

Naked Hitchhikers: The Unknown Photography of William A. Rhoads

Dominic Johnson

Queen Mary University of London

Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it.

— Jacques Rancière (2013a, x)¹

William A. Rhoads was an avid photographer of male nudes. Rhoads' efforts were prolific, dedicated, sustained – and secret. His photographs have never been exhibited formally, and neither have critics nor historians ever discussed them. The effects of his private labours have remained private, and categorically unknown. Rhoads sourced his models more or less exclusively by picking up hitchhikers on California's Pacific Coast Highway, from around 1970 to 1981. The hikers he procured were likely ones he hoped to have sex with, and photography functioned as a convenient alibi for initiating an encounter, and a means of documenting his sexual experiences, for posterity or for his own repeated enjoyment. His sitters may be turning tricks, or enjoy the narcissistic abandon of being watched and documented: one such sitter slouches provocatively in an armchair, showing the hand-poked tattoos on his arms, chest, and prick, each a blurred detail amid a glut of background patterns and vying points of attention in the image (fig. 1). Moreover, Rhoads' process and the cumulative effect of his endeavours can be described in equal parts as an erotic and an aesthetic project. In his process of procurement, *mise en scène*, and photography, he merged the artistic and the erotic into a singular practice – as a pornographic life and work.

I approach his project, firstly, from the perspective of its historical and cultural contexts of emergence and development; and secondly in terms of the naming

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of the work, and the taxonomic challenges they pose, in relation to established histories of art and pornography that were being called strikingly into question in the 1970s. Both approaches allow Rhoads to be understood beyond the false aesthetic distinction between art and pornography – or more precisely, between a personal, erotic practice and a formal artistic one.

Rhoads' archive gives a rich account of a widespread but mostly hidden cultural history of sex in the era of gay liberation – the imaginative ecology of cruising, trade, hustlers, homemade pornography, and the closet. While Rhoads' practice of procurement and his commitment to documenting his encounters – and his erotic steadfastness – might seem extravagant, prurient, or extreme, his activities may not have been so extraordinary in its time, if not for the beauty and technical proficiency of his resulting photographs, and the clarity of his aesthetic choices of selection, posing, and staging. How to sustain the pornographic function – and erotic vitality – of Rhoads' practice and works, while addressing the importance and relevance of his work as an aesthetic undertaking?

In the domains of life and the image, pornography functions as a practice of representation, as well as a model of imagination necessarily beyond representation. For William Haver, 'what is specifically pornographic in porn is precisely what in the act of presentation exceeds representation, for porn is not merely a portrait of pleasure, but presents itself as *in itself* pleasurable' (2002, xii). The 'problem' of pornography – here, a taxonomic rather than a moral or social problem – is suggested in Haver's assumption that pornography categorically exceeds (and thus falls short of) the category of the aesthetic. This ontological separation between pornography and the proper objects of aesthetics is founded in the earliest modern aesthetic theories, as in Immanuel Kant's maxim by which aesthetic judgment consists of 'the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*' (2007, 42, emphasis in original). Kant is concerned to establish the properly disinterested mode of aesthetic judgment, and by extension the objects or

styles that may or may not be appropriate to aesthetic contemplation. For traditional aesthetics, experiences that command a desiring, erotic faculty of engagement are formally inadequate or inconsistent with the aesthetic register: ‘Only by what one does heedless of enjoyment, in complete freedom and independently of what nature would passively procure for him, does he give to his life ... an absolute worth’ (§4, 40).

Critical disinterest – perhaps Kant’s most powerful aesthetic legacy – is endowed with the power to free up our judgement, liberating the body of modernity from its urges, needs, and wants, its troublesome proclivities and ardent predilections. However, it has the effect of grounding the formal separation of that which pleases in disinterested ways and that which forces our engagement in interested, visceral, and desiring fashions, thus erecting a cordon sanitaire between aesthetic and pornographic production and consumption. In twentieth-century aesthetics, Kant’s diplomatic separations (and subdivisions) begin to falter, for example in John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of art, conceived in the 1930s. For Dewey, Kant was ‘a past-master in first drawing distinctions and then erecting them into compartmental divisions. The effect upon subsequent theory was to give the separation of the [a]esthetic from other modes of experience an alleged scientific basis in the constitution of human nature’ (1943, 252). Dewey writes most expressly and enduringly on pedestrian or mundane activities or scenes, as opposed to great works of art. He argues that if art can be defined as an intensification of one’s daily life-experience, it must be a part of – or coterminous with – the other modalities of experience it seems to intensify. If post-Kantian aesthetics represents the category of art as a discrete, extraordinary, or elite category, enumerated and subdivided, castrated and neutered, its ability to speak to our own experience would be dulled, abstracted or obscured. Dewey writes, ‘[e]ven a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of [a]esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience’ (11). Dewey’s ‘crude’ experience – suggesting a raw, pedestrian event, but also, for my purposes, something vulgar or uncouth – addresses

the fact of experience that the work of art emerges from, namely through the material conditions of production, labour, execution, and exhibition; and the life-experience it engenders, including the desiring attachments, investments and participations provoked or enabled by the work.

