

In a Different Light

Curated by Lawrence Rinder and Nayland Blake

An Exhibition at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

January 11–April 9, 1995

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An Introduction to **In a Different Light**

by Lawrence Rinder

how are you feeling in ancient September
I am feeling like a truck on a wet highway
how can you
you were made in the image of God
I was not
I was made in the image of a sissy truck-driver
and Jean Dubuffet painting his cows
"with a likeness burst in the memory"
apart from love (don't say it)
I am ashamed of my century
for being so entertaining
but I have to smile

—From "Naphtha" by Frank O'Hara

In a Different Light explores the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in twentieth-century American art. This exhibition has been developed through poetics rather than polemics: not a definitive survey of gay and lesbian aesthetic sensibilities, it is, rather, a gathering of images and objects which, "with a likeness burst in the memory," sheds new light on our collective history.

The initial inspiration for the exhibition was the dynamism and innovation evident in the work of the contemporary generation of young gay and lesbian artists. Not only has there been, in these communities, an outpouring of work in the visual arts, but, especially in San Francisco, there is a palpable sense of community: visual artists, playwrights, poets, performance artists, filmmakers, and video artists present their work together in a variety of nonprofit venues and small commercial galleries, work that is often itself interdisciplinary

and collaborative. These artists live in a generally hostile social climate, amid the constant threat of "gay-bashings," proscriptive legislative initiatives, and surrounded by the tragedy of AIDS. Remarkably, they not only persist in making art, but do so in a spirit of humor, generosity, and flamboyance. Much of this work, too, has less to do with representing gay and lesbian lives than with conveying gay and lesbian views of the world: it is outward-looking, gregarious, and socially concerned.

Nayland Blake, who I had invited to curate an exhibition on this subject with me, believed that there have already been enough surveys of contemporary art by gay men and lesbians. He proposed, instead, a cross-generational exhibition that might help redress some of the cultural amnesia to which the art world is prone. Gay men and lesbians have been especially susceptible to such forgetfulness because art with homosexual content—literal, metaphorical, or symbolic—has typically remained unidentified as such or simply been excised from the histories. The contributions of numerous important artists—such as Romaine Brooks, Harmony Hammond, Kate Millett, Scott Burton, Jack Smith, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Arch Connelly, and Nicholas Mouffarege—remain comparatively under-documented.

Among those who have been accorded a degree of exposure and fame, the problem of visibility remains in a different form. A 1952 retrospective of the work of Charles Demuth at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, for example, did not include any of the artist's extraordinarily erotic watercolors depicting sailors *in flagrante* nor his equally unambiguous scenes set inside a Turkish bath. Lincoln Kirstein's 1992 catalog essay for a retrospective exhibition of Paul Cadmus at the Midtown-Payson Gallery makes only veiled reference to homoeroticism in Cadmus's paintings—yet, this is arguably his work's most distinctive thematic feature. We can debate whether identifiable gay or lesbian sensibilities as such exist; however, we certainly cannot clarify the issue so long as important artists remain "closeted"—either by their own or by others' efforts.

The historical contributions of lesbian artists, meanwhile, have been doubly obscured: first as women, secondly as homosexuals. While the Feminist movement of the 1970s forced a grudging acknowledgment of women's contributions to the history of art, many activists in this movement embraced mainstream acceptance at the expense of visibility for overtly lesbian art practices or interpretations of women's art that might reflect same-sex desire.

We developed **In a Different Light** by imagining groups of objects and images that, through their juxtaposition, might engage in refreshing and provocative dialogue. Often such groups would coalesce around a few key works, for example, Nancy Grossman's hermetically sealed Head, Arch Connelly's glamorously solipsistic, pearl-encrusted Self-portrait, and Scott Hewicker's plumply pillow-like Someday He'll Make it Plain to Me are placed side by side. This grouping, titled Self, evokes two central and compelling themes: a sense of self that is alienated yet autonomous and an approach to craft that is highly tactile, a fastidiousness bordering on compulsion. We found other related works; among them, Daryl Lynn Alvarez' Shawl, Man Ray's Enigma of Isadore Ducasse, Catherine Opie's Self-portrait, and Joan Snyder's Lady Blacklines.

