

THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

"THE MASTURBATOR INCREASES THE TRANSFORMATION OF SEXUALITY INTO SHARED INTERESTS . . . ALTHOUGH ALMOST UNNOTICED. THE MASTURBATOR'S FRIENDS APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN SEDUCED BY HIM...IT LOOKS AS IF ALL PERSONS OF CULTURE AND SIGNIFICANCE ARE INTENSIFIED. HE GENERATES A NARCISSISTIC WEALTH: ALL THE MASTURBATION SUSTAINED BY THE EXCHANGE OF THE OTHER'S DESIRE IS TRANSFORMED INTO THE CURRENCY OF DEVOTION. THE MASTURBATOR ALWAYS SUBCONSCIOUSLY IMAGINES HIMSELF TO BE THE HEROIC OBJECT OF ANOTHER'S DESIRE. THE MASTURBATOR SECRETLY WISHES TO DEFEAT SEXUALITY AND TRANSFORM IT INTO ADMIRATION. HE LOVES HIS FUNCTION AS THE CURATOR OF EROTICIZED MEMORIES."

—HOWARD HUSSEY¹



GAY MEN ARE PRETERNATURALLY VULNERABLE TO THE VISUAL. We often begin the process of coming out to ourselves as children when we recognize the involuntary pleasure we may experience when looking at other males, a gratification we instinctively recognize we are not supposed to enjoy. (Anxious that I would become aroused in the shower of my high-school locker room, I envied my lesbian counterparts whose titillation at the sight of their naked classmates, I assumed, could not be so easily detected.) The gay male's impulse to look at other males becomes entwined with an equal and opposite instinct to look away. We learn that this kind of conflicted seeing needs to be hidden, redirected to safer objects of longing, or, perhaps, sublimated into forms of narcissism. Photography offers gay men a special refuge from this self-censoring gaze. Here, the pleasure of staring at men we might desire but whom we know cannot look back at us merges with the security of our not being seen to do so. Significantly, this pleasure is mixed with the relief and emancipation—confirmed by the physical presence of the image before us—of discovering that we are not alone, that the pictures we are enjoying were made for and by a community of like-minded men with similar tastes and longings.²

The work of Gabriel Martinez redirects the coded relays of the reflexive, sometimes transgressive, often self-punishing gay male gaze and places them in relation to broader social collectives and other ways of seeing. Grounded in performative actions—private and public, scripted and spontaneous, theatrical as well as vernacular and banal—they are often recorded by photographs invested with the potency of relics. While his general methods reflect the strategies of contemporary peers who have brought photography and performance closer together over the last three decades, his practice is distinguished by a largesse manifest by its often lavish materiality as well as the scope of the audience to which it is directed. Despite the work's frequent address to gay men, Martinez's projects are pitched to a general, more universal public; in the end, everyone gets something to take home. Inspired by a range of social, media, and cultural phenomena, including pornography and an increasingly interactive, photoswapping Internet, Martinez's photographic works are meant to be seen in the light of day, in public spaces, and in the company of all kinds of people. Regardless of what they actually depict—which is, typically, the male body, and often the straight male body in a specific setting—their core subject is not so much these particular bodies but the ways they can be observed and by whom. The details of producing these photographs, the conspicuous physicality of each resulting print, as well as their final presentation and instal-



lation, all become critical. Generated as they are by confrontational actions, the resulting images, made for exhibition, often enact a second but coded transgression in the very fact of their being seen.

An early example of his work epitomizes Martinez's approach to making photographs and the divergent forms of showing and looking they encourage. At the outset of what is now a sixteen-year practice, Martinez made what were,



perhaps, the most unflattering, unflinchingly brutal self-portraits that we have had the courage to view. In a series that evolved over several years, while he was in his late twenties, he photographed his unclothed body with an 8" x 10" view camera assisted by his partner, Lee Shirley, with whom he has shared a committed relationship for twenty years. These sharply focused images, some shot in his bathroom, were taken from angles that capture Martinez's private accounting of his superficial imperfections: razor bumps, pimples, stretch marks, and other blemishes most of us try to conceal. To emphasize the clinical objectivity of his self-scrutiny, some of the images were presented as large-scale transparencies on custom-made light boxes or mounted on extension mirrors.³ In a courageous act of self-exposure, some were realized as posters and pasted on the walls of various locations throughout Philadelphia, where Martinez has lived since 1989. Devoid of labeling information, these anonymous self-portraits became self-incriminating mug shots. Questioning emerging standards of male beauty then being celebrated by an increasingly liberated, gay-friendly media, Martinez's project employed the self-portrait to purge himself of artificial forms of vanity constructed by these images.

