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Thugs and Fairies: The Gay Avant-Garde of the 1960s and 1970s

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Words from Chris:

For me—a college sophomore who clearly didn't experience them firsthand—one of the most interesting things about the 1960s and 1970s is the variety of identities and modes of living that came out (pun intended) during these two monumentally important decades. The Civil Rights Movement, second-wave feminism, and the Gay Liberation Front, among many other movements, showed America just how diverse it actually was and still is. Even more interesting is the American bourgeoisie's re-assimilation of these varied and highly personal forms of identity. This paper, written for Professors Reed's and Schneiderman's course in "The American Avant-Garde," is an attempt both to examine the natures of various gay identities that appeared in American arts and culture during the sixties and seventies and to trace the mechanism by which current forms of identity have arisen out of them.

(Note: this essay was first published in the Fall 2004 issue of *queer.*, a journal of queer studies featuring the work of undergraduates from colleges across America. *queer.* is published by Harvard University.)

Thugs and Fairies:

The Gay Avant-Gardes of the 1960s and 1970s

In retrospect, the 1960s and 1970s are viewed as one of the most revolutionary periods in American history. Reacting against the social repression of the 1950s, with its endorsement of racism, vaginal female sexuality, and heteronormativity, Americans in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the patriarchal mindset that made this repression possible. Among many other repressed groups, gay men and women began to protest their marginalization at the hands of mainstream patriarchal forces, especially after the police raid of Stonewall in 1969. This new outspokenness on the part of homosexuals found expression in politics (with the formation of groups such as the Gay Liberation Front), popular culture (the sexual ambiguity of musicians like David Bowie), and, not

least, in literature and visual art. In this essay, I will examine two examples from these last categories, namely the writer William S. Burroughs and the artist Andy Warhol (I here take these artists to be emblematic of two major currents—certainly not the *only* currents—of gay male identity in that they are the most well-known and commercially successful examples of these currents; my focus on them is, in this sense, pragmatic rather than critical). I will discuss how these artists' formation of new gay identities opposed to mainstream heteronormativity qualified their work as avant-garde by the definitions of art critics Peter Bürger and Raymond Williams. In addition, I will consider how the absorption of Warhol's concept of gay identity into contemporary bourgeois culture has resulted in so-called "metrosexuality," and why, therefore, Warhol's work can be seen as the dominant gay avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s.

Burroughs proposed a gay identity based on an extreme form of traditional masculinity, in which all traditionally feminine traits are expunged in favor of violence and homosexual pleasure, which he suggested were linked. He maintained that the effeminacy with which gay men were identified by the mainstream and, indeed, with which they identified themselves, was the result of the aggressive influence of feminine forces in mainstream society. His solution was to cleave femininity from masculinity entirely and to establish homosexual countercultural groups; as Jamie Russell notes in his book *Queer Burroughs*, "reacting against the view of the gay male as passive, feminine, and weak, [Burroughs] argue[ed] for the total separation of the masculine and feminine spheres, even going so far as to characterize American society as matriarchal in order to suggest that all-male communes are a subversive attack on 'feminine' civilization."¹

¹ Jaime Russell, *Queer Burroughs* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 92.

Burroughs provides a model of his gynophobic gay utopia in the Wild Boys, a group of gay boys endowed with magical power and evolutionary adaptations who are severed from mainstream society and who violently assault this mainstream when it threatens the group's liberty. The Wild Boys appear in Burroughs' books *The Wild Boys* (1971), *Exterminator!* (1973), *Port of Saints* (1973), and *Ah Pook is Here* (1979), which are collectively known as the Wild Boy tetralogy.² In these works, Burroughs portrays the Wild Boys as violent, sexually promiscuous, and physically beautiful. Moreover, he links these (admirable) traits with their lifelong separation from women: "Look at these faces that have never seen a woman's face nor heard a woman's voice. Look at the silence. The wild boys will defend their space."³ This separation of masculinity and femininity and the association of the former with violence make the Wild Boys an example of violent, gynophobic gay identity; as Russell notes, "this separatist tactic produces a vision of gay masculinity in which the masculine is everything that is *not feminine*," and which is, moreover, willing to violently protect itself.⁴

In addition to linking the traits mentioned above to a masculinity removed from any taint of femininity, Burroughs uses the Wild Boys to defeat the psychosexual femininity associated with gay sex. He does this by linking gay sex and its apparatus (particularly the rectum, the site most in danger of feminine connotations in homosexual contact) with the violence that Burroughs associates with masculinity. An example of this is the "Bubu boys," who "secrete a substance from the rectum and genitals which leaves erogenous sores rotting flesh to the bone."⁵ Here the rectum becomes the site of both

² Russell, 90.

