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Embodying Gender:

Narrative and Spectacle in the Photography of

Alfred Stieglitz, Imogen Cunningham, Minor White, and Robert Mapplethorpe

by

Daniell Cornell

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2002

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Executive Officer

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Abstract

Embodying Gender:
Narrative and Spectacle in the Photography of
Alfred Stieglitz, Imogen Cunningham, Minor White, and Robert Mapplethorpe

by

Daniell Cornell

Adviser: Professor Carol M. Armstrong

This study of four twentieth-century photographers is based in debates over gendered representations that have had their initial articulation in film theory. Specifically, it examines the tradition of cinematic spectacle and its address to the spectator's self-conscious viewing experience as a way to critique narrative models of photographic interpretation drawn from psychoanalysis and the visual logic of the gaze.

The first chapter explores Alfred Stieglitz's shift from a Pictorialist to an avant-garde representational mode consistent with linguistic theories of metaphor and metonymy. It focuses on his *Equivalents*, photographs of clouds and sky, and then considers how they provide the visual language for his *Portrait* series of Georgia O'Keeffe.

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The second chapter traces Imogen Cunningham's progression from a Pictorialist to an avant-garde mode of photography, comparing the nude photographs of her husband Roi Partridge with the more abstract visual syntax of her male nudes from the nineteen twenties, which undercut and destabilize the commonplace gendering and sexing of bodies. A similar radical vocabulary is shown operating in her botanical studies.

The third chapter considers how Minor White continued the well-established vocabulary of abstraction in pure photography by extending Stieglitz's notion of the equivalent, transforming its goals to explore his ambivalence toward his closeted gay desires through his sequenced images of ocean beaches and male nudes.

The fourth chapter considers how Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs implicate viewers in the gay erotics that inflect his male nude studies and botanicals. Suspending viewers between narrative and spectacle address, his photographs resist the traditional art historical division between modernism and postmodernism by their commitment to the self-reflexivity of abstract reference, the ambiguity of gendered associations, and the necessity of contingent relations.

The conclusion returns to the period of the nineteen twenties in which the study begins, using the understanding of spectacle explored in photography as a strategy to resist the traditional hegemonic narratives of classical Hollywood cinema. Specifically, it investigates the conditions of queer spectatorship and their relation to spectacle attraction in two of Douglas Fairbanks's most popular films, *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate.*

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Acknowledgments

I attended CUNY because of the range of faculty that its consortium organization creates, and my committee reflects that diversity. James M. Saslow came onto this project in its final hour, and I am extremely grateful for his willingness to offer his carefully considered comments on a study with which he has philosophical reservations. They will be important in turning this baggy monster into a more useful book. Although an architectural historian, Rosemarie Haag Bletter's interest in modernity and art are so wide-ranging that she always finds a connection to any project on which I am working, a connection that turns out to be exactly what I need to think it through. When I first entered the program in art history, I was not planning to earn a certificate in film studies. My first course with William Boddy changed that. He brings a level of analysis to film criticism and theory that keeps me engaged for weeks after any discussion. His comments on this study have been a welcome opportunity to consider how its investigation might be refined.

Of all the fortunate circumstances that attended my return for a second doctorate, the most significant was the appointment of Carol M. Armstrong to the faculty the same year that I entered the program. My first course with her that fall determined the rest of my course (and courses) as a student of art history. The rigor, dexterity, and capacity of her intellect are well known in the field and those qualities alone would have made it a privilege to work under her. Also compelling is her model of scholarly investigation and her confidence in following an inquiry to unexpected conclusions. However, most important has

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been the respect with which she has entertained my ideas. It has been liberating to know that my work will be considered for its strengths rather than dismissed for its foibles. Without the generosity that she showed by remaining my primary advisor after leaving the Graduate Center for a position at Princeton, I would not have been able to finish.

A few times in life we are given the opportunity to thank the people who have made our journey possible, enabling it with their talents and enriching it with their presence. I have been extraordinarily blessed in both the number and the quality of those people. I could only set out on this journey because of the encouragement and unqualified support of numerous friends. In particular, three academics that I am also lucky to count as personal friends -- Carrie Peirce, John-Peters Campbell, and Terry Engebretsen -- gave me the courage to leave the comfort of a tenured faculty position and return to graduate school to pursue a dream that had gotten side-tracked by the vicissitudes of living. They have never given up on me, or my dream, even when I was not so certain. The reach of their intellectual and emotional support during the tumultuous times that have coincided with my schooling has been an uncommon grace, and they remain crucial anchors at my life's center. Virginia Doland, chair of the English department at Biola University, was a constant source of support, often seeming to know more about my desires than I did myself. I also owe a debt to Barry Krammes and Dan Callis in the art department there for whetting my appetite for art history through exhibition experience in the University's gallery. Thanks to my parents, who encouraged me to pursue my goals, even when they didn't make sense to them, and to my sister, who has always been there when I needed her. Two couples, Tamara and Roger Anderson, and Marcia and Jim Quigle, not

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Several people in New York have been invaluable in making it a place to live as well as study. I met Sharon Goldberg when I first arrived, and she has

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proved to be the kind of unwavering friend for which one usually can only hope. The intelligence, hospitality, and perspective of Magda Teter and Shawn Hill often kept me sane. David Rile has always encouraged me and known just what to say when I felt anxious about either my work or my life. Tricia Laughlin Bloom and I have shared so many parts of this journey together that I think she must be my doppelganger. The late Carl Winter was an invaluable kindred spirit who pulled me through a dark time: you are ardently missed.

During my schooling I worked at several museums. Most of all I feel uncommonly fortunate to have worked early in my graduate schooling as a curatorial assistant to Marcia Tucker at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. Her warmth, generosity of spirit, and commitment to artists, their work, and the importance of the art world in our society remains the standard for all of my curatorial practice. I am also thankful for the encouragement I received from Elizabeth Wilson at the Morgan Library and the confidence placed in me by Sandra Kraskin at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College. In 1998 I was awarded a two-year position as the Florence B. Selden Fellow in prints, drawings, and photographs at the Yale University Art Gallery. There I had the privilege of organizing an exhibition under the leadership of Richard S. Field that is the basis for the first chapter of the dissertation. Several scholars in the Yale academic community gave me assistance with that exhibition and helped me to be rigorous in its theoretical formulation, notably Jonathan Weinberg, Lanny Hammer, and Laura Wexler. I also organized an exhibition with Cheryl Finley that explored the issues of abstraction and photography in my dissertation for the Gallery's director, Jock Reynolds, whose generosity and assistance I continue to feel. For their inspiration and informed interest, I wish that I could have taken

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Embodying Gender:
Narrative and Spectacle in the Photography of Alfred Stieglitz, Imogen Cunningham, Minor White, and Robert Mapplethorpe

. . . multiple readings, understanding, and namings are promoted by abstractions providing richness, diversity, and complexity.

-- Barbara Hammer[1]

This study began out of a personal frustration with the discursive contexts that have overdetermined (and even distorted) the meaning of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic oeuvre. The social and political uses of his images in the cultural battles over the acceptability of sexual practices and their representations has effectively shifted the spectator's experience of them away from their visual pleasure and contributions to the history of photography. By examining four artists considered central to the history of "pure" (also called "straight") photography, this investigation posits that Mapplethorpe hoped to make a lasting contribution to the well-established tradition within which he was working, a contribution not limited to the explicit images of sadomasochism for which his name became virtually synonymous during the highly charged controversies over sexuality in the America during the 1970s and 1980s.

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[1] Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," in Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video, Eds., Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 75.

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The artists under consideration here, Alfred Stieglitz, Imogen Cunningham, Minor White, and Robert Mapplethorpe, all use the vocabulary of abstraction in order to explore the photograph's capacity to represent more than narrative content and the cognitive projections of spectators on which it is based. They are especially interested in a challenge to bourgeois subjectivity through the use of what I will call spectacle address, which reveals the gendering of that social order to be contingent and constructed.[2] By manipulating recognizable forms, their photographs demonstrate that when interpreting images, subjective associations matter a great deal not only because the photographic image mirrors structures of identity based in psychoanalytic narrative. The differences in spectators are staged through a self-consciousness regarding the body's presence in reception, which then locates meaning in the visual conditions of spectatorship itself.

Beginning in the 1920s, Stieglitz and Cunningham were invested in shifting the locus of meaning in the photograph from the viewer's narrative projections to their encounter with its visual display. White's lifelong interest in a photographic mode called the Equivalent was driven by his desire to create a self-conscious link between the image and its viewer's perceptions. Mapplethorpe continued these avant-garde strategies, challenging the culture's assumptions about sexuality through his open exploration of gay desires. All four artists sought to mobilize the spatial relationships of images and their viewers through an address to spectators and their viewing conditions.

---

[2] I am using the term "spectacle address" to suggest the combining of discourses from film theory (spectacle) and art criticism (address) that underlies the visual analysis of the spectator in this study.

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Although Mapplethorpe's work falls at the end of this historical trajectory and will be taken up according to the terms of this study in chapter four, it is apposite to consider briefly its reception within the context of postmodern concerns over transgressive subjectivity and related questions about artistic intention.[3]

Due to the highly public nature of the debate, court battle, and eventual censorship of *The Perfect Moment*, the retrospective exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photography, his work has become a key site in discussions over the definitions of postmodernism itself. His work is evoked frequently to provide evidence for the role of postmodern works as the latest avant-garde and heir to the ongoing modernist critique of bourgeois cultural values. By the controversies they engender, Mapplethorpe's photographs seem to rehearse the standard avant-garde narrative of an artist challenging the restrictive values of a bourgeoisie hostile to progressive ideas and liberation. On the other hand, progressives, in tracing the social and political debates over subjectivity and the cultural control of imagery that characterized the 1970s through 90s, often criticize his work, seeing his photographs as another example of an objectifying white, male gaze. Therefore, his works too often are considered either as contested sites in what

---

[3] This study understands the period of postmodernism to encompass the cultural production of the past thirty years. As in any other representational mode, postmodernism is continually being pushed back as critics find evidence of its tenets in work before the actual use of the term as a descriptive designation. There appears to be a general consensus among art historians that any history of postmodernism must at least take into account Jasper Johns, Robert Rauchenberg, and Andy Warhol, and a group of critics usually identified with the journal October make the case that this history begins with Marcel Duchamp, Walter Benjamin, and European cultural Marxists.

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Carol Vance has termed the "culture wars"[4] or as a kind of visual illustration of the continued hegemony of traditional social relations.

Both views of Mapplethorpe's work and reception are valid, and have offered valuable insights into how the cultural conditions of a given time invest an artist's works with meaning, and even more how those conditions create the means of circulation, discussion, and display that are necessary in order to constitute their reception as works of art. However, while my understanding of cultural networks -- and the social and political structures that support them -- has been greatly enhanced by such analysis, my viewing experience of Mapplethorpe's many less controversial photographs has not been enriched equally by such discussions. Nor has it served to suggest what those more controversial images may have in common with the project that informs his quieter nudes and flowers. To appreciate the complexity of Mapplethorpe's photographs themselves, it is more profitable to consider them in light of the earlier photographic traditions on which his postmodern practice depends and the terms through which his work may be understood as an investigation of those traditions.[5]

Mapplethorpe, himself, makes reference to earlier photographic traditions in his interview published in *The Perfect Moment* catalogue. He situates his photography as an exploration of traditional genres: the portrait, still life, and

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[4] Carol S. Vance, "Issues and Commentary: The War on Culture," *Art in America* 77 (September 1989): 39-40.

[5] A refusal to consider the earlier traditions in which Mapplethorpe has situated his work also begs the whole question of why an artist might choose to work within an older historical style in the first place.

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nude.[6] Most tellingly, in his interview, Mapplethorpe does not include documentary or social photography within his list of working genres. This is important both because Mapplethorpe's name is so often linked to the documenting of subcultures, especially queer and sadomasochist communities, and because documentary work has been the mode most clearly associated with the contemporary avant-garde in American photography.[7] Again, it is certainly possible to see Mapplethorpe's oeuvre as documenting queer desires and sexual practices that were meant to disrupt the policing structures of normative heterosexuality.[8] Undoubtedly the work by queer historians of sexuality,

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[6] Janet Kardon reinforces this view by dividing his work into these three genre categories in her introductory catalogue essay. Of course, the return to traditional genres is one of the major strategies of postmodernism and it situates Mapplethorpe's photography within postmodern practice. What makes Mapplethorpe's use of tradition seem less avant-garde and more conservative than is implied by the term postmodern is that he often seems to return to these traditional genres through a traditional vocabulary. This is what has led viewers to focus on the documenting of transgressive subcultures that compose the context of his photographs as a way to pointing to what is new in his work. Janet Kardon, ed., *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 9-13.

[7] This definition of the avant-garde obviously relies on a notion that extends from the nineteenth-century and a belief in the progressive artist as central to an anti-bourgeois critique. It runs from artists such as Diane Arbus and Gary Winogrand in the 1960s, to William Eggelston and Duane Michaels in the 1970s, to Larry Clark and Nan Goldin and in the 1980s, to Tina Barney, Lorna Simpson, and Phillip di Corcia in the 1990s. Even photographers who might be considered more conceptual, such as Lucas Samaras, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Krueger, are related to this avant-garde documentary tradition by their emphasis on how images structure cultural attitudes and reinforce bourgeois social norms.

[8] See especially Richard Meyer, "Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 360-380. Meyer's discussion of Mapplethorpe rehearsed here will be included and expanded in his forthcoming monograph, Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century American Art (Oxford,

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especially Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, and Judith Butler, provided the critical discourses (discourses of subjectivity and power relations) that contributed largely to the analysis of Mapplethorpe's work within such interpretive frameworks.[9]

However, I believe that his photographs are more than visual, political provocations, dressed up in the cloak of a fine art photographic practice. If one considers Mapplethorpe's assertion that he has situated his work within the photographic history of art, it makes sense to view his photographs in light of the questions that have been raised historically within the medium. I want to turn, therefore, to an examination of those traditions as an interpretive context for Mapplethorpe's photographs. Such an examination will throw into relief, and thus reopen, the critical questions that previously have been closed by the reduction of his formalist vocabulary into a descriptive stylistics instead of the historically generated discursive strategies they represent.[10]

This study proposes that Mapplethorpe carefully situates his work in order to reinvestigate a complex network of issues that took visual form in the first quarter of the twentieth century in general, and in nineteen-twenties photography and film in particular. Several important shifts can be located at this historical juncture. Chief among them, and the one that casts its shadow

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U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also Kobena Mercer's "Looking for Trouble," in the same volume, 350-59.

[9] On these relations see especially: Michel Foucault, "How is Power Exercised?" *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 777-795; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 9-48; Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2.2 (1990): 105-125.

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over the ensuing paradigm of photographic art history, is the shift from a pictorialist mode of photography to what came to be known through a number of experiments in the vocabulary of visual representation as a modernist mode of photographic visuality. Although no single, formal style governs the works of artists in the nineteen-twenties, a shared experimental project may be discerned in the artistic productions of that period, which may be generalized under the rubric of modernism[11]. This definition of modernist photography extends from the late Photo-Secession in the United States to the range of European production including the languages of New Vision and the realist

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[10] Obviously implicit in my approach is the assumption that the collapsing of style and formal strategies has resulted in a skewed view of formalism as a method of inquiry.

[11] Although it is more correct to think of modernisms rather than a single stylistic practice, there is nevertheless a set of assumptions about the character of modernist representations and their ideological force that art historians share and that are usually assumed as a general rubric when discussing works produced during the period designated as modernity, roughly from the 1860s through the 1970s. Modernism is the convenient shorthand for the multiple ways that artists in the West broke with the tradition of illusionism and its reliance on the scientific principles of visual perspective that had dominated the making of imagery since the Renaissance. It was accompanied by an increasing breakdown of traditional support for artists from the church, the state, and wealthy patronage in favor of the artist's independent participation in the urban, industrial, and secular society that supported market capitalism. Ironically, modernist artists often produced works highly critical of the status quo and the market system that organized the social and political arrangements on which they depended but from which they felt alienated. The most common characteristic of work identified as modernist is some form of abstraction, often through a flattening of visual perception that draws attention to the arbitrary relation between surface and depth with its implicit critique of scientific positivism. To my mind, the best succinct discussion of modernism remains the address on postmodernism given by Jürgen Habermas in September 1980 on receiving the Theodor W. Adorno prize from the city of Frankfurt. It was published as "Modernity – An Imcomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wa.: Bay Press, 1983), 3-15. A more extensive account is available in Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987).

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perspectives borrowed from Neue Sachlichkeit in German practice and the surrealist and dada languages of distortion and the unconscious in French practice.

American photography shifted from a pictorialist photographic mode to a modernist mode under the influence (some would say dictates) of two dominate artistic circles during the nineteen-teens and -twenties: one group of artists on the East Coast that was organized as the photosecession by Alfred Stieglitz and another group on the West Coast that would become known as Group f.64 in 1932. Artists in both of these groups practiced what was known as pure (or non-manipulated) photography, pushing an important mode of American photographic modernism of the nineteen-twenties in the direction of a vocabulary of abstract form and spatial disorientation. Stieglitz, in particular was attentive to the European avant-garde experiments in representation, which he perceived as an attempt to translate the visual corollaries for intangible experience developed by the symbolists into a more abstract syntax.

Although Stieglitz had begun as a pictorialist and used his journal *Camera Work* to repudiate its visual style, in point of fact, the photographic vocabulary to which he turned was not so very different from it. Stieglitz, along with other members of the Photo-Secession, recognized that photography's pictorialist mode had been rooted in the attempt of symbolist discourse to describe subjective experience through form and color (tone in the case of photography) rather than through subject matter. The subject matter of his pictorialist photography had been merely the armature on which to hang the evocation of a feeling or a mood. The manipulations that accompanied his pictorialist photographs distanced Stieglitz's images from the actual objects iconically

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represented by the camera's realistic description in favor of manipulating their indexical register in ways that invoked the vocabulary of painting and his own subjective experience.[12] Rather than using the formal innovations of photography as a way of stressing the mimetic capacity of its representations, Stieglitz used a pictorialist vocabulary as a way of creating images that resonated with his interior states. For this reason, his contact with the European avant-garde through Gallery 291 was not a threat to his artistic practice but fueled it. Stieglitz rightly recognized, as several Stieglitz scholars have argued, that the symbolists anticipated the modernist break with realism and naturalism in favor of understanding images through the language systems in which they were imbedded.[13] In other words, it was the syntax -- the formal relations among and

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[12] The distinction between icon and index lies at the heart of contemporary photographic theory. It was first articulated by linguistic philosopher Charles S. Peirce. See his "Logic as Semiotic: Theory of Signs," in *The Philosophy of Peirce, Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 98-119. Peirce posits that an icon resembles the object to which it refers whereas an index is the physical trace of that object on another surface. He further distinguishes an icon and an index from a symbol, which references an object without either resembling it or being directly caused by it. These distinctions are also maintained by Roman Jakobson, whose theories of metaphor and metonymy are central to this study and will be discussed in the next chapter. See his discussion in *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge and London: Harvard University and Belknap Press, 1987), 414-26. Most significant for contemporary theory in art history has been the work of Rosalind Krauss, who has argued that the photograph is simultaneously an index and an icon because of its status as the trace of the objects it references. This trace is a function of the chemical reaction caused by the light that is reflected off the object and its resulting depiction mimetically resembles the object. These ideas are found throughout her writings, but were given their most sustained articulation in her "Notes on the Index," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 196-219.

[13] John Pultz, "Equivalence, Symbolism, and Minor White's Way into the Language of Photography," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 39.1-2 (1980): 28-9. Mike Weaver, "Alfred Stieglitz and Ernest Block: Art and Hypnosis," *History of Photography* 20 (Winter 1996): 300.

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within visual images rather than their iconicity, or mimetic status -- that produced their symbolic meanings.

For Stieglitz, the great value in European abstraction for photography was the way it provided a vocabulary that linked the image to the viewer's perception rather than to its content.[14] This change is akin to the shift from a mode of representation that relies on narrative projection for its meaning to a mode that constitutes meaning through a staging of the relation between the viewer and the image, or what film theorists refer to as spectacle, and what I refer to as spectacle address.[15] An emphasis on the way that film addresses its spectators will reveal, even stress, the role of visual perception itself over descriptive meaning. Similarly, the vocabulary of abstraction within the modernist period mobilized the discourse of spectacle address, producing an awareness of the viewer's own body and its relation to a perceived visual field. Because spectacle address implicates the spectator's body in the rhetoric of the image, depictions of the body, and especially of the nude body, take on an increased importance as discursive sites within modernist photography. Additionally, modernist photography deployed both the male and female nude, remaking them as artistic subjects by manipulating the human form through geometry, fragmentation, and startling recontextualizations. This study will

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[14] William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (San Francisco, Ca.: Chronicle Books, 1994), 27.

[15] Tom Gunning expanded the concept of "spectacle" as it originated in film studies, drawing on the initial formulations by Laura Mulvey in her discussions of it in contrast to the narrative constructions of the male gaze. For Gunning, see "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 56-62. For Mulvey, see *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1989), 29-37.

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focus on the photographic nude within modernist theories of representation, with special attention to the male body and the ways in which it has been inscribed through the metaphoric and metonymic conventions that the avant-garde in America developed during the 1920s.

I. SPECTATORSHIP: NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES

> *Regardless of how much we may strain to maintain a "disinterested" aesthetic mode of apprehension, an appreciation of the "purely visual," when we look at an image it is instantly and irreversibly integrated and collated with the intricate psychic network of our knowledge.*
>
> – Victor Burgin[16]

Within art history in general, discussions of sexuality and the body have tended to rely on binary gender assumptions growing out of the insights of feminist film theory. The impact of this theory has been especially strong in positing the narrative relations between viewing subjects as masculine and visual objects as feminine, which is the view articulated famously (and by now infamously) in Laura Mulvey's discussion of the voyeuristic gaze within film, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). However, in contrast to Mulvey's analysis, and taking their lead from Tom Gunning's influential essay of ten years later, "The Cinema of Attractions," a number of film theorists attempted to rethink the set of terms that had been organized into an opposition

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of feminine object and masculine subject within the narrative framework that was Mulvey's primary focus. Rather than the relations on which narrative film depends, these critics emphasize the tradition of overt display and spectacle within avant-garde film production. These strategies focus on the self-conscious awareness experienced by spectators whose attention is directed to the conditions of viewing itself. Such an understanding of spectacle offers an alternative set of terms for describing the body to those in the discussions of narrative that are structured by an overdetermined gender binary. The following discussion traces the history of spectatorship from Mulvey's notion of the gaze to Gunning's notion of spectacle as a prelude to exploring the kinds of investigation that are opened up to visual analysis through a focus on the body as a site of self-conscious display.

The staging of the body as an object of visual display plays a central role in psychoanalytic discourse by French theorists, most notably Jacques Lacan, which provided a powerful framework to rethink classical film production in light of the gender concerns motivating feminism during the nineteen-seventies. Out of that historical moment emerged the familiar theory of classic cinema's "masculine gaze," which held that the camera's operation divided the world of film into viewer and image, as well as into a masculine subject and feminine object. Largely initiated by the work of Laura Mulvey and other British film critics at *Screen*, this work crossed Lacan's linguistic reading of psychoanalysis with Althusser's ideological critiques of how institutions and their apparatus construct perceived reality in order to expose the ways that classical cinema

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[16] Victor Burgin, "Photography, Phantasy, Function," in *Thinking*

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naturalizes the cultural hegemony of a social and political regime organized according to patriarchal codes.[17]

Judith Mayne demonstrates how Americans gathered around the journal *Camera Work* initiated a similar critique based in the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis.[18] Their psychoanalytic theory posits a compensatory relationship between fantasy and the real in order to demonstrate that fantasy is not merely the representation of something unreal but, in fact, is the precondition for the real to exist. For Laplanche and Pontalis, the scene of fantasy is a discursive strategy that constitutes the boundaries of the real and provides a syntax for its articulation through negation and the distribution of coeval signs. This, in turn, mobilizes the uncontrollability of the signified and forestalls the consolidation of the real into a self-stabilizing reification. Fantasy thus operates as the scene of what cannot be imagined without dismantling the very conditions that construct the notion of the real in the first place. In brief, fantasy does not represent an object of desire but its setting, which is

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Photography, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 206.

[17] In her introduction to *Feminism and Film Theory*, Constance Penley reminds her readers that Mulvey was not working alone. The British publication of Screen became the site for a group of social and political film critics who began developing a theoretical model for feminist analysis in the early 1970s. Penley begins her collection of essays with the work of Pam Cook and Claire Johnston partly as a way to reintroduce the collective nature of that early feminist project. Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (London: BFI and New York: Routledge, 1988).

[18] Judith Mayne, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 166-67.

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experienced as a transition point between the unconscious and the conscious with multiple subject possibilities.[19]

The bodies described by this institutional critique are generally informed by the scopic regime of heterosexuality on which traditional feminist notions of the male gaze rely. But what of bodies that appear to escape the oppositional terms of masculine and feminine? What happens when an athletic vocabulary of grace, strength, perfection, and even eroticism, situates a body's representation in a field of desire that is inflected more by the attractions of sensuality than by gender division? The visual address of the male figure to the spectator provides one opportunity to rethink the body as a site that is not limited to representation within a binary visual code under which the circulation of masculine subjectivities and feminine objectification is guaranteed.[20]

Many film scholars have come to question the absolute and hermetic view of the operations of classic cinema under the regime of the camera's

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[19] This brief summary of the theory of Laplanche and Pontalis, comes from their text "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986): 5-34. An insightful summary of their position is also available in Elizabeth Cowie, "Fantasia," *m/f* 9 (1984): 70-105.

[20] An earlier response to Mulvey's position is offered by Steve Neale's important revision of her theories of the gaze in "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," *Screen* 24.6 (1983): 2-16. In this essay Neale argues that Mulvey's theory leads to the conclusion that the male body marked as an erotic object operates as a site of homosexual voyeurism. Thus, in order to realign it with heterosexuality, the male look at another male "must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed" (14). His thesis is that voyeurism is shifted to the register of Sado-Masochism as a way to resituate the erotically presented male body within the patriarchal binary oppositions of active and passive. This was an important first step in considering the limitations of the spectatorial positions within theories of the gaze that will be taken up in greater detail in the conclusion where it is discussed as a view of the spectator that remains grounded in narrative strategies of vision that this study goes on to revise.

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technological address and presentation of an image.[21] And even if one accepts the unitary objectification of femininity within a patriarchal organization of knowledge and power, it does not follow that all subjectivities are collapsed under the visual regime of a heterosexual male viewer. Certainly, the binary logic of subjects and objects as constituted within patriarchal institutions invests a particular subjectivity -- usually identified as heterosexual, white, bourgeois, male -- with the most power. But as Foucault's work has made clear, subjectivity is constituted through a network, or web, of exchanges that position individuals within a continuum of power relations. There is no reason to assume that the most powerful, or even the most visible, subjectivity erases all other possibilities. Indeed, the exploration of these alternate subjectivities was the focus of cultural studies throughout the nineteen-eighties and nineties, and it organizes the discussion of the two films in this study's conclusion.

The individual experience of the historically situated subject has provided one of the most fruitful sites of resistance to a notion that the exclusive power of heterosexual male subjectivity organizes all relations under its regime of ideological vision. E. Diedre Pribram writes that the "transhistorical nature of

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[21] For just such a discussion, see Lee Edelman's essay on Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window. In that essay, Edelman writes that we have "learned perhaps all too well, as a result of the feminist, psychoanalytically oriented theorization of narrative cinema, to observe the dynamics of power that inflect the masculinist desire to see . . . insofar as that lesson, despite itself, can bind still more tightly the ideological blindfold. . . . It can work, that is, complicitously with the seductions of dominant cinema to keep us from seeing a no less significant – and no less significantly male-associated – desire to escape the phallic regime that casts its shadows both as and across the visual field it thus frames." Lee Edelman, "Rear Window's Glasshole," in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 72.

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psychoanalytic models" allows no place "for shifts in textual meaning related to shifts in viewing situation."[22] Pribram argues that:

> Following the psychoanalytic-semiotic argument, then, classic realist cinema by addressing woman as non-subject eliminates the possibility of an 'authentic' female spectator. And further, by repressing the fact that women are historically and socially constituted (and therefore differing) subjects, the argument also precludes the possibility of diversity among women as female spectators.[23]

In other words, the psychoanalytic model is a closed system that can explain existing structural codes but that seems to imply a deterministic inevitability for the roles of all women within patriarchal cultural hegemony. The result has been a feeling by many feminists that the only space available to women lies outside the dominant cultural forms.

As Pribram suggests: "The logical extension of arguments surrounding women's exclusion from popular cinema was that filmic gaze, discourse and pleasure belonged inevitably to the male."[24] This position, Pribram goes on to say, contradicts feminist political aims to be included in the center of cultural production.[25] Judith Mayne acknowledges that Mulvey and Doane, two of the

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[22] E. Diedre Pribram, ed., *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 2.

[23] Pribram, p. 3.

[24] Pribram, p. 4.

[25] Pribram, p. 4.

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most influential proponents of the power wielded by the regime of male subjectivity, have attempted to reassess their positions in light of such criticism by theorizing "a kind of oscillation whereby the gaze remains 'male' but is assumed by the female spectator as a disguise, whether in the form of transvestitism (Mulvey) or masquerade (Doane)."[26] By contrast, rather than arguing that identities associated with other spectatorial positions can take up the pleasures of the male viewing subject, Pribram focuses on how individual subjects may subvert the logic of cultural products themselves and the identities they assume. She argues that a distinction can be made between the spectator that the filmic text intends to manage in accordance with dominant ideological practice and the spectator who takes up a subjective position through the process of receiving that filmic text.

In her attempt to find a position for women by considering the spectator's production of a cultural product's meaning, Pribram echoes the work of Constance Penley. Seeking to move from an understanding of the woman's body as an object of the ideologically constituted male gaze, Penley, too, focuses on the position of subjectivity from which the female spectator looks. She argues for an understanding of the discourses that constitute the subjectivities available to various spectators, reminding us that "masculinity and femininity are ensembles of multiple effects rather than unified opposing fields."[27] Penley's

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[26] Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 19-20. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1989), 29-37. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23.3-4 (1982): 74-87.

[27] Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory*, 20.

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argument is especially apposite for a discussion of subjectivities in the visual address of images of the male body because it extends the possibilities opened up by multiple subjectivities within masculinity as well as femininity. By unraveling the binary understanding of gender, Penley also ruptures the compulsory heterosexuality that has operated in the erasure of alternative, especially queer, sexuality in mainstream visual culture.[28]

Thus, feminist theory has produced two competing models of the spectator in cinema studies whose claims Judith Mayne has attempted to place in dialectic relation to one another. She writes that "responses to apparatus theory are founded on a gap between the ideal subject postulated by the apparatus and the spectator, who is always in an imperfect relation to that ideal."[29] In exploring the way that spectators are both assigned meaning and create it, Mayne suggests that spectatorship is situated in the paradoxes of the gap constituted by "the competing claims of the homogeneous cinematic institution and heterogeneous responses to it: the gap between *address* and *reception; fantasy;* and *negotiation.*"[30]

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[28] This observation follows from the same logic that Craig Owens deploys when he suggests that "the gay male intellectual has a fundamentally different stake in feminism than his heterosexual 'counterpart'." Owens goes on to assert that the projects of feminists and gay males are mutually strengthened through their alliance in spite of the obvious differences that they bring to the question of gender. I would add that it is precisely these differences that serve to buttress Penley's argument about the role of multiple subjectivities in constituting the meaning of a film. Craig Owens, "Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism," in *Men in Feminism,* ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987), 219.

[29] Judith Mayne, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship," p. 157.

[30] Mayne, p. 157.

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These terms suggest that spectatorship participates in the performative mode that has been most often associated with the work of Judith Butler.[31] By focusing on different modes of address operating within the cultural text of the film and the possibility of a viewer taking an active rather than passive role in performing spectatorship itself, Mayne situates subjectivity within the same fictive space that Butler posits as a space of free play. Spectatorship mobilizes alterity as different sets of relations are enacted and the body becomes a stage on which subjectivity is performed. This model shares with Teresa de Lauretis a belief that "the representation of gender is its construction."[32] However, all these models of spectatorship are based in the elements of narrative, and they reflect the teleology of narratological organizing structures. Alternately, as Mulvey's analysis suggests, an attempt has been made to reimagine the spectator as a subject of visual rather than narrative address.[33] Yet it is not the

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[31] Although her work is concerned primarily with linguistic textual fields of discourse, Butler's use of speech act theory to uncover the paradigms of socially constructed modes of address also applies to visual discursive fields. See "Critically Queer," *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. 224-226.

[32] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, In.: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4.

[33] Of course, the narrative-spectacle opposition rehearses a word-image opposition that constitutes a false binary logic of its own. Just as narrative spectators are mobilized through taking up a viewing position, so visual spectators take up a performative role that positions them within the space of discursive strategies. A number of critics--from both literature and art history--working on the intersection of linguistic and visual vocabularies have addressed the implications of the interconstitutive nature of word and image for traditional art history. Mieke Bal discusses the work of Norman Bryson, Svetlana Alpers, Michael Fried, and W.J.T. Mitchell in her excellent chapter "Beyond the Word-Image Opposition" in *Reading "Rembrandt:" Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25-59. See also Norman Bryson, "Semiology and Visual

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spectator whose experience is embedded within narrative structures but the performative role of the spectator in relation to a spectacle that suggests a way to rethink the competing claims of the apparatus and subjectivity.

II. SPECTATORSHIP: SPECTACLE ATTRACTIONS

The most frequently cited article in this revised exploration of the spectator is Gunning's "The Cinema of Attractions." Because it is invoked so frequently, it occupies a place in revised studies of the spectator similar to that of Mulvey's article in relation to feminist studies of spectatorship in the nineteen-seventies. And similar to Mulvey's articulation of the male gaze, a critical vocabulary has been engendered out of Gunning's articulation of cinematic attraction and spectacle. Gunning's work on cinema as a medium based in the attractions staged by spectacle seems to offer a way out of the binary logic underlying theories of spectatorship based in psychoanalysis. In his investigation, Gunning resists both the ideological determinism of narratives that the camera apparatus supposedly imposes and the utopian liberationism of models that emphasize the heterogeneity of social subject positions.

Gunning's work examines the relation between early film and avant-garde practice, revisiting the origins of cinema's standard teleology in order to open up the alterity that exists within the historical narrative itself. He demonstrates the way in which the familiar narrative of history that traces the rise of classical Hollywood cinema is only one of a number of possible histories operating through

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Interpretation," *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, ed. Norman Bryson et al. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 61-73.

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different discursive fields. His contention, in brief, is that by giving priority to the history of narrative in film, we also construct the cause and effect relations that support a belief in the "natural" teleology of film as a narrative medium. Returning to an examination of the period just prior to the years 1908-13, during which film experienced its "fall into narrative," Gunning argues for an alternative understanding of the medium and its structuring in the operation of cinematic spectacle as an intrinsic component of its original appeal.

The standard history of film contrasts the realism of Lumière's actualities and the cinematic tricks of Méliès magical fantasties in the PMR (Primitive Mode of Representation) with the feature-length pictures of the IMR (Institutional Mode of Representation) that characterize classic Hollywood production. The period of change from the PMR to the IMR (roughly from 1906-14) establishes, according to these histories, the origin of a division between the narrative and nonnarrative traditions. In opposition to these histories, Gunning finds instead that the division is attributable to a visual rather than narrative division. The appeal to the spectator by filmmakers of the PMR establishes a very different relation to the screen than the relation later established by Hollywood narrative cinema of the IMR.[34] By focusing on the medium's early spectators instead of its content, Gunning shifts the object of film study away from its customary division into narrative and nonnarrative traditions in favor of a distinction between the spectacle address of exhibitionism and storytelling. This rubric realigns the films of Lumière and Méliès so that they are no longer merely the imperfect origins of a narrative drive within the medium itself but allied with later avant-garde films

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[34] Gunning, "Attractions," 57.

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through their primary focus on exhibition over storytelling.[35] The viewers of such films, explains Gunning, participate in the space of the cinematic spectacle itself, which is no longer limited to the screen but also encompasses the viewing area and its audience. This expanded understanding of cinematic space to include the actual viewers constitutes spectators through the terms of exhibition and display rather than the terms of narrative and character to which they are limited by an imaginary projection into the film's fictional diegesis.[36]

Gunning believes that the avant-garde was most excited by the power of film to harness visibility, the "act of showing and exhibition," which he locates as the primary mode of filmic address before 1906.[37] According to Gunning, the avant-garde was intent on "rescuing the cinema from its enslavement to alien and passé forms, in particular its reliance on narrative editing in order to use the medium for storytelling.[38] By reinventing film studies through the concerns of the avant-garde, Gunning shifts the focus of attention from film as a narrative medium to film as a visual medium. Returning to a period in the practice of film production before its current model became dominant, Gunning opens up what so often appears to be inevitably fixed. He suggests how American avant-garde film practice was not merely the product of an oppositional strategy situated outside the mainstream of classical narrative cinema. Rather, avant-garde practice mobilized terms that were already part of the discursive field constitutive of film from the beginning. It only appears oppositional if we

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[35] Gunning, "Attractions," 59.

[36] Gunning, "Attractions," 59.

[37] Gunning, "Attractions," 56.

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neglect to consider what film looked like when its historical trajectory was still up for grabs. As he argues in another essay: "The cinema of attractions persists in later cinema, even if it rarely dominates the form of a feature film as a whole. It provides an underground current flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism, producing those moments of cinematic *dépaysement* beloved by the surrealists."[39] As this study will demonstrate, the modernist photograph has been subject to similar teleological histories, which elide the continued play of narrative and spectacle as ongoing discursive strategies operating in its representative vocabulary.

Gunning's model, thus, traces an alternative current of cinematic address that continues to flow underneath the more visible narrative tradition. His return to the origins of film production as a site is an archeological investigation that provides the terms to reimagine the relation between avant-garde film practice and the popular imagination. More importantly for my analysis in this study, Gunning's model also points to a more radical understanding of visual images and the subversive possibilities inherent within the terms of their address to spectators.[40] By its focus on Gunning's notion of spectacle address, this study

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[38] Gunning, "Attractions," 56.

[39] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 123.

[40] It is important to take a moment here to mention the difference between the use of "spectacle" in film theory as just described and its use by those historians who use the term to describe the leftist social critique of bourgeois capitalism by the Situationists. The most influential articulation of situationism was Guy-Ernest Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Black and Red, 1967). In it he lays out an analysis of how capitalism transforms its citizens into passive consumers through media spectacles that come to replace an active participation in public life. Although officially the Situationist

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argues that the male nude undercuts and destabilizes the commonplace gendering and sexing of bodies usually established through narrative assumptions. It considers an alternative to the terms of narrative, which encourage an inscription of the nude as a (female) object of display and the spectator as a viewing (male) subject. The terms of spectacle address from film theory shift attention to the attractions of viewing itself in a way that raises more nuanced questions when considering the display of bodies.[41] In other words, an

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International was founded in 1957 when the Lettrists International merged with an Imaginist faction of the Bauhaus (which had closed in 1933), its roots can be found in the art movements of surrealism and dada of the late nineteen-teens and -twenties. Its name derives from the use of urban environments for "situations," which its adherents defined as meaningful social interactions to replace the mindlessness of commodity-driven pleasures. The Situationist International was dissolved in 1972, probably as a result of the failure of the French general strike of May 1968 to effect any lasting social changes. A highly readable account of the Situationist International is Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). For Guy Debord's influence on the Lettrist International and the Situationist International and an explanation of their main concepts – détournement, dérive, and urbanisme unitaire (displacement, drift, and integrated city life) – see esp. 163-185. A politcally conservative critique that is based in a similar complaint about the power of modern technological media manipulation is offered by the American historian Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Originally published as *The Image: or What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1961; reprint, 1977). Chapter four, "From Shapes to Shadows: Dissolving Forms," 118-180, which discusses the role played by film is especially germane to the argument of this study.

[41] It might be argued that within the discourse of cinema the film still also represents a rupture of the narrative mode. However, in spite of being a single image, the language of the film still actually reinforces the narrative vocabulary of visual representation by its implied link to the larger context of the moving image. It is meant to be a visual synechdoche, a figurative trope that mobilizes the larger narrative through a single mise-en-scene. In fact, until recently, most film stills were meant to represent a summary of the narrative by posing the cast on the scene after the action shots were concluded. See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*, Vol. 3 in History of the American Cinema, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 147-8. For a more theoretical discussion of the film still, especially in relation to modernist imagery and the tension between legibility

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alternative film theory based in a notion other than the gaze suggests that art historians of the body reconsider how the terms of spectacle might reframe the relation between viewing subjects and objects. The male body's uneasy situation, especially, within the gendered terms produced by a narrative reading often makes it an especially significant site to explore the power of the gaze and the display of the body when these terms are redefined through notions of spectacle address.

In the nineteen-teens and –twenties, Alfred Stieglitz and Imogen Cunningham, moved from a pictorialist to a modernist mode of photography. In both cases, these photographers developed a language of modernist abstraction through a shift from concerns associated with narrative imagery to those associated with spectacle address. There are a number of reasons that Stieglitz and Cunningham offer an especially interesting comparison in the history of photographic abstraction. They are pendant portraits in terms of location (east and west coast), gender (male and female), and the use of serial subject matter from the natural world (clouds and flowers). Both artists also played a significant role in reinventing the conventions of the nude through their photographs of beloved partners: Stieglitz in the "Portrait" series of his lover Georgia O'Keeffe and Cunningham in portraits of male nudes that began with

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and illegibility, see the discussion of Sergei Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible, 1943, in Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills," *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 41-62. For an art historical perspective, see the discussion of Cindy Sherman's photographic project, Untitled Film Stills, which is based on the vocabulary of the film still in Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman' – The Photographs of Cindy Sherman," *Screen* 24 (November-December, 1983): 102-16. Williamson describes how the film still is a photographic fragment that is

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the series of her husband Roi Partridge. It is my belief that an examination of their images in light of the issues raised by spectacle address reveals how they transformed the vocabulary of photography from an emphasis on the narrative content of pictorialist images into a visual language of modernist abstraction. Both Stieglitz and Cunningham were important pioneers in pointing the way to an avant-garde photographic syntax that implicated viewers in the construction of meaning.

Subsequently, Minor White in the nineteen-forties and -fifties and Robert Mapplethorpe in the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, continued to explore the photographic vocabulary of modernist abstraction developed by Stieglitz and Cunningham. White and Mapplethorpe form another pendant portrait in terms of location (rural and urban), sexuality (closeted and out), and serial subject matter (ocean beach and flowers). Both photographers focused on portraits, male nudes, and isolated natural forms that operate as equivalents to express their interest in sexuality and visual representations informed by gay desires. As did Stieglitz and Cunningham, they also create photographs that implicate viewers in the construction of visual meaning. Further, by choosing a subject matter and visual vocabulary similar to their modernist forebearers, White and Mapplethorpe suggest an interpretive relay with an earlier modernist photographic practice and reveal the interconstitutive relation between pictorialist and modernist imagery implicit in the tension between the visual modes of narrative and spectacle.

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meant to connect an image to the larger narrative context embodied by "the social fabric of our thoughts and feelings" (105).

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Through modernist representational strategies, which were also articulated early in the century by Roman Jakobson in his writings on the linguistic figures of metaphor and metonymy, all four artists employ visual tropes to explore the possibilities of abstraction as a referential language. In a photographic vocabulary of the spectacle, they deploy strategies of disorientation and defamiliarization, performing a series of metaphoric and metonymic operations that challenged prevailing assumptions about sexuality. However, the attractions of spectacle that create its direct address to the spectator as a viewing body are not merely based in the visual content of the image, as these photographers's experiments with equivalents demonstrate. Spectacle initiates that moment when the photograph announces its own mediation and makes spectators aware of their own viewing conditions. It is more than an awareness of the self-referential signs of the medium and/or the hermetic systems of signification within the visual vocabulary of the image. Rather it is the self-reflexive capacity of the photograph to make visible the encounter of spectators with the image in a way that creates a self-consciousness about the act of viewing and the means by which visual reception positions their own bodies as participants in the space of the photograph.

The first chapter explores Stieglitz's shift from a Pictorialist to a Modernist photographic practice by considering his photographs in light of Roman Jakobson's linguistic theories. It focuses on Stieglitz's photographs of clouds and sky to which he gave the name *Equivalents*. I argue that in these photographs it

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is possible to trace the new visual language through which he translated his earlier pictorialist concerns into a syntax that was aligned with other modes of avant-garde representation. The discussion of Stieglitz's *Equivalent* photographs provides the terms for investigating his use of spectacle in the series of photographic nudes that he took of Georgia O'Keeffe, begun in 1918 and continuing throughout the twenties.

The second chapter shifts to the West coast and photographer Imogen Cunningham. Her progression from Pictorialist to Modernist photography can be traced through a comparison of the images that she made of her husband Roi Partridge posing nude along the Mount Rainier trail in 1915 and along Northern California's Dispsea Trail in 1918 with the images of male nudes she made in the twenties using a more abstract visual syntax. The issues of gender raised in these abstract male nude studies are then applied to the botanical images that formed Cunningham's other major photographic project of the nineteen-twenties.

The third chapter moves beyond the formative period of photographic modernism in the nineteen twenties to consider how Minor White used its well-established visual vocabulary in the middle of the century. His own photographic experiments with sharp focused abstraction in images of the ocean and beaches of the San Francisco Bay area reflect White's interest in continuing the tradition established by Group f.64 and the vocabulary of the equivalent. Although he took up the equivalent in response to Stieglitz's use of it, White transformed its goals through the use of sequencing and his more religious sensibility. The chapter concludes with a discussion of White's male nudes, through which he explored his ambivalent attitudes toward his own gay sexuality during the closeted years before Stonewall.

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The fourth chapter focuses on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in order to consider how his position as a gay photographer after Stonewall has implicated viewers in the meaning of his images. I argue that in his nude studies and botanicals, especially, he creates a complex visual language that crosses the syntaxes of Pictorialist and Modernist photographic modes. The shift from narrative to spectacle address, which defines the photographs of Stieglitz, Cunningham, and White, is itself staged within Mapplethorpe's images. This staging of visual strategies allows his photographs to become the sites for cultural projections that reflect back on their spectators. Mapplethorpe's images reveal the role of viewers in the operation of photographic meaning by mobilizing the tension between narrative and spectacle. His photographic equivalents, as represented by his images of flowers, resist the art historical division between modernism and postmodernism by their commitment to the self-reflexivity of abstract reference, the ambiguity of gendered associations, and the necessity of contingent relations.

The conclusion returns to the period of the nineteen-twenties in which my study begins, using the language of spectacle as a strategy to resist the traditional hegemonic narratives of classical Hollywood cinema. As the writings by film theorists of early cinema and spectacle address indicate, audiences used interpretive codes growing out of their shared, historically situated viewing communities.[42] Specifically, this chapter focuses on how two of the silent films that brought Douglas Fairbanks his greatest fame implicate viewers in the

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[42] See also Miriam Hansen, "Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 134-152.

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construction of his body as an erotic spectacle and rupture the narrative logic and seamless surface of the screen's image. This discussion explicitly investigates the conditions of queer spectatorship as a way to critique and extend Gunning's analysis of spectacle address and cinematic attraction. It complicates his reliance on the discourse of avant-garde representation by describing the operation of these terms within popular film.

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Alfred Stieglitz: From Pictorialism to Modern Abstraction

The exchange that art offers is an exchange in kind; energy for energy, intensity for intensity, vision for vision.

– Jeanette Winterson[1]

During the course of eleven years, from 1922 to 1933, American photographer and New York gallery director Alfred Stieglitz took over 400 pictures of the sky and clouds. Experimenting with a Graflex single-lens-reflex camera he created small, carefully crafted images that were literally visual segments cut out of the skies[2] By emphasizing the abstract fields of light and dark in these black and white images, Stieglitz explored the possibilities inherent in photography to create a modern art that would be abstract rather than descriptive. He called the earliest of these works *Songs of the Sky* but soon came to prefer the term *Equivalents*. Although it would be inaccurate to attribute the invention of photographic abstraction to Stieglitz alone, his particular notion of

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[1] Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 139.

[2] It should be noted that clouds were not a completely new subject for Stieglitz who had published an *Equivalent*-like photogravure twenty-two years previously. See *A Dirigible*, 1910, in *Camera Work* 36 (1911). Even as early as 1902, Stieglitz had played off the dark column of smoke from a train engine against the clouds and lighter factory smoke in his famous image *The Hand of Man*, 1903. Doris Bry is the source for the astonishing number of Stieglitz's *Equivalent* negatives in the exhibition catalogue *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1965), 19.

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abstraction developed through these *Equivalents* was a central force in shaping one of the major innovations of American photographic practice.

This chapter examines Stieglitz's photography within the history of ideas that have contributed to the definition of avant-garde photography in twentieth-century America. It samples from two bodies of work, Stieglitz's *Equivalent* photographs and his *Portrait* of Georgia O'Keeffe, to highlight one arena where the early debates concerning abstraction and reference were developed both practically and theoretically. His photographs present an aesthetic approach that brings together seemingly opposite elements: sharp focused description and abstraction, objectivity and personal expression. Stieglitz's *Equivalents* -- begun in 1922 and shown under that title in the "Seven Americans" exhibition at the Anderson Galleries in 1925 -- are an apt starting point, not because they are indeed the beginning of this aesthetic but because they represent a defining moment in that history.[3] The chapter concludes with a discussion of images from the *Portrait*, first exhibited at the Anderson Galleries in 1921. These photographs illustrate Stieglitz's use of an abstract vocabulary to transform the conventions of the nude figure from his earlier depictions, which relied on symbolist and pictorialist languages, into a modernist idiom.

First, however, we must consider the historical background that provides a context for Stieglitz's *Equivalents*. This history begins with Stieglitz's interest in the photographic tradition of pictorialism, with its ties to the Symbolists, and

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[3] The occasion of this exhibition was Stieglitz's opening of The Intimate Gallery, which remained open until 1929 when he opened his last gallery, An American Place. The "Seven Americans" included in the exhibition were the painters Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and photographers Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand.

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traces his shift to the modernist photographic practice that he championed in his journal *Camera Work* and in the exhibitions at Gallery 291 from 1903 to 1917. Following this history, the chapter considers three separate but related issues that formulate a working definition of the *Equivalent*. These issues center around Stieglitz's translation of a symbolist aesthetics into an avant-garde practice. First, Stieglitz's *Equivalents* deliberately consider the nature of abstraction by focusing on clouds. Second, his images present visual tropes for the act of seeing by suggesting correspondences with internal emotional and spiritual states. Third, his photographs announce the nature of photography itself by referencing its indexical vocabulary as a medium. Collectively, these issues inform Stieglitz's *Equivalents* and allow us to appreciate how he placed photography at the center of the debates over the vocabulary of avant-garde representation. Ultimately, the *Equivalents* construct the spectator as a determining rather than passive element in the representational enterprises of abstraction, reference, and the self-reflexivity of photographic art.

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I. DOUBLE EXPOSURE: SYMBOLISM AND PICTORIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Nature is a temple in which living pillars

Sometimes emit confused words

Man crosses it through forests of symbols

That observe him with familiar glances.

-- Charles Baudelaire[4]

Alfred Stieglitz began his career by producing photographs in a style known as pictorialism. Its adherents, primarily gathered together as an association called The Linked Ring in England, assumed that photography shared an aesthetic with the other fine arts, notably painting. From its inception, the value of photography appeared to most people, practitioners and clients alike, to reside in its ability to produce an image that was considered a record of the real world. Most early uses of photography stressed its mimetic capacity. The two most prominent uses of photography in nineteenth-century America were the portrait and the survey landscape. These are genres, as Christian Peterson notes, that stress "detail, facts, and verisimilitude, "qualities that align photography with documentary uses.[5]

Almost from the beginning of its history, photography engendered a debate over the relative value of the medium for documentary versus artistic

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[4] Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences," in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 8.

[5] Christian Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography, 1910-1955* (Minneapolis and New York: Minneapolis Institute of Arts in association with W. W. Norton, 1997), 13.

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purposes. As early as 1843 daguerreotypists were being encouraged to use a large lens opening for portraits of persons with wrinkled skin in order to obtain the soft focus that would result in more flattering portraits.[6] The invention of combination printing (the use of more than one negative to produce a single print) in the 1850s fueled the debate by giving photographers desiring to emulate painterly effects the ability to manipulate the appearance of reality. At stake, then, was the role of manipulation evident in the photographic image itself, and pictorialists set out explicitly to make images that would have the gestural feel of painting. If photography was to be an art worthy of painting, they argued, it must evince the creative hand of artistic intervention.

In place of realistic transcriptions of the world, pictorialists sought to use the camera to record personal feelings and responses. They chose subject matter drawn from academic painting as a way to stress photography's status as an art form. Moreover, they often attempted to emulate painting by creating "evocative and mysterious" images that used simplified arrangements to stress composition and a soft focus to allow for the play of visual imagination.[7] In these ways, pictorialist photography shared in the late nineteenth-century symbolist aesthetic that sought to evoke subjective experience through form and color (often discussed as "tone") rather than through subject matter alone. In

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[6] Beaumont Newhall, ed., *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day*, revised ed. (New York: MoMA, 1964), 59.

[7] This account comes from Christian A. Peterson's history of Stieglitz's pictorialist period in *Alfred Stieglitz: Camera Notes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1993), 19. In a more recent catalogue exhibition, Peterson is somewhat tendentious, vilifying Stieglitz for his control over pictorialism through what he calls the "fiefdom" of the Photo-Secession. In

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her book on late nineteenth-century American painters of intimate landscapes, Wanda Corn defines this sensibility as "tonalism."[8] She argues for an artistic alliance between symbolist evocations of mood and impressionist methods as a way of inventing an American nationalist vision that would be distanced from the dominance of industrialized culture. According to Corn, both painters and photographers looked back philosophically to the beautiful and sublime sensibility that had animated the grand vistas of the Hudson River and Rocky Mountain School painters; however, they shifted their register into the more personal and intimate subjectivity of mood suggested by a contemporary vocabulary of light and atmosphere.[9] The rejection of realist conventions by pictorialist painters and photographers in America reflected philosophical concerns similar to those of symbolists and other artists associated with post-impressionism in Europe.

From its beginning, Symbolism relied on a close association between visual and literary artists. Rejecting the realist mode that had been associated most closely with Emile Zola's writing, Symbolist thinkers first articulated their ideas as a literary movement in Paul Verlaine's *Art poétique* (1882), J.-K. Huysmans *A Rebours* (1884) and Jean Moréas' *The Symbolist Manifesto* (1886). The movement collected around Stéphane Mallarmé and took its inspiration from the Romantic poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Specifically, Baudelaire's theory of

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Peterson's account, the dictatorial demands of Stieglitz resulted in a uniform style and sensibility. See his *After the Photo-Secession*, 13-17.

[8] Wanda M. Corn, *The Color of Mood: American Tonalism, 1880-1910* (San Francisco: M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, 1972). For a definition of Tonalism, see p. 4.

[9] Corn, 2.

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"correspondence" (from his 1857 poem of the same name) became something of a touchstone for writers and painters alike.[10] In this economy, the natural word is valued less for its own sake than as an idealist repository of subjectivist experiences that express the transcendental reality of emotion and spirit.

Rather than concern themselves with the exterior world's visual appearance, which preoccupied their Realist and Impressionist predecessors, Symbolist artists focused on the interior experience of emotional states and feelings. Although still wedded to subject matter, especially the symbolic associations and allegories of narrative, Symbolists did not present those subjects through conventional means.[11] Their visual narratives relied on a vocabulary that communicated the affective experience of the narratives rather than merely relying on the allegorical and moral meanings that accompanied an illusionistic depiction of them. They used themes more allusively, their depictions serving as the armature for forms and colors, which they assumed were the actual carriers of more intangible registers that resided in the mysterious realms of spirit and soul.

Focusing on the natural world as a register of more subjective and internally generated experiences led the Symbolists to explore the instability and danger represented by the passionate but repressed side of human motivation and behavior that the surface descriptions of Realism and Impressionism had

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[10] Baudelaire's poem, in both English and the original French, can be found along with a discussion of it in Henri Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, 8-11.

[11] Philippe Jullian provides a brief anthology of Symbolist Themes from both the literary and visual arts in *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Praeger Pubs., 1974), 229-65.

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elided. To this end, their work relied on a visual vocabulary that emphasize d the expressive, both in content and form. An image like Charles Dulac's *Le Vent (Terrasse de Vézelay)*, 1894 [Fig. 1.1], is not meant to be a record of a specific place in spite of the location indicated in its subtitle. The lithograph is the fourth in a series of nine images meant to express the mystery and passion of a liturgical text entitled "Cantique des Créatures." It accompanies the words "spiritus sancte deus."

However, Dulac's lithograph also does more than illustrate a sacred text. Through a symbolic correspondence with the natural forces of the wind, he evokes the emotional feelings stirred by religious music. In the image, the solitary form of a tree rises in dark silhouette from an even darker shadowed hilltop that is rendered as a mass of black ink. The sky is a confused sea of swirling marks, suggesting tumultuous clouds that may also contain celestial figures caught up in the melange of forms. The emptiness of the terrace steps that climb the hill adds to the feeling of mystery and anticipation. The only light in the print emerges in high contrast from behind the bulk of hill and tree at the center of the composition and seems to be the source of all the energetic activity of nature in the scene. A limited palette of olive green and black, which is characteristic of many symbolist images, creates a dark, murky landscape that serves as a trope for the psyche with its forgotten memories, shadowy past, and repressed desires. Through a deeply felt correspondence with natural forces, Dulac communicates the internal sensory experience of a religious state.[12]

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[12] A focus on the viewer's experience was not new to the symbolist/expressionist vocabulary of subjectivity, as Michael Fried's productive studies of the beholder within Kantian aesthetics have demonstrated. See

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It is within this Symbolist aesthetic that Stieglitz's early photographs belong. It also suggests the kind of artistic conventions that he and the other pictorialists had in mind when they sought to reproduce painterly effects through photographic means. In a photograph such as *Winter – Fifth Avenue*, 1896 [Fig. 1.2], Stieglitz captures the emotional intensity of the scene as the driver struggles with the coach and horses against the blinding snow. But Stieglitz's purpose is more expressive than merely the accurate description of the effect that inclement weather has on the city's streets. The snow gives the image a blurred quality that both conveys the atmospheric effect and feels painterly. Stieglitz uses white in his photograph in a manner comparable to Dulac's use of black. Whiteness dominates the image and threatens to overwhelm the scene. It becomes a trope, evoking the subjective emotional state of apprehension and oppression that is associated symbolically with winter. In addition, Stieglitz asserts that the scene corresponds to his own experience as he struggled to take the photograph. "My picture," he wrote, "is the result of a three hours' stand during a fierce snow-storm on February 22nd, 1893, awaiting the proper moment."[13] The viewer is invited to imagine Stieglitz struggling in a heavy coat

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Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painter and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1980).

[13] Alfred Stieglitz, "The Hand Camera – Its Present Importance," in *Photographers on Photography: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 110. The image conjured up here is the typical photographer of the day with a large format view camera, but in actuality part of what made it possible for Stieglitz to take the photograph – a fact he does not report – is that he is using a newly invented small, waterproof hand camera. See Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983), 14. Stieglitz's was the first extensive use of the hand camera. See Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Amy Ellis, with Maura Lyons, *Stieglitz, O'Keeffe and American Modernism*, exhibition catalogue (Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Athenaeum, 1999), 11.

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with his bulky camera in the middle of the street much as the dark shape of the pictured driver struggles with his horses and carriage.

Although the effects of light and rain were a common Impressionist subject, in *Reflections -- Night (New York)*, 1896-7 [Fig. 1.3], Stieglitz's photograph turns these effects to the more expressive aims of the Symbolists. In fact, the Impressionist use of light is reversed in this image. The photograph uses light and its reflections in the rain covered street to emphasize darkness and the haunting allusions to subjective, internal experience associated with the night. The lights conflate the objects within the image, rendering them all as mysterious silhouettes. That this night scene is an image of the city only heightens its tenebrous evocation of the repressed and forbidden that the Symbolists were intent on evoking.

The earliest of Stieglitz's photographs reproduced as a photogravure in *Camera Work* (January 1913) is Stieglitz's 1892 photograph *The Asphalt Paver: New York*, 1892 [Fig. 1.4].[14] It presents the scene as a symbolist evocation of emotional effect. The dark smoke from the asphalt furnace blends with the lighter steam and clouds as they simultaneously conceal and reveal the tree limbs, aqueduct, and smokestack. Through his alignment of these three elements, Stieglitz associates the power of natural forces with human invention. However, the image presents no easy celebration of progress in spite of its enthusiasm for the modern. It suspends viewers between the spectacular photographic effects of light and the troubling impact of industrialism on the natural world. It would be a mistake to attribute Stieglitz with the impulse of those symbolists following the

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[14] *Camera Work* 41 (January, 1913), 37.

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lead of Paul Gauguin who sought to distort the conventions of normative vision. Nevertheless, at least in the 1890s, Stieglitz seems to share their commitment to expression.[15] At the same time that he is acutely interested in capturing the appearance of subtle atmospheric effects created by the different forms of cloud, Stieglitz also exaggerates the scene's moody evocation of the forces unleashed by the asphalt paver on the landscape. [Fig. 1.4]

In the very first number of *Camera Work* (January 1903), Stieglitz chose his work *The Hand of Man*, 1903 [Fig. 1.5], to represent his own photography. Since the journal was established explicitly as the official organ of the Photo-Secession, we can assume that Stieglitz felt this image accurately portrayed the goals of pictorialism that the organization represented. Those goals are consistent with Stieglitz's own interest in atmosphere and the forces animating modern life. The locomotive steams into the center of the photograph in a manner that evokes Monet's paintings. Its dark plume of smoke dominates the visual field. There can be little doubt that the strong vertical column of smoke is meant to double and contrast with the white plumes of the smokestacks and the clouds in the background. The equally prominent doubling of the electrical pole to the left rhymes with the other poles and smokestacks in the distance. Stieglitz calls attention to the modern, industrial urban setting even as he romanticizes the image through the characteristic pictorialist use of diffused light to create mood. Additionally, viewers are implicated in the photograph's effect by their

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[15] Maurice Denis wrote in 1903, "it had been Gauguin's role to project into the spirit of several young men the dazzling revelation that art is above all a means of expression." See "The Influence of Paul Gauguin," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (London and Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1968), 104.

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spectating position on the switching yard tracks that dominate the entire foreground. The ambivalence over modern urban life that is characteristic of Symbolist artists in general is evident in Stieglitz's photograph. The image is infused with dynamism and a mechanical energy that the title associates with human invention. At the same time, the stream of black smoke and the dark shape of the locomotive arouse feelings of an ominous danger below the surface.

Stieglitz devoted the 12th volume of *Camera Work* (1905) to his own photographs. The number contains eight photogravures and two half-tone plates. As a group they provide an accurate overview of Stieglitz's work in the pictorialist mode. *Winter – Fifth Avenue*, 1896, is included in this group, and is one of four in which Stieglitz photographs horses, a favorite subject. Symbolists also frequently used animals as a way of exploring the more irrational and subconscious drives of human nature.[16] For Stieglitz horses, especially, summoned up that which was often repressed in polite, bourgeois society. He frequently photographed them in harness, working. In this regard, Stieglitz was continuing the Symbolist understanding of the primitive as a measure of vitality, authenticity, and originality. Dorothy Norman quotes a conversation with Stieglitz in which he rhapsodies about discovering that stallions harnessed to wagons in Paris were visible signs of sexual force: "In Paris, I once saw two teams of black stallions pulling wagons going along side by side. . . . The horses stood throbbing, pulsating, their penises swaying half-erect – swaying – shining.

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[16] Among the most influential examples of such use of animals is Gustave Moreau's sixty-three watercolor illustrations of *The Fables of La Fontaine*.

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I stood transfixed, wishing I had a camera."[17] As David P. Peeler has pointed out, the relation between sexuality and the natural world permeated all of Stieglitz's work, and "equine sexuality was a powerful magnet for him."[18] In contrast to the image conjured by this anecdote, Stieglitz's famous photograph, *Spiritual America*, 1923, captures his disappointment in American spiritual values through the cropped, close-up image of a harnessed and docile gelding's hind quarters, its penis no where in sight.

Seeing Stieglitz's earlier pictorialist photographs in light of Symbolist expressive conventions suggests how closely aligned those two movements were in their aesthetic aims. It also provides one explanation for why Stieglitz found photography to be congruent with the expressive conventions of Post-Impressionism.[19] Additionally, it offers an important clue as to why only ten years later in 1907 he would be so responsive to the European avant-garde and the conventions of symbolic meaning that enabled their experiments in the visual vocabulary of abstraction. Yet before applying the principles of abstraction to photography directly, Stieglitz set out to secure the efforts of the pictorialists to legitimize photography as a fine art.[20]

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[17] Quoted in Dorothy Norman. *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1960; reprint, 1973), 240, no. 7.

[18] David P. Peeler, "Alfred Stieglitz: From Nudes to Clouds," *History of Photography* 20 (Winter, 1996): 313.

[19] Wanda Corn argues that pictorialists in both painting and sculpture are more profitably aligned with post-impressionist artists in Europe than with the impressionists. See *Tonalism*, esp. 19-21.

[20] In his book from the Oxford History of Art series, Graham Clarke writes that "it is essentially the figure of Alfred Stieglitz who was the focus and,

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Stieglitz's earliest attempts to establish an artistic pictorial photography in the United States focused on the model of the European salon.[21] In 1902 Stieglitz and other pictorialist photographers created the Photo-Secession movement in order to promote the artistic aims of the medium that they had learned from the Symbolists.[22] The following year, in 1903, Stieglitz established the journal *Camera Work* explicitly as a public forum for the publication and dissemination of pictorialist photography.[23] In 1905 he established "the little galleries of the Photo-Secession," popularly known as Gallery 291, as a way to place photography within the larger artistic context of modern painters and sculptors. Stieglitz was especially interested in the abstract formulations of European artists whose work would form the basis of the groundbreaking exhibition popularly known as the Armory Show of 1913. Well in advance of that exhibition, beginning in 1908, Stieglitz was already exhibiting European artists such as

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in many ways, the force behind the attempt to raise the photograph to the status of art in its own right." *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 167.

[21] William Innes Homer, *Pictorial Photography in Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Academy's Salons, 1898-1901* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1984).

[22] The founders are listed in the first issue of *Camera Work*, the new journal Stieglitz founded in the following year. Chief among them were the well known photographers Frank Eugene, Gertrude Käsebier, Joseph T. Keiley, Edward Steichen, and Clarence H. White.

[23] In the first issue Stieglitz wrote: "The time appearing ripe for the publication of an independent American photographic magazine devoted largely to the interests of pictorial photography, *Camera Work* makes its appearance as the logical outcome of the evolution of the photographic art. It is proposed to issue quarterly an illustrated publication which will appeal to the ever-increasing ranks of those who have faith in photography as a medium of individual expression, and, in addition, to make converts of many at present ignorant of its

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August Rodin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Francis Picabia. At Gallery 291 he created a forum for American artists such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Man Ray to enter into the exchange of modernist ideas occupying the artistic avant-garde in Europe.[24]

The year 1908 is a turning point in the history of the Photo-Secession, Gallery 291, and *Camera Work*. In that year the trustees of the Camera Club of New York expelled Stieglitz, their founder and holder of a life-time membership, from the organization. Their quarrel with Stieglitz was based in the belief that he had abandoned the photographic goals of the club. In the insider drama that followed and is recorded in the pages of *Camera Work*, Stieglitz demanded to be reinstated in order to initiate his own resignation.[25] 1908 was also the year in which Edward Steichen convinced Stieglitz and Auguste Rodin that it would be in both their interests to have an exhibition of Rodin's drawings at Gallery 291. The exhibition consisted of fifty-eight drawings, principally of the female nude. In his

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possibilities." Alfred Stieglitz, "An Apology," in *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jonathan Green (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1973), 26.

[24] For an account of this remarkably productive venue and its artists, see the exhibition catalogue, *Stieglitz, O'Keeffe and American Modernism*, Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Amy Ellis. Also my essay, "*Camera Work* and the Fluid Discourse of Pictorialism," *History of Photography* 23 (Autumn 1999): 294-300 spells out the importance of the European avant-garde to Stieglitz and the photographers of the Photo-Secession. In a 1974 interview Man Ray credits Steichen with bringing the European avant-garde to Stieglitz's attention: "... it was through Steichen really, that modern art at that time -- Cézanne, Braque, Picasso, Brancusi -- came into the Photo-Secession Gallery." See Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, eds., *Dialogue with Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 4. The importance of Stieglitz and Gallery 291 on Man Ray early in his career is discussed in Merry Foresta et al., *Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray*, exhibition catalogue, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 10-16.

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appreciative essay, published as the catalogue for the exhibition, Arthur Symons wrote: "And these drawings, with their violent simplicity of appeal, have the distinction of all abstract thought or form."[26] The link between thought and form as expressions of abstraction that Symons articulates here indicates precisely the direction of Stieglitz's interests which so alarmed the Photo Club of New York. The hostility in the popular media was no less severe. A writer in New York's *Press* declared that Rodin's drawings "are most decidedly not the sort of thing to offer to public view even in a gallery devoted to preciosity in artistic things."[27]

It was through other similar exhibitions at Gallery 291 and *Camera Work* that Stieglitz established the venues which "introduced modern art to the United States."[28] From the time of the Rodin drawings exhibition in 1908, Stieglitz used Gallery 291 less and less for exhibiting photography as he began using it instead to exhibit artists working in other media. For example, in 1910 the exhibition calendar for Gallery 291 lists one exhibition of water-colors, pastels, etchings, one of drawings and etchings, one of etchings, three of drawings, six of paintings,

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[25] For a complete account of the expulsion, resignation, and correspondence, see the essay by John Francis Strauss, "Mr Stieglitz's 'Expulsion' -- A Statement," *Camera Work* 22 (April 1908): 25-32.

[26] For the catalogue text by Arthur Symons and accounts of the exhibition from the press, see "The Rodin Drawings at the Photo-Secession Galleries" *Camera Work* 22 (April 1908): 35-42.

[27] W.B. McCormick's review of Rodin is published in *Camera Work* 22 (April 1908): 40.

[28] Doris Bry, p. 16. *Camera Work* was the first publicly available American publication of several key modernist texts including an excerpt from Wassily

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and three of photographs. Photography, the original mandate of the Photo-Secession, represents only one-fifth of the year's listings.[29] That this clearly caused concern is illustrated by Paul B. Haviland's rejoinder in the July 1910 issue of *Camera Work*, where he writes:

> If the position of photography among the arts is to be firmly and permanently established, this can be accomplished by proving it capable of standing the test of comparison with the best work in other media and not by isolating it .... Those photographers who hope and desire to improve their own work can derive more benefit from following the modern evolution of other media than by watching eternally their own bellies like the fakirs of India.[30]

By 1911, Stieglitz had turned the pages of *Camera Work* in the same direction as the walls of Gallery 291, devoting most of their space to artists and works associated with the European avant-garde and its preoccupation with modernist abstraction. In the April-July 1911 number of *Camera Work*, Stieglitz dedicated most of the issue to Rodin and the drawings that had formed the basis of his two exhibitions at Gallery 291. In July 1912, Stieglitz published the first extracts from Wassily Kandinsky's "The Spiritual in Art" in *Camera Work* and in August 1912, he produced a special number of the journal that was completely devoted to the work of Matisse and Picasso, featuring essays on both artists by

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Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and the writing of Gertrude Stein. See below.

[29] The calendar is published in *Camera Work* 29 (January 1910): 62.

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Gertrude Stein.[31] In his editorial, Stieglitz made it clear that it was Stein's modernist prose itself that was the subject of the special number:

> while it happens that one of these articles treats of Henri Matisse and the other of Pablo Picasso; and while the text is accompanied by fourteen reproductions of representative paintings and sculptures by these artists, the fact is that these articles themselves, and not either of the subjects with which they deal or the illustrations that accompany them, are the true "raison d'être" of this special issue.[32]

It is telling that in the midst of all this attention to the European avant-garde and modernist abstraction in other media, Stieglitz chose to devote the October 1911 number of *Camera Work* to a retrospective of his own photographs. This was his first published retrospective since his initial group of ten images in

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[30] Paul B. Haviland, "The Photo-Secession and Photography," *Camera Work* 31 (July 1910): 41.

[31] Wassily Kandinsky, "Extracts from *The Spiritual in Art*," *Camera Work* 39 (July 1912): 34-35; Gertrude Stein, "Henri Matisse," *Camera Work* Special No. (August 1912): 23-5; Gertrude Stein, "Pablo Piccaso," *Camera Work* Special No. (August 1912): 29-30.

[32] Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work* Special No. (August 1912): 1. This would be just one of the many associations that Stieglitz would make between his own photographic interests and modernist avant-garde writers. In fact, as will be discussed later, it was American avant-garde writers, especially Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Sherwood Anderson with whom Stieglitz had the richest correspondence regarding his developing vocabulary of the *Equivalents*.

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October 1905, which had included *Winter – Fifth Avenue*, 1892.[33] The issue begins with an essay by Benjamin De Casseres entitled "The Unconscious in Art." This essay draws a direct line from Rodin back to Rops, suggesting how clearly Stieglitz and the members of Photo-Secession saw modernist abstraction as emerging from the symbolists: "It is the unknown, the indefinable, the thing that 'worries' you in Rodin, Whistler, Matisse, Rops that fascinates you."[34] Stieglitz signals his own participation in that same lineage in two ways. First, he chose to frame the retrospective of his photographs with graphic work by Rodin and Picasso. This number of *Camera Work* immediately follows the issue devoted to Rodin and essays on European, especially French, modernism that were published in conjunction with his drawings.[35]

The second way that Stieglitz claims the lineage of European abstraction is by reframing his earlier images within context of his current concerns. Of the sixteen images, ten are recent photographs taken in and around New York City, but the remaining six reach back to his pictorialist period: he prints negatives from 1892, 1900, 1902, 1903, 1906, and 1907. Additionally, the only other image in the issue is a half-tone reproduction of a 1911 cubist drawing by Picasso, which seems calculated to suggest affinities in their pictorial development. It is this

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[33] Stieglitz had published only seven photographs in the journal during the intervening six years: three photogravures in *Camera Work* 20 (October 1907) and four photogravures in collaboration with Clarence H. White in *Camera Work* 27 (July 1909).

[34] Benjamin De Casseres, "The Unconscious in Art," *Camera Work* 36 (October 1911): 17.

[35] Of special note in this regard is the essay by Marius De Zayas, "The New Art in Paris (Salon d'Automne)," *Camera Work* 34-35 (April-July 1911): 29-46.

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recontextualization that allows Stieglitz to reconstrue his famous image, "The Steerage" (1907), through the language of abstraction when he writes later in his autobiography: "here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery."[36]

Linking *Camera Work* directly to the emphasis on European abstraction at 291, Stieglitz devoted the entirety of the July 1914 number to sixty-five statements by artists and critics asked to respond to the question: "what does '291' mean to me?" Edward Steichen directly credits the Armory Show to the gallery: "for the public at large it [Gallery 291] had laid the way for others to successfully organize the big International Exhibition of Modern Art held at the Armory in 1913."[37] For Stieglitz, the great value that European abstraction held for photography was the way it continued the symbolist's shift away from the illusionistic image to the viewer's perception of the image. Even more radically than in the expressive vocabulary of the Symbolists, artists working within modernist abstraction focused on the relation between the viewer and the representational space of the image through visual disorientation.

