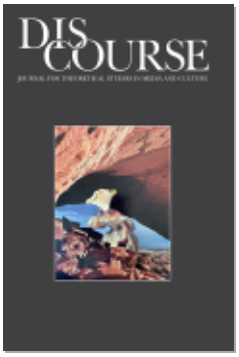
Sex, or the Illegible: AIDS Video Art and the Erotics of Abstraction



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A typeface "A" emerges from an empty black screen, its faded orange hues casting an extended glow across the otherwise impervious background. After a moment's pause, this background is slowly eclipsed. A textured image of whites and purples fades in and takes its place; it might be marble, liquid captured in stasis (figure 1). Stasis is, however, shortly met by motion; a shadowed overlay of two men performing anal intercourse begins to play, at times taking on a glitch-like repetition, at times tending toward a rhythmic sensuality. As if responding to this newfound corruption, the once-prominent "A" fades out, absolving its engagement in the video's graphic hedonism and resigning itself to a plane of total obscurity. For the remainder of the sequence, an aesthetics of the in-between endures; we watch a screen disorganized and afloat, left entirely uncoordinated amid these impressionistic layers competing restlessly for our attention.

So begins André Burke's *A*, a video experiment produced and first screened in 1986 that grapples foremost with the AIDS crisis as an epidemic of erratic miscommunication. Throughout this eight-minute work, an array of such hastily networked colors, textures, bodies, and voices converge in various constellations, staging a response to the ongoing plight that is replete with a number of embedded confusions. In the outlined opening, we watch a screen

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Figure 1. In the opening moments of *A* (André Burke, 1986), standard hierarchies of signification are called into question.

rife with both visual accumulation and a respondent abstraction; although the image's surface transforms insistently, unfolding across various planes and sites of action, meaning does not necessarily follow suit. Here, that is to say, the video's fluid movement between discordant representative registers functions less to determine concrete figurations than to facilitate interpretive slippages. As the orange "A" gradually fades away, repositioning the graphic background as an abstracted foreground, a whole host of ordinarily guiding hierarchies, or means of orientation, are upturned. When narrative strands are elsewhere teased—more often than not through disembodied voices, echoes from an immaterial offscreen—they are similarly redoubled and refracted, set against one another and quickly dissipated. From the outset, then, *A*'s operative philosophy is introduced forthrightly: signification—be it linguistic, pictorial, or cinematic—is porous, insubstantial. The sanctified legibility of an ordinarily functioning symbolic system is frustrated and disturbed throughout, recasting our attention from the represented singular to the alien process of representation itself.[1] Foregrounded in this way, *A*'s discursive surface emerges consistently as an explicit site of rhetorical constitution: an active, potent sphere of politicized negotiation.

In one of the earliest (and only) scholarly texts attending to *A*, Roger Hallas argues that Burke's video works to stage the powerlessness experienced by many queer communities living under the AIDS epidemic's heavily mediatized first decade. Paying close

attention to the video's aestheticized invocation of discourse as process, Hallas writes evocatively of the way that *A* uses "the dense conjunction of sound and image to express the psychological effects of internalising the epidemic of signification."[2] Throughout his writing, Burke's experimental video is said to be significant primarily due to its representational function, for the way that it strategically channels its medium's composite foundations into an erratic exposé of the period's debilitating media economy. "The cumulative intensity of sound and image" at work across *A*, he continues, "forces us to recognise that in the context of AIDS, we do not speak its discourse: it speaks us."[3] Such analysis forms part of Hallas's wider project of tracking the myriad ways that alternative AIDS media came to challenge "the idea of experimental film and video as primarily personal and artisanal forms of expression" during the late 1980s.[4] To this end, the article's critical intervention lies in the way it frames *A* as initiating a movement away from an earlier avant-garde's insular offerings to a more collectively embodied representation, with the latter said to acquire, through this shift, a generative antagonistic charge. Indeed, this historicization is only consolidated when looking at notes distributed at a screening of *A* during the 1987 San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Here, the curators of the video program "Abstractions" (one featuring Burke's text front and center) sought to make clear that the newfound value of their experimental offerings lay squarely in their illustrative potency; queer video makers of the mid to late 1980s, these notes read, were "providing a more *comprehensive portrait* of homosexual lifestyle" than ever before.[5]

While this dominant framing of *A*—as a text both materializing and externalizing a collective queer disorientation—has heretofore provided a useful lens through which to interpret Burke's otherwise ambiguous offerings, my discussion of the video throughout this essay employs an alternative critical framework to grapple with its curious pertinence. For, inasmuch as *A* warrants recognition due to the way that its embedded confusions and withdrawals seem to formally mimic a collective response to the turbulent onset of AIDS, it strikes me that this repeated interpretation of the video has had the tendency to overwrite one of its most intriguing characteristics: the way it serves to actively solicit its spectators' deconstructive probing. The roots of this omission are not difficult to parse. After all, it is by now customary to associate a sphere of AIDS activist media almost exclusively with a collection of what Hallas calls "direct-action videos," a vast corpus of documentary productions committed to recording and disseminating the various enactments of discontent organized by groups such as ACT UP

throughout the late 1980s.[6] Facilitating engagements with audiences unable to experience the fleeting, site-bound effects of live demonstrations, such productions are commended frequently for the way they championed the methods and amplified the voices of those on the front lines of the fight against AIDS.[7] However, recent work by scholars such as Tara Burk has questioned the parameters of such definitions, making a strong case for thinking beyond this camcorder footage as the sole or even primary example of queer activist media circulating during the late 1980s. Here, the testimonial video's self-evident attachments to the history of a street-based AIDS activism are accused of (inadvertently) undermining the more "ephemeral properties" of many adjacent, equally important media outputs.[8] Whereas this mass of direct-action videos offers a visible contextualization of their activist commitment, so the argument goes, a cluster of contemporaneous productions with less immediate (though no less concrete) connections to their political moment have been effectively cast aside. "Activist graphics are not stable cultural objects," Burk notes, attempting to reinstate the operative ephemerality guiding this particular period of resistance; "they are transient, functional, instruments often conceived for a specific event or, at least, in terms of topicality."[9]