Martinez uses photography as a means to invade heterosexual space and reveal queer values that otherwise might go undisclosed and unrecorded. In another early example of a self-portrait, from 1996, Martinez, his partner, Lee, and their dog, Patches, perform the ritual of sitting for a professional family photo. The resulting image (iconic and saccharine, save for an unexpected contribution from Patches) documents their act of coming out as a queer family at a neighborhood mom-and-pop photo studio in Northeast Philadelphia, a revelation that unfolds every time the work is exhibited. Although very different in formal terms, Martinez's more recent series of *Academic Nudes* (2003–6) charges a familiar genre in a similar manner. Among the temptations of the gay male art student is

violating the taboo of bringing a loaded camera into the drawing studio to secure an accurate record of a sexy male model that no croquis study could capture in quite the same way. Documenting professional models working at a number of art schools in Philadelphia, Martinez's photographs subtly capture the dilated stare of the gay male viewer. These black-and-white photographs manage to feel furtive and surreptitious, even though they were made with the full consent of the subjects and their respective venues; the gritty settings are as much the subjects of these works as their figures. (They also anticipate the authentic environments documented in his two new projects.) The realism of Martinez's academes alludes to a long history of the homoerotic photograph sanctioned by the fine-art context and its forgiving alibi of classicism without surrendering to its formal conceits.



Fusing the dynamics of photography, performance, distribution, and display, Martinez employs the camera as a rotating proscenium between public and private spaces, a device through which seeing and showing, looking and projecting, producing and consuming, become reciprocal behaviors.

For Martinez, the camera is a democratic instrument, operated as often by collaborators or those being depicted as it is by him. Frequently, it is the making of photographs that is the action being performed. Understanding that gay men tend to identify both with the camera as well as its male subjects (whom we both *desire* and *want to be* at the same time), Martinez's photographs can serve complementary functions for voyeurs and exhibitionists. Confident in their identity as documents of actions for which they are also *raison d'être*s, they also act as conduits for myriad forms of response, depending on who is viewing them and where.



In *A Spectacle* (1994), among the first of a series of elaborate performances involving large numbers of participants that Martinez realized through the 1990s, the audience was directed to a group of male and female figures wearing nothing but cameras who snapped photographs of the gaping spectators, turning the viewers' voyeurism back upon itself. For another group performance, *100% Body Surface* (1995), Martinez built a thirty-foot-long runway and covered it with photosensitive black-and-white film on which stood six nude men (of different ages, races, and physical types) luxuriantly, yet meditatively, applying Vaseline to their bodies in front of an SRO crowd of men and women gathered at Nexus, a nonprofit Philadelphia cooperative. Eventually reclining on the platform, illuminated from within the runway by red lights, they slowly transferred the oil on their flesh to the film before carefully proceeding out of the room. Using a Vaseline-resist process to develop the film before the audience, Martinez then transformed the oiled surface into a large negative. Displayed on the platform for the remainder of the exhibition, the resulting work established a regendered allusion to the *Anthropometries* of Yves Klein, which Klein executed with blue paint on live female models.⁴ I remember studying the print a few days after seeing the performance and discovering, among its abstract gestures, the perfectly legible impression of

the puckered areola of an asshole. Graphically precise, the mark seemed as much a registration of the pleasure I took in viewing the original performance as it was a trace of the body that placed it there. Finding this detail renewed and extended the event for me; it also established an unexpected, almost tactile intimacy. Such transformative experiences employing photographic processes to reorient the boundary between private and collective desire, personal and public space, past and present, have consistently attended Martinez's works.

On occasion, Martinez will exploit the manner in which the meanings of his photographs are contingent upon the contexts of their production as well as their viewing. In 1996, he was included in a six-person exhibition at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, in which three Philadelphia artists were paired with three artists from Switzerland, Geneva, and Italy.⁵ Matched appropriately with Vanessa Beecroft, Martinez developed a performance for the opening reception on the ground floor of the ICA that was presented simultaneously with Beecroft's in a gallery upstairs. For the duration of the work, Martinez, dressed in a tuxedo, posed on a faux-leather love seat with small groups of friends and Champagne-drinking well-wishers who waited in line for their chance to be photographed with him. All but a handful of participants, however, were unaware that Martinez was wearing a large butt plug the entire time. The resulting 216 instant black-and-white Polaroids, each 8" x 10", stamped and dated with a commemorative seal, were framed and mounted on the



wall during the reception and eventually given to the subjects following the exhibition. While they were being taken and installed, the photographs read as self-conscious records of an indulgent parody of an art opening. The day after, with the plug Martinez wore the night before displayed upright on the love seat where he had been sitting, the photographs turned into records of an extravagant prank that situated what had been the invisible, autoerotic pleasure of this openly gay artist within a larger, primarily heterosexual context. Through this surfeit of documentation, the hidden physical penetration experienced by Martinez was replayed at a larger scale as a second penetration of public, communal space, a gesture replete with divergent interpretations, all of which the artist allowed.

