

## **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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### Curating **In a Different Light**

by Nayland Blake

In 1991, I organized an exhibition with Pam Gregg for San Francisco's New Langton Arts called "Situation." It was a gathering of works by over thirty young gay and lesbian artists. For the most part these were artists whom I regarded as my peers, and the exhibition was conceived of as the third in a series of exhibitions, the Bay Area's contribution to a discussion that had included "Against Nature" in Los Angeles and "Erotophobia" in New York (The organizers of those exhibitions discuss their experiences and conclusions on pages 45-71 in this book.). When "Situation" was installed and had had its opening, I felt a sense of disappointment, not with the selection of artists or with the individual works, but with the entire emotional tone of the event. "Situation" felt more like an ending than a beginning. The two previous exhibitions had opened people's eyes to a new type of activity. "Situation" documented the fact that that activity had established itself in the art world and had found its voice. While that was good news, it was difficult to see where to go next, both in terms of a gay and lesbian dialogue, and my own curatorial practice. Thus, when Larry Rinder approached me about this exhibition, I reacted to the idea with a low level of interest if not outright hostility. It seemed pointless to rehash the ideas presented in "Situation." I only became interested after Larry and I had a discussion of some of the things that we might do differently. Over the course of several conversations, we developed several requirements the show would have to fulfill in order to be a genuine step forward.

First, it would have to be multigenerational. For almost fifteen years, museums have been unable or unwilling to bring together the work of

successive generations of artists. Instead, artists are continually grouped within their own generation, leading to the continual reinforcement of whatever critical discourse has surrounded that period. We are thus encouraged to believe that we already know the truth about a particular group of artists, and that nothing more remains to be said. Artists themselves do not impose such neat distinctions on their influences. I know I don't.

Second, the show should have both queer and straight artists in it. In the same way that artists are not simply responding to the works of people the same age, they are not only looking at works by those who share their sexual preference. Indeed, much of what queer artists are doing these days is questioning the value of identity politics.

In light of that concern, my third requirement was that the exhibition should not have the words gay, lesbian, or queer in its title. The title is the doorway through which the viewer enters the exhibition. If we essentialize the work of these artists in the title, we limit the viewers' chances of being able to find new information and connections among the works. The artists would be once again ghettoized. It also seemed important not to mislead the public. Given the limited time and space resources of the museum, we were not going to be able to present an exhibition that might fully document the enormous historic and artistic achievements of gay and lesbian people. It seemed important to let people know up front that they were viewing a different type of exhibition.

Finally, I hoped to make the show responsive to the ways in which artists operate in the world, as distinct from the way curators or art historians might imagine them operating. This exhibition began, like many others, in response to a type of energy and activity around a community of artists. What, then, is it like for artists to be around that energy, that excitement? What are artists doing? In working on this show, I have thought about those times when being in the world as an artist has meant the most to me; those times when I could feel a presence, a looming joy in the works around me. The early '90s were such a time in the queer community in San Francisco; notions that had been circulating began to come together in new constellations. The world seemed full of fresh messages, truths perhaps addressed to us alone, but connecting us to other initiates. These group epiphanies are the calls we respond to when we make work. Sometimes it is the work of an individual artist that can call forth our own voices, at other times it is the conjunction of previously separated works of art. These realizations happen for different artists at different times, but when

they happen for enough people at one time, new moments are born. We say that "history is being made," but it would be more accurate to say that "life is being lived." In various ways, the works in this show are records of that life being lived, and how that chain of flowerings has led us to where we are today. In working on this exhibition, it is my hope that it will also lead to the next one of those flowerings, and not simply document this one's passing.

Larry and I wanted to make an exhibition that might in some way be true to the sense of energy that we had experienced around this queer art. We began our journey by throwing away our maps. Our methods were intuitive rather than linear. In this project we have endeavored to move away from the identification of queer as a noun or adjective and towards using it as a verb. Previous attempts to discuss the relationship between sexual preference and art-making have asked the question, "What does gay art look like?" We decided to ask the question, "What do queer artists do?" Rather than assume that we know what gay sensibility was, and looking for works that fit that definition, we began by assuming that we did not know the shape of the terrain beforehand. We gave ourselves a few arbitrary parameters: we would restrict our exploration to the United States, and to the twentieth century. For the most part we have honored those borders. We placed works we found compelling as markers within that terrain. Connections were conjectured, examined, discarded. At all times, we tried to let the specific works we were examining provide the guide for our future peregrinations.

The works in this exhibition form a new map that is the result of that wandering. This is a map of a queer practice in the visual arts over the past thirty years. It is, like our journey, incomplete and personal. This very process of mapping, or remapping, is one of the most important components of the particular practice we are trying to document. Many of the artists included in this show have been involved either individually or in groups, with the project of creating and discovering queer territory. These mappings have either proceeded across the physical terrain of cities, the ideological space of the art world, or across history. In many ways, this process has been the same for other marginalized groups, and the ability of artists today to queer the reading of various signs owes much to the previous efforts of those groups. Those on the outside have to struggle to find their face in the distorting mirror of mainstream discourse. This struggle has a deeper meaning for queers since they do not have recourse to the usual alternative repositories of meaning: religious, ethnic or familial heritages.

Queer people are the only minority whose culture is not transmitted within the family. Indeed, the assertion of one's queer identity often is made as a form of contradiction to familial identity. Thus, for queer people, all of the words that serve as touchstones for cultural identification-family, home, people, neighborhood, heritage-must be recognized as constructions for and by the individual members of that community. The extremely provisional nature of queer culture is the thing that makes its transmission so fragile. However, this very fragility has encouraged people to seek retroactively its contours to a degree not often found in other groups. Queer people must literally construct the houses they will be born into, and adopt their own parents. The idea that identity and culture are nonorganic constructs is also one of the most important characteristics of postmodernism. It should be noted that many of the theoreticians of the postmodern-the generation of critics and philosophers that came of age in the late '60s-were gay and lesbian. In certain ways, the discourse of the postmodern is the queer experience rewritten to describe the experience of the whole world.

From the margins, queers have picked those things that could work for them and recoded them, rewritten their meanings, opening up the possibility of viral reinsertion into the body of general discourse. Denied images of themselves, they have changed the captions on others' family photos. Left without cultural vehicles, they have hijacked somebody else's. They have been forced to trespass and poach. To be queer is to cobble together identity, to fashion provisional tactics at will, to pollute and deflate all discourses. Historically, this activity has been a possibility for either the upper class, whose privilege is utilized to exercise in power, or for the lower class, whose reworkings of high culture have often served as a form of social resistance. At various times queer practice has been associated with both the upper and lower class positions. Because queers do not share a set of physical characteristics, we have also had to have greater recourse to semiotic means to express our tribal affiliations. We resort to dress codes, colors, earrings, references to tell-tale cultural interests, whether Judy or Joan Jett. In histories and biographies we scan for words like "companion" and "spinster." Or we read the obituaries looking for men who die before their fifties of a lingering illness.

