Queer Bodies: Homoeroticism, Sensuality, And Erotica In Postmodern Fine Art Photography

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QUEER BODIES: HOMOEROTICISM, SENSUALITY, AND EROTICA IN POSTMODERN FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in

Department of Art History

by

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B.F.A, Loyola University New Orleans, 2020
December 2022
With genuine gratitude and warm regard, I dedicate this thesis to those who have guided me on my academic journey both professionally and personally, without their help and support graduate studies would not have been possible. I am indebted to my advisor Dr. Allison Young, you never lost faith in me, you believed in me till the end. With special consideration, I dedicate this thesis to Fr. Gregory Waldrop, SJ; without your careful guidance and instruction throughout my undergraduate studies, I would not have found my love for art history. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my friends and family, especially my partner Kevin, you helped me through the most challenging times of my graduate journey, and have given me the love and support I needed to push through.
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Abstract

The *queer body*—describes the sum of assumptions and biases attributed to queer people, whereby a person’s own queer identity or expression is overshadowed by the generalizations, (mis)perceptions, and stereotypes that society imposes on that individual. Central to the scope of this thesis is the reality whereby the ostracization of queer people involves the association between the very body of the queer person with sexual acts deemed both deviant and immoral by a cis-heteronormative society. Society renders the queer body as pejoratively deviant simply on the basis of its existence alone, where any form of varied gender or sexual expression is viewed as damaging to preestablished societal values and norms. There is a relationship between the *queer body* and post-modern photography from the 1980s and early 90s, which illustrates the implications of subtext on an artist's work, the dichotomy of pornography and fine art, objectification, and fetishization, government censorship of ‘obscene’ works and body taboo as a subversive tool used by queer artists who sought to disrupt the status quo of a heteronormative society bent on continued ostracization of queer people and queer subject matter from public display.
Chapter 1. Introduction

In late June of 1989, crowds of protesters swarmed the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. to protest the censorship of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's then-canceled exhibition *The Perfect Moment*. The exhibition had traveled to museums in Hartford, CT, Berkeley, CA, Washington, D.C., and later Cincinnati, OH. *The Perfect Moment* was a posthumous exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s photography, most notably works from the *XYZ Portfolios*. Mapplethorpe was an artist who notably coupled fine art with explicit sexual imagery and who by doing so courted controversy at every turn, even after his death. Why the cancellation? Why the protest? Many of the images in question included representations of sadomasochism and homoerotic portrayals of men engaged in varying degrees of sexual intimacy. Accusations of Mapplethorpe's works as obscene images were part of a larger smear campaign by conservative politicians and supporters who believed that works like Mapplethorpe’s should not be on display, nor federally funded by way of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). Thus stemmed a congressional debate on whether Mapplethorpe's works were obscene or if they were art. The exhibition was canceled in Washington D.C by then-Corcoran director Christina Orr-Cahal due to political pressure that arose from the aforementioned controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe's images, specifically the political vitriol of Senator Jesse Helms who made it his personal mission to root out Mapplethorpe’s works from public view. Naturally, protesters gathered to protest Orr-Cahal’s decision and in general the censorship of Mapplethorpe’s exhibition by politicians like Helms. Following the cancellation in Washington, D.C, the exhibition eventually traveled to Cincinnati, OH, where the director of Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) Dennis Barrie, would
be indicted on charges of obscenity stemming from his continued authorization of the images being displayed.

When *The Perfect Moment* was canceled in Washington D.C. and subsequently censored in Cincinnati, these choices were exemplary of the resounding effects of the *queer body* as a societal spectacle built upon a conflation of queerness and deviancy. The intermingling of queer identity with perceptions of immorality and deviancy contributed to a wider belief that images produced by a queer artist and/or art considered to be dealing with queer subject matter were, by their very nature, obscene. If these kinds of works were obscene and according to politicians like Jesse Helms that meant that these works should be rooted out of public display. What this amounts to is a form of censorship that roots out queer subject matter because such subject matter is considered obscene which then means it is unfit for public viewing.

Images can be subversive, pushing against pre-established social boundaries and cultural mores. Some images challenge the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is taboo. Artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, George Dureau, Kiki Smith, Andres Serrano, and Catherine Opie represent a lineage of late 20th century artists who subverted societal norms and defied boundaries of what fine art had been established to be. Throughout this thesis, works by each of these artists will serve to explore varied concepts that challenge societal norms where each engages in their own contributions to a growing discourse surrounding queer bodies and queer representation/visibility.

There is a notorious photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, an artist who will be discussed in depth in the subsequent chapters, that will help introduce the boundaries between pornography and fine art, body taboo, and queer eroticism. *Fist Fuck / Full Body* depicts two men, one standing shirtless in a pair of jeans his arm penetrating the other man’s anus as he is bent over a
leather armchair. Their faces are obstructed from view, turned away from the viewer. The framing of this image allows the viewer a degree of separation from the two men, which also in turn situates them as voyeurs. Their distance suggests the subjects are unaware of their act being observed. On the surface, this image seems painful for the man on the receiving end of the other's fist/arm.

Figure 1. Mapplethorpe, Robert, Fist Fuck / Full Body, 1978, Gelatin Silver print (https://collections.lacma.org/node/2233389)

The photograph seems to beg the question of why this act is being done, and what pleasure, if any does this provide for either party? There are many layers to this image, but the most immediate one is shock—the act of fist ing is not typically visible outside of pornography. As such, the other is a blur between fine art and pornography. Because Fist Fuck / Full Body is an image depicting a sexual act between two men there is room to simply relegate it as pornography. However, unlike pornography, Mapplethorpe focused on the delicate interplay
light, contrast, and texture, drawing the eye across the composition by way of how he has chosen to position the two men, down to what the viewer is able to see and what is obscured from view. There is a purpose behind the composition that might not necessarily be seen in traditional porn where the goal is more so for pure sexual satisfaction rather than contemplation. The visceral nature of this sex act being on full display disrupts passive viewing by way of its shock value and how it challenges the viewer to contemplate something they might not be comfortable with. There is a sense that Mapplethorpe wanted to force the viewer to confront their expectations on what is a palatable depiction of the body—of sexuality. He situates this image to comment not only on body taboo associated with queer bodies but bodies in general, impressing that the body need not be sanitized to be depicted in art. Its self-awareness as a subversive image acts as a proverbial “middle finger” to conservative notions of the body. *Fist Fuck / Full Body* functions in a way that blurs the lines between obscenity and fine art, forcing the viewer to confront their expectations on what they might find aesthetically pleasing versus explicit sexual imagery that they might find unpleasant.

This thesis aims to illustrate the interaction of the spectator and art in regard to art that is either explicitly queer or coded as queer due to heteronormative associations of what being queer means; the result of these associations is the body of the queer person is rendered transgressive due to their identity being associated with deviancy and whose sexual acts are considered immoral by a cis-heteronormative society. Furthermore, this thesis deals with important questions surrounding both self-identification and matters of stereotyping and fetishization imposed by society; therefore, it will be important to state at the outset the intended usage, herein, of a range of important terms related to identity, gender, and sexuality. There are a variety of terms now prevalent within queer theory and in the vernacular of the queer community, such
as queer, gay, LGBTQ+, heterosexual, homosexual, trans/transgender, gender variant, homoeroticism, heteronormative, gender binary, and so on. Each of these terms have their own histories and usages and some have fallen out of common use for various reasons.

The term *queer* itself, specifically, is among the most significant in its transformation from a derogatory label imposed from outside of the LGBTQI+ community to one that has recently been reclaimed on account of its inclusivity. The term has a sordid history; it has been used disparagingly to characterize same-sex acts, as a rallying cry for equal rights, and as an umbrella term for all forms of sexuality and gender variance. The denotive meaning of *queer* is “strange, novel, or unusual”. However, by the nineteenth century, *queer* had evolved into a pejorative to describe anyone who deviated from opposite-sex romantic pairings or expressed their gender identity in a way outside of the traditional social roles and codes associated with their assigned sex. The first recorded use of the word *queer* as a slur was situated within a court case that charged Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde with indecency and sodomy. The slur was used in a letter from the Marquis of Queensberry to his son Lord Alfred Douglas in which he refers to Wilde and other homosexuals as ‘Snob Queers’.

Though imposed as a pejorative for over a century, the word *queer* was subversively reappropriated by activists in the 1980 and 1990s. One of the first clear indications of *queer* as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community was at New York Pride in the zine “Queers Read This!”. The zine was written by an anonymous author and represents a lineage of queer subversion against heteronormative society.

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A selection from the zine reads:

“Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred. (We have been carefully taught to hate ourselves.) And now of course it means fighting a virus as well, and all those homo-haters who are using AIDS to wipe us off the face of the earth. Being queer means leading a different sort of life.” (1990)

Importantly, the zine calls for a push against heteronormativity, which refers to the centering of heterosexuality as a societal norm; this term is often expanded as heteronormativity to indicate not just heterosexuality as a societal norm, but also normative gender expression in which an individual’s identity (as established through dress, social behavior, pronouns, and other public codes) aligns with their sex assigned at birth. Broken down, the modifier ‘cis’ is a shortening of ‘cisgender’ a term used to refer to individuals whose gender identity is congruent with their assigned sex; its opposite is transgender which represents individuals whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth. Queer helps act as a term that can encompass many of the varied terms to describe variant sexuality and gender expression. Historians and theorists Richard Meyer and Catherine Lord express the importance of the term queer and its use in social discourse in their book *Art and Queer Culture*, stating:

"We have chosen the word 'queer' in the knowledge that no single word can accommodate the sheer expanse of cultural practices that oppose normative heterosexuality. In its shifting connotation from everyday parlance to phobic epithet to defiant self-identification, 'queer' offers more generous rewards than any simple inventory of sexual practices or erotic object choices. It makes more sumptuous the space between best fantasy and worst fear." (Lord & Meyer, 2019)

Queer as an umbrella term offers a crucial means of opposition for the queer person. To reclaim the word queer as a term of empowerment represents a key act of dissonance against

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cis-heteronormative values. In relation to the reasons and discourse above, I have chosen to employ this term within my own scholarly voice, even when consulted literature or previous authors might vary in their usage. Queer functions as an intersectional term that I feel better incorporates a larger, more varied experience of the community, specifically in regards to gender. More often than not transgender people and those whose sexuality is not definable by labels like lesbian or gay are excluded from the overall narrative of queer discourse in the 1970s and 80s, wherein “homosexual” or “gay” are used as umbrella terms during this period. While queer possibly has its own shortcomings, for the needs of this thesis as well as my own preferences in terminology, it is the term that best articulates the focus of this thesis in that it allows for a more intersectional approach to works traditionally viewed within the context of “homosexuality”.

The biases or assumptions one conveys about any other person or group can often alter the nature of our interpersonal and social interactions. Real or perceived differences between individuals or groups of people come to influence how we relate to those who are coded as outside of the norm. Often, these differences and how they manifest in others result in these individuals being seen as the "other" or as "strange". Due to their existence outside of pre-established societal norms, those who do not align with society and its expectations in any capacity are often shunned and treated with distrust, and in some instances, even hostility.

The pathologization of sexual variance and expression by the medical industries initiated further social divisions between those who desire opposite-sex and same-sex intimacy, resulting in the scientific codification of the terms heterosexual and homosexual.6 The differences thus established the basis of the queer body—which describes the sum of assumptions and biases attributed to queer people, whereby a person’s own queer identity or expression is overshadowed

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by the generalizations, (mis)perceptions, and stereotypes which society imposes on that individual. Central to the scope of this thesis is the reality whereby the ostracization of queer people involves the association between the very body of the queer person with sexual acts deemed both deviant and immoral by a cis-heteronormative society. Society renders the *queer body* as pejoratively deviant simply on the basis of its existence alone, where any form of varied gender or sexual expression is viewed as damaging to preestablished societal values and norms. This means that images and literature that are understood as *queer* automatically become interwoven within this framework of biases and obscenity. The overlap between society’s perception of the *queer body* and matters of visual representation and stereotype form the basis of both the genre of *queer art* and the study or methodology of queer art history. *Queer art* is a general term that can describe a genre of works that engage with queer-affiliated subject matter, or works that challenge traditional social norms of gender, sexuality, and expression (and their visual representation). However, in many cases even the artist’s own identity has led their works to be rendered ‘queer’ or ‘queer art’ in surrounding discourse—a phenomenon not dissimilar to the way in which work by many women artists has been labeled as ‘feminist,’ regardless of its engagement with issues surrounding women’s experiences, rights, or histories, based solely upon the artist’s female gender identity. The spectator’s own biases, foreknowledge, and experiences can intermingle with queer subject matter or works rendered as queer, bringing upon them a whole new set of socio-political interpretations both intended and unintended by the artist. These works take on a life beyond their original creation. In the context of artistic representation, a body of work or the subject of one’s work is often rendered *queer* in criticism and discourse based solely on the identity of the artist without any pause to consider if the artist's identity relates at all to the content of the work. A nude man depicted by a queer artist becomes
something more than a classical figure study—it becomes coded by, or implicated in, the history of queerness and queer identity, from the Stonewall Riots of 1969 to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Queer bodies are seen as a single entity in which society applies a blanket judgement of deviance where queer bodies become a monolithic representation of what it means to be queer.

**HIV/AIDS Crisis**

The protection of public health, one would assume, would always be a priority of one’s government. However, the HIV/AIDS crisis proved that this is not always the case. On various fronts, the HIV/AIDS crisis would not be addressed despite striking evidence that it gravely threatened public health. For a while there was no defined name for HIV/AIDS; no one knew what it was, what caused it, or even how it could be spread. During the early 1980s, HIV/AIDS would go through various names. First, it would be colloquially referred to as “gay cancer”, a name that derived from the first recorded instance of HIV/AIDS within the US scientific/medical community in 1981. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), describing cases of a rare lung infection, Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), in five young, previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles, California. More often than not, at the center of the narrative surrounding AIDS were gay men. By the end of 1981, there was a cumulative total of 337 reported cases of individuals with a form of severe immune deficiency in the United States—321 adults/adolescents and 16 children under age 13. Of those cases, 130 are already dead by December 31. It would not be until 1982 that another name for HIV/AIDS would be coined, GRID, standing for gay-related

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immunodeficiency disorder, first used by the New York Times in a 1982 article titled “New Homosexual Disorder Worries Officials”. The article focused on a central link between the patients, the fact that they were all young gay men who were otherwise healthy prior to acquiring this “novel” form of cancer. There is also a notable inclusion of comments from a New York City physician, Dr. Lawrence D. Mass, who went on the record saying: "gay people whose lifestyle consists of anonymous sexual encounters are going to have to do some serious rethinking." The singular focus on gay men by way of publications like “New Homosexual Disorder Worries Officials” impressed upon the collective consciousness of society, feeding into a growing homophobic narrative and stereotype where gay men’s promiscuity and lack of accountability meant they were endangering themselves and their health. This article could lead the reader to believe that HIV/AIDS was singularly a “gay problem” or the “homophile disease”. “The New Homosexual Disorder Worries Officials” tries to present AIDS and its transmission as either transmitted sexually or through recreational drug use by using statistics that focus particularly on the mortality of AIDS in association with gay men. Essentially gay men are presented as being mostly the sole spreader of HIV/AIDS. This all can be traced to some of the first instances of HIV/AIDS being diagnosed in the United States and how of those documented in that first case, they were all gay men. In September of 1982 CDC implemented the first use of the term “AIDS” (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) for the first time in a new MMWR.

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AIDS is described as:

“A disease at least moderately predictive of a defect in cell-mediated immunity, occurring in a person with no known cause for diminished resistance to that disease.”

1982 would see the formation of the first activist group to help rally together gay men to help those living with AIDS. The Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) group was formed on January 4th of 1982 by a collection of gay men. Activist and Playwright Larry Kramer was one of the founding members of GMHC. This group was founded in New York, where many other AIDS activist groups would be founded. GMHC focused its efforts on creating a support system for people with AIDS (PWA); they created a hotline that individuals could call to help get the latest information about AIDS, and how to seek end-of-life care and legal provisions. A few months after the formation of GMHC, Larry Kramer would take to writing his own call to action, demanding that gay men get angry and aware of what was happening in their community.