The ritual of the "group photo" that generated this work has achieved an evolving significance in Martinez's practice. The format always assumes a gathering of individuals whose identity is defined by an event, an action, or a social category and documented by a person, usually set apart from that group. Even when Martinez is not explicitly the individual holding the camera, questions of inclusion and exclusion remain relevant in these works. This is especially the case when the performers identify as heterosexual men, a category Martinez has explored in numerous projects and with particular vehemence and a sly, cheeky humor in *A Slice of Heaven* (1997). Conceived as a fund-raiser for the ICA, as well as a pastiche of Vanessa Beecroft's performance presented there, the work gathered twenty straight men in a "back-room" environment lit with red lamps. Each wore nothing but black dress socks and shoes, cheap toupees, and velvet, animal-

print underwear embroidered with the first name of each model and, later, raffled off for the benefit. Lounging about for an hour, both standing and seated on benches, the men were directed by Martinez “to remain unemotional and aloof, vulnerable, and detached.” What ensued, however, suggested a garish parody of a brothel in drag. According to Martinez, many of the men, attired as they were, appeared more fey than stereotypical gay men. Vividly demonstrating the volatile nature of masculinity, the project exposed the absurdity of stereotypical classifications in relation to gender and sexual orientation, an issue that has become one of his ongoing subjects.



Dominion over Gentility (1998–2000), a project executed in conjunction with his residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, contextualized a group of straight men in the slightly more dignified ambience associated with an elite gentlemen’s club. The project took as its focus the production and display of nine men’s robes made of embossed velvet lined with silk charmeuse. Designed after authentic Victorian gentlemen’s “negligees,” they were presented in tall, custom-made glass cases arranged to suggest

a locker room. To document the modeling of the robes, Martinez staged a photograph at Philadelphia’s Union League, a bastion of conservative exclusivity little more than a stone’s throw from City Hall. Inspired by Victorian photographs of sports teams, the finished image depicts nine models standing in a group around the artist, their heads replaced with portraits from vintage prints using digital imaging processes. Underneath their heavy garments, each of the models is entirely nude. The side pockets into which



they have inserted their hands have been consciously finished with an eccentric design feature: Sewn without linings, they permit their wearers to fondle themselves in secret should they wish to do so. Significantly, Martinez, who grew mutton chops for the shoot, stands at the center, as coach or headmaster, wearing a cashmere evening suit instead of one of the robes.

In *Sauna* (2000), Martinez transforms the group photo into a tableau vivant, a living picture depicting him, once again in a Victorian evening suit, separated from a provocative fantasy of his own making. Revisiting the context of the locker room—that loaded site of male vanity and exposure that Martinez first explored in *Body and Steel* (1993)⁶—Martinez invited nine straight men to wear the garments made for *Dominion over Gentility*. After mixing with guests at the opening reception for the exhibition “*Achieving Failure: Gym Culture 2000*” (Thread Waxing Space, New York), one by one each disrobed in the gallery before entering a private side door that led to a “steam room” built for the project. Eventually, all nine got comfortable on the tiered platform around Martinez, “asleep” in his suit and spats. Viewers were permitted to view the scene through an aperture cut into the wall, what the artist refers to as a “Punch and Judy stage set” mounted at child’s-eye level. At the end of the performance, the languishing men roused themselves into a pillow fight, filling the space with down stuffing. As the roughhousing subsided, the gentlemen exited the room, leaving Martinez to wake from his dream covered in feathers.

The licensing of the indulgent behavior of straight males in a group setting that excludes a gay witness is a motif in Martinez’s work that is given radical traction in *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men* (1996–98). In this project, Martinez invited one hundred straight males (from the ages of eighteen to approximately fifty-five) to photograph their feet during the moment of autoerotic climax. Initiated by a printed letter distributed to friends and colleagues, as well as by word of mouth, the series marked a logical progression in his investigation of group identification and the charged dynamics between gay and straight men. By taking on the subject of masturbation, the project frames Martinez’s exploration of the elastic border between private and public behavior within a historical debate that has been ongoing since the beginning of the eighteenth century, prior to which the subject was considered not worth worrying about. Our modern concern about the sin of Onan⁷ is rooted in its intrinsic privacy and the concealment of fantasy that is impossible to monitor—except by the perpetrators themselves. In a review of Thomas Laqueur’s *Solitary Sex*, an authoritative study of the cultural history of masturbation, published in 2003, critic Stephen Greenblatt summarizes three reasons why the Enlightenment concluded that the practice should be feared: “First, while all other forms of sexuality were reassuringly social, masturbation—even when it was done in a group or taught by wicked servants to children—seemed in its climactic moments deeply, irremediably private. Second, the masturbatory sexual encounter was not with a real, flesh-and-blood person but with a phantasm. And third, unlike other appetites, the addictive urge to masturbate could not be sated or moderated. ‘Every man, woman, and child suddenly seemed to have access to the boundless excesses of gratification that had once been the privilege of Roman emperors.’”⁸ Martinez’s original project, as well as its reprise in 2007, explores what Laqueur



proposes may be the ultimate moral boundary between self-government and the fate of civilization. While it might seem that attitudes about what Jean-Jacques Rousseau once called the “dangerous substitute”⁹ have changed, President Clinton’s 1995 firing of the U.S. Surgeon General, Jocelyn Elders, in response to remarks she made expressing her belief that “[masturbation] is a part of human sexuality” and “perhaps...should be taught,” indicate otherwise.¹⁰ Elders’s comment reflects the teachings of Sigmund Freud, who assigned to the activity a constitutive role in the human condition, espousing that we “pass through” masturbation and “build on it” to become sexual adults.¹¹ Regardless, self-gratification remains a challenging topic for general audiences. “Masturbation is virtually unique,” writes Greenblatt, “in an array of more or less universal human behaviors, in arousing a peculiar and peculiarly intense current of anxiety.”¹² When in the rare instances it is taken up by mainstream culture, it is generally handled with nervous laughter, bad puns, and sophomoric humor.¹³