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[36] Quoted in Alfred Stieglitz, "How 'The Steerage' Happened," in Lyons, 130. In an article on Stieglitz's transformation of social space into a space of personal aesthetics, Allan Sekula notes that this accounting by Stieglitz "is pure symbolist autobiography," in spite of its vocabulary of abstract forms and shapes. See his essay "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 464-5. For a reading that sees Stieglitz as a "romantic modernist," interested in a liberal critique of the prevailing culture, see Allen Trachtenberg, "Camera Work; Social Work," in *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 164-228. Trachtenberg contrasts the photographs of Stieglitz and Lewis Hine, arguing that both were involved in a documentary project but based their aesthetics in contrasting definitions of art and the "cultural work" that the camera accomplishes.

[37] Edward Steichen, *Camera Work* 47 (July 1914): 65.

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Paul Strand's images articulated the visual and expressive objectives of modernist abstraction within photography that Stieglitz was seeking. The entire last double number of *Camera Work* in June 1917 was devoted to Strand's images because Stieglitz found them to be so radically new. He saw in them the avant-garde aesthetic that was the foundation of the Photo-Secession, Gallery 291, and *Camera Work*. In his editorial, Stieglitz wrote explaining that there had been no photography exhibited at Gallery 291 during recent years "because '291' knew of no work outside of Paul Strand's which was worthy of '291.' . . . These photographs are the direct expression of today."[38] Strand's photographs represented such a profound break with the past in Stieglitz's view that he decided not to use the Japan tissue paper which was one of the hallmarks of the images in *Camera Work*: "We have reproduced them [Strand's photographs] in all their brutality. We have cut out the use of the Japan tissue for these reproductions, not because of economy, but because the tissue proofs we made of them introduced a factor which destroyed the directness of Mr. Strand's expression."[39] By Stieglitz's own account, Strand's images accomplish the goals of the avant-garde modernists that he has been seeking within photography.

The publication of Strand's photographs in *Camera Work* marks the completion of Stieglitz's journey from pictorialism to modernism. For Stieglitz, they represent the apotheosis of what is required in order to make truly modern photographs. In some ways it is fitting that they are his last project before closing Gallery 291 and terminating the publication of *Camera Work*. Having

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[38] Alfred Stieglitz, "Our Illustrations," Camera Work 49-50 (June 1917): 36.

[39] Stieglitz, "Our Illustrations," 36.

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spent the years of the Photo-Secession from 1902-1917 learning how the language of symbolists might be conveyed through visual abstractions created by the camera, Stieglitz was now free to explore that language in the series of photographic projects that occupied him during the next 20 years.[40] Principle among those projects were two monumental series, one consisting of cloud studies and the other consisting of O'Keeffe portraits, often nude studies. In both series, Stieglitz used his subject -- a phenomenon of nature and the body of the woman he loved -- to develop a photographic vocabulary of equivalence. Indeed, he points to the central role of the equivalent in defining his primary visual mode, using the term as the title for the over four hundred photographs of clouds that make up that series.

II. THE NATURE OF ABSTRACTION

> *The greater the share of the moment of shock in particular impressions, the more incessantly consciousness has to be present.*
>
> -- Walter Benjamin[41]

In the 1920s, Stieglitz reinvented the conventions of symbolic meaning that had preoccupied his earlier photographs by adapting a visual vocabulary from the European avant-garde. Doris Bry discusses the importance of his

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[40] In her biography Doris Bry has identified five projects that are all basically related: "the O'Keeffe portrait; the clouds (*Equivalents*); the Lake George prints; the large portraits; the large New York prints." See *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer*, 17.

[41] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 163

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personal experiences in the development of that vocabulary. Her biography of Stieglitz identifies five photographic projects of this period all of which are basically related by their shared experimentation with the possibilities of abstraction: "the O'Keeffe portrait; the clouds (*Equivalents*); the Lake George prints; the large portraits; and the large New York prints."[42] Bry goes on to write: "The Stieglitz photographs of these later years are basically one thing said many ways. Prints of the clouds, landscapes, friends, are closely akin to each other. Their nature is determined more by his feelings at a particular time than by their subject matter."[43] Bry's commentary places Stieglitz's works of the 1920s within the context of avant-garde debates over the role of photography in artistic representation.

Stieglitz himself wrote, in a 1923 article "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," that his *Equivalents* were not so much about subject matter as a summary of his philosophy and all his previous photographic experience:

> I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in 40 years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life -- to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter -- not to special trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges -- clouds were there for everyone.[44]

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[42] Bry, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer*, 17.

[43] Bry, 17.

[44] Alfred Stieglitz, "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," in Lyons, *Photographers on Photography*, 111-12.

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Thus Stieglitz saw his *Equivalents* as referring back to his earliest photographic interests and at the same time demonstrating the power of photography itself as an artistic medium. He goes on in the same essay to underscore his emphasis on the medium: "My aim is increasingly to make my photographs look so much like photographs that unless one has *eyes* and *sees*, they won't be seen."[45] Stieglitz eventually came to see the *Equivalent* as a photographic mode that extended beyond his own subject matter of clouds and sky to all of art.[46] However, there is much to learn from examining how he understood the photographs to which he actually gave the title of *Equivalent*. They provide, as F. Richard Thomas argues, Stieglitz's "best rendering of the subjective feelings through the presentation of the objective world."[47]

In Stieglitz's *Equivalent 155B*, ca. 1924 – 26 [Fig. 1.6], the tempestuously cloudy sky dramatically fills nearly the entire image with an impressive mass of black contoured by brilliant white. The viewer's orientation, visually higher than

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[45] Stieglitz, "Clouds," 112.

[46] In her biography, Dorothy Norman says that eventually Stieglitz "claimed that all of his prints were equivalents; finally that all art is an equivalent of the artist's most profound experience of life." Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 144.

[47] F. Richard Thomas is writing about the effect Stieglitz's photographic practice had on modernist poets Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. He provides an understanding of how the "equivalent" has influenced literary modes of representation: "The [equivalent] photograph must, then, be studied for its subjective and symbolic content as well as its objective and literal content." See F. Richard Thomas, *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz* (Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 9. Literary modernists often used the concept of equivalency when describing images (sometimes called "objective correlatives") that produce similar subjective responses in most people. The term originates with T. S. Eliot's literary criticism and is a central concept in his own modernist texts.

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is customary in a landscape view, is provided by the evidence of a slip of hill at the bottom edge of the frame. Stieglitz photographs a piece of the world objectively, and yet viewers of this photograph are more likely to be drawn into the subjective feelings of its effects than into an objective understanding of its descriptive recording of a specific place. Even within the small 4 x 5 inch format, it is difficult to escape the sense of power in the gathering of natural forces the image captures. In spite of the knowledge that this is a depiction of Stieglitz's beloved Lake George region, the image does not feel like it belongs to the genre of landscape. By adopting a vantage point that seems unnaturally high, Stieglitz insistently denied the beholder's position, established through a long history of Western landscape painting, that championed a horizon line.[48] Instead, he created a viewing experience that emphasizes the feelings evoked by the sense of an impending change, which the clouds forecast.

Stieglitz used the representational capacity of the photographic medium in order to explore and express his inner thoughts and feelings. He found

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[48] Stieglitz's strategy is consistent with the general shift in landscape painting during the nineteenth century as it became increasingly a genre whose primary subject was representation rather than the depicted scene. See the discussion in Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art, 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1999), 181-7. In this image Stieglitz weds photography to the larger art historical shift from landscape as a space to which human figures belong to landscape as the object of the gaze and the emotional effects of viewing, especially as practiced by Barbizon, Impressonist, and other *plein air* painters, whose sketches focused on the emotive effects of the setting and weather. Perhaps the most significant resonance is with Monet's series of paintings based on his pond of water-lilies at Giverny, where he evacuates the horizon completely. On the Barbizon school, see T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-51* (London, 1973), 72-98. On Monet's water-lilies see Charles Harrison, "Impressionism, Modernism and Originality," in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Francis Frascina et al. (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 214-17.

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correspondences between images from the sensate, external world and his more intangible, personal experiences. It would be a mistake to assume that such expressions were visual transcriptions for literal feelings that can be easily named. Rather, they insinuate the more nebulous experiences that shape the realm of emotion and feeling itself, giving tangible form to what would otherwise remain ineffable. The inner experiences of viewers that these mood-filled photographs evoke are some of the most psychologically complex because they exist at the threshold of conscious and unconscious perception. Viewers recognize a connection between their own interior states, such as happiness or anxiety, and the experiences generated by these visceral images. However, it is not these specific connections that convince viewers to read these images as analogues of their own experience. Instead, the *Equivalents* make palpable the realization that such connections exist, and that they lie just beyond the reach of conventional modes of representation.[49] As a result, Elizabeth Kornhauser suggests that these images are "simultaneously abstract and representational."[50]

Similarly, in her catalogue essay for a retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Sarah Greenough explains that Stieglitz's photographs of clouds and sky used "objective reality to record symbolically the subjective thoughts of the artist. . . . Stieglitz used reality, the clouds, to express

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[49] This point will be elaborated later in the chapter when Stieglitz's use of equivalency is compared with Wassily Kandinsky's use, which Stieglitz greatly admired.

[50] Kornhauser and Ellis, *Stieglitz, O'Keeffe and American Modernism*, 24.

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truths about himself, to reveal his thoughts and feelings."[51] Nevertheless, Greenough relies less on the photographs themselves and more on an extensive appendix of writings and correspondence in order to identify more precisely what Stieglitz was expressing in his photographs. Stieglitz himself said of the *Equivalents* that they were consciously meant to express "something already taking form within me."[52] There is an interesting equivocation in Stieglitz's use of "form" in this statement, which emphasizes the activity of forming rather than the more static use of form as a gestalt property: he seems to suggest that intangible, subjective states in some way take on the formal qualities of a shape. At the same time, the shape of such inner experience finds its exterior analogue -- is made physically manifest -- in the forms created by the sky and clouds. It is this very slippage that makes the notion of the *Equivalent* so compelling and yet so difficult to define.

In fact, interpretations of Stieglitz's photographs frequently rely on conflicting assumptions about the primary focus of what is being represented. Amy Ellis, for instance, writes that "Stieglitz believed his *Equivalents* were not simply images of clouds but evoked a deeper, spiritual meaning."[53] Taking a more skeptical view of the *Equivalents* as expressions of such interior transcendental subjectivity, John Szarkowski argues that Stieglitz "wanted to

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[51] Greenough and Hamilton *Alfred Stieglitz*, 22.

[52] Weston Naef, ed., *In Focus: Alfred Stieglitz Photographs from The J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995), 25.

[53] Kornhauser and Ellis, 52.

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make the description of the sky and the artistic statement inseparable."[54] A photograph such as *Equivalent no. 171E,* 1925 [Fig. 1.7], offers a case in point: turning the sky and clouds into a highly suggestive pictorial space, it can be made to support the differing emphases in the views of either Ellis or Szarkowski.

A dense blanket of clouds covers the entire surface of the image with a subtle range of silvery grays. Barely visible at the very top of the image, the small disc of the sun penetrates the mass of cottony clouds. There is little sense of depth in this image, as these clouds seem to flatten the sky, making it appear as if it were parallel with the surface of the photograph. A reading that follows Ellis's metaphysical interpretation might focus on how the clouds simultaneously block the direct experience of light and offer the material ground through which its display is spread. The overall blanket of clouds gives an impression of opaqueness. The light emanating from the bright disk of the sun at the top of the image, then, suggests traditional associations of matter infused with spirit. Yet seeing the photograph through Szarkowski's eyes, viewers might focus instead on the more self-reflexive, artistic implications posed by the use of light and shadow to create an overall image. The photograph's broad tonal range suggests how the medium relies on the opposition of brightness and darkness for its effect. Such a reading is buttressed by the twin disks of white and black at the top of the image. Ironically, the dark spot is not created by shadow or opacity as it at first appears, but by an opening in the lit clouds that reveals the sky behind them.

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[54] John Szarkowski, *Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George* (New York: Abrahms

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Ultimately, however, the success or failure of the *Equivalents* lies in the responses they evoke in their viewers. Neither of the above interpretations accounts for the feelings of softness and muffledness that the image arouses in this viewer's own affective response. The aforementioned readings rely on photography's capacity to be simultaneously abstract and representational. As Greenough writes: "Stieglitz's challenge, and his accomplishment in the 1920s, was to reconcile abstraction and photography, to find a means whereby he could abstractly express himself while still respecting the inherent characteristics of photography."[55] But Greenough's assessment, echoed in almost every commentary on these photographs, does little to illuminate how the *Equivalents* actually accomplish this dual feat.

It is important to pause a moment here to consider what is meant by the term "abstract." Abstraction is usually art-historical shorthand used to indicate a movement in representation away from the specific toward the more general, often eliminating legible depiction entirely. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art* defines the most pervasive use of *abstraction* as "a mode of representing visible objects which reduces the amount or the particularity of the detail depicted."[56] As Robert Atkins writes, "To *abstract* is to generalize."[57] In

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and The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 29.

[55] Greenough and Hamilton, 23. It is important to note that, while acknowledging Stieglitz's debt to the Symbolist idea of "correspondence," Greenough maintains that the theory implicit in his *Equivalents* goes beyond correspondence by virtue of their more complete engagement with abstraction. See her remarks on the pages following the cited quotation (23-34).

[56] Harold Osborne, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981; reprint 1992), 2. The definition of modernist abstraction that follows in the paragraph is drawn from this source.

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modernist abstraction, artists have relied on two primary strategies to accomplish such generalization: on the one hand, they regularize forms through geometry in ways that suggest an underlying order, either rational or mystical; on the other, they reject iconic systems of depiction in favor of biomorphic forms that are meant to be visual analogues of expression. Often these two modes may be related, as in the works of Wassily Kandinsky. The art-historical understanding of abstraction has also been widely influenced by the notion that it is a primary strategy through which works strive for self-referential purity.[58] In this formulation, geometric and biomorphic abstraction are different visual vocabularies, but they share a self-conscious attention to the methods of specific media. Both modes of abstraction establish a relation between viewers and depiction that makes the conventions of recognizability an issue in the work. Due to the photograph's reliance on actual forms for its depictions, this notion of recognizability is central to the vocabulary of photographic abstraction.[59]

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[57] Robert Atkins, *ArtSpreak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 35-6.

[58] Clement Greenberg, the art critic largely responsible for popularizing this view, wrote: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, eds. Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon Press, 1992), 308. Greenberg's critical theories owed a considerable debt to the writings of Stephane Mallarmé, who first took this position in poetry. See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. by J. O'Brian, 4 Vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9-10.

[59] Several writers have commented on Stieglitz's use of disorientation as an important strategy to make recognition a central issue for viewers of his *Equivalents*. Elizabeth Kornhauser, for instance, writes that in his *Equivalents*

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One powerful and well-known model for the simultaneity of abstraction and figurative representation that was available to Stieglitz came from the European traditions of Impressionist and Symbolist abstraction in music and painting adopted by Debussy and Kandinsky respectively. However, neither one of them was completely satisfying to Stieglitz. He was after a kind of pure abstraction that would reference meaning without literally depicting it, a visual counterpart to music. Taking his cue from Kandinsky, Stieglitz saw music as the purist art form, the one to which all others, including photography, should aspire. Looking back on his 1922 aims for the *Equivalents*, he wrote:

> I wanted a series of photographs which when seen by Ernest Bloch (the great composer) he would exclaim: Music! music! Man, why that is music! How did you ever do that? And he would point to violins, and flutes, and oboes, and brass, full of enthusiasm, and would say he'd have to write a symphony called "Clouds." Not like Debussy's but *much, much more.*

Stieglitz "abstracted his images by eliminating any frame of reference for the viewer. Location, time, and even the direction in which the image should be hung are elusive." Kornhauser and Ellis, 24. Rosalind Krauss writes that the photographic act of "cutting" isolates segments of the sky and clouds in the *Equivalents* in a way that recalls the human hand. She maintains that viewers experience the physical turning and twisting of Stieglitz's hand-held camera through the disorientating relation to the ground and horizon of his images. Further, such manipulations are commensurate with the "gestural" indications of abstract expressionist painters and tie his photographs to their works. Rosalind Krauss, "*Equivalents* / Stieglitz," *October* 11 (Winter 1979): 135. Even within a more traditionally formalist reading of Stieglitz's photographs, Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock see Stieglitz's use of a disorienting pictorial space as the means by which he turns a representational image to the purposes of abstraction: "The elements of the picture are organized in what is conventionally considered to be an abstract arrangement, with the forms seeming to hang parallel to the picture plane and strongly related to the four edges of the frame."

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> And when finally I had my series of ten photographs printed, and Bloch saw them -- what I said I wanted to happen happened *verbatim.*[60]

It is clear from this quotation that Stieglitz believed he could go further than Debussy's Impressionist, aural correspondences. His suggestion about the inadequacy of Debussy's musical forms signals Stieglitz's interest in Symbolist evocations of internal emotions and feelings rather than descriptions rooted in external sensory experience alone. It also points to the limits of commonly understood analogies as a conveyor of correspondence.[61]

As mentioned earlier when discussing Stieglitz's own photographs in *Camera Work,* his interest in the European avant-garde had led him to use that journal as the first American venue for much of their art and theoretical writings. Chief among these writings was his publication in July 1912 of extracts from Kandinsky's "The Spiritual in Art." In this excerpt, Kandinsky champions Cézanne for being "gifted with the power of seeing the inner life of everything," which he expresses through color and form.[62] Stieglitz applauded Kandinsky's understanding of abstraction, seeing in it a visual language that mediates between internal and external experience in a manner that was closely aligned

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Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 10.

[60] Quoted in Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz,* 143-44.

[61] A similar conflation is also at work in James McNeill Whistler's late nineteenth-century "arrangements," "nocturnes," and "harmonies." See Wanda Corn, *Tonalism,* 9.

[62] Kandinsky, in *Camera Work,* 34.

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with Symbolism. Kandinsky's use of artistic forms drawn from the natural world as indicators of inner experience would have resonated with Stieglitz's own understanding of abstraction and the responses it initiated in the preceptive viewer.[63] However, whereas for Kandinsky, the cosmic vision was meant to be equal to the image, for Stieglitz the experience was a more metaphoric and metonymic one, where the response in the viewer was an equivalent of the visual image. Stieglitz's focus on the equivalent as a function of figurative tropes is similar to the understanding of linguistic meaning that was being developed by the Russian Formalists, notably Roman Jakobson.

Jakobson proposed a theory of equivalence based in poetic language. Examining Stieglitz's photographs within the context of a parallel model of equivalency drawn from early-twentieth-century linguistic theory is instructive for understanding how they function. A founding member of the Russian Formalist group in 1915, linguistic critic and university professor Roman Jakobson proposed a theory of the equivalent for poetic texts. He promoted his ideas about the functions of poetic language in his 1921 book *Modern Russian Poetry*.[64] Although Stieglitz's letters and papers do not indicate that he was

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[63] For Kandinsky's understanding of the use of abstraction to initiate responses in the viewer, see Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Involving the Viewer," *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980), 42-51.

[64] Roman Jakobson was a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915) and "OPOJAZ" – translated as "The Society for the Study of Poetic Language" (1916). As a result of attacks on Russian Formalism by the Soviet government, Jakobson migrated to Czechoslovakia where he helped to found the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926). He promoted his version of literary Formalism as a professor at Masaryk University in Brno from 1933 until 1939, when Nazism forced him to flee Czechoslovakia. After a brief period in Scandinavia, Jakobson immigrated to the United States where he was an

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aware of Jakobson's philosophy, the comparison offers a constructive paradigm for reading Stieglitz's visual explorations through a sympathetic, albeit different, mode of representation that was also seeking to combine abstraction and reference during the late teens and twenties. For both approaches combine abstraction's retreat from conventions of recognizability with reference's reliance on shared indicators of meaning.

Jakobson shared the concern of fellow Russian Formalists to shift the focus of interpretation away from mimesis and its emphasis on resemblances. The function of literature, according to Jakobson, was not to reflect reality but to make it seem strange. By unhinging our customary perceptions of the world, the literary artist forces readers -- or in the case of the visual artist viewers -- to experience what has become habitual with renewed attention. Russian Formalists called the disorientation created by such an estrangement from one's usual perceptions "defamiliarization," identifying it as the central characteristic shared by all artistic representations. Jakobson's specific theory of defamiliarization and disorientation within Russian Formalism relies on the

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important influence on the movement of American literary Formalism, known as "new criticism." He was a professor at Harvard from 1949 to 1956 and at MIT beginning in 1957 until his retirement. Characteristic of many European intellectuals, Jakobson's ideas were initially disseminated through his teaching lectures and in the discussion groups cited above before they reached formal publication. A presentation to the Prague Circle in 1928 defined the basic principles of his aesthetic theory of polarities and equivalence in what has come to be called in linguistic studies the "Jakobson/Tynyanov thesis." An important paper summarizing his ideas was published in German in 1931 as "Prinzipien der historischen Phonologie." The first published summary of his theories for English readers is Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956). For the section on metaphor and metonymy that is relevant to the discussion of equivalency in this essay, see 70-96. An account of Jakobson's notion of equivalency for the nonlinguist is discussed in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University

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equivalencies that constitute figures of speech, specifically metaphor and metonymy. A metaphor relies on substitutions of *comparative* relationships, whereas a metonymy relies on substitutions of *contiguous* relationships. Said another way, metaphors transform an object's meaning without changing its context. When a lover complains that the object of his or her affection has "a heart of stone," the metaphor relies on the stone's properties of hardness and coldness to comment on the nature of the relationship between two people; the relationship remains the focus of the comparison. Metonymy, on the other hand, transforms an object's meaning by indicating a different but related context. In the phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword," the context shifts from the battlefield to the scholar's desk in order to argue the power of persuasion over physical force.[65]

Because metaphor and metonymy pull meaning in different directions, Jakobson contends that they are one of the primary ways to make reality appear strange and to dislocate habitual perceptions. Applied to a visual vocabulary such as Stieglitz's photographs, Jakobson's theory offers a way to consider the mechanisms through which the *Equivalents* create references to a shared realm of internal experiences and yet remain personally evocative. As previously noted, the conflicting interpretations of Ellis and Szarkowski demonstrate that the meaning of the *Equivalents* often lies in the personal associations of viewers. Some viewers, for instance, might understand Stieglitz's clouds as metaphors for

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of California Press, 1977), 76-82. For an account of Russian Formalism, see Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (New York: Methuen and Co., 1979), 18-25.

[65] The distinctions are never quite as clear cut as these theoretical categories suggest. For example, embedded within this metonymy is a synecdoche that substitutes a pen for writing and a sword for fighting.

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a tempestuous mood through a comparative association with stormy skies, as in *Equivalent 155B*, ca. 1924-26. Other viewers might understand clouds blanketing the sky as a metonymy for spirituality through the contiguous association of clouds with the heavens. In Jakobson's paradigm, it is conflicting metaphoric and metonymic associations that create unease. As a result, readers and viewers are forced to revise their conventional patterns of understanding.

It is this forced perceptual shift which gives both the verbal and the visual equivalents their emotional, affective power. The result, which Russian Formalists called "defamiliarization," forces a revised understanding on the part of anyone attempting to comprehend a poem's [or photograph's] meaning. The role of abstraction, Jakobson argued, was to break our familiar patterns of reference in order to generate new patterns of perception. It is this model of abstraction based on Jakobson's theory rather than the model proposed by Kandinsky that accounts for the more material sensations evoked by Stieglitz's own *Equivalents*. The perceptual shift described by Jakobson's notion of defamiliarization and disorientation is especially germane to the tension between abstraction and representation that Stieglitz's critics have identified as the heart of his *Equivalents*. Further, these concepts can account for the way in which his photographic series engages both the cognitive and the emotional effects of his images, which, as photographs, are based inherently in a metonymic relation to the real.

Although indeed composed of abstract, dramatic fields of light and dark, the indexical nature of Stieglitz's *Equivalents* make them recognizable as cloud-

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filled skies.[66] Stieglitz's artistry captures that moment when natural forms are neither wholly abstract nor recognizable but register as both, and as such, lend themselves to "defamiliarization" on the part of the viewer. He has created images that turn the most everyday subject, the familiar sky, into something palpably strange. Using a hand-held camera, Stieglitz transforms a piece of natural phenomena into an evocation of personal experience. Despite the absence of an actual body in his photographs, Stieglitz emphasizes the human presence through his disorienting perspective: viewers are made aware of their own bodies as they seek a point of view that will give the scene a recognizable shape.[67]

Stieglitz went on to create images that increasingly separated his isolated segments of sky from the ground and its horizon, making this disorienting perspective and the self-conscious awareness of the viewer's own spectating body even more pronounced.[68] Moreover, he introduced additional strategies to separate the image from its referent. For example, his *Equivalent 216E*, 1929 [Fig. 1.8], is exhibited in a vertical rather than horizontal format. In this instance

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[66] A similar discussion that finds modernist abstraction and representation in the 1920s to be compatible rather than antithetical modes is Thomas Janzen's essay on Albert Renger-Patzsch. See his "Albert Renger-Patzsch's Early Work: Object and Abstraction," *History of Photography* 21 (Autumn 1997): 182-186.

[67] A related point to a different purpose is made by Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock when they write that landscape conveys "the notion of the natural world dominated by nonhuman phenomena though by no means empty of the human." Jussim and Lindquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph* , xiv.

[68] Rosalind Krauss has argued that this is a "gestural" act, tying it to the history of modernist disorientation. She goes on to write of the *Equivalents* that "they call to mind both our need for orientation and our customary means of

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a metaphoric reading of these clouds could evoke stacks of smoke, rows of trees, or ropes of hair among numerous possibilities. On the other hand, in its vertical format, its metonymic potential transforms this landscape image into a "portrait" of the sky, which doubles as a reference to the spectating body.[69]

An image such as *Equivalent 222A*, 1931 [Fig. 1.9], offers another case in point. Any orientation to the ground and horizon is only minimally suggested by a tiny indication of foliage, barely visible in the lower right-hand corner. Yet, ultimately, it remains unclear whether one is seeing the top or the side of this tree. The ambiguity of the viewpoint is heightened by the canted striations of clouds organized along a diagonal axis. Stieglitz further adds to this sense of spatial disorientation through the sensation of movement suggested by the blurred streaks of clouds and his diagonal composition. This abstract quality of the image is heightened by another strategy that relates to defamiliarization and the way it complicates the viewer's referential understanding. As in many of the *Equivalents*, it is difficult to tell here what is sky and what are clouds. In this photograph, a close examination leaves viewers uncertain as to whether the sun is coming out from behind a dark cloud or shining through a light cloud. Through these photographic effects, Stieglitz's image evokes the mysterious

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achieving it by recourse to a horizon that will organize and confirm our relation to the earth." Krauss, "*Equivalents* / Stieglitz," 135.

[69] Barbara Novak has described the relation between the viewer's body and the depicted landscape by reference to earlier philosophical notions of the sublime, which, she argues, translate the natural world into a disembodied "spiritual act composed of wonder and purification." Stieglitz's photograph demonstrates that both the sublime and landscape engage much more of the viewer than Novak's reading suggests. See Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 189.

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qualities of the sky and clouds that make them such rich symbols of reversibility and perception.

These images enact the process of disorientation and create the defamiliarization that Jakobson recognized as the foundation of poetic experience. Although Stieglitz's photograph can be read according to the conventional associations of its visual forms, such as the dynamism indicated by the strong diagonal in the image, he does not rely on the forms alone to carry its latent symbolic content. Rather, viewers enter into a relation with the visual forms in a way that casts their experience as subjective and forces them to reconsider the meanings of those experiences. The resulting equivalency is not a universalizing and transcendental subjectivity inherent in the forms but a personal encounter with one's own assumptions. Stieglitz's concern with formal conception in the *Equivalents* is not meant as an end in itself but as a means to heighten visual discovery. His *Equivalents* throw viewers back into a self-conscious consideration of their own spectating bodies through the photograph's capacity to create visual abstractions from nature.

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III. THE NATURE OF VISUAL TROPES

Photography when used as a representational art is not a mere copy of nature.

-- László Moholy-Nagy[70]

Stieglitz's equivalent photographs offer a particularly resonant mode in the representation of subjective experience because in addition to promoting discovery through visual abstraction, they also suggest correspondences with internal emotional and spiritual states. Reinterpreting visual tropes by investing them with more dynamic properties, Stieglitz tied the relationship between abstraction and reference to metaphysics.[71] Consistent with his own history within Pictorialist and Symbolist traditions, he linked his photographs to mood and internal experience rather than tangible evidence and external description. In both Gallery 291 and *Camera Work*, Stieglitz supported artists and writers interested in the metaphysical. In fact, the first non-photographic works that

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[70] László Moholy-Nagy, "The Future of the Photographic Process," in *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), 33.

[71] There has been much speculation about to what degree, and even whether or not, Stieglitz embraced Theosophy as did other abstractionists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian or his fellow Photo-Secession member colleague Alvin Langdon Coburn. I am less interested in the expressive motive behind Stieglitz's appropriation of the "equivalent" and more interested in how his body of work laid out the use of the Equivalent as a mode of abstraction that was developed and expanded for a variety of projects that share a similar visual operation. Certainly Stieglitz's enthusiasm for Paul Strand's work and his suggestion that it was the revelation that showed him the way to photographic abstraction would suggest a closer identification with the more material-minded Strand than with the mystical Coburn, whose own photographic abstractions, a series of disorienting cubist-inspired aerial views, were being exhibited as early

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Stieglitz exhibited at "291" were 72 Symbolist watercolors by Pamela Colman Smith in 1907. A mystic with Afro-Caribbean ancestors, Smith claimed to have created these works "automatically" as the record of her own hermetic visionary experience while listening to music.[72] Moreover, Stieglitz had published a section of Maurice Maeterlinck's metaphysical treatise on aesthetics in *Camera Work*.[73] However, it was probably not Maeterlinck's mystical ideology that interested Stieglitz. More likely he was attracted to Maeterlinck's symbolic thought because it offered an alternative to absolute subjectivism through his belief in the objective expression of inner feelings.

Such a belief suggests two opposite approaches to the notion of equivalency: on the one hand feelings generated from within the self and on the other, feelings generated from a spiritual realm that many symbolists believed existed outside the self. Although the distinction between these two approaches is not always clear in Stieglitz, he seems to be using his *Equivalents* in order to discover the former – that is, a visual expression that corresponds to an emotional register with the inner self rather than to something supernatural or spiritual residing outside the self. In his use of correspondences from natural phenomena, the realm of the symbolic remains and is focused on the material. In fact, Stieglitz's clouds are a kind of symbol of the symbolic: by their nature as

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as 1913 in "New York from its Pinnacles." Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 161.

[72] For a full account of the relation between Smith's "primitivist" sensibility and Stieglitz's modernist project see Melinda Boyd Parsons, "Pamela Colman Smith and Alfred Stieglitz: Modernism at 291," *History of Photography* 20 (Winter 1996): 285-92.

[73] *Camera Work*, 2 (April 1903): 3. For an account of Maeterlinck's theory, see Henri Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories*, 143-46.

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fleeting, impermanent, and translucent phenomena, they are the quintessential example of the intangible yet materially expressive world. Stieglitz's *Equivalents* are a testament to the aesthetic beauty inherent in clouds in all their varieties.

But even more than simply capturing this beauty, his photographs assert the mediating role of representation itself. Representations, per force, are constructs laden with cultural assumptions. Clouds and the sky are particularly rich concepts for investments of cultural meanings. We acknowledge this each time we locate the metaphysical, spiritual, or ethereal in the "heavens." Similarly, many abstract concepts and reifications typically are discussed in language that suggests they are elevated, as the clouds and sky, above the concrete realm of the senses. Thus, the sky and clouds almost inevitably call up the notion of conceptual mediations.

Stieglitz's *Equivalents* make visible what otherwise appears to be the transparent "window" of the sky, revealing it to be a mediating presence that expresses the relation between the inner and outer in our experience of the world. His photographs of the sky operate as visual tropes for the constituting role of perception. Through the interplay of figure-ground and reversals of a photograph such as *Equivalent 259B*, ca. 1920s [Fig. 1.10], Stieglitz is not looking through the atmosphere but at it. In fact, even when the source of his light, the sun, is not visible, its presence dominates most of the photographs in the *Equivalents*. These photographs are not merely his descriptions of the natural world as much as they are small pieces of the sky seen at a moment in time. More than anything, they remind us of the particular attention that it takes to see. They are visual tropes for the act of seeing.

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And yet for all their self-reflexive character as emblems of sight per se, the *Equivalents* remain images of clouds with their attendant associations, as *Equivalent 144B*, ca. 1920s [Fig. 1.11], illustrates. The subtle range of tones required to capture the complexity of these cloud forms testifies to Stieglitz's technical skill as a photographer. Yet, the *Equivalents* communicate something much more subjectively emotional than the mere skill of turning the indexical register of light into an iconic image of subtle variations. They suggest a feeling of unlimited change, of the constant mutability of every experience because neither viewers nor the sky is ever in the same position twice. This image confirms for viewers the multiplicity of their visual orientations experienced in relation to the natural world. There is no sense of a horizon, only sky unbounded by the earth.

Looking at *Equivalent 177A*, 1930 [Fig. 1.12], we recognize a similar ethereal quality. The forces that are giving shape to this tenuous form simultaneously threaten to undo it. As personal expressions of correspondence, then, Stieglitz's *Equivalent* photographs point to experiences whose emotional effects cannot be accounted for in the language of ordinary vision. The photographs distinguish between passive looking and attentive seeing. They self-consciously establish a point of view and thus once again remind viewers that the experience of sight is a perceptual construct rather than a natural act. Stieglitz's formulation of correspondence as a transcendent relation between vision and emotional or spiritual experience functioned as a point of departure for the other photographers in this study who probed the equivalent for its creative possibilities. As discussions of their photographs will demonstrate, it is the spectacle nature of the equivalent that mobilizes the bodily associations of

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the images, drawing viewers into an awareness of how perception contributes to visual meaning.

IV. THE NATURE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

> *Photographic "literacy" is learned. And yet, in the real world, the image itself appears "natural" and appropriate, appears to manifest an illusory independence from the matrix of suppositions that determines it readability.*
>
> -- Allan Sekula[74]

In his *Equivalents*, Stieglitz has depicted the sky and clouds in a way that encourages viewers to consider his images within the discourse of photographic representation, as visual meditations on the nature of photography itself. The subtle range of tones required to capture the complexity of these forms continues his interest, evident in his earliest pictorialist photographs, in testing the limits of photographic language as both a recorder of natural phenomena and an expressive medium. In his essay, "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," Stieglitz identified clouds as his lifelong subject:

> Thirty-five or more years ago I spent a few days in Murren (Switzerland), and I was experimenting with ortho plates. Clouds and their relationship to the rest of the world, and clouds for themselves, interested me, and clouds which were difficult to photograph -- nearly impossible. Ever since then clouds have been

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> in my mind, most powerfully at times, and I always knew I'd follow up the experiment made over 35 years ago.[75]

This statement illustrates, as Sarah Greenough asserts, that understanding Stieglitz's photographs "for their innovations in style, subject matter, and technique" only captures half of their power. She goes on to write that they "are the manifestations, the visible results, of something larger and more profound, something that permeated and propelled Stieglitz's entire undertaking as a photographer."[76] The *Equivalents* provide an answer to that larger, more profound project through their ability simultaneously to evoke emotional experience and to position photography as the most modern of mediums by its self-referential capacity.

Composed of abstract, dramatic fields of light and dark, Stieglitz's *Equivalents* nevertheless also remain recognizably cloud-filled skies. In *Equivalent 216E*, 1929 [Fig. 1.8], he captures that moment when natural forms are neither wholly abstract nor legible but appear to be both at once. As such, this image may be used to demonstrate how Jakobson's concept of defamiliarization leads to a meditation on the indexical nature of the photographic medium. Stieglitz has created a photograph that transforms the everyday, familiar sky into something that challenges the limits of meaningful perception. Rather than clouds, this image would more likely seem to be depicting columns of smoke

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[74] Allan Sekula "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," 454.

[75] Alfred Stieglitz, "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," in Lyons, 111.

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and their atmospheric effects, one of Stieglitz's favorite subjects from his pictorialist period. He accomplishes this unusual visual effect through a vertical display that turns his photograph ninety degrees from the natural horizon. His shift in point of view disorients viewers and manipulates their relation to this piece of the sky, rendering gravitational clues uncertain through this tactical shift in point of view. In spite of his depiction of these cloud forms, Stieglitz not only represents a natural phenomenon by transcribing it as a subjective response to the natural world, but he simultaneously references the language of photographic abstraction.[77] As viewers make meaning out of Stieglitz's image, they apprehend the gap between icon and index that the photograph usually elides.

Stieglitz has made another characteristic of the photograph --the reciprocity of black and white -- an important element of his *Equivalents* in general. Usually the sky will print as the darkest tone in a black-and-white photograph devoted to the sky, which is a reversal of our everyday experience of the sky's brightness. Yet when clouds thickly cover the sky, they will also print as a dark tone. *Equivalent* 175A, 1926 [Fig. 1.13], demonstrates this reversal well. The black mass of the image saturates the dramatically dark photograph and fills the frame with its velvety richness. Because a single, small, bright cloud occupies a position near the center of the image, it reads more as an opening in

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[76] Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 13. Quoting from Stieglitz's writings, Greenough identifies this larger, more profound project as a search for "the *meaning* of the *idea* photography" (quoted, 13).

[77] Allan Sekula defines a discourse as "a notion of limits," adding that it "is this limiting function that determines the very possibility of meaning." See his essay, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," 452-53.

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the dark than as a cloud in the clear sky. The sense of an opening is increased by the small disk of the sun, which is clearly visible in the midst of the cloud. Mike Weaver has written that the recording of sky as dark suggests a reversal of night and day, with the result that the *Equivalents* depict "both cosmic reflection and personal projection, with the sun-as-moon emitting a primordial and transient light."[78] Such an understanding locates Stieglitz's photographs within the philosophical language of the symbolists. However, it seems more likely that, consistent with his shift into a modernist sensibility, Stieglitz is exploring the intriguing logical paradox of this bright spot in his image as both source and reflection of light, alluding self-referentially to the photograph's reliance on tonal reversals for its effects.

As this paradoxical relation implies, the transformation of a single bright spot of light in an otherwise darkened field self-reflexively resonates with the camera's aperture, recalling the opening and closing of the camera's lens. However, the image points to the vocabulary of photographic representation and the negative in depicting dark that is actually light. In addition, through a visual chiasmus, the sun, the source of light, references the photographic lens that is used to capture sunlight. What at first appeared to be a fairly straightforward metaphor for the camera involves viewers in the much more contiguous associations of metonymy, as the image self-reflexively references the medium of photography itself. The reciprocities inherent in such visual conundrums result in ambiguous interpretations. The consequent irresolution suggests one way in which Stieglitz's *Equivalents* implicate their viewers in the

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[78] Mike Weaver, "Alfred Stieglitz and Ernest Bloch: Art and Hypnosis,"

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emotionally affective realm of intangible experience. At the same time, their visual play with light and its effects reveals how much these photographs simultaneously are depictions of their medium and caused by it as well.

In fact, as this self-reflexive reading suggests, Stieglitz's *Equivalents* use the defamiliarizing potential of metonymy to depict photographic representation itself: by their nature as fleeting and impermanent yet material substances, clouds are the quintessential example of the intangible yet sensate world. *Equivalent 177A*, 1930 [Fig. 1.12], makes its viewer aware of the ethereal quality implicit in clouds. The forces that have given shape to this form, with its tenuous, wispy tendrils spiraling off the center mass, threaten to undo it by virtue of the same activity. One is reminded of the much grander forces of nebulae, clouds of interstellar gas and dust that are part of the vast and mysterious cosmos itself. The intimate scale of the photographs intensifies the emotional power of such an observation. Stieglitz's small (4 x 5 inch) prints force their viewers to draw close in order to see the photographs. The need for such close scrutiny creates an awareness of macro- and microcosm that is reinforced through the symbolic associations generated by the images themselves.

The conventions of modernist abstraction provide a formulation to understand the spectatorial address that Stieglitz has created in his *Equivalent* cloud studies. The viewer does not occupy a position -- indeed is not given a position -- that is familiar within the landscape tradition from which the *Equivalents* are drawn and to which they are usually compared.[79] Stieglitz has

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History of Photography 20 (Winter 1996): 300.

[79] The term "landscape" was originally used by the Dutch to indicate a view appropriated from the natural world that could be contained within the

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taken a conventional subject, the mood effects of clouded landscapes (often at sunset to heighten the light effects), and through manipulating the viewer's visual relation to the clouds "denaturalized" them through the language of abstraction.[80] In this way, the *Equivalents* make viewers aware of the role of visual perception itself in constituting descriptive meaning.[81] By emphasizing that an embodied experience of vision establishes point of view, Stieglitz's photographs emphasize the role of subjectivity and the arbitrarily constructed visual field that is at the heart of modernist representation.

Equivalent 180D, ca. 1935 [Fig. 1.14], calls attention more directly than any of the other images in this series to the figure-ground relation that is the basis of all representation.[82] It is true that all of these images provoke some

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framing devices of a single picture and often included dwellings, animals, and people. See Jussim and Lindquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph*, 10.

[80] There is an interesting irony in Stieglitz's use of a traditional genre that is associated in its beginnings with the rise of bourgeois subject matter and realistic depiction in Northern Baroque art.

[81] In conversations with Richard Field he has raised the question as to whether this notion of the equivalent only begins with these sky images. He speculates that in fact all of Stieglitz's photographs deploy the terms of visual equivalence. I would concur that given Stieglitz's investment in the visual experiments of the European avant-garde, some notion of the equivalent is probably operating before his photographs in the 1920s. Indeed, in her biography of Stieglitz, Dorothy Norman claims that he came to believe "all art is an equivalent of the artist's most profound experience of life." Norman, *An American Seer*, 144. And in his 1995 catalogue for an Alfred Stieglitz exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski writes: "Eventually Stieglitz claimed that all of his photographs were *Equivalents*, indicating that in his own view no fundamental distinction should be drawn between the sky pictures and the rest of his work." Szarkowski, *Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 29.

[82] The classic account of figure-ground relations, and indeed the cognitive perceptualist model of vision that I am exploring here is E.M. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1977). A more recent investigation that takes into

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consideration of figure-ground relations by virtue of the binary implicit in the opposition clouds-sky. Further, the tendency of the photograph to represent the sky as dark instead of light reverses our usual perceptions and forces us to make a conscious assessment of the figure-ground relationship in the image. But the addition of the bird on the electrical wire adds a third element into the content of the photograph, which has the effect of conflating empty sky and clouds into a single field that forms the ground for these figures. The implication, then, is that the sky is always the undefined ground that sets off the figure.

However, a consideration of this photograph also needs to take into account the particular figures that Stieglitz uses to demonstrate the play of figure-ground relations within representation. Within the traditional opposition through which western thought understands nature and culture, the bird would be aligned with nature and the electric wires with culture. Within this context, both are often used as concrete figures for the animating force of their respective abstract concepts. The bird by virtue of its song and ability to fly operates as a metaphor for the soul that links the immaterial and material realms. The electric wire by virtue of its function as a carrier of power metaphorically embodies the mechanical energy of the city as the source of culture.[83] By sitting on the wire,

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account the role of the perceiving subject is offered in Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

[83] One of the most explicit identifications of electrical power and the modern city is set out by Henry Adams in his autobiography, written in 1907 but not published until 1918 after his death. See especially his chapter entitled "The Dynamo and the Virgin" where his writes that when confronting the Dynamo exhibition at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair he suddenly found his "historical neck broken" by the mechanical force that it generated in support of modern culture. Henry Adams, *The Autobiography of Henry Adams* (New York: Norton, 1967).

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the bird suggests a metonymic connection between these two different figures, which act as symbols of their respective concepts.

Through the use of subject matter with such strong ties to the nature/culture opposition, Stieglitz creates an image that suggests a reading of his *Equivalent* within the context of that opposition. And as emblematic formulations, nature is the unformed, the unmediated, the chaotic whereas culture is the informed, the mediated, the organized. Even further, the sky is the most uncomposed of all natural objects, having infinite expanse and being constantly in obvious visual flux. Against this sky Stieglitz has set three lines that in their diagonal structure are suggestive of perspectival orthogonals. As Hubert Damisch has noted, early in the development of Renaissance representational conventions, Brunelleschi found the sky so clearly outside the system of linear perspective that he substituted a burnished silver plaque in its place. The sky, he believed, could only be reflected, not described as a rational space.[84] In Stieglitz's photograph, the diagonals form an internal framing device and call attention to the sky as an absence in the clouds. They do not function as orthogonals, locating spectators within a rational scheme of depicted space. In this way, Stieglitz's image becomes a visual argument for the role that representation plays in mediating our experience of the natural world, illustrating how his *Equivalents* use the tensions between cultural strategies of mediation and the representation of nature to explore photographic abstraction.

In respect to the argument of this study, Stieglitz's *Equivalents* also share a concern with the relation between the viewer's own spectating body and the

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[84] Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 323-4.

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natural world through the spatial strategies of disorientation and defamiliarization that they enact. Those strategies take viewers beyond a visual experience of cognitive recognition, drawing them into a consideration of the conditions of perception inherent to vision's reliance on an embodied spectator. By laying its stress on the spectator's body through setting up a visceral engagement with the abstract vocabulary of the *Equivalents*, Stieglitz's photographs embrace the deferrals of spectacle address over narrative absorption. The resulting self-reflexivity announces the mediation of these images, initiating an awareness of viewing as a cultural condition. In other words, because spectacle emphasizes the relation between the viewer's bodily presence and the image, these photographs create self-consciousness about spectatorship, operating to reveal how perception both shapes and is shaped by the language of photographic vision.

V. BEYOND THE SKY: VISUAL ADDRESS AND THE BODY OF O'KEEFFE

> *What is documented, at last, is not the thing itself but the way of seeing – the object infused with the subject. The eye moving over the world like a lover.*
>
> – Mark Doty[85]

The sky was not the only subject that captured Stieglitz's attention as a repository of experience and the site of ineffable emotional and spiritual resonance. Stieglitz also produced a photographic series depicting his artistic

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partner and lover, Georgia O'Keeffe.[86] Although the *Portrait*, as he came to call the aggregate of over 300 photographs in the series, was begun slightly earlier than the *Equivalents*, he worked on both projects simultaneously throughout the 1920s.[87] In addition, both series reflect his shift to a representational practice informed by similar issues that we have traced in this study's earlier discussion of his *Equivalents*: investigating the tension between abstraction and reference, exploring the tropes of vision, and revealing the nature of photography itself. Further, because the subject of his serial portrait of O'Keeffe is dependent on images of her body, the role of the spectator's own body as an active element mobilized by the address to the viewer in these photographs is a central feature of their reception and meaning.

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[85] Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2001), 56.

[86] Doris Bry indicates that Stieglitz produced over five hundred negatives of O'Keeffe to create the slightly more than three hundred photographs that compose the final *Portrait*. See Bry, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 18.

[87] Although Stieglitz first photographed O'Keeffe during her visit to "291" in 1917 to see the exhibition of her paintings there, the *Portrait* begins when O'Keeffe moved to New York to live with Stieglitz in 1918 and effectively concludes in 1929 when O'Keeffe, feeling confined by the boundaries created by Stieglitz, returned to spend four months in New Mexico and discovered there a new environment "that to one degree or another, would sustain her and inspire her art for the rest of her life." Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 31; 1. John Szarkowski argues in contradistinction to Lynes "that Stieglitz's new life as a photographer had begun before he first met Georgia O'Keeffe in May 1916 and well before the two became lovers, whether that was in 1917 or in 1918." Szarkowski, *At Lake George*, 23. My position is somewhere between these two poles because I would want to acknowledge both the impact of Paul Strand's use of cropping and the photographic close-up as well as O'Keeffe's emotional, intellectual, and artistic investment in avant-garde experiments with abstract representation. And ultimately, of course, the sexual desire and passion she

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The literature on the O'Keeffe *Portrait* is extensive, and much of it reflects a debate over the degree of control that exists in the relationship between Stieglitz as the photographer and O'Keeffe as his subject.[88] Given Stieglitz's well-documented belief in the connection between the world of nature and sexuality, it is not surprising to find that his work provides an important site to investigate the relation between nature and the body in photography.[89] The role of nature as a discursive frame for the nude in photography is a central concern of this study because the conventions of Pictorialism tended to situate the nude within a natural setting that implies a narrative context, as many photographs published in *Camera Work* demonstrate. Some of the most notable are those by the influential champions of pictorialist photography Anne Brigman and Clarence

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provoked in Stieglitz operated as a creative spur that complimented the influence of her painting on him.

[88] The best discussion on the competing views of O'Keeffe is Barbara Buhler Lynes's monograph and discussion of the critical reception of O'Keeffe during her closest association with Stieglitz from 1916-1929. For further discussions on the dominance of Stieglitz as a photographer, see: David P. Peeler, "Alfred Stieglitz: From Nudes to Clouds," 312-319; and also John S. Welch, "Woman in Stieglitz's Eye," *History of Photography* 20 (Winter 1996): 337-8. On the more collaborative nature of the series, and often emphasizing O'Keeffe's resistance to the portrayals of others, see Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America* 78 (January 1990): 114-125+; and Maria-Morris Hambourg, "Alfred Stieglitz: Georgia O'Keeffe," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 55 (Fall 1997): 72; as well as John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 67-70. For the strongest argument in favor of O'Keeffe's artistic control of the Portrait, see Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 76-103. Wagner writes: "To speak of O'Keeffe as both object and author is to make of the Portrait a self-conscious and declarative act notable for its candor, both then and now" (95). Wagner goes on to say that Stieglitz is as much an object of the Portrait as was O'Keeffe.

[89] Several studies explore Stieglitz's understanding of the importance of sexuality in his own photographic practice and in artistic creativity in general. See especially, Lynes, Peeler, and Welch above.

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White.[90] On the other hand, abstracting conventions of the modernist avant-garde tended to fragment and isolate the body in photographic depictions of the nude for the purposes of spectacle as this study goes on to demonstrate. Of course, nature is also often represented through strategies of fragmentation and isolation within the modernist avant-garde as the previous investigation of Stieglitz's *Equivalents* makes clear. In order to examine the significance of the new abstract vocabulary of the photographic nude that was developing among avant-garde, American artists in the 1920s, this chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of how Stieglitz, in conjunction with O'Keeffe, represented her body through the visual vocabulary of spectacle address. It is this very vocabulary that is rehearsed with such profound consequences in later images of the male nude in the photographs of Imogen Cunningham, Minor White, and Robert Mapplethorpe.

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[90] As a member of the Stieglitz circle and a California photographer, Anne Brigman offers an important bridge between pictorialism on the east and west coasts. Stieglitz published two groups of her self-portrait photographs depicting the female nude in nature. See *Camera work* 25 (January 1909): 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and *Camera Work* 38 (April 1912): 5, 7, 9, 11, 13. Clarence White was a founding member of the Photo-Secession and the Clarence H. White School of Photography in New York. For his photographs of male nudes in nature see *Camera Work* 23 (July 1908): 31, 33, 35. A discussion of White and the pictorialist photography that he advocated is available in Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession*, 83-100. See also Kathleen A. Erwin, "'Photography of the Better Type': The Teaching of Clarence H. White," in *Pictorialism into Modernism: The Clarence H. White School of Photography*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Marianne Fulton (Rochester, New York: George Eastman House, 1996), 120-188. Other photographers who were published in *Camera Work* and known for their work in the pictorialist convention of nature as a context for male and female nudes include Alice Boughton, Robert Demachy, Frank Eugene, George H. Seeley, and Edward Steichen. Although not associated with *Camera Work*, also germane to this study are the homoerotic male nudes in nature by F. Holland Day and Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden. See the chapter, "Von Gloeden in Europe, Holland Day in America," in Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from*

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The earliest of the *Portrait* photographs are the most sexually explicit. John Szarkowski says that the "pictures of O'Keeffe during 1918 and 1919 comprise a kind of artistic ravishment."[91] However, an important strand of the argument in this study is that a distinction should be drawn between sexual explicitness and the visibility of sexual desire. Anne Wagner disputes Szarkowski's position, arguing that the visibility of the sexual in the *Portrait* is a self-conscious calculation by O'Keeffe to create forceful images of herself as a forceful individual.[92] The force of those images lies largely in the recognition that this is an indexical record of O'Keeffe's body, pushing viewers into a close-up, erotic encounter and visually invading her body's space through the proximity of the camera's lens. Such an encounter initiates the self-awareness of spectacle address, reminding viewers of their own bodily conditions of spectatorship and shifting the emphasis away from the narrative possibilities on which pictorialism relies to the more abstract perceptual encounters that characterizes modernist photography.

Stieglitz's shift from a vocabulary of Pictorialism to Modernism can be demonstrated by comparing two photographs conceived as artistic images of a torso. The Pictorial photograph was created in collaboration with Clarence White in 1907 and is entitled "Torso" [Fig. 1.15]. It was published two years later

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Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 35-64.

[91] Szarkowski, *At Lake George*, 23.

[92] Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 93-6.

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in 1909 as a photogravure in volume 27 of Camera *Work*.[93] 1907, the year that Stieglitz and White took the photograph, coincides with the time when Stieglitz began using Gallery 291 to showcase non-photographic works, especially those by the European avant-garde who were interested in abstraction, most specifically August Rodin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Francis Picabia. The Modernist photograph [Fig. 1.16], also a torso, is one from a series entitled *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait* and was created in 1918 as a Palladium print. Although only eleven years apart and both designated as torsos, these two images are strikingly different approaches to the same subject.

The 1907 image is given the generic title of "Torso," emphasizing its borrowing from older artistic traditions, notably sculpture. However, the convention of removing the head and limbs in sculpture is modified to allow the depiction of the woman's face and a partial arm that is raised behind her head. The resulting pose recalls the painted "Venuses" encouraged by the nineteenth-century academic salons.[94] However, in spite of depicting the woman's face, Stieglitz's photo rehearses an ideal type, which owes more to art history than to the actual identity of the woman depicted. The conventions of pictorialism, including soft focus and tonal effects, operate in this image to heighten further its similarities to painting and sculpture. The photograph lends itself to a reading

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[93] In a 1996 exhibition, the image has been further identified as *The Torso (Miss Thompson)*, 1907. See Marianne Fulton, ed. *Pictorialism into Modernism: The Clarence H. White School of Photography*, exhibition catalogue, with essays by Bonnie Yochelson and Kathleen A. Erwin (New York: The George Eastman House, 1996), 20. The image in the exhibition is a platinum print.

[94] On "Venus" paintings in the nineteenth-century academies, see Jennifer L. Shaw, "The Figure of Venus: Rhetoric of the Ideal and the Salon of 1853," *Art History* 14 (December 1991): 540-570.

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within the traditional context of the painted, academic nude that links feminine beauty and aesthetics through a narrative of desire based in the viewing pleasures offered by a woman's body. By these means, this woman's particularity becomes a cipher of access and availability. Although apparently isolated from any context, the woman in this photograph is always already embedded in a field of associations that posits her passive role as a condition of nature even without the traditional accoutrements of field and stream.

In 1918 on her first visit with Stieglitz, O'Keeffe allowed herself to be photographed by him. One of the resulting photographs was also a torso that retains the truncated conventions from classical sculpture, almost aggressively so. Whereas viewing the 1907 image suggests a body bounded tightly within its narrative frame, viewing the cropped 1918 image extends the discursive suggestions of violence to the notion of a cut and dismembered body. Although it is possible to read this image as yet another misogynist manipulation of the visual syntax of representing women, it is more productive to consider this photograph within the context of a developing modernist, avant-garde vocabulary based in Jakobson's notions of defamiliarization and disorientation. Because the *Portrait* consists of a series of eighty-one photographs, individually the images remind viewers that identity and representation are multiple: each is only a partial depiction of O'Keeffe. As such, the focused attention viewers bring to the individual photographs allows the suite to function as a series of explorations that are about both O'Keeffe and representational strategies. As Maria Morris-Hambourg writes in an essay accompanying the *Portrait*: "Stieglitz

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and O'Keeffe were navigating uncharted territory, an adventure implicitly changeable and open-ended."[95]

Stieglitz's shift to abstraction as a mode of reference is signaled in the tightly cropped, 1918 photograph of O'Keeffe's torso, reminding viewers by its absence that the face is the most important recognizable element within the conventions of portraiture. In fact, the nearly instant popularity of the camera was due in large part to the ability of early photographic processes, especially the daguerreotype, to provide a means through which the middle classes had access to a genre previously only available to the privileged classes in painting.[96] Graham Clarke has written about the inherent ambiguity, even contradiction, of the portrait in photography: "in what sense," he asks rhetorically, "can a literal image express the inner world and being of an individual before the camera?"[97] Thus, as a genre, the portrait is meant to reveal character, to express through an outward set of signs the inward power of the individual's personality. As John Tagg points out, such an expression isolates the image from its own history at the same time that it constitutes personality as a social identity.[98] The question that becomes germane for each of Stieglitz's photographs, then, is: what are the

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[95] Maria Morris Hambourg, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz*, exhibition catalogue with an introduction by Georgia O'Keeffe (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978; revised ed., 1997), 129.

[96] The most significant early portraitists in the United States were Southworth and Hawes, whose daguerreotype studio in Boston operated from 1841 to 1861.

[97] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* , 101. See also his earlier discussion in the introduction to *The Portrait in Photography* (London: Reakton Books, 1992).

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referential contexts that this image invites its viewers to use as an interpretive frame for O'Keeffe's individual personality? In spite of the fact that only a handful of the images expose O'Keeffe's body, and of these an even smaller number reveal her as nude, the social context of pornography has often been the focus of discussion about the photographs.[99] However, the question also speaks to ways in which the vocabulary of avant-garde representation in the 1920s relies on the language of spectacle address for referential meaning by reminding viewers that the most immediate context is their own bodily presence. It simultaneously aligns O'Keeffe, and by implication her artistic production, with avant-garde practice and its ties to an emerging language of modernist vision.

Stieglitz's *Portrait* uses O'Keeffe's body to consider the nature of abstraction and reference that is constituted within visual representation. Because of the tradition of the female nude in art history, Stieglitz's photographs of her unclothed and/or exposed body also offer an especially potent site to explore the highly contested terrain of subjectivity and objectivity that lies at the

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[98] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 37.

[99] The 1920s were a period of intense public debate over the nature and role of pornography in society, a debate largely organized around D. H. Lawrence and the censorship trials over his publications, beginning with *The Rainbow*, 1915, and becoming especially strident in the United States over *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, 1928. For a discussion of the artistic principles of Lawrence in relation to O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, as well as Americans working within the modernist avant-garde in general, see Bonnie L. Grad, "Georgia O'Keeffe's Lawrencean Vision," *Archives of American Art Journal* 38 (Nos. 3-4, 1998): 2-15. Anne Wagner relates how critics conflated the discourses of pornography and the modern woman during the 1920s, especially in regards to O'Keeffe's flower paintings, through comparisons with Lawrence. Wagner argues that O'Keeffe defeats her critics by appropriation: "O'Keeffe's ironic effort to adopt and employ the key male signifier still stands as the most extreme of her efforts to adjust the terms of her reception." Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 73.

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heart of avant-garde visual practices.[100] The 1918 torso in the O'Keeffe *Portrait* [Fig. 1.16] offers an especially compelling comparison with the earlier 1907 "torso" in light of these issues.

The nearly confrontational insistence of this photographic close-up describes O'Keeffe's body with objectively brutal detail. Yet the power of this image resides less in the objective details and more in the subjective feelings of its effects. The knowledge that we are confronting an intimate view of the woman Stieglitz passionately loved at the time helps to explain this image, which resists the long history of Western portraiture that relied on face, gesture, and clothing to reference personality. As in his *Equivalents*, once again Stieglitz is using the representational capacity of the photographic medium in order to explore and express his inner thoughts and feelings.[101] He is attempting to capture the connections between conscious and unconscious experience that are unavailable through conventional representations of both portraiture and the nude as genres. In the process, he reveals how abstraction creates an emotional relay between the artist and the viewer through strategies of defamiliarization,

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[100] For an especially clear and succinct discussion of these issues surrounding the female nude and spectatorship in western European history, see John Berger et. al, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corp. and Penguin Books, 1972; reprint, 1987), 45-64.

[101] In her introduction to the 1978 exhibition of the *Portrait*, O'Keeffe reveals how much of Stieglitz's subjective experience is captured in his photographs of her when she wryly recounts the reception by male viewers of Stieglitz's photographs at the Anderson Galleries in 1921: "Several men – after looking around awhile – asked Stieglitz if he would photograph their wives or girlfriends the way he photographed me. He was very amused and laughed about it. If they had known what a close relationship he would have needed to have to photograph their wives or girlfriends the way he photographed me – I think they wouldn't have been interested." Hambourg, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz*, n.p.

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especially metaphor and metonymy, that break familiar systems of reference and create new perceptual patterns. Moreover, because O'Keeffe is not a passive element, as were the sky and clouds, but an active agent in this process, her experience enters into this expression as well.

Through the images of O'Keeffe's cropped, naked body, she and Stieglitz make the familiar conventions of portraiture and the nude strange. The explicitness of bodily parts suggests the context of pornography that constantly has shadowed the discourse surrounding the nude within the traditions of avant-garde representation.[102] Such an illicit context is further emphasized by the way in which O'Keeffe and Stieglitz have positioned her body and created an image of spectatorial address that relies on the shock of confrontation. By including the edges of a diaphanous robe, the photograph references the moment of exposure, implying a theatrical parting of material as it falls away to reveal her body. Her full breasts and fleshy body rehearse the tradition of the western nude Venus.

However, O'Keeffe is not presented in one of the usual poses of such Venuses: she is seated upright in a pose that challenges the very notion of availability established by the passive, reclining nude. That challenge is made more complete by Stieglitz's treatment of O'Keeffe's thick and bushy pubic hair, which he printed in the darkest tones possible. Of course, there is an implicit contradiction in Stieglitz's treatment, since the photograph becomes so dark that O'Keeffe's pubic area operates less as a description of her sex organs and more

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[102] See for instance Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Reconsidering Erotic Photography: Notes for a Project of Historical Salvage," in *Photography at the*

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as a dark patch of indeterminacy that serves as a symbol of her sexuality.[103] There is an irony, as well, because in the language of the photograph, the darkest tones result from areas that are exposed to the most light. In other words, Stieglitz's heightened visual access to this most private area of O'Keeffe's anatomy at the moment of taking the photograph works to obscure the spectator's view and yet insistently points to her sexuality, giving access even as it denies the viewer's gaze.[104] In a sense, it can be said that Stieglitz has created a photographic index of O'Keeffe's sexually charged body. His image uses the metaphoric and metonymic associations of this obvious yet ultimately indecipherable darkness in order to address the spectator's own body through an encounter with opaque blackness that may even carry a register of frightening confrontation.

Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices, Media and Society series, vol. 4. (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 220-237.

[103] In her reading of the same photograph, Anne Wagner writes that Stieglitz, rather than O'Keeffe, appears to have been the most concerned about exposing her sexual organs. "It is clear from the photograph that once in the darkroom he [Stieglitz] took steps to make the image less explicit, over-exposing it between the legs, so as to burn into the surface a dark rounded absence where a presence had once been." Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 93.

[104] This use of a sign that simultaneously points to and obscures the anatomy of female sex organs is a photographic version of the artistic tradition known as the *Venus Pudica*, which is analyzed in Nanette Salomon, "The Venus Pudica: Uncovering Art History's 'Hidden Agendas' and Pernicious Pedigrees," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 69-87. Salomon "denaturalizes" the classical tradition of the "subject/pose/gesture" of the Knidian Aphrodite in order to make visible its ideological significance by interrogating it through the lens of feminist analysis. I would argue that in their collaboration, Stieglitz and O'Keeffe perform a similar denaturalization that makes visible the ideological construction of gender within earlier depictions of the nude through the lens of modernist abstraction.

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In contemplating this photograph, the viewer is made aware of the role that sexual difference plays in personal identity. This is, after all, a single photograph that contributes to the larger series that collectively is the O'Keeffe *Portrait*. Even as it presents the body as a fragment, this image both insists on the symmetry we associate with the human form and reveals such symmetry to be a representational construct. The photograph presents its viewers with two breasts, two framing strips of fabric, two hips, and two legs, all organized around a central belly button. Two lines bisect the body, further emphasizing the doubling and symmetry through the visible marks of bifurcation: one extends from between the breasts directly down until it disappears into the dark space of the pubic area, and the other bisects the first, tracing the graceful, horizontal curve of O'Keeffe's firm, round stomach.

However, the insistent symmetry and doubling serves to draw attention to asymmetry and uniqueness within the image. One breast is rounder, the other falls more to the side; one nipple is clear and erect, the other shadowed and somewhat indistinct; O'Keeffe's left side is boldly outlined, her right in shadow; and one leg is straight, the other lifted. Through these differences, viewers are made aware that O'Keeffe's pose is the result of being half-seated, her body turned toward the camera. This is a pose that suggests both availability and participation, the nude as both a passive and an active body. It reveals that even in repose the body is never as perfectly symmetrical as our idea of it is.

The use of symmetry and doubling stands in contrast to the single dark mark of the pubic region, which has been displaced by the cropping from its actual position near the center of the body to the bottom edge of the photograph. The result turns what would otherwise be the attributed lack that

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has traditionally operated as the sign of the feminine into an insistent mark, suspending O'Keeffe's sexuality between absence and presence.[105] The conventional binary, which aligns male sexuality with presence and female sexuality with absence, is here dismantled through the vocabulary of abstraction. In place of the usual narrative context of psychoanalytic desires mobilized by notions of the gaze, Stieglitz and O'Keeffe stage her image through the terms of spectacle address. Viewers find that although they are confronting a thoroughly representational figure, their experience of O'Keeffe's body is rendered unfamiliar and disorienting by Stieglitz's abstract photographic vocabulary.

By calling attention to the conventions of meaning within photographic discourse, the image forces viewers to reassess the terms on which they usually would rely to make sense out of their experience of the photograph. In place of a projected and imagined narrative, the photograph becomes the space of a personal encounter. Its capacity to create visual abstractions out of O'Keeffe's body becomes the catalyst for self-conscious considerations of how the viewer's own sexual identity is constructed in response to another's. Ultimately, as numerous feminist critics have discussed recently, the *Portrait* creates the conditions that lead to a consideration of sexuality in relation to Stieglitz as photographer, O'Keeffe as nude model, and both as sexual and artistic

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[105] The well-rehearsed terms of presence and absence operating in the symbolic as signs of masculine and feminine sexuality respectively are rooted in the psychoanalytic linguistic theories of Jacques Lacan. See especially his essay, "The Signification of the phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 292-325. In addition to Lacan's writings, see Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. *Feminine Sexuality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), esp. 100-120.

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partners.[106] In a further self-reflexive doubling, those conditions mirror the tensions between subjectivity and objectivity inherent in the constitution of both the viewer and the viewed that this study is identifying with spectacle address.

A *Portrait* photograph from 1919 [Fig. 1.17] rehearses the same cropped elements of breasts, navel, and pubic hair that we saw in the 1918 torso [Fig. 1.16]. However, in nearly every way, these two images of O'Keeffe's torso address the spectator differently. In place of the strips of her robe that fall away to reveal her body, O'Keeffe's arms press in tightly against her torso. In place of an emphasis on symmetry, the doubling emphasizes asymmetry and difference. Her left arm extends directly down the right hand side of the image while her right arm swings diagonally across the image from left to right. The narrative suggestion is that her hands meet below the bottom edge of the image, possibly resting on the knee of her crossed legs. Although the insistent close-up and aggressive cropping does not present O'Keeffe's body in terms that are legible enough to establish clearly what narrative action has led to her pose, the photograph does suggest a body with crossed limbs, indicating the defensiveness and self-conscious vulnerability of being naked. Viewers are made to feel O'Keeffe's direct manipulation of her body for the camera -- and thus for them, which is the visual condition defined by spectacle address. O'Keeffe's proximity to the camera lens pushes her exposed flesh toward the viewer, heightening the experience of spectacle and implicating the spectator in her naked vulnerability.

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[106] See especially Chave, Lynes, and Wagner above.

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The spectator's gaze is encouraged to move across the surface of the image by the diagonal swing of O'Keeffe's right arm, but even more literally that swing makes palpable the squeezing of her breasts together. Her arms feel squeezed into the frame of the photograph at the same time that they constrain and frame her torso, forcing her breasts to take noticeably different shapes. And the pubic region that is such a powerful focus in the 1918 torso becomes, in this image, a mere smudge of dark tonality at the bottom right hand corner, more sign than symbol of O'Keeffe's sexuality. These active manipulations of O'Keeffe's body not only render its visible form, which is captured on the photographic surface, but they remind viewers that their perceptions are also the result of visual manipulations. Judith Davidov has pointed up the implicit relation between Stieglitz's *Portrait* and *Equivalents* series when she writes that his photographs "were not representations of special subject matter, but rather of 'seeing' in and of itself, or the pictorial equivalent of the emotion produced in the one who sees and photographs."[107]

The nude images of O'Keeffe in the *Portrait* not only point to the constructed nature of visual perception, but they also allude to the nature of photography itself as it renders her body strange through strategies of defamiliarization and disorientation. In another 1919 *Portrait* [Fig. 1.18] Stieglitz and O'Keeffe reference the nature of photography through their self-conscious allusions to the use of the camera in constituting the image of her body. In this photograph O'Keeffe's torso is cropped and squeezed even further. The image is reduced to the region of her breasts, her pubic hair and navel lying completely

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[107] Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in*

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outside the squarish frame. However, the photograph includes a crucial new element in the exploration of O'Keeffe's body: her hands dominate the space of the photograph as they grasp her breasts with an intensity that gives the image an undeniable haptic register.

The focus on O'Keeffe's hands links this nude image to the many photographs that feature her hands in the *Portrait*. In a 1999 exhibition, *Stieglitz, O'Keeffe and American Modernism*, Amy Ellis argues that the nudes before 1930 often "retain the indistinct outline of earlier pictorial photography and his collaborative work with Clarence White.[108] Such an assessment ignores the history of Stieglitz's shift from the visual vocabulary of Pictorialism, with its narrative focus, to the vocabulary of the modernist avant-garde, with its focus on abstraction. It also neglects the self-conscious use of photography to investigate visual representation that I am arguing was a crucial element in the *Portrait*. Most significantly, it misunderstands how Stieglitz used O'Keeffe's hands in developing a new photographic language during the late teens and twenties.[109]

As early as 1897 Stieglitz had made the association between the artistic practice of photography and the hand in his essay for *The American Annual of*

American Visual Culture (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 410.

[108] Kornhauser and Ellis, *Stieglitz, O'Keeffe and American Modernism*, 44.

[109] Ellis argues that O'Keeffe's hands served to associate her work with Stieglitz and thus subordinated her accomplishments to his. While there is obviously some truth to this iconographic interpretation of the symbolic role that her hands play in the Portrait, I would argue for the priority of more metaphoric and metonymic associations. Such an interpretation links O'Keeffe's hands to an avant-garde interest in the properties of different media, specifically the similarities and differences between painting and photography. It

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Photography entitled "The Hand Camera – Its Present Importance." In this essay Stieglitz lambastes Kodak's recently invented hand camera because it popularized photography by taking away the challenges that had given the medium its artistic character. He writes that Kodak's mass-marketed hand camera was: "a mere toy, good for the purposes of the globe-trotter, who wished to jot down photographic notes as he passed along his journey, but in no way adapted to the wants of him whose aim it is to do serious work."[110] However, Stieglitz goes on to praise use of the hand camera by artists who use it with creative deliberation as opposed to the mass of people who go "shooting off a ton of plates helter-skelter, taking their chances as to the ultimate result."[111] Stieglitz was creating photographs within the Pictorialist tradition at the time he wrote this essay, and he understood the use of "hand" within the discursive terms of that tradition and its emphasis on the manipulation of the print, which was very different than the way Kodak was appropriating the term. Stieglitz's essay is an attempt to recover an artistic understanding in references to the hand from what he perceived to be its degraded commercial use by Kodak. In his pictorialist discourse, the crucial link between painting and photography was the hand of the artist, and the essay signals his early recognition that the hand was central to any discussion about the medium of photography as an artistic practice.

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emphasizes the individuality of Stieglitz and O'Keeffe in their creative endeavors and thus stresses the collaborative nature of the *Portrait*.

[110] Stieglitz, "The Hand Camera," in Lyons, 108.

[111] Stieglitz, "The Hand Camera," 110.

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In a symposium address on an exhibition of Stieglitz's photographs at Yale University, Jonathan Weinberg spoke directly to the significance of these images of O'Keeffe's hands in the *Portrait*. He argued that they were a visual trope for Stieglitz's love of both O'Keeffe and photography:

> Many artists have a fundamental faith that the intense desire for a subject will produce art that is paradoxically about the medium itself. The hope is that by finding what the artist cares most about the world out there, the artist will arrive at that which is most important in his or her craft.[112]

As Weinberg went on to argue, the emphasis on O'Keeffe's hands thematizes touch in the *Portrait*. Moreover, Stieglitz also thematizes fabrication and abstraction in these images. The various activities that he associates with her hands, from painting to sewing, suggest the role of the hand as it is variously gendered in creative making. His radical cropping of the images also turns her hands into highly expressive elements that seem to originate from outside the frame rather than from O'Keeffe's own body. By turning O'Keeffe's *Portrait* into an opportunity to stage the idea of abstraction and fabrication through the

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[112] Unpublished paper, Jonathan Weinberg, "The Hands of the Artist: Alfred Stieglitz's Photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe," *Photographic Views: Developing a Language of Abstraction for Equivalents*, Yale University Art Gallery (October 1, 1999). I am indebted to Jonathan Weinberg for giving his paper at the Symposium that accompanied my exhibition *Alfred Stieglitz and the Equivalent*. Many of the ideas in this section regarding the relationship between Stieglitz and the photographs of O'Keeffe's hands are the result of numerous informal conversations in addition to his paper. The full extent of Jonathan's contribution is evident in his argument recently published as *Ambition and Love in Modern American Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001). See also

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metonymic and metaphoric use of her hands, Stieglitz creates a visual argument for the photograph as a mediated representation on the order of other artistic media.

The use of her hands to stress the mediated nature of the photographic representation becomes most acute in those images in which O'Keeffe manipulates her body for Stieglitz's camera lens, as he does in this 1919 nude torso from the *Portrait* [Fig. 1.18]. O'Keeffe adds her own distortions to his cropping, which truncates her body and presents it as a fragmented pair of breasts and hands. Her hands are elegantly posed in a manner similar to the other photographs of the *Portrait* that feature them, although the way in which she grasps her ample breasts creates the illusion that she has plunged her fingers into her body and rendered those same breasts anything but graceful. The conditions of visual confrontation, which accompany spectacle address, are created for viewers by the sensation that she is on the verge of rending her chest apart with her bare hands. Such violence calls up the discursive conditions of the photographer's objectifying gaze, and yet, O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, as model and photographer, have created this scene together, staging and imaging it with their own hands. Viewers are compelled to experience the violence done to her body and denied the position of voyeur by being made a witness to her own manipulations of it. Even more disturbing, it seems as if she were shoving her breasts forward, forcing the eyes of viewers to confront them like another pair of eyes or a set of lenses in a manner reminiscent of the corresponding tropes deployed by surrealists. This self-reflexivity linking breasts, eyes, and camera

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his essay for *Intimacy and the Creative Pair*, exhibition catalogue (Santa Fe, N.M.: Owings-Dewey Fine Art, 2001).