It would seem, for Dewey, that ‘with the vast extension of its scope to take in (potentially) anything and everything, art would have lost its unity, dispersed into connected arts, till we could not see the woods for the trees nor a single tree for its branches, were there not a core of common substance.’ However, ‘The obvious reply to this suggested inference is that the unity of the arts resides in their common form’ (191). Dewey’s claim for the categorical indiscriminateness of art anticipates Rancière’s proposition, foregrounded as this article’s epigraph, which sets out a more radical and condensed account of Dewey’s claim, namely: ‘Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it’ (2013a, x). Neither claims that everything already is a work of art, nor that art as a discrete category has ceased to exist. Rather, each philosopher retains his own understanding of the function of art and the nature of an aesthetic sensibility, while acknowledging that no trans-historical limit may be placed upon a particular object or event that might disallow its aspiration or elevation to the common substance of art.

Rhoads’ photographs themselves are handsome, languid and evocative. One such photograph (fig. 2), taken on February 12, 1975, shows a man in his twenties or early thirties, seated at a table, in the nude. The focal points of the image are his handsome lantern-jawed face, his gesturing hand, and his heavy, circumcised member. The line of the hand and arm, held up and away from his body, and the long shadow it casts against his strong but fleshy torso, lead the eye back and forth from face to genitals. His fingers press together around a cigarette. His downcast eyes and the gentle pursing of his lips around an invisible jet of smoke lend the image its somnolent grace. He is utterly relaxed. He sizzles. Picked up hours or days earlier on a lucky stretch of highway, and now sitting sultry and naked with a glass of milk, the

unnamed hitchhiker is elevated from his dailiness, and his slightly tawdry origins, and afforded the sleepy nobility of a matinée idol (but for an audience of one). Already confirmed in his easy beauty, the young man is transformed nevertheless, and lovingly recorded, by the delicate embrace of Rhoads' camera.

The striking lighting, chiaroscuro, erotic candidness, and suggestive mood of Rhoads' photographs recall, perhaps, the work of more renowned photographers of men in the 1970s, such as Arthur Tress or Peter Hujar, each of whom stylised the candid self-presentation of sitters, often in the nude, or else in frankly erotic poses and interactions. In the 1970s, both Tress and Hujar worked (for a time, at least) within gallery and museum contexts, where their artistic explorations of erotic content was validated and legitimised to some extent by the institutional framing of their imagery. The comparison with contemporaries, here, might be a reasonable basis upon which to begin to account for Rhoads' achievements: his process, aesthetic, even his marginality. Yet such a project of comparison may lay the foundations for a project of recovery, and a scholarly practice of legitimisation and familiarisation, which erases or obscures the brazenly resistant quality of Rhoads' working life.

Rhoads maintained his private practice of erotic photography throughout the 1970s, until his sudden death from a congenital heart defect on November 7, 1981, aged 64.² Rhoads' will stipulated that his friend Joseph Carrier should receive his nude photos and negatives. A noted anthropologist specialising in practices of homosexuality in Mexico (and himself a keen photographer of male nudes), Carrier kept the collection in his garage for nearly three decades, from 1981 to 2006. In the intervening period, many of the prints and negatives were damaged beyond repair by humidity, flood, and unstable storage conditions, and subsequently lost or destroyed.

² Rhoads' dates of birth and death were not recorded by the inheritor of his estate, beyond a year suggested for his death (which is incorrect), and a note that he was aged in his sixties when he died. I located detailed information from a search of Social Security numbers, which provided details of his birth and death.

In 2006, Carrier donated his personal and scholarly papers – and with the bequest, Rhoads’ extant works – to a major archive of gay and lesbian history, where the materials have been available to researchers since early 2010.

The William A. Rhoads Collection at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles contains hundreds of Rhoads’ unique homemade prints and contact sheets. The prints are mostly 8 by 10 inches in size, black-and-white, and stored unframed and without mounts in five grey, heavy card boxes.³ Additionally, Rhoads compiled a photographic album in 1975, and it is kept in this form as a separate item in the collection. Nearly all of the series are dated, by month and year, or by year alone. Many of his prints also bear some indication of the identity of the model (or models: one series shows a male-male couple; another series shows a nominally heterosexual couple – the sole instance where a woman is represented). If present, the identification of Rhoads’ models usually consists of a first name, full name, or initials, and often the hitchhiker’s place of origin, written in pencil in Rhoads’ old-fashioned, cursive script on one or more in the printed series. Other series remain unidentifiable, likely because the identifying print (with the inscribed name, date, or other information) has been destroyed.

In a two-page memorandum for record, Carrier gives a detailed account of Rhoads’ practice. Rhoads spent weekends in a small house he owned in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, and weekdays in a larger house with more privacy in Goleta, a town north of Santa Barbara, where the company he worked for was based. During his

³ The William A. Rhoads Collection was donated in 2010 by Rhoads’ friend Joseph Carrier in 2010. The acquisition was negotiated along with the donation of Carrier’s own papers, which document his noted research into homosexual practices in Central America. The William A. Rhoads Collection is part of the Joseph M. Carrier Papers, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles (Coll2008-026). I am grateful to the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (especially archivists David Evans Frantz and Bud Thomas) for unrestricted access to the collection, and to Carrier for his support.

weekend drives back and forth between Venice and his weekday home, he would pick up hitchhikers, usually along an expanse of the Pacific Coast Highway between Santa Monica and Goleta, generally while driving north on Sunday afternoons. Only a few were picked up on drives back to Los Angeles on Friday afternoons or Saturday mornings. Carrier writes,

If Bill [Rhoads] felt the men picked up en route to Goleta were trustworthy, he would invite them to spend the night at his house before he got to the turnoff. Some of the men accepting the offer would end up spending a few days or longer with him. The men picked up en route to Venice would be invited to spend the weekend at his beach house and then, sometimes, return with him to the Goleta house and stay on a few days (2006, n. p.)⁴

Carrier notes that judging from the backgrounds, almost all the extant photos were taken in Goleta. Its seclusion afforded privacy for outdoor photography, although the majority of shoots took place in his bedroom or sitting room, whose large French windows allowed plenty of sunlight.

