

F*CK!

EXHIBITION CATALOG

F*CK!

Contents:

*“Closer Encounters”
by Samantha Hiura*

*“Unmentionables”
by Sloane Holzer*

CLOSER ENCOUNTERS

Samantha Hiura

In the queer context, representations of sexuality, kink, fetish, and sexual experience are embedded with simultaneous tones of raw eroticism, honesty, and humor. These elements materialize and are innate to radical spaces for sex, sexual expression, and sexual experience, inseparably binding them with the queer experience. The interpersonal particularities of queer sex culture – including its language, social norms, and images– as a thematic subject in contemporary art remain tinged with traces of taboo. *F*CK!* presents radically queer sexual experiences from multiple positions, juxtaposing a historical, documentary representation through ephemera of San Francisco's LGBTQ+ scene, alongside a subjectively-based, contemporary fine arts expression of queer kink culture and sexual experience as a means of celebrating queer sexual experiences outloud.

*F*CK!* explores the visual aesthetics and experiences of sex, sexuality, and kink in all its pleasure, joy, and humor. The work of Chrissa Chorvat, an MFA student at California College of the Arts, prods the relationship between pleasure and pain, articulating the abject complexities of desire across various mediums including borosilicate glass, print, and multimedia sculpture. The ephemera, such as fliers for queer nightlife, provided by Auto Erotica –a shop located in the historic Castro district specializing in LGBTQ+ objects and memorabilia– represents materialized traces of the queer experience of San Francisco's historic leather, S&M, and club cultures. By examining these themes across material forms and perspectives, *F*CK!* boldly presents a glimpse into the vibrancy of sex, pleasure, kink, sexuality, intimacy, and community-building that exists in the queer community.

The exhibition's title, *F*CK!*, mirrors the coexistent tones and sensations that it explores. The expletive itself, "fuck," is unmatched as one of the most malleable, diversely functional words to exist. In the context of an exhibition on the topics of kink, fetish, and sex, it would make sense that the title *F*CK!* would simply and plainly refer to the verb form– to fuck, fuck, fucking. But the use of the word relies on its malleability, expanding the title's possibilities to hold so much more. "Fuck!" can act as a reactive cry of pain, pleasure, or both, so overwhelming that it can no longer be contained– a simultaneity that is quintessential to sex that brushes up against the boundaries of roughness, and

kink more specifically. The title's exclamation point serves as a celebratory amalgamation of self-declarative power, emphasis, and playfulness all at one. It is also significant to note that F*CK!'s celebratory tone is shaped by queer histories of forced concealment. To take up space, to represent queer sexual perspectives and experiences with celebration, is to radically resist queer marginalization.

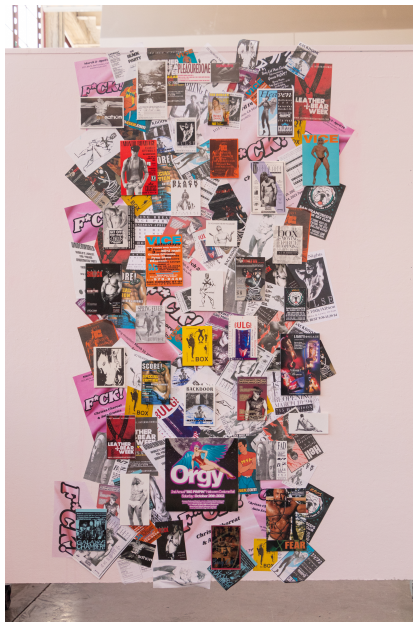


When we speak of queer sex culture, we are obligated to specifically discuss the role of queer nightlife. Through old advertisements, posters, and fliers we can lightly trace the shapes of the backrooms, dark spaces, closed doors, and club bathrooms that can hold queer sexual experiences. Through Auto Erotica's collection of LGBTQ+ memorabilia and art, much of which is rooted in San Francisco's queer community, we can begin to see these spaces and social exchanges materialized. The curated collection of advertising fliers from Auto Erotica in particular serves as a more literal artifact of queer nightlife. Many of them advertise different LGBTQ+ clubs, events and themed parties (like White Parties), and shows, with images sparing nothing for the imagination of what someone might find there. One reads "Get off! Every Friday" and another reading "M4M. It can't get any easier than this!"— there is no mistaking the selling points of these fliers.