Kramer wrote, in an essay titled “1,121 and Counting”:

“Our continued existence as gay men upon the face of this earth is at stake. Unless we fight for our lives, we shall die. In all the history of homosexuality, we have never before been so close to death and extinction. Many of us are dying or already dead.”

Kramer here speaks to what he believed was ambivalence towards AIDS—a lack of push and drive to solve the problem. By the start of 1983, two years into the epidemic, AIDS was still not formally acknowledged as a public health issue, there was still no statement from the White House, nor any acknowledgment by the executive branch of government. Only the CDC and the media would make any public statements about HIV/AIDS. There would be a break in government silence, May 1983, US. Congress passed the first bill with specific funding for AIDS

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research and treatment across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services\textsuperscript{11}. President Regan however, still would not speak publicly to acknowledge the growing epidemic. in May of 1983 a French researcher from the Pasteur Institut Dr. Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, and her colleagues report the discovery of a retrovirus that could be the cause of AIDS. In September 1985, President Ronald Regan finally publically addresses the AIDS epidemic where he promises that he would make AIDS research a “Top priority”\textsuperscript{12} The AIDS epidemic leading up to the end of the 1980s would see more cases, more deaths, and no vaccine or cure in sight. AIDS was often described by religious conservatives as divine retribution for the ‘sinful and unnatural acts’ of homosexuality. In 1993, evangelical leader and pastor Reverend Billy Graham proposed a question to his audience: “Is AIDS a judgment of God?” where he soon after answered his own question: “I could not say for sure, but I think so.”\textsuperscript{13} To an extent, many conservative voices would consider the AIDS epidemic as an inevitable product of rampant promiscuity, and unbridled sexual appetite. To be gay was to be aligned immediately with being a degenerate who proliferated death and disease within the community.

In terms of the conservative voice of opposition from the government on the AIDS crisis, Senator Jesse Helms is one of the foremost figures who opposed any aid or government support for PWAs. He used his platform as a senator to decry homosexual acts, and the government funding of any materials that promoted and/or depicted homosexual acts. He often had been cited as blaming the AIDS epidemic solely on the acts of promiscuous gay men. He helped push abstinence-only education for AIDS prevention. The Roman Catholic church would also to an extent be a part of the conservative choir of voices pushing for abstinence-only education

\textsuperscript{11}“A Timeline of HIV and AIDS”, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, last modified April 29, 2022, https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline


surrounding AIDS prevention. By 1989, there was a push against the influence of the Catholic church and its stance on sex and sexual practices. The Church has always purported a stance against birth control, including condoms. This stance comes from the belief in the sanctity of sex within the confines of a marriage between a man and woman. Any and all sex acts outside of marriage are condemned by the Catholic Church, a condemnation that most certainly includes same-sex sexual acts. However, due to the Church’s position on birth control, they were in direct opposition to many AIDS activist groups who understood that individuals were going to have sex, with or without AIDS as an issue. Safe sex through safer practices and the use of condoms would mean fewer individuals would contract AIDS. This tension between the Catholic Church and activist groups like ACT UP\(^\text{14}\) came to a head in 1989. New York Archbishop Cardinal John O'Connor had decried homosexual activities as well as the use of condoms on many occasions, a position that would lead to ACT UP taking direct action\(^\text{15}\) to help promote safe sex education and to demand that the Catholic Church reconsider its position.\(^\text{16}\). The artists described and analyzed in this thesis from Robert Mapplethorpe to Catherine Opie created works during the HIV/AIDS crisis where the body, particularly the body of the queer person became synonymous with death. Their works were situated in a culture that overwhelmingly associated queer people and queer behavior with HIV/AIDS due to media misinformation, coupled with conservative and religious right pushback against the queer person.

\(^{14}\) ACTUP was a coalition of queer people who sought to demand response from the US government to find a treatment for AIDS and to acknowledge its importance publically. They formed out of Greenwich Village in New York lead in part by former GMHC member Larry Kramer

\(^{15}\) ACT UP staged a massive protest of thousands of members at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, they sought to make a demonstration against the Archdiocese's public stand against AIDS education and condom distribution, and its opposition to a women's right to abortion

Simon Watney’s *Spectacle of AIDS* and the “Homosexual Body”

In conceptualizing the *queer body* in the context of this thesis, I take a cue from Simon Watney's "Spectacle of AIDS" and the discourse on the *homosexual body* outlined therein. In this text, Watney asserts that the effect of heteronormative assumptions and associations of queer people is the creation of a kind of spectacle - marked by a sense of public fascination, shock, entertainment, and shame - in which the homosexual body is highlighted as both a source and scapegoat of societal wrongs. Watney’s use of spectacle in this context represents a phenomenon where society becomes encapsulated by a mass of information surrounding an individual, group, or concept that then propels certain biases and assumptions on the individual, group, or concept in question. For Watney, that focus centered on gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Watney writes:

“The spectacle of AIDS operates as a public masque in which we witness the corporal punishment of the 'homosexual body,' identified as the enigmatic and indecent source of an incomprehensible, voluntary resistance to...marriage, parenthood, and property.”

(Watney, 1987)

During the crisis of its emergence in the 1980s, AIDS became just another vehicle for the further ostracization and demonization of queer individuals and communities. The “homosexual body” as Watney puts it, becomes a metaphor for all the wrongs perceived in society. The identity of the gay man becomes a monolithic concept that represents a deviation from the norm –a deviation that is perceived as the source of turmoil for society specifically situated in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Queer sexuality came to represent a manifestation of queerness as detrimental to society. Pejorative rhetoric surrounding the *homosexual body* is part of a larger social phenomenon in which certain

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members of society enforce a heteronormative view of sexuality and of the family, using the *homosexual body* as a scare tactic to uphold their values.

Watney’s articulation of the homosexual body highlights the intersection between queerness as self-identification and queer stereotype and bias imposed by a heteronormative society. Its usefulness, in art history, can be linked to the dynamics by which the identities and values of artists, viewers, and depicted subjects might interact and overlap. The *queer body*, as it is to be used in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, thus expands the scope of Watney’s original concept of the *homosexual body*. Since queer is used often as an umbrella term to encapsulate any form of gender and sexual variance, so to does *queer body* help expand Watney’s original discourse to encompass more identities that are also relevant to the spectacle he outlined in “The Spectacle of AIDS”. A further expansion of Watney’s “Spectacle of AIDS” would entail an analysis on how a heteronormative society’s assumptions and generalizations of the queer person condition the wider public reception of queer art and art made by queer people. Here, the concept of the *queer body* helps describe a phenomenon where the experiences and foreknowledge of the artist's or subject's queer identity have a resounding and powerful effect on the general reception of art images/works and even the artist themselves. Assumptions and associations of the audience/spectator that are impressed upon artists and or their body of work based on their proximity to queerness make up the *queer body*. Similar to Watney’s concept of the ‘homosexual body’, the *queer body* concept further describes the intermingling of audience associations with queerness and societal wrongs. The *queer body* concept allows for a broadening of Watney’s concept of the *homosexual body* to apply to all forms of sexual expression and gender variance that do not fall on the heteronormative axis, much like how the term queer is used as an umbrella term to express a wider variety of sexual and gender
expression. This chapter focuses on queer theory and functions as an introduction to the concepts described in later chapters, chapter two focuses on subtext and subjectivity, exploring how subtext can influence an artist’s audience based on variables like gender, sexuality, and race; chapter three focuses on Robert Mapplethorpe and George Dureau and their use of queer sexuality coupled with the male nude blurred the lines between fine art and society’s perception of obscenity, chapter four uses two case studies, one on Andres Serrano and the other focusing on Catherine Opie to explore the continuation of a lineage of subversive queer art during the 1980s and 90s, and finally, chapter five concludes the thesis, summarizing the overall narrative that will be presented.

This thesis seeks to illustrate the relationship between the *queer body* and post-modern photography from the 1980s and early 90s, focusing on the implications of subtext on an artist's work, the dichotomy of pornography and fine art, objectification, and fetishization, government censorship of ‘obscene’ works and body taboo as a subversive tool used by queer artists who sought to disrupt the status quo of a heteronormative society bent on continued ostracization of queer people and queer subject matter from public display. Through analyzing selected works from Robert Mapplethorpe, George Dureau, Kiki Smith, Andres Serrano, and Catherine Opie I will establish a lineage of subversive queer art that contributed to the aforementioned disruption of the status quo.

The heteronormative society this thesis speaks of is a society that renders the queer body as pejoratively deviant simply on the basis of its existence alone, where any form of varied gender or sexual expression is viewed as damaging to preestablished societal values and norms. This means that images and literature that are understood as queer automatically become interwoven within this framework of biases and obscenity. The overlap between society’s
perception of the queer body and matters of visual representation and stereotype form the basis of both the genre of queer art and the study or methodology of queer art history.

At its core, this thesis seeks to illustrate the reality whereby the ostracization of queer people involves the association between the very body of the queer person with sexual acts deemed both deviant and immoral by a cis-heteronormative society. The application of societal associations of deviance upon the body of queer people is illustrated through a methodology called the queer body, a methodology borne from Simon Watney’s “Spectacle of AIDS” where Watney describes the pathologization of the homosexual body during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Watney’s homosexual body was a product of its time, focused specifically on how cis gay men were associated with deviance and disease. By my adapting Watney’s concept of the homosexual body as the queer body I seek to apply Watney’s methodology in a more intersectional way to allow for a broader application of how his discourse applied to the entirety of the queer community. I will illustrate how the queer body describes the sum of assumptions and biases attributed to queer people, whereby a person’s own queer identity or expression is overshadowed by the generalizations, (mis)perceptions, and stereotypes that society imposes on that individual. My methodology of the queer body as a continuation of Watney’s homosexual body acts in tandem with how I envision this thesis and its contribution to art historical scholarship: an application of a more intersectional approach to queer art histories that recognizes that during the HIV/AIDS crisis and beyond the queer community was not just a community of cis-white gay men who made artistic contributions but a larger more complex body of queer artists and queer subject matter.
Chapter 2. Subtext, Gender, Sexuality, Queerness, and the Body in Fine Art

On January 12, 2022, a man attacked a sculpture on the facade of the BBC's Broadcasting House in central London, taking a hammer to the sculpture, which depicts two characters from the William Shakespeare play *The Tempest*: Prospero and Ariel. Was this an act of pure vandalism or was it borne out of something else? The sculpture in question was *Prospero and Ariel*, 1931 (fig 2) by sculptor Eric Gill. Prior to this incident, this work has been the subject of troublesome controversy in recent years. It depicts a stoic, bearded man who towers behind a young nude boy with a jovial expression on his face; the boy holds a flute in one hand, his arms held above his head. At first glance, the statue seems mostly innocuous. However, with the added context of the artist’s perverse history with his children, as detailed in diaries published posthumously, the statue is most certainly clouded with a more troubling subtext of pedophilia. With this single piece of information about the nature of the artist’s sexual deviancy and abuse, the statue would now read as a monument of his abuse of children - a visual representation of himself. Whether or not this statue is or is not a representation of the artist’s desires means nothing in how the statue is read by an audience armed with the background knowledge of his abusive behavior towards children. This sculpture becomes adorned and ornamented with a subtext of abuse and harm, so much so that it has sparked demands for its removal.18

The outrage is evident through a BBC published story about the incident detailing the actions of the protester.

“Police were called to the scene at about 16:15 GMT and the man was brought down about four hours later. BBC staff reported hearing the man shout "paedophile" as he struck the statue at Broadcasting House, which is connected to New Broadcasting House, the BBC's main headquarters…The attack on the statue comes a week after four people accused of illegally removing a statue of 17th Century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol were cleared of criminal damage. It happened during a Black Lives Matter protest in the city in 2020, during a widespread debate about the place of certain historical statues in modern society.

The case of Eric Gill’s *Prospero and Ariel* helps demonstrate how an artist’s personal history can result in subtext that can alter or even overpower any meaning they might have intended for their work. Whether or not Gill’s history of abuse was manifested in *Prospero and Ariel*, his personal history of abuse colors how his audience perceives the sculpture which has resulted in cries for

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its removal. When an artist creates art their own experiences and values are intentionally and sometimes unintentionally applied to their art. After their work is allowed to be consumed by the general public, the meaning of that work or body of work is immediately altered by audience interpretation. Whatever meaning the artist had intended becomes secondary to audience perception, often in relation to matters of identity and identification. Viewer reception of the artist’s work often helps to craft a new basis for ongoing interpretation of their work. The audience engages with a work of art based on their knowledge of it and what associations they create based on the work's subject or overall content, this engagement is a form of spectatorship that plays a key part in how one can engage, alter and color their own experience with an artwork. This is evident in Eric Gill’s *Prospero and Ariel*, Georgia O’Keeffe’s flowers, Robert Mapplethorpe’s idealistic portrayals of black men, or Andres Serrano’s *Morgue* series; each of these works in one way or another foster varied interpretations based not only on their content but the surrounding contextual information available to the viewer. Often these interpretations are based on the social climate during the artist's time, or due to aspects of their person like gender, race, sexuality, or the implication that they have caused harm to others. Using aspects of the artist’s person and or social climate, the audience is bound to create their own assumptions of their work based on a combination of factors that then code the original content of the artwork(s). This chapter aims to explore subtext in art and will be mainly contextualized through a case study observing Georgia O’Keeffe and Robert Mapplethorpe’s respective representations of flowers. These artists’ works serve as a key part in exploring how works of art often have many interpretations that can be imposed upon them, some intended by the artist(s) or not.
Subtext can be defined as an implicit meaning that goes beyond what is explicitly represented in a work of art or narrative. Author Robert McKee in his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* offers his definition of subtext:

“Text means the sensory surface of a work of art. In film, it’s the images on screen and the soundtrack of dialogue, music, and sound effects. What we see. What we hear. What people say. What people do. Subtext is the life under that surface – thoughts and feelings both known and unknown, hidden by behavior.”

(McKee, 1997)

In this quote, McKee is describing a scenario in which what isn’t clear to the audience by way of subtext allows for their minds to engage and interact with what’s presented in front of them. Meaning within a work of art that requires careful contemplation and consideration allows for the spectator to be a part of the artwork itself. Since the work is no longer in the hands of the artist, how it is interpreted by its audience becomes its new meaning. Such is seen in the aforementioned example of Eric Gill’s *Prospero and Ariel*, wherein his personal history of abuse altered how the public related and interpreted his work. There are a multitude of variables that come into play that create a sense of various subtext(s) in art. Some of these variables are the artist themselves, their behavior, the cultural climate in which the work was made, etc. For example, queer subtext would describe an aspect of an artwork that evokes the association with queer subject matter, social discourse on queer identity, and or a general association with queerness. Two specific motifs associated with queer subtext that recur in works of art, literature, film, photography, and other cultural products are homoeroticism and queer coding. Homoeroticism represents a form of subjectivity that infers a sense of intimacy and or identity outside of the boundaries of heterosexuality. Queer subtext functions as a multilayered interpretation of an artwork by way of its audience applying associations of queerness with the subject matter within the work itself. Associations between certain subject matter and queerness

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can be parsed through an analysis of the body and how sexuality and intimacy play a part in how a viewer experiences an image and how that image is rendered queer by that viewer's experiences. What place does individual experience and bias have on engagement with a work of art? If we were to examine art history through the lens of viewer reception, we might draw from studies such as Jacques Ranciere's "The Emancipated Spectator" which considers the effect and impact that political art can have on beholders, audience members, and participants though an examination of spectatorship.

