

GAY POWER CIRCA 1970

Visual Strategies for Sexual Revolution

Richard Meyer

You know, the guys there were so beautiful—they've lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago.
—Allen Ginsberg, cited in "Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square"

This essay explores the role of visual images and the rhetoric of visibility within gay liberation, the last great protest movement of the 1960s and the one most often written out of cultural and historical accounts of the New Left.¹ In doing so, it responds to a double historiographical dilemma. The scholarship on radical gay politics to date has almost entirely ignored questions of visual representation, while art historians have narrated the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s without reference to gay politics. What, then, might art history and gay history have to teach or tell each other? And what might this dialogue reveal about the relation between visual culture and radical politics more broadly conceived?

The Stonewall riots of late June 1969 are commonly taken to mark the birth of the gay liberation movement. The story of the riots, in which patrons of a Greenwich Village gay bar spontaneously resisted arrest during a police raid and sparked three days of public uprisings, has been rehearsed in almost every account of queer history. There is little agreement, however, on precisely what happened at the Stonewall Inn, how many people were involved, how long the riots lasted, how many members of the tactical police force were called to the scene, and so forth.² Adding to the event's unstable status within the historical record is the fact that virtually no photographic images of the riots exist.

The pictures printed at the time (and often reproduced in the years since) were by Fred W. McDarrah, then chief photographer and picture editor at the *Village Voice*. With two front-page stories (one reporting on the "view from inside" the bar during the riots, the other on the "view from outside"), the *Voice* carried the

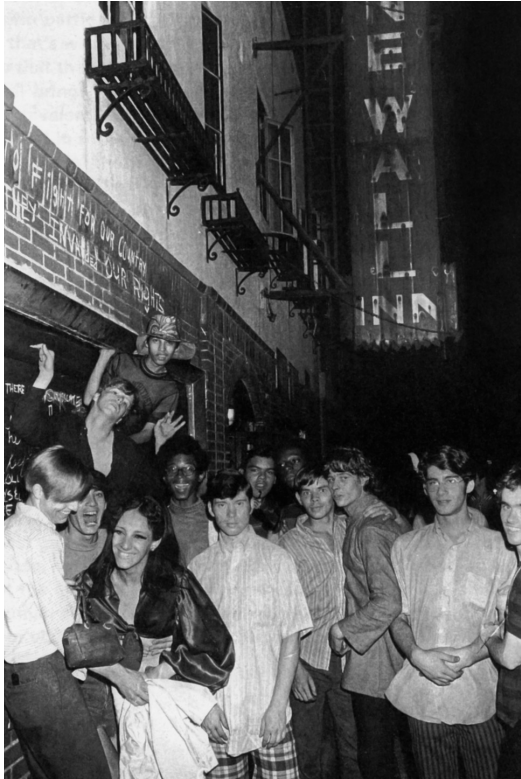


Figure 1. Fred W. McDarrah, "In Front of the Stonewall," originally printed on the front page of the *Village Voice*, July 3, 1969. Photograph © Fred W. McDarrah

battered bar stool, jukebox, and cigarette vending machine along with some trash cans (fig. 3). The photographs occur, in other words, after the clean-up process has begun.

Given the spontaneity of the Stonewall riots, it may not seem surprising that no photographers were on hand to capture the scene. But if, as was reported at the time and reiterated by historians since, the riots spilled out onto Sheridan Square and ultimately involved hundreds, even thousands, of people over a three-day period, then the absence of photographic documentation becomes rather more striking.⁶ This absence registered and seems to have been regretted by gay and lesbian activists at the time, at least to judge from a "plea to the community" printed in the January 10, 1970, edition of *Come Out*, the self-published newspaper of the New York City chapter of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), a radical activist group founded in the weeks just after the riots.⁷ Printed beside the newspaper's masthead, the plea reads, "Anyone owning or having access to photographs

most detailed news coverage of Stonewall and was virtually the only publication to include photographic images.³

McDarrah's photographs, several of which feature a multiracial group of queer street kids posing, laughing, and kissing each other outside the Stonewall bar, were taken just after the riots had ended (figs. 1, 2).⁴ The graffiti on the exterior of the now-boarded-up bar marks one response to the violence of the preceding nights.⁵ McDarrah's photographs of the bar's interior likewise suggest a sense of slight belatedness. The pictures do not show patrons taunting, resisting, or violently confronting police but rather the aftermath of those encounters: the remains of a

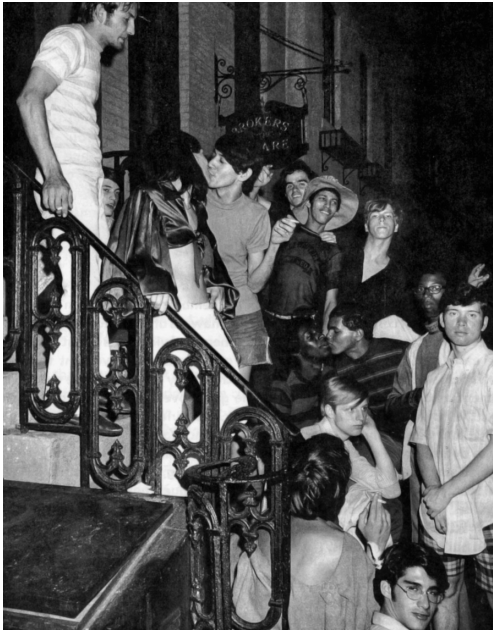


Figure 2. Fred W. McDarrah, "In Front of the Stonewall" (variant), 1969. Photograph © Fred W. McDarrah

however indirectly. In lieu of the image of a wounded police officer, a wounded vending machine would come to serve as a visual record of the riots.¹⁰ And in place of a photograph of rioting homosexuals, McDarrah would fashion a tableau of multiracial queer kids camping it up outside the bar. When it appeared in the *Village Voice*, this picture of young militants (fig. 1) was captioned "In Front of the Stone-

of the Christopher Street–Stonewall riots of last summer please call 477-4875 as soon as possible."⁸ The "plea" was made in the hope of printing photographs of Stonewall in future issues. No such pictures appeared, and *Come Out* ceased publication in 1972.⁹

Given the absence of documentary images of Stonewall, McDarrah's photographs of the bar's damaged cigarette machine (fig. 4) and shuttered exterior stand in for an event that could never be fully shown or known, even in its contemporary moment. Yet the photographs also speak, paradoxically, to the importance of rendering that event visible,