In both versions of his project, Martinez has found relevant and compelling means to position the subject within the discourse of contemporary art as well as broader contexts. His initial impetus came from a series of videotapes he first saw in the mid-1990s showing straight U.S. Marines jerking off for pay with the assistance of a mostly off-camera facilitator named “Bobby,” and with such titles as *AWOL*, *Discharge*, and *Good to Go*. A more instrumental impulse for the work emerged from historical examples provided by self-declared sex researchers, along with their methodologies, taxonomies, and photographic archives.¹⁴ While the number of prints that comprise the work point to the excess often associated with masturbation, the necessity for the statistical set of one hundred examples stems from the terms of a hypothetical experiment devised by Martinez investigating the behavior of the feet and toes of heterosexual men during climax. The

difficulty of the task (as he states, "Any less than one hundred would be too easy") reflects his feelings about straight men as "unattainable" objects of desire for homosexuals. In addition to the vigor with which Martinez attained his complete set of samples, his explicit use of the word "heterosexual" in the work's title is significant. A clue to the project's alibi as the brainchild of a scientist with an agenda, the word confirms the exclusion of gay participants who can only be active in relation to this project as viewers, insisting on a form of segregation that celebrates the performance of the homosexual gaze.

The finished state of the first version of the work features a grid of one hundred images (each 3 3/8" x 2 7/8") printed as ambrotypes,¹⁵ depicting pairs of legs splayed in different directions against a black background. Resembling miniature portraits, each print—a negative image on glass—is encased in an authentic Victorian brass mat and preserver, lined in red velvet, and framed in mahogany. When first presented at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, all one hundred were mounted on a wood panel wrapped in the very fabric Martinez draped behind the legs of all the subjects. (The possibility that this single cloth—which remained unwashed throughout the project—may still hold traces of the DNA of each participant gives it the status of a material relic that is relevant to the later version of the work.) All one hundred images can be seen in one glance; en masse, they convey the intimacy of another group portrait, as well as the reverence we associate with a shrine. Despite any knowledge of what the subjects are doing at the moment of exposure, the work belies an innocence and goodwill that is the product of collective trust and collaboration. The series also conveys sacral associations with the moment of orgasm and its paradoxical condition of a near mystical, transcendent release coupled with physical pleasure and "beautiful agony."¹⁶



Isolated against the black background without any evidence of context or perspective, we cannot always tell if these feet are resting on the floor or rising from it of their own accord, caught, possibly, in the act of jumping (for joy, perhaps?) or levitating out of the frame, ascending to some other realm. These readings join iconic references to the crucifixion, as well as specific canvases by Mantegna and Manet depicting Christ being prepared for burial.¹⁷ Maybe we are looking at these feet from above, as if they are lying on a bed or a table. Privileging this perspective, each disembodied pair of legs may also be said to resemble a mortuary document befitting the record of a "little death." When we scan the grid back and forth, upward and down, the images become remarkably animated, the various positions of the legs implying the actions of a single figure in the manner of a Muybridge motion study. In terms of the alleged scientific research they purport to document, the one hundred images do, in fact, provide evidence of an involuntary curling of the toes that may bear a relationship to Babinski's reflex if not some other yet-to-be-named neurological phenomenon.¹⁸

The first version of *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men* is a fully realized and resolved work that fits logically within the evolution of Martinez's practice. In his letter of invitation generating the second series, sent ten years later, he admits that he enjoyed the original source photographs for the first series before they were scaled down and transformed into ambrotypes, a procedure that he subsequently felt suppressed their immediacy. Intrigued by what he calls "an uneasy presence" in these photographs, Martinez recognized signs of further possibilities for a reprise of the work using contemporary digital technology. After several years devoted to projects exploring forms of memorial homage, his Catholic identity, and gendered standards of physical/athletic prowess (manifest in an

elaborate study of the "perfect" performances of competitive figure skater Michelle Kwan), he returned to the issue of masculinity via a 2006 performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.¹⁹

Comparing the 2007 version of the series with the former, we see that each set reveals attributes about the other that encourage them to be read and enjoyed as two independent works that inform each other in useful ways. Although separated by only a decade, the first series, executed just prior to the widespread use of the World Wide Web, seems more remote, as if it were a genuine product of the nineteenth century. The new version—in its reliance on digital instruments and Internet communications—is unequivocally a creature of the twenty-first. Although Martinez started the 2007 project with an updated variation of the letter he used ten years ago, along with word of mouth among friends and colleagues, he could not have gotten his hundred samples in the time allotted without contacts from such websites as craigslist.com and adultfriendfinder.com.