A dichotomy between active and passive spectatorship is outlined in Jacques Rancière’s book “The Emancipated Spectator”. Theories of spectatorship have dominated art criticism and theory in the postmodern period, stemming from the writing of Guy Debord, Jacques Rancière, and others following them. In short, Debord focused on establishing the concept of the “spectacle” where the spectacle was the presence of media as an overwhelming influence on society that cannot be avoided; Rancière explored the notion of spectatorship rooting it in a debate of active versus passive spectatorship wherein he offered some potential solutions for spectators to. For Rancière, the spectator of a work of art can respond passively or actively to a work of art depending on the content of the artist’s work and the current social climate in which it is produced. The passive spectator is simply fed information by the active “actor” - the artist and does not have much control over their experience.

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Drawing from the example of theater, which art historians have often expanded in relation to all cultural and artistic works across genres and forms, Rancière illustrates the dichotomy between active and passive spectatorship as follows:

“We need a different theatre - a theatre without spectators: not a theatre played out in front of empty seats, but a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by a very term is subjected to a different relationship – that implied by another word which refers to what is produced on the stage: drama. Drama means action.” (Rancière)

Ranciere explains that it is the ability of the spectator to think and engage that emancipates them. When the spectator is placed in a position to think critically or to be challenged by what they are viewing, this is a form of active participation. They are active in the sense that there is a level of engagement between the work and the viewer, even if it only means the viewer is placed in an ambivalent or outright uncomfortable position. Their ambivalence or discomfort is a form of active participation. Passive spectatorship doesn’t allow much interaction between the viewer and an artwork, they are passive in how they respond since they are not challenged or brought to comment on what they are seeing. In practice, an example of passive spectatorship would be a spectator at a gallery being told how to interpret a work either by a placard that explains ways the work has been interpreted or through guided instruction in a book or gallery attendant. Either way, the viewer is not able to actively engage in how they correspond with a work. Active spectatorship on the other hand, makes way for a sort of cyclical exchange of sorts between the spectator and the artists that go beyond the literal imagery of a work or body of work. It is through subtext that images allow for the spectator to engage on a deeper level that requires their thought, participation, and contemplation on a work of art.
Subtext’s role in the spectator’s emancipation can be understood through photographer Andre Ruesch’s book *Subtext: Critiquing Individual Photographs Within a Collective Consciousness*. On the topic of subtext within photography, Ruesch writes:

“...discussing ways to unravel an image, I hope that each reader further develops the skill and confidence to bring their own increasingly emancipated voice to the encounter of looking at the photographic image. Herein lies the power of the “subtext”. The most successful images have the power to engage the viewer way beyond the subject matter and, even if we can’t say why, hold our attention for longer.”22 (Ruesch, 2018)

Ruesch’s text focuses on exploring the intricacies of photography and the ways in which an artist can weave subtext into their work. He seeks to explain that by utilizing subtext in one’s work, an artist can allow for a deeper form of engagement with their viewer. The viewer is allowed the opportunity to interpret the subtext the artist inserts into their work in their own way, allowing for leaps in logic the artist might have never intended but are still relevant to the viewer’s experience with the image. Photography is a unique medium in that apart from the intervention of the photographer on composition, subject, and light, the camera is generally considered to be an objective capturer of what is presented in front of it. There is little or no room for the camera itself to alter the image beyond the intent of the artist unlike other, more tactile mediums like painting or drawing. The allegedly straightforward or "objective" nature of photography allows for the audience to read into an image subtext that the author may have never foreseen or intended in their work.

This chapter aims to define subtext as interpretations of artworks that are not inherently present in the work itself, meaning when the audience looks at an image/work of art their own implicit biases, past experiences, and associations code how they interpret said work in a way that doesn’t necessarily have to do with the literal imagery of a work. To further explain, works

of art often have many interpretations that can be imposed upon them, some intended by the artist(s) or not. This is not to say that these interpretations are incorrect or ill-placed, but more so a product of how the work is understood or lack of understanding of its contextual situation and significant details of its maker or its making. Moreover, all of these factors play a central role in how the audience perceives and engages with art, on a mental and physical level.

All images have subtext but not all subtext is intended or intentional in the creation of an image. In this section, I will examine a series of case studies that demonstrate various ways that subtext guides or even influences audience interpretations of art. Gender, the body, race, and queerness, are key facets of art where subtext, both intended and unintended by the artist, can exist in nuanced, contradictory, or even problematic ways. In regard to gender cases, historians and critics have frequently waged gendered interpretations of work by women artists (such as Mary Cassat and Georgia O’Keeffe), regardless of whether such readings are substantiated by the work itself, or by the artist's stated intentions. Many works by women artists have often been labeled feminist simply because the artist is a woman. No artist of the modern era, perhaps, has been subjected to overtly gendered readings of her work more than Georgia O’Keeffe, whose flower paintings have long been interpreted as significations of eroticism and female sexuality. O’Keeffe defended her works against such one-dimensional claims, denouncing any readings of her flowers as sexual paintings, and instead asserting her intent thusly: “I’ll paint it big, and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it...I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.”

representations of the female anatomy\textsuperscript{25}. Critic Samuel Kootz in \textit{Modern American Painters} (1930), was one such critic who applied a gendered reading of O’Keeffe’s flowers. He asserted that:

"Much of her early work showed a womanly preoccupation with sex, an uneasy selection of phallic symbols in her flowers, a delight in their nascent qualities. O’Keeffe was being a woman first and only secondarily an artist. An assertion of sex can only impede the talents of an artist, for it is an act of defiance, of grievance, in which the consciousness of these qualities retards the natural assertions of the painter.”\textsuperscript{26}

For Kootz to suggest such a heavily gendered analysis of O’Keeffe’s works implies that somehow her gender overshadows her place and talent as an artist, that the two can't possibly coincide with each other. While her flowers do prominently display and at times resemble the anatomy of the vagina, evident in \textit{Black Iris} (fig.3), such examples do not give weight to legitimizing claims that her gender is the cause or source of such imagery, wherein readings of sex and sexuality are more forcefully read upon her works because of her gender. Her works in her own time, as well as now, still garner the interpretation of them as sexual organs rather than simply flowers. In 1919 photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who promoted O’Keeffe’s work at the time, introduced an interpretation of O’Keeffe’s flower paintings as close studies of the female vulva. Stieglitz assumed that sex appeal would better popularize O’Keeffe’s flowers and thus mirrored Kootz gendered read of O’Keeffe’s flowers.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} It is not ideal to use this term to refer to the anatomy O’Keeffe’s paintings have often been compared to, it is used due to a gap in language for a concise, more inclusive term. In no way is this an indication that this type of anatomy is exclusive to women as many trans men have this anatomy, and many trans women do not.
\textsuperscript{26} Samuel M. Kootz, \textit{Modern American Painters}. Pg. 48-49.: Creative Media Partners, LLC. https://ia800302.us.archive.org/29/items/modernamer00koot/modernamer00koot.pdf.
Would flower imagery created by a man warrant the same gendered read Kootz applied to O’Keeffe? Would such images warrant the artist’s gender be the primary focus of their work or would the formalistic elements take precedence; Could images of flowers created by a man garner the same reading of sex and sensuality, without the same focus on his gender as a consequence? Robert Mapplethorpe, who will be explored in depth in the next chapter, was an artist during the mid 1970s and 1980s whose works often focused on sex and sexuality and who was also drawn to floral imagery as a significant part of his portfolio. His sensual images of flowers have many formalistic similarities to O’Keeffe’s. A selection of O’Keeffe’s works observed alongside those of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe will help explore how gender does not play a part in either artist’s works, where in the contrary O’Keeffe and Mapplethorpe’s flowers are not examples of an artist’s gender being the driving factor of how they chose to
depict flowers. Mapplethorpe’s drive behind his work is described as a desire to inject sexuality into his images in any way he could. Photographer, and one-time lover of Robert Mapplethorpe Jack Fritscher comments Mapplethorpe’s motivations behind his imagery as:

“[Mapplethorpe] labored throughout his career to inject that sex rush, that religious feeling, that existential frisson, into his holy pictures of leather sex, black men, celebrity women, and flowers as brilliant as night-blooming sex organs.”

Here Fritscher does not comment on Mapplethorpe’s gender as Kootz does on O’Keeffe. Mapplethorpe is allowed to, ‘inject’ as Fritscher says, sex into his work without any mind to his gender as a contributing factor as to why he would choose to do so. An analysis of two of Georgia O’Keeffe’s flower paintings, specifically those of orchids, alongside a selection of similarly composed images by Robert Mapplethorpe can help illustrate the impact that gendered readings can have upon artworks. O’Keeffe’s An Orchid (fig 4), and Narcissa's Last Orchid (fig 5) are comparable to Mapplethorpe’s Orchid (fig 6 & 7), in the sense both artists depict orchids but also in the sense that they are enlarged orchids that are the key focus of the composition. The first and foremost difference between these works is color, in the case of Mapplethorpe, lack of color. In its place, he highlights the contrast between dark and light, accentuating every curve of the flower through its isolation on a hazy gray-black background. What is presented to the audience is a heightened sense of reality not achievable by the naked eye. The bloom is ‘blown up’ beyond its natural size to push to the forefront the fine textures and details hidden upon its surface. The surface here is key. His use of contrast and texture allows for the orchid to ripple with life despite its being a two-dimensional surface. There is a heightened sense of reality that defies the black and white treatment of the image. It is the contrast that somehow allows for the orchid to still seem vibrant in tone. The skin of the orchids is comparable to that of a human

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person, the tight pores, the suppleness, the stretch of the skin as it twists at various curves.\textsuperscript{29}

Much like his images of humans, there is an unmistakable sensuality to these orchids. They appear stretched open, awaiting an embrace or touch, they seem to invite the audience to touch.

Figure 4. O’Keeffe, Georgia, \textit{An Orchid}, 1941, pastel painting (https://www.moma.org/collection/works/37328)

\textsuperscript{29}Derek Conrad Murray, \textit{Mapplethorpe and the Flower: Radical Sexuality and the Limits of Control} (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 1-10.
Figure 5. O’Keeffe, Georgia, *Narcissa’s Last Orchid*, 1940, pastel painting
(https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/14878)

Figure 6. Mapplethorpe, Robert, *Orchid*, 1987, photograph, gelatin silver print
Notably, what is on display are the key parts of the flower associated with reproduction. While this image does not immediately read as sexual, flowers are associated, as mentioned previously with femininity and sexuality. This is comparable to how O’Keeffe has rendered her Orchids, particularly Narcissa's Last Orchid. There is a similar openness to O’Keeffe’s orchids, both appear to reach out past the confines of their frame. There is desire there, almost as if the orchids themselves desire to interact with the viewer. A similar sensuality is seen in O’Keeffe’s orchids and Mapplethorpe’s. Both artists would have been keenly aware of the symbolism behind Orchid imagery. However, O’Keeffe does not strive to achieve the same kind of surface as Mapplethorpe. The surface of her orchids eludes the viewer’s eyes, seeming to also elude the desire for touch. Her surface is soft, supple, and dreamlike; her orchids seem as if they might wash away in a mix of soft hues and light in the blink of an eye. However, is there anything in O’Keeffe’s work that remotely justifies Kootz's critique that her flowers are the product of a
“womanly preoccupation with sex”? Would Kootz say the same of Mapplethorpe’s flowers but apply the same criticism to his being a man? There is no way to answer this question, however, femininity has had a long history of being suppressed as secondary within a patriarchal order. Both works play at a sense of intimacy with the viewer, using the surface of the orchid to do so. This is not to make a distinction on whether or not this is a correct or incorrect practice. More so it is meant to point out that attributes of an artwork and the artist who makes the work play a big part in how we interpret and read into a work. Certain interpretations are colored by our understanding of the work's history, its place in history, who made it, their individual history and characteristics, etc., and without knowledge of any of these things, one might not arrive at the same conclusions. This, of course, could be countered as a given that without proper context one can only make note of the aesthetic and formalistic aspects of the work, to do otherwise would be pure speculation. Context is what visual analysis needs; without it, one cannot truly make a grounded analysis.

The Body, Queerness, and Objectification

Our desire to represent the human body comes from a desire to understand the nature of our existence and to empathize with other human beings. We are not just bodies but individuals who have bodies. There is a key distinction between person and body and what those words imply. When a person is the subject of art, is the art of the person or their body, or possibly some combination of both? Could it be that human beings are rendered objects when they are transformed into the subject of an artwork?\textsuperscript{30} The question of bodily objectification comes with its own set of ethical issues to contend with. To be rendered an object means to strip a person of their individuality, their adjacency, and their ability to be understood as a living being with thoughts and emotional needs. However, one might counter that to allow oneself to become the

subject of a work of art or body of work is to allow for their personhood to become secondary to their aestheticization within a work of art. In other words, their participation as subject renders them complicit in their own objectification. But can someone be complacent in their own objectification? Instead, can there be a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the subject’s place, whether intentional or inadvertent, in this exchange? How does race come into play in terms of questioning whether a subject can be complicit in their own objectification? Does race add another layer of complexity to that question, or rather does it provide a useful example of how this exact issue comes into play within the dynamics of subject, art, and artists?

The case of Josephine Baker, a notable African American performer from the early 20th century, is among those examples that demonstrate the complex dynamics of a subject’s participation in the context of their objectification and aestheticization—in this case, as a black woman within a white-dominated, patriarchal society. Historian Anne Cheng uses Baker as a case study in her book *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* to help illustrate the possibility for a subtle assertion of agency despite contexts of objectification or fetishization within society. In regard to the dichotomy between agency and objectification, Cheng writes:

“[Baker’s] reputedly primitive nakedness must be understood within a larger philosophic and aesthetic debate about, and desire for, the “pure surface”......Pure surface in turn looks to black skin, not for disavowal but for articulation. What I am calling the dream of a second skin—of remaking oneself in the skin of the other—is a mutual fantasy, one shared by both Modernists seeking to be outside their own skins and by racialized subjects looking to escape from the burdens of epidermal inscription.”31 (Cheng 2011)

The notion of mutual fantasy as articulated by Cheng offers one possible explanation as to whether or not a person can participate in their objectification, but still retain their sense of self through mutual benefit. Evaluating one's ability to participate in one’s own objectification might entail consideration of a multitude of factors, whether or not the individual had any say in

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the way their body was used or positioned within a situation or composition, whether the individual felt that they had a place or ability to say anything. The power dynamics at play, considering the artist holds the most power in this exchange, brings to question whether or not one can truly act with full adjacency in such a situation.

If one’s body and gender can constitute an influential layer of subtext within a work of art, then it stands to say that the same would be the case for one’s sexuality or any other aspect of their person. An artist's sexuality or implied sexuality has the ability to become an influential layer of subtext within a work of art; particularly, if an individual is queer, this makes it likely that their work will also, often, be read as queer in its subject matter, style, or nature. When an artwork is perceived as queer there is potential for a viewer to read queerness as explicitly sexual regardless of the subject matter.

This discussion revolves around how sexuality becomes a key part of how an image is read and what terms are used in association with sexuality. Language is fluid and ever-changing, terms change with the passing decades, and with that change comes another layer of subtext - what does it mean when x term is applied as opposed to y term to an artwork. Terms like homosexual, homophile, gay, queer, LGBT, LGBTQA+, etc. are all part of an evolving lexicon to describe the variance in sexuality and gender identity where each term brings with it another layer of subtext.

Simon Watney describes this fluid nature of the lexicon as follows:

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“All discussion of the changing modern categories of sexuality must proceed from a consideration of desire, understood as an irreducible element in human nature. However, as Michel Foucault, Jeffrey Weeks, and many others have argued, desire is lived and sensuously experienced in ever-changing social and historical circumstances. Far from being scientific, descriptive categories, the classifications of desire within Western epistemology have profound political, ethical, and psychic implications. In this manner, the question of the gender (or genders) to which one is sexually attracted becomes the ground for fundamental power relations of privilege and underprivilege.”