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lens, creates metaphoric and metonymic associations that reference the spectator's position as a viewer by linking body, vision, and photograph.

The spectacle of O'Keeffe's image initially suggests the visual display of exhibitionism, but one must ask: what is being exhibited? The answer is not as simple as the reduction suggested by the way O'Keeffe's fingers grasp her flesh and frame the nipples of her breasts. If viewers shift their focus from the distorted breasts and prominent nipples to the hands, it becomes evident that it is the very act of manipulating her body that O'Keeffe uses to create the elegant pose of her hands. In other words, O'Keeffe calls attention visually to the role of manipulation that is shared by the photographer and the model in creating the conditions of the photographic nude. By calling attention to her body in a way that aligns her image with the conventions of the western nude, O'Keeffe and Stieglitz point to the fetishizing of female breasts in that tradition. But the image displaces the more explicitly visual fetish of the breast with the physical potential of the hand and its manipulations. The photograph depicts a scene suspended between the possibilities of pain and pleasure through its double implication.

Ultimately, these hands point to the nature of photography itself as a creative intervention that mediates reality for the viewer. Not only does it thematize the manipulations that produce the photographic image, but it also is a visual depiction of the indexical character on which the photographic process depends. The clear imprint of O'Keeffe's fingers on the pliant flesh of her body is a reminder of the chemical imprint that produces the photographic image itself. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued, the dual character of the photographic image as iconic and indexical has special consequences for the translation of the

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western nude into the medium of photography.[113] She maintains that this double character of the photograph points to the "violence that may inhere in the representational act itself."[114] The self-conscious violence in O'Keeffe's manipulations of her breasts is itself an intervention into the traditional violence of the discursive conditions that define the western nude.

O'Keeffe's body, violently manipulated by her own hands and by Stiegltiz's cropping of the image, serves as a self-conscious illustration of the violent potential in the photograph's representation of the nude. However, the fact that Stieglitz and O'Keeffe collaborated in this violence points equally to the subjective possibilities of spectacle address. It is evidence that the photograph has the potential to make viewers conscious of the bodily conditions on which their own spectatorship depends. The metaphoric and metonymic associations that suspend O'Keeffe's body between an image of creativity and of violence point to the photograph's ability to be both a descriptive and an expressive medium. Within the emerging vocabulary of avant-garde modernism, the indexical nature of the photograph opened up the possibility of representations that were simultaneously referential and abstract.

The descriptive vocabulary of purist photography that was championed by Stieglitz stressed the capacity of the camera to explore the conditions of vision itself whether its subject matter was the changing sky or the protean possibilities of his companion and lover. However, in spite of how both subjects allowed

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[113] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Reconsidering Erotic Photography,"in *Photography at the Dock*, 233.

[114] Solomon-Godeau, "Reconsidering Erotic Photography," 221.

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Stiegltiz to create visual abstractions out of the play of geometry and light, the tensions between subjectivity and objectivity in the photographic exchange distinguish the photographs of the *Portrait* from the *Equivalents*. Although in both series the defamiliarization of forms and the disorientation of perceptions implicit in modernist abstraction force viewers to reconsider the conditions of their own spectatorship, the self-consciousness created by O'Keeffe's exposed body heightens what is at stake for viewers in the staging of such an encounter. Stieglitz might expect viewers to apprehend the personal resonances that he found between the images that his camera cut from the sky and his own subjective, interior states. But his images of O'Keeffe were much too deeply tied to his private experience of her sexual power for him to expect viewers truly to share in the ineffable associations they evoked. Nevertheless, the images of O'Keeffe maximized the sense of her body confronting its spectators, implicating them in a visceral evocation of their viewing condition through the photograph's self-reflexivity. By mobilizing the vocabulary of modernist abstraction, these nude depictions function as a sign of the difference between passive looking and active seeing, of sight versus observation.

Recounting Stieglitz's journey from Pictorialist to Modernist photography traces his shift from a vocabulary of symbolist referentiality to one of abstract perceptions, which are rooted in a visual awareness of the spectator's bodily experience before the image. His *Equivalents* and *Portrait* of Georgia O'Keeffe provide one arena to investigate how Stieglitz participated in the experiments of avant-garde abstraction during the 1920s. They illustrate his use of photography

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to explore issues of representation that we associate with other modernist artists of the period, specifically the development of a visual vocabulary that would change radically the conventions associated with the nude. The next chapter will explore how Imogen Cunningham navigated her own transition from the pictorialist mode of photography. It investigates what was at stake for her as a woman in the shift to an avant-garde visual vocabulary during the 1920s. And just as Stieglitz had staked his own personal concerns with nature in his cloud studies and with sexuality in his nude studies of O'Keeffe, so, too, Cunningham built a body of work around the twin subjects of nature in her flower studies and of sexuality in her nude studies of intimate male lovers and friends.

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Imogen Cunningham's Trails and Tendrils: From Pictorialist Practice to Modernist Vision

Cunningham shows the desirable characteristics of the hardy perennial.

– Minor White[1]

For Imogen Cunningham, the journey from a Pictorialist to a Modernist mode of representation reflects another aspect of the spectator's self-conscious viewing experience. Cunningham begins by making photographs in the pictorialist mode, creating images that project viewers into the narrative possibilities staged by her referential images. However, in spite of working within the conventions of pictorialism, which emphasize description and the referential associations of the image, the potential of a more direct encounter with the image and the visual conditions of its address to the spectator plays a crucial role in Cunningham's work from the beginning. As she takes up the more abstract visual possibilities of a modernist avant-garde vocabulary, Cunningham paradoxically shifts the viewer's experience to the relation between the image and spectator. Beginning in the 1920s, the visual vocabulary of display, with its attendant focus on the viewing conditions of spectatorship, becomes the explicit premise of her photographs. Reminiscent of Alfred Stieglitz, Cunningham develops an abstract idiom that deepens the emotional resonances in her photographs even as she moves away from the clearly

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[1] *Aperture*, Special Issue: *Imogen Cunningham* 11 (winter 1964), 2.

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recognizable scenarios inherent within the narrative tableaus that pictorialism stages.

Generally, historians compare Cunningham's photographic practice to Edward Weston's.[2] However, Judith Davidov challenges this notion, demonstrating that Cunningham should be seen at the center of a network of women photographers who were much more influential for her than Weston, notably Anne Brigman, Laura Gilpin, Consuelo Kanaga, Gertrude Käsebier, Dorthea Lange, and Alma Lavenson.[3] Nevertheless, both Cunningham and Weston pointed to the influence of Stieglitz. In his *Daybooks* Weston specifically acknowledges a debt to the equivalent in the photographing of forms when he writes: "I have come to realize life as a coherent whole, and myself as a part, with rocks, trees, bones, cabbages, smokestacks, torsos, all interrelated, interdependent – each a symbol of the whole."[4] Therefore, while it is important to keep in mind the group of women photographers who influenced Cunningham, a comparison of her photographic strategies with those of Stieglitz in the 1920s helps to define significant differences that are often overlooked between her work and that of Weston. Such a comparison reveals the influence of Cunningham's gendered position on the photographic mode that Stieglitz

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[2] Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work*, 338-9.

[3] See Davidov, p. 28-31 for her revision of Michel Oren's chart of influences from his article "On the Impurity of Group f.64 Photography," *History of Photography* 15 (Summer 1991): 122.

[4] Edward Weston, *Daybooks* (April 24, 1930), n.p. Weston goes on to describe this equivalency in the metaphoric language of synecdoche: "And further, details of these parts have their own integrity, and through them the whole is indicated, so that a pebble becomes a mountain, a twig is seen as a tree."

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called the equivalent as she pursued her own shift from a pictorialist to a modernist language of visual representation.[5] Her photographs provide the opportunity to investigate the subjectivity of both photographer and model when there is a reversal of normative gender assumptions that inscribe photographic practice within the domain of male prerogatives.

I. DOUBLE REVERSE

> *That was Imogen. She did what she felt, and there were no explanations or excuses.*
>
> -- Willard Van Dyke[6]

Cunningham first pursued her interest in photography at the University of Washington from 1903-06, writing her thesis, "Modern Processes of

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[5] In her last interview, Cunningham was asked about her personal philosophy of photography and specifically whether or not the idea of equivalents interested her. Cunningham's response, typical of her resistance to all kinds of discussions about theory was: "That's all bunk. I don't work on anyone's formula and I think that was a formula." Barnaby Conrad, III, "Photography: An Interview with Imogen Cunningham," *Art in America* 65 (May/June, 1977), 42-7. By referring to Cunningham's understanding of the equivalent, I am not proposing that she was working to define a photographic method in the same self-conscious way as Stieglitz when he called his cloud studies "equivalents." However, this study does propose that in a manner similar to other avant-garde modern artists, Cunningham was working in a mode of representation that shared an interest in defamiliarizing and disorienting points of view for which the term "photographic equivalent" is a convenient shorthand to describe the effects that they were attempting to achieve.

[6] "Willard Van Dyke," Interviewed by Judy Dater in *Imogen Cunningham: A Portrait* (Boston, Mass.: New York Graphic Society, 1979), 43.

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Photography" for a degree in Chemistry.[7] Following her thesis, she went to work for two years, June 1907 to July 1909, at the Seattle studio of Edward S. Curtis. Curtis had recently begun, in 1899, his twenty-volume study of more than forty-thousand negatives, which he would continue publishing until 1930 as The *North American Indian*. Cunningham worked more as a technician than a fellow artist with Curtis. She once quipped about Curtis that "he never spoke to the help."[8] But Cunningham acknowledges that she did learn the mechanics of photographic processing in Curtis' studio, paying tribute to A. F. Muhr, who was in charge of printing at the Curtis studio. It was Muhr who trained her in retouching and the exacting art of platinum printing .[9] She was also drawn to Curtis' work, which she explained in her last interview: "I really grew up with something of the Indians around me and I learned very quickly that nobody treated them right."[10] She goes on to say that not only was Curtis "a great photographer," but he was also motivated by a project that he believed would save the native peoples. The tension between artistic traditions and documentary description in the photographs of Curtis is a current that runs throughout Cunningham's own work. It is present beginning with her own

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[7] Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham: Ideas Without End, A Life in Photographs* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1993), 13.

[8] Quoted in Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 13.

[9] Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 13-14. Cunningham said of her time at the Curtis studio: "The man who influenced my life at that time was A. F. Muhr, who has never been heard of since. He was the operator of the Curtis establishment and he was a gentleman from way back, also a fine technician. He really gave me the run of the place." Quoted in *Aperture* 11 (Winter, 1964): 142.

[10] Conrad, III, 42.

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explorations of pictorialist conventions, and her symbolist vocabulary undoubtedly owes a debt to Curtis' portraits of native people in spite of his colonializing strategies.

However, Cunningham attributes her passion for pictorialist photography not to Curtis but to Gertrude Käsebier. She cites the impact of first seeing Käsebier's *Blessed Art Thou among Women* as the most significant early influence on her artistic development.[11] Her first photographs, taken on the University of Washington campus in 1906, already reflect a penchant for the pictorialist mode. Even the startlingly, sharp-focused and unmanipulated print of Cunningham's 1906 nude *Self-portrait* with it documentary detail places her within the painterly conventions of mythic Venuses. It rehearses the symbolist associations between women and the natural landscape that supported the spreading of both subjects across the field of the image for the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer.

Receiving a grant to study in Dresden with photochemist Robert Luther, Cunningham was exposed to the world's most prominent photographers at the 1909 Internationale Photographische Ausstellung (International Photographic

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[11] Although Käsebier had made *Blessed Art Thou among Women* in 1899 and reproduced it in Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work* in January, 1903, Richard Lorenz argues that Cunningham probably first saw it in Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman*, where it was published in 1907. See Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 13. In a March 1975 interview just a year before her death, Cunningham tried to play down the early influence of Käsebier when she responded to a question about how she got started in photography: "Nobody started me, I was self-motivated. But I did see something of Gertrude Käsebier – and that's all I'm going to tell you about what started me off." See Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 293. In her final interview she was more willing to acknowledge the influence of Käsebier: "Her work was published in a magazine called *The Craftsman*. I said to myself, 'There is a

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Exposition). It was here that she saw the work of photographers from the Linked Ring and the Photo-Secession, especially Adolph de Meyer, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Anne W. Brigman, and Frank Eugene. Richard Lorenz claims that at the exposition Cunningham probably purchased Eugene's *Adam and Eve*, 1898, and his *La Cigale (Dido)*, 1898, both of which were also published in *Camera Work*.[12] Brigman, the first West Coast pictorialist to be published in *Camera Work* and championed by Stieglitz, exhibited her highly symbolist depictions of the nude in natural settings at the 1909 Dresden Exposition. Brigman provided an important model for Cunningham as she was developing her own photographic idiom of the nude.[13] Cunningham obviously greatly admired Stieglitz and the work of the Photo-Secession. On her way back to Seattle from Dresden in 1910, she stopped in New York to visit Gallery 291. She wrote to Stieglitz in 1914 that her goal was to be published by him: "I may as well frankly tell you of my ambition -- I want to be represented in *Camera Work* some day and I want to work toward that."[14]

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photographer. Why haven't I seen anything this good before?'" Quoted in Conrad, III, 42.

[12] *Adam and Eve* was published in *Camera Work* 30 (April 1910) and *La Cigale* in *Camera Work* 5 (January 1904). For a discussion of Cunningham's purchase of these images and their importance to her own collection, see Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham: On the Body* (Boston and New York: Little, Brown, 1998), 11 and 38, n. 15.

[13] By the early 1920s, Cunningham and Brigman had become friends, although Cunningham's later comments about Brigman are uncharacteristically lacking in generosity, especially regarding the esteem that Stieglitz expressed for Brigman's work. See Lorenz, *On the Body*, 38, n. 21.

[14] Quoted in Lorenz, *On the Body*, 13.

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Upon her return to Seattle, Cunningham took up the subject of the nude, which would become, along with her botanicals and portraits, the defining genres of her oeuvre. Two of the first photographs that Cunningham created on her return were the biblically suggestive *Eve Repentant*, 1910 and *The Supplicant*, also 1910. Most likely these works were inspired by her recent education in European art that living in Dresden had made possible. Her early and easy acceptance of the nude as a subject was probably related to an exposure to Die Brücke artists exhibiting in Dresden during her years there. Their use of the nude was simultaneously expressive and symbolic, two characteristics also aligned with pictorialist sensibilities. Nudes in the landscape, especially bathing or engaged in other forms of recreation, were considered an avant-garde challenge to bourgeoisie morality and social conventions. Cunningham's embrace of this idiom for her photographic work suggests her own commitment to the European avant-garde and its developing languages of modernist vision that would result in a simultaneous vocabulary of abstraction and reference.[15]

As we saw in the previous chapter, pictorialism was a mode of photographic production that self-consciously tied its vocabulary to the history of fine art. In doing so, its practitioners attempted to mirror the appearance of the other visual arts, especially painting, as Davidov explains:

> They [pictorialists] achieved special painterly effects by using soft-focus lenses and, in the darkroom, tools, brushes, and fingers to

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[15] For a discussion of the relation between abstraction and reference, see Charles Harrison, "Abstraction," in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 185-212

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> shape or alter forms in the soft gums and oils with which they coated photographic plates. Printed on a variety of art papers, from the heavily textured to the smooth Japanese tissues, no print was exactly like its negative; each individual picture was meant to be a collector's item.[16]

Not surprisingly, pictorialists also borrowed the subject matter of the canvases that they were emulating through their photographic techniques, and it was the nude that was increasingly held up at the most significant genre in the nineteenth-century salons and academies.[17] Pictorialists, therefore, in their gamut to create photographic images that could compete with painting, sought to emulate the conventions of painted nudes. Seeking to create images that reflected the ideologies of the era, they also rehearsed the traditional gendering of the nude. Moreover, as a vocabulary developed during the nineteenth century with its gendered ideology of separate spheres, pictorialism reflected that doctrine's increasingly heterosexual requirements for representations of the nude body.[18]

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[16] Davidov, 52. She attributes this definition to Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 45.

[17] T. J. Clark points out that even as the female nude became more ubiquitous than ever in the 1860s, it was disintegrating as a genre. See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 122-8.

[18] For a historical discussion of "separate spheres," see Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39. For the effect of the regime of "separate spheres" on sexual practices, see Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston,

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Although the function of the nude as an art historical genre is to display the naked body, most artists authorized their images by reference to classical scenarios that relied on an aesthetic theory of gendered morality. The beautiful, nude, young male body operated as the signifier of heroic virtue, an association linking the masculine with action and power. The beautiful, nude, female body, on the other hand, operated as the signifier of uncorrupted nature, an association linking the traditionally feminine with availability and innocence. Artists often relied on a set of conventional symbols to make these metaphoric and metonymic associations. To cite two of the most obvious frequent examples, classical male nudes may carry swords (or be shown wielding them) and their female counterparts may rise dripping from some body of water (or be otherwise engaged with water as in pouring it from a container).[19] The Greek term for this pose is "anadyomene," which means "rising up after having been submerged," and it carries the strong sexual overtones that such nudes evoke.[20]

Mass.: Beacon Press, 1997). For the impact of separate spheres doctrines on nineteenth-century artists, especially women painters in the traditions of Realism and Impressionism, see Whitney Chadwick, "Separate but Unequal: Woman's Sphere and the New Art," in *Women, Art, and Society*, second ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996; revised, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 120-251.

[19] As representative examples in pictorialist photography, see Anne Brigman, *The Source*, 1909, published in Camera Work 25 (1909) and F. Holland Day, *Nude Archer*, 1905, published in Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, 31. However, as Ellenzsweig's discussion of this image makes clear, the homoerotic register was never far removed from images of the male nude by the time of pictorialism.

[20] Thomas Moore, *The Soul of Sex: Cultivating Life as an Act of Love* (Harper Collins, 1998), 48. Moore discusses the erotic implications this and other poses associated with Greek images of Aphrodite: "parakyptousa" – looking indirectly or peeping – and "anasyrma" – lifting of the dress (47-60).

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These associations with classical art were established well before pictorialism in the early history of photography. Eugène Delacroix worked with the photographer Eugène Durieu to produce a series of academie nudes that were meant to serve as painting and study aids for artists in a manner similar to the use of albums of nude sketches done from life that dated back to the Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical academies.[21] These photographs heightened the studio/academic associations of the nude: isolating the figure from contemporary references, positioning it in poses reminiscent of classical sculptures, and highlighting its musculature and form through strong lighting. Male figures were embedded within the activity of narrative and female figures within settings that placed their bodies on display, even though such display might be supported by the narrative alibis of myth or allegory. Such a compensatory binary follows the gendered terms outlined by Laura Mulvey in her theory of the male gaze.

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[21] In order to signal the tradition of training that began in the Renaissance, these drawings are usually referred to through some variant of the word "academy," depending on the country of origin, such as the French "académie," the German "akademien," or the English "academy figure/nude." For a discussion of the Delacroix/Durieu collaboration and their translation of the academy figure into a photographic idiom, see Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, 6-15; and Emmanuel Cooper, *Fully Exposed: The Male Nude in Photography* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990; second ed., 1995), 15-17. For a more general discussion of the academic male figure later in the century during the period of pictorialism, see Ellenzweig, 6-15 and Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 61-71. Peter Weiermair points to the double audience of art students and seekers of erotic imagery to which these realistic photographic studies of the naked body appealed in *The Hidden Image: Photographs of the Male Nude in the nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Claus Nielander (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 12-13. Also see the French text by Jean Sague, *Delacroix et la photographie* (Paris: Herscher, 1982).

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In a study of French painting at the end of the eighteenth century, Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that the heroic activity of the powerful, nude male in that country's history painting was disrupted by works featuring the ephebe, a more sexually ambiguous, passive nude male.[22] Solomon-Godeau notes that this shift in the male nude was accompanied in France by an "eclipse of the male nude and the ascendancy of the female nude."[23] During the course of roughly a thirty-year period, the female nude became the dominant representation of the naked body, replacing the male nude, which had been the staple of history painting since the Renaissance.

Solomon-Godeau ties this change to a historical shift within the ideology of masculinity itself: faced with changing social roles brought about by the rise of the bourgeoisie, the visual strategies that had supported the culture of aristocracy had to be reconfigured.[24] The naked male body of history painting became a site to reconfigure the fixed gender codes of Revolutionary France by emphasizing the erotic interest in men's bodies that had been deferred through the active agency of their narrative roles. As a result, the nude became an overdetermined and anxiety-ridden sign of passivity and libidinal desire rather than activity and heroic passion as it had been since the Renaissance. This shift,

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[22] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation," *Art History* 16 (June 1993): 286-312. She expands on this argument in her monograph *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

[23] Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble," 286.

[24] Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble," 306.

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beginning with the male ephebes, guaranteed that no matter its apparent guise, the register of the nineteenth-century nude would be feminized.[25]

A tension, thus, operates within visual representations of the nude, whether male or female, between its narrative and display functions. And, as Solomon-Godeau's argument makes clear, this is a gendered tension, which maps the contested social networks of the historical moment in which the image is produced. Nearly a century later when the representational strategies that Solomon-Godeau traces had become solidified in painting as visual conventions, pictorialists also tied their photographs of the body, especially in its guise of the nude, to debates over gender and sexuality. Their photographs reflect the anxieties brought about by modern industrialism and the changing social relations it fostered. Further, that debate would of necessity reflect the opposition between narrative and display that structures the visual function of the nude itself. When Cunningham chose the nude as one of her primary subjects, she was engaging with the sexual ambiguities embodied in the culture's changing assumptions about gender roles summarized in the doctrine of separate spheres.

As we have seen, the locus of the nude as an artistic subject throughout the nineteenth century had been women's bodies, represented by a feminized libidinal economy of desire and display. However, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau has pointed out in a discussion of photography, the images produced by the camera "cannot be adequately considered merely as an extension of a pre-

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[25]Solomon-Godeau's view, of course, rejects the thesis of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, which argues that since the Renaissance a fairly stable system of

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existing genre by a new medium."[26] She argues that "photography produces a wholly different visual paradigm."[27] In the shift from a painted to a photographic depiction, the relation between the visual image and the viewer is complicated by the indexical character of the photograph. As an index, the photograph not only translates something into an image, but it also transcribes that thing directly from its actual existence in front of the camera lens onto the photographic emulsion. In other words, the photographic representation operates through the double property of iconicity and indexicality -- it is both a depiction and a trace of its referent, which the operator of the camera viewed at the moment that the shutter was snapped. Solomon-Godeau writes that "the spectator is inevitably situated in a certain -- however ambiguous -- relation to the real."[28] Such a situating sets up a direct and causal link between the phenomenological experience of the viewer and the ontological status of the photograph. And it is this that defines the spectator of the photograph as an embodied viewer rather than a transcendental eye.[29]

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visual organization has continued to operate in which "*men act* and *women appear*." See John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

[26] Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 232.

[27] Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 232.

[28] Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 233.

[29] This is not to say that the photograph equals, or even empirically describes, "the real." In their article, Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh, argue that although the camera appears to record actual physical objects, it is only recording the light reflected by those objects: "These 'physical objects' do not have a single 'image' -- 'their image' -- but rather, the camera can manipulate the reflected light to create an infinite number of images." See "Photography, Vision, and Representation," in Thomas Barrow et al., eds., *Reading into*

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Solomon-Godeau's purpose is to demonstrate that it is this emphasis on the ontological nature of both the image and the spectator that sets the photographic nude in a different register from the tradition of the nude as it had developed in drawing and painting. She asks: "Insofar as the category 'nude' presupposed an elaborate and highly stylized set of mediations, how was photography to manage them?"[30] Her answer is that photography shifted the erotics of the nude "from a conception of the sexual as an activity to a new emphasis on specularity -- the sexual constituted as a visual field rather than an activity as such."[31] Her point is that this shift to the erotic as visual guaranteed that the body of women as represented in photography would always already be positioned as spectacle and thus as a sexual commodity.[32] This is a well-rehearsed argument within the feminist criticism of visual culture. It is an argument that has been extremely productive for describing how the psychology of visual representation supports and naturalizes the gendered relations of power that subordinate women as "looked at" objects.[33] With this

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Photography: Selected Essays, 1959-1980 (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 70.

[30] Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 233.

[31] Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 233.

[32] Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 237.

[33] As a student of Linda Nochlin, Solomon-Godeau is extending to photography observations first made by Nochlin in a ground-breaking, 1972 essay where she writes: "conventions of eroticism are so deeply ingrained that one scarcely bothers to think of them: one is that the very term 'erotic art' is understood to imply the specification 'erotic-for-men.' . . . There really *is* no erotic art in the nineteenth century which does *not* involve the image of women. . . . Whether the erotic object be breast or buttocks, shoes or corsets, a matter of pose or of prototype, the imagery of sexual delight or provocation has always

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history of the relation between the nineteenth-century nude and photography in mind, I would like to return to Cunningham's earliest depictions of the nude as a pictorialist subject.

Richard Lorenz, longtime champion and biographer of Cunningham, asserts that her interest in promoting "the significance of the photograph as a work of art" led her to the nude as "a classic and appropriate theme."[34] In April, 1915, Cunningham wrote an article on photography for Seattle's *The Town Crier* entitled "Is It Art." In it she finesses the question about the status of photography and the other arts with a characteristically avant-garde gambit: "Let us hope that by the time the critics and artists have decided whether there is such a thing as modern art or not, they will also be calmly content to call the work of the camera by its own rightful name of photography."[35] Probably taking her cue from Stieglitz, she maintains that the question of the photograph as "art" is best resolved by considering it within the context of other artistic media, and even more specifically within the avant-garde uses of those other media. The crucial issue is not the photograph's ability to replicate the aesthetic appeal of established art, but to focus on the unique conditions of production offered by the camera and its own aesthetic. The term "photograph," just as the term "painting," is not sufficient to determine whether the category of "art" should be applied to a work. Rather, it is the aesthetic use of the medium that

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been created *about* women for men's enjoyment, by men. . . . Man is not only the subject of all erotic predicates, but the customer for all erotic products as well, and the customer is always right." See Linda Nochlin, "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art," in *"Women, Art, and Power" and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 136-139.

[34] Lorenz, *On the Body*, 14.

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establishes whether or not the specific creative work in that medium may be described as artistic.

In December of 1915, *The Town Crier* published two of Cunningham's photographs featuring nudes: *Eve Repentant* was a double nude of a man and woman and *Reflections* was a triple nude portrait of a family. Both images dated from 1910, the year she had visited Gallery 291 on her return from Dresden and become interested in Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work*. Interestingly, the April 1910 issue of *Camera Work* had included a photogravure of the same photograph by Frank Eugene from 1898 entitled *Adam and Eve* [Fig. 2.1] that Cunningham had purchased at the 1909 International Photographic Exposition.[36]. Cunningham's *Eve Repentant*, 1910 [Fig. 2.2], can be seen as her own response to Eugene's double nude, which she found compelling enough to make one of the earliest additions to her personal collection. A comparison of the two photographs illustrates Cunningham's debt to the pictorialist tradition and her interest in the photographic nude as early as 1910, but its differences also reveal the effect of her gender on her images.[37]

Eugene's *Adam and Eve* is an archetypal pictorialist image, beginning with a title that aligns it with one of the most time-honored traditions of history

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[35] Quoted in Lorenz, *On the Body*, 15.

[36] Lorenz, *On the Body*, 10.

[37] Those differences also undoubtedly reflect her situation as a woman positioned within artistic representations of Adam and Eve that can be traced back to the male-centered assumptions of religious depictions since the Renaissance. The hidden face of Adam and exposed face of Eve here probably references Masaccio's *The Expulsion from Paradise*, ca. 1427, his fresco in the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy.

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painting, the Judeo-Christian narrative of human beginnings from the book of *Genesis*. The moral message of the first couple's creation and fall from paradise has served as the rationale to display the naked bodies of both men and women even when decorum might militate against such display. In this photograph, Eugene follows the conventional presentation of gendered opposition that gave precedence to the female nude as an object for display in nineteenth-century imagery. Although both the male and female body are represented within the tradition of the classical nude, Eugene manipulates the glass negative with cross-hatching that, when printed, largely obscures the section devoted to the male figure. We glimpse just enough to discern that he is modeled on antiquity's heroic ideal male: youthful, muscular, standing in contrapposto, and ready for action. Seen from the back, his sexuality is communicated by the strong rigidity of his form rather than by a view of his sex organs.

Eve, on the other hand, is presented through the stereotypes of nineteenth-century femininity that mark the female body as an object for display. She is presented frontally without the heavy cross-hatchings that partially obscure the male body. In fact, only her head is scored, removing the possibility of an identity. She is made available to the viewer's open gaze, the sign of woman summarized as female sexuality. Further, she stands in a pose borrowed from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingre's *Vénus Anadyomène*, 1848, which was one of the defining works in the tradition of the female nude and the set of gendered assumptions it helped to constitute during the nineteenth century.[38] Moreover, in place of the arrested movement indicated by Adam's

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[38] Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, 126.

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contrapposto, Eve hangs languidly on him for support, her body highlighted by the strong chiaroscuro that adds to the symbolist evocation of her distressed mood. Eugene's pictorialist manipulations visually encode the Victorian doctrine of the separate spheres, projecting them as natural gender characteristics embedded in the moral narrative of Judeo-Christian sexuality.

By contrast, Cunningham's double nude image entitled *Eve Repentant*, 1910, deploys the conventions of pictorialism to a very different effect. In a startling reversal, it is Eve who supports the languishing and grieving body of Adam.[39] Cunningham builds her revisionist narrative of the biblical story in a manner that allows her to resist the stereotypical conventions of the female nude at the time. More alike than different as bodies, these two figures nevertheless manifest contrasting registers. Rather than passive, she is active: it is Adam who appears to be collapsing under the weight of his own body, which in its flaccidity has become of sign of sexual impotence. Rather than weak, she is strong: her arm and hand grasp Adam firmly. Rather than a body on display, Eve takes up the classic contrapposto position. Cunningham presents her from the side and thereby denies viewers the fantasy of easy access that would be promoted by a frontal or rear position. Eve also reflects the new contours "of the ideal female figure that replaced the corset's exaggerated and constricting curves with the more flexible serpentine curvature of the modern body."[40] But most startling of all, Cunningham refuses the impersonality of Eugene's faceless woman. In spite of using the pictorialist convention of soft focus, Cunningham gives viewers a

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[39] Mary E. Law, *Confronting the Uncomfortable* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 1989).

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clear profile with its expression of open-eyed purpose as Eve intently observes the despondent and faceless Adam. In place of Eugene's heavy cross-hatching, with its pictorialist references to the tradition of academic drawing, Cunningham uses the forest setting in order to produce the dramatic chiaroscuro that isolates the couple both literally and symbolically in the dark field of the image.

Cunningham's photograph shares the pictorialist sensibility of romantic individualism, symbolist philosophy, and tonalist mood of Eugene's image.[41] And yet, she skillfully weaves these elements into a narrative of female empowerment. She presents both woman and man as companions in the same fate through a double reversal. In the first reversal, the female nude operates as the sign of heroic action. In the second reversal, Cunningham refuses a simple contradiction of traditional roles: the male nude does not take up the earlier conventionally feminine sign of uncorrupted nature and available innocence. Indeed, Adam's more passive pose indicates exactly the opposite condition: he is the sign of innocence shamed. And his hunched over position from the back hides his penis from both Eve and the viewer. In other words, Cunningham reverses the usual expectations of the image in both its narrative and its spectatorial modes of address to viewers.

Cunningham also constructs the double address of this photograph as a narrative and as display by staging the scene within a forest landscape. On the narrative level, it provides the dark, isolated setting that is appropriate for the

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[40] Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 254.

[41] These are the characteristics that Douglas Nickel summarizes as the essence of the pictorialist sensibility. See Peter C. Bunnell et al., *Photography at*

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moral tale and offers a plausible rationale for the dramatic chiaroscuro. The resulting subtle play of patterned light enhances the sensuality of these bodies. On the level of display, the forest creates a claustrophobic space that pushes viewers into the intimacy of this moment. It makes the sense of the spectator's voyeurism palpable. In both instances, the natural setting constitutes the condition of this nude couple as a natural consequence of their positions both *in* the narrative and *before* the viewer.

II. ON THE TRAIL OF THE MALE NUDE

> *It would be a simple thing to allow the world's inherent sexuality to blossom and be seen and enjoyed in the world around us. It would only take some leisure, less exploitation and more honoring of nature.*
>
> -- Thomas Moore[42]

It was in Cunningham's photographs of her husband, Roi Partridge posed naked in the landscape, that she most fully explored the nude as a genre within the possibilities offered by pictorialist practice. Cunningham created numerous individual photographic studies of Partridge, beginning in 1915 with a series of images that capture his naked body along the wilderness slope of Mount Rainier. Partridge, an accomplished etcher, often spent time in the wilderness, where he

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Princeton: Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of Collecting and Teaching the History of Photography (Princeton, N.J.: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1998), 68.

[42] Moore, *The Soul of Sex*, 262-3.

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would sketch and draw directly on copper plates.[43] Cunningham married him in February, 1915, and accompanied him on his next sketching trip. As we saw in *Eve Repentant*, Cunningham had been applying the lessons of pictorialism from the Photo-Secession since 1910. Augmented by her recent experience of falling in love, this secluded place of wilderness offered a perfect occasion to explore her lover's body through the idiom of pictorialist conventions.

It is telling that the display of Cunningham's photographs produced a storm of protest when one of them was published in the 1916 Christmas issue of *The Town Crier*.[44] The controversy these images generated is especially odd given what was by 1916 the conservative visual vocabulary of pictorialism that Cunningham used in the series and the heterosexuality implicit in the relationship between model and photographer as husband and wife. A similar reception the previous year had greeted the paper's publication of her photographs *Reflections* and *Eve Repentant*, with their nude subject matter and feminist revisions of the genre.[45] In the chapter on Stieglitz, this study has already traced the pictorialist roots in symbolist philosophy and its vocabulary of subjective expression that was supported by the idiom of post-impressionist tonalism. The end of the nineteenth-century also saw the emerging hegemony

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[43]For a discussion of Roi Partridge and his work see Anthony R. White, ed. *The Graphic Art of Roi Partridge: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Los Angeles, Ca.: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1988); and M. Ball, "West Coast Pictorialism: Etchings and Photographs by Roi Partridge and Imogen Cunningham," *Artweek* 11 (August 16, 1980): 13-14.

[44] Davidov, *Women's Camera Work*, 331.

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of heterosexuality as a regime of sexual power.[46] In this ideological economy of the body, pictorialism also became a site for the contested field of sexuality itself.

In her alternative, feminist history of American photography, Judith Davidov summarizes pictorialism's gendered antinomy in the visual relation between the body and nature: "in photography as in painting, the predominantly male artist (as culture) transformed the female nude (woman's body as nature) into a work of art."[47] Given the assumption that the body of

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[45] Margery Mann, *Imogen!: Imogen Cunningham: Photographs, 1910-1973,* exhibition catalogue (London and Seattle, Wa.: University of Washington Press, 1973), n.p.

[46] The emergence of western cultural sexuality as a social category based in the primacy of heterosexuality has its beginnings in the formation of the modern gender order during the period from approximately 1450 to 1650. Social historian R. W. Connell has traced this history to four broad developments that had consequences for gender relations: the crumbling of a monastic model of life during the Renaissance and Reformation, the establishment of overseas empires, the conditions required by commercial capitalism, and the state organizations necessary to support nearly three centuries of religious and dynastic civil wars. Connell explains that in the nineteenth-century this modern gender order was forced to negotiate the shift from a politics of the gentry, with its emphasis on the hierarchies of kinship networks, to the bureaucratic politics of the liberal state, with its emphasis on individual citizens. The ideological apparatus that effected this shift was the institution of gendered separate spheres within bourgeois culture. See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities: Knowledge, Power and Social Change* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: 1995), esp. 185-203.

[47] Davidov, 52. Ludmilla Jordanova offers an important caveat to this generalization in a response to Linda Nochlin's influential essay, "Women, Art, and Power." Jordanova writes: "It is the case that many societies associate women in some way or other with nature. But, and it is a very big but, such a statement cannot stand on its own. Next to it needs to be set the fact that women are also commonly associated with civilization, refinement, culture, high sentiments, principles and feelings -- terms which customarily stand in opposition to nature." Davidson is raising an important issue that needs to be kept in mind throughout this discussion of gendered binaries: namely that often when the compensatory categories that support gendered oppositions are overturned, the binary remains, but in the process of its reconfiguration, the instability and endless reversability of the binary system is revealed.

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woman was aligned with nature, images of the female nude are frequently represented in the natural landscape whether or not the narrative diagetics of the scene support such a setting. This, of course, was the real scandal -- not the naked body of Victorine Meurent -- that Edouard Manet famously exposed in his 1863 *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Odilon Redon's response to Manet's painting demonstrates the power of this discursive association between the natural landscape and the body of woman in nineteenth-century France: "The painter is not being intelligent if, after he has painted a nude woman, she leaves us with the feeling that she is about to get dressed again."[48] Redon's objection is that Manet has replaced the classical, ideal nude with the picture of a naked woman and thus transformed a symbol of nature into a mere representation of herself.[49]

Nevertheless, I think Davidov is correct to attribute the assumptions of this generalization to the visual regime of pictorialist photographic practice. See Ludmilla Jordanova, "Linda Nochlin's Lecture 'Women, Art, and Power'," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, eds. Norman Bryson et al. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 55-56. For a similar discussion of the relationships among nature and women that links this association to "primitivism" and the impulse to abstraction in the late nineteenth-century French paintings of Gauguin, see Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the 'Modern'," in Charles Harrison et al., *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press and The Open University, 1993), 22-27.

[48] Quoted in Françoise Cachin and Charles S. Moffett, *Manet, 1832-1883*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 170. For the full text of the journal entry that is the source of this quote, see Odilon Redon, "The Intellectual Painter," in Linda Nochlin, ed., *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874-1904*, Sources and Documents in the History of Art Series, ed. H.W. Janson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 197-8.

[49] The classic, nineteenth-century visual statement of this alignment of female nude and landscape is given in Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio, Real Allegory Defining a Period of Seven Years of my Artistic Life*, 1854-55. At the center of the painting, Courbet depicts himself focused on the act of painting a large landscape on canvas. Directly behind Courbet, and literally aligned with the edge of the represented landscape in the painting, a female nude stands as the focus of the viewer's spectatorial gaze.

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Deborah Bright argues that this assumption, which allows for the conflation of female nude and landscape, results from the belief "that because a woman is more involved with the 'natural' functions of reproduction and nurture, she is 'closer to nature' than men."[50] Bright goes on to explain that the "insidious corollary" to this position is that "men *choose* to interact with nature and bend it to their will, while women simply *are* nature and cannot define themselves in opposition to it."[51]

When Cunningham photographed her husband Roi Partridge, naked in the wilderness, she was resisting such gendered assumptions about the differences between an active masculine nude and a passive feminine nude. Cunningham's images set up that difference as a tension between opposing positions of spectatorship and suspend viewers between those positions by challenging facile gender assumptions about male and female bodies. In a series of photographs, Cunningham confounds viewer expectations by depicting her husband in the very terms traditionally used to display the female body. Interestingly, she does not show Partridge while he is sketching, in spite of the

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[50] Deborah Bright, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (London and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989; reprinted, 1993), 138.

[51] Bright, 138. The logic of this gendered equation has been a central focus of feminist study for the past thirty years. Three of the most influential texts on the roots of this ideology in the nineteenth-century have been: Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-87; and Marcia Pointon, "Interior Portraits: Women Physiology and the Male Artist," *Feminist Review* 22 (Spring 1986), 5-22; and Linda Nochlin, "Women, Art, and Power," in *Women, Art, and Power*, 1-36. For an overview of the way this ideology is encoded in the language of American culture, the best general overview remains Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as*

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fact that this is the very purpose for which he has come to Mount Rainier. By photographing him within another context she removes more than his clothes. The photographs of his nude body deflect from the usual masculine-defined activity in which he would be making culture out of his experience in the wilderness.

The photograph that created the uproar when published in *The Town Crier* remains firmly rooted in the soft-focused conventions traditionally associated with pictorialism. Entitled *The Bather*, 1915 [Fig. 2.3], its soft-focused sfumato hightens the image's fine art associations and provides a measure of decorum in representing Partridge's naked body. The title also points to the traditionally artistic alibi for displaying the female nude with its connotations of self-absorbed attention to the body associated with femininity and the active scrutiny of illicit voyeurism associated with the masculine gaze. But it reverses that alibi, encouraging viewers to inquire into the appropriateness of such associations. It also exposes those associations attached to the male nude that have been repressed because they do not support the traditional gender organization.

The photograph depicts Partridge seated in a crouching pose reminiscent of a dancer. This image is a more tightly cropped close-up of another photograph taken at the same site entitled *The Faun*, 1915 [Fig. 2.4]. Lorenz points to the associations that align the titles and poses in both photographs with the Ballets Russes' 1912 production of *L'Après-midi d'un faune.*[52] Partridge's position echoes the opening posture of Vaslav Nijinsky, whose sensuous and

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Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[52] Lorenz, *On the Body*, 17.

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erotic performance as a sexually frustrated faun in that ballet both tantalized and scandalized bourgeois society.[53] Cunningham, in effect, was announcing her own bourgeois sexual scandal, a woman taking up the prerogatives of the gaze. In the process, she linked her photographic art to a form of music and dance that relied on the tension between narrative and the display of a theatrical spectacle.

Additionally, Cunningham's photograph stages its narrative references in an avant-garde manner by announcing the conditions of photographic production itself. Partridge is seated at the edge of a still pool, his body and its reflected image almost perfectly centered in the image. By creating a nearly exact mirror image, Cunningham draws attention to the representational capacity of the camera and the reflective character of the photographic medium. The inverted doubling of Partridge's body references the action of the camera lens in capturing its subject on film. This "seeing double" remained a lifelong preoccupation in Cunningham's photographs that gives her entire oeuvre a self-reflexive cast, which will become even more significant in her more abstract

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[53] In addition, Nijinsky's well-published affair with the company's directory, Sergey Diaghilev, made even an association with the ballet enough to bring a charge of sexual scandal. For an account of the queer erotics operating in Nijinsky's coreography, organized around photographs of his four major dances, including *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, see Kevin Kopelson, *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1997). Kopelson writes that Nijinsky's notoriety was "based upon common knowledge of his relationship with Serge Diaghliev, upon his having been one of the first sensuous young men to dominate a Western stage recently riven by the homosexual/heterosexual division we're still contending with, and upon his mastery of leading roles and body languages that had little to do with conventional masculinity" (3-4).

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nudes.[54] Most telling, the flattening of Partridge's image into a reflected surface is a reminder of the translation from three to two dimensions that is central to photographic depictions even when most realistic. In this photograph Cunningham claims as her own, and for women more generally, the vision and the technology afforded by the camera, which previously has been constituted as a domain thought to be masculine. It becomes a reflexive medium rather than a mastering one.

Most of the remaining photographs in the series rely on pictorial evidence alone for their narrative implications. In place of suggestive titles, they are simply called *On Mount Rainier* and are given a number. But they all share an interest in the nude as a site to suspend viewers within the tensions created by a double address to the spectator in terms of narrative and spectacle. Several photographs depict Partridge wading through the same reflecting pool and bending over to touch his own reflection. The associations with Narcissus that were suggested in the earlier photographs of Patridge's beautiful young image reflected in a pool are made explicit here. The moral lesson of the myth of Narcissus is against self-love and the excessive preoccupation with one's own image. As a narrative for the camera, it is particularly appropriate because of the confusion caused by the inability of Narcissus to discriminate between a two-dimensional image and a flesh-and-blood person.

Narcissus is further condemned for becoming obsessed with gazing at a male body, with its implication of homosexuality: he is unaware that it is his own

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[54] According to Davidov, although Cunningham attributed this habit to having twins, it was a central focus of her interest in photography from the beginning. Davidov, 332.

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body that prompts his gay desire for another man. By evoking the myth of Narcissus, these photographs of Partridge slyly expose the double assumption that the photographic gaze can only be produced and occupied by a straight man. Although her relationship with Partridge contextualizes his body as heterosexual, the narrative of Narcissus constitutes him as a sexually ambiguous ephebe and thus calls attention to the instability of gender assumptions. By playing the role of Echo with her photographs, Cunningham reflects the "male trouble" that Solomon-Godeau attributes to times of changing social conditions such as those of early modernity.

These photographs also inscribe Partridge's body within the traditionally female discourse of the landscape. The same associations that have operated to align the bodies of women with the natural world are given visual force in Cunningham's images. *On Mount Rainier 10*, 1915 [Fig. 2.5], depicts Partridge in one of his Narcissus poses in the left foreground of the photograph. The triangled shape of his bent body echoes the triangled shapes of trees, pool, rising hill, and mountains. The image encourages its viewers to incorporate him into the landscape, both near and distant, as a complementary form that is part of the natural view. *On Mount Rainier 1*, 1915 [Fig. 2.6], strongly emphasizes the Narcissus narrative through a close-up image that allows spectators to see Partridge's actual gaze at his own reflection. Nevertheless, his body is curled almost completely within the reflection of trees, his own double merging indistinctly with theirs. A photograph from the series without a number, places Partridge's body in the middle distance, again in the left zone of the photograph. He stands in an elegant pose borrowed from dance. His strongly vertical figure, which is darkly reflected in the pool, is rhymed by the tall trees on the right that

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similarly are reflected in the water. *On Mount Rainier 8,* 1915 [Fig. 2.7] directly aligns Partridge's body with a tall tree that towers above the pool in which he is standing. In addition, a series of concentric circles emanating from his contrapposto stance link him simultaneously to the masculine tradition of the heroic Greek athlete and feminine images of Venus rising from the water.

Another group of photographs from the series juxtaposes Partridge's naked body with the forms of dead tree trunks and branches. These images recall the identification with blasted trees and other natural objects that formed the bulk of Anne Brigman's work. Brigman used her body, usually naked, to stage allegorical tableaus of the spiritual forces that, in her mysticism, she believed underlay the natural world [Fig. 2.8]. Davidov has argued that Brigman's photographs probably function "as parody of the Woman = Nature equation at the core of both Romantic and Symbolist projects, as acts of masquerade that confront the sense in which the presentation of the self is always in response to a reflection in another's eye."[55] The fictions that Cunningham and Partridge collaborated to create in their photographs function as narratives that challenge traditional assumptions about gender roles and propriety in similar ways. In these photographs, Partridge's body is staged in a manner that encourages viewers to see his form doubled in the landscape and to understand his nakedness as evidence of an intrinsic affinity between his identity and nature; they dramatize the "naturalness" of the connection between his body and the untamed wilderness.

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[55] Davidov, 322-3.

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Moreover, if Brigman's photographs parody the equation of woman and nature by pointing to the performativity within that equation, Cunningham's photographs of Partridge take that parody a step further by displacing the eye of the spectator onto the represented body itself. Mieke Bal calls this displacement "focalization," linking it to the interruptions in voyeuristic gaze that are afforded by notions of the narrative glance.[56] The spectator's look is narrativized in these photographs by Patridge's own looking. His face is generally turned away from the viewer and directed at something in the landscape. *On Mount Rainier 5*, 1915 [Fig. 2.9], thematizes the activity of looking itself by Partridge's own gazing at a landscape view. The photograph depicts two dead, barren and bleached tree trunks rising in the foreground to beyond the top of the frame. They are perfectly rhymed by Partridge's naked body as he stands beside them in the center of the photograph with his back to the spectator and his arm also stretching up beyond the frame. The strong light distorts the image of his arms, making them resemble the deformed branches of the dead trees and further reinforcing the comparison between the trees and his body. Directly in front of Partridge the landscape gives way to a steep embankment and a valley that unfolds in the hazy distance. There is no middle ground, only the pairing of trees and nude in the foreground and the view that occupies Partridge's attention in the background. Partridge's body is framed by the symbols of sublime wilderness on the left and by a picturesque view on the right. His pose

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[56] Mieke Bal, "Reading the Gaze: The Construction of Gender in 'Rembrandt'," in *Vision and Textuality*, eds. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 147-173, esp. 158-161. The theorization of the glance is the subject of Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting:*

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also connects him to the classical tradition of the beautiful male nude through his lithe, muscular body and contrapposto stance. The photograph, thus, equates the male nude with nature at the same time that it declares nature's to-be-looked-at condition, Partridge as both subject and object of the gaze.

In *On Mount Rainier 4*, 1915 [Fig. 2.10], Partridge crouches next to a twisted mass of branches, his arms intertwined with the branches in a manner that links them with his body. Again, the site depicted is on a bluff, which overlooks a scenic valley that is the focus of Partridge's own intent gaze. In Bal's terms, he functions as a double focalizer, suggesting two incompatible narratives of vision operating to produce the meaning of the photograph.[57] He appears at once to be looking *at* and looking *through* the branches. To see the branches is to eliminate the view, and to see the view is to ignore the branches. This, of course, is an illustration of the spectator's position, whose actual viewing is thematized by a representation of viewing. In one reading, the photograph encourages its spectators to equate Partridge's naked body with the form of the branches. Such a point of view naturalizes the male nude as an aesthetic object of the spectator's voyeuristic gaze. However, by making spectators aware of Partridge as a viewing body himself, the photograph constructs an alternative narrative of the spectator's own body and its relation to the structure of vision. The elimination of a middle ground in both photographs and the visual jump from foreground

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The Logic of The Gaze (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1983), esp. 87-132.

[57] Bal, 159-60.

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to background operates as a metaphor of the tension between these two opposing possibilities.[58]

In 1917 Cunningham and Partridge moved to the San Francisco area so that her parents, now living on a farm in Sonoma county, could take care of her young boy, Gryff, while she was pregnant with her twins, Rondal and Padraic. They soon took advantage of the nearby wilderness to collaborate on another series of photographs that featured Partridge's naked body in nature. All the photographs in this series from 1918 were simply called "Roi on the Dipsea Trail" and numbered. They also departed from the softer focus of most of the Mount Rainier images. Cunningham still relies on the poetic possibilities in these images in spite of discarding the traditional pictorialist visual effects of tonalism. However, portraying Partridge's body with much greater clarity, this series of photographs signals her growing search for a new visual vocabulary that soon would lead her, as it had Stieglitz, away from pictorialism to the abstractions of "pure" photography.

The first photograph in the series, *Roi on the Dipsea Trail*, 1918 [Fig. 2.11], recalls her use of the Narcissus narrative in the Mount Rainier photographs. Partridge crouches precariously on an outcropping that extends into a small, highly reflective pool. His body is rolled into a tight ball, and he reaches with anxiously clasped hands to touch his mirrored image in the water. Leaning over he meets his own gaze in studied contemplation. The stillness of the pool creates

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[58] Although Cunningham downplayed the influence of Brigman, especially in her later years, a photograph by Brigman entitled "Dawn" uses the female nude in a manner which is strikingly similar to these photographs of Partridge on the edge of a bluff with a landscape view in the distance. It was published in *Camera Work* 38 (April 1912).

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the sensation of inactivity and self-absorption that enhances the feeling of the spectator as accidental voyeur on this private scene of anguish. This photograph also announces even more directly Cunningham's investigation of the medium of photography. She creates a similar doubling of image and reflection as in her photograph *The Bather*, 1915. However, in this image she adds a visual reference to the negative-positive process of the photograph through her arrangement of its black and white tonalities. This photograph, as in the earlier Narcissus image, is divided nearly in half: Partridge's body and his reflection share equal space as if they were negative and print. Cunningham records his flesh in the lightest silver and white tones and his reflection in the darkest grays and black. The sense of a negative-positive reversal is heightened by the pool, which stages an equally stark contrast but inverts the tonalities of Partridge's doubled image. The pool is represented in the top half of the image by dark gray and in the bottom half by nearly pure white. The resulting photograph depicts a white body against a dark ground and a dark body against a white ground. A second rock outcropping is visible in the foreground as a double to the rock on which Partridge crouches. This non-reflecting twin operates as a sign of the spectator's body, which also occupies the foreground by virtue of his or her own viewing position.

In *Roi on the Dipsea Trail* 3, 1918 [Fig. 2.12], Cunningham again produces a photograph that relies on the narrative emphasis of pictorialism but threatens to undo its narrative elements through recourse to visual display. The photograph depicts Partridge from the rear in a long, suspended stride along the rocky bank of a stream bed. He turns to took into the pool of water beside him. In the role of focalizer he directs the viewer's look away from his body to the water.

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However, the slight slip of undifferentiated water at the bottom edge of the photograph is perhaps the least compelling thing in the image: it is merely a white form that bleeds off the left hand corner. The lack of anything that would support Partridge's interest within the image leads to the possibility that his attention is fixed on something just outside the frame of the photograph. The internal focalization of the photograph structures it as a metaphor of blocked and frustrated vision that is inherent to the vocabulary of photography: by its very condition of representation, the camera cuts its image from the larger field of experience that it cannot contain.

In the language of Norman Bryson, this structuring displaces the gaze with the glance, the look of an unconscious voyeur with an awareness of the labor that has created the work of art.[59] The position of the spectator shifts from one that posits the object of voyeurism to one that turns back on the problematics of viewing. Within this structuration, Partridge's body is recovered as the signifier of looking in general, and more specifically of that at which the spectator is aware of looking. In this photograph, spectators are made aware that Cunningham and Partridge have put the classical, male nude on display as an object of natural beauty and her erotic desire. By implication, the spectator colludes in the gendered assumptions about bodies and display (whether they share or resist them) that Cunningham disturbs in her narrativization of the camera's vision. In her photographs of Partridge, Cunningham thus crosses, and

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[59] Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, 92-4. Bryson refers to such images as belonging to a special category called *deictic*, which contain information about their own locus of production (87).

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thereby makes visible, the gendered vocabularies that had been organized into a relatively clear and stable antinomy within the discursive field of pictorialism.

III. DOUBLE VISION

> *Photography as a presentational art is not merely a copy of nature. This is proven by the fact that a "good" photograph is a rare thing.*
>
> -- László Moholy-Nagy[60]

Imogen Cunningham was represented by ten photographs at *Film and Foto*, the landmark 1929 exhibition (May 18 - July 7) in Stuttgart, Germany.[61] The exhibition was designed to celebrate the new directions in photography and film, which had emerged during the 1920s. Largely the brainchild of László Moholy-Nagy, this exhibition announced the end of pictorialism and related approaches to photography that imitated the other arts. In their place, the exhibition featured the New Vision approach, which was championed by the Bauhaus, and other avant-garde practices based in abstraction, collage, photograms, and photomontage.[62] Edward Weston and Edward Steichen curated the American

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[60] László Moholy-Nagy, "The Future of the Photographic Process," *Transition* 15 (February, 1929): 289. This essay is reprinted in László Moholy-Nagy's *Painting, Photography, Film*, 33-37.

[61] The ten works included eight botanicals, one nude couple, and one industrial landscape. Weston had requested only her botanicals, which Cunningham saw as extremely condescending and presumptuous.

[62] The *Film und Foto* exhibition was a logical extension of the ideas Moholy-Nagy had published in 1925 in his book *Painting, Photography, Film*. It also represents the triumph of the Deutscher Werkbund, founded in 1907 by a group of German architects, designers, and manufacturers to promote avant-

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entries. In choosing to represent a significant number of works by Cunningham, Weston acknowledged the importance of her contribution to the role of avant-garde methods in America.[63] Given how many histories of photography focus on the role of Weston in establishing the West Coast's avant-garde tradition of "pure" photography, it is interesting to note his choice of Cunningham's works. It suggests his obvious esteem for them and the importance that he attached to her role in establishing the tradition to which he was strongly committed. This section focuses on Cunningham's innovations in applying those methods to her lifelong fascination with the male nude.

We have seen how Cunningham's photographs of her husband, Roi Partridge, deploy the visual language of pictorialism in ways that are inflected by a gendered sensibility. In photographs from 1910 to 1918, Cunningham disrupts the traditional binary operations that govern the representation and spectatorship of the male nude at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Her photographs had pushed the limits of pictorialism's visual vocabulary by challenging the traditional systems of power that were authorized in the doctrine of separate spheres. However, the conventions of pictorialism also had kept her

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garde principles in design. Franz Roh published his book celebrating New Vision photography, *Foto-Auge/Oeil et photo/Photo-Eye*, to coincide with the exhibition. His introduction, entitled "Mechanism and Expression" directly linked new visual possibilities to the sudden changes brought about by advances in modern technology. With these new visual possibilities, argued Roh, came a new, more modern perspective on society that demanded a more radical politics.

[63] Cunningham's work was hung in a room with Anton Bruehl, Charles Sheeler, Edward Steichen, and Ralph Steiner. Other Americans in the exhibition included Berenice Abbott, Paul Outerbridge, Jr., Roger Sturtevant, Brett Weston, and Edward Weston. Edward Weston wrote one of the texts for the book accompanying the exhibition, *Es Kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Here Comes the New Photographer!).

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photographs tied to idealism, personal expression, and the possibilities of narrative projection.

Then in 1920, Johan Hagemeyer, participated in the same Bay Area's pictorialist group as Cunningham, introduced her to Edward Weston and Margrethe Mather. As Richard Lorenz has written, these friendships created an artistic circle in which the mutual exchange of photographs and ideas supported the transition of all the group's members into an avant-garde visual practice. Rather than arguing for the priority of a single artist, Lorenz stresses the collaborative nature of their association: "Cunningham's work parallels her colleagues Mather and Weston at this formal level, although the sequence in the dynamics of their relationship is difficult to determine."[64] In fact, Cunningham believed that Mather was responsible for much of the merit in Weston's photography, writing to a friend that "she [Mather] was the first and best influence on Edward Weston."[65] What seems clear is that this group of West Coast photographers shifted at a similar moment from their reliance on pictorialist conventions to the visual practices developing within the European avant-garde.[66]

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[64] Lorenz, *On the Body*, 19. In another context, Lorenz is more forceful about Cunningham's creative priority over Weston: "Rather than supporting the traditional precept that Edward Weston was her modernist mentor, Cunningham's work of the late 1920s presents a strong case for her position as the most independently sophisticated and experimental photographer at work on the West Coast." Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 30.

[65] Cunningham to Phyllis Masser, Nov. 12, 1970. Quoted in Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 63, n.15.

[66] Lorenz strongly implies that if any one person precipitated the group's shift, it was the result of Mather, whose "fundamental concept of seeing was

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The change in Cunningham's vocabulary of the nude figure is evident in a 1923 photograph simply entitled *Nude* [Fig. 2.13]. In this image she revisits her earlier interest of thirteen years previous found in *Eve Repentant*, 1910, in the pairing of male and female bodies. The differences, however, could not be more striking. Whereas *Eve Repentant* hung its visual depiction of nakedness on a textual source in the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, *Nude*, 1923, radically excises the possibility of narrative from the image. Cunningham has shifted to a vocabulary of abstract form and spatial disorientation as pronounced as that of Stieglitz in his *Portrait* of O'Keeffe. However, Cunningham was less interested than Stieglitz in using avant-garde experiments in abstraction as a way to translate the visual corollaries for intangible experience into a modern idiom. What she did share was his interest in linking the image to the viewer's perception. Specifically, she also shifts the locus of meaning from narrative projection to spectacle address -- from descriptive meaning to visual perception and the spectator's body. The outward reference to the nude body in these abstractions continues her earlier interest in exploring the impact of gender on expressive and symbolic images. Now, however, her photographs reflect the modernist avant-garde's focus on representation and its effects.

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drastically altered when she viewed the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi in the autumn 1921 issue of Margaret Anderson's *The Little Review*." He points out that in 1921 Mather created a photograph of the composer Henry Cowell that turned his head "into a veritable Brancusi 'Sleeping Muse' transcendentally lit by striations of sunlight." Lorenz, *On the Body*, 19. The earliest images of the nude male form by Cunningham that reflect this shift are a series that she created in 1922 of her young sons entitled *Twins on the Grass*. They represent a striking departure from Edward Weston's well-known pictorialist photograph *Bathing Pool* (1919), which depicts two nude boys beside a swimming pool. The photograph was a favorite of Cunningham and Partridge, who acquired it and a significant number of Weston's other works. See Lorenz, 39, n. 37.

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The importance of *Nude*, 1923, is demonstrated by Cunningham's inclusion of it as the only nude in the group of photographs that she exhibited at the *Film and Foto* exhibition in 1929. Using an 8 x 10 view camera, she turned the bodies of two figures into an abstract arrangement of form. The upper torso of a female body is cropped tightly within the frame. Her head is turned in profile and cropped at the mouth, creating a dramatic tendon chord that runs vertically through her neck. Her arms are raised and also cropped just past her shoulders, possibly indicating that she is grasping the head of the body against which she leans. That body is indicated by a man's neck, which can be glimpsed behind her in the "v" created by the woman's raised right arm and the slope of her neck. The right side of her body is cradled by the man's right arm, which plunges vertically below the bottom edge of the frame in a tantalizing manner, suggesting a sexual embrace. Cunningham cuts the rectangular photograph into two nearly equal triangles of light and dark through a strong raking light that enters the image from the left. The line separating these two zones of tonality travels down the edge of the woman's arm from the top left corner, past her strongly lit right nipple to her dark left nipple in the bottom right corner. As this formal description makes clear, the photograph turns the bilateral symmetry of the human figure into a study of asymmetrical contrasts.

Cunningham's photograph removes any interpretive context that a spectator would have relied on in a more pictorialist mode of representation. Viewers have clues, it is true, to recognize the abstract forms that make up the image as shapes based on the play of light and dark across the bodies of a male and female model. We recognize female breasts, throat, and smooth skin juxtaposed with muscular bicep and hairy arm. Yet, beyond this basic gendered

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assignment the narrative possibilities of the image must be engaged through speculation. And those speculations call attention to the nature of photography itself and its indexicality. By cropping her image so tightly, Cunningham's photograph reminds its viewers of the world beyond its closely bounded frame. What, for instance, is happening to the male arm that appears to continue below the frame and the hand that viewers assume is at the end of that arm? The range of possibilities extends from an erotic caress to unwelcome violation: is the woman being supported or struggling to free herself? Within these two poles, her raised arm could be either the sign of ecstatic pleasure or of determined resistance. Of course, a different set of possibilities opens up if we ask whether instead of the woman leaning against the man, her body might be supporting his. Nevertheless, without a context, as tantalizing as such anecdotal scenarios may be, they remain indeterminate, at best, and inadequate to explain the power of the image.

What is bound to strike the spectator most forcefully in this photograph is the fragmentation of these bodies and their recombination in a manner that renders them unfamiliar.[67] Charles Harrison has written that there are two basic strategies of abstraction: a "strong" version that "makes no pretense to being a picture of any scene or thing or person" and a "weak" version in which "some process of abstraction has led to the suppression of certain easily recognizable characteristics of the original subject."[68] Given its indexical character and

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[67] Obviously, this unfamiliarity is much less marked today after seventy years of experience learning to "read" the vocabulary and syntax of modernist abstraction.

[68] Charles Harrison et al., *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 185.

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invention, development, and dissemination within the discourses of realism and illusion, the photograph provides an especially potent opportunity to uncover this very relation between reference and recognition.[69] The indexicality of the photographic image creates what could be called a "spectatorial imperative" to discover the trace of the so-called real, or actual, experience of the people before the camera. This purchase on the real translates into a belief by subsequent spectators that they are seeing in the image what they would have been able to see had they been present with the photographer at the creation of the photograph. And the tradition of "pure" photography that Cunningham helped to define on the West Coast is well-suited to the self-conscious problematics of such recognition because it explicitly uses the camera to explore the manipulative effects of the camera's optics.

In keeping with the vocabulary of abstraction based in the problematics of recognition, Cunningham's *Nude*, 1923, provides a visual argument for a new grammar of the nude based in the principles of abstract design. She uses its strongly contrasting tonalities to describe this woman through a series of diagonals. The major diagonal that bisects the image and links her arm and breast is the organizing principle of the composition. A secondary diagonal parallels the first in the line created by her jaw. The column of her neck forms another rectangle that is divided into a double triangle. Surmounting the top of her neck, a bright light defines yet another rectangle whose form is also bisected into two triangles. This system of rectangles bisected into triangles moves the

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[69] Harrison locates this as a particularly French concern, which grows out of the historical situation of that country's engagement with "the problems of

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viewer's eye through the image in the manner of a Baroque composition. It creates a sense of visual movement across the surface that suggests dynamic energy.[70] Typically for Cunningham, she resists representing the female nude as a traditionally passive body. Although she no longer uses the pictorialist conventions of her earlier photograph *Eve Repentant*, 1910, Cunningham maintains its priority of demonstrating the strength of the female body in concert with the male.

Cunningham also uses the visual strategies of avant-garde abstraction to create a sense of confrontation between the image and the spectator. She seemingly pushes the image of this woman's torso into the spectator's viewing space. The shallow dimensionality sandwiches the woman's body between the man behind her and the viewer in front of her. In this way Cunningham mobilizes the structures of display that this study has identified as spectacle address. In other words, an analysis of the image based in the viewer's response can take into account more than the cognitive projections of narrative. The photograph supports an investigation into the relationship between image and viewer that constitutes the structure of the spectator's response itself. As in any analysis based in theories of response, it is important to remember that there is not a unitary experience that structures all spectators identically; nevertheless, their viewing positions are constituted through the subjectivities that are

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realism and self-consciousness in figurative representation." Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 194.

[70] Lorenz compares Cunningham's photograph to an earlier work by Weston, remarking: "The work refers to an often-reproduced image by Weston, *Breast* (1920), but confers more dramatic intrigue to the subject." Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 26.

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historically available in the shared codes of specific audiences.[71] It seems clear that Cunningham was intent on exploring subjectivities that were based in gendered codes many avant-garde artists of the 1920s were attempting to resist.

If the focus of investigation turns to visual display, it seems apposite to ask: what is being put on display in this photograph? Most literally, it is the female nude torso that is on display. More specifically, the image's visual display is organized around the confrontational presentation of the female breast and the lack of distance denied to the spectator. Breast and viewer are implicated as shared participants (along with the secondary fragments of the male body) in the shallow space of display depicted by the photograph. Given the formal organization of the image based in the abstract geometry of rectangles and triangles, this additional principle of organization based in the breast reintroduces the presence of the body into the photograph. Such an organization suggests that it matters a great deal who the spectator is in establishing what is at stake in viewing the naked female body as an artistic nude. In other words, viewers of this photograph are invited to participate in the space of its spectacle according to the differing erotics that they bring to the image as spectators.

Cunningham is well known for her female nudes, which along with those by Edward Weston defined the anti-pictorialist approach to the subject during the 1920s and 1930s. But it is in her innovative approach to the male nude that Cunningham most radically challenged the orthodoxies of her day. For this reason, this study will now turn to a series of images, which Cunningham

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[71] For a detailed explanation of alterity in spectatorial response, see this

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produced in the same year as *Nude*, 1923, and that demonstrate how her shift to an avant-garde vocabulary of abstraction changed her presentation of the male nude.

Clare Shephard, John Butler, and Ben Butler were fellow artists and longtime friends of Cunningham. It was they who first introduced her to Roi Partridge, with whom John Butler had traveled in Europe, studying in Munich in 1910 and visiting Rome and Paris in 1911.[72] This group of friends had provided the characters for Cunningham's earlier pictorialist images based in Symbolist narratives. Now, as she began to explore the possibilities of abstraction through disorientation (removing context), defamiliarization (creating fragments), and spectacle address (confronting viewers), Cunningham performed these visual operations on the body of John Butler.

In one group of photographs, Butler holds an African mask between his naked upper body and the light source. Most of the photographs in this series only show the effect of the mask's shadow on the image. However, in one photograph, *John Butler with Mask*, ca. 1923 [Fig. 2.14], Cunningham also gives viewers a look at the mask. Butler holds it above himself and allows its shadow to fall across his own face. Reminiscent of *Nude*, 1923, Cunningham organizes the play of shapes created by the light and dark tonalities on Butler's body through a relay of triangular forms. Even the mask itself is photographed to emphasize its triangular structures.

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study's discussion on the body of Douglas Fairbanks in the concluding chapter.

[72] Lorenz, *Ideas Without End*, 18.

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Since early in the history of avant-garde critiques of European culture, African masks had served as a sign of modernism's other, the "primitive."[73] As an artist interested in what had been established by 1923 as "International Modernism," Cunningham would have been well aware of the use of African masks by avant-garde artists.[74] Within their understanding, these masks usually operated within a gendered antinomy that identified the body of woman with the "primitive" and equated both with nature over and against culture.[75] In her photograph Cunningham reverses this alignment, placing a male body under the mask so that he is literally and figuratively under the sign of the "primitive." Interestingly, the shadows that mark Butler's body are formed by the way his

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[73] The most complete discussion of this issue in recent art history is Kirk Varnedoe's catalogue essay for the exhibition he helped to organize at the Museum of Modern Art, "Gauguin," *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, vol. I (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 179-209. A rebuttal of Varnedoe's argument is offered by Rosalind Krauss, "Using Language to do Business as Usual," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, eds. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 79-94. For a critique of the exhibition through a discussion of "primitivism" as the discourse of fetishism within modernist ideology, see Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks," in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, Wa.: Bay Press, 1985), 181-210.

[74] Cunningham was probably first exposed to the use of "primitivism" in avant-garde art through her reading of Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*, which began featuring such work in 1908. See Chapter One of this study, footnote 24 and the main body text that follows in section I. Also, not only did Cunningham spend 1909 in Dresden, but in June 1910 she traveled to Paris and then London. This experience in Europe made the experiments of modernist avant-garde artists, including Picasso for whom she expressed admiration, easily available. Her time in Germany coincided with the Die Brücke artists who were especially interested in developing a language of expressionism from so-called "primitive" sources.

[75] The most famous example of this alignment in photography is Man Ray's 1926 *Blache et Noir*, three years after Cunningham's transformation of its discursive assumptions.

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hands hold the mask rather than by the mask itself. Cunningham's photograph thus invites its viewers to read the marking of his body through a well rehearsed metonymy of human creativity and manipulation. In this way she not only reverses a conventional gendered division but at the same time calls into question the opposition that establishes a compensatory binary between nature and culture.[76]

In *John Butler with Mask 3*, ca. 1922 [Fig. 2.15], Butler lies, as in the other photographs from the series, prone on the floor, his head and upper torso tipped toward the viewer, his eyes closed, the shadow of a mask falling across him. In this image, he holds the mask outside of the top frame of the photograph so that its shadow falls completely on his upper chest. The resulting shadow doubles Butler's own head, but its form is abstracted nearly beyond recognition: the mask is rendered into a flattened, round shape punctured by three unequal slits of light tonality. The shape suggests, more than depicts, the mask's representation of eyes and a mouth. Viewers would have a difficult time determining what creates this shadow without the photograph's title.

Cunningham's photograph uses the vocabulary of its own medium to render more abstract a representation that was already an abstraction in its own culture, and she points to the mask's use as the sign of abstraction itself in western European culture. All the while the image places Butler's upper body on display for the spectator in the conventionally western pose usually reserved for

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[76] The mask reveals the narrow, almond-shaped eyes that signify a female personification (as opposed to the wide, round-shaped eyes that signify a male) in most African cultures. Although there is no record that Cunningham was aware of this gendered difference in African representational traditions, it adds

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the passive female nude. However, because Butler is lying diagonally across the rectangular space defined by the photograph (another use of the triangle motif), his torso enters the frame from the top right corner and his head lies at the bottom left corner. Therefore, in conjunction with the tipping of his body toward the surface plane of the image, his body appears to be falling in spite of the clear evidence of the floor in the foreground. Through this disorientation, Cunningham has created a photograph that evokes the experience of the body in space.

The final photograph from this series that I would like to discuss is simply titled *John Butler*, ca. 1923 [Fig. 2.16]. In this instance it would be impossible to recognize that the shadow falling on him is created by a mask unless the viewers could draw on their experience of the other photographs in this series. A dark patch of shadow cast by the mask, which is held outside the frame, deeply shades half of Butler's face. Only a single spot of bright tonality exists where the light source is able to pierce the mask and mark his cheek. In contrast to the shadow of the mask, Butler's head is positioned and lit so that the elongated shadow of his profile can be read with some clarity across the bottom edge of the photograph. Cunningham has used an extreme close-up to capture Butler, reducing his body to part of an arm, part of his chest, and a face obscured by darkness. He is lying on a wooden floor, its lines recalling the orthogonals of Renaissance depictions of space. Yet, there is no feeling of space in this image. Butler's partial and fragmented body largely fills the space of the image, creating

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an interesting dimension to the experience of contemporary viewers who may easily introduce this element of gendered play into their responses.

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the sense that the viewer has taken up the space of the photographer, who is nearly on top of him.

Cunningham's photographs frequently demonstrate this ability of the camera to erase its own mediation and create the sense that the spectator is not merely viewing a space but participating in it. While such a visual strategy was not uncommon in depictions of the female nude, Cunningham's use of it for the male nude is remarkable. In *Roi*, 1927 [Fig. 2.17], she again used the body of her husband to transform the conventions of the male nude. The viewing conditions of spectatorship are heightened to an extreme both through the invasion of Partridge's physical space by the camera lens and by its tiny aperture, probably f.32 or the f.64 stop that would define the famous exhibition at the H. M. de Young Memorial Museum exhibition of 1932. The tiny aperture operates simultaneously to flatten the sense of space in the image and to render its depiction in minutely fine detail. Such an approach to photographic description uses a different idiom to mobilize the same tension between abstraction and reference that this study explored in the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz.

Roi, 1927, is a tightly framed and focused depiction of Partridge's chin, neck, upper left arm, and knees. That the figure represented in this photograph is male is also a matter of easy record. There is stubble on the chin, which is rough from shaving, the Adam's apple is prominent, the chest and legs sprout hair abundantly. Yet several elements in this photograph militate against understanding how this easy recognizability functions. Viewers who believe that they have apprehended the totality of this photograph once they have named its immediately identifiable parts will surely miss its import. They must go beyond this simple mapping of a body and its fragmented image to see the

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photograph as a modern treatment of the male nude. And even more, they must consider how the familiar is made strange in this image.

As in Cunningham's earlier experiments in depicting the nude, her photograph is organized around a series of triangles set within rectangles. The image is divided into three segments: a triangle formed by the figure's knees at the bottom right, another triangle formed by the figure's neck and chin at the top left, and the nearly rectangular space between the two triangles. However, the space of the rectangle is itself marked by all the numerous triangles that result from the play of light and dark that the highly contrasting tonalities of the gelatin silver print create: under his arm, on his arm, on his chest, in the background where the line of rock meets the line of his shoulder. This recognition leads to an awareness of the subtler triangles formed by the range of tones in the photograph: in the lines of his skin, in the hollow of his shoulder, and even among the chaotic tangle of his body hairs. In fact, once motivated, viewers are likely to discover triangles wherever they look.[77] And this in fact seems to be exactly the point: the search for recognizable form is always motivated, but it can be deliberately instigated by the artist.

