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New Intimacies

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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ABSTRACT

“New Intimacies” is a photographic study situated in environments known for gay cruising and public sex. Taking influence from Peter Hujar and the photographs he created in the cruising areas around Manhattan’s meatpacking district, I made experimental images that sought to envision the intangible and fleeting qualities of these geographic spaces. The inclusion of various photographic strategies (such as landscapes, portraits, and abstraction) implores the audience to consider the social and cultural elements that contributed to the formation of these sites as spaces of community and public intimacy. The work is also influenced by queer zines, experimental cinema, and other ephemeral elements of this subculture. Throughout the research for this project, reference is made to scholars, artists, activists, and queer theorists such as Douglas Crimp, José Esteban Muñoz, Lauren Berlant, David Wojnarowicz, Michael Warner, Esther Newton, Fiona Anderson, and others. In compiling this research and production, the project contributes to visual representations of cruising culture by examining the development of these geographies of desire and liberation.



Fig. 1 Exhibition view, William Harris Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, April 2023

New Intimacies

“Hunting for emptiness” is the phrase used by art historian Douglas Crimp to survey the photographs in Peter Hujar’s *Night* series.¹ The images were taken in and around the meatpacking district of Manhattan’s lower west side in the 1970s and ‘80s. Many of them depict dimly lit streetscapes and alleyways that are void of human subjects (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Crimp calls these images “cruising pictures,” referring to a pastime that accounts for a significant component of queer histories and sexual cultures around the world.

¹ Douglas Crimp, *Before Pictures* (Brooklyn, NY: Dancing Foxes Press, 2016), 156. Douglas Crimp uses similar phrasing in an earlier essay that was published in the exhibition catalog for *Mixed Use, Manhattan*, which he co-curated with Lynn Cooke.



Fig. 2 Peter Hujar, *Trucks, Night*, 1976

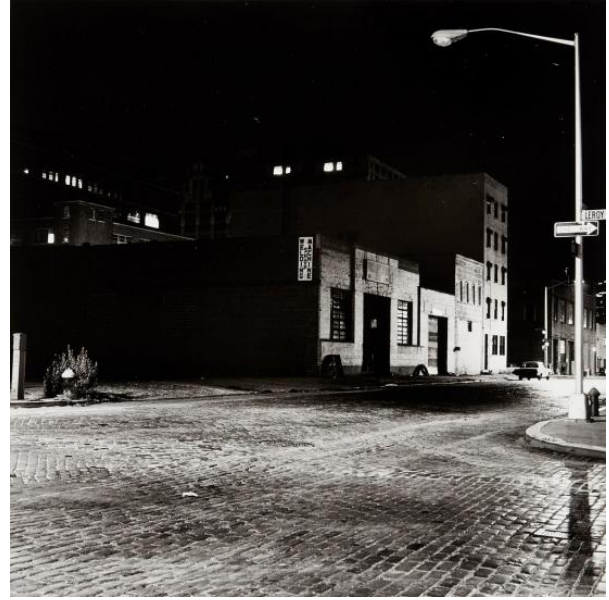


Fig. 3 Peter Hujar, *Leroy Street*, 1976

Cruising is the act of looking for casual sex, often in public places, with participants maintaining a certain sort of awareness toward social cues and rules of engagement. For Crimp, these photographs convey a sense of longing for intimate connection with and within the city, a connection that might be found with a stranger on the street, but also in the sense of “feeling yourself alone” as you make passages through empty cityscapes.² It is at the convergence of public and private intimacies where I use photography to envision the intangible and ephemeral qualities of these geographic spaces. For this body of work, I set out to create a series of images with these questions in mind, hoping to build upon and further explore Crimp’s idea of “cruising pictures.” I wanted to make photographs that prompt consideration for the geographic spaces which are known for cruising and casual sex. In the process, I began to combine portraiture and narrative compositions with abstract and non-figurative images (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) to construct a grammar for the work.