(Watney, 1991)

Watney here is making a point to illustrate how terms that define sexuality and gender are intrinsically tied to the social climate of when they are created and used. Changes in self-descriptive terminology complicate the relationship and overall perception of queer people which gives way to the marginalization of minority groups, in this context, the queer community. Society’s response to changes in self-descriptive terminology is indicative of a deficit in contemporary sexual politics where there is a need to create specific terms to identify variant forms of sexuality and gender. Our society does not function without descriptors, due to how descriptors like “male”, and “female” are deeply tied to social politics. Our society is based on a collective understanding of certain terms, and terms upon which laws and regulations are based. The way in which we attribute certain labels or descriptors to things or people can alter how we relate to them. Language is deeply intertwined with social relations and how we understand social relations between people and abstract concepts. Our perception of things and people is rooted in what words we use to describe them. We attribute thoughts and ideas based on the connotation associated with the words we attribute to people. By categorizing someone as queer, or art as queer, you are inadvertently associating that person/artwork with all of queer history, regardless of their place or association within queer history. We associate certain images with certain concepts based on how we see images. For example, images that imply intimacy between

two men may appear queer due to associations of male-on-male intimacy as automatically queer. Because we live in a hetero-normative society, where intimacy between two men or two women in any context is considered queer, any image of even the slightest hint of intimacy between two of the same sex summons this as a consequence. This is homoeroticism.\textsuperscript{34} As mentioned previously homoeroticism represents a form of subjectivity that infers a sense of intimacy and or identity outside of the boundaries of heterosexuality. Intimacy here is meant to define any act of compassionate touch, it doesn’t necessarily indicate sexual touch, rather, any act of meaningful physical touch that can be read as indicating an emotional exchange between two or more individuals. These type of images and their meaning can become muddled in terms of what the images were intended to represent, and what the audience interprets the image to mean. This is compacted by contextual information like knowing whether the artist is a gay man or queer in some way.

There is an important distinction between one’s identity and behavior. Speaking within the context of what has already been discussed, an individual’s labeling of being queer or homosexual often comes with certain implications that may not be intended by the one attributing such a descriptor. The separation of identity and behavior, in regards to homosexuality, infers that in order for a homosexual person to be accepted they must only be homosexual in terms of identity, not sexuality. This means that someone must only align with being queer as an identity label rather than a descriptor for one’s sexual preference. The conflation of sexual activity with sexual orientation is part of a larger narrative of society’s shortcomings regarding its understanding of queer identity as a complex social phenomenon. Author and historian Douglas Crimp speaks of a collective phobia of same-sex intercourse in the

mind of those critical of same-sex partnerships/intimacy, particularly a phobia of male on male sex. There is this perception of gay sex as being “ground zero” of the AIDS epidemic, that gay sex is synonymous with a deadly disease and it must be rooted out from the public eye and mind. Simply identifying as a homosexual causes a host of assumptions about one's body and one's sexual practices. No matter one’s actual sexual interests, a sort of monolithic idea of gay sexuality is pressed upon anyone who purports or has been identified as homosexual.35

In summary, subtext represents an abstract concept and how that concept relates to artworks and the implications of what the image represents to the spectator. Queer subtext is the culmination of perceptions of the body, homoeroticism, and queer-styling which all play important roles in how the spectator relates to and interprets a work of art. It is this relationship between the image, its subtext, and the spectator that pulls forward a deeper meaning and understanding of what a work of art can create in the mind of the viewer. Viewership can become a form of active participation/spectatorship as outlined by Jacques Rancier in his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, wherein the spectator is invited by the duality of the work and its subject matter to contemplate the various ways in which the work can be interpreted where that interpretation is the product of the spectators' own experiences, biases, and understandings of the work in context which all play a part in the formulation of their interpretation.

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Chapter 3. Queer Eroticism as Fine Art

Where is the line between obscene and art, is it one we can easily define? *Fist Fuck / Full Body* (fig 1), as discussed in Chapter 1, is an example of queer sexuality being placed front and center for public view; it is a prime example of the blurred line that separates art and the obscene—forcing the viewer to contemplate whether there is a clear distinction between pornography and fine art. The visceral image forces the viewers to first question what they are seeing and then from there to contemplate the juxtaposition of a carefully composed image with all the traditional elements associated with art: focus on light, contrast, composition, texture, etc., and an image of a man shoving his fist elbow deep into another man hunched over a chair. Is this image obscene because it is a sex act or is it the coupling of sex and queerness that makes it obscene? Is it that the image is subversive, going against heteronormative notions of propriety in art or in what art ought to be, or is it simply an example of pornography masquerading as fine art?

Photography as a medium during the mid-20th century did not hold the same significance as it does in the 21st century. Its place in fine art would be established by artists like Andy Warhol, and later Robert Mapplethorpe as well as many others whose works propelled photography into the public eye as a significant medium worthy of collecting. Artists such as these would also draw attention to queer visibility, a result of the 1969 Stonewall Riots that sought to normalize queer people and their behavior as well as fighting the discriminatory practices of the police against queer people. This moment divided queer history into two periods, before Stonewall and after Stonewall, where the result was an increased demand for society to not only recognize the existence of queer people but to have queerness integrated within society like heterosexuality. The result of this newfound queer visibility meant that artists felt they now
could explore queerness and queer identity within their work. Over the course of the 1980s, artists, Robert Mapplethorpe and George Dureau intermingled queer sexuality with fine art, pushing the boundaries of what fine art was understood to be and what it could become. In their own ways, they engaged with a deep sense of sexuality and sensuality in their photography that had yet to be seen in art photography. However, this would unfortunately also coincide with the HIV/AIDS crisis which would complicate the relationship between the queer community and society. Newfound visibility of the queer body in art, coupled with the rise of social stigma around it due to the AIDS crisis propelled a larger conversation of obscenity versus art, and whether or not their works and works like theirs were no better than pornography, or if they truly could be considered works of art worthy of public exhibition. This chapter will engage with this dichotomy of pornography versus fine art, subjectivity, and a larger conversation of fetishization and objectification in the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and George Dureau, and if, there is a notable difference between them and the notion of their works objectifying their subjects.

The *queer body*, as mentioned previously, represents a projection of a heteronormative society’s assumptions of what it means to be queer, which in turn creates a collective perception of the queer person and queer activity as deviant and immoral. The *queer body* illustrates how in conflating queerness with deviancy, the queer person or collective is perceived as the other, creating a narrative that queerness is somehow a threat to heterosexuality and traditional gender expression. The bodies and actions of queer people are socially charged by a heteronormative society to represent deviance, resulting in a collective consciousness that sees queerness as something to fear or avoid. Heteronormative ideas on what is admissible for public display results in artworks that engage with queer subject matter to be intrinsically tied with notions of deviance. The intermingling of social politics and art and their relation to the *queer body* is part
of a larger conversation regarding the blurring of boundaries between fine art and erotica that began to emerge in post-modern photography. The line between propriety and impropriety is challenged, queer bodies are highlighted and heteronormative perspectives associated with these bodies are confronted. A critical reassessment of the ‘status quo’ in art and society becomes characteristic of Postmodernism. One key foundational text for the Post-modern period was “Death of the Author”, an essay written in 1967 for the American journal Aspen by French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author”. This essay was one of many notable texts that outline some of the key ideas connected to postmodernism. By Barthes's logic, it was irrelevant to interpret a work of art solely based on the artist's objectives or biography, for the true meaning was not that ascribed by the artist or author but that completed by the spectator, reader, or viewer. It was up to the spectator to interpret the piece of artwork as they saw fit. The reinvention of the idea of self as a notable characteristic of post-modern photography, particularly in the late 1960s through to the mid-1990s, is specifically relevant to the change in body politics surrounding queer bodies. With the rise of more focused queer activism during and after the Stonewall where said activism helped push for the visibility of queerness and queer relationships/dynamics, the concept of the self becomes deeply intertwined with post-modernist art philosophy, giving way to the more focused discourse surrounding the body, queerness, the individual and the self. The invention and eventual accessibility of photography as a medium allowed for a more ‘objective’ depiction of artists’ external and internal worlds; objective, in the sense that the level of subjectivity on the part of the artist was limited to a significant degree more so that other art forms. The camera becomes a new way of observing, a way in which the

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artist can actively engage with his subject and its representation, specifically in regard to human subjects.

Robert Mapplethorpe and George Dureau are notable artists of late 20th century America that helped to push to the forefront queer subjectivity, bodies, and representation in fine art photography, particularly during an era marked by homophobia, violence, and the pathologization of queer identity and desire. Their use of the nude and aesthetics of queer sensuality made it so that assumptions and boundaries of what is “in good taste” for public display were pushed to their limits. Through their own respective ways of aestheticizing the body and the nude, the queer body is brought into public view, helping to combat the stigma associated with queer bodies and queer sexuality by situating them within fine art. Their works were not immediately successful in destigmatizing queer bodies, and in the case of Mapplethorpe, his works were met with criticisms of obscenity that garnered a cry from conservative politicians like Jesse Helms who sought to censor his works and root them out of the gallery and public eye. Mapplethorpe and Dureau’s works, while pivotal in pushing forward queer visibility which resulted in queer subject matter becoming more palatable for public consumption, were situated within a staunchly conservative social climate that defined much of American culture and politics during their time. The result of this social climate meant that queer identities would become more visible but also pushed within the crosshairs of conservative political discourse and backlash.

**Pornography or Fine Art?**

Language plays a key role in influencing collective thought; it is important to consider that words have both connotative and denotative meanings. The denotative meaning can be rooted in culture, politics, religion, etc. and those roots influence how a word can imply or
impose different kinds of subtext on the concept or subject to which it is applied. For example, the word ‘erotic’ comes with its own charged connotations on its meaning. How a viewer perceives a work can be altered by the language used to discuss it. To describe an image or body as ‘erotic’ may impress upon the body an innate sense of sexuality and sensuality. So, the nude itself may not be inherently sexual but the context in which it is situated can alter or re-code the nude as sexual.

The way we read images/works is reflexive of what information we have or have not been given. The language surrounding them is just one element in parsing out how we perceive artworks. How an audience speaks of a work and how they engage with a work speaks to how those works are coded. In this context, the way we perceive potentially stimulating or ‘erotic’ images/works is colored by the language we use to describe these types of works. Typically, the term associated with sexually explicit or stimulating works is pornography. Many American cities have adopted or considered ordinances aimed at limiting and or outright removing pornography from society. This is born out of an assumption that sexually explicit media ought to be rooted out of public access, even private access due to it being ‘morally detrimental’. Some arguments fall under a push for women's rights, protection of the traditional family unit, or a general opinion that pornography is a sort of catch-all for various wrongs in society, and its removal would result in the general betterment of society.³⁷

There is something to consider in highlighting that the word ‘pornography’ is wrought with subtext when applied to visual/written works. There is an inherent assumption of ‘obscenity’ when ‘pornography’ is used as a descriptor for a work. On the surface, the difference between ‘obscene works’ and ‘pornography’ is semantic. However, while the two may appear

synonymous, and many argue they are, this is not implicit as the term ‘pornography’ is an umbrella term for any visual or written material made to sexually gratify the viewer or reader. Anthropologist Carole Vance explains the semantics of the terms ‘obscene’ and ‘pornography’ as:

“Unlike the term “obscenity,” which has a specific and fairly narrow legal meaning, ... pornography is a highly subjective and unbounded term, referring to a potentially wide range of material with sexual content, though in a clearly pejorative way.” (Vance, 1990)

There are a few implications to consider here. First, if the term ‘pornography’ can be considered ambiguous, then how does one differentiate elicit sexual media and fine art? Is a clear distinction feasible? Is it simply the case that all media depicting explicit sexual acts between two people is pornography; or is it more so the case in the context of pornography? Possibly all of this is context-sensitive, meaning in one setting explicit sexual media is pornography whereas in an art/gallery setting it is fine art. A way to begin answering this question is to parse out whether the differentiating factor between fine art versus pornography is the context in which the media is situated. Does the relationship between photographer and their subject play a part in distinguishing pornography and fine art? The relationship between subject and photographer, particularly the photographer as a voyeur, is another factor to consider in this debate between pornography and fine art and what that means for sexually explicit images in fine art. In photographing the body there are implications in such an interaction between the photographer and the subject. There is a deeper engagement between artist and subject through the process of the photograph.

Writer and political activist Susan Sontag describes a way in which the engagement between artist and subject is encapsulated in photography and how photography is understandable as a form of active looking.

“Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation…While others are passive, clearly alarmed spectators, having a camera has transformed one person into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation.”

(Sontag, 1977)

Sontag describes photography as a dichotomy between passive spectators and active voyeurs, the photographers who control and craft images of others. The exchange between photographer, subject, and spectator makes up layers of media consumption and proliferation. How images are created and later read plays into a conversation of active vs passive participation and interaction in the creation and digestion of images. At one level this interaction is voyeuristic. The photographer at this level of the interaction is an unseen onlooker who unknowingly observes the subject. The subject takes on an inactive role in their objectification by the photographer. They do not exert an informed interaction with the photographer, rather they are being observed and their actions are interpreted and coded by how the photographer chooses to present them. In this interaction between photographer and subject, the subject’s personhood is secondary or even tertiary. The subject is “elevated” as an aesthetic object, above the reality of them as sentient beings capable of autonomy and personal drives. Objectification typically is understood as negative or even derogatory. The idea that a person is stripped of their agency is often considered to be dehumanizing. This then begs the question of if it is always necessary that a person, when the subject of photography, be in active engagement with the photographer or even with the process of being photographed. Sontag’s theory of voyeurism in photography can be intertwined with Jacques Rancière’s concept of ‘active’ versus ‘passive’ spectatorship. For Sontag, to act as a

voyeur as a photographer means to be active in one’s spectatorship, while Rancier’s outlook on spectatorship can be interpreted as a framework for understanding the relationship between the photographer’s spectatorship and the subject’s role in the exchange and in conjunction how an audience is connected to that relationship. This methodology can be applied to the works of New York native, Robert Mapplethorpe, and New Orleanian, George Dureau. Their sensual and aestheticizing images of nude men highlighted the beauty of the human body, exploring the intimate and sensitive aspects of human sexuality. Both toyed with the line between art and erotica, the nude and nakedness, and taboo; they courted controversy in their own ways with how they portrayed the male nude in their work. In their own way, each artist used the black male nude in their work which presents its own implications which will be discussed later in this chapter along with the critical response of scholar Kobena Mercer on the use of black bodies in art photography. Another concept that will be further examined is Robert Mapplethorpe’s use of BDSM/Leather culture and shock imagery which teases the fine line between what is considered ‘Fine art’ versus what is seen as pornography.

Robert Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe was born November 4th, 1946, in Queens New York to parents Joan and Harry Mapplethorpe;40 He was their third child. Mapplethorpe's family, namely his father and sister, recount that while growing up, Robert had little to no interest in photography despite his father being one who even had a darkroom in the home.41 According to his family, he was always a curious and precocious child. His curious nature is evident in his work as a photographer, an endeavor he would pick up while in the company of one-time lover, collaborator, and friend, Patti Smith. Starting with polaroids Mapplethorpe would blossom into a

particularly gifted photographer, garnering the attention of many notable New York art scene figures, such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Keith Herring to name a few. His works, which always bordered on the controversial, roughly fit into four key “movements”, the first being his Polaroid series in 1973, a series which became the focus of his first solo exhibition at the Light Gallery in New York City; his personal portraits of friends, celebrities, and artists; his flower images, and lastly his exploration of the New York BDSM scene and the nude.