As the groups expanded, compelling cross-references and themes emerged. It became a crucial challenge to maintain coherence and comprehensibility within each group while allowing for a lively and open play of meaning. We began to look for characteristics of each group that might be brought forward in the form of titles, thereby allowing us to frame and focus our selections. We settled on a series of nine groups: "Void," "Self," "Drag," "Other," "Couple," "Family," "Orgy," "World," and "Utopia." These groups function individually a bit like intimate chamber plays—somewhat in the fashion of San Francisco playwright Kevin Killian's productions in which a variety of members of the local arts community are enlisted to perform: each person, or—in our case—artwork, retains its inherent identity while taking on, in the ensemble, a new role.

The order of the groups suggests a kind of mathematical progression from zero (Void), to one (Self), to two (Couple), to many (Family, Orgy), to infinity (Utopia) and expresses an experience of moving toward ever greater degrees of sociability. On the one hand, this trajectory suggests the historical development of the gay and lesbian communities from a condition of invisibility and isolation, through a developing sense of community, to the present condition of increasing integration. On the other hand, the progress of the groups can be read as the personal passage from alienation to acceptance that faces any gay man or lesbian. It is hoped that the themes of the groups are, at the same time, universal enough to be accessible to a broad audience, straight as well as homosexual.

Void

Frequently monochromatic, often verging on abstraction, the works in this group suggest distance, emptiness, and mortality. While much of this work relates to the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic, other pieces, such as Andy Warhol's Jackie or Peter Hujar's Candy Darling in the Hospital, indicate previous or related expressions of mourning, absence, and alienation in order to place artists' response to AIDS in a broader context.

A number of works in this section, such as David Tudor's reconstruction of John Cage's score for 4 Minutes, 33 Seconds, also suggest the emptiness of what might be called a state of "pre-being" that precedes the birth of a new identity. Seen negatively, such works evoke the repressive alienation of the "closet." Seen in a more positive light, they represent a blank slate of unlimited possibility.

Self

This group is composed largely of images of the body: skin, hair, and the contours of physical form. These works appear to turn inward rather than out towards to the world around them, evoking a sense of alienation as well as self-sufficiency. In these self-reflexive states, fantasies of identity can begin to take shape.

Drag

This group concerns the practice of imitation, and therefore indicates a shifting attention from self to other. Some of the works in this group represent drag in the conventional sense as a kind of playful costuming in which gender is exaggerated or reversed.

Instead of simply representing a parody of gender norms, other artists create works that also question the sincerity or "naturalness" of the art object itself. For example, Robert Gober's Plywood—a finely crafted, hand-made imitation of an industrially produced building material—functions both in the tradition of trompe l'oeil painting—in which artists attempted to paint so realistically as to "fool the eye"—while also suggesting an attempt literally to fabricate an experience of masculinity.

Other

In this group, artists express the longing of unrequited love: the objects of their intense desires remain alluring yet perpetually distant. Whether the other is a star like Madonna, a fashion model, or an image of erotic perfection, such attraction must bridge a social chasm that would be difficult for anyone to cross but which is made especially

impassable for homosexuals because of proscriptions against same-sex desire.

Here, desire for the other is often imagined in terms of a totem or fetish. Totemic works, such as Millie Wilson's *Daytona Death Angel* or Marsden Hartley's *Cascade of Devotion: Mexico*, present a singular and monumental object or image which, in its isolated glory suggests something perfect and unattainable. Fetish-like works, such as Karen Kilimnick's *Madonna Before She Got Famous - Madonna at Home* or Richard Hawkin's *Goethe's Italian Journey*, capture the other with just ephemeral suggestions of their presence.

Couple

The couple is the standard social nucleus. In modern Western society, a couple is almost universally considered to be a union of opposites; that is, male and female. The works here, though, foreground the similarities that can exist between the two halves of a union. Many of the works may allude to the stereotypically negative view of same-sex couples as narcissistic, however, these artists also put a positive spin on the phenomenon of recognition, empathy, and identification that can accompany attraction based as much on similarity as on difference.

Family

In this group, "family" can be understood in a variety of ways. On the one hand, are works that represent the experience of homosexuality in the nuclear, or biological, family. Other works allude to the groups of friends known among many gay men and lesbians as their "chosen family" (often a crucial substitute for a real family that has disowned them). Finally, we have included under this title works that indicate the larger sense of kinship and belonging that has coalesced around the gay and lesbian communities as a whole.

