer's surroundings are captured, framed, and exposed to become documents—even if only accidentally—on social realities, whereby his images reveal unsightly matters that are all the more crucial, timely, and impacting for events regarded obscene enough to be silenced or otherwise under-exposed. The flash of García-Alix's camera, so to speak, paradoxically blinds us into seeing; the photographs invite us to witness, if not interpret, a greater historical narrative for the cultural impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

If we were to look beyond these three images to García-Alix's oeuvre, we see that his photography produces a secondary effect. The experience of death in García-Alix's photographs, writes Jenaro Talens, is not suited by the time of memory, but instead it operates within the space of an absolute present, “de una mirada que nada recobra, que no intenta recuperar nada, ni reconstruir nada, [. . .] de que no hay nada que decir, nada con qué decirlo, no querer decirlo, no poder decirlo, con la obligación de decirlo” (30) (of a gaze that does not recover anything, that does not attempt to recuperate or construct anything, [. . .] of which there is nothing to say, nothing with which to say it—not wanting to say it, unable to say it, but obligated to say it). While García-Alix's work provides us with countless images of somewhat squeamish or unsightly events, his use of the camera invites viewers into (and, thus, opens the door to) the closet of a socially marginalized sphere shared with the photographer's most intimate circle. Ultimately, García-Alix's camera captures the moment (the obscene/unseen event) precisely because it *is* present, and, thus, it ends up producing a document only after time has passed on the realities and various “stages” within the social conception of HIV/AIDS. In this sense, the passing of time turns the absolute present in García-Alix's photographs into a contemplative space, contrary to the eviscerating shock value or immediacy of seeing the unsightly. In them, the viewer becomes witness, albeit only in retrospect, to a stage of cultural obscenity respondent to the *now* of the photograph, taken at a time when the

Spanish State (specifically, the Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo) and activist campaigns were slow to respond to HIV/AIDS. The camera not only grants visibility to a present when political institutions were notably absent or ineffective, but its end result—in photography—gestures towards a narrative in response to the public silence surrounding the health crisis. If there is one way in which this artist props the door open to cultural ob-scenity (and presumably keeps it open), it is through his camera's *intervention*, which enters into an intimate realm for us to *see* the individual crisis as a collective one in a way that public health discourse failed to mediate. As such, the photographs tend to “act up” by fostering *visual and narrative interventions* in the present-time when they are viewed, not by preventing drug abuse or condoning safe sex practices, but rather by lending themselves to a narrative on a collective, social space of “otherness” at the margins of cultural activity. These are images that speak to obscenities swept under the rug or ignored altogether, discarded in the dustbin of history. They sketch out obscenities within each photograph's absolute present to cast their shadow upon a greater narrative (or, “*historia*,” most explicitly demonstrated with the title of Figure 5). Or, recalling the plea made by Ross Chambers, García-Alix's photography *may open the door* to the cultural obscene, inasmuch as it invites viewers to bear witness to its unsightly matters.

Our readings throughout these pages have speculated on the possibilities of seeing what lies beyond the frame of an unsightly image, an occasion that potentially could lead one to turn away in disgust, depending on the viewer's personal (dis-)tastes for what she or he sees. Borrowing from Barthes' language to describe the viewer's encounter with the photograph, this might constitute a *missed* encounter between viewer and image (i.e., “Do you see it?” “Not at all, and I don't care to.”). While recognizing that not all viewers will react to an unsightly image in a similar way, lending our question to interrogate the social norms and subjective factors that inform viewers' responses to the obscene, we have limited our discussion here to the *possibilities of seeing* (i.e., “Do you see it?” “Not yet.” “What if we look again, but this way?”). When met with a willing gaze to turn towards them, García-Alix's photographs operate within a threshold, between disposing of the unsightly and recapturing it as an object of contemplation. But, more importantly, what takes center stage (what is visibly “on stage”), filling our sight by force, is the ever-shifting stage itself and where it places us as viewers. In other words, approaching photography as an atemporal encounter operates within a threshold dangling somewhere in-between being thrown away (like the condom in Figure 5), and being

thrown in front of the camera, which is to say, being thrown in our faces. The images serve as a haunting reminder that the HIV/AIDS pandemic, like the condom, like our sight, and like the peripheral status of obscene cultural matters, is always encountered in the in-between, and, thus, will always situate our propensity to view the unsightly within the in-between: in an encounter with [HIV/AIDS] history where it may be sensed, like the photograph's *punctum*, but is not immediately seen. However, if the HIV/AIDS pandemic has altered the ways in which the body is imagined (as a disease or a potential carrier), the ways in which bodies are represented in culture, or even "practiced" in social and sexual relations, perhaps without our awareness for these transformations, then the photograph may prove a helpful medium to fill and detain our sight with the force of witnessing a cultural scene where and when these changes come about. But interrogating these matters would, before all, require us in individual practice and in academic endeavors to turn towards some-thing and encounter it *there*, even if at first it proves unpalatable for viewing.