Some of the contact prints show multiple shots from what appear to be fairly extensive shoots. Many of Rhoads' hitchhikers sport erections, masturbate, or tug absentmindedly on their genitals, or otherwise casually presents his arousal. How did Rhoads entice his nubile young hitchhikers into his erotic-aesthetic scheme? Samuel Steward wrote of his own penchant for photographing nominally heterosexual sailors in Chicago in a 1951 letter to Alfred Kinsey: 'It takes a bit of conning, sometimes; but I remember what you said about exhibitionism and the male, and have found it all too true' (cited in Spring, 2010, 130). Some of Rhoads' hitchhikers seem to demonstrate this masculine abandon. Others are shown drinking – though none look

⁴ Subsequent citations attributed to Carrier are from this document unless otherwise stated.

intoxicated – suggesting they have been given a beer or a stronger tippie, perhaps for Dutch courage, or as a payment for services rendered. On the road to New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco (indeed, Goleta is en route to the latter), youngsters in the 1960s and 1970s happily crisscrossed the country, *on the road* (or simply on the run), and hitchhiked to relearn the nation as – in Rechy’s memorable words – ‘a vast City of Night stretching gaudily from Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard – jukebox-winking, rock-n-roll-moaning: America at night fusing its darkcities into the unmistakable shape of loneliness’ (Rechy, 1964, 13). Advantageous hitches – furnishing money, free transport, and in some cases perhaps, purloined items – enabled a journey, and sexual favours may have lubricated the transactional nature of a free ride, regardless of the sexual identity of the hitchhiker.

So too, some of Rhoads’ hitchhikers wear wedding rings, low-rent tattoos, or show other signals of being ‘trade’.⁵ Historian Thomas Waugh calls this predilection in photography as the visual allure of the ‘lumpen sizzle,’ whose desirable forms ran a gamut from pictures suggesting prison-break fantasies to ‘the anonymous boy-next-door portrait’ (1996, 145). In Rhoads’ work, the frequency of images of eating in the nude involve the economics of what Oscar Wilde called ‘feasting with panthers’ – that is, consorting with trade – suggesting the mutually beneficial transaction between putting out and getting fed (fig. 3). ‘People thought it dreadful of me to entertain at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company’, Wilde writes from prison. ‘It was like feasting with panthers; the danger was half the excitement’ (1954, 185). This mutually advantageous scenario – of the john sustaining ‘gilded snakes’ so as to partake in the ‘poison [that] was part of their perfection’ (185) – is a familiar trope in writings about and/or by other down-and-outs with sex to buy or sell, including the novels of John Rechy (1964), Samuel L. Delany (2002), or David

⁵ Trade came in many forms, such as “carriage trade” (usually the non-reciprocal recipient of oral sex), or “commercial trade” (a “gay for pay” hustler). For sub-categories of trade in gay slang see Rodgers (1972, 199-201).

Wojnarowicz (1992). Viewed in this light, Rhoads' resourceful hitchhikers are documented in the process of making opportune inroads into 'The Golden Age of Hustlers,' as Bambi Lake described the West Coast in the 1970s (in her song of the same name). Rhoads' practice merges a prolific sexual adventure with a single-minded aesthetic pursuit. His archive suggests, as if from below, a rich sexual culture of encounters at the tail end of the decade of gay liberation. Yet his works are also opportunities to anticipate the effects of the aesthetic regime of art, as his work has never before broached the subject of its own aesthetic valuation (or, indeed, pornographic valuation).

It might be convenient to attempt to distinguish the function of Rhoads' photographs neatly as *either* pornographic or artistic. Yet no fixed criteria are available for such a diagnosis. The pornographic image, and its eroticised yet apparently uncritical consumption, invokes problems for its status in visual culture. Similarly, erotic photography more broadly is a marginal and contested genre in art. The distinction between the erotic and the pornographic – and the role of the homoerotic across these categories – changes according to the historical and geographical contexts in which such images are produced and consumed. Yet pornographic images of men remain beyond the pale for traditional art history.

In *The Nude Male*, the first book on the subject in English, Margaret Walters (1978) begins by observing the marginality of male nudes, and argues that traditional understandings of the nude have failed to distinguish between the differing social and cultural functions of male and female nudes. Despite the ubiquity of the male nude in western culture (from around the seventh century BCE to its decline in the nineteenth century), its social function has been rarely put under scrutiny, and rarely acknowledged as carrying an erotic charge (Walters, 1978, 12-14). Uniquely, she argues that studying the nude male enables a theory of female visual pleasure, to commence the difficult task of devising 'a whole new visual language' for women to articulate their feelings about the male body, commensurate with (but more politically

viable than) the strategies historically enacted against the female nude by (heterosexual) men (18).

