Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public assembles drawings from memory of spaces in New York City where public sexual encounters occurred. A project created in collaboration between Carlos Motta & Joshua Lubin-Levy, it features contributions from an intergenerational group of over 60 gay men.

Conceived as an atlas of queer affection, Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public proposes an imaginative narrative of city life that values not simply the space "as is," but how it has been performed and engaged over time, highlighting the fundamental connection between public space and queer life. The collected drawings, depicting sites extending from a residential rooftop to the Ramble in Central Park, remind us that public sex is not exclusively about a personal pursuit of pleasure - it also contains the seeds of historical social and political action that have brought together communities of gay men.

Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public also asks questions challenging us to expand our vision for queer politics: What if our politics were rebuilt around a broader notion of intimacy, rather than individuality? Can we foster, rather than police, the trust and affection that desiring bodies desire and please? Would equality be about difference, rather than assimilation?

This book includes a preface by Forever & Today, Inc. co-curators Ingrid Chu & Savannah Gorton, a conversation between Carlos Motta & Joshua Lubin-Levy, and an essay by Joel Czarlinsky. Also assembled here are a series of short responses to the question "Does public sex matter?" by authors Aiken Forrett, Gordon Ingram, Ingrid Chu, Savannah Gorton, John Paul Rico, José Esteban Muñoz, Kate Bornstein, Katherine Franke, and Tim Dean.

Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public is commissioned by Forever & Today, Inc.
PETITE MORT
Recollections of a Queer Public

September 9–25, 2011
FOREVER & TODAY, INC.
141 Division Street
New York, NY 10002

PERFORMANCES BY
Cyrus Saint and Polaiakoff
J. Morrison
Juan Betancourt and Todd Shalom
PETITE MORT

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PETITE MORT
Recollections of a Queer Public

CARLOS MOTTA & JOSHUA LUBIN-LEVY

FOREVER & TODAY, INC.
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When we first began meeting with Carlos Motta in the spring of 2010 to discuss a commissioned project for Forever & Today, Inc., we encouraged his interest in collaborating with another artist on a large-scale, socially conscious project that would bring together many viewpoints. This dovetailed with both his own history of realizing ambitious works featuring a diversity of voices, and our mission to offer artists opportunities that expand their practice and engage audiences in new and surprising ways.

Carlos, in turn, invited Joshua Lubin-Levy as a collaborator. After some initial ideas circulated about creating a subjective archive of queer culture within our storefront space in New York’s Chinatown/Lower East Side, they proposed an artist book project entitled Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public. Forming an “atlas of queer affection” specific to New York City, this book serves as a forum for sharing memories of the city’s public spaces, past and present, as sites of sexual encounters that foster bonds between men.

Petite Mort grew exponentially and in a truly organic manner, with Carlos and Joshua welcoming over sixty men, from all ages and backgrounds, to contribute drawings of these locations. To broaden the discourse, they invited thirteen authors to join the conversation, ruminating on sexual culture, their own experiences, and the question, “Does public sex matter?” As a whole, these collected works underscore how creative and intellectual reflection may engender dialogue beyond the project.

To compliment and further explore some of the timely themes arising from Petite Mort, Forever & Today, Inc. has organized a series of public programs in tandem with the publication of this artist book.

Taking place in and around our storefront space—with the notion that it would become both a gathering place and site of activity—these programs include performances with temporary installations and a late-night “cruising” walk.

As the project unfolded, we sought to facilitate a platform faithful to Carlos and Joshua’s artistic vision for Petite Mort. We offer our deep gratitude to both of them, along with all the artists and authors who have so graciously granted permission for their contributed work to appear as part of the project and public programs. We also thank the many donors who generously gave to USA Projects, an online initiative of United States Artists, without which the publication of this artist book would not have been possible.

Ingrid Chu & Savannah Gorton, Co-Directors & Co-Curators
August 2011

**PREFACE**
PETITE MORT: RECOLLECTIONS OF A QUEER PUBLIC
Carlos Motta & Joshua Lubin-Levy

JOSEPH LUBIN-LEVY: Petie Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public weaves together drawings by gay men of spaces in New York City where they had a memorable sexual encounter, and writing from a wider range of voices responding to the question “Does public sex matter?” So it is only fitting that we introduce this project by expressing our deepest gratitude to everyone who worked to realize it. This project extends far beyond its pages and the drawings you see here are only a lingering imprint of the original stories, works, and spaces we talk more about the structure and the drawings you see here are only a lingering imprint of the original stories, works, and spaces where they had a memorable encounter. In other words, rather than Petie Mort originating in a fixed idea or single spark, I see the project as developing slowly through the space of interaction and exchange that has finally led us to this book. But in terms of the dinner party you mention, I am wondering if in your conversation you made a distinction between public sex and cruising? For me, cruising does not equal a public sex life, and I think Petie Mort is about exploring public spaces not for the way queer subjects covertly inhabit(ing) them, but for how they overtly shaped(d) them. Even if that means reconsidering the limits of terms like “public” or “sex.” For instance, I hope this project challenges us to think about how Web sites like Manhunt or iPhone applications like Grindr have changed the way bodies form connections and navigate the space around them. LUBIN-LEVY: Yeah, I would say the project emerged to us, in conversation. In other words, rather than Petie Mort originating in a fixed idea or single spark, I see the project as developing slowly through the space of interaction and exchange that has finally led us to this book. But in terms of the dinner party you mention, I am wondering if in your conversation you made a distinction between public sex and cruising? For me, cruising does not equal a public sex life, and I think Petie Mort is about exploring public spaces not for the way queer subjects covertly inhabit(ing) them, but for how they overtly shaped(d) them. Even if that means reconsidering the limits of terms like “public” or “sex.” For instance, I hope this project challenges us to think about how Web sites like Manhunt or iPhone applications like Grindr have changed the way bodies form connections and navigate the space around them.

MOTTA: It is hard to imagine how teenagers today, for example, would connect, meet, and create a sense of belonging without the Internet. I think I belong to the last generation of teenagers that had to cruise for sex out on the streets. Thinking about how I experience the lack of that kind of physical contact as a personal and a social loss made me think it was urgent to do a project about the disappearance of these public sex sites. For me, Petie Mort addresses the way that this disappearance has been an active ‘cleanup campaign’ driven by the city government and encouraged by LGBT bureaucrats that are busy scrubbing at the image of the ‘promiscuous gay’ that doesn’t conform to a normative model of identity expression. Petie Mort also discusses how these campaigns relate to the privatization of public space in general by the forces of neoliberal economic politics. And lastly, it discusses how cruising grounds, public toilets, dark alleys, etc. have been fundamental to the forming of communities within gay history in New York City, and how these places were sites of emotional and sexual relations, even if they were ephemeral and conditioned by social stigmas.

LUBIN-LEVY: At the same time I think the word ‘community’ can be misleading. I agree with what you’ve said about the cleanup campaigns, but do you also think that the disappearance of these public sites is because they are not really what the current generation of gay men are interested in? That is not to say that there isn’t a profound ideological and moral practice surrounding their disappearance. I guess what I mean to say is that the struggle to reconcile past and present lives can often be a conflicting and confusing experience. Along those lines, I think what really draws me into this project as a way of attending to both history and the present is that it isn’t a project simply about mourning or celebration, but that it articulates a subjective experience of space. Petie Mort is a collection of maps of New York City, not from urban planners, but from the city’s inhabitants. And as much as they may touch on sites of great physical or emotional importance, they also capture spaces of fleeting pleasure and shame, or even barely visible landscapes. Not all these drawings are “important”—which doesn’t mean they have any less to say or that we should attend to them with any less diligence.