Orgy

The works in this group represent an expanding circle of communal pleasure and sexual freedom. Among the many challenges that the experiences of gay men and lesbians have posed to the status quo, one of the most significant is their experimentation with a wide variety of sexual practices. While the majority of gay men and lesbians may remain in fairly conventional, monogamous sexual relationships, others within these communities have embraced their socially marginal status, welcoming the opportunity to overthrow what are perceived as Puritanical sexual norms.

The orgiastic quality of these artworks evokes not only sexual freedom but, equally, a sense of broad social and intellectual experimentation, fueled by a conviction that gregariousness, complexity, and pleasure are inherently positive. The complexity and mutability of sexual experience itself is emerging as a significant new theme in the work of a younger generation of artists many of whom feel far less compelled to conform to a stable and "politically correct" identity.

World

The themes expressed by these works often overlap sexual concerns with broader social and political ones. Readily apparent here is the impact of AIDS, a tragedy which has forced many to acknowledge the relationships between their sexual and political lives and which has helped to forge links between various marginal groups. Even as the gay and lesbian communities have gained in visibility and political clout, rifts within these communities have emerged, expressing lingering divisions based on class and ethnic identification.

Utopia

The works in this section share a brittle but hopeful beauty. With tenderness and sensuality they present bold and dreamy imaginings of an ideal world. For some, such utopian musings are fantasies that, however impossible to achieve, help to keep hope alive. For others, the contemplation of an ideal, harmonious world reflects a renewed spirituality—a renewal based, at least in part, on the need to find sources of strength in the face of the ravages of AIDS.

The progression of groups in the exhibition is not a chronology, as each group contains works from a variety of historical periods. Culture in general, and gay and lesbian culture in particular, interprets and reconfigures the past in terms of the present. In this exhibition, history reads both ways, recontextualizing older works in terms of their present resonances and positing contemporary works in terms of their continuity with historical traditions and sensibilities.

The notion of "sensibility" that we have employed in this exhibition is somewhat idiosyncratic. The groups are not based on aesthetic sensibility, but rather came together and are identified by social sensibility—that is, the various conditions of being in the world in relation to other persons. The exhibition is thus structured in a fundamentally sociological, rather than art-historical, manner. While aesthetic sensibilities as such are not a point of departure or structuring principle, such sensibilities certainly emerge in interesting ways throughout the exhibition.

What would a lesbian or gay aesthetic sensibility be? For lesbians, the social revolution of the women's movement in the 1970s brought about unprecedented opportunities to present and examine their art in the context of sexuality. However, as Harmony Hammond, curator of the historic 1978 exhibition "A Lesbian Show," recalls in her essay in this catalog, the result was not the discovery of a distinctly lesbian aesthetic

sensibility but rather the revelation of a broad variety of shared thematic concerns including, "issues of anger, guilt, hiding, secrecy, coming out, personal violence and political trust, self-empowerment, and the struggle to make oneself whole." [1]

If it is true that, by 1980, no distinctly lesbian aesthetic sensibility had emerged, the phenomenon of "camp" had long before entered the mainstream academic discourse as the token legitimate aesthetic sensibility identified with homosexuality (typically, though not exclusively, male homosexuality). In her 1964 essay, "Notes on 'Camp,'" Susan Sontag wrote, "The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance . . . Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much.'" [2] From her observation that, "every sensibility is self-serving to the group that promotes it," Sontag goes on to say that, "Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness." [3] Clearly, camp, as Sontag describes it, (i.e., "disengaged, depoliticized or—at least apolitical" [4]) would be hard pressed sufficiently to express the list of critical lesbian concerns cited above by Harmony Hammond, concerns which apply equally to gay men. While playfulness remains a strong current within gay and lesbian art, it is generally as an adjunct to, rather than a "solvent" for, a re-constituted morality and progressive political agenda.