Queers are a minority because of what we do, not what we are. As such, we continue to pose a dilemma for a society that can only believe in equality if it is linked to biology. What used to be true only

of queer culture though, has now become true of all culture. All artists today are confronted with a culture that is no longer unified or even divided into the convenient binary of high and low. Postmodern culture is an ever-mutating system of signs and meanings. Value is fluid. Artists have developed a number of strategies for negotiating this circumstance-strategies that bear a marked resemblance to those employed by queers in relation to the heterosexual world. How then do those strategies differ for queer artists? In my view, part of the answer lies in the family tree that has suggested itself to me as a result of the process of working on this show. I want to present the lineage that I have conjured up for these queer artists. I think that their fates might allow us to guess at the answer to that question.

I do not present the following genealogy as part of some positivistic historical progression that will lead us through the high points of artistic production inevitably to the glory of queer art. Rather, the activity that we are calling queer-the works and ideas that interested us for this exhibition in the first place-is similar in its intention, organization and tactics to several other previous activities. In the past, those activities have been organized around other group identifications and other social concerns. But by placing queerness within this progression, I hope to show both what is different about the work of queer people from that of previous generations of lesbian and gay artists, and retroactively to claim space for queer activities in previous situations not associated with queerness. I'll move from this chronological mapping to a spatial mapping of the specific groups of works within the show.

During many of the attempts to articulate what a queer practice might be, I have found myself drawn back to the work of Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's practice challenged assumptions about the ways in which things are classified as works of art, and also of the roles of those individual works within the artist's "body" of work. Laconic, fragmentary, and condensed, Duchamp's work pointed the way to an artistic production based in ellipsis rather than mastery. While his readymades provided much fodder for discussions of the nature of the art object, more important is the way that Duchamp's work derived meaning from its internal cross-referencing and dialectic between gesture and silence. Much of the meaning in Duchamp is made between: between lines, between pieces, between periods. This proved inspiring for many artists, not only the famous group of Cage, Cunningham, Johns and Rauschenberg (although their adoption of Duchamp as a parent of their work is a clear example of the mapping process I have discussed). It is not my purpose here to argue that

Duchamp is the progenitor of queer art, but rather to point out that his practice more than that of any other artist opened a space for queers to formulate points of resistance to the monolithic structure of "culture." By stepping to one side of aesthetic culture, Duchamp managed to produce works that prefigured many of the experiences and strategies of queers when confronted with straight culture. His works play with gender, twist language into arch double entendres, and (in the form of the three stoppages) question the notion of straightness as the measure of all things. Duchamp's work has acted like a call, a series of ironic questions (what does an artist do? what is a work of art? when is a work complete?) spoken into the canyon of history: successive generations have struggled to formulate their answers. Not all of the work in this exhibition derives from Duchamp, but Duchamp's work is the place where many of the strategies for contradicting the homilies of modernism were formed.

A number of American artists used Duchamp as one of the ways to move beyond the ideological strictures of mid-century abstraction and to found what was later to be called pop art. This generation had grown up in a country where to self-identify as gay was to invite, at best, dismissal, and at worst, incarceration and shock therapy. At the end of the '40s, the nation attempted to make explicit links between patriotism and heterosexuality. The House Un-American Activities Committee investigated two things: Communists and Homosexuals. In the art world, abstraction had become America's ticket to the big time, it's chance to bask in art history's spotlight. As much as critics delved into the tortured psyches of the abstract expressionists, they drew the line at sexual deviance. It was impossible to be both a serious American artist and a gay artist. Thus, much of the work made by gay artists in response to this situation either proceeds by veiled allusion or avoids discussion of sexual matters all together. Bohemia provided a haven for queers to live lives exempt from constant persecution, but they effectively eliminated the possibilities for any real impact as well. Artists enjoyed success only insofar as they were able to remain closeted.

The first rumblings of what we could call a queer practice began to be heard in places where there was already no chance of real acceptance, where queers had nothing to lose: independent film and theater. Made far afield from the attention and financial clout of the culture industries, and playing to miniscule audiences of like-minded outsiders, the films, plays and spectacles of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Ronald Tavel and Charles Ludlum conjured a new world of glamour and terror out of the city's rubbish. As desperate leaps of

faith, these down-at-heels extravaganzas pointed the way for a series of new challenges to the cultural mainstream.

One of the first of these was Fluxus, founded in the late '50s by a loose confederation of artists, composers and poets in an attempt to dissolve the boundaries of the art world. By exploding form, confusing authorship, relying on the multiple rather than the unique, Fluxus answered Duchamp's call with a questioning of the very formulation of art movements. While drawing inspiration from many of the twentieth century's avant-gardes, Fluxus always managed to elude easy definition. It was an aggregation of individuals, a "movement" that could barely be charted, and that by some accounts has not yet ended. If the Cage group attempted to take Duchamp's practice as a lesson on the individual level, Fluxus used it as the blue print for collective experiment. Ultimately, many of the artists around Cage moved through the mainstream art world without difficulty, their formal innovations finally posing little problem for the art world. By contrast, much of Fluxus remains unassimilated. Fluxus also spawned a host of corollary movements-performance and conceptual art, mail art, and body art-that have continued to thrive on the margins of the commercial art world and have acted as a conduit for Fluxus' spirit over the past thirty years.

It is important to see Fluxus also as another one of the many discourses of freedom that flowered throughout Europe and the United States in the late '50s and early '60s. It was very much part of the nascent counterculture, an event like many others that combined a pointed questioning of received knowledge with a giddy celebration of unexpected possibilities. Against a centralized art world bound to the notion of a historic progression of unique masters and their great works, Fluxus deployed a blizzard of incidental objects, bottles, scrawled notes, tiny books, stamps, squeaks and stumbles that refused to play the part of masterpieces. In Fluxus, people were demonstrating their exuberance in overturning boundaries between disciplines (painting, sculpture, music, sports, theater dance), identities (composer performer and audience) and values (uniqueness, authenticity, permanence). It acted in some ways as the universal solvent of artistic hierarchy, and its economics of generosity and democracy was and still is a challenge to the closed economy of the mainstream art world.

While Fluxus could posit many types of freedoms, it still retained many of the blind spots of the culture it tried to revolutionize. The most important one of these was that of gender. While many women

produced and participated in Fluxus works, their place within the Fluxus culture was often the same as that of women throughout the art world—wife, muse, or objectified body. In this, as in many other things, Fluxus was a product of its time. Women were beginning to find that much of the counterculture of the '60s could not or would not listen to them or provide opportunities for them to exercise agency. The civil rights, black power and student movements of the later '60s—all attempts to make real the rhetorics of freedom that had energized the early part of the decade—provided much of the blueprint for the women's liberation movement. In the art world, this has come to be known as the women's art movement. The movement is often dated from 1972, when a protest of the Corcoran Biennial's exclusion of women led to a national conference of women artists, organizers and critics. At that conference, many artists had their first large scale exposure to the work of their peers around the country. The groundwork was laid for an explosion of activity by women throughout the United States.