The fliers take a vertical, splashing shape, spread on the wall in a viscerally ejaculatory fashion. Blown-up copies of the fliers are wheat pasted directly onto the light pink walls, and have the same crackling, bubbling textural effect wheat pasted posters take on the street. The verticality of the display recalls the visual encounter of a wooden electrical pole in the Castro, coated densely in peeling layers of posters and fliers built up across days, weeks, or months. Often, one would also encounter these being handed out on street corners. Within this momentary exchange, there is a certain intimacy within the sharing of a brief moment with another person, with the relative tenderness in handing someone an invitation. In the shadow of the pandemic, we see the exchange of such intimacies less. Re-injecting this celebration of physical intimacies and encounters into a college campus, where many of those on campus may have never encountered queer nightlife themselves, with their emerging young adulthood being coated in isolation and a drought of events.

In Auto Erotica's ephemera and copy of *Drummer* magazine, a San Francisco-based gay leather magazine, we also see the consistent challenging of hetero-patriarchal gender norms within queer culture. There is a consistent and pervasive stereotype of queer men and masculine-presenting people as being strictly weak and effeminate. Across these different media forms and subcultures represented, there is a complicated and vast challenging of these stereotypes on multiple fronts. In *Drummer* in particular, we see the direct challenge of this stereotype through the representation of hypermasculine queerness. Men illustrated with unrealistically large muscles, photographs of men with oil-coated abs, adorned in leather, rubber, and metal. The fliers from Auto Erotica continue the degradation of the feminine male stereotype, but also present another subversive representation of male queerness— one of tenderness and gentleness. One flier for an event at Colossus— a notorious queer nightlife hotspot in the 1970s and 80s— that reads "Heaven" across the top, contains an image of a young man who holds an undeniable likeness to Michelangelo's *David*, with a gentle twist in the torso, the contrapposto carrying of weight in the body, and, of course, the idealized musculature Michelangelo was so well-known for. This figure, though, is taken down from David's pedestal and ornamented with soft, full angel wings, which he gently touches and gazes over his left shoulder. He is

an idealized figure, returned from his monumentality to a lifelike, recognizable beauty. His gaze is tender, but desiring, and his beauty lies within his idealized gentleness. The convergence of these different faces of queer masculinity in the same form composes a fuller, more holistic exploration of the varied and perpetually multiple ways gender is expressed across boundaries of gender identity, sexuality, and subculture.



To juxtapose these pieces with Chrissa Chorvat's work is to deepen their significance, and explore the ways in which the cultures they advertise play out in the lived experiences of queer people. Chorvat's pieces are rooted in a personal proximity to kink, fetish, and queer nightlife's backrooms. What Chorvat does is reach beyond an encounter, and pulls out the most jagged, stickiest sensations, urges, desires, and confessions. In *SUPERFAM (The Truth is Stranger Than Fiction)*, we catch every one of these, no matter how transient or residual their nature. Printed across a blown-up image of three women, decorated with 1940s era pin curls and pin-up shorts, sitting on a large, phallic missile stacked one after the next, are hundreds of small sentences. Each sentence is a brief description of an action, scenario, encounter, or desire, all punctuated with the parenthetical gerunds (receiving), (giving), (wearing), or (everything to do with it). They range from the shallower "spit in my mouth (receiving)" to the deeper "sprayed with piss like it was perfume (receiving)."

UNMENTIONABLES

Sloane Holzer

Each month or so, I lose a few more friends. I scour the social media platforms we shared, and enter their usernames again and again in the search bar. But it's as if they never existed. The account @dyke_sweat, once full of glistening bodies raw against leather jackets, wielding crops like fingers, like extensions of their body, returns only a search result full of gym influencers and protein shakes. Thick with screenshots and editorials of raw and dangerous women, @femmefatalism is now a gap in the digital archive. The only thing left is a march of infographics that discusses who is allowed to claim #femme identity. But all the visual examples are gone. No Bound or Basic Instinct or Queen of the Damned. Screenshots that I must have seen a dozen times but never properly thanked.