In accordance with this contemporary line of thinking, the writing that follows suggests that we would do well to consider *A*'s experimental poetics as an example of this "ephemeral activism." How, I ask across the sections below, might *A* be thought of as a political event in and of itself, not as a video merely representing a pervasive sense of despondency but instead as one soliciting a uniquely active set of spectatorial responses? Whereas the interpretive vocabulary used to grapple with this video all too often gravitates toward the passive and the withdrawn—finding significance in its expressivity as opposed to its interventions, in the way it examines as opposed to contests—my work here attempts to somewhat reverse these rigid discursive parameters. In doing so, I echo John David Rhodes's recent provocation that it may sometimes "be useful to move away from [positing] identification as [the] primary mode of conceptualizing our address to film (and film's address to us)," foregrounding instead the way that experimental filmmakers frequently imagine "spectatorship as a mode of doing, rather than of being."[10] Such a proposed recalibration rebukes what Ann Cvetkovich figures as a pressing issue in commonplace understandings of this experimental AIDS media: that even those "aware in theory of the inseparability of culture and politics tend to distinguish between documentary and nondocumentary films by claiming that the former are politically engaged while the latter are less

immediately activist."[11] Throughout this essay, then, I complicate any such distinction, making a case for considering Burke's *A*—and, accordingly, an expanded sphere of AIDS video art—as harnessing a largely overlooked radical force. Reframing our currently limited means of appraising this body of work is crucial, I argue, if we are to account fully for the diverse array of oppositional films and videos emerging from and operating throughout the epidemic's sprawled development. In fact, as Deborah Gould reminds us, during the late 1980s "fighting the AIDS crisis through routine political channels . . . was proving to be utterly ineffective."[12] We thus may find it generative, when attempting to account for the commendable scale of both this period's activist work and queer commitments, to think in excess of pregiven interpretive categories and toward a more expansive archive of discontent.

More specifically, however, my writing makes such a claim by focusing on *A*'s repeated inclusion of gay sex acts and eroticized bodies in its deconstructive project. From the shadowed overlay of anal penetration, which introduces us to the video's graphic landscape, to the spliced inserts of half-naked men lounging around in postcoital repose, such images are constant throughout Burke's experimental diegesis. At times these bodies appear and disappear in an instant, emerging as no more than enticing fragments enveloped within the video's otherwise overwhelming visual economy. Elsewhere, the camera fixes on these eroticized men for a comparatively generous amount of time, granting them the authority to both return our gaze and speak to it. The persistence of such pornographic imagery throughout *A* is striking, existing as one of the primary (or rather only) structuring facets of Burke's wider artistic project. And indeed, it is the varied implications of this investment that this essay will go on to address. Such attention is more than overdue; after all, making gay sex public in the years immediately following the *Bowers v. Hardwick* high court decision was an act loaded with a renewed defiance. During a period where sodomy was constitutionally held to be as serious a felony "as aggravated battery, . . . first-degree arson, . . . and robbery," affirmatively manifesting such carnal desires promised to mount a provocative critique of this dominant rhetoric of abhorrence.[13] However, the various sex acts screened by *A* are by no means affirmative in any generic sense; much like the rest of Burke's video, these images abide by a logic that exceeds rational comprehension, subject to the same processes of decay and corruption that plague its formal operations. The images of sex offered here are thus graphic in both senses of the word: at once intense and confrontational yet entirely inscribed with markers of their mediated distance. Accordingly, the

writing that follows probes how we might begin to grapple with such a stylized depiction of sex. What happens when we think of this graphic mediation as working toward explicitly political ends? Can these erotics be dually considered activisms?

Sex, Abstraction, and the Antisocial

Before attending to these questions, it is crucial that we consider the role that both explicit images and screened intercourse played in this period's more direct activist practice, for it stands that *A* emerged in the midst of a counterpolitical sphere committed to engaging head-on with the numerous issues raised by both AIDS and the *Hardwick* decision. In 1989, for instance, as part of the organization's newly funded media expansion, the Gay Men's Health Crisis responded to this moment of heightened conservatism by producing a series of sex-positive short videos targeted at a range of queer communities. These videos, frequently grouped under the collective title *Safer Sex Shorts*, were instructive, demonstrative, and explicit, capitalizing on the camcorder's ability to register intimate particularities in order to disseminate life-saving information effectively. In one of the first shorts to be produced, *Midnight Snack* (1989, dir. GMHC), a series of abrupt sexual encounters between two men (ACT UP members Peter Staley and Blane Mosley) are depicted in a household kitchen. Alongside a soundtrack of contemporary hip-hop, the video shows the pair kissing, rimming, mutually masturbating, and engaging in oral sex, with whipped cream and honey introduced in this latter scenario. Throughout, the men's use of protection is pivotal. At one point, for example, the camera zooms in steadily on the way the activists creatively implement contraceptives when engaging in oral-anal play. The resulting close-up—paired with Staley's frequent, withdrawn pauses in giving the oral stimulation—enables the sustained advertisement of this nonconventional preventative measure: a dental dam stretched tightly over the hole.[14] Such visual prominence eventually bleeds into the production's audio track; as the sexual intensity increases, the diegetic sounds of latex stretching and contracting, folding and popping, are layered atop the nondiegetic music. The textual privileging of these measures is maintained throughout the video's running time, affectively dispelling any presumptions that the safe and the sensual are fundamentally distinct. As the video's directors themselves explain, *Midnight Snack* was produced with the sole "purpose of getting the message out that you can have hot sex without placing yourself at risk for AIDS."[15]

Figure 2. In the final moments of *Midnight Snack* (GMHC, 1989), the practical takes precedence over the erotic.

This determining practicality is a common feature of these otherwise dissimilar shorts; each production concludes, for instance, with an instructive end card detailing precautionary information specific to the unique sex acts it has depicted. Taking the form of white text on a plain black background, these closing messages tenaciously reinforce their video's aesthetic tendency to highlight methods of safeguarding. In *Midnight Snack*, the end card thus reads "use latex condoms / cut a condom lengthwise to use for rimming" (figure 2). Likewise, in *Law and Order* (1989, dir. GMHC)—a later video marketed toward practicing sadomasochists that demonstrates the process of sanitary fisting—important details potentially obscured by the picture's dark room demonstrations are articulated: "for fisting use latex gloves and water-based lube with non-oxynol 9." Such uniform conclusions make clear that throughout these videos, visualizing sex works dually to build and deliver what Jeffrey Escoffier terms a "vernacular knowledge." For Escoffier, such knowledge is frequently disseminated among cultural minorities so as to establish nondominant frames of social judgment, outlining what he calls alternative "recipes for conduct." This epistemic mode, he continues, "interacts with, challenges, and modifies the authority of the scientific and social knowledges produced by the powerful and legitimating institutions of our society," a practice deemed more than necessary amid the willed negligence displayed by public health officials during the onset of AIDS.[16] Indeed, inasmuch as they collate affirmative, uncensored images with resolute advice, the *Safer Sex Shorts* engage wholeheartedly in this vernacular project, covering a range of creative ways for

their viewers to mitigate the risk of intercourse across this period. Rather than deploying graphic sex in service of a destabilizing or outwardly critical media praxis, then, this cluster of videos carves out a channel for communicating individually achievable solutions with clarity and precision. If, as some have argued, we cannot unify these varied videos based on their style or content alone, we can absolutely unify them with regard to their intent: to combat a hostile dismissal with fruitful, encouraging instruction.[17]