But, is there any significance in this formal exercise of chasing fragments and triangles across the surface of Cunningham's photograph? Is it enough for a photograph to illustrate how the spectator is led into a visual relation with the

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[77] A similar motivation animates Cunningham's most famous nude photograph, *Triangles*, 1928 [Fig. 2.19]. This image resulted from a photo secession with two sisters, Jackie and Helen, who posed singly and together for an extensive series that comprise some of Cunningham's most well-known female nudes. The similarity between the formal elements in *Roi*, 1927, and *Triangles*, 1928, is significant enough to suggest that Cunningham probably

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image? In his discussion on abstract art, Charles Harrison answers this question by positing several different approaches to the interpretation of Malevich's important work from this period, *Black Square*, 1929. The kind of analysis above is what he calls "responding to effects," and it assumes that "the modern artist derives his [or her] chief inspiration from the medium in which [s]he works."[78] For the person interested in such effects, the meaning of any art work lies in its "newness" and its ability to be critical of previous models and traditions.[79] Harrison argues that this is the reason abstract art appealed to the modernist avant-garde artists who were challenging the social, political, and economic structures of bourgeois society. For example, in writing about photographs of the body during the 1920s and 1930s, William Ewing suggests how artists such as Cunningham deployed the fragment as a social critique: "The sense of dislocation implicit in a fragmentary vision is in itself an evocative metaphor for the modern condition."[80] However, as Harrison also points out, the meanings produced by such interpretations ignore the actual subjectivities of the spectators for whom these effects are produced.[81] In other words, what is at stake and for whom in this challenge of bourgeois society? In 1929, Cunningham produced a

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recognized the larger significance of the abstract approach to the nude which she captured in this photograph applied to both sexes.

[78] Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 217.

[79] Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 217. Harrison goes on to acknowledge that he has invented the person who takes up this interpretive position "with an eye to the writings of the American Modernist critic Clement Greenberg" although Harrison acknowledges that Greenberg was no great fan of Malevich, viewing him as too "documentary."

[80] William A. Ewing, *The Body*, 36.

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series of nudes based on the body of modern, avant-garde dancer John Bovington that can serve to illustrate Harrison's point.[82]

IV. A SPECTACULAR DANCER

John Bovington 2, 1929 [Fig. 2.18], exhibits Cunningham's basic organization of the nude around triangular forms with studied insistence. His body is posed to create a series of major triangles that descend in size and prominence. At the center of the image his right leg forms the primary triangle. Above it his left leg forms a secondary triangle and below it his right arm forms a tertiary one. These three forms dominate the visual space of the image, but they are supported by numerous triangles that are created by the black and

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[81] Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 217-8.

[82] John Bovington was a member of the California avant-garde during the 1920s, well-known for his nearly nude, erotically charged modern dance performances, often with his companion, Jeanya Marling. Pauline and R.M. Schindler often hosted avant-garde events at their West Hollywood Kings Road House where Bovington and Marling lived for a year. Dione Neutra later remembered one such performance in 1926 by observing that the couple "would dance practically in the nude, which was, of course, at that time for Hollywood quite and event." Quoted in Elizabeth A.T. Smith and Michael Darling, *The Architecture of R. M. Schindler* (Los Angeles, Ca.: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 100. The announcement for a series of his performances to initiate a teaching studio at the Kings Road House in June 1930 called his work "The New Dance: Being Experiments Toward a Life Dance Rooted in Hygiene." Quoted in Smith, 107. A photograph published with a review by Pauline Schlinder of Bovington shows his revealing loin cloth costume. Pauline Schindler writes in her review: "He stripped off social habits, the old assumptions of life, clothing, and went to lie among the primitives of Java, to develop a fresh conception of life, and think out a more satisfactory civilization." *The Carmelite* 21 (4 July 1928): 1. See also the discussion of Bovington and the "healthful living" movement through which the naturopath Dr. Philip Lovell promoted the vitures of nudity, in Thomas S. Hines,

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white tonalities resulting from a strong light source. The play of triangular forms that organized her fragmented photograph of *Roi*, 1927, are here applied to the full figured nude. Nevertheless, although not presented in literal fragments, Bovington's body is rendered equally abstract through a strategy of disorientation. He poses upside down, his head and shoulders on the ground and his back rising up against a wall. However, rather than creating the sensation that his body is falling as in *John Butler with Mask 3*, ca. 1922, Cunningham isolates Bovington's body from its physical context as if it were floating. She uses a cloth to create the solid tonality that renders the space around him an ambiguous blank. Although Cunningham includes Bovington's entire body in her photograph, she represents it as a series of fragmented and broken abstract shapes. At the same time, in spite of the abstraction, she also reveals his body to be a superbly sculptural and sensual object worthy of celebration.

At this point, a description of the photograph would seek to understand the implications of turning Bovington's body into an abstract arrangement of triangles. An obvious possibility is suggested by realizing that Cunningham's representation associates Bovington with a form that traditionally has served as a sign of feminine sexuality. Cunningham, in fact, had made this point explicit in her female nude of the previous year entitled *Triangles*, 1928 [Fig. 2.19]. The photograph also uses the abstracting photographic effects of disorientation and fragmentation to produce what William Ewing calls her "sensual geometry."[83]

Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture: A Biography and History (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[83] Ewing, *The Body*, 28.

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Cunningham thus represents a male nude that is inflected by the signs and traditions more often associated with the female nude at that time. There may even be a sly reference to her up-ending of conventions by turning the male nude upside down. Through her reversal, Cunningham calls into question the assumptions that had identified sensuality and sexual desire with the gendered display of a woman's body in the female nude.

To take this analysis of gender farther, however, it is necessary to return to the questions posed by Harrison when he reminds us that "effects are effects upon some person, and that person's subjectivity is not universal and disinterested but contingent and constructed."[84] It is not necessary to know that John Bovington was a modern dancer of sexually charged performances to feel the erotic register of this photograph. But it is necessary to inquire into the differences in subjectivities that its erotics might incite. This is especially true given the historical attitudes toward male nudity in America in the 1920s. In *The Male Nude*, David Leddick writes: "Actors' and dancers' publicity stills, and photographs of nudists and bodybuilders, formed the sum total of material available to the average nudity-lover before World War II. . . . A male nude would occasionally appear in a photography exhibition but this was rare."[85] Emmanuel Cooper writes of this period: "Any reference to the nude came to

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[84] Harrison, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, 217.

[85] David Leddick, *The Male Nude* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 1998), 11. Leddick points out that the Supreme Court only ruled that nudity was not obscene in 1968 (11), and that the first exhibition in New York devoted to the male nude was not until 1978 at Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery (12). Additionally, something of what was at stake in photographs of the male nude is indicated by the critical reception of that exhibition. Leddick writes that in 1978 critics "still

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signify the female rather than the male."[86] Within this social climate, Cunningham's photograph of Bovington not only contributes to the abstracting conventions that were redefining the photographic nude as a genre, but is also a bold exploration of the role played by subjectivity in the erotics of display.

The cinematic notion of spectacle address is a useful strategy to unpack the differences in subjectivity that this photograph makes visible. It also helps to explain some of the contingencies that might have been working to make images of the male nude seem so charged that they were virtually banished from public view. Although not as extreme as the crowded space of viewing evident in *Roi*, 1927, *John Bovington* 2, 1929, shares the close-up suggestion of an intruding camera position. It draws attention to the conditions of viewing staged by the photograph. The unnaturalness of Bovington's inverted body further draws attention to the artificial situation in which the image casts the relation between its subject and its spectators. In a manner reminiscent of many New Vision photographers, Cunningham creates an image that encourages its viewers to turn their heads as they seek a continuous rational space through which to orient their point of view and perceptual experience of this male form. Such an action recalls the impulse, upon viewing the disorienting depictions of clouds in Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, to reorient one's own body relative to the visual conventions that are meant to indicate the horizon within realist description. It becomes impossible to view Cunningham's photograph without attending to the

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saw the male nude as the province of homosexuals or women who wanted to view men in a reduced way, stripped of power" (12).

[86] Cooper, *Fully Exposed*, 171.

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conditions of viewing that constitute the bodies of both Bovington and the spectator.

Having manipulated her viewers to attend to the physical state of their own spectating conditions, Cunningham presents Bovington's body as a highly problematic site of gender. Although clearly male his image is feminized. The focus on his lower body, especially his legs and thighs, as signs of erotic desire is more typically feminine than masculine: a more conventionally masculine erotics would emphasize the muscles of his torso, primarily his chest and arms. Cunningham also slyly stages Bovington's body within the image so that the central focus is the area where viewers would expect to find his genitals. However, his penis is elided by the inverted pose, falling away from its usual location and hidden by the main triangle of his thigh and leg. Bovington's pose also eliminates the roundness of his testicles: they are flattened and replaced by a fold in his skin. The effect creates a shadow that reads as an opening and creates a disturbing indeterminacy, which even extends to the impression of a vagina.

That this startling effect takes place within the major triangular form at the center of the image gives it a central presence that organizes the spectator's reading of the photograph more generally. The spectator's response to Cunningham's photograph depends very much on the attitude that one takes toward the manipulation of this male body. In fact, the significance of the photograph lies in the different discursive contexts that are mobilized by the spectator's engagement with the image. By playing with Bovington's genitals, so to speak, Cunningham sets in motion an interpretive play of gendered meanings, which viewers of the photograph are invited to join. These meanings range from the comical and humorous to the serious and psychoanalytical.

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Cunningham was known for her wry sense of humor, and this image could easily reflect her commentary on the male preoccupation with female anatomy. She has been quoted numerous times in regards to her own disdain for men whose appreciation for women was based on outward appearances and sexual attraction alone. Once she was asked to comment on the work of William Mortensen, one of the forces behind the pictorialist journal *Camera Craft* and a photographer well-known for his erotically staged photographs of nubile young women [Fig. 2.20].[87] Cunningham replied ironically that her favorite photograph of his was one called "L'Amour." The photograph depicts a gorilla dragging a nearly-naked young female model across a hill.[88] It must have given her a perverse delight to reverse the tables, presenting a sexually charged view of a male body as if it were female. However, Cunningham avoids the simplistic reversal of merely placing a male body under the scrutinizing gaze of a camera operated by a woman. By virtually castrating him, Cunningham also points to a powerful cultural fear that underlies the resistance to viewing the naked male body at this time.

Castration, or at least Freud's notion of castration in the Oedipal complex, lies at the heart of contemporary feminist theorizing about visual representation. Although the literature is vast and applies to nearly every arena of social and cultural history, its use by visual theorists has been especially productive as the discussion of female spectatorship in the introductory chapter of this study

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[87] William Mortensen, *Monsters and Madonnas* (San Francisco, Ca.: Camera Craft Publishing Co., 1936. For a more sympathetic view of Mortensen, see Peterson's discussion in *After the Photo Secession*.

[88] Mann, *Imogen Cunningham*, n.p.

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demonstrates. In the introduction, this study argues that filmic notions of spectacle address offer a challenge to the operations of control and power within classic feminist descriptions of the gaze. Spectacle address unhinges the compensatory binary of voyeurism and exhibitionism. It offers an alternative model of vision to the active form of cultural control identified with masculinity and the passive form of cultural victimization identified with femininity. Cunningham's photograph is especially germane in this context because it offers the case of a woman artist exploring a visual mode that Freudian theory identifies with masculine sexuality and looking.

In the language of Freudian theory, Cunningham's photograph enacts a double displacement and double shock. It literalizes the fantasy that the female is a castrated male and that the male risks castration. By masquerading as a feminine object, Bovington's body provides male spectators with the classic shock at the sight of female genitalia that results in a fetishistic displacement to other objects as erotic signs. However, as a male body that appears actually to have undergone the very fear that fetishism is supposed to render psychically harmless, Bovington's body points to the reliance of fetishism on a male discursive context. Because she floats his body in a blank space, Cunningham also denies viewers of this image the usual economy of the fetish. There is nothing on which to displace the sexual threat. This strategy guarantees that the spectator's gaze will return repeatedly to the original site of trauma, enacting it over and over. In a sense, Cunningham's photograph may be interpreted as a Freudian joke that relies on a notion of gendered difference based in the

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presence or absence of the phallus.[89] The image implies that it is the Oedipal complex itself -- with its unconscious fear that the female's lack of a penis is the result of another castrating male -- that gives women's genitalia their sexual appeal. Of course, the added layer to the joke here is that if such a scenario were true, then men looking at this image would find themselves sexually attracted to another man and confronting the specter of homosexual desire.

The possible meanings of Cunningham's photograph will vary depending on the subject who is viewing the image. Although she does not reference Freudian discourse itself, Cunningham is probably using the body of this avant-garde male dancer to control and make fun of the very processes of voyeurism and exhibitionism on which conventional male sexual desire is based. Her own desires raise the question of how sexuality and gender are constructed in relation to each other through a network of differences rather than fixed oppositions.[90] Men (and women) whose subjectivities are informed exclusively by heterosexual desire, the priority of male prerogatives, or fixed gender oppositions probably would find Bovington's body deeply disturbing in its rupturing of the usual roles enacted by gendered notions of the sexual fetish.

In another photograph from this series entitled *John Bovington 3*, 1929 [Fig. 2.21], the dancer again poses in an inverted position. He lies on his back with his

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[89] Within Freudian theory the clinical term of the "penis," which functions as a literal description of a biological organ, is replaced by the symbolic term of the "phallus," which functions as a cultural sign of masculine power. The best accounting of this linguistic process and its implications remains Jacques Lacan's "The Signification of the Phallus" in *Écrits: A Selection*, 281-291.

[90] For a much broader view and discussion of the implications of this statement, see the catalogue and exhibition organized by Catherine de Zegher,

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knees drawn up to his chest so that his muscular legs dominate the foreground. His head lies outside the frame, cropped at the bottom of the photograph, only indicated by his chin and its shadow. The same blank cloth isolates his figure and creates an even shallower visual space than in the previous photograph. The effect again is of the spectator occupying the photographer's position, which feels as if it were nearly on top of Bovington. Cunningham introduces the fetishistic sexual implications in this image through the fragmenting and isolating of body parts. Its objectification is further signaled in the sculptural impression created by the inverted pose and the photographic vocabulary of fragmentation, sharp focus, shallow space, and strong tonal contrasts.

Cunningham seems to have recognized the sculptural power of Bovington's legs in this photograph. In *John Bovington*, 1929 [Fig. 2.22], she closely crops the same negative in order to cut his hands, arms, shoulders, feet, and the background from the image. The resulting image isolates his legs from nearly all other visual references in the original photograph. She then turns the image approximately 180 degrees and enlarges it, creating a disorienting perspective for its viewers. Yet, because of the sharp-focused realism inherent in the vocabulary of avant-garde, purist photography, the image is recognizable even as it feels somehow distorted. Any distance that might have remained in the earlier photographs evaporates as this image reduces the spatial dimension to the photographic surface, which for all practical purposes is as close to the spectator as the surface of the print itself. Cunningham's fragmented and abstract image of Bovington's legs operates more according to the language of

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Inside the visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

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the photographic equivalent that informed Stieglitz's images from this period. As in his photographs, in spite of their referential character, the meaning derives from the tension between the viewer's metaphoric and metonymic associations in consort with the mimetic resemblances in the image.

As with Stieglitz, Cunningham's interest in the power of visual tropes to create defamiliarization and disorientation allows her to explore the tension between abstraction and representation. She, too, engages both the cognitive and the emotional effects of her photographs on their viewers. And Stieglitz's early interest in the avant-garde expressionist experiments of Der Blaue Reiter is paralleled by her interest in Die Brücke while studying in Dresden.[91] However, Cunningham's photographs do not share the personal register of ineffable mystery associated with symbolist thought that informs Stieglitz's work. Instead, her shift to the vocabulary of abstract reference, which shares the avant-garde experiments in representation described by Roman Jakobson, more directly explores the gendered social experiences that inflect her images. We have seen Cunningham's use of disorientation and defamiliarization in her photographs of John Butler and John Bovington to create images that challenge the tradition of the male nude. Those strategies, especially when combined with fragmentation and a sharp-focused, close-up, depth of field, lend themselves to a

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[91] In her catalogue for the 1973 exhibition of Cunningham's work, Margery Mann says that while studying in Dresden in 1909, Cunningham "spent all her free time in museums examining the paintings and sculpture she had previously known only through the Perry Pictures. Her hunger to see paintings was almost insatiable." Mann goes on to relate an anecdote that is a telling commentary on her preference for the new avant-garde vocabularies of modernist Europe over traditional representations. When urged by friends to travel to Oberammergau to see the Passion Play, she expressed horror "that

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consideration of meanings suggested by the comparative and contiguous associations of metaphor and metonymy.

As mentioned previously, the cropped fragment in *John Bovington*, 1929, is recognizable as a pair of masculine legs and part of a thigh. Although it is not a male nude in the conventional sense, nevertheless it references many of the concerns tied to that tradition through a vocabulary of metaphor and metonymy. The pair of legs serve to reference the nature of doubling in the tradition of the male nude. The bilateral symmetry of the human form stresses its organization around the double and ties the tradition of the nude in some minds to a belief in timeless, ahistorical values that are associated with antiquity. Kenneth Clark makes this point in his famous study when he writes: "The nude remains the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into form."[92] Speaking of contrapposto in the *Doryphoros* of Polykleitos, Clark writes: "This perfection of symmetry by balance and compensation is the essence of classical art."[93] In another context, Clark asserts that symmetry is one of the primary means by which abstraction purifies the vulgar associations that attend the embodiment of physical desire.[94]

In many ways, Cunningham's photograph references the principles articulated by Clark almost thirty year later. However, by transforming them

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they would expect her to waste her time and money to see 'some peasant dressed up as Jesus Christ'." Mann, *Imogen Cunningham*, n.p.

[92] Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 27.

[93] Clark, *The Nude*, 37-8.

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through an avant-garde vocabulary, Cunningham's images offer a critique of the assumptions underlying Clark's analysis. The nude's classical vocabulary of contrapposto is clearly indicated in the slightly uneven position of Bovington's knees, the single hip balancing the sway of his legs, and the graceful "S" curve created by their shadows. At the same time, the sharply-focused image details imperfections that encourage its viewers to feel the physical effects of time on this body. The knees, especially, show the marks of being scraped and scarred. And while the image presents Bovington's fragmented body as a sculptural form, the visual record of his hairy skin contrasts with the smooth, clean bodies of the classical ideal. John Berger has noted that in the western tradition of representation, "[h]air is associated with sexual power and passion."[95] Cunningham uses the metaphoric associations of these fragments to align her image with the tradition of the antique, classical nude and then critiques its artificial separation of matter and form through the haptic register it creates in the spectator.

A different set of associations is mobilized by the metonymic relations in this photograph. In spite of mostly isolating Bovington's legs from the rest of his body, the available evidence suggests that his physique is muscular and fit. In fact, the tonal contrasts create dark curving shadows that reinforce the visual bulging of the muscles under his skin. In this way the muscles operate as a metonymy for the male nude, shifting its meaning to other contexts in which muscles were on display during the nineteen-twenties. Even for viewers

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[94] Clark, *The Nude*, 71. It should be noted that Clark is discussing the female nude at this point in his argument.

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unaware of Bovington's role as a dancer with a reputation for nude performances, it offers a context that emphasizes the sexuality of his exposed body. Again, the nude's traditional aesthetic role in art historical discourse as a carrier of ideal form is overturned but from a different context. Specifically, the purity that Clark so primly associates with classical abstract symmetry is contradicted by the emphasis on muscles as erotic display rather than ideal form. It is an erotics that implicates the photograph's viewers by seeming to push the visible display of Bovington's body into the very space from which it is viewed.

This strategy of extreme cropping and enlarging of the sharp-focused photograph reaches a culmination in two other photographs from the same year, *Spiral Back*, 1929 [Fig. 2.23], and *Side*, 1929 [Fig. 2.24]. As in the previous photographs of John Bovington, they create an image that gives the appearance of crowding the spectator's space uncomfortably. The resulting abstractions create a disorienting and defamiliarizing view of the male nude that turns it into an image with metaphoric and metonymic associations. As such, these images can illustrate some of the ways that a modernist language of avant-garde abstraction operates as a referential system. More particularly, these photographs demonstrate Cunningham's interest in the male body as a site to explore visual tropes for sexuality through their visual effects on spectators.

In *Spiral Back*, 1929, Cunningham uses close camera work, deep focus, and cropping to transform Bovington's body nearly beyond recognition. In fact, the first impression is more likely to be that we are presented with a fist rather than the back of a torso as the title indicates. The spiral shape of the image results

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[95] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 55.

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from posing the body curled on its side. Nearly the entire image is taken up by the broad expanse of Bovington's back. His shoulders, which are the area closest to the camera, are slightly out of focus in much the same way as an object that is too close to the eye. It creates the impression that the viewer is too close to the photograph and draws attention to it as a representation of spatial relations. Although the rest of the body is sharply defined, the angle of view distorts its anatomy and creates the disquieting sense that its parts are disjointed. Even his buttocks appear to be two independent spheres. In place of a coherent body, the image is organized into a logical form by the spiral line that traces his vertebrae and then follows the outline of his buttocks and thigh.

The long curving vertebrae that extend through the buttocks offer a possible metonymic reading that places this photograph into the history of nude representations. They recall the three extra vertebrae and the extended spine of the *Grande Odalisque*, 1814, by Jean-Aguste-Dominique Ingres, a nude also seen from the back. Ingres painted his odalisque in the grand manner of the Academy and the Salon. Yet for all his rhetoric of classical description, Ingres finesses the reality to which his image lays claim. Nicholas Mirzoeff points out that the "space in which the odalisque was represented was entirely fantastical."[96] Quoting Ali Behad, he continues: in Western painting, the harem was "nothing but a phantasm, a purely fictional construction onto which Europe's own sexual repressions, erotic fantasies, and desire of domination were

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[96] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 108.

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projected."[97] Mirzoeff argues that far from desiring an accurate description, Ingres "mutilated" the body of his odalisque in order to "make the deviancy of women physically visible."[98] However, the real deviancy, says Mirzoeff, is not the depicted body that serves as a cipher for projecting the fear of female sexuality and foreign potency. Rather, the painting alludes to the loss of control that lies outside itself in the spectator whose gaze the woman looks over her shoulder to intercept: "The ordered spectatorship of the Classical period had given way to a hybrid spectator, who disrupted the painter's gaze from beyond the control of the frame."[99]

Cunningham's nude odalisque in a masculine key does not have the same power to intercept the spectator's gaze because his head is cropped from the frame in typical avant-garde fashion. However, Cunningham still manages to implicate the viewers of her image as spectators. By using the distorted form of her nude to initiate a series of visual tropes, she gives visible form to a set of cultural attitudes about male and female sexuality. The image's metonymic association with the *Grande Odalisque* is a reminder that since early in the nineteenth-century, the female nude has served as an object of sexual fantasy that relies on the capacity of spectators to take up a viewing position and the attendant implications of that position. By trading a male for a female body, and representing it through the vocabulary of abstraction rather than academic classicism, Cunningham's photograph offers an interpretive gloss on the

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[97] Quoted in Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape*, 108.

[98] Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape*, 110.

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conventions that conspired to fix both images and spectators within a gendered opposition. She makes the structures that constitute representation visible: the legibility of images depends on the tropes that a form suggests rather than the descriptive realism of the body's anatomy.

The more metaphoric implications of the image relate to its shape, which visually turns Bovington's torso into a fist. This, in fact, is a nearly inescapable effect of the photograph's disorienting New Vision perspective. The traditionally masculine associations of the fist place its viewers in a very different spectating position than its feminine association with the odalisque. Whereas the suggestion of a torso created a claustrophobic spectating position, a larger-than-life fist filling the frame feels confrontational. The highly visible, large scar in the middle of the image reinforces the context of physical violence. The threat represented by this familiar trope of masculine aggression introduces an element of challenge to the control of the photographer. It is a commonplace that the language used to describe the creating of a photograph refers to aggression and violence. We use expressions such as *shooting* the photograph, *capturing* an image, and *taking* a picture. Cunningham's photograph reverses this dynamic. Spectators, who imaginatively take up the photographer's position, are not cast in the role of violator but made to feel the effect of an image that seems to addresses them directly, and even menacingly.

The use of a single part (fist) to stand for the whole (aggressive man) is a particular class of metaphor known as a synecdoche. This is a trope of the fragment, and as such its use in photography calls attention to the nature of

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[99] Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape*, 111.

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photographic representation, which is itself a fragment that is usually meant to stand in for the larger world. The synecdoche thus functions as an experiential node that is selected for its ability to represent the larger field. In the instance of *Spiral Back*, 1929, the context of photography suggests that the fist may reference the act of holding the cable release, which when squeezed operates the camera's shutter. Such a reading actually reverses the traditional assumptions about the power relations staged by the photograph, aligning the field of masculinity and control of the camera with the photographed subject rather than the photographer.

In *Side*, 1929 [Fig. 2.24], Cunningham again disorients the viewer through the defamiliarization that motivates a play of metaphor and metonymy in the spectator's response. The photograph presents another headless spiral that is folded over on itself. Such a folding renders Bovington's body fleshy and soft rather than taut and muscular as would be expected in the figure of a male modern dancer. Cunningham's abstract vocabulary eliminates any conventional associations with the nude figure and replaces them with an undifferentiated form that is punctuated at its center by a series of deep creases and folds. On one level, her photograph is reminiscent of abstract images that suggest the creases and folds of the vagina or the spiral of a shell by fellow avant-garde artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Edward Weston. However, Cunningham's image feels more playful than the sensuous celebrations of O'Keeffe or the misogynous threat represented in Weston's vegetarian *vagina dentata*.[100] She has turned the

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[100] Examples here would be Georgia O'Keeffe's *Black Iris*, 1926, and Edward Weston's *Artichoke*, 1930. When Cunningham photographed Alfred Stieglitz in 1934, she photographed him in front of *Black Iris*. This is the first

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body of a male dancer into a metaphor for female anatomy. Even more provocatively, the tightly puckered opening that is formed by Bovington's body also suggests an anus. Although not gender specific, as a locus of desire the anus is much more likely to serve as a site of arousal for gay sex. Thus, her abstract fragments of this male body transform it from a recognizable form into metaphoric signs of female and gay male sexuality.

As expected, metonymic associations pull this image in a multitude of directions depending on which contexts its viewers bring to the photograph. Given the focus of this study on the impact of gender on such contexts, the metonymic associations of the fold are especially revealing. An emphasis on the body folded over itself into a tight ball suggests a protective posture that correlates visual and physical assault. As we have seen, one of the most common tropes of feminist visual analysis has been an understanding that a structural homology exists between the use of the camera and the controlling power of institutions. Within such an understanding, *Side*, 1929, is a potent analog for the ability by those in power to control the bodies of others by defining them according to their own needs and desires. The reduction of the nude to the minimal signs of a defensive posture calls attention to the body's vulnerability when constituted as an object of display. That vulnerability is heightened by the telling detail of the shiny scar on the body's upper back. Here, at the body's surface, is evidence that its protective layer of skin has been penetrated. The scar is an indexical trace, a reminder that the body is neither

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record that suggests she saw any of O'Keeffe's flower paintings. See *Aperture, Imogen Cunningham*, 150.

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inviolate nor fixed. All bodies are marked by their uses, and it is the camera's use of the body, not the body per se that registers its sexuality.

Fist, fold, open, closed, vagina, anus, penetrating, penetrated: a series of repetitions, deferrals, and exchanges turn Cunningham's male nudes into signs of sexuality. The avant-garde vocabulary of decontextualization and fragmentation creates a metaphoric and metonymic play of associations that turn the male body into a cipher for the viewer's own spectating desires. Cunningham makes visible the camera's capacity to turn the display of the nude into a protean chain of shifting sexualities. And the tight cropping of these fragmented nudes compresses the body inside the frame, emphasizing the tension between inside and outside the photographic space that viewers must negotiate.

Cunningham's photographs of the male body shift the viewer's experience of these images away from the interpretive meanings that are based on a narrative projection into the depicted scenario of the photograph. In place of narrative strategies, she deploys the avant-garde vocabulary of modernist abstraction to stage an encounter between the depicted object and the spectator's viewing condition. In this encounter the referentiality of the photograph emerges as an intertextual event that is motivated by the differing subjectivities that participate in the negotiation for meaning. Neither Cunningham as photographer nor spectating viewers have a secure purchase on the photograph's effects. In the process of making meaning, photographer, photograph, and viewer are organized by the photograph into a constantly shifting set of relations that encode social and cultural assumptions rather than transcribing fixed certainties. As a result, Cunningham's photographs of the

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male body overturn the gendered assumptions that had defined artistic representations of the male nude and the traditional gender antinomy, which its visual display had helped to secure. The final section of this chapter will turn to an investigation of Cunningham's use of flowers as a parallel site for her exploration of gender, representation and abstraction.

V. PERENNIAL POSES

The flowers of your garden blossom in my body.

-- Rabindranath Tagore[101]

Stieglitz cut abstract fragments out of the sky in order to transform the traditional pictorial subject of landscape into a modernist visual vocabulary. Similarly, Cunningham wrests the traditional subject of still life from its pictorial mode through her use of isolated flora, which are transformed by a modernist vocabulary of avant-garde abstraction. However, unlike her photographs of the nude, she did not arrive at these fragmentary studies by first working in a pictorialist visual language. By the time that she began photographing the flowers and plants of her California back yard in the nineteen-twenties, her experiments with the nude had already taught her how to create photographs that used the principles of New Vision photography, which she had first seen in Dresden. As Richard Lorenz points out: "Cunningham . . . probably more than

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[101] Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore was a favorite of Cunningham's after he had first visited her and Partridge in 1914. The line is from a poem Cunningham used in notes for a lecture at the Oakland Museum in March 1965. See Judy Dater, *Imogen Cunningham: A Portrait* (Boston, Mass.: New York Graphic

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any other West Coast photographer, paralleled the objectivity of the Germans in her work."[102] And Margery Mann writes: "about the same time that Imogen was isolating plant forms in Oakland, Albert Renger-Patzsch in Germany was turning his camera onto details of the world, including many plant forms that are not too different from Imogen's."[103]

When asked what led her to take up the subject of botanicals, which has become virtually synonymous with her name, Cunningham always recounted it the same way: "The reason during the 20s that I photographed plants was that I had three children under the age of four to take care of so I was cooped up."[104] Although undoubtedly true, her characteristically sassy explanation offers little in the way of understanding about either the power of her images or the innovation in photographic representation that she accomplished through them. As Pradip Malde writes about Cunningham's work in the twenties: "What is surprising is her abrupt stylistic departure from the earlier photographs. The new pictures were realized with an intense graphic conciseness and were a seminal impetus to the methodologies being formulated by other Californian photographers."[105]

Society, 1979), 14. See also Dater's interview with Roi Partridge in the same volume (25).

[102] Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham: Flora* (Boston and New York: Little, Brown, 1996), 19.

[103] Margery Mann, *Imogen Cunningham*, 13. In 1928 Renger-Patzsch published his New Vision photographs in a book entitled *Die Welt ist schön.*

[104] Conrad, III, 47.

[105] Pradip Malde, *Imogen Cunningham: Die Poesie der Form*, exhibition catalogue (Schaffhausen, Germany: Edition Stemmle, 1993), n.p.

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At the *Film und Foto* exhibition of 1929, Cunningham was one of a handful of American artists, and, besides Bernice Abbott, practically the only woman artist from America who was well represented.[106] Edward Weston, the co-curator of the American entries, initially only requested that Cunningham send her botanical images. However, when she sent them, Cunningham included a nude and an architectural photograph in her entries.[107] By including these two additional photographs, she was making it clear that her botanicals were part of the larger project that encompasses her oeuvre as a whole.[108] This section turns to an investigation of Cunningham's botanicals in light of her avant-garde vocabulary of abstraction. It focuses on the photographs from her *Pflanzenformen* series that she chose in 1929 for the *Film und Foto* exhibition.[109] These images offer a way to explore the use of flowers and plants as equivalents and to consider the role of gender in the representation of natural forms. Such an investigation will reveal how Cunningham's photographs bring the

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[106] In addition to the 1929 original, the catalogue is reproduced in facsimile as *International Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbundes, Film und Foto, Stuttgard 1929* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979). For a list of American participants, see earlier note no. 63.

[107] The nude photograph was *Nude*, 1923, which is discussed earlier in this study, and entitled *Akt*. The architectural photograph was *Shredded Wheat Water Tower*, 1929, and entitled *Vodni rezervoar*.

[108] She deployed a similar strategy three years later at the f.64 photographic exhibition at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1932. There she added a portrait and a hand fragment to her images of botanicals.

[109] *Pflanzenformen* is the name given to the photographs this series at the *Film und Foto* exhibition. References to these works in this study will use their English designations in order to identify more easily the photograph under discussion.

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spectating bodies of their viewers into the play of abstraction and reference that constitutes the meaning of her images.

As with her abstractions of the nude, Cunningham's close-up, fragmented, and disorienting views of plant life are not only descriptions of the natural world in spite of their deep-focused detail. They equally represent visual tropes for seeing itself. As such, they deploy the defamiliarizing strategies of metaphor and metonymy that make her nudes such potent signs of gender and sexuality. Natural plant forms lend themselves to discussions of gender as readily as the nude because they are tied so closely to exhibition and display. Additionally, the focus of viewing is usually their flowers, which have a long art historical association with sexuality as plant's reproductive organs that goes back to their medieval use in emblem books. The question, then, is: how do Cunningham's photographs constitute the conditions of spectatorship? In other words, how do they create a locus or site to stage the relations of photographer, photographic subject, and viewer? And how does gender function in the resulting event?

Davidov distinguishes Cunningham's work from Edward Weston's and Ansel Adams's, explaining her "project" as a "lifelong preoccupation with growing things."[110] Judy Dater's book of interviews with Cunningham's family and intimate friends reveals that they nearly all have a vivid memory of Cunningham that revolves around her garden. It is not incidental to the register of these photographs that they are images drawn from plants that Cunningham

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[110] Davidov, 325-6.

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nurtured into life. She is doubly responsible for their forms, first shaping the natural form in her garden and then creating the visual form in her image.

When Cunningham's camera situates its viewers at the heart of her wide-open *Magnolia Blossom,* 1925 [Fig. 2.25], they become participants in the act of flowering itself. The cropping of the petals so that they extend beyond the frame heightens an identification with the blossom's interior, positioning the viewer near the pistil with its jewel-like crown of stigma and glimpses of another row of petals just outside the central row. The spectator experiences this flower from the inside out. Moreover, the obvious unfolding of these petals are a reminder that this image represents a fragile moment in time. The ever-so-slightly wrinkled and turned back petal on the right testifies to the transitoriness of this moment even as the perfection of the photographic surface captures it as a timeless event. In this manner, Cunningham makes the spectator feel the processes of both flowering and photography.

The relationship between the woman artist and plant life as a trope of gender is complicated by the artistic convention that associates flowers with female genitals and transgressive sexuality. Tamar Garb argues that in nineteenth-century French painting "flowers, so refined and ubiquitous a reference to the feminine, could potentially signal woman's sex and so go over the edge of respectability."[111] The issue is especially vexed when the artist is a

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[111] Tamar Garb, "Gender and Representation," in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century,* ed. Francis Frascina et al. (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 260. Garb writes about this association as part of the scandal underlying Manet's *Olympia*: "If the woman's genitals needed to be displaced in order to be represented and if flowers offered the perfect solution (with their vaginal shape, connotations of

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woman such as Cunningham, who was resistant to identifying her work with feminist issues.[112] Judy Dater quotes a 1975 letter to her son Padraic: "The big news in this country now seems to be between men and women. Many of the people indulging in the cross fire try to drag me in."[113]

However, as Anna Chave has demonstrated in her analysis of O'Keeffe, women artists may be reluctant to accept otherwise obviously gendered interpretations of their imagery as a way to claim their own voice. Chave argues that Stieglitz refused to give O'Keeffe a physical child so that he could say "that he has given birth to her, and that together they had given birth to her art -- those much admired pictures being his progeny."[114] Chave's argument is significant because it offers an explanation for how a woman artist might subvert a visual vocabulary that had traditionally inscribed the feminine within the compass of male prerogatives. Her description of the visual vocabulary that O'Keeffe developed during the nineteen-twenties could easily be applied to Cunningham's flowers from the same period:

> O'Keeffe portrayed abstractly her experience of a feminine body, her body, alluding especially to areas that are invisible (and

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deflowering (*déflorer*) and easily recognized reference to femininity), then their presence in Manet's *Olympia* is understandable" (260).

[112] Dater, *Imogen Cunningham*, 16-17.

[113] Dater, *Imogen Cunningham*, 16.

[114] Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," in *Reading American Art*, eds. Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy (London and New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 359. Chave goes on to say that "O'Keeffe's objection to the sexual readings of her art probably had more to do

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> unrepresented) due to their interiority. She devised for viewers an ever-expanding catalogue of visual metaphors for the experience of space and of penetrability generally.[115]

In this way, O'Keeffe's abstracted forms serve as tropes for a felt experience of the body more than a literal depiction of it.

Cunningham's *False Hellebore*, 1926 [Fig. 2.26], operates in much the same way as many of O'Keeffe's monumental flowers. The leaves of this plant unfold from a dark, central void. The subtle range of gray tonalities encourages viewers to feel the sensuousness of the leaves by emphasizing their soft texture and ribbed structures. These suggestive forms press against the frame, enveloping viewers in the supple, swelling interiority of its embrace. The bright lighting simultaneously exposes the leaves and casts deep shadows that heighten the effect of interiority. Spectators are as likely to experience the felt impression of what is invisible in this photograph as they are its visible descriptions. The artifice of the photograph transforms this natural object through its spectacle address and organizes the visual field of the plant, the photographic surface, and the spectator into a display of gendered space.

The tension between artifice and nature in the photographic process creates a different effect in Cunningham's photograph *Leaf Pattern*, late 1920s [Fig. 2.27]. At first it is difficult to discern that this abstract pattern of jagged forms is actually taken from a plant. The image has been simplified to four basic tonalities of black, white, light and dark gray. In design it relies on the triangular

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with the degrading forms those readings took than with any naiveté about her work's sexual overtones" (359-60).

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principle that organizes Cunningham's abstract images based on the nude from this period. The waves of triangles that form the edges of the leaves add to that geometric principle. The close cropping and viewing position at the center of this column of unfolding leaves again seems to suggest a spectator who experiences the plant from the inside out. However, there is an odd elision of the spectating body. Whereas the leaves on the left hand side of the image throw their shadows to create the dark tones of the leaves on the right, the viewer's body leaves no visible shadow, no trace. By this absence, the photograph operates on its spectators in a manner opposite to that of *Magnolia Blossom*, 1925. Rather than creating the impression of a three-dimensional space that is shared by spectators and blossom, this image confronts the spectator like a two-dimensional mirror, which serves to remind its viewers that the mimesis of the photographic print is rendered on a flat surface. Although taken from nature, the image represents the artifice of an abstract design.

Nevertheless, as Jakobson's notions of defamiliarization and disorientation demonstrate, artifice in art can be an aid to seeing when it forces viewers to forego their usual assumptions and to seek new patterns of perception. Those perceptions often link viewers to images in self-reflexive ways that arouse an awareness of their own spectating bodies. This is especially true of images that create an erotic or sexual register through metaphoric or metonymic associations. *Black and White Lilies 3*, 1920s [Fig. 2.28], offers a case in point. The California Black Calla Lily that dominates this photograph is an exotic plant with a strikingly unusual bloom: a single, arrow-shaped flower bract is

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[115] Chave, "O'Keeffe," 354.

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ruptured by a blackish-purple spike that grows through the middle of the sheaf and supports an inflorescent panicle. This particular image is cropped from a more spacious view in which the contrast between the black and white calla are clearly visible. Here the white calla serves mainly to set off the spike, which creates a diagonal thrust as it plunges into -- or rears out of -- the narrow bowl of the black calla. The rupturing and thrusting of the fleshy spike into and/or out of the enfolding, dark, velvety flower bract provides a clear metaphor of human sexual intercourse irrespective of the spectator's gender. The image holds viewers in an erotic tension of opposites: hard and soft, glossy and velvety, linear and curved, in and out, open and closed.

A more ambiguous allusion is suggested by the pairing of black and white in this photograph. In order to read that opposition within a gendered economy, it is necessary to employ the metonymic associations of those colors. As we saw previously in discussions of the female nude, the discourse of nineteenth-century symbolists and early modernists aligned female sexuality with exotic traditions, especially romanticized notions of so-called "primitive" cultures. As many feminist theorists have noted, Freud fixed that association as a psychological axiom when he referred to female sexuality as "the dark continent."[116] In his imaginary alignment, darkness was associated with an elemental vitality born out of a timeless and inaccessible innocence that Victorian Englanders believed to characterize the African continent and its peoples. Such associations reflect a white, male, European mythology that legitimizes an

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[116] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 215.

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invasive approach to both women and non-western cultures through the colonializing discourse of exploration and discovery.[117]

Mary Ann Doane further points out that in this trope the black woman was doubly an object of conquest.[118] It projects sexual desires and their cultural ("civilized" in the language of Freud) restraints onto the field of racial difference. Thus, the juxtaposition of black and white calla lilies in this photograph may allude to the differing responses of spectating bodies that is suggested by the compounding alterities of female, male, light, dark. It resists any attempt at a hierarchical reading that would produce a gendered analysis by obviating a racial analysis. Previously, we saw in her treatment of the nude how Cunningham creates images that spectators can experience as challenges to a traditional gender antinomy. Her treatment of these calla lilies offers a similar opportunity to consider how different spectators might constitute the experience of gender in images that resonate with other bodily references as well.

If *Black and White Lilies 3*, 1920s, stages the imaginary possibilities of spectator's in relation to the construction of blackness, *Calla*, ca. 1925 [Fig. 2.29],

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[117] The colonial implications of this discourse and its resulting perceptions about the African continent and its peoples is recorded with harrowing detail in Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

[118] Mary Ann Doane, "Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, "in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, eds. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1999), 449. Doane's goes on to argue that the historical trace of colonial racism in Freudian discourse prevents even feminist psychoanalysis from unpacking the imbricated relations between white women and women of color: "Psychoanalysis, unshaken in its premises, cannot be *applied* to issues of racial difference but must be radically destabilized by them" (451). This insight will become even more significant in the discussions of Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes and flowers in chapter four of this study.

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stages the photographic possibilities of whiteness. This image focuses on the pure white flower bract and the yellow inflorescent spike, which is rendered in light gray, at its center. In the whiteness of this bloom, Cunningham locates the impression of her photograph through its emphasis on one end of the gelatin silver print's tonal scale. In discussing tonal balance in photography, Carter Ratcliff argues that extremism in tone "is one of the means photography employs to become more self-revelatory, more fully and ambiguously itself."[119] In *Calla*, ca. 1925, Cunningham keys the tonality of her photograph very high in order to emphasize the whiteness of the image. The dark, nearly black, undifferentiated background isolates the bloom and, in spite of the multiple shadings of gray tones that make up its coloration, further adds to the impression of whiteness. The abundant whiteness presses against the frame, which seems unable to hold the whole flower, pushes it forward into the perceived space of its spectators, and draws the attention of viewers to the photographic surface. The effect creates a tension between the abstract, visual patterns of white and the textures of the depicted flower.

Spectators are not only suspended between the abstract design of the photographic surface and the recognizable description of the calla lily. The highly keyed display of nuanced shades of white also stages this image as an erotic spectacle. Cunningham photographs the flower bract from an angle that emphasizes its spiral form, anticipating her manipulation of John Bovington's body into spiral shapes. And in a manner similar to the ambiguity of sexual differences that she produced in her male nudes, Cunningham seems to load this

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[119] Carter Ratcliff, "Gray Areas: The Photographer's Use of White," *Print*

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calla bloom with paradoxical gender references. The juxtaposition of bract and spike appears to conjoin associations of the receptive, feminine walls of the vagina and the projecting, masculine shaft of the penis. The spiral shape promotes a sense of the bract's unfolding at the erect rigidity of the spike's poking insistence. Even more than in the image of the black calla lily, this photograph references the reproductive poles of human sexuality within a single organism. The clear display of sexual androgyny at such close range encourages a self-awareness of the gendered bodies that spectators bring to their experience of the photograph.

The spectator's awareness of a gendered body while viewing is heightened when the same plant is doubled in her photograph *Two Callas*, ca. 1925 [Fig. 2.30]. The notion of the double is a central preoccupation in her work that numerous critics, and even Cunningham herself, have discussed. Its relationship to her interest in male bodies and the nude seems tied to the birth of her twins, Rondal and Padriac. Margery Mann, in particular, has noted Cunningham's fascination with the double image: "For several years, everywhere she looked there was a real-life double image. Her twin sons left their mark on her work."[120] In this doubling of exotic white callas, Cunningham seems to float their images in a dark space. The viewer looks directly into the spiraling bowls of the flower bracts at the inflorescent spikes that appear like tentative feelers cautiously emerging from a protective recess. The pair of dark leaves spiraling upward in the background further disorients -- rather than grounds -- the spectator's point of view. The image thus sets its viewers adrift in

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Collector's Newsletter 8 (March/April, 1977): 8.

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relation to the space referenced by the photograph, its lack of any bodily anchor in relation to the image doubling the free play of its visual associations.

Due to the corporeal symmetry, the free play of visual associations suggested by the doubled display of these flowers ranges throughout the body. Their forms offer an analogy to numerous bodily pairings: eyes, ears, breasts, nipples, and buttocks. While these sites are common to men and women, they also enter importantly into the vocabulary of the body's gendering. Even eyes and ears participate in this gendering through their associations with feminine adornment. The doubled leaves in the background reinforce these bodily associations by extending them to the more muscular areas of shoulders, arms, hips, and thighs. As with the other sites, these areas play significant roles in the gendering of bodies, both male and female. Cunningham even suggests the more phallic implications of the inflorescent spike surrounded by a velvety bract that are evident in her other calla images. But their doubling here adds an element of excess that heightens the sexual tension. The multiplicity of associations point to the role of the spectator in assigning the sexual register of these sensuously ambiguous flowers, roles that are infinitely reversable because both are variations of the same bloom.

The double, however, is not only central to the discourse of gendered bodies. As we have seen, it is one of the central tropes in the discourse of photography itself. The double calls attention to the belief that the photograph duplicates the world. This is assumed to be both a literal duplication of the actual object in front of the camera and a perceptual duplication of the photographer's

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[120] Mann, *Imogen Cunningham*, n.p.

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visual experience. Yet the mimetic implications of this particular copy disturbs the untroubled assumption of a faithful duplicate. The similarity of these clearly paired blossoms and leaves sets up a play of differences. The very whiteness that characterizes the calla bract is transformed into two decidedly distinct tonalities by the photograph, one dark and the other light. The spiral shape is rounder in one and more elongated in the other. Most telling of all, one of the yellow spikes is light and the other dark, nearly blending into the hollow from which it emerges. Viewers know that these flowers would appear much more similar if experienced outside this representation. Therefore, the photograph calls attention to its own mediation in the constitution of the image. By creating a photograph that so evidently references the body and photography simultaneously, Cunningham demonstrates the interconstitutive nature of representation and gendered perceptions. Just as the photograph cannot, in the end, reduce the representation of calla lilies to an objectively descriptive visual experience based in black and white, so gender cannot be referenced through a binary system of difference.

In her botanicals from the nineteen-twenties, no less than in her male nudes, Cunningham has referenced the body through the visual strategy of spectacle address. In both cases, she takes advantage of the spectator's self-conscious viewing experience in order to create ambiguously gendered tropes. Cunningham uses an avant-garde vocabulary drawn from modernist abstraction to create metaphoric and metonymic associations that focus on the relation between the image and its spectators. This strategy shifts the viewing experience away from a perceptual mode of vision that displaces the body into an imaginary narrative. It constitutes the photograph as an equivalent for the

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emotional experiences of the bodies of spectators as they are engaged in the act of looking. By their very ambiguity, Cunningham's photographs stage the viewing body as a site of gendered tensions. They reveal the different contexts that spectators bring to images as a way of constructing meaning in relation to their own sexual desires. The next chapter will explore how Minor White extends Cunningham's gendered tensions through his development of Stieglitz's use of the Equivalent photograph. It considers what was at stake for him as a gay man exploring his erotic desires in the 1940s and 1950s when the notion of the homosexual closet organized sexual discourse before the liberating effects of Stonewall. Through his serial, abstract photographs of ocean beaches and male nudes, White's images involve their spectators in the tensions of his own gender conflicts.

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Minor White and the Shape of In/Visible Desire

> *Given the ubiquity of the term today and how central the metaphor of the closet is to the ways we think about gay history before the 1960s, it is bracing – and instructive – to note that it was never used by gay people themselves before then.*
>
> – George Chauncey[1]

This chapter on Minor White and the next on Robert Mapplethorpe consider the role of cultural visibility in the production of photographs that carry a homoerotic charge. Chapter four will consider Robert Mapplethorpe's engagement with these ideas, which come with, and immediately after, the Stonewall riots in 1969 that spawned the rise of the movement for civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. The gay and lesbian liberation movement, as it was first called, not only focused attention on the relation between non-normative sexualities and cultural attitudes toward the body, but it also produced with remarkable suddenness a public arena for the display of the

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[1] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 6. As this quote suggests, an investigation of Minor White's expression of his same-sex desires in the period before Stonewall must rely on his use of double-coded language – both linguistic and visual – to reveal what is commonly understood in current usage as his closeted sexuality. White's self-conscious experiences of his sexuality offer a window into the terms that were available for gay men to understand themselves in relation to the larger social order before the articulations that the notion of the closet made possible for an artist such as Mapplethorpe. As Chauncey points out, the closet serves as a powerful analytic discourse to explore the ordering of sex and gender as long as we remember that it is no more essential or fixed than any other social construction.

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male nude. In his important study on homoerotic photography, Allen Ellenzweig argues that "it was two decisive tenets of, first the feminist movement, and second, gay and lesbian liberation, that encouraged a quite specific homoerotic sensibility in photography to declare itself."[2]

From feminism came the principle that "the personal is political." When applied to the gay and lesbian liberation movement, that axiom challenged its members to come out of the closet as "a profound challenge to the social isolation and political enfeeblement that previously had been their lot."[3] Sexualities considered transgressive in the United States prior to 1969 had been not only socially unacceptable but were hidden from public view out of fear of the policing measures, both official and unofficial, that supported a regime of normative sexuality based in the priority of power relations biased toward heterosexual, white males. Because gay sexuality was understood as the clearest affront to this regime, the consequences of its public display had been especially harsh and therefore largely repressed. As John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman argue in their history of sexuality in America, "coming out" was nothing less than a public declaration that erotics play a central role in one's identity.[4] It also served to announce that there were more erotic choices than those desires culturally sanctioned by the mainstream.

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[2] Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, 126.

[3] Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, 126.

[4] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Perennial Library, Harper and Row, 1988; reprint, 1989), 289.

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The photographs of White and Mapplethorpe, produced primarily before and after Stonewall respectively, represent one of the clearest examples of this cultural shift from sexuality as a private matter, especially in its more transgressive gay practices, to sexuality as a public stance. Comparing their photographs illustrate how sex was redefined from something that one did privately in bed (or elsewhere) to a way of life that encompassed both one's private and public selves. During the period before Stonewall, images of gay desire circulated primarily by way of a double-coded visual vocabulary, which offered heterosexual alibis for displaying the naked male body in discursive contexts such as naturist societies, physical fitness models, Hollywood fan magazines, and the neoclassical aesthetics of art history. White's photographs represent this earlier, clandestine encoding of the erotics of gay personal desire that Mapplethorpe's photographs make visible much more publicly. However, in order to understand the extent of that transformation and to comprehend its impact on photography, it is necessary to look first at how White addressed those concerns in the closeted era before Stonewall.

A number of indicators suggest that the photography of Minor White operates as a middle term between Stieglitz and Cunningham in the 1920s and Mapplethorpe in the 1970s. On a purely formal level, he was explicit in his own writings about continuing the tradition of "pure" photographic practice, especially the Equivalent that Stieglitz had championed in his cloud studies. As an artist working first on the West Coast in Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco, California, and then on the East Coast in Rochester, New York, and Arlington, Massachusetts, White was influenced by the continued legacy of both Group f.64

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and the Stieglitz circle, synthesizing them in his version of the Equivalent.[5] Although pictorialism, with its narrative focus, was no longer associated with avant-garde photography, White attempted to reintroduce narrative into photography; however, in place of the pictorialist notion of an implied scenario, he based his narratives on abstract imagery through experiments in sequencing. Most significantly, this study examines how White's photographs rely on an ambiguity within the figurative tropes of metaphor and metonymy, creating a reversibility of sexual associations and opening up his images to a subversive play that exposes the arbitrary and reversible assumptions within the binary constructs of traditional gender.

White also produced a limited but powerful series of nudes, which are based in the avant-garde principles of isolated bodies photographed in a way that effaces their personalities, transforming them into studies of form and tonality. As had Stieglitz and Cunningham, White focused on nude bodies that were objects of his sexual desires, and as with Mapplethorpe, those desires were mobilized by a gay erotics. However, unlike Mapplethorpe's aggressive, post-Stonewall defiance, White's own conflicted feelings about his homosexuality, in consort with the era's cultural demand that gays and lesbians be closeted, led him to keep most of these photographs of male nudes (and the complicated intimate relationships they implicated) hidden from the general public. The photographs of male nudes that White did print for public consumption relied on

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[5] White lived and photographed in Portland, Oregon from 1937 to 1942, in Hawaii while serving in the military during WWII from 1942 to 1945, in Manhattan from 1945 to 1946, in San Francisco, California from 1946 to 1953, in Rochester, New York from 1953 to 1965, in Arlington, Massachusetts from 1965 to 1976.

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the double coded language that made their erotic content available to other gay men even as their context fashioned a heterosexual alibi and opened a fissure through which viewers could access numerous sexually desiring positions. And finally, White's deeply religious sensibility is a bridge between the symbolist vocabulary of the early avant-garde and the sexual extremes of the sadomasochist practices that defined Mapplethorpe's personal vision.

I. HIDING THE VISIBLE BODY

> *When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign.*
>
> – Jacques Derrida[6]

In adopting the notion of the Equivalent from Alfred Stieglitz, Minor White became one of photography's primary champions of "pure photography" and the artistic tradition of sharply focused subjective imagery it represents. Not only did White follow Stieglitz's ideas, but, adds photographic historian Shelly Rice, "[t]he person most responsible for spreading Stieglitz's doctrine (Stieglitz himself died in 1946) was Minor White."[7] White was able to exert a formidable influence on American photography through his wide-ranging activities as a prolific artist, teacher, curator, and editor. Beginning in 1946, he taught at the

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[6] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, Il.: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 9.

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California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (now the Fine Arts Institute), and then at the Rochester Institute of Technology from 1953 to 1965, and finally at M.I.T., Massachusetts from 1965 until his death.[8] By organizing groundbreaking thematic exhibitions at the George Eastman House, New York, and at the Hayden Gallery, M.I.T., Massachusetts, White advanced photographers who shared his philosophical attitudes. And as one of the founders of the widely read publication *Aperture*, White used his position as the journal's primary editor from 1952 to 1975 to disseminate his vision of photography.

White was especially attracted to the Equivalent's contribution to visual abstraction, which James Baker Hall defines this way in his biographical essay published with White's photographs: "the photographic image as a metaphor, as an objective correlative for a particular feeling or state of being associated with something other than the ostensible subject."[9] In Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, White saw a way to initiate the subjective associations of viewers by involving them in a play of recognition between the image and their own associations. In a 1963 article for *PSA Journal*, White wrote: "Probably the most mature idea ever presented to picture-making photography was the concept of Equivalence which

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[7] Shelley Rice, "Beyond Reality: The Subjective Vision," in *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michel Frizot (Cologne, Germany: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1998), 663.

[8] The details of these facts, and those regarding White's curating and editing that follow, may be found in the detailed Biographical Chronology published in Peter C. Bunnell, *Minor White: The Eye That Shapes*, exhibition catalogue (Princeton, N.J.: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1989), 1-13.

[9] James Baker Hall, *Minor White: Rites and Passages* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1978), 18.

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Alfred Stieglitz named early in the 1920s and practiced the rest of his life."[10] White goes on to explain that the tradition he finds in Stieglitz is more than

> a certain appearance, or style, or trend, or fashion. Equivalence is a function, an experience, not a thing. Any Photograph, regardless of source, might function as an Equivalent to someone, sometime, someplace. If the individual viewer realizes that for him what he sees in a picture corresponds to something within himself – that is, the photograph mirrors something in himself – then his experience is some degree of Equivalence.[11]

White, as John Pultz relates, "defines equivalence in photography according to how a photograph functions, not according to formal qualities."[12] In concordance with his own theories of transcendental, especially Eastern, religious philosophy, White intends his images to function in the manner of a Zen Buddhist "koan," a theoretical conundrum usually posed as a nonsense question that is pondered in order to gain insight into unexamined assumptions about reality.[13] His goal is to initiate poetic states of meditation that rely on a

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[10] Minor White, "Equivalence: The Perennial Trend," in *Photographers on Photography: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 168.

[11] White, "Equivalence," in Lyons, 168.

[12] John Pultz, "Equivalence, Symbolism, and Minor White's Way into the Language of Photography," 29.

[13] For a discussion of the role of the koan in the interpretation of White's photographs, see Lawrence Jasud, "Reading Minor White: *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*," *History of Photography* 16 (Summer 1992): 173-4. James Baker Hall writes that White's primary koan was the spiritual conundrum posed by his homosexuality. See Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 59.

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mystical tradition of inner vision. In an essay for their exhibition on landscape photography, Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock explain that White's symbolism is not meant "to be the one-to-one interpretations of allegorical, heraldic, or mythological symbols, but rather the creation of mood-evoking, ambiguous, timeless icons ritualistically experienced in a state of quasi-religious contemplation."[14] In such an economy all responses that lead to self-discovery and personal growth become valid, which seems to be at odds with Stieglitz's more relational attempt to create an Equivalent that would connect the responses of viewers through a shared expression of meaning.[15]

However, it is arguable that White's photographs exceed his metaphysical theories regarding the priority of inner vision over mutual expression. White recognized that viewers were not isolated in their subjective responses but shared interpretive codes of meaning, especially those mobilized by the figures of metaphor and metonymy. Undoubtedly, it was this awareness of the resonances shared by viewers that lay behind White's reluctance to create the photographs he took at Point Lobos State Park, California, primarily during 1949 and 1950. Of these photographs, which formed the core of the group he printed as *Sequence 4*, White wrote that they were made "out of forms I had liked for about three years but would not photograph because of their obvious sexual

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[14] Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Linquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 78.

[15] As Pultz argues, these mystical theories move White's photographs "from art as object to art as experience, and particularly art as therapeutic experience." Pultz, 37.

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implications."[16] Interestingly, White does not say that he *cannot* photograph these forms but that he *would not* photograph them. The squeamishness that White exhibits testifies to his awareness that many viewers would comprehend the sexual register in the images, a sexuality he would not want exposed. Given White's own struggles with his homosexuality, it is not surprising that he was drawn to these forms, which offer a photographic Equivalent of sexual desires and are especially revealing about how such desires become attached to one's visual experiences. James Baker Hall lays the onus for this struggle directly on White's deep commitment to religion: "he was constantly struggling with the compulsion to clothe and obscure and hide himself, to cover his shame."[17] In writing about this sequence, Peter Bunnell writes: "The grouping of ten images is recognized by most viewers as being highly erotic and utterly revealing of his personal frustration and inner conflicts regarding his sexuality and his attitudes toward women."[18]

The primary locus of sexuality at the center of this sequence of images is a long, narrow fissured rock formation that reads as a pair of lips, which is evident in a photograph such as *Two Forms Moving Left and Right*, 1949 [Fig. 3.1]. White has deployed the disorienting and defamiliarizing vocabulary of the Equivalent

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[16] Minor White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations* (New York: Aperture, 1969), 227.

[17] Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 19. Hall goes on to say somewhat disingenuously that it would not have mattered what White struggled with because "the specifics are perhaps not so important as the role of shame itself in religious experience" (19). I would argue that, in fact, given White's choice of photographic subjects, it matters a great deal that it was his homosexuality that created the conflict.

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photograph on this rock formation. His use of close-up and a small lens aperture creates the sharp-focused detail without an orienting horizon that turns this piece of reality into an almost unrecognizable abstraction. In the text accompanying this series of images, White insists on this relationship between abstraction and reality as the central work of photography: "The spring-tight line between reality and photograph has been stretched relentlessly, but it has not been broken. These abstractions of nature have not left the world of appearance; for to do so is to break the camera's strongest point – its authenticity."[19] Yet in spite of White's protests, the figurative associations of lips and skin that are organized by the space of this photograph transform a piece of reality into an Equivalent for a sensual experience that runs counter to the physical properties of the rock face.

As a metaphor, lips suggest softness rather than the cold, hard surface represented here. They also reference the body at one of its most complex sites. As part of the face, lips contribute to an individual's recognizable identity. They also delineate the mouth, a transitional space between the body's interior and exterior. Lips, in fact, are a kind of internal organ that has been turned inside out and positioned on the surface of the body for a dual role that is related to both internal and external functions. Thus, through this abstract image, White signals a site of permeability where the internal workings of the physical body become visible to others and function as a sign of the emotional, usually understood as a realm of experience that happens inside the body and expressed on the body's

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[18] Bunnell, *The Eye that Shapes*, 6.

[19] Minor White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations*, 63.

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surface. In other words, the lips operate as a metaphor for the public display of interiority by their literal performance of that inversion.

Furthermore, the lips carry a series of metonymic associations that are directly related to passion. Without belaboring an obvious point, lips are not only the site where loyalty and tender affection are expressed but also function prominently in foreplay. There is a direct connection between kissing and the erotic imagination as the lips prefigure the sexual embrace of bodies through their active caressing of another. White understood how easily the photographic Equivalents he created from these forms would produce such figurative associations in his viewers. The reciprocity between internal and external experience that is mobilized in White's images stands in contradiction to his need to keep his own inner desires closed off from the public display of his external erotic life. And yet, the slightly parted rocks strongly suggest that White's lips are not completely sealed. He has made these images in order to reference the desires that link his internal and external life even if they leave him more open to public view than he would like. The inescapable associations with the exaggerated features of a clown's face prompted by this image may be a further way that White references the tragic-comic implications of sexual desire more generally.

Of course, the face is not the only area of the body that has lips. The vagina also possesses "lips" that allow for the permeability of a woman's body and operate as a site of her sexuality that is both highly visible and partially hidden. The vertical orientation of *Tar and Sandstone*, 1960 [Fig. 3.2], from *Sequence 4* makes this association more obvious. The dark tar that has pooled in the crevice running between the two lip-like forms and in rivulets on the left

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adds to the associations of female sexuality by referencing its lubricating fluids. Visually, the forms appear swollen, as if they were engorged with blood in a heightened state of arousal. Such a reading of this metaphoric picture relies on a literalness that turns the image into a crotch shot of pornographic proportions.[20] However, the sex organs engorged with blood also carry a metonymic register in regard to male sexuality through the power of blood to turn the flaccid penis tumescent. This more nuanced reading of the reversibility between vulva and blood into penis and ejaculate suggests a contingency of gender associations that is consistent with White's ambiguity regarding his own sexuality. The question is not whether the photograph should be read through the figurative language of female or male sexuality. The point is that as an Equivalent it references both sexualities through a set of associations that also question the relation between desire and representation.

White's Equivalent images in this sequence turn inanimate rock into an apparently organic object that resonates with bodily orifices, dangerous desires, and hybrid sexuality. The metonymic associations in the photographs destabilize the more metaphoric homology of male and female sex organs, turning vaginas into penis, penis into vagina, and both into signs of the fragmented body. That danger is made more explicit by the eighth photograph in the sequence, *Driftwood and Eye*, 1951 [Fig. 3.3]. In this image the rock has the visual appearance of a puckered opening that has created a circular hole. Again, the meaning of this visual image has less to do with its obvious homological

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[20] In a journal entry of a few years later, White writes: "I wonder about my reaction to women – fear? They revolt my flesh. I do not want to look at them." Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 57.

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associations with the anus than with the wrecked debris and splintered wood that is lodged in the hole. The doubling provided by the eye-like form at the edge of the hole serves as a reminder of the colloquial use of "winking eye" as a reference to the anus and aligns the possibilities of peril at this site with White's own seeing. In the language of scopophilia, the threat usually associated with the voyeur's gaze is replaced with the threat of what the voyeur might or might not see. The image betrays an uncomfortable relation to orifices and the vulnerability they make possible. Because *Tar and Sandstone*, 1960, directly follows this photograph in White's sequencing, these psychological dangers vie with the more physical associations of gendered sex organs in the previous photograph.

White maintained that the principle of sequencing was as central to avant-garde photography as the Equivalent. As this study illustrates, Stieglitz and Cunningham had moved away from narrative appeals to those of spectacle address as they shifted from a photographic vocabulary based in pictorialism to one based in the conditions of modernity and the aesthetic language of avant-garde abstraction. By combining Equivalent photographs into sequences, White sought to bring the principles of narrative back into avant-garde photography. However, White is careful to distinguish the narratives created through sequencing with those that supported pictorialism, writing: "A picture story explains and demonstrates. A *Sequence* sustains the feeling-states."[21] In his understanding, pictorialist photographers used single images as illustrations, images that were tableau scenes meant to represent a narrative chain of events

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[21] White, *Mirrors*, 65.

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fanning out before and after them. In such photographs the viewer takes up the position of a beholder, a mental participant in the drama that is signaled by the arrested moment of the image. White complains that such single photographs do not capture his emotions and resist his desire to be an active participant in the visual experience of the image: "With single images I am basically an observer, passive to what is before me, no matter how perceptive or how fast my emotions boil."[22] White's view is consistent with the traditional goals of earlier avant-garde artists who presented their artistic theories as ideological statements about how modern life should be lived.

Even in his Equivalent abstractions, White found the single photograph unsatisfying. While preparing one of his sequences for exhibition in 1959, White writes of the joy he feels working with photographs in series and his feeling that "monumental single photographs seem like tombstones."[23] The narrative White means to evoke in his photographs is a drama of emotions: "When a sequence is brewing," White writes, "the feeling inside is akin to a storm gathering. Only when the storm has passed and the photographs lie like leaves all over the floor may I spell out among them the name of the force that made communication."[24] Shelly Rice argues that both Stieglitz and White used their Equivalents in a similar way: to represent "the shifting emotional tones of life, the ongoing dramas of subjective feeling which can find their visual equivalent in the material

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[22] White, *Mirrors*, 65.

[23] White, *Mirrors*, 68.

[24] White, *Mirrors*, 66.

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world."[25] However an important distinction must be made between their understandings of the site for this drama. Stieglitz may have always presented his Equivalents in series, but it was the visual images of the sky and clouds themselves when removed from their usual context of everyday life that were transformed into figures of correspondence for previous subjective experience.

As opposed to Stieglitz's apriori experiences that he wanted the Equivalent photograph to reference, White created photographic sequences, setting the visual images within a syntax that would produce subjective experiences of their own. He describes the resulting figurative vocabulary in the language of psychology and the unconscious: "A sequence of photographs, then, functions as a little drama of dreams with a memory."[26] In order to create photographs that function as metaphors and metonymies, White seeks to establish a narrative of interior associations based in the gaps between images. Of the images in *Sequence 4*, White writes:

> While rocks were photographed, the subject of the sequence is not rocks; while symbols seem to appear, they are pointers to the

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[25] Rice, "Beyond Reality," in Frizot, 663.

[26] White, *Mirrors*, 67. While White's primary reading and influence in psychology was Carl Jung, his description here bears a remarkable similarity to the circuit of interconstitutive meanings between experience and the symbolic that forms the basis of Jacques Lacan's linguistic-based psychoanalytic theories. White's photographic model offers a visual analogue for Lacan's dictum that the unconscious is structured like a language. Although there is no direct evidence that White read Lacan, he did read widely and often in contemporary studies of Freud. The year of this quotation, 1966, was also the year that Éditions du Seuil published Lacan's collection of essays, *Écrits* and references to his work began appearing in English among second-generation psychoanalytic theorists. A related concept that lies outside the scope of this study, White's preoccupation with the mirror as an "other self," also is suggestive in relation to Lacan's famous

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> significance. The meaning appears in the space between the images, in the mood they raise in the beholder. The flow of the sequence eddies in the river of his associations as he passes from picture to picture.[27]

For White, then, the correspondences lie as much in the experience generated in the viewer by the photographs themselves at the time of beholding as in the capacity of photographs to create figurative associations that viewers will recognize. As in film, viewers experience a series of jump cuts that join images in narrative sequence through editing and link White's photographic practice to the discursive space of film with its underlying tension between narrative and spectacle modes of audience address.

In his ordering of the photographs in *Sequence 4*, White begins the series with an image that resonates with phallic associations. The first photograph, *Opposed Directions*, 1949 [Fig. 3.4], depicts the edge of a rock shelf as a strong thrusting form that cuts across and up the photograph from the bottom right corner. The swirling patterns in the rock on the left animate the image of the rock as if it were reacting to the forceful action of the phallic intrusion. As the title implies, the photograph organizes the visual forms of the rock into contrasting movements. It creates a set of expectations that reinforce the sexual cadences in the images as viewers pass through the photographic sequence, experiencing the figurative associations within them, first of tension and conflict and then of release and repose.

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concept of "the mirror stage" in which he describes the reciprocity between visual and verbal constructions of the self.

[27] White, *Mirrors*, 63.

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Those rhythms are reinforced in the sequence by an early pair of photographs entitled *Outstretched Form, Moving Up*, 1950 [Fig. 3.5], and *Outstretched Form, Moving Down*, 1950 [Fig. 3.6]. The shadowy impressions on the rock surface are not mimetic; rather, they establish the principle of alternating forces that is set up between them and provides the interpretive rubric of the sequence. The final photograph, *Resurgence*, 1950 [Fig. 3.7], completes the sequence by depicting an empty sweep of rock jutting along the edge of the photograph. Beside the rock, pools of water in an empty channel testify to the repetitive movement of the ocean's waves and tide that have worn the rock into the shape of its graceful curve. At this moment, the heaving action of the water seems finished, having spent its force on the rocky shore. White's sequence, which begins with a linear, diagonal intrusion, ends with a curving, empty breach. Through the syntax of his sequence, White had turned the powerful dynamism of these opposing elemental forces into Equivalents for his emotionally and sexually agitated state.[28]

In his statement accompanying these photographs, White says that their purpose was to create a response in the viewer such that "as the object was revealed, the Self of the beholder would unfold."[29] This stress on the effects of his Equivalents on the viewer mirrors White's acknowledgment elsewhere that he had been reluctant to photograph these forms until he was "the victim of an

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[28] The use of an Equivalent sequence to express the tensions of a sexual encounter are not limited to these examples or even to images devoid of actual people. John Pultz has written about White's paean to, and sexual longing for, a young man in the sequence entitled *Song Without Words*, 1948; 1949; and 1961. "The content of the individual images and their dramatic sequencing strongly suggest the rise and fall of sexual tension." John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens*, 110.

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emotional storm" and "sex symbols were just what I needed."[30] Therefore, the personal register evoked by these images is freighted with White's own sexual tensions, fears, anxieties, and prejudices. Peter Bunnell has written about the importance of recognizing White's own history in his Equivalents:

> The reading of such an image requires close scrutiny and a disciplined familiarity with the particulars of the photographer's vocabulary. The dictionary or what might be called the reference guide to this vocabulary is comprised of the welter of psychological-physical happenings of the artist's life, among other information.[31]

White himself explained the importance of bringing the viewer's perception into line with his own in his first published essay in 1943 entitled "When is Photography Creative." He maintains that one of the two ways to be creative "is accomplished by *choosing a subject to photograph which will illustrate an idea heretofore existing only in the mind of the photographer.*"[32] Through the use of photographic sequences, White establishes an emotional relay between himself and his viewers.

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[29] White, *Mirrors*, 63.

[30] White, *Mirrors*, 63.

[31] Bunnell, *The Eye that Shapes*, 17.

[32] Minor White, "When is Photography Creative?" *American Photography* 37 (1943): 17.

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II. THE MIRROR OF LOVE

> *The camera is first a means of self-discovery and a means of self-growth. The artist has one thing to say – himself.*
>
> – Minor White[33]

When it came to sex, White's own experiences of homosexuality and gay desire played a large role in his mental life. As Peter Bunnell notes, many of White's sequences were attempts to transcribe into the language of abstract forms the sexual anxiety that he felt over his attraction to men and his frustration at failed relationships. Notably, Bunnell cites the sequence entitled *The Steely Barb of Infinity,* 1960, as based in a romantic encounter with a student. White used this "sequence executed at the end of a failed relationship as a means of working out for himself the emotions of this involvement."[34] Two of the images in this sequence will serve to illustrate how White used his photographic practice to accomplish this emotional work.

In *Stony Brook State Park, New York,* 1960 [Fig. 3.8], White creates an image that uses the conventions of the photographic Equivalent he adopted from Stieglitz. The image reads as a record of irreconcilable oppositions. On the one hand the scene appears to represent a vista along the shoreline from which the beholder gazes into the distance. There seems to be a horizon line, a sweeping curve where land and water meet, and a heavily clouded sky above. A cursory glance gives the impression that White has discovered a place in the natural

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[33] Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages,* 88.

[34] Bunnell, *The Eye that Shapes,* 10.

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world where the landscape becomes a stylized "s" and has turned it into a found yin-yang symbol. Such a reading would be a simple metaphor of the balance existing in nature and accords with the fact that in 1960 White officially embraced Eastern religious philosophy by joining a Gurdjieff spiritual group.[35]

However, this simple visual apprehension is countered on closer inspection by the sense that the substance recorded in the foreground is fluid. The assurance that the bottom half of the photograph represents land gives way to the suspicion that it more likely is produced by water. But even this reading of the photograph raises the expectations of viewers only to suspend them. If it depicts an image of water, is this an image that represents the close-up view of an ocean wave caught in its turbulent swelling or an overhead view of the surf? Such possibilities mobilize metaphoric associations with the motions and passions of a sexual encounter. Moreover, the possibility of a close-up view throws into question the observer's understanding yet again by raising the prospect that this is not a distant landscape at all but another photograph of the rock formations that White liked to isolate as abstract forms.[36] Typical of the

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[35] G. I. Gurdjieff was a Russian mystic who lived from ca. 1872 to 1949. He advocated a series of religious disciplines of attention that White embraced as a basis for advancing the principles of "pure" photography, especially the concept Edward Weston dubbed "previsualization." The method was described in an essay published with Walter Chappell. See Minor White and Walter Chappell, "Some Methods for Experiencing Photographs," *Aperture* 5, no. 4 (1957): 156-71. For a discussion of White and his relation to Gurdjieff mysticism see Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 39-40.

[36] In a 1963 essay on the nature of the photographic Equivalent, White explained that the word "abstract" comes from painting and therefore is not exactly correct even if the photographic image functions much like a painted abstraction. White says that in actuality, a better term would be "extractions" or "isolations" because they are taken literally from the world of appearances. See Minor White, "Equivalence: The Perennial Trend" in Lyons, 173.

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defamiliarizing strategies of the Equivalent, it becomes impossible for viewers to locate themselves in relation to what is actually occurring in front of the camera.[37] Thus, the beholder's encounter of the photograph and the inability to find a point of bodily reference in relation to it becomes a figure of White's own indeterminate experience with his body in relation to his libidinous desires. More generally, it exceeds the merely biographical details that enter into White's own photographic process to figure the destabilizing effects of desire itself in the viewer's experience.

