

# **playing aids:**

**childish engagements with american gay photography  
since the 1980s.**

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**abstract.**

This thesis analyses the erotic, bodily, psychic, and pleasurable engagements with gay fine art photographic practices produced during the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States. Starting from exhibitions which have shaped critical discourse around gay sex, promiscuity, and AIDS-related mortality and loss, this thesis examines, often for the first time, the photographic practices of Jimmy DeSana, Ryan McGinley, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, and Steven Arnold. The questions which their works ask of us, and the demands we ask these works to meet are the subject of this inquiry. Adopting a psychoanalytic and poststructuralist methodological framework of analysis based on the Object Relations psychoanalysis of D.W. Winnicott and the late texts from Roland Barthes, this thesis argues for embodied forms of engagement with the photographic object, here understood as an object that is as visual as it is physically present in space.

This thesis brackets sexual pleasure in photographs produced during the HIV/AIDS crisis by emphasising an engagement with images through touching, playing, mirroring, and tasting. In so doing, this thesis positions itself in a domain which the widely different aims of postmodernist art criticism, neoconservative gay and straight voices, and AIDS activism alike have relegated to the childish positions of incapacity, infantility, and immaturity. Rather occupying a paranoically defensive position in response to this claims, this thesis reparatively inhabits them, promoting an often-aroused interaction with photography which occurs within the overlapping spaces between the Winnicottian mother with her child and between possible gay lovers. In these spaces, as psychic as they are physical, this thesis discusses a childish return to authoriality and originality as useful categories to mediate and to fill the separation between the photograph and its beholder.

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*playing aids is dedicated to my sister, to my family, and to everyone whom I am and have been dependent on to feel myself.*

**declaration.**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

**introduction\_ foreplay.**

**this thesis is a failure; a preamble.**

This thesis is a failure. It fails at growing up like an ideal (well-weaned) subject and like an ideal (somewhat objective) art historian, who is himself weaned (detached) from the text he authors. In this sense, I fail: I remain unable to remove myself, my attachments, and affective/affectionate responses to the works I analyse in the following chapters for a supposed sense of objectivity. I fail at presenting the subject matter of this thesis as a detached object with its own politics and erotics, extant outside of my often-aroused interaction with it. I delude (another psychoanalytic failure of narcissism) that these works are made for and with me. I am an incapable art historian and a not-good-enough boy-mother.

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This thesis analyses the generative potential of a promiscuous and childish mode of analysis by foiling staged photography from the ongoing AIDS epidemic in the United States against the boyish works of British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott and French structuralist Roland Barthes. Looking at works made by gay men for museum and gallery spaces which at the cusp of the 1980s paradoxically boomed and seemed in ruin, I focus on the erotic, narcissistic, pleasurable, and dependent interactions that works by Jimmy DeSana, Ryan McGinley, Paul Sepuya, and Steven Arnold extoll on their viewer by looking at a series of recent exhibitions of art photography.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, at the centre of this

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<sup>1</sup> The market for art photography skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s, as Juliet Hacking documents. At the same time, scholars like Douglas Crimp noted that the widespread and fast-paced introduction of photography in institutional spaces in the late 1970s productively “ruined” the very notion of the museum, which he reads as being upheld by

thesis stand photographic practices explicitly realised and conceptualised to be exhibited on museum walls, and thus with a certain viewership and physicality in mind. Charlotte Cotton makes clear: “The majority of art photographers working today [...] are crafting work primarily for an audience of art viewers, structured into an international web of commercial and non-profit galleries, museums, publishing houses.”<sup>2</sup>

As such, the American photographic practices which provide the subjects for my thesis find themselves both chronologically and theoretically cemented in a genealogy that is traced between the institutional rediscovery of Surrealist photography and the present-day attention to exhibiting artistic photographic images engendered by Robert Ryman’s “fixtures”, R.H Quaytman’s “rhizomatic mode of production”, and most importantly Wolfgang Tillmans’s “democratic” installations, according to Yve-Alain Bois.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the late-1970s and early-1980s witnessed a rise in exhibitions on 1920s and 1930s French Surrealism and Photography.<sup>4</sup> This interest coincided and often overlapped with a systemic reappraisal of photography as an art historical medium in a wider

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axioms of originality and value of the artwork — axioms which, as I describe later in the introduction, come under intense theoretical pressure in poststructuralist art criticism in the late-1970s and 1980s.

See: Juliet Hacking, *Photography and the Art Market* (London: Lund Humphries, 2018). Douglas Crimp, “The Museum’s Old/The Library’s New Subject” [1989], reprinted in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 66-83.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2020), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, “The Installation as Invitation to Play,” in *Wolfgang Tillmans: To Look Without Fear*, ed. Roxana Marcoci (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2022), 170-171. The volume *Wolfgang Tillmans: A Reader* provides an important collection of documents and interviews that further explore Tillmans’s ideas on exhibiting photography. See: *Wolfgang Tillmans: A Reader*, eds. Roxana Marcoci and Phil Taylor (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster prefaces his text on Surrealist art by pointing out that: “Over the last decade surrealism has returned with a vengeance, the subject of many exhibitions, symposia, books, and articles.” In Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), xi.

poststructuralist project heralded by Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Douglas Crimp, amongst many. While the predominantly male and “Paris-centered viewpoint” with which Surrealism was portrayed in these early reappraisals has been complicated in terms of gender, geography, and historicity by recent literature, this interest in Surrealist photography laid the ground for wider inquiries in photography’s relationship to unconscious desires, subjectivity, and identity.<sup>5</sup> As such, this thesis necessarily goes back to these earlier critical projects as interlocutors whose lineage continues to shape academic and curatorial approaches to the photographic object. As I argue in this introduction and throughout this thesis, this poststructuralist anti-identitarian lineage falls short at the threshold of art photography: a form of photography that becomes, as it is exhibited, intensely created to participate in specific economies of identification with the viewer, as recent scholarship on Tillmans’s oeuvre demonstrates.<sup>6</sup> These poststructuralist failures are further emphasised when brought against practices made by queer artists in the AIDS epidemic in which we all live, as Élisabeth Lebovici has argued.<sup>7</sup> In this introduction, I delve into my thesis’s failures in the specific context of AIDS culture, in which the space of the exhibition becomes a crucial playground for intense debates on the politics and aesthetics of AIDS photography. But since I’m starting on failures, I’ll

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<sup>5</sup> See: *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, eds. Stephanie D’Alessandro and Matthew Gale (New Haven and London: Yale University Press with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Francesco Zanot argues that in Tillmans’s work “the spectator [is made] a very own component [of the work of art].” [“lo spettatore [è fatto] una propria componente [dell’opera]”] In Francesco Zanot, “L’allestimento come opera d’arte: dal concettuale a Wolfgang Tillmans” [“Installation as a Work of Art: From Conceptual Art to Wolfgang Tillmans”], in *Photoshow: Le mostre che hanno segnato la storia della fotografia* [*Photoshow: The Exhibitions which Marked the History of Photography*], ed. Alessandra Mauro (Rome: Contrasto, 2014), 227.

<sup>7</sup> Élisabeth Lebovici, *Ce que le sida m’a fait: Art et activisme à la fin du XXe siècle* [*What AIDS did to me: Art and Activism at the end of Twentieth Century*] (Paris: jrp ringier, 2017), 9-17.

get to this later.

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In his book on the affective and generative potentials of failure, queer theorist Jack Halberstam argues that failures have counterintuitive queer rewards:

Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.<sup>8</sup>

In this thesis, I am not as committed to a Foucaultian framework as Halberstam is in his text. Indeed, as incisive as his work has been on the queer theorists whose work I lean against throughout the thesis— works by José Esteban Muñoz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman, and Elizabeth Freeman in particular — Michel Foucault’s texts do not care much for analysing the things of childhood: his historically contingent and ethically self-ameliorable subject is an adult entrapped in epistemological, biological, and erotic power relations.<sup>9</sup> Nor am I *that* inclined to use the language of failure, though failing subjectivities and failing art historians are indeed a central point of this thesis. This thesis

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<sup>8</sup> Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Mostly, the figure of the child is a repository of naivety or is used as a screen against which adult sexuality is foiled in Foucault.

See: Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), 65;

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 253;

Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Travistock Publications, 1988), 16-49.

deals with photographers and interactions with their works which fail to enter the domain of psychoanalysis's ideal adulthood, but the thesis fails to circumscribe them to a rhetoric of failing.

Yet, Halberstam's language of failure is a good point of departure for an inquiry into staged photographic representations from the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic which do not sit tidily with the demands to mature and to leave personal attachments at the door — demands exhorted by ideals of Kantian objectivity in art criticism's commitment to the deconstruction of identity, activist art, and neoliberal gay politics from the late-1980s and 1990s, as I demonstrate in this introduction. Eliding the boundaries between "childhood and adulthood, winners and losers," Halberstam's failure denounces the too-orderly maturational processes which psychoanalysis describes to stamp out "predictable" adults: a predictability which is most often inflected by the compulsory heterosexuality of psychoanalysis's ideal subject. Indeed, as Kathryn Bond Stockton's research on twentieth-century literature demonstrates, queer children always fail at growing up. Growing sideways, the queer (adult) child is psychoanalysis's bad subject.<sup>10</sup> Resisting the demands of personal maturation and responsibility-taking made by activists, postmodernist art critics, right-wing politicians, and neoliberal gay voices during what ACT UP-member Sarah Schulman recently defined as the "height of [AIDS] impact" in the United States (1987-1993), both the works in this thesis and I assume childish positions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 3.



So, let's start from three failures, one for Republican Senator Jesse Helms at exhibiting proper art, one for queer scholar Douglas Crimp at outlining a political positionality in queer curating, and the last one for me at becoming a good subject in my engagements with art objects.

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**failure number one; postmodernists' originality and mark steven's cock.**

Exhibition spaces, especially exhibition spaces where photography was exhibited, have provided the playground for debates on American AIDS art to unfurl amongst both the artistic and the political sphere since the mid-1980s. The cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe's touring retrospective "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment" at Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C., in 1988, following fierce homophobic resistance from far-right fundamentalists is perhaps the most notorious example of the exhibition space as an arena in which art made by openly gay men came under pressure and scrutiny. The exhibition became a national scandal resulting in (later acquitted) criminal charges of "pandering obscenity" and "the illegal use of a minor in nudity oriented materials" pressed against the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, which hosted the exhibition, and its director in 1990. As Crimp summarises, the highly aestheticized representations of gay SM practices of Mapplethorpe's 1977 *X Portfolio* in crucial conjunction with two of Mapplethorpe's portraits of young children were brought to the fore from the prosecution to sustain these charges.<sup>12</sup>

As Danto describes, however, Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* was not even exhibited in

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Photographs at the End of Modernism," in Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 5-12.

closed proximity to the portraits in “The Perfect Moment”: “the images from the notorious X portfolio were segregated off in specially marked precincts into which one could not possibly wander by accident.”<sup>13</sup> Danto contextualises the two portraits of children in question, *Rosie* (1976) and *Jesse McBride* (1976), as an ethical and aesthetic dilemma that rests on consent and the children’s lack of “*adult* sexuality:” “What children are innocent of is *adult* sexuality,” a sexuality which for Danto is marked by the subjects’ knowledge of their own bodies and by the subjects’ understanding of how their bodies can be sexualised and objectified.<sup>14</sup> In her landmark *Pictures of Innocence*, Anne Higonnet echoes Danto’s remarks on the issue of consent and positions them within a wider history of representation of children.<sup>15</sup> Higonnet argues that, since the seventeenth century, “childhood innocence [has been] considered an attribute of the child’s body, [...] because the child’s body [is] supposed to be naturally innocent [sic.] of adult sexuality.”<sup>16</sup> For both Higonnet and Danto, the positioning of Mapplethorpe’s nude and semi-nude portraits of children alongside his SM works seemingly upturns the visual codes of innocence. Danto further clarifies that, on top of the coexistence of these different types of works in the same exhibition, it is Mapplethorpe’s own gay and sadomasochistic sexuality that appears to right-wing critics at odds with the codes of innocence.<sup>17</sup>

This “incongruity” of visual codes is further informed by Mapplethorpe’s then-recent death from AIDS-related complications. The trial and cancellation of Mapplethorpe’s

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-69.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 166-169.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 2-3.

exhibition participates, as Carole Vance posits, in “a right-wing political program to restore traditional social arrangements and reduce diversity,” which is upheld by sustained and strategic efforts to portray “sexuality [as] shameful and discrediting.”<sup>18</sup> This strategy proved successful for Republican Senator Jesse Helms who, building on the Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato’s denunciation of Andres Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ* (1988) as immoral “trash,” managed to cordon off gay artists’ and AIDS activists’ access to the National Endowment for the Arts for promoting unsanitary, AIDS-death-bound, homosexual behaviour.<sup>19</sup> What emerges is a generalised sex panic which unfolds in the generalised arena of “homosexual art,” and which spreads onto institutionalised curation’s aversion for featuring work explicitly labelled as gay, queer, or homosexual. Indeed, as curator and queer art historian Jonathan Katz puts it:

Exemplifying the pervasiveness of and influence of Helms’s rhetoric, in 1990 the president of the Massachusetts chapter of Morality in Media observed upon the opening of “The Perfect Moment” in Boston, “[p]eople looking at these kinds of pictures become addicts and spread AIDS.” Here, succinctly realised, was the crux of the issue, a stunning series of elisions now yielding the horrifying equation of art=gay=AIDS.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carole S. Vance, “The War on Culture” [1989], in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 230. Vance underscores a similar point a year later in her less-anthologised article: Carole S. Vance, “Misunderstanding Obscenity,” *Art in America* 78 (1990) 5: 49-55.

<sup>19</sup> Crimp summarises and problematises Helms’s 1987 successful amendment to the requirements to receive a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts which prohibits the use of public funds to promote gay safe sex information in his essay: Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” [1987] in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 43-82, esp. 74-77.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture,” in *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, ed. Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 17; Fox Butterfield, “In Furor over Photos, an Echo of the City’s Past,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1990, A8, quoted in Katz, “Hide/Seek,” 17.

Suddenly, the discourse shifts from the morality of artmaking to the art's capacity of sustaining a potentially infective engagement with its audience: an infectivity which collapses the anxieties that a work of art could result in an AIDS diagnosis and, crucially, an anxiety that it could make the viewer gay. Richard Meyer strikes a similar point in his analysis of Helms's "anxious [homoerotic] fantasies that fuel censorship" where Helms gets caught up in the contradictory promotion and reproduction of homoerotic images in his attempt to denounce them.<sup>21</sup> Meyer argues that "Helms's fixation on Mapplethorpe reveals the paradox whereby censorship tends to publicize, reproduce, and even create the images that it aims to suppress," while discussing Helms's photocopying of Mapplethorpe's photograph *Mark Stevens (Mr 10 1/2)* (1976) for distribution in the Senate (Fig. 1).<sup>22</sup> The photograph depicts a muscular white man in leather chaps bending over a granite table-top with his large penis flaccidly and prominently flopping over the stone surface. While the photograph's title indexes a precise subject (and precise penile length), and a small tattoo of a stylised devil with pitchfork appears on the model's bicep, little else identifies the figure as indeed Mr 10 1/2: the model's face is cut out of the Hasselblad's square frame which defines Mapplethorpe's widest-known photographs. The relative anonymity of the model of image reduces Mark Stevens to black and white bodily forms, emphasising the insistence on the roundness of his penis which mimics the curvature of the Mark's arched spine. It is this classical formalism of the body that Janet

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Meyer argues elsewhere that censorship was also used in Mapplethorpe's early work as a technology to attract attention to homoerotic desires.

Richard Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," *October* 104 (2003): 131-148.

See also, Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books and Media, 2018), especially his chapter "Barring Desire: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography."

<sup>22</sup> Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," 133.

Kardon's curatorial essay for "The Perfect Moment" emphasises, often describing Mapplethorpe's photographs in terms of "figure studies."<sup>23</sup> The insistence on the human form and aesthetic formalism is also present in Kardon's testimony on the artistic value of Mapplethorpe's work during the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center trial.<sup>24</sup>

It is also this anonymity that allows *Mark Stevens* to act as a screen for Helms to project his anxious fantasies on a body which — contrarily to most images of fisting, anal penetration, and watersports in Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* — is not depicted as enacting an explicitly homoerotic sexual activity inasmuch as just having a big dick with some leather around it. In many ways the cropping of the image is a testament to the possible homoerotic anal engagements one may have with the Mark — engagements which we do not and cannot know are happening, since Mark's butt-cheeks are cut off the frame in their lower half where his anus is located. Of course, it can be argued that the codes of homosexuality still inform the processes of meaning production of and in the image. Indeed, the 1970s witnessed a growing interest in photography to dissect and understand these codes both in photographic practices and in postmodernist art criticism.

Just one year after Mapplethorpe's *Mark Stevens*, in 1977, Hal Fischer exhibits his photographic project *Gay Semiotics*, which sets out to catalogue and decode the visual symbols adopted by gay communities in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury and Castro districts. Fischer's project features a series of staged photographs of archetypal gay men which, drawing from the language of advertisement and fashion catalogues, are dissected into a trove of signifying objects, clothes, and accessories. Fischer's inclusion of text, both on and beside the photograph, deciphers the sexual practices and preferences of the

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<sup>23</sup> Janet Kardon, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Jane Merkel, "Art on Trial," *Art in America* 78 (1990) 12: 47.

photograph's model by connecting the visual signifiers of the gay archetypes to what he later called "a lexicon of attraction" that is "about personal desire."<sup>25</sup>

Particularly relevant to Mapplethorpe's *Mark Stevens* photograph is Fischer's *Street Fashion: Leather* image of a leather-man confronting the camera head-on (Fig. 2). Fischer's leather-man stands in front of a wall of cinderblocks, legs akimbo. He is wearing a leather jacket, unbuttoned to reveal his hairy chest and stomach, and leather chaps on top of Levi's denim. A set of keys ("an understood signifier of homosexual activity" as Fischer annotates in the picture *Keys*, Fig. 3) hangs from the belt loop of the leather chaps on the left side of the model, indexing the model's preference to assume a dominant position during sexual activity. Fischer's annotations float around the leather-man in white capital letters, listing both the name of the apparel he is wearing and sexual objects and practices to which certain elements of his presentation refer to. "COCK RING" is linked to the right-hand snap of his leather jacket, suggesting that the man's silhouetted bulge underneath the Levi's jeans (emphasised by Fischer's annotating white line) could be due to the sex object which remains unpictured.

Mapplethorpe's *Mark Stevens* is also wearing leather chaps and a cock ring. Though barely visible, the twinkle of metal studs on (what probably is) a leather band can be made out at the base of Mr 10 ½'s penis, wrapping both shaft and scrotum. Metal on leather, Mark Steven's cock ring visually connects to the leather chaps fastened by a metal buckle which he is wearing—the same leather chaps whose construction, open both at the front and at the back, allows for the display of the body parts used in anal sex. While Fischer's leather-man only refers to gay sex through the conceptual processes of signification of

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<sup>25</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson in conversation with Hal Fischer, "'Gay Semiotics' Revisited," *Aperture*, June 4, 2021, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://aperture.org/editorial/gay-semiotics-revisited/>.

gay male codes, Mapplethorpe's image bestows these kinky codes with a more explicit corporeality which, Meyer argues, articulates Sen Helms's confused homoerotic fantasies over a decade after the production of the image. Meyer draws our attention to this: "Notice how Helms's assertion that 'We have ten or twelve pictures of art [...] But we don't have any penises stretched out on the table' unwittingly confuses the distinction between artistic representation and corporeal presence, between pictures and penises."<sup>26</sup>

And yet, the logical step that connects Mark Stevens's "penis[] stretched out on the table" to the immoral and indecent activity of gay sex is not the appropriation of a widely understood "lexicon of attraction" that spans homosexual activities and leathersex which *Mark Stevens* is clearly utilising. As a strictly pornographic image of gay and leather sex remains out of Mapplethorpe's frame and can only (and quite pleasurably) be fantasised about, what makes Mark Stevens's huge cock gay for Helms is Mapplethorpe's own gayness. As an explicitly gay subject is displaced outside the frame by Mapplethorpe's framing elisions and only hinted by the constructing codes of homosexuality, the image seems to suffer from a vacuum of subjectivity that Helms quickly fills with the image's author and the image's audience. In this way, Mark Stevens, who I am led to believe is the model in the photograph and who remains unmentioned by Helms, finds his penis belonging to Mapplethorpe and a desiring audience. In Helms's off-shoot exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photographs — Helms's act of showing a selection of photographs in the public forum of the Senate — Stevens's largeness now becomes roomy enough to accommodate a highly eroticised encounter between author and viewer.

It does not come as a surprise, then, that "despite the prosecution's tactical success in isolating the photographs in question from Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, the defense won its

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<sup>26</sup> Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," 133.

case by reinscribing them within museum discourse” in the trial against the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center, as Crimp points out.<sup>27</sup> In this framing of Mapplethorpe’s images within the “museum discourse” of “formal qualities” (an operation already effected in the catalogue for the exhibition), Crimp argues that the images are “reduc[ed] [...] to abstractions, lines and form, light and shadow.”<sup>28</sup> What this reduction effectively does is that it elides Mapplethorpe as “an openly gay man, a man who also took explicit pictures of ‘perverse’ sex acts, a man who subsequently died of AIDS.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as Danto argues: “the formalism of the experts [during the trial] rendered a great disservice, even if it got the museum and its director off the hook,” as “their vision of the work virtually erased the content.”<sup>30</sup> The focus on the classicist aesthetic qualities builds on the postmodernist conception of a photograph as an image constructed by shared codes extant outside of the frame and at the same time negates the very codes of homosexuality which inform the image.

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Around the same time that Mapplethorpe produces *Mark Stevens*, photography is the subject of theoretical re-evaluation. Early attempts at curating exhibition solely on art photography in larger museum institution in the United States, such as John Szarkowski’s 1964 “The Photographer’s Eye” and 1978 “Mirrors and Windows” exhibition at MoMA, focussed on the privileged position of the photographer as a creative selector of slices of reality; this changes by the mid-1970s when the figure of photography’s author becomes

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<sup>27</sup> Crimp, “Photographs at the End of Postmodernism,” 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 88-89.



heavily scrutinised.<sup>31</sup> Drawing from the early semiological and structuralist work of Barthes, art critics such as Rosalind Krauss attempt to situate the photograph within a discursive field of systems of representation. As Krauss explains in her 1977 two-part essay “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” the critical relevance of the photograph lies in its capacity to lay bare the structures of power and language which agitate the production of meaning. Indeed, Krauss argues that “[photography’s] power is as an index and its meaning resides in those modes of identification which are associated with the Imaginary.”<sup>32</sup> By locating the meaning of the photograph within a Lacanian “Imaginary” as opposed to the “Symbolic” order of painting, Krauss dislocates the process of signification of images from their author to a fantasy that is not produced as much as it is reproduced from a shared reservoir. Indeed, “If the Symbolic finds its way into pictorial art through the human consciousness operating behind the forms of representation, forming a connection between objects and their meaning, this is not the case for photography.”<sup>33</sup> Abigail Solomon Godeau’s review of *The Work of Atget*, a comprehensive five-tome monograph by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hamburg

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. “Since the photographer’s picture was not conceived but selected, his subject was never truly discrete, never fully self-contained.” In John Szarkowski, “Introduction,” in John Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye* [1966] (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), n.p.

Similarly, the curating rationale for “Mirrors and Windows” are primarily the modernist categories of style and the artists’ quest for truth and beauty. See: John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 25.

Douglas Fogle provides a summary of the theoretical and artistic shifts in the uses of photography from the 1960s to the 1980s, connecting these changes to Surrealist artistic practices and critical texts on photography from the 1920s and 1930s. See: Douglas Fogle, “The Last Picture Show,” in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960 – 1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 9-19.

<sup>32</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” *October* 3 (1977): 75.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

on the photographer's oeuvre, further denounces the figure of the author as a "museological relic": a site sustained by scholars' projected "desires" to canonise, to bestow the artist with an aesthetic and affective greatness.<sup>34</sup> This greatness, Solomon Godeau argues, fits uneasily with "most photography," which "is produced for functional and instrumental purposes, not aesthetic ones."<sup>35</sup>

While the Symbolic is for Lacan the stage at which the child finds himself trapped in a world which he had no role in constructing, the world of history and language where objects are already signified, the Imaginary allows for a study of things where signifiers are unmoored from their signified: more than de-coded, signifiers appear un-coded in the Lacanian Imaginary. This becomes clear in the second part of Krauss's essay, where building on Barthes's conceptualisation of the photograph as "a message without a code," Krauss argues that "the connective tissue binding the objects contained by the photograph is that of the world itself, rather than that of a cultural system."<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, Krauss clarifies that it is precisely this indexical quality of photography, its status as an uncoded trace, that gives photography its position as a privileged medium through which to deconstruct and analyse the historical, social, economic power-relation that have sustained the mythologisation of the artist. Conceptualising the photograph as an indexical trace of "the world itself," its simulacrum, rather than the product of a particular

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<sup>34</sup> Abigail Solomon Godeau, "Canon Fodder: Authoring Eugene Atget," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 16 (1986) 6: 226.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 17. Barthes returns to his idea of the "message without a code" in his "The Rhetoric of the Image," where the link between his idea and a Lacanian lexicon is made explicit. In Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 36.

Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2." *October* 4 (1977): 60.

(that is, subject-based) language, Krauss is able to argue that photography allows “to put into question the whole concept of uniqueness of the art object, the originality of its author, the coherence of the oeuvre in which it is made, and the individuality of so-called, self-expression.”<sup>37</sup>

It is the questioning of fundamental mores which Krauss and Crimp ascribe to modernist practices which allows Krauss to declare that “there *is* a discourse proper to photography; only, we would have to add, it is not an aesthetic discourse. It is a project of deconstruction in which art is distanced and separated from itself.”<sup>38</sup> As such the category of Art as it is understood by Modernism is troubled by photography. Photography, as Krauss argues, allows for a self-reflexive understanding of what art is by alienating art’s own language, in the same way that the Lacanian subject is alienated from itself. Crimp makes this clear in his essay “The Museum’s Old,” where — foiling Szarkowski’s own integration of photography as a medium about itself in a modernist tradition already theorised by art critic Clement Greenberg — he argues: “Postmodernism begins when photography comes to pervert modernism.”<sup>39</sup> What Crimp and Krauss understand to be

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<sup>37</sup> Krauss’s argument here is in direct response to French photographer and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who argues in his 1965 book *Un Art Moyen* that photography is first and foremost a social index which attempts to borrow the categories of high art in vain and in a haphazard fashion. For a summary of Krauss’s position regarding Bourdieu’s work, I recommend Jae Emerling’s 2012 chapter on framing and photography.

Rosalind Krauss, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” *October* 31 (1984): 63. See also, Pierre Bourdieu, *Un art moyen: essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* [A middle-brow Art: Essay on the Social Uses of Photography] (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1965);

Jae Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 48-75, esp. 58-63.

<sup>38</sup> Krauss, “A Note on Photography,” 63.

<sup>39</sup> See Greenberg’s description of Modernism: “Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects exclusive to itself.” From which Crimp deduces: “Postmodernism may be said to be founded in part upon this paradox: that it is photography’s revaluation as a modernist medium that signals the end of modernism.”

the intrinsic capacity of photographic image to deconstruct Art as institution ends up deconstructing the perceived “originality of the avant-garde” of Modernism into a series of postmodernist gestures of “repetition and recurrence.”<sup>40</sup>

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It is inside and around this theoretical milieu that Crimp curates his influential “Pictures” show at the Artists Space gallery, New York, in 1977 — one year after Mapplethorpe’s *Mark Stevens* and thirteen years before the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center trial. Featuring photographic works by Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith, Crimp champions photographic work from “artists [who] have turned to the available culture around them” to reveal the processes of representation “as an autonomous function that might be described as ‘representation as such.’”<sup>41</sup> Employing “processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging,” the works of what was later dubbed the “Pictures Generation” point to the necessity of “uncovering strata of representation,” as Crimp explains in his follow-up essay to the “Pictures” catalogue.<sup>42</sup> With a self-reflexivity at play, the works in the “Pictures” exhibition do not attempt to be original or unique, but the opposite: they reveal representation to be exactly a *re-presentation* of already existing images, a gesture of Krauss’s “repetition and recurrence,” and as such they enable a critique of the function of representation in and of

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Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” [1965], in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 5.

Crimp, “The Museum’s Old,” 77.

<sup>40</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” [1981], in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1986), 157-158.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Pictures” [exhibition catalogue, 1977] in *X-Tra* 8 (2005) 1: 19-20.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (1979): 87.

itself. Crimp makes this clear as he argues: “Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture.”<sup>43</sup> In his 1984 essay “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” Crimp doubles on his argument: “Their images are purloined, *stolen*. In their work, the original cannot be located, it is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy.”<sup>44</sup> It is this configuration of the image-as-stolen which leads Crimp to denounce “photography’s claim to originality, showing those claims for the fiction that they are, showing photography to be always a representation, always-already-seen.”<sup>45</sup>

With “Pictures,” Crimp’s aim is to provide a show that is representative of a tendency amongst “a group of younger artists” to emphasise representation as a mediator for the subject’s experience of reality, as an “inescapable part of our ability to grasp the world around us.”<sup>46</sup> While the “Pictures” show only included a handful of artists (most of which were already friends and acquaintances of Crimp’s), the breadth of artists which have become part of the incongruous moniker of the “Pictures Generation” is expanded by Douglas Eklund for his “The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2009. Wider in scale, Eklund’s show cements the “Pictures Generation” in an artistic genealogy (already suggested by Crimp) that develops out of the artistic possibilities afforded by the Minimalist and Conceptual Art of the 1960s

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>44</sup> Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism” [1984], in Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>46</sup> Crimp, “Pictures” [1977], 19.

and early-1970s.<sup>47</sup> Nancy Foote offers a similar genealogy of the postmodernist image in her 1976 essay “The Anti-Photographers,” where she charts the progressive hybridisation of ephemeral forms of Conceptual Art and photography which operate on the margins of documentation and fictional narrative. In the history of photography presented in Foote’s article, one that moves from Alfred Stieglitz to Robert Smithson’s photographs of *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* (1969) via DaDa and Surrealism, the conceptualisation of the photograph is shown to “[change] from a mirror to a window” that gives onto the structures of reality.<sup>48</sup> More importantly, Eklund correctly identifies the direct influence that post-structuralist and psychoanalytic French texts by Foucault, Barthes, and Julia Kristeva had on the works of the “Pictures Generation”—the very same texts unto which the postmodernist art criticism of Krauss and Crimp foils. As Eklund summarises:

Among the French thinkers’ central ideas was that identity was not organic and innate, but manufactured and learned through highly redefined social constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship; moreover, these constructions were embedded within society’s institutions and achieved their effects through the myriad expressions of the mass media.<sup>49</sup>

Eklund quotes Barthes’s famous 1968 essay “The Death of the Author” for its transposition of the idea of a constructed identity into the literary (and art historical) discourse of authenticity and originality. Referring to Barthes’s essay as “a call to arms for the artists of the Pictures Generation,” Eklund charts the influence of Barthes’s idea on these works: of text and image not as the product of a generative mind of an

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<sup>47</sup> Douglas Eklund, “Introduction,” in *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, ed. Douglas Eklund (New York, New Haven, and London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy Foote, “The Anti-Photographers,” *Artforum* 15 (1976): 46-54.

<sup>49</sup> Eklund, “Introduction,” 17.

enlightened author but as a series of “quotations” and “traces” which a generalised reader (or viewer) holds together by looking through the “window” of the photograph.<sup>50</sup> Eklund’s conceptualisation of “The Pictures Generation,” however, “downplays” the direct influence that critical models on identity and its construction proposed by Krauss and Crimp exerted on these photographic practices from the 1970s and 1980s, as Margaret Iversen argues in her review of the show’s catalogue.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this mode of poststructuralist criticism hinged on constructivist models of subjectivity was a direct interlocutor to the conceptualisation of these art photography practices, owing to the widespread influence of *October* onto a generation of photographers who, precisely like the case studies of this thesis, studied photography academically.<sup>52</sup>

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The conceptualisation levied by Krauss and Crimp in the 1970s and 1980s of the photographic image as unoriginal, repetitive of already existing forms of representation, and constructed by a series of “quotations” and “traces” from a set of aesthetic traditions, is precisely what underlies the defence for the trial of Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment” exhibition. With the author becoming nothing more than deferred “*pasticheur*,” as Krauss defines Barthes’s post-structuralist conceptualisation, it becomes congenial for

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Barthes: “le lecteur est l’espace même où s’inscrivent [...] toutes les citations dont est faite l’écriture; [...] il est seulement *quelqu’un* qui tient rassemblées dans un même champ toutes les traces dont est constitué l’écrit.” [“the reader is the space where all quotations of which writing is made are inscribed [...]; [...] he is only *someone* who holds the traces of which the text is constituted together in the same field.”] In Roland Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur” [“The Death of the Author”] [1968] in Roland Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue* [*The Rustle of Language*] (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 66-67.

Eklund, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Iversen, “Pictures without Theory,” *Art Journal* 69 (2010) 3: 128-131.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

the defence to displace Mapplethorpe's gayness, his involvement in SM practices in the 1970s, and his HIV-diagnosis and subsequent death from AIDS-related complications in the 1980s (on which the prosecution focuses) altogether.<sup>53</sup> In a postmodernist gesture, the defence overall favours a reading of Mapplethorpe's images which focuses on its quotation of the formalist qualities of the classical nude, the long Western art historical tradition of the male physique study, the polished composition of the photograph, emphasised by the dramatic chiaroscuro of lighting and black and white photography.<sup>54</sup> Though strategical (indeed, the defence won the trial), this working of authorial displacement — which elides Mapplethorpe's gayness, the sexual subcultures he is representing, and his death from AIDS — sits uncomfortably not only with Mapplethorpe's work per se, but also with the very critic whose postmodernist strategies were employed: Douglas Crimp.

Crimp is not particularly fond of Mapplethorpe's images, as he makes clear in his 1982 essay "Appropriating Appropriation." In this essay, Crimp inscribes Mapplethorpe's images in the postmodernist framework of quotation and appropriation of art historical sources extant to the photographic object but clarifies that this appropriation is traditional and a bit too "*modernist*" for his taste.<sup>55</sup> Contrasting Mapplethorpe's images to the more

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<sup>53</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999) 2: 290.

<sup>54</sup> While the overall defence strategy draws from the postmodernist conceptions of photography which were articulated in the two decades preceding the trial, there are a few exceptions. For instance, Robert Sobieszak's testimony reinscribes Mapplethorpe in the modernist mythology of the troubled artist producing work in the "search for meaning" in a "troubled life." Cf. Robert Sobieszak, quoted in Jane Merkel, "Art on Trial," *Art in America* 78 (1990) 12: 47.

<sup>55</sup> Crimp is not the only gay critic who criticises Mapplethorpe's images in their attempt to neatly fit into the museum space. Hal Fischer also negatively comments on the commerciality of Mapplethorpe's images to non-comitally "play both avant-garde *enfant-terrible* and respectable artist at the same time." Biographer Patricia Morrisroe reads this event as strategic for Mapplethorpe's career.

Cf. Hal Fischer, "The New Commercialism," *Camera Arts* 1 (1981) 1: 10;



postmodernist (that is, self-aware and self-reflexive) photographic practice of Sherrie Levine, Crimp writes that:

Mapplethorpe's photographs [...] appropriate the stylistics of prewar studio photography. [...] Mapplethorpe's abstraction and fetishization of the objects thus refer, through the mediation of the fashion industry, to Edward Weston, while his abstraction of the *subject* refers to the neoclassical pretences of George Platt Lynes.<sup>56</sup>

If in 1982 Crimp frames Mapplethorpe's images in a framework of appropriation, even as he distinguishes these images modernist, by 1989, right in the middle of the "plague years" of the AIDS crisis in the United States, this postmodernist mode of critique starts showing its limitation. In his 1993 essay "The Boys in My Bedroom," first presented in 1989 in a panel discussion titled "Postmodernism and Its Discontents" at the Whitney, Crimp rhetorically asks: "Given these assaults [by right-wing politicians amongst which Sen Helms] on our sexuality and indeed on our lives, what are we to say now of the ways we first theorized postmodernism?"<sup>57</sup> His answer is that "we only now know how it might really matter."<sup>58</sup> Crimp's essay justifies his answer by moving the discussion away from Mapplethorpe and Levine and moving it to the activist poster, where postmodernist strategies of appropriation are used again and again to resist "Helms's equation of

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Brian-Wilson and Fischer, "'Gay Semiotics' Revisited"; Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (London: Papermac, 1995), 204. Jonathan Maho provides a useful summary on responses to the commercialism of Mapplethorpe photography in his 2018 article. Cf. Jonathan Maho, "An Oeuvre Shaped by the Buyers' Taste? The Impact of Compromises on the Reception of Mapplethorpe's Work," *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2 (2018) 4, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v2i4.53>.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in *Image Scavengers: Photography*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 30.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas Crimp, "The Boys in My Bedroom" [1993], in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 157.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

homoeroticism with obscenity.”<sup>59</sup> Clarifying that postmodernist “assaults on originality have given rise to dictums like ‘if it works, use it’; ‘if it’s not yours, steal it,’” Crimp reaffirms the value of appropriation as a critical tool of production and analysis, now reignited by its activist political potentiality.<sup>60</sup>

But in this shift of argument from work made for the museum walls to artistic endeavours which are now taken to the streets, the homophobia which structures one’s encounter with Mapplethorpe’s and Levine’s images (also dependent on Levine’s works’ location in Crimp’s bedroom) and which provides the starting point for Crimp’s essay is hardly dealt with. Indeed, Crimp concludes his essay by encouraging a partial reframing of postmodernism, one that takes into consideration these homophobic attacks, but also a reframing which Crimp locates in the objects of postmodernism not in its theoretical endeavours: “as Jesse Helms has made clear, difference, in our culture, *is* obscenity. And it is this with which postmodern theory must contend.”<sup>61</sup> As such, I want to re propose and reshuffle Crimp’s original question: Given these assaults on our sexuality and our lives, what are we to say now of the way postmodernism theorised gay male works explicitly made for the institution of the museum?

Crimp partially attempts a response in the 1993 introduction to his collection of essays *On the Museum’s Ruins*, where he problematises his previous stance on Mapplethorpe’s images following the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center trial:

What I failed to notice in 1982 was what Jesse Helms could not help but notice in 1989: that Mapplethorpe’s work interrupts tradition in a way that Levine’s does not. [...] Mapplethorpe’s pictures often depict eroticism as openly homosexual [...]. Thus, whereas I saw Mapplethorpe’s nudes only in the context of the other

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 163.

conventional genres of the artist's work—still lifes and portraits—Jesse Helms saw them in the context of the overtly homosexual images of Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*. The lines that Mapplethorpe crossed, between the safely homosocial and the dangerously homosexual, was also a line between the aesthetics of a traditional museum culture and the prerogatives of a self-defining gay subculture.<sup>62</sup>

Crimp explains that, for Helms, the open and explicit homosexuality of some of Mapplethorpe's works becomes a code that is projected without any distinction onto Mapplethorpe's entire oeuvre. What Crimp still fails to fully come to terms with, however, is the relevance not of Mapplethorpe's homosexual works but of Mapplethorpe's homosexuality itself on his work. Getting caught up in his own anti-authorial postmodernist framework, Crimp continues to analyse Mapplethorpe's images through the codes of homosexuality which they appropriate — codes which move through both neoclassical aesthetics and SM semiology. All the while, Helms, more than situating Mapplethorpe's images against themselves, is carrying out a postmodernist anathema: an operation of resuscitating the author behind the photograph to fix its meaning through the category of the artist's identity. Crimp never takes this operation too seriously, and as such it remains only partially conceptualised in his essay as “a line that is crossed” between gay sub-cultures and museal institutions.

While the insistence on the codes of homosexuality, inflected by what Crimp describes as a neoclassical aesthetic, might be a useful category of analysis for some of Mapplethorpe's images, it falls short in describing Mapplethorpe's *Mark Stevens*. Where are the codes of neoclassical beauty and the male physique study in the photograph? Yes, the dramatic lighting does emphasise the contours of Mark Stevens' musculature,

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<sup>62</sup> Crimp, “Photographs at the End of Modernism,” 7.

especially in his clenched glutes and intercostal muscles. But his stomach produces softer folds of skin which culminate in the shade of the lower abdomen sucked in at the navel which sit uncomfortably with neoclassicism. Even Mark Stevens's penis on its own, flaccidly protruding on the granite table and not engaged in any particularly recognisable gay sexual intercourse, does not seem to fully account for the "dangerously homosexual" which Crimp describes.

What makes this image "dangerously homosexual" for Helms is Mapplethorpe himself and what he imagines are the audiences that might enjoy seeing a big dick, rather than the measured decoding of a gay semiology (indeed, I doubt the Helms did know of Fischer's work or of Stevens's gay porn-star career). Literary critic D.A. Miller points to the spectre of Mapplethorpe in Helms's presumed analysis of *Mark Stevens*. Helms denounces Mapplethorpe's work, he declares that "'there is a big difference between *The Merchant of Venice* and a photograph of two males of different races [...] on a marble top table."<sup>63</sup> As such a photograph does not exist in Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, Meyer posits that Helms might be both conflating multiple photographs and misreading the material of *Mark Stevens* granite block for marble.<sup>64</sup> Miller suggests that for Helms "marble top" drifts by assonance into "Mapplethorpe," allowing Meyer to argue that "'marble top' provides Helms with a means, however unconscious, of inserting Mapplethorpe into a sexualised scene of interracial male coupling."<sup>65</sup>

In Helms's drift of meaning, *Mark Stevens* is unshackled from the poststructuralist

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<sup>63</sup> Jesse Helms quoted in Maureen Dowd, "Unruffled Helms Basks in Eye of Arts Storm," *New York Times*, July 28, 1989, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/28/arts/unruffled-helms-basks-in-eye-of-arts-storm.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," 131-133.

<sup>65</sup> D.A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 41-42.

context of the image as constructed based on Barthes's "Death of the Author" and his early semiological writing in favour of a reading of *Mark Stevens's* (and by surrogacy of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre) through Barthes's later writings. Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text* that "the pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. [...] My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. [...] Drifting occurs whenever social language [...] *fails me*."<sup>66</sup> As language escapes Barthes's grasp, his pleasure is engendered. In the fantastic (as in pertaining to fantasy) unmooring of "marble top" from its socially agreed signified to "Mapplethorpe," Helms drifts to a "perversely luxuriant space of homosexuality," as Meyer describes.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the pleasure of *Mark Stevens's* text is not of the "triumphant, heroic, muscular type" of the neoclassical male study. Rather, its pleasure (and queerness) drifts to its author and its audience for Helms. In this (late) Barthesian gesture, Helms becomes problematic for unexpected reasons. Beyond the important political ramifications of his vitriolic and homophobic rhetoric, already denounced and fiercely refuted by Crimp, Meyer, Simon Watney, Lee Edelman, Schulman, and activist organisations, Helms picks up on a crucial postmodernist anxiety: an anxiety that the work of art might find its meaning loosely fixed in the sphere of the autobiographical, a sphere which is concurrently inhabited by the work's author and the work's reader.<sup>68</sup> And, as much as it pains me to admit it, Helms

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<sup>66</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 18-19.

<sup>67</sup> Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," 133.

<sup>68</sup> See: Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism" [1987], in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 27-42;

Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," 43-82;

Crimp and Adam Rolston analyse the responses of activist organisations to the homophobic political rhetoric of the 1980s in their book *AIDS Demo Graphics*. Douglas Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," 131-148;

was right: I do want to get fucked by Mark Stevens's cock.

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**failure number two; *against nature* and the aids politics of representation.**

The problem of AIDS art, autobiography, and gay identity represents a very “dynamic question” in both scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s, as well as in more recent literature. And by “dynamic question” I mean that it resulted in decade-long spats between art critics on different coasts of the United States. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins’s exhibition “Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men” is the most famous example onto which these debates foil in the late-1980s. Originally supposed to be a show about works that addressed AIDS solely curated by Richard Hawkins, as the then-directory of the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions gallery Joy Silverman clarifies in the introduction to the accompanying publication to the exhibition, the show took a “less direct [...] course” in tackling the “growing concerns” that AIDS posed in the late-1980s.<sup>69</sup> The director then recounts how at the same time that Hawkins was approached to curate what was to be an AIDS show, the gallery received an exhibition proposal “about sexual promiscuity and its implications” at the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States by Cooper.<sup>70</sup> Despite initial doubts by the exhibitions

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Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987);

Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004);

Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Joy Silverman, “Introduction/Acknowledgements,” in *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, ed. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

committee about the “antithetical” stance of an exhibition about gay male promiscuity to AIDS activism, LACE proceeded to mount a show which is self-defined as composed of “work[s] [that] [are] confrontational rather than pedantic” in their stance to AIDS.<sup>71</sup> “Against Nature” opened in January 1989 at the LACE gallery to mixed critical reviews and relative success in terms of audience footfall.

The exhibition featured work by relatively little-known artists working in different mediums ranging from photography to sculpture, from painting to performance. Indeed, names such as Kevin Wolf, John de Fazio, and David Bussel, who have contributed paintings, sculptures, and photographs to the exhibition respectively, have hardly become household names in art historical literature. Perhaps the more widely known artists to have come out of the exhibition are Doug Ischar and Nayland Blake. The former received some attention in 2009 for a solo exhibition of his 1985 series of photographs of everyday public displays of gay affection and languid male bodies titled “Marginal Waters” (not included in *Against Nature* but included in the Chicago presentation of “Art AIDS America,” Fig. 4).<sup>72</sup> Nayland Blake and his work *Dust* (1987) — a black flag with the word “DUST” in a white font which plays on its linguistic and visual resemblance to San Francisco’s gay club “STUD” (Fig. 5) — received more critical attention: Blake’s 1995 curation of “In a Different Light” at the BAMPFA touches on discourses of sexuality, identity, and minority demographic representation within institutionalised exhibition spaces which have recently come under further scrutiny in response to the controversial

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> David J. Getsy, “Holding at Bay: Doug Ischar’s *Marginal Waters*,” in *Marginal Waters: Doug Ischar*, ex. cat. (Chicago: Golden Gallery, 2009), 4-11; John Neff, “Interview with Doug Ischar,” in *Marginal Waters: Doug Ischar*, ex. cat. (Chicago: Golden Gallery, 2009), 12-57; Michelle Grabner, “Doug Ischar: Golden,” *Artforum* 12 (2009): 240-241.

2014 Whitney Biennial.<sup>73</sup> The artist's participation to Anne Ellegood and Johanna Burton's 2014 "Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology" at the Hammer, and to Katz's 2015 "Art AIDS America" exhibition, further cemented Blake within the contemporary curational panorama.<sup>74</sup>

Rather than on the artworks featured in the exhibition, reviews and criticism surrounding "Against Nature" were moved to the curation and the accompanying catalogue entries (which Cooper and Hawkins describe as "a component of *Against Nature*, and not its tracing") by then art columnist for the *Village Voice* Gary Indiana and queer film director and film scholar John Greyson.<sup>75</sup> While some reviews praised the curation of the exhibition for its interest in thinking around gay sexuality and desires without looping in a subjectivity that is too anchored in the context of AIDS, as Doug Sadownick writes in

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<sup>73</sup> Nayland Blake, "Curating In a Different Light," in *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, ed. Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholer (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 9-43.

For a summary of the criticism surrounding the lack of female Black artists and the decision of HOWDOYOU SAYSAYAMINAFRICAN? collective to remove their work from the show at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, see: Jaime Shearn Coan, "How to See Black Space in Total Whiteness: taisha pagett's *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)* and the 2014 Whitney Biennial," *TDR* 61 (2017) 3: 72-93.

<sup>74</sup> Glen Helfand, "Art, AIDS, SF: Tales of the City," in *Art AIDS America*, ed. Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka (Seattle and London: Tacoma Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2015), 90-98;

Anne Ellegood and Johanna Burton (eds.) *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2014);

Andy Campbell, *Bound Together: Leather, Sex, Archives, and Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 153-155.

<sup>75</sup> Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins, "About *Against Nature*," in *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, ed. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988), 3.

Gary Indiana, "The Code of Sentiments from *The Babylonian Empire*," in *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, ed. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988), 17-19;

John Greyson, "Parma Violets: A Video Script," in *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, ed. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988), 10-15.



*L.A. Weekly*, others like Jan Breslauer (still in *L.A. Weekly*) found the premise of the exhibition to promote eroticism in the disservice of activism lacking, passé, “apolitical,” “reactionary,” and “enervating.”<sup>76</sup> The stance that the exhibition acquired in relation to AIDS activism, especially ACT UP activism, is the focal point of the debates around queerness, desire, and responsibility which ensued.

Crimp problematises the framing and morals of the rationale for the exhibition in his 1989 essay “Good Ole Bad Boys.” Indeed, Crimp reads Cooper and Hawkins’s use of “homosexual” as a move to oppose his own writing: “Apparently I was cast as this exhibition’s opponent, since, rumor has it, *Against Nature* was conceived from the beginning as a rebuttal of the ‘politically correct’ demands made in the AIDS issue of *October*.”<sup>77</sup> This rumour was somewhat confirmed in a 2016 conversation between Andrew Durbin and Richard Hawkins, where the curator contextualises the exhibition against the “canon” of AIDS art promoted by East-Coast Crimp-like writers:

I realized that a lot of us out here on the West Coast—even though someone like Gary Indiana would be on the East Coast, reading Gary’s book and seeing AIDS integrated into the semiautobiographical fictional narrative—were doing things you couldn’t do for someone like Douglas Crimp, who was writing for *October*.<sup>78</sup>

The problem of autobiography, of framing “Against Nature” within the discourse of

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Sadownick: “Curators Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins have thankfully done the unthinkable: pull together a show of gay artists that isn’t simply an AIDS show.”

Doug Sadownick, “Natural Men We’re Not,” *L.A. Weekly*, January 6-12, 1989;

Jan Breslauer, “Nature Morte,” *L.A. Weekly*, January 26, 1989.

<sup>77</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Good Ole Bad Boys” [1989] in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 110.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Durbin, “Against Message: Richard Hawkins in Conversation with Andrew Durbin,” *Mousse Magazine*, April 1, 2016, accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/richard-hawkins-andrew-durbin-2016/>.

identity and personal desires sits uncomfortably with Crimp. As the accompanying publication to the exhibition features less of a curatorial essay and more of a curatorial statement in a paragraph by Hawkins and Cooper, Crimp discusses the framing of the title “A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men,” criticising the employment of the term “homosexual” as representative of a regressive queer politics. In the curatorial blurb, Hawkins and Cooper write: “We constructed *Against Nature* along personal lines. Who are we? We’re gay male artists obsessed with the ways in which sexual desire informs, distances and empowers the recent history of art made by guys like us.”<sup>79</sup> This centering of sexual desire by Hawkins and Cooper fits in with Cooper’s wider relation to sex and AIDS proposed by Darmuid Hester’s biographical study of Cooper. Indeed, Hester makes the case that AIDS is most often addressed only “obliquely” in Cooper’s personal and “sexually charged” artistic projects.<sup>80</sup> Since neither curator for “Against Nature,” decided to comment further on the framing of the exhibition, either in the catalogue or in interviews, Crimp is left with an analysis of the title, which he reads as taking a stance against Watney’s problematisation of the term “homosexual” in the essay included in the 1987 AIDS issue of *October* which Crimp co-edited with queer theorist Leo Bersani. In “The Spectacle of AIDS,” Watney argues that the notion of

the ‘homosexual body’ would [...] evidence a fictive collectivity of perverse sexual performances, denied any psychic reality and pushed beyond the furthest margins of the social. This, after all, is what the category of ‘the homosexual’ (which we *cannot* continue to employ) was invented to do in the first place.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cooper and Hawkins, “About *Against Nature*,” 3.

<sup>80</sup> Darmuid Hester, *Wrong: A Critical Biography of Dennis Cooper* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 127-133.

<sup>81</sup> Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” *October* 43 (1987): 79.

Watney charts the historical construction of “the homosexual” into the medical field, where the concept is agitated by its link to pathology and social deviance. For Watney, “the homosexual” was already linked to disease before the onset of HIV/AIDS, thus making the substitution AIDS = Gay all the easier to carry out: “Epidemiology is thus replaced by a moral etiology of disease that can only conceive homosexual desire within a medicalized metaphor of contagion.”<sup>82</sup> And indeed this substitution was already ingrained before AIDS became the official medical term associated with the variety of cancers, infections, and symptoms which HIV contagion comported. In the summer of 1981, the *New York Times* ran a story detailing the rise in a variety of rare types of cancers affecting “41 Homosexuals” across the United States, grouping them under the moniker of “gay cancer.”<sup>83</sup> By 1982, the term GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) became widely adopted by mass media, further linking HIV/AIDS to the gay male population. The same year, gay activists proposed in a meeting the term AIDS to reflect the non-specificity of HIV infection to gay people, thus extending it to IV drug users, straight people having unprotected sex, and haemophiliacs.<sup>84</sup> By the late 1980s, the “plague years” of the AIDS crisis in the United States, most infections reported affected the LGBTQ+ community. Trans\*, Black, Asian, and Latinx communities were disproportionately affected since their access to medical facilities and HIV-testing was restricted owing to what Theodore (Ted) Kerr and Alexandra Juhasz have recently called

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>83</sup> Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981, 20.

<sup>84</sup> Contemporary video artist Carlos Motta published a comprehensive timeline of the ongoing AIDS epidemic as part of the 2019 exhibition “United by AIDS — An Exhibition About Loss, Remembrance, Activism and Art in Response to HIV/AIDS” at the Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, curated by Raphael Gyax. This has been reprinted in the volume of *OnCurating* edited by AIDS activist Theodore (Ted) Kerr: Carlos Motta, “*Legacy: A Timeline of HIV/AIDS*,” *OnCurating* 43 (2019): 78-81.

the “formative systems of bias and deprivation,” whereby “systemic [socio-economic] injustices” constrain access to healthcare.<sup>85</sup> The lives of Trans\*, Black, Asian, and Latinx communities in the United States are still disproportionately strained in their access to expensive HIV-preventative medication (pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis, shortened to PrEP and PEP) and HIV-managing medication (anti-retroviral therapy, ART, or highly active anti-retroviral therapy HAART).<sup>86</sup>

The framing of “Against Nature” as a “Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men” thus for Crimp picks up on this oppressive history of disease and does little to disavow it. Indeed, the inscription of “the homosexual” into the medical field was already denounced by Crimp (with the help of Foucault) in November 1988, a few months before his analysis of “Against Nature,” because of the pressure that it applies to modes of representing AIDS, especially its stereotyping in mass media. In his seminal essay “Portraits of People with AIDS,” Crimp analyses the de-eroticisation, dehumanisation, and victimisation that agitates mass media and photographic representation of people with AIDS (PWAs).<sup>87</sup> Arguing that “portraits of people with AIDS created by the media and art photographers alike are demeaning, and that they are overdetermined by a number of prejudices that precede them about the majority of the people who have AIDS,” Crimp leans onto an

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<sup>85</sup> Theodore (Ted) Kerr and Alexandra Juhasz, *We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), n.p.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Kerr and Juhasz: “Regardless of pills, cures, or vaccines, HIV disproportionately taxes some humans’ daily lives due to systemic injustice, and is suffered disproportionately through stigma, discrimination, and criminalisation.” Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Crimp’s argument is exemplified by the photojournalistic practices of Nicholas Nixon and Rosalind Solomon, both of whom exhibited their portraits of PWAs at the Museum of Modern Art and Grey Art Gallery in New York, respectively. In Douglas Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS” [1988], in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 84-96.

anti-authorial framework to analyse representation in the photographic object as swayed by the socio-economic structures it is contained within rather than its “truth” about the subjects represented.<sup>88</sup>

The decision to subtitle the show “A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men” thus weaves in for Crimp a problematic and outright homophobic context the postmodernist-influenced work of Watney and Crimp had previously tried to undermine. The decision to return to the “homosexual” is a politically regressive decision for Crimp whose structure is part and parcel with the processes of representation of AIDS. Indeed, Crimp argues: “Even to have used terms like *queer* and *fag* would have been understood to be in a politically viable line of appropriations of terms of oppression by the oppressed themselves.”<sup>89</sup> Differently, Crimp argues, there is nothing political in Cooper and Hawkin’s regression to homosexual: “*Homosexual*, however, [...] has always been deployed to claim that there is an essential homosexual character or identity, which resides in our inherent sickness.”<sup>90</sup> To re-employ “homosexual,” to somehow fix the meaning of the works in the show under the identity category of the “homosexual” reinforces the essentialist construction of a gay identity that is sick. For Crimp, this also implies a denial of the responsibility of critically engaging with the attacks levied against gay communities and PWAs by both the institution of the museum, which sees politically engaged art as bad art, and by mass media’s stereotyped representation of an overdetermined gay subject.<sup>91</sup> Crimp’s denunciation of the resuscitation of the “essential

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 97-100.

<sup>89</sup> Crimp, “Good Ole Bad Boys,” 112-113.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>91</sup> Crimp posits: “How many times have we heard that political art is always bad art, that is merely propaganda? This is the most sacred art-world dogma of all, and it is one to which Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins [...] cling.” Hence, Crimp continues by

homosexual character” put forth by “Against Nature” can be rephrased through the words he employed in his essay “Portraits of People with AIDS”: “Against Nature” brings the photograph back to the “truth” of the represented subject.

To demonstrate the apoliticality of “Against Nature,” Crimp contextualises the show within the rising infection rates of Los Angeles in 1988: Crimp problematises Cooper and Hawkins’s decision to exclude this information from what might have moved LACE gallery to initially set up “a show about AIDS,” as the gallery director claims.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Crimp reads the whole show as a direct attack to the “political correctness” of the demands he and fellow scholars moved in the 1987 *October* issue on AIDS. Basing his reading on John Greyson’s description of “Against Nature” as “certainly not politically correct,” Crimp emphasises the value of his “politically correct” arguments, since “the position against which [he] argued remains the dominant position, against which we must still struggle, both with our work and with our arguments.”<sup>93</sup> John Greyson, however, is not the only one who is wary of the “political correctness” of Crimp’s arguments: in one of his art reviews for the *Village Voice*, art critic Gary Indiana polemicised the “influence of various middle-aged, late-blooming gay leaders who feel they’ve been put in charge of homosexuality,” an influence which Indiana later clarifies stems from the “political

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calling “Against Nature” “a deceitful way of carrying on the art world’s business-as-usual.” In *ibid.*, 115-116.