While clear communication and the establishment of affirmative counternarratives were central characteristics of this organized video activism, elsewhere a radically alternative articulation of the queer body's sexual/political potential was elsewhere being advanced. In this respect, Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?," an article first published in the winter of 1987, stands out for the way it launches an unrelenting critique of this same period's proliferating discourses on sex. Paying close attention to the way that, throughout the 1980s, many scholars and activists sought to combat a culture of homophobic hysteria by inscribing queer sex acts with a host of redemptive characteristics, Bersani's work set out to problematize the "frenzied epic of displacements" that had come to shape conversations surrounding (and defenses of) gay sexuality during the onset of AIDS.[18] "To put the matter polemically and even rather brutally," he states in the article's introduction, "we have been telling a few lies" about sex, "lies whose strategic value I fully understand, but which the AIDS crisis has rendered obsolescent."[19] Although the claims made throughout are varied and complex, Bersani's writing expresses a sustained scepticism of those figures intent on making space for queer sexual politics within an existing social fabric, arguing that such "aversions" to grappling with the dissociative ruptures induced by gay sex acts themselves fail to appreciate the truly radical potential of this relational mode. In the age of AIDS, he suggests, turning "our attention away from the body," and instead ascribing queer erotics with fabricated narratives and redemption arcs, merely feeds into the mainstream's fantasmatic positioning of gay men.[20] On the contrary, it is said, embracing what a dominant culture posits as the "demeaning," corrosive, and self-debasing properties of gay sex acts might just be our way out of some of the compromised social bonds that gave rise to the open hostility, neglect, and even outright violence characterizing this moment.[21] It is, Bersani ultimately argues, the incessant narrativization of sex—its emergence in discourse as something other than itself, as something socially legible, predetermined and, as Joshua Weiner and Damon Young more recently put it, "adhesive"—that is at the root of this period's

malicious projections.[22] "What if we said," Bersani asks in closing, "that *the value of sexuality itself is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it?*"[23]

Whereas Bersani's statements are frequently read as transcendent or enduring theoretical guides on how to live queerly, my work here invokes his argument as historical manifesto.[24] We would do well to note in this regard the way that "Is the Rectum a Grave?" holds tight—at the rhetorical climax of its appeal—to terms loaded with contingency; phrases such as "practical necessity" and repeated interjections such as "now" are indicative of such a fleeting temporal register. Likewise, the article opens with an inflammatory epigraph from one of the period's leading (and most reactionary) AIDS researchers, Professor Opendra Narayan, setting itself up in direct conversation with ongoing attempts to intervene in the epidemic's devastation. In its structuring essence, then, this is a piece of writing posing a very specific retort (what many have termed a queer "antisociality") to a very specific problem (the epidemic's "malignant aversions").[25] As such, in what follows I take Bersani's article as providing a timely critical lens through which to engage with *A*'s contemporaneous staging of sex acts and eroticized bodies. In doing so, I do not mean to make any lasting value judgments regarding queer forms of sexual representation, nor do I want to suggest that Bersani's writing (and, accordingly, Burke's video) exists in stern opposition to the constitutive sociality of later activist videos such as the *Safer Sex Shorts*.[26] Rather, in what follows I advance a comparatively simple argument: that screened sex emerged in numerous, sometimes contradictory, forms to both contest and disrupt the heightened erotic policing defining the queer 1980s at large. Videos such as *A*, I contend, refuse to inscribe redemptive cultural values into depicted sex acts, variously problematizing and bringing to the fore what Bersani called "the extremely obscure process by which sexual pleasure generates politics."[27] Consequently, it might be said that Burke's video testifies to a currently underexplored strand of alternative AIDS media emerging across this period, one committed to undermining the dominant discursive frameworks deployed to mediate queer engagements with sexuality and, in doing so, providing us with an updated prescription for our critical appreciation of Bersani's text.

Prior to considering any extended description of Burke's graphic images themselves, one might find that my opening discussion of *A*'s formal provocations points toward an antirelational imperative not at all dissimilar from that voiced above by Bersani. After all, the various ruptures to the ordinary functioning of language and images established from the outset of this video construct

an economy of signs that is entirely out of sync with a cohesive sociocultural grammar. From the video's opening to its close, that is to say, representation figures as a problem that Burke makes no effort to resolve; displaced and absent denotations here abound, intelligibility is both playfully exhausted and abused. Across *A*, an abundance of creative strategies are employed to establish and sustain such a fraught communicative project. Of these, the video's soundscape stands out as a particularly potent example. During *A*'s eight-minute run time, diegetic happenings are punctuated repeatedly by an offscreen speaker reading an alliterative list of words. In some cases, terms directly follow one another and are given time and space to affectively bridge their disorienting semiotic dissension: "apropos, affection, attack, avarice." In other moments, a single word sounds, lodged intrusively, sometimes desperately, between the sentences of another speaker: "aversion, . . . aberration, . . . allusion." The list's scope is encyclopedic, featuring no discernible logic outside of the elementary "a" that initiates each prompt. As a consequence, when the video progresses and reason does not, the voice becomes mechanical, its statements increasingly redundant and its intentions unclear. Here, through this peculiar audial tactic, Burke refuses to allow chains of connectivity, of collaboration and correspondence, to function. The linguistic does not answer, as Roland Barthes famously suggests it should, the question "*what is it?*"[28] On the contrary, it intensifies the communicative anxieties underlying this very inquisition. When these disconnected words are spoken from the margins of the frame, the surface forms of language are alienated from any essential credibility or grounded truth. We are left with rhythmic enunciations and textual shells; authority is stripped, stability unsettled.

In line with this established representational tendency, when images of sex appear across *A*—as they so frequently do—they abide by the same organizational protocols. Throughout Burke's video, for example, quick editing patterns prompt depictions of bodies-in-coitus to appear and disappear within split seconds; graphic alterations (taking the form of artificial coloring, counterstimulant superimpositions, and a range of other audiovisual blockades) further problematize the conveyance of these scenes. From the outset, then, there is a general sense that across this video, the erotics we bear witness to exist at a certain remove from our attempts to engage them, in excess (and in defiance) of our desire to latch on to their enduring significance. Unlike the logic of "maximum visibility" guiding the previous decade's gay "art porn" productions, Burke's screened sex acts are not visually sanctified so as to accommodate our passive negotiation.[29] Instead, they feel