Walters is doubtful as to the importance or relevance of homoeroticism in male nude representations. In a markedly coy reading, Walters states that visual statements about 'a certain kind of sexual relationship' tend to lack the 'sensuous vitality and energy' of male artists' desiring portraits of men pictured alongside women (272-3). Her reading seems to reinforce stigmatised assumptions about gay men as effete or hesitant in comparison to rugged and concerted heterosexual desires. Walters criticises the representational strategies in paintings and drawings by Francis Bacon, Patrick Proctor, and David Hockney, describing them as the results of 'working in a very familiar convention, and simply substituting a man or boy as sex object, without delineating anything specific about how a man sees and responds to another's body'; the results are 'thin-blooded and attenuated,' and 'a sophisticated disguise for an old-fashioned romanticism' (273). While Walter's criticisms here pertain to painting and drawing, it could be argued that Rhoads' images do achieve the kind of sensuous specificity that departs from Walters' uncharacteristically reductive typology of the homosexual as an attenuated subject. There is often no denying the carnality of his images, which approach a pornographic candidness, nevertheless elevated or distanced by the formal qualities that characterise his photography more broadly.

Walters devotes a chapter to the emergence of the 'homosexual pinup' in the 1950s, as a 'modern technology' of phallic substitution; for example, she notes the way physique magazines accessorize the male nude with phallic tools, introducing visual surrogates for masculine power via 'everything from electric drills to motorbikes to machine guns' (10). Her theory of the instrumentality of the male nude for a theory of female visual pleasure is difficult to square with Rhoads' work. His photographs – and the secretive practice that produced them – seem to preclude women as consumers of the images. However, if 'male pinups' are carnal, they reject the

traditional passivity of female counterparts, Walters observes: they ‘often hover between an easy nonchalance, a determined seductiveness, and an aggressive look-what-I’ve-got stance (296), as stand-ins for or prompts to the phallic mystique of male dominance over other men. Walter’s distaste for pornography – particularly, gay pornography – is palpable here. This passes over into a generalized discomfort with homosexuality tout court, noting the ‘predatory’ aspects of gay desire, which pinups seem to magnify – for Walters, this is emphasised in the sadistic element of gay pornographic representation, its quintessence being Tom of Finland’s drawings of ‘hulking brutes,’ from the 1950s to the late 1980s (298-9). Other writers on the male nude have noted the purported shortcomings of the male pinup as a photographic genre: for curator Peter Weiermair, physique photography demonstrates a ‘cult of the body,’ from Bruce of Los Angeles and Bob Mizer in the 1950s, to more recent work by Bruce Weber or Jim French (1988, 15; see also Bellas 2008, Hanson 2009). For Melody Davis, a later feminist reader of the male nude photograph, its effectiveness or otherwise depends on its ability to engage with and find solutions to a double impasse: ‘how to photograph the male body in ways that do not equate with unilateral aggression (to or from the subject) and how to maintain the dignity that everyone deserves without illusory conventions’ (1991, 19). Davis continues, ‘those who respond to the challenges have the potential to ... substitute for fears and taboo a masculine presence that is complex and relational’ (19). These provisional solutions may overcome the aggressive/exploitative impasse, she suggests, by finding “artful alternatives” to the limited visual strategies of both advertising and pornography (19).

In Allen Ellenzweig’s sympathetic account, the male nude photograph and its reception is necessarily a social commentary upon homoeroticism, homosexuality, and homophobia. He studies the work of a range of artists, including contemporary examples such as Arthur Tress and Peter Hujar, or Robert Mapplethorpe and George Dureau, to show that the differentials of class, race, age, and gender are crucial to how vocabularies of meaning and desire are produced or provoked in the homoerotic

image. For Ellenzweig, analysis of homoerotic male nudes requires a definition of the homoerotic, and, by extension, a distinction between homoeroticism and homosexuality: ‘The homoerotic engages in varying degrees those feelings of desire, intimacy, admiration, or affection between members of the same sex, whereas the homosexual engages the actual physical or, more properly, the sexual – the genital – expression of those sentiments’ (2012, 2). Moreover, he adds, ‘[it] is distressing for some people to admit that although all homosexuals experience homoerotic feelings, not all homoerotic feelings are experienced by homosexuals’ (2). He suggests the relevance of homoerotic photography for a broad range of viewers, in excess of their sexual identifications, and the appeal – pleasurable, social, cultural, or otherwise – that erotic works may manifest. Whereas Walters and Davis attenuate or stigmatise pornography in order to secure the political potential of the ‘artistic’ or ‘artful’ male nude, Ellenzweig demonstrates that any such distinctions and conclusions are ideologically constructed and sustained in historically, socially, and culturally contingent ways.

The pornographic function of Rhoads’ work can be explained by looking at the historical and social contexts of Rhoads’ biography, the sexual cultures he drew upon, and in turn, his practice of private photography. Little is known about his life. He was born on 6 July 1917. After receiving a PhD in botany, he worked at the University of California, Los Angeles in the 1950s, researching nutritional deficiencies in desert vegetation. (A co-published article by Rhoads describes him as Assistant Research Plant Physiologist in Nuclear Medicine and Radiation Biology at UCLA [Rhoads, Wallace and Romney, 1959, 15]). From the mid-1960s he worked for the national defence contractor EG&G, testing the effects of nuclear radiation upon plant life at the Nevada Test Site (Rhoads and Platt, 1971).⁶ His photographic work

⁶ EG&G was a controversial contractor of high-tech nuclear weapons testing in the 1950s and 1960s. Rhoads authored or co-authored several scholarly papers from his work at EG&G.

remained beneath the threshold of public visibility, partly because his botanical research required security clearance from the Atomic Energy Agency. The requirement of personal disclosure and high-level surveillance would have been a key reason Rhoads remained closeted throughout his adult life – despite his extensively documented sexual encounters with men.

