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William Rubin Remembered

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# The Ties That Bind

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN ON CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD

IN HIS ESSAY “On the Shortness of Life,” the Roman stoic Seneca writes: “We are in the habit of saying that it was not in our power to choose the parents who were allotted to us. . . . But we can choose whose children we would like to be.” To any individual who does not identify with dominant culture, Seneca’s pronouncement is particularly instructive. Reinvented genealogies are part and parcel of the personal lives of different-drummer children, who often align themselves with others according to political perspective, cultural subgenre, or—to cite that lodestone taken up by artist Christian Holstad in “Love means never having to say you’re sorry,” an exhibition that was on view last month in New York—sexuality.

Occupying the bleak innards of a former Middle Eastern deli called Prince’s (renamed Leather Beach by Holstad), the installation was designed to trace an alternative lineage—in particular, that of the generations of “leathermen” who once populated the city’s midtown area. (Before the homosexual hysteria of the AIDS-riddled ’80s and, during the decade following, the city’s famous—and infamous—creation of a marketable tourist area there, midtown was a gay bastion full of hustlers, drag queens, sex shops, and discos.) Holstad blacked out the deli’s windows, giving the building the appearance of a sex shop; he also stripped the deli’s interior and restocked it with totems of ’70s gay s/m culture, sporadically mixing in samplings from ’60s hippie bohemianism and, of course, the effluvia of a run-down corner store. Here we found the leather-daddy icons of the past: leather chaps, canvas-and-leather arm gloves, gas masks fashioned from briefs (made by 2(x)ist, Holstad’s nod to the gay brand-marker of the present) fitted with an aluminum can over the mouth. But most of the fetishized items on display were fabricated by the artist out of cloth, as if he were literally stitching together his leatherman lineage. Among the standard trappings of a New York deli—glue traps littered the floor and a stack of Oldenburghesque fabric carrots sat in an open refrigeration case—were strewn such hippie relics as gaudy yarned bunting, bottles of organic medicinals, and a backpack (albeit one made of a Louis Vuitton–like patterned fabric). In one of the most memorable pieces on display, *Sissy Bar*, 2005–2006, wheatgrass had been turned through a crank

and dropped like manure to the floor.

To some viewers, it might well have seemed as though this bundling together of society’s peripheral zones—combined with the democratic prurience of the street—was haphazard, a kind of crass mix-and-match artistry. But others no doubt immediately recognized a thread connecting seemingly divergent cultures. For each object here evoked the pursuit of naturalism; a spiritual and sexual transcendence of straight, codified order; and overt sexual liberation as a refusal of constrictive societal conventions. Thus, Holstad’s installation concerned previous aspirations to an emancipated future—the *natural* man posited as the hairy gay bear, the itinerant love child, the toughie on the street corner. It is imperative to note that the artist was never a member of any of these fallen utopian subcultures: He chose these past movements as his own pedigree precisely the way Seneca dictates—by deliberate claim, not absolute birthright.

Holstad’s artistic career has often centered on the public spectacle and campy aestheticizing of sexual dissonance. Leather Beach and its contents recall a 2005 project in which the artist set up a glittery jukebox in a McDonald’s in downtown Manhattan, inviting patrons to choose from one hundred tracks by musicians ranging from Grace Jones to Yoko Ono—thereby infiltrating one of America’s iconic capitalist enterprises with his self-portrait in music. But it is in Holstad’s 2002–2003 series of collages that sex becomes a signature site of rupture and reclamation. After first arranging found photographs of young men engaging in oral or anal sex, the artist covers these images of male bodies with bright decorative patterns taken from decor publications. Thus the gross particulars of a pornographic activity are incorporated into wondrous, dazzling designs: On the one hand, Holstad aestheticizes the homosexual act, making its image one of rarefied and universal beauty; on the other hand, such a romantic



From top: Exterior view of Christian Holstad’s site-specific store, Leather Beach. Christian Holstad, *Mobile #2*, 2005–2006, 2(x)ist underwear, hemp, hematite, can, wood, cotton, wheatgrass stains, vegetable leather, pencils, human hair, zipper, Xerox transfers, antique trimming, explosive wicks, strike-anywhere matches, wooden hangers, chains, and hardware. Installation view, Leather Beach, New York, 2006. Photo: Takahiro Imamura.

**Holstad seemed to ask whether s/m codes of thirty years ago have lost their deviant power. More provocatively, he asked what happened to the spiritual and physical liberation once accessed through these forms.**

covering-up is like polybagging a porn magazine, stimulating the imagination by frustrating it.