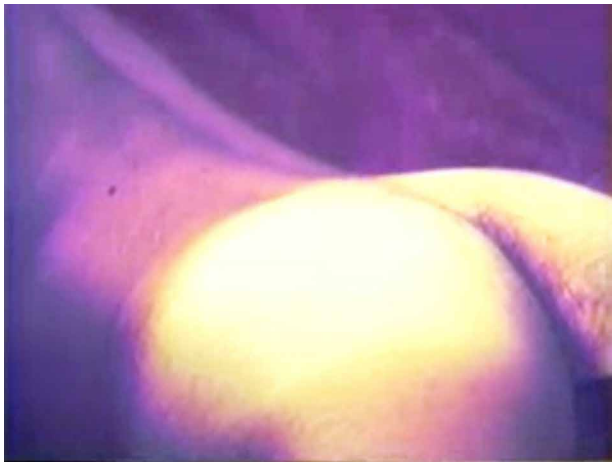

Figure 3. Burke's camera repeatedly scans the body of a nude male figure in *A* (1986).

inaccessible and unavailable, out of reach and corrupt. If, as Linda Williams writes, this earlier "cinematic hard core" presented itself "as the unfaked, unstaged mechanics of sexual actions," employing "certain clinical-documentary qualities" in order to amplify the veracity of its images, then what *A* offers viewers is an unapologetic embrace of its own mediated obstructions.[30] A divergent spectatorial economy is here established, one in which any desire to straightforwardly instrumentalize—to put these erotics to use—is denied.

Such a practice becomes all the more clear, however, when we zero in on one of the video's defining aesthetic characteristics: its insistent reiteration of *the same* graphic images. The repetition of sexual gestures and fragmented moments of intercourse contributes heavily to *A*'s provocative dismissal of social positivities, constructing a visual landscape simultaneously overexposed and stagnated. Some notable examples of this technique involve the camera slowly scanning the lower back and ass of a reclined nude male; the tactile close-up of a sweaty, muscular torso; and a blow job processed through a number of distracting filters. As these images reappear respectively throughout the video, a certain suspension of narrative progression takes place. This is evident most concretely in the initial example listed, where the camera's slow movement—from left to right, from the shoulder blade to the lower cheek—traces and reveals the same contours of a posed figure on three separate (and disconnected) occasions (figure 3). Here, what initially appears to be an ordinarily signifying revelation quickly becomes recursive, devoid of illustrative purpose. Whereas

different lighting patterns provide each encounter with a unique texture and mood, and although variations occur in the run time of these shots, the insistent recycling of such an image places a block on this seductive intrigue amounting to anything heightened or conclusive. It thus might be said that this use of repetition induces some of the effects that Raymond Bellour ascribed to the strategy in an article published at the close of the 1970s: a denaturalization of the screen's "unfolding process," a self-displacement.[31] For Bellour, experimental films such as *T-wo-men* (1972, Werner Nekes) were of particular interest in this regard due to the way that their use of "repetition saturates the narrative space, endlessly superimposing story and narrative, by a perpetual return of the fiction to its pure beginning."[32] In this formulation, such creative deployments of repetition are said to rewrite the reparative impulses of conventional narrative modes, reducing screened bodies to their material essence as discrete "perceptual blocks." This is precisely what we see throughout *A*: an initially enticing organicity conflated with and distorted by its technological reproducibility.

However, we can go further to explore the effects stemming from *A*'s rejection of imagistic variation and narrative development. Consider in this respect the work of someone such as Jonathan Auerbach, who writes of "variation" in conventional film narrative as a pivotal means through which viewers are able to "establish relations between prior and present action."[33] Cinematic variation, Auerbach argues (in an essay addressing a series of early chase scenes), "entails the central issue of causality, which enables a story to turn into a plot by suggesting to its viewers, not just how the figures on the screen are running, but why and where." Without this visual variation, it is said, screened events are lacking in both spatial and temporal dimensionality, rendered without "particular climax" and thus subject to a series of recursive confusions. Such phrasing is doubly evocative when applied to a reading of *A*; after all, in refusing to provide this often lauded variation when communicating its images of sex acts and eroticized bodies, Burke's video both obstructs the emergence of a generic narrative depth while also rewriting the standard framing of sex as a unidirectional movement toward orgasmic climax. Throughout *A*, unlike in the rigid formal systems described by Auerbach, the bodies we are asked to desire have no past and no future; they exist in the erotic present, in the perpetual, endless loop of digital capture and transmission, a space resisting the reductive inscriptions of narrative order and reason. Within this fragmented representational landscape, there is no room for screened figures to become anything other than abstract, nameless, and unknowable; our desiring gaze is solicited,

that is to say, but there is no designated space or time for us to do anything with that desire. It is not so much, then, that the erotics of these representations are rejected in the absolute. Rather, these images are stripped of their immediate social binds along with the suffocating weight that those binds ordinarily impose. This is, in other words, sex without the social, a radical embrace of the one-dimensional, of bodies united through their "self-shattering" drives, of intimacies unburdened by interiority.[34]

Tracheal Erotics, Alienating Intimacies

The antisocial politics inherent in Burke's selective use of repetition find a correlate in *Fear of Disclosure*, a 1989 video collaboration by David Wojnarowicz and Phil Zwickler. Much like *A*, this video maintains a structuring tension between its disjunctive soundscape and visuals, consisting of an audio narration that sits at odds with the hypersexualized image track playing alongside it. Throughout this video, an offscreen speaker presents a number of vexations stemming from his desire—and failed attempts—to find a lover in the age of AIDS. The frustrations aired are multiple, ranging from the unclear logistics of sharing one's seropositivity status with potential partners to the broad complications arising when trying to establish meaningful connections amid a culture of crisis-induced paranoia. As we listen to this disembodied voice, however, the video's images offer a divergent account of this period's sexual possibilities. For most of the text's four-minute run time, we watch half-naked go-go dancers bathed under red and blue lights: bodies in stunted stop motion that refute these relational complications by means of their immediate availability. Likewise, at various moments the same close-up shot of a man descending on another, leaning in for a lustful kiss, occurs (figure 4). In a similar fashion to Burke's digital loops, this repeated gesture—a figure entering from the top of the frame, meeting the lips of his still, horizontal partner—quite explicitly serves as a counterpoint to the voice-over's frustrated relational drives. Whereas the video's narrator grows increasingly irate in recalling his attempts to navigate the epidemic's fraught sociosexual landscape, this repeated kiss advances a mode of intimacy unburdened by such extraneous anxieties. It might be said, then, that *Fear of Disclosure*, much like *A*, works to level a tension between sex acts and their social afterlives, transposing this disjunction onto its incompatible planes of image and audio. If, in the context of a post–*Bowers v. Hardwick* United States, dominant media narratives sought to mythologize a gratuitously invoked queer carnality,

Figure 4. In Wojnarowicz and Zwickler's *Fear of Disclosure* (1989), we return time and again to a single moment of intimacy.