MOTTA: A place where we can see the legacy and currency of a public sex history is in the proliferation of public sex parties that exist today that are privately run and advertised online. It is as if gay men had surrendered to the cleanup campaigns that targeted public space, but thankfully they did not stop having public sex.

LUBIN-LEVY: That’s something we disagreed about. Because when we talked about including those sex parties as a public site I made the argument that they are really exclusive organizations, which profit from sexual encounters and fetishize sexual subcultures. To me, those kinds of events are designed to privatize sex.

MOTTA: Yes, but these sex parties have become places where public sex is still a way of forming bonds with others in ways that are not possible in urban public space. For me, going to the NYBondageClub party at Paddles, for example, is a rare opportunity to interact in an overtly sexual space with an older generation of men who I wouldn’t otherwise have access to, or engage with in that kind of sexual culture. It is also the site where specialized knowledge about bondage techniques, for example, which are a truly unique art form, are passed on from generation to generation.

LUBIN-LEVY: I see what you’re saying, but my point is less about denying pleasurable sexual practices that aren’t my own, and more about the dangers of placing too much value in an antiquated notion of community. I have an aversion to thinking of those spaces you mentioned as a utopia that isn’t subject to the same troubles of collectivity as everywhere else. And I think these kinds of sex parties point toward how identity is becoming shaped...
by sexual practice, rather than sex being a way of pushing at the boundaries of identity. If challenging those fixed categories was part of the sexual revolution that began over forty years ago, then tactics of that revolution don’t seem to have the same efficacy today.

MOTTA: What you say reminds me of a recent interview I conducted with Edmund White, who told me that when he moved to New York there wasn’t really a ‘gay identity’ in the way that we think of it today. He liked men and lived with a partner, but the only time he felt a sense of belonging was when he was cruising on the streets. He also told me something really interesting: he said that after leaving a cruising spot in the West Village or Times Square, for example, the building could have burned down behind him and he wouldn’t have turned around to see if anyone survived. He would go cruise, have sex in that space, see if anyone survived. He would turn around to the building could have burned but it didn’t end there—sex isn’t enough. Maybe the revolution is in the actual walls that house queer sex, in the public toilet, no matter how many times you scrub it clean or padlock it shut. Maybe it’s in trying to remember what the space around sex is like. And these drawings do mostly convey spaces more than bodies, which is interesting since the project started from our desire to interrogate the stereotype of the promiscuous and publicly indecent gay male figure who is defin[ing] public space. Even in that fantasy, space is key.

MOTTA: Yes. The ‘indecent gay male figure’ is a weight most of us carry on our shoulders. When I was a teenager in Colombia, I hung out with a bunch of older boys and a couple of them always told me that being gay only mattered in the bedroom, that out in society, that being gay only mattered in the bedroom, that out in society, that being gay only mattered in the bedroom, that out in society, that being gay only mattered in the bedroom, that out in society, that being gay only mattered in the bedroom, that out in society, that being gay only mattered in the bedroom. But we see that now. We see that this is a project about cruising, decolonizing desire. Why the line between inside and outside. It is a project about memory.

MOTTA: Gays in the 1970s thought of sex as a symbol of liberation and I would like to think that Petite Mort in its own way does the same. After the teachings of the sexual liberation movement, sex has been reduced again to something that has to take place within the confines of a relationship, between two married people and in the privacy of their own home. I would like to see us suggest that sex needs to be taken out of the bedroom, and to re-politicize it within the current conservative climate that believes that queer people want to assimilate to heteronormative society. The forces of the LGBT movement are very strong—there have been prioritized a set of issues that fail to address the fallacies of the larger political system. Instead of fighting to modify that system, gay bureaucrats have embraced the ‘we are just like you’ mentality that queer liberationists had so strongly fought against. Why would any queer person want to join the Army, a lethal institution that propagates a patriarchal, imperialist, and destructive logic of exclusion? Why not organize against it and use our resources to abolish it? Why the need to marry? Why not demand equal access to rights by demanding the transformation of the legal system? I resist the response that these questions are uropian because they are in fact an opportunity to rethink our political goals, to rethink and enact a queer agenda.

To me, Petite Mort approaches these larger political questions by focusing on the way that city policies have transformed public space and consequently imposed the formation of private models for sexual contact. Because we have witnessed this transformation happen right in front of our eyes, this project is an attempt to document the history that is left behind, not scientifically but subjectively. The collected drawings revisit that lost city that will never be again.

LUBIN-Levy: Or maybe that never was in the first place. I don’t want to idealize some other gay life, as a simple escape hatch. Since this project is subjective, it doesn’t do the empirical work of uncovering lost history with a capital “h.” What it does do is illustrate the very difficulty of holding to memories as artifacts and facts of our collective history, as something relevant to our desire to interrogate the stereotype of the promiscuous and publicly indecent gay male figure who is defining public space. Even in that fantasy, space is key.

LUBIN-Levy: The notion that the building could have burned but he wouldn’t have turned to see if anyone survived makes me think about how even after the moment of cruising, the building still exists, whether or not it is out of sight or out of mind. In that sense, Petite Mort is not a project about cruising, but a project about memory.
address the fact that public sex has often been associated with disease. Since the advent of the AIDS crisis, which prompted the closing of all gay bathhouses in New York City, the idea of public sex has been represented as and associated with a ‘promiscuous’ behavior performed by desperate people—think of that very strong scene in Tony Kushner’s Angels in America in which, faced by the desperation of dealing with his lover’s death, Louis goes to The Ramblies in Central Park and begs to be ‘infected’ by the man who is fucking him. Not only is the public park the site of his ‘suicide,’ but it is a stranger that can potentially facilitate his condemnation. In the face of an epidemic I understand how shutting down venues that facilitated “high risk” behavior may have seemed urgent, but what did we learn from the work of activists like Douglas Crimp or Simon Watney who denounced and resisted the misrepresentation of gay promiscuity during the crisis and provided alternative models to think about this?

**LUBIN-LEVY:** I think we learned the same thing they did—that the work of fighting representations and stereotypes is an ongoing battle, an untotizable affair. As much as their work has contributed to the discourse, we can’t hold up a few martyrs or heroes for the cause and consider our work done. We also can’t get bogged down by the past, losing sight of the present and the future. I think Douglas Crimp is an incredible example of this, in that his work continues to take new directions and build on itself. And that sense of attachment to history is something we really worked with in this project. In these drawings, we followed the stereotype mentioned earlier, but we also wanted to expose the process of cataloguing ephemera. All of the drawings were forced to fit in these pages in various ways. All of these disparate elements meet within the structure we have built for them. And though there is so much more to the original drawings and the original contributors themselves, the book is ultimately about asking the viewer to look, even within these standardized pages, for what is deeply political, social, and personal. And in a way, I think our hope is that this book not only produces conversation, but actually becomes the material for reworking the current conversation around these issues. I hope people tear this book apart and reassemble it in new ways.

**MOTTA:** I would also add that Petite Mort is an attempt to construct a document of a particular history that concerns gay men, apart from any focus on identity politics or the politics of exclusion. I think this is a queer initiative, even though gay men might be privileged in certain sectors, we have also been targets of discrimination and exclusion precisely for enacting our sexuality and desire in public. I am interested in the way we thought of Petite Mort as a documentary project but insisted on ‘documenting’ from a very subjective perspective. The decision to ask gay men to submit drawings “from memory” of public sites where they had sex rather than actually requesting photographs from them, is to me a way of thinking about the document in a more fluid way, more along the lines of an oral history. We wanted to resist providing a totalizing narrative, and the drawings from memory really refuse it—it becomes about the experience of space through pleasure/desire, a different temporal space, and not in the accurate way that it exists to be remembered. I think of this approach as a very special form of documentary.