For many of the women involved in transforming the structure of their practice in those years, the experience of making community has been as important as that of making art. Their efforts were designed not only to showcase the works of individual artists, but also to call a community into being. This community transformed many of the collective, anticapitalist strains in '60s culture into much of what we now call the nonprofit art world. But these structures differed from later bursts of independent entrepreneurial activity. This was not a group of young dealers bursting onto the marketplace. The places these artists created were part gallery, part school, part theater, part archive, part counseling center. All of the various activities that activated these spaces were important, and they reflect in their diversity a series of new possibilities in the way artists could see themselves. These were also products of necessity: women had only limited access to the places of power in the society. As such they had to construct their support system from the ground up.

One of the major achievements of the women's art movement, and one of particular importance to us here, was the invention and promulgation of a gendered reading of form. The argument that certain formal choices within works reflected the gender of the work's maker allowed for the first substantive discussions of the differences in men's and women's approaches to abstraction. It also made possible a gendered critique of the assumptions of a (supposedly) universal and neutral modernist abstraction. Like many aesthetic theories, this critique eventually became a way of setting up and policing borders

rather than as a way of talking about and understanding the practice of artists. Unfortunately, it also became in some cases an instrument with which to exclude artists whose work was somehow not female enough; using an essentializing approach as a way of trying to sort out the "true" practitioners from the false. The women's art movement also sparked an enormous project of historical research. Women artists began to sift through art history to resurrect the vanished voices of their forbears. They began to question the way that value had been bestowed on the artists of the past and labored to construct institutions that would allow them to take control of the way that their own work would be valued. Artists began to take on the roles of curator, critic, and historian. Their efforts have provided the model for every outsider practice since.

If Fluxus valued the ephemeral, the trivial, the modest and low forms shunned by mainstream modernism, the women's art movement was quick to point out that many of these forms were regarded as inconsequential specifically because they were forms traditionally used by women. The early '70s saw another flowering of formal and conceptual experimentation as women artists reclaimed materials and approaches from crafts, the domestic sphere, and previous avant-gardes in an attempt to produce a visual language more suited to the expression of women's experience. While many of the artists involved identified as lesbians, there was not a consistent examination of the place of lesbian identity in the art of the time. On one hand, there were attempts to posit a continuum between feminism and lesbian consciousness, on the other was the homophobic purge of lesbians from the women's movement. Even within the context of an alternative art system, there were many who were uninterested in or hostile to, the voices of lesbians.

The innovations of both Fluxus and the women's art movement suffered the same fate once they entered the mainstream art world. In both cases the formal innovations were separated from the political components, diluted and adopted. This segmentation and absorption mirrored the society at large's reaction to the challenge posed by the various countercultures. In the '70s, America transformed a call to radical change into a blueprint for consumer hedonism. Token members of disenfranchised groups were bought off with the promise of inclusion and affluence. In the art world, this meant marginally better careers for some women artists, and a diversification of formal strictures, but only under a depoliticized banner of pluralism. Abstraction and distancing techniques were used to eliminate the social dimensions of the work. Thus, many of the artists of the period

produced images of themselves in various types of drag, but in a fashion that divorced the image from any questioning of the sexual preference of the person depicted. Pattern and decoration were related to formal considerations of grid and pictorial flatness, rather than to effeminacy. The questions raised by Fluxus (why do we need galleries? what is the value of professionalism?) and the women's movement went ignored or unanswered.

By the mid '70s, much of the momentum of social liberation movements of the '60s had been lost or derailed into increasingly limited lifestyle choices. Popular culture embraced escapist nostalgias instead of engaging with social issues. The '50s became a sign of lost innocence, the last time America felt good about itself. The '70s also saw the maturation of the Stonewall generation into gay male ghetto clones. Gay liberation was replaced by gay power, often imagined in terms of economic self-determination and institution building. Gay men and lesbians both began to operate businesses, open their own bars, establish neighborhoods. To some extent this form of community-building reflected a continuing commitment to creating a separate space of tolerance and diversity, but often it reflected an aspiration to join in with the class assumptions and blind commercialism of the straight world.

The decade's strongest attack on those assumptions came in the form of punk. Punk can perhaps best be characterized as a pair of mutually reinforcing explosions of musical activity based initially in New York and London in the late '70s. It drew its name from a prisoners' slang term for faggot. Punk is rarely talked about as a queer movement, but much of its history and many of its poses and strategies are tied to queerness. In New York, the punk scene traced its roots back through glam rock to the Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol's Factory. In London punk was dreamed up by a group of ex-art students as an attempt to recapture the social upheaval of the 1968 Paris student revolts through the construction of self-contradictory consumer artifacts. Vivienne Westwood and Malcom McLaren's shop Sex became the launching pad for a series of provocations in the form of clothing, posters and finally, the Sex Pistols. From the start, Sex's clientele was a mix of gay fetishists and bored teens. (One of the earliest items in the sex line was a T-shirt bearing the image of a pair of half-naked, Tom of Finlandesque cowboys talking about their boredom with the same old scene.)

More importantly, punk was the beginning of a critique of the stultifying cultural quietism that followed the flirtation with progressive

social change in the '60s. Punk overturned the notion that everything was alright by demonstrating that there were needs that consumerism hadn't filled. It fragmented consumer culture and expanded the pieces into obscene horror shows. While much of punk's imagery was sexual, it deployed that imagery to demonstrate the impossibility of any redemption through sex. In punk the body assumed presence only through a demonstration of its extreme alienation. Punk parodied capitalism's annexation of romance and sexual desire to commodity fetishism by portraying sex itself only through fetishism. It turned the private language of fetish wear into street style. Punk refashioned the street into a place of excitement, danger, and longing. It also created an enormous groundswell of cultural producers, thousands and thousands of people who found in punk the permission to wrench culture into their own meaning. Many punk graphics, band posters, record sleeves, and 'zines communicate the sense that new codes and new possibilities are shining out from the fragments of shattered signs. Punk was negation turned into a raucous noise of refusal. Like Fluxus, punk is a movement of fragments, a deliberate lack of mastery, of abjection. Like queers, punks are on the bottom of the cultural transaction, but punk rewrote the terms so that the bottom becomes the escape point, an escape into fury and blankness that demolishes the top.

Punk spread its message through flyers, records and self-published magazines. The networks of 'zine distribution that grew up as a result of punk have had a crucial impact on the formation of new queer culture. The magazine has always occupied a vital place in the lives of gay men and lesbians. In the '50s, magazines were the medium of gay and lesbian culture to people outside of urban centers, magazines such as the Ladder, the Mattachine Newsletter, and Physique Art Pictorial. Queer 'zines are inheritors of this tradition, as well as that of artist-published magazines like File that were outgrowths of the international mail art movement. They have served as forums for sexual debate, as well as a way of identifying like-minded people outside the gay and lesbian mainstream.

Punk was not the only attempt to produce and distribute alternative music in the '70s. Part of the explosion of women's culture at the time was the women's music movement. Women's music became one of the most successful lesbian cultural expressions, generating not only a new roster of lesbian stars, but also providing through concerts and festivals new possibilities for women to meet each other and forge communities. Both punk and the women's music movement were attempts to confront social problems via cultural strategies. Yet, while

their forms might be similar, their underlying ideologies were obviously vastly different. While punk was profoundly anti-humanist, women's music was strongly informed by the humanist ideals of social activism (an attitude shared by many women in the visual arts at the time). While strongly critiquing patriarchy, many of the women involved had a positive attitude towards libertarian notions of self-determination and social dignity. The artists involved were attempting to redeem culture by positing the positive, unifying potential of a culture made by and for women. The belief in essentialism allowed women to create the most visible lesbian culture in the history of the United States. That culture came under attack, however, by a younger generation of women who were highly skeptical of both essentialism and humanism.