Wojnarowicz and Zwickler here make space for an experience of gay desire outside of such aversive frameworks. The elsewhere conflated spheres of sex and sociality are pried open throughout *Fear of Disclosure*, asking viewers to imagine what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner call an eroticism unsutured from "any axis of . . . legitimation."[35]

Elsewhere in *A*, however, we are given access to stubbornly singular images that sustain what Berlant and Warner go on to term—with a Bersanian flair—this radical practice whereby "sex becomes more sublime than narration itself."[36] One such image shows, in a green-tinged extreme close-up, a man's hand sensuously massaging his throat. Just a couple of seconds long, this screened gesture stands out due to the clarity with which it is conveyed. Unlike the video's more general tendency to corrupt its visual indexes (and so to foreground its viewer's distance from diegetic happenings), an unobscured proximity here solicits an almost tactile investment. For the brief moment that we are given to glance upon this image, a series of intimate particularities thus come to the fore: folding layers of skin, veins appearing underneath pressured sites of the body, muscled curvatures and densities (figure 5). The effect of such a shot is strangely alluring, granting vision of this anonymous figure that is unmarked by the insistent glitching and pixelated distortions characterizing the rest of *A*'s image-track. With that being said, however, inasmuch as this access to the screened body is more direct than anywhere else in the video, it is at the same time more

fleeting. Appearing only to be discarded of seconds later, we are left for the most part with mere impressions of this intimacy, an erotic contact that belies our grasp. Furthermore, it stands that this screened gesture itself is imbued with ambiguity: How, for instance, do we come to figure the clavicle as a site of heightened erotic activity? In the context of AIDS, might a sensitive self-examination not indicate an act more clinical than pornographic? Yet, it is precisely this correspondent line of questioning that, I venture, works to extend the video's antisocial investments. For there are no direct attachments, associations, or consequences given to this erotically charged action; just as *A*'s embedded repetitions force us to confront carnal drives devoid of their worldly organicity, so too does this ambiguous intimacy resist any concrete narrative sublimation. Restricted to the experiential, the "inestimable value of sex," as Bersani puts it, is stripped of those justificatory rationales so prevalent and disarming throughout the late 1980s.[37] A decelerated grip of the neck here signals the emergence of an erotic economy that has wholly abandoned the trappings of social legitimation, instead revelling in the promise of an almost unspeakable sexual solipsism.

This process of decontextualizing erotic contact—of absolving its cultural ties and social adhesivity—becomes all the more noteworthy when situated alongside the hostile public discourse providing the backdrop for *A*'s production and initial reception. In his article on experimental AIDS media in the late 1980s, after all, Hallas pays close attention to the way that mainstream representations of the epidemic consistently put queer bodies "on display" throughout this period "as pathological specimens, pathetic

Figure 5. A strangely alluring self-examination in Burke's *A* (1986).

victims, and dangerous criminals."[38] "To sustain the ideological fiction of the 'general public,'" he continues, "the spectacle of AIDS required the cultural visibility of deviant bodies against which the 'moral' health of heteronormative bodies could be diagnosed." In this context, he explains, queer legibility became, for many, no more than a generic marker of contagion, its otherwise complex social potential reduced to what Lee Edelman frames as a parasitic threat, one "waiting to feed upon the straight world."[39] "Visualising the body thus became a fundamental ethical and semiotic problem for alternative AIDS media," Hallas concludes: "how to insist on queer cultural presence but elude the pathologizing imperative regulating the spectacle of AIDS?"[40] If such a question is taken up by Burke, however, then it is fair to say that *A* does not find liberation in simply reclaiming, or asserting mastery over, these mutable signifieds. Rather, the video works to probe at the permeable structures that enabled such ideological designations to be naturalized in the first place. What we witness throughout *A* is not the emergence of a coherent countersexual discourse but instead a cluster of images, voices, and texts—all tenuously related to the ongoing AIDS epidemic—that repeatedly come up against the limits of their own representational fabric. Narrative meaning is here foregrounded as something extrinsic, distant, not existing as a natural property of screened media but instead displaced by a mode of desire uninhibited by its logistical burdens. "The appeal of the literal can be . . . a dangerous seduction," writes Edelman; and indeed, Burke's video facilitates its spectator's total withdrawal from the insidious trap of visibility, both sidestepping and undermining the mainstream's established technologies of dismissal.[41]

We might find it productive, then, to consider *A*'s sensuous, ineffable erotics through a recent strand of film theory preoccupied with the notion of politicized embodiment. The work of Jennifer Barker, for instance, has argued that we would do well to avoid considering the cinema as a "purely visual medium" and instead open our analyses up to the way that film achieves much of its communicative force by pressing upon our various sensory faculties.[42] In *The Tactile Eye*, Barker extends a long line of film-phenomenological thinking in refusing to ascribe agential leverage to either spectator or screen; rather, it is said, "meaning and emotion" emerge from "the intimate, tactile encounter between" the two.[43] Exploring this curious reciprocity, she writes, "opens up the possibility of [figuring] cinema as an *intimate* experience and of our relationship with cinema as a *close* connection," a critical mode distinct from an otherwise dominant understanding of spectatorship as "a distant experience of observation."[44] Such an interpretive model feels entirely

appropriate for thinking through the strange attachments solicited by Burke's magnified registration of stretched skin, muscles, and veins, a way of handling the video without foreclosing the significance of these immaterial, socially errant bonds. And in fact, as Barker continues, her writing mitigates the difficulty of relaying these sensuous relations—of finding a place for them in a predetermined signifying network—via a recourse to the poetic: "spectator and film might settle on each other like mist," she notes, "glance off one another like pelting rain drops, or slip and fold around one another in embrace."[45] Here, the desiring drives nurtured by the cinema are said to almost take over the spectating body, inaugurating a certain de-subjectivization in the way they transform viewers (at least metaphorically) into vessels of pure affective experience. This impression is only amplified when taking into account the fact that Barker, reading the work of Laura U. Marks, later goes on to note that such reciprocity is itself "*shattering*."[46] For both of these theorists, the cinema's ability to refigure the rational economy of standard visual communication thus has the potential to offer an alternative to an existing set of cultural impositions. Much like Bersani's own polemic, this line of thinking pronounces that we are freed, if only momentarily, from the corrosive weight of sociality when we give in to the purely sensuous—and, moreover, that the cinema depends on such radical sacrifice.