The naked hitchhiker shoots generally took place in private, although Carrier remembers being present at two shoots Rhoads undertook at Carrier's home in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, near the end of Sunset Boulevard (conveniently, one block from the Pacific Coast Highway). These two instances gave Carrier the opportunity to observe Rhoads' photographic practice. In one of these instances, Rhoads arrived with two male hitchhikers. In an email to me on October 6, 2013, Carrier remembers, 'Bill remained clothed while taking the photos but did ask me to get nude with them, which I did. Both of the men posed nude with hard-ons but limited their sexual activity to oral sex. Bill stayed behind the camera and did not participate sexually.' However, Rhoads 'probably had oral sex with some (most?) of the men he photographed,' Carrier continues, on account of anecdotes Rhoads told of his encounters. Carrier is clear about the erotic function of the photo shoots: 'Bill obviously got a great deal of sexual pleasure and excitement just taking the photos and then developing the film and making the prints,' he writes. 'Like me, Bill was a "look queen" – we would get a lot of pleasure just looking at photos of naked males.'⁷

⁷ The figure of the "look queen" or "watch queen" entered into sociological parlance through the notoriety that attended the publication of Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* (1970), a participant-observer study of sex between men in public toilets. Joseph Carrier was Humphrey's close friend and confidant in California from 1975 to 1980. Despite Carrier's friendship with both men, Rhoads and Humphreys never met. Carrier explained to me in an email on October 6, 2013: 'I think Laud would have been fascinated by Bill's photos. Laud was interested in my collection of nude photos and once brought two Mexican callboys to my house for fun and games and for me to photograph them.'

And in those days you had to make your own nude male photos. The male magazines we have today showing men with erect penises and having sexual intercourse did not exist.' While the timeline of Carrier's recollection is inaccurate – as I show below, commercial gay pornography was available from around 1969 – his point is suggestive in terms of the libidinal and/or aesthetic drives behind his project, for example towards the production of specialised or otherwise distinctive visual materials.

Exceedingly rare prior to the First World War, amateur gay pornography began to be produced more widely in the inter-war years after the invention of portable cameras, and even more so after the availability of the affordable Polaroid Land camera in 1948, a self-developing camera that allowed enthusiasts to elude the dangers of commercial film processing (Waugh, 1996, 29-30). Obscenity laws remained stringent in the US throughout the 1950s, however, which limited access to pornography except for elite circles, in which illicit materials could be circulated privately among similarly interested parties. In the US, laws were loosened after the Supreme Court decision in *Stanley v. Georgia* (1969), which established a national 'right to privacy' with regard to the domestic consumption of visual or literary printed matter. Soon after, the presidential *Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (1970) found no evidence for adverse social or psychological effects from watching sexually explicit materials. The 1969 ruling prompted the eventual founding of new gay pornographic glossies such as *Honcho* (in 1975) and *Mandate* (in 1978), and porn cinemas in major cities went above ground.⁸

Thus, Rhoads' practice begins around the time of broad shifts in the cultural, social and legal understanding of pornography. While gay pornography immediately became more explicit after 1969, and could show full frontal nudity and more brazen displays of intimacy, the new permissiveness must have been slow to hit home – not

⁸ For example, the Park Theatre in Los Angeles had been in operation for several years, showing risqué physique movies since at least 1968, and its screenings became more explicit after 1970. In regional areas, the transformations were necessarily slower.

least for Rhoads, as a socially isolated and closeted man in his early 50s, whose adult years had taken place first in the depressed wartime years, and subsequently amidst the stultifying political and social conservatism of the Cold War era. From 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy would pursue communists and queers, as mutual sources of Un-American sensibilities. In 1953, President Eisenhower followed suit by prohibiting the employment of homosexuals in civil service. At the time, Rhoads was 36, and gainfully employed at the University of California (a publically owned institution). The 'Lavender Scare' was a formal risk for federal employees, but also barred known or suspected homosexuals from an estimated 20 per cent of jobs in the US, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, from President Eisenhower's Executive Order 10450 (April 23, 1953) which entered into law the conditions for employers to reject or dismiss employees based on perceived 'sexual perversion', until the introduction of relevant employment anti-discrimination legislation in 1975 (Johnson, 2004). Until that time – halfway into Rhoads' project – his photography would have put him at risk of unemployment and probable disgrace.

It is significant that Rhoads' project came to fruition in Los Angeles and its environs in Southern California. Los Angeles had been home to the pioneering homophile organisations of the 1950s, and gay liberation in Los Angeles began with protests against police raids of bars in the Silverlake district in 1967, followed by the 'LA Gay-ins' in March 1968, which drew massive crowds in Griffith Park (both preceded the more famous Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969) (Faderman and Timmons, 2006, 156-7). In most states, the practice of homosexuality remained a criminal offence. Sodomy laws were repealed in California in 1976 (and eventually removed from Federal statutes in 2003), suggesting that around half of Rhoads' photographs served a third implicit function beyond those of works of art and of pornography, namely as potential evidentiary documents of criminal activity. Carrier's characterisation of the availability of pornography suggests he and his friend were profoundly aware of the social context for their activities, and the material risks

associated with Rhoads' artistic endeavours. Secrecy and or privacy would have been paramount requirements. In the same email cited above, Carrier tells me, 'What I cannot remember is what year Bill retired and then theoretically would no longer have to worry about losing his security clearances. Even so, my guess is he showed the photos only to a few very close gay friends,' suggesting the deep-seated concerns implanted by several decades of secrecy. Why, then, would Rhoads embark on such a dangerous undertaking? Taking pictures of naked hitchhikers may have fulfilled Rhoads' penchant for a highly specialised 'look' in his men, or particular content in his images; on different terms, both are conditions, variously, for an artistic or pornographic endeavour. More likely, his project granted him an alibi and a structure for his cruising of hitchhikers – enabling and amplifying the thrill of the chase.