In contrast, *Shore Acres, Oregon*, 1960 [Fig. 3.9], from the same sequence, reads so conventionally that its figurative associations seem remarkably clear. There is none of the radical disorientation or defamiliarizing strategies common to the more abstract Equivalents. The scene is readably a seascape with a large wave crashing against rocks in the foreground and a dark sky that opens in a bright band of light at the horizon. Near the top of the photograph a single bird flies through the sky. This image also is based in an opposition between the top and bottom halves of the photograph. However, in place of the Equivalent oppositions that render emotions but remain unrecognizable spaces, this photograph contrasts the calm, empty appearing spaces at the top with the turbulent ocean that occupies the space at the bottom. The proximity of the

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[37] Of course, this inability to map the image to what was in front of the camera when the photograph was taken is exactly the point of the Equivalent for White. In a 1958 essay he wrote: "While we feel sure that if we had stood beside the camera we would have seen the same subject in the same way, we carelessly mistake the photographic rendition for authenticity and rarely realize just how extensive a mental adjustment we make every time we look at a photograph." Minor White, "The Light Sensitive Mirage," in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981),

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crashing wave creates its beauty but also suggests the threat and danger posed by such a close position. Through the photograph's elevated horizon line, one senses that White has created an image that encourages its viewers to look past their immediate experience to the distance – the future perhaps – where the band of light registers as a source of tranquility and reassurance. The metaphoric implications of that understanding are reinforced by the lone bird, which flies safely, high above the turbulence. White appears to be looking for reassurance that his recovery will occur through time and distance. Because birds often serve as figures of the spiritual realm, we can also speculate that White is using the bird as a metaphor for the triumph of spirit over matter, especially when the physicality of that matter involves his conflicted sexuality.

These two photographs from *The Steely Barb of Infinity*, 1960, rely on different approaches to the Equivalent. Both attempt to register White's emotional and spiritual conflict over the failure of his gay relationship, but their differences point up the value of abstraction as a mode of expression for implicating the viewer's body in the photograph's meaning. *Stony Brook State Park, New York*, 1960, is much more successful at capturing White's experience than *Shore Acres, Oregon*, 1960. In part this is because the Stony Brook photograph remains unresolved and is resonant with the tensions in White's traumatic situation. It also accords with our own experience of life as inherently complex and richly mysterious even in its most troubling moments, adding the valance of the spectator's own personal history of desire. The Shore Acres photograph, on the other hand, offers a resolution that seems simplistic. It

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395-6. In point of fact, White created the image by photographing the ice formations on a windowpane.

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smacks of time worn slogans and false piety that cannot stand up to the tough struggle that viewers know must inform White's situation as much as it does their own desires and the field of erotic representation. Whereas one Equivalent captures an experience that exceeds the capacity of words to express it, the other merely illustrates a conventional wisdom that is inadequate to the questions being posed. In a related way, the photograph that rehearses a more conventional visual vocabulary communicates the more conventional sentiments.[38] In spite of its less precise meaning, White has revealed much more about the nature of failed relationships in general in the abstractions of the Stony Brook photograph than in the more recognizable scene of the Shore Acres photograph.

However, White did not represent all of his relationships with other men and his struggles with gay desire in terms of Equivalents from the natural world as he did in *Sequence 4* and *Steely the Barb of Infinity*. At times he focused on the male body directly, and even explicitly, in homoerotic terms. Beginning in 1940 while working to document the historic buildings of Portland, Oregon, White began photographing young male nudes for his own private pleasure. His models for these nudes came from his acquaintances in the performing arts,

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[38] As has been noted frequently, White's sentiments lean toward the conventional most often when they are expressions of the conflict between body and spirit inherent in the ideological dualism that pervades Western philosophy. One of the most damning criticisms came in response to White's 1972 sequenced exhibition *Octave of Prayer*, which was organized for the Hayden Gallery at M.I.T. and subsequently published by *Aperture*. See A. D. Coleman, "Minor White: Octave of Prayer (I)" and "Minor White: Octave of Prayer (II)," in *Light Readings: A Photography Critics Writings, 1968-1978*, second ed. (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 140-150. The original essays were published in the *Village Voice* (March 15, 1973) and *Camera* 35 (November 1973) respectively.

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especially theater and dance, and from his students.[39] White also photographed several of these same individuals in images that, although marked by a register of sensuality, follow the more decorous conventions of portraiture and were used in his more public presentation of sequences.[40] Nonetheless, in his private photographs of male nudes, White mobilizes the conventions previously reserved historically for the female nude as an object to be "looked at."[41] In writing about one of these photographs, Graham Clarke argues that by using this strategy White "places the male body within a female tradition and gives to the male figure a similar frame of reference from a homo-erotic perspective."[42]

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[39] Pultz, *The Body and the Lens*, 110. Not all the subjects in these photographs are identified by name. Among the identified are Gino Cipolla, 1940, Earle Curtis, 1941, Tom Murphy, 1947 and 1948, Tim Asch, 1951, William Smith, 1953, Tom Schuyler, 1973.

[40] Because this study focuses on the Nude, it will not consider the eroticism that White also explored through highly sensuous portraits and suggestive body gestures. There are four exceptions in which White presented his erotic images for public consumption. His *Second Sequence / Amputations*, 1947, contained two photographs of Tom Murphy that White gave generic titles instead of naming him: *Nude*, 1947, and *Nude and Driftwood*, 1947. *Sequence 8*, 1952, contained a partial nude photograph entitled *Tim Asch and Log*, 1951, which although erotically suggestive was radically cropped to expose only his upper torso. This sequence also included another generically titled photograph, *Nude Foot*, 1947. In all four of these photographs the face was either hidden or the image was cropped in such a way that the subject was unidentifiable, unless, of course, one had recourse to intimate details of their bodies.

[41] The visual construct referenced here belongs to John Berger in his seminal study for the British Broadcasting Company and published as John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*. The ideas discussed in *Ways of Seeing* have received a more sustained, academic account in Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Objectivity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992); See also her *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[42] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph*, 138. The photograph is *Portland*, 1940, and is Minor White archive negative no. 40-658.

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This frame of reference includes the conventions of sexual availability signaled by passivity and objectification.

One of the earliest of these private homoerotic photographs illustrates how thoroughly White had absorbed the lessons of avant-garde abstractionists who had transformed the nude into an object of formal play that mobilized the radical display of spectacle address. There is no evidence that White saw Imogen Cunningham's nudes of John Butler from the early 1920s, but his photograph of *Gino Cipolla, Portland,* 1940 [Fig. 3.10], inverts Cipolla's body through the camera's angle in a way that recalls Cunningham's visual strategy when she placed her figure in an inverted pose. Cipolla lies supine on the floor, his body stretching diagonally across the photographic space from his foot in the upper left corner to his head in the lower right. White compounds the disorientation of space by a photographic angle that obscures the actual position from which the camera took the photograph. As in Stieglitz's Equivalents, viewers are presented with an image that requires them to turn their heads and shift the line of their natural vision in an effort to ascertain the spatial relation between the photographer and the depicted subject. White further heightens the vertiginous perspective of the photograph through the camera's disorienting capacity to flatten space so that Cipolla's body appears to be upside-down, tipped toward the viewer, and remarkably close to the photographic surface. In fact, the disorientation of space flattens the background so completely that it feels as if Cipolla's apparently falling body was vertically pinned to a wall rather than lying on the ground. White even lights his nude model so that the shadows fall underneath him as if he were vertical, precariously elevated rather than on the floor.

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With his eyes closed, his body spread across the image, his torso torqued to tighten his muscles and arch his back, Cipolla is unmistakably on display for the viewer's inspection. In fact, the impression moves beyond mere display to suggest that his body is about to slide out of the photograph into the space occupied by the viewer. This sense is heightened by the cropping of an arm and a leg that extend outside the frame on both ends and the shadow of his head that exerts the feeling of a strong gravitational pull. The pleasures that would accompany such a fall into the spectator's physical space charges this nude form with an erotic appeal that is as unmistakable as it is inescapable. In this manner, White deploys the Equivalent's abstracting principle of disorientation in order to evoke the spectator's awareness of his own body confronting the spectacle mobilized by the display of Cipolla's sexualized body.

Yet for all the conventionally feminine strategies of sexual display, White inflects this body's erotic appeal with a masculine register. The strong light creates tonal contrasts that heighten the muscles, which bulge in spite of the feminized passivity of Cipolla's pose. The bright circle of his kneecap creates a visual accent that calls attention to the body's athletic and supple muscle definition, most immediately in the calf of the right leg, but also in his shoulder, forearms, other leg, and abdomen. White creates a visual pun by using the carpet at the top right corner of the photograph, where the pattern looks like a schematic rendering of the body's torso. Through the pattern, White calls attention to Cipolla's circular abdomen, the chiseled muscles that surround it, and the broadening of his well-defined chest. In an ironic reference, the triangle that lies below the circular form in the carpet pattern doubles the triangular shadow of Cipolla's pubic area but registers as a void. By contrast, the heavy,

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muscular thigh thrusting out horizontally from the actual body rhymes with the penis, which lays on his leg in a slightly aroused state rather than falling limply between his legs. It gives the image a strikingly potent symbol of masculine sexual readiness. Thus, although White uses the defamiliarizing vocabulary of the Equivalent to turn Cipolla's body into a study of abstract forms, it retains its legibility as a well-developed image of virile manhood.

Similarly, Cipolla's raised leg creates a triangular form that echoes a number of other areas on the body and marks their shape: buttocks, underarm, ribs, throat, and the shadow created by his head and shoulder. White redefines the traditionally feminine symbol of the triangle, turning it into a sign that marks the physical differences between the bodies of men and women. Ultimately, these smaller geometric patterns give way to the larger strategy of defamiliarization that organizes his body into an abstract, geometric design: the left arm, curved torso, and bent, right leg trace a circular form that the horizontal line of right arm and left leg bifurcates. White appears to be playing with the conventional symbols of feminine and masculine sexuality by arranging Cipolla's body into a series of lines, circles, and triangles.

Taken as a whole, the figure traces the sign of a null set, suggesting that the body has been cancelled. The effect suspends viewers between a focus on this body as an object of the narrative gaze and as an object of abstract spectacle. In other words, the address to the spectator remains double: the delectations of voyeuristic viewing that engender erotic mental scenarios compete with the fragmenting abstractions that call attention to the viewer's role in visual perception. The photograph positions its viewers to experience a self-conscious

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awareness about the conditions of display that have been used to stage Cipolla's body in relation to them as spectators.

III. PHOTOGRAPHIC TEMPTATIONS

> *Suicide, self-destruction, self-deprecation, self-pity all go whizzing around in my head for hours on end. . . . And what would fix it all is a good fuck.*
>
> – Minor White[43]

In addition to the private male nudes that White photographed as single images, he also produced a series of photographic nudes of his student Tom Murphy in 1947 and 1948. Two of these photographs appear in his published sequences, but most of them never were displayed publicly. However, consistent with his interest in grouping images, White did organize his nude photographic studies of Murphy, along with portraits, into an unpublished, private sequence that he called *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors*, 1948.[44] The series is especially significant for the issues raised in this study, first because of the nude male subject matter that has been rendered in the terms of avant-garde photographic abstraction, but also because of the direct way in which White uses the photographs to negotiate his homosexuality.

During this period of his life, White was finding the struggle with his gay desires especially difficult. He had been inducted into the army in April 1942 and

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[43] From a letter quoted in Hall, Rites *and Passages*, 58.

[44] Since White's death, most of the photographs in the sequence *The Temptation of St. Anthony is Mirrors*, 1948, have been published and/or exhibited

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served in the Army Intelligence Corps, primarily in the South Pacific theater until his release in August 1945.[45] In a 1978 biographical essay on White, James Baker Hall analyzes at length an extended series of meditations in the form of fictionalized letters that White wrote during his military service.[46] As Hall correctly observes, White kept typed copies of these letters, which though clearly "cannot be taken always at face value" in terms of descriptive details "are written characteristically, like fiction, intent on rendering the experience instead of merely naming it."[47] Rather than factual memorabilia, Hall suggests that these letters be treated as a literary device that is "absolutely trustworthy as spiritual autobiography."[48] For this reason, the letters reveal the terms through which White struggled with the impact of his homosexuality on his life.

While in the army, White officially embraced the Roman Catholic faith by being baptized into the church. His letters offer a detailed account of the thinking that led to this decision. There is a lot of worry over the relative devotion that he now owes to "Our Lady" and his birth mother, who he fears will be jealous of his newly professed love for the Virgin Mary. White seeks to reassure his mother (or at least the voice he internalized as hers) by suggesting that she is the urarchetype for the Virgin Mary herself: "Why, mom, all I know

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as individual images. Many of them were displayed in Peter Bunnell's 1989 retrospective, *Minor White: The Eye that Shapes.*

[45] Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 21.

[46] White wrote nine of these meditative letters, dated between November, 1942, and April, 1944, when he was in his mid-thirties. They comprise about fifty typewritten pages. See Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 40.

[47] Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 61.

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of Our Lady came from my knowledge of you. And all I feel about Her comes from my love of you. Are you satisfied now, my sweet, enduring Mother, that I love you more than ever before in my life?"[49] The pattern of anxiety reflected in this passage typifies White's philosophical reasoning throughout his life. He establishes an earthly and a heavenly type as signs of profane and sacred reality and then validates the sacred by his personal experience of the profane.

The consequences of this paradigm become acute when applied to his sexuality where there is a rupture between his understanding of sacred truth and his profane experience. White writes about an encounter with "a sailor at a bar whose frank little eyes" tempted him with the memory of his lost love for "a golden lad who used to sit in my window at the end of day when the feathered clouds turned to wings of gold and rose in a throaty, blue-green sky."[50] White reasons that the religiously based guilt and shame generated by the thoughts of this sailor can only be relieved "by praying to Our Lady that he [the sailor], and the lad of long ago, be led to Christ as I had been." It was only then, continues White, "that I could remember him kindly."[51] In spite of the overwrought piety of White's sentiments, it is telling that he does find a way to assuage his discomfort with the nostalgic memories of his gay desires, which are rendered in halcyon poetic language. Admittedly, the homophobia of White's solution is merely a sublimation of his sexuality, but it seems clear that he is seeking a way

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[48] Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 61.

[49] Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 47.

[50] Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 48.

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to reconcile his sacred and profane understandings by transforming his desire. Later in this same letter, White writes to the woman who is his ostensible confidant: "Would you believe it, but, for a long time, I was fearful of loving Christ because of being shy of loving men."[52] Hall writes that White's anxiety reflects his search "for nothing more or less than a language suited to his own experience of the sacred and the profane, a method of organizing his thoughts and his life so as to stay in touch with what is real."[53]

White goes on to overcome his overly pious fears through a kind of modern Neoplatonism. He recounts going to the chapel of St. Sebastian's by the Sea after a night of gay sex in order to seek forgiveness because he has surrendered to the desires of his flesh. White's extended meditation illustrates the logic through which he gives himself permission to resolve the paradigm of his sacred and profane love for Christ and men in a way that resembles his resolution of the tension he felt between the Virgin Mary and his mother:

> Kneeling there [in the chapel] at dawn was uneasy, for the flesh had sorted out all the apologies – loneliness, need for affection, a reward for prolonged attention to duty – and had taken the only satisfaction it would recognize in the embrace of strong and supple arms. I was especially uneasy because the full afterglow was still upon me and I was in love with the whole world with that detached Olympian regard the flesh rewards us after orgasm. In

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[51] Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 48.

[52] Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 49.

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> this state my love went out to Him [Christ] from the bottom of the very act against Him. I prayed forgiveness with all the solemnity I could muster, and by some miracle of understanding, knew I was penitent for once instead of just ashamed. I was sorry the flesh was stronger than my will, but I could not be ashamed of any work His hand had made. . . .
>
> . . . I felt I had been forgiven for going beyond the bounds of purity into lust: I was forgiven because I had loved. . . .
>
> . . . The love that I had determined to commit, and which had often left me bewildered and hurt, and which too many times was disgusting and sterile, had proved that it also led to Christ.[54]

As the passage demonstrates, at this juncture, White still frames his understanding of homosexuality within the conventional discourse of Roman Catholicism and its philosophical dualism based in the physical versus the spiritual realms.

However, White's impending rejection of this dualism and his turn toward the more synchronous philosophies of Eastern religions is evident in the meditation's refusal to divorce the effects of his sex act from the act itself. In fact, the "reward" that he claims by "going beyond the bounds of purity to lust," is not so much "orgasm" (although he welcomes that too) as the "full afterglow" connecting him to "the whole world" through love. As a metaphor, "afterglow" describes the continuation of an experience after the physical object that created

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[53] Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 39.

[54] Quoted in Hall, *Rites and Passages*, 49-50.

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it is gone. It is a figure of the more durable trace that is potential in the transitory, much as the photograph itself, and constructs White's experience at Saint Sebastian's by the Sea as simultaneously sexual, transcendental, and photographic.

In *The Temptation of St. Anthony is Mirrors,* White echoes this written struggle by bringing the nude male body and spirituality together in the discursive space of the photograph. As James Saslow has noted, there is a long art historical tradition of exploiting the nude beauty of the male body through the narratives of the saints' lives.[55] St. Anthony has also captured the imagination of artists in the western tradition, not so much for his beauty as for his struggle with the temptations of the flesh. St. Anthony is usually regarded as the founder of ascetic monastic life in the Christian tradition. He lived in Egypt during the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era, spending most of his life in solitude as a hermit taking shelter in an abandoned tomb. St. Anthony is remembered for sustaining a series of bizarre conflicts with demons, who tormented him in the guise of wild beasts when he proved too strong for their temptations of his flesh, inflicting physical harm and, at times, leaving him for dead in the desert.[56] This subject was a favorite of Northern Renaissance painters, including Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and Matthias Grünewald, because depictions of Saint Anthony offer the opportunity to create a grotesque visual display of the tormented body. Grünewald also incorporated

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[55] James Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts,* New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), 99.

[56] George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1954; reprint, 1973), 104-5.

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the saint into his monumental *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1510-15 [Fig. 3.11], for the Abbey of Saint Anthony in Germany, a work that is particularly germane for this study of White's sequence.

The Abbey in Isenheim, Germany, was renowned for its hospital, which specialized in caring for those afflicted with skin diseases, notably the plague and leprosy. The altarpiece commemorates Saint Anthony, who stands in the panel to the right of the central crucifixion scene as a witness to the torment and suffering of the flesh that is clearly visible in the body of Christ on the cross. Grünewald includes a demon entering through a window behind Saint Anthony to indicate that Christ's death is meant to redeem the faithful from assaults (both temptations and torments) of the flesh. Patients at the hospital were meant to spend time viewing the altarpiece as part of their medical treatment. The scene of crucifixion would have carried a familiar narrative for the hospital's patients, but Grünewald has painted Christ's larger than life sized body, with its ghoulishly colored flesh, so that viewers would experience the scene's powerful spectacle address. The horror of his tortured body is made manifest in its bloody gashes and wounded flesh the color of ash. Signs of death in the open mouth, blue lips, dangling head, and already apparently decaying flesh heighten the shock of the encounter. In keeping with the mechanisms of spectacle address, the painting sets up a visual relay between the image and the spectator's own body.

While contemplating the crucifixion scene, its viewers are encouraged to identify with the sorrow and loss of the holy family and saints gathered around the dead body of Christ. However, more importantly, the scene is meant to remind viewers of their own mortal flesh and its weaknesses, which have

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required the sacrifice of the body that is palpably suffering in front of them. In Christian theology, Christ took upon himself the sufferings of all humanity in order that it might be transformed with him in the resurrection of his body. Thus, penitents before the altar are expected to understand that the agony they are witnessing has been transferred from their own bodies, and the act of contrition reassigns those sufferings to these believers in an experience that constructs spiritual and physical life as a single field of meaning. Grünewald's crucifixion demonstrates the appeal to spectacle address operating within the discursive space of religious devotion. It positions the scene's spectator as an active participant in a dramatic moment that has been constituted through the visual reciprocity of image and viewer. In addition, it turns private experience into public spectacle through the act of looking.

White's photographs of Murphy in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony Is Mirrors* echo much of the visual vocabulary that operates in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* to address the viewer. Taking his cue from the way that the discourse of Christian religion has represented the body as a site of conflict between flesh and spirit, White translates this struggle into contemporary terms through a series of photographic studies of the male nude. The photograph's reality effect heightens the spectator's encounter with these images, translating the visual address of Grünewald's painting into a modern idiom. Like Stieglitz and Cunningham before him, White accomplishes this appeal largely through the language of avant-garde abstraction and the modernist focus on representation and its effects.

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In *Tom Murphy*, 1948, 48-137 [Fig. 3.12],[57] White appeals to the spectator's body through the haptic focus of the hands, which clutch at the nude male body in the photograph. The torso is cut off pictorially from the arms, which enter the frame from either side of the image, creating an arrangement of body fragments. The hands apparently belong to Murphy, although the radical cropping of the image means that they could belong to anyone outside the frame, a possibility that calls up the spectator's presence. If these hands belong to Murphy, then it appears that he is holding his stomach with his right hand but offering his breast with his left. The bent posture indicated by the wrinkles in his stomach suggests that he may even be retching in response to pain, whether physical or mental.

By introducing the possibility of pain into this image, White aligns Murphy's body with the torments inflicted on the sequence's namesake, Saint Anthony. And as we know from Saint Anthony's history, the physical pains he suffered were directly related to the temptations, both mental and physical, that demons delivered to his flesh. White invests this modern photographic image of the body in pain with associations to temptation and Christian martyrdom as a way to frame its meaning by the religious discourse of spiritual conflict and redemptive purity. However, as White's letters reveal, his gay desires for another male body represented a temptation that he found impossible to contain through traditional Christian narratives of repentance and forgiveness. The

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[57] Because all the images in this series bear the same title and date, I am including the negative number from the Princeton archive after the date of the works in this sequence in order to identify which photograph is being discussed.

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spectacle address of this photograph operates to construct a visual encounter that owes more to the discourse of sexual than religious desires.[58]

Nevertheless, as we have seen, White's paradigm for the sacred and profane constitutes his experience in a way that attempts to reconcile the dualism inherent in this religious formulation. In his photograph *Tom Murphy*, 1948, 48-137, White constructs his view of a contemporary Saint Anthony more as an encounter with a male body than with the narrative life of the saint. The spectacle address of the image deploys the principles of abstraction in order to conflate the spectator's space and the discursive space of the photograph. Formally, the hands organize Murphy's torso into three zones: chest, stomach, and thighs. These three zones are further marked by the erotic focus of each area: nipple, navel, and genitals.

The left hand cups Murphy's breast in a manner reminiscent of countless Renaissance Madonnas, although in that tradition the Virgin offers up her lactating breast as a symbol of grace and spiritual nourishment, and here the breast is held in a way that emphasizes the nipple itself as a site of sexual stimulation. The right hand does not cover the genitals in a gesture of modesty. Not only are the genitals exposed, but also they are disturbingly close to the camera lens and thus to the view of the spectator. They recall the uncomfortably close view of O'Keeffe's pubic hair in Stieglitz's *Untitled*, 1918, "portrait" of her

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[58] James Saslow recounts a telling incident from Vasari in which women parishioners confessed to "unclean thoughts" while contemplating the nude body of Saint Sebastian, suggesting that there has always been an erotic tension between the body presented for pious meditation and the body of the meditating penitent. Saslow wryly notes that upon hearing about the effect of this visual image on the nuns, the priests "removed it to their own quarters,"

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torso. However, whereas Stieglitz increased the tonality of the image in order to render the dark space of O'Keeffe's vagina illegible and thus symbolic, White photographs Murphy's penis to confront the viewer aggressively, emerging as a bright, smooth organ out of the dark mass of his pubic hair. Between the hands, this aggressive sexuality is heightened by Murphy's highly distinctive navel, which offers a metaphor of sexual penetration by its visual resemblance to a plugged orifice. Its visual similarity to the ocean rock formations of White's Equivalents is a reminder of the inherent reversibility in the tenor and vehicle that gives figurative language its ambiguity and personal resonance.

These three sites are further linked by their circular shape: nipple, navel, and the circumcised head of the penis rhyme each other and form a kind of abstract equivalence of their own. As different sites of erotic pleasure, they are reminders that any zone of the body has the potential for sexual arousal depending on how the viewer constitutes it. Reading the image through White's own gay desires constitutes its sexual register as masculine in the camera's sharp focused ability to capture the detail of Murphy's curly body hair, which emphasizes the experience of coarseness and hairiness associated with a man's skin. Although the circular designs of these hairs could reference both feminine and masculine bodies, in this image they draw attention to Murphy's genital region and the circular head of his penis. This distribution of the masculine inscription over the whole body feels especially strong on the legs where it contributes to the sense of tactility in the photograph. As a pattern on the surface of the skin, they echo the photographic surface and its sensuous patterns.

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leaving unspoken "what thoughts the image provoked in its priestly male audience." *Pictures and Passions*, 99.

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Murphy's hands, similarly, recall the discourse of photography through their association with the manual operation of the camera, which is used to manipulate the body. Thus, White brings together three different sets of references to the flesh and their contexts into the discursive space of this photograph: the religious language of bodily temptations; the sexual language of desire for the male body; and the visual language of photographic representations of the body. Through the vocabulary of abstraction, and the spectacle address it mobilizes, White situates spectators of this photograph as participants in the tensions created at the nexus of these potentially opposing contexts. He suspends them in an encounter that mirrors his own struggle to reconcile the three defining elements of his life.

In other photographs from the sequence, White extends his use of abstraction and spectacle address in order to suggest the appeal that the male body carries for him. In *Tom Murphy*, 1948, 48-209 [Fig. 3.13], White incorporates a white rose, an emblem of purity and the passion in Christianity, into his composition. The male torso reclines in a languid pose across the top of the photograph, more typical of the sexual display usually associated with the availability of the female nude. Beneath the torso lies the single, fully opened white rose, which further establishes the feminine connotations of this image by its traditional use as a symbol of Venus and her attributes of victory, pride, and triumphant love.[59] A hand that enters the photographic image from outside the frame holds the rose. As in the previous photograph, the hand logically belongs

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[59] Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 37.

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to Murphy, but ostensibly it belongs to the fragment of an arm that could come from anyone outside the frame.

The rose occupies a prominent position in the photograph by virtue of having the brightest white tonalities set against the darkest black area of the image. The dark pubic hairs on the light-toned body above it mirror that tonal contrast in reverse. White thus turns the rose into a figure of Murphy's sexuality through its visual alignment with his genitals, and simultaneously asserts the reversibility of sexual figures through the rose's association with femininity and the unfolding petals of the vagina. Further, by calling attention to the contrasting darkness of Murphy's genitals, the image references the photographic negative, a reversal that mirrors the metaphoric exchange of sexual meanings and confirms the black and white dualism of the photograph's visual vocabulary. In his appropriation of Christian symbols to represent sexuality, White communicates his belief at this point in his life that the flesh driven desires of the body are less pure than the spiritually driven desires of the mind. The rose also has a well-established history as a signifier of homosexuality, especially within the literature of gay sexuality and transgression.[60] The rose thus unites religious purity, feminine ardor, and transgressive sexuality in a compelling network of associations under the rubric of gay desire. It indicates the potential of the male body to serve as both a site of homoerotic display and a symbol of transgression.

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[60] Around the time of White's *Temptations of Saint Anthony is Mirrors*, Jean Genet was producing such literature in his *Our Lady of the Flowers*, 1943, and even more provocatively in *Miracle of the Rose*, 1946, which attempts to combine Genet's gay desires and a sensuous religious mysticism.

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Not only has White photographed Murphy's body to heighten its potential sexual registers, but he also implicates the spectator in the photographic image through the disorienting point of view and flattening of depicted space that the camera makes possible. White creates the impression that the torso is close to the surface plane of the photograph and tips it toward the viewer in a move that mobilizes the spectacle address of the image. This more vertical orientation of the image also creates an upper and lower visual field that places the rose below Murphy's body. Within the Neoplatonic language that characterizes White's letters, upper and lower operate as visual metaphors of the relationship between sacred and profane realms of experience. In this photograph the body of the nude male functions as a sign of White's earthly experience of gay desire and the rose functions as a sign of his belief in the heavenly character of love defined by the dictates of religious purity. The connection between these two signs is signaled by the downward direction of the penis, as if it were pointing to the rose. Nevertheless, the sign of profane love represented by the male genitals exists in the "higher" plane above the sign of sacred love represented by the rose. Together the penis and rose as signifiers of love's opposing signifieds create the sign of its reconciliation in the reversibility of their metaphoric exchanges. Personally, White deploys this visual economy to understand the philosophical logic underlying his notion of earthly and heavenly types functioning as competing signs of profane and sacred realms, which are then reconciled by an appeal to his own experience of the profane sexuality embodied in his gay desires.

Several of the photographs from the Saint Anthony series also link White's anxiety about his homosexuality to the conventions of the female nude

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and its constitution through a visual vocabulary of framing and containment. These strategies, as Lynda Nead points out, are meant to be a means for containing female sexuality in order to keep it hidden, contained, and regulated.[61] By deploying the same conventions for the male body, White attempts to contain, even as he makes it visible, the image of gay sexuality. In *Tom Murphy*, 1948, 48-136 [Fig. 3.14], both the figure's pose and the boundary of the photographic cut signal the body's framing and containment. Murphy's arms enfold his body as he poses them in a stylized, abstract gesture. The arms are crossed in front his chest in a manner that resembles a defensive or protective posture. And yet the obvious artifice of the hands implies a more deliberately aesthetic motivation. The squeezing of his arms together results in a tightly bounded torso, and at the same time this action emphasizes the muscle definition of his biceps.

Moreover, the photographic space is so tightly cropped that it appears as if Murphy must bend his head to remain within the frame of the image. Murphy's bent head also contributes to his look, down and away, which allows the spectator's gaze to absorb his body fully without a challenge. The black background isolates the figure in an indeterminate space, removing it from any context that would suggest narrative possibilities. Rather, the tightly bound body that is contained by the close-cropped space of this photograph is on display for the viewer's uninterrupted visual scrutiny. In that direct engagement

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[61] Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude*, 2 and 6. Linda Williams has taken this argument a step further in her analysis of filmic images of women. She argues that hard-core pornography is progressive because it uncovers the visible truth of women's sexual pleasure. See her *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (London: Pandora, 1990).

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with the spectator, Murphy's masculine appeal must compete with the formal principles of abstract design that contain his body within the regulatory regime of aesthetics. But the feminizing conventions of the nude insure that Murphy's body remains both a form constituted by the art of abstraction and a naked male figure of sexual vulnerability.[62] The tightly framed and compressed space of White's photograph becomes a metaphor for the restricted spheres of movement and visibility that were permitted the homoerotic body and those whose desires were aroused by it.

Of all the photographs in White's temptation series, *Tom Murphy*, 1947, 47-243 [Fig. 3.15], most clearly turns the male body simultaneously into a visual abstraction, a model of passivity, and an expression of abject sexuality. Although seated on rough boards, the figure is isolated in space by the blank, black background. The symmetrical placement of arms and legs combines with the frontally square camera angle and tightly cropped image to transform Murphy's body into an organization of linear forms. His head has been burned from the photograph, deleting his face and any indication of personal identity. A large piece of driftwood cuts diagonally across his body in a way that displaces his torso, the lines from the grain of the wood suggesting a visual comparison with the lines created by Murphy's body hairs in a reversal of the usual metaphorical

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[62] This argument takes issue with Kenneth Clark's famous study of the nude, rejecting the compensatory binary opposition he sets up between "the naked and the nude." In Clark's formulation, nakedness lies outside the boundaries of representation as an unmediated experience of the body. See, Clark, *The Nude*, 3-29. The reading of the body in this study maintains that in order to be perceived, the body is always already constituted through representation. However, not all representations are situated within the culture equally, and it is in the ways that various images of the body collude or contest with representational norms that its meaning is established.

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role between the body and nature in the photographic close-up. The abstract, formal elements of the photograph thus establish an ingenious correspondence between dead wood and live flesh.

Given the religious allusions of the sequence, the identification of wood and flesh resonates with those associations in a crucified figure, which is supported in the image by the prominent, bony feet that are a standard convention of such scenes. Within the context of crucifixion, the piece of wood stands in for the billowing banners of cloth that are common in the scene's depictions as a double strategy to hide the genitals and reference them simultaneously. Leo Steinberg refers to the convention as "an acceptable circumvention of the prohibited member . . . a potent synecdoche that celebrates the thing covered in the magnificence bestowed on the covering."[63] In another religious reference, the shape of the wood above the right shoulder also resembles the form of a flame, suggesting the flaming temptations of passion. In the iconography of this photograph, White presents his image of the nude as a modern depiction of the body in judgment. The driftwood operates as both the element that organizes the viewer's perception of the image as an abstraction and the agent that provides the viewer's narrative associations. Through the juxtaposition of body and driftwood, White suspends the photograph's spectators between the spectacle address of abstraction and the narrative content of a tableau.

The judgment that White puts on display in this photograph is referenced by the body's abject pose. Michael Camille has discussed the special relevance of

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the seated, abject male figure as "an icon of homosexual desire, " tracing it to Hippolyte Flandrin's *Figure d'Étude*, ca. 1835 [Fig. 3.16].[64] Although White has moved the spectator's point of view from the side to the front of his seated abject figure and altered minor details of Flandrin's image, its conventions remain: it is a study in high tonal contrast of the human body and light; the figure is seated in a crouched position; the knees are drawn up to the chest in a protective fashion; the arms remain beside the body to contain it; and the head is deeply bent in a manner that shadows and obscures the face. In short, it is a figure of melancholic reflection whose overriding impression is despair and shame.[65] Thus, in spite of the metonymic associations that are possible through the religious discourse of crucifixion, White's photograph encodes the nude male body as an object of passive contemplation rather than sacrificial action.[66]

Julia Kristeva has theorized the abject as that which is lost when an individual subjectivity defines itself. In order to constitute one's identity as an integrated, whole body, the self banishes the elements that challenge its completeness. Abjection is the return of those elements through what "disturbs

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[63] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon and October, 1983), 91-2.

[64] Michael Camille, "The Abject Gaze and the Homosexual body: Flandrin's *Figure d'Étude*," in *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, ed. Whitney Davis (New York and London: Haworth Press, Inc., 1994), 162.

[65] Camille notes that the generic quality of this image allowed it to circulate as a cipher for numerous identifications, but the despair and shame of homosexuality pervade them all. Camille, "The Abject Gaze," 164.

[66] And, as Camille explains, the *Figure d'Étude* serves as an image of self-absorbed contemplation and isolation that turns the gaze inward in a depiction of the psychological state of abjection. Camille, "The Abject Gaze," 175.

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identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite."[67] Considering the body in light of abjection focuses attention on what has been banished in constituting its identity, and what has been banished most obviously from almost the entire range of images that rehearse the *Figure d'Étude* are the genitals. The absence is particularly notable because it would be nearly impossible for the male sex organs not to be exposed when the legs are drawn up as they are in this pose. These images identify homosexuality as the abject within a heterosexual economy of desires because they posit a male body that gazes inward rather than outward for what it lacks.[68] The secret lies in the shared codes of meaning, which make gay desire visible to other homosexuals through the very signs that allow homosexuality to remain unseen within the culture at large.[69]

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[67] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

[68] Camille points to this inward gaze as the visible sign of homosexual identity: "The figure looks down to where his/her sexual organs should be/are and what does he/she see? This is the secret." Camille, "The Abject Gaze," 167. Camille goes on to argue that the secret is not a simple reversal in the form of a feminizing emasculation. Rather, it is "an image of loss and disempowerment in a culture where pederastic longings had to be totally effaced and submerged" (168).

[69] Although same-sex partners have engaged in sexual activity throughout history, queer historians in general prefer to reserve the term "homosexual" for the period since the nineteenth century when the persons who engaged in such activity became the center of controversy within legal, medical, educational, and other professional institutions. The Hungarian Károly Mária Kertbeny in an open letter urging the government to reconsider its sodomy laws coined the first known use of the term. For a summary of key moments in the debates that defined the discourse and created the modern concept of homosexuality, see Saslow, *Pictures and Passions*, 182-5. In using the term "homosociality" for her analysis of the contested male image in France during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Abigail Solomon-Godeau

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By using an image of abjection, White illustrates his psychological conflict in creating photographs of gay desire before Stonewall. It also offers a sly depiction of the inward gaze, returning the abject member that has been banished from the male nude as a sign of homosexuality. White's photograph of a male nude's seated introspection effaces an actual depiction of Murphy's sex organs as effectively as in any other conventional abject figure.[70] However, the large piece of driftwood between his legs informs the look of this nude in an unexpected way. Surely this is a metaphor that gives the invisible penis a presence in the image as a prominent "woody." In such a reading the viewer is confronted with a graphic visual perception. It suggests the viewing conditions that are mobilized by spectacle address and its direct appeal to the spectator. White seems to be reminding viewers of their own experiences of abjection by implicating them in his losing struggle with the desires that he longed to banish, those abject parts of himself that transgressed boundaries and could not be reconciled to an ordered existence acceptable within the larger culture.

In his decision to pursue the visual principles of Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, White found a photographic vocabulary well suited to the language of avant-garde abstraction. Through this vocabulary he was able to explore the deeply personal conflicts that were created by a life filled with gay desires in the era before Stonewall. Religious dogma gave way to a personal mysticism as White

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discusses the differences made operative in the use of homosexual versus homosocial, providing a useful way to understand how the language of same-sex desires at any moment is a product of historical conditions. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble*, esp. 26-30.

[70] It is important to assert that White's use of Tom Murphy's body in his nude study of the abject figure is not an indication of Murphy's sexual

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found expression for his experiences in the abstract images created by "pure" photography's transformations based in the camera's disorienting and defamiliarizing point of view. Wanting to move beyond the mere description of emotional and spiritual states suggested by metaphoric and metonymic correspondences in the natural world, White sought to make his photographs into a site where viewers might encounter these visual figures as a source of new experiences. It was his understanding of the importance of this bodily encounter between image and viewer that led him to a visual language of perception based in spectacle address. The photograph was not to be a record of experience but an instigator of it. By suspending their viewers between visual recognition and ocular transformation, White's photographs produce the conditions of visual perception itself. The more these images move in the direction of abstracting their subject matter and the reversibility of sexual references, the more they enlist the somatic experiences of their spectators in order to make sense out of the space represented in the photograph.

In applying these abstracting principles to the male nude, White's photographs operate as unstable equivalents, implicating their spectators in his own uncertain experiences of sexuality. These cropped and fragmented nude bodies in their shallow photographic spaces appear to confront their spectators and crowd the psychological distance between them. Viewers are made to feel the impact of their own bodies on this encounter by such palpable proximity. However, White is interested in more than just setting up discrete encounters between viewers and images through the spectacle address of his photographs.

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orientation. The meaning of the photograph exists in the sexualized exchange operating through the codes that determine the spectator's response.

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As we saw in his sequencing of photographic close-up images of ocean beach and rock formations, White turns these individual moments of confrontation into a syntactical string of events that carries the spectator through a series of experiences. As in a narrative, these events are sequenced to accomplish a teleological goal. White called that goal inner vision, or growth, believing that the most important narrative did not exist within the scene of the photograph but in its viewers.

The next section considers the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, whose revelatory aims contrast dramatically with those of White. White uses the spectacle address of his photographs as a way to explore his conflicted gay desires, especially in relation to his religious beliefs. In the closeted era before Stonewall, he found the photographic vocabulary of the Equivalent to be a relatively safe visual arena in which to consider the social terrain of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Through its visual idiom he was also able to create photographs of sexually ambiguous and reversible figurative tropes to implicate viewers in the contested discourses of desire and difference that structured the social assumptions he found so constraining. Mapplethorpe, on the other hand, exploits the potential of spectacle address to celebrate his gay desires and to reveal the role of photography in constructing homosexuality as a visible practice.

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Robert Mapplethorpe: Confronting Photographs

Robert made everyone an accomplice to his adventures.

– Jack Fritscher[1]

Robert Mapplethorpe turned the perceptual concerns that had informed the modernist photography of Stieglitz, Cunningham, and White to the sexual and artistic purposes of the newly emerging vocabulary of postmodernism. Exploiting the more open social and political climate after Stonewall, Mapplethorpe produced images of intensely erotic content, which also became an occasion to explore the power of photographic language itself that characterized the work of his earlier modernist forebears. Of course, this openness was not welcomed by all sectors of the society, and the very contested nature of Mapplethorpe's photographs became one of the defining fault lines in the debate over the way that the photograph also appears to break down the distinction between private and public life. Because so many people had so much invested in Mapplethorpe's subject matter, looking back from our post-scandal perspective it seems almost inevitable that his photographs would come to play a central role in shaping the limits of both art and sex in public life.

Following the more liberal attitudes toward sexuality in the aftermath of Stonewall, perhaps no photographer of the nude body has occasioned controversy with such a high degree of visibility as Mapplethorpe. This is undoubtedly due in part to the degree that he was willing to push the limits of public tolerance not just

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for images of transgressive sexuality but for the deviant behavior they referenced. He quite candidly explained his work as a function of his desire to elevate the photography of sexually explicit gay images to the status of fine art.[2] Moreover, by his focus on imagery that transgressed bourgeois standards of sexuality in both subject and decorum, Mapplethorpe's photography is aligned with the controversial art practices that characterized the work of modernist artists earlier in the century, although their pictorial conventions were no longer avant-garde by his time.[3] The differences between the photographic references to homosexuality and gay desire in the works of White and Mapplethorpe offer a compelling look at the contrast between art that is made in the closet and the use of artistic traditions that openly critique the cultural milieu, creating a reputation for themselves and guaranteeing their own publicity. In his photographs, White seeks to negotiate with the larger culture's attitudes toward homosexuality, which his own conflict mirrors. On the other hand, Mapplethorpe's photographs take no prisoners in a battle against the hegemony of normative, bourgeois sexuality.

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[1] Jack Fritscher, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (Mamaroneck, New York: Hastings House, 1994), 4.

[2] Edmund White, "Alters: The Radicalism of Simplicity," in *Mapplethorpe: Altars* (New York: Random House, 1995), 128. Arthur Danto puts it this way: "His ambition was to create images that would be as arousing as those in porn magazines, but artistic." Arthur Danto, *Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1996), 76.

[3] Although it can readily be argued that Mapplethorpe's images rehearse conventions of modernism that are well-established and therefore represent a conservative approach to photography, the continued power of his images to participate in the aims of a transgressive, avant-garde practice is evident in the frustrated responses of bourgeois-minded critics such as Hilton Kramer. See his

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I. PUBLIC VIEWING

> *. . . he embraced the double irony of full disclosure and made the efficacy of his images a direct function of their power to enfranchise the non-canonical beholder – to enfranchise, ultimately, that Senator form North Carolina and insist upon his response – because, in truth, if the Senator didn't think an image was dangerous, it wasn't.*
>
> – Dave Hickey on Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*[4]

The most famous battle surrounding Mapplethorpe's photographs involved the trial of Dennis Barrie, Director of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.[5] On April 7, 1990 the center and its director were charged with "pandering obscenity" and the "illegal use of children" in reference to seven nude photographs included in a retrospective exhibition of 175 photographs entitled *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*.[6] Although initially dismissed in the contemporary art establishment as a minor threat that had no substantive constitutional merit but was fueled by reactionary conservatives, the case became

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"Shock Treatment: Transgressive Art Versus the Tragic Art of Odd Nerdrum," *Art and Antiques* 20 (Summer 1997): 116-177.

[4] Dave Hickey, *Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles, Ca.: Art Issues, 1993), 27-37.

[5] Dennis Barrie recounts his own version of the story in "Fighting an Indictment: My Life with Robert Mapplethorpe," *Museum News* 69 (July/August 1990): 63-4. A chronology of the controversy over *The Perfect Moment* exhibition is included as an appendix in Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995), 371-5.

[6] Robin Cembalest, "Imperfect Moment," *Art News* 89 (Summer 1990): 51.

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a national referendum on the 1973 Supreme Court ruling over the definition of obscenity. In that ruling, the court had defined obscenity as occurring when "the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."[7] On the one side, those opposed to the exhibition saw it as a test of community standards and local control.[8] On the other, those defending the exhibition saw it as another in the long history of test cases over censorship and objected to isolating a few photographs from the context provided by the majority of the works.[9]

The Cincinnati case, however, was not an isolated attack by cultural luddites who were cut off from mainstream currents. It followed on the heels of the Corcoran Gallery of Art's cancellation of the exhibition the previous year and the ensuing series of protests by staff, artists, and members that included resignations

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[7] Brian Wallis, "Museum Director Threatened in Mapplethorpe Brouhaha," *Art in America* 78 (September 1990): 59. Even the board of trustees for the relatively conservative art institution the Association of Museum Directors established a fund to pay any costs in the event that the case came to trial and any fines incurred by Barrie if convicted. See Cembalest, "Imperfect Moment," 51. Some art critics, however, did foresee the more threatening possibilities of the controversy, especially in relation to the specter of homophobia. See Thomas Sokolowski, "Iconophobics Anonymous," *ArtForum International* 28 (Summer 1990): 114-19; and Doug Ischar "Endangered Alibis," *Afterimage* 177 (May 1990): 8-11.

[8] The critical forum for those opposed to the exhibit was the art journal *The New Criterion*. See, for instance, the magazine's editorial "Bingo! in Hartford, or How to Exploit a Controversy," *The New Criterion* 8 (December 1989): 2-3. Further, Allan Sekula identified the journal's resident art critic, Hilton Kramer, as the spokesperson for the conflation of homophobia and neoconservative art criticism in "Issues and Commentary I: Some American Notes," *Art in America* 78 (February 1990): 39-43.

[9] Steven Mannheimer, "Cincinnati Joins the Censorship Circus," *New Art Examiner* 17 (June 17, 1990): 33-5; and Grant H. Kester, "A Town Called Malice," *Afterimage* 177 (May 1990): 2; and Gary Indiana, "Democracy, Inc.", *ArtForum International* 28 (September 1989): 11-12. For an international perspective on the

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and cancellations of funds.[10] It also was preceded by attacks on funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) led by Senator Jesse Helms, who criticized the organization based on its support of artists whose work challenged a range of conservative values and mores. The queer-based images of Andres Serrano and Mapplethorpe, which made visible their homosexuality and celebrated gay sex, made them especially potent targets, and Helms turned them into poster children for his moral crusade.[11] Generally, the established art press viewed the cancellation of the exhibition by the Corcoran as simultaneously an act of intellectual cowardice and evidence of the growing influence of conservative political forces on public life. Donald Kuspit was especially vocal in naming the drive for the censorship of Serrano and Mapplethorpe as symptomatic of "the new authoritarianism" in American politics.[12]

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strangely prudish controversy, see Philip Jodidio, "Le cas Mapplethorpe," *Connaissance des Arts* 451 (September 1989): 5.

[10] Brian Wallis, "Can Crippled Corcoran Survive?" *Art in America* 77 (November 1989): 41.

[11] Carol S. Vance, "Issues and Commentary: The War on Culture," *Art in America* 77 (September 1989): 39. For a comprehensive compendium that includes this and other essays, articles, letters, and legal statements surrounding this controversy, see *The Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992). Richard Meyer offers an especially insightful reading of Helms's contribution to the rhetoric of censorship through the senator's misreadings of Mapplethorpe's photographs, which accompanied photocopies of select images from *The Perfect Moment* catalogue that he circulated among his colleagues. "Helms's effort to foreclose the fantasmatic space of homosexuality" as Meyer demonstrates, "resulted instead in its reconstitution." For his argument and the quotation, see the section on Helms in Richard Meyer, "Mapplethorpe's Living Room: Photography and the Furnishing of Desire," *Art History* 24 (April 2001), 292-295.

[12] Donald Kuspit, "Sexual Censorship and the New Authoritarianism," *New Art Examiner* 17 (September 1989): 42-4. In the same issue, Nicols Fox similarly lamented the impact of conservative political pressures on Congress

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Nevertheless, it seems certain that the controversy over Mapplethorpe's photographs were a watershed for gay visibility, reflecting the anxiety of America's cultural mainstream over the public evidence of homosexuality in the wake of Stonewall. In a wry moment of levity, Dennis Barrie makes this point when he reports a conversation about the upcoming Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Center with the mayor of Cincinnati. The mayor wonders if this were the artist "that has the peeing on the Christ."[13] When Barrie explains to the mayor that he has identified (somewhat inaccurately) a work by Andres Serrano and that Mapplethorpe is known more for homoerotic photography, the mayor replies: "Oh, that homoerotic stuff. We can handle that."[14] Barrie uses this exchange to suggest that the controversy over Mapplethorpe's exhibition was a pivotal moment in the psyche of middle America regarding the visibility of gay desire: "I think," writes Barrie, "that's the first time our mayor said 'homoerotic' anywhere, but since then everybody uses it in our town."[15]

It is astonishing that fifteen years later when, in Great Britain, the Hayward Gallery of London mounted a retrospective exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photographs the controversy surrounding his work would be iterated in nearly

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and the resulting pressure to limit artistic creativity and freedom of expression. See his "Cultural Cowardice, Conservative Clout," *New Art Examiner* 17 (September 1989): 38-41. The journal also supported demonstrations protesting the exhibition's cancellation on its editorial page. See the Washington, D.C. editorial page of the *New Art Examiner* 17 (September 1989): 7.

[13] Dennis Barrie, "Freedom of Expression Is the Issue," in *Culture Wars*, ed. Richard Bolton, 296.

[14] Barrie, "Freedom of Expression," in Bolton, 296.

[15] Barrie, "Freedom of Expression," in Bolton, 296.

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the exact same discursive terms as it had been in the United States.[16] Not only was the debate cast along a similar polarity based in the moral categories of public decency and artistic freedom, but even the defense of Mapplethorpe's images followed the earlier trial's emphasis on his photographs as the latest avatar in an enduring and purifying tradition of classical beauty and creative originality.[17] These are the very terms that proved to be legally successful but politically inefficacious in the case of Dennis Barrie. Although Barrie was acquitted, he was forced to give up his position as director of Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center and was not able to secure comparable employment in an established art institution. He maintains that his years at the center of the Mapplethorpe controversy destroyed his career, his marriage and family, and his health.

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[16] This controversy keeps reasserting itself in debates about public support of Mapplethorpe's work. As recently as October 1997 the University of Central England was threatened with censorship by the Crown Prosecution Service in Great Britain, which seized of a book of Mapplethorpe's photographs from its library. Students and faculty alike were denied access to the book because two of the book's 382 photographs contained images of what the Service considered "pornographic" homosexual acts. The University provoked further controversy when it refused the Service's order to destroy the book as a matter of academic principle. See Reuel Golden, "Mapplethorpe Case Abandoned," *British Journal of Photography* 7 (October 7, 1998): 3. Another recent case in Great Britain involved the Hayward Gallery, which self-censored two photographs from its Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective during its September 19 to November 17, 1996, exhibition after "advice" from London's Vice Squad. See Henry Lydiate, "Mapplethorpe," *Art Monthly* 201 (November 1996): 53; and Mark Sladen, "School for Scandal," *Art Monthly* 201 (November 1996): 12-14.

[17] Such an argument is made by Lisa Jardine, who goes even further in her apotheosis of Mapplethorpe as an artistic genius creating photographs of classical beauty by her insistence that his work has an extraordinary impact, which transcends the shock of his subject matter, his transgressive behaviors, and even the cash and influence of his celebrity status as a protege of socialite Sam Wagstaff. See Lisa Jardine, "Robert Mapplethorpe: Squandering Beauty," *Modern Painters* 9 (Winter 1996): 68-71.

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However, as Columbia University philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto reminds us, Mapplethorpe photographed and exhibited his works without much attention outside contemporary art circles until 1988 when he became the center of controversy over artistic funding by the National Endowment for the Arts. Even someone as interested in art as Danto knew little about Mapplethorpe or his photographs until challenged at a party to review the artist's first retrospective exhibition in the United States at the Whitney Museum of Art for his column in *The Nation*. Danto relates that he had passed up both the press opening and the formal opening, thinking "that there was no urgent reason to think about Mapplethorpe."[18]

Danto finally went to review the exhibition more as a philosophical occasion to consider what it might mean for art to be gay: "There was, then [1988] as now [1994], a great deal of talk about the art of this or that group – of women, or of African-Americans – and the issue seemed important and in fact urgent enough to justify writing about Mapplethorpe's art from the perspective of gayness."[19] Danto relates that he was not prepared for the shock of the images that he encountered in Mapplethorpe's photographs, writing that "it is almost impossible to imagine, today, what it was like in 1988, before his art had become notorious, to visit an exhibition of his work."[20] Danto recounts that "at a visceral level it was an

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[18] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 2.

[19] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 3.

[20] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 4. Later in the essay, Danto claims he was not alone in being unprepared for the shock of Mapplethorpe's photographs, or of anyone else for that matter who was working with such imagery: "Even as late as 1988, so far as the straight press was concerned, no one would have

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exceedingly frightening moment: those were real people who had put themselves in that way in front of the camera."[21] Part of the shock, Danto admits, was his realization that Mapplethorpe, "given the physical constraints of the photographic session, had to have shared a space with them [these real people] as well as a set of values."[22]

Danto's language throughout his discussion makes it clear that it was not merely the sexuality represented in the visual images themselves that gave the photographs their power. It was the way that the viewer was implicated in an encounter with the images in these photographs. In addition to the descriptions above, Danto characterizes his experience with Mapplethorpe's photographs through words such as: "transparent," "embodied," "uninflected," "participant," "new perspective," "facing the reality," "confronted," "lived reality."[23] This is recognizably the instrumentalist vocabulary of positivism, which rehearses the naïve view of the photograph as a record of the truth that has been captured by the scientific instrument of the camera. However, Danto is not a rube and elsewhere has been quite clear about the mediations of the camera's operation and

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known what sorts of images were to be encountered in the corner gallery of the Whiney Museum" (100). This suggests an important context for the Mapplethorpe controversy, indicating that it was as much about the practices of non-normative sexuality in general as about the specifics of gay sexual desire.

[21] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 9.

[22] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 9-10.

[23] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 9-10. In the title essay from the same volume, Danto comments on Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait*, 1978: "... there is nothing false about the image: that is a real whip being pushed autoerotically up a real anus" (59). The point, of course, is that this is an image of such objects and an action. Viewers are only made to feel that they are "real" by the necessary conditions of taking a photograph.

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the psychological impact of the photograph as an indexical trace of what it represents.[24] I suspect that he uses this naïve-sounding language precisely because he wants to point up the degree to which Mapplethorpe relies on the analogic character of photographic representation in staging the confrontations between his images and their viewers. Without discounting the somatic possibilities of these disturbing images through a spectator's narrative appreciation of their *mise-en-scene*, I want to suggest that Danto's more visceral experience of confrontation is a result of their spectacle address. By attending to Mapplethorpe's less controversial works as a context for his more graphically transgressive images, this investigation will demonstrate that the visual operations of his photographs are engaged with traditions of modernist abstraction similar to those that characterize the other artists in this study. Here, I offer something of a reversal in terms of the images that are considered controversial, arguing that the radical character of Mapplethorpe's photographs is mobilized as much by their formal explorations of photographic discourse as by their images of sadism and masochism.[25]

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[24] Roland Barthes discusses this reality effect, which is established by the photographic trace, calling it a paradox that allows the photographic image to operate as both nature and culture, or as an analogical reproduction of literal reality at the denotative level and a coded signifier at the connotative level. He writes: "What is the content of the photographic message? What is it that the photograph transmits? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality." Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1985), 5.

[25] It should be noted that this situation is not unique to Mapplethorpe or the particulars of his queer-centered sadomasochism. Radical sex photographs,

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II. DEVELOPING IMAGERY

". . . as we now know after several decades of attention to human sexuality, desire is mutable and varied

David McCarthy[26]

Mapplethorpe's earliest artistic works were not photographs, and he took up the medium that defined him almost incidentally. After graduating from high school in Floral Park, Queens, New York in 1963, he moved to New York to attend the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.[27] At first he majored in advertising design, but then changed his major to graphic arts with a concentration in drawing, painting, and sculpture. During the late sixties, Mapplethorpe primarily worked at a kind of conceptual sculpture, creating fetishized objects, often out of clothing such as men's underwear and shirts. There is a strong consensus among art historians that Mapplethorpe's forays into sculpture were less than successful, embarrassing even. Danto writes that Mapplethorpe's "reputation could have only been enhanced had all those mounted Jockey briefs and body shirts been destroyed."[28] However, even in these works it is possible to see his later artistic vision and its double preoccupation with private and public life, the bits hidden away from view and

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whether homosexual or heterosexual, are likely to dominate the discussion of artists, especially photographers, whose work includes them.

[26] David McCarthy, "The Nude: That Darling of the Artists, That Necessary Element of Success," in *The Nude in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (Ridgefield, Conn.: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 72.

[27] This and the rest of the biographical information in the paragraph is found in the detailed chronology in Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 143-53.

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those that are visible, the things secretly desired and the desires that society makes accessible.

Beginning in 1968 he also began working in assemblage and collage. Manipulating found imagery, he brought together the Catholic background of his childhood and his interest in homosexuality.[29] At the time, Mapplethorpe was sharing a room at the Chelsea Hotel with fellow artist and confidant Patti Smith as they both tried to break into the circle of successful artists and promoters who met regularly at Max's Kansas City Bar and Restaurant. Max's had become famous, especially its back room, as the center of New York's bohemian art scene in the mid-sixties when it was frequented by Andy Warhol and members of his Factory.[30] Consistent with prevailing art world assumptions, Mapplethorpe's assemblage and collage works use the appropriation and manipulation of images, and the visual sites they represent, as a way to explore the traditional understandings of authorship and originality. However, as Richard Marshall points out, Mapplethorpe was taking his lead not only from contemporaries like Andy Warhol, whom he greatly admired, but also from earlier artists within the

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[28] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 125.

[29] During his early years before Stonewall, Mapplethorpe was as conflicted about his sexuality as was White. In her biography of Mapplethorpe, Patricia Morrisroe recounts his attempts to keep his first significant affairs a secret even from Patti Smith, who had become his artistic and emotional confidant in 1967. He even told his parents that he and Smith were married. It was his relationship with David Croland in 1970 that finally outted him to Smith. Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 56-60; 84-86.

[30] Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 70-1. One of Mapplethorpe's early and touching portraits is constructed out of a group of four Polaroids of a Warhol icon, *Candy Darling*, 1973. Although Max's was still frequented by Factory

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tradition of avant-garde modernism, whom he had studied at Pratt, notably Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp.[31]

In 1970, to celebrate the relationship with his new lover, David Croland, Mapplethorpe asked Sandy Daley, an artist friend also living at the Chelsea Hotel, to make a short film about him entitled *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced.*[32] Daley was also a photographer and historian of Victorian photography, who tutored Mapplethorpe in nineteenth-century photographers and their technical processes.[33] At Daley's urging, Mapplethorpe began to use her Polaroid camera as a way to create an image bank of his own photographs, which could replace working with found images.[34] In an interview with Janet Kardon, Mapplethorpe explained his motivation for taking up Polaroid photography: "I picked up a camera and started taking erotic pictures – so that I would have the right raw material and it would be more mine, instead of using other people's pictures. That was why I went into photography. It wasn't to take a pure photographic image, it

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members at this time, Warhol, himself, stopped spending much time in public after Valerie Solanas tried to kill him in 1968.

[31] Richard Marshall, ed., *Robert Mapplethorpe*, with essays by Ingrid Sischy and Richard Howard (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1988), 8.

[32] This film was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971. See Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 145.

[33] Daley had written her college thesis on Julia Margaret Cameron and experimented with Henry Fox Talbot's calotype process as a way to print large-scale images on canvas. See Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 69.

[34] Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 86-87.

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was just to be able to work with more images."[35] Not surprisingly, Mapplethorpe used the Polaroid to take photographs of his lover, David Croland, who thus became his first nude model. He also used it to take a series of self-portraits in which he explored the sexualized image of his own body in exhibitionist poses.[36]

In 1971, an introduction to John McKendry, curator of prints and photographs at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, secured the link between Mapplethorpe's artistic future and the medium of photography. McKendry took Mapplethorpe on as his special charge, opening the photographic archives of the Metropolitan for him to study. Alfred Stieglitz had given his photographic collection to the Metropolitan, and it was here that Mapplethorpe first saw Thomas Eakins's homoerotic photographs of nude male adolescents, Stieglitz's own nude photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe, and the whole range of Photo-Secessionists who had worked in pictorialism, including F. Holland Day, whose homoerotic, religious tableaus struck a sympathetic chord.[37] In a later interview, Mapplethorpe said: "Looking at those photographs made me think photography maybe could be art. I had never thought about that before, but now I found myself getting excited about the possibilities."[38] Danto relates that

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[35] Kardon, *The Perfect Moment*, 23.

[36] *Polaroids*, Mapplethorpe's first photographic exhibition, in January, 1973, at the prestigious Light Gallery in SoHo, included a series of such erotic self-portraits.

[37] Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 108.

[38] Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 108.

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Mapplethorpe was especially drawn to the "pure" photographic prints of Stieglitz and Paul Strand.[39]

What becomes clear in this brief account of Mapplethorpe's conversion to photography as an artistic medium is that in spite of his disingenuous remarks to Kardon, he did have an interest in the discursive space of the photograph itself. He may have been drawn to photography initially because it allowed him to create highly personal images, which could be used to explore the visual register of homosexuality and his own gay desires. But what fascinated him equally and compelled his interest was the history of photography and its uses by both the pictorialists and modernists.[40] Inevitably, the tensions between these two modes of photographic address inform Mapplethorpe's work. As Richard Marshall wrote in the catalogue for his retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art:

> He [Mapplethorpe] attempts to reconcile the formal concerns of color, texture, form, and balance with the subjective and emotive associations of the photographic image. He wants to allow the photograph to be experienced in a different way, to be accepted on the same aesthetic and critical grounds as painting and sculpture.[41]

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[39] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 145. Danto also reports that it was McKendry who gave Mapplethorpe a new Polaroid and helped him to secure a modest grant from the Polaroid Corporation in 1971.

[40] Mapplethorpe's own private collection, which he sold in 1982, emphasized late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century pictorialist and photosecessionist photography. See the catalogue of the sale: *Photography from the Collection of Robert Mapplethorpe* (New York: Sotheby Parke Bernet, Inc., May 24, 1982). Also of special interest for this study, the collection contained a classically posed photograph by Minor White of a male nude seen from the rear.

[41] Marshall, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, 14.

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This assessment of Mapplethorpe's own creative project points up the conservative nature of his practice, aligning his photography with the cultural concerns of an earlier era. It sounds remarkably similar to the goals that Stieglitz set out for the Photo-Secession when he shifted from a pictorialist to a modernist vocabulary. It rehearses the link that Stieglitz established in his *Equivalents* between an emphasis on the subjective and emotive associations of pictorialist photographers and the formal concerns of early twentieth-century avant-garde photographers. It also reiterates Stieglitz's commitment to placing photography on an equal footing with painting and sculpture. And as in Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, Mapplethorpe's gambit has been to deploy the visual vocabulary of the camera in a way that stages the relationship between the photograph and its spectators as an encounter with the viewing conditions of representation.

Mapplethorpe's early *Self-Portrait*, 1974 [Fig. 4.1] demonstrates his concern with the viewing conditions that are staged for the camera. At the time, Mapplethorpe was working with a Polaroid camera, which he uses both literally and figuratively as a framing device for the photographs.[42] In a number of works he incorporates the material conditions of the Polaroid process, signaling them through his use of the plastic mounts that were supplied by the manufacturer. Often these mounts were then painted and organized into aggregate compositions.[43] In the 1974 self-portrait, Mapplethorpe extends his investigation of the Polaroid and its referential capacity by enlarging it as a gelatin silver print.

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[42] Mapplethorpe did not start working with a view camera until 1976 when his lover and patron Sam Wagstaff gave him a Hasselblad camera.

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In keeping with his goal of elevating the status of photography as an artistic medium, he increases the scale of the image and enhances its visual presentation through an elaborate frame.

The staging of the photograph as a Polaroid image enunciates Mapplethorpe's use of a technology that belongs primarily to the private world of the snapshot while its scale and self-referentiality insist on its public status as art. The grainy quality of the image marks it as an enlargement from the original Polaroid process. Functioning as a visual analogue, the green, wooden frame has been crafted to resemble the look of the Polaroid film's encased mini-lab, complete with its hand tab, which is used to pull the film from the camera's body. In this way Mapplethorpe invites the viewer to participate figuratively, just as the camera's user does literally, in the revelation that produces the image captured by the camera. This, then, is a double self-portrait, representing both the artist and the photographic process.

The process of photography is thematized in the image itself through the way that Mapplethorpe uses a wall to create the effect of his body as an object emerging onto the white photographic paper. More than two-thirds of the image is rendered as blank space, in the form of a white wall, which creates the optical illusion of a single plane by its visual conflation with the white background behind Mapplethorpe. On first glance, the effect is startling: his body appears fragmented, parts of it impossibly absent from the image if this were a nonmanipulated photographic print. On closer inspection, the white blank does not turn out to be

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[43] For example, in *Candy Darling*, 1973, four Polaroids of the Warhol icon on the telephone are installed in mounts that are painted different shades of pastel and grouped together in a single frame.

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the single plane of a flat wall but to include the corner of a building. By standing against the unseen wall around this corner, Mapplethorpe hides part of his torso from the camera lens's visual field. The corner of the building acts as a visual cut, which slices through Mapplethorpe's head and torso and renders the display of his body as a visual rebus. It mirrors the vocabulary of the photographic cut, displaced here from the edge of the image to its center as the visual principle that organizes the viewer's perception. Through the actual frame, which resembles the Polaroid film packet, and the framing device of the wall's edge, which stages the camera's cut from a larger field, Mapplethorpe draws attention to the photograph as an image that simultaneously reveals and conceals. He also implicates the photograph's viewers by depicting the visual codes that they must accept in constituting a comprehensible image.

Mapplethorpe also uses his body in this self-portrait to reference the figure in art history and the sexual register of the nude as an avant-garde object. In the traditional binary terms that construct the male body as powerful and active and the female body as available and passive, Mapplethorpe has aligned himself with the female body. There is an abused innocence in the darkly lidded and downcast eyes that do not meet the gaze of the camera. His mouth pouts with a kind of injured pride that nevertheless communicates vulnerability as he presses his head against the wall in a gesture of resignation. His right arm and hand seems to be engaged in a surrealist gesture, as if he were pushing aside the wall coyly in order to reveal his body emerging from behind it. His other hand flirts with the notion of access, perhaps inviting violation, by reaching into the back of his pants. In the sexual vocabulary of the eroticized body, Mapplethorpe's image places him on

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display as a permissible object of illicit desires that viewers are allowed to scrutinize without reproach.

The fact that this display reverses the roles usually ascribed to men and women before Stonewall might be seen as an implicit critique of their gendered assignment.[44] It seems more probable, however, that Mapplethorpe is adopting a vocabulary that will position his body within the terms that have authorized erotic looking as a male activity. The registers of inward reflection convey the sense of a physical self-absorption more than romantic introspection and encourage the implied male spectators to consider Mapplethorpe as a desirable object. He renders himself in the guise of a hustler, a body available for the right exchange. As Carol Duncan has shown, the prostitute's body functions as the nearly overdetermined sign of avant-garde art in the twentieth century.[45] By revealing that an erotics of the gaze can inflect a male body with the signs of prostitution as readily as a female body, Mapplethorpe demonstrates the culturally constructed nature of the traditional sexual binary and its assumptions.

By using his own homosexuality to illustrate the role of photography in constituting the sexual registers that establish the relations between viewers and

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[44] A more resistant reading also might challenge this seemingly clear example of the distribution of active and passive roles by suggesting that the operation of a traditional subject-object binary is not absolute. Implicit in Mapplethorpe's gesture of pushing aside the wall to reveal himself is a notion of control over what is seen, which seems to reference the strategies of exhibitionism as a way to defeat the scrutinizing gaze of the viewer.

[45] This is the assumption behind Carol Duncan's influential essay "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," first published in 1973, and reprinted in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, ed., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1982), 293-313. Duncan later extended her analysis to the space of the museum

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images, Mapplethorpe has not only outted himself but also the homoerotic valence of the male nude as well. But as we have seen, he also has used this image to illustrate the visual vocabulary of photography that served the more self-referential aims of artists who had worked in the language of modernist abstraction. Such effects reference the photographic medium and its materials as a way to reveal the culturally normalizing assumptions of vision and the constructed nature of meaning. Thus, in one of Mapplethorpe's earliest silver gelatin prints, he has already placed in tension the competing modes of photographic address that are represented by pictorialist narrative and modernist abstraction. Without eliminating the content on which narrative understanding relies, Mapplethorpe has created a photograph that locates meaning in an encounter between the viewer and the image by mobilizing the visual conditions of spectacle. In other words, spectators are made aware of the photographic apparatus and its staging of the image as a visual event that is directed at the conditions of their viewing.

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and the exhibition of avant-garde art in her essay "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," *Art Journal* 48 (Summer 1989): 171-8.

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III. NARRATIVE SUBJECTS

> *We do not for the most part live our fantasies out, and so they never evolve. But the form of life Mapplethorpe had entered had made of sex a public practice, and this enabled it to evolve in ways quite beyond the power of private fantasy to anticipate.*
>
> *-- Arthur Danto*[46]

In spite of Mapplethorpe's reliance on a modernist vocabulary of photographic abstraction, his images are often tied to narrative models of subjectivity and the desiring gaze. As Janet Kardon argues in her catalogue essay for *The Perfect Moment*: "One cannot avoid the homosexual implications of Mapplethorpe's work."[47] This is especially true in light of a series of thirteen photographs that he made in 1977 and 1978 and organized into his infamous grouping of *The X Portfolio*. The photographs consisted of 13-1/2 x 13-1/2 inch gelatin silver prints mounted on board, which graphically depicted scenes from the urban subculture of New York City's gay sadomasochism community. Exquisitely printed, these sharp-focused images deploy the vocabulary of "pure" photography to create images that are simultaneously recognizable and abstract in their references. Kardon attributes the power of Mapplethorpe's photographs to the dialectic created by this referential tension: "The underlying formal imperative

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[46] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 8.

[47] Kardon, *The Perfect Moment*, 10.

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of any Mapplethorpe image can sufficiently unsettle the viewer to activate a sense of disbelief, since the circumstantial evidence is contradicted by the presentation."[48]

Allen Ellenzweig, in his book on the homoerotic photograph, admits that these images are organized visually as "formalist compositions" but argues "that for many people such explicit sexual or abusive content overwhelms formal issues. . . . it is the transgressive nature of the image that immediately, and finally, impresses itself."[49] In other words, the detail that is captured by pure photography makes their register as documents of a narrative based in subject-object relations inescapable. These photographs partake of a kind of documentary evidence that is rooted in the shock of disbelief, what Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls its "confirmatory aspects."[50] According to curator Ingrid Sischy, they "go beyond what's considered representable, go so far that they're viewed as reprehensible, better off as dirty secrets."[51] As Sischy points out, this is because they are about sex, and not just sex, but forms of sexual desire that have been associated with

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[48] Kardon, *The Perfect Moment*, 10.

[49] Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, 127; 129. A good example of such a response is evident in Dominick Dunne's review of the 1988 Whitney Exhibition: "However much you may have heard that this exhibition was not a shocker, believe me, it was a shocker. Robert Mapplethorpe . . . [is] a documentarian of the homoerotic life in the 1970s at its most excessive." Dominick Dunne, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Proud Finale," *Vanity Fair* (February 1989), 126.

[50] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 172.

[51] Ingrid Sischy, "A Society Artist," in *Robert Mapplethorpe*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Boston, Mass.: Bulfinch Press, 1988), 83.

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illicitness and forced underground.[52] They seem to define the permissible limits of control and submission by depicting subject-object relations that most viewers find too disturbing to inhabit even imaginatively.

It is the disturbing character of the subject-object relations documented in these photographs to which Danto is responding when he writes that Mapplethorpe was a "participant observer": he "did not hide behind his camera, or remain outside the life he observed."[53] By identifying himself as a participant in the world he portrays, Danto argues that Mapplethorpe documents his subjects without betraying their trust as did other well-known post-World War II documentary photographers such as Gary Winogrand or Diane Arbus who turn their subjects into objects.[54] In her discussion of Arbus's photographs, Susan Sontag argues that such objectification is inherent in documentary photography, which turns the camera into "a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed."[55] By contrast, Danto's point is that the subject-object

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[52] Sischy, "A Society Artist," 83.

[53] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 43.

[54] Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, 43. Here Danto is referring to photographers in the generation just previous to Mapplethorpe who were defined as a group in 1967 by the *New Documents* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition also included Lee Friedlander, who Danto does not mention. He substitutes Henri Cartier-Bresson for Friedlander in his analysis.

[55] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 41. Sontag goes on to describe Arbus's photographs in the language of nineteenth-century exploration that linked documentary and colonial discourses: "The photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear" (42). Sontag, it should be

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relationship within sadomasochism is structured by trust, which is what allows these images of people putting themselves in extreme danger also to function as a metaphor for the relationship between a photographer and the person being photographed. As a metaphor, it reveals that Mapplethorpe is documenting more than the transaction depicted within the image; he is also using these narrative scenarios to document something about the necessary conditions that creating a photographic image requires.

Richard Meyer attempts to make sense out of such documentary uses that have been assumed to operate in Mapplethorpe's photographs of sadomasochism. He investigates the way in which Mapplethorpe's images both deploy and resist documentary discourse by refracting the sadomasochistic photographs through two self-portraits, which he argues frame Mapplethorpe's production, *Self-Portrait*, 1978 [Fig. 4.2], and *Self-Portrait*, 1988 [Fig. 4.3]. Meyer acknowledges that Mapplethorpe's work seemingly fulfills "the conventional function of documentary photography, namely, the framing of the subject as victim, freak, or specimen in relation to an enfranchised, implicitly normative viewing audience."[56] However, making a point similar to Danto's, Meyer says that the 1978 *Self-Portrait* [Fig. 4.2] announces Mapplethorpe's own investment in the subculture of

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noted, is approaching Arbus as a photographer whose work is marked by the politics of class and cultural privilege, and probably a certain amount of ethnocentrism as well. In so doing, Sontag erases from view a consideration of the political work accomplished by the visual vocabulary of the photographic images themselves, which is more germane to the considerations of the current study.

[56] Richard Meyer, "Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography," 362.

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sadomasochism as both "photographer and erotic participant."[57] As both objectifier and object, Mapplethorpe thus stages his photographic production through the same relational dynamic that supports the operations of sadomasochism itself. Because Meyer offers one of the best accounts of the visual operations that inflect Mapplethorpe's photographs, and because I also intend to base my investigation on their self-reflexive character and the way in which they can be seen to defeat traditional subject-object relations, I want to rehearse Meyer's argument about their narrative function as something of a foil for my own claims about spectacle address.

Meyer explores the rhyming of subjects and objects that is staged by being both photographer and photographed, sadist and masochist in the *Self-Portrait*, 1978. Noting the inclusive nature of the artist's participation in both productions, he writes, "the reflexivity of Mapplethorpe's auto-penetration mirrors the reflexivity of his auto-portraiture."[58] Once Meyer has set out the homology between Mapplethorpe's practices of sadomasochism and the practice of photography, he is able to read the sadomasochistic photographs ingeniously as a record of sitters who resist being objectified by the power dynamic that operates in a binary economy of subject and object. Insisting on their own agency, Mapplethorpe's photographic subjects actively collude in the artifice of the image by staging the fetishistic signs of their transgressive sexual practices in place of acting out those practices for the camera's controlling gaze. As a result, they resist the impression of full disclosure that gives photography the force of documentary

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[57] Meyer, "Discipline of Photography," 363.