² Crimp, 156.



Fig. 4 *Untitled*, 2022



Fig. 5 *Untitled*, 2021

Certain photographs emulate the practice of cruising directly, with subjects modeling the gestures associated with anonymous public sex. Other images work indirectly through symbolism and coded visual devices. On Fire Island, for example, I staged photographs using glowing lights along the trails of the “meat rack” – a popular area where queer people meet for sex in the summer months.³ These floating streams of light represent the push and pull of energy in this space, the crossing of paths, and the physical exchange and connections made along these trails (Fig. 6). Other examples from this project include images that suggest a fleeting human presence through double exposures (Fig. 7), blurry and ghostlike portrait effects, or haze created on the image plane made by holding a detached lens close to the camera body (Fig 8).

³ Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 92-93. Esther Newton's historical project outlines the burgeoning sexual culture on Fire Island, describing in great detail the development of the “meat racks” in the 1940s and 50s.



Fig. 6 *Untitled*, 2021



Fig. 7 *Untitled*, 2021

My first encounter with cruising culture came at the age of seventeen, when I heard about a local park in my California hometown where men would meet in the parking lot at sundown. I had recently moved from my family's house into a two-bedroom apartment with a friend from high school and our building was next to a bike path that ran along a dry riverbed. The path connected to the cruising park, about a half-mile away, so I would often walk over in the evening and survey the scene of men driving in and waiting for others to pull up alongside them. Some would get out to linger in the public restroom, but most preferred to sit and idle with their windows down. After a brief exchange, two cars would pull off together and head into the unknown, out of view from spectators and other prying eyes. These rituals fascinated me; I found immense intrigue in their special character, especially given the prevalence of repressive attitudes towards sexuality in this conservative pocket of my home state. This is where I first became a spectator... where I first experienced the lonely pleasure of hunting for emptiness.

What can we make of the existence of these spaces? And how do they offer protection and community amidst this sense of precarity and vulnerability?



Fig. 8 *Untitled*, 2019

In 2008, I left California for Portland, Oregon, which at the time was an affordable alternative to the San Francisco Bay Area, the preeminent and historic gay capital of the West Coast. After spending the years of my youth in California's conservative Central Valley, I longed to connect with other artists and queer people. In the Pacific Northwest, I collaborated with and learned from musicians and visual artists with whom I shared a strong sense of identity: dykes, punks, weirdos, anarchists, the line cooks I worked with at the vegan cafe, and others who were critically engaged. It was an economic and social class that permitted me to feel at home in my body, and this affirmation spurred my creative outlook on the world. I played drums and toured with several queer music projects, allowing me to perform for new audiences and meet activists and organizers throughout the U.S. and Canada. As I traveled across the continent, I carried my camera to take snapshot photos of friends and nightlife from city to city (Fig. 9). I attribute much of my artistic development to the connections and friendships that I made during this time. It was later when I connected this diaristic approach and its aesthetic to the work of artists like Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans.



Fig. 9 *Untitled*, 2014

I include these personal details to highlight the significance of this period to my identity as a queer artist whose practice is deeply engaged with notions of the social and the historical. I have always been drawn to counterculture, from punk and hardcore music to experimental cinema, zines, and self-published books. These cultural outposts provided the foundation for a radical queer consciousness that would take hold within my political education and artistic practice for years to come.



Fig. 10 *Untitled*, 2022

In the summer of 2022, I visited cruising sites and made work in and around New York City, which has a long and storied history of queer life and sexual culture. I utilized the rare materials collection at the New York Public Library to research out-of-date guidebooks and fetish journals in search of leads to historic public sex locations (Fig. 11) and I consulted their contemporary counterparts in online directories for casual sex encounters. Leaving my camera at home, I frequented parks, cinemas, and underground clubs to observe and participate in what critic and queer theorist Leo Bersani describes as “an apprenticeship in impersonal intimacy.”⁴ I would later return to create photographs in the daytime hours, when the energy had shifted, and the composition of these geographies were void of their nocturnal features. The social immersion at night and in the day allowed me to feel the lingering essence of these moments, fragments of which I can only aspire to capture in these frames.