Mapplethorpe's work helped breathe new life into queer art. His work toed the line between fine art and “forbidden” or illicit media, such as pornography, through his use of aestheticized sensual depictions of nude men. The body was always a playground for Mapplethorpe, who explored the body and the limits and excesses of sexuality. By exploring the limits of sexual imagery in his work, he helped to drive forward an important question of what is the distinction between sensual fine art and pornography and whether such imagery should be hidden or kept under limited access. This can be described as a sort of "Cellophane" inaccessibility, as put forth by Richard Meyer; this concept refers to Mapplethorpe's desire to create a sense of excitement in his work which parallels that caused by consuming “forbidden” media like pornography. The term ‘cellophane inaccessibility’, for Meyer, refers to the cellophane that is wrapped around sexually explicit media in public for purchase, where the buyer is unable to view the contents immediately. Mapplethorpe was interested in the oscillation of desire and shame one experiences when buying pornography, the understanding that what you are buying must be tucked away behind plastic, its contents hidden due to their perverse nature. The anticipation of ripping the cellophane with the understanding that the media it contains is on the fringes of what is acceptable for visual consumption, combined with a sense of taboo creates

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a sense of thrill for the viewer. The interplay between explicit media and the viewer’s anticipation of consuming something they perceive as taboo is what Mapplethorpe sought to recreate in his work. Works like these quite possibly were too confrontational and subversive for the conservative cultural climate of the US at the time, especially when many of Mapplethorpe’s works were created during the AIDS crisis where just the notion of queer sexuality was enough to evoke a fear of death. His works also disrupted established views of a socially accepted relationship or dynamic, gay men did not fit in a heteronormative narrative where the only relationships that were promoted were heterosexual ones. There are levels in which society has developed over time to allow some permutation in terms of what kinds of sexual content is deemed permissible in the open air. Certain subcultures like S&M or BDSM are representative of more illicit forms of sexual content when the subject of photography or video. This is quite possibly due to assumptions made by individuals who do not participate or practice S&M and perceive it as a form of abuse rather than a type of social dynamic between individuals or a form of physical intimacy an individual or group can engage in whether or not it is underpinned by sex. This type of disconnect from the reality of S&M dynamics by society where S&M has impressed upon it a perceived sense of sexual deviance quite possibly is what drew Mapplethorpe to the subculture in the first place. There is a sort of ‘hush’ that befalls even the most benign conversations surrounding sex, let alone amending said conversation with more “perverse” sexual acts and exchanges. And paradoxically, there is also a draw to the perverse and profane by the uninitiated. What is hidden, or seen as illicit, evokes curiosity, this is what

43 This is a commonly used abbreviation of “Sadism/Masochism”; it is meant to illustrate a dynamic between two people wherein one is the sadist who performs acts of degradation or some form of bodily harm upon the masochist who is a willing recipient. Both derive pleasure from this exchange, the pleasure however is not always sexual but more commonly sexual arousal is the goal in this dynamic.
44 This is a similar subculture to S&M and is a commonly used abbreviation of “Bondage, discipline/domination, sadism/submission, masochism”. This is the more commonly used acronym for the S&M subculture today, although currently both are used, often interchangeably.
“Cellophane inaccessibility” describes. It is the relationship between an object of a deviant or “forbidden” nature and the curiosity of the viewer who is enticed to consume media that they are not supposed to see, or they feel they ought not to because of feelings of shame, societal pressure, religious decree or any other sort of deterrent. And it is also this concept of Cellophane inaccessibility that helps describe how in Maplethorpe’s work he seeks to tow a line between what's prohibited in media and what is permissible to show under the bright lights of a public gallery. Mapplethorpe’s notion of cellophane inaccessibility comes into play in how he intertwined sexuality into his work, a type of deeply pervasive sexuality that blurred the lines between what was acceptable to show to the public. In *Self Portrait with Whip*, 1978, (fig 8) Mapplethorpe depicts himself in leather riding chaps, the better part of a leather whip inserted into his anus while his body is contorted to show him staring down the viewer. Here Mapplethorpe seeks to impress upon the viewer a sense of discomfort, as mentioned previously photos such as these weren’t made as public images. He is watching the viewer watch him, he is making himself an object of his own gaze. The viewer is forced to contemplate this image as art versus pornography and the merits or lack thereof regarding either classification. Is the image obscene because he has a whip in is anus or is it because it is potentially unnerving to see? Does its artful composition complicate the relationship the viewer might have with it? If it were more amateurish in composition would that then relegate it to pornography versus art? The distinction perhaps is in the rendering of this image. Mapplethorpe’s careful attention to detail, light, and contrast set this image apart, implying that while the image is explicit, its sexuality is part of the viewing experience intended by the artist. As mentioned previously Mapplethorpe's piercing gaze acts as a challenge to the viewer; he presents himself as keenly aware that he is putting himself on display in an explicit way and by doing so he is challenging expectations when it

comes to art and pornography. An image like this as well as *Fist Fuck / Full Body (fig 1)* are images held up by American right-wing conservatives like Jesse Helms, a self-appointed paragon who sought to root out obscene images from public view and to disallow their funding through government organizations like the National Endowment of the Arts. Note that Helms will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

![Image](https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/109FW8)


In regard to Mapplethorpe’s treatment of the nude, art historian Richard Meyer explains that it is "not just the visual pleasure of eroticized male bodies but also their ‘unreachability.’ ..." Meyer’s comment highlights an important question regarding Mapplethorpe’s aesthetic treatment of his subjects and his choices in subject matter and the subsequent display of images; was it the homoerotic/explicit same-sex interactions or even

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Mapplethorpe’s own sexuality that colored his images as particularly taboo? The interplay between homoerotic imagery and taboo represents how the homosexual body/queer body is so deeply tied with assumptions and stereotypes within culture and media. To be queer, even without explicit mention of sexuality, automatically takes on a sexual component when it is the topic of conversation/discussion. Unlike heterosexuality, any form of same-sex attraction triggers an immediate connection to sex. For those who are not queer and do not know or directly engage with queer people, there is an inherent fear of queer sexuality, a fear of its supposed threat to modernity and morality. Mapplethorpe focused on challenging perspectives surrounding the queer body and photography. While his goals were not to directly engage with gay liberation activism, his work still is part of that narrative. His work is part of a larger network of queer art that helped bring the queer body to the public eye.

**George Dureau**

George Dureau was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on December 28, 1930. Self-described as “Classical Romantic”47, Dureau sought to render the beauty of the human figure in any way he could, whether it be in a charcoal drawing, painting, or photography. He became a photographer somewhat by accident. With no formal training to speak of, he originally sought to use photography to aid in his painting practice. His photos, however, took on a character of their own and became an important part of his practice as an artist and are now what he is predominantly known for. Like Mapplethorpe, he was a self-described gay man where the main focus of his works focused on the deeply aestheticized bodies of men and occasionally women.

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Dureau’s work was, and remains, unique on account of his interest in photographing differently-abled subjects, among others made social outcasts on account of real or perceived deviation from the normative. Some of his regular sitters were amputees or people with other visible forms of physical disability, but none of these aspects changed the way that Dureau sought to represent them. Each person he photographed was treated with the same compelling sensuality - their bodies were highly aestheticized and treated to an intimate and sensitive portrayal. While some of Dureau’s photographs depict full-frontal nudity, his images are much more reserved in terms of the more explicit depictions of sexual interactions/acts in Mapplethorpe’s works. There is an innate sense of intimacy in Dureau’s work, where the viewer is brought in by how Dureau composes his images, giving way to a sense of ‘knowing’ the subject. While his subjects are aesthetically elevated, there is an honest depiction of them as real people. Their nudity accentuates this intimacy as the viewer can come to understand that they are being allowed to see these individuals bare, a part of them that would not typically be on public display.

**Intimacy, Empathy, and the Nude: Mapplethorpe and Dureau**

There are striking similarities between the works of Mapplethorpe and Dureau, not just in their choice of subject matter but in how they chose to portray their subjects. It is important to consider the connection between Robert Mapplethorpe and George Dureau as not only were they contemporaries, but they also knew each other and had even worked together for a brief period of time. A 2017 joint exhibition of the two artists' works organized by Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans is one example of a connection made between Mapplethorpe and Dureau.⁴⁸

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Roger, a long-time friend, and supporter of Dureau writes in the foreword of the catalog:

“I met Dureau while working at a gallery in the French Quarter of New Orleans. George was already recognized as an established artist, and also widely loved for his flamboyant personality. During this time Robert Mapplethorpe began visiting New Orleans and was introduced to George by a prominent local collector, Dr. Russel Albright. The two artists became friends, endeared by their mutual interests.” (Roger, 2017)

The involvement of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation in this joint exhibition and therefore, approval of Roger’s statement helps bring to light the importance of Dureau and his influence on the works of Mapplethorpe. One-time lover and associate of Mapplethorpe, Jack Fritscher in his memoir Mapplethorpe, Assault with Deadly Camera, also corroborates this interaction and friendship between the two artists, wherein he describes their relationship:

“Robert Mapplethorpe loved visiting Dureau, but not for the food. Robert was made quite anorexic by drugs; his main interest was in Dureau’s latest ideas. Mapplethorpe was a collector of Dureau’s photographs and a closet student.” (Fritscher, 1994)

You only need to look at the photography of Dureau and Mapplethorpe, specifically works of the late 1970s and early 80s, to gain a better understanding of these artists interacting and exchanging ideas with one another. One substantiation of the professional interactions between Mapplethorpe and Dureau comes from their photos of one another. Mapplethorpe’s photograph of Dureau titled For George (fig 9) is dated 1978, and Dureau’s Untitled (fig 10) photograph of Mapplethorpe is dated between 1978 and 79. Mapplethorpe’s portrait of Dureau shows a very honest look at him not only as an artist but as an individual, much like his other portraits of friends and fellow artists. Dureau’s depiction of Mapplethorpe is also not so dissimilar to how Mapplethorpe himself rendered his own image in previous self-portraits. Both artists take care to give an arguably honest impression of the other, in the least in how they seemed to see each other.

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Both Mapplethorpe and Dureau exhibited examples of black male nudes in their portfolio dating back to 1979: *Bob Love (fig 11)*, Mapplethorpe; *Clarence Williams (fig 12)*, Dureau. These images help illustrate the similarities and differences between Mapplethorpe and Dureau’s...
treatment of the nude male body. These images help illustrate the connection and exchange of ideas between the two artists. Both images are gelatin silver prints depicting a nude black male subject, positioned seated and centered, as the main focus. Dureau’s subject is shown from the side, looking away from the audience, and Mapplethorpe's subject stares directly at the viewer, laid bare in every way from his stark nakedness to his peering gaze looking past the ‘frame’ of the photo. Both men are rendered almost sculptural, amplified by the use of light and the refraction of light off of their skin. The two men seem to shimmer like bronze, their stoic expressions and the position of their bodies speak to an almost statuesque physique. There is an innate draw to these two photographs in how both artists have styled their subjects. Dureau’s choice to distance his subject’s gaze away from the viewer amounts to the viewer seeking more from the image. Since the viewer is denied access to the subject by his averted gaze there is an allure that surrounds him. Mapplethorpe’s subject is the reverse of this. He is frontal, his body on full display, his gaze direct. His body is open and on display. There is a sense of confrontation between the subject and viewer, his direct gaze is confronting the viewer and their position as spectators. Their ability to view his nakedness is challenged by his ‘awareness’ of their gaze. While it is evident that both artists, at the onset, had their own methods and artistic vision it is evident from these two images how similar their works are compositionally, which in part speaks to their correspondence. These images help illustrate the connection between the two artists, establishing a possible timeline in which they might have exchanged ideas that potentially changed how both artists approached their subject and practice.

Figure 12. Dureau, George. Photographer. “Clarence Williams” Photograph, 1979, gelatin silver print on paper, Arthur Roger Gallery
As much as there are similarities between the works of Dureau and Mapplethorpe, there are also many key differences. Since there was undoubtedly an exchange being made between the two artists in the late 70s, it is hard to ignore that there is a strong connection in their subject matter. This exchange can possibly be seen as part of why Mapplethorpe became deeply enamored with the black male nude, which would later become a dominating subject in his work up until his death. Mapplethorpe's fascination with the black male nude as well as Dureau’s use of the black nude will be explored at length later. Both artists engaged with the aestheticization of black men, their bodies isolated and contorted to reveal classical ideals of male beauty. Both artists, as evident by their work, apply a sense of idealization and aestheticization to their interpretation of the male body. However, there is a key difference in how Mapplethorpe and Dureau engage with the individual behind the body they are idealizing in their work. Some of those differences are outlined in a press release for the exhibition "George Dureau Black 1973 - 1986", by Higher Pictures gallery in New York. Higher Pictures quotes author Claude J. Summers on the “obvious link” between George Dureau and Robert Mapplethorpe where she says:

“Dureau's photographs have often been compared with those of Robert Mapplethorpe. But the influence runs not from Mapplethorpe to Dureau but from Dureau to Mapplethorpe. The photographers were friends in the early 1970s. Mapplethorpe was greatly moved by Dureau's photographs, even to the point of restaging many of Dureau's earlier compositions. For all their similarities, however, the photographs of Dureau and Mapplethorpe are quite different. Whereas Mapplethorpe exhibits his subjects as cool and objective, self-contained and remote icons, Dureau presents his as exposed and vulnerable, playful and needy, complex and entirely human individuals. The difference is foremost a matter of empathy.”

Summers’ comments indicate a key distinction between Mapplethorpe and Dureau’s work is empathy. This can be expanded to a difference in how both artists engage with intimacy. On one

hand, intimacy can denote a sexual exchange between two people, but on the other hand, it can also describe a sense of connection, and empathy between two individuals. In order to see this distinction come into play and to better understand and illustrate the intricacies of Mapplethorpe and Dureau’s work and how they compare it is important to analyze some of their images in conjunction with each other. Two images from The Arthur Roger Gallery’s 2017 joint exhibition of Mapplethorpe and Dureau’s works will serve as a sort of baseline and framework for exploring how each artist approached male nudity in their work and how said works can be applied to the larger concept of the queer body.

Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1984 photograph titled, *Micheal St. Claire* (fig 13), a gelatin silver print, is comparable to George Dureau’s undated photograph of B.J Robinson E (fig 14). Mapplethorpe’s image shows a nude black man from the waist up, his back bent back to form a sharp and distinct curve. His arms are positioned in a way in which it is unclear whether he is armless or if he is contorting himself to give the illusion of missing limbs. Dureau’s photograph of B.J Robinson E depicts a white man with long dark hair and a beard balancing his entire body on one arm; the subject does not have legs and is an amputee. Both images toy with viewer expectations. Rarely is the body shown as ‘fragmented’, fragmented in the sense that both subjects appear to have some part of their body missing. Whether simulated through clever posing or the actual absence of limbs, the effect is the same. A sense of mild shock is evoked in the viewer when what is usually expected to be present is not present, in this case, arms or legs. There is an immediate question of whether what one is seeing is an optical illusion where the result is both demand a closer observation of their subjects.
Figure 13. Mapplethorpe, Robert. photographer. "Micheal St. Claire", Photograph, gelatin silver print, Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

The positioning of their bodies differs greatly, Mapplethorpe's subject’s body is contorted in a way that highlights the curves of his body, allowing for the light to reflect and refract off of his body in a way that emphasizes its shape. Each curve, bend, and impression in his skin is accentuated. His body follows an ‘S’ curve, drawing the eye from the top of his head along his shoulders, down his sides to his backside. He is statuesque. In contrast, Dureau’s subject is more static. His body is rendered dynamic by way of his literal balancing act of holding himself up with one hand. There is an intriguing visual flow here as well. His shoulders and arms formulate a triangular focal point where the eye flows across his shoulders and arms. Both images are visually interesting due to their positioning, allowing the viewer’s eye to ‘dance’ across their bodies. The focus on the body here is key. Both images, particularly the Mapplethorpe, have a deep sense of intimacy with the viewer. Here the intimacy is in how the eye is able to engage with their bodies, allowed to peer without interruption. The intimacy lies in one subject’s knowledge and the other subject's lack of awareness of his observation. Not only does the photographer act as a voyeur but so does the viewer. The viewer is placed in a position where they are challenged and unchallenged in their spectatorship.

How might these images be understood under the context and discourse of the queer body? Are these images influenced by the knowledge that both artists are queer men? On the surface, there is nothing in either image to denote them as queer. While of course there is an innate sense of homoeroticism in some of these images, homoeroticism does not necessarily mean the images are queer but queer coded. In the case of Dureau, many of his subjects were straight men, so one can not argue that the subject themself is queer, so this logic can not be applied in attempting to render the image as queer. Does the sense of intimacy in these images become altered or shift in meaning when these images are understood in context to who created
them and their potential gaze in making these images? The context here is important in understanding how images become entrapped in subtext and within a larger visual history. The majority of Robert Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre was composed during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and while many of Dureau’s photographs are undated, many similar to this image were created in the 1980s and 1990s. There is an unmistakable reality that with both artists being openly gay men that their work would be situated within a larger social discourse of the HIV/AIDS crisis and queer activism in general.