[58] Meyer, "Discipline of Photography," 363.

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evidence. Meyer posits, therefore, that Mapplethorpe's supposed documenting of gay experiences throughout his oeuvre is, instead, an insistence on the impossibility of photography to fulfill the mandate of the document, which claims to represent the actual experience of a subject, and even to emphasize the medium's impoverishment before such experience. This strategy runs all the way through to his final, *Self-Portrait*, 1988 [Fig. 4.3], where "as in the self-portrait with bull-whip from a decade earlier, Mapplethorpe meets and then defies the gaze of his own camera."[59]

As was rehearsed in the introduction to this study, the narrative possibilities of subject-object relations have been theorized since the 1970s largely through feminist psychoanalytic notions of the gaze and its structuring of voyeurism and the fetish into a ocular regime of gendered binary positions. In his analysis, Meyer participates in a revisionist model similar to those feminist film theorists: he seeks to rupture the logic of a compensatory binary by asserting the subjectivity of those captured by the camera – including Mapplethorpe – as they seek to control its objectifying gaze. Meyer's analysis does provide a provocative account of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre and the insufficiencies that constantly threaten the mastery of full disclosure around which the discourse of documentary photography is organized. However, in his attempt to resist the documentary uses of Mapplethorpe's photographs by reading its signs as staged simulations, Meyer relies on the codes of self-reflexivity that emphasize the narrative element of theatricality rather than the work's confrontational address to the beholder mobilized by its spectacle aspect. My own reading of these self-portraits from 1978

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[59] Meyer, "Discipline of Photography," 377.

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and 1988 relies on a homology that is less inflected by narrative assumptions of performance and more dependent on registering how Mapplethorpe has staged the formal terms of his self-image. By focusing on his hand, which serves as a metonymy of his roles as both camera operator and sexual participant, Mapplethorpe stresses the indexical nature of the photographic trace and its potential to create a sense of confrontation with the viewer.

The 1978 photograph became infamous as the image used to announce the "Censored" exhibition of works at the Langton Street alternative art space in San Francisco, in which he first publicly showed photographs containing images of sadomasochism, including *The X Portfolio*.[60] The 1988 photograph is equally infamous, but in the changed social climate created by the AIDS pandemic, it serves as a public register of the "homosexual artist" and his disease through its association with Mapplethorpe's death. In both images, Mapplethorpe looks directly into the camera with his hand wrapped about a phallic object, the bullwhip penetrating his anus in 1978, the cane surmounted by a skull in 1988. The equivalence between these phallic objects and Mapplethorpe is also signaled through the poses he adopts.

In the 1978 image, Mapplethorpe's body is twisted into a double "Z" that echoes the shape of the whip. His gaze at the camera is direct, but awkward, as he

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[60] The "Censored" exhibition took place at 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, from March 21-April 1, 1978. The address is located in what was the gritty and dangerous warehouse district known as South of Market Street, the center of San Francisco's leather sex cruising community in 1978. Although it has been gentrified considerably, this area still serves as the heart of the West Coast leather scene and site of the "Folsom Street Fair," the largest, yearly, public, international celebration of sadomasochism. A fuller account of this area and its leather subculture can be found in Gayle Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of

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strains to see over his hunched shoulder. In the 1988 image, Mapplethorpe's black turtleneck and the photograph's high tonal contrast work to abstract his body as background. His head is left to float hauntingly in the upper right corner. In the lower left corner, unnaturally white, the forward placement of his hand near the camera lens causes it to double his head as the only other light object against the uniform black ground. Visually situated at the top of his hand, the skull doubles Mapplethorpe's direct gaze: its eye sockets, empty, nevertheless seem to confront the camera. The short depth of field and forward placement of his hand bring the gray skull into sharp focus, leaving Mapplethorpe's own visage slightly blurred. As a *memento mori*, the skull seems more solid than Mapplethorpe's fading presence, and its gray tone mediates between the foreground whiteness of his hand and the black ground of his body.[61] Through the use of these props, Mapplethorpe signifies his identity as a sign, first of gay sadomasochism and then of gay death. He produces a rhyming of significations in which his body is twinned with the obviously fetishized objects of bullwhip and skull.

Such an account relies, as does Meyer's, on a vocabulary of self-reflexivity. It is not, however, the self-reflexivity of a narrative enacted by the positions of subject and object that Meyer traces. In place of the discursive operations through which power relations are constituted, I am proposing to read the image's self-reflexivity as a visualization of photographic signification itself. Rather than imaginatively inhabiting (or resisting) narrative codes that position viewers within

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the Butthole," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Boston, Mass.: Alyson Publications, 1991): 119-141.

[61] The skull as a *memento mori* figure is one of the most common conventions of Baroque still-lifes, tying this photograph to that genre and its *vanitas* theme.

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the image, its spectacle aspect makes them aware of the signs that mediate the image's meanings. Of course, the narrative implications of Mapplethorpe's auto-penetration do not simply evaporate from the image by focusing on its rhyming signifiers. But the bullwhip snaking out of the frame at the bottom edge of the photograph shifts the narrative scene to encompass its viewer, whose own position as spectator appears to begin where the bullwhip ends. Mapplethorpe uses the whip to collapse the spatial distance between the fictive space of the photographic image and its actual viewers, challenging them to a self-conscious awareness of what their own bodies are experiencing in the act of looking.

Not incidentally, the bullwhip's sinuous line directs the spectator's look to Mapplethorpe's sodomized anus, and Mapplethorpe gazes directly back at the viewer, as if soliciting his or her emotional response whether it be pleasure, discomfort, or disgust. However, whatever sexual fantasy is referenced, its action has come to a stop in order to create a controlled image for the camera.[62] The requirements of studio photography disrupt the narrative scenario in favor of the more seductive experience of a direct appeal to the spectator, who is invited to participate in something that carries an illicit charge. The visceral charge of the photograph derives from the tension between narrative absorption and bodily awareness that the viewer experiences in realizing that Mapplethorpe has staged this scene as a confrontation with its spectators.

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[62] Meyer makes a similar point when he says "This is no *verité* realm of the street or sex club but an acknowledged artistic set-up." However, Meyer's concern remains the relation between the photographer and the scene's actors rather than the photographer's use of the scene to confront the spectator. See his "Discipline of Photography, 366.

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Looking back at David Joselit's essay for *The Perfect Moment* catalogue, it seems almost prescient in its insistence that labeling Mapplethorpe as a photographer of "sophisticated naughtiness" obscures his broader, more significant relevance.[63] Joselit, like Meyer, frames his discussion with Mapplethorpe's self-portraits, which he uses to locate "the hauntingly unstable vision of masculinity *and* femininity his art proposes" and its "complex compound dramatization of the interplay between sexual aggression and submission – in men and women, heterosexual and homosexual."[64] He also could have added "black and white" because the same theoretical models of the male gaze from film theory have organized the responses of critics who argue that Mapplethorpe's photographs of African American men erase their subjectivity and present them as objects of his fetishistic gaze.[65] While this study's focus does not allow it to enter

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[63] David Joselit, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Poses," in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Janet Kardon (Philadelphia, Pa.: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 19.

[64] Joselit, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Poses," 19.

[65] These criticisms usually focus on Mapplethorpe's two books that are comprised entirely of the nude bodies (and body fragments) of African American males. See Robert Mapplethorpe, *Black Males*, with a preface by Edmund White (Amsterdam: Galerie Jurka, 1983), and Robert Mapplethorpe, *Black Book*, with a foreword by Ntozake Shange (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). For a summary of this critique see the essay and roundtable discussion, Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "True Confessions," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 191-200, originally published in *Ten.8* 22 (Summer, 1986). For comments on the book *Black Males* specifically, see Kobena Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," in *Photography/Politics: Two*, ed. Pat Holland, Jo Spence, and Simon Watney (London: Comedia/Methuen, 1987): 61-69. For the critique of *Black Book*, see Mercer's revision of his earlier argument in which he views the photographs more positively by placing Mapplethorpe's racism within the context of gay desire and visibility. See his "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial

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into the full debate over the degree of racism within Mapplethorpe's photographic project, the narrative mode of visual understanding that grounds the critics of such arguments makes a brief consideration of their position germane.[66]

One of its earliest articulations is a 1986 essay by Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien. They argue that Mapplethorpe's photographs of African American men have relied on an alliance between the camera's ability to fetishize and the culture's projections of race in order to erase the subjectivities of his black male nudes [Fig. 4.4]. As a result, his work situates the black male body as the erotic "Other" of his white, male desire.[67] These images, they argue, stage the pleasures of erotic looking at black bodies in a similar manner to the way that female bodies historically have been represented: "the history of the nude as a genre is the story of a masculine reduction of the female body to the status of an Image that bears the burden of representing men's sexual desires and fantasies to other men."[68] In the case of Mapplethorpe's images of black men, which they acknowledge as exceedingly beautiful, this burden of representation shifts from women to black

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Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary" in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1991), 169-222.

[66] Both critics and artists have articulated this criticism. For an account of significant artistic interventions by Lyle Ashton Harris, Christian Walker, and Glenn Ligon, see Thelma Golden, "My Brother," in *Black Male*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 33-4.

[67] Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," 62.

[68] Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," 63.

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men, who "are defined, confined and reduced in their 'being' as sexual, and nothing more or less than sexual, hence super-sexual."[69]

In her study of the contemporary male nude, Melody Davis agrees with this assessment, but she is less forgiving than Mercer of the beauty of the bodies in these photographs. Stating that Mapplethorpe's images are both "racist and fetishizing" and that "*Black Book* marks a new low in glamorizing the excluded," Davis asserts that the idealization merely serves to mask, and thus reinforce, the actual difficulties experienced by African American men.[70] bell hooks is even more

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[69] Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," 62. However, as a result of the controversy surrounding *The Perfect Moment* exhibition, Mercer revised his earlier understanding by admitting that his original analysis underplayed the "subversive homoerotic dimension in the substitution of the black male subject for the traditional female archetype." See Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 178. For an account by a critic who did not change his mind as a result of the controversy, see Essex Hemphill, "The Imperfect Moment: Photographs of Black Males by Robert Mapplethorpe," *High Performance* 13 (Summer 1990), 18-19.

[70] Melody D. Davis, *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1991), 85. Davis has organized her study around the degree to which photographers of the male nude either reinforce or resist what she calls the "metonymic fantasy" and the "action ideal" in its representation. The metonymic fantasy is the translation of the penis, which traditionally symbolizes desire, into an omnipresent image of masculinity: "The penis becomes the man by the shorthand of metonymy" (5). Although I think this is more properly synecdoche, Davis is correct in her assessment that the cost of such a figurative trope places more psychological weight on the literal organ, especially its ability to remain erect, than it can bear and invests it with excessive meaning that gets harnessed to sexual identity in destructive and potentially dangerous ways. The "action ideal" follows directly from the metonymic fantasy. It is a rejection of passivity as belonging to female nudes, which "befits their status as beautiful possessions, an objectification that has little to do with actual women and a great deal to do with patriarchal privilege. . . . The metonymic fantasy requires an ideal of action by which the male must constantly measure his sexuality or be in danger of losing it" (11). Mapplethorpe, she argues, reinforces both the metonymic fantasy and the action ideal in the most egregious ways possible (69). Davis contrasts Mapplethorpe's photographs with those of George Dureau, who she applauds for his resistance to these codes of meaning in spite of his similar position as a white man motivated by homoerotic interest in African Americans: "Dureau has his subjects

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hostile to Mapplethorpe's images when she writes: "It is so obvious as to almost be unworthy of note, and certainly not of prolonged debate, that racist / sexists iconography of the black male body is reaffirmed and celebrated by much of Mapplethorpe's work."[71]

Nevertheless, the substitution of a black, gay male for the white, female nude is not a simple exchange because it cuts across the differences of race and gender in the representation of sexuality. In other words, the issues of motivated viewing that are made visible in this exchange interrupt the naturalization of the heterosexual, white male point of view, which has dominated the discursive space of the photographic nude. It points to the role of shared codes in the interpretation of meanings that Cindy Patton has identified as a "sexual vernacular" when she says: "Sexual languages are very much tied to particular communities, and each community has its own very rich and special way of speaking: a sexual artifact that makes sense in one community often looks very strange or offensive or stereotypical when taken outside that context."[72]

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return our gaze (and possibly our desire), so that they perhaps posit us as much as we posit them" (106). This, says Davis, is an example of Mulvey's "call for a dialectic to scopophilia," and it rejects traditional conventions of the nude in the request for empathy from subjects who reproach viewers for a lack of it (106).

[71] bell hooks, "Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic," in *Black Male*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 136. hooks is no less hostile to Davis, who she castigates for championing Dureau: "Framing her critique by juxtaposing Mapplethorpe's images of the black male body with the photographs of George Dureau maintains a colonizing schema wherein racially unaware whites determine who holds the more politically correct 'rights' to the black male image" (137). This, to my mind, seems like a polemic rather than accurate reading of Davis's analysis, especially in light of more nuanced critiques such as Mercer's later, more appreciative assessment of Mapplethorpe.

[72] Cindy Patton, "Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle, Wa.: Bay Press, 1991):

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James Smalls points to this notion of sexual vernacular by identifying as a black gay male who desires white men. Smalls argues for the positive value of the images that fetishize gay, black men in the photography of Carl Van Vechten and Mapplethorpe. In the representation of desire found in these two photographic projects, Smalls sees a mirror image of his own sexual proclivities.[73] Within the community of gay men motivated by interracial sexual desires, Smalls maintains that photographs such as Van Vechten's and Mapplethorpe's can function positively if they "successfully confuse philic and phobic attitudes about race for both the spectator and for the master subject in their interracial erotic indulgence."[74] Smalls does not dispute the racial bias of these images, but he is more interested in "how these photographs lay bare the destabilizing function of fetishism, primitivism, and spectatorship in the reception and reading of racialized homoerotic visual imagery."[75] Smalls's essay is a reminder that there is more ambivalence, more fracturing and multiplicity of positions, within the voyeurism of fetishized looking than those roles authorized solely by a fixed identification of the controlling gaze with that structures the standard psychoanalytic narratives of film theory.

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55. This, of course, is what lies behind M.M. Bakhtin's notion of double-coding, which is the linguistic mechanism by which social groups inflect dominant discourse with their own associations. This point is expanded in the final section on spectacle address and queer viewers of Douglas Fairbanks's masculine image in film.

[73] James Smalls, "Public Face, Private Thoughts: Fetish, Interracialism, and the Homoerotic in Carl Van Vechten's Photographs" in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 81.

[74] Smalls, "Public Face, Private Thoughts," 82.

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As this section demonstrates, Mapplethorpe's photographs have been thoroughly inscribed in the narrative discourse of the filmic gaze because most critics have focused their attention on their implications for subjectivity. It is my contention that the conditions of spectatorship itself, especially those that rupture the seam of narrative absorption in favor of the immediacy of spectacle address, have not been sufficiently appreciated. Even efforts such as those of Meyer, Mercer, and Smalls, which seek to find Mapplethorpe's work subversive of the socially constructed vision that is authorized by theories of the male gaze, rely on the assumptions of narrative absorption underlying its scopic regime.[76] For this reason, Mapplethorpe's photographs offer an opportunity to revisit arguments about the camera as an inherently objectifying mode of vision that must be resisted. While the insights that have been made by means of revisionist theories of the "male gaze" contribute to this resistance, their reliance on a psychoanalytic model establishes the Oedipal complex as the locus of investigation, tying their revisions to a narrative identity and a sexual hierarchy based in "normative" male development. By considering Mapplethorpe's photographs of male bodies as images organized through a vocabulary of spectacle, I mean to suggest how they

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[75] Smalls, "Public Face, Private Thoughts," 80.

[76] It is worth noting that in order to suggest how it might be possible to escape the scopic implications of the gaze, Judith Butler has used Mapplethorpe's photographs in a discussion about pornography, celebrating the "uncontrollability of the terms that are suppressed by regulatory violence." See Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy," 120. This position argues for a notion of excess that is usually associated with Norman O. Brown's theories and his amalgam of sexual and political anarchy. See his *Love's Body* (New York: Random House, reprint, 1996). Richard Meyer's account follows a similar line of reasoning, praising Mapplethorpe's subjects for their "contradictions" of such extreme disjunction that there are no "sufficient metaphors for their identity." See Meyer, "Discipline of Photography," 370.

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manage to succeed as work that resists a narrative structuring of the spectator's look in order to make visible the operations of both gay sexual desire and photography. Such an investigation will also reveal the discursive fields that create the coded conditions through which these operations circulate largely as concealed practices of signification within contemporary culture.

IV. BODY DOUBLE

> *. . . [T]he desire to have is never entirely distinct from the desire to be. . . . We exist, in both time and space, in a vast network of near-sameness, a network characterized by relations of inaccurate replication. Accurate replication – the perfect identity of terms – is an attempted human correction of these correspondences, a fantasy of specularity in the place of correspondence.*
>
> Leo Bersani[77]

Due to the social and political controversies to which they have been harnessed, the photographs in *The X Portfolio*, *Black Males*, and *Black Book* have become nearly synonymous in much of the public's mind with Mapplethorpe's work. In fact, for many people, it is their only context for his work, serving to overdetermine the meaning of his photographs within the discursive networks of pornography and the instrumentalist use of the camera to fetishize and objectify.[78]

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[77] Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 63; 146.

[78] In her essay on Mapplethorpe, Ingrid Sischy defines pornography as a representation that "invokes distancing mechanisms that invite one to feel one's

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As we have seen, there are good reasons for his images to be mobilized by, and become inflected with, the concerns motivating the debates within these discourses. And, in turn, the discursive fields constituted by those debates are certainly richer for the visual vocabulary that Mapplethorpe's images introduce. However, I have found increasingly that the mere mention of Mapplethorpe's name elicits a set of responses, whether pro or con, which seem to rehearse the same set of assumptions, as if everyone were seeing exactly the same thing when they looked at his photographs. Such a point of view suggests, in effect, a naturalization of vision in regards to Mapplethorpe's images, similar to any visual code that has become a transparent iteration of an ideology. Rethinking Mapplethorpe's photographs as sites of spectacle engagement not only is a reminder of his modernist practices that connect him to the earlier photographers in this study, but it also rescues them from the univocal objects they seem to have become.

This intervention into the usual reception of Mapplethorpe's work has the added benefit of drawing attention to a category of photograph that has received less attention, work that seems as compelling and as characteristic as the photographs that circulate more infamously. I refer to a class of photographs that represents the body through strong tonal contrasts as a way to foreground the relation between dark and light. Not only is this relation the ground of racial definitions, but it also supports the formal vocabulary of photographic language, organizing the image and directing the viewer's gaze. This category of photograph offers insight into how Mapplethorpe's work not only deploys but

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control over the image, to feel that what one is looking at is not a person but an empty vessel for one's ego." See Sischy, "A Society Artist," 86.

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also reveals the operation of photography's discursive field, denaturalizing its mode of vision. At the same time, these photographs stage the represented body as a site where aesthetic and erotic play conjoin.

While this heightened tonality operates throughout the range of Mapplethorpe's photographs, its use in images of the male body is especially significant given the controversies over the kinds of desire that are figured in his male nudes. Even more particularly, his staging of black and white bodies within the same visual space turns them into a performative exposition at the intersection of race and sexuality. Of course this choice is motivated by my own subjectivity and visual desires at least in part. However, these photographs also provide a frame that may be used to examine how Mapplethorpe implicates more generally the bodies of spectators regardless of their sexuality in the significations of gay desire. The following section takes up the five photographs in *The Perfect Moment* exhibition that explicitly organize their images around the bodies of black and white men together.

One of the primary ways that spectacle address is set in motion is by announcing the mediation of the camera, which halts narrative absorption and makes spectators conscious of their own viewing conditions. Although the most direct strategy to achieve this result is the direct gaze out of the image by a figure in it, we have seen that the strategies of modernist abstraction can also instigate the spectator's bodily self-awareness through fragmenting defamiliarizations and contextual disorientations. In other words, the language of abstraction can achieve a result that the viewer's experience of narrative absorption would disallow. In *Ken and Tyler*, 1985 [Fig. 4.5], Mapplethorpe uses the vocabulary of abstraction to turn two nude male bodies into an image that references the photographic

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apparatus and calls attention to the spectator's position. A white body and a black body are posed to double each other. Both are spectacular visual specimens of the male physique. They are decontextualized, presented against a black ground that completely isolates them as floating forms without even the spatial clues of floor and wall to anchor them. They are also fragments, their arms and heads cropped at the top of the frame. These floating fragments carry the burden of signification in the photograph: nothing else exists to reference a context that would compel the viewer to give these bodies a subjectivity apart from their function within the photograph and in relation to each other. However, the indexical nature of the photograph, which is heightened in the modernist vocabulary of "pure photography," means that viewers cannot escape the reminder that these two bodies existed in front of the camera lens in the pose represented here.

Although there is no other context referenced in the photograph, the bodies themselves are marked by a metonymic signifier in the striations of light and dark cast on them. At the most basic level, these striations refer to light itself, which has been refracted clearly on each of the figure's legs. By using the striations of light and dark, Mapplethorpe points to the mechanical operation of photographic production: they are a reminder that the image viewers see is the direct effect of light mediated through the shutter of the camera apparatus. Through his access to Stieglitz's photography collection that McKendry made available to him at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mapplethorpe most likely would have been aware of the photograph *Sun Rays – Paula – Berlin,* 1889 [Fig. 4.6], which employed a

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similar device, albeit within very different visual contexts.[79] In fact, the light striations from the open window in Stieglitz's photograph add to the narrative elements of the image, suggesting the tradition of women, letter writing, and domestic space that were the hallmark of Dutch baroque genre paintings. The photograph is replete with references to capturing and making images through the number and kinds of them represented in the photograph.[80] It makes a claim for photography as a medium that is consistent with the history of artistic representations of the highest status even as it serves as a metaphoric figure of the different method by which photography produces those images. The open window, partially shuttered blinds, and darkened room whose contents are illuminated by the entering light echo the camera's lens and box. It links a new visual technology to an old subject.

Mapplethorpe's photograph, on the other hand, employs the light striations to make just the opposite claim. The fragmented bodies of Ken and Tyler are the only objects represented. Nevertheless, Mapplethorpe uses their bodies to great effect, giving his image an even more strictly photographic valence through its economy than does Stieglitz through the accumulation of representational images surrounding Paula. Mapplethorpe is working within a visual context in which the artistic status of photography is no longer an issue. Rather, what is at issue is the

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[79] Chief among these contexts is Stieglitz's commitment at this time to the dictates of pictorialism. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, for all its self-referential allusions to photographic reproducibility, there is no reference in this image to the photographic cut that became a prominent feature of modernist photography. In fact, says Krauss, "the effects of cutting or cropping are deliberately masked by Stieglitz, covered up or fuzzed over by the effects of internal framing." Krauss, "Stieglitz / *Equivalents*," 134.

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elasticity of the art historical tradition of the nude and the conventions of abstraction as a mode of reference. The photograph has become a way of interrogating art history itself. The use of doubling in *Ken and Tyler* renders the photograph a visual analog of the photographic process. However, in contrast to Stieglitz's image of Pauline, which metaphorically references the camera apparatus and its reproductive capacity, Mapplethorpe's visual trope of doubled bodies fragmented by the cut of the camera metonymically references the vocabulary that constitutes the discursive space of photography as a representational language.

The doubling of bodies signifies the indexical doubling of reality in the camera's image that is responsible for the reality effect of the photograph. That the doubling is of dark and light bodies recalls the tonalities of the photograph and serves as a metaphoric reminder of the contrasts on which its optical effects depend. The difference in skin tone also creates an opposition in the register of the light and dark striations on the two bodies. Mimicking the operation of light and shadow, the light striations are registered on the black body whereas the shadow striations are registered on the white body. This reversal references the chemical process of the negative and the print. The undifferentiated black ground against which both bodies are displayed could easily recall the film itself on which the image is captured. Finally, the cropping of the heads draws attention to the photographic use of the cut at the same time that it serves the more practical purposes of eliminating the faces that would draw attention to difference rather than doubling.

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[80] A good discussion of these references is offered in Krauss, "Stieglitz /

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However, in spite of calling attention to similarities, the doubling also does put the differences between these two bodies into play through their dark and light contrasts. Doubling is itself a trope that motivates viewers to attend to the category of difference within similarity. In *Ken and Tyler* it heightens an awareness of the details that separate these two figures beyond the color contrast: the heavier musculature, more prominent, blood-filled veins, and rounder buttocks of the darker body; the underarm hair, smaller feet, and pubic hair of the lighter body. In attending to these bodies for their differences, the viewer discriminates in the darker body exactly those areas that are usually eroticized and in the lighter body those that most often serve as sexual fetishes. Thus, through their difference, the bodies themselves register two kinds of sexual desire: eroticism, which focuses on the body's anatomy and its sites of physical arousal versus fetishism, which substitutes those sites with isolated fragments compulsively repeated to postpone anxiety about some perceived lack of the viewer's.[81]

Not insignificantly in light of the debates over the fetishism in Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, in this pairing of a black and a white body, it is the white body rather than the black that bears the signifiers of fetishism.[82] By distributing the signs of the erotic and the fetish across two

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Equivalents," 133.

[81] The figures of metaphor and metonymy are also distributed across these desiring systems, serving eroticism and fetishism respectively. In this respect the fetish serves as a surrogate for another site that carries erotic potential.

[82] This observation is consistent with Kobena Mercer's revised analysis of Mapplethorpe's photographs as sites of resistance to received assumptions about race and representation. In this respect, I am aware that there is a certain amount of racial stereotyping that operates in the comparison given that the differences I have noted are precisely those that mark the body by inscribing it

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different bodies, Mapplethorpe's photograph questions the racial codes that collapse the differences between these two signifying systems. Further, by making difference a function of doubling the male body, these desires are made to circulate within a male economy, and the front to rear positioning stages the sexual potential between these nudes as gay. Unlike Mapplethorpe's more graphic images of genitals and anuses, *Ken and Tyler* defers those visible organs to the practices of signification that make the representation of gay sexual desire possible. At the same time he uses the bodies of these men as a spectacular display of photography's discursive field in order to defeat the narrative codes of the male gaze.

In the catalogue for *The Perfect Moment*, the photograph of *Ken and Tyler* occupies the page facing a double profile headshot entitled *Ken Moody and Robert Sherman*, 1984 [Fig. 4.7]. Given that the heads in *Ken and Tyler* are cropped from the photographic frame, the placement of a pair of heads, one black and one white, on the facing page brings these two images into dialogue as did their installation in the exhibition. The photograph is another spectacular display of male imagery as a visual meditation on black and white. Both profiles reveal beautiful faces, beautifully photographed and printed in high tonal contrast. Again, the high contrast between light and dark organizes the visual field of the photograph, and again, the doubling recalls both the iconic and indexical doubling that is central to photographic discourse. However, because this photograph does not double bodies but two faces, the most insistent sign of the individual in our culture, their

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through racial signifiers. However, my point is not that such marking is natural to these bodies; rather, I am suggesting that Mapplethorpe employs their doubling in order to make visible the significations that give currency to the images of sexual desire that circulate within gay culture.

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difference rather than similarity is foregrounded by the pairing. The alignment of the two profiles suggests an equivalency between two things that is situated as a visual contrast: the organization of formal elements competes with the dark and light tonal contrast. Viewers are required, in effect, to make sense out of this visual contradiction. There is an obvious homology here with the photographic operation itself, which doubles objects iconically but at the same time relies on the viewer's awareness of the difference between those actual objects and their indexical images.

At the same time, the photograph deploys the vocabulary of avant-garde defamiliarization to turn this double portrait into a figure study of abstract forms that displays a homoerotic sexuality. As in his photograph of *Ken and Tyler*, Mapplethorpe does not need to present an explicit image in order to represent gay sexual desire. The heads exist in a dark space, devoid of any referential context that would provide viewers with interpretive clues. The baldness of the heads contributes to the focus on their formal shapes and allows for the sharp outline that flattens the feeling of space in the image.[83] With no other clues, viewers are made to attend to the tight back to front positioning of these male bodies, which is indicated through the close proximity of their heads and heightened by the forward protraction of the rear neck. In an interesting exchange with the image of *Ken and Tyler* on the facing page, the oppositional contrast that creates the codes of meaning is reversed: the photographic dark to light, racial black to white, hierarchical front to back, and homosexual top to bottom. Nevertheless, the formal similarity of the profiles defers the viewer's attention from the obvious

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racial differences.[84] Instead viewers are drawn to note those differences that emerge after the formal doubling of the composition is assumed: the slightly parted mouth, closed eye, and vaccination scar on the darker head versus the dark rupture of pupil, nostril, and ear canal on the lighter head. This visual vocabulary of open and closed, which is distributed on both heads, marks them as simultaneously similar and different. It is a visual account of the deferrals and displacements that constitute the significations of erotic display, and it organizes these referents according to the relations motivated by two male bodies.

Both *Ken and Tyler*, 1985, and *Ken Moody and Robert Sherman*, 1984, are photographs that use strategies of abstraction, notably the fragmenting and isolating of figures in a spatial void with high tonal contrasts that flatten their depictions and align them with the visual surface of the image. These strategies engage viewers in a confrontation with spatial relations that either feel impossible to enter imaginatively or are so immediate that they seem to impinge on the very space of spectatorship. They structure the spectator's look to deflect the distribution of narrative roles that would assign the active and passive positions within the image with which viewers could identify. Nevertheless, as the discussion of these two works suggests, viewers can be drawn into the

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[83] The baldness is a result of a medical condition that both men share called alopecia. Sischy, "A Society Artist," 80.

[84] In this assessment, I disagree with Sischy, who argues that this photograph's meaning lies in its racial content, which is "made blatant by the image's exaggeration of the relative difference in skin pigmentation to which one is accustomed in a black and white photograph of a black and white person. Mapplethorpe's lighting and toning make this contrast the first subject of the photograph. Sischy, "A Society Artist," 80. I am arguing, instead, that both race and the tonal contrast are placed in the service of a self-referential metaphor of

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speculations of narrative even when the photograph stages its own viewing conditions and calls attention to the camera's mediation. In such cases, the locus of meaning shifts from a narrative preoccupation with the subject-object relations determined by the "gaze" to the discursive associations that different bodies bring to the spectating position itself.[85] By heavily freighting these images with visual signifiers of the photographic medium and homoerotic relations, Mapplethorpe manipulates his viewers to attend to the problematics of reference that their own bodies bring to the spectating condition.

In his photograph *Embrace*, 1982 [Fig. 4.8], Mapplethorpe uses the pairing of a black and white body to create an image of mutual dependence. Both men fully wrap their arms around each other and have buried their faces in the other's shoulder so that they cannot be seen. Strictly speaking they probably would not be considered nudes but only shirtless, and their close embrace obscures most of their torsos from the viewer. The primary focus of the image is the muscular arm that each wraps around the other. These arms form a series of triangles based in the reciprocal figure-ground relationship created by the difference in skin color, emphasizing not only their opposition but their interdependence as well. But even more than interdependence and a turning toward each other, they register as a turning away from the spectator in a hermetic embrace that appears to shut out everyone, and everything, else. The tightness of the embrace is indicated by the

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the photographic process, which in turn operates to figure the functioning of erotics.

[85] In discussing this photograph, Sischy argues that Mapplethorpe's achievement lies precisely in this personalization and the physical reactions that it evokes: "Physical sensations and reactions are usually generalized and distanced when it comes to art; Mapplethorpe's achievement is that he pins them, personalizes them, activates them. Sischy, "A Society Artist," 80.

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tautness in the bulge of their biceps. These men are not merely hugging; they are grasping each other with fierce affection. However, it is impossible to tell whether it is passion, joy, tenderness, or sorrow that motivates this powerful display of emotion.

The blank studio setting offers no clues to direct viewers, forcing them back to the bodies themselves for clues to the referential meaning encoded in this photograph. Having been visually locked out of the scene, the spectator is made aware by the sharp details and tight cropping of the frame that the camera is extremely close to this intensely shared moment. This creates exactly the opposite effect than is usually associated with the confrontational character of spectacle address, in which something in the image initiates an engagement with, and implicit acknowledgment of, the spectator. Yet the felt proximity of the camera, and by association the viewer, to these men becomes another kind of confrontation that collapses the spatial distance on which narrative absorption relies and sets up a relationship between the image and the spectator. That relationship positions the spectator as an intrusion, which initiates the confrontation between viewers and the image stages as surely as a direct look from within the photograph.

This inverted spectacle address sets up an interesting tension between the refusal of the image and the transgression of the viewer. It loads the image in a way that resonates with the notion of transgression in general: public affection, interracial coupling, gay sexuality, and, given the 1982 date, quite possibly the many transgressions associated with AIDS, including death. For Ingrid Sischy, this is what sets Mapplethorpe's work apart from most other artists:

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> Most art calls primarily on what we have learned to recognize, or on how our lives have trained us to put something together or take it apart. Mapplethorpe's work does this too, but it really revolves around something opposite – around those people the culture is reluctant to recognize, does not want brought to the surface; around those images it does not want shown or taken apart, in fact around the whole training of 'do nots' and 'are nots.'[86]

Of course, given the controversies surrounding Mapplethorpe's sexually charged photographs of sadomasochism and queer sexuality, it also references his photographs as a transgression into the world of high art and polite society. And finally, *Embrace* becomes a figure of the way in which photography itself allows viewers to participate in objectification, voyeurism, optical rationalism, and the confusion of representation for reality.

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[86] Sischy, " A Society Artist," 81.

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V. SHIVERING DESIRES

> *We urgently need, therefore, to understand the many means by which photography punctuates the look of the world into a series of discontinuous signs – photographs – which are none-the-less endlessly offered as images of totality, merely divided in* moments.
>
> – Simon Watney[87]

The camera's transformation of one experience of reality into a record of another links Mapplethorpe's work to the modernist experiments with optical manipulation that characterized New Vision and other subjectivist modes of photography, which this study examined earlier in Imogen Cunningham's photographs. Through the defamiliarizing and disorienting strategies that support a vocabulary of abstraction, Mapplethorpe participates in the aim of modernist artists to reference both intangible experiences and the processes of representation. In this regard, *Dan S.*, 1980 [Fig. 4.9], illustrates the importance of the photographic history of abstraction to Mapplethorpe's overall project. Although it presents a single body, the photograph belongs to his category of images that combine black and white bodies by virtue of Mapplethorpe's ingenious manipulation of studio lighting and printing to exaggerate the tonal contrast. The body in the photograph is transformed into a surrealist harlequin of black and white flesh. It sends the viewer in search of signifying clues based in racial stereotyping. After noting the kinky hair and skin tones, there is not much

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[87] Simon Watney, "On the Institutions of Photography," in *Visual Culture*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, 143-4; originally published in

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available evidence except in the opposing hands on each shoulder where the effect is simultaneously most compelling and exposed. They read with the stereotypical signifiers of race: the black hand is darkly pigmented on the outside and light underneath the nails while the white hand appears to be more uniformly pigmented. However, closer inspection reveals that the model's arms must be crossed, reversing the color positions of the hands from their respective sides of the body. In spite of its virtuosity, therefore, the photograph does not hide its artifice but displays it for the admiration of its viewers. At the same time, the photograph questions stereotypical categories by forcing viewers to search for the visual signs of racial difference even as it dismantles the black-white binary that organizes such difference by shifting the tonal register of both halves of this body to shades of gray.

Such a display of artifice also announces the discursive space of photography as a visual field of representation rather than a transparent transcription of reality. The narrative potential of the image is ruptured by its obvious status as a staged event in the studio, mapping the signifiers of the photographic medium onto a nude figure. Most clearly, the contrasting skin tonalities on the symmetrically divided body reference the negative-positive process that produces the photographic image. The photograph's isolating of a figure from its lived context is figured by the empty ground that sharply outlines the body. That isolation is reinforced by the visual cut at the head and thighs, which also calls attention to the inherent fragmentation imposed by the photographic frame. The rear view also emphasizes the camera's limitation as a

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Photography/Politics: Two, ed. P. Holland, Jo Spence, and Simon Watney (London: Photography Workshop/Comedia, 1986): 187-197.

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mode of complete ocular inspection, of necessity disallowing an explicit portrayal of the genitals in its depiction of the buttocks.

In spite of denying viewers a clear look at the figure's genitals, Mapplethorpe nevertheless sexes his nude by organizing it and the photograph around the signifying split. The split opens up a breach of meaning in the image and simultaneously traces a dividing line that runs down the center of the nude and emphasizes the dark cleavage of his taut buttocks.[88] At the culmination of this split, the darkest point of the image, the testicles hang heavily between the figure's spread legs.[89] Viewers, who have already been compelled to a higher degree of scrutiny than usual in searching for racial clues, now find their attention drawn to sexual signifiers that Mapplethorpe invests with a gay erotics by his focus on the bodybuilder physique and the split of Dan's clenched buttocks. Richard Dyer has pointed out that the development of muscular definition is not a natural biological condition of men, a point reinforced in this image by the way its musculature has turned the body into an aggregate pattern of loosely connected, abstract shapes. On the contrary, Dyer argues that such a physique must be achieved through rigorous training and isolated movements. The skin acts as a surface that organizes this aggregate into a comprehensive whole even as the model flexes and

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[88] *Dan S.* restages a photograph by George Platt Lynes, *John Leaphart*, 1952, which also dealt with similar issues of race and sexualized the male nude but from a stronger fashion aesthetic than Mapplethorpe's attempt to bring together the competing discourses of race, sexuality, fashion, abstraction, and photographic representation. The photograph is reproduced in Peter Weiermair, ed. *George Platt Lynes* (Germany: Bruno Gmünder, 1989), 42.

[89] Sischy argues that the confrontation throughout Mapplethorpe's oeuvre "almost always entails the highlighting of those very details that symbolize our history of splits," which have remained unexamined in order to keep things hidden. Sischy, "A Society Artist," 87.

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stretches it to reveal rather than conceal the musculature underneath. Dyer calls such exaggeration an "hysterical" image of displaced power and strength.[90] The bodybuilder physique is rock hard, the very definition of the perfect erection.[91] At the same time, Leo Bersani notes that "virile displays always seem feminine. What passes for the real thing self-destructs from within its theatricalized replication."[92] In addition, the figure's self-embrace simultaneously encodes it with virility due to its exaggerated autonomy and vulnerability by virtue of its defensive posture. The photograph represents the nude as a gay erotic ideal: erect and vulnerable, a split in the assumed, seamless impenetrability of the male body.

In *Thomas and Dovanna*, 1986 [Fig. 4.10], Mapplethorpe deploys all the operational terms of this study: spectacle address, narrative absorption, photographic representation, the male nude, and gay eroticism, to create an interdependent discursive network. As with the other photographs discussed, Mapplethorpe's image is organized around the conjunction of two bodies, one black and one white, and the use of high tonal contrasts. It announces itself most

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[90] Richard Dyer, "Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up," *Screen* 23 (September/October, 1982), 71.

[91] Melody Davis points up the role of the symbolic in this transformation when she calls this image a "megamorph," which she defines as "tensing muscles in codes of invulnerability." Davis, *The Male Nude*, 22.

[92] Leo Bersani, *Homos* , 18. This is an abbreviated formulation of Jacques Lacan's comments about homosexuality in relation to *Verdrängung*, the repression inherent in the economy of the phallus. According to Lacan, the regime of the phallus can only function when veiled, which in the realm of the feminine is expressed in the masquerade. From this follows his famous comment: "The fact that femininity finds its refuge in this mask, by virtue of the fact of the *Verdrängung* inherent in the phallic mark of desire, has the curious consequence of making virile display in the human being itself seem feminine." See Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits*, 288; 291.

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prominently in the terms that are germane to this study through its associations with the spectacle appeal of the Hollywood movie musical. Thomas and Dovanna are posed as if they were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, captured in the midst of a song and dance production number, which Gunning identifies as the site where spectacle asserts its presence most clearly within classic narrative cinema.[93] Mapplethorpe literalizes the use of that tradition to place the male nude on display in the representation of Thomas's naked body, which is made even more naked by contrast with the elegantly clothed Dovanna.[94]

Not only does this photograph self-consciously reference the tension between narrative and spectacle, but it also establishes the role of the camera in creating the conditions of display that motivate those different modes of address. The contrast between dark and light is displayed less through two bodies than through the juxtaposition of body and costume. The startling effect of Dovanna's white-gloved hand against Thomas's dark skin serves as a synecdoche of the photograph's visual strategy: it is a spectacle of the covered versus the uncovered emphasized by the tonal contrasts of light and dark. Dovanna's dress, rather than her body, provides the contrast to Thomas's nude figure, providing a second

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[93] For a discussion of the movie musical and its display of the male body, see Steven Cohan, "Feminizing the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 9-20; reprinted from *Screen* 24 (November/December, 1983): 46-49.

[94] Although not explicitly under discussion in this study, it should be noted that Mapplethorpe also deploys the codes of fashion photography in this image, which was produced for that purpose in *Interview* magazine. See also the discussion of fashion in relation to the work of Mapplethorpe in Joan Didion's introduction, "An Annotation," in *Some Women: Robert Mapplethorpe* (Boston, Mass.: Bulfinch Press, 1989), n.p.

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ground to the black backdrop of the photograph. In effect, it is the body of Thomas that is doubled through a play of black and white, which is reminiscent of the strategy that Mapplethorpe used in his photograph of *Dan S* discussed earlier. The right side of Thomas's body is set off against white fabric in contrast with the left side of his body, which is set off against the black background. This parallel even extends to the way that the front of his legs seems to disappear into both the black and the white grounds. In this manner, Mapplethorpe again relies on a split to create the doubling of a single body that may be understood to reference the operation of the photographic process. However, instead of a simple homology, the splitting of a single body references the camera's transformation of whatever it represents through the manipulations of its formal vocabulary of light and dark. Although Thomas's body is single, it registers differently against different grounds.

Thomas and Dovanna also participates in the formal organization of the contrast between light and dark as a self-referential image of the photographic intervention into the flow of narrative time. An interesting parallel exists between the use of tonal striations in this photograph and those in *Ken and Tyler* discussed earlier. Both photographs deploy a similar contrast of light on dark and shadow on light along the black and white arms respectively. However, the use of alternating striations is formally more complex in this photograph, extending to Dovanna's dress, shoes, and the floor. On her shoes, the striations rhyme the ankle straps, suggesting restraint and the forceful arrest that is implicit in the photographic image. Conversely, the striations also mark Dovanna's blurred arm and the edge of her dress. They are a reminder of the marks in a still image that signify movement, and at the same time, they serve as indicators of the signifying

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limits within the photographic vocabulary as it attempts to capture reality.[95] Further, the striations on the floor are broken by the couple's distorted shadow, providing a visual analog of the flattening distortion in the representations mediated through the discursive space of photography. The use of these striations distinguishes the still photograph from the moving image. They call attention to the arrested motion of photography as a mode of vision that is distinct from the apparent action of film in spite of the fact that both rely on the camera's image for their effect. It is a reminder that the photographic use of spectacle suspends narrative time as well as narrative anecdote.

Thomas and Dovanna clearly uses self-referential photographic signifiers in order to draw attention to the camera's mediation and announce the image as a spectacle. It may be less obvious how it also stages the visual display of gay sexual desire in similar terms. This is, after all, a man and a woman engaged in dancing, one of the cultural activities most heavily inflected by heterosexual gender divisions. In keeping with the traditional gendering of male and female roles that dancing reinforces, Thomas is cast in the role of supporting and leading Dovanna. Indeed, her closed eyes and swooning body suggests a lassitude and pliability that contrasts with his direct gaze, taut musculature, and rigid stance, all of which further inscribes their pose within the traditional heterosexual register of active male and passive female. Within traditional theories of the camera's gaze and

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[95] An opposing film vocabulary to the musical that relies on light and dark striations such as those represented in the photograph's high tonal contrast between black and white is film noir. Dark sets punctuated by vertical slits of light that enter the scene at oblique angles such as in this photograph are one of film noir's most recognizable characteristics. Primarily a cinema of mood and tone, film noir's artifice is used to suggest that reality lies underneath the surface appearances available to both the eye and camera lens.

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subjectivity, which this study questions, one might well read this image as exactly the kind that supports male power and female objectification. However, reading the image through the theory of spectacle address and its attractions reveals the visual operation of the photograph, which makes sexual desire visible by rupturing the significations that naturalize heterosexuality and elide the gay inflection of its erotics.

The visual attraction that most obviously disrupts the narrative possibilities in this image is the display of a nude male body against a clothed female body. It is a spectacle heightened by its reversal of the traditional display of the nude female body in Western art history, typified in an image such as Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863.[96] Within a narrative construction of this image that is guided by Mieke Bal's notion of focalization, which displaces the eye of the spectator into the represented body, sexual voyeurism would not only reflect the

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[96] In fact, this image plays with its tradition in a manner that is remarkably similar but reverses the way that Manet plays with it. Manet borrows directly from Raimondi's engraving of Raphael's classical scene of nude river gods and nymphs, altering the narrative relations in it significantly by clothing the male figures. Mapplethorpe borrows directly from the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers classical film clip, altering the theatrical relations in it by presenting the male figure as unclothed. For Manet's painting and a discussion of his sources and possible motives, see the catalogue entry number 62 for *Les dejeuner sur l'herbe* in *Manet, 1832-1883*, exhibition catalogue, organized by Françoise Cachin and Charles S. Moffett in collaboration with Michel Melot (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 165-172. For a discussion of gender reversals and the rupturing of its binary formulation in the exchanges between the bodies of Victorine Meurent and Edouard Manet that are staged by the painting, see Carol Armstrong, "To Paint, to Point, to Pose: Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*," in *Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe,"* ed. Paul Hayes Tucker (New York and Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90-118.

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subjectivity of the male gaze, it would also imply miscegenation.[97] However, the eroticism of the ideal nude represented in Thomas's body as it is displayed against Dovanna's dress arrests such narrative potential. It addresses the spectator as an embodied viewer by deferring the voyeurism of the female figure that the situation would ordinarily set up onto the "otherness" of a black male figure. The perceived immediacy of the erotic nude body trump the narrative desire for agency and turn the male figure's more active body into the ocular focus of the viewer's attention. Yet, for the viewer to accept Thomas's body as an erotic object within the matrix of heterosexual assumptions would threaten male mastery by unraveling the web of relations on which such mastery depends.[98] Viewers of *Thomas and Dovanna* experience the tension between clothed and unclothed, which gives the nude its erotic charge, through a juxtaposition and reversal of the gendered and racial roles that they expect from narrative action.

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[97] See the earlier discussion on "focalization" in Cunningham's photographs of her husband *Roi on the Dipsea Trail* in Chapter two of this study, 132-134 and n. 56.

[98] This strategy makes viewers aware, additionally, of the way in which the myth of miscegenation relies on and supports the power relations of sexism. Sischy writes that this image actively enacts racial fears and fantasies in America black/white relations: "It is of a couple dancing. The man is black; he is naked. The woman is white, she wears a white evening dress, white gloves. She is arched in a melodramatic pose, and he supports her. The picture is a twist, a tie of images that summon *Gone with the Wind*, *Mandingo*, and fashion all in one." See Sischy, "A Society Artist," 88. In an essay on the photography of British artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Mark Reid explores this racial tension further when he writes that "viewers tend to rely on certain master formulas to decode the unclothed black body.... Mapplethorpe's work reflects his preoccupation with dramatizing the racist (homo)sexual fantasies held by the neocolonial mind." see Mark A. Reid, "Postnegritude Reappropriation and the Black Male Nude: The Photography of Rotimi Fani-Kayode," in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 217-18.

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The transgressions that Mapplethorpe produces by combining the visual language of the movie musical and the nude within a single discursive space are given a further twist by his homoerotic queering of the image. On first inspection, the image seems to draw on conventional masculinist assumptions by keeping the male penis in its role as signifying phallus out of sight even as it suggests that Thomas's body is penetrating Dovanna's. As photographic historian Deborah Bright argues: "The erect penis was understood in western culture to be the *echt* sign of penetrating male dominance over women and lesser males, yet it could signify its governing power only by remaining hidden."[99] However, even as the photograph calls up that convention -- through its narrative pairing of active male and passive female and its staging of neocolonial derived fears over the "primitive" sexuality represented in the myth of the black male's exaggerated sexuality -- its homoerotic register deflects those fears and renders the image impotent through the spectacle of a gay body.

Part of what creates this register is the spectator's knowledge of Mapplethorpe's own sexual desires and his more explicit depictions of gay sexual practices in other photographs. Part of it comes from the spectator's knowledge of the gay intertextual fields that can inflect the imagery, what Michael Ann Holly expresses as "the domain of texts begetting other texts."[100] This is particularly true

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[99] Deborah Bright, ed., *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 11.

[100] Michael Ann Holly, "Past Looking," in *Vision and Textuality*, ed. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 80. The notion of intertextuality comes from literary criticism. Its banishment from interpretive considerations was a key component of the so-called "new criticism," which assumed that the best understanding came from "a confrontation with the words on the page unmediated by the experience of

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in relation to the conventions of pornography that entered the work as a result of Mapplethorpe's relationship with, and photography for, Jack Fritscher, editor of *Drummer*, a hard-core magazine that celebrates sadomasochism.[101] For initiated spectators it also comes from the knowledge that Thomas made a living by placing his body and sexuality on homoerotic display as the gay male porn star Joe Simmons.[102] Ultimately, however, such knowledge is not sufficient alone to give the image its homoerotic charge. Its erotic register acquires most of its force from the way that the photograph represents Thomas's body through the shared codes of sexual desire that circulate among gay viewers.

We have seen how Mapplethorpe used the self-referential vocabulary of the photograph to figure the ideal, gay erotic icon in his nude image of *Dan S.* by combining virile and vulnerable signifiers to represent the male body as simultaneously erect and penetrable. Although there are numerous conventions for encoding the body with a gay register, it is the inscription of this supposed binary split (at least as understood within the conventions of traditional gender assignment) onto a single body that signifies most clearly as homoerotic. In his

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other texts. In other words, it [new criticism] ignores the intertextual elements of intelligibility, the recognition of similarities and differences between a text and all the other texts we have read, a growing 'knowledge' which enables us to identify *a* story as *this* story." See Catherine Belsey's discussion in *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), 21.

[101] Edward Lucie-Smith, *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 115.

[102] Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 194-197. Mercer argues that through the photographs of Thomas, who posed for both art periodicals and pornography magazines such as *Drummer* and *Men*, Mapplethorpe was participating in a post-Stonewall phenomenon that helped to give gays a sense of community identity: "Repetition has become one of the salient pleasures of gay male pornography, as photographic reproduction and video piracy encourage

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book on Roland Barthes, D. A. Miller describes how the virility of the muscled male physique acquires its valence differently in the codes of heterosexuality and homosexuality:

> Only those who can't tell elbow from ass will confuse the different priorities of the macho straight male body and the so-called gym-body of gay male culture. The first deploys its heft as a *tool* (for work, for its potential and actual intimidation of other, weaker men or of women) – as both an armored body and a body wholly given over to utility, it is ultimately aligned with the unseen body of its bossman, the dick in boxer shorts and business suit; whereas the second displays it muscles primarily in terms of an *image* openly appealing to, and deliberately courting the possibility of being shivered by, someone else's desire.[103]

In siting the locus of gay sexual desire in the "shiver," Miller touches precisely and eloquently on the split, which is central to both Mapplethorpe's vision and the vocabulary of photographic reference. As Miller uses the term, it means to shake, quiver, or tremble, especially in anticipation of either fear or pleasure. It is the signifier of disparate emotional experiences that evoke similar somatic registers, and it links those powerful feelings to desire. In this sense it also describes the operation of sadomasochism, with its conflation of fear and pleasure, whose inflection Mapplethorpe tied directly to the content of his entire oeuvre by rupturing any boundary between those images and the rest of his work.

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the accelerated flow by which models and scenarios constantly reappear in new intertextual combinations"(197).

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But to shiver also can mean to splinter or fragment, as in the shattering of glass into many pieces. This definition opens up an important understanding of desire, treating it as a modality of bodily self-awareness within a psychoanalytic model. It alludes to the fragmenting of self that initiates desire and structures the look as always already incomplete.[104] In the words of Jacqueline Rose: "The relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure, and distrust. As if Freud found the aptest analogy for the problem of our identity as human subjects in failures of vision or in the violence which can be done to an image as it offers itself to view."[105] In keeping with the analysis in the study, I am less interested in the psychoanalytic possibilities of this split as a theoretical model of narrative subjectivity than in following the lead of W. J. T. Mitchell, who sees "theory itself as a form of picturing."[106] In other words, I

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[103] D. A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1992), 31.

[104] Lacan's term for this is *méconnaisance* (misrecognition) and it sets up a chain of constantly shifting metonymic signifiers that represents the structure of desire. According to Lacan, misrecognition splits the subject between *la langue* and *la parole*, which is to say between the language one speaks and individual speech acts within it. A good summary of this model of consciousness is available in James M. Mellard, *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago, Il.: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 20-27.

[105] Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1999), 411.

[106] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago, Il.: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9. As a corollary, by deploying the language of the split to define gay desire, I am inscribing it with a set of associations that challenge its most famous narrative in the history of sexual identity, which comes from Plato's *Symposium*. Plato attributes the origin of biological difference between men and women to the splitting of a single, androgynous, whole body into two separately sexed half bodies that only find fulfillment in reuniting with their lost halves through intercourse. Plato's model obviously overdetermines desire in

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want to deploy the split's splintering and fragmenting to suggest that the formal vocabulary of photographic signification structures the image as an address to the viewer.

As a signifying code, the split speaks to the photograph's double cut both in time and space; it isolates a fragment from both the narrative flow of reality and the visual field. It is also a focusing of visual attention through a mechanical operation that splits the image of a thing from itself, exchanging its active presence for a passive absence. At the same time, the indexical trace of the photograph deflects the viewer's attention from all these shiverings by its compelling impression of an image that mirrors reality through an integrated and comprehensive disclosure, made more complete through its undifferentiated and heightened attention to detail. As Simon Watney explains, the rise of the social sciences coincided with the rise of photography as a technology that supported their positivist belief in observable systems of unified organization. This is nowhere more evident than in the sociological notion of the unified individual as represented by photography: "there is no other technology which can so easily return to us the impression of ourselves as completely unified, coherent individuals. Which, after all, is largely what it was invented to do."[107] In *Thomas and Dovanna*, Mapplethorpe challenges these notions of the photograph as

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heterosexual terms of mutual difference that I find Mapplethorpe's photography useful in disrupting.

[107] Watney, "On the Institutions of Photography," 146-7. Watney's influential essay goes on to argue that the self-validating interrelationship between photography and sociology has obscured the need for an analysis of the rhetoric of the image in the signifying system of photographic vision: "It is the rhetoric of photography itself which, in individual contexts, is harnessed to the purposes of very different institutional interests" (149). He calls for an

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representing an integrated, unified, and singular reality. His photograph not only announces itself as a suspended rupture in the flow of space and time but also as an intervention in the camera's collusion with cultural assumptions that would position spectators according to a unified narrative of desire.

The photograph of Thomas and Dovanna parses the split that Miller articulates between the straight and the gay muscled physique. Through a series of visual rhymes, Mapplethorpe aligns the muscular body of Thomas with the vulnerability encoded in Dovanna's body, effectively shifting his masculine register from armored tool to available image. A number of elements draw the viewer's attention to Dovanna's throat as the central focus of the photograph. It is encircled by a series of white highlights: her white gloved hand on his back, the white glitter of her bodice, shoulder straps, and earring, the white tip of his nose and mouth, and the white of her upturned face. But ultimately, the viewer is drawn most strongly by the extreme and seemingly impossible attenuation of the neck itself. Dovanna's rigid and elongated throat carries a register that is both phallic and extremely vulnerable. The lassitude of her head, in conjunction with her closed eyes and swooning posture, inflects her with a register of erotic ecstasy. In addition, the rigid curves of her pronounced collarbone and the depression between them operate as a displaced vagina through their suggestive forms and the hollow cavity that they create. Those associations are rhymed in the form of Thomas's rigid back muscles and his tight, curved buttocks. The spectator's eye is drawn from Dovanna's neck, and its encoding as both penetrating and penetrable, down the back of Thomas's body to its site of literal penetrability, which invests his

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analysis of the politics of representation to accompany the well-rehearsed study of the representation of politics in Marxist discourse.

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rear end with a similar register. The photograph puts the tight, muscled male buttocks on display and encodes its image with the sexual potential of anal eroticism. Indeed, all the formal elements of the photograph operate to organize the visual spectacle around the doubling of her sensuous throat with his sexy derrière.

This use of spectacle attraction splits Thomas's muscled body from the thing that its codes supposedly represent – the masculine ideal of an armored tool of intimidation and power. It only takes a little imagination to turn the pair of round buttocks and the long, rigid muscles of his back into the image of a giant erection, fulfilling the masculine fantasy of body as phallus. And yet, in place of intimidation, this body as erection is aligned with the vulnerability depicted in Dovanna, who represents the conventional, feminine ideal of an available object of male desire. Mapplethorpe manages to inscribe the image of an erection as the site of another's desire, turning it into a sign of Thomas's vulnerability and sexual availability. It enacts a split in the culture's dominant modes of vision and desire. In other words, the spectacle of gay desire is itself the figure of a split in the dominant culture's seamless codes of sexuality, which it sets in motion by the erotic display of the muscular male nude.[108] Moreover, spectators of all sexualities are implicated in the significations of gay desire operating in the photograph. The deferral of narrative absorption for the confrontational experience of spectacle creates spectators who are made aware of their own bodies in reference to the

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[108] There is a concomitant disruption of the homosocial bonds that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues are necessary for the operation of male dominance through their elision of the homoerotic in her important formulation for queer studies *The Epistemology of the Closet*, for which see the discussion in Chapter one, 6.

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attendant experience of becoming self-consciously viewing subjects. Such visual strategies stage the viewing body itself as the site of gendered tensions, which the relation between spectators and the photograph sets into play.

This study has explored the way that Stieglitz, Cunninhgam, and White transformed traditional pictorial subjects into a modernist visual vocabulary that is self-reflexive about the signifying system of photography. Stieglitz cut abstract fragments out of the sky and isolated segments of O'Keeffe's nude body; Cunningham organized male nudes and flora into sharp-focused, abstract close-ups; White transformed the natural world and the nude bodies of his students into visually puzzling koans and sequences. These artists share a commitment to the language of modernist abstraction and its system of references to sexuality and desire. Most particularly, they use its vocabulary of disorientation and defamiliarization as a way to mobilize the spectacle address of the photograph and bring the body of the spectator into the chain of significations that constitute meaning in the image. The metaphoric and metonymic associations of the photograph's visual signifiers turn the viewer's encounter with the image into an equivalent for emotional, psychological, and other ineffable somatic experiences. Mapplethorpe, too, extends the valence of his nudes through the discursive conditions of the equivalent and the photographic rhetoric of abstract reference it deploys. In a final section on Mapplethorpe, I will consider his translation of the still-life tradition in a manner reminiscent of Cunningham's use of botanicals. Like her, he creates equivalents out of flowers, initiating a self-reflexive experience of viewing and an awareness of the spectating body in the formal play of abstraction and reference that constitutes meaning in his images. And as in Cunningham's photographs, Mapplethorpe relies on a visual confrontation in his equivalent

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images to generate the intertextual associations on which viewers rely for their understandings.

VI. FULL FLOWER

> *And the eye became a body, the murky heart of a rose.*
> *The sinister shadow of an orchid. Or the indolent poppy*
> *balanced behind the ear of Baudelaire.*
>
> -- Patty Smith[109]

Like his quieter images of black and white men together, Mapplethorpef's flower photographs feel as if they are in danger of getting lost in the midst of the shock and scandal over his more controversial depictions of graphic sex and fetishized nudes. They are, however, equally powerful images, freighted with an erotic sensibility. In his introduction to a published collection of these flower photographs, the poet John Ashbery observes that their artificial and claustrophobic atmosphere inflects them with a provocation "even more shocking than that of the erotic pictures."[110] The shocking provocation that Ashbery cites is another way of describing what this study has been tracing as the spectacle attractions that introduce a self-conscious focus on the relationship between

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[109] Robert Mapplethorpe, *Flowers*, with a foreword by Patti Smith (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1990), n.p. For a good discussion of the relationship between Mapplethorpe's photographs and Baudelaire's poetry, especially their mutual attraction to beauty, transition, and the urban underworld, see Andree Flageolle, "Mapplethorpe and Baudelaire: Their Approach to Physical Beauty," *History of Photography* 19 (Winter 1995): 374-5.

[110] Mapplethorpe, *Pistols*, ed. with an essay by John Ashbery (New York: Random House, 1996), 6.

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spectators and photographic images. And as would be expected from the evidence of the other artists under investigation, this is especially true in the case of those images that deploy the defamiliarizing and disorienting vocabulary of abstraction. While Mapplethorpe's basic idiom throughout his oeuvre is classic perfection and frontal display, it is his photographs of single blossoms in isolation that carry the strongest register of the erotic and more clearly than the images often considered pornographic suggest how his gay sexuality inflects all his work.[111]

It may seem odd that Mapplethorpe should choose to work in the still-life tradition of flower paintings that historically had been associated with female artists and a "feminine" style.[112] Catherine King has described this notion of a "feminine" style as complicit in "the gendering of genres," which "alludes to the

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[111] Janet Kardon relates the representational work of Mapplethorpe's classic frontality to trecento Madonna paintings and finds it is the source for his spiritual vocabulary of purity, symmetry, and perfection. Kardon, *The Perfect Moment*, 25. My position is more closely allied with British photography critic Peter Hamilton, who understands this "classical purity" as a function of Mapplethorpe's engagement with "an American aesthetic of formalism." Peter Hamilton, "No Sympathy for the Devil," *British Journal of Photography* 7094 (September 18, 1996), 28.

[112] Gill Perry remarks that in the nineteenth century London's Royal Academy of Art codified the conventions of flower painting as a way to exclude women artists from the "higher" genre of history painting and the sublime. When a woman such as Angelica Kauffman painted a successful history painting she was seen as being "possessed by a masculine spirit" because "the kinds of intellectual activity required for the expression of the 'sublime' in history painting is not a 'natural' mode of expression for women painters; hence the view that they were better suited to working in the lesser genres of portraiture or flower painting." Gill Perry, ed. *Gender and Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 98-99. Perry goes on to explain that this set of assumptions became a self-fulfilling prophesy, requiring that women develop a style suited to decorative genres and faulting them when they translated that style into the intellectual genres such as history painting. It also became a double bind because even when successful at adopting the look of masculine history painting, Kauffman was criticized for "having lost something of the 'warm' and 'delicate' nature" of her earlier work – i.e. its "femininity" (100).

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idea that within the range of subjects, forms, and media regarded as the field of art at any time, the female artist will be expected to practice in areas which symbolize in some way her relative weakness, her dependence, her decorum as daughter, wife or mother, and her supposed intellectual incapacity."[113] However, the genre was transformed dramatically from such expectations by modernist artists, not least by those important to this study such as O'Keeffe and Cunningham, who worked within the vocabulary of avant-garde abstraction. As discussed in Chapter two, both artists, one in painting and the other in photography, created visual images of intense intellectual rigor and powerful presence. These images demonstrate the arbitrary cultural assumptions at work in any notion of flowers that reduces them to a feminine subject suited to specific social roles, ignoring their undeniable sexual hermaphrodism and polymorphous gender implications. Mapplethorpe continues this rigor and presence, extending the power of representations to invest the flower with both its masculine and feminine associations. As literary and cultural critic Richard Howard writes, Mapplethorpe's

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[113] Catherine King, "What Women Can Make," in *Gender and Art*, ed. Gill Perry (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 61. Wendy Slatkin makes a related point in discussing the work of Clara Peeters, Rachel Ruysch, and Judith Leyster, three women artists working in Holland during the Baroque period when such genres became significant modes of painting. They "demonstrate the level of excellence that may be achieved by women artists when the expectations for women in their culture do not conflict with the measure of equality of opportunity and access to training." Wendy Slatkin, *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997), 81.

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flowers are "in their engorged, erectile, anti-chthonic forms, identified with that 'male' principle we so clumsily (and often reductively) decry as 'phallic'."[114]

Mapplethorpe drew on a select cast of species in his photographic depictions of flowers. Although there are some exceptions, by in large he preferred to photograph hothouse paragons: lilies, orchids, poppies, and tulips.[115] When it came to blooms, he appears to have been especially fascinated by the calla lily. Its dramatically expansive single bract and insistently protuberant stamen certainly conform to Howard's phallic description. In *Calla Lily*, 1984 [Fig. 4.11], for example, Mapplethorpe relies on just this set of associations with male sexuality. The flower is centered, filling the image with its open, white expanse of a single blossom that almost appears to float in the inky blackness through Mapplethorpe's characteristic dramatic lighting and high tonal contrast. It enters the visual space at the left edge rather than from the bottom of the photograph, cut off from its usual rootedness in the ground. The rigidity of the stem and its angle, both echoed in the phallus-like form of the stamen, create the visual impression of an erection, an impression reinforced by the associations with sex that flowers carry by virtue of their reproductive functions. The dramatic bract has unfurled to its maximum limit as a backdrop for the emerging stamen, which is heavily laden with the sensuous texture and fecundity of its pollen.

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[114] Richard Howard, "The Mapplethorpe Effect," *Robert Mapplethorpe*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Boston, Mass.: Bulfinch Press, 1988), 154.

[115] Of the fifty photographs selected and published by Mapplethorpe's estate in 1990 as a summary of his flower images, more than half are of orchids and calla lilies. See Mapplethorpe, *Flowers*, with a forward by Patti Smith, n.p.

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However, in spite of these obviously phallic associations, it would be a mistake to assume that they exhaust the sexual register of the image. The insistent, probing assertion of the stamen from within the open cavity of the bract's petal also resonates with the tongue. As another organ of the human body that carries a sexual charge, the tongue extends the associations of the image across a wide range of gendered possibilities. The bract even mirrors the shape of a tongue, a visual metaphor that is given weight by the way that the stamen seems to inhabit the flower as if it were a mouth. Once motivated to consider the implications of bract and stamen as an occupied cavity, spectators are likely to consider its association with other sites of sexual sensation, viewing, for instance, its petals as the lips of a vagina. In such a reading the stamen nestled within the petal signifies the clitoris, engorged and ready as any male erection to initiate orgasm. These additional sexual associations point to the fact that Mapplethorpe is not creating a simplistically emblematic symbolism that univocally translates flowers into male genitals as it is so often assumed.[116] Rather he is drawing out the figurative associations themselves as a way to suggest the multivalent possibilities that adhere to the signifying discourse of the erotic no matter the set of sexual signs to which it is harnessed. This is the actual significance of Mapplethorpe's often quoted and misunderstood remark when he says, "my approach to photographing a flower is not much different than photographing a cock.

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[116] The most frequently cited account is in Gerrit Henry, "Robert Mapplethorpe – Collecting Quality: An Interview," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 13 (September/October, 1982), 129.

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Basically it's the same thing."[117] They are not simply an equivalency of visual or functional analogies, although those connections are rich and productive, but the more important equivalency lies in the way that Mapplethorpe's images of flowers and genitals are made to illustrate the ambiguity implicit within representation.

Another image also entitled, *Calla Lily*, 1984 [Fig. 4.12], depicts what appears to be the same flower from the back of the bract. This photograph emphasizes the thick, sturdy stem that holds up the bloom. The same strong lighting and high tonal contrast creates a composition that dramatically stages the use of black and white in the photographic image. In many ways the operation of this photograph resembles *Dan S.*, 1980 – which was discussed earlier – not merely as a visual homology but in its signifying strategies. As in that photograph, the spectator is given a rear rather than frontal view. It results in a kind of visual blind that obscures the viewer's access and self-reflexively calls attention to the limiting conditions in the photograph's rhetoric of full disclosure.

Also as in *Dan S*, the photograph uses the language of the black and white photograph to render the calla as a study in dark and light. In spite of knowing

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[117] This was especially true in the texts for his 1988 exhibition catalogues. In *The Perfect Moment*, Kay Larson wrote: "Flowers and fruit, you recall with a start, are botanical organs of reproduction. A single pear in an empty background swells in slightly awesome fecundity, second cousin (from nature's viewpoint) to the swollen testicles of one of Mapplethorpe's men" (16). Also in *The Perfect Moment* catalogue, Janet Kardon says when interviewing Mapplethorpe: "you think of flowers as possessing an elegance, or refinement, and I think you treat the flowers like the cocks and the cocks like the flowers" (26). In the Whitney Retrospective catalogue, Richard Howard writes: "much of Mapplethorpe's enterprise urges us to see the male genitals as potential forms of great delicacy and poise, paired with the thrusting, assertive, conventionally female figurations of flowers." Howard, "The Mapplethorpe Effect," 155. Again, I would not want to be understood as arguing against these more literalist tropic readings. But their reductive use as an explanation for the figurative meaning in

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that the overall hue of the calla is white, viewers experience its stem and bloom through the variegated values of the gelatin silver print. This photograph, too, is organized along a split, which runs up the stem and along the edge of the curling bract that creates its spiraling form. This split divides the image into a contrast represented in the rigid, upturned folds of the oval and the down-turned shape below. The visual resemblance to a tongue in the lower portion of the bloom recalls his photograph of the other side of the calla. The flower becomes a metonymy of the photograph's visual vocabulary, which in its self-reflexivity links the image to more multivalent sexual and gender associations.

Mapplethorpe's calla lilies deploy the self-reflexive vocabulary that we saw Cunningham developing in her photographs of the 1920s and 1930s. As in her case, his flowers also draw on strategies of defamiliarization and disorientation to create metaphoric and metonymic associations that not only reference the signifiers of engendered bodies but that also stage the relation between the spectator's body and the image in its spectacle address. In *Calla Lily*, 1988 [Fig. 4.13], Mapplethorpe presents its bloom with such uncompromising formality, rigorous symmetry, and confrontational display that the natural world is all but evacuated from the image in favor of artifice and abstraction. The soft, organic shape of the flower is cropped in a way that makes it seem almost architectural in its rectilinear form, as if it were a column holding up a beam. It takes its structure from a cross, dividing and rationalizing the space along strict horizontal and vertical lines. It reminds viewers of the insistent way that the camera frames the world, centers it within the frame, cuts it away with the hard line of exclusion, and

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Mapplethorpe's images of flowers has impoverished the reception of his photographs.

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presents it to viewers as an isolated experience. There is nothing limp or even reserved in this bloom; it seems to assert its presence, demanding to be noticed by its viewers.

The extreme close-up of the image in conjunction with its radical cropping produces in Mapplethorpe's photograph an effect that is similar to the one produced in Cunningham's *Calla*, ca. 1925. As in her photograph, the high tonal contrast emphasizes the whiteness of the bloom against the saturated black ground with a visual push toward the viewer. It also renders the image with a flatness that feels almost flush with the photographic surface and calls attention to the viewer's experience as a two-dimensional transcription. At the same time, the three-dimensionality of the world of the spectator overwhelms the frame, which seems unable to contain the full flower. The photograph collapses the image and its spectator into a shared space. Such a collapse stages the relation between viewers and the image as a provocation, announcing itself as an artifice that has been constructed with its viewers in mind. The visual experience of a calla bloom has been turned into a disorienting and defamiliarizing spectacle, suspending its viewers between the natural world and its abstract representation.

In bringing its viewers into such a close-up confrontation, the photograph also implicates them in its visual play of sexual metaphors and metonymies. The photograph transforms the calla's bract into a pouch that resembles the male contour in a pair of briefs or a jockstrap. *Patrice*, 1977 [Fig. 4.14], one of the so-called pornographic photographs from the infamous *X Portfolio*, illustrates an

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earlier use of this visual association in Mapplethorpe's imagery.[118] Even the woven ridges of Patrice's jockstrap are echoed in the structuring veins of the calla's petal. However, whereas the heft of Patrice's penis is merely suggested by the outline of its head in the jockstrap, the calla's prominent stamen rises directly up from the center of the image with the rigid insistence of a phallic sign. An obvious reference to masculinity in this image, it also serves as the visible evidence of what the pouch-like bract must contain. More literally, it references a standard image within gay pornography: the fantasy ideal of a man with an erection so hard and massive that it cannot be contained by his underwear but juts far past its waistband in stiff defiance of the controlling restrictions of his clothing, which have been made ineffectual by sexual arousal. Nevertheless, it is not the visual homology that gives this image is sexual potency so much as the set of signifiers for phallic masculinity that these images from two different discursive contexts share: rigidity, insistence, and defiance in contest with control, containment, and decorum.[119]

The abstracting of the calla in this photograph admits the metaphoric and metonymic associations linking its emotional register to Mapplethorpe's other photographs that depict his gay sexuality more explicitly. Yet, that same abstraction opens up the image to other sexual associations. As in Mapplethorpe's

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[118] Roland Barthes denies that this is a pornographic image, noting "Mapplethorpe shifts his close-ups of genitalia from the pornographic to the erotic by photographing the fabric of underwear at very close range: the photograph is not long unary, since I am interested in the texture of the material." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 41-2.

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earlier depictions of calla lilies, the phallic resonance of this 1988 photograph is not univocal but is contested by its feminine associations. Specifically in this image, the potency of the pouch that is based in the masculine power it allegedly contains is deferred by reference to the power of containing associated with femininity. The curving edge of the flower's bract forms an elegant resistance to the severe, linear, vertical thrust of the image. It forms the bract by wrapping around itself in a kind of self-embrace that suggests delicate folds of flesh and by implication masturbation. The enfolding yet penetrable embrace of fleshy petals registers as the folds of the vulva, which comes from the Latin for "wrapper" or "covering." Given these associations, there is also a visual joke in the relative size of the stamen as phallic signifier, which is overwhelmed by the scale of the calla's bract.[120] The sinuous swirl of petal at the front of the containing bract is both an opening and a closure. It is an image of the power of the embrace over rigid insistence.[121]

The point of this reading, which finds Mapplethorpe's calla lilies to be multivalent signifiers of a range of sexualities along a masculine and feminine continuum, is not to resolve whether or not his flowers are visual analogues to the more graphic sex pictures. As I have shown, even when they can be shown to

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[119] Not incidentally, these are the very same terms that allow his images of sadomasochism to function as a signifying system that references the sexual mechanisms of erotic desire more generally.

[120] Thomas Waugh finds that such sexual jokes and obscene humor are central to the subversive power of illicit sexual images when he writes that such depictions are "closer to an implicit recognition of the kinship of laughter and orgasm, the role of laughter as physiological and cultural release in the high-stress domain of the libido." Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 300.