<sup>92</sup> See Crimp: “Los Angeles recently surpassed San Francisco among U.S. cities for absolute numbers of people diagnosed with AIDS, with nearly 6,000 cases as of the end of 1988. Of these, 89 percent are among gay and bisexual men. The curators refrained from providing this information.” In *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>93</sup> John Greyson, “Parma Violets for Wayland Flowers,” in *AIDS: The Artists’ Response*, ed. Jan Zita Grover (Columbus: Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, Ohio State University Press, 1989), 12;

Crimp, “Good Ole Bad Boys,” 116.

correctness [...] from the senior staff of *October*.”<sup>94</sup> So, “Against Nature” becomes for Crimp a relinquishing of the “politically correct” responsibility for art to be politically engaged and align itself with the denunciation of governmental underfunding, inaction, negligence, and stigmatisation in their — both the government’s and mass media’s — responses or even acknowledgement of the AIDS crisis raised by activist groups. Crimp makes this clear in his most quoted argument: “*we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.*”<sup>95</sup>

Crimp’s argument on the role and responsibility of art to position itself against the struggle of AIDS was in the minds of, if not the curators, the participants to the show. Greyson’s script, part of the catalogue for the exhibition, makes this clear, as one of the characters of in the script writes a fictional letter addressed to LACE:

Dear LACE: I regret I can't participate in your show Against Nature. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to disclaim or disown my dandy comrades or their work. It's more the premise, which runs the danger of being renamed 'Against Responsibility,' which suggests that our artistic response to this health crisis has been nothing more than an ineffectually morbid flap of the wrist. Of course, we

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<sup>94</sup> Gary Indiana decided not to reprint this review in his collection of *Village Voice* art columns *Vile Days*, nor does he mention his disagreements with Crimp in his autobiographical memoir *I Can Give You Anything but Love* (published around the same time as Indiana’s, Crimp does not mention this in his own memoir *Before Pictures*, as Andrew Durbin points out). As the editor of *Vile Days*, Bruce Hainley vaguely indicates: “After reviewing the manuscript for *Vile Days*, Gary asked that one of his columns be removed from the book.”

See: Bruce Hainley, “Who Taught Her Everything She Knows: Afterword,” in Gary Indiana, *Vile Days: The Village Voice Art Columns 1985-1988*, ed. Bruce Hainley (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018), 579;

Gary Indiana, *I Can Give You Anything but Love* (New York: Rizzoli, 2015);

Douglas Crimp, *Before Pictures* (New York: Dancing Foxes Press and University of Chicago Press, 2016);

Andrew Durbin, “Books,” *Frieze*, September 20, 2016, accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.frieze.com/article/books-49>.

<sup>95</sup> Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism,” 33.

white fags may seem to shock or transgress the status quo by flapping our genitals in the face of respectability, but do we really produce anything more than titters (and titillation)?<sup>96</sup>

Much like Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel about social responsibility and the quest for purely ecstatic aesthetic experiences, from which *Against Nature* borrows its title, the debate around the political responsibility of art proposed by Crimp is framed in a dyadic opposition: on the one hand, the apolitical, "dandy" and frivolous, erotic work which arouse and chuckles like a kid of "Against Nature" and, on the other hand, moralising activist work that agitates mobs through direct political denunciation and the visualisation of loss, absence, mourning, and death that AIDS implied at the cusp of the 1990s.<sup>97</sup> While Crimp's writing is less committed to the dichotomy of eroticism versus political engagement (indeed, he writes in 1987 that "*it is our promiscuity that will save us*"), the exclusionary notion that it is either personal pleasure or community politics, either a pleasure-driven narcissist or an activist, has underlaid the majority of writing on AIDS art and politics.<sup>98</sup> In retrospect, Crimp both recognises the creation of and clarifies the unproductivity of this opposition:

the polemical, prescriptive, moralizing tone that does enter my own voice in the AIDS issue at times, which also—which I regret, mostly because I do think that the notion that the only valid artistic response to AIDS is one that's directly recognizable as activist, is wrong.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Greyson, "Parma Violets: A Video Script," 13.

<sup>97</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>98</sup> Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," 64.

<sup>99</sup> Douglas Crimp and Alex Fialho, "Oral History Interview with Douglas Crimp, 2017, January 3-4," in "AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project," *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institute of Art, Washington D.C., January 3-4, 2017.



However, the rhetoric of political mourning in the wake of AIDS-related death, the mourning of sexual practices and spaces which could not survive the “plague years,” and social fight and denunciation put forth by Crimp both in his 1987 *October* issue and in his 1989 essay “Mourning and Militancy,” do become the chief principles of understanding the historical and artistic practices of the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>100</sup> The categories of loss and activism gain grounds as the organising themes of both “historical” and more recent exhibitions in the United States and abroad.<sup>101</sup> In 1989, AIDS worker and activist Jan Zita Grover curated a show titled “*AIDS: The Artists’ Response*” at Hoyt Gallery which featured activist-driven works by Gran Fury and by members of ACT UP such as Jean Carlomusto, Mike Tidmus, Marc Huestis, and was framed by politically focussed essays, such the “Art and Activism” interview in which Crimp and activist and film-maker Gregg Bordowitz declare that “didacticism is the only vulgar thing you can do in the art world!”<sup>102</sup> The same year, Boston School photographer Nan Goldin curated the exhibition “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” at the Artists Space in New York, in response to the mourning of her friend and gay photographer Mark Morrisroe (Fig. 6).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy” in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004)

<sup>101</sup> I am wary of using the term “historical” to describe exhibitions on AIDS which took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, “historical” may result in the distancing historicisation of an epidemic that is still ongoing both in the United States and the rest of the world. See: Theodore (Ted) Kerr, “Editorial; What You Don’t Know About AIDS Could Fill A Museum: Curatorial Ethics and the Ongoing Epidemic in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *OnCurating* 42 (2019): 5-13;

Fiona Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York’s Ruined Waterfront* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), see especially the concluding chapter “Rising into Ruin,” 159-162.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas Crimp and Gregg Bordowitz, “Art and Activism: A Conversation between Douglas Crimp and Gregg Bordowitz,” in *AIDS: The Artists’ Response*, ed. Jan Zita Grover (Columbus: Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, Ohio State University Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>103</sup> For more information on the “Boston School,” see: Lia Gangitano, “Introduction,” in *Boston School*, ed. Lia Gangitano (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995), 11-18;

While the conceptualisation of the show is deeply personal to Nan Goldin — indeed, the exhibition is dedicated to the artists and friends who she lost to AIDS and features works made by primarily by artists with whom she was close — Goldin is quick to reinscribe the show within the framework of representation of loss, melancholia, and public mourning put forward by Crimp. As Goldin makes clear in her introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition:

This is not a show for or about the art market. [...] By its very existence and its volume, this show proves its own premise — that AIDS has not and will not eliminate our community, or succeed in wiping out our sensibility or silencing our voice.<sup>104</sup>

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Significantly, the categories of activism, memory, loss, and melancholia still remain a predominant rationale for inquiries into AIDS art: the group exhibition “United by AIDS — An Exhibition about Loss, Remembrance, Activism and Art in Response to HIV/AIDS,” makes this markedly clear in its title. Curated in 2019 by Raphael Gygax for the Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich — and featuring collective work by Fierce Pussy, General Idea, and the “Silence=Death” project alongside works by Cookie Mueller, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Nan Goldin — this exhibition directly builds on the

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Lia Gangitano and Alex Fialho, “Oral History Interview with Lia Gangitano, 2017, February 5-6,” in “AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project,” *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institute of Art, Washington D.C., February 5-6, 2017;

Linda Yablonski, “How Lia Gangitano Became the Patron Curator for the New York’s Most Subversive Artists,” *Document*, May 11, 2013, accessed November 25, 2023, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2013/05/how-lia-gangitano-became-the-patron-curator-for-the-new-yorks-most-subversive-artists/>;

F.C. Gundlach, “Emotions & Relations,” in *Emotions & Relations*, ed. F.C. Gundlach (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1998), 11-22.

<sup>104</sup> Nan Goldin, “In the Valley of the Shadow,” in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ed. Nan Goldin (New York: Artists Space, 1990), 5.

mourning of sex practices, the mourning of friends, and the transformation of melancholia into activist militancy proposed by Crimp’s “Mourning and Militancy” (indeed, the essay is reprinted in an abridged version in the anthology that accompanied the exhibition).<sup>105</sup> Gygax legitimises his choice to analyse AIDS art under categories put forward in the late-1980s because of the reasonable anxiety that these activist practices are being forgotten “forty years after the ‘insidious’ disease first alarmed the Western world—and was demonized as a ‘gay plague,’ a stigma that has never entirely faded away.”<sup>106</sup> Enters the category of remembrance of these practices as a response to Gygax’s anxiety, one that is complicated by Kerr’s catalogue entry which focuses on the exclusionary, whitewashed and United States-centric, “canon” of AIDS art that was established over the past two decades.<sup>107</sup>

Another recent show at the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester focused

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<sup>105</sup> See: Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” in *United by AIDS: An Anthology on Art in Response to HIV/AIDS*, ed. Raphael Gygax (Zurich: Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst, 2019), 68-107.

<sup>106</sup> Gygax contextualises this anxiety within the contemporary worldwide “high infection rates” and Trump’s 2017 dismissal of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. This anxiety is foregrounded by acknowledging the pharmaceutical advancements since the onset of the epidemic in the United States and their discontents: these medications are neither available world-wide, nor are they accessible to lower-income people (which always intersects with race, sexuality, and gender) in the United States owing to their high cost.

See: Raphael Gygax, “United by AIDS — Perspectives on Social, Creative, and Individual Responses to HIV/AIDS,” in *United by AIDS: An Anthology on Art in Response to HIV/AIDS*, ed. Raphael Gygax (Zurich: Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst, 2019), 6-7.

<sup>107</sup> Theodore (Ted) Kerr, “After the Second Silence: AIDS Cultural Production in the United States in the Twenty-First Century,” in *United by AIDS: An Anthology on Art in Response to HIV/AIDS*, ed. Raphael Gygax (Zurich: Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst, 2019), 186-233.

In his exhibition review, James Boaden analyses the subversive dynamic of Kerr’s catalogue entry in “Gygax’s tokenistic approach” of non-United States-centric works in the exhibition. For more information see: James Boaden, “United by AIDS?” *Art History* 44 (2021) 5: 1090-1097.

on the continued tradition of HIV/AIDS, safe sex activists' posters: "Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism, and the AIDS Poster," curated by Donald Albrecht, draws from the hosting University's collection of posters to present the visual, textual, and political strategies adopted by safer sex advocates and AIDS activist groups.<sup>108</sup> Albeit the influence of Crimp's late-1980s politics on the show was not as directly called into consideration as it was in "United by AIDS," the conceptualisation of "Up Against the Wall" is dependent on Crimp's denunciation of the museum's and art market's reticence to consider AIDS art valuable art. Indeed, Crimp argues in 1989 that "the institutions of real power in the art world are very slow to recognise [AIDS activist practices]." To underscore his point, Crimp specifically selects Deborah Wye's 1988 exhibition of activist posters, "Committed to Print," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which does not feature any posters made in response to HIV/AIDS, despite their intense presence on the New York urban space.<sup>109</sup>

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The moral endeavours and demands moved by Crimp in the late-1980s on what the art world ought to do to support efforts to combat AIDS, the very same demands that were opposed by Cooper and Hawkins's "Against Nature," have been the guiding light for

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Donald Albrecht, "Introduction: A Historical Perspective," in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism, and the AIDS Poster*, ed. William M. Valenti, Jessica Lacher-Feldman, and Donald Albrecht (Rochester, NY: The RIT Press, 2021), 1-8.

<sup>109</sup> See Crimp: "When, for example, the Museum of Modern Art last year mounted the exhibition 'Committed to Print,' showing activist art in the print medium since 1960s, there was not one example of AIDS activist work; when asked about this omission by a *Village Voice* writer, the show's curator claimed that none of any interest existed." In Crimp, "Good Ole Bad Boys," 115.

See also: Deborah Wye, *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988).

thinking about AIDS in the exhibition space. Indeed, Crimp denounces Cooper and Hawkins's curation as "acceding to [the] authority" of the museum, rather than "resisting" it. Even as Kerr and Juhasz attempt to create multiple timelines of the ongoing AIDS crisis, which move from "AIDS Crisis Culture" (1987-1996), to the coming of what they name a "Second Silence" (1996-2008) with the advent of life-saving medication, and finally with the ongoing "AIDS Crisis Revisitation" (2008-Present), which is marked by "a sudden deluge of cultural production focused on earlier responses to the virus," they remain indebted to Crimp's theoretical and political mores on the role of art and the art world in AIDS cultural production in the United States.<sup>110</sup>

However, some of the ideas put forward in scholarship from the "AIDS Crisis Revisitation" do not line up so neatly with Crimp's theoretical and political writings. Indeed, art historian, ACT-UP-Paris activist, and journalist Élisabeth Lebovici considers the often too-erotic modes of representations and subjectivities of HIV/AIDS that could not come into being during the "plague years" owing to urgent concerns about safety, health, death, and the devastation of a community. These modes and subjects, ascribed to what Lebovici calls a "liquid modernity" (after Zygmunt Bauman's sociological study) and first perceived as "menacing," are only now starting to receive critical attention.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Indeed, Kerr thanks "[Crimp's] stern generosity" for providing a framework from which to depart and on which to build to think about and around AIDS and the role of Art and curation in the epidemic nowadays.

See: Kerr, "What You Don't Know," 7-8;

Kerr and Juhasz, *We Are Having This Conversation Now*, n.p.

<sup>111</sup> See Lebovici: "La modernité liquid s'établit dans un contexte où écrire, parler, visualiser le sperme et toutes les sécrétions sexuelles, vaginales, anales, le sang, les menstrues, mais aussi la salive, la sueur, les larmes et des pratiques, comme la fellation, la coprophagie ou l'urophilie, sont des termes porteurs de menaces." ["Liquid modernity is established in a context where writing, speaking, visualising sperm and all sexual, vaginal, anal secretions, blood, periods, but also saliva, sweat, tears and certain practices like fellatio, coprophagia and urophilia, are menacing terms.'], in Lebovici, *Ce que le sida m'a fait [What AIDS did to me]*, 69.

Scholar João Florêncio analyses one of Lebovici's "menacing" subjects in his 2020 book *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures*, where he eschews an erotic position for a queer male subject that is marked by "the plague years" of AIDS in the same capacity as he is constructed by the potentials opened by the pharmaceutical advancements of the 1990s and 2000s. Florêncio discloses:

I cannot help reminiscing about how the spectre of AIDS informed the development of my own subjectivity as a queer boy, how it made my sexual life as a young adult become a constant, hyper-conscious, and vertiginous negotiation of trust, safety, risk, pleasure, and belonging—how that often felt both life-consuming and yet still titillating—and how the new millennium seems to have brought with it a new hope in the shape of new drugs that allow me—and others like me—to finally lift the weight of AIDS off our shoulders and, in so doing, set ourselves onto new paths of sexual fulfilment and self-discovery.<sup>112</sup>

In his book, Florêncio builds on Lacanian queer scholar Tim Dean's study of bareback communities in the 1990s and crystallises these collisions into what he names a subject "becoming-pig," who, he then demonstrates, is articulated through extreme sex practices, gay erotic scripts, and confessional speech.<sup>113</sup> The subjects which Lebovici reads as kept at arm's length during the 1980s and 1990s for Florêncio are bestowed with new erotic possibilities with the advent of HAART, PrEP, and PEP. Florêncio's conceptualisation of identities "post-AIDS" or "post-crisis" is indirectly problematised by Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed's 2011 book *If Memory Serves*. Rather than contextualising these marginal subjectivities as proliferating "post-AIDS" and in the

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See also: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2000).

<sup>112</sup> João Florêncio, *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures: The Ethics of Becoming Pig* (London: Routledge, 2020), 6.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. See also: Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

context of “a new hope in the shape of new drugs,” Castiglia and Reed argue that these “menacing” subjectivities and potentialities have been “traumatically unremembered” during “the plague years.”<sup>114</sup> In their argument, Castiglia and Reed pick up on Crimp’s denunciation of the moralising calls for maturity held against gay men and shift it onto Crimp’s own discourse.

In the introduction to his volume of essays, Crimp denounces the neoconservative gay politics put forward by Andrew Sullivan in his 1996 article for the *New York Times* titled “When Plagues End.” Portraying both promiscuity and AIDS activism as frivolous phases of queerness, Sullivan calls for people to move their forces to establishing gay men’s social positions in heteronormative structures of marriage, adoption, and listing in the army. In fact, Sullivan recontextualises the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s as the “Faustian bargain of the pre-AIDS closet: straights gave homosexuals a certain amount of freedom; in return, homosexuals gave away their self-respect.”<sup>115</sup> Sullivan’s relinquishment of promiscuous sexuality for a normal life in a bid to be accepted by heterosexuals portrays gay men as unable to grow up, to fully commit to the sense of responsibility that AIDS was supposed to have taught them.<sup>116</sup> A decade prior, Crimp denounces activist Larry Kramer’s near-calls for sexual monogamy as a response to AIDS. Taking into consideration Kramer’s assertions at GMHC meetings and in his play *The Normal Heart* (1985) and demonstrating their similar politics to Randy Shilts’s

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<sup>114</sup> Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011)

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1996, 61-62.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Sullivan’s end-of-plague musing: “People who thought they didn’t care for one another found that they could. Relationships that had no social support were found to be as strong as any heterosexual marriage. Men who had long since got used to throwing their own lives away were confronted with the possibility that they actually did care about themselves.” In *Ibid.*, 62.

homophobic quest for finding “Patient Zero,” Crimp argues: “Common sense, in Kramer’s view, is that gay men should stop having so much sex, that promiscuity kills. But this common sense is [...] conventional moral wisdom: it is not safe sex, but monogamy that is the solution.”<sup>117</sup>

It is this equation of “AIDS=maturity,” and in turn that maturity=monogamy, that Crimp fiercely rejects in both Sullivan’s “Plagues End” statements and activist Larry Kramer’s “Mid-Plague” propositions. Crimp always resists removing gay sexuality and promiscuity from the responsibility of militancy one has in the face of AIDS. Castiglia and Reed strike a similar point, as they argue that:

gay neocons in the 1990s promised that by making a complete break with a “diseased” past of narcissistically and recklessly immature pleasures that supposedly led to AIDS, gay men could achieve a maturity cast as normalcy that would safeguard health and purchase, sometime in the unspecified future, a place at the table of political negotiations.<sup>118</sup>

As Crimp insists that overt sexuality needs to be mobilised in art in favour of direct political resistance rather than under the “modernist” category of self-expression, Castiglia and Reed are not that committed to anti-identitarianism and anti-authoriality. They read the ongoing AIDS epidemic through the unremembered gay sexual and cultural practices of sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, going as far back as the nineteenth-century frivolous figure of the dandy; a figure which is used to move negative criticism against Cooper and Hawkins’s “Against Nature.”<sup>119</sup> It is in this return to the

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<sup>117</sup> Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 56.

Cf. also: Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* [1985] (London: Nick Hearn Books, 2021); Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* [1987] (London: Souvenir Press, 2011).

<sup>118</sup> Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 3.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



subject's (and author's own) desires, the same return that is held in "the Homosexual Men" of Cooper and Hawkins, that Crimp argues engenders a politics of regression. Indeed, Cooper and Hawkins conceptualised the whole show around "personal lines:" they look at sexuality by agitating the author's self-expressive questions "Who am I?" and "How am I gay?"

I find it impossible not to read Crimp's conceptualisation of "Against Nature" as "regressive" outside of the postmodernist framework around photography and identity which he articulated in his earlier writings. Crimp maintains his interest in postmodernism's commitment that "humanity is not a universal and natural condition of being but a contingent and cultural construction of historical, social, linguistic, and psychic forces" even in his later essays.<sup>120</sup> "Regressive" finds its meaning in the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis which informs postmodernist engagements with art: Crimp's "regressive" brings AIDS politics into the postmodernist art historical discourse of authorship, autobiography, and subjectivity. As such curating AIDS through self-expressive sexuality becomes a childish endeavour, which forgoes the activist's demands of political responsibility, as art is rewritten within one's proper (that is, postmodernist) engagement with it in toto.

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### **failure number three; childish positions and boyish readers.**

A particular subject is eschewed by its *failure* to comply with the moralising demands of responsabilisation levied in the 1980s and 1990s. Though diametrically opposed on the

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<sup>120</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality" [2002], in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 300.

political spectrum and often conflicting or downright homophobic, as I have shown in this introduction, the failure to meet these demands of activist representation, prescribed monogamy, or compulsory asexuality keep gay subjects ungrown-up. The gay subject, often too sexual, too promiscuous, too narcissistic, too frivolous, too self-expressive, too modernist is thus portrayed as death-bound or politically regressive: he remains childish. While some of this positionality of gay men as childish has received some scholarly attention, its political potential in AIDS art, as well as his continued presence in the imaginary of art criticism and queer politics as the unideal subject since the onset of AIDS in the United States remains unconceptualized, or flat-out dismissed as apolitical. Indeed, as Bond Stockton demonstrates in *The Queer Child*, there is always something that has been portrayed as regressive in queerness; a claim that is echoed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation that gay men are only grown up when their bodies and identities are perceived as normatively masculine.<sup>121</sup> But as Halberstam shows, it is in this failure, which he describes as an especially queer art, that "some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood" is preserved and in turn "disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers."<sup>122</sup> In this light, an analysis of this childish position of resistance, stubbornness, excessive arousal, disproportionate attachment, narcissism may provide an insight in the generative potential of the unideal subject of AIDS politics and of the anti-authorial practices of the "Pictures Generation." It is precisely the political and creative possibilities of these childish positions that this thesis analyses. Arguing that these "unremembered" positions are only understandable in AIDS

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<sup>121</sup> See: Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*;

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 154-164.

<sup>122</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

photography by meeting the works' and author's demands to childishly engage with them in their playful eroticism, I perform postmodernism's unideal critic and rub my and the work's childishness against the demands of responsabilisation. To perform this gesture, I necessarily reframe AIDS discourses around proper engagements with art in the institutions of the art world and art history through Carol Mavor's and postmodernism's boyish readers late-Roland Barthes and D.W. Winnicott and against early-Roland Barthes and Lacan.

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This positionality of the childish gay man is particularly negatively portrayed in 1990s poststructuralist conceptualisations of the proper engagement with the art object. Amongst the ranks of art historians and art critics writing for the art journal *October* such as Krauss and Hal Foster, the artists and art historians who fail to separate their outright political gestures — especially gestures made under the moniker of identity politics — are ascribed to a place of intellectual naivety.<sup>123</sup> This becomes clear in a roundtable discussion published in *October* in following the famous 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition, where identity politics, the curatorial rationale of the exhibition, is problematised for its recentring of the autobiographical which is interpreted as rehashing the limiting and mythologising (so too-modernist) categories of authorship, creativity,

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<sup>123</sup> Though Douglas Crimp is often included in the circles of *October* writers, I am hesitant to propose this grouping. As Crimp himself disclosed in his memoir-cum-art history book *Before Pictures*, and later in an interview for the Smithsonian Institute's "AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project" his departure from his position as editor of the journal, despite the comparative success of his 1987 "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism" issue (co-edited with Leo Bersani) was motivated by *October*'s non-committal stance to reading how an artist's identity and social oppression inform a work of art. Crimp, *Before Pictures*, 243-247; Crimp and Fialho, "Oral History Interview."

and originality. Indeed, in Foster, Krauss, Kolbowski, Kwon, and Buchloh's discussion of the exhibition, it appears clear that the artist and the critic who get too attached to the work exhibited in the public space of the museum void the work of its political potential by anchoring signifiers to a too-personal meaning. This attachment to one's experience, to one's passions, to one's desires as a mode of engagement with works of art is clad in the rhetorical register of infantilisation: the autobiographical implies a "rush to the signified" that bears both the stigma of the incapable child and risks infantilising its audience by spoon-feeding "banal, doxa-ridden, thin" meanings.<sup>124</sup>

It thus becomes an ethical imperative to allow a work of art to be ambivalent, structural, constructed in its formalism. Discussing the photographic cinematic stills of Cindy Sherman, Krauss criticises the reductive non-comital stance that "some feminists" adopt in relation to a formalist analysis:

Cindy Sherman attacked the construction of the image as vertical [...]. In this way she attacked notions about the *Gestalt* and good form, the body and beauty. But there is an absolute refusal [by some critics] to think about what she has been doing in the construction of her work for over the last ten years. That demeans her work. As a critic, I have an obligation to that work—that's my first obligation.<sup>125</sup>

For Krauss, good, detached, non-autobiographical criticism becomes a matter of duty: it is a matter of the *responsibility* which is owed to the work; a responsibility from which the infantile critic shirks away in favour of identity. Hal Foster underscores a similar point in his 1996 *The Return of the Real*, where he argues that the myth of the subject returned into the field of art criticism traumatically in the mid-1990s. In the concluding chapter of

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<sup>124</sup> Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," *October* 66 (1993): 21.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

his book, Foster posits that the “bad name with which [critical theory] is often branded today” is symptomatic of the traumatic return of a postmodernist subject, whose “splittings” render him “often dysfunctional, suspended between obscene proximity and spectacular separation” from its object.<sup>126</sup> Trying to navigate the question of how a “good” critical distance might be engendered in the postmodernist subject, Foster leans onto Lacan’s concept of subjectification in the mirror stage: criticality is attained through the maturational processes of “a model of deferred action, a relay of anticipation and reconstruction.”<sup>127</sup> In this way a good art critic matures like the ideal Lacanian subject (as opposed to a too-literal and infantile Object Relations analyst, as I discuss later in this introduction): neither too close, nor too far from its loved object which is always kept at arm’s length. Gavin Butt problematizes the moralistic and heteronormative connotations of what “good criticism” consists of for Foster and Krauss: “taking something seriously is in large part a morally sanctioned and habitually ingrained form of cultural response to something we take to be of value.”<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, in a Lacanian model of subjectivity, getting too close in our engagement with objects to the point of near identifying with them, projecting our desires on them, might resuscitate the author behind the object as our quasi-authoritarian mirrored whole. In this way, “good” criticality may also hinge on levelling the playing field between the art object and its spectator while revealing the object’s construction.<sup>129</sup> Photography, in its

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<sup>126</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 222-226.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>128</sup> Gavin Butt, “How I died for Kiki and Herb,” in *The Art of Queering Art*, ed. Gavin Butt (Birmingham: Article Press, 2009), 89.

<sup>129</sup> At the base of the poststructuralist project stands an antiauthoritarian political posture: “This attitude of refusing the subordinate posture [of the critic in relation to the maker] as the one who is spoken for by seizing the right to speak, and consequently of challenging the institutional and social divisions that support these separations of power [...]

perceived automatism, is a privileged medium to this postmodernist project, as the photographic discourses on subjectivity and authenticity in the late 1970s attest. This turn pivots on the widespread interest that American critics demonstrated toward the then-newly translated work of French post-structuralist and deconstruction thinkers such as Foucault, Jacques Derrida, François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and the early semiological works by Barthes. Specifically reflecting on certain American avant-garde art practices in the 1960s, especially those of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, which broke from the institutionalised tradition of Abstract Expressionist painting of the 1950s, Crimp argues that postmodernism hinges on a break from modernist practices operated by a conceptual shift from “production” to “reproduction.”<sup>130</sup> This photographic move evidences for Crimp a crisis for the institution of the museum: positing the need to rethink the notions of authenticity and originality, Crimp argues (echoing Walter Benjamin’s 1935 seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) that technologies of reproduction chisel away the auratic dimension of the work of art which sustains the museum as an exclusionary institution.<sup>131</sup> Beyond the museum, the subject is at stake in Crimp’s text: in the shift to reproduction “the fantasy of a creating subject gives away to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, as curator and critic Andy Grundberg

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crystallized around the time of 1968 into what has been termed poststructuralism.” In Rosalind Krauss, “Poststructuralism and Deconstruction,” in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism; Third Edition*, ed. Hal Foster et al. (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2016), 42.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Douglas Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins” [1980], in Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, 58.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” [1935] in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. by J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>132</sup> Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” 58.

succinctly summarises: “postmodernist art therefore must debunk or ‘deconstruct’ the ‘myths’ of the autonomous individual (‘the myth of the author’) and of the individual subject (‘the myth of originality’).”<sup>133</sup> The responsibility to maintain a critical distance to the work is part and parcel with the responsibility to deconstruct the subject and relinquish its biography.

However, being moulded by art historical analyses of photographic practices that belong specifically to the Pictures Generation, this postmodernist framework of analysis is put under pressure with a rising institutional interest on modes of photography which are staged, directorial, and inventive in the mid-1980s, alongside what Kerr and Juhasz named “AIDS Crisis Culture.”<sup>134</sup> In 1989, the National Museum of American Art mounted the exhibition “The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s” curated by Joshua P. Smith. The exhibition, featuring clearly staged photographs — that is photographs which outright forgo the pretence of “truthful” documentation of the photographic image — by over ninety American artists, is foregrounded by these works’ relation to postmodernism. As Merry A. Foresta writes in the introduction to the exhibition’s catalogue: “now at the close of a century that also marks the end of a millennium, artists of the eighties demonstrate a clear interest in the subjective experience of contemporary life;” an experience which is allowed to be investigated creatively since, because of postmodernist thought, “the ‘truth’ of the photograph is now open to a full range of artistic interpretation.”<sup>135</sup> While Foresta posits that the interest in representing

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<sup>133</sup> Andy Grundberg, “The Crisis of the Real: Photography and Postmodernism,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 168.

<sup>134</sup> Kerr and Juhasz, *We Are Having This Conversation Now*, n.p.

<sup>135</sup> Merry A. Foresta, “Introduction: The Photographic Moment,” in *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s*, ed. Joshua P. Smith (Washington D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 5-6.

“the subjective experience” comes at the expense of modernist categories of “style and originality,” it is unclear what agitates this replacement more than the curator’s attempt to legitimise inventive photographic practices under the banner of postmodernism.<sup>136</sup> But this legitimisation soon fails to live up to the distanced postmodernist standard. Curator Joshua P. Smith exemplifies this failure in his curatorial essay:

The new photography has also been seen as lacking in value. [...] The reduced emphasis on truth, power, hope, and inspiration in favour of invention, irony, loss, memory, and desire is [...] a relevant commentary. [...] By exploring the possibilities of a photography that focuses on providing a complete vision [...] the photographers in the exhibition] are not only constructing images but are calling for the construction of a more coherent and authentic society.<sup>137</sup>

The postmodernist relinquishing of “truth” lays the ground for the “invention” of a paradoxical authenticity in staged photography, hence becoming the anathema of postmodernism.

“The Photography of Invention” is not the only attempt to situate inventive and creative photographic practices in a postmodernist tradition and stumbling on a failing paradox. In 1995, Michael Köhler mounted “Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography,” a touring exhibition in Germany which featured, with a few (historical and geographical) exceptions, the same photographers as Smith’s 1989 show. Once again, this show was committed to the concatenate these photographic practices in postmodernist analytical tools, which the creativity in and of “invention” ends up troubling: Andreas Vowinckel describes these practices as a Baudrillardian “simulative,”

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>137</sup> Joshua P. Smith, “The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s,” in *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s*, ed. Joshua P. Smith (Washington D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 26-27.



“in the traditional claim of authenticity of the photographic image the reality of the depicted subject becomes the reality of an imagined event which has never actually taken place.”<sup>138</sup> This “simulative,” however does not find its roots in a collective unconscious of images, Crimp’s and Krauss’s “Lacanian Imaginary,” but rather is signified by the “personal experience” of the artist: images are signified by an interplay of autobiography and structure since the photographic object is creatively *made* not taken.<sup>139</sup> The curator of the exhibition picks up on the limitations of applying 1970s and 1980s “localized” postmodernist conceptions of photographic practices to stage photography; a dissatisfaction that leaves him arguing that more than “postmodernist,” staged photography is merely “Post-Modernist,” as it occurs after Modernism.<sup>140</sup>

Crimp strikes a similar point in his 1980 essay “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” where he argues that “Postmodernism can only be understood as a specific breach with modernism, with those institutions which are the preconditions for and which shape the discourse of modernism.”<sup>141</sup> These “postmodernist” staged photography practices, such as Sandy Skoglund’s object-ridden technicolour sets, or Duane Michals’s narrative series of black and white images (both included in every attempt to analyse the staged photograph that follows), however, are carried out specifically with the intention of being seen in the exhibition space, of being encountered in “those institutions which are the preconditions for and which shape the discourse of

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<sup>138</sup> Andreas Vowinckel, “Analysis and Simulation — Strategies for the Instrumentalization of Reality,” in *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography*, ed. Michael Köhler (Zurich: Edition Stemmlé, 1995), 12.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>140</sup> Michael Köhler, “Arranged, Constructed and Staged — from Taking to Making Pictures,” in *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography*, ed. Michael Köhler (Zurich: Edition Stemmlé, 1995), 16.

<sup>141</sup> Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism”, 108.

modernism.”<sup>142</sup> At a surface level, these photographic practices neatly snuggle up to the institutions of modernism, rather than directly attacking them.<sup>143</sup> It is perhaps this attachment to the institution of this museum and to self-expressiveness which motivate Anne H. Hoy’s decision to conceptualise staged photography as “late-modernist.” Indeed, in her 1987 monograph *Fabrications*, Hoy relinquishes postmodernism tout-court in describing a plethora of artists that includes near-all “The Photography of Invention” checklist. Hoy argues that staged photographic practices even in the 1970s and 1980s are at best “late modernist, for they still support the conception of the artist as creator and the self as unitary.”<sup>144</sup>

A.D. Coleman seemingly strikes a similar point in his brief history of the staged photograph in his 1976 essay “The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition.” Attempting to situate new photographic practices from the 1970s, Coleman argues that some staged photographic practices, which he defines as operating in a “directorial mode,” “[*treat*] the external world [...] as raw material, to be itself manipulated as much as desired prior to the exposure of the negative.”<sup>145</sup> Coleman sets this self-reflexivity, of the photograph that relinquishes its claim to a truthful, or even more insightful, representation of the real against “pure” or “straight” photographers of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Minor White, Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams, Paul Strand,

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Indeed, critic and curator Andy Grundberg makes clear that for Crimp and the *October* writers, “[Postmodernism] means [...] an *attack* on modernism, an undercutting of its basic assumptions about the role of art in the culture and about the role of the artist in relation to his or her art” (my italics). Cf. Grundberg, “The Crisis of the Real,” 166.

<sup>144</sup> Anne H. Hoy, *Fabrications: Staged, Altered, and Appropriated Photographs* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>145</sup> A.D. Coleman, “The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition” [1976] in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 485.

and Dorothea Lange.<sup>146</sup> Coleman contextualises the “directorial mode” in a genealogy of photographic practices that interpret photography as a “tool” for the “full realization” of the artist’s vision: these span the Victorian pictorialist portrait photography of Julia Margaret Cameron and the Surrealist photographic practice of Man Ray.<sup>147</sup> The “directorial mode” for Coleman thus becomes understandable only through (and not against) “that field of ideas [that] is built into and springs from the medium of photography itself;” a field which Coleman clarifies is the “history and tradition” of modern and modernist practices.

Coleman is not alone in ascribing the staged image in the traditions of Victorian pictorialism and Surrealist photography: recent exhibitions in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, and Canada extend this genealogy to staged photographic practices of the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, by exhibiting contemporary photographs next to Surrealist and Victorian photographs.<sup>148</sup> In emphasising the creativity, production, and

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<sup>146</sup> Moa Goysdotter provides a more in-depth history of how staged photography in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States contravenes the aesthetic responsibilities and sensibilities of “straight” photographers in favour of an “impure approach” to representation and reality. Cf. Moa Goysdotter, *Impure Vision: American Staged Photography of the 1970s* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2013), 22-36.

<sup>147</sup> Coleman, “The Directorial Mode,” 487-489.

<sup>148</sup> See, for instance, “Making It Up: Photographic Fictions,” 2013, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013, which juxtaposed Gregory Crewdson’s 2007 cinematic staged scenes to Clementina, Lady Hawarden’s 1860s staged photographic studies of her two daughters. Alexander Streiberger’s curatorial essay for the 2020 exhibition “Staged Bodies: Mise en scène du corps dans la photographie postmoderniste” at Musée L, Belgium, similarly underlined the historical traditions of Victorian pictorialism and Surrealist photography in the photographic practices of Eleanor Antin, Cindy Scherman, Duane Michals, and Les Krims. These historical traditions were put in conversation in the 2006 exhibition “Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre,” which included works by Julia Margaret Cameron, Man Ray, and Duane Michals framed through the lens of Modernist debates on theatricality. Or even, see: Erin C. Garcia’s 2010 *Photography as Fiction*, which included a curated selection of images by Julia Margaret Cameron, Man Ray, and Lucas Samaras from the J. Paul Getty Museum collection.

Martha Weiss, *Making It Up: Photographic Fictions* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018);

expressiveness of the photograph's director, with its "histories and traditions" rooted pre-postmodernism, Coleman seems to return to modernist categories that are perceived as childish and that frame these practices as childish endeavours of resuscitating dead or dying monikers of identity, authoriality, and autobiography. The infantility of this "return" is rendered explicit by Foster in his *Return of the Real*, where he notices that certain artistic practices in the 1990s are digging up the subject's body from the grave that postmodernism put it in.<sup>149</sup> More than a simple "return," Foster voices his concerns that "new and ignored subjectivities in the 1990s" might give art criticism "a bad name."  
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What transpires from Foster's text is the need to rethink postmodernist art criticism as a response to these subjectivities. Of course, Foster resorts back to postmodernism itself as the *proper* response. Marx, Lacan, and Barthes's semiological texts still provide Foster with the framework with which to keep a morally responsible critical distance from the object of analysis when faced with the rise of these infantile subjectivities. What comes out of these moralising demands for responsibility of AIDS and postmodernism is the eschewing of an irresponsible, stubborn, and infantilised gay subject, who wants to fuck, who doesn't want to grow up, and who doesn't want to take it to the streets. A position that in the art world appears narcissistic, apolitical, incapable, too attached.

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Alexander Streiberger (ed.), *Staged Bodies: Mise en scène dans la photographie postmoderniste* [*Staged Bodies: Staging in Postmodernist Photography*] (Gent, Belgium: Snoek Publishers, 2020);

Karen Henry, "The Artful Disposition: Theatricality, Cinema, and Social Context in Contemporary Photography," in *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre*, ed. Lori Pauli (London and New York: Merrell in collaboration with National Gallery of Canada, 2006), 133-160.

Erin C. Garcia, *Photography as Fiction* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010).

<sup>149</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 212.

This gay childish subject is thus a subject that *fails* on all counts when it comes to “responsibility” because of his attachment to himself (his autobiography) and to his quest for sexual arousal. In this thesis, I therefore ask: how may we start conceptualising these infantile subjectivities without dismissing them as politically and artistically regressive or traumatic? Halberstam positions the idea of failure as moving dynamically between childhood and adulthood.<sup>150</sup> When it comes to the failing gay subject in the context of AIDS then we should assume that the non-binarism of childhood and adulthood that failure entails must move cogently between modernism and postmodernism, between autobiographical experiences and structuralist formalism, between personal erotic desires and community politics. To fulfil this exercise, an inquiry into forms of staged photography by gay men from the 1980s until present day seems particularly apt: these are works made for the museum institution that are neither modernist enough nor postmodernist enough. This type of “directorial” staged photography is entangled in a paradox: the insertion of modernist photography in the museum marks the end of modernism and the start of postmodernism, as Crimp as argued; but this work, with its resistance to let go of the author’s gay desires and its demand that these gay desires are both requited and actively sustained by the viewer fit equally unevenly with the postmodernist.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, forgoing categories of authoriality and autobiography seems to me a failure in its own right to fully account for the gay desires that agitate the signification of images; a point which Crimp also comes to realise agitates activist productions and efficacious safer sex campaigns, but which Cooper and Hawkin’s

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<sup>150</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Crimp, “The Museum’s Old/The Library’s New Subject,” 66-83.

“Against Nature” exhibition posits could be subversive in the museum, too.<sup>152</sup>

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As the Lacanian matrix agitates constructivist models on critical distance forgoes the categories of identity and creativity in favour of *Gestalt*, construction, and anticipation, what happens when we get too close to the work, when we meet the work’s demands? This becomes a particularly key issue in AIDS art, when this postmodernist distance seems to start fraying. Of course, for Lacan, the subject’s process of identification with the work of art as his other is always underscored by anticipation and insufficiency. Lacan makes this clear in his famous 1949 essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” where Lacan discusses the psychic processes at play when the child looks at his reflected image. Indeed, what the child sees in the mirror is not only his double, but a double that is perceived as whole in its form and who the child intensely desires. This desire for Lacan is foregrounded by the child’s sense of anticipation to be whole like his double and deep feeling of insufficiency: while his erotically invested double is whole, the child feels himself to be fragmented, dislocated, lacking.<sup>153</sup> It is this desiring relationship between the child’s inner psyche and his outside double that shapes the

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<sup>152</sup> When it comes to the idea of queer desires in the museum, Crimp holds that its subversive power lays in its (postmodernist) capacity to dismantle the subject: “That is one reason why an art such as Smith’s — and Warhol’s — matters, why I want to make of it the art I need and the art I deserve — not because it reflects or refers to a historical gay identity and thus serves to confirm my own now, but because it disdains and defies the coherence and stability of all sexual identity.” In Douglas Crimp, “Getting the Warhol We Deserve,” *Social Text* (1999) 59: 64.

See also: Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 43-82; Cooper and Hawkins, “About *Against Nature*,” 3.

<sup>153</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” [1949], in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 75-81.

subject's relationship to culture and reality for Lacan. For the Lacanian subject then, the desiring demands of the other, of the child's double who is representative of cultural experience, can never be fully met without increasing his sense of lacking and fragmentation. It is this inherent lacking and fragmentation of the Lacanian subject's desire and sexuality that is filled with the analytical potential to show that all sexuality and all identities are unfixed and full of discrete fragments. Indeed, the idea of the autonomous whole subject becomes merely utopic, to borrow Muñoz's words, in postmodernism and queer theory: always delayed, always strived for, and never fully achieved.<sup>154</sup>

These critical models — of a subjectivity that is already constructed as lost, melancholic, traumatised, and lacking, and of an author who is already dead (owing to Lacan and Barthes's semiological writings) — are painfully reified during the “plague years” of the AIDS crisis in the face of loss, melancholia, trauma, and the death of many authors and artists. It is precisely for this reason that Katz problematises postmodernism and the “death of the author” in the context of AIDS art in his exhibition “Art AIDS America.” Indeed, autobiography, personal experiences of loss, sexual identity come burgeoning back as useful categories to analyse AIDS art for Katz, as he argues that many works of art strategically adopt the role of somewhat modernist spies within the postmodernist art scene. For Katz, artists are able to address personal concerns, to return to the autobiographical as a source of creative originality and a fixative of the signification of their works, by adopting an aesthetic “veneer of obedience” to the plurality of meaning

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<sup>154</sup> For Muñoz queerness is always there and then, never here and now: it is a utopia which can be “cruised” through erotic desires but never fully inhabited. For more information see: José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

advocated by postmodernist art criticism and by the Pictures Generation.<sup>155</sup> As Katz explains: “this attitude allowed artists to address AIDS [...] directly under the noses of both philistines like Helms and art world sophisticates like Krauss, confident that the ‘viral’ meanings of such art would always operate above or below their frequencies.”<sup>156</sup> Operating “above or below” the frequencies of the demands of maturation and responsabilisation, the gay childish subjects engendered by works of art which Katz ascribes to a form of “poetic” postmodernism “open[] a dialogue with the viewer, thrusting us into a complex social situation in which the work of art operates as our interlocutor, a presence, confronting us, asking questions about us, our feelings, our emotions, our judgments.”<sup>157</sup>

In this interaction, the modes of engagement between the subject and the other, between viewer and work of art, between self and cultural experience, escape a Lacanian legibility. Indeed, the fragmentariness and incapability to meet the other’s demands falls short in describing the relationship between the self and the work of art in the context of AIDS. As curator Jan Zita Grover argues, an audience emotional, erotic response is crucial to the creation of AIDS activist works:

An accurate reading of audience became particularly important here; AIDS activist groups and service organizations now spend as much time defining and addressing questions about audience, appropriate language, idiom, graphic style, literacy level and circulation for different "markets" of AIDS information [...]. Many young artists have had their first introduction to their own marginality as speakers and audiences (e.g., as gay men, as lesbians, as sex workers, as artists) while working on these projects. They have also learned the salutary lesson that

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<sup>155</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” in *Art AIDS America*, ed. Jonathan D. Katz and Rock Hushka (Seattle and London: Tacoma Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2015), 37-38.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



it is difficult to speak effectively for or to people unlike themselves.<sup>158</sup>

What is fundamental for Grover for these demands to be facilitated and met is a recognition of a certain queer sameness: “it is difficult to speak effectively for or to people unlike [oneself].” Rather than speaking to a generalised postmodernist critic then, the works of Katz’s “poetic postmodernism” ask us that we become childish like them, that we meet their demands, and that we let ourselves become attached to their feelings, and make them our own, and vice versa, thus productively filling in the space between self and other, between autobiography and culture, between modernism and postmodernism, not with a sense of insufficiency, but of queer communion, of a childish becoming. What transpires is exactly what Helms argues and later weaponizes in his homophobic attacks against Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment:” to meet the demands of cultural productions arising from the ongoing AIDS crisis, we need to positively respond to their status as gay and seropositive; we need to let them be viral and infectiously become gay with them. Indeed, the language of virality, which underscores a particular anxiety of infection, is used by Katz to describe the relation that underscores AIDS art and its viewer; a relation which is phobically denied by the “art world sophisticates like Krauss.”<sup>159</sup>

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**resistance number one; notes on methodology, writing, and structure of my thesis.**

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<sup>158</sup> Jan Zita Grover, “Introduction,” in *AIDS: The Artists’ Response*, ed. Jan Zita Grover (Columbus: Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, Ohio State University Press, 1989), 3, quoted in Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>159</sup> Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 36.

As such in this thesis, I precisely analyse this: the demands, the attachments, the feelings, the erotic arousal that agitate my own interactions with the works of art at the time of AIDS. I focus specifically on staged photographic practices for three key reasons. Firstly, because photography is fundamental to Crimp's and Krauss's (de)constructivist conceptualisation of authoriality and identity in their postmodernist projects. Secondly, because staged photographic practices trouble postmodernism by remaining childishly attached to modernist values. And, lastly, because photography provides the space for artist and viewer to collide and potentially signify each other. Indeed, as Kaja Silverman argues, when she describes the medium of photography as an "analogy," "Photography develops, rather, *with us*, and *in response to us*."<sup>160</sup> Developing "with us," photography allows the viewer to develop with it and in response to it. Catherine Grant strikes a similar point as she conceptualises staged photographic practices since the 1970s as providing a "performance space" whereby the photographic object becomes "a site of fantasy that requires the viewer's complicity in believing and constructing the scene being viewed."<sup>161</sup> By demanding us to sustain its development, the photograph asks us to become what D.W. Winnicott defined as the child's "transitional object," an object which stands for the child's mother and through which the child can play in its attempt to fill in the space between himself and reality.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, differently from Lacan, the space between self and other is constantly and productively filled by the child's mediating gestures of

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<sup>160</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy: Or the History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>161</sup> Catherine Grant, "The Performance Space of the Photograph: From 'The Anti-Photographers' to 'The Directorial Mode,'" *re-bus* 5 (2010): 8.

<sup>162</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" [1971] in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1-34.

creative playing.<sup>163</sup> By playing, the Winnicottian self is in constant becoming, in constant development, rather than anxiously insufficient like the Lacanian subject. What underscores the photographic practices described in this thesis, however, is not only their willingness to use me as the object for their development, but to be used in their own right as the “transitional objects” for my own queer development — a development which, as the following chapters demonstrate, is far from an ideal maturation which often implies an integration into traditional masculinity and heteronormative structures of marriage, but one which engenders a perpetual unideal childishness. What this results in is a relinquishment of the “responsibility” of the mother to be “good-enough” and provide what Winnicott calls a “facilitating environment” for the child to develop straight, in favour of a dislocation of the positions of mother and child onto both viewer and work of art.<sup>164</sup> Too childishly attached to one another, mother and child, works of art and I in this thesis become indistinguishable: they-we infect each other with each other’s queerness. Winnicott’s position, and more generally Object Relation psychoanalysis, in a thesis about AIDS, photography, and postmodernism is unconventional. As the work of art historian Mignon Nixon shows, Object Relation psychoanalysis, especially the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein on the mother-infant relationship, historically and theoretically positioned in opposition to Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, occupies an infantile position in a postmodernism framework intensely insistent on Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage.” Indeed, Mary Jacobus begins her 1990 early reappraisal of Klein’s psychoanalysis by denouncing the infantile position which Object Relations

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<sup>163</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self,” in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 71-86.

<sup>164</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development” [1971] in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 149-159.

psychoanalysis occupies in a theoretical environment dominated by Lacan: “One response to the current return to Klein: it feels like eating one’s words. Psychoanalytic feminism has been so thoroughly immersed in Lacanian theory for the past decade that taking Klein at her word — reading her literally, as she asks to be read — seems to risk a kind of theoretical *regression*” (my italics).<sup>165</sup> Five years later, Mignon Nixon extends Jacobus’s denunciation of Klein as theoretically regressive to feminist artistic practices particularly prone to be analysed through Object Relations psychoanalysis “that also are often framed in terms of theoretical regression.”<sup>166</sup>

Even in recent scholarship on photography, scholars’ commitment to Lacan’s lacking subject allows for an inquiry into the potential of the photographic medium to be analogous to and a screen for understanding experiences of trauma and traumatic memory. Scholars like Margaret Iversen and Ulrich Baer build on the inherently lacking subject presented by Lacan and the emptiness of the index put forward by Krauss, and later reprised by Griselda Pollock, to understand the photograph as insightfully operating in the psychic temporality of trauma.<sup>167</sup> Looking specifically at photographs from the Holocaust as a form of undigested and indigestible return of the real, Baer argues that “photographs can capture the shrapnel of traumatic time;”<sup>168</sup> a traumatic time whose

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<sup>165</sup> Mary Jacobus, “‘Tea Daddy’: Poor Mrs Klein and the Pencil Shavings,” in *Reading Melanie Klein*, ed. Lyndsey Stonebridge and John Phillips (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 92.

<sup>166</sup> Mignon Nixon, “Bad Enough Mother,” *October* 71 (1995): 72.

<sup>167</sup> Margaret Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

Cf. Also, Griselda Pollock, *After-Affects / After-Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>168</sup> Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 7.

genealogy Iversen's book traces from Georges Didi-Hubermann's Lacanian understanding of images of the Shoah to the "new forms of memorialization" created in response to the AIDS epidemic.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, the Lack/Lacanian subject has provided a useful structure for AIDS writers in the 1980s and 1990s to make sense of forms of representation of loss and mourning as a response to AIDS-related trauma and mortality.<sup>170</sup> However, this focus ascribes certain queer photographic practices, like those described in the following chapters, to a position which appears at risk of a theoretical, political, and aesthetic regression.

But, as I demonstrate in this thesis, Winnicott's work is particularly relevant to account for charting a queer engagement in photographic practices which centre self-expression and creativity by bracketing the discourse of lacking, trauma, and loss to its margins and in turn embracing the aesthetics, erotics, and politics which a Lacanian and distanced postmodernist approach to the art object configures as regressively childish. Indeed, Catherine Grant, building on Film Studies scholar Annette Kuhn's work, posits that Winnicott's psychoanalysis is useful to analyse

the spectatorial experience [...], for it enables us to explore and express, in a particularly compelling way, how we use these objects imaginatively in our inner

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<sup>169</sup> Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. by Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma*, 16.

<sup>170</sup> Beyond providing a useful structure to understand mourning and memorialising in the AIDS epidemic, the Lacanian subject has a wider presence in queer studies from the 1990s. For more information on the uses of Lacanian psychoanalysis in queer theory, see: Tim Dean, "Lacan and Queer Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 238-252. For more information on Tim Dean's own Lacanian analyses, see: Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago University Press, 2000); Tim Dean, "The Frozen Countenance of the Perversions," *Parallax* 14 (2008) 2: 93-114; Tim Dean, "Taking Shelter from Queer," in *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson (Earth: Punctum Books, 2017), 397-302.

lives; and it can also be used to present something shareable about those objects — some attained knowledge or understanding.<sup>171</sup>

By dislocating the object of study from the object per se to its engagement with its sustaining viewer, a study of the AIDS photograph must account for the processes of interaction, identification, and intense attachment to ourselves and to one another that for Winnicott does not prefigure a self-sufficient subject which speaks for mankind (as the postmodernist would have it), but one that is contingent on its dynamic response to the other's demands, even if these are met unideally. The self is never self-sufficient for Winnicott; he maintains a connection to the other: a space of identification that becomes not one of insufficiency but one that is constantly played in, one where the demands of the subject and the other are creatively mediated and boundaries of propriety are continuously tested. Winnicott's self is forever childish in its resistance to stop playing. As such, Winnicott's works might point to a childishness that is as political as it is able to undo the paranoid positions in which Kantian objectivity resides for Sedgwick, in a move towards what she calls a "reparative reading."<sup>172</sup> Indeed, as Michael Snediker argues:

The very practice of returning to Winnicott resembles the non-paranoid reading position of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a queer theorist who taught [...] the inseparability of ethics from the surprise of not knowing in advance where desire

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<sup>171</sup> This is a different Grant to the scholar previously cited. Catherine Grant, "The Use of an Illusion: Childhood Cinephilia, Object Relations, and Videographic Film Studies," *photogénie*, June 19, 2014, accessed December 1, 2023, <https://photogenie.be/the-use-an-illusion-childhood-cinephilia-object-relations-and-videographic-film-studies/>.

<sup>172</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.

might converge with rigor, gauziness, creativity and or delight.<sup>173</sup>

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It does not come as a surprise, then, that Winnicott's work has been productively used in multiple inquiries on the culture of childhood in art history. Particular interest has been given to the culture of childhood as a discourse agitating the formation of meaning in images, fleshing out the structure of unconscious fantasies, and as a source of artistic inspiration. Art historical and literary writings on adolescence, childhood, childhood eroticism, and the things of childhood, have largely developed around the key moments of the history of staged photography pointed out by previously discussed attempts of historicization of the directorial image. Indeed, the figures of the child and the adolescent, especially the adolescent girl, have been explored in scholarship on Victorian, Surrealist, and 1990s staged photography. James Kincaid's work on Victorian literary and visual culture has pointed out the usefulness of looking at ideas of innocence and misbehaviour coaxed by the figure of the child to highlight an intense interest in childhood sexuality and the structure of erotic fantasies.<sup>174</sup> Carol Mavor's work on Victorian photographic practices builds on Kincaid's texts and, with the help of Object Relations psychoanalysis, argues for the potential of childhood sexuality in delineating the coming into being and

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<sup>173</sup> Michael Snediker, "Out of Line, On Hold: D.W. Winnicott's Queer Sensibilities," in *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson (Earth: Punctum Books, 2017), 146.

<sup>174</sup> James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

coming together of female subjectivities.<sup>175</sup> This is further extended into contemporary photographic practices by Grant and Lori Waxman's texts on the erotics and politics which agitate the visual imaginary of adolescence and the adolescent girl.<sup>176</sup>

The culture of childhood in relation to masculinity and queerness is explored in Michael Moon's 1998 *A Small Boy and Others*, where artistic practices and performances by queer men in the first half of the twentieth century are understood through the autobiographical memories of childhood and boyhood of their author. Moon's boyish subjects are thus portrayed in a constant revisitation and retrieval of the things of childhood and fill "their own most compelling feelings, desires, fantasies, and fears" with potentially queer meanings.<sup>177</sup> This economy of retrieval of (queer) childhoods is also explored in David Hopkins's work on Dada boyishness and the use of toys in Surrealist productions.<sup>178</sup> Hopkins's texts, especially his 2021 *Dark Toys*, adopts Winnicottian psychoanalysis as a useful resource to understand the influence of Surrealist artists' childhood memories on their (adult) artistic outputs. His chapter on "The Surrealist Toy" presents an especially successful use of Winnicott's idea of the "transitional object," the infant's first

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<sup>175</sup> Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996); Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess of Hawarden* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>176</sup> Catherine Grant, "Bellmer's Legs: Adolescent Pornography and Uncanny Eroticism in the Photographs of Hans Bellmer and Anna Gaskell," *Papers of Surrealism* 8 (2010): 1-20; Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman (eds.), *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2011).

<sup>177</sup> Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>178</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada's Boys: Masculinity After Duchamp* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); David Hopkins, *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021).



possession, as a Surrealist object which allows for an exploration of unconscious fantasies through childhood memories and creativity.<sup>179</sup>

In his use of Winnicottian psychoanalysis, Hopkins is able to work around already established poststructuralist scholarship on Surrealism (notably helmed by Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* and Krauss's catalogue essay for the 1985 exhibition "L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism") in which subjectivity, identity, identification, and affective responses to unconscious fantasies are kept at representative arm's length owing to its explicitly Lacanian framework of trauma, fracture, and desire.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, Foster prefaces his analysis of Surrealist art by arguing for the mutual development of Surrealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, where "the emergence of the subject in an imaginary situation of (mis)recognition, of identification, alienation, and aggressivity" occur concurrently to "the deferred action of surrealism on Lacanian conception of desire and the symptom, trauma and repetition, paranoia and the gaze."<sup>181</sup>

As such, scholarship by Hopkins, Moon, and Mavor moves beyond mobilising photography in the service of undoing the formalist myth of optical purity in favour of a more fractured experience of the real and a contextual understanding of the structures of power in which of desire and representation are imbricated.<sup>182</sup> Rather, these texts return to the erotic and political potential of subjectivity, with its possessions, its autobiography, and its feelings. This is not to regressively return to the Artist as the Greenbergian producer of a universalising way of feeling and seeing, but to further diversify the

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<sup>179</sup> Hopkins, *Dark Toys*, 10-40.

<sup>180</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingstone (Washington D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1985).

<sup>181</sup> Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xiv.

<sup>182</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993).

plurality of experiences and feelings which agitate the processes of signification of the image.<sup>183</sup> Focussing on the figure of the child, with its autobiographical childhood memories and experiences, these texts eschew a politics of denunciation of and resistance to the failures of an “adult” society which appears too straight, too male, too white and too bourgeois. In a Winnicottian turn, the artistic practices described in this scholarship become playgrounds for these performative subjectivities to come into being without the totalising foreclosure of a universal meaning or truth about the image.<sup>184</sup>

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While some of these scholarly texts usefully and productively make use of Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theories to analyse the childish creativity of the artist and more generally the culture of childhood as a trove for artistic inspiration, Winnicott’s psychoanalytic practice as a mode of analysis has not extinguished its potential yet. The analytical space for Winnicott is characterised by a quasi-neurotic identification between analyst and analysand; one that operates on modes on near-total identification and transference between the two parties. Indeed, Winnicott argues that “psychotherapy takes place in the overlap between two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. *Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together*” (my italics).<sup>185</sup> Winnicott

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<sup>183</sup> Krauss criticises the universality of feeling, politics, and sophistication adopted in Greenberg’s formalist analysis of Jackson Pollock’s painting in her sixth chapter of *The Optical Unconscious*. See: *Ibid.*, 243-320.

<sup>184</sup> Getsy’s edited volume further extends the playground structure of twentieth-century avant-garde practices by demonstrating how their subversive politics strategically return to playing subjects and authors. For more information, see: David Getsy (eds.), *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2011).

<sup>185</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Dreaming, Fantasying, and Living: A case-history describing a Primary Dissociation” [1971], in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 38.

further adds that the work of analysis is precisely that of allowing for the conditions of a playing analysand to be met, to bring the object of analysis “from a state of not being able to play to a state of being able to play.”<sup>186</sup> This is achieved for Winnicott by the analyst’s restaging of what he calls a “facilitating environment,” a psychic space provided by the mother to the child in which both child and mother mirror each other in order for the child to develop the capacity to actively participate in culture.