Similarly, in the installation at Leather Beach, rough-sex signifiers were reworked—somehow drawn close even as they were held at an aesthetic distance—by the artist’s own hand in canvas, yarn, and thread. Indeed, with each object, the artist seemed to reassess the legacy of these past movements not by looking at their power in the ’70s but by assessing their value today, considering in particular their historical evolution from loaded icons of subcultural dissonance to contemporary commodities. They are things that can



From top: Christian Holstad, "Love means never having to say you're sorry," Leather Beach, New York, 2006. Photo: Takahiro Imamuka. Christian Holstad, *Light Chamber (Tanning Booth)*, 2006. tanning booth, wood, nylon mesh, speakers, vegetable leather, paint, pencils, beans, human hair, horsehair tubing, upholstery fabric, handmade underwear, Xerox transfers, black sand, hemp, leather, glitter, music by Painslut. Installation view, Leather Beach, New York, 2006. Photo: Takahiro Imamuka.

be bought, but not necessarily believed in. For this reason, Holstad never evacuated the site's commercial detritus—display counters, register, and his own addition of two buzzing fluorescent lights—from his visual vocabulary. Part theater, part clothing outlet, the installation featured works, hanging like so many wares on industrial chains, that would have seemed right at home in a West Village sex shop were it not for their neutralizing sea-foam blue color. These suspended articles were in turn not so much shocking in their sexual possibility as in how they floated like empty human forms—suggesting deviance minus the physical reality of a body.

Where have Holstad's chosen ancestors gone? The artist seemed to have found one in Larry Townsend, author of *The Leatherman's Handbook*, first published in 1972, the year of Holstad's birth. In the opening chapter, which was distributed as a pamphlet at Leather Beach, Townsend provides an analysis of master-slave behavior first by working through its historical origins ("binding a captive on the battlefield and claiming him as one's property—sexual or otherwise—

was common enough in most early civilizations") before, in typical '70s rhetoric, writing: "If *you* are going to enjoy it, and your partner's going to enjoy it, and no one else is going to see it or be hurt by it, what difference should anyone

else's hang-up make to you?" Love, here, means never having to say you're sorry, whether to your partner—since in the voluntary master-slave dynamic, individuals are willing participants—or to wider, straight culture. If it feels good, do it. And if the leather hoods and whip burns socially codify you as a homosexual, all the better. But the question that Holstad's project underscored is whether those codes have lost their deviant power some thirty years later. More provocatively, the artist seemed to ask in turn: What happened to the spiritual and physical liberation once accessed through these forms?

In Susan Sontag's 1975 essay "Fascinating Fascism," the critic implies that the eroticizing of fascist bondage as a codified natural, spiritual force is ultimately a theatricalization of sex; that is, it's rehearsed. "The rituals of domination and enslavement being more and more practiced . . . are perhaps only a logical extension of an affluent society's tendency to turn every part of people's lives into a taste, a choice: to invite them to regard their very lives as a (life) style," she concludes. Holstad's installation, resembling a clothing store in so many ways, recalled this question of style—but left viewers with a particularly deadly aftertaste. A sound track in the store comprised what seemed a concert of locusts (small, pencil-widdled locusts were, in fact, to be found on the clothes on display), evocative of an oncoming plague. And here was yet another sign of terrible pain: Walking through a door marked **EMPLOYEES ONLY**, viewers stepped down a small flight of stairs to the basement, past a toilet marked off by red-velvet ropes lying on the floor. Incredibly loud industrial music by the band Painslut emanated from the end of the hall, where, inside a freezer, black sand covered the floor beneath a bright tanning bed—its cover thrown open to shine the light of a terrifying sunset on those icons of liberation found in the store upstairs. One may immediately think of how tanning beds have been used by men

with HIV to give them a natural glow to hide their anemic conditions. In fact, taken in the context of Sontag's earlier commentary, the bed also underscored the question of where and how "life" meets "style": Essentially, Holstad provided us with an aesthetic coffin. As a publisher's stamp on the back page of Townsend's handbook reads: "We also note the book was written before the onset of our current health crisis."