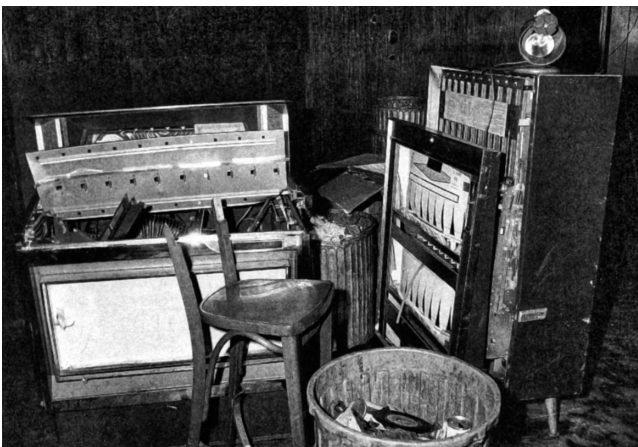


Figure 3. Fred W. McDarrah, "Inside the Stonewall Inn," 1969. Photograph © Fred W. McDarrah

wall.” But the photograph might just as well have been captioned with the headline of the nearby article: “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square (A View from Outside).”

In that article, *Voice* reporter Lucian Truscott IV positioned the riots somewhere between breaking news story and dramatic street theater. Truscott’s overheated prose—alternately literary and colloquial, triumphalist and phobic—sought to capture the intensity of the scene:

Sheridan Square this weekend looked like something from a William Burroughs novel, as the sudden specter of “gay power” raised its brazen head and spat out a fairy tale the likes of which the area has never seen.

The forces of faggotry, spurred by a Friday night raid on one of the city’s largest, most popular and longest lived gay bars, the Stonewall Inn, rallied Saturday night in an unprecedented protest against the raid and continued Sunday night to assert presence, possibility, and pride until the early hours of Monday morning.¹¹

Even as he reports on the uprisings, Truscott remakes them into a colorful, quasi-fictional story. He likens the riots first to a Burroughs novel and then, in an obvious pun (even for Truscott), a “fairy tale.” The article dramatizes and restages the events it might be expected simply to record. Truscott’s casually demeaning descriptions (“the forces of faggotry”) seem less surprising when compared with contemporaneous press coverage of the riots. The *New York Daily News*, for example, printed a nastier (though more cleverly titled) article under the headline “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad.” In contrast to the *News*, however, Truscott’s article interweaves amused contempt with an acknowledgment of the courage (the “presence, possibility, and pride”) of the Stonewall rioters.

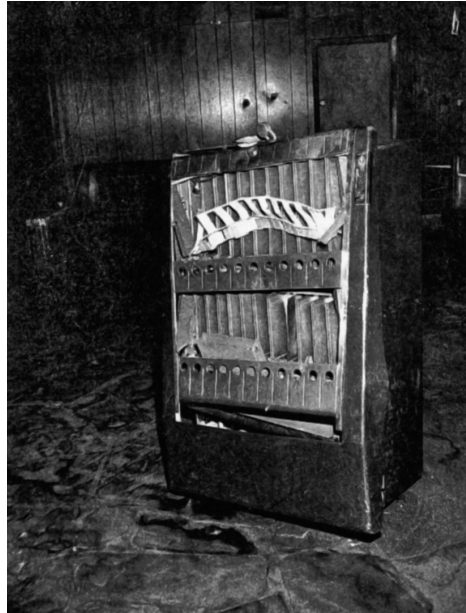


Figure 4. Fred W. McDarrah, “Damaged Vending Machine,” 1969. Photograph © Fred W. McDarrah

In the remarkable concluding passages of “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square,” Truscott’s voice increasingly defers to that of the poet Allen Ginsberg. Having detailed the riots and intermittent celebrations (“the fag follies”) of late Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, Truscott closes the article with a tranquil scene set in the earliest hours of Monday morning:

Allen Ginsberg and Taylor Mead walked by to see what was happening and were filled in on the previous evenings’ activities by some of the gay activists. “Gay power! Isn’t that great!” Allen said. “We’re one of the largest minorities in the country—10 percent, you know. It’s about time we did something to assert ourselves.” . . .

He left, and I walked east with him. Along the way he described how things used to be. “You know, the guys there were so beautiful—they’ve lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago.” It was the first time I had heard that crowd described as beautiful.

We reached Cooper Square, and as Ginsberg turned to head toward home, he waved and yelled “Defend the fairies!” and bounced on across the square. He enjoyed the prospect of “gay power” and is probably working on a manifesto for the movement right now. Watch out. The liberation is under way.¹²

From Ginsberg’s vantage point (as opposed to Truscott’s), the crowd in and around Stonewall just after the riots had ended was “beautiful.” It had “lost that wounded look” of shamed homosexuality and taken on the audacity and confidence of something called “gay power.” Like McDarrah, Ginsberg was too late to witness the actual riots. But in glimpsing their immediate aftermath, Ginsberg recognized that something about the terms of homosexual visibility had changed.

Although the immediacy of the Stonewall riots eluded photographic capture, the symbolic force of the riots would be repeatedly enacted and embodied by gay liberationists in the months and years after June 1969. The front cover of a fall 1970 issue of *Come Out*, for example, features a partially blurred scene of two handcuffed rioters (one male, one female) being escorted by police officers through the night-lit streets of the city (fig. 5). The accompanying story, “Gays Riot Again: Remember the Stonewall!” reports on a GLF march in Times Square (fig. 6) and a brief riot in the Village that occurred in August 1970. The photographs of the march and riot refer back to (or “remember”) the Stonewall riots while trying to compensate for the documentary invisibility of that earlier event. The article, written by GLF member Martha Shelley, likewise opens by linking the 1970 riot

with previous face-offs against the police:

Once again, the police stepped up their pre-election harassment of Village homosexuals, and once again, we struck back. For a couple of weeks, police brutality against homosexuals rose to a new high, with beatings and interrogations on the streets of the Village, and a “cleanup” campaign in the Times Square area which meant over 300 arrests during one week. . . . For the first time, women have been hassled by pigs on the street for being gay—possibly due to the increasing militancy of the Women’s Liberation Movement. . . . Assembling on 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue on Saturday night, August 29th, the groups [of gay and feminist activists] unfurled their banners and marched several times around 42nd Street, to the amazement of the tourist crowd. We women grouped together in the middle, and to the chants of “Out of the closets, into the streets!” and “Gay, gay power to the gay, gay people!,” we added, “Male chauvinist, you better start shakin’—today’s pig is tomorrow’s bacon.”¹³

