

A Pornographic Avant-Garde:

Boys in the Sand, LA Plays Itself, and the Construction of a Gay Masculinity

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LGBT 3400: The Politics of Pornography

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Library Prize Submission

Wakefield Poole and Fred Halsted stand as foundational figures in the history of the gay hardcore porn film. In 1971 Poole made the landmark film *Boys in the Sand*, the first gay porn film to achieve crossover success, playing to general moviegoing audiences, outside the confines of the porn theater. A few months later, in 1972, Halsted released his innovative gay hardcore film, *LA Plays Itself*. *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* invoke a history of gay erotic art films in an effort to legitimize the porn film. These films achieved a crossover success perhaps only possible for gay porn films – indeed, for porn films of any kind – in the brief period of “porno chic” of the early 1970s, in the wake of the sexual revolution and gay liberation, as pornography played an unprecedented role in shaping American culture. In merging the auteurist, self-consciously artistic qualities of the independent art film with the hardcore sex of porn films, these early films of Poole and Halsted attempt to collapse the distinction between pornography and art. The aggressive positioning of their porn films as art and of themselves as artists allowed Poole and Halsted to bring startling images of gay male sexuality, briefly, into the mainstream, helping to form the dominant images of gay masculinity in the 1970s. These films, therefore, carried surprising political power, as their cultural influence allowed for the circulation and validation of nascent sexual identities.

Bringing explicit images of gay male sexuality to a larger public, *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* proved uniquely positioned to shape and address an emerging gay male culture and sexuality, offering a new, post-Stonewall concept of gay masculinity. As Jeffrey Escoffier writes, these films “reinforced the new style of gay masculinity,” inventing, recording, and codifying a “new masculine sexual ethos that was emerging among gay men.”¹ In disseminating these new images of gay masculinity to an ever-widening audience, these works form what

Michael Warner terms a gay or queer counterpublic, a culturally mediated, rhetorical space in tension with dominant public discourses, generating new, queer social forms. Warner contends that queer counterpublics “work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy.”² Warner makes note of this pedagogical aspect to queer world making. Gay cultural works, such as *Boys in the Sand* or *LA Plays Itself*, do not simply help to liberate a pre-existing gay sexuality, but in fact help generate and disseminate a gay sexuality. These queer counterpublics “make possible new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship – meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender.”³ As Warner writes, “gay people or queers exist by virtue of the world they elaborate together.”⁴ *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* participate in this elaboration of a queer world, creating and molding new identities based around emerging notions of gay male sexuality and masculinity.

As José B. Capino contends, the “porno chic” heralded by these films “turned the motion picture apparatus and some fledgling pornographers, performers, and audiences into instruments of what Michel Foucault calls the ‘implantation of perversions,’” creating new sexual identities and shaping new ideas and experiences of sexuality.⁵ These films in fact ushered in the era of “porno chic” in America, more commonly associated with heterosexual pornography, such as the 1972 film *Deep Throat*. As Capino claims, in this period, “something of an American Kama Sutra began its intense and rapid expansion.”⁶ Screened in mainstream movie theaters and famously seen by celebrities such as Jacqueline Onassis and Johnny Carson, *Deep Throat* epitomized the entrance of hardcore porn into mainstream discourse.⁷ It positioned itself,

perhaps not wholly unjustly, as instructive, promotive of sexual health. Indeed, in the wake of the film, its titular oral sex act, “deep throating,” became a staple of porn films and entered public discourse about sex.⁸ As this example illustrates, porn films consist of much more than just filmed sex acts. They in fact “encode and disseminate practices of sexuality.”⁹

Deep Throat came to exemplify the newfound cultural influence of porn films in the 1970s. Yet both *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* aggressively courted and won mainstream attention before the storied appearance of *Deep Throat* on the American consciousness. *Boys in the Sand* became the first porn film, gay or straight, to receive reviews in *Variety* and *The New York Times*. Indeed, decades later, filming a documentary on *Deep Throat*, interviewers asked Poole, “How do you feel for not getting credit for what you did for the sex film industry?” As they acknowledged to Poole, *Boys in the Sand* most likely helped to make the legendary success of *Deep Throat* possible.¹⁰