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have a direct correspondence to such photographs, this reference in no way exhausts their meaning. Rather, I have used these readings to describe the defamiliarizing and disorienting strategies by which Mapplethorpe renders flowers in the vocabulary of abstraction as a means to engage the contingent associations of the photograph's spectators. In an essay on Mapplethorpe's flower photographs, Peter Schultz argues for that contingency among gay viewers who share a historical awareness of flowers as intertextual signs of homosexuality throughout a range of verbal texts and visual images. Citing the traditional reception of Mapplethorpe's flowers as metaphorical signifiers of male genitalia, Schultz notes that these associations derive principally from the etymological chain linking orchids to testicles by their Latin root in "orchis," from the flower's status as the plant's reproductive organ, and from Mapplethorpe's own subjectivity as a gay man whose work includes homoerotic photographs.[122] However, Schultz believes that more significant associations derive from the iconography of "flowers as gay signs."[123] Reminding his readers that the photographer was a classicist in terms of his compositional vocabulary, Schultz situates Mapplethorpe's works as the latest development in a long tradition of cultural productions that begins in antiquity: "fruit and flowers have been consistently used within an exclusively homoerotic context, an iconographic continuum which finds its roots in

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[121] In this reading, the photograph resonates strongly with Mapplethorpe's photograph discussed earlier of a black man and a white man embracing and its mobilization of social rather than purely sexual transgressions.

[122] Peter Schultz, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Flowers," *History of Photography* 22 (Spring 1998), 84.

[123] Schultz, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Flowers," 84.

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the homoerotic vase painting of the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC in Greece."[124] Schultz illustrates this continuum, which includes visual and literary artists, to suggest the context that is necessary in order to read Mapplethorpe's flowers accurately as representations of gay sexuality.[125]

While admitting the dependence of Mapplethorpe's imagery on personal associations drawn from still-life, etymology, botany, iconography, and sexual subcultures, the focus in this study moves beyond the reductive assumption that his photographs merely reflect his desires as a gay man. Its investigation is more concerned with how Mapplethorpe's photographs mobilize the attractions of spectacle in order to shift representation from a concern with visual signs as symbolic content to a concern with signs as the ground of subjectivity and meaning. It locates the viewing experience in a relation that inevitably inflects the photograph with the potential to make viewers self-conscious about their own bodily experiences whether they are looking at bodies (or parts of bodies) or other objects from nature such as flowers. As the *Equivalents* by Stieglitz, Cunningham, and White demonstrate, manipulating the spectator's visual relation to the photograph by means of the defamiliarizing and disorienting vocabulary of abstraction denaturalizes the experience of an otherwise customary object in the natural world and initiates a self-reflexivity that reminds viewers of the camera's

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[124] Schultz, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Flowers," 86. Schultz goes on to cite the photographic predecessors who Mapplethorpe knew and who drew on the homoerotic traditions of antiquity. Schutlz argues that Mapplethorpe's photography was a deliberate participation in that iconographic discourse, especially the works of Wilhelm von Gloeden, F. Holland Day, and George Platt Lynes (87).

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mediation. In addition to calla lilies, Mapplethorpe's favorite flower blooms when creating equivalents for the camera's abstracting language and the emotional experiences of spectators are the orchid, poppy, and tulip.[126] As in earlier practitioners of the equivalent mode, Mapplethorpe relies on the camera's ability to disorient viewers in regards to their own point of view and the visible space occupied by the flowers in his photographs.

Mapplethorpe's *Orchid*, 1986 [Fig. 4.15], offers one of the clearest examples of how he has manipulated the point of view in order to undercut a spectator's reliance on a rational and stable sense of space. In fact, the image announces that it is about disorienting perception by staging a multiplicity of visual signs competing as indicators of the horizon. The image is composed of a series of oblique lines, all of which vie for the viewer's attention as possible indications of a horizon that could be aligned with his or her bodily perceptions and operate as the perceptual key to orienting the image within the viewer's space. This canceling of a single, definitive horizon confounds the viewer's relation to the object depicted.

Further, the strong contrast among the geometric shapes of red, blue, and black, that forms the background serves to emphasize the role of abstraction, and the subjective conventions borrowed from New Vision photography, in defining spatial relations between viewers and the depicted object. Even the individual flower and its shadow enter the photograph's isolated, square space in a canted

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[125] The literary artists that Schultz discusses in relation to Mapplethorpe's use of gay signs include Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Fernado Arrabal, Jean Genet, and from antiquity Strato and Meleager.

[126] Although only Stieglitz and White expressly called their photographs in this mode *Equivalents*, Cunningham and Mapplethorpe share in the visual

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fashion. In spite of the shadow that indicates a light source from above, the image resists a description that would provide more than this generalized assessment of the actual ground and the flower's relation to a real horizon. The obvious play between the perception of the orchid as a three-dimensional object and its image as a flat, visual surface only serves to stress the inevitable two-dimensionality of both the flower and its shadow, reminding spectators of their own three-dimensionality in relation to the representational surface of the photograph.

It is true that by orienting the image of the orchid more or less vertically, Mapplethorpe gives it an eerily menacing presence as an animated personification. But it is precisely this staging of menace that operates to situate the orchid as a spectacle image, drawing viewers into the photograph's confrontational scene. And once confronted, viewers must struggle to orient themselves and the orchid within a rational, spatial continuum that the photograph continually frustrates. That such a continuum remains ambiguous and multiple is exactly the point as viewers become aware most acutely of their own perceiving bodies that are defeated by the representational space of the photograph in spite of its direct appeal to them. And it this awareness that gives the image its sexual potency, even more than the iconicity of the orchid or its often cited punning references to testicles.

Whatever narratives of desire are spun out of the spectator's impressions of this image, they are less influenced by the purely iconographic associations of this blooming stalk than by the position taken up by viewers, who when encountering the photograph become self-conscious about their own bodily experience.

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language of those works and should therefore be considered as visual images operating within its representational compass.

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Mapplethorpe has used the simplest of still-lifes – a single bloom – in order to establish an equivalent for the spectator's double experience of the sexual as both seduction and threat. He plays off this orchid's multivalent associations as hothouse flower of fragile beauty, erect stalk devoid of softening foliage, and singular rearing bloom that seems poised as if to strike. It is an image of sexual readiness in its naked insistence, and yet the anticipation it suggests carries an ominous indeterminacy. Moreover, its personified confrontation resonates with the bold, direct gaze of nude subjects that stare into the camera, turning its objectifying lens back on the would-be voyeristic viewer through the rhetoric of exhibitionism.[127] As an equivalent, the image allows for an alterity that is rooted in individual subjectivity but that nevertheless remains recognizable across radically different subjective positions. Each person will attribute something of his or her own sexual drama to the image through the confrontation it stages.

Mapplethorpe uses another favorite flower in *Poppy*, 1988 [Fig. 4.16], which also problematizes the relationship between the photographic space and its spectators. The image mobilizes allusions to sexuality that seem to be nearly inescapable, even inevitable, metaphors from nature. The depiction of twinning stems suggests an embrace, to which is added the association of human flesh through the detailed description created by the strongly lit tendrils that can be read as body hairs. The pairing of pent bud with fully open petals rehearses the traditional associations of flower imagery and its attendant vocabulary of sexual desire and fulfillment. The use of saturated color, of contrasting greens and reds, and of strong light all serve to distort the poppy's appearance and to heighten the

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[127] Mapplethorpe identified this confrontational look of his flowers as "a

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visual tension that is characteristic of symbolist images.[128] Most potently in terms of sexual desire, the coupling of bud and flower can allude to the anal penetration of gay sexual practice. Mapplethorpe presents the bud slightly split, erect, and rigid in contrast to the bright, red flower of the poppy, which is shown from behind, its stem penetrating the flower where the flesh-like petals are gathered as if they formed the puckered opening of an anus.[129] As Leo Bersani reminds us, for Jean Genet, one of Mapplethorpe's sexually transgressive heroes, the lover's anus was the apotheosis of a flowering scene.[130]

As this study has explained, such analysis has become standard in the descriptions of Mapplethorpe's flower still-lifes. However, this method of pictorial exegesis does not account for why these highly charged erotic readings of flowers seem so obvious. What overdetermines the register of these beautiful flowering blossoms so that they become symbolic ciphers for transgressive, gay sexual practices? How is it that even the traditional notions of *vanitas* in the still-life take

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certain archness." Quoted in Kardon, *The Perfect Moment*, 25.

[128] Nineteenth-century Symbolist photography was well represented in Mapplethorpe's own collection and that of his lover-patron Sam Wagstaff, who owned the largest private collection of photography in the United States. See Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 196-7. And as the chapter on Stieglitz in this study makes clear, Symbolist principles were central to the development of the notion of the Equivalent as a visual mode.

[129] Schultz makes a similar point about another of Mapplethorpe's poppy photographs from 1988. See Schultz, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Flowers," 85.

[130] Bersani quotes from a passage in which Genet celebrates rimming his lover as a sylvan pastoral act: "a dizziness shook my prick harder, my tongue grew soft, forgetting to dig harder, my head sank deeper into the damp hairs, and I saw the eye of Gabès [the anus] become adorned with flowers, with foliage, become a cool bower which I crawled to and entered with my entire body, to sleep on the moss there, in the shade, to die there." Quoted in Bersani, *Homos*, 178.

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on the valence of erotic desires? Mapplethorpe is relying on more than the iconographic history of flowers and their figurative and literal associations with sexuality in order to register such strongly erotic understandings. Rather, the meaning implicit in the image's iconicity relies on the organization of spatial relations that causes viewers to attend to their own bodily perceptions. It makes these visual rhymes and puns of sexual desire appear so inevitable by drawing the spectator into the photograph's ground of meaning. In other words, Mapplethorpe insinuates the contingent associations of the viewer's body into the representational vocabulary of the photograph's discursive space.

In *Poppy*, 1988 [Fig. 4.16], the flower enters the visual space of the photograph even more arbitrarily than in the photograph of the orchid discussed previously. Whereas that photograph contains at least a shadow and the suggestion of a surface, in this photograph there is nothing, whether floor or wall, to ground the image. The flower and bud wind their way into a completely isolated and otherwise empty void: it cannot even really be considered a space because there are no visual clues, not even hints, that might operate to suggest where the camera is situated in relation to the ground. Even the light offers no clues, appearing as it does to be emanating not from above, and by inference the sky, but from in front of the photograph, the place occupied by its viewers. This photograph could be turned on any side, which then would become its establishing ground in a rational orientation to a horizon that is shared by its viewers.

The rear view adds to the ambiguity of the relational space, the flower and bud appearing to extend from the plane occupied by its spectators and thoroughly collapsing the space of viewer and image. The clear sense of confrontation staged

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by their shared space is the ground, which establishes the very relay of sexuality that at first might appear to arise naturally out of the image's iconicity. Yet, it is only within the context of the spectator's awareness of bodily orientation that issues of sexuality become central in the first place. The homoeroticism that invests my earlier reading of this image resides not so much in any concrete, allegorical symbolism but in the very ambiguities that it spectators must negotiate as sexual possibilities in relation to the attentions initiated by Mapplethorpe's own gay erotic interests.

It is telling that even when Mapplethorpe combines two of his single blossoms in the same photograph in ways that otherwise might suggest narrative personification, he defers such a possibility by the disorienting potential of an ambiguous space. In *Tulips*, 1984 [Fig. 4.17], he bifurcates a solidly black square through the diagonal created by two tulips that emerge from opposite corners of the image. And in spite of the high contrast and subtle detail of the flowers -- which is created by strong lighting and a shallow depth of field -- only the assumption that the arrangement is lit from above acts as an aid to orient its viewers. However, there are no ground shadows to confirm that the actual source of this light is the naturalizing one from above. In point of fact, a close examination reveals that the lighting is much more closely modeled on the artificial effects of classic fashion studio setups than on the natural world: lights of various intensity are used to create an artificial world that is only exists in the camera's eye.[131] Mapplethorpe transposes the use of light, detail, and a rational horizon,

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[131] Although Mapplethorpe was not trained in fashion photography, several of the most important influences on his visual vocabulary came from that world, most notably in the photography of George Platt Lynes and Andy

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which are central to realist depiction, into the modernist key of abstraction by disallowing the spectator a singular, organizing point of view.

However, the transposition from iconic metaphor to abstract equivalent does not eliminate the use of figurative tropes when reading the image. Rather, it produces an awareness of how meaning is made, rupturing both a simple subject/object binary and an equally facile inner/outer binary. In this way, Mapplethorpe's use of an equivalent mode in his flower photographs reopens questions posed by early modernists who were searching for a new visual vocabulary to express their experiences of ambiguity and uncertainty, finding in abstraction a visual analog for the experience of emotion itself. By frankly using his gay desires and the equivalent to reopen the modernist discourse of photographic abstraction, Mapplethorpe directly engages with the nature of subjectivity and the assumptions behind its place at the heart of modernism.

Recognizing that Mapplethorpe's equivalent photographs participate in both postmodernism's commitment to contingent relations and modernism's explorations of abstract reference opens a fissure in the common understandings of these as philosophically opposed movements. It also demonstrates that the definition of modernism as a fixed mode of discourse operating within binary sets of inflexible and arbitrary opposing terms is not so much a description of the

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Warhol. Mapplethorpe's relation to fashion is discussed in an article on the appropriation of his photography by Helmut Lang in their advertisements for jeans. See Bruce Hainley, "Smile and say 'jeans!': Mapplethorpe Photo Used in Helmut Lang Ad," *Artforum International* 35 (May 1997), 31. The suitability of Mapplethorpe's images for a fashion aesthetic is discussed in an essay on the collaboration between photographer Terry Richardson and designer John Bartlett in Collier Schorr, "Olivier Zahm's Flash Track," *ArtForum International* 34 (May 1996), 90-1. Although not the principal focus of his work, in the late nineteen eighties Mapplethorpe was hired to do fashion photography by

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movement's philosophical assumptions as it is an enabling critical construction of postmodernist thought. More than his subject matter, it is Mapplethorpe's use of spectacle as an intervention into the historically constituted discourses of the figure, flowers, and abstraction that allows his work to be both classically modernist and postmodernist.

Harpers. These photographs are most closely related to his work in portraiture, which lies outside the focus of my study.

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Reveling in the Spectacle:
Masculinity and the Discourse of Cinema

If it is any worldview we need right now to allow for preserving difference, it is a worldview that embraces flexibility, possibilities, and multiple understandings of phenomena.

– Barbara Hammer[1]

Proceeding through a series of interlocking comparisons, this study has posited a network of associations that bring its four photographers into the discursive space of the photograph in similar ways. Stieglitz and Cunningham transformed pictorialist aims into a modernist idiom of abstraction. Cunningham and White celebrated the operations of the camera in their commitment to the purist photography conventions of Group f.64. Stieglitz and Mapplethorpe insisted on the priority of photography as an artistic medium, drawing other representational traditions into its visual compass and resisting the perception of it as primarily documentary. Stieglitz and White transformed landscape into equivalents and organized their images into series and sequences. Cunningham and Mapplethorpe transformed the botanical still life into equivalents of erotic viewing. White and Mapplethorpe inscribed their photographs with sexual codes that included their own gay desires. All four photographers contributed to a reinvention of the nude through their photographs of bodies they found desirable. They all translated elements from the natural world into an abstract

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vocabulary that referenced inward and emotional experience through the photographic equivalent. Moreover, they all four mobilized the spectacle capacity of the photograph to engage spectators in a self-conscious awareness of the role their own bodies play in viewing and making meaning. And all of them deployed the self-reflexive capacity of the camera's visual vocabulary to call attention to those conditions of meaning.

Such a network of complementary strategies organized around the principle of spectacle has the added benefit of breaking down a distinction that is often used to organize photographic history according to a set of antinomies, principal of which is the contrast between narrative and nonnarrative modes of representation. These antinomies also include other oppositional formulations that the view of the four photographers offered by this study has resisted: pictorialist versus modernist versus postmodernist, documentary versus fine art practices, abstract versus recognizable forms, and formalist versus contingent meanings. As it does for Gunning's model from film theory with which this study began, the use of spectacle realigns the visual history of photography by shifting the locus of meaning from a hermetic image to the space of reception that is defined by both the image and its spectators.

By its focus on the spectator instead of content alone, spectacle address shifts an understanding of photographic meaning away from the culturally determining narratives of subjectivity to other contingent, intertextual associations that inflect its formal visual display with the discursive contexts embodied by its viewers. Just as spectacle realigns film history along a continuum that runs from exhibition to storytelling, so it realigns photographic

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[1] Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," 71.

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history along a continuum that runs from those images that display their mediated conditions to those that attempt to efface their representational status, from the attractions of multivalent indeterminacy to those of apparent transparency. By their commitment to the vocabulary of abstraction, the photographers in this study are aligned with artists working within a modernist tradition of images, which announce their mediation and create referential ambiguity (or complicate legibility) for their spectators.

At this point, by way of conclusion, I would like to return to the period of the 1920s where this study began and a consideration of how the insights of spectacle address from its consideration in photography might read back onto the discourse of film, from which this critical concept originated. Gunning's model points most obviously to the attractions of spectacle in avant-garde films of the period, especially those that deploy the more exhibitionist vocabulary of visual abstraction found in surrealist works such as Fernand Leger's *Ballet Mechanique*, 1924, or Germaine Dulac and Antonin Artaud's *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, 1928.[2] My interest, however, lies in the opposite direction, with more commercial films. The popular appeal of such mainstream film has traditionally been understood to be nearly synonymous with the narrative pleasures of the classic Hollywood feature-length movie, which became the prevailing studio mode during the 1920s.

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[2] Other films in this list would include: Man Ray, *Retour de la Raison*, 1923, Germaine Dulac, *Smiling Madame Beudet*, 1923, Viking Eggeling, *Symphonie Diagonale*, 1924, Rene Clair, *Entr-Acte*, 1924, Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925, Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929, Luis Bunuel, *Un Chien Andalu*, 1929, Luis Brunuel, *l'Age d'Or*, 1930. Gunning mentions a line that "can be traced from Méliès through Keaton, through *Un Chien andalou* (1928), and Jack Smith." See Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," 61.

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In his history of film in the 1920s, Richard Koszarski rehearses the prevailing critical notion that with the rise of "the silent feature picture," the early attractions of spectacle were almost entirely replaced by narrative story lines as the focus of spectatorial interest in the popular cinema.[3] The priority of fictional narrative, he further argues, meant that the "idea that the motion picture was essentially an escapist medium was not only accepted but celebrated."[4] Thus the avant-garde ambitions of modernist artists working within the language of abstract reference would seem to be inimical to the bourgeois pleasures of popular film's escapist narrative absorption. However, as Gunning has noted, the attractions of spectacle did not completely disappear even with the dominance of the feature-length narratives of the 1920s. Rather, they became "an underground current flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism."[5] It is this underground current of spectacle that I want to explore in order to demonstrate its power to rupture the seamless surface of the film's visual narrative.

Following from the thesis of this study, the operation of spectacle, even in popular film, should animate the spatial relation between the screen's image and its spectators, opening up the film's referential structure to the contingent associations of its viewers. By investigating the possibilities of spectacle and the

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[3] Koszarski traces the uneven shift among genres from the short to the feature length film. In general dramatic films relying on melodrama were the earliest genre to embrace the feature so that by *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 the dramatic short was virtually eliminated. The feature came later to Comedy, with relatively few being produced before 1920. See Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 174-183.

[4] Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 190.

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male body in two of Douglas Fairbanks's most successful films from the 1920s, this analysis will describe how spectacle calls attention to the camera's mediation and makes spectators aware of their own viewing conditions as the ground of meaning. In particular, I want to describe the power of spectacle to rupture the heterosexual codes in the image of Fairbanks by the way that it alerts viewers to his mediated image and undercuts the figurative associations of his representation through referential ambiguity. And significantly for the question of gay desire that has been a central focus of this study, this description takes account of the bodily awarenesses mobilized in the shared space of representation and reception through which queer spectators would be able to contest the traditional gendering of Fairbanks's hypermasculine body. A queer reading based in the film's spectacle aspects shifts meaning from the narrated mise-en-scene to intertextual contexts that are mobilized by gay spectators and inflect the film with tropes that reference their sexual desires.

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[5] Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 123.

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I. CONFRONTING SPECTACLE

> *... the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.*
>
> – Tom Gunning[6]

There are a number of reasons that Fairbanks's lavish costume films *The Thief of Bagdad*, 1924 [Fig. C.1], and *The Black Pirate*, 1926 [Fig. C.2], operate as especially appropriate sites to investigate the erotic possibilities of the male figure that are staged by the spectacle attractions of cinematic display.[7] First, their tremendous popular success places them as representative examples, rather than anomalous exceptions, in the history of the development of classic Hollywood cinema.[8] Second, they were conceived as self-conscious presentations of spectacle that were meant to call attention to the medium of film by confronting viewers with their astonishing effects. Third, they were star vehicles, designed to put Fairbanks's athletic physique and sexual potential on display for the film audience. Fourth, Fairbanks himself cultivated an image of hypermasculinity that according to traditional narrative theories of spectatorship should resist an erotic look.

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[6] Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," 58.

[7] *The Thief of Bagdad*, US: Douglas Fairbanks [Elton Thomas], 1924, 35mm, black and white, silent; *The Black Pirate*, US, Douglas Fairbanks, 1926, 35mm, Technicolor, silent.

[8] Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 33. Fairbanks's films are included high in the lists of the most popular films of 1922-27. Koszarski also says of

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Douglas Fairbanks dominated the costume fantasy genre of silent films, beginning with *The Three Musketeers*, 1921. This was a move away from the melodrama, which had firmly taken told as a direct translation from the stage and vaudeville in the early years before the dominance of narrative film.[9] Melodrama was especially well suited to the film short and serial pictures because their time restraints limited their narrative capacity, especially with regard to character development and thematic subplots.[10] It also, as Kosarski notes, was "perfectly suited to an age that saw most of its dramatic conflicts in highly conventionalized terms."[11] This is not to claim that costume fantasies did not employ their own conventional devices, but their dramatic conflicts were based on continuity editing and the development of character that longer features made possible. However, both melodrama and the costume feature film appealed directly to middle-class audiences. One of the primary reasons for such appeal, as Ben Singer notes, is their common investment in spectacular effects and an aesthetic of astonishment that was a response to the conditions of modernity, especially the heightened sensationalism associated with the emerging urban centers at the turn of the century.[12] He goes on to write,

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Fairbanks's costume adventure films in the 1920s that his "films were among the most commercially successful of the silent era" (270).

[9] Kosarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 181.

[10] For a discussion of early melodrama in film, see John L. Fell, "Motive, Mischief, and Melodrama: The State of Film Narrative in 1907," in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca.: University of California Press, 1983), esp. 278-81.

[11] Kosarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 182.

[12] Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 13. Singer's study

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"Melodrama activates various kinds of excess in the spectator's visceral responses."[13]

Gunning's argument, which has been central to the investigation of photographs in this study, is based in an assumption that feature-length films are opposed to the spectatorial pleasures of early films and the avant-garde by virtue of their reliance on narrative, which was demanded by the middle-class audiences who supported commercial cinema. However, Gunning's argument, which ties the codes of spectacle attraction to avant-garde film, does not account for their insistent presence in the classic Hollywood films of Douglas Fairbanks. Nor does his theory account for the enormous appeal of these highly visible spectacles for middle-class audiences, who, he argues, are only interested in the pleasures of narrative absorption. And yet, it was precisely members of the middle classes who flocked to see Douglas Fairbanks in films that were produced as spectacles and marketed as elaborate vehicles that placed the medium of film on visual display.

The spectacle aspect of both films is signaled in contemporary reviews. The *New York Times* review of *The Thief of Bagdad* emphasized the spectacular nature of its "mammoth scenes," including "the City of Bagdad," which is

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provides another arena to investigate the role of spectacle and the ways that it creates an address that directly engages with the bodily experience of viewing in contrast with the diegetic absorption encouraged by the cause and effect logic of narrative continuity. See especially his discussion of sensationalism, pp. 48-58. Following Singer's logic, the highly conventionalized dramatic conflicts of Melodrama were less about Victorian morals, as Kosarski states, and more about creating a modern cultural expression that reflected "the wider phenomenon of sensationalism in popular amusement" (8), which was designed to manage "the inherent anxiety and disarray of the postfeudal, postsacred world of nascent capitalism" (11).

[13] Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 39.

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"suspended in midair," "Buddhas that have fingers about twelve feet long, doors with teeth that open from the sides, top and bottom and close in the middle that look as if they were thirty feet high, great gates that dwarf dozens of men," and another "wonderful Crystal City, supposed to be under the sea, which was actually built out of glass."[14] The review also extols the photographic tricks used to enliven the spectacle, especially marveling at the "magic carpet" that "is seen flying from the floor of the palace, up stairways, through doors and out into the skies." In a description that points to the writer's preoccupation with the film's technical artifice, the review goes on to comment that "even to an experienced eye the illusion is in nearly every instance kept up to a state of perfection."[15] At least for this reviewer, the near perfect illusion works against the film's transparency by drawing attention to itself precisely as an illusion. Similarly, the review of the film in *Variety* emphasizes the spectacle attractions of the film over its narrative, exclaiming that nothing is "commonplace," and promising that through "trick photography" the picture offers viewers something "magical," a presentation of "mystical events" rather than a story.[16] Again, the focus of the review celebrates the visual manipulations of the camera and the artifice of the film medium.

Reviewers writing about *The Black Pirate* commented similarly on the display of spectacle and its attractions over the narrative story line. The most

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[14] Review of *Thief of Bagdad*, "Arabian Nights Satire," *New York Times* (18 March 1924), 19:1; reprinted in *The New York Times Film Reviews, 1913-1968*, vol. 2 (New York: The New York Times, 1970): 189-90.

[15] Review of *The Thief of Bagdad*, "Arabian Nights Satire," 19:1.

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significant element of this display in the reviews is the use of Technicolor to heighten the visual fascination, which is not surprising, given that it is the first full-length feature commercially released in the two-strip Technicolor process.[17] *Variety* opens its review with the remark that it is "Fairbanks' initial feature *shot* completely in color" [reviewer's emphasis].[18] The review goes on to exclaim: "It's as great a boost for the Technicolor process as for Fairbanks. . . . Between Fairbanks name and the color thing, this one should be able to hold over in any of the major palaces."[19] Mordaunt Hall's review in the *New York Times* is even more effusive about the Technicolor, rather extravagantly comparing its use to old master paintings.[20] Hall marvels over the film's technical and artistic possibilities, which he says result in images that are "always clearly defined without a single instance of the dreaded trembling *rainbow* impinging itself on the picture" [reviewer's emphasis].[21] Hall probably would not be thinking of a

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[16] Ibee, Review of *Thief of Bagdad, Variety* (26 March 1924); reprinted in *Variety Film Reviews, 1907-1980*, vol. 4 (New York: Garland Pub., 1983), n.p.

[17] David Bordwell et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 355. The authors write: "On the whole, Technicolor was identified with the musical comedy, the historical epic, the adventure story, and the fantasy – in short, the genres of stylization and spectacle. . . . *The Black Pirate*, one of the first two-strip Technicolor features, made extensive use of color for spectacle" (355).

[18] Ekig, Review of *The Black Pirate, Variety* (10 March 1926); reprinted in *Variety Film Reviews, 1907-1980*, vol. 4 (New York: Garland Pub., 1983), n.p.

[19] Ekig, *Review of The Black Pirate*, n.p.

[20] Mordaunt Hall, "Mr. Fairbanks's New Picture," Review of *The Black Pirate, New York Times* (9 March 1926), 21:4.

[21] Hall, "Mr. Fairbanks's New Picture," 21:4. The "trembling rainbow" to which he refers was a problem early on in the development of Technicolor that resulted from its two-camera process. Two reels of film were shot, and then one

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technical problem unless the film's spectacle had directed his attention to its mediating effects. The review also explains the value of Technicolor to enhance the film's spectacle when it notes, the use of "decisive red" was not "garish" as in earlier color processes but heightened the visual display of blood on the screen.[22]

As the reviews demonstrate, the reception of *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate* was centered in the spectacle of both films. However, before spectators enter the theater to view a film, they have been exposed to a range of visual and textual images that enter into the conditions of viewing and inflect their reception. Chief among these pre-encounter intertexts during the silent picture era of the 1920s was the marketing and promoting of the films through studio sponsored events. In the case of *The Thief of Bagdad*, an elaborate opening program added to the spectacle in conjunction with the film's inaugural run in New York at the Colony Theater, itself a recently built space of spectacle.[23] The premiere was held on Christmas day, as the culmination of all the display that accompanies the holiday spectacles of commerce. A souvenir program, which sold for 25 cents, lists a four-part extravaganza for the event. It consisted of a symphony concert, with a march composed especially for the Colony premiere; a selection of operatic songs sung by a leading New York mezzo soprano; a special tableau of "Bagdad" conceived and staged by "Alexander Oumansky," his the

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was developed in the red-orange spectrum and the other in the blue-green spectrum. The actual film was created by cementing these two separate strips together, fusing them into a single image.

[22] Hall, "Mr. Fairbanks's New Picture," 21:4.

[23] The movie palace was itself also a site of spectacle attraction, which turned the scene of reception into a self-reflexive metaphor of the spectacle it also staged. B. S. Moss directed the construction, decoration, and furnishing of the

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middle eastern sounding name desgined to enhance its exotic authenticity; and concluded with the screening of the film.[24]

In the commemorative program under a heading that reads "Translating Fantasy Into Pictures," the notes stress the complex means necessary to create the spectacular effects of the film's elaborate fantasy. They describe the "acres of glazed floor" and glass that were specially built to give "the illusion of floating" and to make "the magnificent structures" appear to be "hanging from the clouds rather than set firmly on the earth."[25] In addition it explains how the scale of everything on the set was "designed out of proportion to human fact" in order to create "a bizarre quality suggestive of the unreal."[26] For those anticipating the premiere screening, the program notes promise that the illusionary spectacle will extend to the very atmosphere of the theater itself by "incense born of the flowers of the Orient."[27]

Colony Theater in New York, one of the most lavish spaces devoted to cinema in the 1920s.

[24] A copy of the program is available in the *The Thief of Bagdad*, Press file, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York. The Exhibitor's Campaign Book for *The Black Pirate* recounts its opening premiere at Grauman's Egyptian Theater in Hollywood, which included a similar extravagant program that was staged on the "scene of a ship's deck. A baritone buccaneer sang 'Three for Jack' and other sea ditties. Then sixteen girl pirates romped in, and did a fast swordplay dance, in which at times eight of them were crossing blades with the other eight. A man and a woman then came on the stage with a specialty pirate dance, winding up with a pursuit of the woman into the rigging. The dancing was concluded with a 'hurrah' finish of the girl pirates. The show then went into the picture." See *The Black Pirate*, Exhibitor's Campaign Book, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[25] *The Thief of Bagdad*, Program, 7.

[26] *The Thief of Bagdad*, Program, 7.

[27] *The Thief of Bagdad*, Program, 8.

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However, this promotional language in the premiere's program notes is not merely descriptive of the spectacles on display in the film. Its contradictory deployment serves to describe the mechanisms by which spectacle address itself operates. Paradoxically, the notes point to the cinematic "tricks" that were used to create the imaginary effects on the screen, simultaneously celebrating and defeating their power of illusion through explanation. Spectators are enjoined to experience the glazed floor, structures of immense scale, and bizarre designs as both illusion and the spectacle of illusion at the same time. In other words, the spectacle nature of the film trades on the fascination with illusionism that always accompanies its overt display, suspending viewers between their belief in what they perceive and their self-consciousness about the manipulations on which that belief relies. In this case, for the fantasies to register as "authentic," spectators must simultaneously submit to and overcome the reality effect of the camera on which narrative relies. By calling attention to this self-reflexive strategy, the notes underscore the viewing experience of spectacle as the film's main attraction rather than its storytelling.

The program encourages the film's viewers to ponder the means by which it accomplishes its special effects under the heading, "A few things to puzzle about after you have seen *The Thief of Bagdad*." I quote the list in full because it suggests how central the notion of spectacle was to marketing the film and in its preparation of the spectator's self-conscious viewing experience:

- The Flight of a Thousand Steps leading to the Citadel of the Moon.
- The Spider many times bigger than a man.

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- The Living Dragon of gigantic size.
- The Winged Horse that carries the thief in spectacular flight through space.
- The Cloak of Invisibility which with weird effect shields the thief from human sight.
- The Magic Carpet of Bagdad which bears its owner over the housetops and away into the land of Romance.
- The Cavern of Enchanted Trees.
- The Wondrous Idol so great in size that a man can stand upon its chin and barely reach its lips.
- The Crystal Realm far beneath the floor of the sea, where beautiful sirens abide.
- The Valley of Fire.
- The Mountain of Dread Adventure.
- The Sea of Midnight.
- Scores of other features that render this glorious fantasy of ancient Bagdad the most enthralling spectacle ever brought to the screen.[28]

By calling attention to these effects directly, the studio probably intends to create discussion about the film as an advertising ploy. However, it also alerts prospective viewers to the film's spectacle engagement rather than its narrative, addressing not just viewers but their condition of viewing. The film itself bears out this emphasis. It becomes clear that in overcoming these obstacles during his

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heroic quest, the thief's narrative engagement with them is much less important than the opportunity that his quest provides to create these visual displays of cinematic spectacle.[29] These effects substitute for characters in the film and serve as a foil for its primary spectacle, the body of Fairbanks.

II. REVEALING SPECTACLE

> *Despite the legendary eroticism of film, the critical language for understanding the questions about sexuality it raises is still impoverished.*
>
> – Ellis Hanson[30]

Both *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate* celebrate the athletic, male body, and especially the body of Fairbanks, as an object of spectacle attraction. The introduction to this study examined the models of spectatorship from feminist film studies and the various strategies that have been used to uncouple the compensatory binary that is figured in theories of the gaze. That work primarily focused on the problematics of subjectivity and the spectator's look in

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[28] *The Thief of Bagdad*, Program, 9.

[29] William K. Everson makes a similar point in his history of silent film, *American Silent Film* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1978). In it he argues that *The Thief of Bagdad* is "awe-inspiring, full of camera trickery and incredible production design, but with only occasional snatches of action, and those dependent more on novelty (Doug's fights with various monsters, the flying carpet scenes) and the spectacle of mass action (the conjuring up of the magical army in the climax) (283-4)." He also credits William Menzies and Arthur Edeson with the "decision to make Baghdad a city of whiteness and light, spectacular but not solid, a city that was a backdrop to action and fantasy, not a city in which people really lived" (304).

[30] Ellis Hanson, ed., *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 5.

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relation to the female body in the visual economy of relations posited by those theories. In the case of Fairbanks, the display of the male body complicates notions of the gaze in ways that are productive for this investigation into spectatorship and spectacle.

In an important revision of Mulvey's thesis, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," Steve Neale challenges her notion that the object of the camera's gaze is necessarily the body of a woman. Mulvey's theory, Neale argues, leads to the conclusion that the male body marked as an erotic object always operates as the site of homosexual voyeurism. Thus, in order to realign it with heterosexuality, the male look at another male "must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed."[31] As a result, Neale maintains, Mulvey elides an entire field of visual experience when she locates the site of voyeurism and fetishism solely in the body of a woman.

Neale goes on to maintain that when a context between two male characters is staged within the narrative of a film, its voyeurism is shifted to the register of sadomasochism as a way to resituate the erotically presented male body within the patriarchal binary oppositions of active and passive.[32] When the narrative hesitates for the purposes of spectacle, as in battle and combat scenes, the body of the male, which is stylized and fragmented by close-ups, becomes the focus of the spectator's attention. Characters who register fear, hatred, or aggression, all of which serve "to disavow any explicitly erotic look at the male body", mediate the tension produced by the possible fetishizing of such an

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[31] Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle," 11.

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objectified male.[33] Neale's view does not overturn Mulvey's argument so much as supplements it. He also admits the possibility of a heterosexual female gaze but argues that its object, whether another woman or a male, is necessarily "feminized," in order to reinscribe assumptions about the priority of male power and domination.[34] The possibility of a male object was an important addition in considering the limitations of the gendered binary positions within theories of the gaze. However, by retaining a view of the spectator grounded in strategies of vision that rely on heterosexual narratives, Neale affirms that "the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male."[35] He cannot imagine a spectatorial look that takes erotic pleasure in the displaced display of the male body.

Nevertheless, in spite of Neale's skepticism, contemporary reviews of Fairbanks, especially in his costume fantasies, revel in the images of the film star's body and its display as a visual spectacle. In its review of *The Thief of Bagdad*, the *New York Times* first lists Fairbanks's masculine physique as the most potent site of the film's spectacle offerings: "In most of this production Fairbanks is bronzed and naked to his waist line, showing a fine depth of chest and

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[32] Neale cites westerns, gangster movies, and war films as emblematic of this strategy Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle," 12.

[33] Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle," 14.

[34] Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle," 14.

[35] Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle," 15.

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impressively muscular arms."[36] The *Variety* review notes that Fairbanks's body is on display when writing that "the Thief, customarily stripped to the waist, gives a corking performance" that is not so much a hero as "the dream lover."[37] And the *New York Morning World* writes of Fairbanks that his "[su]per-[tann]ed, handsome, muscular and romantic thief of Bagdad .... is a fine, vital glamorous performance."[38] All three reviews share a preoccupation with the partial nakedness of Fairbanks and his muscular physique. Two of them also emphasize the lyrical quality of Fairbanks's portrayal of the thief. For an actor who had established his reputation as a gymnast and stunt man, the focus on this visual rather than active performance is telling.

Watching the film, it is apparent that Fairbanks's lyrical movements bear a stronger relation to choreography than to acrobatics, even though the film is filled with his usual stunt business. Indeed, Gaylyn Studlar calls *The Thief of Bagdad* "one of the most heavily dance-inspired films of the 1920s," adding that the film "reeks of the influence of the Ballets Russes."[39] Pointing to the use of dance as a double coded visual discourse, Studlar asserts that it provides the

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[36] Review of *The Thief of Bagdad, New York Times* (18 March 1924), Clippings file, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[37] Review of *The Thief of Bagdad, Variety* (26 March 1924), Clippings file, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[38] Review of *The Thief of Bagdad, New York Morning World* (19 March 1924), Clippings file, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[39] Gaylyn Studlar, "Valentino, *Optic Intoxication*, and Dance Madness," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 42.

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opportunity for the sexual involvement of female spectators.[40] Dance, she argues, offers them a "safe display of the dangers of masculine domination."[41] This was especially true in the 1920s of "*ethnic* dances that invariably linked Orientalism and eroticism."[42] Such a coupling is central to *The Thief of Bagdad* generally and to the erotic valances in the display of Fairbanks's body in particular. Studlar's term for the visual spectacle mobilized by dance is "optic intoxication," suggesting the libidinal excess implicit in this display of the male body as an exotic and erotic object. In fact, the massive scale and the use of exceedingly reflective surfaces creates a highly theatrical set that not only initiates the film's self-conscious spectacle address but serves at the same time as a backdrop for Fairbanks's dance-like movements through the city. His "orientalizing" costume, with its Ballets Russes associations and diaphanous fabric, is extremely revealing and further signals the relationship between dance

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[40] In her discussion of the role of Valentino as a focus of women's erotic attention during the silent film era, Miriam Hansen touches on many of the issues that are central to this study's questioning of the Classic Hollywood narrative paradigm and its hegemony of the "male gaze," including spectacle, narrative, sexuality, address, and reception. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's notion of modernity and the "public sphere," Hansen argues that film created a new social space where women were as free as men to constitute themselves as active and desiring subjectivities. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15. In her earlier essay on Valentino, Hansen asserts that his film star persona was defined almost entirely by becoming the object of female desires. See Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship," *Cinema Journal* 25 (Summer 1986): 6-32.

[41] Studlar, "Valentino, *Optic Intoxication*, and Dance Madness," 36.

[42] Studlar, "Valentino, *Optic Intoxication*, and Dance Madness," 23. Studlar's focus here is the screen image of Valentino, but her discussions of *The Thief of Bagdad* suggest that the bodies of both men were situated according to similar visual codes through an association between orientalizing motifs and dance.

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and sexuality by the way that it exposes Fairbanks's partially naked, muscled, tanned, and highly oiled body. The use of dance, then, produces a double deferral of narrative by the twinned spectacles of choreography and body.

Contemporary reviews of *The Black Pirate* revel similarly in the elements of spectacle that put Fairbanks's masculine body on display as an erotic attraction. Not only the Technicolor process, but the setting and character of Fairbanks as a pirate in the South Seas contribute powerfully to the exotic register of the film's direct visual appeal to the spectator and emphasizes spectacle over narrative. The *New York Times* reviewer comments that *The Black Pirate* "is a series of robust scenes slung on a slender thread of a story."[43] The reviewer for *Variety* writes: "In the tale it spins it's the weakest Fairbanks has ever had."[44] The *Variety* review goes on to observe: "There is no dearth of action at any time, but the story impresses as little more than an excuse."[45] That it is an "excuse" to align the erotic pleasures of viewing Fairbanks's masculine form with the film's spectacle address hardly needs stating. Certainly the context of bloodthirsty, cutthroat, plundering pirates offers plenty of opportunity for the kind of displaced spectacle in sadomasochism that Neale posits.[46]

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[43] Review of *The Black Pirate, New York Times* (9 March 1926), Clippings file, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[44] Review of *The Black Pirate, Variety* (10 March 1926), Clippings file, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[45] Review of *The Black Pirate, Variety* (10 March 1926).

[46] Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle," 12.

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Additionally, the studio press book for the film indicates the traditionally gendered use of the male body within narrative when it suggests that the film be pitched to women as an "artistic romance," to men as a "virile, heroic action story," and to the young as a "moral adventure story."[47] Nevertheless, viewers expecting a narrative film will be frustrated by its emphasis on the conditions of spectacle, which continually defer what little story line the film does provide. And contrary to Neale's assertion, this deferral does not inscribe Fairbanks through a stable active-passive binary in order to disavow the spectator's desiring look. On the contrary, the visual strategy of the film organizes its spectacle around the display of Fairbanks's body and the other muscular actors in ways that confound the differences between active and passive positions.

This is nowhere more evident than in the climax of the film when Fairbanks as the Black Pirate returns on a galley rowing ship to defeat the band of nefarious brigands that has captured the heroine. In a review from the *New York Times*, Fairbanks is described in this scene as returning "with husky deep-chested men to rout the sea-robbers."[48] The scene so described is nothing less than a battalion of soldiers clad only in tight black shorts and black leather harnesses, which not only register as visual signs of discipline but also cross and cut into their bare chests to produce an astonishing sadomasochistic display of bulging, muscular physiques. Additionally, they are improbably standing phalanx-like on the deck of the racing ship, arms crossed and legs spread in a

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[47] *The Black Pirate*, Press Book, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1.

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pose that displays their pumped-up bodies to full advantage. In spite of the hypermasculinity of this stance, the position on the boat renders them immobile, ready for action but passively on view in the meantime.

In contrast to this double row of male bodies coded in the erotics of sexual anticipation, Fairbanks is shown actively urging the ship on from its bow with gestures that seem calculated to remind viewers of a master with a whip. Taking charge of the impressive cannon at its bow, Fairbanks splinters the mask of the pirate ship in a none-too-subtle equation between cannon and phallus that would appear to establish his active masculinity without question. Then, almost immediately, another, opposite, erotic spectacle associated with feminine display is invoked as the soldiers are shown swimming under water for a surprise attack of the pirate ship. Fairbanks and his muscle boys swim in synchrony, resembling the choreography that Busby Berkeley would use a decade later to create his elaborate spectacles out of the bodies of female dancers. In this way, the film puts the muscular male body on display in both passive and active roles, rather than distributing those roles across gender.

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[48] Review of *The Black Pirate*, *New York Times* (16 March 1926), Clippings file, The Celest Bartos International Film Study Center, Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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III. Queering Spectacle

> *I've had the experience of watching films with different audiences and they've become different films.*
>
> -- Stuart Marshall[49]

The spectacle in these films, thus, stages their reception as a deferral of narrative in favor of the more participatory visual attractions of exhibition and display. In that deferral, spectators encounter the visual images on the screen with a self-consciousness that activates a reciprocal relationship with the film, drawing them palpably into the experience of a shared space and an awareness of their own bodies. At this point, I would like to turn in a more personal way to a consideration of the role that spectacle address plays in the viewing experience of a gay spectator of Douglas Fairbanks in these films. How might the introduction of a gay body into the filmic space create intertextual associations that would open up the possibilities of meaning in his films? And how do the contingent historical positions of queer desire create associations that inflect the interpretation of these films for their viewers?

One of the most fruitful areas of investigation during the 1990s has revolved around the cinematic pleasures of queer spectators. Popular culture studies have demonstrated how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered viewers mobilize their sexualities to subvert the heterosexual matrix through which classic Hollywood cinema encoded its narratives. Queer critics redefining

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[49] Stuart Marshall, "Filling the lack in everyone is quite hard work, really . . . " in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha

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their personal pleasures through autobiographical accounts of their own sexual investments have accomplished much of this work. Using their own viewing experience, they explore the enjoyment afforded by a mode of production that ostensibly not only ignored their emotional responses but also supported a system of erotics inimical to their own desires. The confessional nature of the accounts by such critics obviously owes a debt to the analysis of feminist film critics, who used their own responses to explore the sexual relations posited within classic cinema as rehearsed in the introduction to this study.

It is precisely the individual viewing experiences of historically situated subjects articulated by feminists that queer critics have used to mobilize their own resistance to the exclusionary power of heterosexual male subjectivity and the narrow regime of ideologically coded vision that it authorizes. Of course, this power has never been as absolute as its use as a critical foil implies. Even Mulvey, whose name, unfairly, has become largely synonymous with totalizing notions of the male gaze, recognizes that all subjectivities are not collapsed under a unitary visual regime in spite of the objectifying organizations of knowledge and power supported by patriarchal assumptions. In an essay on the history of 1970s feminism, Mulvey historicized her own theoretical project, warning that "an article written in a polemical spirit and above all, to precipitate change, loses significance outside historical context and integrated into the timeless body of film theory."[50] The result has been a shift from theories that focus on the

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Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 45.

[50] For this later revision, see Laura Mulvey, "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1989), 162.

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structural relations of spectators that are mirrored in visual images to reception theories that examine the viewing positions that specific audiences negotiate.

Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty strategically open their 1995 anthology of queer essays on popular culture with Robin Wood's groundbreaking essay "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic" in order to signal the crucial role of historical subjectivity in the kind of queer analysis represented by their collection. In that essay, published in 1978 just three years after Mulvey's formative essay on the male gaze, Wood acknowledges that his historical subjectivity as a gay film critic has informed his writings from the beginning, both when he was in the closet and after coming out of it.[51]

Of course, the most well known use of his historically situated subjectivity as a gay critic remains Vito Russo's pivotal study *The Celluloid Closet*. Russo uses his own identity as a lens in order to critique the ways that Hollywood has portrayed gays and lesbians both before and after Stonewall. Russo's autobiographical approach made visible a set of critical assumptions that were central in opening up gay and lesbian readings of film narrative. One of the most famous is encapsulated in his statement about the difference between the experience of lesbian and gay lives and Hollywood's stereotyping homophobia: "There have never been lesbians or gay men in Hollywood film. Only homosexuals."[52] He supports this statement of the personal affront to all lesbians and gays (to which should be added bisexuals and transgendered persons) that is

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[51] Robin Wood, "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 12.

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perpetrated in Hollywood films through his "Necrology" index, which systematically charts the abusive deaths that have been the staple of the industry's resolution for queer characters.

More recently, critiques of popular visual narratives have extended the notion of gay subjectivity to account for the multiplicity of queer positions that gay men occupy in relation to those narratives. In *Making Things Perfectly Queer,* Alexander Doty describes the difficulties confronting a gay critic engaged in reception theory given the complexity of historical subjectivities. The notion of "audience," he writes, "is now always already acknowledged to be fragmented, polymorphous, contradictory, and *nomadic,* whether in the form of individual or group subjects."[53] Doty's solution is to announce his own position as "feminine-identified gay man" and then to enter into an argument with previous articulations of this position that place it outside some presumed normative reception space based in heterosexuality.[54]

Doty posits a form of queer "auteurism" based in the way that "meanings are constructed within and across film texts through the interplay of creators, cultures, and audiences."[55] In his account, the spectator's queer position is constituted through the act of making meaning itself rather than proceeding intrinsically from any single sexual or gender category. In Doty's notion of

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[52] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981; revised ed., 1987), 245.

[53] Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

[54] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 6 and 15.

[55] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 24.

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reception as a site of meaning occupied by "creators, cultures, and audiences," he buttresses my own thesis about the use of spectacle address as a strategy for imbricating spectators and images into a spatial relationship that produces meaning out of contingent associations. It is this notion of the pleasures constituted in taking up the position of a gay male spectator in relation to the body of Douglas Fairbanks that I will deploy in an analysis of his gendered image in the two films under discussion.[56]

One of the best known pleasures of gay male spectators is their appropriation of classic Hollywood films through a camp sensibility. Those films that were vehicles for strong women stars, especially, have been the subjects of considerable study.[57] Indeed, in his book on the making of a gay sensibility in film, Michael Bronski asserts that gay men "may have appreciated and been sexually turned on by the beauty of actors like Romon Novarro, Douglas Fairbanks, or Rudolph Valentino .... [but they] responded emotionally to films and to the men in films through identification with women stars."[58] In other words, Bronski is arguing for a queer viewing position based in a camp

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[56] Because I identify as a man with gay sexual desires, the erotic possibilities of Fairbanks's body are pleasurable in a way that spectators with other sexualities might experience through different emotions (even possibly anxiety or threat) when taking up such a viewing subjectivity. I am not arguing for the necessity of an essentialist spectator (gay or otherwise) in order to access the queer erotics in the image of Fairbanks. However, I am acknowledging that not everyone who takes up such a queer viewing position will find it either as enjoyable or as central as will someone whose habit of life is grounded in those desiring possibilities.

[57] See especially the arguments in Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (London: Macmillan, 1986); and Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1984).

[58] Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 94-5.

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sensibility that accesses the erotic pleasure of men in film through masquerading as feminine. His view ignores the pleasures of gay male spectators whose primary emotional response lies in the display of other men as erotic objects but who want to maintain a masculine subjectivity.

Such a view goes dead against my own viewing experience of Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate*. To my eye, very little could compete with the attractions of Fairbanks's body as an object of erotic display, and certainly its representation as spectacle arrests whatever narrative action might lead to an identification with women in these films. In point of fact, although the slender narrative of *The Black Pirate* inscribes Fairbanks within a heterosexual matrix through his love, rescue, and concluding shipboard wedding proposal, the film loads the screen with spectacle displays of hundreds of men while only admitting two women, who conveniently disappear for long periods of time and thus cannot serve as a surrogate for the spectator. As a result, most of the screen time is given over to the male image, making the all-male realities of pirate life palpable.

In both films Fairbanks's clothing is the primary guarantee that the spectacle will focus on his body and not merely his person. In the *Thief of Bagdad*, Fairbanks is shirtless for most of the film. He wears a pair of tight-fitting briefs, which resemble a current day, racing style swimsuit, under a pair of diaphanous leggings in a middle-eastern inspired pattern. This costume permits him to be naked from the waist up throughout the film, offering a nearly unending display of his well defined, clean shaven, and sensuously oiled muscular chest. His presentation is reminiscent of the physique pictorial tradition, which used the alibi of muscular assessment in order to present exposed male bodies. In the

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years before Stonewall this tradition spawned an entire industry of pictures, magazines, and models that served as one of the primary sources of gay male erotica.[59] Bronski notes that beginning in the 1920s, gay males adopted the classicizing poses of body-builders in both physique culture and pornography.[60]

In addition, the translucent material of the thief's sheer trousers combines with the brightly lit and highly reflective set, allowing viewers to see another apparently well-defined site in the clearly outlined bulge that fills his briefs. To insure the viewer's attention to these sites of sexuality, the stunts that Fairbanks performs often emphasize the impressive shape of his body by making the fabric cling in ways that focus attention on his prominent bulge and brawn. The sexual register of the costume is made explicit in a scene when the thief breaks into the princess's bedroom where she lies sleeping. The light shining through an art nouveau grill simultaneously illuminates the gossamer netting that surrounds her bed and the sheer material of the thief's trousers in a revealing display that rhymes both bodies as thinly veiled erotic objects.

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[59] Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 46.

[60] Classical sculpture has long been acknowledged as a site of gay male eroticism. The person usually credited with inventing art history as a discipline, J. J. Winckelmann, analyzed Greek and Roman art through the discourse of his own homosexual desire. For a well documented and closely argues explanation of this thesis, see Whitney Davis, "Winckelmann Divided: Mourning the Death of Art History," in *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, ed. Whitney Davis (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1994): 141-60. The practice of same-sex love in Greece also served the cult of the sexually available male youth as the aesthetic ideal in classical statuary. It allowed Winckelmann to write simultaneously about his aesthetic and erotic pleasure. Winckelmann's crossing of classical aesthetics and gay desire is by no means unique, finding a particularly compatible discursive field in late nineteenth-century photography, especially in the work of pictorialists such as F. Holland Day and Baron von Gloeden. For a fuller discussion and compelling images of queer desire and its representational

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We have already noted the role of Fairbanks's costume as a signifier of exotic dance and the context of the Ballets Russes in *The Thief of Bagdad*. The impression that he is dancing his stunts rather than performing them crosses the discourses of the athlete and the dancer. As an athlete, Fairbanks signifies male strength as a naturalized condition. As a dancer, he signifies feminine theater as a cultural condition. Both operate in the spectacle display of his body, inflecting each other with conflicting associations, suspending him between gender assumptions that appear to be highly unstable.

Throughout the film Fairbanks's body is represented in both active and passive display that compounds this instability. The very first view of Fairbanks several scenes into the film plays with this tension. After the intertitle "A street in Bagdad – dream city of the ancient East," the camera cuts to a medium shot of the thief, apparently lying asleep along the edge of a well. After lingering on his supine form, there is a dissolve to a close-up of Fairbanks's face in soft focus, and the camera allows viewers a lengthy, unchallenged gaze at his handsome profile. However, when a man enters the scene to draw water from the well, viewers discover that the thief's sleeping pose has been a ruse as he leaps to action and, undetected, robs the unsuspecting man. This scene serves as a synecdoche, warning viewers against taking any passive poses in the film, which occur regularly, at face value. At several points in the film we see Fairbanks in such passive, reclining poses that suggest why the *Variety* reviewer described his presence in the film as a "dream lover."[61] In place of a confident and direct gaze

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codes from antiquity, see Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, esp. chapter three, 35-64.

[61] Review of *The Thief of Bagdad*, *Variety* (26 March 1924).

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that would signal masculine power, Fairbanks often stares vacantly off into space, looking vulnerable and languid.[62]

In contrast with these passive and feminizing images, the film also represents Fairbanks's body in such stereotypically male poses that they register as a spectacle of hypermasculine display. His fluid, dance-like movements are frequently punctuated with aggressive stances that in the space of spectacle feel confrontational in their rigid insistence. A particularly notable example occurs as the thief bounds up a fancifully elaborate stairway in order to attain a better view of a thief being flogged in the courtyard. Halfway up the stairs, he abruptly stops in a defiantly aggressive stance, his legs spread and arms crossed. The result is so calculated in its performativity that it reads as a parody of a masculine need to pose and posture. The other male figures in the courtyard wear elaborate, orientalizing costumes that completely disguise their bodies beneath layers of heavy, gathered fabric, further focusing attention, by contrast, on the scantily clad presence of Fairbanks's muscled torso. In another scene, the thief breaks into a palace to steal from a massive treasure chest filled with glittering, opulent jewels. As he lifts up a strand of pearls, he pauses to admire them in light that simultaneously falls on his reflectively oiled and muscular chest. There is a relay of gazes among the film's viewers, the thief, and the jewels that signals the audacity of the scene of this spectacle and identifies Fairbanks's

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[62] Although they rely on a very different set of visual strategies than the moving image, many of the film stills that were distributed to advertise the movie are even more insistent on presenting Fairbanks in this passive pose. The question of the film still in relation to my larger project is deserving of a study of its own.

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ever-present, masculine chest as the film's true treasure and object of the spectator's desiring gaze.

Fairbanks's costuming for his character of the black pirate is even more ambiguous in its use of his body to stage the tension between masculine and feminine registers. The black pirate sports a spit-curls hairstyle, a pair of double earrings, an oversized belt buckle, short pants, and a revealing décolleté on his sleeveless shirt. At the same time, his shorts are rolled high to expose his muscular thighs, and his shirt is split in a manner meant to suggest their well-worn pirate status even as they artfully disclose his broad shoulders and muscular chest. Even though Fairbanks, as the black pirate, is costumed in ways that read ambiguously in terms of gender, he seems always to be brandishing a sword or a pistol (or two) with typical phallic bravado. Somewhat incredulously, he also manages at several points to align his body with cannons, giving him the opportunity to discharge them in displays of exaggerated potency that read as another parody of hypermasculinity.

Fairbanks's costume also bears out Richard Dyer's observations regarding the erotic appearance produced by the clothing of sailors (and pirates, who are renegade sailors, even more so): "open-necked tops suggesting broad chests; trousers worn tight at the crotch and made of molding serge; the flap fly, bell-bottoms which emphasize by their oddity, naval costume as costume."[63] This appearance, Dyer argues, is an erotic encoding that marks its signifiers with the

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[63] Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 112. Although one could quibble that the Black Pirate's shorts are not tight fitting in the crotch in the way Dyer describes the trousers worn by sailors, Fairbanks, as the pirate, spends a great deal of time in

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sexual registers of gay desire. The connection between sailors/pirates and gay sexuality is corroborated by their "single-sex environment," lack of ties "to marriage, family and conformity," encounters marked by "anonymity and fleetingness," worldly travels that render them "exotic or broadminded," and tasks that "produce well-developed physiques."[64] According to historian B. R. Burg, the kind of alternative same-sex communities that Dyer implies in his description are not merely a product of queer utopian rhetoric but were common among actual seventeenth-century pirates.

In his book, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, Burg points to the tradition of the "matelotage," a social system that established a master-servant bond between two pirates.[65] This system served in place of marriage and family to the extent that "when a man died all goods went to his partner, whether master or *matelot*."[66] Burg concludes his study with the observation that within such a social organization, a man "engaging in sexual activity with another male aboard a pirate ship in the West Indies three centuries past was simply an ordinary

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the water where the fabric molds to his body just as revealingly as would a pair of tight-fitting trousers.

[64] Dyer, *Now You See It*, 112. The discourse of sailors and gay desire is a central component of the argument throughout the study by Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Age of Marsden Hartley, Charles, Demuth, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993).

[65] B. R. Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 128-9

[66] Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 129. In *The Black Pirate*, Donald Crisp, the film's comic relief character, performs a role that accords closely with the conventions of the matelot described by Burg in his study. Crisp's character becomes the Black Pirate's loyal servant and follower, saving his master's life on more than one occasion.

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member of his community, completely socialized and acculturated."[67] Burg's account suggests that by the very transgression of normative social institutions that their lives required, the pirate world inscribes the masculine body in terms that resonate with the erotics of gay sexual desires.

Both films, thus, create costumes for Fairbanks that encode his clearly masculine physique with more ambiguously gendered registers, resisting clear masculine and feminine inscriptions. As we saw in Mapplethorpe's photography, this suspension of a male body among the various registers of masculinity and femininity was one of the main ways that he signaled gay sexual desire. Even more particularly, it was signaled by his combining of the cultural extremes represented by the hypermasculine in the image of an erect virility and the ultrafeminine in the image of an available vulnerability. To be simultaneously erect and penetrable is to combine the virile and the vulnerable in a way that signifies one of the main forms of gay desire. Mapplethorpe referenced these associations through his use of the split as a figuring trope, which also plays a central tropic role in the film, the cuts in the Black Pirate's costume serving to indicate his own vulnerability and penetrability.

Most significant for this discussion is film's famous scene in which the Black Pirate makes good on his boast to capture a merchantman ship single-handedly by riding down its main sails on his knife blade, splitting them completely in two. It is a tour de force feat of athletic prowess that makes it one of the film's most impressive spectacles, especially in light of Fairbanks's well-

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[67] Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, 173.

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known insistence on always performing his own stunts.[68] It also presents Fairbanks as a hypermasculine action hero. Yet, the splits in Fairbanks's clothing echo the splitting of the ship's sail, visually aligning the vulnerability of the ship and his own body. In other words, the scene uses the notion of the split in a spectacular display of the muscular male body as simultaneously an armored tool and a vulnerable object, the site of penetration and penetrability. Far from acting to resist a reading of Fairbanks's body as an image of homoerotic display, this scene's hypermasculinity actually serves to guarantee that his body will be coded for gay viewers with the signs of their sexual desires.

The hypermasculinity of Fairbanks's body in both his characters of thief and pirate is freighted with a referential ambiguity that, as in abstraction, opens up his image to the intertextual associations of its viewers. Queer viewers, and gay male viewers in particular, are able to inflect the body of Fairbanks with the discursive fields that constitute the subjectivities of their own bodies. Once introduced into the photographic space of spectacle, these associations constitute the body on screen through a network of contested assumptions about gender and sexuality. Examining the pleasures that gay audiences are likely to bring to the space they share with the film as viewers suggests one way in which the classic Hollywood cinema is open to more spectatorial positions than those that reinscribe the dominant culture and its assumptions.

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[68] Of course, this, as many of the other stunts, is equally the result of the trick photography that Gunning points to in the work of Méliès during the PMR era, which emphasizes the spectacle tradition. In this case, the camera angle created the scene's illusion. The sails were leaning so that Fairbanks was actually sliding down the canvas rather than hanging from his knife as it appears on the screen when the film is projected.

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In part, recognition of the diverse and often surprising discursive fields that spectacle address draws into visual meaning is a strategy of subversive misreadings. However, the film also prepares the ground for such queer readings of Fairbanks's body by the way in which it stages him through a hybridized vocabulary of masculine and feminine signs as well as both active and passive displays of erotic cinematic spectacle. Such an account suggests that mainstream cinema is not as seamless or monolithic as Hollywood institutions imply, allowing for positions and pleasures other than those they overtly promote. It creates the possibility of rupturing the unary understanding of desire that its structures attempt to contain as a way to reproduce the masculine power relations on which it is based. The possibilities for gay men to read *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate* through the codes of their sexual desires can help to account for a theory of spectatorship that makes the viewer an active participant in cinematic spectacle rather than its hapless victim. It also offers another example of how repressed groups constitute spaces by appropriating images from the dominant culture in ways that allow them to make their own meanings and to flourish in spite of its alienating assumptions.

IV. POSTSCRIPT

I want to conclude this investigation into the operations of spectacle by way of a more personal interjection. Circling around, under, and behind the study of spectacle and the body in this study has been my own investment in these issues as a gay man with erotic desires that have been both shaped by, and are resistant to, traditional gender assumptions. As an art historian of visual

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culture, my own looking has been motivated by the search for images that would help to clarify my own subjectivity. I became intrigued with spectacle address because I noticed that whenever I became self-conscious about the experience of my own body as a viewing subject, I was drawn more clearly into an awareness of how meanings were constituted in the image that I was observing. This is both a personal position and a public one. By attempting to understand what drew me to certain images and critical discussions, I have engaged with the cultural discourses that have been fundamental in constituting the positions that are available for me to inhabit as a thinking, seeing, feeling, speaking person. At the same time, that engagement has empowered me to understand the uneasy alliance of competing claims that make up this "person" I am.

These difficult engagements give rise to a complexity that is not always comfortable, but one that I welcome as someone committed to the possibility of discovering what is at stake in the prevailing organizations of power and understanding and how they can be transformed. It also offers a lever for the discovery of meaning. And without knowing where it comes from, I also have to admit that I often derive the greatest satisfaction in my life from the pleasure of discovery. For this reason, I find great resonance in Barbara Hammer's discussion of why she is drawn to abstraction as a perceptual pleasure. It promotes, she says, the multiple possibilities of meaning and thereby initiates an active search that, in its resistance to passivity, becomes a political strategy for all areas of life. As she writes: "Finally, multiple readings, understanding, and namings are promoted by abstractions providing richness, diversity, and complexity. If it is any worldview we need right now to allow for preserving

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difference, it is a worldview that embraces flexibility, possibilities, and multiple understandings of phenomena."[69]

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[69] Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," 75.

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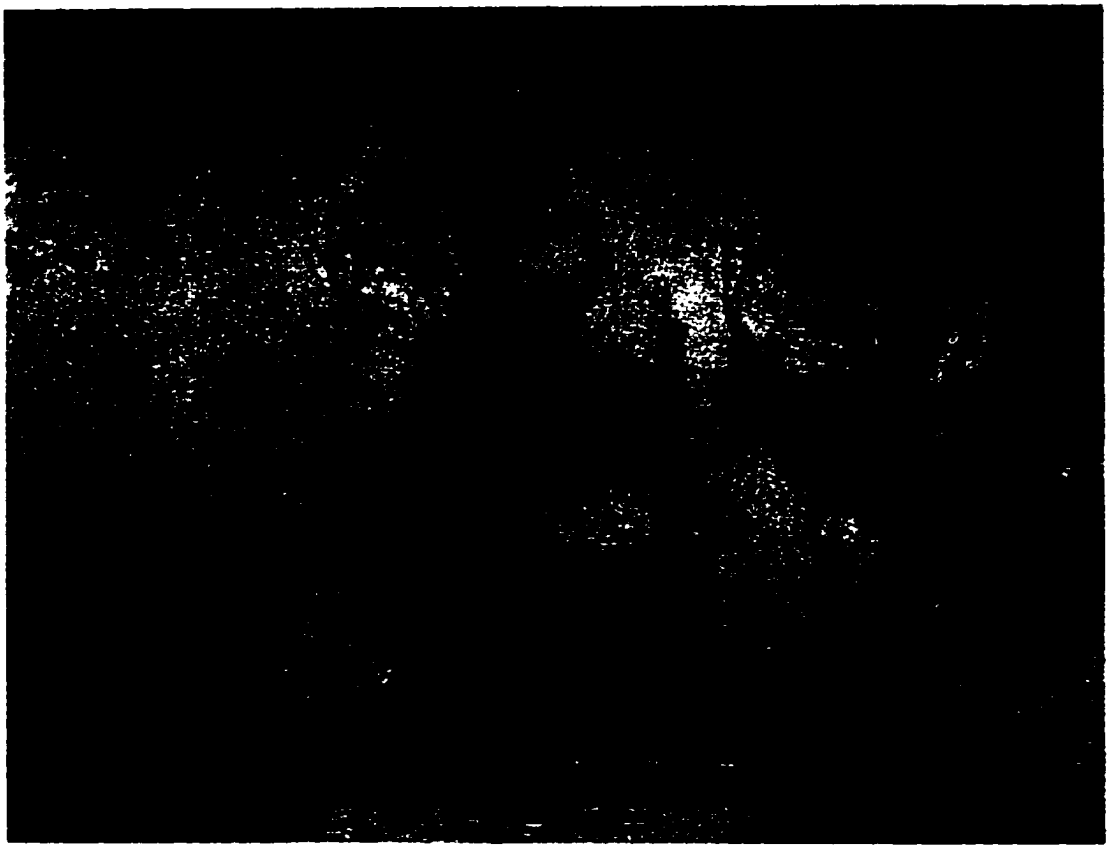

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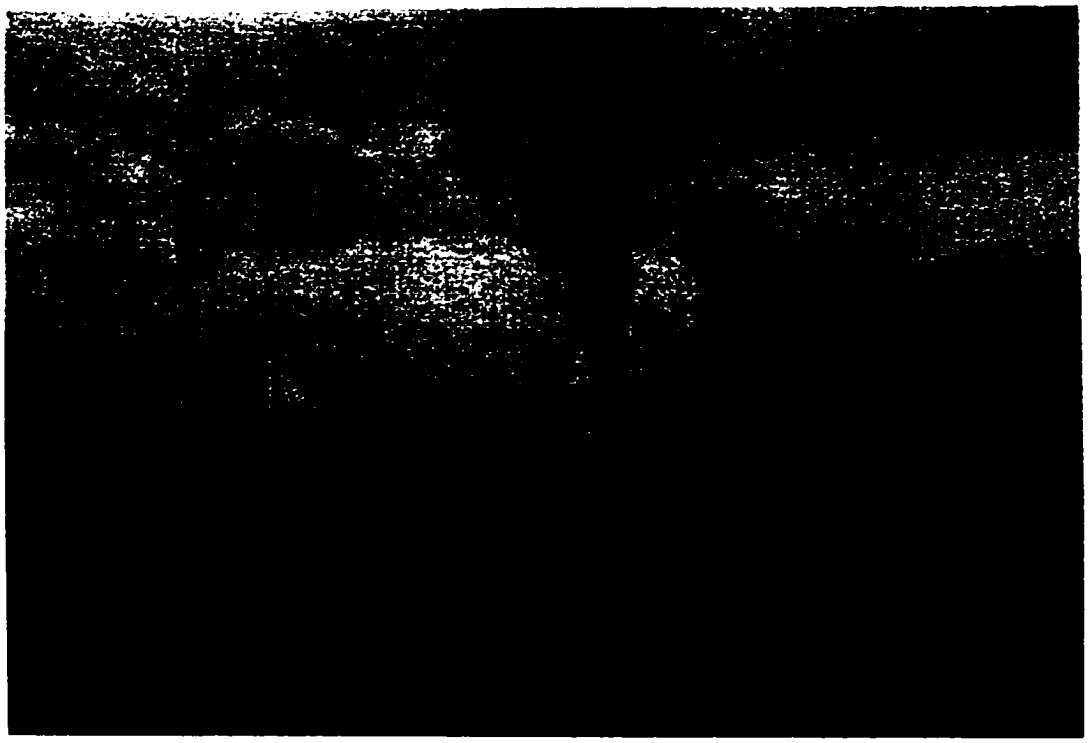

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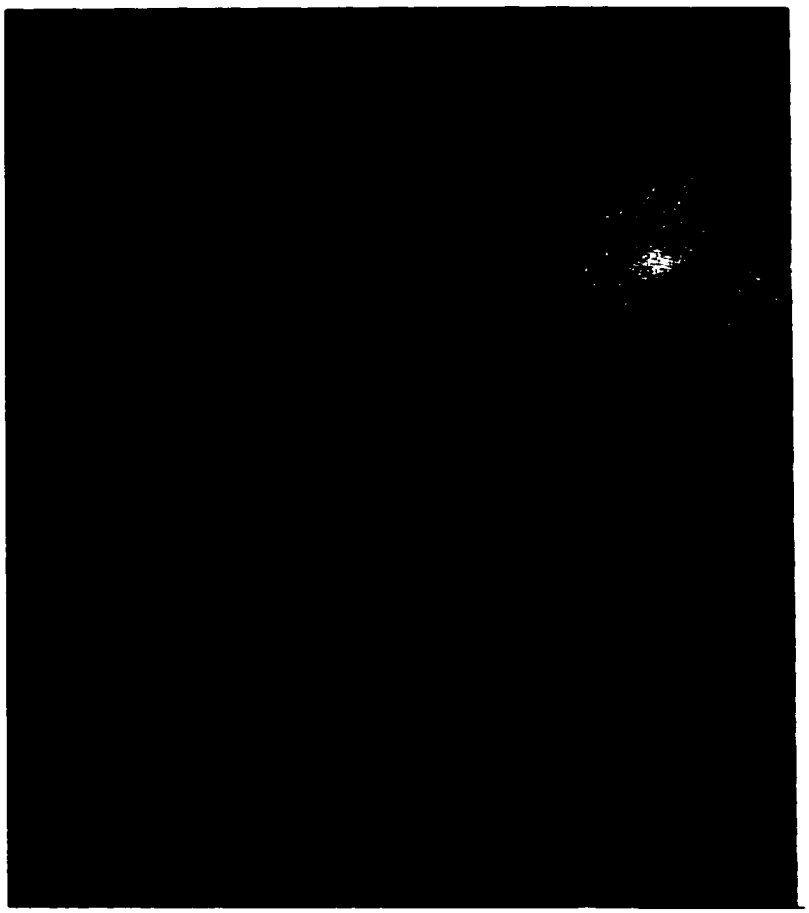

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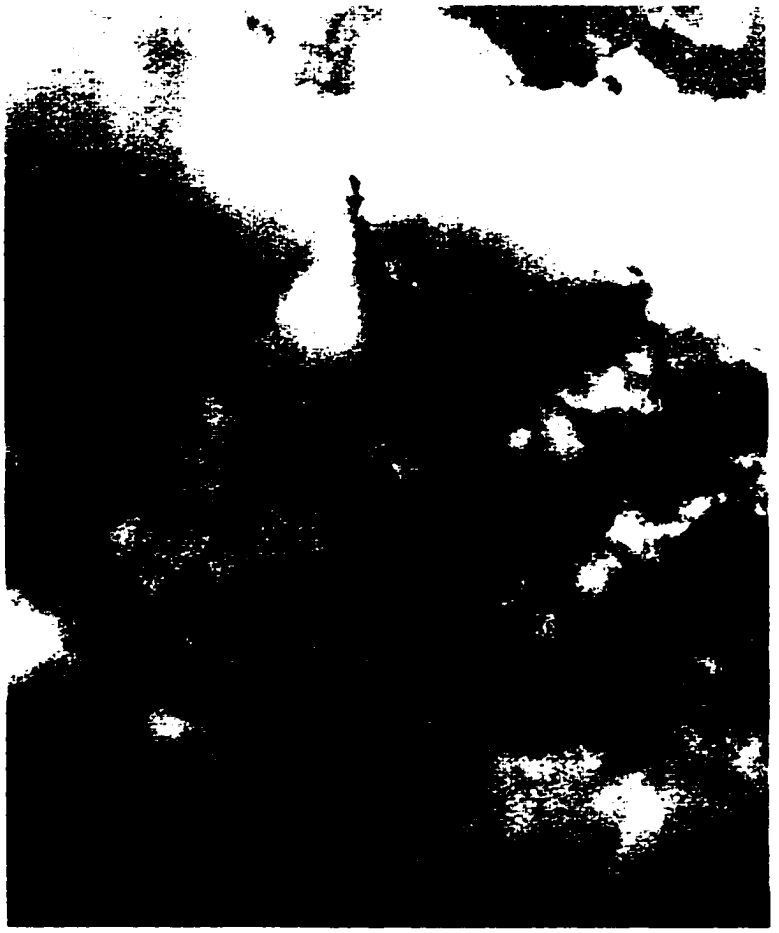

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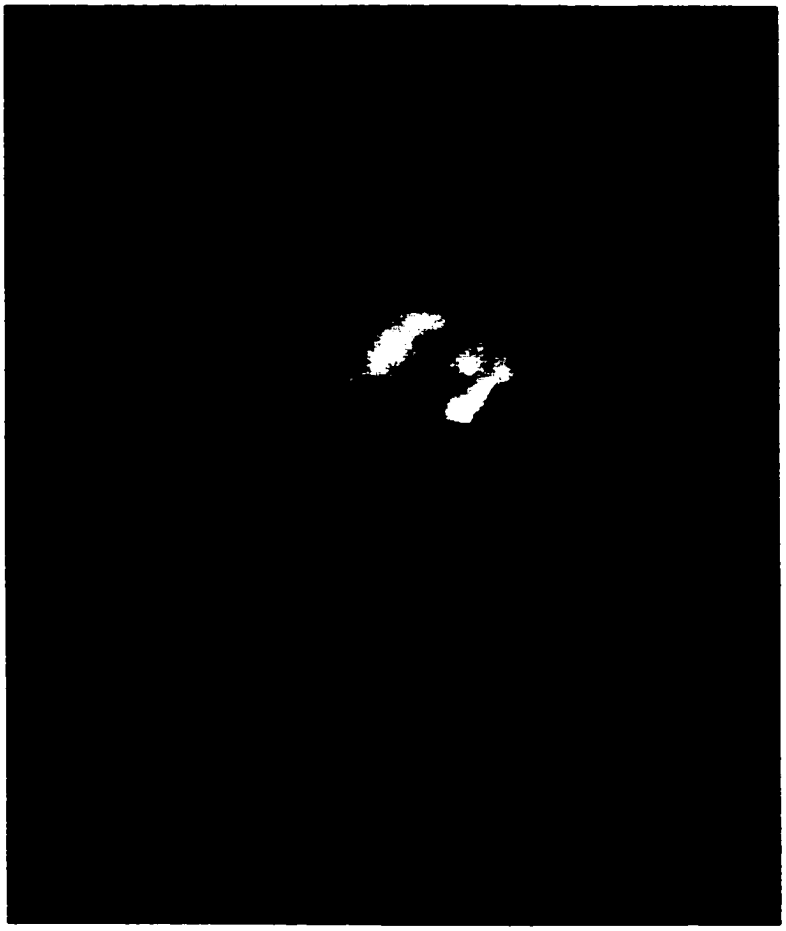