³ William S. Burroughs, *Port of Saints* (Berkeley: Blue Wind Press, 1980), 92.

⁴ Russell, 95.

⁵ Burroughs, 72.

homosexual pleasure and grisly violence, expressed through the oxymoronic phrase “erogenous sores.” The coexistence of the two within the most female center of homosexual contact defeats the association of psychosexually feminine orientations with the act of anal intercourse. Thus, within the characters of the Wild Boys, Burroughs links traits he finds positive with effeminophobic masculinity and associates homosexual contact with violence, thereby forging a gay identity based on violent masculinity that distances itself from effeminate and defeats patriarchal conceptions of gay men as effeminate.

Burroughs’ masculine gay identity has repercussions for all men, not just homosexual men; his concept applied, in his view, to all males, regardless of their sexual orientation. His linking of masculinity to homosexuality attempted to naturalize gayness such that heterosexuality could be viewed as a societally-conditioned sickness; Russell observes that “[Burroughs] transformed [homosexuality] from a sickness and perversion into the natural and authentic state of all human males, a condition that has been contaminated by the moralistic discourses of a feminine, heterosexual dominant.”⁶ Burroughs attempted to make the Wild Boys a model of gay identity but also of masculine identity in its entirety, and thus the Wild Boys tetralogy can be read as a call-to-arms directed toward all men to abandon “matriarchal” bourgeois civilization and to form a new, violently masculine, society.

In contrast to Burroughs’ concept of gay male identity rooted in violent masculinity, Warhol posited a gay identity based on androgyny. Moreover, he suggested that androgyny, or the coexistence of (traditionally separate) masculine and feminine modes, is implicit in the very patriarchal mainstream that seeks to divide these modes. In

⁶ Russell, 95.

his book *Outlaw Representation*, Richard Meyer considers Warhol's silkscreen *Double Elvis* and describes how the overlapping of pop-culture imagery prevalent in Warhol's work can be read as the decoding of (specifically homosexual) androgyny latent in this imagery.⁷ Expanding on Meyer's technique, I will analyze another of Warhol's silkcreens, titled *260: Superman* (fig. 1, below).

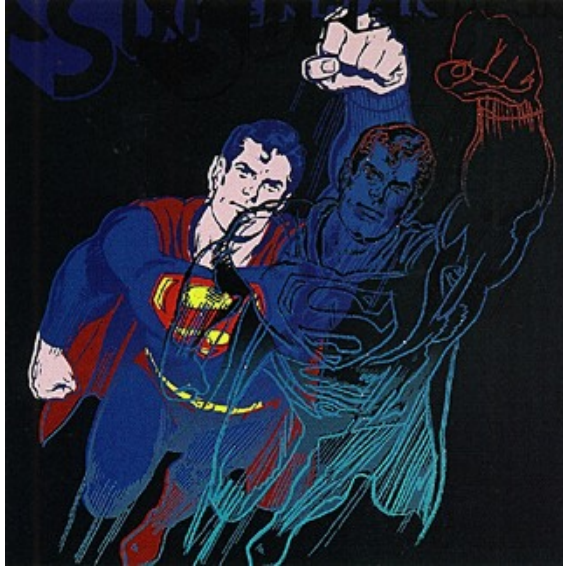


Fig. 1. Warhol, Andy. *260: Superman*. Silkscreen on Museum Board.: 38 x 38 inches. The Martin Lawrence Galleries.