In December of 1971, nearly a year before the release of the crossover straight porn hit *Deep Throat*, Wakefield Poole premiered his pioneering gay porn film *Boys in the Sand* at a small theater in Manhattan, the 55th Street Playhouse.¹¹ Poole and his business partner, Marvin Shulman, launched an advertising campaign unprecedented for a pornographic feature, placing ads for the film in gay and mainstream publications. Produced on a budget of \$8,000, the film grossed \$24,655 just in its opening weekend single screen run. On its second weekend it made another \$20,100. *Boys in the Sand* remained on the charts in *Variety* as one of the top 50 grossing films in the nation for three consecutive weeks and went on to long runs in all the major American gay capitals.¹²

Poole received a great deal of attention in both the gay and the mainstream press for his groundbreaking success. He also received attention for the departure he and many of these publications believed his film marked from the sleazy, shoddy porn films that preceded it. Poole later recalled that the inspiration for making *Boys in the Sand* came from a disappointing evening spent at a porn theater a year earlier, in 1970. The films screened proved utterly unerotic, according to Poole. The police regularly patrolled theaters serving a gay clientele. Cruising proved impossible that evening due to this police presence, leaving theater patrons with few options beyond suffering through the films on screen. He recalled theater patrons, including his friends and himself, laughing or falling asleep in response to the gay porn films screened that night. One patron, Poole claimed, sat reading *The New York Times*.¹³ One of the porn films showing that night proved particularly dispiriting, depicting a man raping another man at knife-point.¹⁴ That night, faced with an “ugly,” “horrible” porn film, Poole recalled telling one of his friends, “Somebody oughta be able to do something better than this!”¹⁵

Artfully photographed and composed, *Boys in the Sand* represents the result of this effort to create something better than the gay pornography available at the time of its making. Shot on Fire Island in the bright summer day, the film consciously attempts to offer an opposing vision of gay male sexuality to that on offer in porn theaters such as the one Poole visited. Its explicit sex acts taking place in a natural paradise of sand dunes, clear blue water, and secluded lanes of green trees, the film wrenches hardcore gay porn out of the realm of sleaze. Linda Williams notes this emphasis on “the play of light and shadow through the trees,” which “immediately marks the aesthetic ambitions of the film as artier than most straight hardcore,” or, indeed, most hardcore pornography of any kind.¹⁶ An extended sequence in a swimming pool recalls queer

pop artist David Hockney and his famous series of swimming pool paintings, such as *A Bigger Splash* (1967). The soundtrack, featuring Indian classical music, psychedelically-tinged rock, and Debussy, signals the hip, countercultural, and serious-minded artistic aspirations of the film, placing it closer to the queer cinematic tradition of Jean Cocteau, Kenneth Anger, and Andy Warhol than that of previous gay hardcore porn films. Poole set out to combine the lyrical qualities of a filmmaker such as Cocteau with extended scenes of unsimulated, hardcore sex, breaching a cinematic taboo that previous queer artists, such as Warhol, Anger, Pat Rocco, or Jean Genet approached but never quite broke.

The Edenic Fire Island setting of *Boys in the Sand* not only signals the artistic aspirations of the film, but also reflects its utopian, gay liberationist ethos. The whole film takes place within the seclusion of this gay vacation spot, famous since the early part of the twentieth century as a refuge for queer people seeking not only pleasure, but also temporary reprieve from the discrimination and harassment of their everyday lives in the city. The film briefly alludes to this harassment back in the city, showing its star, Casey Donovan, reading an article about police raids on gay bars in a gay newspaper. Linda Williams points to the importance of this Fire Island setting for the utopian vision the film offers of a liberated gay male sexuality. In the film, as she observes, “Fire Island ... is portrayed as a fantasmatic place where not only the taboos against the graphic display of sex are suspended but also those against the display of homosexuality.”¹⁷ As in any porn film, sex remains constantly on offer in *Boys in the Sand*. Importantly, however, this space of unlimited sexual availability is an out gay community in which men quite openly express desire for one another. Following the model of the gay or queer counterpublic, as posed by Warner, “no one is in the closet” in the queer world conjured in the film, which suspends the

“presumptive heterosexuality” of the world outside.¹⁸ Sexual contact takes place in the open, freely, without the necessity of surreptitious cruising or even rudimentary attempts at seduction. Williams finds in *Boys in the Sand* “a lyrical, joyful celebration of a utopian place ... where men take pleasure in one another in the face of normative taboos.”¹⁹ The verdant, sun-dappled Fire Island setting of *Boys in the Sand* serves as a back-to-nature utopia, allying graphic depictions of gay sex with notions of artistic beauty and freedom from societal prejudice.