The most apparent difference in the new iteration of *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men* is the singular presence established by the almost-life scale of each color photograph, as well as the overwhelming impression made by the full set of one hundred images. This continuous grid of framed chromogenic prints, each photograph abutting the next, has the environmental,



immersive capacities of an installation that begins to suggest an expansive "tea room" and the potential for an extensive game of footsie, were it not such an outdated mode of proposition (a fact that makes Senator Larry Craig's strategy for anonymous contact in a public restroom as quaint as it is unfortunate). Each of these images makes physical contact with its neighbors to create an almost claustrophobic proximity. For Martinez, the installation shows us what we might see if someone "suddenly lit a match to light his cigarette in a busy back room where everything was dark and anonymous."²⁰ This sudden revelation of stacked cubicles, each containing a man in extremis, suggests a photographic variation of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, that efficient architecture of surveillance created by the union of self-censorship and public scrutiny.

With the exception of a few subjects who chose to keep their trousers on or drop them to the floor, the legs of most of the subjects are bare. The naked thighs, calves, ankles, and clenched toes, which were so hard to get a good look at in the ambrotypes, become telling protagonists in these larger color images. Martinez insists that the project is not about fetishizing feet, but it is difficult for him to disabuse us of this reading, especially in light of all the absent male genitals. Often cropped within a hair of the subject's testicles, in the manner of a miniskirt on a drag queen, the legs in most of these photographs provide decisive evidence

of the undraped male pelvis just out of reach of the top edge. Cut off as they are from each torso, these legs resemble twinned bodies (left and right, same but different), and thus become analogs for gay coupling. As metonyms for the missing phallus, they also indulge the apocryphal legend about the relationship between foot and penis size, touching on the matter of “sizing up,” an issue about which both gay and straight men obsess equally (and perhaps might be a matter for further research).



The shift to a wide horizontal (“landscape”) format in relation to the oval vertical (“portrait”) orientation of the first series opens up a detailed terrain of carpets and floors, along with myriad clues to class, taste, education, hobbies, personal and domestic hygiene, and ubiquitous tangles of electric cords linking the subject to video monitor and Internet. The angle of the camera places the viewer, in Martinez’s terms, in a frontal position of “servitude and worship.” The wealth of information in these images invites us to study these interiors as if they were crime scenes loaded with forensic evidence. Martinez’s goal to produce prints with sharp, overall focus and detailed resolution, coupled with the necessity of a portable light source, required that the camera shutter remain open from one quarter to a full second. These longer exposure times sometimes result in the expressive blur of moving feet, but also make it more difficult to register the paths of “ejaculate in trajectory,” documented so graphically by Andres Serrano in his abstract and disembodied series of 1989.²¹ In a handful of the shots, with some willful searching, one can see gray, linear smudges of flying sperm. In many more, and with much less effort, we can spot semen on the carpet or floor.

The freshly dropped fluid is verification of a climax in process, and opens up an unusual temporality for these images. Thanks to digital technology, the sitters are able to take multiple exposures of their feet (usually between six to eight) during their orgasm, giving Martinez the option to choose the one frame he feels is the most essential of any given sequence. The ephemeral brevity of the male climax, as registered in this manner by the photograph, is seemingly suspended in perpetuity. Joining a collection of similar moments unified around a single, identical instant of exposure, each communes with its neighbor to represent a simultaneous *jouissance* of undreamed of, orgiastic proportions.

Except in one instance (at this writing, at least) do we get a glimpse of the busy hands of the subjects—one is firing the surgeon general while the other is shooting the digital camera with the remote shutter release. The conflation of production and consumption that can occur in Martinez’s work is embodied here in the dual roles played by the remote. In some instances, according to the taste of the participant, a *second* remote is used to facilitate the subject’s use of visual stimulation, which Martinez offers in the form of a DVD compilation of straight porn. According to the artist, half of the men choose not to use the erotica provided, the printed form of which—a dog-eared copy of *Hustler*—is visible on the floor in some of the shots. Many of the participants seem to be aroused simply by the presence of the camera and the hot light set up in spaces chosen by the subject before Martinez departs. These trappings of an amateur porn shoot, he notes, also resemble the setting of an interrogation scene, while providing the constant (scientific) illumination we see in all but a few of the one hundred images.

The remote control feature on Martinez’s Nikon D-80 allows his subjects to take multiple exposures for a duration of up to fifteen minutes after it is set. Once Martinez has programmed the camera and left the model’s home, the subject has only a quarter hour to complete his task before the camera defaults back to its single-exposure mode. This given time limitation exerts some additional pressure on the subjects; none, to date, has exceeded it.²² If this coincidental, fifteen-minute period suggests the duration of Andy Warhol’s famously democratic entitlement of fame, the provocation of Martinez’s camera and hot light makes a more direct reference to the process that generated Warhol’s earliest films. Writing about these works in his 2001 biography of the artist, Wayne Koestenbaum remarks that the simple presence of Warhol’s loaded Bolex—what Koestenbaum calls his “spy”—could actually “incite sex” as well as “earn the right to see it.”²³