After the Times Square march, many of the protestors reassembled on the streets of the Village. A brief riot, provoked in part by outsiders, ensued. Smaller and less significant than Stonewall, this riot’s most noteworthy moment seems to have been the overturning of a parked and unoccupied (though presumably heterosexual) Volkswagen Beetle (fig. 7). In contrast to the Stonewall riots of the previous summer, however, movement photographers were on hand to capture the event. Indeed, newspapers such as *Come Out* were founded in part to document

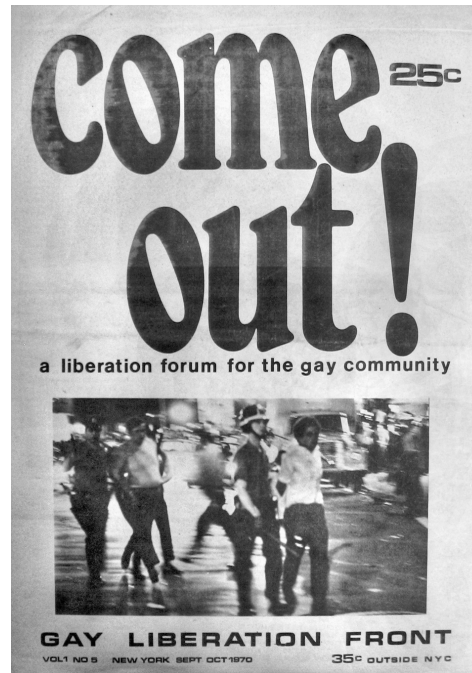


Figure 5. *Come Out*, September–October 1970.
Courtesy of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives

the GLF's protests and public events and thereby recirculate the group's activist efforts and political visibility. *Come Out's* editorial collective included photographers such as Steve Rose and Diana Davies who, in contrast to the *Village Voice's* McDarrah, identified themselves as gay liberationists and conceived of their work as contributing to a broader activist mission. The GLF understood the task of visual documentation not as by-product or after-effect of its public actions but as a crucial component of them.

As the title of the GLF's newspaper suggests, gay liberation demanded that homosexual men and women proclaim their sexuality to family, friends, colleagues, and the larger public world. "The key phrase," said Jill Johnston in the 1970 *Village Voice*, "is COME OUT. Come out of hiding. Identify yourself. Make it clear. Celebrate your sexuality."¹⁴ "Coming out" was framed by the movement not simply as a private act of self-disclosure but as a public demand for visibility. New forms of communal activity such as "Liberation Day" parades, "gay-ins" (mass gatherings in city parks or other highly visible venues), and "zaps" (public confrontations with antigay politicians, magazine editors, and public officials) asserted the confident presence of gay men and women within the public sphere. The GLF positioned visibility—including the photographic visibility of its social gatherings and political demonstrations—as a key component of its broader mission.

Keeping in mind the idea of the camera as an active participant in, rather than a neutral recorder of, gay liberation, I turn now to what is arguably the most iconic and widely reproduced image associated with the movement (fig. 8). In the early summer of 1970, the New York chapter of the GLF created a poster to



Figure 6. Steve Rose, "Times Square Protest March (August 1970)." Originally published in *Come Out*, September–October 1970. Courtesy of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives

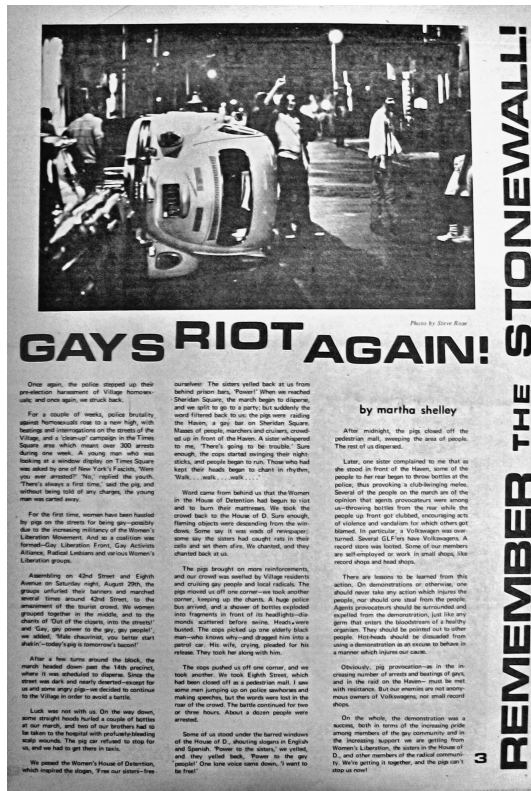


Figure 7. Martha Shelley, "Gays Riot Again! Remember the Stonewall!" Photograph by Steve Rose, *Come Out*, September–October 1970. Courtesy of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives

sionally making it difficult to determine just where one ends and the next begins. Members of the group look ahead or off to the side or even close their eyes momentarily. Men and women are similarly dressed in jeans and casual shirts, some striped, polka-dotted, or tie-dyed. Several of the liberationists smile, though not necessarily for the sake of the camera. Some raise a fist above their heads. Peter Hujar, a studio and fashion photographer, shot the image for the poster. Although not a member of the GLF, Hujar was the boyfriend at the time of one of the group's founders, Jim Fouratt, the front-row figure in sunglasses and striped pants, second from the right.

The GLF understood the term *gay* as part of a broader reinvention of traditional categories of sex and gender and, by extension, of society itself. "Gay,"

promote membership in the group and to publicize the upcoming first anniversary of the Stonewall riots.¹⁵ The poster's textual message—"Come Out!! Join the Sisters and Brothers of the Gay Liberation Front"—is amplified by the image of some seventeen men and women walking and running, arm in arm, down an otherwise deserted city street. The poster presents the GLF members in a loosely horizontal arrangement, the contours of which seem marvelously unstable, both because the group is variously one, two, and three bodies deep and because its movements appear spontaneous and not fully coordinated. Hair flies, arms intertwine, bodies alternately entangle and obstruct one another, occa-

wrote Allen Young in his manifesto on the subject, “in its most far-reaching sense, means not homosexual, but sexually free. . . . This sexual freedom is not some kind of groovy life style with lots of sex, doing what feels good irrespective of others. It is sexual freedom premised upon the notion of pleasure through equality.”¹⁶ With their long hair and raised fists, the young militants in the *Come Out!!* poster enact their defiant identification as “gay”—as sexually and socially free—rather than simply as homosexual. The poster presents the sisters and brothers of the GLF as an “army of lovers” whose insurgent force reverberates throughout the city’s streets.¹⁷