Maybe the algorithm slips up for a moment, and I find a result. A post from last year, where another account is responding to them. But they're speaking to a ghost. My friend's account is gone. The tweet responding to them lies there, scarecrow in a field, gesturing towards that absence. I used to think the terrifying force of history was on our side, our threats palpable enough to carve out space against these prohibitions on language, on bodies, on our history. But the censorship marches on and we only adapt.



ACT UP demonstration in 1990 addressing women's issues in AIDS activism.

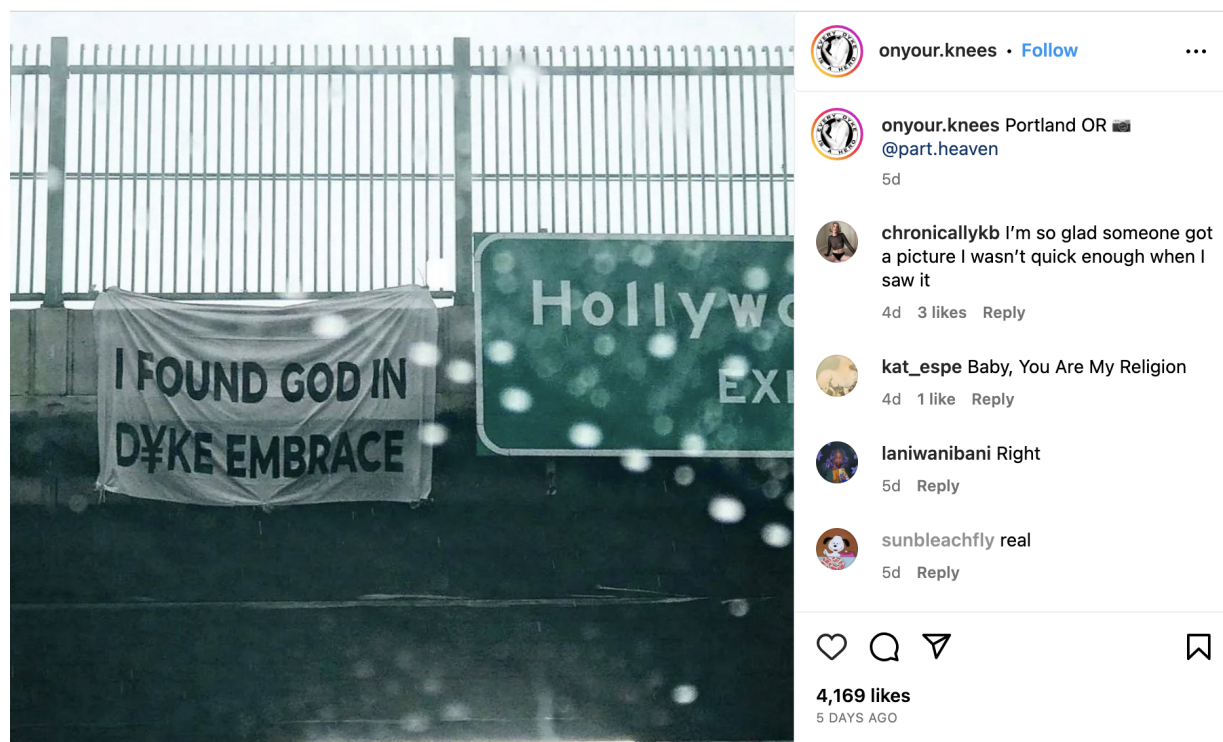
It could have been a flirtatious message, trying to game that very algorithm. Some touring sex worker posts a selfie with city stops and dates, trying to solicit clients on a platform that was once (at best) benign towards their professional presence. And we all would respond, tease, make empty gestures to fuck in the comments. It's an attention economy after all. Each of us can try and grab it.

Perhaps they posted lingerie that was a shade too sheer, a photo from a kink session that featured too much flesh pressed into the delicate shimmer of latex. Maybe their trans body flew in the face of community guidelines founded on constraining form into a narrow and binary reality. Their digital life is now a negative space. One more account hidden, shadowbanned, or permanently suspended for violating the terms of service.