Both lesbian and gay culture of the '70s should be understood as first generation, valuing integrity, identity, and in search of heritage. Those communities attempted to create cultural structures alongside of and as good as straight culture. Much of what was understood as gay and lesbian art of the time was concerned with depicting the realities of lesbian and gay life. This is a community striving to recognize itself; and in striving to do so, it relied on simplistic if not retrograde aesthetic strategies. It was thus at odds with the prevailing forms of the time, but in a way that could not constitute a true critique.

The '80s began on a promising note in the art world: the scene that had given birth to the punk movement was mutating into a visual art scene of surprising generosity. On the Lower East Side of New York, musicians and artists were trading places as the arbiters of hip. In the summer of 1980, the Times Square show opened, a sprawling and varied mix of artists and styles crammed into four stories of an abandoned massage parlour in midtown. The sheer energy and democracy of the installation signaled new possibilities for the making and viewing of art. Because the names of the artists were listed only on a map available on the first floor, it was possible to see the whole exhibition without ever knowing who had made what. At the same time, the streets of New York were blooming with new sets of signs, left in Magic Marker, wheat-pasted flyers, and spray-painted stencils. Later we found out who had made these marks, but our first encounters with them made us realize that we didn't need to know. These new markings reterritorialized the city for us in ways very similar to when we recognized and were recognized by the first punks. Once again, energy was there, anything was possible. Within one season however, that energy was transmuted into a new roster of white, male art stars. What had been an urban style compounded of graffiti color, rewritten pop culture, and fucked-up image making, was

elevated into neoexpressionism, a parade of high culture angst with pretensions to internationalism. In response to yet another challenge, the art world consolidated and tried to confuse the excitement of making culture with the excitement of making money. (Later this was turned into the excitement of watching other people spend money, once auction fever set in.) As neoexpressionism progressed into various postmodernisms, the '80s began to be characterized as a time when an exquisite refinement of art theories was coupled with an art of massive bad faith. The first (and still most lucrative) wave of postmodernism was an art that used the fragments of modernism to both rehearse its death and mourn its loss. The loss was mourned because, for the most part, this art was being made by the people who had most benefitted from the rhetorics of modernism. But as the decade progressed, gay men were encountering death, but not on an ideological level. Many artists found their voices in response to the massive indifference displayed by the straight world to the deaths of their lovers, teachers, co-workers, and neighbors.

The AIDS epidemic became the catalyst for the first viable social protest movement since the feminist heyday of the mid '70s. For a generation of gay men who had previously indulged themselves in assimilationist fantasies, it provided the undeniable evidence of America's profound homophobia. Many became activists for the first time; many of them became artists. In combatting the hatred and disdain of straight society, these new activists drew on the techniques of the movements that had come before them. The response also varied greatly from place to place. In New York, artists and activists countered gay invisibility by forging a new street art of arresting immediacy. Once again the streets teemed with new information, on T-shirts, posters and stickers. The city was remapped as an infected zone. Artists began producing works for the gallery context that explored the loss they experienced. These elegiac works had profound implications for queer artists. Specifically for gay men, they marked the first time that there was recognized gay content that was not simply representations of gay male desire. Ironically, gay artists were exploring issues of mortality at precisely the time that the rest of the art world was abandoning personal content in favor of highly theoretical discussions of simulation and spectacle. The art world was recognizing gay artists' right to speak on a crucial issue. But there was little interest in hearing about anything else. AIDS had provided the wedge, however, and increasing numbers of artists insisted on being heard. Many younger artists explored explicit identifications as queer only after a period of social activism. The experience of opening up a place for queer identity on the street then provided the model for

doing so in the context of the gallery. The traditional model of cultural progress posits that ideas surface first in avant-garde elites, and are then dispersed into the general culture. In the case of this new queer content, the model was reversed.

The AIDS epidemic occurred at a crucial juncture for gay and lesbian communities. I have referred to the social activism and community building of the '70s as first generation activities. By the early '80s, gay and lesbian communities, however tenuous, were facts of life. There was a new generation entering the picture. These people, in their late teens to early twenties, had been children at the time of Stonewall and had not participated in the construction of any of the community structures that had occupied the previous generation. It was not a given that they would have an investment in the continuation of those structures. In one sense they grew up in a world that was much easier to come out into, but they also had a tenuous relationship to the values of essentialism and identity politics that had informed their predecessors. The tension between these generations was making itself felt in the early '80s, but was subsumed in the midst of the AIDS struggle. As the '80s came to a close, the split began to reassert itself. It has assumed many forms, but one of the most persistent has been the conflict over the use of the term queer. The controversial attempt to reclaim a previously negative term has become the symbol of the emerging generation gap in the gay world. Queer has come to mean an attitude that is aggressive and anti-assimilationist. The term is supposed to be gender neutral, and thus indicative of the idea that queer men and women may have more in common with each other than they do with older homosexuals.

The work that I am characterizing as queer is the inheritor of all this history. It derives much of its aesthetic strategy from Fluxus and punk, producing ephemeral, funky objects that seem thrown together. It also embraces the gendered reading of form promulgated by the women's art movement. Many of its forms are skewed, floppy, and tenuously made. At those points where it has recourse to rigorous craft, it often does so as a sort of drag: wearing the mantle of authority as a way of deflating the power of that authority. Often the artists involved in this work are operating in a variety of formats and employing several different distribution strategies. Many of these artists not only show work in galleries, but also work as activists or care givers. They make up the staffs and boards of nonprofit arts organizations, they are educators. They publish 'zines, write stories, perform. These roles are important because they demonstrate queer artists coming to consciousness at many different levels of the art complex.

Much of this work looks back to the '70s. Many of the male artists are recreating working methods that originated in the women's art movement. They are employing centralized imagery, using "craft" materials, sewing and employing a pre-modern rhetoric of sentiment. Many of the women are using '70s gay male culture as a template for expressions of sexual exploration and community. They are exploring drag, s/m technologies, and flaneurism as a way of moving lesbian identification beyond the feel-good homilies of essentialism. As such, there is an interesting crossover in this work. The issues of representation and abstraction have different meanings for men and women at this point, but the willingness of individual artists to move back and forth between them is the thing that separates out this generation from the previous ones. Also pertinent is that these artists are actually finding this energy secondhand. Much of this work draws on conceptualism and postminimalism. Both of these movements were, in a sense, the official versions of artists' activities that were tied to structures that had far greater implications for the mainstream art world. But we have seen how the gallery/museum system has been unable and unwilling to engage those implications. Instead, it has chopped Fluxus and women's art movement down to a size that it could digest. It has consistently seen social challenges as simple permutations in either form or content, and has recognized those aspects of artists' work. Thus, much innovative work has disappeared from the visual memory of the art world. Young artists are often reinventing the wheel much to the consternation of those who have been around long enough to remember the first version. But often, by following the energy refracted through these official versions, queer artists have found their way to that energy's true source in the discarded history. Identification as queer has helped many of these artists recognize their connections and debt to their peers in other mediums. Many of these artists are looking at drag, but as part of a larger community wide debate over the meanings and uses of gender. Both women and men have resurrected punk, this time with the sexual charge intact. Punk is informing both the anger and abjection in much of this work, but it is also providing much of the energy and democracy. Much of this work continues the queer strategy of treating straight culture as a series of readymades, available for appropriation, manipulation, and detournment. In this it looks back to Duchamp.