In advancing this gay liberationist, utopian vision, *Boys in the Sand* offers a riposte to mainstream cinematic representations of gay men. Indeed, its title spoofs that of the mainstream William Friedkin film of the previous year, *The Boys in the Band*, a film criticized by many at the time for perpetuating images of gay men set in the stereotypical mold of the effeminate, troubled, and self-loathing homosexual male.²⁰ In response, Poole offers his audience the wholesome, blond Casey Donovan. *Boys in the Sand* made Donovan the first gay porn star. A “gay-liberated Robert Redford, the all-American male,” Donovan “resembled and aptly symbolized the newly liberated gay man,” according to Jeffrey Escoffier.²¹ The strongly masculine, at times slightly hippyish, image of the gay male and of gay male sexuality offered by *Boys in the Sand* reflects the influence of post-Stonewall gay liberation and related countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The film and Donovan would help popularize this new image of the gay male, which would become increasingly homogenized and commoditized as the seventies wore on, in the more safely middle class persona of the “Castro clone.” Epitomized by Donovan and fellow porn star Al Parker, this macho look became known as “the clone” because it became the norm for gay men in burgeoning gay enclaves such as the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco. The

clone look represented an idealized image of the American male, a muscular Marlboro man in Levis. Through this reimagining of gay masculinity, the clone look, seen in its infancy in *Boys in the Sand*, countered decades of media representations of gay men as comically effeminate, unhealthy, degenerate, un-American. It also, however, implicitly defined the gay male community as white, hypermasculine, homogeneous, consumerist.

From its inception, Poole saw *Boys in the Sand* as a film which would bring the sensibility of independent art cinema, as practiced by queer filmmakers like Cocteau, Anger, and Warhol, into the context of the hardcore pornographic feature. Accordingly, he promoted his hardcore film with unprecedented boldness, selling it on the basis of its quality as a film and its superiority to typical hardcore fare. “We did all the advertising,” he recalled in an interview, “treating it like a real movie, even if it was porn.”²² He “gladly cultivated the recognition of his film as a sophisticated answer to erotic cinema.”²³ Poole quite consciously leased the small theater on 55th Street for the premiere screenings of his film, as “Andy Warhol had shown his films at the 55th Street Playhouse.”²⁴ He presented an image of himself, perhaps quite accurately, as a filmmaker with serious artistic concerns. Profiled in *The Advocate* and *Interview*, Poole “posed naked for publicity shots in front of his collection of Claes Oldenburg sculptures and Warhol Marilyn Monroe paintings.”²⁵ Reviews of the film, appearing even in mainstream publications such as *The New York Times* and *Variety*, generally praised *Boys in the Sand* for its artistic ambition.²⁶

Poole recognized the political implications of the breakthrough success of his gay porn film. Indeed, he viewed his aestheticization of the gay porn film as potentially liberating. In an interview with *The Advocate* to promote the film, Poole expresses hope that gay men will look at

his film and feel more comfortable with their sexuality, seeing the beauty in its sex acts and their lyrical depiction on screen.²⁷ In another interview, Poole relates stories of gay men who were liberated by viewing his film: “So many people say, ‘God! You changed my life. I saw Casey Donovan sit on a dildo in *Boys in the Sand*. I heard men did that, but when I saw a beautiful man plug himself suddenly that became alright for me.’”²⁸ According to Poole, other men have seen his film and “come out of the closet” because of it.²⁹

The beauty of the images in the film also served to legitimize their depictions of gay sex for mainstream, straight audiences as well as for gay men. Poole claims “straight reviewers took notice” of the film because of its pronounced artistic qualities, which made it “the first gay film that straights perceived as not sleazy.”³⁰ Although the film addresses itself primarily to a gay male audience, capturing the attention and respect of straight critics would prove useful. Poole understood that, in bringing raw depictions of gay sex into the mainstream, his film played its own role in the gay liberation movement of the time. “The whole film features high-profile homosexuality with no guilt,” he justly boasts in his autobiography.³¹ Poole advertised *Boys in the Sand* with the tagline, “There are no more closets!”³² Indeed, the publicity garnered by the film helped to bring new images of gay male sexuality into the mainstream media. It also, however, shaped the discourse surrounding that sexuality, fashioning a new image of the gay male for the wider straight society as well as for newly liberated gay men. In this regard, *Boys in the Sand* did not merely serve to liberate gay men from oppressive social stigma, but contributed to the fashioning of a new gay male identity in the post-Stonewall period. Poole quipped that the ads for his film, which appeared frequently in numerous mainstream media outlets, represented