Here, Winnicott remarks on the role of the analyst in psychoanalysis are informed by his earlier work on defining countertransference, that is the projection of the analyst’s intense feelings of love and hate on the object of analysis. In his 1949 “Hate in the Counter-Transference,” some twenty years prior to *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott opines that “counter-transference phenomena will at times be the important things in the analysis.”<sup>187</sup> Denouncing the analyst’s own repression of counter-transference in the interpretative work that analysis must incur, Winnicott proposes a reappraisal of the analyst’s own feelings in analysis. For Winnicott, the acknowledgement and constant sustaining of the analyst's feelings is not only strictly necessary for professional objectivity but is also beneficial for working around potential moments of neurosis in analysis: “the patient can only appreciate in the analyst what he himself is capable of feeling.”<sup>188</sup> Indeed, Winnicott describes that in analysis, analyst and analysand establish a process of cross-identification that needs to be acknowledged to avoid the interpersonal conflict that is neurosis. To achieve this, Winnicott argues that “the analyst needs more analysis;” the processes of identification and projection that inform the analyst’s interpretation must be not only

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Hate in the Counter-Transference,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 30 (1949): 70.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

paradoxically actively encouraged, but also analysed in their own right as object.<sup>189</sup>

It is in this space of the psychoanalytic session, where analyst and analysand, object and I, are all at risk of becoming the object of study that I want to locate the mode of analysis adopted in this thesis: a place of managed neurosis where the subjectile between work of art and me needs to be both actively unravelled and reparatively sustained. When it comes to the use of Winnicott in academic contexts, theory becomes self-reflexively an object of analysis, as feminist writer and psychoanalyst Julie Mitchell warns us:

The person, the technique, the setting, and the theory are then the “analytic object.” But, of course, behind this amalgam lies another: the person of the mother, her technique, her setting, and the theory that she represents and in which she is embedded. The transference of this primary infantile constellation to the clinical conditions cannot, I believe, be ignored when the destination is instead the academy and its wider intellectual context.<sup>190</sup>

Arguing, as does Winnicott, that the figure of the mother finds “its repetition in the analyst,” Mitchell envisions art historical analysis as a “tension of coexistence” between the art critic/art historian and the figure of the mother.<sup>191</sup> This “tension of coexistence” has been productively employed by Mavor in her work on Winnicott and Barthes, where the object of study becomes inextricable from the figure of the child that needs nurturing to fully come into being. Mavor’s analysis hinges on her assuming the performative subjectivity of a mother whose often-autobiographical experience of motherhood inflects theory by making it full of subjective meanings.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>190</sup> Julie Mitchell, “Theory as an Object,” *October* 113 (2005): 30.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Mavor introduces her work by declaring that her work has a productive “disease” which she reveals to be her own loving attachment to her “children.” Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J.M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D.W. Winnicott* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 56.

In many ways, I perform the same subject as Mavor's in the relation to my objects of study in this thesis. In many ways, I simultaneously do not. The "infantile constellation" to which analysis refers for Mitchell and Winnicott, implies that analysis, while pivoting around the figure of the mother and child, is less inclined to distinguish between child and mother, and between objects and subjects. In the inescapable system of identifications and cross-identifications that Winnicott argues the analytic session needs, mother and child are indistinguishable. Winnicott makes this clear in his "The Capacity to Be Alone": the child is paradoxically alone "in the presence of the mother," because, to the child, everything around him is himself.<sup>193</sup> In analysis, this "primary infantile constellation" needs to be restaged. As such theory, analyst, setting, technique, and analysand are alone, colliding and colluding in a neurosis that can only be managed by creative playing. In this light, mother and child are one of Halberstam's queer failures: both adult and infantile, they are *childishly* dependent on one another's playful interaction to one another in a space that is equally psychic as it is physical. So, yes, like Mavor's subject, I assume the position of the mother — and indeed share her commitment to mobilise Winnicott and late work by Barthes as a theoretical framework that allows this identification — but necessarily I assume the positionality of the child too in relation to my objects of study. The act of performing critical subjectivities to criticise the principles of Kantian objectivity implicitly adopted in the poststructuralist and Lacanian analysis finds a recent legacy in art historical and theoretical writings on performance. Jennifer Doyle makes this pointedly clear in her problematisation of what she names "serious" mode of critical engagements with art objects by Krauss and Foster (and by extension Crimp's early

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<sup>193</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to Be Alone" [1958] in D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1994), 29.

work). Building on James Elkins's return to (the work's) emotion and (the critic's) emotionality against the rigour of Kantian objectivity, Doyle denounces the "austerity" of "the writing that grew out of *October* and *Artforum* after the 1960s" as a response to the universalisation of feeling implied in formalist criticism.<sup>194</sup> Indeed, Doyle's mode of engagement with the art object — which she describes elsewhere as "promiscuous" — reignites the critical and political possibilities afforded by taking "passionate and personal" emotions as a serious mode of criticism.<sup>195</sup> Amelia Jones shares Doyle's criticism on the "austerity" of non-identificatory writing and productively moves emotionality into the more psychoanalytic framework of identification: "we cannot continue to act as if issues of identification do not condition every engagement we have with art, as with culture broadly construed and with others in general."<sup>196</sup> In his important work *Disidentification*, Muñoz underscores a similar point on the importance of practices of (dis)identification in the access to a "sense[] of self" by minoritarian subjectivities.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> James Elkins, *The State of Art Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>195</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 72. Doyle argues that this emotional engagement, where personal emotions embody a form of promiscuous criticality, opens the possibilities of emphasising queer dimensions of art objects. For more information, see: Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), esp. xi-xvi.

<sup>196</sup> Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 220. Jones previously explored the centrality of identification in art engagement against poststructuralist criticism in: Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006);

Amelia Jones, "Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning," in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 39-55;

Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>197</sup> I use "(dis)identification" rather than "disidentification" for textual clarity: indeed, throughout this thesis, "identification" is used following Winnicott's use, which relinquishes the attachment to "bad objects" which identification implies in Freud and

Outlining his dissatisfaction with “a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self” and providing a summary of how identification was cast aside by queer theory in favour of a Lacanian understanding of desire, Muñoz argues that a reclaiming of identification may engender a political “survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” for queer and BIPOC subjects.<sup>198</sup>

When it comes to the discursive field of photography, Margaret Olin reminds us of the risks that identification with the photographic object comports: to identify with the objects, as Barthes does, Olin argues, might also mean to naively misidentify with them. But, for Olin, it is this “naivety” of making pictures emotional by identifying with them—Barthes’s own naivety in identifying with the photographs he discusses in *Camera Lucida*—which reveals that “the most significant indexical power of the photograph may consequently lie not in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the relation between the photograph and its beholder.”<sup>199</sup> Indeed, as Irit Rogoff argued, emotionality may sometimes imply a “looking away” from the object.<sup>200</sup> Here, Olin constructs her argument around Barthes’s own comments regarding his engagement with photography, where he finds himself “in the situation of a naïve man, outside culture,

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Lacan. It is the latter idea of “identification” that Muñoz builds on and reclaims with his concept of “disidentification.”

José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 69.

<sup>200</sup> Irit Rogoff, “Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture,” in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 117-134.

someone untutored who would be constantly astonished at photography.”<sup>201</sup>

But can Barthes’s naïve emotionality towards and identification with photography represent a solution to Foster and Krauss’s paranoid position? Indeed, Winnicott and emotionality may allow us to resist the Kantian objectivity of previous inquiries and to point out the political and aesthetic potential of practices which had previously been discounted as infantile or regressive. After all, as Avital Ronell points out in her study of stupidity and Kant’s philosophy, that which does not ascribe to Kantian objectivity in analysis, that which “outdoes” objective rationality by becoming too attached, too subjective, is bound to become idiotic and puerile.<sup>202</sup> The work of Paul Clinton further emphasises how this anti-Kantian positionality may offer a productive methodology to centre queer experiences.<sup>203</sup> And, indeed, Ricardo Montez’s analysis of Keith Haring’s work makes a remarkably productive use of Barthes (and literary scholar D.A. Miller’s projected gay desires on Barthes) to lay the ground for “a kind of biographical image that resists objective representation in favor of a portrait that might more effectively speak to [...] the emotional vicissitudes of an embodied, which is to say felt, knowledge that cannot be proved in any absolute sense.”<sup>204</sup> In this thesis, I ask: Can this position of stupidity, of naivety, of *childishness* be reparative in its loving embracing of Barthes’s and my constant astonishment of the image?

The analytic methodology of this thesis is thus not only motivated by my commitment to demonstrate the usefulness of Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory and methods to analyse

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<sup>201</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 357.

<sup>202</sup> See: Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>203</sup> Paul Clinton, “Stupidity,” *Parallax* 19 (2013) 3: 1-4.

<sup>204</sup> Ricardo Montez, *Keith Haring’s Line: Race and the Performance of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 6-7.



forms of queer childishness engendered by the photographic practices around which this thesis revolves; indeed, Winnicott is primarily a child psychoanalyst. Importantly, my decision to adopt a Winnicottian analytic methodology, where the analyst's feelings, processes of identification and countertransference are given the same centrality as the object of analysis itself, is informed by the necessity to undo the "ideal" critical distance posited by Krauss and Foster when it comes to forms of staged and art photography produced during the ongoing AIDS epidemic. Katz makes this pointedly clear in his catalogue chapter for "Art AIDS America," where "the work of art operates as our interlocutor, a presence, confronting us, asking questions about us, our feelings, our emotions, our judgments."<sup>205</sup>

But how to write about emotion without falling into the universalising formalist entrapments of feelings which Krauss has warned us about? In this thesis, I have elected to borrow from Barthes's late work both theoretically and stylistically to avoid the foreclosure of affect as a *productive*, rather than universalising, analytical methodology. In his late-work, Barthes intimately holds autobiography and structure in the "adolescent language" of fragment, as Tzvetan Todorov aptly describes Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*.<sup>206</sup> Among his late work, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, *Camera Lucida*, *The Rustle of Language*, *Journal de deuil*, *S/Z*, *Incidents*, and *A Lover's Discourse* employ a structural textual fragmentation to allow affect and autobiography to operate as a "basis for renewed aesthetic criticism," as Oxman put it.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 38.

<sup>206</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, "The Last Barthes," trans. by Richard Howard, *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981) 3: 452.

<sup>207</sup> Elena Oxman, "Sensing the Image: Roland Barthes and the Affect of the Visual," *SubStance* 39 (2010) 2: 73.

This renewed criticism makes use of autobiography, which Crimp described as Barthes's own "drift," as a mode of engagement with the visual object that circumvents a totalising "interpretation."<sup>208</sup> Indeed, in a 1982 elegy to Barthes's passing, critic Susan Sontag writes that "Barthes's work had to end in autobiography."<sup>209</sup> Thus, the stylistic strategy of the fragment — which drifts with Barthes's textual pleasure, as he makes clear in his *The Pleasure of the Text* — may provide what Sontag has named "an erotics of art;" an erotics which in both Sontag and Barthes stands in opposition to a universalising "interpretation" of the work of art.<sup>210</sup> What this means in the economy of this thesis is that the more traditionally academic text is scattered with textual fragments, where analysis and its written form are allowed to drift off in unexpected ways; where the text is allowed to fray and risks making everything potentially meaningful in ways which allow for surprises in the engagement between subject and photographic object: little

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In her article Oxman also breaks down some of the criticism levied against Barthes's apparent negation of his earlier semiological work since the 1980s. Geoffrey Batchen further summarises criticism moved especially against *Camera Lucida*.

My thinking on the "fragmentariness" of Barthes's late work is based on Dana B. Polan's description of Barthes's insistence on the fragment in his late work. See: Geoffrey Batchen, "Camera Lucida: Another Little History of Photography," in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 76-91.

Dana B. Polan, "Roland Barthes and the Moving Image," *October* 18 (1981): 41-46.

<sup>208</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Fassbinder, Franz, Fox, Elvira, Erwin, Armin, and All the Others," *October* 21 (1982): 66.

<sup>209</sup> Susan Sontag, "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes," *The New Yorker*, April 26, 1982, 122.

<sup>210</sup> See the similarity of Sontag's "The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show what it means" to Barthes's "it can only be said of pleasure that *it is there* (that which is also the contrary of Interpretation)." ["on peut dire seulement du plaisir qu'*il est là* (ce qui est aussi le contraire de l'Interprétation)."]

Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 18-19;

Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" [1964], in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 14.

Roland Barthes, "Préface," in Renaud Camus, *Tricks [Boys]* (Paris: P.O.L, 1988), 15.

Winnicottian playgrounds of signification.

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In this thesis, thus, the objects and I play in a setting that is equally governed by projection of fantasies and by the physical space in which the photographs are exhibited. Indeed, the space of analysis is an object of analysis in itself, as Mitchell's reading of Winnicott reveals.<sup>211</sup> In this thesis, this space is both located in the psychic space established between the work of art and its observer, but it is also the very real space of the exhibition, where the presence of the photographic object is manifested through dimensions, curation, and thus participates in an economy of spatial relations which must be restaged as a facilitating environment. It is perhaps because of this reparative need to restage the historically and geographically contingent space of the exhibition in a constant presentness that the exhibitions, be it historical or still open at the time of writing, are discussed in the present tense in this thesis. Indeed, as Snediker reminds us, "to read Winnicott alongside [Sedgwick's reparative reading] is to aspire toward for [sic.] an ethics freed from the normatively non-contingent, but no less predicated on the contingencies of availing dislocation."<sup>212</sup> As such, the photographers discussed in this thesis show a commitment to create photographic objects that are both self-expressive vehicles of gay erotic fantasies and at once very physical objects made specifically to be exhibited in a museum or gallery setting, which, as Zanot argues, "facilitates the disavowal of a direct relationship to the tradition [of the artist as creator of a common imaginary] back to the linguistic and contextual questions" of the work of art in the

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<sup>211</sup> Mitchell, "Theory as an Object," 30.

<sup>212</sup> Snediker, "Out of Line, On Hold," 146.

exhibition space.<sup>213</sup>

**chapter one** continues the discussion on the concept of the appropriate critical distance and its shortcomings in analysing the erotic geographies and histories of photography made in the AIDS epidemic. Focussing specifically on American queer photographer Jimmy DeSana's "Suburban Series" (1979-1984) as it is exhibited in the 2022 retrospective "Jimmy DeSana: Submissions" of the photographer's oeuvre at the Brooklyn Museum, I argue for an engagement with photography that hinges on the concept of loving dependence described in Winnicott's work on the mother and child. With the help of Barthes's own concept of dependence in engaging with image, I show how this dependence is engendered in Jimmy DeSana's work as a form of sadomasochistic erotic bondage informed by DeSana's own personal interest in SM, by his creative process, and by his use of string which stubbornly wraps around personal time and public space, subjects and objects, artist and viewer alike. Here, the concept of correct critical distance thus become challenged by the production of an unideal, unweaned, childish subjectivity, which demonstrates the inherent anxiety of infectivity at the base of Kantian objectivity — an anxiety which is made all the more meaningful in the "plague years" of the AIDS epidemic, but whose reparative tackling shows the aesthetic and political potentials of childishness.

Indeed, while this childishness is often portrayed as self-serving, death-bound, and narcissistic in the face of AIDS, it may also engender a communal erotics of art that is based on touching the work of art and letting the work of art touch us. This is the subject of **chapter two**. Analysing the idea of touch as a form of doubling, that hinges on a

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<sup>213</sup> "facilita l'annullamento di un rapporto diretto con la tradizione per ripartire dalle questioni linguistiche e contestuali." In Zanot, "L'allestimento come opera d'arte" ["Installation as a Work of Art"], 219.

mirroring which virally multiplies, I focus on two exhibitions: one of studio works by Paul Sepuya (2016-2018), titled “The Conditions” (2019); and the other of Ryan McGinley’s “Mirror Mirror” series (2018). With these exhibitions occurring in the same place —Team Gallery in New York City — I argue for a mode of identification in the gallery space that counters Lacan’s notion of the “mirror stage” as a psychic space of insufficiency and anticipation where subjectivity is always kept at a distance. Indeed, here I lean on Winnicott’s concept of the “mirror role” which the mother adopts to provide the child with a psychic space in which he may become a subject through creative playing. With a subjectivity in becoming, and a mode of directorial photography that centres adolescent fantasies, I posit a non-traumatic, queer return to authoriality as a politics of intimate communality.

With my childish return to the figure of the author, **chapter three**\_ focusses on the possibilities of autobiography to engender a proliferation of childish meanings tasting in photography for all its oral pleasures and oral mournings. Here, I analyse Steven Arnold’s tableau photographs (1981-1990) and his idiosyncratic use of a black background through the oral eroticism on which his unpublished autobiography insists. With a photography sustained by its use of oral sex and metaphors of eating, Arnold envisions a politics of mourning that productively and directorially restages infantile oral fixations as a reparative means of sharing and experiencing loss as a pleasurable embodied affect. I contextualise Arnold’s use of oral darkness in his two published photobooks and with the fairy-tale language of his autobiography in an attempt to resist an anxious positionality of desire that appears anorexic in recent Lacanian-influenced queer theory. In this contextualisation, Arnold’s autobiographic interest in orality lays the ground for an oral understanding of photography and of mourning which hinges on a childish enjoyment of

swallowing. As such, in this chapter I embrace the political and aesthetic regressive connotations vested onto returning to the author and onto returning to Object Relations psychoanalysis.

In the **conclusions**, I re-polemicise Crimp’s 1987 stance against art that is transcendental to the AIDS epidemic — a positionality which Crimp reads as a phobic denial of the crisis which verges on the apolitical. Following the case studies in this thesis — that is, photographic practices which prima facie resemble more “art of transcendence” rather than art that actively participates in the political claims staked out by AIDS activists — I reiterate the political, erotic, and aesthetic possibilities engendered by staged photography which is sustained and sustains a childish engagement with its beholder. I effect this by finally bringing my childish methodology outside museums, galleries, and private archives and into the public space, with a reading of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s 1991 *Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)*, reprinted throughout New York in 2012 by The Museum of Modern Art. Finally exploring this thesis as one of Winnicott’s “Squiggle Games,” I fill and occupy Gonzalez-Torres’s unmade bed with my squiggles.

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My research for this thesis was carried out amidst the closures of archives and institutions following the Covid-19 pandemic. This severely impacted the access to materials and foreclosed the possibility of a wider research on historical mappings and connections. Some of the archives consulted during this period — especially around Jimmy DeSana, whose legacy has been divided across multiple institutions — heavily relied on specific questions to be asked from the offset of the research. Owing to these restrictions, a thesis whose research started around the legacies of Surrealism in queer staged photography

during the ongoing AIDS crisis (which the artists in this thesis all embody to different extents), soon turned into an inquiry into the exhibition of specific printed and framed objects. The main archives employed in this thesis contain exhibition records and installation shots: these materials were available online or stored in institutions which I was allowed to visit even with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The primary claims I make in this thesis are theoretical in nature, taking the Winnicottian analytic session as a useful structure in and with which to analyse works and the relation they establish with me. The selection of the case-studies analysed in the following chapters bears my interest in this structure: like a Winnicottian child, I play with the toys I am presented with, delineating AIDS culture as a playing environment for my promiscuous desire for gay men and annexed pleasures to freely find their grip on physical objects. As such personal attachment and desire — crucial points of analytic contention in this thesis — are left to spontaneously and creatively inform the selection of case-studies. This desiring selection is coupled with interviews with archivists, models, friends, and figures who often participated in the creation of the proscenium of the photographs, thus providing an insight into the photographers' direction. Their words have also filled in historical blanks left by the archival materials which I could not access. The motivation to present these art photography practices non-chronologically rests on the agreement in current scholarship that the AIDS epidemic is far from over. Fiona Anderson's, Kerr's, and Juhasz's texts render explicit the problems that historical linearity presents in participating in cultural and academic productions on AIDS.<sup>214</sup> Firstly, a linear history which starts before "the plague years" of the AIDS epidemic risks

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<sup>214</sup> Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 159-162;  
Kerr and Juhasz, *We Are Having This Conversation Now*, n.p.

pathologizing AIDS as symptomatic of the sexual liberations of the 1960s and especially 1970s.<sup>215</sup> Secondly, an historicised linearity may risk presenting the present-day as “post-AIDS” (an historical posturing which I further problematise in **chapter two**), rather than an evolving and global situation which demands continued participation rather than complacency.<sup>216</sup> To avoid these risks, certain strategies have been employed: most recently, the 2023 exhibition “Aux Temps du Sida” at the Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporaine in Strasbourg foregrounded the entrance to the exhibition by a regressive timeline which starts at present day and ends in 1983 with the first reports of a “gay cancer” and a “new plague” in the French press.<sup>217</sup> In this thesis, I also employ this regressive timeline with the progression of the ideal maturation from childhood into adulthood of the Winnicottian subject rather than with chronology: I move backwards from dependence and playing, to the mirror role, to infantile orality in order to emphasise the constant presentness that playing has for Winnicott and to resist a forced theoretical move into the moral, political, and erotic demands that “maturity” implies.

Rather than *a series of failures and regressions*, then, this thesis represents a series of resistances that I describe as childish in their potential to eschew a relationship to the photographic object which allows for often-unexpected collisions, erotics, and politics. Ultimately, I ask: What is at stake when we forgo responsibilities and calls to mature to establish childish modes of engaging with the art object? What happens when we start playing with AIDS?

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<sup>215</sup> See: Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 159-162.

<sup>216</sup> See: Kerr and Juhasz, *We Are Having This Conversation Now*, n.p.

<sup>217</sup> “‘Le cancer gay’ *Libération*, 17.05.1983 [...] ‘La nouvelle peste’ *Paris Match*, N° 1781, 15.07.1983” In *Aux Temps du Sida: Oeuvres, Récits et Entrelacs*, ed. Estelle Pietrzyk (Strasbourg: Éditions des Musées de Strasbourg, 2023), 1.



## **chapter one\_ string toys.**

Let's play.

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### **introduction; or pulling the strings on desana's toys.**

DeSana's toys are kept separate from the photographs which he took after having his spleen removed owing to AIDS-related complications in 1984.<sup>218</sup> In the 2022 “Jimmy DeSana: Submission” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, DeSana's photographic work produced before 1984 seemingly stands before the double gates of AIDS. In the layout of the exhibition, this consisted of a set of two closed two-handle doors, separated by a relatively sombre corridor of black velvet curtains and dark painted walls. By 1984, DeSana was preemptively already dead — his remembrance already foregrounds the work he produced after the removal of his spleen. In the connective corridor, a video of DeSana's long-time best friend Laurie Simmons and her daughter Lena Dunham produced in 2017 for amfAR acted as a testament and remembrance of DeSana's characteristic exuberance and sweetness as well as providing an affective history of DeSana's death from AIDS-related complication and the sense of loss that ensued. In the video, Simmons recounts: “We knew that AIDS was a death sentence. The expression

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<sup>218</sup> DeSana formally received his positive HIV diagnosis in September 1985. He often described the removal of his spleen as the turning point for his works. The removal of his spleen, however, Laurie Simmons tells me, is most likely an early exhibition of AIDS-related symptoms. See: “I remember asking my sister Dr Bonnie Simmons, an emergency room physician, if Jimmy's splenectomy meant that he had been infected by the virus. She seemed to feel there was a good chance it meant he'd exhibited symptoms of AIDS and prepared me that the news might not be good and of course it wasn't.” Written correspondence with Laurie Simmons, January 16, 2024.

‘living with AIDS’ did not exist, because no one with AIDS lived.’<sup>219</sup> This comes across as a strange anachronistic moment for an exhibition (and accompanying catalogue) which takes chronology as the cataloguing rationale. Indeed, this landmark exhibition of DeSana’s oeuvre, the first major retrospective of the different productions of his career, follows the chronological succession of photographic and film work quasi-religiously as it moves cogently from series to magazines to collaborative projects to video works.

The exhibition begins by showing DeSana’s early works from the late 1960s, realised in part as examination material for his course in photography at the Georgia State University, such as his first series titled “101 Nudes,” a pun on Disney’s *101 Dalmatians* which features black and white photographs of drag queens and DeSana’s friends in unconventional poses in a domestic environment, though, disappointingly for dog-lovers, no dalmatians (Fig. 7). This part of the exhibition also features images he produced in the early 1970s for various grassroots magazines and punk publications, most notably his work for art critic and persona Gregory Battcock’s short-lived “Trylon and Perisphere” magazine, as well as the bonanza of bum photographs accompanied by Disney cartoons published in and used as advertisement for the various iterations of the “John Dowd Fanny Club” magazine with mail artists John Dowd, Ray Johnson, and AA Bronson, who was one of the founders of the artist collective General Idea.<sup>220</sup> Drew Sawyer articulates in the

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<sup>219</sup> “Laurie Simmons Remembers Jimmy de Sana,” directed by Matt Wolf (C41 Media for amfAR, 2017), video.

<sup>220</sup> The third and last number of “Trylon and Perisphere” published in 1978 bears a notice on its last page which marks the termination of the working relationship between DeSana and Battcock on the magazine to due unknown diatribe with the then art director of the magazine, later dubbed by the media as the “man immune to AIDS,” painter Stephen Lyon Crohn. The notice reads: “Jimmy De Sana disassociates himself from this magazine due to obvious objections to the art direction.” In Gregory Battcock (eds), *Trylon and Perisphere* 3 (1978): 29.

exhibition catalogue: “DeSana was [...] drawing from, and at the same time parodying, cultural modes and makers, from camp to porn to Disney;” idiosyncrasies that DeSana maintained throughout his production.<sup>221</sup>

DeSana’s work from the 1970s occupies the following section of the exhibition, including portraits of the punk and new wave music scene in New York City, which he realised for various underground publications, among which the “Punk ‘Til You Puke” issue of General Idea’s *File* magazine in 1977, which DeSana also co-edited.<sup>222</sup> This section of the exhibition is split between DeSana’s glossy commercial work and his funny, violent, erotic SM black and white photography, with the collaborative series “The Dungeon,” realised with Terence Sellers before the two fell out over Beat-generation writer William S. Burroughs’s preference of DeSana’s solo SM work.<sup>223</sup> This latter tranche of DeSana’s

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Drew Sawyer, “1968-1976. Performative Identities and Radical Networks,” in *Jimmy DeSana: Submission*, ed. Drew Sawyer (New York: DelMonico and Brooklyn Museum, 2022), 11-20.

<sup>221</sup> Drew Sawyer, “1968-1976,” 14.

<sup>222</sup> Drew Sawyer, “1976-1980. DeSana’s Downtown Scene and Collaborations: No Wave to S-M,” in *Jimmy DeSana: Submission*, ed. Drew Sawyer (New York: DelMonico and Brooklyn Museum, 2022), 51.

<sup>223</sup> Indeed, DeSana’s “The Dungeon” photographs, taken in Terence Seller’s dominatrix lounge/titular dungeon and rumour has it on the Fire Island beaches, were to complement Seller’s memoir-cum-SM-feminist-manifesto book *The Correct Sadist*. According to Sellers, DeSana would “dump” her writing in favour of receiving an introduction from Burroughs. Even though the collaborative work was only minorly featured in the *Submission* publication, Sellers revendicates her lasting impact on DeSana’s work. Upon falling out, she also “invoiced DeSana for her work at the going rate of the dungeon,” for the time DeSana spent learning and voyeuristically attending her dominatrix practices with her slaves. It is possible that this change of heart in DeSana, to work with Burroughs over Sellers, is owed to DeSana’s personal admiration for the author, whose work “[he] read a lot of [...] in the late sixties.”

Terence Sellers, “Famous versus Infamous,” *terencesellers.org*, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.terencesellers.org/pdf/famous.pdf>;

Johanna Fateman, “Discipline: The Lost Collaboration of Terence Sellers and Jimmy De Sana,” *Apology* Winter (2013): 80-89;

Laurie Simmons, “Jimmy DeSana: Interview by Laurie Simmons,” in *Jimmy DeSana*, ed. William S. Bartman (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1990), 4;

John Belknap, “Portfolio: Jimmy DeSana and Terence Sellers,” *Artforum* 61 (2022) 3.

work was collected in a 1979 photobook *Submission*, and is included in the Brooklyn Museum exhibition in an attaché to this section under red lighting to mimic their exhibition in Sur Rodney (Sur)'s 1978 *File 13* exhibition at Viewing Room Galleries (Figs. 8 and 9).<sup>224</sup> In his introduction to the publication, Burroughs comments on the religious aspects that agitate DeSana's *Submission* photographs, which he likens to veritable documents of guilt-ridden perversions and histories of Christian repression, while completely omitting the "wit and playfulness" that "[DeSana's] images also convey," as Sawyer correctly points out.<sup>225</sup> Indeed, while the SM photographs in the "Dungeon" series could be thought of as documents of SM practices, more specifically as Sellers's own dominatrix practices with her sex slaves, the photographs in *Submission* are more directorial, staged, propped. They are realised in domestic interiors and feature common domestic objects and furnishings, such as TV sets, shower-heads, bidets, coffee tables; they are more akin to DeSana's "101 Nudes" series, not only because of their emphasised domestic setting, but also in the positioning of the anonymised models, often repeating the same poses, compositions, and placings — lying on the sofa, legs akimbo; a high-heel shoe replacing the genitals — used in his earlier directorial work, and later also employed in his "Suburban" series.

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<sup>224</sup> Sawyer, "1976-1980," 57.

<sup>225</sup> Burroughs writes: "My dear, it's all so *Christian* and *medieval* and *gloomy*. Precisely, Jimmy De Sana, your intrepid photographer, has witnessed and preserved for posterity the unspeakable rites of these benighted natives, rites as clearly derived from Christianity as a black mass." It remains unclear what aspects of the contents in the images Burroughs does find "medieval" and "gloomy," since most of the images are strongly set within rather middle-class American interiors from the 1970s: look at those free-standing fridges and TV sets!"

William S. Burroughs, "Introduction," in Jimmy DeSana, *Submission* (New York: SCAT 1979), n.p.

Drew Sawyer, "1980-1984. The Body as Object," in *Jimmy DeSana: Submission*, ed. Drew Sawyer (New York: DelMonico and Brooklyn Museum, 2022), 82.

Before the gates of AIDS, Jimmy DeSana's posthumously titled "Suburban" series remains untroubled by the amfAR video, just one set of doors away from the temporality jumble — of chronological and autobiographical linearity, of utopian and political potentialities — effected by HIV/AIDS (and theorised through postmodernism and psychoanalysis).<sup>226</sup> This tranche of his work builds on the composition of his SM photographs and tints it with saturated plastic greens, oranges, reds, and blues; a "signature colorization" which DeSana describes as "ma[king] things a just a little more upbeat" (Fig. 10).<sup>227</sup> Here, the domestic objects onto, into, against, with which bodies are propped and played are once removed from the tout-court SM fetish objects utilised in *Submission*. Whips, gags, leather masks and huge dildos are replaced with marker cones, cardboard, sports bags, phone cables, and the sort of toothpicks you would find sticking out a small cube of cheese at your Italian grandmother's aperitif, those with the frills made from coloured gel plastics. Piss, douche water, shit (and a hard-boiled egg) become shower water, shaving foam, plastic leaves (and an iguana). Fetish gear and fetish bodies are replaced by and as makeshift domestic sex and sexual toys.

DeSana's "Suburban" works received their first institutional exhibition in 1981, alongside the works of Larry Clark, Kathy Acker, Nan Goldin, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kiki Smith and over a hundred other artists in Diego Cortez's

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<sup>226</sup> Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197-222;  
Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995);  
Lee Edelman, "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," *Narrative* 6 (1998) 1: 18-30;  
Edelman, *No Future*;  
Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005);  
Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*;  
Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>227</sup> Simmons, "Jimmy DeSana," 12.

landmark exhibition “New York/New Wave” at P.S.1 then in Long Island City.<sup>228</sup> From December 1982 to January 1983, images from DeSana’s “Suburban” series were displayed in a relatively unknown exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia titled “Image Scavengers: Photography.” The exhibition, and its twin “Image Scavengers: Painting” displayed concomitantly, sought to examine contemporary artists’ appropriation of the imagery used in commercial advertisement, political campaigning, Hollywood films, mass media, and more broadly widely-known artworks and objects, as their preferential mode of production.<sup>229</sup> It does not come as a surprise then that the artists’ list for the exhibition includes some of Crimp’s and Solomon-Godeau’s postmodernist darlings from the loosely related group of the Pictures Generation: Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman are exhibited alongside Ellen Brooks, Eileen Cowin, Don Rodan, Laurie Simmons and Jimmy DeSana.

For the catalogue of the exhibition, Crimp writes an essay titled “Appropriating Appropriation,” the very same essay which he later problematises in “The Boys in My Bedroom,” which I discuss in **chapter two**. In his “Appropriating Appropriation,” Crimp discusses the epistemological force with which modes of image scavenging, as the

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<sup>228</sup> Glenn O’Brien writes for *Artforum* that the exhibition “New York/New Wave,” signalled “the institutional emergence of this new force [the democratising force of the 1980s generation of artists],” being the spiritual successor of the 1980 “The Times Square Show,” installed in a massage parlour on 41<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> which was reviewed by a sceptical Lucy Lippard as including works somewhat politically non-committal on issues of “sex and money and violence and human degradation.” DeSana’s work featured in both shows. Glenn O’Brien, “1981: ‘New York / New Wave,’” *Artforum* 41 (2003) 7: 108.

Anne Ominous (Lucy R. Lippard), “Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of The Times Square Show,” *Artforum* 19 (1980) 2: 50-55.

<sup>229</sup> For more information on “Image Scavengers: Painting,” see the accompanying exhibition catalogue: *Image Scavengers: Painting*, ed. Janet Kardon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

title of the exhibition goes, shatter the “field of knowledge” of objects within a museum space by always referring to something outside of the museal institution.<sup>230</sup> The essay begins by comparing Michael Graves’s “retrograde” and Frank Gehry’s “progressive” architectural modes of appropriation.<sup>231</sup> Crimp then continues with a more committed discussion on photographic appropriation in Robert Mapplethorpe and Sherrie Levine, before diverting to how “notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined,” in the works of none other than Robert Rauschenberg (in a second postmodernist gesture, Crimp sends us back to another essay of his: “On the Museum’s Ruins”).<sup>232</sup> At the end of the essay, Crimp quickly returns to the exhibition for which he is writing a catalogue entry and adds three sentences on Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, and Sherrie Levine, before concluding his essay.

Art historian William J. Simmons, one of the DeSana’s most devoted critics, attempts to conceptualise DeSana’s absence from the line-up of artists in Crimp’s “Appropriating Appropriation” and from the Pictures Generation. In a portfolio review of DeSana’s “Suburban” series for the *Aperture* magazine issue “Queer,” he writes that:

DeSana was incisively critical of the photographic medium, normative sexuality, and commodity culture as his Pictures Generation colleagues, but the narrative of photography has been conspicuously devoid of an appreciation of queerness as a critical tool. It would seem that, in art-historical discourse, gay men are only friends, lovers, curators, or artists with a single platform: AIDS.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation,” 33.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-30.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>233</sup> William J. Simmons, “Jimmy DeSana: Surreal Sexuality,” in *Aperture* 218 (2015): 67.

While I am not as committed as Simmons to circle AIDS out of the equation of “the narrative of conceptual photography,” Simmons is right in his denunciation of the exclusion of DeSana’s queer formalism from Crimp’s art historical conceptualisation of the Pictures Generation: the 1982 “Image Scavengers: Photography” exhibition is a case in point of this.<sup>234</sup> DeSana’s “Suburban” photographs, exhibited in the “Image Scavengers: Photography” show, are not directly called into consideration anywhere in Crimp’s text. Even indirectly, DeSana’s images are a tough fit for the strategies of “appropriation, pastiche, quotation” with which Crimp introduces the exhibition and which demarcate for Crimp the “shift [...] between modernism and postmodernism” that his “Pictures Generation” embody.<sup>235</sup> What exactly is the “Suburban” series (not) scavenging for Crimp to elide DeSana from the exhibition in which he is participating? One early commentator on the exhibition, Ronny H. Cohen, timidly tries to situate DeSana’s images in the context of the exhibition by discussing DeSana’s interest in TV and advertisement:

[DeSana’s] pictures comment ironically on the creative side of the media, which strives to make clever, inventive, and most importantly, memorable contexts. This

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<sup>234</sup> As Anderson and Patton argue in their projects on pre-AIDS sexuality, using the AIDS-epidemic as a framing lens may lead to limiting, even homophobic, results. Forgoing the rhetoric of apocalypticism associated to AIDS discussed by Thomas L. Long, my inclusion of AIDS into pre-AIDS sexualities is motivated by my intention to show that the political and pleasurable potentials of pre-AIDS representation can be productively brought forward and into AIDS histories and narratives.

Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 8-9; 159-162;

Cindy Patton, *L.A. Plays Itself / Boys in the Sand: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 27-28;

Thomas L. Long, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2-13.

<sup>235</sup> Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation,” 27.



often involves a suggestive degree of storytelling through which the product, as image and message, is pitched.<sup>236</sup>

The similarity of DeSana's "Suburban" photographs to images of commercial advertisement is also cited by the curator of the exhibition, Paula Marincola, as the rationale behind DeSana's inclusion: "They reproduce the 'look' of certain formats—the movie still, for example, soap opera scenario, or fashion and product advertisement."<sup>237</sup> However, the critic's review of DeSana's work in the exhibition, with its emphasis on creativity and "storytelling," points towards a duplicitous referentiality employed by artists operating in what Coleman defined as the "directorial mode" of image-making: a more postmodernist referentiality to structures outside the museum juxtaposed, crucially, to a referentiality that circles to and within the artist's self-expression. DeSana's practice thus veers more towards the "photography of invention" — which gained popularity as the subject of USA-wide exhibitions in gallery and museum spaces throughout the 1980s and 1990s — than the photography of "re-invention" conceptualised by Crimp for his "Pictures" show.<sup>238</sup> Indeed, Crimp argues in his essay accompanying the "Pictures" show, that "for their pictures, these artists have turned to the available images in the culture around them."<sup>239</sup> But DeSana does not only turn around as much as he turns toward himself, self-referentially, towards what Winnicott called the "intermediate zone" of the

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<sup>236</sup> Ronny H. Cohen, "Image Scavengers: Photography, An Exhibition," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 14 (1983) 2: 57.

<sup>237</sup> Paula Marincola, "Stock Situations/Reasonable Facsimiles," in *Image Scavengers: Photography*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>238</sup> Crimp, "Pictures," 19.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

potential space between “me” and “not-me” where “cultural experience (play) takes place.”<sup>240</sup>

It is true that “the uncanny Technicolour haze of Jimmy De Sana’s photographs,” which for Dominic Johnson inscribes this work in a genealogy of Glam fashion, does refer to TV and fashion advertisement.<sup>241</sup> DeSana himself confirms this, commenting on the “dissociative kind of color:” “I’ve had bad reception on my TV since I’ve lived in midtown (ten years). It would turn a face green.”<sup>242</sup> However, as I look at DeSana’s toys, bodies propped with objects propped with bodies, the postmodernist referentiality discussed by Crimp of DeSana’s photographs to fashion and advertisement seems to account for the saturated coloration alone. Indeed, one year prior to the “Image Scavengers: Photography” exhibition, William Olander, curator of a smaller show on photographic practices loosely associated to Crimp’s Pictures Generation (Richard Prince, Ellen Brooks, and Don Rodan are included in the exhibition line-up) also commented on the capacity of DeSana’s work to “critique the world of consumerism.”<sup>243</sup> In the catalogue for this exhibition (the second instalment of the “New Voices” series of exhibitions of contemporary artists at Oberlin College, Ohio), Olander highlights the “theatrical [...] living, and lurid, color” of DeSana’s critical gesture.<sup>244</sup> Similarly to Cohen’s review that DeSana’s images seem to centre the “creative side of the media” which pitches “the product [...] as image and message,” Olander stresses the creative and

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<sup>240</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “The Place Where We Live,” [1971] in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 141-144.

<sup>241</sup> Dominic Johnson, “Crocodile Tears: A Counter-Archive of Glam Aesthetics,” in *Glam: The Performance of Style*, ed. Darren Pih (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 96.

<sup>242</sup> Simmons, “Jimmy De Sana,” 17.

<sup>243</sup> William Olander, “6 Photographers: Concept / Theater / Fiction,” in *New Voices 2: 6 Photographers; Concept / Theater / Fiction*, ed. William Olander (Oberlin, OH: Allen Art Museum and Oberlin College, 1981), 2.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

erotic potential that also agitates the critique of “the world of consumerism:” DeSana’s “Suburban” series “celebrates his own, more private, world of real imagination.”<sup>245</sup> As both critics seem to suggest, DeSana’s “Suburban” series operates on a double, even paradoxical, register: the photographs work both with the detached language of advertisement analysed by Krauss (the “press photograph,” Barthes tells us is “an object endowed with structural autonomy,” whose message is “quasi-tautological”) and with the mother-attached language of spontaneity and creativity.<sup>246</sup>

DeSana’s use of advertisement strategically positions his figures as toys for him to play with and then photograph. While “Jimmy relied on existing interiors” and “things he owned or were lying around the studio,” Laurie Simmons tells me that the posing of his models (“his friends, lovers and pets”) was decided solely by DeSana: “Posing was more static, not at all like a fashion shoot with movement and music. He had a gesture in mind and that pose had to be held until he got the shot. It could be a bit challenging.”<sup>247</sup> For his “Suburban” works, DeSana would position his dolls and ask them not to move until the photograph was taken. Moving away from the commercial setup of the “fashion shoot,” DeSana plays the director of his models, holding them still as puppets with string, as one of the bondage practices he photographed in his *Submission*. An object and a subject, the

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<sup>245</sup> Cohen, “Image Scavengers,” 57;

Olander, “6 Photographers,” 2.

<sup>246</sup> Krauss utilises Barthes’s idea of “quasi-tautology” to develop a language of photography that is structurally disengaged and distant: “this veracity [of photography’s indexicality] is beyond the reach of those possible internal adjustments [...] of language. The connective tissue [...] contained by the photograph is that of the world itself, rather than that of a cultural system,” and this emblematises “the photograph’s distance from what could be called syntax.”

Krauss, “Notes on the Index. Part 2,” 59-60;

Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 15;

Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” 36.

<sup>247</sup> Written correspondence with Laurie Simmons, January 16, 2024.

doll has been understood both as a commercialised and identificatory simulacrum of girlhood and girliness and as a screen for the projection of (adult) erotic and violent fantasies onto the female (and often young) body: Grant and Hopkins make this clear in their analyses of Bellmer's surrealist photographs of dolls, which I briefly discuss later in this chapter.<sup>248</sup> Robin Bernstein further emphasises dolls as racialised “things that script a repertoire of behaviors:” a referent and performative of childhood innocence, the doll can also be understood as an object of sexed, gendered, and racialised initiation for girls into adulthood.<sup>249</sup> My employment of “dolls” in this chapter is necessarily informed by this scholarship, but remains primarily grounded in the Winnicottian toy: as a motherly mediator between the child and its external reality.

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While DeSana's previous works were collected in the format of portfolios and photobooks, the “Suburban” series was created for museum and gallery spaces: as DeSana confirms to Laurie Simmons, “the color [of the photographs in the “Suburban” series] was intended to be presented on the wall.”<sup>250</sup> The printing (16in x 20in) is as such

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<sup>248</sup> Catherine Grant, “Different Girls: Performances of Adolescence in Contemporary Photographic Portraits,” (doctoral thesis, The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2006), 99-102. Hopkins, *Dark Toys*, 74-77.

<sup>249</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>250</sup> Simmons, “Jimmy DeSana,” 11.

These images, made for the wall, are indeed some of the images that DeSana most widely circulated in his lifetime. Photographs from the series are widely featured in both solo and group shows on staged photography in New York, Washington D.C. and in the USA generally. Some European influential galleries, with the Jablonka Galerie in Cologne being its main representative in Europe, also featured DeSana's “Suburban” work in the artist's lifetime. These images, perhaps because of their more veiled homoerotic subject-matter than DeSana's previous work were also featured alongside Andres Serrano's *Bondage in Kyoto* (1997) in the international contemporary art review *Tema Celeste* and

larger than his previous black and white work (8in x 10in), and is carried out through what Sawyer, echoing Dick Hebdige's sociological study on punk subjectivities, labels as punk DIY methods: "For the *Suburban* works, he exposed the paper using the enlarger in his darkroom, and then rolled the prints up in a tube in order to bring them to a lab for development."<sup>251</sup> This resulted, Sawyer continues, in "imperfections" that "disrupt the realism of the photographic image."<sup>252</sup> At the Brooklyn Museum, the imperfections resulting from the printing processes were emphasised by the bruises, dents, marks and scratches on the photographic objects (Fig. 11). Electing to use for the most part vintage prints, DeSana's "Suburban" photographs at the Brooklyn Museum bore the marks of being played and toyed around—the marks of the childish desires and childish violence which the Baudelairean child leaves on their *joujous*:

When this desire [to see the soul of the toy] becomes ingrained in the cerebral marrow of the child, he fills his fingers and nails with singular agility and strength. The child twists and turns his toy, he scratches it, he shakes it, bumps it against the walls, throws it to the ground.<sup>253</sup>

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were given a solo feature in an article for the *Hong Kong City Magazine* written in July 1988 by late Hong Kong queer photographer Julian Lee.

Julian Lee, "Jimmy De Sana: The Salvation of Post-AIDS New York," *Hong Kong City Magazine*, July 1988, MSS-008, Series II.B, Box 104, Folder 203 7, American Fine Arts and Pat Hearn Gallery Archives, CSS Bard Library and Archives, Annandale-on-Hudson, USA;

Demetrio Paparoni, "Il grado zero della finzione" ["Fiction at Degree Zero"], *Tema Celeste. Arte Contemporanea* March-April, 1998.

For a full list of exhibitions featuring DeSana's work: Jimmy DeSana, *Résumé* (New York: Salon 94, 2020),

<https://cdn.sanity.io/files/cpu8yyypf/production/06b820e44042207095cd50447395c07d924bc553.pdf>, accessed March 18, 2021;

Pat Hearn Gallery, "Jimmy DeSana's *Résumé*," 1997, MSS-202, Box 72, Folder 123, Jimmy De Sana Papers 1954-1997, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York, USA.

<sup>251</sup> Sawyer, "1980-1984," 87.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> "Quand ce désir [de voire l'âme du joujou] s'est fiché dans la moelle cérébrale de l'enfant, il remplit ses doigts et ses ongles d'une agilité et d'une force singulières. L'enfant

But AIDS, unlike the idea of future for queer theorist Lee Edelman, isn't kid's stuff, so DeSana's toys are left behind, bruised, as DeSana *matures*. To Baudelaire, this growing up is marked by the mourning of a lost-object, by exhausting the toy's potential, by losing the *vie merveilleuse*; the same mourning that activates Crimp's radical call for action against state neglect in handling the rising mortality rate due to AIDS-related causes in the late-1980s.<sup>254</sup>

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Past the amfAR video of Laurie Simmons and Lena Dunham, DeSana is already almost adult: he is propped up against a wall like an ecstatic St. Sebastian, arm up and gaze lost somewhere off camera, wearing only red briefs in one of the first self-portraits he has taken, *Stitches* (1984) (Fig. 12).<sup>255</sup> The plastic light that distinguishes his "Suburban" series tints the portrait red but dissipates to a normal warm white light at the centre of the image, emphatically underscoring the sutured wound which cuts through the centre of its chest before tapering down to his left upper hip, "both evidence and prophesy," as Jessie Dorris remarks.<sup>256</sup> The label on the exhibition tells us that "DeSana made this self-portrait

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tourne, retourne son joujou, il le gratte, il le secoue, le cogne contre les murs, le jette par terre." In Charles Baudelaire, "Morale du joujou," ["Moral of the toy"], *Le Monde littéraire*, 17 April 1853, accessed 24 August 2023,

<https://www.bmlisieux.com/litterature/ baudelaire/moraljou.htm>.

<sup>254</sup> See: Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 129-150.

<sup>255</sup> As Sawyer rightly points out, a DaDa and Surrealist-influenced self-portraiture practice ("auto-portraits") appears more insistently in DeSana's HIV/AIDS works. Though he did use himself as a model in all his series, it is only after his HIV diagnosis that he starts showing his face in his photographs. Drew Sawyer, "1984-1990. Queering Histories," in *Jimmy DeSana: Submission*, ed. Drew Sawyer (New York: DelMonico and Brooklyn Museum, 2022), 131.

<sup>256</sup> Jessie Dorris, "Jimmy DeSana's Transgressive Vision of Life and Desire," *Aperture.com*, December 14, 2022, accessed August 24, 2023,

shortly after his spleen ruptured, which was a result not only of his celiac disease but also of his infection with HIV, the principal cause of AIDS.”<sup>257</sup> Very much like the exhibition employs 1984 as a clear-cut demarcation between DeSana’s pre-AIDS and AIDS work, DeSana himself tells us that the operation on his spleen pushes him toward more his more abstracted photographic work:

I started looking at life and death in a new way after the operation. It was a major change for me. [...] For me [abstraction] is an escape. AIDS is such a sexually oriented disease, for my group at least. I think I had to get away from sexuality for a while.<sup>258</sup>

So, DeSana moves to a series of abstracted works marked by conceptualism, monochromatism in his quest for the representation of “nothingness,” to be collected in an unfinished photobook called *Salvation*, which he continues to work on until his death from AIDS-related complications in 1990.<sup>259</sup>

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<https://aperture.org/editorial/jimmy-desanas-transgressive-vision-of-life-and-desire/?p=235900/>.

<sup>257</sup> Museum label, in “Jimmy DeSana: Submission,” curated by Drew Sawyer, Brooklyn Museum, 2022-2023.

<sup>258</sup> Simmons, “Jimmy DeSana,” 27-32.

<sup>259</sup> Though this work is not labelled as DeSana’s “AIDS work” anywhere in the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum or in the multiple archives containing DeSana’s works and ephemera, there seems to be a consensus that it is. Separated from his other works in this recent exhibition, the works from “Salvation” are most often referred to in the context of collective and DeSana’s personal histories of HIV/AIDS. Indeed, curator Lorenzo Fusi discusses the the turn in coloration of “Salvation” portfolio in relation to DeSana’s seropositivity in his catalogue for the exhibition “The Sodomite Invasion” at the Griffin Art Projects in North Vancouver. Similarly, DeSana’s *Stool* (1986) from this tranche of his oeuvre is the only work by the photographer featured in the landmark “Art AIDS America” exhibition curated by Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka.

Lorenzo Fusi, “Notes on Jimmy DeSana,” in *The Sodomite Invasion: Experimentation, Politics and Sexuality in the Work of Jimmy DeSana and Marlon T. Riggs*, ed. Lorenzo Fusi and Lisa Baldissera (North Vancouver, BC, Canada: Griffin Art Projects, 2020), 83-170, esp. 159-170;

“Exhibition Checklist” in *Art AIDS America*, ed. Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka (Seattle and London: Tacoma Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2015), 280-285.

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In this chapter, I want to play with the toys of DeSana's "Suburban" series, hold them still, as DeSana did, and tie them around me. The use of bodies as objects in the series has already been explored in various texts and confirmed in an interview by DeSana himself: in the series "the body was treated as a prop and used with objects." Artist and critic Travis Jeppesen has already commented on the use of bodies as objects in DeSana's "Suburban" series, reading this "gesture" as "a violence against disappearing," citing the permanence of plastic objects in stark contrast to the ephemerality of human life as indicating "a freedom in not-being."<sup>260</sup> This idea has been echoed by Elizabeth Sussman, Jill H. Casid, and Christian Liclair, who have all, to some degree, argued for a reading of DeSana's work through an ontology of objecthood that highlights the erotic, ethical, and political possibilities opened up by "becoming object."<sup>261</sup> The idea of "becoming object," as valuable as these critics demonstrate it is, only partly describes the games of to and fro, fort/da, that these photographs establish: what happens when one is object? In a blog post, Jeppesen writes that it is precisely the utilitarian sexuality invoked by DeSana's

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Simmons, "Jimmy DeSana," 3-38;

Sawyer, "1984-1990," 138-140.

<sup>260</sup> Travis Jeppesen, "Forever Okay: The Art of Jimmy De Sana," *disorientations.com*, April 14, 2013, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://disorientations.com/2013/04/14/forever-okay-the-art-of-jimmy-desana/>.

<sup>261</sup> Elizabeth Sussman, "Jimmy DeSana: Erotic Miniaturist," in *Jimmy DeSana: Suburban*, ed. Dan Nadel and Laurie Simmons (New York: Aperture and Salon 94, 2015), 87-89;

Jill H. Casid, "Queer Deformativity: Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, and Jimmy De Sana at Pat Hearn," in *The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co.*, ed. Jeannine Tang, Ann E. Butler, and Lia Gangitano (New York: CSS Bard and Dancing Foxes Press, 2018), 213-237;

Christian Liclair, "Becoming an Object amongst Objects: Jimmy DeSana's Submission of the Self," *Texte zur Kunst* 130 (2023): 122-130.



suburban toys that make the photographer a visionary: “for the corporealist, sex is just another utility; come here, let me touch you where it matters least. Jimmy De Sana knew things that we’re only now, in the twenty-first century, beginning to figure out.”<sup>262</sup>

In this chapter, I want to keep touching (and be touched by) DeSana’s photographs “where it matters least” and string together the temporal, interactive, erotic, SM, and childish possibilities opened by playing with objects, by *being toy*, as I argue that this series stages bodies and objects alike as toys for DeSana to directorially play with. Here, I adopt Winnicott’s ideas of dependence and attachment between the mother and child as useful analytical structures to pinpoint the two-way sadomasochistic relation that DeSana’s work establishes with me. Indeed, for Winnicott this dependence not only blurs the lines between mother and child as discreet positions, but also, I argue, presents inherently queer sadomasochistic dynamics in the attachments that sustain this dependence. This is evidenced by Winnicott’s analysis of a boy’s obsession with softness and with playing with string, which, I posit, engenders maternal attachment as a form of bondage that wraps mother and child in an indiscernible imbroglio.

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### **stitches string.**

Though portrayed as a turning point in the artist’s chronological visual production in the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, and thus as a key to read the works produced *afterwards*, I want to focus on the childish stubbornness of DeSana’s *Stitches*, and indeed as I argue of DeSana himself, to leave his “Suburban” toys behind. It would be too facile to read *Stitches* chronologically, but DeSana’s *Stitches* is stringy, attached, dependent,

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<sup>262</sup> Jeppesen, “Forever Okay.”

and too stubborn to fully transform into DeSana's late, or as the vocabulary goes *mature*, work. Such a reading would imply a growing up that DeSana is not quite performing well enough. But queerness never quite matures anyway, Bond Stockton argues, it grows sideways: like string, it gets caught on the uneven surfaces of DeSana's beaten up photographic prints.<sup>263</sup> On DeSana's naked abdomen, stitches pull together more than two stretches of skin: they rope bind bondage knot string time objects photographs sideways. DeSana's stitches mark both a wound and a resistance to give up playing, and a reticence to comply with the linearity of one's own lifetime.

It is easy, somewhat poetic even, to create a linear biography of maturing in DeSana's work through the figure of Baudelaire's child. Baudelaire's child violently, obsessively, and erotically plays with his toys looking for their souls. Like DeSana's "Suburban" photographic objects, toys are beaten around, they bear the signs of this playful violence. For Baudelaire, this becomes a maturational moment: soon after playing out the quest for the toy's soul — the child's "first metaphysical tendence" — the child is able pry open his *joujou*:

The life of marvels ends. The child, like the people that sieges the Tuileries, makes a supreme effort; finally, he breaches, he is the strongest. But *where is the soul?* It is here that the numbness and sadness begin.<sup>264</sup>

Baudelaire's *enfant* grows up through his own assertion of mastery over the toy, through being "the strongest." Once the toy has been opened, it reveals that nothing lies on its

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<sup>263</sup> Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 4-6.

<sup>264</sup> "La vie merveilleuse s'arrête. L'enfant, comme le peuple qui assiège les Tuileries, fait un suprême effort; enfin il l'entrouve, il est le plus fort. Mais où est l'âme? C'est ici que commencent l'hébétement et la tristesse," Baudelaire, "Morale du joujou."

inside: Baudelaire's child is subjected to the melancholic consequences of his erotism. From here, DeSana's career is painted as an all too moralising story of quasi-suicidal death-boundness. Once his body, used in the photographs as his toy, is opened because of his operation, opened by AIDS, DeSana's work becomes a quest for the nothingness which he found within the toy, he becomes a herald of the melancholic maturity which writers like Andrew Sullivan declare is required by AIDS.

Indeed, Andrew Sullivan writes that "before AIDS, gay life — rightly or wrongly — was identified with freedom from responsibility, rather than with its opposite. [...] But with AIDS, responsibility became a central, imposing feature of gay life."<sup>265</sup> Of course, responsabilisation toward safer-sex practices was crucial and lifesaving before antiretroviral therapy and preventative medication became commercially available. The problem, however, lies in overdetermining this mature melancholia as the result of the childish erotic behaviours pre-AIDS. In his introduction to *Melancholia and Moralism*, Crimp denounces the equation of "AIDS=maturity" onto which Sullivan's logic pivots: "Sullivan's equation of maturity with his own conservative sexual politics and infantilism with what he calls liberation politics is consistently produced through a narrative about AIDS and gay men."<sup>266</sup> Building on his previous work, which showed the oppressive and "moralizing rhetoric of 'relapse,' 'irresponsibility,' 'selfishness,' and 'compulsivity'" that was instrumentalised in the AIDS crisis only served to promulgate conservative and homophobic politics, Crimp sarcastically mocks Sullivan's push for a he(te)roic growing up of gay men: "AIDS made gay men grow up. [...] It turns out that the only reason gay

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<sup>265</sup> Sullivan, "When Plagues End," 61-62.

<sup>266</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction," in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 4.

men were shunned was that they were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked responsibility. Thank God for AIDS.”<sup>267</sup>

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DeSana’s *Stitches*, however, plays on the off-key of this tune: the photograph catches the linear temporality of growing up in erotic knots. Opened, but mended, DeSana’s body is more akin to the beaten-up toy of the playing child, than an opened *joujou*. Like a child’s prized teddy bear, who’s been fondled, handled, used with great affective violence and eroticism, DeSana’s toy, his very own first possession, has been sewn back up with cotton stuffing, reparatively.<sup>268</sup> Winnicott describes the relationship between the child and his first possession, his first toy, his transitional object as being capable of withstanding, of “surviving,” extreme loving and aggression: “the object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated.”<sup>269</sup> The survival of the DeSana’s toy, following Winnicottian psychoanalysis, is tantamount to the processes of establishing the boundaries between inner and external realities for the child. This, Winnicott tells us, points to the child’s creative participation in cultural life and use of symbols rather than a direct “growing up.” Building on psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Winnicott tells us that the child’s first possession “is symbolical of some part-object, such as the [mother’s] breast.”<sup>270</sup> Its symbolic status, as stand-in for the part-object, is significant: “When

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<sup>267</sup> Douglas Crimp, “De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS [1994],” in Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 267; Crimp, “Melancholia and Moralism,” 5.

<sup>268</sup> Melanie Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation” [1937], in Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1954*, ed. Hanna Segal (London: Vintage, 1998), 306-308.

<sup>269</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 7.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

symbolism is employed the infant is already distinguishing between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects.”<sup>271</sup> Symbolism points to a difference between me and not-me.