**LUBIN-LEVY:** I think that’s one of the most special things about this project. I think Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore’s drawing is a great example of that, of remembering the space and the labor to convey it to an audience, who will never really be able to inhabit that space the way Mattilda did. It reveals the challenges of accessing a history that is ours, and yet is not something we experienced.

**MOTTA:** The only actual blueprint that we included in this book is the one of El Mirage, which was submitted by its owner Joel Czarlnsky. I used to live across the street from the sex club El Mirage. So I went there quite frequently, and looking at the blueprint I could actually visualize the space in my mind—it’s color, its smells, the way time worked in there, etc. I knew exactly where the different partitions were positioned, where the bathrooms were. I remember the darkness of the backroom, which was sooo dark, but when you passed through it you reached the cells, which were lit by a dim yellow light...

**LUBIN-LEVY:** I wish people could hear your tone as you talk about that memory, but maybe we should just get on with the book and let them see what emerges for themselves. Before we do, any words on why we chose the title?

**MOTTA:** I was drawn to the expression “petite mort,” a French phrase which literally translates as ‘little death,’ because it is used as a metaphor for orgasm. I have always been fond of the wonderful anxiety associated with public sex—risk, trespassing, breaking or resisting the law—in other words, how public sex can be thought of as a little social death. Through the discourse we’ve built around this project, we can see how these public orgasms are productive sites of social and political activation. Do you agree?

**LUBIN-LEVY:** Absolutely! And I think walking the line between life and little death, Petite Mort, this book, reminds that this project is about looking at the personal as political, and realizing that it is always harder to see than we might expect.

August 2011
I moved to New York City in September 1975. I'd been offered a scholarship by Helen McGehee to Julliard that summer while studying in Toronto. But before I even showed up for the audition, I was contracted by the Joffrey Ballet. It was downtown at 10th Street and Avenue of the Americas in the West Village. So instead of staring out of Julliard's Lincoln Center windows, at a mostly straight Upper West Side crowd of people, I had the advantage of taking barre and rehearsing while seeing gorgeous, hunky men cruising the streets just two stories down.

NYC was not only the place to find work for dance in America in 1975, it was the mecca for gay life. I was like a kid in a candy store. Being barely eighteen, I was considered a kid—by many of the guys around. This wasn't a bad thing, mind you. Back then was an exciting, sensual time, when sex before friendship was the norm. And you could just as easily become fuck buddies, platonic boon friends, or somewhere in between—because gay guys weren't as hung up about sex as they are today; something I attribute to the "mainstreaming" of gay life. But alas, that is a different essay.

Meeting guys on the street for immediate sex at one or the other's apartment, or on the streets, were some of my first sexual experiences—and made some of my best friends. Nights on 22nd Street between the Spike and the Eagle—under the stoops of brownstone buildings—to name a couple. Sex as a form of personal communication and means of connection (a unique human virtue), not just procreation or marriage—was the gay sexual revolution. It was a living, exploring, and "guiding" principle spreading through the country—until the AIDS epidemic hit. The joy and power of gay sex became linked to risk and fear. That philosophy was probably one of the biggest losses of the AIDS epidemic, second only to the passing of lovers and friends.

I was not much of a bar person. Not a huge drinker and not into small talk—when what I really wanted was to meet someone and have sex. So very early on I found the bathhouses. There were so many of them, from the sleazy Everard Baths to the Continental Baths with the performance lounge. The Club Baths were on First Avenue and Man's Country on West 15th Street which had theme floors such as Western or even the back of a big truck. My favorite became the St. Marks.
Baths for a few reasons. One was that I could go there between rehearsals at Joffrey to sunbathe, swim, and fuck. Great pool, steam room, California hot tub, and roof deck. It also was a place I could meet older men around the pool just to talk with and learn about what NYC was like in the ’40s, ’50s, and ’60s. It was like a gay history class with no strings.

Busy any time of day or night, St. Marks Baths was my friend Tony Balcena’s and my favorite place to go after dancing all night at 12 West on the Westside Highway. Friendly, intense relationships happen more often than the “public” wishes to admit. I had one of these at St. Marks Baths with a Polish man from Toronto. We never made a special date to meet at the baths but if we were both there we spent all our time together. These experiences are the reasons I opened El Mirage.

Though all this was amazing for a young man from Kansas City, Missouri, my first real mindblowing experience was the Black Party at the original Flamingo on Broadway and Houston Streets. This was before the Saint and circuit parties. We are talking 1976/77—when dancing was about music and physical connection. I was taken to Flamingo by Rick Barlow, a friend and fuck bud. The elevator opened up to a huge loft room with the most amazing “creatures” dancing and fucking on the dance floor. This was not just about leather. This was leather, feathers, rubber, silks, accessories, and IMAGINATION. A fantasy world of exotic men all in tune to the music and each other’s bodies. You walked into this world where sex and dancing and music were the gods you offered yourself to. It was a time when music was fun, ecstatic, and diverse. Even recreational drugs were different. They were basically happy, mood enhancing and sensual—Quaaludes, MDMA, acid, THC, shrooms, and pot—whereas today they are hard, speedy, and erratic—parallel to the music.

The other extraordinary venue was the Mineshaft—two levels of pure heaven, if your sexual appetite was on the edge. My first night at the Mineshaft was a lesson for me of the universe creating a circle of my life. After having my beers and checking out the upstairs and downstairs, and being involved in a three-way at the downstairs bar, I walked up to the main room to relax and have another beer. While sitting on a stool I noticed two guys that were singeing the hair off a man that was laying prone on the long high table in the middle of the room. This play touched on something that felt so normal to me but I did not know how or why. So I approached the two men and just intently observed at close range. They asked me if I would like to try. I enthusiastically said yes. I immediately jumped up on the table with the matches they gave me. But, to my surprise, who should be staring me in the face while lying there prone was none other than Rouben Ter-Arutunian, a set designer I met while at the...
Joffrey whose energy had excited me but scared me to death when I was eighteen (three years earlier). Of course, he recognized me and got a huge smile on his face. From that night on we became friends until his death.

To enter the Mineshaft, you walked up the stairs from the street to get past the manager/doorman Wally. Then you entered a large room containing a bar, a place to check your coat or clothes, a pool table and other play furniture. Past this room was where the serious play began. It was filled with cages, crosses, hooks, bondage benches, and the like. Downstairs was a corridor with small rooms/vaults to the side. These contained everything from shackles to four-legged bathtubs. At the end of the downstairs was another bar area and a small dark play area behind that. The Mineshaft played an eclectic music list through the night from Berlioz to Pink Floyd.

As strange as trees growing out of rocks sounds, that is the initial response I received to opening a private men’s club in 1999. The original concept presented to the investors was to house El Mirage four nights a week and the other three days/night I could use for artistic endeavors to my liking. Well, El Mirage became bigger than even I had expected. And I was the person selling to the investors how much-needed and appreciated a new play space would be in NYC. To this day, I have people asking me if we are going to re-open another El Mirage. I tell them that the present administration would never allow a legitimate, community involved, proud sex-based business to stay open.