Indeed, over the course of this essay I have stressed that, throughout *A*, Burke works tirelessly to wrest a gay sexuality from the reductive binds of the social. Offering visualizations of both graphic sex and ambiguous intimacies that fragment, fracture, and reprocess erotic activity to the point of near illegibility, *A* withdraws from the insistent rationalizations plaguing its own period, making space for desirous exchanges unmoored from any discursive exposition. Watching this video, that is to say, we are not tasked with justifying or defending our spectatorial intrigue, of aligning our desires with any extraneous social or narrative logic; such practices are rendered almost impossible by the video's constant interruptions and paragrammatic confusions.[47] Instead, we experience Burke's graphic images as a profound detachment, a cinematically solicited moment of total social departure. And it is here, I suggest, that the radical crux of *A* lies: not in the recuperative advancement of a logical countersexual discourse but rather in facilitating what Bersani might call "collective psychic rebirth[s]," those experiences of immediate relational suspension and negation.[48] By Bersani's account, after all, this particular mode of antisocial withdrawal posed a problem for cultural authorities in the age of AIDS, those who achieved legitimacy throughout the late

1980s by relentlessly situating perverse bodies in prescriptive narrative frameworks. Likewise, Bersani suggests, embracing this antisociality simultaneously offered a means of stepping away from an established tendency within the gay community to feed into this discursive trap, making apologetic cases for queer inclusion that inadvertently sustained a culture of fantasmatic projection in their "refusal to speak frankly about gay sex."[49] What was needed during this period, Bersani ultimately argues, was "a way to explode" this ideological circuit entirely, perhaps, he adds, through "an arduous representational discipline."[50] If this is the case, then it seems entirely fair to suggest that Burke's *A* works toward such an end, rendering the ground upon which we come to communicate our collective understandings of sexuality tenuous and, in doing so, advertising "the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal."[51]

The particular aesthetic configurations thus far outlined belong to a much larger body of tactical erotics employed across AIDS media art of the late 1980s, however. Despite the relatively strict focus maintained over the course of my writing—a focus that has intended to detail the multifaceted resonances of a video elsewhere deemed purely expressive—it would be wrong to assume that *A* was alone in staging these politicized sexual alternatives. For instance, in *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* (1989), the activist-filmmaker Tom Kalin collates a thirteen-minute-long stream of found footage clips, the majority of which are charged with queer inferences. Abstracting these scenarios of homoerotic affection from their original contexts, Kalin's video confronts viewers with an estranged series of intimacies: two women kiss in front of a generic studio backdrop, a man licks another man's neck as they embrace, and a pair of shirtless soldiers wash each other's backs. Interspersed with vitriolic commentaries pulled from an archive of dominant cultural representations, these images serve as an "erotic counterstrike" to the period's rampant homophobic logics, working, as Cvetkovich writes, "to revive and celebrate the desires rendered invisible by . . . the mainstream media."[52] Likewise, in Scott Shat's *Of Man; For Dad* (1988), a video shown at the 1989 San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, extreme close-ups of abject carnality (penetration, ejaculation, bestiality) are juxtaposed directly with home movie recordings of happy families.[53] Making repeated use of a split screen to both fragment and duplicate its exposed organs, this video goes to great lengths to intensify the visceral minutiae of its perverse sex acts. In effect, Shat thus stages a series of rhythmic collisions between these graphic images and those of a de-eroticized domesticity, launching a playful critique of those sanitized aversions to sexuality that form the bedrock of the public sphere as we know it.

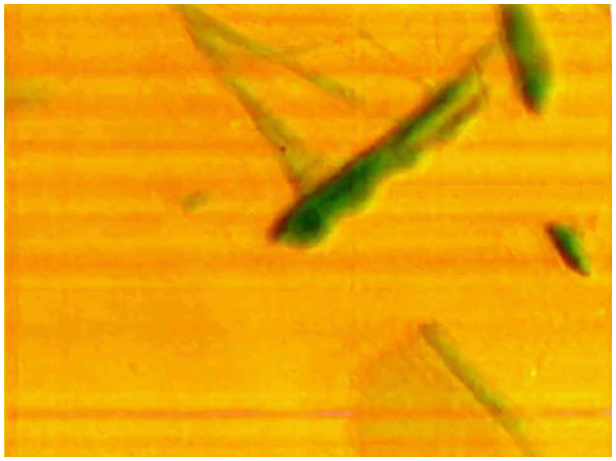

Figure 6. Shafts and/as shadows in Jerry Tartaglia's *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.* (1988).

Yet, examples of this strategic communication of sex acts can be found too outside the confines of a loosely defined video culture. Thus, while one way to account for the prevalent employment of these repressive distortions might be through a certain technological determinism, the transmedial nature of such formal features prompts us to consider their wider political resonances. For example, in the experimental pornographic films of Jerry Tartaglia, from *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.* (1988) to *Ecce Homo* (1989), the continuation of this excessive mediation serves to further estrange screened sex from a set of dominant cultural impositions. A notable instance from the former production sees the screen covered with a heavy orange overlay, rendering the camera's registration of sex acts almost indiscernible for a short while. After a couple of seconds, however, the emergence of shapes, shadows, and motion grants us some clarity: we see, vaguely, a close-up of fellatio taking place within the image's burnt coral hues (figure 6). Figuring this explicit act in tandem with its aestheticized negation, Tartaglia here limits the social intelligibility of his graphic scene; in this moment, spectatorial engagements with gay sex become tied to the act of discerning, above all else, form, detail, and texture. As a result, we are once again brought back to the body, asked to (very materially) experience our salacious drives as bound to the fleeting immediacy of their origins.[54] Indeed, by Michael Stolbach's account, *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.*'s affirmative depictions of "masturbation and oral sex" leave viewers with the impression that the mainstream's handling of "AIDS is being used to annihilate gay

identity and sexuality."[55] What the film offers, in this reading, is a reassertion of the socially outcast body as the primary locus of queer political potential. Much like in the case of *A*, it seems, these strategic entanglements between technologicity and corporeality provided Tartaglia with a platform upon which it was possible to stage a series of necessary withdrawals from this period's governing erotic epistemologies.[56] While no doubt aided by the emergence of advanced video technologies during the late 1980s, it thus might be said, such depictive strategies worked above (and in defiance of) any strict machinic determinates.