<http://martinlawrence.com/warhol.html>

For *260: Superman*, Warhol overlaps one virtually unchanged copy of a rendering of DC Comics' Superman with another that is transformed into outline. As with *Double Elvis*, Warhol's source image was originally intended as representation of a character rooted in intensified masculinity: Superman's powers, which include enhanced strength, speed, and agility, represent heightened versions of traits traditionally associated with

⁷ Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 128.

manliness. (Perhaps most psychosexually active and therefore most notable among Superman's superhuman abilities is his "x-ray vision," which can be read as an enhanced form of penetration.)

Warhol defuses the heterosexist resonance of the source image in two ways. First, he renders one copy in outline in the style he used for his openly homoerotic drawings from the 1950s, a style which Meyer characterizes as feminine.⁸ Through this device, Warhol implies that the masculinity of the original image is supported by a feminine structure, that it is literally "outlined" by femininity. Second, Warhol suggests sexual contact between the "feminine" copy of the image and the unchanged "masculine" copy by overlapping them such that the former's fist hovers over the latter's pubic region. This alignment inverts traditional psychosexual dynamics by placing the "feminine" Superman in the active/dominant role as the giver of pleasure and the "masculine" Superman in the passive/submissive role as the receiver of pleasure, thereby achieving psycho- and homosexual androgyny. Warhol suggests that homosexual contact and, by extension, homosexuality itself unlock nontraditional and psychosexually androgynous erotic possibilities that exist within the mainstream itself, thus forming a positive gay identity based on this androgyny and defeating patriarchal heteronormativity.

Another layer of meaning resides within *260: Superman* and centers on the name of its subject. The word "superman" carries with it associations with Friedrich Nietzsche's *übermensch*, a concept outlined in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and variously translated as "Overman" or "Superman." In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche conceives of the Superman as the next stage of human evolution who will bring humankind into enlightenment: "What is the ape to men? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment.

⁸ Meyer, 110.

And just so shall man be to the Superman... Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the madness, with which you shall be cleansed? Behold, I teach you the Superman: he is this lightning, he is this madness!”⁹ The comic character Superman offers a patriarchal interpretation of the *übermensch* as a being of distilled masculinity. By homosexualizing this character in *260: Superman*, Warhol undermines its patriarchal meaning and thereby links the *übermensch* to homosexual androgyny. In effect, Warhol offers androgynous homosexuality as the future of humankind, as the concept that will advance society into enlightenment and “cleanse” humanity, and thus declares androgyny a societally-significant and positive gay identity.

Both Burroughs’ and Warhol’s work formulated gay identities different from the conception of gay men held by the patriarchal mainstream in their time. Burroughs linked homosexuality with masculinity and violence and thereby undermined the image of the gay man as effeminate and weak. Warhol suggested that the androgyny with which homosexuality was associated in patriarchal thought is inherent to patriarchy and that, as a source of strength and societal evolution, it should be the goal of mainstream as a whole. Despite these similarities, Warhol’s and Burroughs’ gay identities are clearly different, even diametrically opposed. In assessing the legacy of these artists’ work, then, we must ask which has had significant impact on today’s culture. In an effort to clarify this issue, I will consider how various theories of the avant-garde apply to the work of these artists.

Both Burroughs’ literary art and Warhol’s visual art qualify as avant-garde in that they both posit, in Peter Bürger’s words, a “new life praxis from a basis in art.” In other

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books: 1969), 41-2: I, 4.

words, both formulate a mode of existence, expressed through creative works, that is different from the “means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday,” which reduces some citizens to “partial fraction[s]” or devalued members of bourgeois culture on the grounds of (among many other things) “deviant” sexuality.¹⁰ As such, both Burroughs and Warhol hold sociological relevance as what Raymond Williams calls “class fractions,” or entities that mount “revolt[s] against the class but for the class;”¹¹ that is, both created gay identities out of line with mainstream versions of such identities with the intent of propelling the bourgeoisie, heterosexual and homosexual, toward a new form of civilization.