Notes

1. We wish to extend our deepest gratitude to Alberto García-Alix for his generosity in granting us permission to reproduce his work here. Also, Nicolás Combarro and David Caron provided insightful, detailed comments on an earlier version of this essay. Our sincerest thanks to the three of them.
2. Although, for reasons of space, we do not intend to explore how HIV/AIDS in Spain has manifested as a dually "sacred" and "abject" phenomenon in cultural representation, it is worth noting several sources that examine this important matter. Brad Epps offers an excellent reading of the mystical undertones of disease, and specifically AIDS metaphors, in Juan Goytisolo's *Las virtudes de pájaro solitario*. See his essay "The Ecstasy of Disease: Mysticism, Metaphor, and AIDS in *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*." As well, Paul Julian Smith comments on the symbolic reworking of religious paradigms to represent AIDS in Spanish narrative and visual art, mentioned in his analysis of "lesser known" artists in Spain, like Juan Vicente Aliaga and José Miguel G. Cortés, and their readings of works by Alberto Cardín, Eduardo Haro Ibars, and Pepe Espaliú. See Smith's essays "Fatal Strategies: The Representation of AIDS in the Spanish State" and "Back to Front: Alberto Cardín's Queer Habitus."
3. For a documented archive of HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns promoted by the "Plan Nacional sobre el Sida" from 1988 to present, see the Spanish Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo's website, www.msc.es.
4. Ricardo Llamas alludes to this violent casting-out of the ailing social body (the category of *otherness* in counterpoint to the healthy body) visualized in the social imaginary as the "sickly," and foremost "homosexual" body of

PWAs: “Todo cuerpo con sida pasó a ser un cuerpo homosexual, o, en todo caso, un cuerpo desalmado (cuerpo de mujer, de drogadicto, cuerpo pobre, negro o de inmigrante). El sida no hacía sino confirmar (evidenciar) una realidad sólo física. El sida, caracterizado simbólicamente como enfermedad de transmisión sexual (ignorando otras vías de transmisión), solidifica la encarnación fantasmática del ‘homosexual’” (179) (Every body with AIDS becomes a homosexual body, or at least a debilitated body [the body of a woman, a drug addict, a poor body, a black body or an immigrant]. AIDS only confirmed (made evident) a purely physical reality. Characterized symbolically as a sexually transmitted disease [ignoring other means of transmission], AIDS solidifies the ghostly reincarnation of the ‘homosexual’).

5. The Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo’s campaigns promoting condom usage since 2006, and particularly the 2008 television spot with its rap, “sólo con koko, sólo con condón” (only using your head, only with a condom), are primarily directed at youth, for which an accompanying report explains the announcement’s motives when targeting this population sector: “Los jóvenes tienen la percepción de estar protegidos de las posibles consecuencias desfavorables de las relaciones sexuales, que pueden ocurrir a otros pero no a ellos. A pesar de la consideración de que los jóvenes están muy informados se observa que la información suele ser superficial con importantes creencias falsas. El preservativo sigue siendo el método más utilizado, pero en ocasiones se justifica su no utilización con la confianza en la otra persona, confundiendo confianza con responsabilidad” (Youth have the perception of being protected against the potentially unfavorable consequences of sexual relations, which can happen to others but not to themselves. Despite the consideration that youth are well informed, we note that their information is usually superficial with significant false beliefs. Condoms continue to be the most used method of contraception, but not using a condom was occasionally justified by the person’s trust in the other person, confusing trust with responsibility). See the Spanish Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo’s website, www.msc.es.
6. Among nationally distributed newspapers in Spain, *El País* has historically offered the greatest number of news articles covering the HIV/AIDS pandemic since 1981, thereby constituting one space of public visibility in the media which has called into question the pandemic’s lack of visibility in other news sources. For example, in 1996 the newspaper covered the State television network’s (TVE) cancellation of a taped discussion among government officials, doctors, and representatives from HIV/AIDS organizations after the panelists protested TVE’s intention to follow their conversation by airing a polemical video, *Sida: La duda*, which argues that HIV/AIDS does not exist. See “TVE suspende un debate sobre el sida para ‘La noche temática’ de Arte” (G.G., R. 51).
7. Smith addresses why HIV/AIDS in Spain has produced so few cultural expressions, despite its prevalence. “Three possibilities arise. The first is the pattern of transmission. [. . .] official figures (often tardy and unreliable) claim that the proportion of transmissions deriving from IV drug use is much higher in Spain than in the US or Northern Europe, and that