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that no gay and lesbian street activism occurred in the United States prior to Stonewall. What changed in 1969, as historians such as John D’Emilio and Martin Duberman have demonstrated, were the strategies, rhetoric, and forms that visibility took as well as the number of people willing to embody it within the public sphere.¹⁸ Although it predates *Come Out!!* by only five years, the cover of the October 1965 issue of the *Ladder*, the



Figure 8. *Come Out!!*
1970. Gay Liberation
Front poster. Photograph
by Peter Hujar. © Estate
of Peter Hujar. Courtesy
Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York

first nationally distributed lesbian publication in America, offers a dramatically different approach to homosexual visibility. The cover photograph documents a picket by “homophile groups” at the Civil Service Commission in Washington, DC (fig. 9). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, homosexual activist groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis self-identified as “homophile,” a term created to defuse the explicitly sexual force of homosexuality and thereby render it less troubling to the dominant culture. The names of these organizations drew on literary or mythological references (e.g., Mattachine, Bilitis) so as to similarly camouflage their association with homosexuality.¹⁹ Homophile groups typically stressed responsible citizenship while seeking social and legal reforms that would improve the lives of homosexual people. They presented homosexuality as dignified, nonthreatening, and assimilable to the mainstream. Gay liberationists of the early 1970s, by contrast, sought a full-tilt social and sexual revolution.

In the *Ladder* cover, a group of four people march in a loosely semicircular formation, keeping a measured distance apart. Each holds a placard. The lone woman, dressed in sleeveless blouse, pleated skirt, and black pumps, carries a handbag in the crook of her elbow. She may well be wearing pantyhose.²⁰ The men behind her include a priest sporting a wool suit with a white pocket square over his black shirt and clerical white collar and two younger men in dark tailored suits, white business shirts, and conservative ties. The orderliness of the marchers, the gender appropriateness of their dress, and the scarcity of their number provides a dramatic contrast to the activists in *Come Out!!*

The difference between the 1965 cover and the 1970 poster is not, however, as stark or straightforward as it initially appears. The members of the Washington picket were brave nonconformists who enacted an image of middle-class propriety for official protest. As a matter of strategy, homophile groups determined that they should look as respectable as possible when picketing in public, even if that meant borrowing a tie or buying a dress (the priest’s collar and suit, by the way, were part of his preexisting attire). “It was important to look ordinary,” as one demonstrator put it, “to get bystanders to hear the message rather than be prematurely turned off by appearances.”²¹ The homophile picketers on the cover of the *Ladder* stage-managed the image of their own acceptability.

If the reassuringly ordinary appearance of the 1965 demonstration was prepared for cameras and bystanders, so too was the sense of egalitarian community and irrepressible action conveyed by *Come Out!!* The New York City chapter of the GLF had put out a call to its entire membership, which included over 150 peo-



Figure 9. *Ladder*, October 1965. Courtesy of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives

ple at the time, to participate in the photo shoot for *Come Out!!* but only seventeen people showed up.²² Hujar cleverly masked this disappointing turnout by densely packing the picture's middle such that the participants outstrip the limits of the visual field. The rhetoric of the image, which suggests an insurgent, uncontrollable collective, thus belies the reality of the photo shoot. A similar paradox marks the representation of gender parity. Whereas the poster presents a collective in which "sisters and brothers" participate equally, the GLF was, in fact, dominated by men, both in leadership positions and overall membership.²³ The poster belies

the gender inequities that structured the GLF at the time, inequities that would later lead a core group of lesbians to leave the organization.²⁴

Both the *Come Out!!* poster and the *Ladder* photograph must be seen as highly mediated images of homosexual activism rather than as snapshots of historical truth. Both pictures reflect the public strategies rather than the internal realities or ideological contradictions of the groups they portray. And both point to photography's crucial role in producing modern gay and lesbian visibility. While visual rhetoric and sartorial style do not, of course, fully reveal the history of gay activism, neither can they be siphoned off as the mere cultural remainder or fashionable by-product of "real" politics. The staging and circulation of visual images fueled the efforts of both homophile activism and gay liberation in the 1960s and

1970s, in part by attracting participation and affirming membership in the political project at hand.

In both its posters and numerous manifestos, the GLF insisted on a radical reshaping of vision, particularly in terms of what it would mean to look and be looked at as a homosexual. Listen, for example, to the opening passage of Shelley's 1970 manifesto titled "Gay Is Good":

Look out straights, here comes the gay liberation front, springing up like warts all over the bland face of Amerika, causing shudders of indigestion in the delicately balanced bowels of the movement. Here come the gays, marching with six foot banners in Washington and embarrassing the liberals, staining the good name of the War Resister's League and Women's Liberation by refusing to pass for straight anymore. We're gonna make our own revolution because we're sick of revolutionary posters which depict straight he-man types and earth mothers with guns and babies.²⁵

Shelley likens the gay liberation front to a disfiguring of America's "bland face," to a stain on the fabric of the liberal movement, including those members of the War Resister's League and Women's Liberation who would have preferred that homosexuality remain invisible, that those six-foot banners never be unfurled. At

the end of the passage, Shelley shifts attention from protest marches to political posters. "Gay is good" when it overturns a traditional imagery of male machismo and female maternity. Hujar's *Come Out!!* poster provides one example of what such a liberated poster might look like.

Within a year of its creation, the poster was redesigned by GLF member Su Negrin in a large-scale color format (fig. 10). The later version is saturated in tones of deep purple and pale peach. No longer emerging from an urban backdrop of cars, streetlights, and city buildings, the sisters and brothers of the GLF now appear before a giant mandala, a Buddhist meditation form



Figure 10. "Gay Liberation" (poster), 1970. Design by Su Negrin. Courtesy of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives

frequently appropriated by 1960s counter-cultures to convey a sense of alternative consciousness and non-Western spirituality. Although the liberationists are still crowned by a textual message, the message itself has changed. Rather than “come out,” the poster now instructs the viewer to “let go,” a phrase that repeats four times each in a series of three concentric and successively smaller circles. Negrin designed this version of the graphic by combining and then color printing two preexisting black-and-white posters: Hujar’s *Come Out!!* and a mandala graphic drawn by GLF member Suzanne Bevier (fig. 11).²⁶

The groovy colors and looming mandala of the composite poster propose gay liberation as a matter of both psychic and social change, of both freeing consciousness at an individual level (let go) and heightening collective visibility and political power (gay liberation). To convey this simultaneous sense of internal and external transformation, gay power artists increasingly turned to psychedelic, quasi-mythic, or otherwise highly stylized imagery that could not be confined to the space of reality.