“one of the first instances that gay ideas and propaganda were published daily in *The New York Times*.”³³

A few months after the release of *Boys in the Sand*, in 1972, Fred Halsted debuted his seminal hit gay hardcore film, *LA Plays Itself* at the Paris Theater in West Hollywood.³⁴ Halsted began work on *LA Plays Itself* in 1969, before Poole had ever thought of making a film. Unlike Poole, Halsted claimed to have never seen a gay porn film before working on his own.³⁵ His interest in making a porn film seems to have stemmed from a desire to create an accurate, autobiographical representation of his own developing S/M sexuality. Certainly he created a singular film of rough, unvarnished beauty. In its imagery and discontinuous editing, the film strongly calls to mind the films of Kenneth Anger, which Halsted found particularly important in his formation as a filmmaker.³⁶ As with *Boys in the Sand*, the artistic ambitions of *LA Plays Itself* garnered the film the attention of a mainstream, straight audience as well as a gay male one. Halsted screened the film at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and it became the first hardcore porn film included in the permanent collection of the museum. “Halsted was,” according to Patrick Moore, the “unlikely creator” of “a work of art so sophisticated that it could play both in a porn theater and MoMA.”³⁷

LA Plays Itself starts off in an idealized setting, in the hills of Malibu, amid misty rocks and wildflowers, in scenes reminiscent of *Boys in the Sand*. Indeed, David E. James claims that, without realizing that Halsted had started work on his film long before Poole shot *Boys in the Sand*, its bucolic, vaguely hippyish opening scenes would almost appear “to be a satire on the pastoral idealism and positive images of films like *Boys in the Sand*.”³⁸ As in *Boys in the Sand*, this opening segment of the film features a mix of Asian and Western classical music, including

the *Pastoral Symphony* of Beethoven, lending it a patina of high art. After some rudimentary sex under a waterfall, the film breaks off, however, becoming another film entirely. Bulldozers invade its Arcadian setting, ripping up the earth, and the soundtrack grows discordant. Eerie, cold, relentlessly driving synthesizer music overtakes the soundtrack. The gay utopia of *Boys in the Sand* crumbles and a more radical vision of sexuality emerges within the threatening spaces of the city.

The second, longer section of the film takes place in the gritty, urban space of Los Angeles. Nature is vanquished, giving way to a constant stream of advertisements, billboards, and graffiti, against which figures – hitchhiking boys in tight jeans and Halsted himself, cruising these boys as he passes through the urban sprawl in his car – seem lost, each one just another object in the city landscape. In these menacing scenes of urban abstraction, *LA Plays Itself* recalls the alienating, commercialized Los Angeles of the 1970 Michelangelo Antonioni film, *Zabriskie Point*. However, whereas the countercultural figures in the Antonioni film must leave Los Angeles for the desert to discover a radical sexuality, in *LA Plays Itself* the city itself seems to breed a new, far more radical sexuality. In this second part of the film, the sex veers away from the comparatively vanilla sex acts of its first section and of *Boys in the Sand*, and the film introduces a more radical, gay S/M sexuality. Halsted appears in the film, kicking, whipping, torturing, and eventually fisting Joey Yale, a blond, wholesome looking boy, closer to the Casey Donovan mold of *Boys in the Sand*.

Again the film inadvertently conjures an image of Halsted making a mockery of *Boys in the Sand*. Edmund White sees “the whole atmosphere of the second half of the movie” as a “complete grim contrast to the plucked pretty-boy look of ... *Boys in the Sand*.”³⁹ During a

torture session, the film cuts to a newspaper in the bedroom, its headline warning of murder and kidnapping. A stream of voiceover dialogue between a naive teenage boy with a corny Texan accent and a sinister older man drives home the recurring point: the city is dangerous, sex is dangerous. Poole made his utopian *Boys in the Sand* partly in response to a grim rape scene in a shoddy porn film. In *LA Plays Itself*, Halsted shows little interest in countering such gruesome images of gay male sexuality with idealized portraits of a healthful, all-natural gay sexuality à la Poole. Instead, he places these dark scenarios within a wider artistic vision of an emerging, urban S/M subculture. “No one can accuse me of showing sex as fun in my films,” Halsted once quipped.⁴⁰ In offering an unapologetically dark fantasy of a gay S/M sexuality, Halsted created images of startling beauty that, according to Patrick Moore, “simply did not exist before” him.⁴¹