## Works in **In a Different Light**

### **Void**

This group of works is built around images of blankness, absence, and loss. In some cases this is loss directly related to the AIDS epidemic, but the way in which that loss has been expressed owes much to previous formal experiments. Judy Chicago's drawing from the Rejection Quintet documents a moment of personal and professional loss. She uses her trademark centralized composition and floral, vaginal imagery as a vehicle for expressing grief and distress rather than the wholeness and celebration her work is usually known for. Chicago's work speaks the formal language of its time with its solid frontality, underlying grid structure, and cool execution; but it is also reaching out historically to evoke the work of other artists, notably O'Keeffe and Kahlo. Grief is thus connected, via a formal device, with the struggles of other women. Chicago's work in some ways has come to be emblematic of much of the women's art movement. The associative chain of center-vagina-flower has been echoed in the work of many gay male artists who have replaced vagina with anus. In this context, Brett Reichman's painting *Blind Spot* confronts the viewer with multiple readings, its imagery shifting through the registers of sunburst, flower, mirror, anus. The anus shines seductively like the sun, a floral mirror that reflects, that offers the viewers themselves. But this mirror is blank; the viewer has been erased. Reichman refers to Chicago to make this point: the anus is the vagina for gay men—their "flower"—but one that harbors the possibility of annihilation rather than birth. This ambivalent reaction to the anus as both source of pleasure (and in Reichman's case, a certain form of gay male identity) and source of disease, death, and loss has colored much of our society's reaction to the AIDS epidemic. It is also echoed in the work of John Priola and Peter Nagy. Nagy's work *Internal Erotic* is from 1983, nine years after Chicago's, and ten years before Reichman's. While its title seems to refer to the sexuality referred to above, it actually addresses illness as part of a critique of consumer society. Nagy produces an image of viral malignancy by fusing corporate logos into flowers of evil: a swirling, malignant mass of confused information and desires. Nagy's work is profoundly skeptical of the ability of any imagery to operate sincerely.

Ree Morton's *Fading Flowers* shares with Judy Chicago's work the aim of recovering a lost mode of address. Morton uses the 19th century language of sentiment. Her work's tone is deliberately conversational, disarming in its modesty, but earnest about evoking sensations of passage and death. Morton consistently worked this edge, making

pieces that revealed the serious undercurrents of funky domestic decoration and feminine activity. This recuperation of emotional affect was part of women's attempt to forge an art out of postminimalism that spoke more directly to their lives and their work in terms parallel to gay men's attempts to find a language appropriate to describing mournful emptiness left in the wake of AIDS. Ross Bleckner's work since the mid '80s has been the most dramatic example of this. Bleckner's inky heavens, flickering birds and funerary urns have caught the emotional devastation of the epidemic. His urn paintings were some of the first to refer explicitly to the enormous numbers of those lost. Like Bleckner, both Judie Bamber and Michael Jenkins have developed personal iconographies to describe emotional states. Jenkins' white felt dots refer both to snow and to Kaposi's sarcoma lesions. They form a freezing blizzard of infection in contrast to the woolen blankets they rest on. Judie Bamber dispassionately isolates individual objects on grounds of seductive color. Her works might seem at first glance to be firmly in the Chicago tradition, but the fierceness of Bamber's regard for these objects strips them of sentimentality.

The void is not only the result of loss, however. It is also the state preceding existence. In this sense, both Scott Burton's work and David Tudor's *Reconstructed Score* from John Cage's 4 minutes 33 seconds present voids that are liberating: situations where anything can happen. By focusing on the void we become alert to the possibilities of the moment. Cage's is perhaps the most powerful example of this truth to have come to us in the twentieth century. Burton's stage furniture awaits our inhabitation rather than our attention. But the void can also rebuff us. Zoe Leonard's aerial photograph of Washington D.C. is like Reichman's mirror: it refuses to reflect back ourselves, to make a place for us. Leonard's photographs often play on the profoundly threatening inertness of the captured image. This is a Capitol that we can see, but that we cannot find a place within. It's surface complication hides a profound blankness.

## **Self**

The first of these works explore the self as a physical entity before the formation of identity. If, in a primal void, we begin to sense ourselves, how do we picture those selves? Often these artists are operating through synecdoche, using one portion of the anatomy to stand for the entire body. In Harmony Hammond's *Flesh Journals* and Eva Hesse's *Test Piece*, both treat latex as a stand-in for human skin. Hesse is searching within form for gender, but her alert manipulations also evoke the body in its various activities. Hammond is more directly

concerned with skin as a surface, a page that can be inscribed by experience. This inscription takes place literally in the artist's skin, as seen in Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait*. Opie's wounding is also seen as part of a tribal identification, since the lines on her back describe a fantasy scene of lesbian suburban bliss. The wounded self can also construct armor, whether of attitude or surface, as in the works of Nancy Grossman and Scott Hewicker. Hewicker's mute polyester bundle is the flipside of Grossman's elegantly defended *Head*. Both works evoke the shadow of abuse with differing strategies for coping with it. This wounding can be deliberate, self-imposed, and symbolic, as in Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*. Kahlo, with her insistent interminglings of the mundane and the fantastic, as well as her transformation of personal tragedy and limitation into a position of aesthetic power, has proved to be one of the most influential artists of the last thirty years, providing the inspiration and emotional tone for much feminist, diary and body art. In this painting, Kahlo's defiant inhabiting of Diego Rivera's suit and her strewn hair point to the notion of gender as a self-proclaimed reality. Many artists in this show use hair, its lack or abundance, as the signifier of gender, and the ease with which it can be adopted or discarded becomes an indicator of a queer destabilization of gender constructs.

The questioning of gender is one of the things about queerness that provokes anxiety on the part of the straight world. Another is the notion of the queer as somehow self-pleasuring and self-sufficient. Both Laura Aguilar's *In Sandy's Room* and Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait with Whip* are images of queers that are powerfully self-contained. By being self-sufficient, by not needing "the opposite," the people in these photographs exhibit a sexuality that escapes the functionalized libidinal economy. It is only at the moment of leisure that the possibility of resistance can come into being. Thus, modern society strives to regulate leisure, making it another type of work. Sex has not escaped from this regulation. Straight sex is functional sex. (Needless to say, all heterosexual sex is not necessarily straight sex.) This is one of the places where gay men and lesbians share a common place of resistance. They both demonstrate the fact that sex is not simply a type of work, geared to the perpetuation of the species and the social norm. This nonproductive queer sex, that can exist as leisure, without being put to work, that is satisfied with itself, points up the constructed, regulated nature of "straight" sex. This is what the Aguilar's and the Mapplethorpe's works share. Neither of them need the viewer. They do not make a place for us in the way that we expect sexual images to.