In a 1970 cover image from the liberation newspaper *Gay Power*, a deeply saturated Day-Glo color scheme helps suggest the physical and spiritual transformation of the liberated subject (fig. 12). The cover showcases a naked male body as seen in diagonally outstretched and upturned profile. While the figure gymnastically balances himself on fingers and pointed toes, he throws back his head in an ecstatic gesture of receptivity, though precisely what he is receptive to remains an open question.

Gay liberation is here embodied by a figure that, while recognizably male, is not rigidly phallic or insistently masculine. The androgynous or “soft” masculinity of such images flowed in part from the feminist politics of the gay liberation movement and its critique of male supremacy. One might argue, however, that the Ginsberg poem accompanying the image insists upon gay power of a more explicitly phallic order: “We’ll be real heroes now / in a war between our cocks and time /

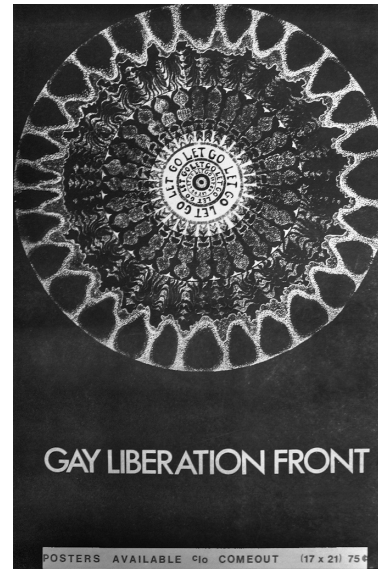


Figure 11. “Gay Liberation Front” (poster), 1970. Design by Suzanne Bevier. Reprinted on back cover of *Come Out*, June–July 1970. Courtesy of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives

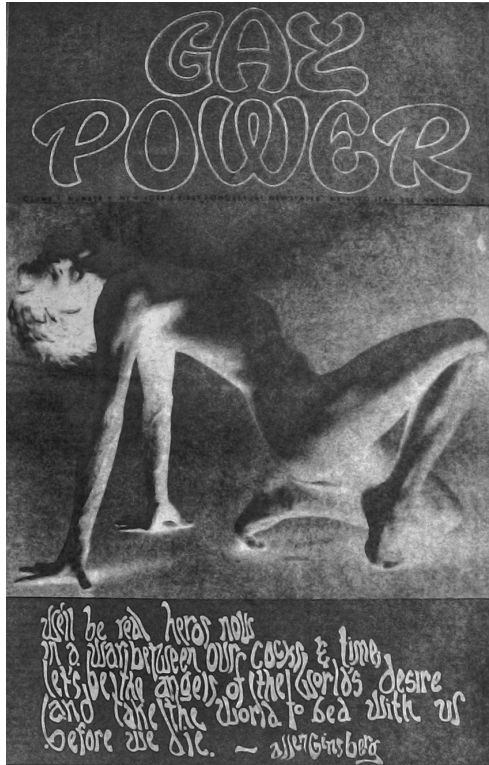


Figure 12. *Gay Power* 1, no. 9 (1970). Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

gay liberation manifesto, “Gay revolution will see the overthrow of the straight male caste and the destruction of all systems of caste and class that are based in sexism.”²⁸ By way of visualizing this revolutionary goal, images of effeminacy, drag, and genderfuck were featured extensively in gay liberation publications (fig. 13). Warhol superstar Jackie Curtis was a particular favorite of *Gay Power*, which devoted several features and one cover story to her life and work as a drag poet, playwright, and performer (fig. 14).

Within the space of just two to three years, however, the liberationist commitment to alternative gender roles would be displaced by an increasingly vehement focus on homosexual manliness and the rise of consumerist gay subcultures severed from radical politics. By 1972 *Gay Power* had been sold to a commercial publisher who repackaged it as a soft-core gay-porn magazine devoid of any coverage of radical gay politics and devoid as well of any female, effeminate, or cross-gender bodies (fig. 15). To mark this shift, *Gay Power*’s slogan was changed from

let’s be the angels of the world’s desire / and take the world to bed with us before we die.” In considering this poem, we should recall that the references to war and death would have been quite specifically inflected by the Vietnam War and the draft. Fervently anti-war, the gay liberation movement proposed male homosexuality as the opposite or undoing of warfare. Among the gay liberation slogans of the day: “Send the troops to bed together,” “Suck cock to beat the draft,” and “Soldiers: Make each other, not war.”²⁷

The framing of gay power as an alternative to militarism and conventional masculinity followed from the conviction that dominant models of gender, and especially of manliness, were themselves the core problem to be overcome. In the words of one

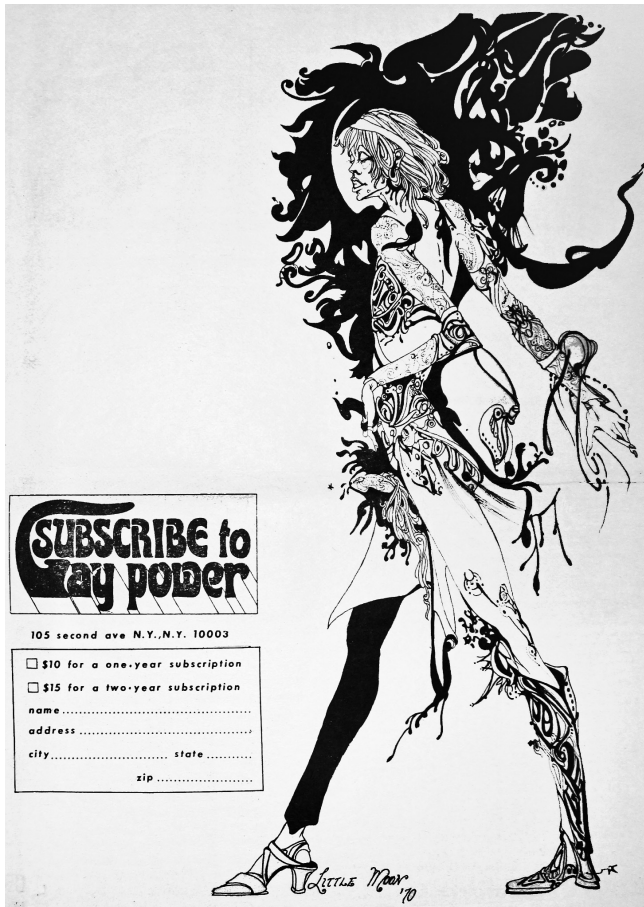


Figure 13.
Subscription ad,
Gay Power, 1970.
Drawing and design
by Little Moon.
Courtesy of the Gay,
Lesbian, Bisexual,
Transgender
Historical Society of
Northern California,
San Francisco

“New York’s First Homosexual Newspaper” to “The Entertainment Tabloid for Today’s Gays!” What had been a collectively run, community-based newspaper became a publication hawking male pinups, photo spreads of nude couples and threesomes, personal ads, and sexual paraphernalia (which, even in the pages of *Gay Power*, were referred to as “marital aids”).²⁹ The sale and redesign of *Gay Power* touch upon a far wider packaging of gay sexuality as an urban lifestyle (or form of entertainment) rather than as political resistance or social critique.