In making *LA Plays Itself* Halsted hoped, like Poole, to make history as the first filmmaker to get widespread attention and respect for a gay pornographic feature. In an interview, Halsted confesses that he “freaked out” when *Boys in the Sand* came out, because he had thought that he would be the first filmmaker to get attention for a hardcore gay feature.⁴² “I read about *Boys* in *Variety* and just panicked,” he admits.⁴³ Although shaken up by the wild success of *Boys in the Sand*, Halsted did not rule out the possibility of making use of all the attention the film had garnered. When *LA Plays Itself* came to New York, Halsted leased space in the 55th Street Playhouse, the same theater *Boys in the Sand* had premiered at and at which it had just finished a fifteen-week run.⁴⁴ Halsted did, however, try to outdo Poole by lowering the admission price for *LA Plays Itself* to three dollars, down from the five dollar admission required for *Boys in the Sand* and most other gay porn films of the time. Perhaps getting back at Poole,

Halsted told *Variety* he considered the five dollar admission required by Poole “exploitation of the homosexual community.”⁴⁵

Halsted, like Poole, aggressively marketed his film, in a manner utterly unheard of for pornographic films at the time. Like Poole, he promoted his film as a serious artistic endeavor. Ads for *LA Plays Itself* stress its status as an artwork, worthy of serious consideration. One ad for the film prominently features a quote from Salvador Dali, an uncharacteristically clumsy attempt at signaling its pretensions to the status of high art, ridiculed by columnist Fran Lebowitz in the pages of *Interview* magazine.⁴⁶ Another frequently printed ad, while identifying the film as gay porn, “touts quality filmmaking as its strong suit,” with “raves from avant-garde filmmaker and critic Jonas Mekas, novelist William Burroughs, and *Screw* editor Al Goldstein.”⁴⁷ Indeed, Goldstein hailed *LA Plays Itself* as a masterpiece and, more oddly, “the homosexuals’ *Gone with the Wind*.”⁴⁸ In his influential “Movie Journal” column for the *Village Voice*, Mekas largely approved of *LA Plays Itself* and considered the question of whether the film represented “the beginning of a movement of porno cinema as art.”⁴⁹ Halsted sought out critical attention for his film. *Variety* noted, at the time of its New York premiere, that “the gay hardcore feature ... appears to be the first hardcore pic, gay or hetero to actively seek conventional media attention through pre-opening screenings for critics and opinion makers.”⁵⁰

As in the case of *Boys in the Sand*, the aggressive marketing of *LA Plays Itself* as an independent art film garnered the film mainstream attention, outside of the gay community. This attention, for Halsted as for Poole, served to further gay liberation. Before *LA Plays Itself*, gay films, including *Boys in the Sand*, used euphemisms rather than the words “gay” or “homosexual” in their advertising. For instance, ads for such films from this period typically

boast that the film features an “all-male cast.” As *Variety* marveled, however, ads for *LA Plays Itself* “call the film ‘homosexual’ point blank.”⁵¹ “Gay porno helps gays,” Halsted would claim in an interview.⁵² “Up until the last few years, homosexuals have been pariahs in society. There has been a real change in just the past few years. Everyone is out in the open and cinema has a lot to do with it. People can see forbidden acts on screen and after seeing them a few times, it just becomes accepted,” Halsted insisted.⁵³ This opinion may sound naive today. Nevertheless, in offering new, widely disseminated, self-fashioned images to a community only recently emerging from forced obscurity, gay porn films did play an active role in the astonishingly rapid transformation in the lives of gay men during the 1970s period of gay liberation.