*Stitches*, however, is still too maternally dependant: as Coleman’s “falsified document,” *Stitches* still collapses fact and fiction, inner and external objects, me and breast.<sup>272</sup> Toy and not-toy blur in *Stitches*: they are stitched together by stitching. The titular stitches form a line which sews up DeSana’s body and underwear together: starting from the middle of the thorax, the stitches descend in a curve toward the left hip, joining the stitching on the white elasticated band of the waist his briefs. On his left side, a triangle of warm white light overexposes skin and fabric to an undefined white blur. DeSana is in DeSana’s red chest of toys, the lid opening (or is it closing?) illuminates triangularly the toy in the box. Body becomes fabric, fabric becomes body. DeSana is a pair of red and white Calvin Klein’s briefs: both in colour scheme and stitched forms. The suturing stitches taper to the right of the image precisely like the stitches joining the leg and the pouch of his briefs. Like a stuffed doll, his genitals are replaced by a soft bulge. In the image, DeSana sags on the background of the frame, soft and textured, like a teddy bear, like the maternal breast. The triangle of warm white light opens on his body, casting long feathered shadows on DeSana’s body hair on his chest and inner thigh and highlighting the cotton fabrics of his briefs. His neck folds, skin overlapping onto itself. The red light softens the contours of his body: his arms become undefined against the red background, almost blending on his left shoulder and right elbow.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Coleman, “The Directorial Mode,” 491.

DeSana's DeSana, nicknamed *Stitches*, is a tactile toy of psychoanalytic and photographic maternal softness. In *Camera Lucida*, the linearity of history is caught up in soft maternal fabrics. As Barthes contemplates a photograph of his mother, the photograph subverts past time to an always present time: "I can awaken in myself the rumpled *softness* of her crêpe de Chine" (my italics).<sup>273</sup> Barthes's argument here is on History, its "hysterical" nature, unevenly split between before-me and during-me. What characterises the "during-me" period in Barthes's text is a certain childishness given from an uncertain boundary between me and a photographic not-me. Barthes's personal attachment to photographs and to his mother queers time: "As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history."<sup>274</sup> Upon looking at a photograph of him and his mother, time is stitched erotically onto itself: a needle pierces through Barthes and the photographic object and by thread pulls them together, against each other, softly. Uncoincidentally, in Barthes's French a stitch, "*un point*," finds its etymological thread in "punctum." A punctum, "that accident which pricks me," stitches me and not-me, so that the boundaries between the child and the maternal breast never quite separate, so that the child never quite grows up.

Winnicott describes the analysis of a patient named X, whose development into adulthood has been marked by an incapability to remove wholly himself from the maternal breast, that is to unknot the stitches between the maternal breast and toys. Winnicott introduces X as a man "who had to fight his way towards maturity."<sup>275</sup> Having "had a strong and

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<sup>273</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2020), 78.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>275</sup> Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 9.

early attachment to [the mother] *herself*, as a person,” X is portrayed as incapable of fully making use of transitional objects to mature.<sup>276</sup> It is only when “he found employment away from the hometown,” and as such away from his mother, that he managed to “come[] within the wide definition of the term ‘normal,’ or ‘healthy.’”<sup>277</sup> Winnicott’s final remark on X’s case is that “this man has not married.”<sup>278</sup> X, “mother-fixated,” unmarried, finds that his position within the straight categories of “normal” and “healthy” is hanging by a thread.<sup>279</sup> In inverted commas in Winnicott’s text, “normal” and “healthy” seem to be relating too closely to heterosexual marriage and sexual reproduction. Indeed, his brother, Y, used as a comparison for the typical, “*straightforward*,” maturational development of the child, is described first and foremost by “now ha[ving] three healthy children of his own.”<sup>280</sup> X, like Barthes, is queered by his psychoanalytic dependence to his mother: Winnicott writes elsewhere that “in healthy development, the developing child becomes autonomous, and becomes able to take responsibility for himself or herself independently of [the] highly adaptive ego support” notably provided by the mother in the potential space.<sup>281</sup>

In *Stitches*, DeSana curves the “straightforwardness” of the maturational process described by Winnicott and of the aspired post-AIDS responsibility described by Sullivan. The linear thread that sees a good-enough detachment from maternal dependence to marriage and fatherhood (through letting go of the maternal breast first, and later the toy) is tangled up in *Stitches*: it curves to the toy’s, to DeSana’s, left hip, and

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>281</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Interrelating apart from Instinctual Drive and in Terms of Cross-Identifications,” in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 176.

gets entangled with his briefs, centring his half-red-half white navel. Leaving childish desires and dependences behind, Sullivan prophesises that at the “end” of AIDS: “The radicalism of Act-Up segued into the radicalism of homosexuals in the military and same-sex marriage. [...] Once gay men had experienced beyond any doubt the fiber of real responsibility [...] more and more found it impossible to acquiesce in second-class lives.”<sup>282</sup> Crimp has already successfully challenged the implicit logic behind Sullivan’s postulations, their “chrononormativity,” to employ Elizabeth Freeman’s useful temporal terminology.<sup>283</sup> Freeman defines “chrononormativity” as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”<sup>284</sup> Chrononormativity’s ultimate end, Freeman emphasises, seeks to establish a linear mastery over the time of life and living.<sup>285</sup>

In her book, *Time binds*, Freeman argues that queerness, contrarily to chromonormative living, strings different moments in time together in and through bodily sensations and transformations. Freeman suggests an epistemological method by which queer bodies have non-traumatically, erotically, and performatively strung histories forward in a “hybrid present”: this method Freeman calls “erotohistoriography.”<sup>286</sup> Erotohistoriography, neither “a desire for a fully present past” nor a “writ[ing] of the lost object into the present,” attests to the perseverance of objects through time so that they may be always encountered in the present.<sup>287</sup> Like DeSana’s toys, queer historical objects are “forever okay,” (as Jeppesen described DeSana’s photographs) and are constantly

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<sup>282</sup> Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” 61-62.

<sup>283</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



activated by queer encounters, time keeps on playing, always in the present.<sup>288</sup> For the childish reader, Freeman’s erotohistoriography plays out as a photographic maternal attachment: like Barthes and X, childishness awakens in the softness of his mother’s photographic crêpe de Chine, remains unmarried, and does not father any children. Erotohistoriography keeps DeSana’s red toy box forever open, it spools threads around past presents objects subjects and plays like Winnicott’s boy with string, who, as Mavor has pointed out, is too queer, too effeminate, too soft to mature.<sup>289</sup>

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DeSana’s *Stitches* operates through a personal erotohistoriography that wraps up and discards Sullivan’s “AIDS=maturity” equation in an imbroglio: the strings of the equal sign knot up in a bondage. Stylistically attached to his previous work “Suburban” series, with the saturated lights and its (titular) emphasis on objects, even harking back to the fun sadomasochistic bondage of his “Submission” works, *Stitches* erotically ensnares personal and queer histories of playing and pleasure. *Stitches* stubbornly remains pre-AIDS, childish, unproductive, even dandy. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed argue in their analysis that pleasurable past queer histories — like dandyism in the nineteenth century and the sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s — were rewritten by neoconservative politics as histories of “a dangerous form of immaturity:” “the sexual past was relentlessly reconfigured as a site of infectious irresponsibility.”<sup>290</sup> Pushing for maturity and responsibility, neoconservatives in the 1990s, like Sullivan, elicited what Castiglia and Reed have defined a “traumatic unremembering” of pre-AIDS sexual

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<sup>288</sup> Jeppesen, “Forever Okay.”

<sup>289</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 72.

<sup>290</sup> Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 3.

freedoms and joys.<sup>291</sup> *Stitches* presents a challenge to re-body the pre-AIDS “dangerous form[s] of immaturity” of DeSana’s “Suburban” series after the gates AIDS. It presents an invitation to reach into the opening of the fleshy red toy box, to quasi-fist his photograph, in an operation that closely resembles the silly sadomasochism of DeSana’s previous series of works, and fiddle with DeSana’s soft stringy toy.<sup>292</sup>

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### **sado-mama-sochism.**

Before the gates of AIDS stand DeSana’s *Marker Cones* (1982), *Cowboy Boots* (1984), and *Cardboard* (1985), all images from DeSana’s “Suburban” series, though one of them is stretching chronologically beyond *Stitches* (1984). They are exhibited in a wide-base triangle, with *Cowboy Boots*, hung higher than the two works at either side and higher than eye-level, spinning on top of my head (Fig. 13). Battered and bruised, with marks, dents, drops of discoloration, and specks of dust and hair, DeSana’s dolls spin fold balance on and because of the objects that give the works their titles.

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*Cowboy Boots* depicts one of DeSana’s naked dolls in green, red, and white light. The doll is upside down and faceless (Fig. 14). Turned against the corner of the two walls onto which it is balancing, the doll’s legs widen in a V to reach toward two conjoined walls for stability, mimicking the triangle of white warm light projected onto the walls and the

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 145-174.

<sup>292</sup> Here, my use of “after the gates AIDS” is not to be confused with “post-AIDS.” Indeed, as many critics and writers have pointed out, the AIDS crisis is still ongoing. For more information on AIDS temporalities and timelines, I recommend: Juhasz and Kerr, *We Are Having This Conversation Now*, 3-4.

doll's left butt-cheek. The walls and the doll are both bare and white, their smooth surfaces ruffled by creases in the plaster, the fuzz of thigh hair, the occasional holes and dents above the skirting board and on the photographic print. The gel lights that illuminate the upper two thirds of the image (and cast a blurred-out soft shadow of the doll's penis onto the right wall) dissipate in the lower third. The shading on the standing arm-leg removes all details from the doll, which becomes all contours. With the floor of the room too dark to make out in the print and the dramatic shading on the doll's surface, the bottom of the doll disappears off-image and out of the frame. DeSana's doll sadistically pushes onto me to sustain itself in the frame.

In a handstand, DeSana's *Cowboy Boots* spins while pressing down on my face with a cowboy leather boot. Indeed, the photograph hangs above me, and cocking my neck backwards, raising my chin up, I give my face to DeSana to use as his floor; I need to look up to see the image. The doll is wedged against the walls of the photographic set—DeSana's 1984 New York apartment—and my face, sustained by the sadistic humiliation it presses on me. In *Time Binds*, Freeman discusses the bondage of strings into which time gets stuck in sadomasochism: for Freeman, sadomasochism operates as “a kind of erotic time machine,” which transforms the body as “means of invoking history — personal pasts, collective histories, and quotidian forms of injustice — in an idiom of pleasure.”<sup>293</sup> Scholar Andy Campbell builds on the erotic time-travelling potential of sadomasochism described by Freeman to provide an epistemological methodology to investigate archives on leathersex and leather gay and lesbian communities. In his *Bound Together*, Campbell utilises Freeman's argument to demonstrate the inextricability of bondage and personal attachments to historical objects and argues that this “attachment

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<sup>293</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 137-138.

reveals the unruly flow of affect described and mobilized by queer theorists” such as Kosofsky Sedgwick and Muñoz.<sup>294</sup> DeSana’s *Cowboy Boots* picks up on the erotic semiology of the leather cowboy boot as SM fetish gear and as a symbol of hyper-masculinity to establish the time-travelling bondage in the humiliation described by Freeman and Campbell, but gets his mastery tangled-up in his attachment to me as much as I get mine tangled up in him.<sup>295</sup> The doll is maternally *dependent* on me, to sustain him, provide him with a floor to his Winnicottian potential space, as I am to him.

In **chapter two**, I adopt Winnicott’s definition of potential space as the place between mother and child where playing and cultural experience occur to define the playful and childish processes of holding and touching through which objects and subjects are able to overlap and separate in the photographic space. Here, I want to focus on the sadomasochistic inter-dependence of the figure of child and mother, dislocated between object and subject to create this potential photographic space. Indeed, dependence, Barthes tells us, is an inherently sadomasochistic practice of love and humiliation. In his *Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes writes: “I am distracted by dependency, but even more — a

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<sup>294</sup> Campbell, *Bound Together*, 150-151.

<sup>295</sup> The relationship between leather, power, and hypermasculinity in SM practices is well-established in scholarship on SM underground cultures and practices (mostly in the 1970s and 1980s). For more information, I recommend reading:

Leo Bersani, *Homos*,

Patrick Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1994);

George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994);

Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal* (New York: Zone Books, 2007);

Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*;

Gayle Rubin, “The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M” [1981] in Gayle Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 109-136.

Jeffery Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985).

further complication — I am *humiliated* by this distraction” (my italics).<sup>296</sup> For Barthes, the condition of being dependent is interpreted as a distraction that knots up the upward linearity of the growing up time as it operates on Freeman’s and Campbell’s sadomasochistic time: both a distracting longing (one must wait for it) and a memory restaged (one must acknowledge it and return to it), dependence operates in the erotohistoriography of humiliation and subjugation.<sup>297</sup> Although Barthes starts in a masochistic position, being the object of such humiliation and subjugation, the sadomasochistic power relations of dependence are soon complicated and delocalised. Soon the sadist other, object of Barthes’s “amorous vassalage” and “assigned to a superior habitat,” finds itself on Barthes’s own playing field: “the other, too, may be subject to an instance beyond his powers,” he is dependent on me.<sup>298</sup> As DeSana’s doll presses his cowboy boots on my face, he is precariously held up by the physical presence and psychic projection of my humiliating “amorous vassalage,” in the form of the fantasising my face as his floor. He presses me down but is also getting wedged into the photograph by me. In our sadomasochistic encounter, DeSana’s doll and I become each other’s child and each other’s mother. Indeed, Barthes’s concept of dependence prefigures this doubling of desire: in dependence, Barthes becomes “twice subject: to the one [he] love[s] and to *his* dependency.”<sup>299</sup> In Barthes’s doubling, there is a Winnicottian sense of “good-enoughness” and its excessive opposite: “I must improve upon it, without limits.” Indeed, for Winnicott, the figure of the mother must be fully adaptive to the child’s needs but only to a certain extent, to a certain length of time; the mother must be “good-enough” and, after

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<sup>296</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2018), 82.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

having sustained the child's sense of omnipotence, she must dis-adapt for the child to fully mature: "In time," Winnicott writes in his 1966 "The Ordinary Devoted Mother," "the baby begins to need the mother to fail to adapt," to fail to be dependent so that the child can become independent.<sup>300</sup> This becomes clear in Winnicott's 1970 "Dependence in Childcare:"

It can be said that the story of the growing child is a story of absolute dependence, moving steadily through lessening degrees of dependence, and groping towards independence. A mature child or adult has a kind of independence that is happily mixed with all sorts of needs, and with love which becomes evident when loss brings about a state of grief.<sup>301</sup>

But mine, Barthes's, and DeSana's dependence is one of excess, "without limits," to each other, to our "image-repertoire." Not wanting any grief, outright *denying* any separation, DeSana and I cannot let go of the images that came before: the staged sadomasochism of his *Submission*, emphasised by the fetishistic Cowboy leather boots which give the image its title.

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The child's excessive attachments and dependence on the figure of the mother engenders in adulthood a certain childish queerness for Winnicott, that is, the childish queerness of the un-married, un-fathering man. In his "Transitional Objects," Winnicott relays the case of "a boy aged seven years" who, being too attached to his mother but forced to be

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<sup>300</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "The Ordinary Devoted Mother" [1966], in D.W. Winnicott, *Babies and Their Mothers*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), 8.

<sup>301</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "Dependence in Childcare" [1970], in D.W. Winnicott, *Babies and Their Mothers*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), 83.

separated from her, developed a “preoccupation with string.”<sup>302</sup> In his first interview with the boy, who “did not immediately give an abnormal impression,” Winnicott enters a session of his idiosyncratic squiggle game with the boy which quickly unravels the imbroglio of the boy’s first-hidden string-play. Playing with the squiggles on Winnicott’s paper, a “collaborative” creative endeavour which Mavor likens to “the Surrealist practice of making Exquisite Corpses” (and whose erotic potential I discuss in the **conclusions**\_), the seven-year-old boy draws:<sup>303</sup>

lasso  
whip  
crop  
a yo-yo string  
a string in a knot  
another crop  
another whip<sup>304</sup>

When questioned on the stringiness of the boy’s squiggle drawings, the boy’s parents “said that the boy had become obsessed with everything to do with string, [...] they were liable to find that he had joined together chairs and tables; and they might find a cushion, for instance, with a string joining it to the fireplace.”<sup>305</sup> This innocuous preoccupation, Winnicott is told, becomes worrisome once the boy “tied a string round his sister’s neck (the sister whose birth provided the first separation of this boy from his mother).”<sup>306</sup> Winnicott remains involved with the family for a period of four years, until string boy is eleven years old. In these four years, Winnicott witnesses a continuous return of the boy’s

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<sup>302</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 21-22.

<sup>303</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 70.

<sup>304</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 22.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

compulsive string playing in concomitance with instances of separation from his mother. Moving on from tying objects together, this compulsion escalates to tying himself to objects as a form of playing: “[the father] came home one day and found the boy hanging upside down on a rope. He was quite limp and acting very well as if dead.”<sup>307</sup> Winnicott concludes his retelling of the case of string boy with a diagnosis: “it is not difficult to guess, therefore, that he has a maternal identification based on his own insecurity in relation to his mother, and that this could develop into homosexuality.”<sup>308</sup> Too *de-pendant* to his mother, the soon-to-be-queer boy hangs himself in playing to call her attention. In her absence, Winnicott tells us, the boy becomes a secret string mother in his own right. Playing with “a number of teddy bears which to him are children,” he uses string to care for his soft toys: he “makes trousers for them, which involves careful sewing.”<sup>309</sup> Much like DeSana with his Suburban photographs, Winnicott’s string-boy strings together disparate objects and (later) bodies with maternal strings — as Mavor commented, the boy’s “feminine play” with soft objects makes sure that “his boyish ways keep him tied to his mother’s apron strings.”<sup>310</sup> In *Cowboy Boots*, the doll hangs from invisible strings attached to the boots at the end of his limbs at the centre of the image. With the floor too dark to make out in the photograph, the doll reaches his left arm towards me to remain suspended. The arm, like a taut (and muscular) lasso — another object of Winnicott’s string boy — tugs at my attachment to him, too: the doll presses on my head, on my face, and paradoxically ropes me in towards him. DeSana’s boyish play holds his doll still in a bondage with me: “that pose had to be held until he got the shot.

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>310</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 72.



It could be a bit challenging at times,” Laurie Simmons describes.<sup>311</sup> Wedging the doll between my face and the walls in the photograph, DeSana strings his toy onto my body to sustain his directorial sadomasochism: “a bit challenging,” needing discipline (from the doll, from me) to sustain the posing, DeSana keeps the doll tied to my apron strings. *DeSana’s Stitches doll and I, his mother-viewer, are stitched at the hip.*



The mutual dependence and attachments between mother and child are not only as effeminate and queer, as Mavor rightly points out, but they also engender playful, childish forms of undifferentiated sadomasochism. “In the same way” that string engenders a childish queerness, “the preoccupation with string could develop into a perversion.”<sup>312</sup> I am not interested in providing a psychogenesis of SM practices within what Winnicott describes as a fraught, too dependent mother-child relationship. Rather, I want to point out the inherent sadomasochism that agitates string boy’s attachment to his mother, the softness of his toys, the wish for limpness and inertness in his body. String-boy is already a soft leather-man in Winnicott’s use of sadomasochistic language: described by Winnicott as “developing along ‘tough-guy’ lines,” string-boy creatively imagines Winnicott’s squiggles, not only as strings, but as toys and leather gear. A squiggle becomes for string boy two crops, two whips, a “string in a knot,” a lasso (which is in itself another “string in a knot”) and a yo-yo.<sup>313</sup> Mavor has already demonstrated, with the help of Krauss and Freud, the childish formless interplay between in yo-yo and “Ma-

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<sup>311</sup> Written Correspondence with Laurie Simmons, January 16, 2024.

<sup>312</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 25.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 22.

ma.”<sup>314</sup> Winnicott himself comments on the case that “string joins:” making up for “*a denial of separation*” between string-boy and his ma-ma, “string becomes a thing in itself, something that has dangerous properties and must needs be *mastered*” (firstly, Winnicott’s italics, then, my italics).<sup>315</sup>

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The boy’s feminine play connects mother and child in a sadomasochistic bondage too tight to differentiate them, it denies any separation between them. String boy remains boyish but also plays a mother at the same time. Being dependent and not able to fully discern the “me” from the motherly “not-me,” DeSana-String-Boy-I deny any analytical separation. Analysis, Barthes notes in his course at the Collège de France on February 25, 1978, is a form of untying: “analysis (*luô* --> to untie).”<sup>316</sup> Indeed, in *Cowboy Boots*, how can we distinguish DeSana’s doll from his cowboy boots when they’re both named in the same way, printed on the same surface, and visually impossible to discern? How can we discern, at least in the fantasy of the performative-cum-potential space of the photograph, held up by me and the photographic object my face from DeSana’s *Cowboy Boots* floor? The invisible strings of the photographic referent (another form of maternal attachment, as I discuss later in this chapter) join them/us together, seamlessly moving from skin to

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<sup>314</sup> Cf. Krauss: “For yo-yo belongs to a whole series of childish terms — the very earliest being mama.” In Rosalind E. Krauss, “Yo-Yo,” in Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 219, quoted in Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 75.

<sup>315</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 25-26.

<sup>316</sup> Roland Barthes, “Session of February 25, 1978,” in Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Holler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 30.

leather, from my face to the floor. DeSana's sadomasochist strings resist the un-tying of analytical discerning.

In the first curatorial essay for his landmark exhibition *Art AIDS America*, Jonathan Katz highlights indiscernibility as a crucial strategy adopted by queer artists and AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s to infiltrate predominantly straight museum spaces. Drawing from a queer history of homophobic anxieties surrounding spying and spies (“the image of the spy, logically enough, constituted the dominant metaphor for homosexuality in the fifties, with its Cold War anxieties and fear of homosexuals as a fifth column”), Katz argues for a language of “dissimulation, hiding, and absolute self-awareness” to analyse the “camouflaged” status of AIDS art in the museum.<sup>317</sup> Further, Katz establishes the link between camouflage and the biological viral reproduction of HIV that is worth quoting in full:

In one of the great historical ironies of the era, these artists [dating as early as 1985] took HIV, the very virus that was killing them, as the blueprint and battle plan for a similarly clandestine, camouflaged attack. In their hands the very glossary of AIDS — viral, clandestine, camouflage, infection, unwitting replication, and subsequent spread beyond the host—became the lexicon of an art revolution that knew, like HIV itself, that the immune system was the best vector of attack, precisely because, once infected, it cannot attack itself.<sup>318</sup>

For Katz, the museum becomes a site of infection for activist art to reproduce itself: a site akin to the seropositive body. Katz traces the genealogy of this infective strategy back to a couple of years in the mid-1970s, quoting 1976 and 1977 as significant dates for the establishment of postmodernist art criticism representing the publishing of the inaugural

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<sup>317</sup> Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 26.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

issue of the postmodernist art historical journal *October* and the opening of Crimp's "Pictures" show, respectively.<sup>319</sup> Katz discusses how the ideas of appropriation and anti-authoriality have been redeployed as a tactic of infection to work around the constraints posed by the art world, under the guise of taste and naïveté, and homophobic politicians alike: these ideas are regalanised as a strategic aesthetic during the plague years of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>320</sup> Katz argues that "this attitude allowed artists to address AIDS [...] directly under the noses of both philistines like Helms and art world sophisticates like Krauss, confident that the 'viral' meanings of such art would always operate above or below their frequencies."<sup>321</sup> Katz quotes Krauss's essay on Robert Rauschenberg, and her suspicion of "iconography" to demonstrate his point on postmodernism's dismissal of sexuality as a valid methodology for analysing works of art, calling it "unsophisticated," naïve and démodé.<sup>322</sup>

Indeed, the "convinced iconographer is impossible to dissuade."<sup>323</sup> For Krauss, the sexual methodologist is a stubborn child who relinquishes structure for his attachments (to his mother, or even to activist politics, as Crimp hints in his Oral History interview).<sup>324</sup> This is clear in Krauss's criticism of Lorna Simpson's work in her participation for the *October* plenary discussion of the Whitney Museum Biennial of 1993.<sup>325</sup> Focussing on the form

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>320</sup> See: Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*; Iversen, "Pictures without Theory," 128-131.

<sup>321</sup> Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 36.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), 223.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. Crimp: "I was moving in my own direction because I had become an AIDS activist, and that's what I was doing, and that was different from what *October* had stood for." In Crimp and Fialho, "Oral History Interview."

<sup>325</sup> Elizabeth Sussmann summarises the political and art historical power to "[fix] the terms of critical debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s" effected by the Whitney

evinced by the grids made of trumpets' mouthpieces in Lorna Simpson's *Hypothetical?* (1992) (Fig. 15), Krauss takes an issue with what she perceives to be a too limiting "rush to the signified" effected by the presence of a newspaper clipping on the court verdict regarding a case of police brutality against Rodney King, a Black man, in Simpson's work (and in curator's, Thelma Golden, catalogue essay on the piece "What's White...?") (Fig. 16).<sup>326</sup> Arguing that such a bondage that is identity politics forecloses — tethers with string — the plural possibilities of meaning of the formal signifier, Krauss dismisses part of the work and accompanying text with a rather condescending "her work is better than that."<sup>327</sup> Rushing, impatient, too stubborn and angry to let go of a clipping on police brutality against Black men, Simpson is spoken to with the tone of the scolding mother who wants the artist to be cool, calm, collected, and to let go of the too personal, too autobiographical, and too political attachments that wrap around the meaning of the work. For Krauss, Simpson's tethering of and to the work via the clipping fixes meaning within the work: this tethering becomes a childish and uninformed mode of production that relinquishes the more universal mode of approaching audiences through form and structures. More than that, this type of work appears infective, to use Katz's vocabulary, in Krauss's argument: the childish artist makes for a childish, uncritical audience. As Buchloh points to a specificity of audiences that works might attempt to speak to, Krauss (and Foster) dismisses this possibility as "complacent" and "condescending" to audiences. To Buchloh's query "Why can't one say, I define my project to be opening up venues, addressing new audiences, providing models of enactment, empowerment,

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Museum Biennial of 1993 in her article "Then and Now." See: Elizabeth Sussmann, "Then and Now: Whitney Biennial 1993," *Art Journal* 64 (2005) 1: 74-79.

<sup>326</sup> Foster, et al. "The Politics of the Signifier," 6-7.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

articulation?” Krauss replies that this “new competence” of engaging with works of art is akin to the adult man who cannot move on from his ten-year-old self, citing Homi Bhabha’s essay in the exhibition catalogue as an example.<sup>328</sup> Krauss further decries “no one is *looking* at the work anymore [...] These students think of themselves as having competence.”<sup>329</sup> For Krauss, childish works rope in the audience, leaving them bereft of criticality and deluded for competence, not looking. Work and audience become one and the same. These “damaging” modes of criticism and social positionality, as Foster piles on, are already infected and infectious: critical distance and growing up are heralded as condom against their childish infectivity, against becoming so attached that they are indistinguishable.<sup>330</sup> Krauss and Foster draw hard lines between themselves and their objects of study: they have the critical distance of the well-weaned subject. DeSana’s toys, however, are limp, soft, infectively attached, so that I get motherly attached to them too in an erotic bondage.

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At the Brooklyn Museum, DeSana’s *Cardboard* (1985) hangs above eye-level, limp like a puppet with too much loose string in the frame on the right-hand side of *Cowboy Boots* (Fig. 17). Backed into a domestic corner, DeSana’s doll is portrayed from three-quarters at the back, revealing its bare bottom to the camera as the rest of its body is flaccidly flopping forward, towards the wall, its arms hanging down lifeless. DeSana’s infectious red and white lights shine on the doll, casting soft shadows on its legs and in turn

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>329</sup> This point is also echoed in the text by Kolbowski, who states “That’s because of the underdevelopment of critical writing in general.”

Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

emphasising the soft curvature of his quadriceps and glutes. The spine remains un-erect in its cardboard trappings, like a cock in a soft SM cage: six panels of square-cut cardboard wrap around the length of its body in what appears to be regular intervals. Constrained by its formalist encasing, but also giving it its shape, the doll uses its body as veritable string: like a pull-along caterpillar toy, the body maintains the six discrete panels of the titular cardboard on the same object, connecting them together. As its childish viewer, the photograph invites me to pull the doll's limp upper body taut, completing the downward movement hinted at by the curvature of the doll's back. If I tug at the limp arms, knotting my fingers in the gaps separating the doll's own rope-like fingers, the doll might hinge at its hips, throwing his intergluteal cleft up in the air and spread his cheeks.

As string, the doll's body holds together queer desires and postmodernist artistic and critical structures: the grid, one of the post-structuralist's greatest lovers, hinted at by the formalism of the square, moves from a fragmentary, schizophrenic, neurotic, infinite, repressive symbol of the detachment of the work of art from its author and viewer, to one of infective desire and unlimited attachment.<sup>331</sup> Indeed, the doll's butt crack (and its associated queer and childish desires for anality) seamlessly extends into the square of cardboard, which is lit to match the skin colour of the doll's glutes. DeSana's doll's arse opens the cardboard square and incorporates it in its body. Adopting a "vener of obedience" (as Katz named it) to postmodernist critical distance and heteronormative well-weanedness, *Cardboard* is able to bring into play the dependent viewer's erotic desire to be a mother and be mothered, to call this queer desire for attachment into

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<sup>331</sup> Krauss writes on the psychic and structuralist detachment that form of the grid effects on the work of art and on temporality and spatiality. See: Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 50-64.

question as veritable mode of sustaining the photograph.<sup>332</sup> *Cardboard* is already infected and infectious: spy and seropositive, *Cardboard* strings in the married man with no strings attached.

Indeed, though not visible in the photograph at the Brooklyn Museum, another photograph with the same doll taken in the same session, but shot slightly more to the left, reveals the little sparkly highlight of a wedding ring on the left ring-finger. Under “the veneer of obedience,” of discipline, of *Submission*, *Cardboard* only role-plays as the straight (mature) married man that is Sullivan’s assimilationist gay and Winnicott’s Y — well-weaned, married, fathering, “developed in quite a straightforward way throughout” — while remaining as “mother-fixated” as X in his sadomasochism.<sup>333</sup> This “veneer of obedience” appertains more to the Winnicottian concept of the disengaged, maladapted “false self.” Winnicott’s False Self operates schizophrenically like one of Krauss’s beloved grids: “related to the environment on a basis of compliance,” the false self arises as a schizophrenic “split-off” in the uncared-for child, whose mother is incapable to adapt to the child’s needs well-enough.<sup>334</sup> Feeling that the mother is not adapting well enough to the child’s needs, the child’s True Self hides and his False Self begins adapting to the mother’s needs.<sup>335</sup> He begins complying to the demands of the environment in which he lives, and by extension is unable to fully develop the capacity for using symbols, for creativity, and for giving ground to his desires: Winnicott argues that when “the mother’s

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<sup>332</sup> Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 37.

<sup>333</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 9-11.

<sup>334</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self [1960],” in D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, Inc., 1965), 149.

<sup>335</sup> “Where the mother cannot adapt well enough, the infant gets seduced into compliance, and a compliant False Self reacts to environmental demands and the infant seems to accept them.” *Ibid.*, 146.



adaptation to the infant [...] is deficient, *not good enough* [...], the process that leads to the capacity for symbol-usage does not get started.”<sup>336</sup> Much like Krauss’s postmodernist grid, which relinquishes the myth of its author — a myth operated by “belief (or illusion, or fiction)” of the symbolic — in favour of “[serving] as a [...] model for the anti-developmental, the anti-narrative, the anti-historical,” Winnicott’s False Self is voided of authoriality. Never spontaneous, disengaged from its motherly attachments and desires, the False Self “contains no true experience, [...] has no past.”<sup>337</sup>

By contrast, Winnicott argues that a True Self is always a mummy’s boy, forever queerly dependent: “The True Self cannot become a reality without the mother’s specialized relationship, one which might be described by a common word: devotion.”<sup>338</sup> This devotion, bearing Barthes’s sadomasochistic humiliation, is always necessary, and must always be “[improved] upon [...], without limits.”<sup>339</sup> Indeed, Winnicott argues that a full separation from the mother is never beneficial: this “separation” is constantly “avoided by the filling in of a potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural [which also implies a creative] life.”<sup>340</sup> Like X and String-boy, Winnicott’s True Self ties his mother in a sadomasochistic bondage, and his mother ties him back.<sup>341</sup> When it comes to the True Self, there is no distance between the child and the mother, precisely because the separation between them is

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Krauss, “Grid,” 54-64;

Winnicott, “True and False Self,” 148.

<sup>338</sup> Winnicott, “True and False Self,” 148.

<sup>339</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 82.

<sup>340</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “The Place Where We Live,” in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 147.

<sup>341</sup> See Mavor’s argument: “Winnicott does not take into account what I take to be the complex role that gender plays in the mother’s own relationship to the transitional object. [...] ‘The addiction’ that she [the mother] provides to her child [...] becomes a fascinating and perpetual addiction to self.” In Mavor, *Becoming*, 76.

always filled in by creative playing, queer desires and attachments. Winnicott's True Self is never fully weaned: childishness strings this separation together.

The idea of necessary critical distance for the postmodernist (who as Krauss and Foster argued, must never project, and never identify themselves with the work), is as defensive as Winnicott's False Self. The criticality of which Krauss speaks operates as defensively against infection as a condom: Krauss laments that "art critics and historians are now modeling their own writing on those earlier examples of people coming from other fields with little competence in visual analysis. We have this development in which there is an absolute incapacity to attend to the signifier."<sup>342</sup> With a vocabulary of invasion equated to positions of "incapacity" "incompetence" and "infantility," it becomes rather easy to connect the fear of infection of postmodernist structures to a specific anxiety of the field of "art criticism" being subjected to the inferior bastardisation of an immature, childish analysis.

The infectious child, with its potential to make everything meaningful and symbolic in its childish attachment to the mother, in its unlimited intimacy and dependency with her, must be kept at a critical distance from the work. And the works themselves must act to keep the childish viewer at a distance. The very idea of the "vener of obedience" to the art market, the gallery space, postmodernist art criticism by "[threatening] to make everything meaningful, or potentially so" postulated by Katz gives itself to being likened to a condom, a thin layer used as "vene(e)real" protection which keeps works and critics at a safe distance, preventing them from infecting each other.<sup>343</sup> To give into the desires for political closeness, one must bareback it, without the outer layer of critical defence.

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<sup>342</sup> Foster, et al. "The Politics of the Signifier," 22.

<sup>343</sup> Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 37-38.

Indeed, postmodernist structure has already been infected by mine and DeSana's *Cardboard* queer motherly attachments. With its erotic limpness, *Cardboard's* grid grows sideways: it collapses onto itself rather than spreading vertically and horizontally. The adult, well-weaned critic and the married man get roped into DeSana's childish SM games; formalism and all get trapped in a cardboard cock-cage and in the doll's plump bottom protruding prominently towards the camera and extending well into the cardboard. In analysis, Winnicott tells us that it is paramount to peel back the False Self, to peel back the separating "veneer of obedience" of the child, so that the child may wrap its strings on the analyst: "At the point of transition, when the analyst begins to get into contact with the patient's True Self, there must be a period of extreme dependence."<sup>344</sup> Hence, for a psychoanalytic session to be useful, Winnicott argues that the child who was separated from reality by finding itself into a maladaptive environment, and thus developed a False Personality, must re-establish the "extreme dependence" of a potential environment that adapts too well to its needs; the "extreme dependence" between a mother and a "mother-fixated" child.<sup>345</sup> By way of analogy, to peel back the "veneer of obedience" to which queer AIDS artworks complied and adapted as a response to the maladaptive museal environment fostered by postmodernist "sophisticates" and homophobic "philistines like Helms," might thus mean to re-establish an "extreme dependence" of motherly attachments between artwork and critic.<sup>346</sup>

It is in this potential space that DeSana's photographic dolls and I are playing, infecting, and queering each other.

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<sup>344</sup> Winnicott, "True and False Self," 151.

<sup>345</sup> Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 11.

<sup>346</sup> Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 36.

### **breeding dolls.**

Infecting the Pictures Generation under the guise of referentiality to the language of advertisement, DeSana's work maternally gives birth to his childish dolls, who demand as children and as mothers to be loved back, to be interacted with. DeSana wraps his strings on me (both his mother and his child) so that a potential space for his erotic creativity is established. Film scholar Annette Kuhn emphasises "the centrality of space and spatiality" in Winnicott's string boy and more generally in his psychoanalytic theory as a whole: "what string was doing for Winnicott's string-boy [...] is to bridge absence/*spaces*, be these literal, physical, metaphorical, mythical, virtual or physical."<sup>347</sup> Ultimately, string boy creates his strung-together bondages because he is looking for a mother which he perceives to be absent but also wants to be motherly in his own right, and in his efforts he makes queer formalist spaces: "queer formalism might be," Simmons reminds us, "a desire to attach and reattach to oftentimes problematic elements of culture in an effort to make them love us back, as we do with handsome and distant bodies."<sup>348</sup> Asking to be loved back, DeSana and I, like Barthes, "play with the mother's body:" we mould it into our shape as Krauss's naughty critic, who is incapable, infective, childish, "in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, to take it to the limit of what can be known."<sup>349</sup> The adaptive and adaptable body of the mother is where pleasure and creativity reside for Barthes and Winnicott; in DeSana, the mother's body is

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<sup>347</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Spaces and Frames: An Introduction," in *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2013), 14.

<sup>348</sup> William J. Simmons, *Queer Formalism: The Return* (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2021), 18.

<sup>349</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 37.

dislocated among “handsome and distant bodies:” an anonymous maternal sex dolls, whose distance I deny with string.<sup>350</sup>

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DeSana’s toys are soft; like plastic and mothers, they are adaptive, they hold my shape, so that there’s no difference, no distance between us. I return right outside the gates of AIDS, where plastic turns to flesh, and flesh becomes “the miraculous substance” that is plastic in DeSana’s *Marker Cones* (Fig. 18).<sup>351</sup>

Part of a particularly prolific set of photographs (and one less successful “so tedious, so bland, so unfocused” acrylic painting), *Marker Cones* pictures one of DeSana’s toys precariously held off the ground by limbs culminating in upside-down marker cones.<sup>352</sup>

DeSana’s *Marker Cones* doll is lit by a set of two gel lights, typical for the “Suburban Series”: a neon magenta one from the right and a warm light from the left. *Stitches* in with its erotic strings, its erotohistoriographical bondage, has already infected the rest of the “Suburban” series: another V of warm white creates an opening outside of the frame, outside of the potential space; more red light sends me back/forward to DeSana’s soft doll and red briefs (is *Marker Cones* kept in the same toy box as *Stitches*?). The high saturation colour of the photograph, strung out on the psychedelic daze of Lucas

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<sup>350</sup> As Bryan Barcena points out “Further distancing his work from that of his contemporaries, DeSana almost never reveals the identity of his sitters. Faces are almost invariably obscured by a prop: a stocking, a helmet, soap suds, or even the camera itself [...]. In much the same way that subjugation and compliance are fundamental to BDSM culture, here the camera becomes dominant.” In Bryan Barcena, “Jimmy DeSana: Suburban / Submission,” *FOAM: International Photography Magazine* 54 (2019): 238.

<sup>351</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 117.

<sup>352</sup> Thomas Lawson, “Jimmy DeSana: Bonlow Gallery and Stefanotti Gallery,” *Artforum* 21 (1982) 4: 75.

Samaras's mid-1970s "Photo-Transformations" (Fig. 19), which DeSana admired,<sup>353</sup> both draw the eye to the marker cones by producing a halo effect around them and flatten the highlights on the body thus giving the effect that the body, too, has been plasticised, likened to an object.<sup>354</sup> Contorted as a stringy rubber toy is stretched and pulled, DeSana's doll has two bottoms, one at each end of the back. Crushed black shadows delineate clefts at both ends of the headless doll. Though we might imagine the top cleft to be formed by the model's scapulae, the photograph seems less certain about distinguishing body parts: the magenta red lighting clips out the shadow on the musculature on the back of the doll, making it look malleable, rubbery, plastic smooth. At their points of junction, body and marker cones appear undifferentiated: they are bound so tightly on the photographic paper that visuality cannot tell them apart.

DeSana's plastic cones and plastic body are as adaptive and as soft as a mother. Barthes tells us that "plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation [...] made visible."<sup>355</sup> Motherly and photographic, Barthes's "plastic remains impregnated" by its adaptive transformation: "it is less a thing than a trace of a movement."<sup>356</sup> Operating photographically, plastic is indexical: it is pure trace, it retains its referent in its own very shape: plastic "is a 'shaped' substance."<sup>357</sup> Its final form bears the form of the object onto which it is moulded: plastic adapts around its object like a too-good mother with her child, and it never fails to adapt, softly. Winnicott explains in his 1960 article "The Theory of The Parent-Infant Relationship" that mother has the same shape of her baby, at least at

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<sup>353</sup> Sellers, "Interview," n.p.

<sup>354</sup> As DeSana informs us: "I attempted to use the body but without the eroticism that some photographers use frequently. I think I de-eroticized a lot of it. Particularly in that period." Simmons, "Jimmy DeSana," 4.

<sup>355</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 117.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

the beginning of the child's maturational development: only fully identifying with her child, and her child with her, the mother can adapt around his needs; only by having the shape of the child, by transforming around him like Barthes's plastic, the mother is able to care for him and provide him with a facilitating environment.<sup>358</sup> But while mothers need to fail their adaptation so that the child can move towards independence, plastic keeps its child forever dependent. The plastic cones forever hold the soft shape of the DeSana's doll: they sustain him psychically and visually, just as DeSana's plastic doll sustains the cones upside down. They are dependent on each other's sadomasochism. Indeed, Barthes's plastic keeps the child un-weaned: Barthes pushes the soft maternity of plastic further by likening its visual appearance to milk. "Plastic keeps a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled;" plastic is milky and maternally soft: it is flocculent, like wool, like the motherly crêpe de Chine in which Barthes wakes up in *Camera Lucida*, like DeSana's limp dolls.<sup>359</sup>

Hal Foster is reticent when it comes to critically engaging in motherly adaptive softness. Discussing Mike Kelley's works (Fig. 20), his soft toys and faecal lumps (exhibited soon after DeSana's own soft toys at the Jablonka Gallery in Cologne, Germany, in 1991), Foster is uncertain that the abjection of these objects is revolutionary in any way, let alone political:

Lumpen forms (dingy toy animals stitched together in ugly masses, dirty throw rugs laid over nasty shapes), lumpen subjects (pictures of dirt and trash) [...].

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<sup>358</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "The Theory of The Parent-Infant Relationship" in D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, Inc., 1965), 53-54.

<sup>359</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 118.  
Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 78.

Most of these things resist formal shaping, let alone cultural sublimating or social redeeming. [...] But does this indifference constitute a politics?<sup>360</sup>

Foster continues his discussion by reading this indifference as a “politics of alterity pushed to nihility,” which presumes a return to the (modernist) autobiographical and to identity politics through the lens of an “impoverished” definition of trauma which divides the subject into identifying with the oppressor or its phobic object.<sup>361</sup> These projections become especially problematic for Foster when it comes to their superficializing effect to art criticism:

When the other is admired as playful in representation, subversive of gender, and so on, might it be a projection of the anthropologist, artist, critic, or historian? In this case an ideal practice might be projected onto the field of the other, which is then asked to reflect it as if it were not only authentically indigenous but innovatively political.<sup>362</sup>

In this turn of phrase, the critic is denounced as the figure from which these politics are (inauthentically) stemming; politics which the object does not “authentically” and “indigenously” hold. For Foster (as it is the case for Krauss), the object (and its critic) must thus maintain a distance so that the critic (child) does not project himself onto the mother-object; so that he possesses a certain well weaned-ness.

However, this discourse of authenticity (or lack thereof) does not hold up with photography, especially directorial photography, where meaning is projected, produced, invented, even fabricated out of external objects. As Coleman argues, in what he calls the “directorial mode” of producing photography, “the ‘authenticity’ of the original event is

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<sup>360</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 164.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-168.

<sup>362</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 183.



not an issue, nor the photographer's fidelity to it, and the viewer would be expected to raise those questions only ironically."<sup>363</sup> This photographic operation, that sees the "raw material" of "the external world [...] manipulated as much as desired," does allow for a directorial mode of criticism, one that is just as attached, via the mother-fixated strings of queer desire, as "the field of the other" discussed by Foster.<sup>364</sup> Not only directorial photography allows for (un)authentic politics to be mobilised, but it is precisely the too motherly attached systems of projections, of desires to love the object and be loved back by it, as Simmons argued on queer formalism, that represents a queer politics of resistance in and of itself.<sup>365</sup>

Simmons's desires echo Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's own formalist devotion to objects and to one's own childhood promises: "a kind of visual formalism, a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for [...] was one way to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen object."<sup>366</sup> For Sedgwick's these attachments take the form of a "[smuggling of] queer representation" in sites of resistance and become increasingly important as modes of survival, of "challenging queer eradicating [borne out of the AIDS emergency] impulses frontally."<sup>367</sup> In this sense, waking up in the maternal softness of the photograph, infecting the photograph through our playful interaction with it (as the child infects the maternal body, especially the breast, with aggressive, erotic, and reparative drives for Winnicott and Klein, as I discuss in **chapter three**), eschews a childish politics of survival that circumvents Foster's

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<sup>363</sup> Coleman, "The Directorial Mode," 485.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Simmons, *Queer Formalism*, 18.

<sup>366</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

traumatic and schizoid structures of political meaning.<sup>368</sup> This is true even for Kelley's toys: more than simulacra for trauma, Kelley's toys seem representative of the mother and her needs (indeed they also speak in the language of the mother), as David Hopkins points out, than the traumatised child.<sup>369</sup>

When it comes to DeSana's *Marker Cones* doll, the mother's and mother-fixated child's infective attachments are brought about not only by conceptually playing with the mother's body but also by veritably manipulating the mother's body to form the "visceral near-identification" with it of which Sedgwick speaks. With its milky plastic feet, pendulous and so close together on the sloping artificial lawn that substitutes DeSana's apartment floor that they might be a cow's udder or one of Louise Bourgeois's overbearing and restorative spider *Maman*, DeSana's doll widens its legs away from the camera (Fig. 22).<sup>370</sup> In the widening of the doll's legs, a beam of quasi-religious white light is cast out, so that the doll may seem to be giving birth: the doll photographically enacts its desire for the mother's body by becoming the reproductive mother herself. Like Winnicott's String-boy who acts out and fills in his anxiety of separation from his mother by mothering his soft toys, DeSana's *Marker Cones* fantasises about giving birth to soft

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<sup>368</sup> Melanie Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation" [1937], in Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1954*, ed. Hanna Segal (London: Vintage, 1998), 306.

D.W. Winnicott, "Creativity and Its Origins" [1971] in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 94-95.

<sup>369</sup> Hopkins, *Dark Toys*, 263-264.

<sup>370</sup> Though Mignon Nixon argues on the limitations of reading Bourgeois's work through a strictly biographical lens, I would recommend Deborah Wye's text on the reparative relationship between Bourgeois's own mother and the iconography of the spider.

Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait; Prints, Books and the Creative Process* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 149.

Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2005).

photographical toys, and in so doing effeminises itself (indeed, Winnicott tells us in a passive remark that soft “family” toys are prevalently for girls).<sup>371</sup>

Tim Dean describes barebacking as a practice which swings linguistically, symbolically, and structurally from a vocabulary of soft feminised marriage and pregnancy to the hypermasculine jargon of military and initiation.<sup>372</sup> Barebacking, which Dean argues is a term that historically appears because of the presence of HIV/AIDS and is only given meaning because of the categories of seropositivity and seronegativity, involves an unravelling of desire through fantasies of breeding and being bred, fluid and infective exchanges, that shift HIV from the discourse of disease to a discourse on “kinship” and “fraternity.” These social structures of communality, Dean argues, are not only likened to the heteronormative categories of marriage, parenthood, and military inscription (all categories which gay assimilationists like Sullivan circumscribe to adulthood) but substitute them as non-institutional “experiments with elective kinship” which centre, like sexual reproduction, around condom-less penetration and ejaculation.<sup>373</sup> The presence of HIV makes gay male bodies potentially maternal in their capacity for gestating foreign bodies ensuing unprotected penetrative sex: soft gay male maternity and infectivity become at least conceptually tied in a knot; for Dean “gay men have discovered that they can in some sense reproduce without women.”<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> “Boys to some extent tend to go over to use hard objects, whereas girls tend to proceed right ahead to the acquisition of a family.” Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 6.

<sup>372</sup> “The presence of HIV has allowed gay men to transform the practice of taking it up the butt from a sign of failed masculinity into an index of hypermasculinity.”

Tim Dean, “Breeding Culture: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving,” *The Massachusetts Review* 49 (2008) 1-2: 85;

Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 48-96.

<sup>373</sup> Dean, “Breeding Culture,” 82.

<sup>374</sup> Dean is careful about not equating the “barebacking community” to an offshoot of the “gay community,” arguing that barebacking shifts the focus from identitarian affiliation to “viral exchange.” Dean, “Breeding Culture,” 86; 91.



In DeSana's *Marker Cones*, this type of infective breeding kinship (between photographic object and me) has both already happened and is presently exhorted. With legs and butts multiplied on the doll, the doll exhorts the critical skin-to-skin closeness of raw anal penetration, with its infective potential and maternal dependence, while also giving birth to photographic light. Like one of Hans Bellmer's Surrealist photographs of his *poupées*, DeSana's *Marker Cones* doll is full of legs (Fig. 21): each limb of the doll culminates in a milky marker cone, hands trans-morphing into more nipple-feet. Grant, discussing the adolescent (another form of childishness, of not-quite-adulthood) eroticism of Bellmer's dolls, points to pregnancy and birth as indexical of a feminine adolescent curiosity. As Grant explains, "Bellmer's idea for his first doll involved a panorama in its belly, making clear his intention to reveal its interior secrets."<sup>375</sup> In a later drawing by Bellmer, "in which a little girl is shown peeling back her skin to reveal her insides," Grant argues that the doll "becomes the curious investigator" of her own sexuality.<sup>376</sup> Simulacral and symbolic, Bellmer's doll experiences pregnancy (and in turn motherhood) as the aggressive and erotic desire of the child to see what is inside, a desire which Baudelaire's child is very much aware of. In DeSana's *Marker Cones*, this childish desire is infectively projected on the viewer's desire to penetratively pry open the doll cracks to feel close to it. Breeding, after all, engenders a type of kinship that is reminiscent of the heteronormative (adult) structures of marriage, as Dean argues, also but virally infects them.

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<sup>375</sup> Grant, "Bellmer's Legs," 5.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

Projecting adult and heteronormative positions on the subject, is what toys do according to Barthes. It is for this reason that Barthes disliked toys. In his early semiological *Mythologies*, Barthes dedicates a chapter on how French plastic toys are too full of gendered adult meaning, and as such engender a strict progression of the child into the adult world. Seeing that “toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions,” amongst which Barthes lists “war, bureaucracy [...]” for boys and “house-keeping” for girls, “the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it.”<sup>377</sup> Contrasting ephemeral formal toys, with their “wounding quality of angles which are too sharp, the chemical coldness of metal,” to the generative formlessness of wooden blocks, Barthes muses on the world building potential of the latter: “the child does not in any way create meaningful objects, it matters little to him whether they have an adult name; the actions he performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge.”<sup>378</sup> When it comes to the generative potential of toys, Barthes is quite clear: only formless toys allow the child to originally, that is, meaninglessly play. The formal toy, Barthes argues, projects its own wishes — the wishes of society at large which the toy holds simulacrally — and asks for the child’s compliance to them.

As Barthes describes, these kinds of toys “wound” the child, by not adapting their shape to the child’s imagination. In *Camera Lucida*, a later stage of Barthes’s thinking as I have outlined in the **introduction**, Barthes goes back to the idea of the wound to describe the punctum: here, Barthes seems both to use the photograph as one of the formless toys described in *Mythologies* and gives this wound a generative affective dimension. With the photograph as toy, Barthes creates the world of the photograph (even, perhaps, *fully*

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<sup>377</sup> Roland Barthes, “Toys,” in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 57-58.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

*imagines the photograph itself*, as Mavor ruminates on the famous *Winter Garden* photograph).<sup>379</sup> Barthes's early ideas on formlessness become in his late work generatively maternal: formlessness adapts to the creative, world-making desires of the child, and the child plays with it in its own right with the same futility and meaninglessness of that Barthes reads in maternal dependence.<sup>380</sup>

DeSana's photographic toys, asking for an infective relation to them — one that is too maternally attached — adapt these structures so that the erotic desire for motherhood can be played with in the discursive field of photography. It is through the photographic medium that DeSana is able to directorially and creatively reconfigure the “*raw materials*” of Barthes's wounding metal toy whose shape projects heteronormative positions on the child. In many ways, the practice of DeSana's photographic development involves (and infects, attaches) metal toys and follows the structure of pregnancy: conceived in his apartment — an apartment which he shared with Laurie Simmons, who helped him constructed the sets for his photographs and followed him on his shoots — the photographic objects are then gestated in the homemade amniotic liquid of salt baths in the camera obscura which is always tinged uterine red. The (infra)red light is primarily used in the camera obscura as it does not interact with the silver salts used for photographic development and as such allows the developer to see without ruining prints. However, the constant presence of a magenta lighting in DeSana's photographs, the red light which places *Marker Cones*, *Cowboy Boots*, and *Stitches* at least conceptually in the

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<sup>379</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 144.

<sup>380</sup> Barthes argues that dependence “requires a fathomless futility,” which reads particularly queer. See Castiglia and Reed: “self-indulgence, insatiable desire, unproductive frivolousness [...] were by the end of the nineteenth century consolidated into the newly emerged figure of the dandy [...] inextricably identified as homosexual.” In Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 18. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 82.

same place, in conjunction with the triangular openings of warm white light illuminating *Stitches*, *Cowboy Boots*, and *Cardboard*, and emanating from *Marker Cones* concealed vaginal opening, strongly qualifies the magenta light as in-uterus. For Barthes the photographic referent is always “umbilical:” “a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, here is a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”<sup>381</sup> DeSana’s *Marker Cones* is giving birth to his light babies: the carnal medium of light coagulates into more Suburban toys.

The metaphor of the umbilical is used by Barthes to describe a bridging of the separation between the real referent of the photograph and its indexed photographic print. More than a simple connection, Barthes’s use of the umbilical cord reinforces the maternal attachments of Winnicott’s boy with string, by locating the photograph not only as connected to the maternal body but, through the rays of light, also inside the womb. As Mavor argues in her chapter on Barthes’s “umbilical referent,” “Barthes’s love for his mother is the archetype not so much for the *photograph* but, rather, for *the condition of photography*. [...] Barthes’s photographic discourse becomes the maternal body;”<sup>382</sup> a body which the mother shares with Barthes’s gay lovers: “the boy’s string becomes an umbilical referent, inspiring Barthes to play (in *A Lover’s Discourse*) with the body of his lover as if his lover were his mother.”<sup>383</sup> Mavor writes looking for Barthes’s attachment to his late-mother, an attachment that Mavor argues retroactively informs Barthes’s late-work. Barthes’s inextricable entanglement between the photograph and the pregnant bodies of queer lovers and mothers (of which I am both in relation to DeSana’s

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<sup>381</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97.

<sup>382</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 143-144.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

photographs) is reminiscent of the breeding infectivity of which Dean and Katz speak, of something that grows, borderless and virally within the body.

This breeding, pregnant borderless-ness is reinforced in DeSana's printing: as Antje Krause-Wahl argues, DeSana's Cibachrome printing allows the body in his prints to have a certain "invisibility:" "the basis of Cibachrome paper is polyester, the surface layer of which is so smooth that, when viewed from a certain angle, the prints have a metallic sheen through which the body's connection to the material [of the objects] disappears."<sup>384</sup> Using Cibachrome printing, a technique which increasingly gained popularity amongst photographers in the 1980s for printing in colour (owing to the brilliance and saturation that it bestows upon the colouration of the print), DeSana is able to eliminate any border between the bodies of his dolls and the objects which give the photographs their title.<sup>385</sup> Like Winnicott's boy with string and Barthes's umbilical referent, DeSana's printing denies any separation: the photograph becomes one of Barthes's good toys (which is also a good-enough mother); it becomes meaninglessly futile, insofar as this futility is understood as Barthes understands it: sadomasochistically; in a tactile bondage with the mother's body. The tactility of sadomasochism and its toys engender a "pleasure in the 'futile'" for Barthes, who defines "futile" in his notes as "<fundo—which flows, that nothing withholds."<sup>386</sup> So maternally smooth, the Cibachrome print withholds nothing, it

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<sup>384</sup> "Die Basis von Cibachrome-Papier ist Polyester, dessen Oberflächenschicht so glatt ist, dass die Drucke aus einem bestimmten Winkel betrachtet einen metallischen Glanz aufweisen, in dem der mit dem Material verbundene Körper verschwindet." Antje Krause-Wahl, "(Un)Sichtbar Werden: Körper in den Fotografien Jimmy DeSanas" ["Becoming (In)Visible: The Body in Jimmy DeSana's Photographs"] *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 4 (2022): 889.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 888-889.

<sup>386</sup> Barthes, "Session of February 25, 1978," 30.



lets borders flow in amniotic liquid, infecting bodies and meaning through its umbilical referent.

As I argued, the anxiety of infection operates as a mode of exclusion of the queer maternal attachments in some postmodernist circles of art criticism. It is an anxiety which is reconfigured under the banners of incapacity to promote the implicit message that critical distance is the pinnacle of all that is mature, adult, sophisticated. There is no childishness in critical distance: the child is too attached, too infective with its tendency to project meaning and desire. Childishness, like the boyishness which Mavor reads in Barthes's theoretical engagements, forms an umbilical cord between the subject and its object so that analysis is forgone for synthesis. An umbilical referent which, operating in the manner of Winnicott's string, is formed in the *punctum* rather than the *studium* of the photographic object. The *studium*, which Barthes parenthetically adds "is never my delight or my pain," appertains to "knowledge and civility, 'politeness'" of the mature critic.<sup>387</sup> The *studium* disciplines (and does so not in a kinky way). Never left to chance, and belonging to "the order of *liking*, not of *loving*," the *studium* categorises value through the idea of taste and sophistication.<sup>388</sup> "Slippery" the *studium* displaces maternal sexuality to make sure the subject is always kept at a distance, always somewhat away from the work of art, so that it does not get pricked and infected. Indeed, Bersani tells us that people's aversion to sex stems from the displacements (of governmental funding, of knowledge on the capacity of the body for pleasure) described by Simon Watney in his *Policing Desire*, as well as from the intrinsic structures of desire itself: "Desire, by its very nature, turns away from its objects."<sup>389</sup> Differently from the *studium*, the *punctum* is

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<sup>387</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>389</sup> Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 221.

agitated by the softness that st(r)ings of maternal sexuality: it pricks, wounds bodies, but also sutures them together with navels and stitches.

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“Displacement is endemic to sexuality,” argues Bersani as he reveals what he makes out to be people’s best kept secret: that people don’t like sex.<sup>390</sup> But as Terrence Sellers asks DeSana about the sadomasochistic practices in his photographs, DeSana replies: “*sex is fun. Whatever happens is great.*”<sup>391</sup>

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In DeSana’s *Stitches*, stitches are repeated photographic *puncti* and *punctures* that are reparatively mended in the womb of sadomasochism. Stringing time along, stubbornly not letting go of it, *Stitches* infect the temporal horizontality of the adult grid with the presentness of Freeman’s herotohistoriography: stitches spread the temporality of penetrative sex horizontally so that it always appears in the present tense, always breeding and always playing. With a resistance to let go of childish attachments (to the “image-repertoire,” to the mother-viewer, to the childish-viewer), DeSana and I remain joint at his hip: the needle that pierces in and comes out, pierces and comes out, ... pulls us together in an erotic bondage with a thread like Winnicott’s mother-fixated strings and in so doing it mends us like a mother sews teddy bears and like a child repairs the bed/good breast. Repaired by and dependent through holes and strings.