Koestenbaum’s comments on Warhol’s filming process seem particularly relevant to Martinez’s project, especially in its repetition and the instrumental, perhaps therapeutic value of the photographs to both models and viewers. “Warhol’s Bolex,” he writes, “authorized and legitimized excess. It functioned as a moral solvent, a mechanized confessional, dragging out bugaboos and detoxifying them, the absolving repetitions of reels like a host of Hail Marys.”²⁴ This emphasis on the camera, or, rather, its substitution for the director behind it, is crucial. Martinez’s absence at the scenes being filmed—one of several contractual conditions that permit the performances to be recorded in the first place—preserves some measure of the privacy that is essential to these acts of self-absorption. At the same time, Martinez’s “spy”—the live, anticipatory camera—also compromises this solitude. Transforming the (selfish?) autoerotic act into something for the delectation of others, the process also makes each model complicit in his self-objectification for a community of spectators that includes gay men but is not limited to them. By altering the usual conditions of solitary sex in ways that are unprecedented for most of the participants, as well as viewers, Martinez grants it unforeseen meanings and purposes.



Martinez entitles each photo with the first name of his sitter, but he allows participants the option of withholding even this shred of identity should they wish. Regardless, it is ultimately the anonymity assured by the decisive cropping of each photograph that makes the project possible. It is here, once again, that Warhol becomes a salient reference, in particular his 1964 film *Blow Job*. The only activity viewers see in this forty-one-minute film is the storm of expressions that cross the tightly cropped face of its protagonist, evocations that range from pain and boredom to religious rapture. With the possible exception of the cigarette smoked in the final reel, there are no other objective clues to activity promised by the film’s title. At first glance, Martinez’s project elicits a similar sense of our



need to take the artist at his word, yet a number of the photographs give us ample evidence that the man whose legs we are looking at has indeed ejaculated. The visual spectacle of the male orgasm—the industrial staple of both straight and gay porn, the cum shot—has been sacrificed. The trophy Martinez takes home in its place, however, is infinitely more compelling. The quiet but undeniable presence of seed cast onto the ground in some of the images equates the material production of semen with the photograph that records it. Diverting the methodology and reproductive services of the sperm bank, Martinez’s project generates new pictures for us instead.

Because its milky opacity and fluid nature are temporary, semen can be legibly photographed for only a short period of time before it dries and begins to resemble other indeterminate blemishes in the community of stains. Photographed wet, it becomes declarative evidence of pleasure in progress. By comparison, those photos in this series that show no trace of semen raise the specter of the faked orgasm, a fiction not normally indulged in by men but one that—when resorted to by heterosexual women to avoid injuring the egos of their male partners—points to masturbation as an alternate sexuality and mode of self-expression liberated from the strictures, as well as the real hazards, that can accompany coupled sex, straight or gay.²⁵ Martinez’s project also reminds us that male masturbation can be a demonstration of phallic worship that accesses an archaic (Priapic) essence of masculinity, which bonds gay men and their straight brothers in a shared

move away from “normal” heterosexual relations. Masturbation is practiced with more frequency by boys and men than it is by girls and women, a statistical consequence due, in part, to the anatomical availability of the penis. We could propose, then, that the secret vice is not only *male* but, because it has historically shared the closet with men’s love for other men, is, as Lacquer has stated, “decidedly queer.”²⁶

Indulging us in the vivid, well-lit *mise-en-scènes* of acts we have been prevented from witnessing directly but to which we have been granted intimate, immediate, and consensual proximity, Martinez’s photographs become fuel for fantasies that, in their wealth of implicit detail, are as anecdotal as they are visual.²⁷

When we recall that we are looking at the feet of men involved in the production and consequences of their own imaginations as well, the generative capacity of these images becomes truly realized. Martinez’s occlusion of the money shot is a device that we have seen in the work of Larry Sultan, Ken Probst, and Jeff Burton—all of whom have taken photographs on porn sets without depicting anything overtly pornographic. By making us conscious of the edges of the cinematic frame and by drawing attention away from sex and more to its contexts, these pictures assert that eros resides not only in our heads but also in its staging. By comparison, the photographic close-ups of Aura Rosenberg and John McRae, depicting the faces of their subjects in the throes of orgasm, are so intimately explicit that they leave little room to the imagination. This is also the case with the short videos on mybeautifulagony.com, a website that invites participants to share footage of their faces—and only their faces—during orgasm. (For me, at least, the sense of doubt and extreme length of



Blow Job make Warhol’s film more captivating.) Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972), a work defined by its complete elimination of the visual, perhaps best illuminates the virtues of Martinez’s project. In this now-iconic performance work (first presented at Sonnabend Gallery, in New York, and reproduced and reinterpreted by Marina Abramovic at the Guggenheim, in 2006), Acconci positioned himself under a platform that rose from the gallery floor and onto which visitors could walk. Upon hearing a visitor enter the gallery, Acconci would narrate a fantasy about that person into a microphone, which was broadcast live by an audio monitor on top of the platform as he masturbated beneath it. Although less gendered and defined by sexual orientation, *Seedbed*’s staging of a kind of imaginary, hermetic contact between people who cannot see each other reflects the foregrounding of fantasy on which Martinez’s images hinge.