**Objectification and Fetishization**

Objectification and fetishization, in regards to human beings, describe an interaction between two individuals where one impresses upon the other their gaze and desire wherein one becomes separated from his personhood and individuality to become an aesthetic object to be coveted and observed. The intricacies of the individual hardly if ever play a part in why they are being fetishized. Nuance surrounding the subject as a person, not just a body, is secondary wherein one’s body, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, etc are irrelevant to the act of fetishization and objectification. In the place of their identity as an individual, the aesthetic qualities of a tertiary aspect of the subject’s person become the main focus, resulting in their objectification encapsulating and replacing all other qualities of the individual that do not serve the desires of the ‘objectify-er’ in service to their gaze. By becoming an object of desire to be fetishized, the subject is rendered as an aesthetic object to simply be observed or only engaged with based on what is being fetishized. When an individual renders their subject as an aesthetic object to be fetishized, the subject’s humanity is rendered null, their humanity is irrelevant, and in its place, the subject’s existence is relegated to serving the desires and gaze of the objectifier.
The aestheticization of black men by Mapplethorpe and Dureau is the result of their photography creating aesthetic objects out of their subjects. There is an obvious social dynamic at play given that Mapplethorpe and Dureau are white artists whose work contains an overwhelming host of examples of black men as their subjects. This aestheticization of the black body is part of a larger conversation and debate of objectification, tied with the sensitivities of what it means for a white man to make objects of black men. More specifically, these men are made into sexual objects, evocative of eroticism and desire. However, there is an important distinction to be made between the way Dureau composed his images versus Mapplethorpe. There is a significant degree of separation in how explicit their images were. While it is true that both artists did not shy away from nudity, and in fact, they both reveled in representing the nude body, there is a key difference in how those nude bodies were represented. The presentation of an erect phallus or the presence of BDSM gear does not necessarily equate to a sexually-explicit image, however, an argument can be made that an image of an individual engaged in a sex act is explicit.

Debatably, the aforementioned concept of fetishization and objectification is more aptly applied to the whole of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work, particularly within his works depicting nude black men. There are also important implications within Dureau’s treatment of black bodies in his work which will be examined later. Some of Mapplethorpe’s own comments on the matter help form a better picture of how ideas of fetishization and objectification come to play in his work. The 2017 HBO documentary, Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures, directed by Bailey Fenton and Randy Barbato helped piece together a sort of portrait of the controversial artist, highlighting his life from his formative years through to his career, and untimely demise from AIDS. Look at the Pictures, is principally told through interviews with known associates of Mapplethorpe as well as audio interviews with the artist himself. It serves as a sort of broad
commentary and insight into the sentiment behind Mapplethorpe’s images and his near-constant climb towards fame. The documentary was made with support from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. The archival material, particularly the audio interviews with Mapplethorpe allows some keen insight into his mind and practice. In one of these interviews, Mapplethorpe recounts his proclivity toward including black men in his body of work:

“I often say that photographing black men is like photographing bronze….It became an obsession with me, taking these pictures of blacks…. For the most part, when whites have photographed blacks, they’ve sort of shown them from a certain social point of view. I’m photographing them as form, in the same way, that I’m reading the flowers…. I’m not attempting to make a social statement about their plight.”

For Mapplethorpe to say that his photographs of black men do not attempt a “social statement about their plight” is a glaring comment that fails to grasp that such a perspective comes from a seat of immense privilege. As a white photographer chose to make black men the focus of his obsession, likening their portraits to his flower photographs, images of inanimate objects, which very much engages as a social commentary of their “plight”. Moreover, Mapplethorpe’s remarks arguably further situate black men, more specifically blackness as an aesthetic object rather than a complex social reality and culture experienced by millions of individuals across the world. Mapplethorpe is complacent in the blatant objectification of black bodies for his own personal gratification and as a vehicle for his own personal ideals of portraying a classicizing idea of human perfection as seen in the male nude. However, this is not to say that Mapplethorpe’s aestheticization and fetishization of black men comes from a particular racial bias or prejudice, rather it comes from how he looks at black bodies.

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This is an observation first brought about by scholar Kobena Mercer who asserts that Mapplethorpe’s book *Black Males*:

“Is not the product of the personal intentions of the individual behind the lens, but a cultural artifact that says something about certain ways in which white people ‘look’ at black people and how, in this way of looking, black male sexuality is perceived as something different, excessive, Other.”52 (Mercer, 1994)

Mercer is of course commenting on how while a white artist, in this case, a photographer, might not have prejudicial intentions in how they photograph black bodies, there is a somewhat innate prejudice in how they see black bodies and by extension black sexuality which then becomes a subconscious basis for how a white photographer might choose to photograph black men. Black men then become the subject of exoticism and their sexuality is seen as somehow different from white men. Their blackness becomes not an intricate part of their experience as a person and instead becomes an element of sexual gratification. Mercer comments on the reality of how black bodies are often observed saying:

“an erotic/aesthetic objectification of black male bodies into the idealized form of a homogenous type thoroughly saturated with a totality of sexual predicates.”

Black men are viewed as a sum of their sexuality and their gender, and their personhood becomes simplified or even outright ignored. Nothing else seems to matter besides their idealization and the proposed ideas behind their being black individuals displaying sexuality. Mercer asserts that Mapplethorpe’s photographs attempt to create an equation whereby the combination of these two elements (blackness and masculinity) generates the erotic, aesthetic objectification of such subjects within the context of American history’s violent suppression and exoticizing treatment of such subjects. This analysis is not intended to be a condemnation of Mapplethorpe’s choice to depict black men in his photographs; instead, it was meant to highlight

the complex intricacies of his position and specifically in his use of eroticized black subjects - and in the (potentially exploitative) context of the advancement of his own artistic career. In conjunction, this is not to say that Dureau’s use of black men in his work is somehow excusable compared to Mapplethorpe's because his images were less sexually explicit; for the same reasons Mapplethorpe’s use of black men in his work can be questioned and critiqued, the same critique can be aptly applied to Dureau. There are significant implications to consider with the subject/photographer dynamic, and how there is an unbalanced power dynamic in this relationship. The artist holds the most influence and power in this situation, where the subject is rendered vulnerable to his will and desires. There is a capacity for the subject to not act with full agency in this scenario.

Mapplethorpe and Dureau explored queer sexuality and sensuality in a way no one else had dared to do, at least not so publicly. Both toyed with the line between art and erotica, the nude and nakedness, and taboo; they courted controversy in their own ways with how they portrayed the body in their work. Their sensual and aestheticizing images of nude men highlighted the beauty of the human body, exploring the intimate and sensitive aspects of human sexuality. In their own way, each artist used the black male nude in their work, a choice wrought with implications of objectification and fetishization of the black body. Their works are echoes of each other and the key difference between them was their level of engagement and empathy with their subject. Mapplethorpe courted fame at every turn, his subjects almost aesthetic objects on display to prop up his career, whereas in contrast Dureau never sought fame like Mapplethorpe, his images show an artist who placed his aesthetic ideals on par with how he engaged with his subjects. There is a sense of empathy in Dureau unseen in Mapplethorpe. While neither artist was particularly interested in being subversive in terms of politics or activism, the
result of their works publicity meant that the queer body was pushed into public view, and queer bodies were highlighted in a way that made society question the heteronormative narrative established as the status quo. Their works and history serve as the foundation of queer subversion in art, and for this thesis, an essential part of a subversive queer lineage that coupled queer bodies and art. Prior to Mapplethorpe and Dureau, the queer body was regulated to the private sphere. They established a significant part of the foundation for artists after them to engage in subversive works that challenged a sanitized view of the body and of heteronormative perspectives surrounding sexuality in art. The result meant that others could create more conceptual works that further blurred the lines between transgressive and acceptable, works that would further drive a push against the conservative and religious right’s monopoly on public opinion.
Chapter 4. Post-Modern Subversion

Case Studies in subversion, abjection, and queerness within Post-Modern Art

Blood, semen, and urine are bodily fluids that are a natural reality of being human, a reality that is often ignored or often sanitized from public view or conversation. The HIV/AIDS crisis meant that such bodily fluids which already had a social stigma tied to them became increasingly taboo in a time when the body, namely the *queer body*, became synonymous with death and disease. Artist Andres Serrano utilized the social climate of the 1980s and 90s surrounding the body and its fluids to create a series of works that placed bodily fluids at the heart of his artistic practice. Serrano’s *Semen and Blood III* (fig. 15) depicts a viscous mix of semen and blood congealed together situated atop the backdrop of an opaque black void. *Semen and Blood III* defies the body taboo brought on by the AIDS crisis, and in fact, subverts it by situating bodily fluids within art. He makes an attempt to further blur the lines between traditional art photography and conceptualism, where his imagery is parsed through various degrees of abstraction. Both his methods and his subject matter are subversive, challenging the established traditions of art and of societal norms of the body and its representation. He makes an attempt to push against body taboo, against avoiding natural realities of the body, that our bodies are not always palatable or pleasant. His work is situated within the discourse detailed in the previous chapters on the *queer body*, where the queer body is representative of how the queer experience has been intrinsically intertwined with politics and how this intermingling of queerness and politics is caused by a history of queerness being contested as taboo. Same-sex attraction and gender variance have often been viewed as controversial. The term ‘queer’ has come to function as an umbrella term for any form of variance in gender or sexual expression. Thus the intended use of ‘queer experience’ in the context of this chapter, is to explain a reality
in which queer people are intrinsically linked to queer history and activism regardless of what part they play in their own history. In other words, to be queer means assumptions and biases are impressed upon you based solely on expectations of what it means to be queer. To be queer means you are situated in the history of the Stonewall riots, the HIV/AIDS crisis, etc. because your very body is seen as a summation of all that is queer, and by extension, all that is wrong with society.

Figure 15. Serrano, Andres, “Semen and Blood III” Cibachrome print, 1990

Queer individuals are subject to a phenomenon called “othering”; “othering” is a concept from the theory of identity formation which describes the interrelations between individuals within society wherein identities are considered “always social”, specifically in a way that minority identities are always in some aspect situated within specific social contexts
and conditioned by them. This means that to be outside of traditional norms means that one’s existence outside of those norms means they are seen as separate, literally relegated as “the other”. It is more prevalent than not for those who are different to be demonized; to be an “other” who deviates from traditional norms and mores of society means that they are not allowed or ensured the same rights and protections as the majority. There are certain rights and protections the majority members of society have and take for granted like the right to marriage, healthcare, end-of-life care, etc. Many queer individuals have limited access to such basic rights by virtue of their sexual orientation or gender expression. One example is marriage rights, the Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. 644 ruled that same-sex unions should be upheld without discrimination; this ruling did not occur until 2015. The court outlined, in part, its basis for this ruling as:

“The right to marry is a fundamental right inherent in the liberty of the person, and under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment couples of the same-sex may not be deprived of that right and that liberty. Same-sex couples may exercise the fundamental right to marry. Baker v. Nelson is overruled. The State laws challenged by the petitioners in these cases are held invalid to the extent they exclude same-sex couples from civil marriage on the same terms and conditions as opposite-sex couples.”

While this ruling was a landmark development for queer people, the length of time it took for the United States to come to such a conclusion (which continues, nonetheless, to be a contested one) is evidence of systematic oppression and stigmatization of queer people. It is important to remember that even the term ‘queer’ was once a derogatory slur used to subjugate and shun those who did not express their gender and or sexuality in a palatable way. ‘Queer’ represented a way in which society sought to “other” those who experienced same-sex attraction and those

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who defied the gender binary. As Chapter 1 outlined, the *queer body* is a methodology that
demonstrates the disparaging lens through which queer people have always been viewed, as
being outside the bounds of conventional society and conceptions surrounding sex, sexuality,
and gender. Queer art and photography as genres are part of a long history of sexual and
subcultural visual representation(s). ‘Queer Art’ as well as ‘Queer Photography’ can be
construed as a way to define subversive imagery that is borne out of a desire to confront
heteronormativity and traditional values surrounding sex, sexual expression, and gender
identity/expression.

**Body Taboo, Abjection, and Shock**

It is imperative to consider *why* some things are rendered taboo. Why are certain subjects
taboo and others normalized within society? Is taboo a result of fear of the unknown or the
unusual; that to defer from the status quo means one will be rendered deviant, thus undesirable to
society? Why is the body celebrated in one context, but its natural processes abhorred in another?
Society values what is palatable, understandable, and definable. When people or ideas do not
neatly fit into traditional expectations there is an upset. To challenge normalcy is to be a hostile
actor to the ‘greater good’ of society, a threat to traditional values. The body and its sanitation is
just one example, where representations of an idealistic nude are celebrated when represented by
Greek and Roman antiquity, but cast aside and shamed when the body is used to make a
socio-political stance against injustice. The body, when shown unfiltered and un-aestheticized, is
deviant to a traditionalist society. To be queer is seen as one of the most prominent forms of
social deviancy, the *queer body* is rendered a sum of society's wrongs, which is most evident in
HIV/AIDS discourse in the 1980s and early 90s. The body as a broader subject is already
sanitized in its representation outside of queer discourse and representation; there are only
certain circumstances in which the body is admissible in art or media, especially the nude body.
Depictions of a body unburdened by idealization or aestheticization warrant rejection by a society that values proprietary and palatability. The AIDS crisis helped artists understand the power of the unsanitized body in art. Artists such as Kiki Smith, Andres Serrano, and Catherine Opie engaged in a rejection of a sanitized and heteronormativity idealized body by challenging expectations of the body and its presence in art.

A selection of works by Kiki Smith will help introduce the ‘de-aestheticized’ body, unburdened by the demands of a society that demands palatability from the human form. The majority of Smith’s visceral works are best described as subversive depictions of the body that focus on disrupting various social binaries: male/female, mind/body, cleanliness/impropriety, etc. After her father's death in 1980, Smith turned her attention to themes of death and decay, focusing on the intricacies surrounding humanity’s existence as physical, mortal beings that can experience death and refuse. Kiki Smith’s Leaky Bodies series of sculptural works engage with a body free from the bounds of societal pressures on how it ought to be viewed. These bodies destabilize the assumption that art of the nude must always be approachable, beautiful, and or held to a standard of cleanliness. Two of Smith’s ‘Leaky Bodies', *Pee body (fig 16)*, 1992, and *Train (fig 17)*, 1993, show that having a body is messy. To have a body means we piss, we bleed, and we aren’t always what society wants to see. Both works show a yellowed white figure positioned near a trail of bodily fluids. They are not a depiction of an aestheticized body nor is their positioning indicative of any form of traditional bodily styling seen previously in art. The way Smith renders her figural sculptures speaks to a rejection of bodily aestheticization and societal norms surrounding how the body must be rendered. *Pee body* sits in shame next to its fluids, holding its knees close to its body. *Train* stands with its legs spread while blood-like fluids

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fall from its body. Both illustrate the reality of the impropriety that comes with having a body. These “Leaky bodies” Disturb the binary of Western thought, complicating the boundaries of mind, body, and spirit. These bodies are diametrically opposed to the proper ‘clean’ bodies we are used to seeing.