Perhaps I should start at the beginning and not the end of the story of one of the most notorious and beloved gay sex clubs of NYC. There had been a huge hole in gay sex nightlife. Almost all the bathhouses were closed by 1986/1987, and along with that many sexual establishments, including bars with strong sexual overtones. By the mid-’90s the only places left were the jack-off clubs and one sex party that had all the elements of presenting sex as if it were a bad thing. It was completely dark with no showers, one bathroom, and relatively rude staff.

So around 1997, I thought there needed to be a counterpoint to the idea that sex is a bad, dirty activity, which implied that our bodies were the same. Part of the blame could be placed upon politics of the administrations, part on the pendulum swinging to the right in the country, part on the scare of AIDS, and part on the mainstreaming of the gay community to emulate straight society.

I began scoping out venues while simultaneously talking to investors about opening a private men’s club. Along with my legal team, we researched and studied the means the city used to close the bathhouses, particularly the St. Marks Baths. From that research we formed the rules and standards to open El Mirage.

I had decided to base the concept on the Mineshaft, with creative spaces through the club, but no actual rooms. The difference was that we had showers, bathrooms, and a mandatory clothes check. Of course, we could not serve liquor. It did take a few months for the men to be comfortable having sex in a sexual arena, which was not pitch black—where you could enjoy the passions of others as well as see those you are playing with.

El Mirage changed its theme every nine months—from a dungeon look to Central Park. Since there had not been anything like this over thirteen years it took awhile for the guys to grow accustomed to such a venue. But after a gestation period of about nine months, El Mirage became a destination for the night. El Mirage catered to every sexual appetite available. There was even a lesbian & men’s party once a month.

Over the eight years El Mirage was active, before being closed down by the city, a myriad of friendships and relationships were formed there. It was the most diverse gay club NYC had experienced—diversity in race, age, form, economics, and politics.

El Mirage was a community. A community for those who enjoyed sex and knew it should be a positive part of their lives. This was true of members and staff. Even today when I have been asked to organize other events I can still call on my staff to come together, and like old friends we seem to pick up our conversation and time together as if it were just yesterday. When past members of El Mirage happen to be in attendance at those parties they enjoy being part of the rekindling of a special time in the past. Still today you can ask former members of El Mirage about guys they met there and you will hear stories of how many of them became friends and still hang together.

One might ask why such a good “thing” would come to an end? The answer is that disdain for the alternative gay life has grown acceptable. When an administration that dislikes, or is afraid, of nightlife—and especially gay nightlife—is willing to use its power to destroy through lies, threats, and deceit, it becomes impossible to do business. But even if businesses can’t survive, people can—and survive we do.

This enlightened philosophy towards being a gay man—with its attitude of being sensual, thinking of sex as a positive, powerful characteristic—has been an incredible gift in shaping my life of amazing friends, undeniable truths, great joy; and insight. To this day I try to pass that knowledge and experience to others through my art, writings, businesses, and example.

I sing my songs in the starlight
And play with my flute by the moon
I’m a faun on a long adventure
Never to be forgotten

—JBC
MoMA and Me + 1 = 3!

Screening Room at MoMA

(Once upon a very long time ago.)

A ten-second loop from a silent film was playing, but no one was watching. The scene of a house fell on a man, but he passed through an open window and was unharmed. The theater was very crowded, we were steady.
Untitled (Financial District)

ANONYMOUS

The year is 2002. I saw rats.

Old New Building in Financial District

Some kind of construction tent

There's a space behind it

I got E train to Financial District

No idea why it was about 20 minutes USA!
ANONYMOUS

Backroom (Crowbar), ca. 1992
rooftop summer evening full moon. Ske apartment. Louvre Hotel.
Anonymous

Perry Street

Who: me and a Greek-German boy.
What: public sexual encounter.
When: summer 2010.
Where: across from Perry Street, on the park overlooking the West Side piers.
How: after wandering aimlessly through the city, an invisible magnetic force led us there.
ANONYMOUS

Boulder (110th & X)

Large granite boulder, like an island, under the shade of a tree. In the woods, two of us sit side by side, cut niches along the lines and curves.
ANONYMOUS

Ikea Terminal
Allen Frame

Central Park West

The address of the location mentioned in the drawing, approximately, would be Central Park West and 60th Street.

I picked up a guy on a train back from Montauk. Neither of us could invite the other one home, so we got a cab headed to drop him off, and we got past Columbus Circle on Central Park West, just past Columbus Circle on Central Park West, just past Columbus Circle on Central Park West, just past Columbus Circle on Central Park West. This other taxi came alongside us with this guy, and we had sex. The woman who was shocked to see us having sex.
8th Avenue

Car passes. I see his face, and his suit, and his smile. He turns a street, I follow him, and step inside. Tinted windows, no one sees us.
In this warm steamy men's bathroom on the 6th floor of New York University's Leon Shimkin Hall, I found a place to blow off some serious art school steam. There were always at least a couple of other men waiting.
This was on a buddy’s fire escape in Greenpoint around Nassau and Eckford Street. While in the act, a car blaring dance music drove past, then stopped, reversed, and then three or four Polish dudes got out and started to shout something. We fell back in through the window and laughed all night.
I took him to see the theater I had worked in. I took him to the stage. I took him behind the curtain. And while the people in the bar downstairs roared with laughter as if they were talking with Booth himself he took me. He took me.
CHRISTOPHER SCHULZ

The Meat Rack

During a stay at Fire Island a friend and I were shown the heart of the Meat Rack. There was a long winding narrow path that led to a clearing deep in the middle of the Meat Rack. I can't remember exactly how to get there, which is why my drawing is as vague as the memory of the location. Sex was difficult because strangers kept appearing, wanting to get involved. It was a special place though. I hope to find it again.
Blowjob with Saarinen

This image records the development of underground sexual practices in the context of iconic architectural landmarks as spaces of frivolous cruising or fraternal gathering which linger on the excitability of the voyeur and the risky behavior of the exhibitionist.
When I moved to New York in my mid-twenties, I ventured into Central Park one summer evening to cruise The Rambles. The sky was clear and crisp and someone gave me a blow job near the lake as I looked down towards Central Park South. It was a fun and liberating experience. I felt incredibly lucky to have moved to the city and thought it was a privilege to get a chance to see it from this perspective.
I actually have no idea who the guy was or what he looked like that night of the blackout in 2003, but we had fun somewhere on 12th Street.

12th Street, 2003
Dave King

The West Side piers in the late '70s

When I was in college, I drove a checkered cab. I used to fuck the fares in the back seat.
DAVID DEITCHER

A Night at the Adonis—at the Adonis

My picture recalls a night during the summer of ca. 1978 when I visited the Adonis Theater (since demolished) on 8th Avenue and 50th Street in Midtown Manhattan, when the Jack Wrangler vehicle, A Night at the Adonis, was playing as I was cruising—just like the guys in the film. What a meta-delight.
Not sure exactly where we were, it might have been Tompkins Square Park. With foggy glasses I looked over Mark's shoulder and saw two glaring lights.
Eric Rhein

Self Portrait - Pine Clearing
(‘The Meat Rack,’ Fire Island)

A photograph of my uncle Lige Clarke, a pioneer in the early gay rights movement, graces the cover of the book Welcome to Fire Island-Visions of Cherry Grove and The Pines, published in 1976. My uncle was researching to write the book when he was murdered while traveling in Mexico. His partner Jack Nichols authored it into completion. The book with the photograph of my uncle, beaming, and with welcoming outstretched arms has a special meaning to me as I have followed his footsteps to Fire Island for my own experiences as a gay man. Some of them have been quests for erotic adventures in the pine forest between Cherry Grove and The Pines that in my uncle’s day was lovingly referred to as the "Judy Garland Memorial Park" and in my generation is known as ‘The Meat Rack.’
There is a dense forest in the north part of Central Park with some paths running through it. This area feels like a wilderness. Faint distant sound of the city lingers in the background, like a memory.
ETHAN SHOSHAN

I'm always thinking of you even when I'm kissing another boy.