In his memoir of gay life in the 1970s, Edmund White places *LA Plays Itself* at the beginning of a process of reinvention and community formation among gay men. White writes that in the mid-1960s New York “had just one leather bar and it was inconspicuous and customers would wear their normal clothes and carry a change of costume in a bag,” to change into when they got to their destination.⁵⁴ In the early 1970s “all that was changing,” according to White.⁵⁵ One of the first major cultural events White remembers signaling this change toward a highly visible, open expression of gay male sexuality was the 1972 release of *LA Plays Itself*.⁵⁶ As the seventies wore on, an entire gay male S/M identity and community would form around bars like the Mineshaft, in New York, and magazines like *Drummer*. When *LA Plays Itself* premiered, however, it struck many people as something totally new, so widely unrecognized was the particular sexuality it celebrated. Gary Morris sees *LA Plays Itself*, “perhaps the earliest film to show fist fucking,” as “a film of private rituals publicly exposed.”⁵⁷ Patrick Moore, like White, credits Halsted and *LA Plays Itself* with helping to form an entire gay male S/M

community. “One might say that a world cannot exist until an image of it has been created,” Moore states.⁵⁸ When *LA Plays Itself* opened in theaters, according to him, “the world of urban leathermen was created.”⁵⁹ This world of leathermen did, in fact, exist already. It existed, however, as a small subculture within a subculture. *LA Plays Itself* radically expanded the visibility of this gay S/M sexuality, bringing it into a larger discourse concerning gay sexuality.

Not everyone in this newly liberated gay male community appreciated the depiction of radical gay sexuality Halsted offered, however. According to Jack Stevenson, *LA Plays Itself* “featured the kind of sexual brutality and violent S&M that drove many in the gay community to condemn him for portraying gay sex as a cruel debasement.”⁶⁰ Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito also write that the film “attracted a good deal of adverse attention” from gay men who disapproved of its rougher, more violent image of gay male sexuality.⁶¹ According to Turan and Zito, the Manhattan police eventually raided the 55th Street Playhouse, while *LA Plays Itself* was showing there, on the basis of complaints lodged by such disapproving gay men.⁶² Reporting on the police raid, *Variety* similarly raised the possibility that some gay rights advocates might have in fact helped bring about the raid.⁶³ *Variety* noted that *LA Plays Itself* had proved controversial “within the Gay Liberation movement ... with some activists trumpeting the artistic merits of the film while others, even more vocal, are calling it a callous exploitation of gay lib,” “appalled” by the “sodomasochistic images” of the film.⁶⁴ Offering among the first widely viewed, explicit images of gay male sexuality, images far more radically outside the mainstream than those offered by *Boys in the Sand*, *LA Plays Itself* perhaps could hardly avoid creating controversy in a gay community still in the midst of an attempt to find a unified political voice and a new image of gay sexuality and gay masculinity to accompany that voice.

Indeed, when the New York Museum of Modern Art screened *LA Plays Itself* as part of its Cineprobe series a couple of years later, in 1974, the film similarly caused controversy. Many, speaking on behalf of the gay community, praised the museum for their risky decision to screen the film. Indeed, the museum received letters from grateful attendees, praising the film both for its artistic quality and its potential to further the cause of gay liberation.⁶⁵ Others, however, also speaking on behalf of the gay community, strongly protested the Cineprobe screening. Upon leaving the museum, these protestors handed visitors to the Cineprobe screening leaflets, gruesomely detailing the potentially fatal risks of fisting and deploring *LA Plays Itself* for its “romanticized” treatment of the sexual practice.⁶⁶ Visitors also received a leaflet entitled “What You Should Know About *LA Plays Itself*,” criticizing the film and the museum for misrepresenting the gay community.⁶⁷ The leaflet describes *LA Plays Itself* as “an exploitation film, made by a self-described petty criminal and hustler.”⁶⁸ It excoriates the museum for applying “the pretentious label of ‘Art’” to “expressions of anti-homosexuality.”⁶⁹ In presenting audiences with uncompromising, deeply personal images of his own S/M sexuality, Halsted risked offending those looking for sunnier, more agreeable films to serve the needs of gay liberation. Rather than softening the hardcore rawness of its gay sex acts with prettified imagery, marking its sex as healthful and natural, as in *Boys in the Sand*, *LA Plays Itself* coldly and unabashedly presents an aggressively violent vision of a gay S/M sexuality, unapologetically disturbing sexual norms. If Poole helped forge a more mainstream gay male identity, Halsted may in some ways point toward a proto-queer identity, persistently resistant of assimilation.