I do not wish simply to lament the decline of gay liberation in the early 1970s or to reproach the emphasis on gay manliness and sexual pleasure as an end in itself. Rather, I would like to underscore the all but irreconcilable tension between the egalitarian aims of radical politics and the impolitic pull of sexual desire: the problem, for example, of gay men attempting to challenge male supremacy as a social and political force while continuing to invest in it on the level of libidinal fantasy. Like other liberation newspapers, *Gay Power* became entangled



Figure 14. *Gay Power* 1, no. 6 (1970). Photograph by Lee Childers. Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

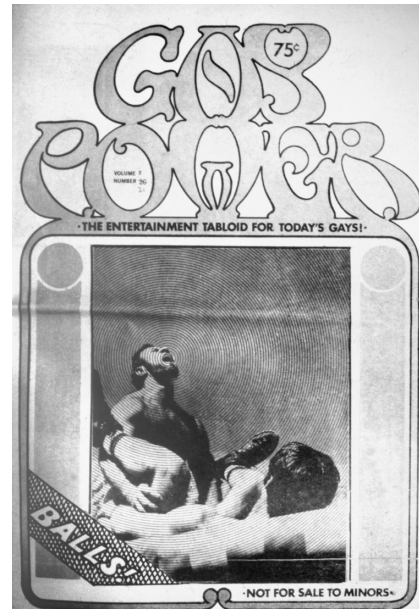


Figure 15. *Gay Power* 2, no. 22 (1972). Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

in this contradiction even before it was sold off to a commercial pornographer in 1972. Although the first three issues featured lesbian imagery and feminist graphics (fig. 16), such pictures quickly disappeared in the face of complaints from male readers who were “turned off” by them.³⁰

At the beginning of this essay, I promised to explore the broader implications posed by gay liberation imagery to the field of art history. By way of doing so and also by way of conclusion, let me briefly rehearse how I became interested in *Gay Power* circa 1970. In consulting the archival clippings of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation about ten years ago, I discovered that a collage by the artist titled *Bull's Eye* had appeared as the cover image for a 1970 issue of *Gay Power* (fig. 17). This information came as a surprise to me insofar as there is no mention of the cover—or, for that matter, of any involvement by Mapplethorpe in the gay liberation movement of the early 1970s—in the extensive published literature on the artist.

I later wrote about *Bull's Eye* as a self-conscious response on Mapplethorpe's part to pre-Stonewall censorship and criminalization, to the blocking out or covering over of the genitals of male nudes in physique and nudist magazines so

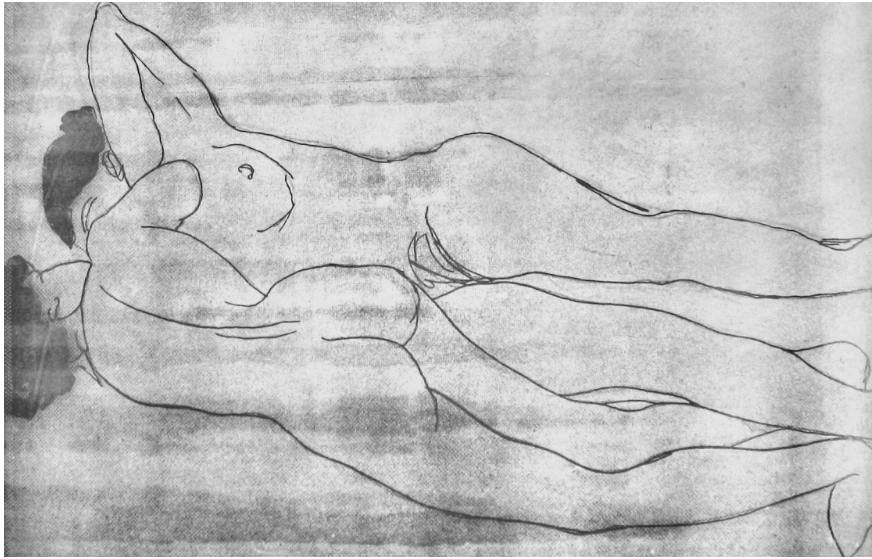


Figure 16. Lesbian graphic (unattributed) from *Gay Power* 1, no. 3 (1969). Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

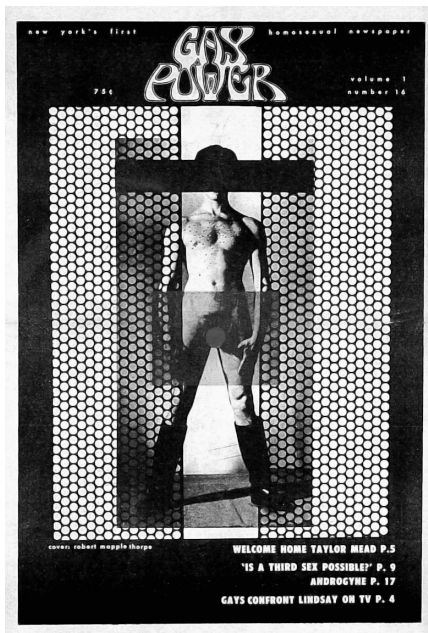


Figure 17. *Gay Power* 1, no. 16 (1970). Cover by Robert Mapplethorpe. Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

as to avoid criminal prosecution, and to images of homosexuals in police manuals whose eyes were barred so as to protect their identity.³¹ This argument had virtually nothing to say, however, about the specificity of *Gay Power* as an activist publication or about the broader movement of which it was a part.

Several years later, I decided to continue my research on Mapplethorpe by reading the entire run of *Gay Power*, a decision that entailed leaving (both physically and conceptually) the archives of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation and entering those of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California. It was there I encountered a series of images that would help illuminate

Figure 18.
Subscription ad,
Gay Power 1, no. 2
(1969). Courtesy of
the Gay, Lesbian,
Bisexual, Transgender
Historical Society of
Northern California,
San Francisco



the links among Mapplethorpe, radical gay politics, and the limitations of art history as a discipline.