It seems Rhoads did not consider himself an artist.⁹ Neither did he conceive his photos as works of art. Yet he clearly took his work seriously, and advanced his technical and compositional abilities over the course of his self-training as a photographer and printer. In an email sent to me on October 1, 2013, Carrier recalls, 'I remember Bill being a very intense man who probably studied the craft of photography in the same focused way he did nuclear botany.' As the 1970s progressed, his work grew to be a more full-fledged artistic project, as he accrued more precise personal and aesthetic investments in his photography. Some of his contact sheets have evidently been studied with a critical eye – either, it would seem, towards aesthetic or pleasure-oriented criteria. Where some frames display markings, corresponding high-quality prints accompany the sheets. His friend Carrier confirms in the email of October 1:

In the beginning I don't think Bill thought of himself as an artist. He was fulfilling an erotic obsession with these men. But as time passed and he could

⁹ Joseph Carrier asserts as much in personal correspondence with the author, 1 October 2013.

see the possible outcomes of his photography as something more I think he visualized the artistic aspects of the photos he was taking.

Many individuals have catalogued their sexual exploits and fleeting encounters – often in extensive detail – through writing, or in photography through what Waugh calls the “trick” portrait’ (1996, 113). Yet Rhoads’ archive is unique for the singularity of his methods of procuring ‘tricks,’ and at least notable for the resounding beauty of his images.¹⁰ In the second half of this article, I explore the provocations of a life lived through and as a pornographic enterprise, which entails but is not reducible to the production of pornographic images. In my reading, the photographic documents prompt yet exceed the art/pornography question (namely, is it art or is it pornography?) I attempt to engage the taxonomic problems posed by Rhoads’ works: without consenting to a paranoid legitimization of my own research (and implicit identity); and also without ignoring Judith Butler’s provocation that ‘naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm’ (1993, 224). Rather than *save* Rhoads’ work from being defined as pornography (or, indeed, as art), Rhoads’ life becomes profoundly ‘pornographic,’ in the sense of a yearning to imagine erotic experience as the pleasurable foundation of a life and its labours, rather than its inconsequential supplement.

In his lifetime, Rhoads remained strictly artisanal or amateur in his pursuits. A lover of men and photographs, he neither sought nor secured audiences for his work, beyond an intimate coterie of friends. Since his death more than three decades ago, his works have remained unquestionably *unknown*. Beyond the material conditions of their invisibility – that is, Rhoads’ outsider status and his archive’s long-

¹⁰ While distinctive, Rhoads is not anomalous as a photographer. For a comparative project of amateur and/or secret gay pornographic photography, see Denfield 2000. For distinctive examples of gay pulp or pinup photography, including Bruce of Los Angeles, James Bidgood, and Bob Mizer, each of whom have recently found broader audiences, see Bellas 2008, Benderson 2009, Hanson 2009, respectively.

term closure – the works are also formally marginal. More precisely, the photographs occupy an uneasy status between formal categories at the fringes of the aesthetic: primarily, nude male photography and pornography. Having located an anomalous archive – and having been charmed by it, what might we ask of aesthetics, once the anomalous, alien, or offensive archive is brought to bear upon its assumptions and its poetics?

Jacques Rancière has written extensively of the crisis of aesthetics in the twentieth century. For Rancière, it is, in fact, a crisis ‘as old as ‘modernity’ itself,’ magnified in recent decades by consecutive reconsiderations of the proper objects of aesthetic analysis (2009, 49). A founding problem, he writes, concerns the difficulty of securing ‘a certain regime for the identification of art, that is to say a specific relationship between the practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility that enable us to identify the products of these latter as belonging to art or to *an art*’ (2009, 28, emphasis in original). Thus, *the aesthetic regime of art* is the frame that legitimises an object as art, or negates it by turning it into something else – into, say, pornography, commodity, craft, or kitsch, all of which categories Rhoads’ photographs flirt with. Rancière does not address pornography directly in his writing, but dismisses it elsewhere as a ‘problem’ – either taxonomic or moral – rather than subject to the distribution of the sensible: ‘Certainly it’s a problem, but it’s not a problem related to my own research’ (Rancière and Power, 2010, 80). For Rhoads, the problem is not what can or cannot be art – much less what is good or bad art (though these dilemmas continue to trouble some critics). Rather, the problem at hand concerns how a regime for the identification of art comes to be defined, sustained, and challenged. This begs the question of what happens to the objects, practices, and ideas surveyed by the proponents of such a regime. Rancière makes clear:

The property of being art refers back not to a distinction between [technical] modes of doing, but to a distinction between modes of being. This is what

‘aesthetics’ means: in the aesthetic regime of art, the property of being art is no longer given by the criteria of technical perfection but is ascribed to a *specific form of sensory apprehension* (Rancière and Power, 29, emphasis added).

Thus, the status of a cultural text as art is not determined by its formal quality or achievement, but by wrestling with the ‘distribution of the sensible,’ as the forms of inclusion and exclusion that govern what can be sensed, known, or understood. The process of aisthesis – classically, of apperception – enables objects to bear upon our assumption of what is thinkable and what is not, by causing the limit between categories to ‘vacillate’ (2013a, ix). In his book of the same name, Rancière redefines ‘aisthesis’ as the transformation in which a perceptible object or scene ‘calls forth the sensible fabric of experience in which they are produced,’ defined through and through by the material conditions of production, which enable and limit the creation and circulation of events; it is also dependent upon the ‘modes of perception and regimes of emotion,’ which accompany their dissemination, and condition the ways in which meaning is produced and foreclosed (ix-x). In other words, in aisthesis, an artefact is not only sensed, but instantiates a scene as one that matters by challenging the codes of visibility that allow the scene to be understood as the subject of aesthetics.