Found Object: Remains from a rubber sole

I went on a date with this really hot guy who was into feet. We ended up going to the MET to see an exhibit there. Walking through the galleries I noticed on the floor, pieced remains of a rubber sole. I thought it was funny and so fitting, being on this date and noticing this, as if something there was connecting us. Later, when we went to Central Park to lay in the sun, he started telling me his public sexual experiences while we were watching people come in and out of the rambles, as a way to say to me how easy it would be...

Story excerpt from
I'm always thinking of you even when I'm kissing another boy, 2010
Ethan Shoshan
EUGENIO PERCOSSI

I Love NY and NY Loves Me
Easy to see from higher rooftops, the guys who played here were never shy. One of the neighboring buildings rarely locked the front entrance; so guys would walk roof to roof ‘til they reached the party.
This is my watercolor painting of a place that doesn’t exist anymore in New York City’s East Village, on 14th Street near 3rd Avenue—now it’s a Duane Reade underneath a NYU dorm. Places like this may have been considered a ‘blight’ on the neighborhood because it’s porn-related, but when I moved to the city at age 17 in 1986—I used to be so fascinated that a place could exist that pronounced its homosexuality so blatantly. I had come from upstate New York, and it’s hard for youngsters today to understand… but nothing and nobody was ‘openly gay’ back then—even Boy George was in the closet! This may sound ridiculous today, but back then, just walking past this place made me feel good, as it validated my existence.

I’ve now lived in the East Village over 20 years, and I am shy about giving details—but I do remember going to this place on the way home from a night of ‘bar-hopping’, and meeting one of the hottest NYC bartenders here (who had just served me drinks two hours before). We had gone home together from here and had a wild time—today we are still friends, but only just friends.

I did the painting from memory and from a blurry Polaroid or two I had taken in the 90s… what had always struck me was how the building looked so much like this 1927 painting by Edward Hopper called Drug Store… had it actually been the same place?
Making Headway
JAKE YUZNA
28 Locust Street
JARROD BECK

Local
86th Street subway, B/C line.
In The Bambkes, Central Park,
at night, with starlight through
the branches, and the quiet.

Jason Wee 2011
JEAN DE BOYSSON

With Carl in snow-covered Central Park.
It was Sunday. We marched westward through Bank, Perry, or Charles Street. At the crossing with Greenwich Avenue there were the trucks side-by-side. We reached the final avenue before the river. Guys passed beneath the decrepit structure of the elevated highway. On the other side, the docks, the wonderful wharves. In the vast warehouses in ruins, openings were used, doors had been opened, gaps in the walls. Inside: stairs, scales, holes through the floors, metal debris, spokes of light, glass canopies, panels collapsed... an architecture of desire.
John Juraj

Untitled (What Looks Like Me But Does Not Resemble Me)
I met a guy when I was visiting Williamsburg for the first time in July 1996. I had until then only visited Manhattan. I can’t remember what swimming pool he took me to, it might have been the Douglass and Degraw pool. We hung out swimming and tanning all afternoon, then cruised some guys in the shower together and jerked off when we thought we were alone.

I remember the shower as being inconsistently tiled with bright light filtering in and lots of guys making eye contact and checking each other out. I often think back to that experience, remembering that week when I was 23 as one of the most fun trips I’d taken to New York before moving here in 2006. I’ve always considered myself lucky that I was able to get to know New York before the sanitization of the city.
JONATHAN CRESPO

Bijou Urinal

Club 82/Bijou East 4th Street. Night of the reopening of the new Cock.
In a taxi going over the Williamsburg Bridge with the water rushing below.
MANU RODRÍGUEZ

Truck Stop
(Chelsea NYC - circa 1995)

Location: somewhere in Chelsea off Sixth Avenue.
Cock Light
MAX STEELE

Petite Mort

131 Orchard Street is the doorway of an apartment building, where a boy once dragged me by the hand. We had been at a nightclub up the street, but he brought me there to blow me. People were walking by and absolutely saw us, but it still felt somehow private, like hiding in plain sight.
A couple years ago I was in a taxi headed home to Bushwick. It was late and the driver asked me if I would give him a blow job. I was pretty down about a guy and life and being twenty-four so I said sure fuck it- whatever and he pulled over in Bed Stuy near the J train. I moved to the front and gave him head. It didn’t really help.
MICHAEL LEHMANN
Bathroom (The Hole), 2004
119118

PABLO LEÓN DE LA BARRA

Eero Saarinen TWA Terminal NY

December 1990, I was 18, flying back from Europe for the 1st time...
PATTERSON
SCARLETT
Broome Street at Broadway
(Rooftop Elevator Room)
An anonymous corner of Williamsburg. A single cold light illuminates the otherwise dark alley. A stiff figure, lit by a television set, is silhouetted in a window. Desire and fear become one indistinguishable experience.
Hole In My Heart

BATHHOUSES, a.k.a., THE BATHS, THE CLUB BATHS, THE BATH, THE SNAP BATHS, ואיך, חללי, או כל שם אחר שמתאימה, הם מסחריים связиים, או מסחרייםקו, של אנשים ש📞. בניה של איזהtü ש_iters או המחלה של Ngườiים או אנשים אחרים_<br><br>there are various kinds of baths, such as:<br><br>1. **RUGGED BATHS**: A place where people go to relax and unwind.<br>2. **ANGLESHIRE BATHS**: A place where people go to improve their health through swimming and exercise.<br>3. **THE BATHS, THE CLUB BATHS**: A place where people go to improve their health through swimming and exercise.<br>4. **THE BATHS, THE CLUB BATHS**: A place where people go to improve their health through swimming and exercise.<br>5. **THE BATHS, THE CLUB BATHS**: A place where people go to improve their health through swimming and exercise.<br>6. **THE BATHS, THE CLUB BATHS**: A place where people go to improve their health through swimming and exercise.<br>7. **THE BATHS, THE CLUB BATHS**: A place where people go to improve their health through 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people go to improve their health through swimming and exercise.
"Mr. Ishizaki’s instinct is crisp, hard and direct, revealing all."

-Paul Goldberger

in printed: the Palladium
N.Y. Times May 29, 1985
TM & LIAM DAVY

The Dunes of Field 6
ULTRA-RED makes a visit to the glens of Griffith Park and The Ramblers, Central Park.

DECKED WITH MICROPHONES AND DAT-RECORDERS, MARCO AND DON'T FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF HENRY THOREAU, WHO LISTENED, IN THE WOODS OF JOHN CAGE, "JUST AS COMPOSERS USING TECHNOLOGY TODAY... Listen, he paid attention to each sound, whether 'musical' or not. Just as they do, and he explored his surroundings with the same appetite with which they explore the possibilities by electronics..."

It is a hot, record-breaking July evening. The humidity soaks their skin in a pungent mantle. As the night lingers, both Los Angeles and New York recede into the low-end of white noise. One of the musicians reaches through the leafy undergrowth, his fingertips landing a wooly gift...