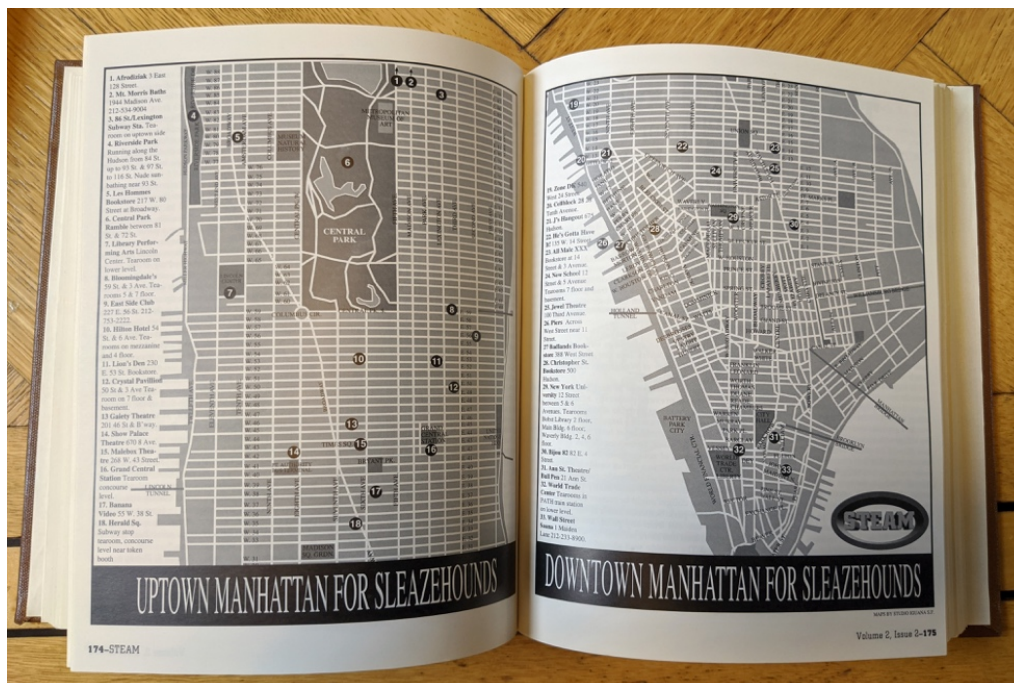


Fig. 11 Scott O'Hara, *Steam Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1994

⁴ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 69.

My recent photographs of cruising locations – of geographies of desire – are influenced by queer and postmodern theorists of the mid-to-late twentieth century. I use experimental strategies and visual abstraction to consider the historical memory of these locations as they have been accessed over time (Fig. 10). I adapted this concept from the late José Esteban Muñoz and his formative text *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. A queer theorist and performance studies scholar, Muñoz identified that his book’s “critical methodology can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision.”⁵ I have employed the gesture of this “backward glance” in my study of queer cruising sites, looking to the history of these spaces for the enduring potential that they hold.

Gay enclaves began to form in the distant corners of the New York region as early as the 1930s, often as a result of homophobic exclusion. Esther Newton writes about the development of Cherry Grove, the lesbian and gay vacation community on Fire Island, explaining that while “Cherry Grove was a beacon toward which gays were drawn by possibility, it was also a ghetto into which they were pushed by the hatred and intolerance of straight society.”⁶ Joan Nestle, founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, wrote of the two-hour subway and bus trek that she would take just to spend time with her lover and friends in the safety of a remote gay beach at Jacob Riis Park in the early 1960s.⁷ And there are well-documented histories of the abandoned piers along Manhattan’s west side highway, the site of thrilling narratives of public sexuality, and the subsequent dangers and risks associated with its secluded geography.

⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

⁶ Newton, 9.

⁷ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Minneapolis, MN: Cleis Press, 2003), 68.

In making the photographs in this project, I wish to explore the temporal nature of cruising as an activity, and more pointedly, as a mode of being in the world. For this, I look to the work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, whose writings in the 1950s and '60s played on the spatial-temporal notion of psychogeography. The Situationists were avant-garde artists and revolutionary political theorists who enabled “situations” that modeled social liberation through imaginative exercises and political demonstrations. In Debord’s *Theory of the Dérive*, readers are offered directives for practicing psychogeography and for observing “the effect of a geographical location on the emotions and behaviors of individuals.”⁸

The overlapping interests between gay cruising and Situationist psychogeography have had a defining influence on my practice for creating images. My approach is a somewhat hallucinatory take on street photography, attracting a viewer’s attention to what is absent from physical presence. I seek to suspend obligations and allow for periods of temporal displacement – or disconnected wandering – so that I may see beyond the particulars of the current moment. In addition to the Situationist mode of psychogeographic exploration, I relate this practice to the writing of Charles Baudelaire and his conception of the *flâneur*: the nineteenth-century Parisian ambler who experiences the modernist city from a place of detached observation. Mark Turner writes that “the cruiser, like the *flâneur*, continues to rely on the ambiguities of urban modernity, on the uncertainties that linger in the fleeting experience of a backward glance.”⁹ It is at this place of overlap and intertextual exploration where I begin to find those glimmers of utopian possibility. This utopian ideal, written extensively about by Muñoz, offers a “critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.”¹⁰

⁸ “Psychogeography,” Tate, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/psychogeography>.

⁹ Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2003), 66.

¹⁰ Muñoz, 35.

Throughout “New Intimacies,” I try to touch on all facets of cruising culture through the inclusion of certain affective visual elements in the frame. Some images are dark and ghostly, suggestive of risk, carnal pleasures, or otherworldly desire. In one image, a winding path leads the viewer through dense brush and foliage until the light begins to break through, beckoning from the other side. The corner of the frame is marked by a shift in color, as if pulling back a curtain to reveal something on the other side (Fig. 12). In another image, a man appears from within a cracked mirror frame, bound to his seat in a gesture that can be read as erotic, menacing, or both. The light spills in from behind him, illuminating his naked body as well as the markings and streaks on the mirror’s glass (Fig. 13).



Fig. 12 *Untitled*, 2022



Fig. 13 *Untitled*, 2022

Other photographs are staged, softened by a blissful, euphoric haze, the aftermath of a summer meeting between lovers. I feature the masculine body in some of these works, emphasizing a connection between participants that I find illustrative of the fleeting moments that take place across Fire Island's gay communities. One image is a blurry rendering of two men caressing nude in the midday sun, their backs to the viewer, whose gaze looks upon them from the perspective of a third participant (Fig. 14). Other images are framed in such a way to showcase the verdant, green spaces where people have come for amorous summer experiences for the better part of a century. Half of the focal plane in the latter image falls into a field of blur, an attempt to represent the land as it is today as well the long, historical memory that it holds (Fig. 15).



Fig. 14 *Untitled*, 2022



Fig. 15 *Untitled*, 2022

Conceived as a body of work, these photographs highlight a range of possibilities, from the danger and vulnerability that cruising entails, to the spontaneous thrill of sexual pleasure with a stranger. To avoid simplifying this culture into easily digestible representations of pleasure, I intend to complicate the utopian aspects of these spaces by accounting for the social stigmas that have promoted their development as necessity in the first place. What I hope to convey, ultimately, is the power and freedom that come with the improvised manifestations of this sexual culture, so that we may look to its examples as prospects for our community's continued liberation.



Fig. 16 *Untitled*, 2022

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