Most of the early issues of *Gay Power* feature publicity ads in which naked men (and in the first ad, one woman) peruse a recent copy of the very publication that we, the viewers, are also reading at this moment (figs. 18, 19, 20). The ads wittily stage the act of reading *Gay Power* as a collective letting go of sexual and corporeal inhibitions. But there is another and more practical logic that structures these ads, a logic that also informs the use of drag names, aliases, and first names only that appear on the masthead of *Gay Power*, namely, the need for gay people to avoid identification in print, out of concern for social, professional, or legal retribution.

Consider, in this regard, McDarrah's portrait of gay activist and bookstore owner Craig Rodwell (fig. 21), a portrait that makes of its slogan "Gay is Good" both an alternative mode of vision and a blockage of identification, both a mock

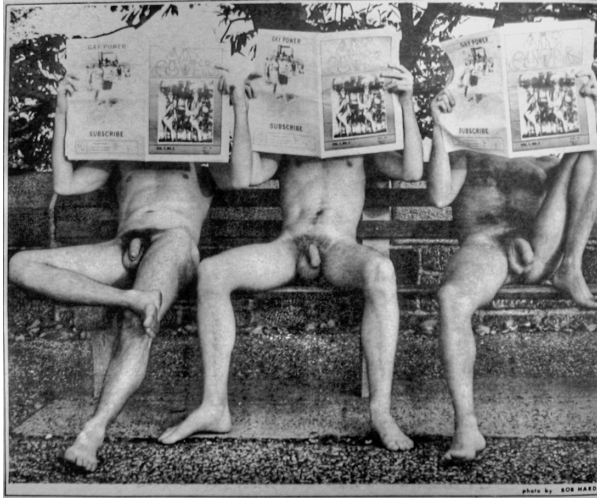


Figure 19. Subscription ad, *Gay Power* 1, no. 3 (1969). Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

staging of criminality and a refusal to be fully seen or captured by the camera.

Even those images that, like Hujar's *Come Out!!* poster, seem to insist on radical visibility return us to issues of concealment and constraint. By way of explaining why only seventeen members of the GLF showed up for the photo shoot, Duberman recalls that "ap-

pearing on the poster would be tantamount to publicly coming out, and in 1970 that was still a terrifying prospect for most people. Many of the phone messages [asking people to participate] went unanswered, and many others called back to stammer invented regrets or express real fears."³² Even for the most radical gay liberation group in 1970, homosexual visibility was not simply a matter of collective power and presence but also of individual liability and restriction. And the



Figure 20. Subscription ad, *Gay Power* 1, no. 7 (1970). Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco

Figure 21. Fred W. McDarrah: Craig Rodwell, founder, Oscar Wilde Bookstore, October 14, 1969. Photograph © Fred W. McDarrah



restriction at issue extended not only to the people portrayed in gay liberation imagery but also to those who produced that imagery.

Mapplethorpe could not, for example, find any gallery in New York City that would show collages such as *Bull's Eye* in 1970. According to Patti Smith, the artist's roommate and best friend at the time, Mapplethorpe's work was deemed "too gay" by art dealers (including homosexual ones) for gallery exhibition. Hujar, for his part, was working as a fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1970. His portraits and studio photographs had yet to be recognized by art galleries, critics, or collectors. Yet if the art world had little use for either Mapplethorpe or Hujar at this moment, the gay liberation movement certainly did.

And what use does the art world find for Hujar and Mapplethorpe today? There have now been several critical essays and one monograph published on Hujar as well as a full-scale retrospective of his photography at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. None of these include, reproduce, or even mention Hujar's brilliant photograph of the Gay Liberation Front. A similar silence has attached to Mapplethorpe's *Gay Power* cover even as the collage on which it is based, *Bull's Eye* (fig. 22), has now been reproduced in books and exhibited in museums worldwide.

While it is the unique, hand-signed object in which art history and the art market now invest, we should remember that it was only the inexpensive reproduction of that collage as the cover of a radical gay liberation newspaper that achieved any form of public visibility in 1970. The unexpected roles of Mapplethorpe and Hujar in shaping the radical vision of gay power should not be consigned to the status of historical footnote or biographical aside. Nor should the contributions of now obscure figures such as Su Negrin or Steve Rose be dismissed as unworthy of

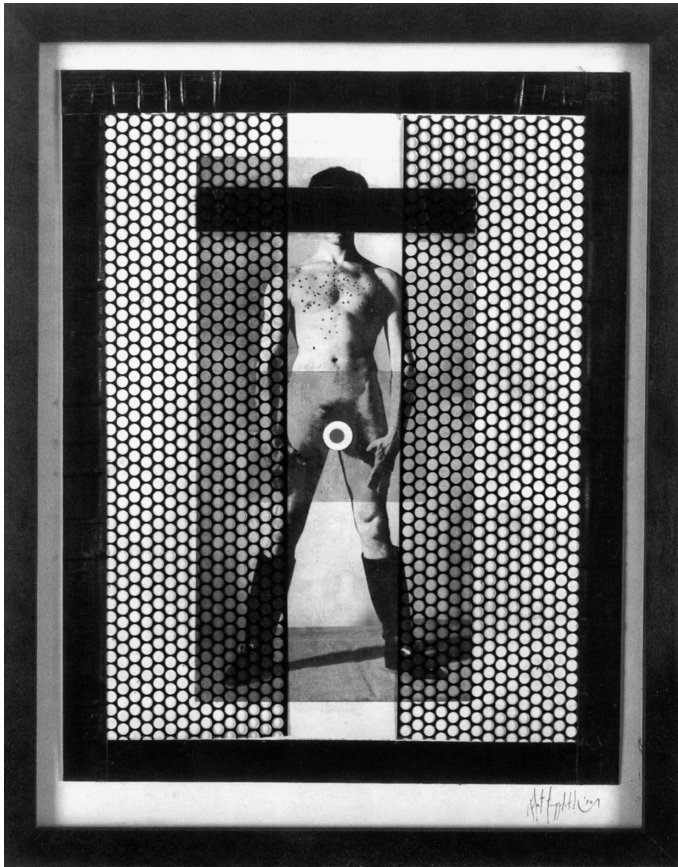


Figure 22. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Bull's Eye*, 1970, collage. © Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe

study because they do not conform to the dominant narratives or aesthetic criteria of modernist art history. If we are truly to grapple with the link between art and radical politics, we must expand our sense of what counts as a legitimate object of art-historical inquiry, of what merits being looked at, written about, and reproduced in our scholarship. This is one of the lessons that *Gay Power* circa 1970 has taught me.