Interestingly, an unintended, and unrelated, corollary to Holstad's show also opened in March in New York's Chinatown, at Asia Song Society, a gallery run by Javier Peres (of the Los Angeles-based gallery Peres Projects) and artist Terence Koh. Taiwanese artist Li Ping recognized another site of gay sexual liberation from the more recent past: He faithfully reconstructed the infamous back room of an East Village gay bar, the Cock, which in the late '90s and earlier this decade was known for being a no-holds-barred site of sexual indulgences. After the original Cock closed last summer, its owners opened a second Cock in the same neighborhood, eerily decorating the bar to look exactly like the original—minus the back room. To make his version, Ping transformed the storefront gallery space into a pitch black room and, for the opening, hired naked male strippers, who could be seen only in the fleeting flashes of light from the street. The black void offered a strangely inverse counterpart to Holstad's blinding sunset. Three decades after the publication of Townsend's book, homosexual liberation is not spelled out in clear subcultural signifiers; there are no chaps, no metal-toe boots, no vinyl zip masks. Rather, the sexual feast is in the endless anonymity, all bodies without faces, individuality reduced entirely to communal flesh. One could argue that the lack of props was meant to suggest that the gay movement has become mainstream, no longer requiring its token signs of resistance. Liberation here is in the endless sexual energy without compromise, but in an all-black room, anonymity is also a refusal of any position, any revolt, or any meaningful, if naive, dream of a utopian potential.

Ping's show was pointedly titled "Future Cock," a questionably hopeful projection of a future much like a sunset at Leather Beach, although, due to New York's continual cleanup, this back room, too, was merely a visitation of the past. Both artists searched for the tatters of present gay

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Simmons is an admirer of such Broadway musicals as *A Chorus Line* and *Gypsy*; the genre was, for her, an inspiration. But the most direct precedent for her film is Todd Haynes's 1987 docudrama, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. Though Barbie dolls filled all the leading roles (and all dialogue was voice-over), Haynes's use of the dolls humanized people whose real-life celebrity had turned them into objects. The Carpenters' sentimental music didn't hurt either.

Ironically, the most powerful moments in Simmons's film come in the gaps between songs, in the silences where characters can inhabit their own kind of being. I'm thinking of the final scene in "The Green Tie," where two identical hand puppets, painted to look like balding grandfathers with bushy mustaches, sing a heartfelt lament to a life that must go on: "When a life so full of sorrow asks you what you have done / Stick to what you know now / Not what may have been." The situation is pure melodrama: One man's son has killed himself over losing a job to the other's, the boy's lifelong friend. In the end, one puppet consoles the other with a clumsy, sobbing pat on the back, letting its head fall on the other's shoulder. This awkward exchange of affection and grief takes place in a silence that descends on the scene like a falling curtain.

In art we talk of external and internal vision, of what there is in the world to see and what lives independently in the mind's eye. As John Cage demonstrated, the mind has an ear as well. It listens to the way we think. Perhaps Simmons's film is a picture of the mind's ear, and the music of regret is silence. □

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identity by digging into the past. In both cases, they unearthed the overwhelming disappearance of the distinctive values, codes, and even architectural safe havens that defined precedent gay life. In the case of the former, there is a melancholic feeling of loss; in the latter, a lockdown on even drowning happily in a sexual abyss. For any marginalized group, the first step to unity lies in reclaiming its heritage the way these two artists have done—in true Senecan form. But to perpetually hold the backward glance is to slip into a nostalgia for beliefs and tactics long out of date. Today's pressing matter for gay culture may indeed stem from the question of how to define one's sexuality as a resistant force against the dominant culture, when that culture has removed or appropriated homosexual markers without absorbing their meanings. The second step is in perceiving the failures of its fathers, as Holstad has done so adeptly, and finding new locations, signifiers, and strategies for subversion. This revolution may not exist in the shock of the sexual experience. Its seeds may have to be planted in stages—outside of the dungeon or the back room—in the certain light of day. □

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day, or rather, about half an hour before the time was up, Rubin coyly asked to be excused to go conduct his graduate seminar at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts. Springing to his feet before anyone else had time to react, Steinberg proposed a toast to the departing professor for having

offered us, thanks to his impressive curatorial muscle, such an unforgettable exhibition. The long, roaring applause did not stop until Rubin had left the room.

It was during the "Picasso and Braque" show that Rubin became Bill for me, and from then on, I visited him in his smoking-allowed office every time I came to New York. We saw the exhibition several times together, discussing various minute points of chronology (was this or that painting predicated on this or that one, or the reverse?), which led to further discussions about the evolution of museology and the function of MOMA as an institution (should it set a cutoff date for its permanent collection, after which it would just act as a Kunsthalle, in effect erecting a barrier between the modern and the contemporary?). Chronology as a heuristic tool was something he cared deeply about; the thematic approach that is becoming dominant in the presentation of modern-art collections in museums worldwide did not have his sympathy. On this count, he was the true successor of Alfred H. Barr Jr., even if he liked to poke fun at the famous chronological diagram of modern-art movements adorning Barr's 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art*. It certainly governed Rubin's whole attitude toward acquisitions: "Fill the gaps" was his motto, and his pride was immense when he was able to secure for MOMA a painting or a sculpture that made "the story" clearer, even if it was a promised gift that would only benefit the visitors of the future. His attitude was the same with regard to exhibitions: They were useless, even harmful, if they did not clarify "the story." They had to have a point. This actually had practical consequences, as I learned when accompanying him on his searches for the supremely fragile paintings of Ad Reinhardt for the retrospective he curated in 1991: I learned that to persuade a museum or a private collector to lend a prize possession and risk endangering it, one has to have a pretty convincing story to tell, which means, first of all, that the curator himself has to be convinced.