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Watney, *Policing Desire*.

<sup>390</sup> Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 197; 221.

<sup>391</sup> Terrence Sellers, “Interview,” n.p., 1981, MSS-202, Box 73B, Folder 164, Jimmy De Sana Papers 1954-1997, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York, USA.



Winnicott writes that in maturity “when loss brings about a state of grief” an independent kind of love “becomes evident.”<sup>392</sup> In childishness, this state of grief is always displaced and denied by reparatively stringing it along. Indeed, DeSana brings strings through the gates of AIDS. In 1987, he creates a series of images in the monochromatic, solarised style of his “Salvation” work, titled *String* (Fig. 23). Fusi comments on the irrelevance of strings in this series of works: “the essence and *raison d’être* of these strings is irrelevant: they do not convey information, not even on a symbolic level, and their very ‘stringness’ [...] loses meaning. [...] Rather, they become pretext. [...] they are pure rhythm.”<sup>393</sup> The infectiveness of DeSana’s maternal strings continues to operate as Katz’s infective engagement in the museum space, but the solarised yellow strings on black background continue to erotically rope me with their umbilical referent reaching to his “Suburban” series.

Indeed, DeSana was not one for tying up a bow around objects and put them aside: as Laurie Simmons recounts, “from his HIV diagnosis in the fall of 1985 until his death five years later, Jimmy worked in a frenzy trying to create as much as he possibly could. Tying up his affairs was not on his to-do list.”<sup>394</sup> In 1990, A.R.T. Press, L.A., published a limited run of *Jimmy DeSana*, the first catalogue sampling DeSana’s entire oeuvre. The book is succinct and playful: a slim volume of 48 pages, some of which fold out to reveal images which appear hidden at a quick thumb through. In the making for over a year before its

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<sup>392</sup> Winnicott, “Dependence in Childcare,” 83.

<sup>393</sup> Fusi, “Notes on Jimmy DeSana,” 161.

<sup>394</sup> Laurie Simmons, “The End,” in *Jimmy DeSana: Submission*, ed. Drew Sawyer (New York: Brooklyn Museum), 167.

publication, DeSana worked assiduously on the catalogue, collaborating with William S. Bartman, the founder of A.R.T. Press, until his death just months before the project hit the presses. As Bartman writes in the dedication on the cover flap of the catalogue:

This book was Jimmy's final project. It was very important to Jimmy for everything to be just the way he wanted it. In his final days he was still working on picking colors and deciding the exact wording of different parts of the text. He was able to complete this work in its entirety even though he was very ill.<sup>395</sup>

In the book, which features the "Suburban" series predominantly, DeSana keeps on wrapping its erotic maternal strings towards his dolls, with the joy of staging them "to be just the way he wanted." Laurie Simmons tells me: "I know Jimmy was pleased with the book."<sup>396</sup>

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DeSana's mother cared for him in his final years. Laurie Simmons picked up DeSana's archives upon his death and is taking care of them to this day.<sup>397</sup> Since receiving the archives and delving into it, Simmons has remarked that: "initially familiar, Jimmy's pictures felt like your mom's house or back-yard as it might exist on our sister planet, a place you'd want to visit but I would forgive you if you did not want to live there."<sup>398</sup>

DeSana's dolls and toy invite me to play mother and child with them. Using each other as a transitional objects for our mutual dependence, we sustain one another in a sadomasochistic bondage that thwarts a linear growing up and a linear passing of

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<sup>395</sup> William S. Bartman, "Dedication," in *Jimmy DeSana*, ed. William S. Bartman (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1990), front cover flap.

<sup>396</sup> Written Correspondence with Laurie Simmons, January 16, 2024.

<sup>397</sup> William J. Simmons, "Diamond Tears," unpublished, n.p.

<sup>398</sup> Simmons, "The End," 169.

historical time: if straight maturation is a vertical timeline, DeSana and I fold into knots  
that keeps us forever childish, forever stitched at the hip.

## chapter two\_ mirror mirror games.

### introduction; or postapocalyptic adolescents.

In March 2019, former editor-in-chief of *Artforum* David Velasco asserted of the opening of Paul Sepuya's exhibition "The Conditions" at Team Gallery:

These are postapocalyptic photos. Like all great photographers, Sepuya uses his camera to figure something out. He is of the generation of gay men who grew up in the immediate wake of the death frenzy of AIDS. We inherited safe sex, we inherited our lives; scared shitless, with so many mentors dead, we found our own paths. And so it's a blessing that the kids are all right, hanging out in Sepuya's bedroom. If there is other action, it's implied, a serene counterpoint to the splendidly staged and captivating voyeurism Ryan McGinley popularized then and in the years just prior.<sup>399</sup>

Trying to dislocate Sepuya from "the lineage of gay portrait makers, from Carl Van Vechten to Jack Pierson to Peter Hujar," Velasco attempts to position the photographer in the moment after the advent of postexposure prophylaxis and HIV preventative pharmaceuticals, like Truvada and PrEP, made seropositivity manageable and not life-threatening anymore if treated.<sup>400</sup> Indeed, Velasco implies that the serene present in Sepuya's portraits, and by extension, Ryan McGinley's "captivating voyeurism," is the creative fruit of a "postapocalyptic" sensibility. "Scared shitless," not only "the kids are all right," Velasco says — echoing the title of McGinley's first exhibition in a major museum space, the 2003 "The Kids Are All Right" at the Whitney Museum of American Art — but they are also granted somewhat of an unprecedented creative freedom: "with

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<sup>399</sup> David Velasco, "Project: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Artforum*, March 2019, accessed January 13, 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201903/project-paul-mpagi-sepuya-78670>.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

so many mentors dead, we found our own path.” While I am troubled by Velasco’s (perhaps too hasty) logic that connects someone’s death from AIDS-related complications to someone else’s artistic freedom, something about the unexplained “postapocalypticness” that Velasco sees in Sepuya’s and McGinley’s photographs resonates with me. Where is this post-apocalypse represented in their images? On a denotative plane, nothing in the photographs seems to be pointing at the apocalypse of AIDS from which this “post” is defined. This postapocalyptic, it seems to me, agitates itself in the childish sexuality and narcissistic pleasure that structure the viewer and the images.

For Winnicott, adolescent sexuality is always postapocalyptic and narcissistic, insofar as the apocalypse is engendered by a sexually transmissible pathogen, like it is for Velasco. As Winnicott writes in his 1961 piece “Adolescence: Struggling through the Doldrums,” the first of “the three main social developments that have altered the whole climate for adolescents in adolescence” is that “(i) *Venereal* disease is no longer a bogey. The spirochaete and gonococcus are no longer (as they were certainly felt to be fifty years ago) agents of a punishing God. Now they can be dealt with by penicillin and by appropriate antibiotics.”<sup>401</sup> While understanding the difference between the “spirochaete and gonococcus” (that is, syphilis and gonorrhoea) and the HIV epidemics, it is interesting to note that Winnicott’s adolescent structurally inhabits Velasco’s post apocalypse: both subjects find themselves in a social and sexual settings which have shifted with the advent of pharmaceutical advancements that cure or manage STIs. No more as heavily moralised as a punishment of God for sexual promiscuity,

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<sup>401</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Adolescence: Struggling through the Doldrums” [1961], in D.W. Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development* (Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 82.

homosexuality, or premarital sex, Winnicott sees in his contemporary adolescent a freeing and welcome disinhibition to sexual experimentation.

Some twenty years after Winnicott timidly proclaims the supposed end of moralisation on experimental adolescent sexuality, sex finds itself once again heavily moralised: indeed, the figure of the gay man on a quest for erotic experimentation is relegated to a position of immaturity and childish narcissism. People both inside AIDS activism and neo-conservatives redefine this narcissism as murderous. See for instance Larry Kramer's assertion that activist and critic Vito Russo "was killed by 25 million gay men and lesbians who for ten long years of this plague have refused to get our act together," or right-wing aide Patrick Buchanan's declaration that gay men "have killed themselves because they could not control their suicidal appetites."<sup>402</sup> Beyond being murderous, a claim which has been fiercely dispelled by Bersani, Edelman, and Crimp, sexual experimentation becomes the mark of gay men who in the face of AIDS were not capable of growing up, of developing an antisexual or safe-sex moral benchmark which would save them from their narcissistic appetites.<sup>403</sup> But as Bond Stockton persuasively demonstrated, queer children never quite grow up in a linear, straight, manner, anyway: their development is "arrested."<sup>404</sup> My argument is that this childish narcissistic position inherited from AIDS discourses is structural to gay processes of subjectification in the post-Truvada moment, differently from scholar João Florêncio's history of suspension of

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<sup>402</sup> Larry Kramer, "Who Killed Vito Russo?" *OutWeek* 86 (1991): 26; Patrick Buchanan, *New York Post*, June 26, 1991, quoted in Lee Edelman, "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism," in Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 107.

<sup>403</sup> Edelman, "The Mirror and the Tank," 93-117; Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 197-222; Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism," 3-16.

<sup>404</sup> Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 22-27.



gay promiscuity in the 1980s and 1990s and a subsequent reinsertion of sexual uninhibition “at the centre of [gay men’s] processes of subjectification” with HIV-preventative medication.<sup>405</sup> Indeed, the post-apocalypses that Velasco ascribes to Sepuya’s and McGinley’s work, happening some twenty years after the emergence of HIV managing medication in 1996, are related to an AIDS genealogy of cross-generational artistic transmission, that Velasco claims is interrupted.

In this chapter, I argue that the discourses of eroticism and narcissism in the “post apocalypse” of the childish are structured by the immature position they are ascribed to by anti-identitarian theorists and AIDS criticism. I elect to use the term “childish” in this chapter because of its generative capaciousness in accommodating categories of the “adolescent,” and the “kid,” while dislodging them from strictly maturational age brackets and stressing their ambivalent, dependent “adulthood.” My childish arrests the maturational velocity of “*storm und drang*,” as G. Stanley Hall famously characterised adolescence, and rewrites it onto the bodies of “adult” gayish men.<sup>406</sup> Looking at photographs from Sepuya’s “The Conditions,” which includes works realised from 2016 to 2019, and McGinley’s 2019 series “Mirror Mirror,” both recent exhibitions at Team Gallery, I advocate for a playful reading of staged photography and its interaction with the viewer, who I define as the only viewer I experientially know: me. These two series are useful to point out the structuring narcissism which erotically allows subject and viewer to collide and come into being in the experience of looking at the photographic object, not only because both series employ mirrors and mirror images and thus lend

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<sup>405</sup> Florêncio, *Bareback Porn*, 55. Chapter three provides a more in-depth discussion of Florêncio’s argument.

<sup>406</sup> G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904).

themselves particularly well to a discussion on narcissism; but also because the two series show a childish stubbornness to comply to the death of the author and anti-identitarian appropriation conceptualised in the late-1970s by poststructuralist and Lacanian-influenced writers.

In this chapter, I thus employ the mirrored doubling of the mother on the child and vice-versa described by Winnicott as a crucial psychoanalytic model to understand McGinley's and Sepuya's photographs. Indeed, the dislocation of the positions of mother and child effected by the projections and identifications of each position onto the other allows for an understanding of narcissism that is not death-bound, but one that foregrounds a creative coming into being of subjects that are never fully realised, but merely *becoming*. While the adult teaches us that "the social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games," the childish stubbornly says no, and shows games to be doing the exact opposite: they make the subject.<sup>407</sup> Indeed, both McGinley's and Sepuya's series put childish desires and childish attachments left, right, and centre: providing a potential space for the subject and the viewer to become together through their desire and their identification with one another, as Carol Mavor argues of the mother and child in her reading of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden's Victorian photographs.<sup>408</sup> These photographs reframe narcissism as a paradoxically isolated and collaborative endeavour.

Winnicott remarks that, in the post-apocalypse "the sex experiences of younger adolescents are coloured by this phenomenon of [*narcissistic*] isolation."<sup>409</sup> But this

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<sup>407</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 40.

<sup>408</sup> Mavor, *Becoming*, 76.

<sup>409</sup> Winnicott, "Adolescence," 81.

isolation is never lonely in Winnicott, just like the viewer is never alone in the mirror mirror rooms provided at Team Gallery. Mirroring me repeatedly in the gallery space, this chapter understands both exhibitions to perform erotically: through looking, touching, and the fantasies these actions engender, the gallery space of Team Gallery becomes something akin to what Barthes has defined as a Sadean room: a room full of mirrors where pleasure is endlessly reflected, where “the space of the action is *covered* in debauchery” and “in which [...] the meaning of the art of being alive has not been completely obliterated by vulgarity and morality.”<sup>410</sup> Erotic and alive, the mirror mirror spaces of Sepuya’s and McGinley’s exhibitions relish in the “practices of sexual experimentation” which Florêncio sees in the post-AIDS period, but also recognise the history that has relegated these practices as childish. More than that, they *make* me participate in their childishness thus sustaining their processes of “subjectification.”<sup>411</sup> The figure of the adolescent, both material and psychic, provides an often-erotic screen for artists to point out the failures of an “adult” society which appeared too straight, too male, and too bourgeois. Indeed, as Julia Kristeva points out in her “The Adolescent Novel:”

Like a child, the adolescent is one of those mythic figures that the imaginary, and of course, the theoretical imaginary, gives us in order to distance us from certain of our faults [...] by reifying them in the form of someone who has not yet grown up.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> “L’espace ménage rest *nappé* de débauche.” “Dans lesquelles [...] le sens de l’art de vivre n’a pas été complètement oblitéré par la vulgarité et la moralité.” In Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 143-145.

<sup>411</sup> Florêncio, *Bareback Porn*, 55.

<sup>412</sup> Julia Kristeva, “The Adolescent Novel,” in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990), 8.

Building on Kristeva's text, Catherine Grant argues that the "identification with the adolescent is one that blurs sexual difference, so that male and female become related in a serial, rather than oppositional manner."<sup>413</sup> Here, Grant's argument on the seriality of identity builds on the processes of doubling and repetition from Surrealist photographic practices wherein, Krauss proposes, "the disarticulation of the self" is operated "by means of its mirrored double."<sup>414</sup> However, as Kristeva remarks, this "disarticulation" is only such "through the eyes of a stable, ideal law," which the adolescent never quite "*naturally*" subscribes to anyway.<sup>415</sup> When we move from the position of the "adult" to the queer position of the "adolescent," the disarticulation of the self proposed by Krauss disappears: the rhetoric of *undoing* becomes one of *becoming* through the self-expression of mirrored doubles.

What I find crucial in Kristeva's text is her commitment to "understand[ing] [...] the term 'adolescent' less an age category than an open psychic structure."<sup>416</sup> More of an operative psychic field than a bracket of people appertaining to a certain age group, Kristeva's adolescent is both non-pathologically perverse and connotative. As Kristeva argues: "[Open structure personalities] integrate the '*as if*'" (my emphasis).<sup>417</sup> These positionalities open *as if* to its potential for analogy ("like if") and childish forms of incredulity, mockery, and delusion ("*as if*"). In the discussions of the things of childhood in the scholarship on Victorian, Surrealist, and 1990s art, culture, and staged photography which I covered in the **introduction**, the connotative character of the adolescent is often overshadowed by a denotative one. Indeed, these important texts centre works which

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<sup>413</sup> Grant, "Bellmer's Legs," 6.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid. See also: Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," 28.

<sup>415</sup> Kristeva, "The Adolescent Novel," 9.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 9.

directly depict children, adolescents, and toys, not structures operating “as if” they were children, adolescents, and toys. However, in the photographs discussed in this chapter, there is nothing of the sort: the figure of the child I am discussing is evacuated of the things of childhood per se. It is connotative and in this “*as if*” the photograph finds its eroticism. It is *childish*, and its non-denotative turn renders a Lacanian analysis limiting, as I discuss in the first half of this chapter.

Barthes famously makes an important distinction between denotation and connotation in the photographic message: “the denoted message in the photograph is absolutely analogical, which is to say *continuous* [...]; the connoted message on the contrary does compromise a plane of expression and a plane of content, thus necessitating a veritable decipherment.”<sup>418</sup> Connotation is paradoxically borne out of an objective message “*without a code*” in the photograph but is also agitated in the proscenium of the photograph.<sup>419</sup> Connotation is an erotic “as if” for Barthes because it is metonymic.<sup>420</sup> Indeed, in his discussion of Bataille’s *L’histoire de l’œil*, Barthes argues that “[the metonym] allows on the level of the discourse, a *counter-division* of objects, of utilisations, of meanings, of spaces and of properties, which is eroticism in itself.”<sup>421</sup> In the space of connotation, mirrors screen an excess of narcissistic adolescent desire. Alone and plural, the narcissist at the mirror is a childish figure of infantile attachments through

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<sup>418</sup> Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 20;

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 19;

Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” 36.

<sup>420</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* [1964], in Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Vintage, 2010), 89.

<sup>421</sup> “Elle permet au niveau même du discours, une *contre-division* des objets, des usages, des sens, des espaces et des propriétés, qui est l’érotisme même.” In Roland Barthes, “La Métaphore de L’Œil” [“The Metaphor of the Eye”], *Critique* (August-September 1963) 195-196: 776.

which pleasure is recentred, post-apocalyptically.

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In “Mirror Mirror,” McGinley’s stages a series *as if* it is one of the “erotic game[s] of adolescents,” Kristeva discusses: “nothing obscure or scandalous, or even explicit, nothing but suggestions — approximations — allusions” to an erotic pleasure that is sustained by the interaction between the pornographic writer and the adolescent; or in this case the photographic object and its childish viewer, me.<sup>422</sup>

Between the summer of 2016 and spring of 2017, New York photographer Ryan McGinley asked “family, college friends, brothers-in-law, moms, aunts, former models, or ex-boyfriends” to be the players in a new body of work titled “Mirror Mirror.”<sup>423</sup> The photoshoot takes the form of a game, a photographer-directed solitaire, at which McGinley is not present, if not under the form of the text of instructions which the players receive — the rules of the game; daddy’s overarching playing principle, concealed in the final object. McGinley physically removed from the space of the shooting, the photographic practice is distilled to its essential directoriality: players are given a series of discrete directions that unfold over the course of five turns, each marked by a distinct roll of film with which the subjects themselves document their own presentations of selves. As the instructions increasingly spin out of control, becoming more and more unusual in how they ask players to interact with the space, the set-up of the game remains axiomatically constant. The players must be naked throughout the photoshoot. The photoshoot must take place in their own homes, which become both staged and found,

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<sup>422</sup> Kristeva, “The Adolescent Novel,” 21.

<sup>423</sup> Ryan McGinley, “I’ll Be Your Mirror,” in Ryan McGinley, *Mirror Mirror* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 6.

both artifice and *scène trouvée*. Players must photograph themselves in front of the titular mirrors with the same camera — a suggested Yashica T4 Superscope.<sup>424</sup>

Over the course of an hour, players are given five rolls of film and thirty-six exposures to stage themselves in their own home. Each roll of film marks a turn of McGinley's game. The rules of the game make this clear: in his instructions McGinley introduces each stage of his game with a roll number and parenthetical addends outlining the amount of time each turn should take and how mirrors need to be moved around the space by the player.

For instance, the second turn reads:

ROLL 2

(Take 15 minutes to complete the second roll. Rotate mirrors accordingly so everything that's leaning vertical now leans horizontal and vice versa)<sup>425</sup>

The directions that follow each introductory blurb instruct the subjects on how to position their bodies, how to style their rooms, and what actions to carry out as they take their own photographs in an increasingly psychotic game of charades. McGinley's instructions cover the positions the player must adopt in relation to the mirrors, how to light the image, how to hold the camera, and how to affectively and performatively respond to their own mirrored image. From screaming at the mirror to flirting with your own image, McGinley's photographic game stages a series of interrelated *fort/da* competitions between the subject and its own image, between one's presentation of self and McGinley's directorial mode, between the private space of playing and the museum space, between the nonsensical rules of the game and one's own childish breaking of

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<sup>424</sup> McGinley, "Ryan McGinley: Mirror Mirror," 16.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

them. The space of the game is both found and stylised by the subjects themselves under the rules given by McGinley: over the proscribed one hour of play, the subjects were only allowed five rolls of 35mm film to play.<sup>426</sup>

The photographic subject (or subjects if they play as a couple) comes into being through playing the game and only as player. This series marks a more conceptual turn for the photographer who first came into the museum space in the early noughties. In 2003, McGinley exhibited his series “The Kids Are Alright” in a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, which depicted the youthful, dissenting, erotic hedonism of McGinley’s and his “extended family” life in their early twenties in what has been called an “insider documentary” style, despite McGinley’s insistence on his choice of people and location for his photographs and the painstaking rehearsing of an image.<sup>427</sup> This youthful exuberance marks his art photography practice; a practice which has often been contextualised around the post-apocalypse of a post-9/11 New York City, and which he has carried out alongside his commercial photography for fashion and music magazines.<sup>428</sup> In “Mirror Mirror,” McGinley passes the camera to his subjects, but retains

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 16-19.

<sup>427</sup> See: “What I’m doing isn’t real, you know, it doesn’t relate to the real world. It’s a fantasy world that I’m creating and it’s completely assembled with certain people that I’ve chosen to photograph and locations where I’ve chosen to shoot.” Ryan McGinley, “Interview with Bill Powers” *Ryan McGinley*, 2013, accessed Dec 6, 2022, <https://ryanmcginley.com/bill-powers-2013>.

See also Pitts’s description: McGinley created “pictures that seemed rushed and documentary in their style, but which were often rigorously rehearsed and haphazard only on the surface.” George Pitts, “My World: Ryan McGinley at Work and Play,” *Ryan McGinley*, n.d., accessed Dec 6, 2022, <https://ryanmcginley.com/georgepitts>.

Sylvia Wolf, “Out of Bounds: Photographs by Ryan McGinley,” *Ryan McGinley*, 2012, accessed Dec 6, 2022, <https://ryanmcginley.com/sylvia-wolf-2012>.

<sup>428</sup> Even before his entrance in the institution of the museum with his art photography, McGinley had a prolific career as a commercial photographer for magazine, also occupying the role of photo editor for *Vice* in 2001.

For more information on the contextualisation of McGinley’s work as post-9/11, see:



a decision-making role in the final image: the choice of shooting on a disposable camera makes it so that the players of his game are not allowed to see the prints, only their reflection. For them to see the photographed image of their playing in the mirrors was beyond the scope of the game.<sup>429</sup> McGinley's game resulted in a series of photographs — awkward, adolescent, and erotic — grouped under the childish fairy-tale name of “Mirror Mirror.”

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### **mirror-role lovers.**

Seemingly, Sepuya's and McGinley's series do not indicate by any denotative or formal means the centrality of childishness inflected by the AIDS crisis which I am attributing to the photographs in the reading that follows in this chapter. Though McGinley's series does include a few photographs in which the playing adult subjects photograph themselves with their own stuffed toys or with their own babies and toddlers, the photographs bear close to no denotative sign of the subjects' or McGinley's childhood. Players are clearly adults of varying sexual orientation, gender expression, ethnicity, and age: their naked bodies bear the signs of adulthood caught at different stages of life, from 19-year-olds to 87-year-olds — the youthful and the aged are encountered non-linearly at Team gallery, New York, in 2018 and in the accompanying publication. Of the 211 photographs in which McGinley's game resulted, only thirty-two were featured in the

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Ryan McGinley, “The Kids Were Alright,” *Vice*, March 1, 2008, accessed July 19, 2024, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/kw73ze/the-kids-were-alright-v15n5>;

Grace Linden's doctoral thesis breaks down how McGinley, alongside his friends and artists Dash Snow and Dan Colen, cemented themselves in the post-9/11 scene in downtown New York: Grace Dorothy Linden, “Together as Kids: Dan Colen, Ryan McGinley and Dash Snow in New York” (doctoral thesis, University of York, 2019).

<sup>429</sup> McGinley, “I'll Be Your Mirror,” 6.

exhibition: these were exhibited on the top floor of the gallery, where visitors would be surrounded by them after walking up a bare black metal staircase (Fig. 24). The photographs in the exhibition do not follow the quasi-sequential order of the publication: McGinley's players do not come to us one by one, mirror by mirror, as we flick through the pages; rather they are reflected and reflect all together at once in the exhibition space — a mirror mirror room.

The mirror mirror rooms of 83 Grand Street were inhabited by more mirrors the year following McGinley's "Mirror Mirror" exhibition. In 2019, Team Gallery exhibited a selection of Sepuya's latest portraits, "Studio Works," and "Mirror studies" in an exhibition titled "The Conditions." This provided a sort of *amuse-bouche* for Sepuya's larger 2019 retrospective at the Contemporary Art Museum in St Louis which opened only a month after the show at Team and included Sepuya's early portraits, which he self-published in his magazine *Shoot*, and from which he moved away to focus on the studio as a space of "comfort" and "fixation [...] always there for casual observation or a large intervention or *a game to be played*" (my emphasis).<sup>430</sup> As the photographer himself discusses in the March 2019 issue of *Artforum* dedicated to him and coinciding with his solo show at Team Gallery, in "The Conditions":

I wanted to present [...] a show that would really connect all of the [...] four main points that I am thinking about: the portrait of the figure; my [...] implication in the creation of the work; the observation of the studio; and then the reworkings

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<sup>430</sup> Sepuya's magazine of portraits *Shoot* comprised of seven issues self-published from 2005 to 2008. Drew Sawyer and Branden W. Joseph contextualise Sepuya's magazines in the history of queer magazine and the resurgence of queer self-publishing in the 2000s in their catalogue: Drew Sawyer and Branden W. Joseph (eds.), *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines* (London and New York: Phaidon and Brooklyn Museum, 2024).

Adam Murray, "The Queer Intimacy of Paul Mpagi Sepuya's Self-Portraits," *AnOther Magazine*, January 26, 2024, accessed March 3, 2024, <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/15381/paul-mpagi-sepuya-exposure-interview-nottingham-contemporary>.

through the mirror surface.<sup>431</sup>

On and through the mirror surface, Sepuya continues, his “playful” portraits attain “the humour of the doubling of the language of the darkroom — the photographer’s darkroom — and the social darkroom.”<sup>432</sup> With a strong synthetic approach, as in pertaining to synthesis, to a bringing together, Sepuya’s “four main points” are presented without labelling in “The Conditions.” The studio portraits, reworked through Sepuya’s own subjectivity and the mirrors are exhibited *promiscuously* in the space. I here use “promiscuous” both for its fuck-frenzied gay erotic connotation and the taxonomical aversion of its etymological derivation from the Latin compounding of “*pro*,” “in favour of,” to “*mescere*,” “mixing.” Indeed, “The Conditions,” differently from Sepuya’s St. Louis show, does not neatly separate the photographer’s works by their chronological order or stylistic resonance. Like McGinley’s “Mirror Mirror,” Sepuya’s photographs are exhibited at once in the rectangular room; their sizes and positioning on the gallery walls reinforce the likening of the framed photographic objects to mirrors: larger than life-size photographs hang but a few centimetres off the concrete-grey floor of the gallery like full-length mirrors (Fig. 25).

Perhaps by mere coincidence, the larger photographs directly mirror the architectural interior of the gallery space. The full-figure portrait, *A Portrait (0X5A6109)*, 2017, and the two large-scale staged scenes, *Model Study (0X5A3973)*, 2017, and *Drop Scene (0X5A8165)*, 2018, are shot in Sepuya’s studio. The studio’s white walls and concrete floor seamlessly mirror the post-industrial features of the gallery space: the space of the

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<sup>431</sup> Paul Mpagi Sepuya, “Paul Mpagi Sepuya on ‘The Conditions,’ 2019,” online video, 6:18, posted by *Artforum*, March, 2019, accessed December 16, 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/video/paul-mpagi-sepuya-on-the-conditions-2019-79337>.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*

gallery is optically doubled in Sepuya's photographs; the private studio space becomes public gallery and vice versa through "the reworkings of the mirror surface." The floor-length size of the photographs further strengthens the impression that Sepuya's models — often the artist's friends and lovers — inhabit the same space as the viewer. Entering Team Gallery, I enter the same photographic environment of Sepuya's "gently erotic" figures: the photographs' frames act like mirrors depicting mirrors.<sup>433</sup> While Sepuya's images, and indeed McGinley's too, may seem to lend themselves to the structures of childhood described in Lacan's "Mirror Stage," this chapter challenges a Lacanian reading as too-limiting and too-denotative.

Returning to his theory of the Mirror Stage in 1949, Lacan clarifies in his influential text that the Mirror Stage in infancy comports an "*identification*" of the child with its own illusory whole image.<sup>434</sup> Out of this symbolic identification, the subjectivity of "the little man," Lacan continues, "is *precipitated in a primordial form*, prior to being objectified in the dialectic identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (my emphasis).<sup>435</sup> With this rather abstruse formulation, Lacan describes the inescapable regression of the subject in the mirror stage to a reality before language and as such before objecthood and subjecthood, Other and I, are defined as categories in the psyche of the *infans*. This regression to "a primordial form," to a reality before language and before social structures, of the child in the mirrored space — Lacan does emphasise the "spatial capture manifested by the mirror stage" — is engendered by a rhetoric of form and denotation; it is, primarily, a problem of "gestalt"

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<sup>433</sup> Flora Dunster and Theo Gordon describe Sepuya's nude portraiture as "gently erotic, dovetailing the intimacy of the encounter with that of making the image." In Flora Dunster and Theo Gordon, *Photography—A Queer History* (London: Ilex, 2024), 147.

<sup>434</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 76.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

for Lacan.<sup>436</sup>

The mirror stage is for Lacan emblematised by the child (who Lacan places in the age bracket spanning from six-months- to eighteen-months-old) who realises that he can control his reflection as he playfully sees his own image in the mirror:

This act [of visual recognition] [...] immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment.<sup>437</sup>

In the mirror, the child does not merely see himself gesturing back, but also sees his own body in its *totality*, which “is given to him only as a gestalt.”<sup>438</sup> In Lacan, the self is reworked regressively through the mirror surface: the child precipitates *back* to a totality which is only an alienating “exteriority,” or a “contour.”<sup>439</sup> It is this psychic environment of pure surface that foregrounds what is probably Lacan’s most quoted proposition: “the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation, [...] from a fragmented image of the body to [...] an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality.”<sup>440</sup> The anxious anticipation of being whole, of seeing a unitary bodily representation of the self in the mirror is mediated in the child by a regressive erotic desire for maturation and for the social power that becoming non-child engenders for Lacan.<sup>441</sup> The child’s recognition of his own insufficiency, that he is not mature yet, is revealed through his narcissistic libido, which is always already presented as a lacking *objet a*: desiring his own whole mirror image, the child is made aware of his own childish

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

“fragmented body.”<sup>442</sup>

But this Lacanian reading of the photograph shores up as insufficient itself. Entering Sepuya’s “The Conditions” from the black metal staircase at Team Gallery, the full-length mirror *Model Study (0X5A3973)*, 2017, is facing me (Fig. 26). The image is exhibited directly opposite the entrance of the single room in which the exhibition is located. The photograph depicts a boyish model in a moment preceding curious self-discovery: he stands there, naked except for a white jockstrap which reads “nasty pig” repeated on the larger waist-band elastic. His lower body is engaged in a contrapposto stance: his right leg stands straight, engaged, photographed from the side, while his left leg is propped up on a wooden bench; knee hip-high, his left thigh provides the background to his jockstrapped bulge, silhouetted white against his Brown thigh. The model’s upper body twists away from the camera and towards a black velvet fabric hung in front of him and pinned directly on the white walls of Sepuya’s studio. With his left middle and index fingers hooked around the trim, Sepuya’s boy pulls down the velveteen curtain to reveal the upper portion of a wall mirror — opaque with wash marks and sticky black tape — just enough for his face to be reflected back to himself. The positioning of the camera in relation to the model, slightly lower than eye-line, prevents me from seeing more than the model’s eyes, brows, and hairline.

Has the boy found his matured self and his lacking desire in the mirror? A Lacanian reading of the image would answer this question with an at most lukewarm yes, bringing to light the boy’s anxious anticipation to fully remove the black velvet curtain which separates him from a full cathexis of his own insufficient position as a regressed child thus revealing the illusory mature gestalt of his total mirror image, not of his face alone.

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 78.

He would narcissistically become his own object of desire, his own *objet a*, the mature—adult version of himself he erotically desires, mediated through his photo-graphic image.<sup>443</sup> Tim Dean has analysed the radical potential that Lacanian theory, especially his *objet a*, has within the efforts of the anti-identitarian strand of queer theory: “for Lacan, the subject and desire come into being at the same moment; and he names this constitutive division that founds the subject ‘object *a*,’ a term intended to designate the remainder or *excess* that keeps self-identity forever out of reach, thus maintaining desire.”<sup>444</sup> Indeed, for Dean, the *objet a* “demotes or relativizes [...] the phallus” because “[it] implies multiple, heterogenous possibilities for desire” as “[it] bears no discernible relation to gender.”<sup>445</sup> Struck in a continuous erotic tension between discovering his own mirror image and revealing himself as lacking, Sepuya’s boy would always be “out of reach” of himself and would always already be (at least gender-)queer by virtue of his narcissistic desire to grow up.

Registering this image within the wider anti-identitarian exercise of Lacanian psychoanalysis and queer theory however tells us more about the mirror than it does of the boy and his connotative, rather than denotative, childishness. Indeed, Sepuya’s boy seems more interested in peeking through the mirror rather than revealing his own already adult gestalt. He gently tugs at the velvet curtain with two fingers, pulling as far as he

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<sup>443</sup> Ruth E. Iskin analyses how Lacan’s concept of the gaze operates photographically: “Like the mirror image, ‘I am *photo-graphed*,’ invokes the understanding that the self is constituted as it is made visible to itself under the spell of a variety of mediations, be they verbal or written language, or images in a mirror, a photograph, or a painting.” Ruth E. Iskin, “In the Light of Images and the Shadow of Technology: Lacan, Photography and Subjectivity,” *Discourse* 13 (1997) 3: 47-48.

<sup>444</sup> Tim Dean, “Lacan Meets Queer Theory,” in *Perversion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives / Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, ed. Lisa Downing and Dany Nobus (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 290.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.* See also: Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*.

needs to reveal his face and nothing more: the two fingers remain there more to keep the curtain low enough than to attempt to pull it further down with anxious anticipation. Even the objects around the boy in Sepuya's studio never fully reach a total gestalt: just a third of a photograph hangs to the left of the boy, a few wooden crates with anonymous books peek through from behind the wooden cube, which itself blocks me from seeing the boy's right toes. A die-hard-Lacanian analysis would here make a point on the metaphorical insufficiency of the child who cannot with his own strength, operating as a metonymy for the social power Lacan speak of, succeed at pulling down the curtain, thus keeping the *objet a* at arm's length and forever inaccessible.

Sepuya's boy physically retreats from this reading, however. His feet are firmly planted on the floor of Sepuya's studio space. His left big toe slightly lifted off the wooden bench, Sepuya's nasty pig moves his centre of gravity back away from the mirror. Were the boy to be anticipatorily longing to see his alienating desire, he would have edged forward and upwards, on tiptoes, trying to glimpse more than his face on the mirror surface. Rather, Sepuya's boy moves his weight from the toes to the left heel and clenches his right glute, stiffening the engaged standing leg. Metaphorically, he leans away from trying to be read through a mirror stage. This resistance to a Lacanian alienating regression is negotiated in Sepuya's photographic practice by an aversion to gazing on any totality in the mirror, which results in a permanent childish unravelling of the subject, a crystallised becoming. Even on the level of the composition of the image, my eyes and fingers are caught up in the twist of the jockstrap, right at the centre of the image — producing a subject that is already immediately readable as masculine and childishly resolved before the gestalt of his own mirror image renders mature subjectivity unrealisable. I say childishly resolved because its resolution is somewhat of a failure of finishing—it is a becoming.



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The image is unravelling in a little failure: a twist in the jockstrap that makes the “nasty pig” nothing more than childish pornography: “the pornography of the young and immature, like that of writers, of *adolescents* in short” is “the effort to name, to make an uncertain meaning appear at the frontier of word and drive,” Kristeva reminds us.<sup>446</sup> At the “frontier of word and drive,” Sepuya’s subject presents himself before the camera as an adult, masculine and homoerotic “nasty pig” but gets his tongue tied in a twist, frozen in its childish becoming.

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Sepuya’s subjects are never realised in their totality through their mirror images: they lovingly remain ungrown-up, identified with a post-apocalyptic adolescent. This becomes evident in his *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2070386), 2017, also exhibited in “The Conditions” (Fig. 27). In front of a black background, Sepuya attempts to photograph himself nude in the mirror: his camera held right in the centre of the photograph, pointing at himself and me, Sepuya’s eyes are separated from the camera’s viewfinder by the embracing hand of an unnamed male figure. Sepuya’s friend intimately holds the upper body of the photographer.<sup>447</sup> He, too, looks away from the mirror and in so doing offers his collarbone and muscular shoulder for Sepuya’s head to rest on, lovingly holding him close, staged “as if [he] were, could be, or had been a lover.”<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Kristeva, “The Adolescent Novel,” 21-22.

<sup>447</sup> Wassan Al-Khudhairi, “Interview with Paul Mpagi Sepuya,” in *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, ed. Misa Jeffereis and Eddie Silva (New York and St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Aperture, 2020), 13.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

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Rather than alienating, mirrors in Sepuya's imagery are in favour of multiplying desire as a structuring force of identity, not de-structuring. Like McGinley's game rules, Sepuya's utilisation of the mirror space provides the titular *conditions* for narcissistic desire and identity to be staged as lovers. Sepuya is interested in the childish polysemic nature of "conditions," as he explains in his interview for *Artforum*:

The verb "to condition" means "to train" or "to prepare" something so that something else can happen; and then, "condition" as a noun is a set of circumstances that have to exist before something can happen. Those are both social, personal, one's own self conditions that lead up to the thing or how the studio conditions in order for these things to unfold.<sup>449</sup>

On the mirror surface and the reflected studio space, the conditions are provided to Sepuya's boys for a personal, social, and erotic unfolding, rather than the alienating gestalt of their impossible maturity. In this way, Sepuya's mirror becomes less of a denotative Lacanian mirror and more of a continuously shifting *mirror-role* — that which psychoanalyst (and boyish reader) Winnicott ascribes in a first instance to the child's mother.<sup>450</sup>

Winnicott underlines the importance of the mirror-role of the mother for the child in 1967, in a chapter written for an edited volume on the role of the family in the psychic

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<sup>449</sup> Sepuya, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya on 'The Conditions,' 2019," online video.

<sup>450</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 24.

development of the individual from infancy, through adolescence, reaching “maturity.”<sup>451</sup> Though at the beginning of the chapter Winnicott quotes Lacan’s mirror stage as influential to his thinking, Winnicott does so non-committally: beyond a brisk “[Lacan] refers to the use of the mirror in each individual’s ego development,” Winnicott quickly does away with anything that vaguely resembles any concepts from the French psychoanalyst’s text.<sup>452</sup> Indeed, Winnicott makes a distinction between his mirror-role and Lacan’s mirror stage clear from the outset: “Lacan does not think of the mirror in terms of the mother’s face.”<sup>453</sup> Before the child acquires a discrete sense of self — that is, the capability to distinguish what is “me” and “not-me” — the child reflects himself in his mother’s face. Rather than looking at the totality of the contours of his own image and perceiving his own insufficiency, as it is the case for Lacan, the Winnicottian child “sees” himself in his mother’s contours and in the environment around him, which he perceives to be a part of himself.<sup>454</sup>

The crucial difference between the Winnicottian mother (and indeed everything and everyone around the child) and the Lacanian mirror stands on the adaptive role that the mother-mirror adopts. More than a passive mirror onto which the child is reflected, the

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<sup>451</sup> Peter Lomas (eds.), *The Predicament of the Family: A Psycho-Analytic Symposium* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1967).

<sup>452</sup> Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother,” 149.

According to Luepnitz, “[Winnicott] neither described that [Lacanian] influence nor appeared to comprehend Lacan’s widely cited piece. Winnicott, who acknowledged in a letter to Ernst Jones ‘a neurotic inhibition to reading Freud,’ not surprisingly found Lacan’s re-reading of Freud incomprehensible.” Deborah Anna Luepnitz, “Thinking in the Space between Winnicott and Lacan,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 90 (2009) 5: 958.

D.W. Winnicott, “Letter to Ernst Jones,” in *The Spontaneous Gesture: Selected Letters of D.W. Winnicott*, ed. Francis Robert Rodman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 33.

<sup>453</sup> Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother,” 149.

<sup>454</sup> “What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother’s face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself.” *Ibid.*, 151.

mother acquires for Winnicott a “mirror-role.” While Lacan focusses on gaze and language as (de)structuring for subjectivity passively reflected back by the mirror, Winnicott’s mother-mirror-role reflects back and actively carries out:

1. Holding
2. Handling
3. Object-Presenting.<sup>455</sup>

For Winnicott, the child does not see his own mature reflection and as such does not illusorily develop a sense of insufficiency and anticipation. Rather, he sees his own image actively making “environmental provisions:” he sees himself being held, being carried around, and being given objects by himself.<sup>456</sup> He sees his own image narcissistically and erotically pleasuring himself; he sees himself being loved: he sees and feels himself, on his mother’s and his loved ones’ faces and through their touch and actions, setting up *the conditions* to become a subject.

In *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2070386), Sepuya does not see himself in the mirror, but he is *held* — cradled in his lover’s arms, nesting a shoulder under his lover’s armpit; his forehead grazed by his lover’s thumb, which presses Sepuya’s head closer to the nameless lover’s chest fading in the erotic space of the black background.<sup>457</sup> He is *handled* and handles. Sepuya’s arms are at once holding his lover’s forearms closer to him and the camera which points directly at the mirror and at us. Standing in front of the frame, I come into being in and through Sepuya’s image, *as if* I were too his childish lover. The mirror role for Winnicott is not fixed on a precise moment of the child’s psycho-sexual

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>457</sup> The employment of a black background as a restaging of the erotic space of the cinema and of gay sex spaces is discussed in **chapter three**.\_

development. Indeed, this would do little to avoid a return to the language of regression which I first criticised Lacan for. The mirror role is re-established in erotic and loving intimacies—it's a childhood which continues *photographically* throughout one's life; it's *childish*. It is present in adolescent love (though, this also involves actual “figurative” mirrors for Winnicott), and again in the relationship between analyst and analysand.<sup>458</sup> It is present in Sepuya and Sepuya's lover and, by virtue of photography, me. This photograph is a tender childish threesome.

Photography emblematises the mirror-role for Winnicott. The psychoanalyst uses the “illustration” — *like children's books, Winnicott's writing is “illustrated” by tales of his patients* — of a woman who after years of therapy sees Winnicott's own photographic portrait on a book and writes to the psychoanalyst for a “bigger version” of the print; a request to which Winnicott complies.<sup>459</sup> The larger print, offering a larger variety of detail, enables “the patient's search for a face that could reflect herself, and at the same time see that, because of the lines, [Winnicott's] face in the picture reproduced some of her mother's rigidity.”<sup>460</sup> In the photographic object, the woman mirrors herself in virtue of Winnicott's resemblance to her mother: as the patient looks, Winnicott suggests, she also wants to be seen by her mother who, because of her depression, could not fulfil her mirror-role during the patient's infancy. For Winnicott, this makes the patient enter “a serious and deep regression to infantile dependence,” as she attempts in fantasy to recreate the potential environment of her mother's mirroring face which could not be provided to her in infancy so that she may become a fully weaned subject.<sup>461</sup> Winnicott's patient looks

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<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. For a wider discussion of how children's books illustrations have influenced especially Surrealist art see: Hopkins, *Dark Toys*.

<sup>460</sup> Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother,” 156.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

at the photograph reparatively: in Winnicott's face, she not only sees herself but also she sees in the photograph an environment in which she can see or feel herself being held.

However, this regression to infancy, utilised time and time again to delineate the psychic positionality of the narcissistic gay man, occurs only when the child is not provided with a good-enough environment to creatively come into being as a subject for Winnicott, as the previous patient's (his)story illustrates.<sup>462</sup> This is not to say that the subject does not restage infantile moments of his own psycho-sexual development in adulthood: as is the case for creativity, the Winnicottian subject constantly reuses psychic structures, impulses, and processes from his childhood without regressing to childhood.<sup>463</sup> The photographic space in which the mirror-role of the mother is articulated and where the subject mirrors himself in the other's face and touch is representative of the subject's wider interaction with the world. Any creative identifications with which the subject engages in adulthood happen in the potential space between the subject and the object where cultural experience is located. As Winnicott clarifies in "The Place where We Live," "for creative playing and for cultural experience, including its most sophisticated developments, the position is *the potential space* between the baby and the mother."<sup>464</sup> In this light, the potential space of the photograph is a childish space, so reminiscent of the mother and yet motherless, where self and other erotically overlap and then separate; where the conditions are right to reflect and feel myself in Sepuya and Sepuya's lover

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<sup>462</sup> Cf. Michael Warner, "Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality," in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 190-206.

<sup>463</sup> See for instance Winnicott's discussion of the creative impulse: "The creative impulse is [...] something that is present when *anyone* — baby, child, adolescent, adult, old man or woman — looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately." Winnicott, "Creativity and Its Origins," 92.

<sup>464</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "The Place where We Live," in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 92.

and outside of them.

This becomes articulated through a series of erotically prevented gazes in favour of hapticity, holding, handling, and the traces of fingerprints left on the mirror surface, like in *Orifice (0X5A6982)*, 2018 (Fig. 28), and *Darkroom Mirror (\_2150768)*, 2018 (Fig. 29).<sup>465</sup> Queer scholar Muñoz, picking up on philosopher Graham Harman's concept of touching as mode of resisting a traumatic assemblage of interchangeable objects and subjects, has used touching as an epistemological structure to understand how identity is located and dislocated in especially Brown and Black performances. For Harman, "to touch something is to make contact with it even while remaining separate from it because entities that touch do not fuse together. To touch is to caress a surface that belongs to something else, but to never master and consume it."<sup>466</sup> For Winnicott (as it is also the case for Melanie Klein, Winnicott's principal resource in his psychoanalytical thinking of the relationship between infant and mother) the mother is never mastered and never fully consumed by the baby, despite his efforts, as I discuss in **chapter three**. Klein argues that even when the infant bites, ingests and digests, holds or clenches the mother in an attempt to destroy her, at least in fantasy, the mother, especially her breast, survives the baby's attacks (and the baby subsequently feels guilty and tries to "make good" reparatively).<sup>467</sup> Her mirror does not shatter despite the baby's aggressive attacks.

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<sup>465</sup> Goysdotter argues for a haptic reading of the staged photograph in the 1970s, as she discusses "how Krims, Michals, Tress, and Samaras broke free from the disembodied distance [of optic vision] that had been so important to straight photographers, in order to follow the ideal of objectivity." In Goysdotter, *Impure Vision*, 121.

<sup>466</sup> Graham Harman, "On Interface: Nancy's Weights and Masses," in *Jean-Luc Nancy and Plural Thinking*, ed. Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 98, quoted in José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 7.

<sup>467</sup> Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation," 306-343.

Winnicott is less dramatic in describing the aggressive and erotic drives that shape the relationship between mother and child, opting for a rhetoric of tenderness: *Holding and Handling Transitional Objects* which, like Sepuya's mirrors, are never washed but preserve the continuity of a childish reality, of the subject's uninterrupted use. As Winnicott describes:

The parents know [the transitional object's] value and carry it round when travelling. The mother lets it get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in the continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant.<sup>468</sup>

To wash the subject's own traces, however phantasmic and melancholic they may appear in the face of AIDS, is to destroy the meaning of the child's reality. It is to remove the tenderness of Sepuya's lover's embrace. Indeed, Barthes reminds us that tenderness is in structure like a transitional object: both a metonym — for Sepuya's lover's touch, for the mother's breast — tenderness and transitional objects “can only be interrupted with laceration: everything seems to be called into question once again.”<sup>469</sup> Just as touch for Harman outlines a separateness between I and Other, the transitional object (through which the subject begins to negotiate that boundary for Winnicott) sets boundaries between “me” and “not-me,” by bearing the multiple, accumulative traces of the subject's tender handling touch — “where you are tender, you speak plural.”<sup>470</sup>

Sepuya's “Mirror Studies” speak plural. Not only because of the use of actual and metaphorical mirrors, which photographically double and redouble space, subjects, and sexual pleasure, but also because they present the mirror and the camera as transitional

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<sup>468</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 5.

<sup>469</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 224.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 225. For the uses of the transitional object as the mediator between the child's internal and external reality, see: Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 2.



objects shared amongst photographer, model, and beholder: they involve the viewer as a player in the uninterrupted, unwashed erotic tenderness, caught in the twist of a jockstrap *as if I were, had been, or could be a lover, too. As if!* Returning to *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2070386), camera and mirror bear the signs of the subject's tender continued use. The Panasonic Lumix camera with which Sepuya realises the image is broken and mended: a strip of black tape holds the camera together in the upper left corner. The tape is peeling off at its edges revealing its lighter thread and indicating that the camera has been used after the makeshift reparation for quite some time. Like a teddy bear, Sepuya's camera bears the signs of its psychic and physical use as a transitional object: Sepuya's camera is "affectionally cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated" in the photograph.<sup>471</sup> It is held with two hands even if only one hand is necessary for the logistical aspects of taking the photograph: while Sepuya's left hand holds the camera upright and his left index finger presses the shutter release button, his right-hand fingers wrap around the lens, they squeeze onto the black corrugated surface of the lens's shaft, affectionately rather than functionally. Indeed, the only functionality on a short lens like the one employed by Sepuya here is the focus: the use of narrow aperture of the lens in the photograph, evidenced by the shallow depth of field in the photograph, makes focussing the camera particularly easy. He does not need to hold the focus manually, the image would come out in focus anyway. Not to mention that Sepuya cannot see in the viewfinder because he is held.

This is an image structured compositionally and psychically by holding and handling: Sepuya cuddles the camera at the centre of the frame: the upright orientation of the camera splits the composition of the frame vertically into two halves, one which is occupied by

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<sup>471</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 7.

Sepuya and his lover and one which is empty. Sepuya's lover holds the photographer back; he squeezes Sepuya toward his half, revealing just enough room in the potential space of the studio for a third queer subject to come into being, to embrace Sepuya as well. The lover makes room for the background, just enough for the black velvet to reflect some of the smudging on Sepuya's mirror, "made visible through a process within or against darkness or dark material."<sup>472</sup> Sepuya describes the visibility of the traces left on the object to originate from his intention to reveal the artifice of his own image-making: "the smudges in the first mirror studies were left as an indication that the mirror's surface was not intended to be a trick 'non-space.'"<sup>473</sup> The presence of the mirror as photographic artifice that reveals the production and the fiction of the image, that cement the image in a clearly reflected studio space, as opposed to the real one, are later developed by Sepuya as "metaphors extending from latency versus visibility."<sup>474</sup>

But whose latency and whose visibility are indexed through the smudges? Sepuya never resolves this tension, rather he emblematises it in the theatrical space of the photographer's darkroom and its analogical relation to "the social darkroom of sexual-social encounters."<sup>475</sup> But my question regarding whose subjectivity Sepuya is taking into question in the conceptual revelation of the staged scene remains: whose sexual-social encounter is given the conditions to happen in the potential space of the photographed studio? These two questions are unanswerable on their own. As Sepuya's lover tenderly pulls the photographer closer to him, he exposes the dark background of the studio's velvet curtain which sets these questions in motion. The dark background which allows

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<sup>472</sup> Al-Khudhairi, "Interview with Paul Mpagi Sepuya," 19.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

the mirror to gain its own objecthood beyond mere photographic tool — indeed, it reveals the mirror as another transitional object which sustains the illusory reality of the childish subject — also reveals the *photograph* as mirror-object in virtue of its printed presence in the museum space. This is nothing new for the photographer, who comes to this more recent body of works through his “Studio Works” and his “Studies,” where his photographs are folded, cut, assembled, and propped free-standing around his studio before being rephotographed.<sup>476</sup>

Like Winnicott’s patient, who looks at Winnicott’s photographic portrait to see herself, I reflect in the mirror space of Sepuya’s *Darkroom Mirror* (\_2070386), his “darkroom of sexual-social encounters.”<sup>477</sup> The photograph is exhibited at eye-level under the bright lights of Team gallery. In a row of seven photographs of the same size, all framed under glass, my image comes in and out of focus on the photographic object. The dark background not only makes the traces visible on the mirror surface, but also allows my image to be reflected amidst those traces when exhibited in a brightly lit room. I remain a trace, slightly suspended and out of focus on the glass pane of the frame around the photograph, until my image slips into focus and the photographed subjects become blurry smudges. Holding Sepuya on the side of the frame, the lover makes room for my image to be reflected more clearly against the back. I, too, like Sepuya and his lover, am allowed to play with the transitional objects of mirror and camera; I am photographed:

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<sup>476</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Sepuya’s “Studio Works” and “Studies,” see: Lucy Gallun, “Red Studio/White Feet,” in *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, ed. Misa Jeffereis and Eddie Silva (New York and St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Aperture, 2020), 34-38; Ariel Goldberg, “To Empower the Fragment,” in *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, ed. Misa Jeffereis and Eddie Silva (New York and St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Aperture, 2020), 44-45; and Malik Gaines, “A Parliament of Parts,” in *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, ed. Misa Jeffereis and Eddie Silva (New York and St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Aperture, 2020), 62-63.

<sup>477</sup> Al-Khudhairi, “Interview with Paul Mpagi Sepuya,” 19.

narcissistically, I delude myself that the camera points both at me and at them so that erotic desire may unfold, multiply, and cathect. Like Winnicott's patient, I see myself as mother and child in Sepuya's image. The mirror reflects us three simultaneously, both in focus and out of focus; latent and visible. On a bit of black velvet, I appear on the surface of the photograph, invisible and visible, holding Sepuya and his lover. Like one of the androgynous "hidden mothers," the adult figures that are covered in cloth while holding babies in Victorian portraiture, I disappear and make myself manifest, as Geoffrey Batchen argues.<sup>478</sup>

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### **the narcissistic photograph.**

Winnicott's concept of the transitional object and of the mirror-role are particularly relevant tools not only to describe the relationship between Sepuya and his camera in his darkroom photographs and the narcissistic erotic drives that allow us to occupy the same hybrid mirror-mirror space. They also provide a helpful mode to understand the problems that staged photography since the 1970s poses to the photographic discourses of documentation and authorship, creativity and automatism. Discussing Vito Acconci's performative photographs from the early 1970s, Catherine Grant argues that, here, "the photograph's potential for documentation is played with as being not simply 'a window,' but as a site of fantasy that requires the viewer's complicity in believing and constructing the scene being viewed, apart from any notion of factual completeness."<sup>479</sup> Grant's argument draws from two texts published in the same September 1976 issue of *Artforum*

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<sup>478</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 213-220.

<sup>479</sup> Grant, "The Performance Space," 8.

which attempt to champion their contemporary photographic moment, Foote's "The Anti-Photographers" and Coleman's "The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition."<sup>480</sup> These two texts set out to understand the new influx of conceptual and narrative mode of photography in the 1970s in opposition to the emphasis on quasi-scientific objectivity and the uber-photographic clarity of the "straight" photographic mode of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and their surrounding Group f.64 which became the predominant institutionalised photography from the 1910s to the 1960s in America.<sup>481</sup>

Moving from the conception of "straight" photographers that the mechanical reproduction of the camera allowed not only an objective window into reality, but a window with microscopic clarity at that, artists' photographs since the 1970s recalibrate and problematise the focus onto the person holding the camera, onto authorship and the post-structuralist, postmodernist efforts to abate the myth of the originality of representation.<sup>482</sup> As Crimp succinctly summarises these efforts: "they use art not to reveal the artist's true self but to show the self as an imaginary construct."<sup>483</sup> The anti-identitarian commitments of postmodernist writers and, later, queer theory, are articulated through the deconstruction of the originality of the image effected by photography: "always deferred," photography shows the original "to be always a *representation*, always-already-seen."<sup>484</sup> If the photographic image reveals reality "to be always a

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<sup>480</sup> Coleman "The Directorial Mode," 55-60; Foote, "The Anti-Photographers," 46-54.

<sup>481</sup> For an analysis of the influence of pure photography in the American context, see: Therese Thau Heyman (eds.), *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography* (Oakland, CA: Oakland Museum, 1992); and Goysdotter, *Impure Vision*, 10-15.

<sup>482</sup> As Bates describes, "what appeared to be thrown out of the window in postmodernism was an ideology of *originality*; the 'original' new was rejected and replaced by the concepts of 'reference' and 'quotation.'" In Bates, *Photography After Postmodernism: Barthes, Stieglitz and the Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2023), 12.

<sup>483</sup> Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 122.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

representation,” then the originality conferred by the author’s perceivably unique creative input is also revealed to be a myth.

Crimp explores this in 1977, with his landmark exhibition “Pictures” at the Artist’s Space in New York, discussed in the **introduction**\_. For Crimp, these artists represent a clear break from the modernist (and critic Michael Fried’s) homophobic aversion for theatricality by embracing a displacing return of “the realm of imagination” which marks their works as postmodernist.<sup>485</sup> Indeed, “We would never take these photographs for being anything but *staged*,” anything but fiction, declares Crimp in his rewriting of the exhibition’s catalogue text for *October*.<sup>486</sup> Paradoxically, the return of “the realm of imagination” in photography coincides with the death of its author: this imagination is engendered in Crimp by the reutilisation and appropriation of already existing images that are not generated as much as they are “*stolen*,” be it literally, as it is the case for the Levine’s photographs of Weston’s photographs included in the “Pictures” exhibition, or simulacraly stolen from the contingent of the real.<sup>487</sup>

“The realm of imagination” which structures this new photographic mode becomes for Coleman a creative manipulation of the real exerted by the artist. In this milieu, there is something unresolved about Grant’s theorising of the photograph “as a site of fantasy that requires the viewer’s complicity in believing and constructing the scene being viewed:” an undigested narcissism that is structuring in the photograph as a self-expressive mirror, as proposed by Coleman, and an interaction that the photographic object demands from

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<sup>485</sup> Crimp, “Pictures [1977],” 18. See also, Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 116-147.

<sup>486</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (1979): 80.

<sup>487</sup> Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” 118. On the simulacral nature of representation, see: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* [Simulacra and Simulation] (Paris: Édition Galilée, 1981), 9-17.

its viewer which forcefully pinpoints to recognise a subject creating the work.<sup>488</sup> In Sepuya's "Darkroom Studies" and in McGinley's "Mirror Mirror" series, where the "author" is directly reflected on the mirror where the photograph is taken, my reflection actively sustains the authors' *becoming* subject. With the author peeking through the image, Crimp's early postmodernist reading of the varying degrees of appropriation and manipulation of staged photography comes under pressure: presenting an author and a viewing subject narcissistically coming into being through their own photographic object troubles the *tout court* anti-identitarian postmodernist analytical practices, described in **chapter one**\_. It is precisely this junctive narcissism that marks these images as childish and as pleasurable, especially in the wake of AIDS.