At the time of their release, both *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* participated in “the radical aspirations of queer culture building,” advanced by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner.⁷⁰

They helped produce “not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture,” unsettling the “powerful norms supporting that privilege,” making heterosexuality hegemonic in culture.⁷¹ “Queer culture,” in contrast to the dominant culture, “has almost no institutional matrix for its counterintimacies,” as Berlant and Warner argue.⁷² In rendering new images of gay male identity and disseminating these new forms of gay masculinity to a wide audience, *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* opened up new possibilities for gay identities and intimacies to a wider public, countering formidable social norms privileging heterosexuality. In producing a sexualized, gay counterpublic, these films challenged a larger, sanitized, desexualized public keeping queer forms of intimacy closeted, just as they challenged the divide between art and porn. Their explicit images of gay sexuality made visible forms of intimacy previously absent from view in the larger culture. Berlant and Warner warn against devaluing the historic importance of explicitly sexual material, such as pornography, in shaping the gay or queer cultures that predominate today. “Respectable gays like to think that they owe nothing to the sexual subculture they think of as sleazy,” they note.⁷³ “But their success, their way of living, their political rights, and their very identities would never have been possible but for the existence of the public sexual culture they now despise.”⁷⁴

The gay counterpublic that *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* helped generate came with its own limitations, however. *Boys in the Sand* led the way toward the commercialized, limiting stereotype of the Castro clone, privileging a hypermasculine, often implicitly white and middle class, form of gay identity. As the controversy surrounding *LA Plays Itself* attests, the gay counterpublic produced by these films solidified itself into an intractable, uniform concept of

the gay community. Both the voices defending *LA Plays Itself* and those excoriating it pointed to the needs of this monolithic gay community in support of their claims. Rendering and disseminating new images of gay masculinity, reaching a wide public with unprecedented success, these films perhaps also imposed new limits on queer men. The new gay male identity these films helped popularize would leave many queer people largely unrepresented, as they did not conform to this new mold in terms of their race, class, their sexual preferences, or their gender presentation, for instance. Even the more radical leatherman persona popularized by *LA Plays Itself* participated in this limiting construction of a gay male identity, as the queer world conjured by the film ossified into a more commercialized subculture.

Boys in the Sand and *LA Plays Itself* perhaps could not provoke such a strong public response today. These films could only have had the revolutionary impact they did during the brief era of “porno chic” they helped create, in the wake of the sexual revolution and gay liberation. By the 1980s, as Jack Stevenson writes, “gay commercial porn cinema ... once again retreated behind closed doors as the emergence of home video allowed private accessibility to product, while the AIDS crisis prompted a police shutdown of public gay-sex institutions and effectively brought about the suppression of gay porn as a public experience.”⁷⁵ Already in the 1970s, however, Halsted and Poole both found difficulty repeating their initial successes, as porn became increasingly commercialized, leaving less and less room for films that straddled the divide between art and porn, which they had attempted to blur. As queer filmmaker William E. Jones observes, pornography “made its gradual transition from monstrously profitable and intermittently interesting outlaw form to almost respectable, formulaic corporate content,” leaving little room for an artist like Halsted, or even the comparatively less revolutionary

Poole.⁷⁶ The world Halsted worked in is, for Jones, “another world,” the product of a time “when a man with no formal training in filmmaking and a small amount of money could make a sexually explicit experimental film starring himself, and the result could be a hit that enabled him to embark on a career.”⁷⁷ In aggressively positioning themselves as serious artists, while promising sexual liberation and the shock of the new in offering hardcore pornography, Halsted and Poole garnered unprecedented attention for their revolutionary films. They briefly found themselves able to produce films with no oversight or restrictions placed on them. Although they brought attention to their films by stressing their artistic quality, these filmmakers almost surely could never have made such radical films, while still turning a profit, outside of the genre of porn. As Halsted complained in a letter to Laurence Kardish, film curator at the Museum of Modern Art, he had “no chance with the studios,” in his hometown of Los Angeles, “because of the homophobia” that pervaded mainstream media and its institutions.⁷⁸ Allying discourses of sexual and gay liberation with a rhetoric of aesthetic innovation, *Boys in the Sand* and *LA Plays Itself* succeeded in bringing new images of gay sexuality to a wide public. These films represent a fleeting moment in history, during which porn held extraordinary political power.

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1. Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009), 6.
 2. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 57.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.
 5. José B. Capino, "Seizing Moving Image Pornography," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 4 (2007): 121. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30137726>> (30 March 2011).
 6. Ibid.
 7. Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 198.
 8. Capino, "Seizing Moving Image Pornography," 121.
 9. Ibid.
 10. Matthew Hays, *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 235.
 11. Wakefield Poole, *Dirty Poole: The Autobiography of a Gay Porn Pioneer* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), 163.
 12. José B. Capino, "Seminal Fantasies: Wakefield Poole, Pornography, Independent Cinema and the Avant-Garde," in *Contemporary American Independent Film*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2005), 155.
 13. Escoffier, *Bigger than Life*, 95.
 14. Hays, *The View from Here*, 235.
 15. Escoffier, *Bigger than Life*, 95.
 16. Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 145.
 17. Ibid., 150.
 18. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 120.
 19. Williams, *Screening Sex*, 153.