"The story": This is where the reproach of dogmatism often hurled at Bill seems most grounded. He had fairly ecumenical taste—the private collection he had acquired before joining MOMA as well as his publications and exhibitions attest to that—but he was the first to recognize that it was limited. According to him, the story it was MOMA's mission to tell was that of what he dubbed "High Modernism." His version of it was of a much wider scope than Clement Greenberg's, for it included, for example, Pop art, but he doubted it had a much longer lifespan. In any case, Bill's "High Modernism" was pretty much object-based and bound to a fairly traditional notion of medium specificity. It fit his conception of the art museum as an unsatisfactory but necessary compromise between the private spaces of the wealthy class and the public spaces of democracy (he liked fairly small rooms, similar in scale to those of a bourgeois apartment, in which viewers could isolate themselves in the contemplation of a handful of works installed together with a purpose). In view of this, his response when criticized for failing to go after Earthworks or Conceptual art for MOMA's collection, in hindsight, makes a lot of sense. "The museum concept is not infinitely expandable," he countered. "If someone offered us the *Spiral Jetty* [1970] and enough money so that we could maintain it and protect it in perpetuity—because the minute we took it into the collection, we would be responsible for its care—we might do just that.

But it still wouldn't be *in* the Museum of Modern Art (and couldn't be seen in relation to its other modern art)." This was said in 1974, in a remarkable two-part interview published in *Artforum*: Amazing, isn't it, that what he imagined as the ideal fate of Smithson's work describes, grosso modo, the arrangement conceived for it by the Dia Art Foundation a quarter of a century later? As for Conceptual art, was he so off the mark when he wrote: "Why can one not accept that forms of art may emerge—or have emerged—which transcend museums, that belong elsewhere? . . . I feel, for example, that a great many Conceptual works are far more comfortable in an art magazine than in a museum"? To some at the time, this comment doubtless sounded conservative, but, in fact (and here's one more prejudice about Bill that will have to go), it revealed that his grasp of works such as Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, 1966–67, or Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson's *Domain of the Great Bear*, 1966, was much better than he was credited for—and perhaps even better than that of many of this new art's most ardent advocates. □

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popular response. Exhibitions such as "Cézanne: The Late Work" (1977), "Picasso: A Retrospective" (1980), and "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" (1984), to name only a few, importantly helped to build and enlarge an interested, informed public for modern art.

In addition to his curatorial skills, Bill brought admirable personal qualities to his work at the museum—among them, generosity, integrity, refreshing candor, and a self-deprecating humor that tempered a not-inconsiderable ego. He could be very demanding when immersed in a project, but his impatience was forgiven as a reflection of the high standards he set for himself, and any hurts were healed by the warm appreciation he showed everyone involved when the project was completed.

As a colleague and friend, Bill was very good company, with wide-ranging interests and knowledge. He was a polymath, coming late to art history after studying musicology, Italian literature, and French history. He had played the clarinet in a chamber group, led an orchestra during his army service, and once even considered conducting as a career. Perhaps his virtuosity as a lecturer was an echo of this training. Speaking without notes, Bill shaped and paced his lectures as though they were movements in chamber music. Sharing a love of opera, he and I sometimes relaxed by discussing the merits of various singers. I still treasure a tape Bill made especially for me, pitting the tenors Jussi Björling and Beniamino Gigli "mano a mano," as he put it, by juxtaposing their recordings of the same arias.

I also remember the trips we made together to seek exhibition loans or to cultivate potential donors. Bill prized his creature comforts, so we lived and dined quite well on these excursions. Russia, however, in the Soviet days of the '70s, almost defeated him. On our first night in Moscow, in a hotel dining room staffed by a single sullen waiter, Bill tried to get toast with the caviar he'd ordered, even attempting to clarify his request by passing a piece of bread over the flame of his cigarette lighter. Having no success, he looked glumly at his plate and pronounced, "This is not a country for a spoiled, cosmopolite Jew." continued on page 312