At a base level, Sherrie Levine's appropriation of someone else's photographs (and someone else's son) in *Untitled (After Edward Weston)* (1981), discussed time and time again by Crimp, is not so different from McGinley's operation in his "Mirror Mirror." Like Levine, McGinley selects photographs someone else has taken and that someone else has set up in the photographic proscenium. Yet, in the introduction to the catalogue of this project, McGinley declares: "I'll be your mirror," thus positioning himself both as a foil for this appropriation and as the very object that connects all the differently authored photographs.<sup>489</sup> But as I look at *Quinton* (Fig. 30), I cannot see McGinley. Where is he? All the image denotatively reproduces is Quinton in *Quinton*. He obediently stands naked in a contrapposto stance, the very stance that McGinley directly asks in the set of rules

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<sup>488</sup> For Grant, the key difference in Foote's and Coleman's 1976 attempts to describe staged photography is their respective commitment "to ascribe the anti-photographers as approaching photography as a window (as Foote does), and the directorial mode approaching photography as a mirror." Grant's article, however, shows that this opposition becomes blurry in its middle, arguing that "a focus on the performance space of the photograph dissolves this opposition." See: Grant, "The Performance Space," 16.

<sup>489</sup> McGinley, "I'll Be Your Mirror," i.

given to the participants of his game. “Do a contrapposto pose, putting most of your weight on one foot so that your shoulders and arms twist off axis from the hips and legs.”<sup>490</sup> Quinton complies; his shoulders twist a little more towards the mirror, differently from his hips which are reflected mostly in the profile, lightly outlining his buttocks. Quinton, like Weston’s son Neil reproduced in Levine’s photographs, has a neoclassical flavour about him. With his contrapposto stance and hunched back, ribs pulled in overlapping his abdominal muscles in the form of the Belvedere torso, Quinton, under the displaced directions of McGinley, replicates art historically appropriated forms in front of the mirrors in his room.

To this point it is useful to turn back to Crimp’s analysis of appropriation in Levine’s photographs, which he negatively compares to the naïve, incompetent, regressively modernist use of classicism in Mapplethorpe’s mid- to late-1980s homoerotic nudes, like *Michael Reed* (1987) and *Torso* (1985) (Figs. 31 and 32). Originally, Crimp writes in the catalogue for the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art exhibition “Image Scavengers: Photography” that with “no transformation, no additions, [...] Levine’s appropriation reflects on the strategy of appropriation itself — the appropriation by Weston of classical sculptural style; the [naïve] appropriation by Mapplethorpe of Weston’s style,” thus revealing self-reflexively “photography as a tool of appropriation.”<sup>491</sup> This tautological appropriation of forms evidences for Crimp the already established tenet of postmodernist critique that representation is engendered by a self-conscious “*re*-presentation” of existing forms, which Mapplethorpe’s passé images

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<sup>490</sup> McGinley, “Ryan McGinley: Mirror Mirror,” 16.

<sup>491</sup> Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation,” 30.



do not have.<sup>492</sup> When it comes to Quinton in *Quinton*, however, an outright dismissal of appropriation as regressive seems insufficient to describe the two-fold way in which appropriation operates in the photograph.

On the level of the photograph itself, Quinton's appropriation of neoclassical forms does not fully answer the setting in which these forms are recontextualised: Quinton's bedroom. What is Quinton's Belvedere torso doing juxtaposed to the leopard print pillow in the foreground? What effect does a contrapposto stance elicit when it is staged on top of one's own messy bed and opposite seven overlapping mirrors? Even outside of the photographic object per se, the structure of Levine's appropriation of authorship to dislocate the author as the point of origin of the image, as detailed by Crimp, is complicated by McGinley's willingness to be the mirror onto which his models are reflected. While McGinley does appropriate his models' photographs, in these images there is a resistance — given by the set of instructions that the models follow and by the models' own self-styling of their performance space and their bodies — to completely forgo the credit of image production, so long as these point to a subject coming into being in the image. As McGinley adopts a self-prescribed mirror-role which sees him as the director and facilitator of the model's gestures, he provides a potential space in which his own models can come into being through their own playful self-staging.

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<sup>492</sup> Krauss draws the same conclusion one year before Crimp's article. Reworking Walter Benjamin's idea that authenticity does not hold to scrutiny in photography ("to ask for the 'authentic' [photographic] print makes no sense"), Krauss argues in 1981 that "'originality' is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence."

Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," 157-158. See also: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility; Second Version," in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 25.

McGinley offers a mirrored version of what Grant has called “a performance space in which identity can be destabilised and interrogated;” that is, he uses photography as a performance space in which identity is given the conditions to self-stage.<sup>493</sup> Quinton’s mirror neighbour at Team Gallery, Desmond, in *Desmond*, finds his reflection in three mirrors (Fig. 33). Like Quinton, Desmond stands naked in a contrapposto stance in front of the mirror. A little more disobedient than Quinton, Desmond breaks McGinley’s set up rules: he shoots his own portrait with a Dutch tilt. “You can shoot both vertical and horizontal (not diagonal).”<sup>494</sup> Immediately, the composition of the photograph points to a key difference in the models’ subjectivities — one that is mirrored against the rules of Mother-Mirror-McGinley. Given the same set of rules to delimit the potential space of playing, “*playing*” after all “*has a space and a time*” — each model in McGinley’s photographs gives themselves over to a comparison out of which their subjectivity is pointed to thanks to the serial presentation of “Mirror Mirror.”<sup>495</sup> The subjects *become* through the visual difference of their bodies, gestures, and styling of their own domestic spaces. Indeed, as Grant and Christian Keathley usefully summarise Winnicott’s structure of playing, “while playing, children use objects, setting, situation, and their imagination to ‘stage’ or ‘perform’ their negotiation of the internal and the external” out of which the subject starts testing, which is also a touching, the boundaries between the me and not-me.<sup>496</sup>

Take Quinton and Desmond: while both their stances appropriate a classical contrapposto

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<sup>493</sup> Grant, “The Performance Space,” 27.

<sup>494</sup> McGinley, “Ryan McGinley: Mirror Mirror,” 16.

<sup>495</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Playing: A Theoretical Statement,” [1971] in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 55.

<sup>496</sup> Grant “The Use of an Illusion.”

See also: Winnicott, “Playing: Creative Activity,” 72-73.

stance, the photographs each point to a Quentin and a Desmond that narcissistically exceed a generalising “re-presentation” of existing forms, through a series of binary oppositions. Obedient versus disobedient. Portrait orientation versus Dutch angle. A belvedere torso versus an open chest, back arched backwards. White versus Black. At the same time, the subjectivity pointed at moves beyond the strict boundary of body and performative gesture, expanding in creative choices on interior decoration, personal objects, and placement and number of mirrors within the domestic space which break free from a yes/no, present/absent binarism. Desmond keeps his curtains tied in a knot at either side of the window which illuminates his body; a string of fairy lights dangles from the window, leading the eye to two big teddy bears, childish and gay. The teddies, heaped, slouched even, on the corner of his bed, watch a naked Desmond with seeming erotic gusto: the mirror mirror room, Barthes remind us, “has the double advantage of equalling subjects to furniture [...] therefore covering, inundating the libertine with a bright and liquid [orgiastic pleasure].”<sup>497</sup> Also shooting on his bed, Quinton finds his reflection among the flowers in the blue and Marshall portable speaker in his bedroom, which find themselves right at the centre of the image, framed in a triangle composed of Quinton’s reflected body. In *Quinton and Desmond*, disparate objects and bodies are held together in the photographic image without any visual separation. This gives the sense that Quinton and Desmond may be subjects precariously coming into being as an incongruous mass of haphazard body parts and objects, like one of DeSana’s photographic dolls discussed in **chapter one** where plastic cones and limbs are materially likened and juxtaposed non-traumatically.

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<sup>497</sup> “Le double avantage d’identifier les sujets à des meubles [...] couvrant, inondant ainsi le libertin d’une orgie lumineuse et liquide.” In Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 143.

This reflects the dichotomy conceptualised by American psycho-sociologist Erving Goffman, from whom Winnicott borrows and distances himself in his theory of playing, who has divided the “expressive equipment” of the subject into “personal front” and “setting.”<sup>498</sup> Goffman defines the personal front as a series of performative and personal characteristics, including “clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; [...] posture; speech patterns: facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like.”<sup>499</sup> Differently, Goffman’s postulation of “setting” is akin to what Grant has defined as the “performance space” of staged photography since the 1970s: here, self-expression is managed by “the oscillation that occurs between performing the self or a scene, a self-conscious presentation of reality, and the psychic space of encounter that is performed both by the viewer and the photographer.”<sup>500</sup> For Grant, it is this performative oscillation that structures the staged photograph as “a site of fantasy” in which the viewer’s and photographer’s beliefs, eroticism, and subjectivities are tested and renegotiated.<sup>501</sup>

In this collaborative performance, “the realm of imagination,” discussed by Crimp, may show the figure of the author and of the self as nothing more than passé modernist illusions to the coolly detached (that is, weaned, and as such somewhat adult) postmodernist critic, but they are useful illusions — “sites of fantasy” — at that, nonetheless. Barthes tells us in his seminal early work “The Death of the Author” that “the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the

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<sup>498</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1959] (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 34. The key difference between Goffman and Winnicott is the latter’s addition of the internal use of the setting as structuring for the individual which then produces a performative front. To this regard Goffman remains only (limitingly) invested in externality.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>500</sup> Grant, “The Performance Space,” 27.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

instance saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, empty outside the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together,’ suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.”<sup>502</sup> The very nature of the photographic language problematises this because, by definition, the photographic is always there, always being performed in front of the viewer; the staged photograph constantly utters Barthes’s *je*, just like a good-enough, too-good even, mother constantly mirrors the internal life of her child. As I look — like Grant’s viewer — at Desmond, as Desmond forever performs himself in front of mirrors in *Desmond*, I cooperate in constructing Desmond’s interiority and sustain the belief that the interiority is already there in his fragmented, plurally erotic, mirror image, in the stylistic choices of his bedroom. Like early Barthes’s author, Desmond does not exist outside of the performance of his photograph, he is a “performative,” to which I return again and again.<sup>503</sup> Desmond holds together an author that is not adult, but crystallised, frozen, in his becoming a subject: forever adolescent. Indeed, as Grant reminds us, the photograph is a “site of fantasy” which operates “apart from any notion of factual completeness.”<sup>504</sup>

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Like Mavor’s Barthes, I am not quite adult enough when I am looking, because I cannot fully detach myself from the childish eroticism of dependency to this illusion, as it is in the illusory figure of the subject that I narcissistically see and stage myself and my own

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<sup>502</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author [1968],” in Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 145.

<sup>503</sup> “Performative.” Barthes defines “a performative” as that “in which the enunciation has no other content [...] than the act by which it is uttered.” *Ibid.*, 145-146.

<sup>504</sup> Grant, “The Performance Space,” 8.

desire.<sup>505</sup> Like a child and like a lover, I replete *Desmond* with the “more imaginative, expressive, poetical discourse” promoted by Grant and Keathley, one that makes use of the illusion that McGinley’s mirror photograph depicts what the photographer named “the authenticity in a person’s apartment, in their meaningful possessions and décor, which tells you a lot about their interior lives.”<sup>506</sup> McGinley’s appropriated photographs are structured as transitional objects, and as transitional objects I use them. Winnicott discusses the illusory automatism of the transitional object as something that “must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own,” while occupying a position between the internal and external reality of the child.<sup>507</sup> In this light, Winnicott’s transitional object is particularly resonant with the tension between document and creation, between mechanical automatism and creativity that has shaped the discourse around the medium of photography, and which Grant regalanises to discuss staged photography from the 1970s. To grant the photographic object its own vitality, a spontaneity of its own, implies a continuation of the narcissistic structures that sustain one’s own erotic investment in entering a mirror-role relation (be it as mother, as child, or as lover): as Winnicott remarks the transitional phenomena is “often referred to as [...] a narcissistic type of object-relating.”<sup>508</sup> The photograph is my transitional object.

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One’s own presentation of self, dictated by the staging of the potential space in which one

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<sup>505</sup> On Barthes’s boyish attachments, see: Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 129-162.

<sup>506</sup> Grant, “The Use of an Illusion;”

McGinley, “I’ll Be Your Mirror,” 8.

<sup>507</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 7.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

feels like oneself, comes burgeoning in Quinton's image to break the appropriative loop that postmodernism associates to the "re-presentation" of the image. Blocking Quinton's looping image in the mirror stands his own domestic space — a blue vase with spindly flowers and a portable music speaker covers him in one of the furthest away mirror reproductions at the centre of the photograph, while another mirror in the back shows the back of a closer mirror, breaking the endless repetition of his image. Reflection in *Quinton* is not used as a repetition and a doubling that undoes the self; rather, repetition and doubling allow the self to narcissistically play with itself: erotically touching his own othered and non-othered reflections, him and not-him, Quinton uses his own mirrored image to pleasure himself. The largest mirror in his bedroom, the one onto which the masculine classical forms of the contrapposto and Belvedere torso are appropriated in Quinton's bodily gesture, truncates Quinton's head right above the tip of his nose.

The rest of his head appears from behind the mirror with a childish *coucou*, right at the point where his left forearm disappears from the reflection. Seemingly "show[ing] a vitality or reality of its own," Quinton's reflection both holds and pushes down Quinton's head by the nape of his neck.<sup>509</sup> He looks at his own reflection and looks at us outside the frame, making sure that we are looking back, to sustain this narcissistic illusion. The rest of Quinton's left forearm reappears a little below his head, with his left hand he holds a second smaller mirror, tilted diagonally towards his body. Quinton's head reflects on this mirror, too. This time, Quinton seems to look downwards, through the camera which the first reflection points toward us. By holding the mirror at its top edge, Quinton's right hand once again seems to be holding and pushing downwards his own head. Intercalating mirror reflections, Quinton pushes his own head in a diagonal which only stops at the

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 7.

level of his contrapposto-hidden crotch. Beyond being on the same horizontal line, one that cuts right through the centre of the image, head and crotch are further connected by their visual resemblance: both head and crotch are separated in dichotomous entities by a diagonal line; the former provided by Quinton's hair line, while the latter by Quinton's contrapposto'd thigh. These lines separate the head and crotch in two mirroring zones composed of hair and skin: hair and face find their mirrored counterpart in Quinton's pubes and thigh in the photograph. With a game of mirror reflections, Quinton annexes his head to crotch in an attempt to narcissistically seek erotic cathexis, through a conceptual self-sucking.

Shifting between subject and object, the photograph centres, quite literally, Quinton's own sexual pleasure directed towards himself and his image. In his 2000 study of the queer disruptive potential of narcissism and the figure of Narcissus, Steven Bruhm has suggested the mobilisation of a homophobic regressive rhetoric of narcissism "to conflate homosexuality with egoism and selfishness and with self-delusion and excessive introspection."<sup>510</sup> Bruhm later describes this rhetoric to stem from Freudian psychoanalysis, citing Freud's 1914 "On Narcissism: An Introduction" as the piece where Freud most insistently describes that a regressive return to and "intensification" of primary narcissism "is evident in both (heterosexual) women and effeminate men" as opposed to the "'normal' male sexual development."<sup>511</sup> Through Freud, a not-so-implicit moral link is made between the gay male and the undeveloped child, marked by "egoism

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<sup>510</sup> Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. See also, Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction" [1914], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Vintage, 1975), 88.



and selfishness” and excessive delusions of omnipotence which brings forth an “antisocial” investment in his own pleasure. This moralising tenet is replicated again and again in discussions on narcissism, for Bruhm:

Regardless of the degree to which cultural critics and theorists may find the Narcissus myth a productive and generative fiction, they are always brought up short at the door of homoeros and at that moment revert to an easy pathologizing narrative that diagnoses and condemns the gay man (and sometimes the lesbian) for an antisocial, antisexual narcissism.<sup>512</sup>

Narcissism is for mummy’s boys, motherly boys. Lesbian boys?

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During what Juhasz and Kerr defined as the years of “AIDS Crisis Culture,” the homophobic rhetoric of the regressed narcissist was adopted as moralising tool by right-wing politicians and some members of AIDS activist groups to frame gay sexuality, and its supposed self-interest, as the cause of the whole epidemic and AIDS-related deaths.<sup>513</sup>

Edelman, striking a similar chord to Bruhm’s, writes in “The Mirror and the Tank” that narcissism is mobilised (by Larry Kramer and Ronald Reagan’s aide Patrick Buchanan) as an “ideological structure[] that make[s] it easy — indeed, that attempt[s] to make it *natural* — to represent the gay community as murderous in its attachment to ‘narcissistic’ gratification.”<sup>514</sup> Advocating for an activism “that need not define itself against the ‘narcissism’ and ‘passivity’ that figure the place of gay male sexuality in the Western cultural imaginary,” Edelman challenges what he names:

the ongoing campaign to refashion the gay subject in terms of an ‘AIDS activist’

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<sup>512</sup> Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus*, 2.

<sup>513</sup> Juhasz and Kerr, *We Are Having This Conversation Now*, n.p.

<sup>514</sup> Edelman, “The Mirror and the Tank,” 107.

identity that deploys [...] as the mirror image against which it would call itself into being, a contemptuous depiction of non-“activist” gay men as narcissists addicted to pleasure, resistant to struggle, and therefore themselves responsible for the continuing devastation of “AIDS.”<sup>515</sup>

Rather, Edelman reignites the identity of the narcissistic “non-activist,” its proneness to what Bersani has sardonically called “the suicidal ecstasy” of anal receptivity, its childish attachment to sexual pleasure, to upend “the myth of the subject’s [heterosexual] unidirectional development,” which was then revamped by right-wing attacks against homosexuality.<sup>516</sup> Indeed, Edelman persuasively argues that the position “maternally-identified preoedipal eros” where the Freudian narcissistic homosexual is ascribed is used as a cultural foil for “heterosexual masculinity [...] to define itself.”<sup>517</sup> In a reverse mechanism, Edelman transforms the narcissist gay man looking at himself in the mirror as *the mirror itself* that sustains the fantasy of adulthood and full-development of straight masculinity. But in this reversal, Freudian gay narcissism is never analysed, never pressured by Edelman, just displaced and contextualised against “adult” straight masculinity.

When I look at *Quinton*, and indeed at McGinley’s “Mirror Mirror” series, or at Sepuya’s “Darkroom Studies,” I cannot simply displace the narcissism of photographing oneself in the mirror and the eroticism it entails. Indeed, staged photography, with its attachment to the Barthesian performative subject-author, shows gay narcissism as a sexual and a

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<sup>515</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 101.

See also: Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 212.

<sup>517</sup> Edelman, “The Mirror and the Tank,” 101. See also: Lee Edelman, “Imagining the Homosexual: *Laura* and the Other Face of Gender,” in Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 234.

collaborative endeavour because of the very nature of staged photography's interpellation of a fantasy that is shared and sustained by viewer and object, as Grant has argued.<sup>518</sup> Commentators and reviewers of the 2018 "Mirror Mirror" exhibition at Team Gallery were quick to contextualise the photographs in a contemporary discourse of the intersection between narcissism and selfie-taking.<sup>519</sup> While this chapter will not include a discussion of selfie culture as it is beyond the scope of this research, it is important not to dismiss critics' willingness to read narcissism in these photographs.<sup>520</sup> The subject photographing itself in the nude without hiding the camera or setting a timer to veritably displace the camera outside of the frame is central to McGinley's direction and the rule of his mirror mirror game. As McGinley sends a point-and-shoot film camera, he forces his models to feature the camera in their reflections: having no setting for delayed shutter activation, the Yashica T4 Superscope needs to be held and manually pressed to take the

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<sup>518</sup> Grant, "The Performance Space," 8.

<sup>519</sup> See, for instance: Emily Colucci, "Filthy Dreams GIF Review: Ryan McGinley 'Mirror, Mirror,'" *filthy dreams*, August 16, 2018, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/5417/RM%2018%20FilthyDreams.pdf>; Emma Coyle, "Exhibition Review: Mirror, Mirror," *Musée*, July 13, 2018, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/5409/RM%2018%20Musée.pdf>; Nicholas Chittenden Morgan, "Ryan McGinley Says His Latest Inspirations Are Dressing Room Mirrors and Staying Home," *Vice Garage*, July 10, 2018, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/5408/RM%2018%20ViceGarage.pdf>; Sharifa Morris, "Mirror Mirror," *office*, July 6, 2018, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/5407/RM%2018%20Office.pdf>; Taylor Dafoe, "For His Latest Series, Ryan McGinley Handed His Subjects a Camera to Take Their Own High-Concept Nude Selfies," *artnet news*, July 9, 2018, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/5406/RM%2018%20ArtnetNews.pdf>.

<sup>520</sup> For more information on the topic of self-portraiture and taking photographs of oneself as a performance, I recommend: Simon Baker, "Performing for the Camera," in *Performing for the Camera*, ed. Simon Baker and Fiontán Moran (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 11-27; Jonah Westerman, "Original Sin: Performance, Photography and Self-Knowledge," in *Performing for the Camera*, ed. Simon Baker and Fiontán Moran (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 223-231.

photograph. The subject is forced to play with the camera and photograph that interaction, as they activate their own shutter. The presence of the reflected camera in every photograph of the series, with the subject of the photograph *holding* the camera, dispels any doubt that the subject is not aware of being photographed or that they are photographed by someone else.

Barthes details the processes of fictionalisation of posing through his own experience of being photographed in *Camera Lucida*. Premising that “very often (too often, to my taste) I have been photographed and knew it,” Barthes recounts that “once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into image.”<sup>521</sup> For Barthes the very knowledge of being photographed sets in motion processes of *narcissification*: like Narcissus, the photographic subject is tied up in a struggle between themselves and their image. Struck between the desire of subjectification (“what I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image [...] should always coincide with my (profound) ‘self’”) and photography’s othering processes (“‘myself’ never coincides with my image”), Barthes argues that the subject, in their posing, let themselves “drift” into becoming “Death in person; others.”<sup>522</sup>

Reminiscent of the Brechtian alienating effect of performance, Barthes’s argument here mirrors his own “The Death of the Author,” where the “person” disappears to become a performative “*sujet*.”<sup>523</sup> Indeed, Brecht describes the necessary separation between

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<sup>521</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-17.

<sup>523</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author [1968],” 145.

performer and performance, between the subject and its objectified, directed double.<sup>524</sup>

What I am particularly interested in, however, is the erotic potential of Barthes's *drifting*, which redefine this quasi-Brechtian alienation in the context of masculinity as immensely (and childishly) pleasurable. It is worth quoting at length what Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

The pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. [...] My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, and intimidations, [...] I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable*, bliss that binds me to the text [...]. Thus another name for drifting would be: *the Intractable* — or perhaps even: Stupidity.<sup>525</sup>

In her reading this passage, Mavor points out “[Barthes’s] boyish, indeed effeminate, arguably queer desire to be dependent.”<sup>526</sup> For Mavor, this dependency is Barthes’s dependency on the maternal, on his late mother, which he returns to again and again through his work.<sup>527</sup> What remains unargued in Mavor’s reading is the queer potential of this “drifting,” which Mavor also reads as a “cruising,” in the narcissistic photograph.<sup>528</sup> In *Quinton*, what complicates Barthes’s intercalation of subjectifying and objectifying processes of photography in the photographic sitter is the visual knowledge that it is Quinton himself that is taking his own photograph. Like Narcissus, it is Quinton himself that lets himself erotically *drift* into “Death in person” through the “suicidal discourse”

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<sup>524</sup> Bertold Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), 195.

<sup>525</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 18-19.

<sup>526</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 132.

<sup>527</sup> For a wider discussion on the Barthes and maternal dependence, see **chapter one**.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

of *drifting*.<sup>529</sup> But this discourse is “suicidal” only to the idea of self as an adult, independent, autonomous whole, which Edelman persuasively shows to be the heterosexual man, or Barthes’s “triumphant, heroic, muscular type.” Avoiding retransforming gay sexuality as a mirror onto which straight masculinity narcissistically reflects, which is what I criticised Edelman for, *Quinton* demonstrates that it is precisely homoerotic narcissism that allows for Freudian narcissism itself to be opened up to the sexual and the social. Staging the death of his own adulthood through a self-sucking, self-positioning for himself, Quinton comes into being as not quite adult enough, as *childishly* dependent on the desire of the viewer, my desire, to sustain his performance. And I remain “intractably,” stupidly even (which is to say queerly, as Paul Clinton points out in his essay on gay stupidity), dependent on the pleasure of his text.<sup>530</sup>

Though the forms appropriated in the photograph are those of the classic sculpture of “a triumphant, heroic, muscular” Hellenistic statue, this appropriation, differently from the photographs of Mapplethorpe and Weston, undoes this language of adult male machismo. Quinton’s messy bedroom, his unmade bed, the flowers in the centre of the image, move away from the minimalist language of crystalline light on oiled bodies, of isolated figures in perfectly framed positions. *Quinton is excessive, maximalist, theatrical*. Ever present in McGinley’s “Mirror Mirror,” the subject’s own domestic potential space breaks this appropriative total undoing of the subject. Messy bedrooms, messy living rooms, messy kitchens, personal objects heaped in corners, provide the background and originating grounds for each subject. In their contextualisation, appropriated forms meet the “intractable” domestic space of the subjects, which *drifts* into the staged image — which

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<sup>529</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 19.

<sup>530</sup> Clinton, “Stupidity,” 1-4.

stubbornly holds still, as document, against the direction of McGinley and the models' performance. The performative space of the photograph, Grant reminds us, is a hybrid between a window and a mirror, between document and fiction.<sup>531</sup> The photograph's appropriation of classical forms may herald the death of its author in McGinley's mirror, but only as long as it also paradoxically engenders the author's pleasurable becoming: "the author's friendly return," as Barthes penned it in his 1971 *Sade / Fourier / Loyola*, happens in the bedroom (or living room, kitchen, balcony, bathroom wherever you want really).<sup>532</sup>

"The pleasure of the Text also comports the author's friendly return;" a return which for Barthes sees the author reappearing "without unity; he is a simple plural of 'charms.'"<sup>533</sup> Departing from Seàn Burke's 1992 reappraisal of Barthes's notion of the author after "The Death of the Author," scholar Jane Gallop reads this passage in relation to Barthes's desire for the theoretically dead author in *The Pleasure of the Text*.<sup>534</sup> In her 2011 *The Deaths of the Author*, Gallop emphasises that the perversely queer fantasy that underpins Barthes's gay love for the author hinges on Barthes's own hypothetical identification with the author.<sup>535</sup> Gallop further stresses that the temporality of this identification, one that is as bodily and erotic as it is immortal: "We have here a sort of immortality — a bodily, erotic immortality — a fantasy, a desire, a bodily touching that extends beyond death."<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Grant, "The Performance Space," 16.

<sup>532</sup> "Le retour amical de l'auteur." Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 12.

<sup>533</sup> "Le plaisir du Texte comporte aussi un retour amical de l'auteur. [...] [il] n'a pas d'unité; il est un simple pluriel de 'charmes.'" Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Seàn Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, third edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

<sup>535</sup> Jane Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 42-45.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 47.

The specific passage from *Sade / Fourier / Loyola* which Gallop is commenting on is the following: “If I were a writer, and dead, how I would love it that my life were reduced [...] to a few details [...] [that could] come and touch [...] some future body.”<sup>537</sup> Rather than its immortal temporality, I am here more interested in Barthes’s photographic temporality: the way he fantasises about touching a future body (a reading and seeing body) with its excessive erotic and affective identification; an identification which is more reminiscent of Barthes’s own identification with, and of his own being touched (moved) by the photograph, as written in *Camera Lucida*.<sup>538</sup>

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If Barthes were a writer and dead, he would come and touch the reader as a postapocalyptic Winnicottian adolescent: through his love for touching and his aversion to “factual completeness,” Barthes reveals the author as a collaborative site of childish gay fantasy which is always dependent, always becoming and “figur[ing] something out,” as Velasco wrote of Sepuya’s “The Conditions.”<sup>539</sup>

McGinley’s Quinton’s structuring narcissism is *dependent* on the mirror-role relationship between him and me — just like Sepuya’s photographs in which Sepuya, his lover, and I come into being through touching and mirroring; our contact “creates meaning, always and everywhere,” because contact is an “enormous documentation” of fantasy.<sup>540</sup> Our

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<sup>537</sup> “Si j’étais écrivain, et mort, comme j’aimerais que ma vie se réduisît [...] à quelques détails [...] [qui pourraient] venir toucher [...] quelque corps futur.” Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 13.

<sup>538</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of identification in *Camera Lucida*, see **chapter one**. Margaret Olin also offers an analysis of Barthes’s emotive response to the photograph in her chapter on Barthes in *Touching Photographs*. For more information, see: Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 51-70.

<sup>539</sup> Velasco, “Project: Paul Mpagi Sepuya.”

<sup>540</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 67.



contact is excessive. Narcissism in the mirror-role is always plural, always excessive, because it is dependent; and as Barthes remarks, in dependency, “I am twice subject: to the one I love and to *his* dependency.”<sup>541</sup> Dependency like a mirror, like a mirror-role, doubles and redoubles in narcissistic excess. This is perhaps what made Winnicott wary about using the term “narcissism” to discuss the child’s transitional phenomenon. For him “narcissism” “leaves out the idea of dependence, which is so essential at the earliest stages before the child has become sure that anything can exist that is not part of the child.”<sup>542</sup> His own conception of how narcissism occurs in the child seems so far removed from previously conceptualisations that Winnicott refrains from naming it such, saying that “[he is] not sure that it is what [he] mean[s].”<sup>543</sup>

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Winnicott’s narcissism is excessively queer. It is always plural, mother and child both, always asking for more: Winnicott’s Narcissus loves (sees and holds) himself in multiple ponds at the same time. He is Winnicott’s postapocalyptic adolescent who, in attempting to find an identity, “repeats this struggle [of infancy]:” alone, everything becomes the adolescent so that he can only identify with himself.<sup>544</sup>

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Winnicott’s shyness in adopting the term “narcissism” stems from a Freudo-Lacanian conception of “narcissism.” Lacan, building on Freud, returns narcissism to the myth that

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>542</sup> Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 20.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>544</sup> Winnicott, “Struggling through the Doldrums,” 125-126.

granted it its name: Narcissus. Returning to his theory on the mirror stage — indeed, he overwhelms his reader with the multitude of explicit references to his paper on the mirror stage — Lacan defines Narcissus’s erotic drives as self-obliterating.<sup>545</sup> Feeling his real body insufficient compared to the whole gestalt of his mirror image, the Lacanian Narcissus is neurotic; his sexuality becomes distinguished by the “bitterly jubilatory satisfaction” of his “*narcissistic suicidal aggression*,” with which Narcissus undoes his real, insufficient body.<sup>546</sup> For the Lacanian subject, narcissism epitomises the inherent displacement of the subject’s subjectivity through his sexuality, as sexuality “enables [the subject] to *see* in its place and to structure as a function of this place and of his world, his being.”<sup>547</sup> As I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, the Lacanian subject is singular in the mirror stage. It is *his own* narcissistic eroticism which writes the subject in a position of insufficiency in “his world.” More than alone, he is *lonely* in front of his own mirror image.

Differently, in Winnicott, primary narcissism is more akin to Barthes’s description of the Sadean mirror mirror room. Occurring in the field of omnipotence right before and at the beginning of the transitional phenomenon, Winnicottian narcissism is plural and dependent because it is managed within the mirror-role relationship between mother and

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<sup>545</sup> See: Jacques Lacan, “On Narcissism: Concerning Performatives; Sexuality and Libido; Freud or Jung; The Imaginary in Neurosis; The Symbolic in Psychosis” [1954], in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Mille, trans. by John Forrester (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 107-117.

<sup>546</sup> “Satisfaction amèrement jubilatoire;” “*l’agression suicidaire du narcissisme*.” In Jacques Lacan, “Propos sur la causalité psychique” [“On Psychic Causality”], *Évolution Psychiatrique* 1 (1947): 146.

<sup>547</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Two Narcissisms: The Notion of Drive; The Imaginary in Animals and in Man; Sexual Behaviour Is Particularly Prone to the Lure; The *Urich*” [1954], in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Mille, trans. by John Forrester (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 125.

child. Indeed, as Winnicott describes the fundamental paradox which structures his idea of narcissism in his seminal 1958 work “The Capacity to Be Alone:” “*this experience is that of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of the mother.* Thus the basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present.”<sup>548</sup> While Winnicott describes the capacity of being alone “*in the presence of the mother*” as a distinct sign of maturational development, it is important to stress that this maturation is such because of the recognition of an Other in his aloneness, not because the child is not alone before such maturation. As Winnicott remarks, emotional and sexual development is evidenced by “being able to enjoy being alone along with another person who is also alone,” which for Winnicott “is itself an experience of health.”<sup>549</sup> Before this maturation however, the child is also alone: incapable of or only starting to distinguish the me and not-me, the child perceives everything to be himself. Mother, environment, objects, these are all encompassed in the child: as Winnicott writes elsewhere: “the infant is an isolate, at least he or she has repudiated the not-me.”<sup>550</sup> The Winnicottian subject is plurally, heterogeneously alone but never lonely: he mirrors himself in everything, as everything human and nonhuman, subjects and objects, have not been separated from the “him.” The childish subject appropriates in excess.

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When I look at Quinton’s narcissistic photograph, Quinton is neither “antisocial,” nor

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<sup>548</sup> Winnicott, “The Capacity of Being Alone,” 30.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>550</sup> Winnicott, “Adolescence,” 81.

“antisequal.”<sup>551</sup> His plural narcissism is crucial in establishing social and sexual relationships which are mediated through the staged photograph. His narcissistic appropriation of ancient forms, as well as McGinley’s appropriation of Quinton’s photograph, further complicates the paradigm of the narcissist that only cares about his own pleasures, defined by Edelman.<sup>552</sup> Through his narcissistic appropriation of everything as “me,” Quinton upends the concept of the (straight) narcissistic subject as autonomously and independently responsible for his own masculinely defined “triumphant” and “muscular” sexual pleasures.<sup>553</sup> Indeed, on the level of the image and image production, Quinton is both himself and McGinley. As one commentator of the McGinley exhibition pointed out: “even though the camera wasn’t in his hand, much of ‘Mirror Mirror’ looks as if it could have been shot by McGinley himself. The series fits neatly with the artist’s now-familiar aesthetic.”<sup>554</sup> On the level of the photographic object, Quinton is sustained by his own erotic narcissism and mine. Mirroring each other, it thus becomes impossible to define the subjectivity taken into consideration in the photographic object as anything but a collaboration with its dependently childish viewer (still me).

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### **the boyish in my bedroom.**

In 1997, Solomon-Godeau writes about the position of the photographer as writer.

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<sup>551</sup> Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus*, 2.

<sup>552</sup> Edelman, “The Mirror and the Tank,” 105.

<sup>553</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 18.

<sup>554</sup> Ariela Gittlen, “For His Latest Project, Ryan McGinley Hands the Camera to His Friends,” *artsy*, June 26, 2018, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.teamgal.com/production/5393/RM%2018%20Artsy.pdf>.

Analysing Wilhelm von Gloeden and his cousin Pluschow's staged photographs of erotic adolescent boys in Taormina (1890-1910), Solomon-Godeau concludes that "this writing on the body [of spectatorial and photographic desire], these processes of textualization and narrativization [...] should be understood as culturally authored, as well as authorized."<sup>555</sup> Solomon-Godeau uses these late-nineteenth-century photographs of adolescent boys to outline a similar point to the early work of Barthes: that is, the capacity of photography to inscribe the body within the textual, within a series of socially constructed codes and signs. In this field, any sort of claim to the truthfulness of the photographic (and of the photographer's insiderness) is problematised by its connotative utilisation of the sign.<sup>556</sup> It is this "cultural authoring" of the text of the photograph that for Barthes, because of its veritable connotative nature, requires deciphering. The code through which the photograph needs to be deciphered is understood by Solomon-Godeau and by Barthes's semiological work to be located within the cultural experience: as Barthes writes, "the code of the connoted system is very likely constituted either by a universal symbolic order or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes."<sup>557</sup> Crimp also recognises this and thus applies pressure on his own reading of staged photography. In 1989, Crimp implicitly problematises his 1982 reading of the appropriative dimension of the 1981 Levine photographs of Edward Weston's son in a

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<sup>555</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Written on the Body" [1997], in Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History*, ed. Sarah Parsons (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 42.

<sup>556</sup> Solomon-Godeau challenges the veracity of the insider position of the photographs. Discussing Larry Clark's *Teenage Lust* (1978) series and Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), Solomon-Godeau argues that "a photographic practice ostensibly premised on insiderness ultimately reveals the very impossibility of such position in the realm of the visual." In Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Inside/Out" [1995], in Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History*, ed. Sarah Parsons (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 23.

<sup>557</sup> Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 18.

panel discussion at the Whitney titled “Postmodernism and Its Discontents.” By 1989, Crimp argues that these photographs, which depict Weston’s naked son Neil in neo-classical statuary poses, cannot be read without taking into account the “ways in which homophobia structures every aspect of our culture.”<sup>558</sup> In his article “The Boys in My Bedroom,” Crimp uses the interaction between Levine’s appropriated photograph and an anonymous lover in his room as a starting point to discuss the importance of how postmodernist strategies of appropriation and their effected displacement of authorship and identity has shaped the public image of AIDS activism: as he writes, “Assaults on authorship have led to anonymous and collective production. Assaults on originality have given rise to dictums like ‘if it works, use it’; ‘if it’s not yours, steal it.’”<sup>559</sup>

I am not trying to undo the importance that Crimp correctly ascribes to the appropriative creative practices of AIDS activist groups. However, I am less committed here to an activist reading of Levine’s photographs. Indeed, while not disagreeing with Crimp’s conclusion that postmodernism fails to account for the structural homophobia which informs signification, his argument is somewhat moot as Levine’s photographs are only marginally used to demonstrate homophobia. Yes, the lover-boys in Crimp’s room were both “perfectly able to read [...] the long-established codes of homoeroticism” and participated in the homophobic association of these codes to “the codes of kiddie porn,” reproducing, even if implicitly, the wider homophobic rhetoric (and legislative action) of senator Jesse Helms in the wake of the 1989 Mapplethorpe retrospective “The Perfect

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<sup>558</sup> Crimp, “The Boys in My Bedroom,” 162.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 161-162. Crimp goes into further detail elsewhere on how images are appropriated in the making of the AIDS activist poster: “part of our point is that nobody owns these images.” In Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), esp. 13 and 53-57.

Moment.”<sup>560</sup> Yet, upon being questioned regarding the Levine’s photographs by the titular boys in his bedroom, Crimp asserts “[he] usually said a white lie, saying only that they were photographs by a famous photographer [Weston] of his son,” resolving the moment of tension before sexual encounters by erasing Levine’s appropriative gesture.<sup>561</sup> What this interaction demonstrates is that regardless of Levine’s appropriation, the image never quite loses an author behind it: Crimp returns to Weston to foreclose the possibility of bruisingly writing the codes of homosexuality in paedophilia and re-configure the image in the field of a father taking photographs of his son. While this answers the boys’ question “Who’s the kid in the photographs?” it does little to dispel the hanging homophobic presupposition that links homosexuality, obscenity, and paedophilia promulgated by Helms.<sup>562</sup> The trace of the author behind the photograph is resuscitated by Crimp, performatively and photographically “as a site fantasy,” as a shared space, for his own comfort.<sup>563</sup> Crimp’s childish attachment to the figure of the author, though he portrays it as dismissive in his own article, comes to the foreground not as a coolly detached postmodernist criticism (though this is the tone of what follows in the article), but repositions the subjective response, “the authority of [the subject’s] own feelings” as Bates calls it, if not as central, certainly as a useful starting point for analysis.<sup>564</sup>

This is because the homophobia unaccounted by postmodernism that overdetermines the boys in Crimp’s bedroom finds its place in the cultural experience; it is, as Solomon-Godeau would say, “written on the bodies” of Weston’s son, just as it is on Gloeden’s

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<sup>560</sup> Crimp, “The Boys in My Bedroom,” 156-157. For more information on the scandal surrounding the Mapplethorpe’s posthumous “The Perfect Moment” see the **introduction**.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Grant, “The Performance Space,” 16.

<sup>564</sup> Bates, *Photography After Postmodernism*, 4.

and Clark's photographs of adolescent boys. But, as Winnicott reminds us, the location of the cultural experience "is located in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment;" the place of playing and of the mirror-role which is so structuring of one's interaction with the photographic object as the "post-apocalyptic" photographs of Sepuya and McGinley's erotic games powerfully show.<sup>565</sup> What this means for Crimp's boys is something which Crimp himself fails to account for: his own participation as viewer of the photographs and the boys in his room's participation as viewers. This is not to say that the homophobia Crimp problematizes is to be attributed to a blameful Crimp, responsible for his own oppression, guilty of having the photographs in his room. Rather, it is to structurally point out that the intrinsic homophobic rhetoric promulgated as a response to the AIDS crisis is projected as a misreading of the very mechanisms of subjectification engendered by the narcissistic eroticism of photographic objects.

Homophobia here articulates itself as moralising the desire which agitates the subject's own becoming in its mirroring double. The structuring homophobia Crimp points out as informing the images is the very same homophobia which marks narcissism as a childish excessive desire pointed out by Edelman. It stems from the fear that "the codes of homosexuality" written on the bodies of the photographs do not engender an interaction as lovers, but that in the mirror-role relationship of the photographic object, these might mean a forgoing of the "a triumphant, heroic, muscular" adult masculine for a childish pleasure of writing a boyish text. This is the same text that is written in Weston's, Levine's, von Gloeden's appropriation of the masculine classical hero for the body of adolescent, undeveloped, possibly effeminate, and rather queer, boys. The

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<sup>565</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience" [1971], in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 135.



homophobic anxiety of the boys in Crimp's bedroom is double: a repetition of outer structures of homophobia which linked homosexuality and paedophilia, and, crucially, a fear that the subjectifying site of fantasy of the photograph might reveal their viewers, the boys in Crimp's bedroom, to be exactly what Crimp calls them: boys. Even worse: they might find this unmanly, boyish position incredibly pleasurable.

□ □ □ □ □

The mirror works of Sepuya and McGinley stress the necessity of a collaborative narcissism as a form of erotic sociality between viewer and object at the centre of these “processes subjectification.” This is a type of narcissistic pleasure does not magically disappear in the AIDS crisis just to reappear in the late 1990s, revamped with fewer condoms and with extra daily pills, but one that continues through AIDS and is changed by the often-intersectional discourses of AIDS activism and postmodernism. As narcissism becomes heavily moralised on and reconfigured as murderous or suicidal — the hallmark of the gay man who does not toughen up and grow up in the face of AIDS — the figure of the subject, its authenticity and originality, is also at the centre of theoretical attacks and revealed as a naïve modernist fairy-tale. Narcissism as self-pleasuring and narcissism as the attachment to the self come under fire from many fronts and become accredited a not-good-enough position: not adult enough, not male enough, not truthful enough, not militant enough, not objective enough, not postmodernist enough. What Sepuya's “Darkroom Studies” and McGinley's “Mirror Mirror” show, however, are the potentialities of being both a good-enough mother and a good-enough child, outlining childish positions as places which give Sepuya's titular “Conditions” for a subject to come into being; for narcissism to productively structure the homoerotic

encounter between a viewer and an object, between an author and its reader; and for sensuous and tender touching to continuously blur and separate “me” and “not-me.” Viewer and artist playfully touch in the potential space, leaving finger-marks on each other, part objects, toys: half a face, the twist in a jockstrap, a dried tangerine peel scattered in a corner. In the “site of fantasy” of the staged photographs, perhaps the anxiety of boyishness saw by Crimp’s boys seeing Crimp’s appropriated photographic boys is pharmacologically mitigated in the “post-apocalypse.” What remains is Sepuya’s post-apocalyptic serenity, and McGinley’s “captivating voyeurism,” knowing that in their childishness “the kids are all right.”<sup>566</sup> Not quite good-enough to mature, just “all right.”

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As both photographers stage their productions as potential spaces, filled with transitional objects, and possibilities of self-expression, I sustain their “erotic game[s] of adolescents” *as if* I were a player and a lover.<sup>567</sup> *As if* they were in my bedroom, boyish, drifting on the pleasure of the text written on their appropriative bodies. Touching each other and leaving finger marks on each other’s mirrors, we pleasurably drift into a space of mirrored identification and cross-identification which is sustained by a cooperative and childish narcissism. Seeing myself in their bodies like a child sees itself in the face of its mother, I ask the photograph to sustain my perpetual *becoming* in a shared psychic space, hoping that this invites a friendly author to come in me, to necessarily return through our playful interaction. I reflect myself in these boyish queer spaces, wishing to inhabit multiple photographic rooms at the same time. And indeed, as McGinley’s series demonstrates, I

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<sup>566</sup> Velasco, “Project: Paul Mpagi Sepuya.”

<sup>567</sup> Kristeva, “The Adolescent Novel,” 21.

could plurally inhabit them: McGinley does not have to be there to photograph me, but he does give me the full set of rules of the game for me to narcissistically play in the mirror mirror room.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> The set of instruction is included in McGinley's published series of photographs.

### chapter three\_ ~~eat it, baby.~~

#### introduction; or the appetite for cum.

In the introduction to his unpublished and unfinished 1990 autobiography *Cocktails in Heaven*, gay photographer Steven Arnold eats his own words. In the totality of its 123 pages, typed on Arnold's friend writer James Leo Herlihy's computer, Arnold only strikes out a few words and one sentence located in the opening paragraph: "I've erupted like a volcano and my memories have all shot out of me ~~like a big load of come. Maybe I'm masturbating all over you with big hot globs of come. Eat it, baby!~~"<sup>569</sup> Erupting like a volcano, Arnold mixes memories with a climax that is as bodily as it is creative. It is along these lines, between spiritual creativity and bodily gratification, that Arnold writes his autobiography: a small tome in which Arnold glamourises his life with rich and detailed descriptions of sumptuous banquets, oral sex, and artistic revelations. Right from the start of the first chapter, Arnold contextualises his life in the sphere of magic: "My name is Steven. My birth was a miracle."<sup>570</sup> This magic is peppered throughout his autobiography: from his upbringing in San Francisco around a creative family in the 1950s to his meeting his muse and best friend artist Pandora and his first sexual encounters with a ballet dancer in high school; from his academic studies in camera-based arts at the San Francisco Art Institute to his psychedelic forays in Europe in the 1960s; from his beginnings in feature-length and short films to his cruising in San Francisco's Castro district in the 1970s and finally ending with his move to a disused Pretzel factory

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<sup>569</sup> This passage has been included in this thesis after a discussion with the artist's estate. Steven Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, unfinished and unpublished autobiography partially edited by James Leo Herlihy, 1990 ca. – 1994, 1. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

in Los Angeles, which he names *Zanzibar*, in the 1980s where he begins his black and white tableaux photography practice. Arnold adds flavour to his life in the form of superlatives, indulgent lists of objects and foods, descriptions of chicness and outrageous self-styling, and poetic, raw, excessive sex.

When writing his autobiography and discussing his tableaux, Arnold uses the language of the fairy tale: magicked and transformative, his language drifts from charting strictly autobiographical information to his oral pleasures and divine interventions. Arnold writes his autobiography in the early 1990s while he is suffering from AIDS-related complications and hopes of a cure for AIDS seem to wane.<sup>571</sup> He dies in 1994, leaving the manuscript partly unedited. AIDS or Arnold's seropositivity do not figure directly at any point in his written work. Novelist and scholar Marina Warner writes in the introduction to her history of fairy tales that "Magic [...] needs to be implied and present in a fairy tale, and it conjures the presence of another world;" a passage which in Carol Mavor's reading is summarised as: "In the world of fairy tales, the world transforms. Humans fly. Things talk. In fairy tales, as in cuisine, materiality transforms."<sup>572</sup> With these transformations, Mavor argues, fairy tales create a certain appetite in their reader: "The fairy tale is a big feast [...] a domestic art, a kind of cooking."<sup>573</sup> Satisfying hunger in excess, like "a big feast," the fairy tale is an oral pleasure for Mavor: the fairy tale is shared and altered, like recipes, through oral traditions across generations, and listening to a fairy tale equates to erotically taking it in, to ingesting it like food. In Mavor's work,

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<sup>571</sup> Crimp, "De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS," 267.

<sup>572</sup> Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of the Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

Carol Mavor, *Aurelia: Art and Literature through the Mouth of the Fairy Tale* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 18.

<sup>573</sup> Mavor, *Aurelia*, 23-25.

the fairy tale becomes both food and magic, *cocktails* and *heaven*. Fairy tales are a feature of “Oralia,” Mavor argues. The term “Oralia,” coined by Michael Moon, outlines a point of departure for an erotic analysis of works of art that begins at the level of the mouth, at the level of the artist’s excessively queer and biographical attachment to food, and goes “all over the place:” to person, bodies, identities, and bodily parts.<sup>574</sup> To this regard, Arnold is a more than generous chef: glamorous banquets and detailed description of food and drinks set the backdrop for the tales of his life, his meetings with art, literature, and fashion glitterati like his mentor Salvador Dalí and *Vogue* editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland, and his sexual encounters with friends and strangers alike.

His autobiography is a fairy tale feast, and yet, with unsteady lines, Arnold’s introduction leaves me very hungry for oral pleasures: imprisoning his “big hot globs of come” between paper and black ink, Arnold puts forward an imperative invitation for me to “eat it” and quickly pulls his “big hot” dish away, creating an appetite for cum that is satisfied nowhere in his autobiography despite its insisted chronicling of food and sex (Fig. 34). Why does Arnold strike out this line in particular? In his autobiography, Arnold does not shy away from the explicitness of sex, so this pulling out before the moment of feeding cannot be attributed to sexual conservatism. An answer for this question might be found in the type of reader that this line positions as Arnold’s preferential reader: that of the cum-eater sucking Arnold off, which closely resembles that of a hungry child sucking at a mother’s breast—and indeed, elsewhere in the text, Arnold is directly writing to his “children.” Perhaps wanting his readership to be as broad as possible, Arnold strikes out this position from his manuscript’s introduction, but in so doing he puts me in the same position as a young man described by Crimp. At least for now.

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<sup>574</sup> Moon, *A Small Boy and Others*, 133-137.

In his landmark 1989 essay, “Mourning and Militancy,” Crimp goes autobiographically anecdotal to emphasise the mourning of gay sexual practices which were abandoned in the “Plague Years” of the AIDS Crisis because of their risk of infection. Of course, this is not uncommon: Crimp, as many others do, often employs morsels of autobiography as starting points for his theoretical and political arguments (see for instance, my discussion of Crimp’s “The Boys in my Bedroom,” in **chapter two** ). What is striking, gobsmacking even, in “Mourning and Militancy” is that his autobiography is not employed as a starting point, but rather, as the essay’s salient exemplification of how the ambivalence and conflict between activism and mourning, between pleasure and militancy, is experienced cross-generationally. Crimp writes:

[After a weekly ACT UP meeting in New York] A group of us had seen an early ‘70s film at the Gay and Lesbian Experimental Film Festival and went out for drinks afterwards. The young man was very excited about what seemed to me a pretty ordinary sex scene in the film, but then he said, “I’d give anything to know what cum tastes like, somebody else’s that is.” That broke my heart, for two reasons: for him because he didn’t know, for me because I do. [...] For men now in their twenties, our sexual ideal is mostly that — an ideal, the cum never swallowed.<sup>575</sup>

Crimp’s figure of the young man who has never tasted cum finds his implicit opposite characterisation in the homophobic scapegoat of the sexually insatiable gay man who mainstream newspapers, television, and neoconservative gay voices blamed for causing AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s — a stereotype fiercely and successfully refuted by Bersani and Watney.<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” 139-141.

<sup>576</sup> Watney, *Policing Desire*;

Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1987): 197-222

Crimp personifies the young man's relation to the "culture of sexual possibility," in which Crimp and what he names the "Stonewall Generation" inhabited, as a Freudian mourner who sees the world as "poor and empty."<sup>577</sup> Crimp cautions, as Moon does, about the pathologizing nature of Freud's concept of mourning, highlighting its shortcomings in a direct application to understand the relationship between mourning and ACT UP activism.<sup>578</sup> However, the figure of the mourner who sees the world as barren is a limiting moniker for Crimp's young man. While he may see the world as "poor and empty," the young man's excitement and idealistic desire for the taste of cum — a desire whose realisation is always kept at a distance, never fully attainable in Crimp's essay — seem to subscribe more to a Lacanian notion of desire and its articulation through unconscious drives.

Lacan examines the logic of unconscious drives in his 1964 rereading of Freud's 1915 essay "Drives and their Vicissitudes," titled "The Deconstruction of the Drive." In the essay, Lacan identifies four partial drives; for the purpose of this discussion and for its relevance to Crimp's young man and Arnold's struck-out invitation to eat his "big hot globs of come," I here want to focus on the oral drive. Lacan describes the oral partial drive in terms of a desire for satisfaction, rather than the fulfilment of a need: "as far as the oral drive is concerned [...] that it is not a question of food, nor of the memory of food, nor the echo of food, nor the mother's care, but of something that is called the

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<sup>577</sup> Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 141.

Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 127, quoted in Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 141.

<sup>578</sup> Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 134-137.

See also: Michael Moon, "Memorial Rags," in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995), 233-240.



breast.”<sup>579</sup> For Lacan, any partial drives depart from “vital function[s]” and move into the deathly language of the *petit objet a*, the forever unattainable object of the subject’s desire.<sup>580</sup> In his chapter “Lacan and Queer Theory,” Tim Dean conceptualises the importance of integrating the *petit objet a* into Queer Theory’s anti-identitarian, relational commitment. Dean’s insistence on Lacan’s *petit objet a* is motivated by two reasons: firstly, for its capacity to “deheterosexualize[] desire,” as it is inherently genderless; and, secondly, for its psychoanalytic conceptualisation as imparting a linguistic “death-like quality” to pleasure, through the Lacanian understanding of “jouissance.”<sup>581</sup> Indeed, chronicling the birth of queer theory in the 1990s as a by-product of AIDS in his chapter, Dean argues that “although it emerged as a response to the AIDS crisis, queer theory has not shown itself especially adept at thinking about death as anything other than terminus.”<sup>582</sup> It is for this reason that Dean advocates for a rethinking of death not as “terminus” but as starting point for a jouissance that is not dependent on the subject as much as it is on the subject’s relation to an ever unreachable other. In a Lacanian economy of pleasure, the other is always experienced through a sense of insufficiency and anticipation, as I have discussed in **chapter two** of this thesis. As such, for Lacan jouissance, too deathly, too pleasurable, is always necessarily experienced as both desired and out-of-reach; as globs of cum struck out. Even in more recent Lacanian theorisations on queer desire, we are reminded that the political potential of queerness stems from its hunger rather than its satisfaction, which is always conceptualised as an *a priori*

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<sup>579</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Deconstruction of the Drive,” in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company), 168.

<sup>580</sup> Indeed, Lacan configures all partial drives, including the oral drive, under the rubric of the death-drive. *Ibid.*, 168-169.

<sup>581</sup> Dean, “Lacan and Queer Theory,” 245-248.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

impossibility. Lee Edelman makes this clear in his recent *Bad Education*: focussing on the interruptions of desire, rather than its possibility of what he names a reparative “redemption,” Edelman tells us that Lacan does not “positivize,” which in Lacanian parlance means “materialise.”<sup>583</sup> In Edelman’s readings, any form of restaging, that is materialising in fantasy, must actively be avoided by queerness: for Edelman in *Bad Education* and elsewhere, the queer finds its political power in holding dear the troubling, anxious negativity of nothingness (non-meaning, non-identity, antisociality) that interruptions offer.<sup>584</sup> Indeed, Edelman argues that “[queer] never resolves into sense, establishes an alternative world, or makes a claim on being.”<sup>585</sup>

Ideal queer hunger must and can never materialise, that is restage even in imagination, its desired food. The appetite for cum must remain just that: an appetite, an impulse marked, even fuelled, by its impossibility to find release. Arnold, however, materialises desired and desiring food in his tableaux to satiate a particularly gay hunger. Eight boys writhe their naked and muscular bodies around each other on the black floor of Arnold’s studio like noodles on a plate for me to slurp up in a tableau aptly named *Bowl of Boys* (1985) (Fig. 35). Dramatically lit from the top two corners and from the bottom left, the image’s high chiaroscuro emphasises the knottiness of the boys’ limbs: the stark shadows puddle interstitially among the orgy of overexposed body parts like liquid pasta sauce, contrasting the white three-dimensionality and the roundness of arms, pectorals, legs, penises, testicles, and faces. To return each limb and appendix to its body, the boys must be disentangled from the imbroglio of the photograph, starting from the semi-erect and

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<sup>583</sup> Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), 11.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

See also: Edelman, *No Future*, 1-32.

<sup>585</sup> Edelman, *Bad Education*, 43.

cock-ringed (another noodle in itself) penis at the exact centre of the image. Arnold invites me to perform this action in the same way I might unravel a plate of spaghetti: by sucking in each single, sauce-lathered, strand.

Like Sepuya's mirror lovers, discussed in **chapter two**, who hold each other and make space for me against a black background, Arnold's *Bowl of Boys* uses an entanglement of body parts that never resolves into fully formed, autonomous subjects, and which require my sexual complicity to express its gastronomic potential. Indeed, it might be my reparative desire for wholeness and fullness, for the satiating pleasure of swallowing the bodies, which keeps them together as body parts and as loving subjects, despite their visual fragmentation. As discussed in the previous chapters, when subjects are crystallised in a queer becoming of body parts and disparate objects, they escape a tout-court Lacanian legibility. It is for this reason that, in this chapter, I employ the psychoanalytic model of the mouth as a place for holding together the aggressive fragmentation of the body and the subsequent reparative and nourishing pleasures. Using hunger and oral sexuality as understood by Winnicott through Klein, I set this chapter against what I describe as Lacan's anorexic mouth and pose the mouth as a locus of mutually nutritious exchange between mother and child, and amongst gay men.

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Crimp's young man's relation to the taste of cum bears the hallmarks of Lacanian anorexic desire, of a desire that is never quite fed, of cum that is never quite swallowed.<sup>586</sup>

Crimp's mourning appears relational to opposite positionalities occupied cross-

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<sup>586</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use the terms "anorexic" and "anorexia" in the same way employed by Mavor in her *Aurelia*, "as an aesthetic term, which is necessarily connected to anorexia, but is not necessarily medical." Mavor, *Aurelia*, 54.

generationally: the knowledge afforded by the taste of cum is an equation out of which difference mourning is produced. Crimp's "heartbreak" spans the young boy's Lacanian anticipatory and insufficient desire — "for him because he didn't know" the taste of cum but desires its "ideal" language — and Crimp's Freudian loss of the sexual practices which produce this knowledge: "for me because I do." Here, Crimp seemingly speaks the language of the fairy-tale to outline his mourning and the young boy's wish of sex. Crimp's mourning is foregrounded by the sexual bounty of olden days where "sex was everywhere for us, and everything we wanted to venture," which in the present turn to "mostly just that—an ideal," to the young man's anorexic desire. This Lacanian desire, by which the loved object is kept at a distance, leaves a bad taste in Crimp's mournful mouth, who writes: "Now our untamed impulses are either proscribed once again or shielded from us by latex."<sup>587</sup>

Crimp's insistence on restrictive language, through shielding and proscription, underscores a distance and, in turn, a discontent with the implicit psychoanalytic positionality he adopts. Of course, Crimp contextualises this discontent with safer sex as necessary, lifesaving, and, for younger generations, as "an act of defiance."<sup>588</sup> The essay focuses precisely on Crimp's ambivalence on following the necessary proscription of "untamed impulses" and the mourning of the pleasures that these impulses afforded. As Crimp goes into further detail about the "culture of sexual possibility" which he has "lost," he commits Edelman's Lacanian anathema: Crimp seemingly restages sexual possibilities in the language of the fairy tale, chronicling the places and practices lost in "the advent of the AIDS crisis" as a gay legend of old.<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>587</sup> Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 140.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

“Back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths: the trucks, the pier, the ramble, the dunes” are followed by “golden showers and water sports, cocksucking and rimming, fucking and fist fucking;” a plenitude which for Crimp is kept at a distance, condomed, like Lacan’s *objet a* is always already condomed for the subject.<sup>590</sup> But Lacan’s *objet a* cannot account for the mourning of sexual practices, nor for their mournful restaging through the language of the fairy tale; it can only account for the “resignation [to safe sex of many men of the Stonewall generation]” and for the young man’s ideal desire — *insufficiency* and *anticipation*.<sup>591</sup> Even Freudian mourning does not include a restaging of the lost object as much as it attempts to “sever its attachment to the non-existent object,” an attachment that Crimp himself argues should not be severed, thus showing his discontent with the model used.<sup>592</sup>

. . . . .