Figure 16. Smith, Kiki, “Pee Body” Mixed Media Sculpture, 1992, Harvard Art Museum

Figure 17. Smith, Kiki, “Train” Mixed Media Sculpture, 1993.
Smith is seeking to highlight the horrors of the body, blood viscera, defecation, etc., they are on full display for the viewer to see whether they want to or not. The viewer is forced to accept the body as is. Smith shows that our expectations associated with our bodies aren't always reconcilable with the reality of having a body. Works like Smith’s *Leaky Bodies* as well as works from other artists yet to be discussed are situated in a social history of the 1980s and 90s where the notion of bodily fluids as a focus or key element of artworks would have been deeply unnerving. The HIV/AIDS crisis was an increasing concern throughout the 80s and 90s, wherein the body and its fluids, particularly blood gained a more sinister connotation of death. This fear was situated in fear of bodily pathologies where the exchange of fluids through sex or other means possibly meant death. To focus on the body and or its fluids, particularly breaking the boundary from fluids leaving the body was socially charged by the AIDS crisis. Bodily functions like bleeding or ejaculation took on a deeper sense of impurity and impropriety where their very mention could be considered taboo in the social climate of the AIDS crisis. The ambiguity that surrounded much of the 1980s around what caused AIDS amplified fear of the body as a whole while also allowing the *queer body* to be even further associated with disease, contamination, and immorality. A deep disconnect between the public and the body arises when bodies are situated in a sexual context, and or in a way that would infer or directly depict the expulsion of fluids from the body in any form; Serrano’s *Semen and Blood III* (fig 15) and Kiki Smith’s *Leaky Bodies* (Fig. 16, 17) exemplify how artists could use this social context to their advantage, to further challenge and subvert such associations of filth and immorality by forcing the viewer to accept that bodily fluids (or simulated fluids) such as blood and semen are being used to make art. Such works force the viewer to contemplate their fear of the body by way of making the
body visible, particularly visible in a way that is disruptive of social pressures and expectations of the body.

The disconnect between societal pressures and expectations of the body, and a confrontation of those expectations, is outlined in the concept of *abjection*. The theory of abjection as outlined in the 1980 book *Powers of Horror* by the feminist psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva illustrates the relationship between body/bodily function and society. 'Abjection' means to 'expel' or push out; it describes bodily functions that are deemed impure and inappropriate for public display. She expresses this through writing: “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself... I claim to establish myself.”\(^{56}\) Kristeva seeks to show how functions of the body are often taboo, particularly the woman's body. She is forming a rejection of the expectations imposed on her body and the bodies of others. This rejection is rooted in a desire to shed the weight of others’ perceptions, her body is hers to express and it does not have to be palatable. To abject here means to expel those expectations, to establish oneself as a more legitimate embodiment of a human person with a living breathing body that is not restrained by societal expectations on propriety and acceptable behavior. Self-establishment comes through abjection, where bodily functions deemed impure and inappropriate for public display are pushed to public view to challenge and confront patriarchal expectations of the body. Kristeva further explains this through another key passage, writing: “Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.” In the previously quoted statement, Kristeva suggests that the undesirable aspects of having a body, the putrid and the decay are necessary and even fundamental factors of our existence as living beings. Within a feminist context, a woman’s body is restrained under the confines of the patriarchy so she must 'abject' or expel herself and

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her body. It is important to note that feminist and queer histories share much in how they both sought to fight against a patriarchal over-management of the body, specifically the bodies of women and queer bodies respectively. Feminist works contest society’s demand for sanitized heteronormative bodies similar to the rejection of that same heteronormative rejection of queer bodies. Thus works created within a converging point in feminist and queer history engage with the shocking aesthetics of abjection–which were, unsurprisingly, abundant in the late 1980s and 1990s–are in fact subverting the traditional sense of cleanliness, propriety, and taste, especially as situated explicitly within the context of the body, bodily function, and bodily fluids. When placed in context with the AIDS crisis where, as mentioned previously, bodily fluids became intrinsically associated with death and disease. Art that dealt with the concept of abjection had another, more pressing layer of social politics and subtext imposed upon it. This theory is firmly situated in conversations surrounding gender, sexuality, and society. It focuses on how our bodies are living, bleeding, fluid-filled things that are not always under our control nor always aesthetically pleasing.

*Chicken Knickers* (fig 18), 1997, by Sarah Lucas, likewise illustrates Kristeva's theory of abjection. The juxtaposition of a raw chicken on top of a woman's groin helps show that the body is raw–that it can be unsettling in the reality of its fleshiness. It can also show how women's bodies are seen as no better than meat for the slaughter. In the context of *Powers of Horror*, this work can be understood as a blur between the acceptable body and a body that is unfit for public display. The fact that the chicken is featherless and dead situated on top of a woman’s groin illustrates how women’s bodies are perceived, specifically their genitalia. A woman’s genitals are rendered “abject” under the patriarchy and the traditional societal order. This reading is situated in context by a trajectory of how women’s bodies have been received/perceived by the public;
women's bodies went from being celebrated in the 1970s to being taboo in the 1980s and 1990s. The functions of her body were relegated to a hushed whisper while at the same time she is forced to align with the role of mother. Abjection seeks to bring the body and all its dirty laundry to light. Abjection here refers to a separation between the maternal body and child that helps us to situate ourselves as subjects.

Figure 18. Lucas, Sarah, “Chicken Knickers” Photograph on paper, 1997, TATE

Andres Serrano

Born in 1950 in New York, Andrés Serrano was a self-taught photographer whose works focused on the juxtaposition of religion and abjection and almost always courted controversy. He explored the opposition of the sacred and the profane through the lens of his Catholic upbringing as well as his sexuality.57 As a gay man, his work is particularly situated in queer discourse and

57Willis Hartshorn, Anne Hollander, and Ellen Handy, Reflections in a Glass Eye: Works from the International Center of Photography Collection (Boston, MA: Bullfinch Press, 1999), 227.
body politics. He sought to challenge known associations between the queer body and the HIV/AIDS crisis through his use of abject imagery of the body and bodily fluids.

Serrano’s *Bodily Fluids* series evokes a keen sense of ambivalence in the viewer. This is caused by the realization that what you are seeing is not paint and varnish but bodily fluids. *Semen and Blood III (fig 15)*, 1990, a Cibachrome print best illustrates the ambivalence of Serrano’s Fluids series. At first glance, many of the *Bodily Fluids* series are seemingly innocuous, not so different from Piet Mondrian or Mark Rothko’s use of color and line in abstract expressionist painting. It is the coupling of Serrano’s images with their title that impresses upon them a feeling of ambivalence. *Semen and Blood III* is a prime example of the juxtaposition of the artwork itself and its title and how this title alters one’s perception and interpretation of the work. The realization that the viewer is observing blood, semen, piss, and/or some combination of all of the above immediately evokes a sense of shock. When these works are placed into context, that they were created during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the ‘point’ of these works is evident. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, there was an overwhelming body taboo surrounding queer people and their sexual practices. The very body of the queer person is rendered transgressive by way of their association with HIV/AIDS, and in general by way of their identity already being considered immoral or deviant. The association of the queer body with AIDS coupled with the association of queer sexuality as immoral inadvertently rekindled the ire of various religious groups, namely many key figures of the Catholic Church like the archbishop of New York, Cardinal John O’Connor who publically opposed the distribution of condoms to prevent HIV transmission on the basis of the Catholic Church’s opposition to contraception.
It is important to consider the ongoing dichotomy between Church and State when discussing some examples of Serrano’s work, especially regarding his works that deal with Catholic/Christian subject matter. The book *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts* helps demonstrate some of the intricacies of art, religion, and politics that are at play for Serrano. The opening of the tenth chapter reads:

“A breakdown in the unity of state and church has altered the context in which blasphemy might be understood. Rather than viewing blasphemous libel as intrinsically linked through the Ecclesiastical courts within the unity of State and Church, the emphasis has shifted to the individual in society whose freedom of artistic expression is constrained instead by the secular laws of defamation and obscenity.”

The notion of church and state and the spillover between those two entities can help situate Serrano’s works and the social climate in which they were made. If the separation of Church and State meant that religious beliefs were no longer able to explicitly influence politics and government, then the natural shift would be the individual beliefs of government figures or prominent figures outside the main body of government would use moralizing judgments to try and sway and impress their views upon government and politics through social pressure. *Immersion (Piss Christ), 1987,* *(fig 19)* is a prime example of the push and pull between art and the perceived blasphemy against the Catholic Church and its ideology. The photograph is of a crucifix submerged in an opaque yellow substance. The title “Piss Christ” points to this substance being urine. The larger context of *Piss Christ* is the crucifix is submerged in Serrano’s own urine. There are obvious implications of disrespect and blasphemy that this image could immediately evoke in the religious faithful. On the surface, the image is a petulant mockery of Jesus Christ, who Christians purport to be the ‘Son of God’; meaning that Serrano committed a sacrilege, significant

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desecration against Christ by submerging a crucifix in urine. However, a more nuanced read of *Piss Christ* sets in the context of a postmodern critique of Catholicism, particularly of the magisterium (the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church).

![Figure 19. Serrano, Andres, “Immersion (Piss Christ)”, Cibachrome print, 1987.](image)

Like the *Bodily Fluids* series, *Piss Christ* represents a form of abjection and subversion. Here Serrano is undermining the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, seeking to critique its reach and influence on American politics. Particularly, Serrano is revolting against a Church that mingles with politics and involves itself in a national crisis like HIV/AIDS. *Piss Christ* represents a critique of the rhetoric promoted by the Catholic church during the HIV/AIDS crisis where many American bishops and cardinals decried the use of prophylactics and same-sex intimacy.

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Piss Christ would propel Serrano's work internationally, this in part occurred due to the controversy surrounding the image and the involvement of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding of Serrano’s work. The NEA is a government entity that provides funding for the arts, its website describes its purpose as:

“...an independent federal agency that funds, promotes, and strengthens the creative capacity of our communities by providing all Americans with diverse opportunities for arts participation. Amount of funding of arts education projects annually.**60**

This statement is largely vague and does not explicitly state what works should or should not be funded by the NEA. Many American politicians and Catholic clergy decried Piss Christ and other works like it as inappropriate for public viewing and, by extension, government funding. The crusade against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was led by Senator Jesse Helms who believed it was reprehensible and immoral that government funding is given to “immoral trash” like Serrano’s works along with many others, including Robert Mapplethorpe.**61** Piss Christ became a springboard of sorts for attacking “obscene and morally reprehensible” works funded/partially funded by the NEA wherein Robert Mapplethorpe’s works would be next on the agenda for Helms and others who shared his views. Helms decried the works of Mapplethorpe and others like him by capitalizing on ‘public fears and fantasies about male homosexuality’**62** He used his position as senator of the United States to direct a malicious attack on homosexuality and queer art. Helms keenly focused his attacks on Robert Mapplethorpe and his works, creating photocopies of some of the artist's images to send to other members of the senate to sway their opinion on the NEA obscenity controversy; some of the images in question


were *Mark Stevens (Mr 10 1/2)* (fig 20) and *Man in Polyester Suit* (fig 21) two images that prominently showed the subject’s penis as a focal point.

![Figure 20](image1.png)

**Figure 20.** Mapplethorpe, Robert, “*Mark Stevens (Mr 10 1/2)*” Photograph, gelatin silver print, 1976.

![Figure 21](image2.png)

**Figure 21.** Mapplethorpe, Robert, “*Man in Polyester Suit*” Photograph, gelatin silver print, 1981.
Helms demonstrated his scrutiny of “obscene” imagery to the New York Times by saying:

"[Mapplethorpe] was an acknowledged homosexual. He's dead now, but the homosexual theme goes throughout his work… There's a big difference between The Merchant of Venice and a photograph of two males of different races [in an erotic pose] on a marble-top table."(Dowd 1989)63

Historian Richard Meyer keenly notes that Helm’s comments are not reflective of the actual content of Mapplethorpe’s works. Meyer explains that nowhere in Helms’ selected images of Mapplethorpe’s works from ‘The Perfect Moment’ are what Helms described. Meyer remarks that this is not surprising given that it was not likely Helms would have given any of the aforementioned works a careful analysis and that Helms’ comments are reflective of “how the language of censorship summons its own fantasies of erotic transgression and exchange” (Meyer 2003).64 Helms’ remarks are part of a larger culture of stigmatization and generalization of homosexuality as fundamentally transgressive. In attempting to censor Mapplethorpe’s works as well as other works by artists deemed morally reprehensible, Helms creates a paradox in which he suppresses these images while at the same time inadvertently bringing them to the public's attention. His attacks on Mapplethorpe’s works come on the heels of his attacks on Serrano’s Piss Christ; Helms’ talking points against Serrano’s Piss Christ are largely the same, which amount to a blanket condemnation of 'obscenity' without elucidating in any meaningful way why these works needed to be censored.65 Were these images obscene because they were explicit or was it more so what they represented? Were Helms’ criticisms and condemnation of these images rooted in a social stigma against queerness, or in Serrano’s case, punishment for

challenging Christian authority? Potentially the answer is all of the above, that Serrano and his art represented a challenge against established authority, a heteronormative society that values a collection of misinterpreted Christian ideals that demonize the behavior of the other. Serrano was punished for confronting the hypocrisy of government officials who hid behind religion to justify their bigotry and of a Church whose teachings quite possibly needed a reevaluation centuries ago. And namely, Serrano’s works represented a rejection of a society where the body of the queer person is synonymous with death and disease.

There is something ominous about death and decay; it is seldom explicitly represented in photography; death is not palatable for a wide audience largely because many people do not enjoy contemplating their own mortality. In 1992, Serrano created a series of three dozen Cibachrome prints in, The Morgue Series, depicting the corpses of individuals who had died in various ways. In regards to these images Serrano said:

"In a manner of speaking, I photographed these people after the moment of death. I never knew them as human beings. I never knew what languages they spoke, what their religious or political beliefs were, how much money they had, or who they loved. All I know about them is the cause of death. And, as they say, you cannot judge a book by its cover." (Blume & Serrano 1993)

The anonymity of these bodies and Serrano’s lack of knowledge of his subjects help show how indiscriminate death is. The bodies he chose to photograph were unified in death, wherein we are all unified in a sense that one day we all shall die, our mortality is an undeniable certainty. The thought of death and mortality becomes even more pressing when in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis, a threat that remained well into the 1990s. Several causes of death are depicted in Serrano's Morgue series, including AIDS as seen in, AIDS Related Death, 1992 (fig 22) and Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS, 1992 (fig. 23) these images illustrate the indiscriminate

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nature of HIV/AIDS. *AIDS Related Death* is a close-up photograph of a pair of hands crossed over atop a bare chest. The skin is pale, but not quite so pale as to indicate death. There is no indication of who this person was, what gender they were, or anything else that would notably identify them beyond their cause of death. Many of the corpses photographed were done so shortly after death. Here this individual appears to be one of those who Serrano photographed shortly after their death.

![AIDS Related Death](image)

Figure 22. Serrano, Andres, “*AIDS Related Death*”, Cibachrome print, 1992.

On the surface, the image appears to depict a person in an artistic manner with no clear indication of death. Like Serrano’s other works discussed previously, this image’s meaning is compounded by its title. It becomes another example of Serrano’s interplay with the spectator’s assumptions and interpretations. Through the absence of proper context, the audience is forced to confront their assumptions. The corpse’s anonymity becomes a pressing factor in how the audience relates to the photograph’s subject. Does the title indication of the cause of death being
“AIDS-related” cause the audience to attribute assumptions of the corpse’s gender and or sexuality? Might they be assumed to be a gay man? Even if such an assumption could possibly be correct, that does not mean that the spectator would be basing that assumption on anything other than their own associations with gay men and AIDS.