The dark, veil-like forms concealing the identities of the figures that comprise *Untitled (Self-Portraits)*, the second project on view in this exhibition, complement the paradoxical anonymity of *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men*. In each of these solarized prints, processed from original images downloaded from dudesnude.com, manhunt.com, ratemyschlong.com, and other Internet sources, the face of the subject has been masked by the flash from the camera reflected in a mirror. Whether conscious applications of a photographic phenomenon or inadvertent accidents, the overexposed light sources draw our attention to an array of posing bodies. The figures represented run the gamut from preening beefcake to less buff types that appear, alternately, forlorn or hopeful, depending on who’s looking through the deep haze of these prints. While we can assume that the men depicting themselves are gay, the various states of undress and modes of display in these gray images suggest a gradient of orientations and motivations in keeping with Martinez’s larger project.

We know that there are many ways to go about taking a photograph of oneself without using a mirror, let alone revealing the presence of the camera. It is precisely this combination of flash and looking-glass reflection—the substitution of cameras for eyes—that Martinez makes a subject in this series. The overexposures and dangling straps are not only markers of expediency and inexperience, they can also be read as signals of the isolation or autonomy of men who have not asked another to take their photographs. The sexual agency being advertised in some of the images can also be seen as another example of the erotic provo-

cation of the camera, enhanced, possibly, for some of these subjects, by studying their own reflections. This split condition of desiring both self and other is reproduced in the conflation of photograph and mirror image, a phenomenon made literal in those examples depicting mirrors whose surrounding frames are also pictured. It is also ably demonstrated in Martinez’s *Double Anonymous* (2007), a symmetrical diptych made from a single negative that eloquently, if not without a cool, perhaps disturbing precision, provides an example of the *mise en abyme* of queer, narcissistic scopophilia.

Each example included in *Untitled (Self-Portraits)* is the result of an elaborate process combining digital, chemical, and analog procedures that contradicts the ease and speed with which the original snapshots were taken. Martinez’s solarized images also echo the historical processes used to produce the ambrotypes that comprise the first version of *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men*. After downloading the original color photographs, Martinez transforms them into black-and-white images, reversing their values to transform them into paper negatives using a laser printer. These paper negatives are then contact-printed onto traditional silver gelatin paper and solarized in the darkroom. The sudden blast of light required by this technique re-performs the flash depicted in the source images. In the final prints, blacks not only become whites, and vice versa, but contours are heightened by white outlines, shadows are exaggerated, and the specs on the dirty mirrors are given an explosive, graphic presence.



Martinez’s transformation of the Internet portraits, characterized by the lurid topicality of their often abject color, cleanses them of their specificity and self-conscious heeding, displacing them into a broader arena that not only includes some of the portraits of Man Ray (processed with the same technique) but the grisaille paintings of Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol’s silk screens. In another consequence of the darkroom procedure, the blank, overexposed areas in each



image expose the chemical activity that has occurred on the surface of the photographic paper. Each camera flash becomes a smoky, liquid stain deposited on the surface of the print. Recalling the drops of semen visible in some of the *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men*, these passages assert a singular, corporeal reality for images, that without Martinez’s appropriation, would most likely exist only in virtual forms. The series thus provides a documentary function in an era in which the “jack pack” file on the desktop has started to replace the cache of magazines under the bed.

Presented in a grid, the *Untitled (Self-Portraits)* set up the possibility of alternate, imaginary connections with the other self-portraits in the exhibition. The multiple flashes captured in the confines of bathroom and bedroom mirrors suggest the public popcorn of paparazzi, perhaps celebrating, if not photographing, the performances in the *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men*. The two series, each representing groups of anonymous men in the isolation of their private environments, represent the poles of desire and satisfaction. Presented together in this public venue, the two projects open up a real as well as a hypothetical space for connection, identification, and fantasy that coincides with the formation of communities and new ways of charting what curator Bill Arning, writing about Martinez’s work in 1997, called the “living dynamic structures of queer erotics.”²⁸ In an era defined by technology’s dramatic redefinition of public and private space and the mixed blessings that accompany the mainstreaming of gay sensibility, Martinez’s provocations play an instrumental role not only in helping us negotiate these structures of desire and identity but creating them as well.

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NOTES

¹Abstractions from Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). These notes were taken by artist and writer Howard Hussey while he was enrolled in the course “Form, Structure, and Symbol,” School of Visual Arts, New York, 1962.

²These comments were developed in response to Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine, Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Bill Arning’s text about Martinez’s work, published in the June 1998 *Honcho*, also proved instrumental.

³A day job that Martinez held working in a photo lab that processed before-and-after documentation for plastic surgeons and dermatologists had an early impact on his aesthetic.

⁴Martinez’s reference to Klein’s *Anthropometries* (1960) in this project is also an allusion to Ap Gorny. An influential artist and teacher now residing in Buffalo, Gorny lived in Philadelphia in the mid-1980s and early ‘90s. A mentor to Martinez, Gorny developed many ambitious projects in response to the work of Yves Klein.