In this exhibition, a number of artistic areas emerge as substantially infused with the experience of gay men and lesbians. While perhaps not broad enough as phenomena to constitute "sensibilities" as such, these are, nevertheless, important areas for further investigation. For example, if we can speak of "gendered" abstraction in the work of Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, or Jackson Pollock, can we speak of an abstraction of homoerotic experience in the work of Richmond Burton, John Cage, or Louise Fishman? One notices here, too, the extraordinary re- invigoration of agit-prop styles and techniques in the work of Gran Fury, Boys and Girls with Arms Akimbo, Dyke Action Machine!, and Bureau. There are also numerous contemporary

progeny of Marcel Duchamp's subversive gender-bending practices that are more conceptual than camp. If identifiable gay or lesbian aesthetic styles or sensibilities exist, they exist in multiplicity, and in complex intersection with mainstream art practice. They are emanations of complex, fluid sociological constructs, never simply gay or lesbian. Just as the manifestations of sexual desire and behavior are multifarious and mutable, so, too, are the reflections of those desires and behaviors in art.

By trying to work from objects and images—instead of exclusively from the sexual orientation of the makers—we arrived at one of our most important operating principles: to include both homosexual and non-homosexual artists, and to leave sexual orientation unspecified in the exhibition.

Some historical conditions pertain primarily to the lives of self-identified—whether closeted or not—homosexuals (i.e., social and legal oppression), but creative response to such conditions are not limited to those so affected. An ostensibly straight artist may identify with any one of numerous conditions—sexual or otherwise—central to the experience of gay men or lesbians. He or she may create a work of art that contributes to the cultural dialogue of both the gay and lesbian communities and of the culture as a whole. Drag, for example, is situated primarily within the experience of gay men and lesbians because the culture at large identifies homosexuality with gender transgression. However, drag and its implications pervade the culture as a whole. Drag points toward the fact that any gender position is accomplished through role-playing and imitation, as if to say, "Honey, we're all in drag!" Works in this exhibition by straight artists such as Lynda Benglis and Robert Morris speak to this issue as cogently as the work of any gay or lesbian artist. If there are such things that can be called gay or lesbian sensibilities—esthetic or otherwise—these are highly amorphous phenomena within American culture and are not attached exclusively to people who have sex with people of the same sex.

While developing a broad social and historical framework, we also sought to acknowledge the initial inspiration for the exhibition, that is, the contemporary dynamism in communities of younger gay and lesbian artists. Ironically, within these communities, homosexuality—as a category of identity—seems to be posed increasingly more as a question than as a fact. For many artists in their twenties and early thirties—at least those in urban areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York—the very definitions of sexual identity are in

flux. The category of "queer" is rapidly replacing gay and lesbian as the defining term for both men and women of this younger generation. Queerness, as opposed to gayness or lesbianism—or, for that matter, "straightness"—is becoming a term which subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it: queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political. Much more than the terms "gay" or "lesbian," "queer," from the outset, alludes to a way of life in which sexual freedom and gender transgression are but component parts. While the present moment seems to mark an historic watershed for gay and lesbian art, this extraordinary creativity may be happening not because of a solidifying of gay and lesbian identity, but precisely because of crisis in that identity.

Some may argue that the sexual orientation of artists is irrelevant to art itself. Art can and should at times be presented and experienced as an intimation—if not an assertion—of universal experience, but such an approach need not rule out other interpretative approaches. A strong work of art is readable on a variety of levels, both as a subject of specific historical, political, or cultural interest and as a thing of beauty or emotion. Recent debates pitting these approaches against each other—with antagonistic charges of "Formalist Aestheticism" versus "Political Correctness"—are divisive, unproductive, and unimaginative.

In a Different Light opens the door to a fascinating new area for exploration. The resonance of gay and lesbian experience in twentieth-century American art has been profound in ways we are just beginning to appreciate. At the same time, it seems that the work of many of the younger generation of artists is telling us that our definitions of sexual identity are changing in unforeseen ways. Now may be the right time to reflect on our collective history while we still have one foot planted in "gay," "lesbian," and "straight" experience and the other stepping into a new world whose definitions—and pleasures—are, as yet, unknown.

Lawrence Rinder

Notes

1. Harmony Hammond, "A Lesbian Show at 112 Greene Street Workshop, January 21 - February 11, 1978," in *In a Different Light*, Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, Amy Scholder eds., City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1995, p. 45.

2. Susan Sontag, "Notes on `Camp,'" in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, Vintage Books, New York, 1983, p. 112.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 107.