This series of ‘vacillations’ confounds our understanding of assumed distinctions between (for Rancière) art objects and commodities (or between artists and artisans). By extension, aisthesis contests and restages the sensible limits between: the useful and the useless, the legible and the illegible, the known and the unknown, the familiar and the strange. Elsewhere, Rancière writes, ‘by becoming obsolete, unfit for consumption, any old commodity, any object of use whatsoever, becomes available for art: ... as a disinterested object of satisfaction, as a body ciphering a story, or as a witness to an inassimilable strangeness’ (2009, 50). Rancière suggests the ideological nature of the partition between art and its others (which may include pornography), and he points to the function of the aesthetic as a necessary hindrance

to its own essentially volatile security. Thus, the charm, shock, or pathos of Rhoads' images depends less on their prior pornographic utility, as 'an object of use' for the amatory/amateur photographer. Aisthesis depends upon and stages their transformed identities, after Rhoads' death, as both persistent erotic remainders *and* aesthetic events – that is, as erotic scenes of aisthesis. Mementoes from a private world of pursuit and pleasure, homage and possession, they perform what Rancière describes as the ne plus ultra of the aesthetic: that is, 'the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself' (2013b, 18).

In order to pursue this defining vacillation, we may track Rhoads' relationship to two categories: contemporary art photography, and commercial pornography. Rhoads developed an aesthetic that often resembles snapshot photography, borne out of the development of light, portable equipment that became available in the mid-twentieth-century. A representative image, taken on July 29, 1974, shows a handsome man, seated at the familiar table and chairs, pressing his torso forward to engage the camera with a serious, unsmiling face (fig. 4). Typified by quickly but compellingly framed images that often feign a lack of staging, snapshot photographs seem to catch a subject off-guard, capture a moment, and render the photographer relatively unobtrusive. Snapshot photographers – Rhoads included – create images as vignettes, which are by turns familiar or exotic, comforting or titillating, and range from a kind of visual memento to, in some cases, a false intimacy between the viewer and the subject that can be gratuitously fictive, ethically difficult, or at least misleading (Kotz 1998). The aesthetic of spontaneity connotes Rhoads' adjustment to key trends in contemporary art photography, but it is also a symptom of his familiarity with the visual language of mass-market pornography. Rhoads positions the male body flatteringly, to expose faces, genitals or buttocks with suggestive, casual, yet purposeful and efficient poses. Specifically, his work recalls the styling of physique photography, which between the 1950s and 1970s was a prolific

domain of mostly (at least publicly) soft-core imagery.¹¹ Legally freed from the constraints imposed upon physique photographers after 1969, Rhoads nevertheless borrows the aesthetic styling of the genre, while stripping away the more obvious conceits and alibis they required to persuade the censor of the work's licit status (if not its reputability).

For Rhoads, the photographic act was its own alibi – that is, an aesthetic pretence that enabled his erotic procurement of soon-to-be-naked hitchhikers, and the more intimate encounters that often followed. In his patently erotic depictions, the role of staging, costume and props in Rhoads' work seem to cater more to his own desires or “kinks,” than to legitimise the men's states of undress (on account of the lack of dissemination of the works in Rhoads' lifetime, taking the photo was alibi enough for *securing* their nudity). A minority of his images are explicitly sadomasochistic, from suggestions of the erotics of sleep (a cipher for submission), to more explicit representations showing bargaining or bondage. A striking example of the latter is a series of portraits of a hitchhiker (named in full on the reverse of one print). Taken in 1981 – three months to the day before the photographer's death – the sitter tightens a necktie round his scrotum (fig. 5). The ligature is one of many neckties adorning the smiling hitchhiker. Ties are wound loosely round his neck and arm, and lay scattered around him on Rhoads' bed. The ties function to bind and adorn the pornographic sitter, and therefore fulfil at once both primitive and

¹¹ His work thus recalls the best-known physique photographer of the period, Bob Mizer, founder of the Athletic Model Guild (a photographic studio), and publisher of the magazine *Physique Pictorial*. From 1951, Mizer used suggestive props, costume, and tactile scenarios as alibis to allow his models into graphic states of undress, and to excuse ever-more-intimate encounters that massaged the line between legality and obscenity. Mizer had served six months in a correctional work camp in California in 1947, for distributing obscene materials through the mail, and therefore learnt to temper or camouflage the illicit content of his commercial photography (Hanson 2009).

imaginative technological functions. They also work as a visual joke.¹² One assumes they are Rhoads' ties. He worked in a professional context as an academic and scientific researcher, where a tie would have been *de rigueur* in the 1970s, and we know that he was profoundly closeted throughout his professional life. The ties bind the photographic subject to the erotic scene, even enable, to some extent, the masturbatory success of the interaction (they are bound round the subjects genitals); and they also bind the sexual event, and its attendant freedom, perversity, abandon and excess, to the signifier of his workaday frustrations, and its erotic privations (his inability to speak his sexual 'truth' in his professional habitat).