A shadowban refers to the practice of platforms like Instagram or Twitter restricting the visibility of (or actively removing) a user's content – usually without notice. Rarely is there an opportunity for the post or story or handful of sentences to receive reinstatement. There are articles about how to avoid shadowbans and articles documenting how queer people and sex workers deal with this algorithmic targeting. Those two groups, who have a distinct proximity to marginalized, criminalized, and hypervisible sexuality, often means they are the first targets of shadowbans. But sex workers and queer people need these platforms, in the same way every person does. They are crucial sites of connection, cruising, and hustling. But amidst the exhaustion of restarting accounts, building up a following from zero, while utterly unable to receive recourse, many have turned to algospeak.

I first noticed it on Twitter, but quickly saw it taken up elsewhere. Asterisks in place of vowels. They were often used to skirt the panoptic experience of the platform's plastic edges, but also to avoid the possible violence of other users. High traffic and searchable words had their vowels replaced – c*nt, f*g. One of the most popular effacements was Tr*mp. It was used with particular frequency because it allowed users to speak about him without the term being searchable, its crucial vowel gone. A way to avoid being targeted by the boldness of his fascistic followers, who would regularly hunt down and harass those criticizing him.

Later, ¥, the symbol for yen, takes up residence as the Y in dyke. Then I see @ in fag or tranny. This is all self-imposed. The community guidelines are there to “protect” us, to prevent harassment and bullying. But they can’t account for self-identification, for the reclamation of slurs as a way of claiming some sense of ownership that tries to own the violence of the world. Algospeak never jumps from written to spoken word. I never hear someone in a gay bar in between karaoke performances, or at an intimate play party in someone’s worn down West Oakland Victorian, try to stumble through “tr-at-nny”. I see it happen again with Tiktok. Corn star, spicy accountant, seggs ed, people who professionally or passionately engage with sex jumping through the tightening hoops of content moderation.



Screenshot from @onyour.knees, Instagram.

Algospeak, this new language that shifts around the demands of community guidelines and text filters. It’s channeling one of language’s most well-worn functions – the ability to hold multiple meanings. The language of sex work and fetish communities already evade how they can, trying to speak to only those in the know. I call him a client. Another friend might say trick. I ask for provider references. Contact the other sex workers he might have seen recently, who can

vouch for him not being a creep. It's a donation, not a rate. Small prayers in language, hoping that whatever surveillance might be watching doesn't catch on to the hustle fast enough.

My friend, who both makes and repairs leather for the fetish community, complains that she can't help but think in code. A red elastic band signifying that she's into fisting rings the top of her athletic socks. She wears them not because she's into fisting (she is) but because they were in a free pile, one of the perks of the job. She'll arrive back in Oakland, the always polished black leather of her backpack laden with bottles of unsold lube or unopened nipple clamps that a customer returned. They tumble out of her cowhide bag like Christmas presents. But I dare not post about these gifts.

Auto Erotica opened in 1996, two years after I was born. Patrick Batt told a Hoodline reporter that when he opened the store as purely a sex shop, selling dildos, lube, and condoms, that there were no other similar stores in The Castro. In one of the handful of essays about living in San Francisco during the 1990s that is woven into Alexander Chee's exceptionally curated memoir *How To Write an Autobiography*, Chee shares a small detail with the audience. It has stuck with me since I finished the book in a cafe in the Mission that no longer exists – that space having been taken over and reinvented by at least three businesses since 2019.

He writes about all the garage sales and estate sales which dotted the steep hills in the neighborhoods around The Castro. Each week there would be another handful of sales rife with the hallmarks of a selectively fashionable life. It took a few weeks of attending these impromptu for-sale excavations of the queer lives which surrounded Chee for the author to realize that they were occurring so rapidly because of the mass death toll from AIDS. When I read Sarah Schulman's *Gentrification of the Mind* a few months later at the dawn of lockdown in 2020, she wrote that the first mass wave of gentrification was the children of white flight returning to the urban environments their parents fled. This was made possible in large part because of the real estate vacated by the violence of the AIDS crisis.