⁵In addition to the work of Martinez and Beecroft, “You Talkin’ to Me?” paired Philadelphia artists Tristin Lowe and Virgil Marti with the work of Ugo Rondinone and Anne Sauser-Hall, respectively. The exhibition at the University of Pennsylvania was curated by Patrick Murphy and Paulo Columbo.

⁶For *Body and Steel*, Martinez gathered fifteen men clad only in jock straps (and wearing no deodorant) to work out in a gallery set up as an exercise room. Viewers were allowed to look at but not to touch or talk with the performers, as the gallery filled with the smell of sweat. For the duration of the two-hour performance, Martinez was in a separate space taking a shower, which viewers were able to watch as a live-feed video projection.

⁷Technically speaking, Onan’s sin was not an act of autoeroticism but coitus interruptus. According to Genesis 38:1-10, after God killed Onan’s older brother Er, Onan was required by the tradition of levirate marriage to marry Er’s widow, Tamar. When he had intercourse with Tamar, Onan “spilt his seed upon the ground” because the resulting child would be considered his late brother’s, not his. In response to the transgression of disobedience, God killed Onan, too.

⁸Stephen Greenblatt, “Me, Myself, and I,” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 6, April 2004.

⁹Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 43.

¹⁰Ibid., 18.

¹¹Ibid., 397.

¹²Greenblatt, “Me, Myself, and I.”

¹³The films *American Pie* (1999) and *There’s Something About Mary*, (1998) along with the 1992 *Seinfeld* episode entitled “The Contest” in which the main characters bet to see who can go the longest without masturbating, offer three ready examples.

¹⁴In his book *Hard to Imagine, Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*, Thomas Waugh describes numerous examples of archives assembled by amateurs (for instance, a man he identifies as Piet [1900–1989]) and such recognized scientists as Alfred Kinsey.

¹⁵The ambrotype was developed in the mid-1850s as a less expensive, more practical alternative to the daguerreotype. It is a negative image on glass, made to appear as a positive by showing it against a black background. The reverse of the glass plate was either painted black or backed with a black material.

¹⁶This phrase is the title of a website (beautifulagony.com) relevant to Martinez’s project. Subtitled “*Facettes de la Petite Mort*,” the site’s home page states: “Beautiful Agony is dedicated to the beauty of human orgasm. This may be the

most erotic thing you have ever seen, yet the only nudity it contains is from the neck up. That’s where people are truly naked. The videos were made in private by the contributor (and sometimes their partner). We don’t know what they’re doing, or how they are doing it, we just know it’s real and it’s sexy as hell. Make your ears blush by putting on your headphones and turning the sound to eleven.”

¹⁷The particular works are Andrea Mantegna’s *The Lamentation of the Dead Christ* (ca. 1490) and Edouard Manet’s *The Dead Christ and the Angels* (1864).

¹⁸Babinski’s reflex is the name of an involuntary response to a test administered to identify diseases of the spinal cord and brain. When the lateral side of the sole of the foot is rubbed with a blunt implement so as not to cause pain, in healthy adults the toes curve inward. Babinski’s reflex may be experienced while asleep or after a long period of walking.

¹⁹Presented in October 2006, this untitled performance work featured an extravagant procession of ten men dressed in silver Zentai bodysuits carrying heavy, oversize headdresses. Inspired by Las Vegas revues, “I Love Lucy,” and Philadelphia’s annual Mummers Parade, the pageant also alluded to the male of the species as a decorated peacock.

²⁰This comment was included in an email about the project from Martinez to me in August 2007.

²¹Each of the large-scale photographs that comprise this series of close-ups of airborne semen against a black background are entitled *Ejaculate in Trajectory*. Without the title, it would be difficult to determine the subject of these pictures.

²²Martinez shared this information with me in early September 2007.

²³Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Viking Press, 2001), 87.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 81. HIV and AIDS remain critical consequences of (unprotected) sex. Laqueur reminds us that after the demise of the bathhouses, “Masturbation became a new option for gay men. For a time, it was written about as second-best, a retreat from the revolutionary limits of the old venues.”

²⁶Ibid., 82. Laqueur follows this sentence in his book with a quote from critic Eve Sedgwick: “To have so powerful a form of sexuality run so fully athwart the precious and embattled sexual identities whose meanings we always insist we know is only part of the revelatory power of the Muse of masturbation,” in “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” in *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary and Artistic Discourse of Autoeroticism*, Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario, eds. (London: Routledge, 1995),137. See also Laqueur, 254–55.

²⁷It is generally understood that males are more responsive to visual stimulation than women, who—although not unsusceptible to images—tend to be more aroused by literary erotica. In a recent conversation, Martinez and I speculated about the possibility that gay men might have a tendency to be more affected by literary erotica than straight men.

²⁸Bill Arning, “Featured Artist, Gabriel Martinez,” *Honcho* (June 1998): 69.

I am indebted to Gabriel Martinez for the generosity with which he shared information about his work. In addition to thanking Israel Burshatin, Linh Dinh, Benjamin Pierce, Lee Shirley, Alex Stadler, and Gustavus Stadler for their assistance and suggestions regarding this text, I wish to acknowledge the resourcefulness and insights offered by my dear friend Howard Hussey.