reported transmission by male-to-male sex is correspondingly lower. With drug users even less likely than gay men in Spain to view themselves as a community with a right to public self-expression, the paucity of artistic representation of the syndrome might seem inevitable. Likewise, the relative lack of formal infrastructure or of tradition of public speech in a putative Spanish gay community would problematize both the reach of health-care education and the production of literature, art, or film around the epidemic. Finally, the fragmentation of the Spanish state, with the multiple autonomous regions competing for scarce resources and the central authorities offering only fitful attempts at nationwide campaigns, tends perhaps to discourage collective awareness and collaboration even between very similar groups of committed artists from whom collective action might be expected.” (“Fatal Strategies: The Representation of AIDS in the Spanish State” 105). Smith’s assessment of the autonomous communities’ lack of coordinated efforts when organizing HIV awareness campaigns is also reflected in a 1996 report by El Centro de Estudios Epidemiológicos sobre el Sida de Cataluña, which criticizes the Spanish State’s absence from controlling or supplementing HIV/AIDS research from the hands of pharmaceutical company interests. See Javier Torrontegui’s article in *El País* “Un duro informe epidemiológico critica la descoordinación española sobre el sida” (26 Oct. 1996): 26.

8. See Lourdes Chamorro’s article “VIH y sida en España.”
9. This prejudice was, as well, prevalent among health workers in Spain, according to the Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo’s 1989 study, “Actitudes sociales ante el SIDA entre el colectivo de trabajadores de salud” (Social Attitudes towards AIDS among Health Workers), in which a reported 36.8% of doctors, nurses, medical assistants, and other health workers in Spain’s hospitals believed that “los enfermos de SIDA deberían ser aislados de las demás personas para evitar el contagio” (persons with AIDS should be isolated from other persons to avoid contagion), an isolation strictly based on a person’s positive status without risk of transmission. The study stands as one of the first proactive measures by the Ministerio to correct misinformation among health workers regarding HIV transmission and contact risks. See Azucena Criado’s article “Casi un 40% del personal sanitario cree que los enfermos de SIDA deben ser registrados y aislados.” Common misinformation on HIV transmission has also been reflected in discriminatory laws, such as the Ayuntamiento de Madrid’s ban of HIV-positive persons from entering public pools, a measure that was repealed in 1996. See the Madrid edition of *El País* December 13, 1996, p. 3.
10. Similarly, Paul Julian Smith suggests the invisibility of HIV/AIDS is a crisis of representation, a cue he attributes to Simon Watney’s argument on the “look” of AIDS in a symptomatology of the disease (“Fatal Strategies 102).
11. David Caron has argued compellingly that HIV/AIDS discourse in France is intricately tied to historical notions of “otherness” and the imaginary of the French nation as a healthy social body. What we call the radical potential of AIDS to signify a wide range of metaphors on “otherness” is

perhaps nowhere better described than by Caron: “just as it was with late-nineteenth-century constructions of male homosexuality, Jewishness, racial and colonial otherness, et cetera, what is at stake in metaphorical and narrative uses of AIDS is truly the cohesion of national communities and the reinforcement of borders (in the literal and metaphorical senses of the term)” (103). Helen Graham and Antonio Sánchez have suggested, in the case of Spain, that gypsies, immigrants, and persons with HIV/AIDS share in their “otherness” as the site of identity creation for a “new” marginalized group, in line with that of a Eurocentric mode of exclusion, one that Spain had formerly been subject to under dictatorial isolation from Europe. See Graham and Sánchez’s article “The Politics of 1992.” Lastly, Teresa Vilarós offers a productive comparison between the social body in Spain, stricken by the AIDS crisis, and the metaphorical expulsion of the disease—into invisibility—of the abject, “infected body.” AIDS as metaphor, Vilarós suggests, is an intricate site of intersection between identity, sexual politics, the Spanish state, and notions of historical “otherness,” allowing the disease to be recast into a plurality of gothic horror forms, from the blood-sucking vampire to the uncanny monster. See Vilarós’ chapter on the infected body, “Cuarto mono: La España infectada. Conclusión” in *El mono del desencanto: Una crítica cultural de la transición española (1973–1993)*.

12. The three photographs we discuss in this article are reproduced in *Autorretratos/Self-portraits* (Barcelona, Galería H20, 2001). For the most complete collection to date on García-Alix’s photography in monograph format, see the exhibition catalog published on the occasion of the photographer’s 2008–09 retrospective at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, titled *Alberto García-Alix: De donde no se vuelve*.
13. Our description of García-Alix’s wounded torso as a corpus that “bleeds out across time” echoes Cristina Moreiras-Menor’s work on “wound culture” in contemporary Spain, and draws a parallel with her argument that cultural production may be read, like García-Alix’s ailing (social) body, as a site marked by collective trauma. Moreiras-Menor explores how Spain’s dictatorial past has permeated cultural representations in cinema and literature after the traumatic occurrence, in the aftermath of Francoism, and in ways that are not immediately accessible to—but do indeed gesture towards—the unseen, past origin of a collective wound. See Moreiras-Menor’s *Cultura herida: Literatura y cine en la España democrática*.

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