Trying to think about Auto Erotica as the sole sex shop in The Castro brings up the same feeling of disbelief brought about by the forced scarcity

Schulman and Chee write toward. I am already thankful for the digital sexual cultures I grew up surrounded by. Everyday there is another reminder that the variations of sexual life continue to narrow because of algorithmic constraint. Chee writes that “The men I wanted to follow into the future are dead... I feel I owe them my survival.” The platforms, the posters, the content that broke open the deviant possibilities of my soul have all been deleted or silenced. I feel I owe them this writing.

I hate the rotten aesthetically pleasant bohemia we all share now. The mixed-use condominium-ification of the internet. Monetization has dominated the few spaces left for social interaction, platforms which profit off your attention. Don't mind all the messy edges that have been erased for your viewing convenience. Graffiti power-washed off the side of the building. Hardly populated forums, which once held the open promise of an overgrown vacant lot's quiet possibility, are buried underneath it all. Everything that replaced it, bare concrete walls, cute graphic design, chic pale pink signage, will always be a poor replacement. No amount of individually-purchased manicured houseplants can turn a rental property into the vibrant undergrowth necessary for cruising.

Gayle Rubin has said repeatedly that the only reason SOMA became the “Miracle Mile” of leather culture was because of the cheap real estate leftover in the neighborhood after San Francisco built up its shipping capacity during World War II. City officials worried about the freedom and deviance made possible by “unattached individuals” – single men and women living in the rusting, salt-caked infrastructure surrounding the waterfront's shrinking importance. I think about this each time I catch a drag show at Oasis. Beneath the dance floor was a pool at a leather bar called The Plunge. All those depths of feeling have been filled in. We're left dry, wanting so much more.

*F*CK* feels both like a challenge and a form of cover. The reprieve created by the asterisk opens up a moment of sexual possibility, but we have to figure out what might take the place of that gap. Is it enough to rely upon the passive benevolence of hosting platforms like Vimeo, after years spent watching threats against public sexuality mount on platforms like Tumblr and OnlyFans?

Auto Erotica is one of the few places left to catalog queer counterpublics which now exist primarily in some historically fetishized and commodified way.

I'm tired of my friends and I wishing we could (re)open a leather bar as rowdy as those which have shuttered, or those which have become the hollow scaffolding filled by upscale grocery stores or parking lots. Pale protection offered by social urbanism in the form of a "Leather District" attempts to place boundaries around our queer imagination called Folsom St., Boystown, or the Lesbian Sex Mafia. They are relics of a bygone rebellion. Take the lessons, leave the worship. Every pervert who participated was messier than we'd care to remember anyways.

My erotics starts with something like STAR house. Founded by Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, bankrolled by their sex work on the streets of New York in the 1970s, it was the first queer youth shelter in America. Our protection or lack thereof has always been linked to our sexuality. I can't dream about all the ways I want to get fucked until my rent is paid or I have a place to safely sleep. When I am certain that if a client tries something I have a structure of sisters, lovers, and trans people to back me up, I'll take the booking without fear. Sexual utopia can't be bought. But imagination takes some degree of comfort to dream toward. The tension between what we can't live without in the present and what we'll learn to love with ferocity in the future.



Banner from STAR.

I'm demanding the erotics of the first Folsom Street Fair, which was created as a block party to resist urban development efforts. It hasn't always been solely the carnival of flesh that brings record numbers of attendees to San Francisco. The leather presence was there because those people lived in the neighborhood alongside veterans, Filipino immigrant families, drug users, and the working poor. Sell your boutique leather outfit worth more than someone's rent money and pay off a stranger's bills. There will be fucking in the street at the debt jubilee. We just need to believe that the material power of our sexuality is capable of something stronger than image.

Audre Lorde may have thought S/M practitioners were irredeemable deviants, but everyone who fights for a sexual future worth defending knows at a gut level the importance of her ambitious erotics. "For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves." This fight is worth breaking through the grimy dancefloor of Oasis and finding all the cavernous emotion underneath.

It will take all of us filling in those watery gaps together. It will take us plainly stating the stakes, in whatever way we need to. Dykes 4nd f@gs and tr@nnie\$ and 3v3ryon3 wh0 c@n'+ m@ke 3nd'\$ m33t car\ving ()ut ()ur place ()n7in3 and 1n person. It will take U.