**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  
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**Interview with the Co-Curators of In a Different Light**  
**Lawrence Rinder and Nayland Blake**

**Q:** What made you decide to do this exhibition now?

**LR:** Well, I had been traveling around looking at a lot of art all over the country, and it seemed to me that while most of the art world was in a kind of limbo, that in the gay and lesbian community, particularly among younger artists in New York and San Francisco, there was a lot of energy, a lot of enthusiasm. There was also a lot of formal innovation, and a certain generosity of spirit in the work. I thought this was really remarkable considering the rather oppressive social conditions that gays and lesbians still live in and the devastating impact of AIDS. A great deal of the work was collaborative, between visual artists and playwrights and poets, things happening collaboratively within the same venues. It just seemed a lively and vibrant community, and I wanted to represent that in the museum.

**Q:** In Larry's introduction, he says that the exhibition was developed through "poetics rather than polemics." What does that mean within the context of this show?

**NB:** I think it means that we thought about the individual works first and let the combination of works determine for us what the thematics of the show would be, rather than deciding beforehand that "gays and lesbians make art about this" and then going out and finding the work that fit that bill. I think that's the way most shows get curated, that people come up with this thesis beforehand and then fill in the work to fit the thesis. I think that we were really responding to the fact that there was all this energy out there and we started going, "well what does this energy remind us of, what other things, what other moments is this moment similar to." And so the connections that we developed between works might be connections that are more due to our reading of the spirit of
the work, rather than saying, "well, this artist looked at this particular piece and then made this other piece in response to it." We're bringing objects together across generations in ways that the artists themselves may not have thought of, but ways that seemed to make a sort of poetic sense to us.

**Q:** And that's why you decided to bring in some historical work as well as the contemporary work that you had been looking at?

**NB:** Yes.

**Q:** Was there a similar feeling to bringing in the ephemera, things that aren't considered fine art, or weren't produced for the fine art market?

**NB:** Right, a lot of it is about saying that artists don't only look at artwork when they're responding to things. And particularly when thinking about the work of gay and lesbian artists, there's been so little, so few possibilities for them to communicate with each other and for their history to even be visible that they are very involved in looking at things in straight culture and trying to make them mean something different and also reconstructing their own history. Looking at things in popular culture. That's where a lot of the ephemera is coming in.

**LR:** Also, after we had developed these groups, and they suggested certain themes, then we did on occasion expand the groups with popular material from those core themes consciously, saying "OK, what might be an interesting relationship?" For example, in the Family section, which tended to be about suggestions of gregariousness and a growing sense of a social group. We wanted to include ephemera from the early period of the gay liberation movement: old Mattachine Society posters, copies of *The Ladder* and *One*.

**NB:** Queer people are the only minority whose culture is really transmitted almost exclusively orally, outside of nuclear/biological family. Because we don't necessarily have recourse to the usual institutions for transmitting culture that other minorities might have, whether they be family or maybe religion or particular ethnic enclaves. In order for queers to have a history, they have to put these signs out into the world and pull together their tribe from a very dispersed place.
Q: Given that you're trying to, in some sense, claim a "history" with the inclusion of the historical works and so forth, how do you put that together with your decision not to identify who is straight, gay, or lesbian in the show?

NB: That decision was really reached in order to let people know that these ideas that we are talking about have implications for straight people, straight artists, as well as gay and lesbian artists. In many of the shows that are based around identity politics, it becomes very easy to localize the concerns, as being only the concerns of "these people." And people approach those shows like they're ethnographic shows or something like that. That you go in and you look at the customs and ideas of these people. We really wanted to open that back up again because, particularly for so many gay and lesbian artists it's not interesting for them to think in those terms. It's not the thing that helps them make their work and it's not the way that they see themselves conducting the discussion. So instead of giving people an experience of essentializing, "here's a gay artist, that means that what he's doing is representing 'gayness'," we wanted people to think about "well, in some ways this makes sense to me. Is this a 'queer' idea?" I mean, things like having the Sticky Fingers Rolling Stones album cover designed by Andy Warhol in it, which is a big mass culture item, but to see that in a continuum of gayness. If you come upon that and you're not in an open frame of mind, then you don't see the ways that it starts to connect up with all of these other things in the world.