## **Drag**

There are two types of drag in this section. The first of these is drag as travesty, where the artist is using a sort of exaggerated gender costuming in order to play with the possibilities of switching identity. In many cases, the fluidity of gender identification is staged for the camera. Photography is still so insistently associated with the real that one of our first impulses seems to be to trick it. But, while many artists in the late '60s and early '70s did pieces incorporating the methodologies of drag, they were using those methodologies to question identity, not sexual preference. Often this cross-dressing is presented in such a way that it demonstrates the impossibility of really changing genders. Vito Acconci's *Conversions Part III* (1971) is a case in point. Like much of his other work from this time, the piece hinges on our ability to see Acconci's actions both as sincere attempts, but also as failures. Whether he is attempting to sing a blues song "just like the record," make himself into a woman, or construct a masturbatory fantasy about the viewer, Acconci is presenting gaps that can never be bridged, no matter how much they can be narrowed. For a generation of artists just beginning to come to grips with an all-pervasive popular culture that leveled differences, it is possible that the drag queen's willful embrace of constructed identity seemed a tantalizing strategy for survival. Again, queer methodologies were anticipating the postmodern condition.

Younger artists have shifted from using drag as a subject matter (depictions of people in drag) to drag as a method. In this sense, they are turning the making of certain objects into a type of drag. While the earlier approach to drag deals with it as a type of parody of gender norms, and emphasizes drag's artificiality, this new approach often involves artists taking on each other's personas and voices, and is thus based on the notion of drag "realness": the ability to pass. Much of the feminist approach to appropriation is this type of drag. Sherrie Levine's representations of the works of photographers like Rodchenko, and in this show, Walker Evans, serve to foreground the assumptions of male privilege inherent in the photographers ability to take, produce, and circulate images. Levine's disruption of authorship operates almost subliminally to induce the disquiet that makes us look again. Deb Kass's reinvention of the works of Andy Warhol bring that disquiet to another level. Kass no longer remakes famous Warhol works, but rather, has inhabited Warhol's method, like Drag King Elvis Herselvis. Kass takes Warhol's star-struck outsider manner and uses it to point up new areas of marginality. Warhol's gay, catholic veneration for Jackie Onassis gets replayed as Jewish veneration of and lesbian desire for Barbra Streisand. Kass brings the edginess of Warhol back

into focus by showing that while history may have made a place for him, it still has not made a place for all outsiders. Amy Adler makes this point again, by referencing not only Edward Weston, but Sherrie Levine's appropriation of him.

Robert Gober's Plywood (1987) is drag in a different key. Gober uses painstaking individual craft to make an object that seems simply mass-produced. The plywood is a high class (unique, handmade) object masquerading as a lower class one. It also plays on the history of minimal sculpture, evoking the "humble" materials used by many minimal artists in their efforts to avoid artifice. Gober provides what is in essence a second layer of artifice, making a sculpture that looks like the raw material for sculpture.

### **Other**

This section deals with artists stepping outside of themselves to engage with another. Often this is the beloved, the object of desire, or the object of fan worship. Some of these works try to cast light on the dilemmas of "otherness" itself. In a trio of works, this otherness is examined as a series of permutations of the image of the bride. In Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (represented in this show by a catalog illustration), the bride occupies the upper realms—a machine whose presence excites the sexual advances of the bachelors below, but who ultimately remains aloof, impenetrable and self-enclosed. The bride is an apt example of Freud's fetishised female. A flattened object of desire for the bachelors clustered below her, the bride is oblivious to their fertilizing essence. This impenetrable object is the phallic woman, a figure both authoritarian and immaculate, a male fantasy of the uncastrated mother. In 1972, Kathy Huberland offered the female ripost to this fetish as part of the landmark installation, *Womanhouse*, in Los Angeles. Perched at the top of *Womanhouse's* staircase, their bride was a store mannequin wearing a standard issue white lace gown. As the gown's long train descended the staircase, it became dirtier and dirtier until it arrived soiled and dingy at the house's kitchen. Here again is the phallic woman, an impenetrable dummy clad in blank white and standing on high. Her self-containment is now seen as an impossibility, a strait jacket offered to women. The female experience of this fetish is about the discrepancy between "me" and "the bride." This disjunction becomes clear in the frozen immobility of the mannequin. One can only be a bride at the time of a wedding: for a brief moment I am the bride, and then I lapse into being myself again. As time goes on I descend from the pedestal and become "worn" and "soiled." The *Womanhouse* piece points up the cruel toll Duchamp's libidinal

economy exerts on real women, perennially punished for not being abstractions. The third variant in this tale is from 1992. It is a stack of newspapers, bound, perhaps, for recycling. The top section is folded opened to an ad out of which a bride wistfully gazes; above her head is the slogan "Having it All." The bride's image is at the top of the heap as well as above the fold, crucial placement in newspaper cosmology. On closer examination we can see something odd about the model, and indeed she is in actuality the artist Robert Gober, whose drag displacement reawakens the gender anxiety in Duchamp's original. Our attention is directed below the fold, to the mystery of what lies beneath the bride's white skirts. This bride is also self-sufficient: since she "has it all." The image of the bride has then shifted through three registers: fetishised and desired other, alienating fetish figure, and fetishised self.

The desire, anticipation, and sometimes fear we encounter when we imagine the other is powerfully evoked in the works in this section by Romaine Brooks, Zoe Leonard, Millie Wilson, and Joel Otterson. Brooks' *Peter, a Young English Girl*, is an image of unalloyed glamour, a painting whose silvery palette and sinuous lines produce a portrait of a young woman who combines coolness and swagger. Looking at her now we could easily see her as a rock'n'roll or film star: Brooks seems clearly smitten. Joel Otterson and Millie Wilson both use inanimate objects to make their figures of desire. Both of their pieces are columnar, but Wilson's oversized wig becomes a zoftig, working class caryatid, while Otterson's assemblage is an example of overdetermined phallicism that revels in its own excess. Both of them are images of the other tinged with danger and humor.

Connie Samaras' photo portrait of an alien "visitor" makes explicit the ways that queer desire for the other can assume proportions that extend beyond gender itself. In many ways the lesbian and gay fascination with science fiction and alien life is part of the desire for a third term, neither male nor female. This utopian wish for something else also sees in the representations of alienness the possibilities for queer identification. For much of his career, David Bowie presented himself as this dually sexed alien, an identification that allowed him to play queer whether or not he was playing gay. The world of science fiction continues to prove hospitable to images of "other" couplings, thus allowing a space for queer interpretation.

### **Couple/Family**

These works are about the experience of trying to evoke queer social structures, often in the face of societal indifference or hostility. These

structures range anywhere from couples to depictions of the gay and lesbian community as a whole. In some cases these works are signals sent out to call a community into being, potential tribal markers, flags to rally round. Others are documents of an existing group or of a time when a group finally did come into being. As queers are forced to construct their own families, the forms that these families can take are endlessly varied. Both Carrie Moyer and Charles LeDray examine the tensions, erotic and/or violent that can occur within the biological family. In other cases, the gay community is linked to a "family of man" as in the case of the Gay Liberation Front Poster designed by Peter Hujar. Others reach back to claim figures from the past as members of the family.

Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin, and Kate Millett present three distinct images of lesbian couples. While Arbus' photograph is set at home and is sympathetic in tone, it remains the view of an outsider. Nan Goldin's *Siobhan and I: sex (black bra), NYC*, an image of great tenderness, is an insider's view, a personal revelation of intimacy. Millett's work is almost diaristic, a record of the vicissitudes that plague all relationships set forth plainly in brush and ink.

Over the past thirty years there have also been a number of figurations of the male couple, not all of them by gay artists. Some of these couples have operated as collaborative teams, who then depict their relationship as benign and cooperative, as in the work of Gilbert & George, or violent and contestatory, as in the work of The Kipper Kids. Pruitt & Early present themselves as collectable souvenir dolls, equal in their banality and cuddliness.

Geoffrey Hendricks represents both the dissolution of one couple and the union of another. His *Flux Divorce Box* documents the process by which he and his wife ended their marriage by bisecting all of their possessions. Hendricks' divided wedding album stands in poignant contrast to his bound-together chair, made as part of Jill Johnston's Fluxus marriage to her lover. Both objects are examples of the ways that Fluxus artists could take very literal ideas and use them to invent new ceremonies of surprising resonance.

Suzanne Lacy's *One Woman Shows* was a similar type of experiment in creating family by creating new structures for making family possible. Lacy's work has always been explicitly concerned with finding new ways for women to come together, often in situations that emphasize the connection between emotional and physical territory. This piece's

branching form, made up of participants picking others to participate, mimics the family tree's structure, as well as dispersing the power among all of the performers. This is a community that forms itself, with the artist as a guide, rather than as an autocrat.

A similar interplay between individual and group is evident in Harmony Hammond's *Presences*, and Kate Delos' quartet of symbolic paintings. Both posit families of tranquility, a tranquility that slips into self parody in General Idea's *Baby Makes 3*, an image of the bliss of a new nuclear family with their heads in the clouds. The image ended up on the cover of *File*, General Idea's inversion of *Life* magazine, and there is something of *Life*'s flattened world view in this retouched image of the three artists with their demonic putti faces.

Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt's cellophane and tinfoil drag queens are similarly poised between angel and demon. Lanigan-Schmidt was one of the first artists to resurrect extravagant decoration and ephemeral materials in the late '60s. The avatar of this style was Jack Smith, whose performances, tableaux, and films transformed the work of innumerable artists in the New York scene. Smith's devotion to the secret alchemy of debris, his resolutely outsider position, and his baroque imagination left their mark on artists ranging from Andy Warhol to Karen Kilimnik. Smith's *Beautiful Book* is a collection of photographs that like his film *Flaming Creatures*, documents and constructs a variety of queer scenarios. Smith's work is always oddly timeless: his poses orgiastic, and yet somehow strangely frozen.

While many of the posters and magazines presented in this exhibition stress the up-beat image of community, McDermott and McGough's painting, *A Friend of Dorothy*, 1943, shows a gay community constituted in a history of invective. Vincent Fecteau turns a jaundiced eye on the queer "family."

## **Orgy**

As people come together, there are different possibilities for pleasure. These works explore the pleasures of connection, of excess, of overflowing boundaries. Often this is expressed in formal terms in works that are knotted together, works that flow into each other. In many cases these are artists who celebrate the democratic experience of urban life. Several of them seem to want to remake the entire world in their image.

Nicole Eisenman's installations are composed of hundreds of drawings that endlessly shuffle styles and voices. Eisenman's work can run from

star-struck mooning to raunch to mythologizing to pungent self-mockery, sometimes in the same drawing. She borrows visual stylings from '20s neoclassicism, underground comics, and clip art. Her work documents a new kind of queer subjectivity: angry, horny, raucous and smart. Donna Han shares Eisenman's capacity for output, but her work charts a different geography. While the majority of Eisenman's work is based in the image, Han achieves her effects through patterning and exuberant color. Her sensibility touches on both Sanrio and psychedelia. Other worldly characters float through her pieced-together fabric works.

Jerome Caja's paintings, with their snickering, crystalline figures and scenarios of copulation and doom evoke the world views of both Jack Smith and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt. It is also possible to catch glimpses of Kahlo in Caja's autobiographical wrestlings with selfhood, existential pain, and oppressive Catholicism. Like Han and Eisenman, however, Caja deals with serious issues by flipping them into parody.

Cary Leibowitz describes the queer experience in the world with an unending supply of self-mockery and black humor. Leibowitz' objects can't even believe in themselves, much less anything else. He depicts himself in his works as a perennial loser unworthy of love or even regard. His works are rescued from obnoxious self-pity by the misplaced enthusiasm with which his downer sentiments are expressed (GO SADNESS! on a sports pennant).

In Orgy we've tried to stress works that have broken away from previous formal assumptions. Claes Oldenburg's *Soft Drum Set* exhibits a yielding sexuality that retains its charge even in its detumescence. Its forms are interlaced, collapsing on each other. Its hardness made soft is contrasted with Steve Wolfe's *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, where the softness of the paperback book is made hard by turning it into silkscreen on wood. Wolfe is quoting Warhol when he turns *The Diaries* into a variant of the Brillo boxes, but he is adding something as well. We are reminded of Warhol's uncanny ability to turn almost any form to his use. Wolfe's amendment encourages us to see *The Diaries* as one of Warhol's best pieces, albeit a posthumous one. While in form it is not orgiastic, the book's endless detailing of social commerce, petty squabbling, drug excess, and relentless voyeurism could hardly be more so. Both the sealed diaries and the flaccid drum set refer to raucous sounds that are now silenced. Oldenburg's soft sculptures were part of the earliest explorations of new materials for sculpture. As the '60s progressed, that exploration was joined by a great many artists, and the formal innovations of

those artists have proved to be one of the greatest influences on the younger generation. Jim Hodges and Richard Hawkins are both artists strongly influenced by the earlier work of Eva Hesse, Barry LeVa, Alan Saret, and Hawkins uses flimsy and pathetic materials to present a formalism of the fop. He combines star struck fascination with a dandy's fastidiousness, alternately venerating and attacking the pornstars and rockers that populate his assemblages, ultimately lifting them to the status of beautiful trash.

David Hockney's *The Hitchhiker* and Tee A. Corinne's *Photographs #27* and *#42* (from *Yantras for Womanlove*), all from 1982, use combined and overlapping of imagery to represent the nature of consciousness. In Hockney this consciousness is shifting, fractured from moment to moment, while Corinne employs similar techniques to imply integration and wholeness. Her orgy is peaceful and fulfilling, a utopia of pleasure forged out of community.

## **World**

If the previous sections have dealt with the ways in which queer artists have striven to understand first themselves and then their tribe, this section deals with their attempts to envision the interaction, abrasive and otherwise, of that tribe with the society at large. It also looks to the work of artists who attempt to engage the public and forces beyond the art world.

