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IDENTITY CRISIS AT THE UAM
(*New Art Examiner*, September 1995)

"In a Different Light" is a complicated show, a display of 205 numbered items including artwork, art history, and underground pop and activist culture, organized by categories of stylistic affinity (shape, color, attitude) and existential paradigm (does it come from the pre-conscious void or from a lobotomized utopia?). The premise, as stated in the catalog, is to represent the contributions of gay men and lesbians to the continuum of visual and text works in American art and culture, in terms of their "resonance."¹ Larry Rinder, a curator with the University Art Museum, and artist/educator Nayland Blake are the show's curators. They developed the exhibition "through poetics rather than polemics,"² by first seeing what queer artists are saying, and then constructing a curatorial stance based on their findings. Curating and programming decisions were informed and guided by the artists and their work, which "shed light new on our collective history."³ The exhibition seems to have practically organized itself in a responsive, deductive and somewhat historical manner.

A survey of the artists included suggests that what actually happened is more an invention, rather than an unfolding, of collective history. "Queer" has many meanings in the context of the show, and includes straight queers like Vito Acconci and Mike Kelley, straight feminists whose work is unquestionably about heterosexual situations such as wedding gowns and marriages, and of course lesbians who sleep with men.

According to Rinder, "The category of queer is rapidly replacing gay and lesbian. Queer is becoming a term which subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it...queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political."⁴ Identity,

then, is a matter of what one feels like at a given moment. Privilege may induce a desire to cross boundaries and appropriate identities, making claims to fluidity and freedom. For those whose identity is a barrier to rights, let alone privilege, this blurring and mixing of terms, is a step toward continued invisibility. The claim that although queerness is a sign of mutability and also a political position suggests that politics are formed from the individual outward to the society. This keeps the outsiders out, with a claim to political imperative. A dose of our own medicine, perhaps.

Work by young gay male artists is decidedly more prevalent than work by emerging lesbian artists, suggesting that while Rinder and Blake may be familiar with what's happening on the gay male scene, they do not know many lesbian artists, or if they know them, they do not have an adequate background for understanding or judging the language of their work. It also suggests that men and women have a different relationship to artmaking, different uses for art in our communities, and different issues in both form and content. We have a different relationship to art exhibition, criticism and art history as well. "In A Different Light" does its best to understand work by lesbians in gay male terms, and in doing so, fails to give lesbian work honest representation.

Work by lesbians cannot "resonate" when the curators seem to not know the history of feminism, the so-called women's art movement,⁵ or what younger, under-exhibited, or emerging lesbian artists are doing. Unless an exhibition's organizers are willing to become more familiar with the art scene supposedly on display, by including women on our own terms, they should use more conventional curating and display strategies.

Why were there no women curators for "In A Different Light?" If the curators could see that they lacked vital information about the history of lesbian artmaking, as well as about contemporary younger lesbian artists, they must have understood that curating by intuition⁶ was not going to adequately represent female artists. Work by

women, especially by lesbians, is the most misrepresented, under-represented, and misinterpreted in the exhibit.

Overtly lesbian and overtly political work, by men and women, is defused and rendered sadly ridiculous, since the exhibition context transforms it into nostalgia or camp. Continuity in women's activist and art history is reduced to funk and curiosity. One of the most telling examples is the display of liner notes for the Olivia Records album *Lesbian Concentrate: a lesbian anthology of songs and poems*, (1977). The notes illustrate, in microcosm, how women used culture, and the advantages we gave ourselves to network and operate on a community level at every turn. No background is provided, however, and this tiny bit of history is categorically rendered precious, or even eccentric. The inclusion of straight women as engaged in queer cultural practice reinterprets the lesbian work in straight feminist terms, seeming to illustrate the much-loved misapprehension that lesbian artwork owes a heavy debt to straight women.

Subversion of lesbian content is a theme of the show. The choice of specific work by Amy Adler and Monica Majoli, two lesbians whose contributions are a drawing of a nude male torso (*After Sherrie Levine*, 1994), and a painting of a gay male sex scene (*Untitled*, 1990), respectively, makes a clear point. Lesbian "polemics" is effectively vaporized, but our "poetics" are intact, hidden behind the curators' delusion that even in the lesbian erotic canon, the male is the sexual partner. Deborah Kass's drag queen photograph (*Altered Image*, 1992) contains a loving hint of irony, an appropriation of the Warhol legacy, and is read as gay male work, as well. Kass's *Double Blue Barbra*, (1992) provides more information about her relationship to drag and Warhol, fortunately.

I have questions about why lesbian artists use male and gay male sexual subjects. On the optimistic side, it may be that women's experience teaches us to be less threatened by a broadened scope of representation (i.e. we don't have a lot to lose). We do not see the male as another aspect of self. Rather he is another aspect of gay culture, someone familiar and someone with whom we share personal bonds and a political stake.