The image through which these desires are articulated in Crimp’s text is the juvenile taste of cum. Always kept at a distance, never fully satisfied in Crimp (and Edelman and Lacan), the desire of tasting cum engenders an impossible appetite for it: too excessive to be digested by the subject, too traumatic in its melancholic position, the appetite for cum is displaced either as the moral ideal of defiance — I will not taste it, though I want to — or as the foreclosed possibility of resignation — I cannot taste it, though I want to. Though Crimp posits that these two positions are “perhaps the AIDS activist movement’s least inhibited stance,” they both hinge on the subject’s enforcement of restriction and discipline which is felt even more markedly as “our sex lives are now publicly scrutinized

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<sup>590</sup> Ibid.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>592</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 137.

with fascination and envy.”<sup>593</sup> I struggle not to read this restriction of pleasure, inherent in Lacan’s conception of desire, in the economy of morally sanctioned pleasure described by scholar Joseph Litvak in his 1997 monograph *Strange Gourmets*. Litvak “argues for the utopian exemplarity of ‘excessive’ pleasure — including the pleasure of ‘excessive’ interpretation — in a cultural order intensively involved in the regulation and distribution of *sufficient* pleasure, in making sure that no one, not even the rich and famous, takes more pleasure than he or she ‘deserves.’”<sup>594</sup> This “utopian exemplarity” lies at the bottom of Arnold’s orgiastic *Bowl*, with not one boy but an excessive feast of twenty-four limbs, seven nipples, four penises, and eight faces looking directly at Arnold’s camera to suck, nibble, taste, swallow, and wriggle around my analytical tongue.

What Litvak describes as “*sufficient* pleasure” shores up as insufficient against the utopian ideal of Crimp’s young man, where the appetite for cum becomes “excessive.” In the context of AIDS, this sufficiency must also be read in the milieu of the neoconservative political promotion of compulsive heterosexuality or chastity, where the insatiable, thus childish, gay man is portrayed as moved by a greedy “death-wish,” a phrase I borrow from Larry Kramer, because he took “more pleasure than he [...] ‘deserves.’”<sup>595</sup> Gay desire in “good taste” is thus stuck in a bind of compulsive anorexia: it must remain unsatiated, rather than insatiable. Indeed, as I discussed in **chapter one**, writers like Andrew Sullivan make it pointedly clear that the insatiability of gay desire, exemplified as a childish “absence of responsibility,” is something one must grow out of

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<sup>593</sup> Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” 140-141.

<sup>594</sup> Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>595</sup> Larry Kramer was particularly vocal against gay promiscuity, which he often portrayed as suicidal. See Crimp’s discussion of Kramer’s literary work and speeches at GMHC’s meetings: Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 44-82.

in favour of ascribing to heteronormative structures of sociability.<sup>596</sup> The same emphasis on the “irresponsibility” of promiscuous sex is moved in the mid-1990s by gay activist groups who sought the total closure of gay sex spaces under the assumption that these represented “the Killing Fields of AIDS,” which I discussed in **chapter two**.<sup>597</sup>

Some three years after his manifesto essay, Crimp strikes a similar note to Litvak’s on the conceptualisation of gay sex and its pleasure as morally sanctioned because of its excess:

Behind the ‘there is no such thing as safe sex’ line, which has been used mostly to prevent teenagers from getting safe sex education, there has always been a tacit assumption, applied equally to queers and teenagers (doubly to queer teens), that for such people sex is a luxury, an indulgence, an excess, a dissipation.<sup>598</sup>

The figures of the queer and the teen, resonant to one another because of their relationship to sex in Crimp’s passage, are both the subjects of a moral *adulthoodification* which seeks to restrain their inherent indulgent (that is juvenile) relationship to pleasure and sexuality. Crimp’s later introduction to his collection of essays, *Melancholia and Moralism*, gives

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<sup>596</sup> Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” 61-62.

<sup>597</sup> This assumption has been widely dispelled by scholars such as Crimp, who emphasised that sex spaces in the late 1980s and early 1990s were particularly fruitful places to provide life-saving prophylactic material as well as important guidance on safer sex to their customers and attendees.

I borrow the phrase “the Killing Fields of AIDS” from an article by Gabriel Rotello, one of the members of the HIV Prevention Activists. The article, criticised as unhelpfully “moralizing” by Crimp in his 1994 “De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS,” calls for the closure of gay sex spaces in New York City.

See: Gabriel Rotello, “Sex Clubs Are the Killing Fields of AIDS,” *New York Newsday*, April 28, 1994, A42, quoted in Crimp, “De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS,” 267.

<sup>598</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Accommodating Magic” [1992], in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 210.

further contextualisation to this infantile sexuality. In a sardonic denunciation of Sullivan's "When the Plague Ends," Crimp summarises Sullivan's claim as such: "Prior to AIDS, gay men were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked the responsibility that comes with normal adulthood [...]. Gay men only wanted to fuck [...], and at that to fuck the way naughty teenage boys want to fuck—with anyone attractive to them, anytime, anywhere, no strings attached. Then came AIDS. AIDS made gay men grow up."<sup>599</sup> In **chapter one**, I analysed Sullivan's claim and discussed how the responsibility to grow up which he attempts to emphasise is ultimately a straight responsibility. Here, I want to turn to Crimp's formulation of wanting to fuck "the way naughty teenage boys want to fuck," a formulation which Crimp connects to Sullivan's descriptions of affective forms of pre-AIDS sexualities and "such childish liberation politics as AIDS activism."<sup>600</sup> The teenager emerges from Crimp's texts as a figure of sexual excessiveness and insatiability; a figure which in the late-1980s seems more apt to embody the "culture of sexual possibility" of the pre-AIDS period which Crimp mourns, more prone to satiate himself with Arnold's gastronomic *Bowl of Boys*, than to inhabit the anorexic position of "cum never swallowed."<sup>601</sup>

It is perhaps owing to the necessary proscription and shielding of the "untamed impulses" in the face of AIDS, outlined by Crimp in 1989, that scholar João Florencio argues for a suspension of gay sexual insatiability during the "[HIV] epidemic" and a return to it in the "post-AIDS" period. Florêncio attempts to conceptualise "the creative openness of becoming that the introduction of antiretroviral drugs has catalysed, [...] all potential yet

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<sup>599</sup> Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism," 4-5.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>601</sup> Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 140-141.



to be actualised in new queer forms of sexual sociability and communion.”<sup>602</sup> In a turn of phrase that discursively draws from the same utopic as Muñoz, the queer and porous that Florêncio points to are not quite here and are not quite now: they are crystallised in their *becoming*, or as Muñoz put it, “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”<sup>603</sup> Florêncio charts the history of the erotic script of the “gay pig”— a term usually employed to define a gay bottom’s “uninhibited sexual behaviour and insatiable sexual desire” — from the 1970s to the advent of HIV-managing treatments, concluding that “gay ‘pigs’ can be seen to constitute a new chapter in a longer history of sexual emancipation and gay masculine self-fashioning that was not so much brought to an end as it was suspended by the [HIV] epidemic.”<sup>604</sup> Florêncio details a rather linear history of gay erotic emancipation that intercalates the 1970s sexual exuberance and bodily boundary pushing, the subsequent forgoing of these practices during the pre-antiretroviral therapy AIDS crisis, and the “renaissance” of these sexual practices post-Truvada. As Florêncio puts it:

Heirs to the sexual experimentation and rituals that helped define, before the onset of the AIDS crisis, gay masculinities in opposition to the middle-class heteropatriarchal privileging of reason over the body and its messy interiors, twenty-first-century gay ‘pigs’ seem to have picked up where their forefathers had left, putting promiscuity and uninhibited sexual practices back at the centre of their processes of subjectification.<sup>605</sup>

While I do not disagree with Florêncio’s conclusions, this history of gay masculine subjectification through erotic practices he puts forward is perhaps too linear. By

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<sup>602</sup> Florêncio, *Bareback Porn*, 6.

<sup>603</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>604</sup> Florêncio, *Bareback Porn*, 55.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*

bracketing the AIDS crisis as a moment of pause, or “en-niche-ment,” of these practices, Florêncio fails to account how AIDS has shaped gay erotic pleasure even after the introduction of antiretroviral therapy. Florêncio’s framing that “twenty-first-century gay ‘pigs’ seem to have picked up where their forefathers had left” rewrites the AIDS crisis as more digressive than discursive to the relevance and signification of “putting promiscuity and uninhibited sexual practices back at the centre of their processes of subjectification.” If we are to read the AIDS crisis as engendering a “epidemic of signification” or a “crisis of meaning” — as critics like Treichler, Schwartzberg, Watney have described it — then we must reframe and re-signify twenty-first-century gay “promiscuity and uninhibited sexual practices” in and against the discursive spaces of AIDS and its postmodernist roots at the height of the AIDS crisis.<sup>606</sup> Indeed, AIDS discourses on unbridled, or to borrow Tim Dean’s term, “unlimited,” gay erotic pleasure, have reconfigured the processes of subjectification outlined by Florêncio as infantile, as adolescent, as childish — in Crimp’s words “the way naughty teenage boys want to fuck.”<sup>607</sup>

So how to account for my childish appetite for Arnold’s cum, “[erupting] like a volcano” during the AIDS crisis, rather than simply conceptualise it as an untamed pre-AIDS pleasure that is suspended before returning post-AIDS? Florêncio’s history only sees “promiscuity and uninhibited sexual practices” put “back at the centre of their processes of subjectification” with the advent of HIV antiretroviral therapy. In this chapter, I want

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<sup>606</sup> Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” *October* 43 (1987): 31-70;  
Steven Schwartzberg, *A Crisis of Meaning: How Gay Men Are Making Sense of AIDS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997);  
Watney, *Policing Desire*.

<sup>607</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*.

to remain in the linguistic register of orality and oral pleasures used by Crimp to eschew his politics of mourning of the “culture of sexual possibility.” The mouth offers at once a representative of childish excessive hunger, appetite, pleasurable insatiability and the locus of mourning. Activist and scholar Michael Bronski invites us in 1988 to conceptualise death and mourning with the same energy devoted to sex: “The gay movement can learn to deal with death in the same way it has learned to deal with sex: not as a means to an end, as a metaphor, but as a physical experience, a material, not a moral reality.”<sup>608</sup> Bronski’s invitation is in part an acknowledgment and in part a complication of Crimp’s 1987 introduction to the issue of *October* on AIDS, in which he famously argued that “*we don’t need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.*”<sup>609</sup> Of course, Crimp is here talking directly to the institution of the museum, denouncing the assumption that political and activist art is bad art, as well as denouncing art for fundraising as perpetuating the myth that art has no political function outside its commodification.<sup>610</sup> Crimp’s denunciation of art that is transcendental seemingly forms the basis for Bronski’s conceptualisation of the limits around thinking of representations of death as metaphorical or moralistic. While these limits are pointed out again and again in scholarship on mourning and death, not least by Crimp himself, Bronski’s invitation to think of death outside of the order of the symbolic and inside the literalness of embodied affect hasn’t fully been picked up.

In this chapter, I abandon the symbolic register of Lacanian desire and Freudian mourning

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<sup>608</sup> Michael Bronski, “Death and the Erotic Imagination,” *Radical America* 21 (1988) 2-3: 65.

<sup>609</sup> Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” 33.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

in favour of stressing the literality of feeling and bodies which provides the basis of Object Relations psychoanalysis. In this literality of feeling, I materialise Arnold's cum in the imagined encounter between Arnold's text and tableaux photographs and my mouth, satiating a childish appetite. I restage Arnold's invitation of eating, sucking, tasting his works with the literality of Winnicott's child hunger, in a bid to reach excessive pleasure in "the way [of] naughty teenage boys." Indeed, it is precisely for its resistance to the symbolic that Object Relations psychoanalysis was shunned as regressive and juvenile in queer and feminist critique: as Mary Jacobus writes in 1990, "[returning to Klein] feels like eating one's words."<sup>611</sup> Pointing out the centrality of Lacanian psychoanalysis in literary and art historical feminist criticism in the 1980s, Jacobus explains that "taking Klein at her word — reading her literally, as she asks to be read — seems to risk a kind of theoretical regression."<sup>612</sup> This theoretical regression, Jacobus pins onto Klein's disinterest in accounting for language in favour of her interest in orality, which as Jacobus points out "Lacan himself views as regressive."<sup>613</sup> Moving away from the linguistic abstraction of the sign to delineate sexuality, Klein regresses to "primary instincts" which are mapped onto the relation between the child and its environment, most notably represented by the mother.

In the previous chapters, I analysed the childish engagements established between me and the photographic object; engagements which I located in the playground between the mother and child, however dislodged the positions of mother and child are between the work and me. In this chapter, I regress further in the maturational development proposed by Winnicott, going back to breastfeeding and the oral relations between mother and child

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<sup>611</sup> Jacobus, "Tea Daddy," 92.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

which stands at the basis of Object Relations psychoanalysis, through Arnold's invitation of ingesting his work like milk and like semen. This chapter is thus located as much in the space of the glory hole as it is in breastfeeding, both blowjobs and food. With my excessive instinct to be fed on Arnold's fairy tales of images-words-cum, I move away from a Lacanian framework of anorexic pleasure to restage Arnold's black and white tableaux in my mouth. Retaining the same dark anonymity that agitates encounters in the glory holes, I encounter these images outside of the institutionalised space of the museum and commercial space of the gallery: like fairy tales transformed by the mouth and now passed on through books, I select my encounters through Arnold's published photobooks: *Reliquaries* (1983), and *Epiphanies* (1987). These books, published by Twelvetrees Press with the help of fine art publisher Jack Woody, gave Arnold intense pleasure and joy. In this chapter, I treat Arnold's books like menus: I spend a long time taking in their covers, Arnold's selected chef's speciality, and slurp up some the photographs contained within quickly, promiscuously, ravenously.

In his notebooks and autobiography, Arnold writes that he was "beyond the valley of ecstatic" with the publishing of *Reliquaries*, introduced by his close friend and actor Ellen Burstyn.<sup>614</sup> While his second book, *Epiphanies*, is only briefly mentioned in the autobiography ("I was able to publish a second book of photographs with Jack Woody"), Arnold gives us a lengthy preview of his third book, *Teophanies*:

in none of [the previous books] was I able to print frontal nudity. How tragic! But with my new book Theophanies I promise that you'll get lots of frontal nudity,

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<sup>614</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 96.

and even erections! Ah erections. People need to see, gaze upon and adore erections. This is the tree of life, darlings! Let's study it!<sup>615</sup>

This preview is all that remains of his third book: Arnold's last course can only be imagined, fantasised, materialised as a banquet of erections. Throughout this chapter, I behave as a greedy child: I indulge and ingest Arnold additively, which is to say mouthful after mouthful, and provide a reading of mourning and pleasure which is only possible thanks to the theoretical childishness of Object Relation psychoanalysis's reparative drive, whose importance stems from "AIDS crisis culture" and has been reenergised by Sedgwick's "reparative reading."<sup>616</sup>

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**"as food to vision hungry children."**

Tableaux photography comes to Arnold as a divine revelation. He comes to tableaux photography through the black room of the cinema and cruising in dark nights.<sup>617</sup> In his autobiography, Arnold recounts how he attended high school in Oakland, California,

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<sup>615</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>616</sup> The moniker of "AIDS crisis culture" has recently been put forward by Ted Kerr and Alexandra Juhasz in their *We Are Having this Conversation Now* to delineate the explosion of artistic, literary, activist production and discourse regarding HIV/AIDS in the period from 1987 to 1996 in the USA. See: Juhasz and Kerr, *We Are Having this Conversation Now*, n.p.

Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 149.

<sup>617</sup> Or at least, this is the artistic journey which Arnold wants to portray. Indeed, Arnold forgets or omits. That he elects a course in photography at the Art Institute San Francisco is not included in the pages of his autobiography. However, Weise remembers meeting Arnold "in a classroom at the Art Institute San Francisco taking photography" in 1966. Michael Weise, taped interview with Stephanie Farago, Tape 6, transcribed in Stephanie Farago, *Steven Arnold Project*, 6. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

where under the tutelage of visual arts teacher Violet Chew, both he and his long-time friend, soul sister, and artist Pandora won scholarships for further studies in fine arts through painting.<sup>618</sup> He enrolls at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1961, with the support of his parents, where he stays for two years before going to the Ecole des Beaux Art in Paris in 1963 on a student exchange. Soon he would drop out of the Ecole in Paris and go to Formentera, an island off the coast of Spain, where he would be part of a commune and take “the original LSD-25” every day for a year.”<sup>619</sup> With a psychedelically enlightened mind and leaving a trail of “most handsome” Americans-in-Europe lovers behind, Arnold returns to San Francisco, via Fez, Morocco, then Paris, to complete his undergraduate study in 1965.<sup>620</sup> The following year he enters a graduate course in Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute, which offered “an experimental film program,” to which Arnold “was the first one to sign up,” he tells us with grandiosity.<sup>621</sup> What follows is Arnold’s career in filmmaking, alongside a few forays into commercial photography and fashion, with surrealist-influenced black and white shorts like *Messages, Messages* (1968) and psychedelic, absurdist feature-length films like *Luminous Procuress* (1971) earning him recognition in North American experimental film circles for his direction.<sup>622</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> Pandora and Arnold would be forever grateful for the Chew’s input and the freedom of expression afforded to them in her classes. Arnold would constantly refer to Chew as “divine, the mentor [he] truly needed at that point in [his] life.” Pandora also stresses the importance of Chew’s teachings in their art and lives: “She taught us love, to be open, and how to see. She taught us that we were all beautiful souls on a journey.”

Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 19.

Pandora, taped interview with Stephanie Farago, Tape 3, transcribed in Stephanie Farago, *Steven Arnold Project*, 3. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

<sup>619</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 31.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>622</sup> In 1969, *Messages, Messages* would win “Best Experimental Film” at the Hemisfilm International Film Festival, “Jury Award” at Vancouver International Film Festival, and would be invited to the “Director’s Fortnight” at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1970. *Luminous Procuress*, would be screened at the Whitney Museum of American

In his autobiography, he describes the imaginative freedom of taking his first tableau in 1981: “Here at last I had found my medium; [...] I could work without compromise, stretching my imagination to the max.”<sup>623</sup> In his first tableau photograph, *Angel of Night* (1981) Arnold’s maxed out imagination takes the shape of a mouthful of divinity (Fig. 36). In the image — which also dubs as the cover for Arnold’s first published collection of photographs, *Reliquaries* — a half-angel, half-human figure materialises on a stage shaped like an oval. The figure, portrayed by model Juan Fernandez, is framed by a makeshift curtain of thin white paper, with staggered holes punched in like teeth-marks. The paper frays at its edges and curls outwards and upwards, catching onto the translucent veils of tulle which curtain the scene at its edges, revealing a central oral darkness in the shape of a big O. The intense sources of light outside the frame casts long, dramatic shadows on the little paper that remains intact after being chewed. These shadows stretch from the pitch-black darkness of the backstage at the centre of the frame and scatter

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Art. Before abandoning film altogether, Arnold tried to find funding for a film based around a story drawn from Chinese mythology written in I Ching’s *Book of Changes*. The film was titled *Monkey* and would star his best friend and artist Kaisik Wong as the protagonist. This film would never be realised because of the lack of funding, and, according to some, a lack of story in Arnold’s script.

See: Harold, taped interview with Stephanie Farago, Tape 1, transcribed in Stephanie Farago, *Steven Arnold Project*, 23. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles;

Gerhart Samuel, taped interview with Stephanie Farago, Tape 8, transcribed in Stephanie Farago, *Steven Arnold Project*, 21. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

Information found in Michael Weise’s 1975 Resumé. Held at the Berkley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California, USA.

Steve Seid, “Illumination Procured: Steven Arnold and the Body Eclectic,” BAMPFA, undated, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://bampfa.org/page/illumination-procured-steven-arnold-and-body-eclectic>.

Gene Youngblood for *Expanded Cinema* (n.d.), quoted on promotional material for *Messages Messages* by Canyon Cinema, Sausalito, CA. Held at the Berkley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California, USA.

<sup>623</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 95.



radially to the outer limits of the photograph, giving the impression that the central darkness will soon suck in both the angel and me.

In *Angel of Night*, Arnold's mouth might close at any moment, it might shutter like a camera. Fernandez might start getting digested on the plastic tongue on which his figure stands: his feet are already dissolving into the shiny, frothy, spill of saliva at the bottom of the frame. Holding this frothy tongue from spilling out of the frame, a row of lit candles stands in a semi-circle, like a bottom-row of teeth. Arnold's image engenders a veritable appetite to swallow Fernandez, tasting him as he slowly dissolves like sugar on a wet tongue — oiled muscular body, cotton candy wings and feathered groin piece all. In an interview with Arnold's friend Stephanie Farago, Fernandez explains that Arnold used the row of lit candles to "symbolize the passage of time."<sup>624</sup> Much like Fernandez, the candles are already melting, slowly: hard and upright, they drop hot gelatinous white liquid, wax, in the photographic mouth. *Angel of Night* is chewed and eats at the same time, both food and hungry.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes that "for [him] the photographer's organ is not his eye [...] but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates [...]. I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way."<sup>625</sup> In her analysis of this passage, Mavor shifts the photographer's organ from the finger to the *mouth* (which perhaps frightens — and thrills — Barthes even more): "the shifting dynamics of maw and gaze are inherent to the very workings of the pre-digital still

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<sup>624</sup> Fernandez, interviewed by Stephanie Farago, quoted in Arnold and Farago, *Steven Arnold*, 157.

<sup>625</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 18.

camera, whose mouth *shutters* with smooth metal teeth.”<sup>626</sup> With his tableaux, Arnold materialises food with his mouth-camera. Arnold positions his angel on a stage that is shaped like a mouth and offers the photograph to be eaten both by his camera and by me, the photograph’s willing observer. Indeed, Arnold explores the relationship between his images and food in one of many bitesize manifestoes which are sprinkled amidst the preparatory drawings for his tableaux in his sketchbooks:

Creative energy is contagious [sic.] – in its finest form it heals the creator in his process – teaches him expands and enlightens all who fall within its golden beams [...] its [sic.] the moment that the shutter clicks when my eyes fill with tears for the glory of creation – I light a thousand candles in gratitude for that precious second. [...] The incarnation of my most secret visions takes concrete form and remains to be shared and given, like toast in high mass, as food to vision hungry children.<sup>627</sup>

Flowing like the beams of a golden shower, Arnold employs his contagious creativity to freeze on photographic paper images that he imagines sharing “as food to vision hungry children.” With this operation, Arnold engenders his ideal audience as “hungry children” waiting to be satiated by his image-cum-food photographic objects: his *Angel of Night* wants to be experienced with an open mouth.

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The oral dimensions of seeing as a form of taking the image into one’s body have most notably been put forward by psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, a predecessor to Lacan, who

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<sup>626</sup> Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima mon amour* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 101.

<sup>627</sup> Steven Arnold, “Obsessed by a Photograph — For Jamie [James Lee Herlihy],” Sketchbook, 1983, n.p. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

succinctly establishes, in his 1937 “The Scopophilic Instinct and Identification,” that “To look at = to devour.”<sup>628</sup> Discussing the processes of identification with the object as a form of assimilation of the Other, Fenichel attempts to exemplify his scopophilic equation through what he understands as a widespread passion for reading on the toilet, arguing that “part of one’s bodily substance is being lost and so fresh matter must be absorbed through the eyes.”<sup>629</sup> This brings Fenichel to provide a system of digestive scopophilia that hinges on the subject’s homeostasis, whereby something lost (i.e. shit) necessarily implies something gained (i.e. a book). While Fenichel associates this with “oral incorporation-tendencies,” he does so only timidly: Fenichel draws upon the ideas of the child’s oral sadism put forward some years prior by psychoanalysts Karl Abraham in 1924 and later redeveloped by Object Relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein in 1937 (both of which were at different times colleagues of Fenichel’s at the Berlin Institute of Psychoanalysis), but quickly does away with them to connect the eye with the penis rather than the mouth.<sup>630</sup>

Fenichel’s connection between seeing and the order of the phallus provides the basis for Lacan’s conception of the gaze as a form of desire and of mastery in the order of the symbolic, which has had a rather prolific life in art historical, especially Film Studies, scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>631</sup> Film scholars such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian

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<sup>628</sup> Otto Fenichel, “The Scopophilic Instinct and Identification,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 18 (1937): 6.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

<sup>630</sup> Russel Jacoby provides a more in-depth account of Fenichel’s position in the Berlin Institute as well as his relationship to Abraham and Klein. For more information, see: Russel Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>631</sup> Todd McGowan examines the uses of Lacanian psychoanalysis in Film studies in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as its subsequent resistance by “Post-Theory” film scholars, in his article: Todd McGowan, “Looking at the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes,” *Cinema Journal* 42 (2003) 3: 27-47.

Metz, and Laura Mulvey make use of Lacan's theorisations of the "Mirror Stage" to flesh out the power-relations established and reflected in the processes of identification between the object and its spectator. In his landmark book *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz argues that the relation between film and its spectator is an enhanced, more symbolic, form of the processes of identification established by the Lacanian child in front of the mirror.<sup>632</sup> Building on Baudry's idea that the subject's experience of watching a film is akin to that of the being a child, quasi-still and "hyper-vigilant," Metz argues that cinema is a "chain of many mirrors," where the subject's identification with a film produces the subject's own absence and a necessary, perpetual, dissatisfaction of the sexual drives based on distance (one watches a film from a distance) and in turn on desiring an object that is ultimately lost (the spectator is never in the film).<sup>633</sup> Mulvey further explores the analogy of the screen-as-mirror in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Here, Mulvey focuses on the act of looking at the cinema screen as constituting a "male gaze," a projected mode of looking which Mulvey associates with the gendered categories of "woman as image" and "man as the bearer of the look."<sup>634</sup> In the economy of the gaze, identification becomes representative of the unbalanced power relations between male and female, activity and passivity, whereby being looked at is akin to being possessed, mastered.<sup>635</sup> Even though film studies have progressed past these theorisations on the "screen-as-mirror," building on critiques that this formulation engenders a "missing

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<sup>632</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), 42-49.

<sup>633</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28 (1974-1975) 2: 39-47; Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 58-59.

<sup>634</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975) 3: 6-18.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*

spectator,” they have not been able to move past the insufficiency central to Lacanian identificatory processes.<sup>636</sup> Todd McGowan and Joan Copjec directly respond to this critique, also denouncing earlier Lacanian-influenced studies for not being Lacanian enough, but only succeed in engendering a spectator that is embodied, but incomplete.<sup>637</sup> In these Lacanian readings, identification with an object is sex that never climaxes, hunger that keeps its food in its mouth to master it (though the food might resist this mastery), but never fully swallows it.

Can a reading of Arnold’s *Angel of Night* then also incorporate the pleasure of swallowing its angel? Can it engender an identification with the photograph that does not result in the absence or partial loss? Arnold’s angel is after all offered to us “as food,” and as such he needs to be read through the satisfaction of hunger: I must ingest it as food to both nutrition and sexual appetite. More than a Lacanian spectator, I want to feel satiated by cooperating with Arnold as his table companion, I become a “playing spectator.” Film scholar Phillis Creme adopts Winnicottian psychoanalysis to define a “playing spectator” against the Lacanian spectator engendered by Metz: her spectator becomes the “paradox” which occurs when “the spectator begins to play” and “she makes that shift into her own

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<sup>636</sup> See, for instance: Stephen Prince, “Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Problem of the Missing Spectator,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 71-86.

<sup>637</sup> Cf. McGowan, “Looking at the Gaze,” 30;

Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1994), 15-38.

Anthony Ballas provides a more in-depth analysis of McGowan’s and Copjec’s claims against the earlier uses of Lacanian theory in film studies in his article: Anthony Ballas, “Film Theory after Copjec,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 51 (2021): 63-81.

potential space and starts to participate in the action that she now both watches and enacts, apparently passive but at the same time active.”<sup>638</sup>

“Mak[ing] the shift into [my] own potential space,” I enact the very same oral operations that Arnold exerts in his photographic practice; I speak the oral language of the fairy tale: Mavor argues that “an O is the mouth from which the fairy tale emerges. [...]. The letter O, full and abundant, looks like a numerical 0. Empty, not full.”<sup>639</sup> O is my empty mouth wanting to be filled with Arnold’s fairy tales. At the centre of *Angel of Night*, the angel stands partly genuflected; his hips move backwards, seemingly sucked in by the oral opening at the back of the frame. His feathered wings, too, splayed and curving upwards are protracted towards the black mouth hole, reflecting the angel’s neck cocked backwards. With his hips, wings, and head moving away from my mouth and into the photograph’s, the angel’s chest arches forward, and he offers me a single dark nipple, highly set off against a brightly illuminated, milky-white pectoral. Arnold stages this image not only as food for him — as food for the “maw” of the camera and the non-descriptive blackness of the photograph’s background — but as a feast to be “shared and given.”<sup>640</sup> On the angel’s body, our mouths may find each other in a sucky kiss.

Moving away from the language of mastery (a mother is never passive, never mastered by the child; rather, she actively *facilitates* the child’s identificatory becoming), Klein and Winnicott, differently from Lacan, directly link feeding and oral stimulation in their consideration of the child’s orality: it is during breastfeeding that the child first

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<sup>638</sup> Phyllis Creme, “The Playing Spectator,” in *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 41.

Cf. also: Winnicott, “Playing: A Theoretical Statement,” 51-70.

<sup>639</sup> Mavor, *Aurelia*, 9.

<sup>640</sup> Arnold, “Obsessed by a Photograph.”

experiences oral stimulation. In his 1936 “Appetite and Emotional Disorder,” Winnicott directly links his ideas of oral sexuality and hunger to Klein’s “Love, Hate and Reparation.”<sup>641</sup> In her psychoanalytic work on orality, Klein builds on Abraham’s work on oral sadism, by which the child exercises in fantasy a certain destructive violence to the mother’s breast while breastfeeding, and complicates it by introducing the possibility of the child’s wish for reparation.<sup>642</sup> Once the child has destroyed the Other, most notably the good part-object of the mother’s breast, the Kleinian child attempts to make reparation through the mouth to deal with the guilt of having destroyed a loved-object.<sup>643</sup> Winnicott feeds on Klein’s concepts and defines an original “oral instinct,” the need for food, subsequently nourishes an “oral fantasy,” the need to satisfy hunger, which gives richness to the child’s inner creative life:

First in the appreciation of oral function there comes the recognition of oral instinct. ‘I want to suck, eat, bite. I enjoy sucking, eating, biting. I feel satisfied after sucking, eating, biting.’

Next comes oral fantasy. ‘When hungry I think of food, when I eat I think of taking food in. I think of what I like to keep inside, and I think of what I want to be rid of and I think of getting rid of it.’

Third comes a more sophisticated linking up of this theme of oral fantasy with the ‘inner world.’<sup>644</sup>

The oral pleasure which the child is afforded through its mouth in the space of breastfeeding is directly linked to its fantastic restaging. “I want to suck, eat, bite” the

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<sup>641</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “Appetite and Emotional Disorder” [1936], in D.W. Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 33.

<sup>642</sup> Cf. Karl Abraham, “A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, Viewed in Light of Mental Disorders,” in *Essential Papers on Object Loss*, ed. Rita V. Frankiel (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 72-93.

<sup>643</sup> Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” 306-343.

<sup>644</sup> Winnicott, “Appetite,” 34.

mother's breast, and "when hungry I think of" the mother's breast, digesting it, getting rid of it, repairing it. What Winnicott is referring to here, as he discusses the child's relationship to its food and the satisfaction associated with it, ultimately falls on the child's capacity to use objects, to play with them in the facilitating environment (discussed in **chapter one**): "oral fantasy can be deduced from observations on the infants and little children who play with an object."<sup>645</sup> Winnicott sees in the child's desire for assimilation, its desire to keep objects inside its stomach, as a necessary form of greed that is conducive to playing and creativity. Some forty years after "Appetite and Emotional Disorder," Winnicott expands on the oral and auto-erotic origins of playing: in his *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott argues that "thumb-sucking" and the auto-erotic stimulation of the mouth engenders the child's first experience of object relating — playing — and "a defence against anxiety."<sup>646</sup> Playing with the mouth is masturbatory, creative, and a mechanism against anxious positions. Of course, nothing is materially swallowed in thumb-sucking; the swallowing is *materialised*, for the child's pleasurable satisfaction, in the child's "inner world:" "One may suppose that thinking, or fantasizing, gets linked up with this functional experiences."<sup>647</sup>

Like a child, "I want to suck, eat, bite" Arnold's angel. "I enjoy sucking, eating, biting" Arnold's angel. "I feel satisfied after sucking, eating, biting" Arnold's angel, in the same way that the "maw" of the camera, the mouth of the stage, and Arnold feel satisfied. Arnold writes about the pleasure and satisfaction of creating his tableaux multiple times in his sketchbooks: in his 1983 sketchbook, he writes "I love the process — whatever all

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<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

<sup>646</sup> Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 4-5.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid., 5.



this becomes I have had the joy of creating it.”<sup>648</sup> Arnold directly links the joy of creating his work to the erotic pleasures of orality: his tableaux are like banquets to be swallowed, even if in fantasy. Always in his 1983 sketchbook, Arnold writes: “Behind my mask are rivers of tears for the beauty I find in this form — to freeze it into potent [sic] swallowable tableaux [sic.] is my goal.”<sup>649</sup> The materialisation of Arnold’s inner world is frozen on a tableau that is as potent as it is “swallowable.” Arnold’s *Angel of Night* is a banquet to be shared and swallowed by the photograph and me: rather than a simple Lacanian screen onto which I project and identify my hunger with Arnold’s, *Angel of Night* is an invitation to keep the photograph in my mouth and pleurably swallow its fairy tale song. Becoming “as food,” Arnold’s photograph asks to be sucked and eaten, to enter my body and be held in my stomach — operations which find their bodily localisation in the mouth and its erotic stimulation.

White and generative, *Angel of Night* demands to be understood through the oral stimulation and nutritive pleasures of breastfeeding and fellatio, milk and semen. Winnicott tells us that for the child there must be a certain healthy greed to eat food, a greed which he further connects in his “Appetite and Emotional Disorder” to the child’s disinhibition to playing. In the article, Winnicott illustrates thirteen cases of children and adult whereby his patients present difficulties in the assimilation of food, be it for lack of desire (appetite) or lack of interest in eating (swallowing). In each illustration, Winnicott first describes the child’s playing pattern, its engagement with the world, to analyse its relation to food. With especially little children, Winnicott position a spatula in front of

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<sup>648</sup> Steven Arnold, Sketchbook, 1983, n.p. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

<sup>649</sup> In Steven Arnold, Sketchbook, 1983, n.p. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

them and observes how this is utilised in play, whether this is thrown away or kept through their attempts to eat it — later, in *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott will confirm that the child starts relating to the external reality by oral stimulation, by the child's fantasy of swallowing the world.<sup>650</sup> Where “[the child's] play is unimaginative, lacking in richness and fantasy,” the child might be said to “[have] never been ordinarily greedy:” when it comes to the child playing with a spatula, the child might throw it away, not putting it in its mouth first as it is expected.<sup>651</sup> For the child, swallowing food is necessarily agitated by the child's greed: his fantasy of ingestion underscores a wish to make food his forever that is as erotic in its oral stimulation as it is playful. Playing with food, playing with the mother's breast, allows the child to greedily keep the breast inside as an internal object, and outside as an external object that despite the child's attacks is never mastered and never destroyed.

In my identification as one of the “vision hungry children,” Arnold asks to be greedy and continuously suck and eat his Angel. This operation may engender a form of anxiety that my greed to eat may also destroy the Angel that gives me food — an anxiety that the child also experiences in relation to the mother's breast: if I destroy the Angel, if I destroy the mother, who will feed me? Arnold's *Angel of Night* engenders this anxiety of total destruction of the photograph and of the Angel: with candles like teeth burning so close to a plastic tongue, with the upper row of teeth made out of paper, the whole image might be set alight and the angel might burn as the maw of the camera shuts. Indeed, he may be *swallowed* by the flames — *fire like a greedy child's mouth swallows its food to sustain itself*. But as Winnicott argues, this anxiety must be actively dealt with through playing

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<sup>650</sup> Winnicott, “Appetite,” 48-49.

Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 1-6.

<sup>651</sup> Winnicott, “Appetite,” 49.

and reparation, through a sustained disinhibition in playing and tasting with the other's body:

It is these same anxieties that are dealt with *at the source* by the inhibitions of greed [...]. Inhibition means poverty of instinctual experience, poverty of inner world development, and consequent relative lack of normal anxiety about inner objects and relationships.<sup>652</sup>

As such, to be greedy in relating to the other, to establish a relationship, to sit at Arnold's banquets, one needs to move from an anxious position to a position of richness and fullness. Dealing with "the inhibitions of greed," inhibitions which are readily related to what Litvak describes as sustaining the economy of not-enough-pleasure, one must "suck, eat, bite" and, in an excessive move, swallow.<sup>653</sup>

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Swallowing the Angel's milk and semen is a reparative surprise which Arnold invites me to share with him. As Winnicott argues, the inability to incorporate objects underscores a certain unbearable anxiety that prevents the child from establishing meaningful and playful relations with its environment. Sedgwick picks up on this anxiety in relating to objects in her Kleinian understanding of the paranoid and reparative positions between which a reader can swing. Fleshing out her "reparative reading" through the idea of reparation put forward by Klein, Sedgwick demonstrates the generative surprises that dealing with destructive and aggressive anxieties of a paranoid position opens: once a

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<sup>652</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>653</sup> Litvak, *Strange Gourmets*, 7.

reader is able to move past the hallmark of the paranoid position, one that for Sedgwick is defined by “strategies of *forestalling pain*,” the reader is able “to move toward a sustained *seeking of pleasure*.”<sup>654</sup> This quest for pleasure, constantly sustained in excess like one of Florêncio’s gay pigs, finds its roots in Klein’s oral reparation: indeed, Klein’s idea of the “drive of reparation” is motivated by the child’s guilt of believing that his aggression toward the mother’s breast, in biting and mouthing it during feeding, has destroyed the mother.<sup>655</sup> Connecting its oral genesis to the creation of a readerly positionality, Sedgwick argues that a reparative reading opens the surprising possibilities from “providing a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care.”<sup>656</sup> Swallowing a photograph requires and elicits love and care of the eating child: it demands embracing the possibility of having destroyed the Angel and realising that after sucking him, he is still there outside me for more sucking but also frozen and preserved inside me and the maw of the camera. The angel is an excessive banquet that cannot be depleted (destroyed) and that reparatively sustains seeking pleasure through tasting and swallowing him.

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### **feeding in the dark.**

In her monograph on eating, scholar Ruth Cruickshank characterises Barthes as “one of the post-war French thinkers most readily associated with food.”<sup>657</sup> Scholarship on Barthes’s conceptualisation on the cultural mythologies of food and his use of food as an

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<sup>654</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 137.

<sup>655</sup> Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” 306-343.

<sup>656</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 137.

<sup>657</sup> Ruth Cruickshank, *Leftovers: Eating, Drinking and Re-Thinking with Case Studies from Post-War French Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 33.

analogy to think through semiology is a bountiful feast, with scholars like Sophie Eager, Knut Stene-Johansen, Ariane Pfenninger, and Jean-Pierre Richard building on Barthes's conceptualisation of food as a structure to discuss modern and contemporary literature.<sup>658</sup> Barthes's queer foodstuffs, however, remain unexplored. In his inaugural lecture of January 7, 1977, Barthes proposes a gastronomic understanding of writing: "writing is to be found wherever words have flavour (the French words for *flavour* (*savoir*) and *knowledge* (*savoir*) have the same Latin root). [...] Where knowledge is concerned, things must [...] have that ingredient, the salt of words. It is this taste which makes knowledge profound, fecund."<sup>659</sup> Just four years prior, Barthes outlines in his *Pleasure of the Text* the capacity of writing to engender a "textual pleasure" by emphasising the oral sexuality of words.<sup>660</sup> Barthes argues that for a corporeality of writing that, rather than aiming at "the clarity of message," creates "a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, the tongue."<sup>661</sup>

What emerges from Barthes's description of writing and words is not a form of pleasure that is physically oral simply because "to eat, to speak, to sing (need we add: to kiss?) are

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<sup>658</sup> Sophie Eager, "Eating with Barthes: The Comfort of Touching the Real," *Barthes Studies* 7 (2021): 23-48;

Knut Stene-Johansen, "Nourriture/Food," in *Living Together: Roland Barthes, the Individual, and the Community*, ed. Knut Stene-Johansen, Christian Refsum and Johan Schimanski (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), 255-266;

Ariane Pfenninger, "A Table avec Roland Barthes" ["At the Table with Roland Barthes"], *Romance Notes* 42 (2002) 2: 243-250;

Jean-Pierre Richard, *Roland Barthes: Dernière Paysage [Roland Barthes: Last Landscape]* (Paris: Verdier, 2016).

<sup>659</sup> Roland Barthes, "Lecture: In Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977," trans. Richard Howard, *Oxford Literary Review* 4 (1979) 1: 35-36.

<sup>660</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 66.

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

operations which have the same site of the body for origin,” however crucial their bodily convergences are.<sup>662</sup> Rather, Barthes’s oral pleasure of language seem to agitate in its affiliation to a queer oral taste: the pleasure of the text is attained through the articulation of the tongue to produce an oral feeling (its taste?) that is flocculent, patinous, salty, grainy as it slides through the throat, and fecund. The pleasure of the text for Barthes provides the same bodily knowledge and oral stimulation of giving a blowjob (to suck has, after all, “the same site of the body for origin”) and the mouthfeel of tasting and swallowing-eating cum. More than a Lacanian anorexic “nothing,” advocated by Edelman, pleasure is excessive in its taste of cum: it exceeds clarity, it exceeds meaning in favour of wholly bodily stimulative sensations. In *Dreamson Dreamulism* (1987), Arnold covers his models with seasoning and garnishes to further emphasis their taste and mouthfeel (Fig. 37). The photograph serves me two sleeping boys: the first boy is sprinkled with petals, stems, and butterflies against a black background scratched with globular white noise; he occupies the top half of the images, balled up for easier ingestion among golden grainy speckles. The second boy, Arnold serves on a silver platter: he lies on a metallic tongue shining with watery saliva; his legs genuflected, the boy is served with a side of long smooth noodles, though the three tinfoil nipples prodding out of his pectorals and on the side of his thigh scratch a little as he moves down my oesophagus.

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Barthes returns to pleasure and desire as exceeding meaning in his *Lover’s Discourse* to discuss the idea of “Night” and its darkness and in *The Rustle of Language* to discuss

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<sup>662</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 257-258.

sitting in a cinema: the oral pleasures which Barthes ascribes to language and text finds their location in dark interiors. Like *Angel of Night*, and most of Arnold tableaux, flavour is served against an intensely dark background: the open mouth offers an easily visible entry into the darkness within our bodies. In *Lover's Discourse*, Barthes postulates an insatiable desire that does not stop in darkness: "I suspend any interpretation; I enter into the night of non-meaning; desire continues to vibrate."<sup>663</sup> Suspending interpretation, the photograph opens itself to an erotic and sensorial engagement, as Susan Sontag's invitation in her essay "Against Interpretation" posits.<sup>664</sup> It is perhaps favouring this erotic imagination, in seeking the dark pleasures of non-meaning, that Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* that "In order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes."<sup>665</sup>

Barthes attempts to materialise a cinematic, erotic darkness: with our eyes closed, leaving us in the darkness, perhaps a photograph is best interacted with in the mouth. Indeed, Barthes found that black "is the 'color' of a diffused eroticism [...] it is because I am enclosed [in the anonymous, populated, numerous, darkness of the cinema] that I work and glow with all my desire."<sup>666</sup> Indeed, Barthes continues, "it is in this urban dark that the body's freedom is generated."<sup>667</sup> Building on Barthes's description of the excessive desire in black, Mavor continues in her 2012 embodied examination of memory and forgetfulness, *Black and Blue*:

Black is the color of the darkroom, of desire, [...] of cinema, of being underground, of a fall through the hole of the pupil of the eye, of a bomb shelter, of a cellar, of a pile of coal, of dirt, of sweet, thick, dark molasses, of bad luck

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<sup>663</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 171.

<sup>664</sup> Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 9-10.

<sup>665</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 64.

<sup>666</sup> Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 346.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid.

cats, [...], of night, of caves, of melancholia, of the black sun, of the sunless sky (after a volcanic eruption or after the dropping of a nuclear bomb) and of beauty. [...] Black is the color of cinema itself. [...] Black is [...] womb-like.<sup>668</sup>

Thrilling, exciting, scary, melancholic, mournful, ecstatic, childish, erotic. Black is the colour of the mouth in Arnold's *Angel of Night* which allows me to taste cum. Barthes's cinema is glory hole black: it is night and "urban dark;" cinema is "the very darkness of [his] desire," where "[he] live[s] between blows" (my emphasis).<sup>669</sup> "Darkness," Barthes tells us, "is transluminous:" it envelops and passes through figures of light like naked bodies in a bathhouse, "the dark interior of love."<sup>670</sup> And Arnold only shot at night after sumptuous salons with "every creative person who came through LA" at his studio.<sup>671</sup>

In *Heal-A-Zation Swathe a la Glob Ba* (1985), the photograph that gives the cover to Arnold's second photobook, *Epiphanies* (1987), Arnold's "figures of light" lie in a wet dark mouth, orgasmically overlapping onto one another owing to the multiple exposures with which Arnold experiments and refines as he continues creating his tableaux (Fig. 38). In *Heal-A-Zation*, an Angel floats on a puddle of darkness, the black floor of Arnold's home studio. He lies on his right side, twisting his hips and legs, genuflected as he drags them to his upper body, to the left of the image. Like the Angel in *Angel of Night*, he offers his nipple directly to the maw of the camera: twisting his spine, his abdomen contorts towards the floor, his chest and pectorals lie flat on top of the papier-mâché angel

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<sup>668</sup> Mavor, *Black and Blue*, 9.

<sup>669</sup> In the original French, this passage does not lose its sucky oral eroticism. "Je vis au coup par coup," "sip by sip," writes Barthes.

Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 171.

Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), 203.

<sup>670</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 171.

<sup>671</sup> Vishnu Dass, in conversation with Jeppe Ugelvig, "Steven Arnold," *Acne Paper* 19 (2024): n.p.



wings. Arnold's dramatic illumination, so close to the floor, casts a strong light to the face of the Angel, emphasising his pursed lips, but also casts strong shadows to his abdomen which begins dematerialising with the black floor: in a dark puddle, his stomach is half-submerged, half-digested by the oral darkness of the background. Around his right ankle, a metallic chain tethers the Angel to the insides of the metallic scallop shell surrounded by waves of gilded fabric at the bottom of the image, bounding him to the image, as Barthes is bound to the bliss of the text.<sup>672</sup> He holds a golden rose in his left hand, perhaps picked from the row of roses at the bottom. Like the candles in *Angel of Night*, the roses frame the image at the bottom, overlapping onto each other like a row of crooked teeth. The rose-cum-tooth in the Angel's hand points directly to the Angel's glutes and cleft, which occupy the exact centre of the square photograph.

As Johnson describes: "[adorned bodies] were laid out in a busy field on the floor, and photographed by Arnold hanging on a trapeze installed in the centre of the studio, which produced [...] the disconcerting effect of subjects floating in a sea of glittering objects and fabric."<sup>673</sup> The intensely dark background of Arnold's photographs does not betray any clue to the location of the studio: in *Heal-A-Zation*, naked bodies float on a liquid surface. Specks of light refract and gleam against the darkness: transluminous, these points of light puddle around the Angel's wings and head, giving him the semblance of a halo. They ripple around the floating Angel and the four semi-transparent naked men which occupy the four corners of the image.

In his study of the strategies which modern art and media have employed to create artificial darkness, Noam Elcott argues that "controlled artificial darkness" is a

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<sup>672</sup> See: "I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable*, bliss that binds me to the text." Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 19.

<sup>673</sup> Johnson, "Crocodile Tears," 102.

dispositive which “negated space, disciplined bodies, and suspended corporeality in favor of the production and reception of images.”<sup>674</sup> Examining modernist art through its roots in the entertainment of the macabre, Elcott is committed to charting the history of the black screen to phantasmic, or rather “phantasmagoric,” spectacles of projection and light refractions that toed the line between the physical (i.e. following the scientific principles of light) and theatrical engagement with audiences.<sup>675</sup> Phantasmagoria, he defines elsewhere, is “the assembly of humans and images in a common space,” in which a displacement and a dematerialisation occurs.<sup>676</sup> Part of the experience of dark lanterns and phantasmagoric slides shows which began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe, especially in London, consisted of “a black-ground image” which “*hovered* in space, unmoored from the screen. [...] The result did not resemble an image on a screen as much as a phantom suspended in space.”<sup>677</sup>

In *Heal-A-Zation*, the overlap of multiple frames participates in the “illusions of incorporeality” that defines phantasmagoric spectacles: the model who poses as the Angel reappears as the four naked men around the frame. Of course, the Angel is not “unmoored:” indeed, he is actively moored (as a boat to the pier, as a puppet with which Arnold loved playing as a child) by the chain around his ankle. The same cannot be said for the four men drifting in the image: more than “hovering,” they are floating in dark wetness, following the currents of Barthes’s night pleasures; as I discussed in **chapter**

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<sup>674</sup> Noam M. Elcott, *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-133.

<sup>676</sup> Noam M. Elcott, “Tony Oursler’s Phantasmagorias,” in *Imponderable: The Archives of Tony Oursler*, ed. Anne Weher (Zurich: Ringier, 2016), 435.

<sup>677</sup> Elcott, *Artificial Darkness*, 84.

two\_, “[Barthes’s] pleasure can very well take the form of a drift.”<sup>678</sup> The two figures at the bottom are quasi-specular: both curled up onto themselves with their arms protracted towards the centre of the image, they caress the Angel’s wings and chain as they seem to drift outside the frame, away from the muscular Angel. The two figures at the top have already partly floated away: like driftwood they follow the wet currents that stream away from the Angel: their chests and heads outside of the frame, only their partly submerged legs and lower stomachs remain visible.

Although Arnold’s subjects are often muscular young men, sculpturally invested in presence, like George Platt Lynes’s models, the superimposition of images and multiple exposures in the same frame, makes this muscularity transparent, soluble.<sup>679</sup> In the photograph, the superimposition “suspends corporeality” in favour of a wet assimilation: like sugar on a tongue, they dissolve into Arnold’s liquified floor. Arnold’s use of visual darkness does negate a real space and favours a psychic one of childish oral pleasures: a real floor may start tasting like a tongue. This spatial negation, as Elcott’s study points, is articulated and emphasised by the ghostly apparitions that illuminate it: “the artificial darkness in the lower stage [where the actor would be located] was the agent of

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<sup>678</sup> As Takano writes: “One of [Arnold’s] main interests as a child was his marionette theatre, and his playroom was like a set for his puppet shows. Steven still makes all the props and sets for his photographs. It is the same microcosm that he had created in his playroom as a child.” In Ikuroh Takano, “Positive Signs and Metaphors,” in *Steven Arnold: Angels of Night*, ed. AMC and Shuhei Takahashi (Tokyo: Parco CO., 1987), n.p. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 18-19.

<sup>679</sup> Arnold was intimately aware with the photography of George Platt Lynes: in one of his sketchbooks he writes, “you have to proove [sic.] that you are much more than G.P.L.” In the same sketchbook, Arnold also amuses himself by planning a prank call to the publisher of his photobooks, Jack Woody, pretending to be George Platt Lynes. In Steven Arnold, *Sketchbook, 1982 – 1983*, n.p. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles., n.p. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

Elcott, *Artificial Darkness*, 100.

dislocation.”<sup>680</sup> Through a technical apparatus of mirrors and images of the actors’ body parts, “disciplined” in a space with clearly demarcated boundaries, could be projected, “disembodied,” on “a second black backdrop” on the stage for the audience’s uncanny enjoyment.<sup>681</sup>

When it comes to photography, this displacement in which the spiritual and the spiritive come to life in these forms of *fin-de-siècle* entertainment is not immediately translatable. As Elcott delineates, in the uses of this dispositif in spirit photography and the implicit level of technical (and subjective) mastery it entails, the black screen in these images is often repressed; the black screen poetically disappears in the darkness of the camera obscura during combination.<sup>682</sup> While a certain level of discipline is exerted on the Angel, by chaining him to a liquidly contextualising shell, this disciplining somehow disappears in the drifting of the four men: undisciplined, they are sucked away from the image and assimilated into the “disorder” of Barthes’s desiring night; “*estar en tinieblas* (to be in the shadows: *tenebrae*) happens to me when I am blinded by attachment to things and the disorder which emanates from that condition.”<sup>683</sup> “Blinded,” seeing black, “by attachment,” Barthes’s desire resists its maturational disciplining: as discussed in **chapters one\_ and two\_**, not severing attachments to the mother and her representatives is a resistance to a mature criticality, and a resistance to growing up straight. Merging with the dark floor of Arnold’s photographic mouth — under their tongues, mouths have wet floors that secrete digestive saliva — the four men index a disorderly, excessive and accretive, childish insatiability: that of a camera that (c)licks, (c)licks, (c)licks, (c)licks,

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<sup>680</sup> Elcott, *Artificial Darkness*, 100.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid., 109-118.

<sup>683</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 171.

and (c)licks the same body in five (how greedy!) exposures, and by addition of (c)licking in the printing, it both starts dissolving the model like a lollipop and repairs him into a single frozen tableaux.

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What is striking about Elcott's historicization of the black screen in spirit photography is a reticence in fully giving into the playful element of this trickery. Crucially, this photographic mode was childish entertainment — a mix of technical bravura and amateurish representation purely made to entertain. Though Elcott acknowledges the popularity of spirit photography as emphasised by the proliferation in Europe and the US of how-to guidebooks, he does not linger on their titles as he lists “manuals such as Bergeret and Drouin's *Les récréations photographiques* (1890), Schnaus's *Fotografischer Zeitvertrieb* (1890), and Woodbury's *Photographic Amusements* (1896).”<sup>684</sup> *Photographical Recreations; Photographic Pastimes; Photographic Amusements*. The history of spirit photography — the photography of flying bodies — appears deeply entrenched in child's play.<sup>685</sup> The aesthetic ascribed to this photographic mode was not that of the professional adult photographer: it was amateurish, immature work — like one of Leonardo's flying machines according to Freud.

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<sup>684</sup> Elcott, *Artificial Darkness*, 111.

<sup>685</sup> Cf. Chéroux who argues that the turn of the century witnessed “the development of new entertainment-oriented practices that were designed specifically for them [amateur photographers] and grouped under the general heading of ‘photographic recreation.’” In Clément Chéroux, “Ghost Dialectics: Spirit Photography in Entertainment and Belief,” in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, ed. Clément Chéroux, Andreas Fisher, Pierre Apraxine, Denis Cauquilhem and Sophie Schmit (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 52.

Freud postulates in his *Leonardo* that flying is directly related to the regressed male homosexual who fixates over the symbolic blowjobs given in childhood.<sup>686</sup> Starting from Leonardo's earliest memory — that of a vulture prying open his mouth with its tail while Leonardo was still in his crib — Freud weaves an analysis that passes through the visual instances of winged penises in antiquity and linguistic colloquialisms in which birds may come to signify a penis.<sup>687</sup> His reading of Leonardo's "distorted" fantasy of a memory lingers on the hieroglyph of the vulture in ancient Egypt, where bird, mother, and penis are united in one androgynous symbol, à la holy trinity.<sup>688</sup> This fancy of absent mothers, memories, and penises allows, according to Freud, a special insight into the psychic motivations behind Leonardo's artistic production as an adult, especially when it comes to the Florentine artist's insistence on (o, so tragically!) putting aside his (mature) painterly masterpieces to focus on (immature) "trifles," "fables and riddles," and the engineering contraptions which would allow him to fly.<sup>689</sup> Arnold looks past our shoulders as he serves himself to me in his *Self-Portrait as Leonardo Da Vinci* (late 1980s) (Fig. 39). He holds a glittered globe in his right hand while his left is pointing up at the sky and at his own creation—an Italianate landscape sketched out in large brushstrokes of paint, partly covered by a theatrical curtain. His right forearm materialises out of a hole in the dark sleeve of his tunic. His arm flies mid-air as it holds the globe: it levitates against Arnold's black tunic allowing the globe drills another hole at the level of Arnold's stomach filling it with grainy white. A dove sweeps down from the top right-

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<sup>686</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood" [1910], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XI*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 63-137.

<sup>687</sup> Freud, "Leonardo Da Vinci," 125.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

hand corner of the frame: Leonardo's bird-dick, with its wings splayed and a single feather as a tail, flies towards Arnold, whose bottom lip poutily protrudes in waiting for the patting of the bird's tail, to be satiated.

"Why do so many people dream of being able to fly?" Asks Freud rhetorically. "The answer that psycho-analysis gives is that to fly or to be a bird is only a disguise for another wish," namely "a longing to be capable of sexual performance," which is an abstruse way to mean homosexually desiring (having/receiving/fellating) a penis.<sup>690</sup> Freud makes sure to clarify that the homosexual desire of flight, which is displaced to a disproportionate attachment to playing in Leonardo, is inherently childish and crude and as such is sublimated and repressed into other activities:

It is probable that Leonardo's play-instinct vanished in his mature years, and that it too found its way into the activity of research which represented the latest and highest expansion of his personality.<sup>691</sup>

As Freud concludes, Leonardo's childish impulse to restage, relive, reify homosexual fellatio — that is, Leonardo's erotic instinct sublimated into his play-instinct — "vanished in his mature years," and his ideal homosexual impulses were sublimated into the scientific and mechanic pursuit of knowledge and allowed Leonardo to "live in abstinence."<sup>692</sup>

However, this comes as an unsatisfying conclusion to Freud's writing, not only because of its theorisation of homosexuality as a pathology to be avoided at all costs, and which cannot possibly tarnish the name of the great Leonardo da Vinci. Rather, it seems an odd conclusion because of its unjustified retrocession on the creative potential of adult

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid., 125-126.