Another work in the Morgue series, *Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS*, helps further speak to the intricacies of assumption and association. *Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS* shows a face partially obscured by a white sheet. Their mouth is slightly ajar and is mostly obscured by the sheet; the corpse’s unobstructed eye is open, the pupil dull and lifeless. Like *AIDS Related Death*, this image seems to also depict an individual who had died very recently before the photograph was taken. However, unlike the other image, it is unmistakable that this individual is dead. You are confronted by this reality most fervently through the eye of the corpse. There is no need for the title to give the needed context to indicate that this person is
dead. There is an interesting interplay between these images. In one instance the viewer is offered hardly any information, not even a clear indication that what they are seeing is a corpse. What they are offered, by way of the photographs' title, is that the individual died due to AIDS. In the other photograph *Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS*, the individual is less anonymous in that you are able to somewhat see their face, other aspects of anonymity still apply: gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. However, in this image, you are confronted with an unmistakable reality of their death. Looking closer at the working of these two titles it's evident Serrano was making a statement on assumption. The fact that in *Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS* their death is contextualized by indicating that they contracted HIV through a blood transfusion. This does not elicit the same connotations as *AIDS Related Death*. To indicate that this individual died from contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion is to potentially direct assumptions against their being queer. There is potential for a viewer to arrive at the assumption that this individual is somehow removed from the implications of contracting HIV/AIDS and that, outside of the blood transfusion, they might not have any potential to contract HIV. This analysis is rooted in the idea that viewer assumptions are based on stereotypes made of those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS where the disease was intrinsically tied to homosexuality. The juxtaposition of these two images and the implication of how they might be read shows there is an intrinsic predisposition that queer or gay is synonymous with HIV/AIDS. These images help outline the disconnect in the reception of those who died from AIDS, that somehow the way in which you contracted AIDS might alter how culpable you are in contracting the disease. AIDS was never the “Gay Plague”\(^67\) that sought to weed out sexual deviants as some religious extremists might have proposed.\(^68\) It

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wasn’t divine retribution\textsuperscript{69}; it simply was a disease like any other that infected and killed as a part of its evolutionary drive to propagate itself. Whether you were gay, straight, male, female, gender variant, HIV was (and still is) a threat. Serrano recounts how from his perspective, the Morgue photographs were no different than \textit{Piss Christ} or his photos of the Ku Klux Klan as seen in \textit{Klansman (Great Titan of The Invisible Empire III)} (fig. 24):

“I photographed the morgue no differently than I photographed Piss Christ or the Klan. Perhaps it is easier for you to accept that work because you feel morally superior to it. If you don’t consider yourself a Catholic nor a racist you can appreciate the work from a comfortable distance because you don’t have the same investment or involvement that a Christian or a person of color has. Therefore, your acceptance and understanding of, say, the Klan pictures is very different from someone who has experienced the effects of racial discrimination.”\textsuperscript{70} (Blume & Serrano 1993)

Serrano challenges the position of privilege some spectators might have when viewing his work. If you aren’t a member of a particular group or have some form of association with the subject matter, your reaction and interpretation are not weighed down by your own association with what’s depicted. In regards to the aforementioned Morgue images, \textit{AIDS Related Death} and \textit{Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS}, a spectator who can view themselves as separate from the HIV/AIDS crisis because it does not directly affect them or people they personally know are not subject to the same experience as say a queer person, someone who is or knows someone who is HIV positive, etc. The degree of separation between the content of the image and the unassociated spectator allows that individual to have a form of engagement with the photographs unbothered by the ambivalence of a lived experience. There are no stakes for this spectator, aside from the obvious and aforementioned discomfort that might arise from viewing an image of a corpse.


The spectator is only able to engage with what they have come to understand about HIV/AIDS and those who it affects. Due to HIV/AIDS's consistent association with queer people, it is safe to say that the first association one would have with these images is they depict a queer person. Here again, it is important to illustrate the concept of the ‘queer body’. These images do not contain any context beyond that both individuals died from AIDS-related complications. However, there is likely an implicit association that at least one of these individuals was queer in some capacity. Already assumptions are applied to this person based solely on the intermingling of queerness and queer identity with HIV/AIDS.\footnote{George Ayal and Andrew Spieldenner, “HIV Is a Story First Written on the Bodies of Gay and Bisexual Men,” \textit{American Journal of Public Health} 111, no. 7 (2021): pp. 1240-1242, https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2021.306348.} This is rooted in the reality that from the onset when HIV was noted as a “novel virus”, medical professionals associated the disease with Gay men calling it ‘Gay-related immune deficiency’ or GRID.\footnote{Lawrence K Altman, “New Homosexual Disorder Worries Officials,” \textit{New York Times}, May 11, 1982.} While it is certainly possible some
spectators of these images might not make these assumptions, there is overwhelming evidence that those who do not are outliers.

Serrano and his works represent an important progression of subversive queer art from traditionally aesthetic fine art and more conceptual works that spoke more directly to the social discourse at play during the HIV/AIDS crisis. He pushed the boundaries of subjectivity, further subverting what subject matter was acceptable within art. He paid no mind to taboo, employing imagery from blood and semen, the sacred and profane, the KKK, to portraits of the dead. No subject was too taboo, each played a part in a larger social discourse of representation and subjectivity within a social climate that saw queer bodies as degenerate, an ideology bolstered by warped interpretations of Christian ideology and a fear of the queer person as a threat to society.

Catherine Opie

Among other contemporary artists, Catherine Opie explores identity and selfhood through what scholar Loren Erdrich calls a 'vantage point immersed in post-modern theories of fragmentation and discourse.' Through the self-portrait, she seeks to create imagery that utilizes the unsightly and grotesque to illustrate the reality of identity. Her images disrupt expectations of the body and how the body “ought to be” represented in art. As an artist, Catherine Opie is a photographer whose passions are situated on creating a sort of social documentary of identity. Her work is primarily focused on community and identity, as seen through sexuality and gender. Opie’s photography gained significant prominence in the early 1990s when she chose to create intimate portraits of her friends in the Los Angeles S&M community. Her work has come to represent how deeply intertwined ‘kink’ and queer culture are.

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In regards to her work, Opie writes:

"Within my work, I've always addressed the politics behind visibility and community, but I don't think that I am a singular identity. Queer photographers these days are not necessarily identifying in singular terms; they are more interested in being part of a political discourse about how radically life has changed over the past three decades for queers."

Opie challenges heteronormative views on gender and sexuality, continually playing with the audience’s expectations. She seeks to challenge the assumptions and potential biases one might have in regards to sexuality and gender, creating a visual narrative that helps draw out more nuanced interpretations of how you can interpret others and their bodies. One key example of her interplay with gender stereotypes and audience expectations is the photograph *Angela (crotch grab)*, 1992, (fig. 25).

![Angela (crotch grab) by Catherine Opie](image)

Figure 25. Opie, Catherine, “*Angela (crotch grab)*” Photograph, 1992.

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This work suggests a play on overt masculinity and male sexuality. The image shows an anonymous individual from the waist down, their hand stuffed into a tight pair of denim jeans at the crotch. There is no clear indication of the subject’s gender, nor is there anything to identify them in any other notable way. *Angela (Crotch Grab)* bears a striking resemblance to the stylization of male models at the time in editorial and fashion photography. A 1991 Calvin Klein Jeans campaign, for instance, pictured men posing sensually in underwear or sometimes almost nothing. The photograph of *Marcus Schenkenberg* (fig 26) by Bruce Weber, is a famous case in point. Here a thin, muscled man stands in the shower naked, his head obscured by the edge of the image; his genitals are barely covered by a pair of wet jeans held limply in his hand while his other hand is pressed firmly against his bare thigh. Both Opie and Weber’s images are wrought with a sense of raw sexuality and homoeroticism.

![Figure 26. Weber, Bruce, “Marcus Schenkenberg” Photograph, print advertisement for Calvin Klein, 1991.](image-url)

There are hosts of images much like Weber’s photograph that gleefully toe the line of overt sexuality and homoeroticism in men’s fashion photography. *Angela (Crotch Grab)* is a
clever visual allegory for societal assumptions on sexuality and gender. Opie is using the established visual language of male sexuality and masculinity and turns it on its head by defying the audience with a clear indication of the subject’s gender. The viewer is denied that knowledge and is thus forced to confront both personal and societal associations with typical male sexuality and masculinity. As an artist who was one of the first to apply a more intersectional approach to queer imagery, Opie’s work is integral to the continuing conversion surrounding the queer body and queer representation. Specifically, Opie was among some of the first artists to visibly depict transgender and gender variant individuals in fine art photography. One notable image in her oeuvre is *Mike and Sky*, 1993, (fig 27) which depicts two transgender men.\(^7^6\) One is posed behind the other, his arms wrapped tenderly around the other. Their embrace does not seem so subversive on the surface. With proper context to situate them as trans men, this image becomes a key example of transgender visibility in fine art photography. There is another layer of context for this image. While Sky and Mike align with a male gender identity and are socially understood to be men, the couple still use the term “lesbian” to identify their sexuality.\(^7^7\) Terms like lesbian and gay have a typically ridged association with the gender binary when it comes to the dynamics of the intersection of cisgender identity and same-sex attraction that these couplings conventionally denote. The typical association for the term “lesbian” refers to two women in a romantic and or sexual coupling. In terms of the contemporary use of this term, one way it has been defined is to note that it does not only apply to woman + woman couplings but

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\(^7^6\) Transgender is a term typically refers to individuals who’s gender identity does not coincide with their sex assigned at birth; it can also function as an umbrella term for any form of gender variance. The compound term ‘Transgender men’ denotes that these men are individuals who were assigned female at birth and their gender identity does not match their biological sex.

\(^7^7\) Connie, Samaras, Feminism, Photography, Censorship, And Sexually Transgressive Imagery: The Work Of Robert Mapplethorpe, Joel-peter Witkin, Jacqueline Livingston, Sally Mann, And Catherine Opie, 38 N.y.l. Sch. L. Rev. 75 (1993).
more broadly applies to ‘non-men’ + ‘non-men’ couplings. However, this notion of ‘non-men’ + ‘non-men’ couplings being a definition of a lesbian relationship does not allow much variability to who the label ‘lesbian’ really applies to. This definition of lesbian does not apply to Sky and Mike; they are men, they see themselves as men, and socially are men.

![Image of Mike and Sky](image)

Figure 27. Opie, Catherine, “Mike and Sky”, Photograph, 1993

Their continued use of the term lesbian is an act of subversion not just to a heteronormative society, but to the queer community as well. They blur the line of the assumption that gender identity is synonymous with sexual identity and that certain terms must apply based on your gender expression as well as engaging with a much larger conversation surrounding potentially binary labels for varying types of sexualities.

Similar to Robert Mapplethorpe’s use of kink in photos like *Leather Mask*, 1980, (fig 28), some of Catherine Opie’s photography also engages with S&M/BDSM and kink. Despite the shared history of leather culture/kink and queer activism, there was a divide between kink and

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78 This verbiage is specific to how some lesbians have defined the term lesbian in recent years which comes with it’s own implications, namely how it inadvertently exclude nonbinary people and those who defy the need to limit the scope of labels for sexuality.
the queer community growing in the 1990s. Kink culture became subjected to a similar form of “othering” that was impressed upon the entire queer community by society. This inner division between kink and queer culture manifests in Self-Portrait/Pervert (fig. 29). Opie depicts herself in a leather bondage hood, nude from the waist up. Her hands are intertwined together resting on her lap, along both of her arms are hypodermic needle tips “woven” into her skin, penetrating one side of the skin and emerging on the other side. The needles lead up to her shoulders spaced uniformly. Her chest is cut forming the word “Pervert”; a symmetrical branch of leaves sits under the “Pervert” carving. From the carving to the leather hood, to the needles there are many layers interwoven into this photograph. The leather hood is representative of Opie’s association with the leather community.

Figure 28. Mapplethorpe, Robert, “Leather Mask” Photograph, Gelatin silver print, 1980.

The needles are also representative of kink culture. In some S&M/BDSM/kink circles, needles are embedded into the skin by one individual into another. This exchange is part of a culture of explicit and constant consent between two people. While there are some instances
where this exchange would take place in a sexual exchange, the act is not sexual by itself. Kink culture at its core represents trust and a deep sense of intimacy between those involved.

Figure 29. Opie, Catherine, “Self-Portrait/Pervert” Photograph, 1994

It is an exchange between one individual and another or group. However, kink largely is associated with sex, this association is the source of the divide and discourse about kink not being allowed in some queer spaces. The word “Pervert” is a pejorative applied to individuals like Opie who engage in kink culture; her choice to carve this word into her skin is representative of the “othering” of kink culture by some individuals in the queer community but also another form of kink representation. Self-Portrait/Pervert potentially is a parallel of Self Portrait / Cutting, 1993, (fig 30) where both images are a reflection of Opie explicitly indicating that she is a part of the groups she documents, explicitly stating that she is not an outside observer. Self Portrait / Cutting is similar to Self-Portrait/Pervert where both utilize purposeful cuts into Opie’s body, the former shows a child-like image of a house, two clouds, and two stick figures holding hands carved into her back, while the latter is the word “pervert” cut into her chest in a script-like font. Both engage with a deeply polarizing subject of self-harm or purposeful harm.
Typically self-harm is situated within a context of trauma where harm to one’s self is a form of unhealthy catharsis for the individual. For Opie, the carvings into her skin evoke such an association while also playing a part in representing her place in kink culture where there are instances of cutting as an act of trust between two people where cutting is not representative of harm to one’s self but instead an intimate social exchange. The harsh redness of the cuts, coupled with hints of blood pooling at the surface touch on a similar sense of body taboo explored by the other artists mentioned in this chapter.

![Figure 30. Opie, Catherine, “Self-Portrait/Cutting” Photograph, 1994](image)

Opie represents an important progression of a lineage of artists who sought to explore the *queer body* in art despite knowing such imagery would be subversive, transgressing established norms of a heteronormative society that deemed queer behavior as abnormal or ‘against God’. She pushes the boundary between aesthetic art and a type of conceptualism that seeks to challenge society’s views of the body and of how bodies ought to be shown in art. Her work shows a growing shift in intersectional perspectives where the queer community is shown as
being more than just cis-white gay men and their perspectives. Her work speaks to the deeply varied nature of the queer body, of bodies that have been outliers of a society that has always deemed them as deviant.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

This thesis sought to illustrate the relationship between the *queer body* and post-modern photography from the 1980s and early 90s, focusing on the implications of subtext on an artist's work, the dichotomy of pornography and fine art, objectification, and fetishization, government censorship of ‘obscene’ works and body taboo as a subversive tool used by queer artists who sought to disrupt the status quo of a heteronormative society bent on continued ostracization of queer people and queer subject matter from public display. Through analyzing selected works from Robert Mapplethorpe, George Dureau, Kiki Smith, Andres Serrano, and Catherine Opie I sought to establish a lineage of subversive queer art that established the aforementioned disruption of the status quo.

The heteronormative society this thesis speaks of is a society that renders the queer body as pejoratively deviant simply on the basis of its existence alone, where any form of varied gender or sexual expression is viewed as damaging to preestablished societal values and norms. This means that images and literature that are understood as queer automatically become interwoven within this framework of biases and obscenity. The overlap between society’s perception of the queer body and matters of visual representation and stereotype form the basis of both the genre of queer art and the study or methodology of queer art history.

At its core, this thesis sought to illustrate the reality whereby the ostracization of queer people involves the association between the very body of the queer person with sexual acts deemed both deviant and immoral by a cis-heteronormative society. The application of societal associations of deviance upon the body of queer people is illustrated through a methodology called *the queer body*, a methodology borne from Simon Watney’s “Spectacle of AIDS” where Watney describes the pathologization of the *homosexual body* during the HIV/AIDS crisis.
Watney’s *homosexual body* was a product of its time, focused specifically on how cis gay men were associated with deviance and disease. By my adapting Watney’s concept of the *homosexual body* as the *queer body* I sought to apply Watney’s methodology in a more intersectional way that allowed for a broader application of how his discourse applied to the entirety of the queer community. I have outlined that the *queer body* describes the sum of assumptions and biases attributed to queer people, whereby a person’s own queer identity or expression is overshadowed by the generalizations, (mis)perceptions, and stereotypes that society imposes on that individual.

My methodology of the *queer body* as a continuation of Watney’s *homosexual body* acts in tandem with how I envisioned this thesis and its contribution to art historical scholarship: an application of a more intersectional approach to queer art histories that recognizes that during the HIV/AIDS crisis and beyond the queer community was not just cis-white gay men who made artistic contributions but a larger more complex body of queer artists and queer subject matter.
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Vita

Rosa Michel Pace, known to his friends and associates as Romulus, was born in Harvey, Louisiana, and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with University Honors, in Studio Art from Loyola University New Orleans. The following academic term, he gained admittance to the Graduate Department of Art History at Louisiana State University to pursue a Master of Arts in Art History. Romulus anticipates graduating in December 2022.