Notes

1. On the marginalization of the gay liberation movement from cultural and historical accounts of 1960s radicalism, see Terence Kissack's indispensable essay, "Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971," *Radical History Review*, no. 62 (1995): 104–34. Among the books cited by Kissack that either minimize Stonewall or ignore it altogether are James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets*:

- From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Bantam, 1987); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*; and the otherwise wide-ranging anthology *The 60s without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres, Aders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Frederic Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
2. See Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993); Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 17–23.
 3. The *New York Times*, by contrast, published a one-column article without illustrations in its June 29 edition with a shorter follow-up, again without pictures, on June 30. See “Four Policemen Hurt in ‘Village’ Raid,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1969; “Police Again Rout ‘Village’ Youths,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1969. Notice that the *Times*’s headlines narrate the event from the perspective of the police rather than from that of the rioters.
 4. As the cultural historian Scott Bravmann has noted, “Though obviously staged for the camera rather than a ‘live action’ shot, the . . . photograph provides the closest approximation of an on-the-scene visual image of the riots, its campily posed subjects continuing to garner anonymous fame with recent republications of the picture” (*Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 76).
 5. The graffiti on the brick wall above the front window to the bar reads “To fight for our country, they invaded our rights.”
 6. Robert Taylor, for instance, mentions “two hundred or so patrons” of the Stonewall bar who helped initiate the riots and adds that “soon their numbers doubled, then tripled. . . . The riots continued the following night, when about four hundred policemen ended up battling a crowd of more than two thousand” (“Gay Rights in America,” in *Gay Pride: Photographs from Stonewall to Today* [Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1994], xxii). Lillian Faderman similarly estimates that “two hundred working-class patrons—drag queens, third world gay men, and a handful of butch lesbians—congregated in front of Stonewall and . . . commenced to stage a riot” (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 194). Duberman estimates that “two hundred or so people . . . were inside the Stonewall” when the police raid began. Many of these patrons joined the “growing crowd and mounting anger” outside the bar, a crowd that ultimately “swelled into a mob” (*Stonewall*, 193, 197, 198).
 7. The GLF described itself as “a militant coalition of radical and revolutionary homosexual men and women committed to fight the oppression of the homosexual as a minority group and to demand the right to the self-determination of our own bodies” (“What Is Gay Liberation Front?” flyer, spring 1970, cited in Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries,” 107).
 8. *Come Out*, January 10, 1970, 2.

9. The founding of gay liberation newspapers such as *Come Out*, *Gay Flames*, and *Gay Power* (in New York City), *San Francisco Gay Free Press* and the *Berkeley Tribe* (in the Bay Area), *Fag Rag* (in Boston), *Killer Dyke* (in Chicago), and *Gay Liberator* (in Detroit) between 1969 and 1972 marked an unprecedented degree of visibility—and self-generated press coverage—for the radical gay movement. On the flowering (and rapid decline) of gay liberation newspapers, see Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995).
10. According to press reports, four police officers (and an unrecorded number of rioters) were injured on the first night of the confrontation.
11. Lucian Truscott IV, “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square (A View from Outside),” *Village Voice*, July 3, 1969.
12. Ibid.
13. Martha Shelley, “Gays Riot Again: Remember the Stonewall!” *Come Out*, September–October 1970, 3–5.
14. Jill Johnston, “Of This Pure but Irregular Passion,” *Village Voice*, July 2, 1970.
15. This first anniversary of the Stonewall riots marked the inauguration of the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, which evolved into the Gay Pride Parade first in New York City and then in cities and towns around the world.
16. Allen Young, “Out of the Closet: A Gay Manifesto,” *Ramparts Magazine*, November 1971, 8; rpt. as a pamphlet by the New England Free Press and in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (1972; rpt. New York: Jove/HBJ, 1977).
17. Like their counterparts in Black Power and Women’s Liberation, gay liberationists viewed the city streets as a key site of political contestation. Urban gay visibility symbolized the liberationist insistence that homosexuality was not simply a private matter but one of public defiance and collectivity. Thus the popular gay liberation slogan, “out of the closets and into the streets” or, in a more pointed critique of psychiatry, “off of the couches and into the streets.”
18. See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Duberman, *Stonewall*.
19. On the rhetorical strategies of the homophile movement, see Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
20. See Duberman, *Stonewall*, 112.
21. Ibid., 111.
22. Duberman explains Hujar’s staging of the photograph: “Ultimately, some fifteen people showed up to be photographed. And Hujar had them run back and forth, back and forth, down the deserted street, shouting and laughing in triumph. . . . In the final poster, the fifteen [sic] marchers crowd the center, and it only gradually becomes clear that the sidewalks behind them are empty; these ebullient troops seem to have

- no backup forces. What also becomes apparent is the nearly equal number of men and women—though in GLF itself the women were far outnumbered” (*Stonewall*, 273–74).
23. According to D’Emilio, “Lesbians were active in both early gay liberation groups and feminist organizations. Frustrated and angered by the chauvinism they experienced in gay groups and the hostility they found in the women’s movement, many lesbians opted to create their own separatist organizations. Groups such as Radicalesbians in New York, the Furies Collective in Washington D.C., and Gay Women’s Liberation in S.F. carved out a distinctive lesbian-feminist poetics” (*Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 236). This split was indicative of larger divisions between gay male and lesbian subcultures at the time, divisions that would become deeper and more ingrained throughout the 1970s.
 24. According to Young, “By the Spring of 1970, many of the GLF women began a separate caucus, and before long this turned into a new, separate group, the Radicalesbians. The lesbians were responding to a situation in which they were wasting their energies pointing out sexist attitudes to men. They decided to respond to their unique situation as gay women, and they were joined by many lesbians from the feminist movement who had not previously associated with gay liberation” (Allen Young, “Out of the Closets, into the Streets,” in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 26).
 25. Martha Shelley, “Gay Is Good,” *Rat*, February 24, 1970, rpt. in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 31.
 26. Bevier’s poster appears in the foreground of a memorable photograph of a GLF meeting in 1970 by Diana Davies. For a reproduction, see Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman, *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 163.
 27. The name of the Gay Liberation Front was loosely modeled on the National Liberation Front, the formal title of the Vietcong. See Robert Ridinger, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement: References and Resources* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 64.
 28. Gay Revolution Party Manifesto in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 344.
 29. According to Streitmatter, the commercial version of *Gay Power* “was published by a straight entrepreneur interested only in exploiting the gay community for financial gain” (*Unspeakable*, xi).
 30. See, e.g., the letters to *Gay Power* printed in the first several months of the run of that journal.
 31. See Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Boston: Beacon, 2004), 168–83.
 32. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 274.