I have only to consider how many gay men choose to eroticize lesbian sexuality or depict non-denigrated female bodies, however, to understand that Adler's and Majoli's work is not to be interpreted as lesbian erotic expression, nor as broadened cultural perspective. Overtly gay male subjectivity as addressed by lesbian artists is chosen for a "queer" show instead of work with clear lesbian content, because of a willingness on the part of these artists, for the sake of visibility and access to exhibition (i.e. male approval), to negate lesbian subjectivity. This may position them closer to the power gay men have in the queer community, and for an individual artist, it is an obvious trade-off.⁷

In case this point is made too subversively for the viewer to pick up, he or she need only to spend a few minutes with Acconci's piece, *Conversions Part III (Associations, Assistance, Dependence)* (1971), to see a more literal depiction of the idea: a woman on her knees sucking a cock. The queerness of the action escapes me. Acconci's supposed trip into the "feminine," in a boring Freudian/Lacanian metaphor, interprets female as male without a dick. His "feminine" side is depicted as the artist minus a cock, because it is in the female subject's mouth.⁸ Very Queer. The current myth about lesbian sexuality is that it was killed by feminists sometime during the seventies, and gay men showed us how to revive it during the eighties. Therefore, it makes sense that lesbian erotic expression should show an obvious indebtedness to the gay male, who gave her back her sexuality. Inclusion of the work by two lesbians that specifically refers to or celebrates gay male desire reinforces two lies: that lesbians are asexual, and gay men invented all queer sexiness. My analysis does not suggest that women must limit content, or restrict ourselves to a narrower world view. It is the curators who limited the lesbian content of the show by using lesbian artists to represent gay male sexuality. This is not about our poetics, it is curatorial politics.

Rinder's and Blake's insistence on keeping male supremacy intact, within a presumably shared queer culture, is clear when encountering the work by Judie Bamber, Judy Chicago and Zoe Leonard hung over a wall of photocopied cum stains, by Rex Ray (*Untitled*, 1993-4). The work by women is literally placed in the context of the male

jerking off. The aggressive intrusion of male sexuality into everything female on the wall subverts a feminist, or female-oriented, reading of the work. Rex Ray's cum wallpaper functions as a hostile gesture toward women, regardless of the artist's own intention with this work. In other words, the women are metaphorically fucked, or raped.

The show's theoretical arch-rival is "'essentialism,'" described in Kevin Killian's *Artforum* interview with Blake and Rinder as that which insists on specific identities and meanings. Quoting Rinder, "But we are going up against an essentialist attitude that says, Certain communities own certain issues, on which other communities have no right to speak; the original community, on the other hand, can't speak about anything else."⁹ Certain communities, of course, "own" very little except a clear understanding of their own situations. The idea that acknowledging this restricts artists who are making politically engaged work from speaking on anything but themselves is misleading. It is to our collective advantage, as people engaged in visual and other forms of representation, to understand each other's social and political realities, speaking to those realities interactively, freely, and as often as possible. Rinder's logic actually supports the continued ghetto-ization of politically-engaged artwork by claiming that some not only favor the restriction and closed spaces of the ghettos, but insist upon it. The logic claims no less than that we are responsible for our own marginalization, and our work cannot be seen outside that framework.

The exhibition is organized to negate clearly directed political interpretations, giving many of the individual pieces new meaning, one which is non-threatening to the status quo and projects a bourgeois optimism about cultural defiance. Cultural defiance by a despised group (real queers, not occasional ones) can be made palatable and entertaining. If our specific cultural identities are appropriated, we become harmless de-sexualized perverts on parade. Anyone can join the parade because our situation is one of a sublime "universal experience."¹⁰ We do the dance of life, we represent chances you will never have to take, and we do it with flamboyance, humor, silliness, style,

pathos, the tears of a clown, basically. The idea of universal experience, and the belief that art must represent this, is rather essentialist.

The exhibition represents a sexless lesbian and gay community, looking into and out of voids and oblivion. Our strongest objections to decades of brutal intolerance, psychological abuse, abandonment, the near complete lack of equal rights for women, the legislation of our reproductive systems and sexual activities, the way we are left to die, gets boiled down to stylized sentimentality and the search for utopia. So-called Queer Culture is appropriated by the museum, lesbian expression becomes a sub-category of gay male expression, and straight feminism becomes the historical precedent for lesbian work. Drag becomes the vanguard of the gender-bending revolution, and straight people like Richard Prince, Mike Kelley, Marcel Duchamp, Carolee Schneeman, Jenny Holzer, and Lutz Bacher are suddenly queer. The agenda to broaden the meaning of queer to include straight artists as well as queer artist may be an "anti-essentialist" gesture. But more than that, inclusion of straight artists in a supposedly queer show is a good way to avoid unpleasant questions about the careerist appropriation of gay or lesbian experience, and art strategies, by straight artists.

In regarding the exhibition as a whole, Rinder and Blake have overlooked two of the most vital and popular arenas for gay and lesbian visual dialogue: film and video. The show has declined to include the video and film portions, except as an aside, into the official exhibition. Museums are still in a quandary over how to show film and video, how to curate it, understand it as an art form, or how to write about it. The UAM, however, has an excellent theater for just that purpose.