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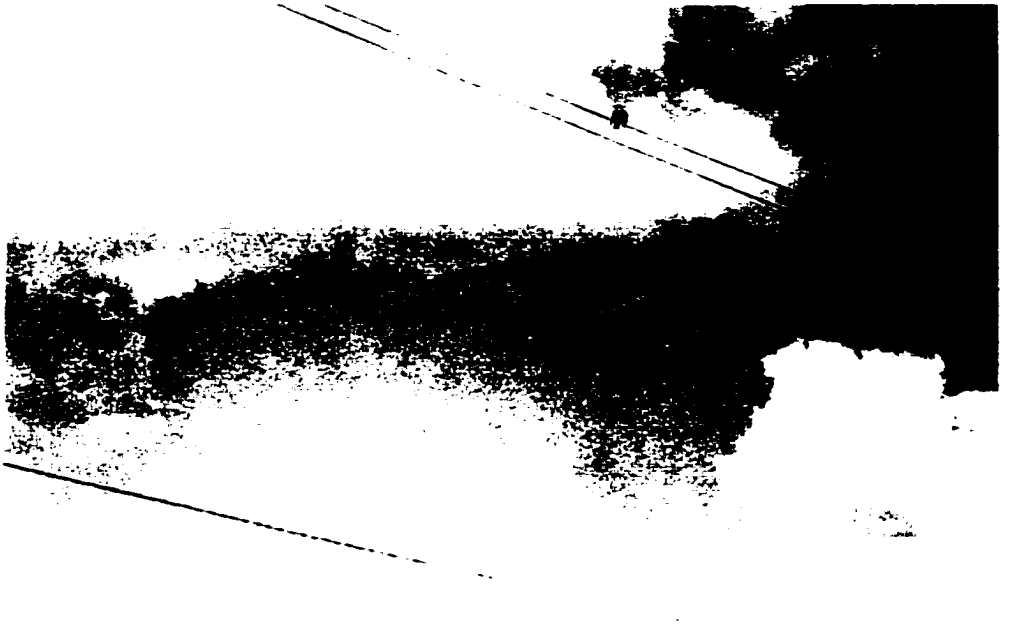

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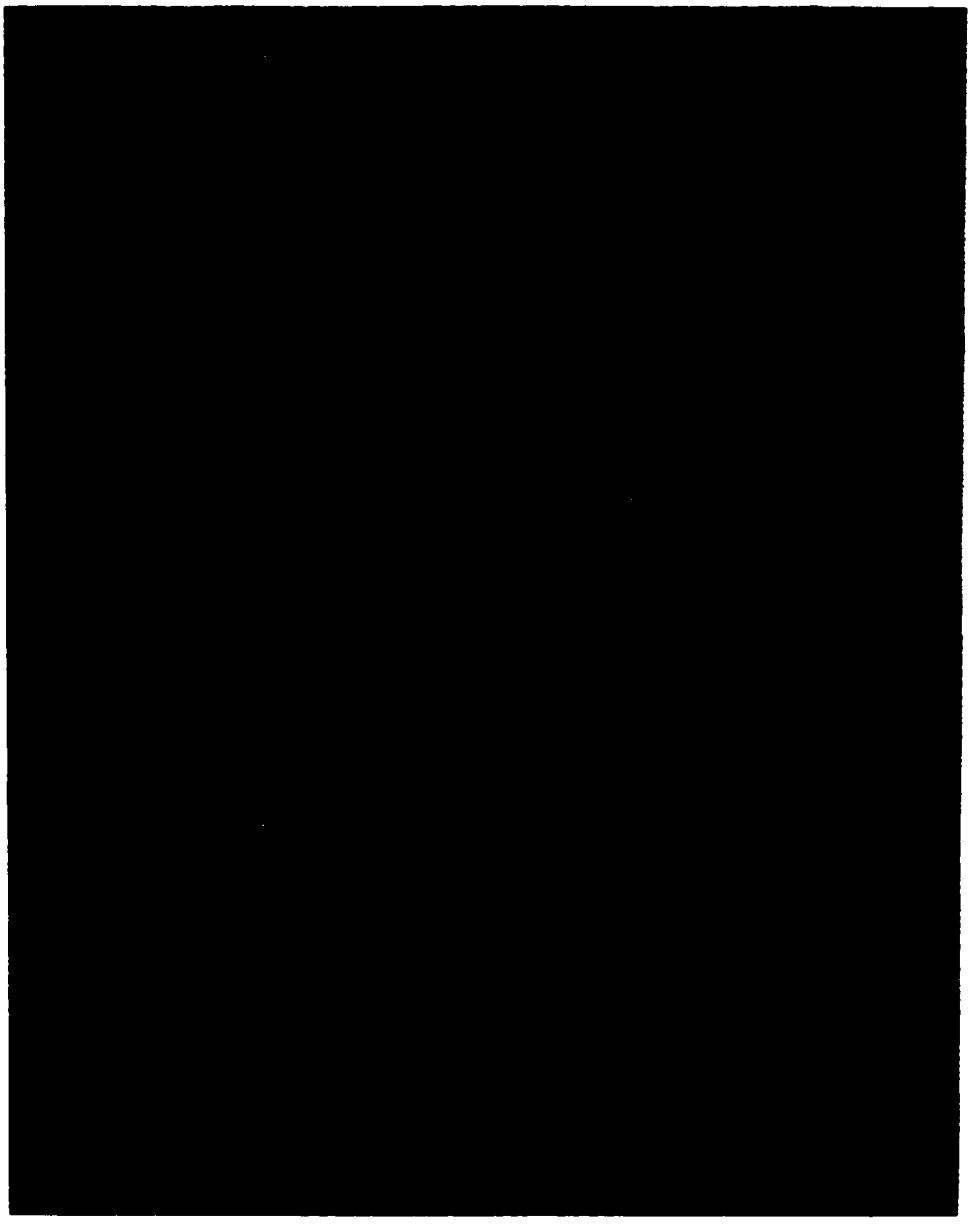

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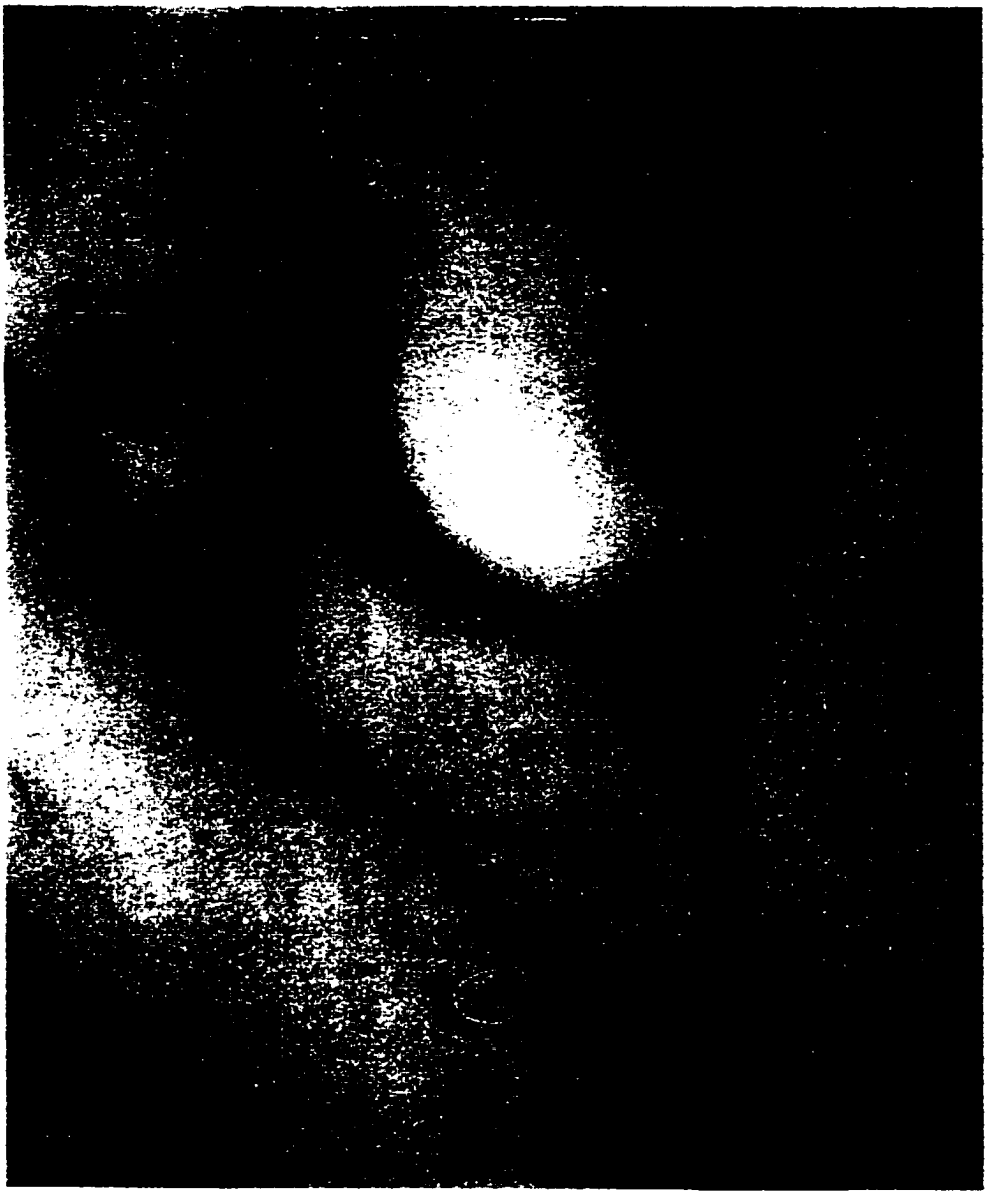

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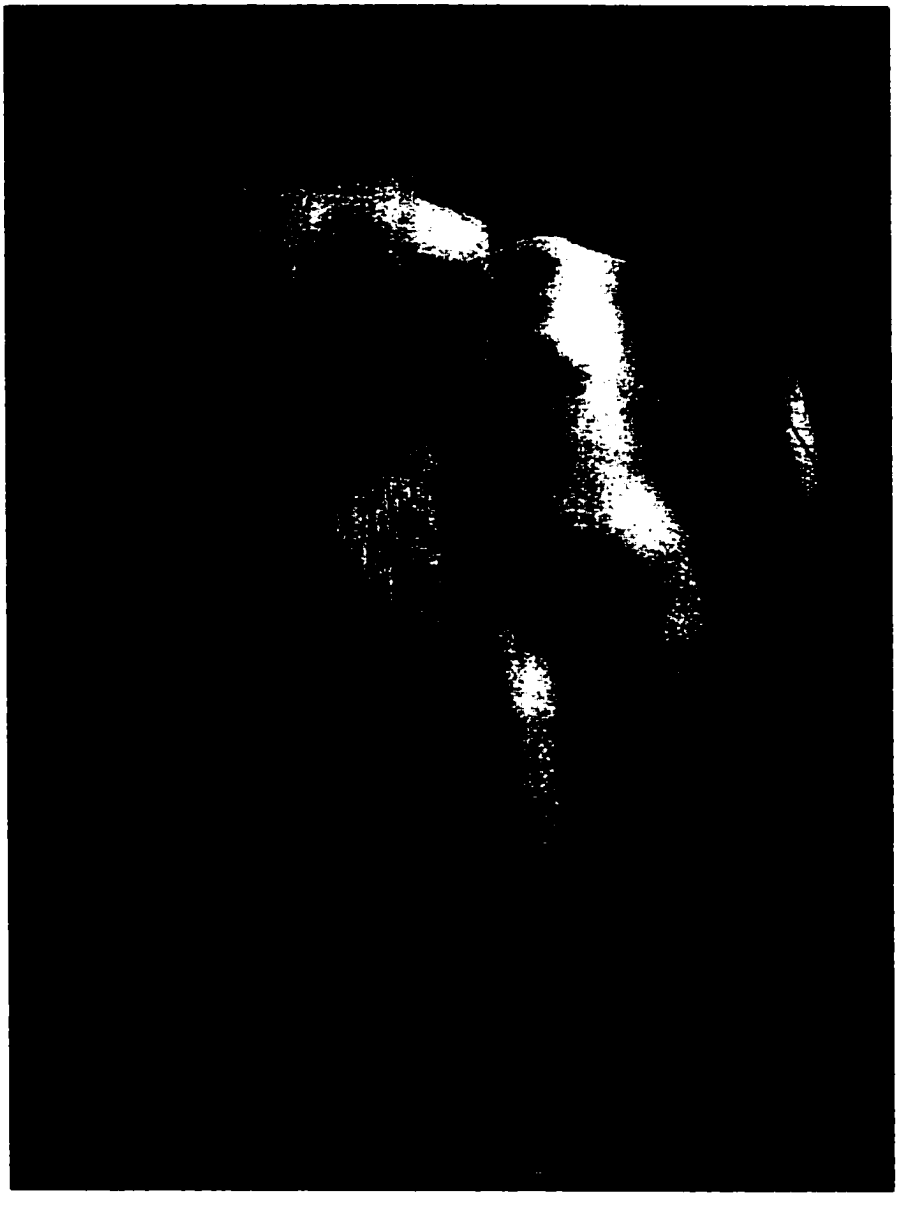

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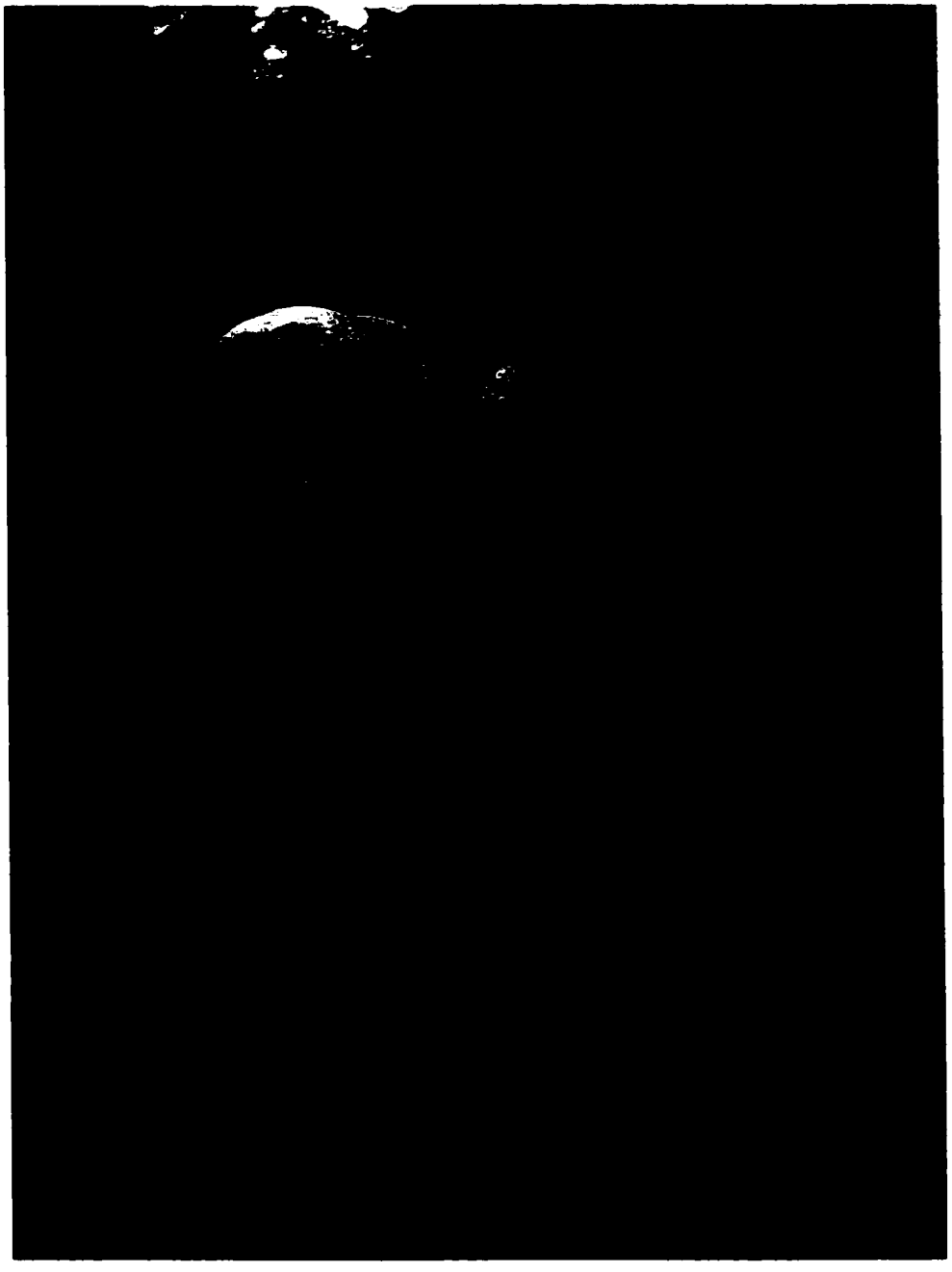

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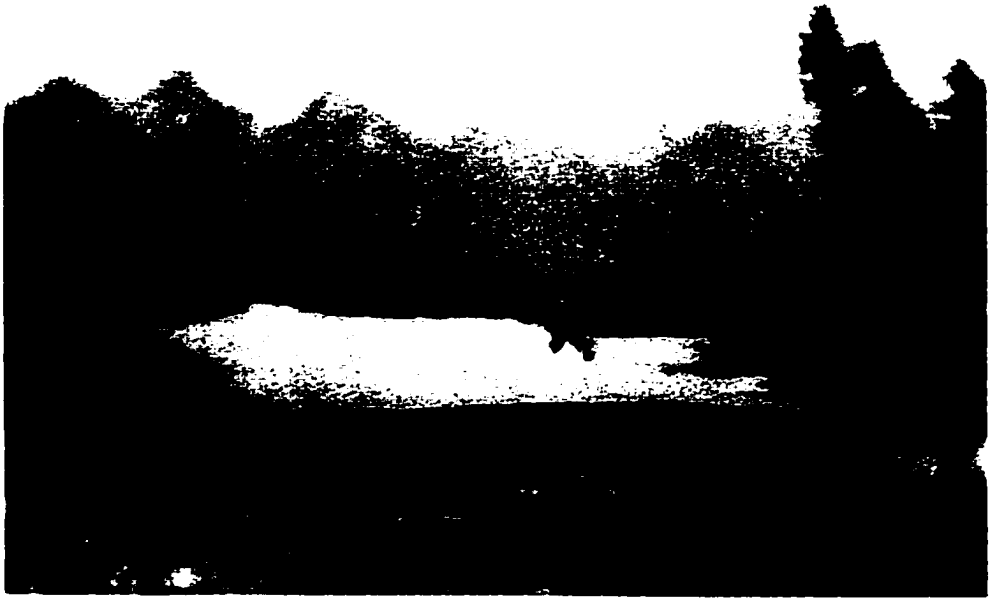

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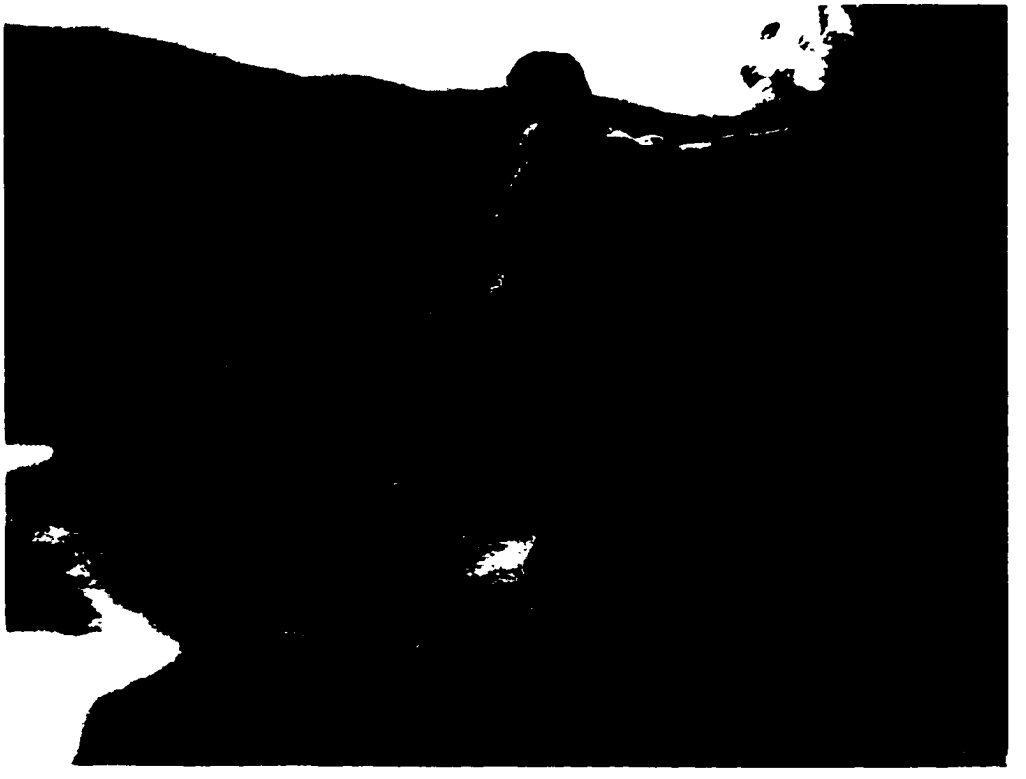

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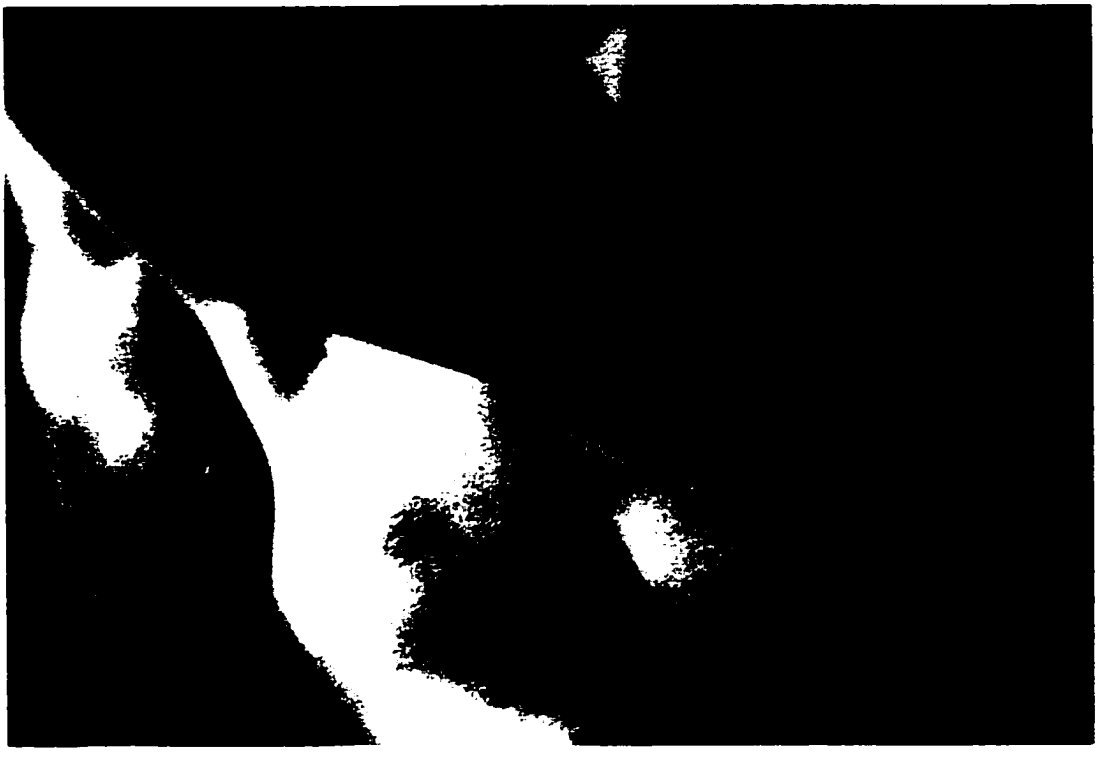

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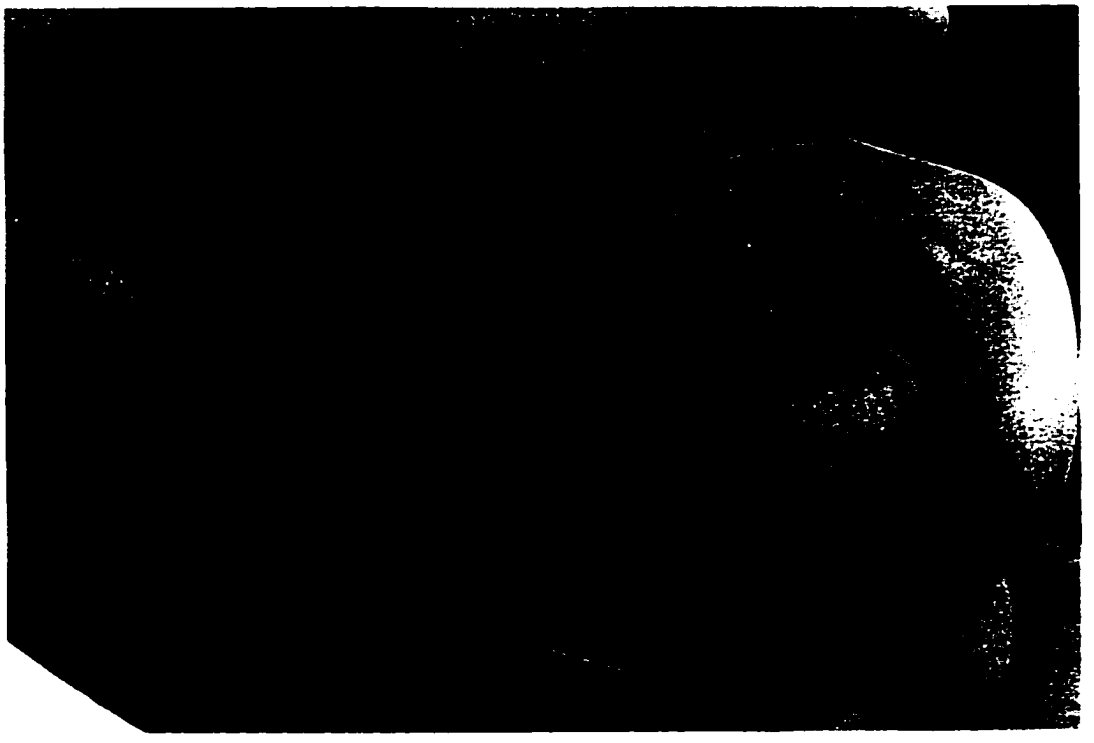

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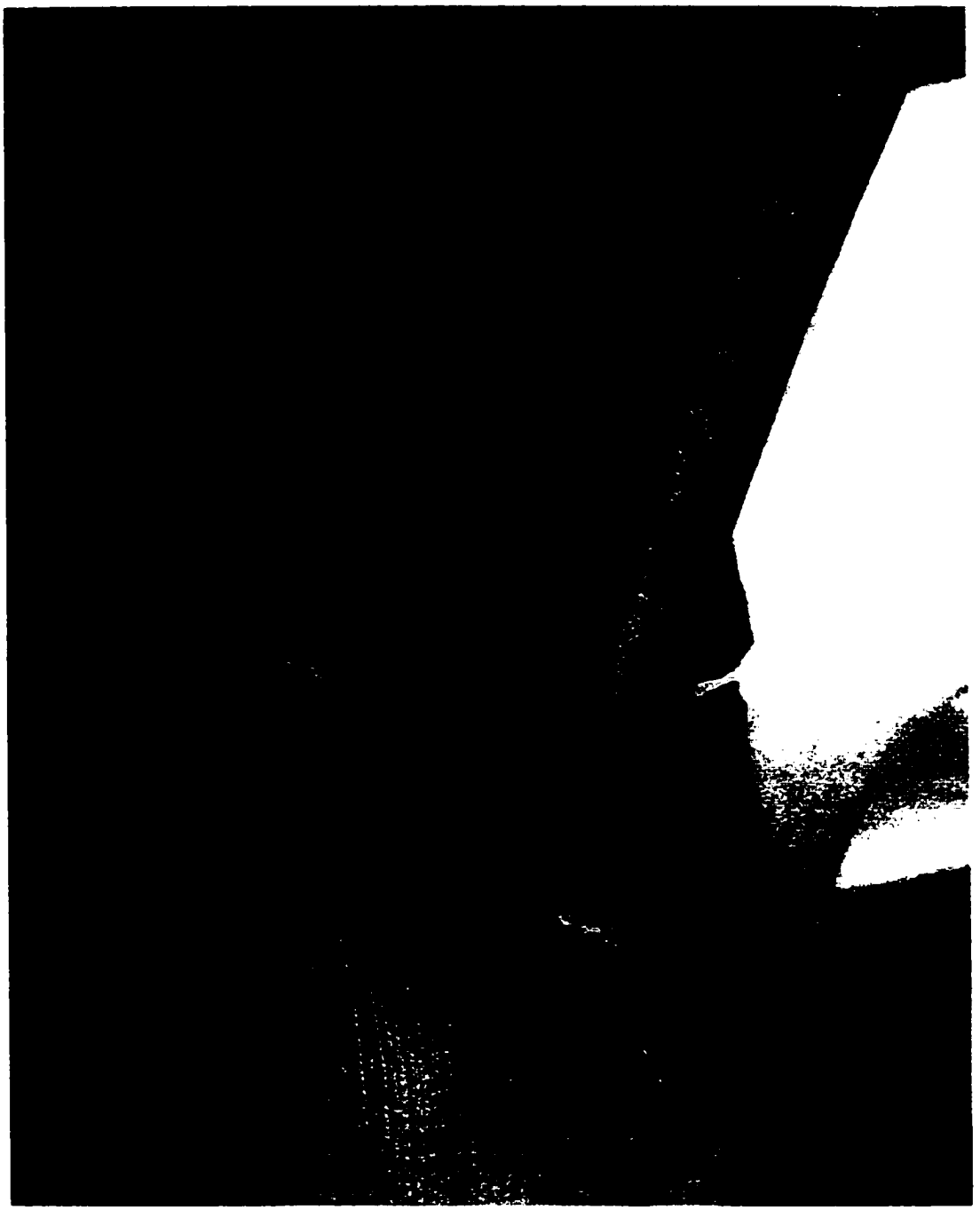

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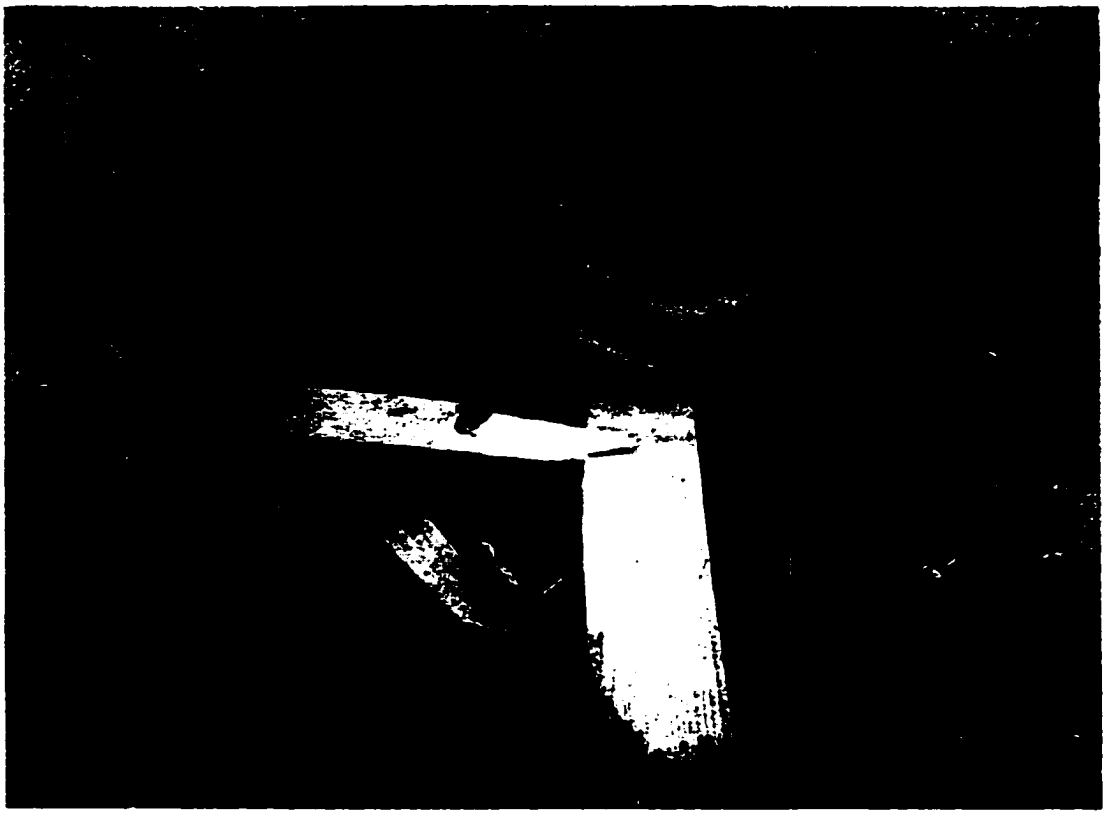

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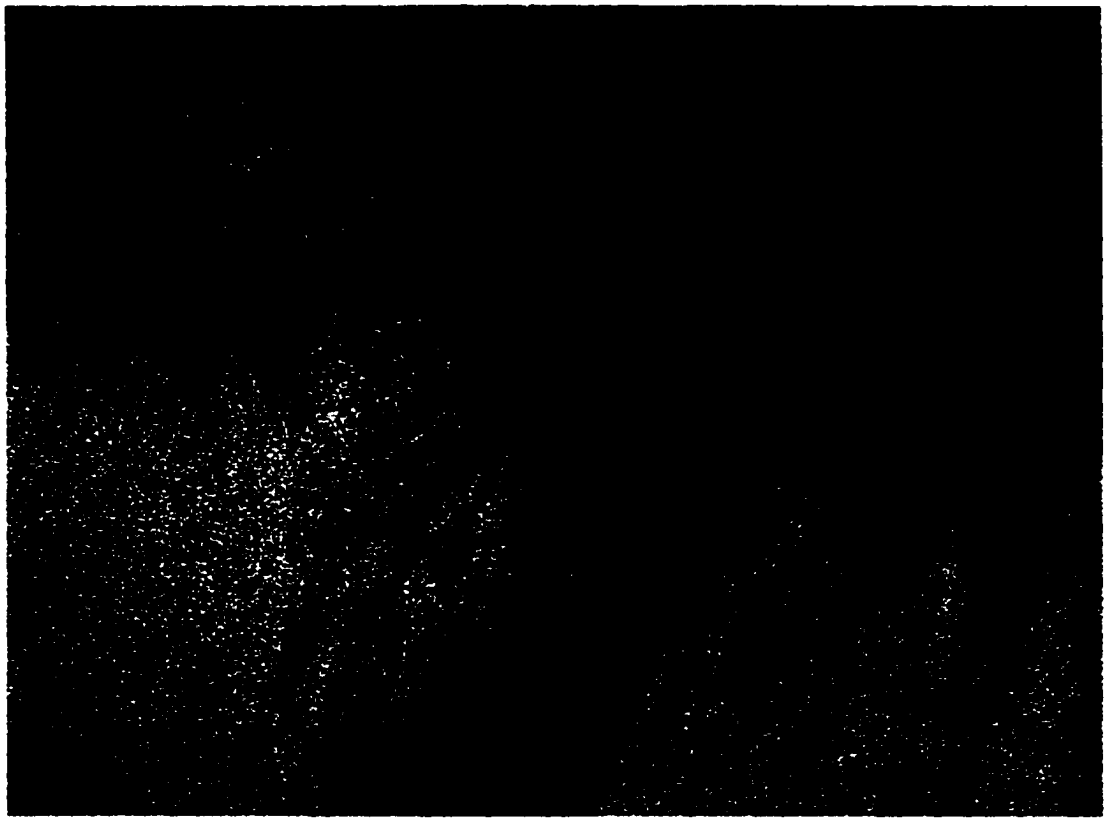

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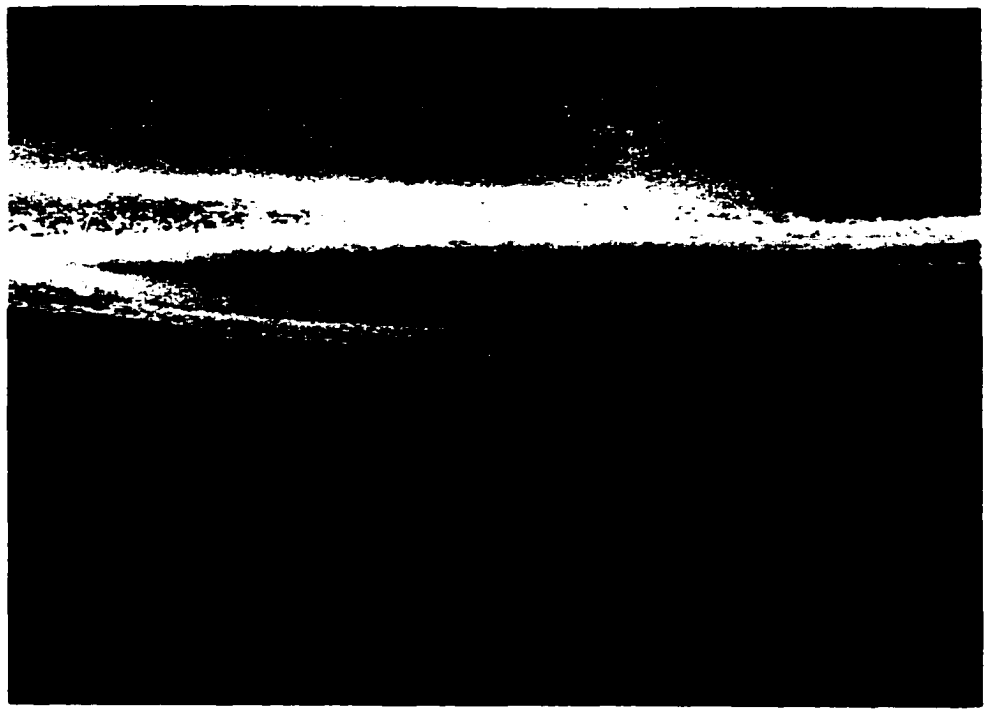

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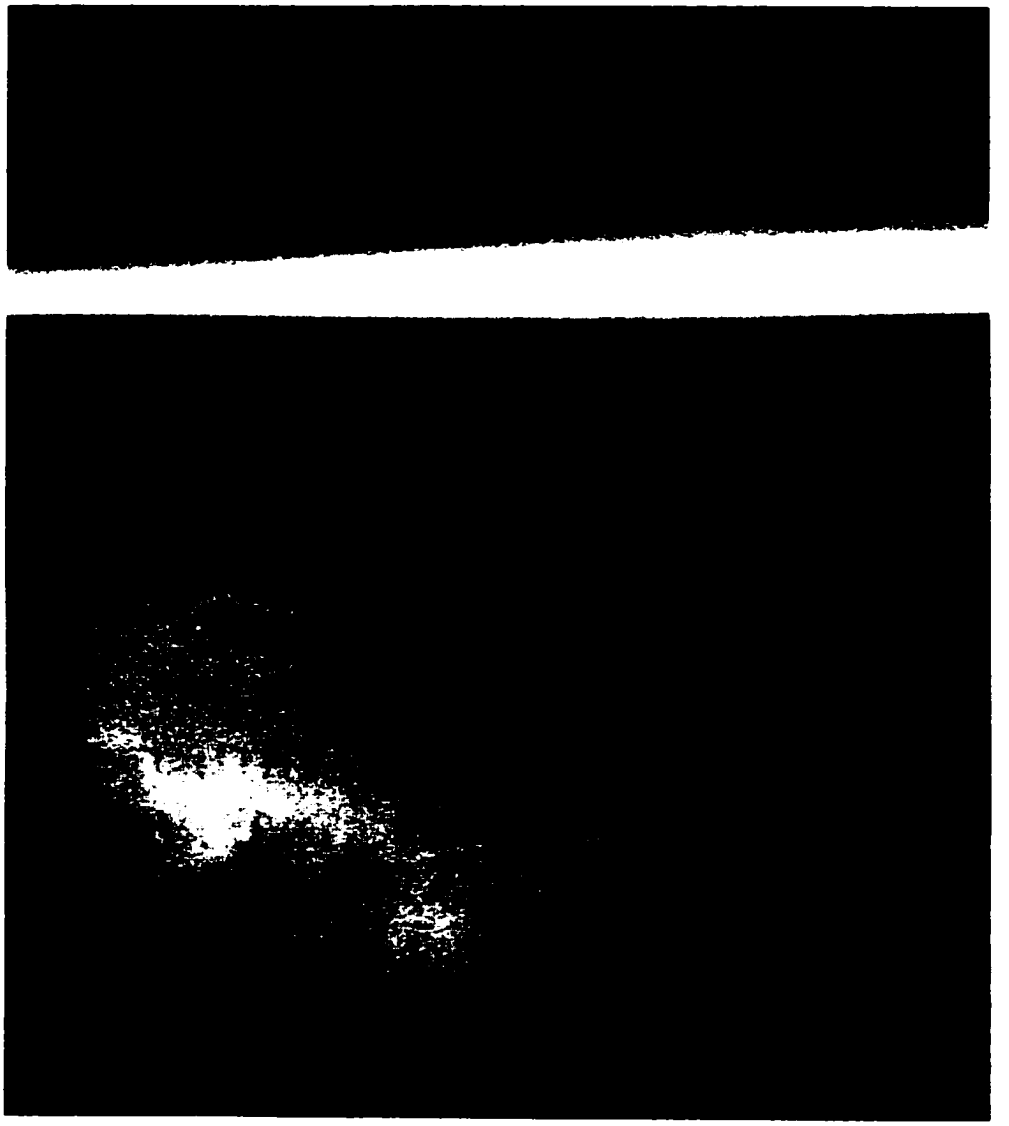

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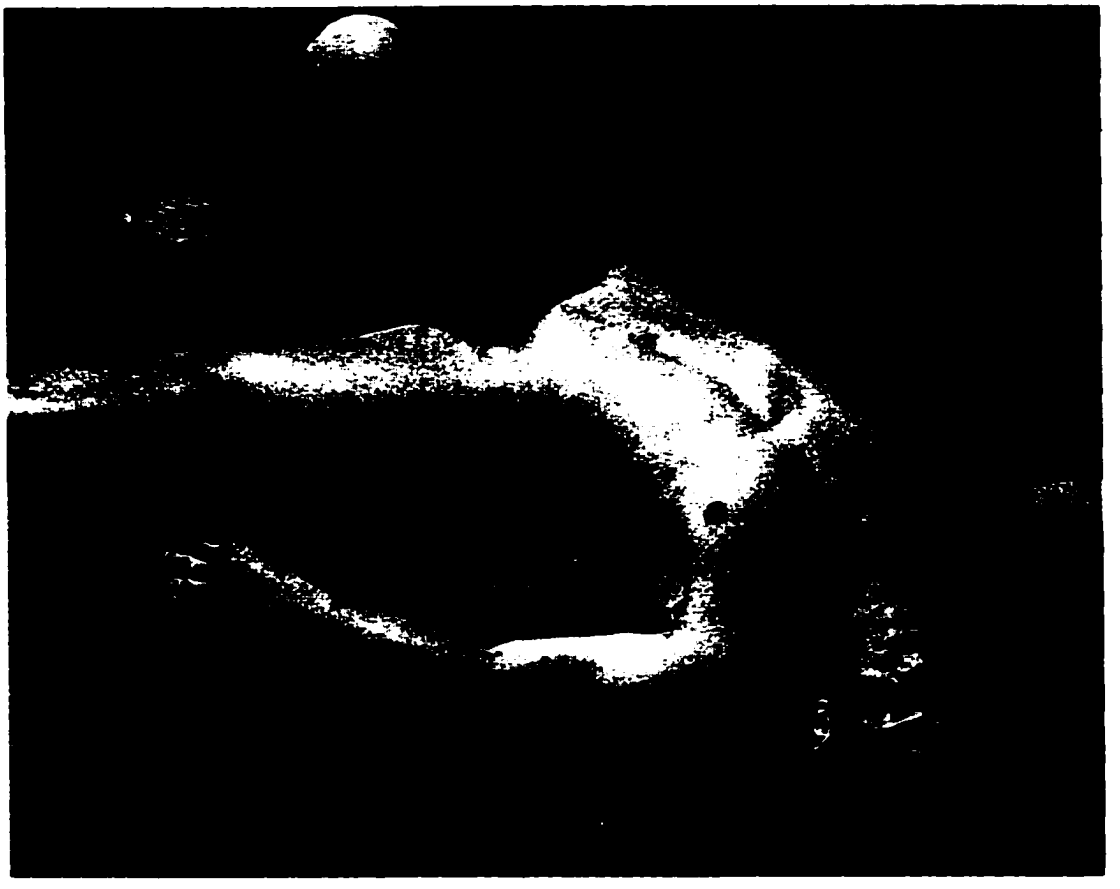

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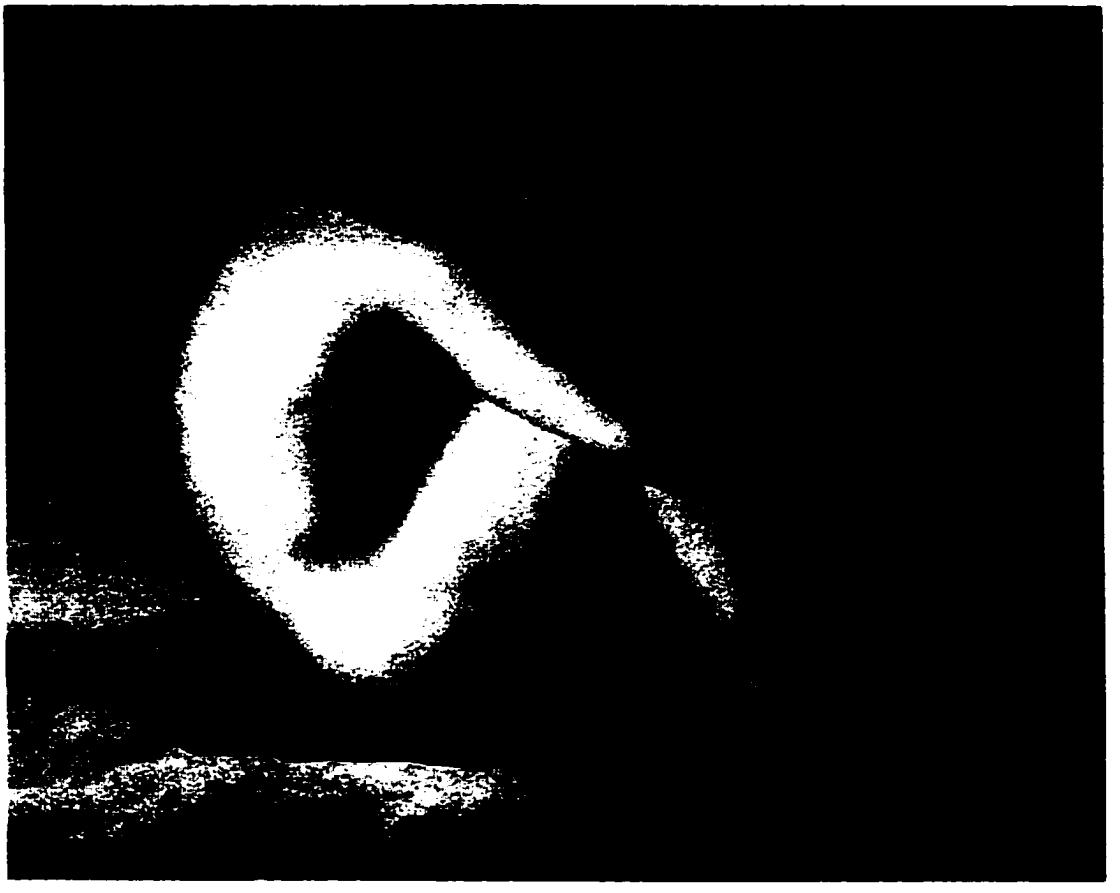

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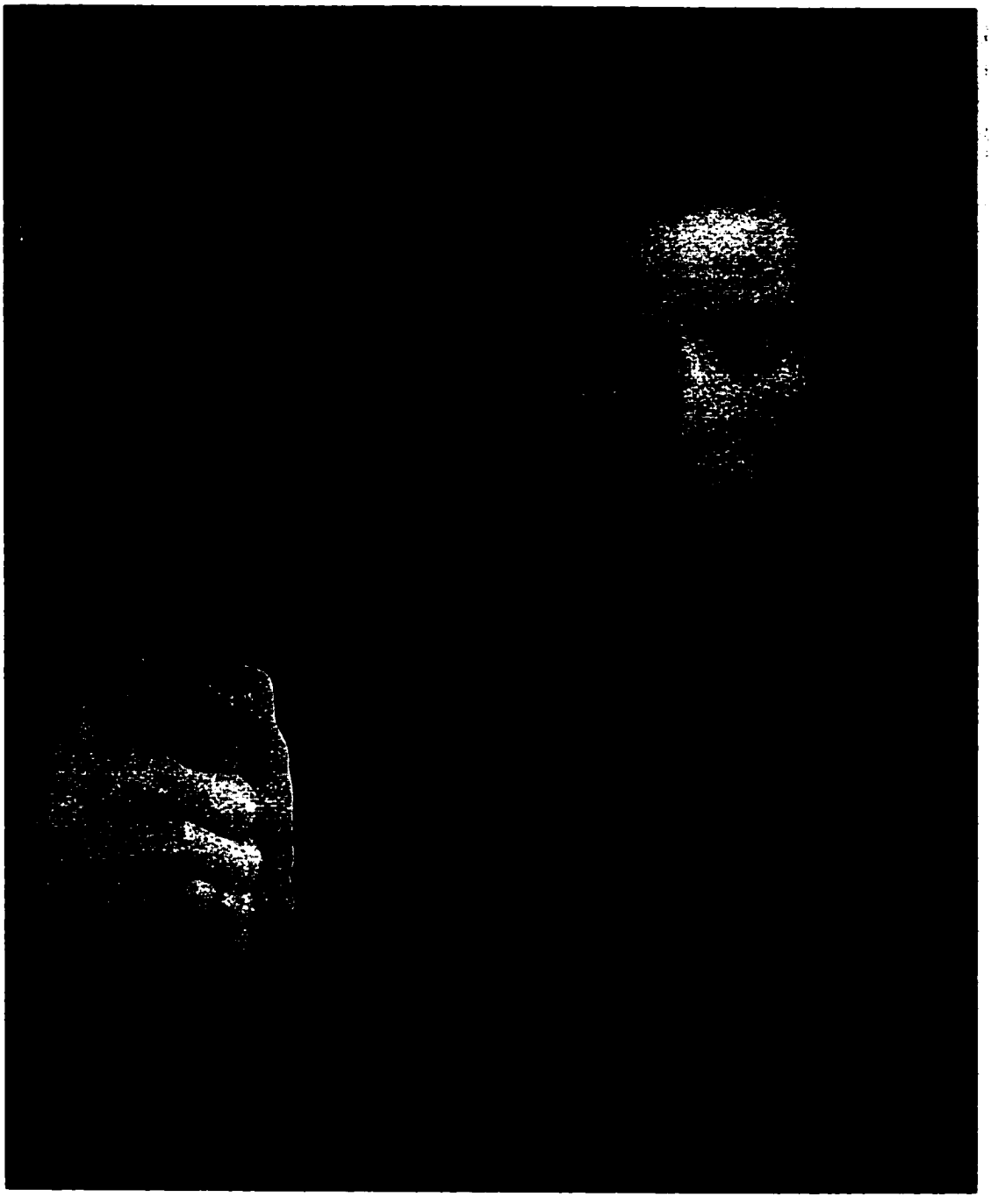

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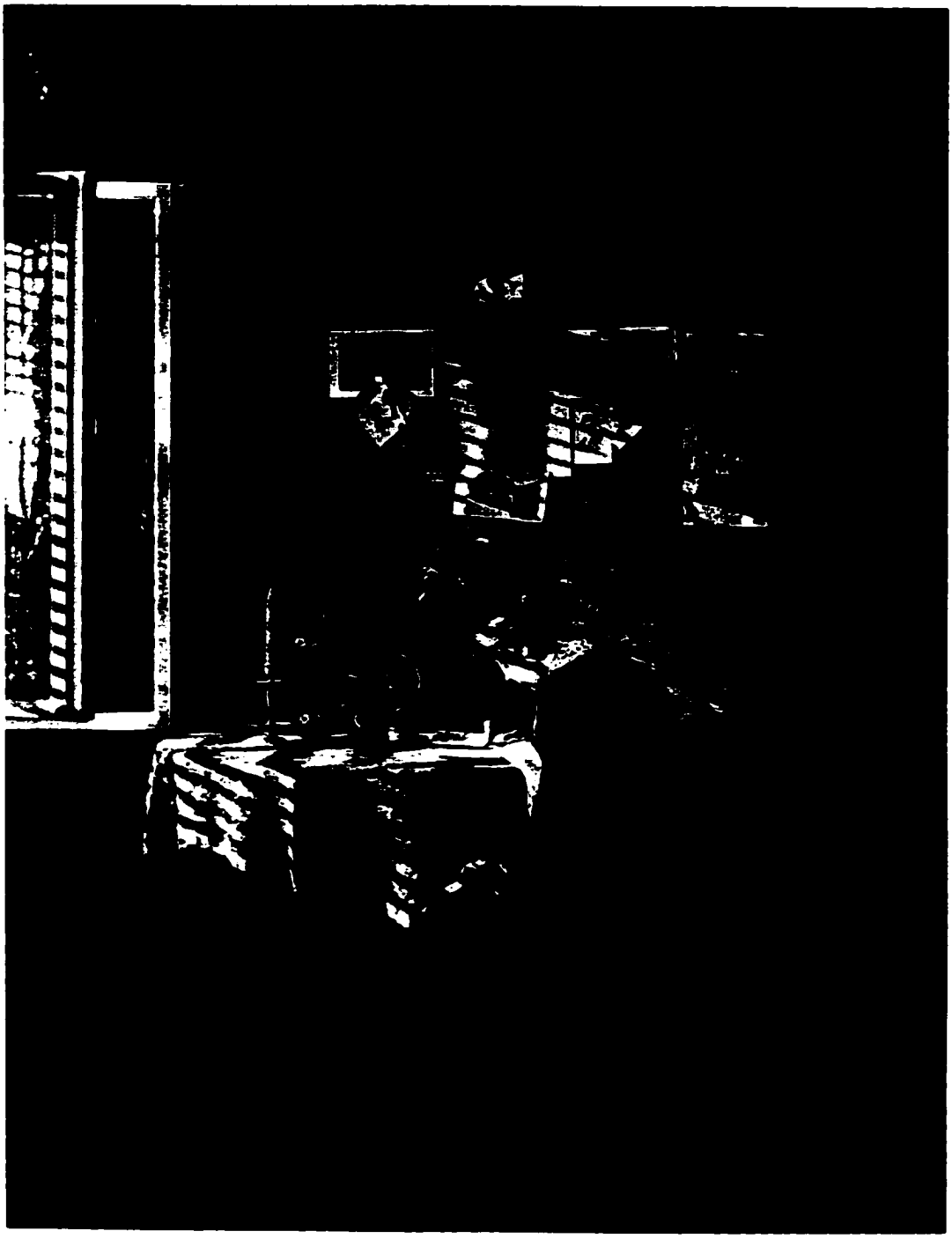

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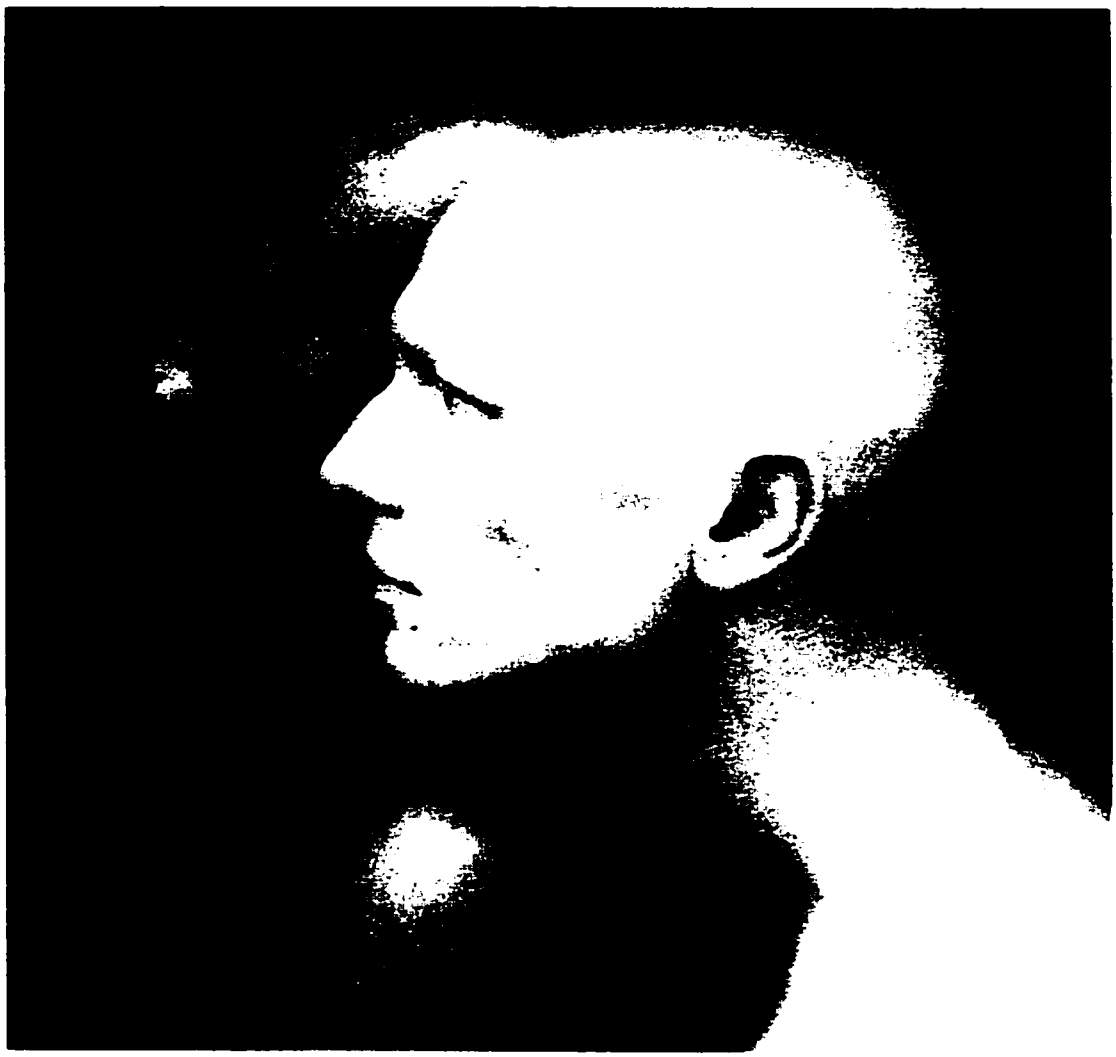

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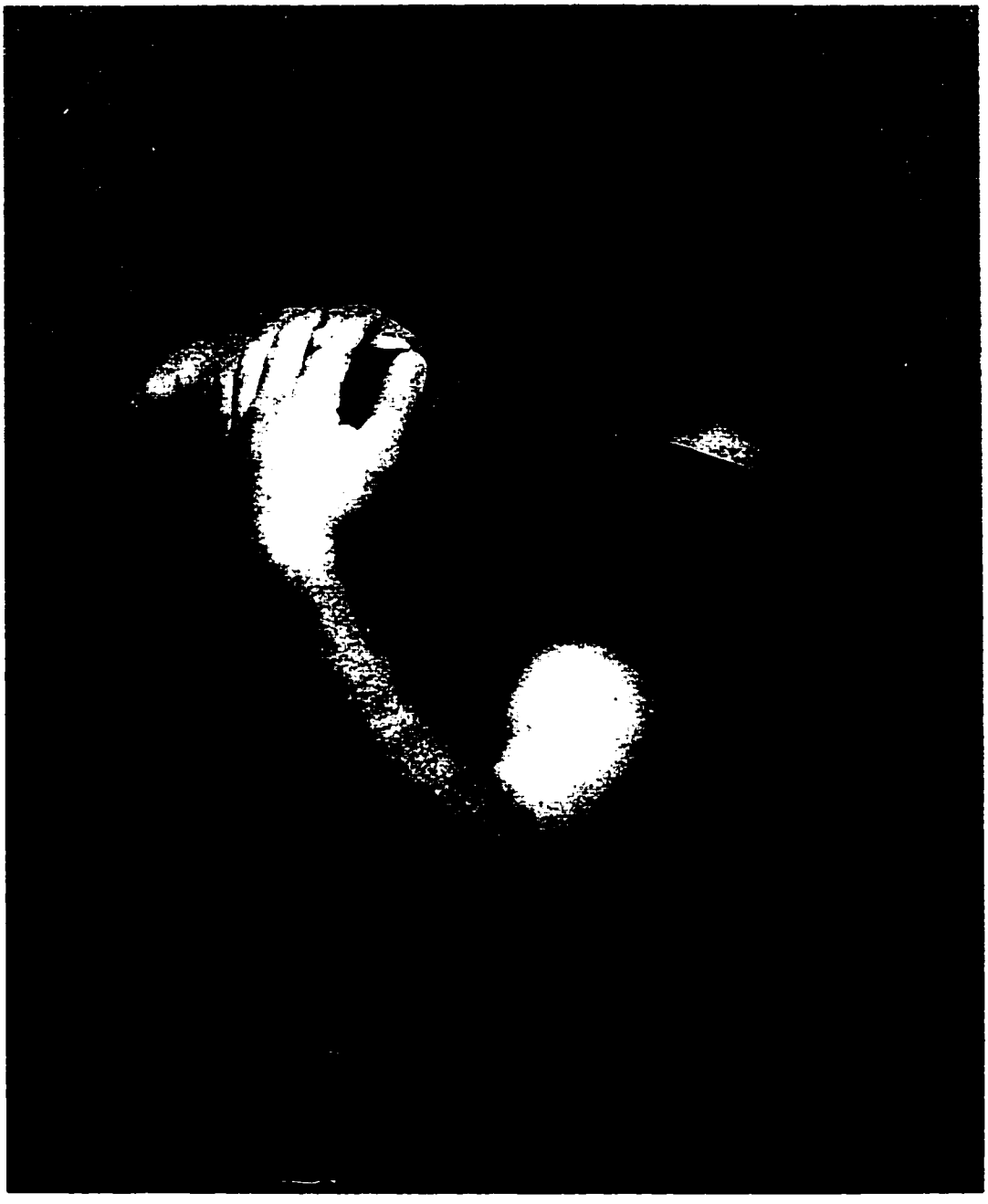

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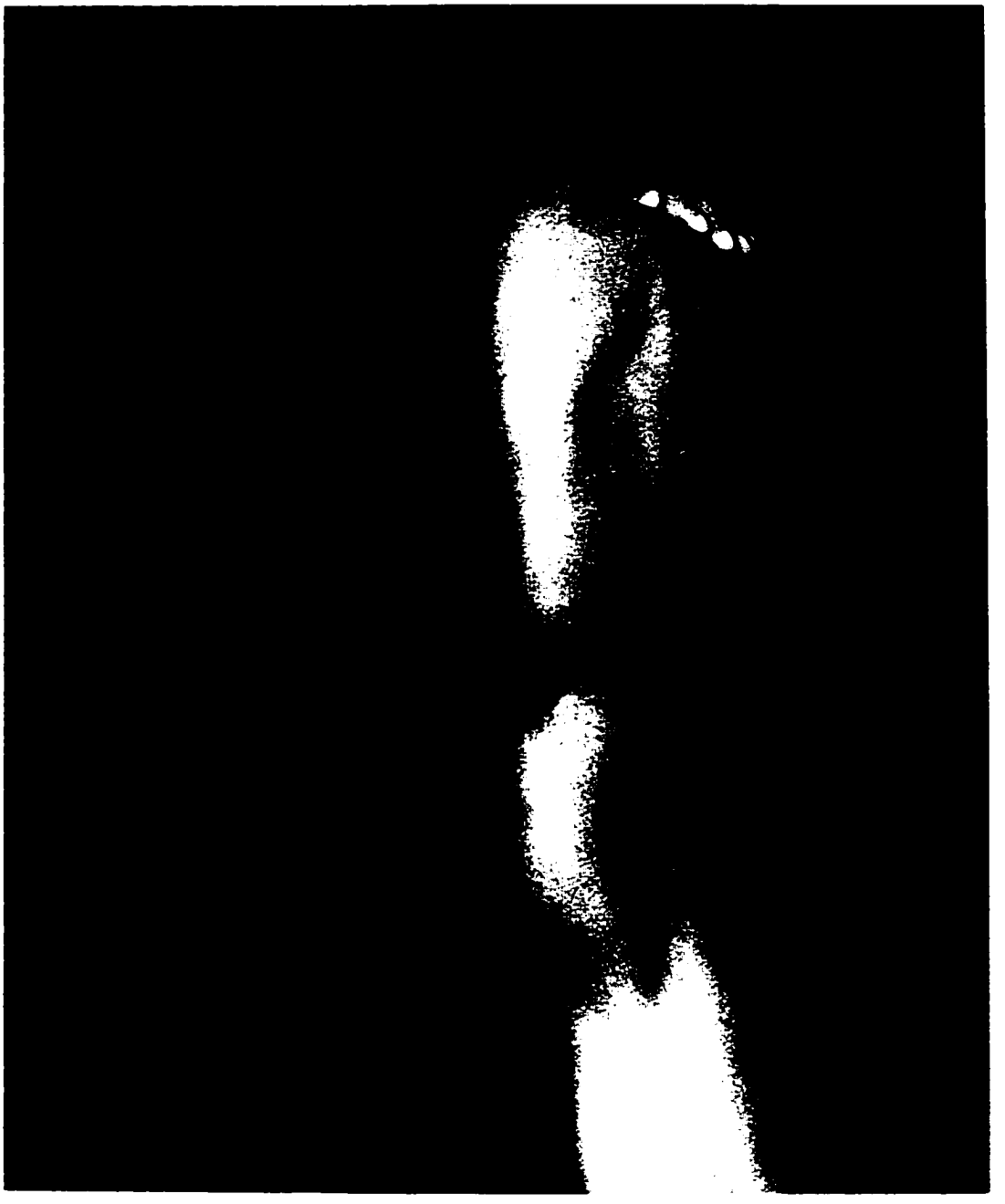

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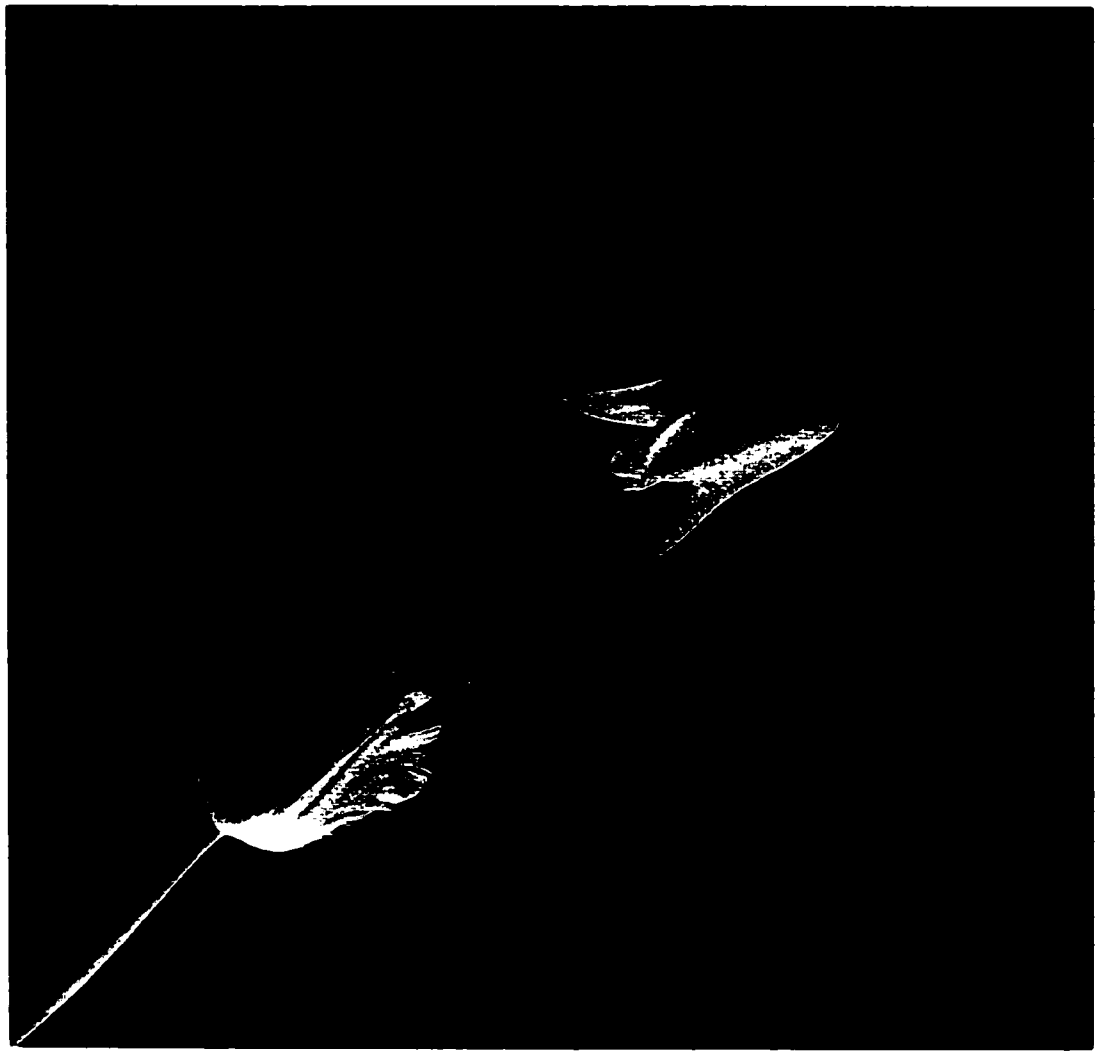

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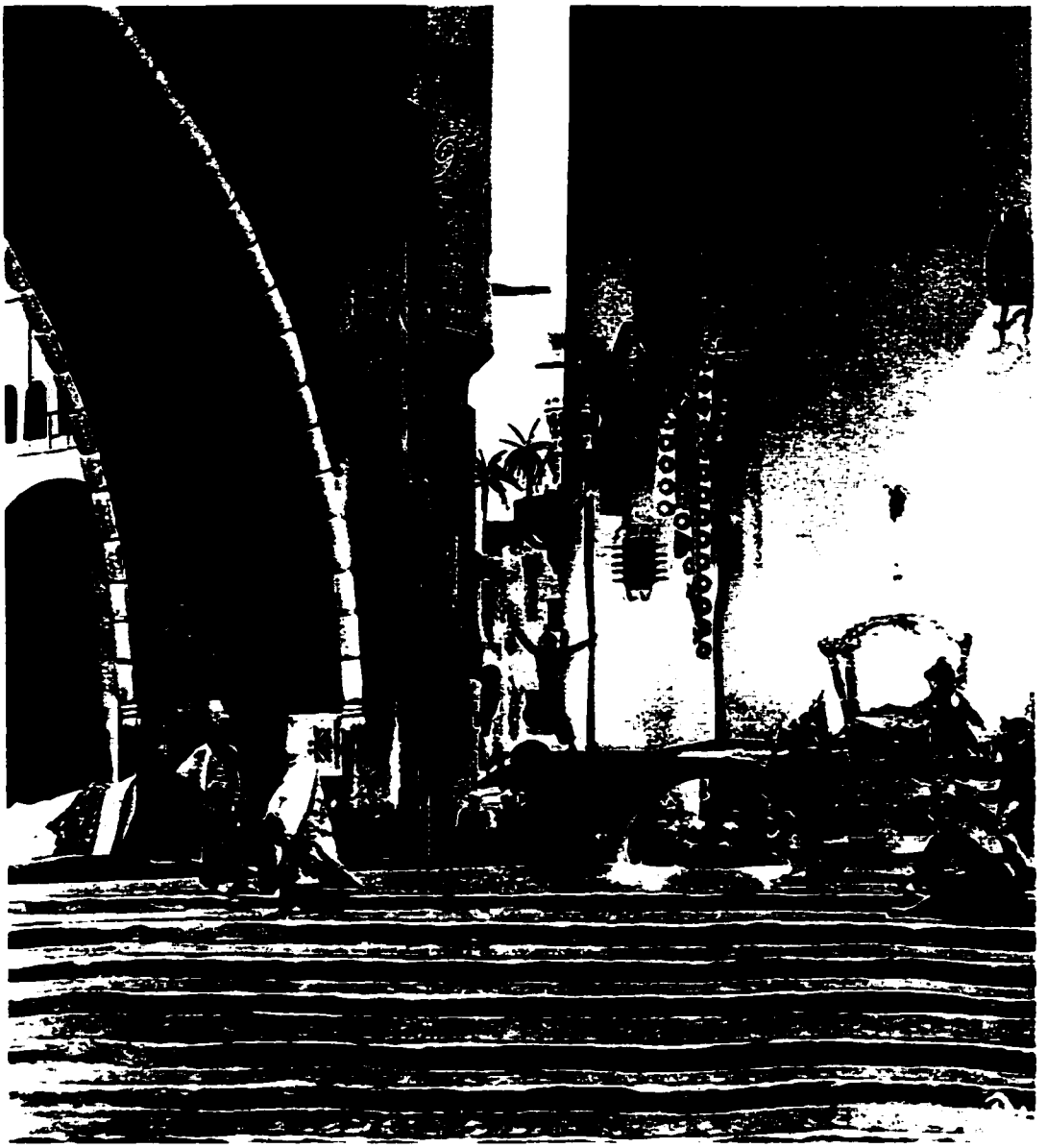

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