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Review of *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* by Patrick Moore.
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Review by Benjamin Shepard

“The world would be a much better place if people living in it had more access to their sex, imagination, to their fantasies,” Michael Bronski explains in his wonderful introduction to *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* by Patrick Moore, an writer, ACT UP veteran and founding director of the Estate Project for Artists and AIDS in New York. Moore’s thesis is simple enough: a vast cultural amnesia has robbed us of much of our cultural memory and legacy of the significant contributions of the queer artists from the 1970s through the mid 1990’s. Whether they were sex club owners, occasional porn film makers, or activists defending these spaces – for Moore, their work and play, their passions and plays spaces all deserve recognition, for without it, a culture of social and sexual shame takes hold.

Moore’s claim is not an claim without substantive philosophical roots. While Moore makes it clear, his work is for a broad readership and he has not closely considered the sociological or queer theoretical writings on queer/AIDS activism, a brief investigation of the ideas Moore eludes to are worth teasing out. The underlying point, which David Halperin explores in more depth in *St. Foucault*, is that queer life offers a route outside of imposed ideological structures and expectations about gender and culture; queer spaces allowing for personal and social transformation. Within this context, the search for another way to live within the culture becomes a work of art in itself. This is Moore’s point. Hence, Moore’s rich chapters on the history and aesthetics of legendary queer public sexual spaces, including the clubs the Mineshaft, the Saint, the Catacombs, as well as the rise of Lower East Side New York City. These were all spaces where personal lives overlapped with aesthetic explorations. In the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault elaborates on the practices of self in question:

Practices of the self are those voluntary and deliberate practices according to which men not only set themselves rules of conduct but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into a work of art that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria practices of the self.

Philosopher Richard Rorty has gone as far as suggesting that some of the most important philosophy taking place today occurs within these transformative narratives and practices of self, these "texts of the lives of gay men." Within this context, Moore’s brief studies of the life stories of queer artists, such as Fred Halsted, David Wajnarowicz, Cookie Mueller, Assotto Saint, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, as well as the owners, bar tenders, tricks and patrons of legendary sex clubs mentioned.

While sex inspires this high level of creativity, periods of moral panic, on the other

hand, restrict such creative ways of approach social, sexual life and community building. Hence the ongoing imperative of AIDS/Queer activism, which Moore addresses in a substantive fashion. While ACT UP rejected right wing discourses linking social and sexual liberation with social decline, the core point of the AIDS activism became that pleasure and creativity would be the only ways to halt the epidemic. The most effective way to fight a culture of sexual shame was through a “vision of sex as liberation and joy.” In ACT UP’s world, these creative juices flowed in endless directions. “In the world of ACT UP, flirtations, love affairs, and simple fucking were fairly common between gay men and lesbians who had formed new, powerful relationships that came without rules of precedent,” the author, another early member, recalls. Within this context, pleasure, social eros, joy and sex combine to elevate the most basic demonstration into an aesthetic practice in and of itself.

In one example, Moore discusses ACT UP’s 1991 Days of Desperation in which the group produced a banner drop over the train schedule and blocked commuters on their way to trains during rush hour traffic. “While this was intended as a non-violent action, the violence and hatred of the commuters was of a level I have never seen,” the author recalls.

Those of us sitting on the floor were kicked as commuters, like a stream of ants, began to literally climb over our bodies. ACT UP had created the perfect metaphor for AIDS in their country – normal Americans were willing to literally walk over our bodies while ignoring AIDS (p. 142)

Looking back on the anger, the troubling issues of blocking access to public transportation for even those who sympathized with the group which, like any good work of art, inevitably arose with the demonstration, Moore suggests:

ACT UP at that moment had crossed into the realm of art. Day of Desperation had ceased to be about tangible activist goals: it had become a huge performance, a theatrical event designed to express desperation and rage. It will remain emblazoned in the memories of all those who participated. It was the moment when my generation was able to live fully as artists and achieve something as transcendent as the Mineshaft or feminist performance... (p. 142).

And this is the point for Moore. “It was, in fact, the first moment in my life when I felt pride rather than shame,” (p. 143).

Yet, the creativity which sustained this work was cultivated within an atmosphere which took on the qualities of a radical experiment in direct democracy.

To look at ACT UP as a loose space filled with creative individuals has the added benefit of removing the idea of leaders and stars. In the same way it is impossible to assign credit or membership to a free floating group that came together in a bar, it is fruitless to assign credit or blame to individual members of ACT UP. Those who quietly attended committee meetings or who only marched in demonstrations played just as important a role as those who spoke fiercely from the floor or were quoted in the press. Individuals were relatively unimportant in the larger cultural action that was created by the group. ACT UP outwardly detested the idea of star players. (p.

124).

There are occasional flaws. For a book about queer sexuality, there is perhaps more discussion about the perils of addiction than the possibilities and precautions of harm reduction. I found the chapter on Catacombs overly reliant on Gayle Rubin's wonderful essay, "Catacombs: a Temple of the Butthole," in *Leathermen*. And finally, it's easy enough to suggest that "ACT UP had run its course," after one's personal involvement wanes. Other AIDS activists would suggest ACT UP's work remains an imperative, run by a different generation of activists, overlapping with other movements. While Michelangelo Signorile, a man who once suggested calling the police to raid queer sex venues where gay men meet to have sex, may not understand ACT UP's coalition work within the global peace and justice movement, others do. Signorile's essentialism seems unwelcome (for a volume which does occasionally fall over-reliant to such a mode of thought). Still, all in all *Beyond Shame* is of the best of contribution to thinking about queer practices of self-witnessed in recent years.