In New York, in the late '70s and early '80s, a number of artists began to use the city's surfaces as a new platform. Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* articulated an unrelenting urban paranoia, all the more chilling for its anonymity. It was impossible to tell if they were warnings, jokes or some bizarre ad campaign. The *Truisms* are an outgrowth of almost two decades of "idea art" experimentation, but they also owe a great debt to the blank anger and low budget means of punk graphics. At the same time Keith Haring began amending street and subway ads by adding in drawings of dogs, UFOs, and his soon-to-be-trademark babies. Haring's drawings migrated to blacked-out posters in the subways, where they began to tell increasingly bizarre stories of alien abduction, social strife, and communication with dolphins. Haring's work has always been valued more on the streets than in the gallery. Much of it is genuinely democratic in spirit, a trait that Haring shared with Warhol. Despite all of the hoopla about art in the '80s, Haring and Barbara Kruger are the only artists from that decade whose work has had any impact on the visual sensibility of the society as a whole. As early as 1982, Haring's characters and lines were already being pirated for use on low-budget T-shirts and skirts on 14th street. Haring's

enormous acceptance has on the street has stopped almost any serious discussion of his work in the art world; but in a certain sense it is possible to see Haring's retail outlet, The Pop Shop, as the inheritor of several generation's desires for an art that was direct and anti-elitist. Haring's buttons, radios, and inflatable babies have more to do with Fluxus boxes and stamps than with classy prints, or even the objects in Oldenburg's Store.

A sense of unease and confrontation fills Marlene McCarty's matchbook piece, *Crossfire*. The double-edged slogan "Lick Me I'm Sick" invites the viewer literally to play with fire, while the matches' arrangement on the floor suggests a freshly turned grave. AIDS, sex, and danger come together on this bed of fire. McCarty was a member of Gran Fury, one of the first artist collectives to take on the AIDS crisis, and her work retains much of the rage and direction of that experience.

AIDS activism brought a vast number of artists onto the streets. Gran Fury, Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo, and Dyke Action Machine! use the street as the place to promote queer visibility, confront health issues, and counter straight media's phobic depictions of lesbians and gay men. These projects have also become places for queer artists to meet one another and examine issues that have had a profound impact on their work in galleries as well. In many of these gallery works the confrontation between the queer and straight worlds can take a more intimate, ambivalent tone.

## **Utopia**

Beyond the vicissitudes of this world lie the infinite possibilities of another. These works embody artists' visions of the final outcome, visions of locations and futures hopeful and not. Roni Horn's photographic explorations of Iceland's natural hot springs and works from Catherine Opie's freeway series are attempts to reinvent the frontier from a lesbian perspective. If Zoe Leonard's image of Washington, D.C., shows us a space that refuses to make room for us, Horn and Opie both attempt to find the space that will. Opie's photographs record a wistful flaneurism on and around Southern California freeways. The overpasses and concrete vistas assume an odd majesty, summoning us to the road. These images speak with ease and reflection. Horn, on the other hand, is more guarded in her approach. Her suites of photographs show Iceland both as a place of great natural beauty and power and as a place where that power has been trivialized by human incursion. Horn's work, both photographic and sculptural, has consistently grappled with the question, "What does it mean to occupy space?" Her installations have answered that

question with discretion, elegance and intelligence, employing objects that strive, through their design and finish, to achieve a prelapsarian state of perfection. These photographs ask whether Iceland might be the place that contains such perfection.

If perfection is not a possibility, perhaps transformation is. Siobhan Liddell and Tony Feher attempt to turn the barest of possibilities into the greatest of triumphs. Liddell's materials are so slight that they barely exist, yet her sculptures share with Roni Horn's an enormous capacity for both beauty and rectitude. If this is a lesbian art, it is one that draws its inspiration from Gertrude Stein, finding poetic power in the simplest means, severe and generous at once. Tony Feher has more in common with the lushly transformative gifts of Joseph Cornell. Feher's sculptures are always a little askew, but their humility is laced with a joyous vision. That joy also fills Nicholas Mouffarege's Banana Pudding, a joy that may seem a little silly to us at first, but one that we desperately need in our lives. Sally Elesby shares with Feher some formal concerns, but her works are built around an un-alloyed visual and tactile pleasure. Elesby's beads, pipe cleaners and ribbons enact an elaborate dance of beauty and bliss.

If this show is going to not be an ending but a beginning, what can we look forward to? A look at the fate of previous moments of outsider energy should prepare us for the inevitable time when this energy is converted into style and pushed through the art world's intestinal tract. We are already seeing versions of this, in the way that the art world views anal sexuality or drag or working with fabric or medical surveillance or decoration as fascinating and important only as long as it is explored by a straight man. This should not surprise us. As it is presently constituted, the mainstream art world is a system for the production, exhibition, valorization and distribution of the work of heterosexual white men. As long as queer people look to it for their sole source of recognition, they will be disappointed. A few will be picked, as long as they can keep their noses clean, and the rest will be condemned to their "one dimensional" life on the sidelines. It is up to queer artists not to wait around for approval, but to become agents in the development and support of the work that they value. **In a Different Light** records the views of eight curators of queer exhibitions in the United States over the past fifteen years. Not one of those shows was initiated by a straight artist or curator, however much straight people may have supported them. Straight people should have a stake in dismantling the labels and distinctions that keep us from seeing ourselves and each other as we really are: no sex is as "straight" as bigots wish it might be; and there is no art that is

untouched by the experience, innovation, and vision of lesbians and gay men. A queer sensibility has roots far back in modernism, and queer methodologies continue to proliferate. Simply because this show is appearing in a museum, the art world should not think that it has done "queer," and queers should not think they are done with the art world. Rather than submitting ourselves to another cycle of marginalization and cultural amnesia, we should continue to learn from the past and keep queering the discourse. I hope that this exhibition can be a catalyst, a launching pad for a new discourse, a new flowering for artists to respond to.

If you love this exhibition, or if you hate it, go out and organize another one. We've all got a lot more to say.

Nayland Blake

### **Notes**

Many people offered me guidance on this show and essay. Much of my thinking about what queer practice could be is due to Stefen Brecht's book *Queer Theater. New Feminist Criticism*, edited by Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, contained a number of essays that had a great influence on my understanding of the shape and role of the women's art movement. George Chauncey's *Gay New York* provided me with the analogy of spatial mapping as a gay cultural strategy, and Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming* is one of the most coherent, and thorough going histories of punk in Britain. Finally, my thinking has been most indebted to Greil Marcus' writings, most importantly *Lipstick Traces*, one of the few books of cultural history to present the evolution of artistic ideas in a fashion that speaks both their political and emotional truth.

Terry Wolverton, Arlene Raven, and Moira Roth were all inordinately generous with their time and resources. Anne Philben, Garry Garrells and Mathew Marks all provided timely suggestions and support. Amy Scholder was both a patient editor and the moral heart of the project. She consistently challenged us to go beyond our assumptions. This show would have been greatly impoverished without her presence and participation.

Finally I have to express my deep gratitude to Philip Horvitz, whose love, support, and example have been my savior not only through this project but for the last five years of my life.