The subsequent recording all crickets and rustling, the two others meaning line engines in the park.
VINCENT W.
GAGLIOSTRO

55th Street Playhouse

Was on West 55th Street between 5th
and 6th Avenues. It premiered Wakefield
Poole’s Boys In The Sand. All notable given
its location in uptown Manhattan. My
recolletion reflected here was of many
hues of grey cut by shards of light from
the backlight of the movie screen which
we would gather behind and form small
huddles. One night all eyes, especially
mine, sighted the silhouette of an amaz-
ingly beautiful torso being revealed as this
stallion-like creature removed his t-shirt.
All in a great rush swooped on to him—and
worshiped.
The Towers of Cum & Horndogs of Yore

Up until 9/11 (a fatal event that The Man used as an excuse to implement sweeping anti-homo measures), EVERY public restroom, secluded park area, roadside stop, et al., since the beginning of time, was a potential or actual orgy room.

I stumbled upon several hot spots for public sex within my first few days in New York City back in the late-70s, and then discovered even more when I started living full-time in the mid-’80s. There is not enough room here to outline even a fraction of what existed until The End but one such spot was most definitely The World TRADE Center.

Stop #1 on a sex tour of the WTC would be the men’s room on the lower level near the entrance to the PATH trains—where you could find rows of guys jerking off 24/7 since the day it opened ’til the day it blew up. There was every combination of guys there: from workmen, delivery boys, shop workers, executives, tourists, random dads, and well...you name it. Lunch hour was typically out of control and the cops would periodically try to bust it up by standing around for a while with their walkie-talkies turned up loud for effect, or they’d knock a nightstick on the stalls and bark something like “OK ladies, time to break it up.” But then the minute they’d leave, the boys would be back at it. Besides the walking at the urinals, there’d be hanky-panky going on in the stalls. One guy would stand on a toilet seat so his legs would be out of view while another would blow or even screw his partner(s). That, or the doors would open and close as random dudes flashed boners. Some guys went there specifically for this kind of action but many would simply wander in and get caught up in the heat of the moment.

For the more in the know there were other, more private, restroom on other floors...sometimes you’d need a key and sometimes not. Sometimes you could get access via a horny employee and other times you’d just catch the door opening as someone was exiting. In those tearooms, there’d often be more leisurely fucking and sucking going on—sometimes with multiple participants. There were also private unused offices and then one time, I followed a workman through a series of back hallways to a storage room and got busy with him there (although he was mainly into black guys with huge dicks and only settled for me on a couple occasions as a last resort I guess). In all cases, in every area of the complex of buildings, it’d be a mix of white-collar and blue-collar guys of every race, class, and ethnicity.

The best place by far though was the underground stairway and stairwells leading up from the underground parking lot. Basically, nobody took those stairs except horndogs who used it as a secluded sex spot; everybody else took the elevator—which was faster, cleaner, and more convenient. The thing about that stairwell that made it so popular was that cops never patrolled it and you could hear someone coming from several floors above or below. And THE best area of all was on the ground level because the door only opened from the inside out, so if you did hear someone coming, you’d just duck out onto the busy street and get lost in the crowd of pedestrians. Because of that feature, that part of the stairway was literally covered in decades of cum. There were also years’ worth of raunchy graffiti where guys would write stuff like “Meet me here on Tuesday to get fucked by my 10 inches,” etc. Used condoms were strewn everywhere and obviously the workmen and anyone else who happened to see that area knew about in the Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Jersey City metro area.

This is prolly enough type here for your thing but back in the day I met a very experienced guy who marked up my subway map with various hot spots around the city and told me what time of the day or night was best for each location. It’d be one of the men’s rooms in the subway early in the morning (yes, they had restrooms in the subway!), Borough Hall an hour after that (where you’d see Hasidic boys and men jerking off), WTC to catch the rush at lunch hour, Washington Square Park a bit later, and so on.

Anyways, it all ended everywhere in every part of the country over a decade ago and is regrettably ancient history now. But I know for a fact that there was dick sucking and butt fucking going on there the day the planes hit those buildings. I have talked to at least one guy who was THERE, and narrowly escaped. And since it was always going on, well...ruff said.
Sex Matters

As we write this, the state of New York is busily revamping its marriage licenses to reflect the June 2011 passage of legislation recognizing same-sex marriage. What a strange month June 2011 was for New Yorkers. If the end of the month was dominated by public debate and legislative maneuvering over same-sex marriage, the first half was taken up by the sexting scandal and media circus that ultimately drove Congressman Anthony Weiner from office. Together, these two events have much to tell us about how profoundly public sex matters. How so? Although public sex is usually negatively contrasted to some gold standard of the private conjugal couple, in fact, marital sex is always sex in public. If the state is involved—as it is in the case of marriage—then so is the public. In general, though, what married couples do in practice, behind the curtain of marital privacy, is their own business. The very public nature of marriage is what provides the cover of privacy (for those whom the state desires to protect). Indeed, marriage is an alibi that covers a host of sins, but the trade for public recognition is that sexual transgressions within marriage are supposed to be and remain private. (Former Congressman Weiner should have taken a few classes in privacy settings before using his Twitter, Facebook, and email accounts.) Versions of this idea, that what happens between husband and wife are or should be a private matter, have of course long propped up patriarchal privilege and male violence against women and children.

We do not dismiss the desire of many gay men and lesbians for state recognition of their intimate relationships, especially as this public recognition brings with it a host of material benefits and privileges that are not otherwise (easily) available: access to health care, immigration sponsorship, the right to inherit even in the absence of a will, and parental recognition. The list goes on. But marriage is not only a conduit through which the state delivers and restricts what are or should be public goods. It is also a rite of recognition that bestows symbolic goodness on its chosen few. Of course, gay men and lesbians should be equal before the law, but as we have written elsewhere, we think equality before the law is setting for too little. The same-sex marriage movement, even as it might be expanding the compass of marriage, yet contributes to an ongoing narrowing of what is or can be properly public, what can be a matter of public value.

As marriage becomes the gold standard for anyone who wants to lay claim to the public value of their intimate relations, it is worth remembering the web of queer intimacies that have sustained so many of us—gay and straight—for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, in good times and bad. In the rush to City Hall, let’s not forget all the many ways in which sexual relations matter deeply, publicly.


The Pussy in Public

YEAH IT MATTERS AND
IT COULD BE ANYTHING. I
MEAN FOR INSTANCE A GAY
MAN ACTUALLY TOLD ME
WITH A BIG SMILE ABOUT
HIS DIFFICULTY WITH THE
SIX PAGES OF PUSSIES IN
MY LAST BOOK. IT'S WEIRD
SINCE I'VE NEVER THOUGHT
MY DISINTEREST IN MEN'S
DICKS WAS IMPORTANT FOR
ME TO SHARE WITH THEM.
SO TO SHARE HERE THAT
PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS
BY MEN STRAIGHT OR GAY
OR WOMEN TOO ABOUT
FEMALE GENITALS BEING
UGLY TO THEM IS AN
AFFRON TO MY DESIRE
TO HAVE PUBLIC SEX BY
WHICH I MEAN TO FREELY
CONDUCT THE ONGOING
CELEBRATION OF THE PUSSY
WHERE I AM—OWNING ONE
AND LOVING ANOTHER.
The importance of public sex in an age of digital appliances

Not so long ago, sex was a way to make friends and even to find detente with enemies, to take a furtive communion in the midst of hostility, and to get the lay of the land naked in some obscure location that could barely be argued to be “in public.”