Erotic Disidentification

In moving toward a conclusion, it is worth reiterating the very material stakes of the erotic regulations and rationales imposed on queer communities during the 1980s, the most debilitating of which played a pivotal role in the *Bowers v. Hardwick* ruling's constitutional prohibition of sodomy in 1985. Throughout this US Supreme Court case, after all, a range of wholly abstracted—and indeed wholly bizarre—justifications were employed to figure gay men as unquestionably deviant in the eyes of the law. Early on in the hearing, for instance, one Supreme Court justice made a point of noting that "homosexual sodomy was a capital crime under Roman Law" before inviting the floor to consider a similar statute within the ecclesiastical courts of the English Reformation.[57] Here, in a heightened example of what Bersani called the epidemic's "malignant aversions," it was suggested that to "hold that the act of homosexual sodomy is somehow protected as a fundamental right would be to cast aside millennia of moral teaching."[58] As opposed to engaging with any grounded, timely, or even historically accurate concerns, the imposition of a predetermined sphere of social propriety here came to overwrite a whole host of contemporaneous issues.[59] Such loaded narrativization was only extended when the same judge went on to state that although any ruling against sodomy would need to have a "rational basis," such a rationale can be found in the fact that this conduct has "been subject to state intervention throughout the history of Western civilisation."[60] In both of these cases, the state emerges as a self-authorizing apparatus, its own operational history (and prejudices) cited as a valid moral predicate for future action.[61] Any attempt to construct a logical counterargument to such evasive justifications was consequently almost positively set up to fail; "in *Hardwick*," the legal scholar and former ACT UP member Kendall Thomas writes, "the

Supreme Court does not calmly reason about homosexuality, but rather rages irrationally against it."[62] In this context, the desire to withdraw from such frustrating discursive subterfuge becomes understandable as a means of breaking with the autoconcretizing traps of these exhausting civil frameworks. As Kendall himself puts it, speaking as a member of both the academy and this period's activist community, "our collective project will remain unfinished without an analysis that transposes the anti-homophobic critique of *Hardwick* into another, even more dissonant key."[63]

And what I have been arguing across this essay is that a series of experimental, sex-positive videos made throughout the late 1980s—emblematized and initiated by André Burke's *A*—not only advocated for but also facilitated such radical breaks. These videos, I suggest, established various aesthetic strategies predicated on mediation and abstraction in order to address a range of pressing political issues emerging in the wake of the *Bowers v. Hardwick* ruling. From disturbing the inscription of predetermined narratives onto queer sex acts to rebuking the mainstream media's attempts at naturalizing its phobic coverage of the crisis, it has become apparent that such experimental aesthetics served a generative antagonistic purpose across this tense moment. To suppose, as many have, that alternative AIDS media practices of this period were dependent on the testimonial registration of an elsewhere present discontent is thus, I contend, to dually foreclose and efface the energizing reverberations of this disparate body of video. As Bordowitz writes in an essay reflecting on the long history of AIDS cultural activism, giving voice to the argument animating much of the above analysis, "political art does not earn its guarantee of relevance or truth from protests and activist efforts. Art must provide its own guarantees through form."[64] Indeed, among the productions addressed throughout this essay, the active refusal to give visual testimony allows for a range of unique interventions into the corrupt political networks enabling much of this period's antigay rhetoric. If, as Jacques Rancière would posit, "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak," then such strategic withdrawals from the false totality of the index work to lay bare these perverse communicative delimitations.[65] In the most rudimentary sense, this AIDS video art should thus be acknowledged for the way it initiated a series of oppositional ruptures, activating (and at times deactivating) a whole host of radical queer subjectivities through its tactical deviations and distortions.

The implications of this claim are varied. It stands, after all, that scholarship attending to the role of screened sex in alternative

AIDS media has heretofore focused on the way that images of intercourse worked to stage scenarios of vernacular significance, combatting the mainstream's phobic neglect with affirmative, uncensored guidance.[66] Throughout the AIDS video art addressed in this essay, however, we see this particular cultural use subsumed by an entirely different project. The pornographic is not presented throughout *A* and its peers as a set of practices able to be reproduced or sutured into a functional subversive fantasy. Rather, following the tactical shifts deemed necessary during this period by the likes of Bersani and Kendall, the screened erotics at the core of these videos prompt moments of disidentification without the promise of realignment. During a period of the epidemic that saw the nonhyperbolic policing of sexual deviancy join ranks with a then-standardized legislative complacency regarding AIDS, explicit images here functioned as a site upon which the mainstream's suffocating grip on queer bodies could come undone. If, as Franklin Melendez writes, "a frenzied temporality of simultaneities . . . has become the very organizational principle of video" pornography, then Burke's *A* capitalizes on such a frenzy in order to pry open a sexual imaginary unburdened by the corrosive trappings of sociality.[67] As Bersani himself frames the matter, concluding his article that advocated for precisely this mode of withdrawal, "it may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with the murderous judgment against him."[68] The graphic images presented throughout *A* materialize such conducive destruction, I thus argue in closing, soliciting what Bersani envisioned as an experience of sex that shatters "the sacrosanct value of selfhood" and, in doing so, salvages gay sexuality from this culture of brutal aversions.

Notes

1. Akira Mizuta Lippit suggests that "video is haunted" by such a "heterogeneity," suggesting that the medium is "fundamentally constituted as a multiplicity," a protean excess of remediated "technologies and media" forms. See Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 107.

2. Roger Hallas, "The Resistant Corpus: Queer Experimental Film and Video and the AIDS Pandemic," *Millennium Film Journal* 41 (Fall 2003): 55.

3. Hallas, "The Resistant Corpus," 55.

4. Hallas, 54.

5. *San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival*, Program guide, June 18–28, 1987, 14–15 (my emphasis). Alongside *A*, videos screened in this program

include *You Taste American* (John Greyson, 1986), *Narco and Ecola* (Bruce Geduldig, 1986), *Virtual Cockpits of Tomorrow* (John C. Goss, 1986), and *Illegal Tender* (Paul Bettell, 1986).

6. Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 87.

7. Consider, for instance, the way that Gregg Bordowitz writes of these videos as being "punctuated with powerful images of protest, explicitly intended to present direct action as *the* means to change." See Gregg Bordowitz, "Picture a Coalition," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 192.

8. Tara Burk, "Radical Distribution: AIDS Cultural Activism in New York City, 1986–1992," *Space and Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 437. In this sense, Burk's text aligns with the more recent work of Jennifer Ponce de Léon, who has written of the "aesthetic apparatus" of history that "works to consign some things to oblivion or render them apparently anachronistic, while others are made to seem natural." See Jennifer Ponce de Léon, "Historiographers of the Invisible," in *Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 85–86.

9. Burk, "Radical Distribution," 438.

10. John David Rhodes, "This Was Not Cinema: Judgment, Action, and Barbara Hammer," *Film Criticism* 39, no. 2 (2015): 123.

11. Ann Cvetkovich, "Video, AIDS, and Activism," in *Art, Activism & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant H. Kester (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 185.

12. Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 173.

13. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186, Periodical (1985), 198.

14. Dental dams are "latex squares manufactured for dentists performing oral surgery" that were frequently used to facilitate/advocate for safe oral-anal and oral-vaginal sex during this period. See Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto, "Do It: Safer Sex Porn for Girls and Boys Comes of Age," *Outweek*, August 28, 1989, 41. Sarah Schulman reflects on the legacy of such campaigns *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan and Bush Years* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 172.

15. Bordowitz and Carlomusto, "Do It," 38.

16. "The shifting amalgams of power/knowledge generate new 'truth' and 'power' effects in the society's everyday knowledge." See Jeffrey Escoffier, "The Invention of Safer Sex: Vernacular Knowledge, Gay Politics, and HIV Prevention," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 43 (1998–1999): 5–7.