The impetus for not identifying people came very much from the artists as well as from us. Because I think there's a real sense on the part of the artists that it's just not interesting anymore for people to continue to essentialize these discussions. In the best of all possible worlds, American society would be a society that would recognize difference and then say that difference has something to say to all of us. That its concerns are all of our concerns.

But I think instead right now we have a situation in America of "yes, we can acknowledge difference," but that is then supposed to mean something that's like separate-but-equal. Where we only allow each group to say a very specific thing, in a very specific way. That means that as long as they conform to that expectation, then there isn't a problem. When they step outside of that expectation, then we say that "well, they're not truly being African American, not being truly feminist" or whatever. And that system is just so perpetuating, it means that we don't get any new knowledge. It means we actually
lose, we don't have access to the wisdom that these different groups have. Because we demand of them that they say what we expect them to say. Otherwise we don't hear it.

Also, we wanted people, since the show is called In a Different Light, we wanted people to see things differently than they would normally expect. We wanted them to have some surprises. And if everybody was busy reading the labels about who's gay and who isn't, then they wouldn't necessarily be as surprised.

Q: I remember hearing you say in an earlier talk that for most exhibitions you walk into a gallery and assume all the artists are straight unless otherwise identified. In this show, you'll walk in and, perhaps, assume all the artists are gay or lesbian unless otherwise identified. It puts you in a different frame of mind just walking into the gallery, maybe makes you question assumptions in general.

NB: Exactly.

LR: And then, the show is about the resonance of gay and lesbian experience, and that experience resonates beyond people who have sex with people of the same sex. It's an experience that impacts everyone, in terms of how they gender-identify, how they imagine their own sexuality. Straight identity would not exist without gay identity—there would be no such concept. Also, just to let the notion of influence be more fluid and for people to be able to construct a sense of influence in a poetic way, not a rigid art historical way. To see this about more as relationships between objects than about relationships between people.

Q: So, is there such a thing as a gay or lesbian aesthetic?

LR: Yes and no. On the one hand, I don't believe that there is any art that is essentially queer or inherently sexual. All sexuality, and all aesthetics, for that matter, is profoundly culturally specific. On the other hand, I do think that at certain times and places, in certain cultural moments, people may collectively see things in certain sexual ways even though there might be nothing objectively sexual about the objects or images themselves. You can talk about this in terms of cultural codes, and that sort of thing is certainly present in twentieth-century American gay and lesbian experience—the creation or transformation of codes to be read over the mainstream cultural meaning. Something, too, I think, operates on an even more subtle level, something like a collective intuition. It's this sort of thing that
allows us to appreciate the expression of gay or lesbian experience across such an incredibly broad range of material as is included in our exhibition.

Q: To wrap this up, what do you want people to come out of this show with? Socially, politically, artistically. I mean, what kind of impact do you want this show to have?

NB: Well, the show started in response to a real feeling of excitement, so, to my mind, I want people, at the most basic level, to come out with that same sense of excitement. I think that one of the things that bringing in this historical material does, is it says that there's something that's been going on on the sidelines that we haven't really been able to focus on yet. And that somehow it's informed all of these different bursts of cultural activity. And that we are in the middle of one of those cultural bursts right now, and right now it's localized in the queer community. But the message of a lot of this work is really liberating for anybody to think about. And that's what we would hope people would get. Also, that what they think is "gay art" is not necessarily what it actually is. That you may have an idea in your head of what queer artists should be doing or are doing, but what they have been doing is actually pretty different.

LR: Well, in a humanistic vein, I hope this exhibition encourages people to relax and have a sense of humor and be a little more open-minded about their relationship with other people and culture. While at the same time giving them, whether straight or gay, access to certain experiences that, without saying that they're universal, that hopefully will touch them. Whether it's experiences of longing or loss or unity, I think there are things here that people can have some relationship to.

Also, I think that we have assembled a group of fantastic works of art. That each taken individually is really extraordinary to see in itself. One way to look at this is as an extraordinary display of twentieth-century art.