Once upon a time, there was a neo-tribal kind of linear progress; a simple arc starting with desire, then investigation, the creation of a map, eventual contact, sex (singular or countless), pleasure, a bit of satisfaction, inevitable desire, then investigation, the creation of a map, eventual contact, sex. After many legal battles, with harassment, and the batteries will eventually shatter. The viruses cause grief and the batteries will eventually poison drinking water. Does it feel any better to maneuver through a toxic waste dump rather than an “enchanted” forest? Not really.

But occasionally we still have fun, make friends, learn something new, and push a little harder on the cage that so constrain who we are, what we can be, and who and how we enjoy and sometimes love.

Excerpt from an email exchange with Joshua Lubin-Levy (August 4, 2011):

...Please forgive the delay in responding to your gracious and quite fascinating email. It must be deeply nerve-wracking to be working so close to your deadline. The project is very exciting and I have a series of Polaroids I’ve been doing for years called “Kissing in Public,” which is an homage to the queer history of the SX-70 Polaroid camera that, in its condensation of the taking and making of the photograph and thus its ability to bypass the eyes of the local photo developer, became, from its release in the 1970s, a vital accessory to intimate encounters. And, thus, I’ve been thinking in various ways about how public sex matters in the sense of value but also in the sense of the material conditions and conduits of that mattering. But I understand you’re soliciting written reflections and reactions and I’m overburdened at the moment with a small mountain of writing deadlines...

...It feels not just spare but also bare to have something so breathlessly brief and unedited appear in print, but perhaps that’s in the spirit of public sex and the messy quickness that is both pulsing and almost skinless in its exposure...

...If there were time for some more back and forth, I’d want to respond to your mention of the legal conditions regulating display of bodies and faces and discuss the fact, for example, that photographers usually need a “model release” even if those represented aren’t recognizable. I’d want to talk, too, about the material differences between original drawings and photographic multiples but also the ways that the small Polaroids (hand-sized, tucked into pockets and drawers) defy some of those differences in the material facts of their being singular (reproducible only if digitally scanned) and also somewhat writerly—notorious actually for the volatility of their emulsion and the curious way one can push the emulsion around before the picture develops and hardens, creating strange trails of viscous fluid in and across the image that come closer to effects like those of Andy Warhol’s pin paintings than anything one usually attributes to photography. That last point leads to the precarious and volatile remains of public sex, to what defies preservation even when photographed, when made to matter and made material...

...So then, I guess, yes, go ahead and use what you think helps make the points you want to press. Warmly—Jill
While romanticized notions of cruising as egalitarian queer culture have often ignored the ways in which parks, bars, and piers were always hierarchically stratified, the eradication of sex from public spaces nevertheless has democratic implications. It is not that the contemporary city is being desexualized, but rather that liaisons arranged online or with GPS technology on smartphone applications are now more likely to take place in the private sphere of the home. Such reprivatization of queer sexuality is bound to undermine what was once its most attractive feature: the ability to transcend classed binaries of “host/travel” (and “your place or mine?”) in favour of a sexual realm beyond anxious domesticity.

Public sex happens. The simplicity, brevity, honesty, and candor of this proposition, is, I contend, one of the most principal ways in which public sex matters.

It matters because it happens, and it happens because it matters. This is no small thing. It still happens and matters, even now, after so many attempts to ensure that it no longer does. Public sex is resilient and persistent, and its temporal-historical stamina lies—in large part—in its geospatial anonymity, itinerancy, imperceptibility, and illegality.

Contemplating my response to the artists’ query, I considered the possibility of simply supplying them with a list of all of the places where I have had public sex (necessarily non-exhaustive due to the innumerable number of places over the years, as well as the limits of memory and the evanescent residuality of the encounters that it would retrace).

But as I thought back to these remembered incidents, I found it easy to recollect and draw out images of these scenes, yet nearly impossible in most instances to locate with any kind of cartographic accuracy the exact name or address of these particular spots—less punctuated locations than elliptical lines—easily returned to in memory or in actuality yet difficult to nominally cite in a list.

Herein lies the other principal way in which public sex matters: where it happens is without adequate or appropriate address. Less a place per se, than it is a non-appropriating taking place, public sex is the erotic/libidinal/desirous and pleasure-filled happening and coming together of two or more bodies in the pure exhilaration of this singular shared encounter with the space of their separation.

1. Or is it to be written: Public Sex/the difference being a matter of erring on the side of the adjectival or the eidetic?
Sharing Public Sex

There is a question that stands to the side of whether or not public sex still matters and I answer it as a way of eventually returning to the initial prompt.

A great deal of my writing has occurred under the sign of public sex. That writing certainly calls on experience, to some degree my own, but more prominently those of others who have left ephemeral traces of lives that met obliterating negation. Such writing mimetically and performatively reflected styles of intimacy that seemed haunted and detached from/at their inception.

Looking back, I now notice that this writing transpired under a sign that had become maybe too celebratory, too ecstatic. Often it amounted to the sharing of something that resisted the protocols of sharing. I wrote about gay sex before AIDS as a reflection on a world that was always on the cusp of expiration. Reflecting on the work that others and I have done under the sign of public sex gives me pause. My writing was an effort to share this thing that resisted its inscription, or notation. Maybe the point is not to cast the bright light of publicity on flickering signs of sexual dissidence lived in public. If we move our emphasis away from the purportedly "liberated gay man" who wishes to inhabit experiences of renegade intimacy in the open and, instead, imagine other people who attempt to flourish within illicit economies that include public sex, the imperative to document and narrate the experience comes into question. Does the writing of public sex potentially share too much? How does it risk the over-rendering of life that by its very nature resists a certain conceptual grid of knowing? The strategy of weighing, marking, and measuring public sex through writing needs reassessment. Public sex matters in vastly different ways than it once did.

The time has come to understand public sex as an unshareable thing that queers manage to share. But the sharing needs to resist the impulse towards ecstatic celebration, romantic remembrance, and spectacle. Maybe it’s enough to know public sex simply matters and to practice resisting the impulse to pull it apart and put it on display. Let us be content to share the fact of the unsharable.

KATE BORNESTEIN

Midsummer’s day, Vienna, 1994, at the city’s first ever Transgender Film Festival. I was a guest of honor at a luncheon panel. Think academic dinner theater. The woman seated next to me looked like a French runway model, which, in fact, she turned out to be. She had two fingers up inside me. I toyed with my strudel for a while. Then…

“Get up. We’re going outside.”

I don’t know if any of the people passing by the end of the alley turned their heads to see her slam me up against the brick wall and fuck me so good that we did it again an hour later in the last row of the next festival screening.

Well, that’s when I learned to respect and adore public sex.
Public Sex, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Afterlife of Homophobia

Consider two events that dominated the news in the summer of 2011. Anthony Weiner resigned from Congress after it became public that he had been tweeting to some of his female Twitter followers photos of himself in various stages of undress, and New York State became the largest and most significant state in the U.S. to grant same-sex couples the right to marry. Two iconic images captured this juxtaposition: a thumbnail of Weiner’s bulging briefs and wedding cakes topped with same-sex couples.

While these two events may bear no strict causal relation to one another; they are meaningfully related synchronically. How so? The panic that unfolded upon the revelation of Representative Weiner’s taste for a kind of public sexuality that Twitter enabled was fueled in important respects by something I’ll call the afterlife of homophobia: an afterlife that appeared in the wake of the success of same-sex couples’ demand for marriage equality rights. The summer of 2011 marked an important turning-point in the geography and politics of sex: public sex, previously a domain dominated by the specter of a hypersexualized gay man, became the province of the irresponsible, foolish, and self-destructive heterosexual man, such as Anthony Weiner. Meanwhile, homosexuals were busy domesticating their sexuality in the private domain of the family. Just as hetero-sex shamefully seeped out into the open, homo-sex disappeared from view into the dignified pickets of private kinship. While Anthony Weiner was exploring—at his peril—new sexual publics that social media made possible, same-sex couples celebrated their official, legal inclusion in the domain of the traditional, sexual private.