<sup>691</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid., 132.

childishness, immaturity, and playing. As Mavor noted, “Freud [...] *emphasises* the importance of play with special regard for artistic practice”: indeed, Leonardo appears “forever ‘boyish’” in Freud’s portrayal, not redemptively mature in his later years.<sup>693</sup> As Mavor also stresses, Freud seems more interested in crafting a portrait of a Leonardo who keeps on playing in his later life, that researches the genesis and pleasure of his earlier instance of homosexual desire that flying represents.<sup>694</sup> Indeed, Leonardo’s obsession with aviation might be an attempt at creatively reliving “its infantile erotic roots.”<sup>695</sup> His intricate drawings of wings as well as “the degree of affective interest with which he clung to his wish to succeed in imitating the art of flying himself,” seem to me less related to recreating an attachment to the mother who was absent in his life than they are to evade the inherent impossibility of restaging the most pleasurable instance of giving fellatio he has ever had.<sup>696</sup>

Freud explains a particular investment in one’s childhood and in the wish of flight in the subject may signify a particularly pleasurable erotic experience by pointing out “how slowly anyone tears himself from his childhood if in his childhood days he enjoyed the highest erotic bliss, which is never again attained” in the subject’s adulthood.<sup>697</sup> This investment is sublimated into creativity again and again thanks to a return to the child’s play-instinct. In short, being childish and immature and acting upon it is directly linked to the subject’s quest for a deeply male homosexual erotic pleasure. I am not stressing this to reiterate the long-standing stereotype that all gay men are children and, in Mavor’s

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<sup>693</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 68.

<sup>694</sup> Freud, “Leonardo Da Vinci,” 127.

<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.



words, “boy[s] who [...] [do] not grow out of [their] ‘boyishness.’”<sup>698</sup> Indeed, classifying homosexual desire as a regression into childhood and as having a genesis in childhood has proven to be dangerous. It facilitates the pathologizing discourse of homosexuality as something that can be cured and reversed, even as homosexuality is medically demoted from the list of pathologies in 1973, as Sedgwick explains.<sup>699</sup> For Freud, Leonardo commits a pathologised faux pas that he needs (and eventually does) to grow out of: he remains attached to the childish, effeminate, gay oral pleasures of sucking dick—pleasures that, in Freud, Leonardo compulsively restages or, in Edelman’s Lacanian language, *positivises*. Indeed, Freud explains that the intense anxiety of castration is resolved in Leonardo through his continued oral anorexia: unable to process his castration anxiety while still giving head, Leonardo ends up living a “life in abstinence;” unable to bear blowjobs, Leonardo stops eating all together—but Arnold’s stomach is full crowned sparkling glob(e)s to manage his hungry anxiety.

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In *Heal-A-Zation*, Arnold seemingly castrates the same model five times with the maw of his camera. In the dark photographic mouth, the figures float penis-less: their genitals have already been assimilated by the wet tongue. The liquid darkness of the photograph’s tongue covers the figures’ crotches. In the photograph, Arnold intimately holds the anxiety of castration which Leonardo finds unbearable through his oral fantasies of eating, swallowing, ingesting Angel and boys whole through photography. In the Notes for his lectures at the Collège de France, Barthes reads the childishness of Freud’s

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<sup>698</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 72.

<sup>699</sup> Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay,” 155-159.

portrayal of Leonardo through a of “fright,” “excess,” and “wound:” “Freud dealt with fright, mainly, I believe, in connection with Leonardo da Vinci [...]. Leonardo: excessively sensitive to trauma, sensitive to sudden stimulations, even low-intensity ones. Ceaselessly on the verge of being wounded.” (Or, less penetrative and more castrative, “on the verge of being cut/injured,” from the original French “*blessé*”).<sup>700</sup>

This anxiety of destroying through chewing, of castrating through fellatio is resolved in Arnold’s photograph with an insistence on oral pleasures of nutrition and of erotic stimulation. Ceaselessly on the verge of being wounded, of being eaten, of being sucked, like a mother’s breast, the figures in the photograph twist their spine and reveal their glutes: these are also revealed to be at least in part licked by dark water. Arnold does not dispel the anxieties and pleasures that may be derived by oral sexuality in favour of at best desiring anorexia: he regalanises them with their bodily sensitivity to “sudden stimulations,” constantly restaging these pleasure in photographs as potential spaces for the unfolding of gay sex and sexuality. With his photographs and their oral, wet, darkness, Arnold *materialises* the very gay spaces, practices, and tastes lost to AIDS which Crimp is mourning in his “Mourning and Militancy.” Arnold, like a child, mourns the lost object with his mouth and with his mouth he repairs it. Arnold’s books, *Reliquaries* and *Epiphanies*, open like menus on photographic glory holes and bathhouses: wet, dark places full of creative white semen, where images and bodies come and leave; photographic places where Arnold finds that he can “reinvent the world on [his] own

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<sup>700</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, ed. by Thomas Clerc and Eric Marty, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 207-208.

Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)*, ed. Thomas Clerc and Eric Marty (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 258.

terms” by “ejaculat[ing] [his] imagery [sic.] without compromise,” as he writes in 1982 in an unpublished introduction for *Reliquaries*.<sup>701</sup>

Flicking through the pages of Arnold’s books, theatrically staged naked bodies materialise on the idiosyncratic black background of Arnold’s studio. They are adorned, glamourised, with make-up and drapery which ebbs and flows like water: they come very quickly in Arnold’s camera mouth and leave with a (f)lick of the page. The boy of *Parting of the Ceiling* (1983 ca.), arms outstretched, appears on the page doing backstrokes on Arnold’s inky black studio floor, surrounded by a creasing waves of fabric (Fig. 40). One wave drapes over his body, washing over his crotch and twirling around his ankle. His face, metallic golden like the twinkles puddling around him, stares at me seductively, inviting come swim with him. Moving through Arnold’s bathhouse, I turn the corner and two naked boys are getting at it on a white-fabric-clad altar in a decrepit room: set off against a cracked grey wall, *Holy men Are Everywhere* (1987 ca.) doesn’t care about my presence (Fig. 41). The boy laying the bottom, his back pressed against the fabric, is arching its neck backwards, off the left-hand edge of the altar. His eyes are closed, and his neck muscles are outstretched, proudly displaying the pearl necklace dripping to the side, on his back, around his arms. The second boy squats in between the lifted legs of the first boy, hinging forward and sustaining himself with his right hand on the first boy’s shoulder. He holds the first boy’s right leg in his left armpit as he reaches his left hand on the back of the first boy’s thigh, heading downward. He is looking to the left of the image

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<sup>701</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 93.

Steven Arnold, “Intro for Reliquaries,” Sketchbook, 1982-1983, n.p. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.

For more information on the similarities between masturbation and cultural production, see: Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), esp. 13-23.

towards the bright spotlight that illuminates the scene: this second boy also does not seem to care about my presence, so I move to two muscular naked boys playing with a bear in *Barely Salvation* (1987 ca.) (Fig. 42). Here, the waves of fabric and sparkling black pools return as a background to a boy showing his brightly illuminated pectoral to Arnold's maw. He is resting his head on his floating fellow's abdomen, who looks at me, and clenches his fists around a chain which gags the stuffed animal's mouth at the bottom of the image. The boy's arms and the chain he holds tautly delineate a vaginal lozenge at the centre of the photograph which delineates the boy's overlapped legs immersed in dark waters. My mouth is full.

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Glory holes are theatrical places of oral erotic unravelling.<sup>702</sup> They are the dark playgrounds in which Arnold plays and invites me to play. Delineating the ethical structures of glory holes, Dave Holmes et. al argue, following Deleuze and Guattari that "the glory hole-using body must become-other, either inside or outside the bathhouse, and connect with others to configure new potentialities (becomings)."<sup>703</sup> Here, "encounter[s] [are] not only marked by silence but by visual and body fragmentation," which allow the subject's desire to freely unfold, "perhaps [...] enacting a kind of

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<sup>702</sup> William L. Leap, "Introduction," in *Public Sex / Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1-22.

Ira Tattelman, "Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse: Communicating in Sexually Charged Spaces," in *Public Sex / Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 71-94.

<sup>703</sup> Dave Holmes, Patrick O'Byrne, and Stuart J. Murray, "Faceless Sex: Glory Holes and Sexual Assemblages," *Nursing Philosophy* 11 (2010): 255. See also: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

castration fantasy.”<sup>704</sup> Holmes et al.’s analysis, however useful, shows us only half of the story of the glory hole. The focus of their analysis is on the subject who actively participates in the “the castration fantasy”— it is on the person who dares penetrating the circular opening, despite the Freudian anxious thrill of castration, not on the kneeling person, the hungry child, waiting for the hOle to be filled. Indeed, most of the scholarship on glory holes falls into the same trap: it affords an intense attention to the genital pushing the oral to the margins.<sup>705</sup> Ironically, it leaves oral shaped gaps in the knowledge walls; wet black lacunae.<sup>706</sup> While the subject receiving oral sex “[is afforded] an intense, temporary escape from the demands of subjectivity,”<sup>707</sup> the pleasure giver remains unaccounted for, erotically anonymous, revealing and rehashing an implicit effeminophobia against the perceived un-masculinity of being penetrated.<sup>708</sup> Yet, Arnold relishes in this (at least theoretically) androgynous role. He cuts the holes for giving blowjobs with his photographs, and at the same time fills them with beautiful objects and bodies: with Leonardo’s immature “fables and riddles.”<sup>709</sup>

Queer scholar Ira Tattelman writes that glory holes and bathhouses present “a theatrically designed lighting scheme [that] favors other senses over sight;” touching, mouthing, tasting are favoured over vision: in Arnold’s photographs, I might have missed some

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<sup>704</sup> Holmes et al. “Faceless Sex,” 256.

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.;

Juliet Richters, “Through a Hole in a Wall: Setting and Interaction in Sex-on-Premises Venues,” *Sexualities* 10 (2007) 3: 275-297.

<sup>706</sup> As the *Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* reminds us, the word “lacuna” as an “unfilled space” etymologically dips its toes in wetness: it “comes [...] from Latin, ‘pool.’”

*The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed. Elizabeth M. Knowles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. “lacuna.”

<sup>707</sup> Holmes et al. “Faceless Sex” 253.

<sup>708</sup> Katz, “Hide/Seek,” 11.

<sup>709</sup> Freud, “Leonardo Da Vinci,” 126-127

details in the quick blurry reading, but they were delicious.<sup>710</sup> This favouritism is emblematic of the core differences between the processes of subjectification of the self in Winnicott and Lacan. As I analysed in **chapter two**, while the latter centralises the child seeing itself in the mirror, the former argues for a tactile and gustative exploration of the external world. As Lacan's child sees its own emptiness and insufficiency, Winnicott's child fills his world with touching, holding, tasting the world around. The erotic and sexual pleasures of these gay sex spaces are hardly visual: Tattelman evocatively writes that in their darkness, "figures materialize out of the shadows, steam, and long halls. One's eyes begin to adjust to the blur, distinguishing body outlines and facial profiles."<sup>711</sup> With their quasi-incorporeal imagination (the figures are mere outlines, profiles, and blurs of bodies), Tattelman's and Arnold's (photographic) sex spaces are akin to the childish dispositif of artificial darkness addressed by Elcott. (Doesn't a hard penis slotted through a hole in the wall "dematerialise" the body behind the wall? Doesn't it restrict, or "discipline," the movements of the person behind the wall to the space of a circular opening?)

In this erotically heightened and orally fixated space — "this space with water, naked men, and sexually charged situations," as Tattelman describes the gay bathhouse — Arnold's photography doesn't simply hold castration anxiety as a force to desubjectify and reveal a meaningless nothing at the base of identity, as Edelman remarks.<sup>712</sup> With its wet darkness and with its favouring of non-visual bodily sensations, the anxiety associated with a predominantly visual castration is mediated by a reparative impulse to

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<sup>710</sup> Tattelman, "Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse," 71.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid., 81. See also: Richters, "Through a Hole in a Wall," 275-297.

<sup>712</sup> Tattelman, "Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse," 71.

Edelman, *Bad Education*, 6-8.

multiply and accrue the pleasures associated with the mouth, through the literality of their materialisation on photographic paper: stages open like oral cavities, nipples are offered as a shared communion between the camera and me, white objects float, gloop, puddle, refract with their undefined edges. Even the models, regardless of their ethnicity, become milky white in the high chiaroscuro contrast of Arnold's works. Arnold's invitation to treat his tableaux as his frozen swallowable ejaculation establishes a nutritive relationship between me (and my desire to be fed white foodstuffs) and the chewing-assimilative mechanics of the camera. The positionality eschewed by the anxiety of castration is rewritten as my and Arnold's digestive fullness: as Sedgwick argues of her reparative reading, "the desire of a reparative impulse, [...] is additive and accretive. [...] It wants to assemble and confer plenitude."<sup>713</sup> "Plenitude:" after feeding in excess on the photographs of Arnold's books, I am full and want more.

"MORE! MORE! MORE!" Arnold writes to his friend Sarah Richardson in 1983 describing the aspired aesthetic of his tableaux.<sup>714</sup>

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### **a lump in the throat.**

The English expression "to have a lump in the throat" (also mirrored in Barthes's French, "*avoir une boule dans la gorge*") denotes a sensation of tightness in the oesophagus and trachea symptomatic of an excess of negative affects. Medically referred to as a "globus" (and Arnold loved the imagery of the "globs," often using it in his work and writing), a lump in the throat is the physically felt embodiment of something swallowed that does

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<sup>713</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*, 149.

<sup>714</sup> Steven Arnold, letter to Sarah Richardson, 1983 ca., personal collection of Sarah Richardson.

not quite reach the stomach as a response to excessive sadness and grief. It is mourning, death, and loss, felt in the mouth and vocal apparatus like Barthes's linguistic pleasures. If we are to think of death with the same literalness of sex, as Bronski invites us to do, then we must also think of death as insatiable and excessive: we must mourn and taste death with the same childish appetite for cum. Michael Moon strikes a similar point in his analysis of loss and fetish in "Memorial Rags." Building on Bronski's invitation, Moon argues that "Resisting thinking of the deaths of others as the making deficient of our own bodies or body parts and resisting thinking of death as absolutely rupturing the possible erotic relation of a living person to a dead one may make an important difference in our mourning practices."<sup>715</sup> The erotic relationality that the fetish affords, Moon reads reparatively: against and through Freudian fetishism which always underpins an anxiety for castration, Moon sees the possibilities of fetishism for the dead to engender "not a displacement or a dismemberment — not a castration — but a re-memberment."<sup>716</sup> Sucking, eating, kissing Arnold's photographs restage, "re-member," the taste of loss and of Freud's phallus in the mouth.

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In *Cocktails in Heaven*, Arnold reminisces on the gay sex spaces in San Francisco in the 1970s. "Wild for prowling the nights away in his favorite sleazy haunts," Arnold paints an excessive, insatiable, oral, and liquid sexual landscape:

I've never been a real monogamist at heart, preferring the thrill of chance encounters. Well darling, I was living in the center of brief encounters and I wasn't wasting any time; I was filling my plate. Sex in San Francisco in those early days

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<sup>715</sup> Moon, "Memorial Rags," 236.

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.



was everywhere, and at any time and as often as you chose. It was so easy all you had to do was wink and you got it three to six times a day, and this fluid availability was fucking hard to resist. [...] Can I tell you about the parks, the piers, the alleys, the backrooms, and even the toilets of high class hotels! That was the way it was then [...]. [G]orgeous hunky boys were everywhere [...], and I licked the platter clean.<sup>717</sup>

Speaking of gay sex spaces that were there and abundant, Arnold describes his sexual life in the language of a fairy tale never-ending banquet, as a parataxis of fluidly available courses: platter after platter of “gorgeous hunky boys” met in chance encounters, and passing “transluminous” through the night, licked clean, repeatedly. But “that was the way it was *then*,” Arnold writes: might he be mourning, as Crimp does in his “Mourning and Militancy,” the pre-AIDS “lost culture of sexual possibility”?<sup>718</sup> Arnold intimately sets his practice (with its onanistic and oral childish pleasures) against an historical backdrop marked by the closure of sex spaces in all major urban centres in the USA due to increasing gentrification and stricter laws on “public hygiene” being (phobically) redacted in response to HIV/AIDS.<sup>719</sup>

However, rather than settling for an anorexic Lacanian position in relation to this lost culture, Arnold restages it through photography as a site of pleasurable fantasy, through which his own mourning and hopefulness can be agitated. Black is the colour for mourning, and his *Angel of Night* plays on a dark ambivalence. On top of being the first of Arnold’s tableau and perhaps a response to the rising death toll from AIDS-related illnesses especially among gay men, intravenous drug users, and haemophiliacs, *Angel of*

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<sup>717</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 39-41.

<sup>718</sup> Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” 140.

<sup>719</sup> See: John Hollister, “A Highway Rest Area as a Socially Reproducible Site,” in *Public Sex / Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 58-60.

*Night* is black in the mourning for ground-breaking American Black model Donyale Luna, who passed away in 1979.<sup>720</sup> Juan Fernandez, the Angel in the photograph, recounts: “Alex and Lee Jewellers had created these amazing wings for Donyale Luna who was the first female [B]lack model to appear in *Vogue*. When she passed away, I inherited the wings.”<sup>721</sup> Arnold sets the mourning wings of the Angel, Luna’s wings, against a black background to make them fly again erotically in his sucking photographic assimilation. Arnold holds the Angel in his mouth like a fairy tale (“fairy tales,” Mavor reminds us, “are the first flights [...] that we alight from as children”).<sup>722</sup>

Fernandez recounts that “Steven cried through the entire photoshoot” of *Angel of Night*.<sup>723</sup> The dark mouth of Arnold’s photography is made even wetter by mourning. In *Black Sun*, psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva explains that mourning and melancholia are both cannibalistic and wet. Kristeva explains that the “Greek notion of melancholia [is] metaphorically rendered by froth (*aphros*),” which she defines as “a white mixture of air (*pneuma*) and liquid,” similar to “froth of the sea” and to “wine, as well as in the sperm of man.”<sup>724</sup> The frothy “sperm of man,” Kristeva argues, is activated in “melancholy

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<sup>720</sup> As Tracy Baim notes “if you are an older generation, and especially a gay man, you probably remember reading or hearing about a July 3, 1981, *New York Times* article.” While Arnold never spoke publicly about AIDS and his work, it is possible to retrospectively link the creation of *Angel of Night* to these early reports, given his return to his studio around the same time.

See: Ellen Burstyn and Steven Arnold, video interview, 1990 ca., quoted in Farago, *Steven Arnold*, 119.

Tracy Baim, “AIDS: The Plague Years,” in *Art AIDS America Chicago*, ed. Staci Boris (Chicago: Alphawood Foundation, 2016), 63.

<sup>721</sup> Juan Fernandez, interviewed by Stephanie Farago, quoted in Arnold and Farago, *Steven Arnold*, 157.

<sup>722</sup> Mavor, *Black and Blue*, 75.

<sup>723</sup> Fernandez, interviewed by Stephanie Farago, quoted in Arnold and Farago, *Steven Arnold*, 157.

<sup>724</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 7.

cannibalistic imagination” which “nourishes [the self] and becomes transformed into the self.”<sup>725</sup> Swallowing *Angel of Night* thus might mean tasting Arnold’s photographic semen and tears both in an attempt to engender my position in relation of the photographic object as a playing spectator who actively sustains the object’s wet becoming. The “cannibalistic imagination” of melancholia makes me eat bodies and photographs and gestate their becoming in my stomach, and at the same time nourishes me with excessive pleasure, too. In her analysis of motherhood in relation to the Victorian photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden, Mavor suggests that the Winnicottian child comports a shift in its mother, too: the Winnicottian good-enough mother also moves to a positionality of psychic development by reflecting her own wishes onto the child. Asking her child to meet her demands, as much as the child demands the mother, the mother embodies a position of *becoming*.<sup>726</sup> As playing spectator, excessively melancholic, I hold the photograph inside and develop it too; I am the photograph’s mother and its breastfed child.

Arnold’s *Angel of Night* is wet with Élisabeth Lebovici’s “precious liquids”—liquids out of which subjects dissolve and develop both photographically and psychically, forever present, forever playing, despite the governmental draining of the baths with the rise of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s.<sup>727</sup> Sweat, saliva, semen, spit, steam, piss are held in “a space ‘between,’ interstitial, between darkness and light, splashed by one and the others, [...] pulled by nostalgia, pushed by desire.”<sup>728</sup> Arnold’s photography is developed in the

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<sup>725</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>726</sup> Mavor, *Becoming*, 76.

<sup>727</sup> Lebovici, *Ce que le sida m’a fait*, 59-63.

<sup>728</sup> In this way Lebovici describes Mark Morrisroe’s photograph *Ramsey, Lake Oswego, 1988*. “Un espace ‘entre’, interstitiel, entre ténèbres et lumière, éclaboussé par l’une et les autres, [...] tiré par la nostalgie, poussé par le désir.” In *ibid.*, 61.

amniotic liquids of the camera obscura (Barthes's darkness is "womb-like," Mavor argues) and held in the Winnicottian playground between a mother and her child and in the childishly gay space between the mouth and the glory hole.<sup>729</sup>

Nourishing, pleasurable, melancholic, Arnold's photograph intimates to experience loss and death *within* as an embodied feeling, through taste, not as an externalised dispossession: it is here that the image loses its Freud-Lacanian intelligibility. In describing the processes and forms of "dispossession" that structure eroticism and mourning, Judith Butler argues that mourning provides a specific entry point to and cannot be understood without "the ties we have to others."<sup>730</sup> That mourning is a mode of social relationality and political organising has already been established in the context of HIV/AIDS, most notably by Crimp, and has been used as a form of historicization and remembrance in recent exhibitions.<sup>731</sup> In Butler's Lacanian conceptualisation of mourning, this relationality is not purely social but also becomes a form of ecstatic and dissociative introspection.<sup>732</sup> Indeed, Butler points to the ecstatic as a mode of understanding the relationality of mourning, but in so doing, she foregoes the social dimension of mourning to privilege the relation between the self and its sexuality.<sup>733</sup> "To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or

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<sup>729</sup> Mavor, *Black and Blue*, 9.

<sup>730</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 22.

<sup>731</sup> See the most recent exhibitions, "More Life" at David Zwirner in New York and London (2021), "United by AIDS — An Exhibition about Loss, Remembrance, Activism and Art in Response to HIV/AIDS" at the Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich (2019).

Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 3-18.

<sup>732</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

grief”.<sup>734</sup> More than a “dispossession,” which Butler terms as “a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another,” this also encompasses a dissociation and a displacement: a seeing oneself from the outside. Being “beyond oneself” and “*beside oneself*” in sexuality as in mourning opens an externalising topography of the subject that escapes the possibility of embodying loss, through the outside, the “not in me,” the “not mine” of the dispossession, displacement, and dissociation which are structural to Lacanian desire.

But Arnold’s loss is internally materialised, produced through feeding in the potential space between the dislocated positions of child and mother. With his camera, Arnold attains “the precariousness of magic itself,” a creatively photographic illusion of flight and floating. Indeed, the “precariousness of magic itself” that Winnicott finds in playing starts with the infant holding things in their open mouth: “it is well known that infants as soon as they are born tend to use fist, fingers, thumbs in stimulation of the oral erotogenic zone, in satisfaction of the instincts at that zone, and also in quiet union.”<sup>735</sup> As Winnicott remarks, the creativity of playing always operates within the confines of the potential space between mother and child, or in this case between me and Arnold’s photographic object. Arnold, like a Barthesian writer, “is someone who plays with his mother’s body:” he photographically fills my stomach and nourishes me.<sup>736</sup> I become a mother and “vision hungry child” both, able to orally castrate and overwrite that anxiety through pleasure. Arnold feeds me cum and loss: I am at once seeing his creativity ejaculating, and (willingly?) forced to receive his sperm through the opening of the frame. “The photograph is violent,” Barthes notes, “because in its occasion *it fills the sight by force,*

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<sup>734</sup> Ibid.

<sup>735</sup> Winnicott, “Playing: A Theoretical Statement,” 64.

Winnicott, “Transitional Objects,” 1.

<sup>736</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 37.

and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed.”<sup>737</sup> The concept that the photograph “fills the sight” implies the existence of something to be filled to begin with: vision and mouth seem to operate concomitantly in their dislocated oral pleasures. Indeed, the photograph is like sugar for Barthes: “that we can sometimes call [the photograph] mild does not contradict its violence: many say that sugar is mild, but to me sugar is violent, and I call it so.”<sup>738</sup> Mavor points out the colonial, racist, “bruising,” violence that accompanies sugar and Barthesian theory; she remarks that “[her] mouth falls open.”<sup>739</sup> It “falls open” at Barthes’s racist phrase which the critic uses in the description Van der Zee’s photograph of a Black family and the “solacing Mammy” (Fig. 43).<sup>740</sup> Mavor, continues by analysing the “sense of honor, surprise, and emotion” given by the Ô in Barthes’s original French.<sup>741</sup> “Barthes’s ô is held in there in a bluesy song: its little mouth, too, is wide open.”<sup>742</sup>

Beyond “honor, surprise, and emotion,” that Ô, Barthes’s “little mouth,” is held open to index Barthes’s becoming a playing spectator in the Van der Zee’s photograph. He is waiting to be fed by the photograph’s punctum, that evocation of the bruised Black maternal breast which the Ô introduces and the unspeakable desire Barthes has for its milk, at which Mavor hints but does not make explicit. “I behave as a well-weaned subject; I can feed myself, *meanwhile*, on other things besides the maternal breast,” writes Barthes about an absence which he characterises as always feminised and survived by forgetfulness.<sup>743</sup> This pivotal “*meanwhile*” contradicts Barthes’s position as “a well-

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<sup>737</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 91.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid.

<sup>739</sup> Mavor, *Black and Blue*, 29.

<sup>740</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 54.

<sup>741</sup> Mavor, *Black and Blue*, 30-41.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>743</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 14.

weaned subject” for a desiring longing of the “maternal breast”, which in *Camera Lucida* becomes a re-enactment of the sexual and nursing violence perpetrated against Black enslaved women, through desire and playing. In the absence of his white mother’s breast, Barthes materialises in fantasy, “*meanwhile,*” a Black woman’s.<sup>744</sup> Here, Barthes operates through cannibalistic pleasure of melancholia and mourning, a pleasure which in its engagement with photography opens the possibility of replicating but also being nourished by the mourning of racist violence. It is indeed because of the death of his mother that Barthes feeds elsewhere, filling himself with the fragility of melancholia for food that isn’t and hadn’t been there for a while: in his *Journal de deuil (Diary of Mourning)*, Barthes writes less than a month after his mother’s passing in 1977 that he feels “a sort of digestive fragility—as if I were affected there where she used to care for me the most: food (even though she hadn’t prepared any for months herself).”<sup>745</sup> Playing is a dislocating of the mother’s breast onto something else, tells us Winnicott.<sup>746</sup> Looking for pleasurable nourishment and the negative affective positions that line this pleasure, cannibalising Donyale Luna’s wings and Juan Fernandez’s body through my mouth, the melancholia of this violence also engenders my becoming, I am gestating it in my stomach.

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<sup>744</sup> As Sharpe argues, “Mammies served as surrogate mothers and wet-nurses to white children, often raising them alongside their own. [...] This license allowed slave women to manipulate their sexual exploitation even if they could not escape it.” In Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 62.

<sup>745</sup> “une sorte de fragilité digestive—comme si j’étais atteint là où elle prenait le plus grand soin de moi: la nourriture (bien que depuis des mois elle ne la préparât plus elle-même).” In Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil [Diary of Mourning]*, ed. Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2009), 71.

<sup>746</sup> Winnicott, “Playing: A Theoretical Statement,” 51-70.

Arnold's photography operates both in the gutter of the glory hole and in the divinity of motherhood.<sup>747</sup> In his autobiography, Arnold, similarly to Barthes, restages his late mother: her presence and creativity throughout Arnold's life is peppered throughout the text, both as the person who made his clothes and guided his creativity with her sartorial skills, as well as the figure who fed Arnold through his negative emotions. It is for her spiritual and nutritious role in Arnold's life, that he writes: "When a gay man loses his mother, it is a break of the deepest bonding, and of the most sacred, precious kind of love."<sup>748</sup> A love that is intimately sewn between nourishment and creative nurturing, but onto which mourning is stitched. Playing with and as the mother's body, Arnold's photographic tableaux operate in an orally liquid space which locates me as a table companion and cocksucker.

With Arnold's work, my playing takes the form of an oral opening which has an appetite to be filled with Leonardo's childish "fables and riddles."<sup>749</sup> Arnold refused to speak of HIV/AIDS, especially if asked about his own diagnosis.<sup>750</sup> His silence is invertedly mirrored by his oral eroticism. Arnold writes as his veiled response to HIV/AIDS in his autobiography, guiltless about his oral wet pleasures, despite AIDS: "We have to be as queer as possible darling if the planet is to be saved. More nail polish! More eyelash curlers! More cocksucking and pussy eating! Let's scream it from the rooftops, darlings:

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<sup>747</sup> Deutsch defines this tense ambivalence between sacred and profane as a "bad beatitude," a "state[-]of-being that embod[ies] an unconventional grace obtained through reconceptualising and even exalting [...] conventionally degrading behaviours or identities, such as same-sex sex or nonconformist genders." In David Deutsch, *Bad Beatitudes: Queer Angels in Post-1945 American Literature and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 2.

<sup>748</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 109.

<sup>749</sup> Freud, "Leonardo Da Vinci," 126-127.

<sup>750</sup> When asked about art and AIDS in 1991, Steven replies: "let's not talk about AIDS; I'd rather not." Steven Arnold, "Steven in Pink," taped interview, 1991. Held at the Steven Arnold Archives and Museum, Los Angeles.



Suck cock! Eat pussy!”<sup>751</sup> Childishly screaming from the rooftops, the onset of HIV/AIDS makes him double down on his oral pleasures, metonymic for “that gay spirit” in the face of “what is unhealthy and abnormal” in this context: “the discrimination against sexual freedom by anyone or any organisation.”<sup>752</sup> In the 1970s, Arnold recounts as a fairy tale in his mouth, “we believed that it was time to get down on our knees and suck the cocks of our brothers in love and lust. A big dick in our mouth was the core of a new religion.”<sup>753</sup> During the times of HIV/AIDS, he continues with hope, “our spirit hasn’t died.”<sup>754</sup>

. . . . .

As it is the case with Arnold’s tableaux, playing occurs in the dark. The space of playing is always dissociative according to Winnicott because fantasizing is dissociative for him. As he explains thanks to the case of “a woman of middle age,” fantasizing puts the self “in a dissociated state” where “omnipotence was retained and wonderful things could be achieved.”<sup>755</sup> Considering this case, Winnicott warns against this dissociation when it detrimentally influences the (adult) subject’s everyday life. But as a childish subject, I stress the ambivalent sexual pleasure at the core of this dissociation. For the “woman of middle age,” “fantasizing [...] probably started with a ‘cure’ of thumb-sucking.”<sup>756</sup> Dissociation, like my tasting of Arnold’s cum, is accompanied by a certain oral erotic

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<sup>751</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 105.

<sup>752</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>753</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>755</sup> Winnicott, “Dreaming, Fantasizing, and Living,” 35-40.

<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

pleasure of fellating and of cannibalising melancholic objects, which “happens immediately, except that it does not happen at all.”<sup>757</sup>

. . . . .

Arnold’s autobiography finishes orally, in song: “Sing with the angels, listen to your dreams.”<sup>758</sup>

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<sup>757</sup> Ibid.

<sup>758</sup> Arnold, *Cocktails in Heaven*, 123.

**conclusions\_ post-coital snooze.**

**empty beds.**

Upon the death of his mother, Barthes writes alone in an empty bed, the bed that his “*mam.*” occupied in her final days. He keeps a diary of his grief, his *Journal de deuil*; a collection of 330 dated notes that begin the day following his mother’s death, October 26, 1977, and end a couple of years later, on September 15, 1979. The first entry of his diary is a meagre two lines: “First wedding night. But first mourning night?”<sup>759</sup> Without a verb denoting any action, any movement, any labour, Barthes lies still and uncertain in the very image of the bed conjured by the first wedding night. If the bed is repleted with the potentialities of sex, affect, and intimacy in the first wedding night, these are emptied and uncertain in the first mourning night. The first mourning night appears as a question that is void of a subject: whose voice is questioning the very possibility of a first mourning night? Barthes’s? The two bodies of the first wedding night leave their imprint on the bed of the second question: if they are intimately in bed together in the first affirmative fragment of a sentence, the coordinative conjunction “But” that introduces the second question demarks their absence. No certain sex, no certain sleeping, no certain bodies, no certain subjects in the first night of mourning, just someone’s voice looking for its absent mother. The two bodies of the first wedding night become a decorporealised inquisitive voice printed on Barthes’s bed like the two absent bodies of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (billboard of an empty bed)* (Fig. 44).

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<sup>759</sup> “Première nuit de nocés. Mais première nuit de deuil?” Barthes, *Journal de deuil* [*Diary of Mourning*], 13.

In 1991, Cuban American artist Gonzalez-Torres exhibits the photograph of an empty bed on multiple billboards in the streets of Manhattan. The same photograph re-occupies the billboards of Manhattan (alongside Brooklyn and Queens, this time) from February to May 2012, as part of The Museum of Modern Art's "Print/Out" exhibition (Fig. 45). Situated within a highly productive practice of billboard art that is informed by Minimalist and Conceptualist art of the 1960s and 1970s and by Gonzalez-Torres's photographic academic readings of Benjamin and Barthes's semiological texts, *Untitled (billboard of an empty bed)* consists of a larger than life-size photograph of the upper half of a double bed to be displayed in public space.<sup>760</sup> Gonzalez-Torres's bed is made and unmade: two pillows occupy the top of the frame in full crisp white linen. A fitted sheet, with translucent ribbing, lets the lozenge patterning of the mattress appear. A thin bedsheet made of the very same fabric of the fitted sheet covers the lower half of the image. But the bedsheet is crumpled at its upper rim, folding onto its own crinkles, and the two pillows present each a depression at their centre, giving the impression of two absent bodies having just left the bed, that they are lost from the image.

Speaking about works by Gonzalez-Torres which see the audience taking a piece of the work that is constantly replaced, like a piece of candy or a sheet of paper, John Paul Ricco

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<sup>760</sup> Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 1995), 3.

See also: Christophe Cherix, "Print/Out," in *Print/Out: 20 Years in Print*, ed. Christophe Cherix (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 13-27;

Laura Steward Heon (eds.), *Billboard: Art on the Road* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999);

Matthew Drutt, *Billboards: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (San Antonio, TX: ArtPace, 2014).

explains that Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre "locate[s] finitude, loss, and disappearance" as a mediator of anxiety and death.<sup>761</sup> Ricco continues by commenting that this "is a sustaining—by sharing together—in the separation between us [artist and audience]," whereby the separation between artist and audience engenders the unravelling of both, their mutual "incompletion," and "unbecoming."<sup>762</sup> For Ricco's Lacanian argument, eating Gonzalez-Torres's work underscores the incompleteness of both work and audience, an incompleteness through which mourning is mediated. Eating the work and the oral pleasures which this operation engenders, however, may allow a childish and excessive satiation, rather than anorexic incompleteness, to mediate and physically feel death and pleasure as affective positions, as I argued with Arnold's tableaux in **chapter three**.

In the economy of mourning proposed by Ricco, Gonzalez-Torres's bed sustains the "incompletion" of self and image by galvanising their separation: the sense of aloneness of Barthes's first night of mourning finds its grieving analogous in Ricco's generalised "audience" who constantly empties Gonzalez-Torres's already empty bed and in doing so it is reminded of their own aloneness. But as I look at *Untitled*, there is very little to take from the work, the bed is already partly unmade, messy: I am less invited to strip away its pillows than to fill them by inhabiting them.

In his *S/Z*, published in 1970 six years before the death of his mother, Barthes argues that "when it is alone, the voice does no labor, transforms nothing: it *expresses*."<sup>763</sup> The voice needs its playing reader, Barthes's performative *je* of his "Death of the Author," to

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<sup>761</sup> John Paul Ricco, *The Decision between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 195-196.

<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>763</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* [1970], trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 160.

“constitute a braid” of plural threads, codes, meanings.<sup>764</sup> And, yet, without the body of his mother to play with (Barthes’s metaphor for writing), the space of the text remains empty and alone. As Mavor argues in her Winnicottian reading of the relationship between Barthes and his mother, “without his mother, [Barthes’s] labor might no longer be possible: the braid (the umbilical cord) is under the dark shadow of the scissors.”<sup>765</sup> *Might*. Indeed, Barthes is a terrible mourner: he refuses to separate from his mother and constantly restages her in photographs. The empty bed of an uncertain first night of mourning is constantly filled by Barthes’s endeavour not to separate from his *maman*. While Barthes begins the French edition of *Camera Lucida* with the photograph of an empty bed, *Polaroid* (1979) by Daniel Boudinet — the very same photograph that Mavor through private correspondence with Gonzalez-Torres’s commentator Nancy Spector attributes to the inspiration of Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled* — by the end of the text this bed is full of maternal softness, as I discussed in **chapter one**. In his identification with and projection to the photographic object, Barthes completes the empty bed with his childish body and the lost body of his mother as a resistance to separation: “contemplating a photograph in which [*maman*] is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine.”<sup>766</sup> Not alone anymore, Barthes’s voice labours in its braiding of mother and bed within himself: rumpled and soft, *maman*’s dress is crumpled like Gonzalez-Torres’s bedsheets. Here, disappearance and loss are not kept separate from Barthes, rather they are held intimately together in the space of a hug between the child and mother.

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<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 135.

<sup>766</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77-78.

After all, the separation that Ricco ascribes to the audience interaction with Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre, the separation of mourning, is an "achievement" for *unbecoming* adults.<sup>767</sup> Winnicott tells us that the child(ish) doesn't mourn very well: "mourning implies emotional maturity and health," the capacity to be fully alone, to manage loss with the temporary lack of a transitional object.<sup>768</sup> Indeed, Winnicott argues that "the trauma when a child is separated from the mother is often not the loss of the mother but the loss of the thing that I call a transitional object."<sup>769</sup> As such mourning implies the mature ability to hold the separation between object and audience which Ricco discusses without playing with the image, without restaging and materialising our own attachments in the work of art as transitional object for our *becoming*. Yet, neither Barthes nor I are quite mature enough to detach, to cut the braid, to keep our distance: we continuously play with photographs as our own transitional objects, constantly repleting empty beds with our own feelings and attachments.

In fact, Crimp argues against the separation and solitariness which psychic processes of (Freudian) mourning AIDS-related loss entails in his "Mourning and Militancy," outlining the incompatibility of AIDS activism and the necessary disentanglement that the self must operate from the lost object.<sup>770</sup> Crimp returns to this detachment in the introduction for his edited collection of essays *Melancholia and Moralism*, where he rephrases it as a form of tout-court disavowal of AIDS. Problematising the wide-reaching equation between AIDS, responsibility and neoconservative moral values on gay

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<sup>767</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "Discussion of 'Grief and Mourning in Infancy'" [1953], in D.W. Winnicott, *Psycho-Analytic Explorations*, ed. Claire Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 430.

<sup>768</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>769</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>770</sup> Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 134-139.

promiscuity that Sullivan's "When Plagues End" promulgates, Crimp argues that "the turn away from AIDS is no simple matter," and continues by identifying two types of this disavowal of the crisis:

On the one hand, the turn away from AIDS can be seen as one response to the epidemic from the moment it was recognised in 1981. Whether as denial that it was really happening, that it was happening *here*, that it was happening to people *like us*, or as a denial of its gravity and scope, the fearsomeness of AIDS always induced this tendency to disavowal. On the other hand, those who did confront AIDS as a crisis, often because they had little or no choice to do otherwise, were eventually overwhelmed by the enormity and persistence of the tragedy, and they too sought the ostensible relief of turning away. But this second turning away is more complicated than the first. The first entails a phobic denial [...]. The second involves too much loss [...]. The denial in this case is less of the actuality of AIDS itself than of the overwhelming effects of cumulative loss. This, too, might be characterized as melancholia.<sup>771</sup>

Of course, Ricco does not contextualise the separation between his generalised audience and the work of Gonzalez-Torres as a disavowal of "the actuality of AIDS" more than a mediator of the anxiety that loss and death produce: his idea of separation verges on the sustained creative potential of *ex nihilo*; the Lacanian nothingness prized in Edelman's recent monograph, which I described in **chapter three**. Still, this critical distancing allows Ricco to work around critical engagements that do directly connect Gonzalez-Torres's work to AIDS. Indeed, scholarship on *Untitled* presents a duality that swings between a historical contextualisation of this work within AIDS-related death and loss and a formal consideration of this work. David Breslin and Thomas Folland have both discussed the complicated relationship that Gonzalez-Torres's work establishes between

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<sup>771</sup> Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism," 8-9.



the intimacy and privacy of two bodies in a bedroom and the photograph's bombastic display on a public billboard.<sup>772</sup> David Deitcher further contextualises the juxtaposition of this work within the wider context of the AIDS epidemic: "To have seen this work in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, at a time of escalating, institutionally sanctioned homophobia [sic.], was to grasp for whose benefit the artificial separation between 'public' and 'private' is maintained; and for whom, even in the eyes of the law, it does not exist at all."<sup>773</sup> Amada Cruz strikes a similar note: "this intimate images raises the issue of public scrutiny of private behavior and also functions as a memorial for those who had once lain there," a memorial which "in the age of AIDS [...] take[s] on ominous connotations."<sup>774</sup> These too-attached "ominous connotations" that might replete Gonzalez-Torres's unmade bed are nowhere to be found in Ricco's reading: they are sustainedly kept at a distance. The mediating separation described by Ricco thus becomes what Crimp defines as a disavowal: for Crimp, following Freud, denial for the mournful subject is characterised as a defence mechanism against loss — "I can no longer bear this [loss]." For the mourning subject, separation is a necessary defence that helps the subject disengage from the lost object: an object which you cannot play with anymore; an object which the subject matures, through mourning, out of. Barthes's and I however see an empty bed and sleep in it, reawaken in it, populate it with other bodies.

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<sup>772</sup> David Breslin, "A Formal Problem: On *"Untitled"* (A Portrait) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Anne Wehr and Lucas Zwirner (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2017), 43;

Thomas Folland, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled"* (billboard of an empty bed)," *smarthistory*, August 9, 2015, accessed May 25, 2024, <https://smarthistory.org/felix-gonzalez-torres-untitled-billboard-of-an-empty-bed/>.

<sup>773</sup> David Deitcher, "The Everyday Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Magasin 3 Stockholm* (1992-1993): n.p.

<sup>774</sup> Amada Cruz, "The Means of Pleasure," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Russel Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 16-18.

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Throughout this thesis, I have argued for a resistance against maturation and distance in favour of my inhabiting positions of childish, pleasurable attachments to photographic objects I have touched, seen, and tasted. To an extent this has also engendered one of Crimp's disavowals, and to an extent it has not. The delusional and narcissistic positions ("this isn't happening' [and] 'this can't affect me'") which Crimp attaches to the phobic and denying subject do not necessarily partake in the uptight morality of the straight-up phobic subjects like Sullivan, Shilts, and Kramer. In the photograph, delusion and narcissism may also function as the very opposite through an identificatory attachment which dispels a distancing phobia altogether: "this *is* happening to me," "this *can* affect me," as I discussed in **chapter two** \_ in relation to McGinley's and Sepuya's employment of a mirroring that is both physical and reminiscent of Winnicott's "mirror-role" of the mother.

Even in Crimp's formulation, the linguistic negations articulated by "isn't" and "can't" operate more on a fantastic — perhaps utopian, as Muñoz would describe it — wish-fulfilment level, than an ontological one: they do not delineate the absence of the "this," but establish an ambivalent playing relation with it.<sup>775</sup> The objects indexed by the "this" (HIV infection, AIDS-related illnesses and mortality, and the anxieties and grieves that ensue from them) are not forgone in the formulations "'this isn't happening' [and] 'this can't affect me.'" Rather, the subject's relation to these objects is transformed in Crimp's language from disavowing phobia to dissonant distance: the phrases "'this isn't happening' [and] 'this can't affect me'" sound less like an outright denial than a self-

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<sup>775</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11-13.

convincing mantra that disengages the subjects from objects which he does not want to play with. To resist this distance from (bad) objects, I, like the Objects Relations child, have made reparations with them in my playing with photographic objects, thus opening the possibilities of an identificatory attachment that operates through structures of a communal narcissism and mutual sexual pleasure between me and the photograph. A container of AIDS-loss, anxiety, intimacy, I sleep in and with Gonzalez-Torres's mad bad bed.

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### **squiggly beds.**

Barthes concludes his *Camera Lucida* restaging his mother through the delusive madness afforded by the photograph. He posits: "Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits [...]; mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time."<sup>776</sup> Arguing that aestheticization, turning the photograph into art, only works to tame its explosive and irrefutable force, Barthes speaks of a mad engagement with the photographic object, one that works around aesthetic distance and hits a "loving and terrified" subject. Mad Barthes, mourning his mother, loving his mother, always confronts the reality of her passing by restaging himself beside her in a photographic bed that has two empty outlines. Winnicottian analyst and analysand both, Barthes manages the "mad" neurosis of the confrontation between a "loving and terrified consciousness" and the "intractable reality" of the photograph with identification. Indeed, as explained in the **introduction\_**, Winnicott

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<sup>776</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 145.

describes the analytic session as a neurotic space of identification and cross-identification between analyst and analysand which must actively be managed and sustained.

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In her reading of Gonzalez-Torres *Untitled*, Miwon Kwon argues that the emptiness of Gonzalez-Torres's bed opens the potential of her projection and identification with the image: "These images [...] give me an opportunity to occupy the images, to become their protagonist [...], to project myself into the scenes that they picture and the social and discursive that they mobilize, as if they are, or could be, pictures of love and loss from my own life."<sup>777</sup> Kwon, nonetheless, caveats this identification with a separation to curtail the madness of the photograph: "[these images] somehow do not belong to me in any secure way in the end. These are not scenes from my life after all."<sup>778</sup> Analysing Gonzalez-Torres's spreads of sweets, Theo Gordon argues however that audience participation through relational embodiment puts pressure on the idealisation of Gonzalez-Torres's work at the expense of its relevance to "the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic."<sup>779</sup> In the madness of the photograph, managed poorly by the immature reader, I may come to believe that these scenes are from my life, that they are made for me, that they *are* happening and *can* affect me in our mutual becoming. While the conceptual gap of intimate proximity to and immediate evacuation of Gonzalez-Torres's unmade bed articulated by Kwon re-enters the "unbecoming" logic of mutually sustained separation

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<sup>777</sup> Miwon Kwon, "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl/dangin, 2006), 281-314.

<sup>778</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>779</sup> Theo Gordon, "Spit or Swallow? Orality in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Art History* 43 (2020) 4: 797.

proposed by Ricco, I suggest that strangers' beds may sometimes be made for us to sleep in without resorting to claiming any ownership of them.

In Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled*, Kwon restages private intimacy, the intimacy of becoming in bed, in the public space, and quickly empties the bed: these scenes are not from her life after all. Élisabeth Lebovici reprises Kwon's argument of intimacy and distance with the work of Gonzalez-Torres and extends it as an analogue to feeling in the exhibition space: "Does this relationship, which is both intimate and public, not constitute the exhibition?"<sup>780</sup> Lebovici's extension of the space of identification with an unmade bed into the exhibition space asks precise analytical questions about feeling, being, finding pleasure in a stranger's house: the exhibition space also does not belong to me, after all. The identificatory distance between Kwon and Gonzalez-Torres's unmade bed — between me and Gonzalez-Torres's unmade bed — may be dealt with in the same way identification is managed between Winnicott and the children he analyses: through playing.

I inhabit Gonzalez-Torres's unmade bedsheets as squiggles on a white page, cringing its surface with the motherly softness of Winnicottian playing. In his analysis with children, Winnicott used to play what he named the "Squiggle Game." The "Squiggle Game" is "a game with no rules" that would unravel as follows: Winnicott would draw a convoluting line or separate lines on a piece of paper that he would then give to the child to play with and complete the nonsensical drawing he started.<sup>781</sup> The child would draw over it as they

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<sup>780</sup> Élisabeth Lebovici, "A Matter of Time," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres / Roni Horn* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta and Pinault Collection, 2022), 70.

<sup>781</sup> D.W. Winnicott, "The Squiggle Game: An Amalgamation of Two Papers: One, Unpublished, Written in 1964, the Other Published in 1968," in D.W. Winnicott, *Psycho-Analytic Explorations*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (London: Routledge, 1989), 316.

pleased and then would return the drawing to Winnicott. After the first drawing, the roles of the game would be reverted: here, the child draws, and asks Winnicott to complete the drawing, and so on. These games are for Winnicott “a useful solution” in analysis, as he who would use the child’s creations to work through situations of distance, impasse or noncommunication.<sup>782</sup>

While the sheet of paper is given to the child by Winnicott, and as such is not part of the child’s life, the child fills it through the “impulsive movements” of “enjoyable” creative activity.<sup>783</sup> In this way, playing allows the Winnicottian child to occupy the works of others productively as its own playgrounds. Indeed, Winnicott points to this occupation as felt by the child under the lens of transgression. “Some children feel [squiggle games] to be *naughty*,” Winnicott argues, because of the perceived limitations of the physical support (“size and shape of the paper”) which squiggles exceed.<sup>784</sup> “[Squiggles],” like Barthes’s photograph, “are mad” and “frightening,” Winnicott notes.<sup>785</sup> In the **introduction**, I outlined that Winnicott’s space of analysis is agitated in the same identificatory space between the mother and the child in which playing occurs. This is no different for the Squiggle Game, where the sheet of paper becomes “an overlap of the area of play of the child and the area of play of the adult or therapist,” that neither belongs fully to the child’s nor to the mother-therapist’s.<sup>786</sup> It is in this overlap of playing areas that I have managed the encounters between me and the object of this thesis, filling other boyish subjects’ beds with productive squiggles and letting others fill my white sheets with theirs. Squiggles desire to be creatively completed by the cooperation between

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<sup>782</sup> Ibid., 299-317.

<sup>783</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>784</sup> Ibid.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid., 317.

childish players and a playing spectators encountering each other on the same object. Or in the same photographic bed as becoming bedfellows.

As Kwon argued of *Untitled*, Gonzalez-Torres's bed might not belong to my life. His crisped-up sheets and holed pillows may simply be squiggles that crinkle a flat white surface waiting to be squiggled some more through gay childish pleasures; a bed to sleep in and open to the identificatory potential of gay sex and sexuality which I discussed throughout this thesis. Gonzalez-Torres's bed is empty but not *emptied*. The outlines of the two depressions on the pillows (on which much of the scholarship on the piece's duality and AIDS memorialisation depends) do not point for certain to the absence of two heads resting there. The narrowness of the lowest point of these depressions combined with the preened plumpness of the pillows results less in the absence of heads as much as in the creation of navels or of soft white anal folds. The pillows' folds spread radially around a central tight bottom point that is hardly wide enough to accommodate a head inside it: the folds overlap each other creating narrow clefts interspersed with the plump reliefs of a fleshy sphincter as soft as the pillow's stuffing.

Gonzalez-Torres plays with the pillows leaving anal squiggles covered in white for me to play with. *Untitled* deals with the grief and loss of absent bodies by providing a facilitating environment where I can childishly play, fiddle, finger with fleshy and characteristically gay fleshy toys. Playing with squiggles and fleshy toys resists the all-too straight maturation processes which I denounced in **chapter one**\_ emphasising the sadomasochistic maternal dependence which structured my engagement with DeSana's stringy toys. This becomes clear as Winnicott notes that "the result of a squiggle is satisfactory in itself" and "is linked to the very early stage of maximal dependence when

the infant self is unformed.”<sup>787</sup> “Satisfactory in itself,” Winnicott’s squiggle is futile like Barthes’s conceptualisation of textual pleasure (which I discussed in **chapter two**) and as futile (unreproductive) as the gay sexual relations based on touching, oral sex, and anal sex which I established as communal forms of subjective and authorial *becomings* in the chapters of this thesis.

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After his mother’s passing, Barthes’s fills his photographic and textual bed with boys and squiggles: Barthes doodles at the end of the autobiographic reading of his own work, *Barthes by Barthes*, calling his squiggles on paper a “doodling...or the signifier without the signified.”<sup>788</sup> Barthes decision to end the reading of his work without a clear signified opens his textual bed to an unanchored reading which allows other boyish readers to populate it and pleurably *drift* in its sheets. Indeed, Mavor suggests that while the umbilical cord that connects Barthes to his mother might come into question with her death, Barthes restages the cord with the boys and sex workers he cruises on in his “Parisian nights.”<sup>789</sup> Written in the form of a diary, Barthes’s dated entries in his *Soirées de Paris* (from August 24, 1979, to September 17, 1979) overlap with the end of his *Journal de deuil*, both ending in bed. Barthes’s first and last entries in his *Journal* bracket Barthes’s time in bed: if the *Journal* begins with pondering the first night of mourning, the last entry of September 15, 1979, emphasises the morning: “there are some very sad mornings...”<sup>790</sup> The following day, Barthes recounts in his *Soirées*, he is lying in bed,

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<sup>787</sup> Ibid., 302-303.

<sup>788</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* [1975], trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2020), 194.

<sup>789</sup> Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 152-153.

<sup>790</sup> “Il y a des matinées si tristes...” Barthes, *Journal de Deuil* [*Diary of Mourning*], 255.



trying to fill his sheets with Oliver G., his gay lover, to whom he ask to nap beside him.<sup>791</sup> However, Oliver sits on the edge of the bed, far from Barthes's supine body.<sup>792</sup> Barthes reaches a hand towards him, crossing an empty silhouette on the mattress.<sup>793</sup> With an extended arm reaching to his gay lover as a baby reaches its mother, Barthes attempts to gesturally and reparatively re-establish a "loving dependence" — the umbilical cord that connects him to his *maman* which Mavor centres in her reading — asking for his desire to play and be played with in bed to be requited, for an intimate playground to be established between self and other.

The mapping of gay male subjectivities in their becoming onto the dislocated figures of the Winnicottian mother and child effected by this thesis not only keeps queerness forever childish as I have argued throughout, but also forever maternal. It is perhaps in this maternal that the language of caring and softness is allowed to complicate even further the positionalities of a traditional masculine maturation, as I argued in **chapter one**. The similarities of the gay man to the maternal are brought closer together in surprising, traumatic even, ways in the context of AIDS: as Dean has argued, likening HIV infection to a gay pregnancy allows for new maternal forms of sociability.<sup>794</sup> In this way, the maternal might span the reproductive and the creatively productive: the dislocation of mother and child eschews moments of sexual, erotic, and tender encounter as queer subjectivities meet in the playground-cum-bed of the photograph.

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<sup>791</sup> "I asked him to come on the bed next to me during my nap." "Je lui ai demandé de venir à côté de moi sur le lit pendant ma sieste." Roland Barthes, "Soirées de Paris" ["Parisian Nights"] [1979], in Roland Barthes, *Incidents* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 115.

<sup>792</sup> "He [...] sat on the edge [...]; his body was very far away." "Il [...] s'est assis sur le bord [...]; son corps était très loin." Ibid.

<sup>793</sup> "I extended my arm toward him." "J'étendais le bras vers lui." Ibid.

<sup>794</sup> Dean, "Breeding Culture," 86-91.

Indeed, Barthes's identification in the photographic also implies an identification with the maternal to manage the loss of his mother. Repleting the "intractable reality" of the photograph with his own wish for his mother, Barthes creatively restages the mother as gay lovers in his bed.<sup>795</sup> Like Barthes, this thesis inhabits this double position: that of the gay man restaging the mother and of the gay man behaving as a mother. It is in this cross-identification, actively and reparatively sustained by me and the works within this thesis, that the queer and the maternal may overlap; as mothers to each other, as gay children, as gay lovers, we productively and creatively play with each other's bodies, mirroring each other's desires. We sustain each other's becomings, like the Winnicottian mother does with the child, through caring and nutritiously pleasurable exchanges. Playing with and restaging the mother's body in each other, as Barthes does, we establish neurotic analytical spaces to feel ourselves, extending our arms towards each other as a form of playing that fills our maternal beds; mummy's boys and boys' mummies both.

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As Katz argued in the introduction to his *Art AIDS America* (a touring exhibition, and as such in many strangers' beds), works of art and exhibitions produced in and as a response to the plague years of the AIDS crisis extend a hand across the patch of mattress that separates them from me, eschewing particularly personal analytical questions about pleasure, sexuality, feelings.<sup>796</sup> As a response to Katz's argument, I employed identification and cross-identification as a reparative methodology to understand the affective relations between me and gay male fine art photographic practices in the

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<sup>795</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 145.

<sup>796</sup> Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 36-37.

chapters of this thesis, as I explained in the **introduction**\_. I argued that in asking about our feelings, the photographic works of Jimmy DeSana, Ryan McGinley, Paul Sepuya, and Steven Arnold ask to be engaged with in plurally childish and playful ways. I employed the repository of childishness to collect a series of pleasurable gay positionalities which have been defined as immature, incapable, unserious by queer uses of Lacanian psychoanalysis, by neo-conservative gay and straight voices, and by poststructuralist art historical and critical practices which gravitate around (de)constructivist models of identity.

In my childish readings, I argued for a dislocation the mother-child positions outlined in Winnicottian psychoanalysis onto my and the objects. In **chapter one**\_, I analysed the “Suburban” toys of DeSana, exploring Winnicott’s idea of dependence as a form of gay sadomasochism through their mutual interest in the materiality and hapticity of string and bondage. I argued that sustaining the dependence between me and DeSana’s images is a form of resistance to neo-conservative calls by gay men to grow up and out of promiscuity as a response to the plague years of the AIDS crisis — a form of resistance that cannot be conceived in the theoretical framework provided by deconstructivist models of identity.

In **chapter two**\_, I mirrored myself into the mirror images of Sepuya and McGinley and let the images mirror themselves in me, utilising Winnicott’s structures of identification and cross-identification in the mirror-role which the mother provides to the child — identifications which are established through touching and holding each other, rather than through the Lacanian categories of language and vision. Structural to playing for Winnicott, tactility and identification reopen questions around the Barthesian death of the author in poststructuralist discourse. In images where the author is represented, and in a cultural and political context like the plague years of AIDS when authors are intensely

politicised figures, I argued, following late-Barthes, for a “friendly return of the author” through childish structures of cooperative narcissism.

In **chapter three**, the author made his autobiographical return through my pleasure of swallowing his creative cum. Understanding Arnold’s photobooks as menus composed of courses which are created by and to engender oral pleasures, I argued for a language of satiating excess in gay pleasure, through Barthes’s conceptualisation of linguistic pleasure, as a resistance to a Lacanian anorexic desire. In asking for the photographic image to be engaged with on the level of orality, Arnold’s work rethinks and restages gay sex spaces and maternal spaces for me and the work to come together through the childish oral pleasures of swallowing semen. These pleasures are structured by a loving, erotic, and affective positionalities which, I argued, help thinking through feelings of melancholia arising from the AIDS-related death, following Bronski’s invitation to experience the feelings of AIDS mortality as embodied and as strong as those arising from gay sex.

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In the foreplay of thesis, I fluffed the positions of immaturity which I found myself in and would methodologically occupy in the following chapters. I then fondled with DeSana’s toys, touched the boys in Sepuya’s and McGinley’s mirrors, and took Arnold’s white-semen night-dark tableaux into my mouth. At the end, Gonzalez-Torres’s bed reaches a hand towards me, bathed in cream morning light, with soft pillow-anuses covered in white to squiggle on before *drifting* to sleep: “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes.”<sup>797</sup>

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<sup>797</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 64.

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but was it good for you?

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