Williams goes on to note that “it is really no surprise that [class fractions’] emphases of style, suitably mediated, should become the popular bourgeois...[identity] of the next historical period.”¹² It is along these fault lines that a split between Burroughs’ and Warhol’s legacy for “the next historical period” appears. While both created new praxes of life with implications for the bourgeoisie, it is Warhol’s androgynous identity that has become part of the bourgeois identity of today. This manifests as what has become known as “metrosexuality,” an identity in which heterosexual men adopt character traits traditionally associated with femininity and thereby become androgynous. Helena Oliviero, a journalist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, characterizes this new bourgeois identity thus: “a fabulously dressed “metrosexual” [is] someone who fits the hot new marketing term describing straight men who are on easy terms with both women

¹⁰ Bürger, Peter, “The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde,” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 238-9.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, “The Significance of Bloomsbury as a Social and Cultural Group,” in *Keynes and the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. D. Crabtree and A.P. Thirwall (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1999), 54.

¹² Williams, 54.

and feminine ways.” Oliviero further projects that “one in every five men in a big city is a metrosexual” and that “today's climate makes it easier for men to chafe against the restrictions of traditional male boundaries.”¹³ Oliviero thus implies that the androgyny of metrosexuality is inherent in men and that only traditional concepts of masculinity—“climates”—prevented men from expressing it in the past, an implication that mirrors the assertions of Warhol’s silkscreens. Metrosexual androgyny is also linked to homosexuality in much the same way that psychosexual androgyny is linked to homosexuality in Warhol’s work. This is viewed positively by metrosexuals themselves; Oliviero quotes Ed Sieber, a self-proclaimed metrosexual, as noting that “I have some gay friends who said, ‘When I first met you I couldn’t tell if you were gay or straight,’ and I thought that was a good thing.”¹⁴

Despite the easiness with which homosexuality and metrosexuality are linked within the metrosexual identity itself, it must here be noted that metrosexuals are, by definition, heterosexual. The imposition of this somewhat orientationist distinction is necessary because it illuminates how Warhol’s androgynous identity can be assimilated by the bourgeoisie where Burroughs’ hyper-masculine identity cannot. Warhol’s identity allows for a mode that incorporates essential elements of the mainstream male identity, specifically heterosexuality, and equally essential elements of itself, specifically androgyny. That is to say, Warhol’s conception of maleness can be used by the heterosexual dominant to form an adapted mode of itself—it allows for the creation of a simultaneously heterosexual *and* androgynous identity, an identity which has indeed currently begun to exist in bourgeois culture as metrosexuality. As such, Warhol’s gay

¹³ Helena Oliviero, “Fashionably Male,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 11 June 2003. <<http://www.ajc.com/living/content/living/0703/11metrosexual.html>> par 4, 6, 11.

¹⁴ Oliviero, par. 10.

identity is reformative in that its assimilation calls for an adjustment, rather than a complete rejection, of the mainstream.

In contrast, Burroughs' identity demands that all men consider themselves gay. His identity has no point of purchase for the bourgeoisie in that the masculinity by which it characterizes itself is *inextricably* linked to homosexuality. Were absorption of Burroughs' identity to occur, the resulting mode could take only two forms. In one, the homosexual element of the identity would be rejected, leaving only masculinity as the essential trait of heterosexual maleness. This mode is identical to the prevailing mainstream mode. In this scenario, then, Burroughs' identity cannot be considered assimilated because it has been subsumed. It has lost an essential element of itself, namely its homosexuality. In the second possible mode, the homosexual element of the identity would not be rejected, and this mode would cease to be a sector of the mainstream. Part of the essential identity of this second possibility is its homosexuality, which places it squarely outside of the bourgeoisie. Burroughs' identity, then, is insoluble in the mainstream. It is only valid when it operates within the homosexual mode—outside of this mode, it becomes inert. Thus, it cannot be assimilated into the heterosexual dominant. It requires that the very parameters of maleness be redefined to include homosexuality and exclude heterosexuality. It is, in contrast to Warhol's identity, revolutionary. Because of this, no identity as yet distinguishable within the mainstream can be cited as the effect of Burroughs' identity on this mainstream as metrosexuality can be cited as the effect of Warhol's identity on it, and it is unlikely that any ever will.