In a striking, extraordinary image taken before or after, but presumably in the same sitting as the above photograph, the hitchhiker stands outside, wearing an accumulation of further ties, round his waist, his thighs, and his head (fig. 6). The hitchhiker also wears a cheap plastic lion mask, and the overall effect is one of play, but also of fetishistic involvement in the scene – signalled not least by his erection. This image is out of sync with the broader context of physique photography, partly for its explicitness, but moreover on account of its seemingly anomalous sexuality – confirmed by the ties and the mask – and assemblage which caters to an aesthetic sense of the encounter, or to a highly specialised desire (or *kink*) on the photographer's (or sitter's?) part.

To make matters more complicated, a further image in the series shows a self-portrait by the photographer (one of only two such images), himself adorned with ties in much the same fashion as the hitchhiker (fig. 7). The ties bind the same parts as his companion (whom, one assumes, took the shot), as well as one wrist, yet Rhoads sits in a more provocative and candid pose, spread-eagled against a backdrop of lush foliage. Squinting in the Californian sun, Rhoads' tight erection juts out, drawn against the onlooker, perpendicular to the frame. With a newfound forthrightness, towards the

¹² I thank Jennifer Doyle for calling my attention to the visual joke.

end of his life and after a decade of technical and formal experimentation, this series overcomes the relative coyness of his more aesthetically poised representations, and embraces the singularities, commitments, and tensions represented in the fetish. Similarly, the introduction of his own body into the shot reminds us of his emphatic erotic investment in the scenario. It stages belatedly the revelation of his active participation throughout his general project, and breaches, here, the discrete screen between the space of photographic representation or pornographic enactment, and the concealed space of technical operation. This particular shoot represents metonymically the general sublation or convergence of highly specialised erotic and aesthetic imperatives – of art and of life, in his project of procurement and depiction.

The unstable location of Rhoads' project in relation to the two anomalous domains of visual culture – the homoerotic male nude, and pornography – renders his images multiply compromised in formal and material terms. Both the male nude and pornography are burdened by their marginality, and subsequently trouble the conferral of cultural value upon the artefacts in question. The 'problem' of the male nude can be soothed or legitimated fairly easily (as in the work of Margaret Walters, Melody Davis, and Allen Ellenzeig, discussed above). While the category of pornographic invention allows us to consider Rhoads' project as overcoming or exceeding the distinction between art and life, the apparent status of Rhoads' images as (non-commercial) pornography provokes fundamental problems for critical and aesthetic considerations of his work. For Beatriz (now Paul B.) Preciado, the dismissal or devaluation of pornography as a valid object for critical study is premised upon 'the hypothesis of the brainless masturbator'; Preciado writes, 'pornography is seen as the zero degree of representation, a closed and repetitive circle whose only function is and should be that of uncritical masturbation – with criticism understood as an obstacle to masturbatory success' (2008, 25). Preciado goes on to question the binary between pleasure and criticality. Preciado exposes critically the assumption that the producer and/or consumer of pornographic culture is credulous, apolitical, over-

invested, and drunk on desire. Implicitly, the masturbator's mythic brainlessness – which Preciado explodes – is contrasted with the idealised viewer of art, who is trained to be intellectually engaged, critically distanced, and able to overcome (or at least sublimate) their desires.

Seizing the means of production, in part at least to bypass the unavailability, uniformity or conservatism of pornography, how might Rhoads refuse the injunction to name his work, and in turn deny the taxonomic distinction between art and pornography? How do we read Rhoads' work while neither fully trafficking the repertoire of images into the discourses of art (which it strains against in its utility), nor abandoning the work to the critical vacuum of pornography? The task at hand is to encourage the archive to persist in its vacillation, on the cusp of art, with its roots in pornography's sustaining muck (a botanical analogy I hope Rhoads might have enjoyed). This situation is one that can't quite reach the full transformation promised by Rancière's aisthesis. By making sensible the relation between art and pornography, without negating or disavowing it, Rhoads suggests a kind of *pornographic aisthesis*. This operation retains the work's partial identity as pornography, and preserves the pleasure afforded by his erotic labour of production. His evocation of aesthetics as a sensible fabric of experience challenges assumptions about the 'brainless' utility of pornography, by laying claim to his identity as creator and lone consumer of a series of experiences, from procurement, to the production of images, to the private scenarios for their subsequent enjoyment. At the same time, to sustain his work's promise as art affirms and extends the political logic of aesthetics. We do a disservice to Rhoads, and to aesthetics, if we deny his work's viability as art, even if we do so for sympathetic reasons. As Rancière writes in *Aisthesis*, 'The problem is not to judge the contest, but to reflect on the criterion that grounds it' (2013a, 208). Or, as he explains more directly, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 'the role of the critic is to say, "this is the world that this work proposes."' It is to try to explain the forms – as well as the possible shifts in the forms – of perception, description and interpretation of a world that are

inherent in the work' (2013b, 80). This is not limited to the transformation of the limit between art and the commodity form, but to the vacillating distinction between art and its *other* others: including – but not limited to – pornography.

In conclusion, I have not sought to diagnose the status of Rhoads' hitherto unknown photographs as *either* art *or* pornography, nor Rhoads' status as an artist or a pornographer, but instead attempt to suspend the different possibilities in dialectical tension. Rather, his naked hitchhikers pose the stickier question of what happens – to an artist, a photograph, or to art – when a lost body of work enters into, refuses, or otherwise engages the prospect of taxonomic identification. Overinvested, inhabited, and integrated in a way of doing – a poiesis – and a way of sensing and knowing – an aisthesis, Rhoads' photographs are visual documents, or image diaries, whose peculiar dignity stems from his perilous pursuits of both art *and* pornography.

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