The twin projects of privatization and legitimization of homosexuality began, of course, with Justice Anthony Kennedy in his 2003 opinion in Lawrence v. Texas, in which he put an end to the identity of the homosexual as the sodomite by refiguring the homosexual in nonsensical terms. As I have written elsewhere:

With respect to the right to make decisions about intimate affiliations in private settings, Justice Kennedy notes that “persons in a homosexual relationship may seek autonomy for these purposes, just as heterosexual persons do,” and that the statutes at issue in Lawrence and in Bowers “seek to control a personal relationship that, whether or not entitled to formal recognition in the law, is within the liberty of persons to choose without being punished as criminals.” Note that the analogy here is between persons in a homosexual relationship and heterosexual persons. Thus, the issue in Lawrence, as well as in Bowers, was not the right to engage in certain sexual conduct—that, says Kennedy, would be demeaning to John Lawrence and Tyron Garner. They would be disgraced just as a married couple would if the claim were made that “marriage is simply about the right to have sexual intercourse.” Kennedy writes that “[s]exual conduct can be but one element in a personal bond that is more enduring.” More enduring than what? Than sex?

Justice Kennedy’s finding in Lawrence that the Texas sodomy law violated a fundamental liberty right was premised upon a story he made up about Lawrence and Gardner being in a relationship in which their interactions allowed them to elaborate their “concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Dale Carpenter’s work on the backstory of this “relationship” tells a quite different tale—but the truth of the matter is really irrelevant. What is important is that the Supreme Court was willing to welcome lesbian and gay people into the community of rights-bearing citizens not because of the sex we have, but rather because of the “enduring personal bonds.”

In the marriage cases, the decent, loving, faithful gay character is met by adamant arguments from the other side insisting that marriage is essentially a procreative enterprise, and that since only a man and a woman can procreate, marriage can only be made up of husbands and wives. In response to this heterosexualization of marriage, the same-sex couples insist that “we too have children, just not the way you do.” It makes sense for the plaintiffs in these cases to insist that there are ways to make babies that aren’t essentially heterosexual, but the consequence of this argument is that homo-sex loses any political, legal, or social significance. Marriage, it seems, is where homo-sex goes to die. While the path of the argument may not have been one we initiated, lesbian and gay advocates have been complicit in the marginalization, if not erasure, of homo-sex and other forms of sex that are the excess over reproduction. Of course the female orgasm, contraception, and abortion have a stake in this politics as well. But who, if not lesbian and gay people, see themselves as having an interest in carrying a brief for sex? Sex for its own sake, and as part of a politics of freedom.

How did we get to this curious place, a place with a politics that would be almost unimaginable to the sexual freedom fighters of Stonewall? Once here, should lesbian and gay rights activists care about sex in public any longer? Should we cede that terrain to misfits such as Weiner while we celebrate the legitimization of same-sex love that marriage rights afford, or do we maintain a stake, or at least an interest, in the notion of sexual publics?

Better yet, now that homo-sex has become privatized is sex in public only of interest to those who define themselves as Queer? The space evacuated by the repeal of sodomy laws need not be taken up immediately or entirely by the domain of kinship and the family—but there is a great risk that it would be. This space could be
one in which a kind of sexual leg-ibility might emerge that is not pri-vate, does not entail property rela-tions, is not matrimonial, does not take the couple form, and is not necessarily enduring. The terms of its zoning would be beyond marriage, kinship, or the family. Although serious attachments may form, they simply wouldn’t be ones whose terms of legibility are set out by the state. It is these spaces that are most threatened by homophobia’s afterlife.

In a time when homosexuality has been heteronormativized (so long as it conforms to the hygienic rules of marriage) certain forms of sex-based shame and perversion have been rendered all the more vulnerable to social and legal stigma. Here we find the afterlife of homophobia. Homophobia’s work has shifted from buttressing the criminalization of sodomy, and from justifying the ongoing exclusion of same-sex couples from legal marriage, to imposing a kind of penalty on those from step with the main current of gay politics—and indeed they are seen to pose a threat to that politics insofar as they undermine the claims to decency, respectability, and dignity that the plaintiffs in the marriage cases claim entitle them to the benefits of legal marriage.

So here’s where Public Sex can be so crucial as a site for resisting homophobia’s afterlife and for imagining a kind of sexual citizenship that isn’t defined by and through the redemptive pastorality of marriage. It’s time sex pushed back and resisted a hygienic sexual politics that aims to cleanse homosexuality of its raunchier elaborations, and demanded a legitimate presence in quasi-public spaces such as Twitter and Facebook, along with the more commonly understood public space of the street, the bar, or the bookstore. Since same-sex marriage advocates have surrendered to, if not embraced, the heteronormativity of the private family, the public sphere may be the last refuge for sexual liberty. In this sense, Anthony Weiner may be more of an ally in the cause to defend sexual liberty than are lesbian and gay rights advocates. The elaboration of sexual publics (and by this I don’t mean weddings) and new forms of Public Sex are essential as counterweights that can challenge the hegemony of the matrimonialized gay subject/gay couple.

Fearing from a telling amnesia, I was under the impression that I’d never had public sex in New York City (it has all been in San Francisco or Seattle), until, prompted by the invitation to contribute to this book, I recalled an afternoon over twenty years ago, when I visited the city to view ‘Picasso and Braque’ at The Museum of Modern Art. Seeing Cubism up close and personal was great, but I wanted to look at something else, so I slipped out of the exhibition to investigate porn theaters in the neighborhood.

It’s thanks primarily to Samuel R. Delany’s Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999) that we have a record of those amazing institutions, which have since been destroyed. Books such as Delany’s—and Petrie Mort—are important for preserving and, indeed, renewing memories of the passing encounter, moments of contact where something is exchanged between men. In semi-secret spaces, men come together to exchange neither names nor rings but something more fragile and impermanent. Memories of those exchanges are especially significant at an historical moment when recognition of same-sex desire is being completely subsumed under the banner of marriage.

On that fall day in 1990, I ditched the Picasso and skipped by the Eros, one of the gay porn palaces, in favor of a theater showing straight porn, where there was plenty of action among the exclusively male audience members. That afternoon showed me how public sex affords a unique way for getting to know the denizens of the city.

For some people, the fact that it takes place outside the home, away from domesticity and familiar coordinates, is the best part of sex in public. This kind of sexual encounter offers a welcome respite not only from the home but also from oneself. Public sex provides a vital means of exploring urban spaces and their shadowy multitude of mobile men. But it also opens up a highly pleasurable avenue for exploring the less familiar aspects of one’s own desire.
Petite Mort
Recollections of a Queer Public

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Familiar

SPECIAL THANKS TO
Charles W. Leslie, Ingrid Chu & Savannah Gorton, Joel Czarlinsky, José Esteban Muñoz, Kira Shewfelt, and Sean Johnson.

THANKS TO
All the contributors, authors, performers, Alan Ruiz, Asher Remy-Toledo, David van der Leer, Douglas Crimp, Edmund White, Jeremy Steinke, Lawrence Jacobson, Robert Flynt, Rubén Gallo & Terence Gower, and Sergio Muñoz Sarmiento.

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