There is a program of films and tapes by and about gay men and lesbians at the Pacific Film Archive "in conjunction with" the museum exhibition, but these contributions are virtually unacknowledged. Except for two terribly annoying videotapes by straight people in the gallery space, film and videomaking have been dislocated from the "queer" art dialogue. The catalog does mention this program, but no one was recruited to write about the work, and film and video continue on a parallel course, not

quite part of what may be happening, not quite outside it. That gay and lesbian media has a very wide and enthusiastic international audience/maker network, and is a vital contributor to a complex dialogue regarding every issue from the most basic ways of speaking about representation to sophisticated experimentation, is lost on the exhibition's organizers.

I hate the show, although I do not hate most of the artwork. Romaine Brooks's *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923-24) is beautiful, for example, and after having seen it reprinted in numerous lesbian books, newspapers, and magazines for about 20 years, to finally see the actual painting is intensely satisfying. It is also worth wading through the awkward organization of the works to find specific pieces by Tony Greene (*The Grain of His Skin*, 1987), Harmony Hammond (*Flesh Journals*, 1993, and *Presences III, IV and VI*, 1972), Roni Horn (*When Dickenson Shut Her Eyes - No. 1027*, 1993, and *Suite #1*, 1991-94), and Siobhan Liddell (*Untitled*, 1993), among others.

The way the show is organized, however, disguises or sentimentalizes the original politics of items displayed, and the work becomes reinterpreted within a false history of feminism and gay representation. The exhibition is organized to successfully confound a clear understanding of work by gay men and lesbians as part of a multi-cultural dialogue, by insisting that this dialogue is exclusivist. In fact, their main premise is that gay and lesbian is a state of mind, something flexible, an unstable "preference," completely malleable. The so-called queer outsider takes his or her place among the generations of Euro-American art visionaries and outlaws.

"In A Different Light" is a horribly flawed exhibition because it turns the feminist and gay radicalism of almost 30 years into a perfumed implosion, a postmodernist camp trip. It uses artists and artworks out of context, and situates them into a "queer" one, based on style and suggestion rather than on histories, intentions or dialogues. It equates men's and women's legal, psychological and physical realities. It seeks to simultaneously retain and erase any markers of identity--the definition of the closet.

Footnotes

¹Lawrence Rinder, "An Introduction to In A Different Light," in *In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, eds. Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Lights Books), p. 1.

²*Ibid.* p. 1.

³*Ibid.* p. 1.

⁴*Ibid.* p. 7.

⁵ Nayland Blake's catalog essay, "Curating In A Different Light," (*Ibid.* p. 17) wrongly states that the invention of a women's art movement is based on museum politics and dialogues within the official art world. He also suggests, therefore, that activist concerns are not, historically, in conflict with existing art power structures, and ignores the grass roots foundation of feminist artmaking. "In the art world, [the Women's Liberation Movement] has come to be known as the women's art movement. The movement is often dated from 1972, when a protest of the Corcoran Biennial's exclusion of women led to a national conference of women artists, organizers and critics. At that conference, many artists had their first large scale exposure to the work of their peers around the country. The groundwork was laid for an explosion of activity by women throughout the United States." Blake is most likely referring to the organized feminist protest of the 1970 Whitney Annual, by Lucy Lippard, Faith Ringgold and others.

There is mis-information also later in the essay (p. 26), as Blake states that "Many of the women [in the UAM exhibition] are using '70s gay male culture as a template for expressions of sexual exploration and community." This denies that women are connected to our own history, and find a more satisfying continuity with gay male work than with the presumably essentialist lesbian and feminist work of the '70s. The work of many gay men, and others like Mike Kelley and Matthew Barney, in fact, are influenced by the women artists. Typically, the work by women has gone under-catalogued and much has fallen through the cracks of art "history."

⁶ "Our methods were intuitive rather than linear." Blake, p. 11.

⁷ I happened upon another example of lesbian deference to gay men in an interview by David Blanton with writer Jane DeLynn. From *The Insider*, March 24 - April 6, 1995: " 'It's all part of the PC police thing,' says DeLynn. Typically outspoken, DeLynn is critical of the notion that lesbians form much of a community in New York, anyway. 'From the first time I walked into a woman's bar, it was like high school cliques all over again.' If this aspect of lesbian social life strikes her as juvenile, does she find gay male culture any better? 'The degree of sophistication in gay male writing is much higher. Whereas gay women have gotten much better in terms of appearance, I find gay men are much more fashionable across the board,' she says." Thank you and goodnight.

⁸ Misunderstanding female physicality as existing primarily in terms of male desire and anatomy, even gay male desire, underlies much of what has been included in the show. "The associative chain of center--vagina--flower has been echoed in the work of many gay male artists who have replaced vagina with anus. ...the anus is the vagina for gay men." (Blake, exhibition catalog, p. 28.) That women's "center" is actually displayed as our

"hole," as our "void," not only denies that female sexuality exists for women, outside these negative metaphors, it also illustrates Blake's thoughtless misogyny.

⁹ Kevin Killian, "The Secret Histories," *Artforum*, Feb. 1995, p. 23.

¹⁰ Lawrence Rinder, catalog essay, p. 7.

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