17. Alexandra Juhasz, for example, reminds us that "to generalize about [their content] is impossible"; works were rather "made individually . . . by members of a staff who themselves had different styles and interests." See Alexandra Juhasz, "So Many Alternatives: The Alternative AIDS Video Movement," *Cineaste* 20, no. 4 (1994): 33.

18. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October* 43 (1987): 220.

19. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 206.

20. Bersani, 210.

21. Bersani, 222.

22. Joshua J. Weiner and Damon R. Young, "Introduction: Queer Bonds," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (2011): 223.

23. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 222.

24. In this respect, my writing aligns with recent work by Oliver Davis and Tim Dean, who write that Bersani's article "may be read as the primary intellectual manifesto of the AIDS pandemic during the 1980s. That context," they clarify, "is worth underscoring." See Oliver Davis and Tim Dean, *Hatred of Sex* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 65.

25. See, for instance, Robert L. Caserio, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006), 819–21; Lee Edelman, "Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 821–23; and Jack Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5, no. 2 (2008): 140–56.

26. The *Safer Sex Shorts* do not necessarily partake in this critiqued narrativization of sex. They provide practical information on how to have sex, not justifications for why, when, and how often we should.

27. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 208.

28. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 39.

29. Here, I use the term "art porn" in the same way as Linda Williams does, referring to a specific era of gay erotic filmmaking that begins "with directors like Wakefield Poole and Joe Gage." See Linda Williams, "Cinema's Sex Acts," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2014): 19. The term "maximum visibility" comes from Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 48.

30. Williams, *Hard Core*, 48. Although Williams is here describing hard core films featuring sex acts between men and women, Ryan Powell has written recently of a same-sex hard core in a similar manner: "Hardcore sexuality was not only about the performance and visualisation of certain kinds of sex acts—like fucking, sucking, and coming—but, as amplified through films, books, magazines, and stage performances of all sorts, just as much an outlook, an ethos, and a style." See Ryan Powell, "Hardcore Style, Queer Heteroeroticism, and *After Dark*," *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 2 (2019): 111.

31. Bellour states that "the repetition of the successive frames . . . carries the coming into being of the film." See Raymond Bellour, "Cine-Repetitions," *Screen* 20, no. 2 (1979): 67.

32. Bellour, "Cine-Repetitions," 70.

33. Jonathan Auerbach, "Chasing Film Narrative: Repetition, Recursion, and the Body in Early Cinema," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 804.

34. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 222.

35. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 565. See also Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

36. Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 565.

37. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 215.

38. Hallas, "The Resistant Corpus," 58.

39. Edelman does, however, note that this homophobic association existed before the epidemic, writing that AIDS merely appeared to literalize and consolidate these hostile assertions: "even before the historical accident of the outbreak of AIDS in the gay communities of the West, homosexuality was conceived as a contagion." See Lee Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and 'AIDS,'" in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 87.

40. Hallas, "The Resistant Corpus," 58.

41. Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," 92.

42. "Rather than examining just the structure of the object, or just the subjective act of our own looking or touching, we examine both together, with the understanding that they cannot exist separately." See Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 2, 17.

43. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 15.

44. Barker, 2.

45. Barker, 32.

46. Barker, 38. Barker pulls this term from Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 151. For an explicitly queer framing of these concerns, see Katharina Lindner, "Questions of Embodied Difference: Film and Queer Phenomenology," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 199–217.

47. Craig Dworkin, writing via the work of Leon Roudiez, identifies the paragrammatic as those "networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits." See Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 12. Additionally, in thinking about this interaction between erotic image and experimental grammar, we should recall David Pendleton's assertion that "the gay porn video seems to operate on the spectator's identification not with the narrative agents but with the syntax of the sexual sentence." See David Pendleton "Obscene Allegories: Narrative, Representation, Pornography," *Discourse* 15, no. 1 (1992): 165.

48. Leo Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13.

49. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 221.

50. Bersani, 209.

51. Bersani, 222.

52. In its listing on Video Data Bank, *They Are Lost* is described as "an erotic counterstrike to the Helms Amendment." See "They Are Lost to Vision Altogether," Video Data Bank, 1989, https://www.vdb.org/titles/they-are-lost-vision-altogether. See also Cvetkovich, "Video, AIDS, and Activism," 189.

53. At this festival, the video was featured in a program titled "Getting Off and Dancing" along with shorts by Mark Paradis and Tom Rubnitz.

54. Speaking in the first-person plural ("we") feels appropriate when considering the screening contexts of these films and videos: at festivals and in galleries. While on the one hand the aesthetic tendencies of these productions worked to isolate sex acts from any extended social significance, they were nonetheless received in a collective, public context. Such a dynamic parallels what Lauren Berlant calls a "collectively emergent sensorium," one constituted by "diverse and contradictory systemic forces." See Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 100.

55. Michael Hunt Stolbach, "A Day without Art," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 185.

56. Tartaglia recently voiced his disgust at the gay community's assimilationist imperatives in a manner that feels aligned with Bersani's earlier work: "America gives you itself reflected in your own image: good little queers, feeding the culture which would exterminate you." See Jerry Tartaglia, "Queer Media Manifestos," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013): 560.

57. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 196–97.

58. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 197.

59. For instance, in 1976 (almost a decade before this ruling) Michel Foucault advanced the now well-known claim that "one would have a difficult time finding among the Greeks (or the Romans, for that matter) anything resembling the notion of 'sexuality.' . . . Our idea of sexuality . . . functions quite differently" than the morals and knowledges there advanced. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 35. Additionally, the work of Beert C. Verstraete has continued to outline how, far from being a capital crime, those practices we might now term "homosexual" were largely tolerated in Roman civilization. See Beert C. Verstraete, "Homosexuality in Ancient Greek and Roman Civilisation: A Critical Bibliography," *Journal of Homosexuality* 3, no. 1 (1977): 87–89.

60. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 196.

61. Jasbir Puar writes brilliantly on the "flawed genealogic practice of [legal] precedent." See Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 130.

62. Kendall Thomas, "The Eclipse of Reason: A Rhetorical Reading of *Bowers v. Hardwick*," *Virginia Law Review* 79, no. 7 (1993): 1828.

63. Thomas, "The Eclipse," 1806.

64. Gregg Bordowitz, "More Operative Assumptions," in *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003*, ed. James Meyer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 279.

65. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 13.

66. In addition to this essay's earlier discussion of the *Safer Sex Shorts*, consider William Leonard, "Safe Sex and the Aesthetics of Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Prevention in Australia: From *Rubba Me* in 1984 to *F*** Me* in 2009," *Sexualities* 15, no. 7 (2012): 834–49.

67. Franklin Melendez, "Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 406.

68. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 222.