Aside from these fundamentally philosophical reasons for the dominance of Warhol's identity over Burroughs' in the mainstream arena, another capitalistic force

places androgynous gay identity over masculine gay identity. As the characterization of metrosexuality as a “marketing term” indicates, androgynous sexuality as filtered through a heterosexual lens lends itself to activity in the capitalist marketplace. This can be seen from the lead-in to Oliviero’s article: “Jason Dauble owns 20 pairs of black dress shoes, uses only Aveda products in his cropped, salon-only snipped hair and favors a fitness club where bottled water is served on silver trays.”¹⁵ The femininity that characterizes metrosexuality as androgynous also characterizes it as fastidious and consumerist. This consumerism, which is concerned predominantly with appearance (expensive clothes, hairstyles, and gym memberships), makes the metrosexual identity a specialized marketing niche, an area of expansion for the selling of products designed to improve physical appearance, products that are traditionally targeted at females. Androgynous sexuality within the heterosexual mode is therefore favorable from a bourgeois—in this particular instance the Marxist bourgeois—perspective. It creates a base of consumption among heterosexual men for traditionally “unmanly” goods and services. While theoretical analysis reveals that androgynous identity *can* be incorporated into the mainstream, economic analysis reveals *why* this incorporation has taken place: it provides another potentially large source of fuel for the capitalist machine that propels bourgeois culture.

As might be predicted from the philosophical contrasts between Warhol’s and Burroughs’ identities, the latter provides no niche for the expansion of capitalism. Indeed, Burroughs demands that countercultural groups such as the Wild Boys be formed in opposition to bourgeois capitalism. He envisions these groups as communes that

¹⁵ Oliviero, par. 1.

perpetuate themselves through labor that is directly connected to its own subsistence; the Wild Boys either hunt for their food and thus remove themselves from the capitalist machine or steal from capitalist vendors and thus rupture this machine by refusing to interface with it in “good faith.”¹⁶ Where the androgyny of Warhol’s identity provides a model for existence within capitalism, the masculinity of Burroughs’ identity forces the holders of this identity outside the realm of capitalistic exchange. Thus, while both Burroughs and Warhol formulated gay identities that included positive meanings of homosexuality and had both philosophical and economic repercussions for the heteronormative mainstream and can therefore both be considered avant-garde, Warhol’s identity has transmitted itself into contemporary bourgeois culture in a way that Burroughs’ has not, indeed cannot, and for this reason Warhol’s work can be considered the dominant gay avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s.

It seems prudent to note that the above argument is not meant as an indictment of the gay identity forged by Burroughs any more than it is meant as an endorsement of that forged by Warhol. Such indictments and endorsements call for moral study. The study of avant-gardism is ultimately the study of the bourgeoisie and the means by which it progresses rather than the study of the avant-garde per se; it is therefore a pragmatic study. I have, then, discussed primarily the intersection of ostensibly “heterosexual” and “homosexual” identities rather than homosexual identities in themselves. The significance of this discussion is not in whatever moral judgment it seems to imply in its establishment of a hierarchy of gay avant-gardes. Its significance is rather as a projection, based on historical forces, of what form(s) gay avant-gardism may take that will lead to

¹⁶ Burroughs, 112.

wider acceptance of homosexuality (if assimilation may be considered acceptance). The question as to whether acceptance via absorption is desirable on either front is, again, a moral issue. This second issue, while seemingly easy to resolve at first glance, is complicated by the complicity with capitalism upon which the assimilation of Warhol's androgynous gay identity depends. Thus the sustained interest in Burroughs; while his identity cannot be assimilated by the mainstream, it raises the very concrete question as to whether perpetuation of the bourgeoisie is truly desirable from a minority standpoint. It provides another voice, however irrational it might seem, that argues suggestively against the judiciousness of allowing gay identity to be assimilated by capitalist forces. At present, the language available to discourse on morality is insufficient to grapple with these issues; as can be seen from the present writing, with its phal(og)ocentric thesis and conclusions, contemporary discursive modes favor masculinity above both femininity and androgyny. In such modes, non-favored gender identities tend to be either marginalized or destroyed. The most probable, or at least most efficient, solution to this lingual difficulty is a reform of discursive modes themselves to include androgynous forms of reason, whatever these may be. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that such a reform could result from mainstream absorption of androgynous homosexuality. And when this absorption takes place, as it has already begun to, it also seems probable that the very method by which gay identity is considered will change for the better. Then the real discussion may begin.

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