20. In 1980 William Friedkin would again find himself accused of perpetuating homophobic stereotypes, with the release of his film, *Cruising*, set in the New York gay S/M scene. The film was widely protested by gay activists at the time of its release, but has since received reevaluation and praise from queer critics. In stirring up trouble by bringing images of a radical gay S/M sexuality into the mainstream, the controversy over *Cruising* in some ways recalls that surrounding *LA Plays Itself*.

21. Escoffier, *Bigger than Life*, 102.

22. Hays, *The View from Here*, 235.

23. Capino, "Seminal Fantasies," 155.

24. Poole, *Dirty Poole*, 163.

25. Capino, "Seminal Fantasies," 156.

26. Jack Stevenson, "From the Bedroom to the Bijou: A Secret History of American Gay Sex Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1997): 28.

27. Donn Teal, "'No Degradation': Wakefield Poole Adds New Dimension to Porn," *The Advocate*, 1 March 1972, 17.

28. Jack Fritscher, "Dirty Poole: Everything You Fantasized About Wakefield Poole but Were Too Wrecked to Ask," *Drummer* 27 (1979), *The Best of Drummer Magazine*, personal webpage, <<http://beararchive.com/Drummer/Issues/027/Dirty%20Poole.html>> (30 March 2011).

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Poole, *Dirty Poole*, 157.

32. Ibid., 165.

33. Ibid.

34. Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 59.

35. Escoffier, *Bigger than Life*, 74.

36. Bill Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 117.

37. Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame*, 59.

38. David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 373.

39. Edmund White, *City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and 70s* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 232-3.
40. Paul A. Siebenand, *The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles: The Industry and the Audience* (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1975. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983) 226.
41. Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame*, 62.
42. Siebenand, *The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles*, 216.
43. Ibid.
44. "'Aggressively Naive' Gay Pic Sell for Incoming 'LA Plays itself,'" *Variety*, 5 April 1972, 18.
45. Ibid.
46. Fran Lebowitz, review of *The Sex Garage* and *LA Plays Itself*, *Andy Warhol's Interview*, June 1972, 22.
47. Capino, "Seizing Moving Image Pornography," 125.
48. "Deep Fist at the Modern," *Screw*, 29 April 1974, 11.
49. Jonas Mekas, review of *The Sex Garage* and *LA Plays Itself*, *The Village Voice*, 21 April 1972, 75.
50. "'Aggressively Naive' Gay Pic Sell for Incoming 'LA Plays itself,'" 18.
51. Ibid.
52. Siebenand, *The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles*, 227.
53. Ibid.
54. Edmund White, *City Boy*, 232.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Gary Morris, "Private Rituals Made Public: The Lost Erotica of Fred Halsted," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 49 (2005). <<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/49/halsted.htm>> (30 March 2011).
58. Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame*, 59.
59. Ibid.
60. Jack Stevenson, "From the Bedroom to the Bijou," 29.

61. Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, *Sinema: American Pornographic Films and the People Who Make Them* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 193.
62. Ibid.
63. Addison Verrill, "'Gay' Pic Grim Stuff to Police," *Variety*, 18 April 1972, 3.
64. Ibid.
65. The Museum of Modern Art has some of these letters available for consultation in their archive. Department of Film Exhibition Files, C116. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
66. Charles Pitts, "Hands Across the Sphincter: A Fistfucker Comes Clean," Film, C116. MoMA Archives, New York.
67. "What You Should Know About *LA Plays Itself*," Film, C116. MoMA Archives, New York.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 548. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344178>> (30 March 2011).
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 562.
73. Ibid., 563.
74. Ibid.
75. Jack Stevenson, "From the Bedroom to the Bijou," 30.
76. William E. Jones, "Halsted Plays Himself," *Artforum*, 23 August 2008. <<http://artforum.com/film/id=20966>> (30 March 2011).
77. Ibid.
78. Fred Halsted, letter to Laurence Kardish, 5 November 1975, Film, C116. MoMA Archives, New York.

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